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# No excuses

In the first of a new series **Rupert Holmes** breaks down some of the barriers that stop people getting afloat.

**P**erhaps one of the most important things for a newcomer to realise is that there are so many different aspects to sailing and racing that they could almost be considered different sports that just happen to share some of the same principles. Racing a singlehanded dinghy on a small body of inland water, for instance, is very different to offshore yacht racing. This is different again to racing one of the many classic designs such as XODs, Salcombe Yawls and the Royal Mersey YC Mylne class, which collectively attract thousands of enthusiasts all round the country.

Of course, this can prompt a dilemma in itself –

where to start? The answer will depend partly on what kind of sailing appeals to you and partly on what's available within an acceptable travelling distance of where you live. Don't forget that you can always try out new areas of the sport at any time – in fact doing so is often the best way to figure out what you enjoy most, as well as helping to broaden your experience and knowledge base.

Given all the compelling reasons to get afloat, it's perhaps not surprising that marine industry research shows that a very large proportion of the population is interested in going boating, but there are many perceived barriers that put people off actually doing so. We solve the most common complaints:

## 'But I don't live near the sea...'

This is a common misconception, but very few people in the UK are more than an hour's travel from a variety of sailing opportunities. In particular, there are sailing clubs that offer great racing and training on reservoirs, rivers, lakes and ponds throughout the country. These are as diverse as the population, ranging from small inner-city clubs, to large bodies of water such as Rutland Water in Leicestershire, Kielder Water in Northumbria and Cumbria's Lake District. These have miles of 'coastline' – 27 miles in the case of Kielder – and some are large enough to sail cruising yachts that you can sleep aboard.

Check out our directory of clubs on



PHOTO DAVID HARDING

**Left** It's easiest to learn whilst you're young...

**Above and right** ...but no matter what your age, size, or fitness level there is a boat suitable for you.



PHOTO GRAEME SWEENEY/YSA\*

[www.yachtsandyachting.com](http://www.yachtsandyachting.com) to find out about the clubs near you.

**'But it must take ages to build enough qualifications and experience to become competent and safe?'**

Although it's a potentially dangerous activity, it's possible to participate fully and safely in sailing many kinds of boat with very little experience, providing you know your limitations and operate within a controlled environment. All clubs have safety boats of some type that provide rescue cover should you get into difficulties.

The RYA, sailing's national governing body, has a very comprehensive training scheme, which can be slowly worked through, while you simultaneously build experience through your own sailing.

With families that are new to sailing, it often works best if everyone learns together, over a period of time. This is nearly always better than one parent gaining minimal qualifications in a short time frame and then struggling to teach the rest of the family, but unfortunately that's how it often happens.

**'Surely sailing is very expensive?'**

This is perhaps the biggest of all the perceived barriers and it's certainly true that there are some

people who spend utter fortunes on their sailing – even dinghy sailors can be guilty of throwing eye-watering sums at their sport. But it needn't be like that – there are also thousands of people who race dinghies worth only a few hundred pounds on very modest annual budgets.

The biggest boat shows, with their dazzling multi-million pound exhibits, don't help with this commonly held view, but a visit to the Dinghy Sailing Show at Alexandra Palace in north London will show a very different side to sailing. Here you'll find enthusiasts representing over 100 dinghies and class associations, ranging from popular fast and fun classics such as the Fireball that can be picked up for less than £1,000, to the latest hi-tech designs with five-figure price tags. The show also has leading brands for holidays and equipment. This year's show takes place from March 1-2, 2008, find out more at [www.dinghysailingshow.org.uk](http://www.dinghysailingshow.org.uk)

Membership of sailing clubs tends to be much cheaper than that of golf clubs, especially those on the coast (most inland water clubs have to pay fees to the water utility companies which can put the prices up a bit) with costs varying upwards from as little as £30 a year. Don't write off joining a small club for getting started, they can be much more friendly and approachable than some of the larger and more expensive establishments.

Of course, one of the easiest ways to keep costs





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**Above** If you don't fancy getting cold and wet, learning on holiday is a great option.

**Right** Keelboat and yacht racing is also accessible to all levels – many sail training schools offer race-specific training.

down is not to own a boat at all – fortunately boat owners at all levels are always looking for people to crew. Often this is a great way to build your skills level, learning from people who are more experienced than yourself. As your own expertise increases, you'll be increasingly in demand from better helms. There can be very few dinghy sailing clubs where there's not a demand for crew. Equally, if you want to sail offshore, big boats need lots of people to sail them, so the majority of people who race offshore never own a boat of their own.

Before offering yourself as a race crew, you'll probably need to get at least a small amount of experience. Many clubs around the country provide training that may be exactly what you're looking for. Alternatively, a course at an RYA-recognised sailing school will get you started. These are run throughout the UK and cover dinghy sailing and racing, as well as big boat sailing, although the latter is geared mostly to the needs of cruising sailors. Prices start from little more than £100 for a weekend.

Those wanting to race big boats are catered for by many sea schools, such as Sailing Logic, On Deck Sailing and Five Star Sailing, where training that's geared specifically to yacht racing is followed by competing in inshore or offshore races.

Of course, once you're utterly hooked on racing, it becomes easier to justify spending more money on sailing, even if savings need to be made elsewhere.

**'But what about the time commitment – it dominates the lives of all my friends who sail?'**

It's true that the lives of many of the sport's enthusiasts revolve around their sailing commitments, but that's as much a sign of the enjoyment and satisfaction they get from the sport. It certainly need not be the case – there are many people who restrict their racing to just one evening a week in the height of summer.

Many clubs recognise that their members have many other obligations and so have racing only at very specific times – for instance on Saturday mornings – which keeps the rest of the weekend

free for other activities.

**'Isn't racing only for the super-fit? I don't have the fitness or co-ordination for it!'**

It's true that if you want to compete at the very top level internationally, then you'll need to be as fit and just as well trained as an Olympic athlete in any other discipline. But if your aim is to have fun on the water and become a reasonable club sailor, then it's a different matter – a wide spread of ages, physiques and even disabilities are often able to compete on level terms. The 2006 national championship for the 19ft Squib keelboat, held at Royal Victoria YC, for instance, attracted crews ranging in age from 10-84 years among the near 100-strong entry.

**'I'd really like to give sailing a try, but don't want to be put off if my first experiences are bad weather and cold water.'**

This is a very common and totally understandable sentiment, which is why almost 50 per cent of people who give sailing a try now do so for the first time while on holiday in the sun. There are an ever-growing number of companies offering watersports package holidays, varying from the low-key and relaxed participation to those with the latest top of the range racing craft.

Don't worry, though, if you're one of the other 50 per cent who get their first experiences in the UK – modern sailing clothing is fantastic, and virtually everyone finds it a positive experience, irrespective of the weather. ■

**Learn more...**  
 This series will include starting dinghy racing, multihulls, keelboats and Sportsboats, as well as big boat round-the-cans, offshore and ocean racing. It will also look at where to sail, including learning in the sun, choosing a first boat, and improving your technique. Next issue: how to get initial experience.