


On the Wind



When charter cruising, saying yes to Plan B can be delightful

We live in a 9-to-5 world, our calendars, computers and appointment books jammed with scribbled must-dos and don't-forgets, and we have very little time that isn't scheduled. The very concept of "spare time" has disappeared from our vocabularies. Kids scurry from soccer practice to dance lessons without pause for either kid or parent.

On a charter, though, you can leave all that nonsense at home.

In the olden days of wooden ships and canvas sails, the captains never, ever, wrote the words "going to" in their logbooks. They always listed their voyages as "bound for" and therein lies a world of difference.

"Bound for" leaves enough slack so that they could end up anywhere in the world without feeling badly about it. If the winds were against them, or they had a problem en route, they just went somewhere else. No big deal.

When it comes to bareboat charters, I admit it: I used to be like many of you. I couldn't resist planning my charters from start to finish. It was, for those of you old enough to remember the movie, the "If it's Tuesday, this must be Belgium" mentality. We weren't getting on a tour bus every morning, but I knew where we would anchor each night, sights we would see, reefs we would snorkel, and pubs we would suck dry.

But then I sailed as a guest with some friends who were almost fanatically committed to the unplanned adventure. The theme to their entire lifestyle might be called "Plan B." As we cast off the lines on the first day of our charter, we had no idea where we were heading. We had two or three good options, of course, but we let the wind be our guide.

Literally.

As we cleared the harbor, we looked to see which way the wind was blowing, and went with it. Only then did we check the chart to see where we were headed that day. It put fresh meaning to the words I remembered from the 1960s Vince Guaraldi song, "Cast Your Fate to the Wind."

"I set my sail as the tide comes in, and I just cast my fate to the wind."

It was, from start to finish, an absolutely delightful charter without my train schedule mentality.

We lingered over breakfasts, enjoying the morning coolness without having to rush to our next destination. We would up the

anchor at midday, sail for a while, and then look at the chart to see where we might anchor for the night. In fact, on our third day, or maybe it was the fourth, possibly even the fifth, we didn't go anywhere.

At all.

We liked where we were anchored and we were content to savor the whole day: snorkeling, beachcombing, reading in the cockpit, sipping a rummy cocktail. We met some cruising folks on the beach and joined them on their boat at happy hour to watch the lemminglike rush of arriving charterers who were on The Schedule. And we smiled with delight at our own relaxed attitude.

"I shift my course along the breeze, won't sail upwind on memories."

Since that time, I've become a convert, mostly. I've managed to throw away the minute-by-minute schedule. Now, on a seven-day charter, I have a mental list of three or four places I'd like to visit. If we make it, great. But if not, no problem. Refer to Plan B.

Rick Steves, the ubiquitous travel writer, has a basic piece of advice for all his readers, whether seasoned or novice: "Whenever and wherever your travel, let your default response be this: YES." It's solid advice for charterers as well.

If you're sailing near an island and spot a beautiful beach with not a person on it, the answer to "Should we stop?" is YES. What do you think about having dinner at that little restaurant near the marina? YES. What if we skip the expected second-night anchorage in favor of one the charter company mentioned? YES.

In the process, She Who Must Be Obeyed made friends with a couple running a tiny beach food stand who were more than happy to make grilled ham and cheese sandwiches for us. We still get Christmas cards from them. I know an amazing snorkeling reef that even locals don't know, simply because we said, "Sure, why not?" YES.

As a result, I've mellowed, knowing that I'm likely to find a handful of wonderful places I never knew existed. So it all seems to balance out rather nicely. The discoveries are serendipitous, and often a lot more fun than a scheduled destination.

The sheer vagaries of wind and weather on a charter are a refreshing and much-needed change from our over-regimented world.

"I wonder how it might have been, had I not cast my fate to the wind."

Trust me on this: You won't regret it!

On the Wind

Putting fun back into learning to sail keeps kids on track to a lifetime of sailing

We were turned loose in our 8-footers to go have fun.

Longtime readers know that I have a few rants that pop up from time to time, so consider yourself warned. This is going to be one of them. One of my rants has been the late, great, America's Cup, which sadly is the empty shell of a once-epic event that no longer relates to today's sailors. I don't beat that dead horse anymore, because I simply don't care.

But I care about today's kids, who seem to be living in a world populated by helicopter parents and a sailing lifestyle best described as a "trophy culture." Winning is everything. I was at a yacht club recently, watching the junior sailing program with coaches in chase boats yelling at the kids going through drills. It had started before I arrived and was going when I left, and I was saddened by the sheer monotony of it.

I thought back to learning to sail on California's Alamitos Bay in a community program where the essence of the summer sailing program was to have fun. There were blackboard talks about both sailing and racing techniques, but then we were turned loose in our 8-footers to go have fun. That meant water fights or piling a bunch of kids in your boat to go to a sandbar or just sailing companionably with others "going nowhere and doing nothing."

While the kids I saw recently could bang off perfect roll tacks, there wasn't much joy. There were no peals of laughter, no shouts to friends, no splashing. Just drill, drill, drill.

As I watched the winter Olympics in Pyeong Chang earlier this year, I was intrigued by two things. First, the Norwegians were kicking butt and, second, they seemed to be having fun doing it. This tiny country, with a population about that of the Detroit metro area, sent 109 athletes, yet they dominated these Games from the start, winning 14 golds in a medal count of 39.

