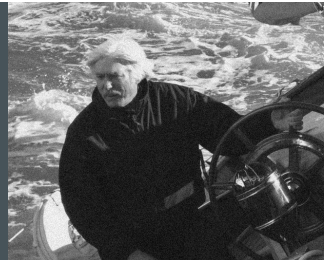


Tom Cunliffe



So, you want to be a sailing instructor?



Tom gives us the low-down

I suppose an outsider could be forgiven for imagining that a sailing instructor's life is one of unmitigated pleasure. After all, most of us leisure sailors spend a large part of our working year living for the day when we don the deck shoes and cosy tops to toddle down to the boat for a spot of yachting. We crave the close, steamy confines of a tiny cabin where the most impossible individuals become friends. There, discomforts of a magnitude that Dickens and other social reformers fought against are accepted as some sort of Nirvana. Sleep deprivation is charmed into adventure when laced with a few dollops of cold salt spray, so that the prospect of beating down the back of the Wight on a late autumn night into the filthy sea kicked up by the carefully calculated fair tide obsesses our desk-bound hearts like the sort of fetish reserved for less healthful pursuits by wayward MPs.

For better or worse, we have chosen to take to the sea in our leisure time, but what of the poor devil perched on the backstay of a training yacht for six days a week all the year round? How does he feel about it - or she for that matter? There is undoubtedly a serious comprehension gap between the professional and the person who sails with no intention of ever being paid for it. When you consider the realities of the vocation carefully, an instructor's motives seem far from obvious.

Pay is not good, even for the few who achieve the dizzy heights of Yachtmaster Instructor. It may also be sporadic, so not even they can be out there for the money. Job security, with a few notable exceptions, stinks. Nobody teaches sailing because they are concerned about being able to stump up for next year's mortgage.

Pensions? That's a laugh! On a geological scale the profession is still in its infancy, but research to date indicates that sailing instructors who have not been certified insane after a protracted tour of duty are likely to pop their wellies and patronise the local funeral parlour prematurely. Despite these pointers to a cheap deal for the pension funds, schools are still unaccountably reluctant to offer such schemes as an inducement to employees.

Working conditions would give a union convenor apoplexy before he, too, was bundled ashore with a nasty case of trench foot. Nineteenth-century governments collapsed over the living standards of industrial labourers, yet the shelter enjoyed by those working classes was arguably superior to that of an instructor dossing down between the drips in a condensation-ridden quarter berth.



This sailing instructor might not always agree with the name given to his boat

Socially also, the luckless tutor of our sport is in the cheap seats. Office workers condemned to toil amongst people not of their choosing who drive them to drink, violence, or both, can escape to the peaceful haven of the five-thirty from Euston. Our hero, on the other hand, must bear with all-comers and be a friend to everyone on board. Even in those too-brief hours off watch during the sixty and seventy-hour weeks, the death-rattle snores of the person all hands would wish elsewhere is a constant incitement to crime which must be resisted, regardless of the stress which results. It wouldn't be difficult to go on...

I speak with some authority because I worked for several years amongst the downtrodden in the slums of the Solent marinas. Mostly in those days I ran instructor courses, confirming acolyte members into the fellowship; but in that word lies part of the secret of why we carry on, for 'fellowship' it surely is.



Teaching sailing is not a glamorous job. Like most good news, competent instructors don't make the headlines. They do, however, discover great job satisfaction and a camaraderie that is second to none. The Dunkirk Spirit is abroad out there on the blustering nights of winter courses, and there is more meaning in the casual nod exchanged between instructors from different ends of the English Channel as their yachts pass at dusk than in many a handshake at the boardroom table.

Another plus for sailing instructors is that although they visit certain ports more frequently than they might wish, most at least arrive as part of a happy ship. In my early years of long-distance yachting I was served a typical helping of 'aggro' in small craft, from dark mutterings through slanging matches to outright violence. This sort of carry-on is almost unheard of in well-run teaching boats. I cannot remember the last time a student tried to brain the instructor with a CQR, and the incidence of recorded homicide of the customers is also mercifully small. There have been apocryphal incidents of freaked-out instructors being tear-gassed in France by the gendarmes but sadly, in an ever more colourless world, a student's chances of partaking in such an incident are becoming less than those of contracting food poisoning from a supermarket sausage.

The main reason for this state of harmony is that the group on board benefits from a strong lead and everybody is motivated in the same direction. The authority of good instructors is rarely challenged and their minds are free to concentrate on the job. A cynic might respond that courses last only five or six days, and a healthy adult can put up with almost anything for that long, but he would be reckoning without the large proportion of repeat business enjoyed by most schools.

For an instructor at sea week after week with different crews, this sense of belonging is crucial. In this respect, a pattern developed in my own feelings that was at first disturbing, but which later became a source of reassurance. By Thursday, the skipper and students had integrated into a multi-faceted community with strong man, comedian, philosopher, boffin, mother-earth, chief party-goer, swot and the rest having established themselves in one another's lives.

Some degree of mutual support was also in place, and heaven help anyone from another yacht who criticised ours or any of our people. We may have groaned amongst ourselves about the food, the dodgy engine or the blown-out genoa with as much camber as a tablecloth, but if an outsider passed a remark we'd fight to protect our ship's good name. All this dissolved as the team debriefed, cleaned ship and wandered away to their cars. Not only was I sorry to see them go, I was also filled with apprehension concerning next week's crowd. How could they possibly measure up to the folks who just left?



*How can
next week's
crew possibly
measure up
to the ones
signing off?*



As the new crew pitched up, my apprehension often deepened yet, after three days, history repeated itself and the old Contessa's rigging once again rattled with laughter.

I've always been faintly annoyed when people at parties say to me, 'You're a lucky fellow, aren't you? You do as a job what the rest of us only manage to achieve for a few weeks a year.'

In response, I find myself reeling off the list of horrors mentioned briefly in this article, and being terribly blasé about the whole business; but really, I am a hypocrite of proportions that would have impressed Mr Pecksniff. The truth is, I was out there because I loved to sail. When I bailed out of the law to go yachting I knew I would never be rich and I dimly realised that physical comfort would often be in short supply, but I had a yearning for the feel of a boat leaning to the wind that would neither be denied nor relegated to an occasional pleasure. For me and my colleagues in the trade, sailing has to be more than that. Like the Cape Horners before us, it must be a way of life.

Instruction is an important part of our calling, though few continue with it indefinitely. There are many ways to follow the sea, but we all know that during the years when we are passing on to others those skills we have, we are learning more about our profession and ourselves than at any other period in our careers.



There's great job satisfaction in passing on age-old skills

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