

Intro sailing excursion takes advantage of blissful Gulf-Islands route

Training includes rescue drill

BY CHRISTOF MARTI, VANCOUVER SUN SEPTEMBER 19, 2013



The crew hailed from Canada, Mexico and Singapore aboard the Celeste for a five-day sailing course.

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The water was flat, almost glassy, with a silver shimmer when Celeste, our boat for the week, pulled out of the marina and made its way to the Harbour Green Park where a new group of sailing students was waiting to embark on a five-day cruise through the Gulf Islands.

The crew hailed from Canada, Mexico and Singapore.

It was a busy Monday morning with float planes taking off in Coal Harbour, chunky cargo ships loaded with bulk goods proceeding toward the Lions Gate Bridge, and tug boats buzzing through the harbour on their way to pick up the next load.

Celeste gently touched the Harbour Green dock and one of the students made fast the mooring lines. After introductions and a short safety briefing, it was our turn to cast off the bow lines and make our way toward English Bay. As we slid under the Lions Gate Bridge, passing Prospect Point, a group of tourists cheerfully waved at our red boat.

Out of the bay, with a fresh breeze we hoisted the sails. The white sails, contrasting beautifully against the blue sky, propel the boat forward. Celeste cut through the waves, spray flying off the bow like pearls glittering in the sunlight. The students all take turns at the helm, getting a feel for the boat and taking their first steps to become a sailor. It was a delightful crossing in sunshine and a steady wind. Later in the afternoon, Vancouver disappeared in the distance and we entered the Gulf Islands through Gabriola Pass.

Celeste comes to a stop at Pirates Cove, with the anchor firmly dug into the muddy seabed. After a long day, we enjoyed steak from the barbecue and a glass of wine. We watched a spectacular sunset while the boat was gently pulling on its anchor line in the light evening breeze. Anchoring offers the opportunity to explore some of the islands, learn about their colourful history or just take a stroll along the beach.

The days were filled with sail practice, reading charts (the nautical term for “map”), understanding aids to navigation and exploring picturesque islands and coves. Learning to sail in many ways is like studying a new language: There are countless unique terms to memorize. The unfamiliar environment, the movement of the boat and the every changing wind conditions can be overwhelming.

However, by the end of Day 2 the novice sailors manage to take the boat through the basic manoeuvres on their own. The new skippers shout commands from the helm like professionals and their able crew carry out the manoeuvres with precision.

Halfway through the course we tied up at Ganges Marina on Saltspring Island. The crew took a break from boat duties, had a hot shower and dinner at Calvin’s, the Swiss restaurant with a patio overlooking the harbour.

After our brief visit to Ganges, we left the harbour, set the sails and pointed the bow toward Trincomali Channel heading north between the rolling hills of Saltspring Island and the towering cliffs of Galiano Island.

In Trincomali Channel we often find wind even when the Strait of Georgia is calm during those sunny summer days. The channel was named after the HMS Trincomalee. Built 1812 in Bombay, India, she can now be seen at the dockyard museum in Hartlepool, England. This makes her the oldest boat of the Royal Navy still afloat.

These waters claimed many boats over the years. Small lighthouses, buoys and GPS have made travelling much safer compared to the early days when Captain Vancouver, Valdes and Galiano charted B.C.’s coastline in search of the elusive Northwest Passage.

That day we practised crew overboard manoeuvres. At that point someone asked if they had to jump in the water. On that hot summer day, it sure would have been a treat. Being cautious sailors though, we all stayed aboard. Instead, I introduced Charly (an old life vest) which had to go yet for another plunge into the cold water only to be rescued by the students. This manoeuvre is a great practice

and usually a lot of fun, with the students shouting encouraging words to soggy and cold Charly.

For our last night in the Gulf Islands we set anchor in North Cove, a protected and often empty anchorage on Thetis Island. On the menu was barbecued wild sockeye salmon, steamed rice, fresh salad and a glass of chilled white wine. The sun set and the moon rose over the island, its dim white light reflecting on the glasslike ocean. We turned in for an early night to be ready for the crossing back to Vancouver in the forecasted strong winds.

We woke up to a calm morning, but as we entered the Strait of Georgia the wind steadily increased in strength until it blew at 20 to 25 knots, making for very exciting sailing. The students, now mastering the sailboat, had a blast and we hurled across the ocean, punching through waves and spray frequently drenching the deck. Everybody had a smile on their face when we docked in Coal Harbour where we left only five days ago. Another great sailing adventure came to an end and the students went home with rich experience and what I only can hope a new passion to pursue in their lives.

I am writing this sitting at anchorage in Princes Cove, with another group of students. Two just went off to explore the island in the crisp morning air, while the other two rest for a little longer. The blue sky, some scattered white clouds and a light breeze promise another joyful day on the water.

Christof Marti is the owner of [Simply Sailing School](http://simplysailing.ca) in Vancouver (simplysailing.ca) and is a director on the Board of BC Sailing. Trained as an engineer and with an MBA in finance, Christof is also a qualified sailing instructor and a certified Yachtmaster. He will be filing reports from B.C.'s coastal waters over the season.

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