More important, the Norwegians were clearly having a good time, and not just because they were winning. The team had a unity in a world where competitors remain fierce rivals on or off the field. When interviewed,

the Norwegians were clearly friends, and reporters were delighted to find the Norwegian team played cards and charades together before their events.

And thus I discovered a little secret that Norway knows and, apparently, America doesn't.

They don't let their kids keep score until they are 13.

According to Tore Ovrebo, a director of Norwegian Olympic Sports, "Our goal is not to have winning 10-year-olds, but to create mature adults." They don't want sports to be a culture of winners and losers. Their three goals are to have fun, make friends and stay involved.

Says Ovrebo, "We think the biggest motivation for kids to do sports is that they do it with their friends and they have fun while they're doing it, and we want to keep that feeling throughout their whole career."

"We want to leave the kids alone," he adds. "We want the kids to play. We want them to develop and be focused on social skills. They learn a lot from playing. They learn a lot from not being anxious. They learn a lot from not being counted. And they tend to stay on for longer."

Norway's choice of the age 13 is interesting, since a recent sports poll says that 70% of kids in youth sports quit by age 13 with the reason being that it's just not fun.

When I look back at the now-grown kids from that summer sailing program so many years ago, the vast majority of them are still sailing. Like me, some went on to a lifetime of collecting trophies, while others chose just to sail and cruise. But sailing stuck to us.

Winning is not a bad thing and, in fact, kids like to win. But when winning becomes more important than being out playing, it sends the wrong message.

Yes, naysayers can make the argument that Norway did well in the winter Olympics because they have lots of snow. And, yes, they didn't sweep the summer Olympics, winning only four medals and none in sailing.

But that doesn't diminish their very thoughtful approach to making children happy, healthy and socially secure. Rather than forcing your kids into a program to win trophies and finish first, perhaps you should encourage them to have fun and make friends.

And splash some water.

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Be like Fred: Leave the beer can racing to the amateurs

There are Grand Prix levels of racing where the pros can go play, but when they're being imported down to the beer can series level just to win a shiny trinket, this whole thing has gone far enough.

To quote Peter Finch as newscaster Howard Beale in the movie "Network," "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take this anymore!"

What led to this state of affairs was a phone call to an old friend in California to catch up on his summer and to get his sympathy on my hurricane season. My innocent question, "How did the Wednesday beer can series go?" launched a rant that She Who Must Be Obeyed, a ranter of gold medal standards, would have appreciated.

"I sailed the first few evenings and then quit," said my friend (we'll call him Fred) with a twinge of bitterness, adding "It just wasn't fun anymore."

The essence of his rant was that the beer can fleet used to be a bunch of folks, including spouses and kids, who climbed on their boats at the end of the Wednesday work day and had a race followed by a burger bash, where everyone consumed beer and told lies about their sailing prowess.

But over the past few years, there had been an insidious invasion of hot sailors who had gradually turned the once-fun beer can evening series into a combat zone. They brought with them tactics more suitable for the Olympics or world championships, which led to lengthy protest hearings because of these tactics which, in turn, dented the burger and beer time as well.

"I don't mind losing," Fred said, "but it's not much fun losing to people you don't even know. Heck, I have a lifetime of losing to my friends. We joke that it's part of the game. Sometimes I would win, sometimes they would. A lot of these hired guns just get in their cars straight from the dock and skip the burger bash. Where's the joy in that?"

I'd like to say, with all modesty, that I've had some fine rants here on the pages of [REDACTED], and more than a few have been about how winning has become the all-consuming goal in a sport that is supposed to be fun. From the moment they first plant their little rears

in an Optimist, kids are being trained to focused on one thing: winning. It's no wonder so many kids drop out of sailing: It's no fun!

I'm not going down the "it-was-better-in-the-old-days" road. Wait. Yes, I am. I do remember when the owner of a yacht wouldn't think of accepting a trophy if he hadn't steered the boat. I remember when both beer can and weekend regattas were a time to gather friends and family, throw on a case of beer and some deli sandwiches, and have fun on the water, win or lose. There was never any hotshot who had flown in on the owner's nickel to whisper tactics in his ear or to actually steer the boat. Paid hotel rooms? Snort!

The editor for some of my books at Norton Publishing was a fine seaman and his crew survived the deadly Fastnet race of 1979. He treasured sailing with a crew of non-pro friends. He eventually converted his Frers from a racer to a cruiser, simply because he wearied of racing against boats filled with pro crews expecting free air tickets, hotel rooms and spending money, which was a code word for salary.

We use the word Corinthian to mean amateur sailors who take pride in doing the racing themselves without professionals. It used to signify someone with a sense of honor and dignity, one who would never think of using the rules as a club against a competitor. To be called a Corinthian meant you were highly esteemed.

Amateur is not synonymous with hacker: it should have the same weight as when used in golf or tennis, meaning a person who enjoys a sport as a pastime, not a profession.

But this all-consuming craze to win, inbred from childhood, is doing sailing no good. There are Grand Prix levels of racing where the pros can go play, but when they're being imported down to the beer can series level just to win a shiny trinket, this whole thing has gone far enough.

You don't have to shout out the windows as newscaster Howard Beale told viewers, but it is time to reassess what direction racing is going. And is this where we want it to go?

I'm with Fred. Let's get back to the fun of racing with friends and family.