

newtosailing



PHOTO MARTIN HOLLINGSHEAD

Where to start

There's a potentially bewildering range of places, both in the UK and overseas, at which newcomers to the sport can start sailing. **Rupert Holmes** explores the options.

For most newcomers to the sport, and especially those who start with dinghy or keelboat sailing, one of the first steps is to choose a club to join. The UK has a long-established club structure for the sport of sailing, with clubs organising virtually all the racing, as well as much of the tuition. All but a tiny handful of the nation's 700 or so clubs are affiliated to the RYA, the sport's national governing body. Over the past dozen years or so many have benefited from substantial National Lottery funding and now offer facilities that many could only have dreamt of 20 years ago.

Many non-sailors perceive that most sailing takes place on the sea, or at a few high profile and

very large bodies of inland water. This is, however, a distorted picture – the UK's sailing clubs are as diverse as the nation's population and there are many great clubs that offer excellent racing and training on small reservoirs, ponds and lakes, as well as on Britain's many rivers. One result of this is that very few people in the UK are more than an hour's travel from a variety of sailing opportunities.

In fact, some of the best racing in the UK takes place in seemingly unlikely inner city settings. There are ways in which such apparent drawbacks can be put to advantage. For instance, you can learn a huge amount about wind awareness from racing at city centre clubs. Equally, an evening sail in jovial company on Millwall Dock, in the shadow of Canary Wharf, is a great-stress buster after a long day at the office.

If you ultimately want to sail multihulls or keelboats, then your options as to where to sail will be more limited, but it may still make sense to initially opt for a smaller club close to home. Dinghy racing on a narrow stretch of river, or a small lake, can see the action concentrated into a small area, which maximises the fun and accelerates the rate at which you hone your new-found skills.



PHOTO MIKE RICE/FOTOBOAT

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Those who learn to sail and race on small bodies of water often have very good boat handling skills and boat-on-boat tactics. As each leg of the course may only be a few minutes in duration, they get far more practice at these very important aspects than many sailors. Equally, they tend to be very good at reading very shifty wind patterns.

Conversely, those who sail mostly on large reservoirs may be better tactically in big fleets, while those who sail on the sea will always be thinking of tidal streams, even if only subconsciously. At the end of the day no single venue is likely to make you a better sailor than any other – successful sailors are all-rounders that have experience of many different situations.

One advantage of a club on a larger stretch of water might be that some give improved opportunities for pottering, for those who want to practice some of their newly acquired skills before testing them out on the race track. In any case, do not forget that once you start doing well in club racing you may want to travel to open meetings at other clubs, where you can compete against a larger number of your class of boat. This in turn means your choice of home club may assume less importance.

To locate clubs in your area and research information about them, check out the ‘clubs’ section of www.yachtsandyachting.com As well as key information such as classes sailed, location and so on, you will also get contact information and a link to the club’s website. Bear in mind that many of the smaller clubs rely on volunteers rather than

full-time staff, so don’t be put off if you don’t get an instant response to your first contact.

Assessing your priorities

Be realistic about how far you are happy to travel – whatever your level of enthusiasm, you are more likely to get afloat frequently if you can get to the boat within 30 minutes than if a round trip of well over two hours is involved.

It is also important to analyse what you need from your initial club in order to get started in the sport. Is tuition a must? What about (possibly informal) on-going support and coaching to help you improve and develop your skills? Are most of the members you meet at the club approachable and friendly?

Does the club own boats that members can use? This can ease the route into the sport, allowing you to figure out whether sailing is really for you, and enabling you try a variety of boats before committing to the expense of buying one. If you have children who would also like to learn to sail, it’s obviously important to figure out what each prospective club would offer them.

Big vs small

Big clubs tend to be professionally run, with great facilities, although members still usually help out with race officer, safety boat and other duties. Small clubs are usually run by the members (although often just as effectively as those with professional management), with everyone joining in on a rota system to run racing, bar and kitchen,

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PHOTO PAUL WYETH

as well as to maintain the club's premises and equipment, including safety boats and club dinghies. Many are very friendly and welcoming to newcomers to the sport, with plenty of people willing to give help and advice. Smaller clubs also tend to be relatively cheaper to join, with costs varying upwards from as little as £30 a year for those on the coast, although inland water clubs tend to be more expensive, as most have to pay fees to the water utility companies.

If you have a choice of clubs in your area it is worth going along to a few to see what they offer. Try to speak to a number of other new members to gauge their experiences – and be wary of any club that can't find you anyone! Just as some large clubs can be very friendly, some small ones can appear cliquy at first.

While initially you may not want to join more than one club, many people eventually join a second one, perhaps on the coast for weekends and holiday sailing, or so that they can sail different types of boat.

Matching club and boat

One point to bear in mind is that many clubs have restrictions on the boats they sail. In some cases this is very strict – for instance Itchenor SC in Chichester Harbour only allows a very limited range of boats. The advantage of this is that it provides fantastic, level-class racing in big fleets for the boats that are supported.

Other clubs offer handicap racing, which takes account of the differences in speed between different designs of boat, and normally uses the RYA's Portsmouth Yardstick Scheme. Many clubs have both fast and slow handicap fleets, so that the boats in any individual race do not differ too widely in terms of speed.

The key advantage of choosing to sail in a handicap fleet is that you have freedom to choose the design of boat you want to sail. However, you will not know your actual position in the race until the race officer calculates the overall results, after the last boat has finished. With class racing, on the other hand, you know your position all the time,

and you have the challenge of more boat-on-boat jostling for position, which adds to the excitement and creates a greater tactical challenge.

Even clubs that offer handicap racing may place a restriction on the maximum size of boat they allow, especially if they sail on a small area of water. This is one reason why, even if you already have an idea of the class of dinghy you would like to sail, it is usually best to defer the actual purchase until after you have made a definite decision as to which club to join.

Other opportunities

Although membership of a club is the route through which the overwhelming majority of people build their sailing experience after completing their initial RYA courses, there are other routes to getting your first sailing experiences. There are many RYA training centres around the UK, in both inland and coastal locations that offer a wide range of courses. Details of these can be found on the association's website.

Many local authorities also have watersports training facilities. Often these are primarily geared to the needs of school children, but many also run courses for adults, as well as for children on an individual basis out of school time. Some of these also provide opportunities to continue sailing after completing RYA courses, without the need to buy a boat of your own.

Also – and it's easy to see the attraction of this route into the sport – a very high proportion of Brits now get their first taste of sailing as part of a holiday in the sun. This offers the advantages of near-guaranteed decent weather and warm water, which maximises the chances that your initial experiences will be enjoyed to the full. We'll cover this in greater depth in a future issue, but in the meantime check out the sailing holiday companies that advertise in this magazine. And remember to join a club when you return home – most people do not keep up their good intentions in this respect, and miss out on great opportunities to enjoy their new activity on a regular basis. ■

Further information

www.yachtsandyachting.com
www.rya.org.uk
www.sailing.org