



SCHOOLS IN FOR WINTER

WARM WEATHER AND AN EXOTIC LOCALE MAKE LIVEBOARD SAILING CLASSES IDEAL WINTER GETAWAYS

BY MARK CORKE AND DAVE BALDWIN

Sextants and Sunshine

Some sailors detest chart work; they think it unnecessary nonsense. I enjoy plotting courses the old-fashioned way and making landfalls at new anchorages. Lured by visions of Tahiti's legendary lagoons and a 100-mile passage through the South Pacific, I signed up for Modern Sailing Academy's 10-day trip aboard a Beneteau Oceanis 473, which offered an optional ASA Offshore Passagemaking certification course, and met skipper John Connolly and the rest of the crew in Papeete.

My shipmates were a mortgage broker and a financial-services specialist from San Francisco and a massage therapist and a retiree, both from Florida. We represented a variety of expectations, aspirations, and sailing experience, but all of us hoped to gain valuable knowledge in a location far removed from our normal cruising grounds. An advanced course like this one examines every aspect of life aboard, from provisioning (which we did in the market at Papeete) to assigning watches; it can be somewhat intense, but John took care to make sure that it was fun.

Provisioning accomplished, we set out for Moorea, a good afternoon's sail to the west. For most of the year the easterly trade winds make for consistent and predictable sailing conditions. Moorea hove into view not long after we left Tahiti, and most of us were happy to navigate from the fresh air of the cockpit while we activated our sea legs. The swells picked us up and swept us forward, giving us a fast and exciting sleigh ride.

I was glad it was still light as we went through the pass in the reef and into the anchorage at Cook's Bay. Each of us checked and rechecked the course on the chart and in the pilot book since navigation marks are few and far between, and a good pair of binoculars proved to be as important as any electronic gizmo. This is just the sort of navigation I like, and an anchorage gained through skillful piloting brought all of us a warm feeling of satisfaction. The next day some of the crew explored while I practiced with the sextant. Celestial navigation is a requirement for Offshore Passagemaking certification, though not part of this cruise; however, everyone had a go at taking a sight. I've always been



Tahiti: Anchoring skills are learned



Tahiti: Terri learns sextant basics from John

fascinated by the idea that with the aid of some simple tables, a sextant, and a clock, you can find your position anywhere on the earth's surface.

The following evening we set off on our longest leg, 130 miles to Raiatea, a north-west course almost dead downwind. John split the crew into watches, and I tried to get some sleep once we were clear of Moorea's reef. I appeared on deck at the appointed hour and relieved Chad, the mortgage broker, at the wheel.

It was a rough night, and the boat slammed in the short, steep waves. Things jumped off shelves and doors crashed open and shut as we raced along. In the rain and dark of the night, the only indication that Raiatea really existed was the dot on the chartplotter screen and the track line tracing our path toward the eastern pass in its encircling reef. Although we used the chartplotter for checking our position, for much of the time we turned it off and relied on dead-reckoning, updating our position hourly on the chart. I was on watch when the mist lifted long enough for me to get a bearing on Huahine, which we passed to the south. At dawn we were close to our objective, and everyone came up on deck for the tricky piloting through the reef.

Raiatea and neighboring Tahaa share a reef, making it possible to sail completely around both islands without leaving the safety of the lagoon. The smooth water and breezy conditions seemed ideal for the

There was plenty of time to brush up on knots and ropework



Beneteau, and we took advantage of the opportunity to practice anchoring and close-quarters maneuvering.

Bora-Bora lay shrouded in clouds to our north. Although the distance is short, the navigation can be tricky, and the only entrance to Bora-Bora's lagoon, on the far side of the island, requires a dogleg around the southwest corner of the low reef. Underestimating the time it would take us to get to the pass gave us a demonstration of the importance of passage planning; we arrived late and had to fight a strong ebb current to get through. Those of us unaccustomed to the European cardinal marks ("green right returning") got an additional lesson. Fortunately, we had a few days to relax and play in Bora-Bora's lagoon before returning the

boat to Raiatea.

The main objective of this adventure was for participants to gain insight into offshore passagemaking. I had the option to take the ASA Offshore Passagemaking exam at a later date, and after this experience I think I would have passed. ▲ M.C.

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CERTIFICATION

Both the American Sailing Association (ASA) and US Sailing offer progressive certification courses, but although they have similar course offerings, they are not interchangeable. When switching between the organizations you will be required to take an equivalency exam and be subject to review by an instructor.

Charlie Nobles, executive director of ASA, recommends certification for both beginning and experienced sailors. "If you've never sailed, it is the quickest and best way to become a confident sailor. If you are experienced, certification can prepare you for emergencies and teach you the subtleties of performance." Liveaboard courses offer a fast track to certification and an introduction to chartering—and beyond. And with exotic locations to choose from, liveaboard courses can be a great vacation.

