



A Week in the Life of a sail training voyage

This is the story of a week in the life of a 70ft steel ocean going ketch that belongs to the sail training organisation, Ocean Youth Trust North (OYT North).

The groups of young people we have on board come from many different backgrounds. Most of them have never set foot on a boat before. From our stand point they have one thing in common ~ they all start with a clean slate as we rarely know anything about them, and their past is not relevant to what we do.

When the crew arrive they find themselves bunks and lockers, unpack and settle in for a while before we play the name game. Here we all sit around the big saloon table and everybody tells us their name, their expectations, their fears and what they would like to get out of the week.

The hard bit is having to recall and recite the names of everyone who has spoken before. Most people forget someone at the start but by the end of the session we all can remember most names. The young crew members also meet the volunteer sea staff and learn about their roles during the week.

Next come some practical sessions below deck.

They learn how to use sea toilets, light the gas cooker and find some waterproofs. They practice fitting their lifejackets ~ you can't do this alone and they find they have to help each other ~ then they are each given their own safety harness. The crew is not allowed on deck at sea without being attached to special safety lines running around the boat that prevent them from falling overboard.

Up on deck they learn how to tie useful knots, and how to prepare the boat for sea and for coming alongside in port. They are shown the safety equipment and everybody is allocated to a watch and gets a place on the cooking and cleaning rotas.

After dinner we have the doom and gloom chat where we brainstorm 'all the things that could possibly go wrong at sea'. The intention is not to frighten everybody but to make them aware of how they could be injured and how to avoid it. This is vital ~ and we have a very good safety record.

We cover in detail man-overboard, fire, collision and seasickness and how to prevent them. Before we go to bed we sit around the table with a chart of the North Sea and I ask them where they would like to sail. This leads on to learning how to measure distance and estimate voyage



James Cook under full sail



Planning for tomorrow

time and we soon work out that going to Norway is not always an option, even if all of the crew had brought their passports. On some voyages we do cross the North Sea to the Baltic, we take part in the Tall Ships Races and have sailed to Iceland, but that is another story.

When I ask them what affects where we can go in a sailing ship they always come up with wind and weather and then someone remembers the tide, the effect of which I compare to a moving walkway ~ going with it, your speed over the ground is faster ~ try to walk in the opposite direction and you struggle. We discuss the wind, where the boat can and can't sail, the various motions it makes, and then we get a weather forecast and decide where we will go over the next few days. We have made an outline plan.

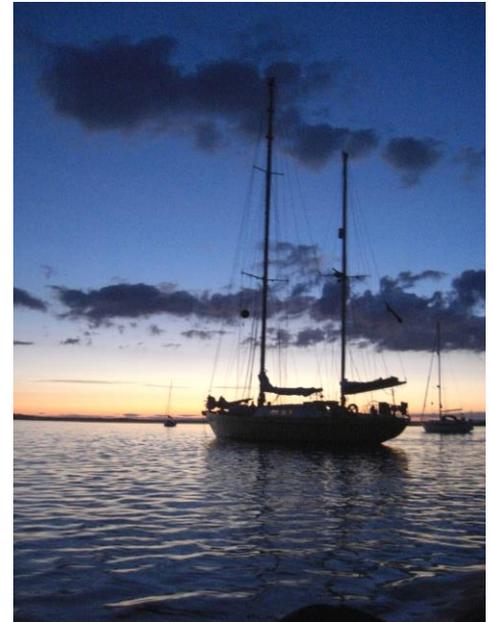
The young crew works out how long it will take them to get there, adding on time for getting the sails up and down at either end of the passage. They add to this an estimate of how long it will take to get up, get dressed and have breakfast, then they can work out what time we need to get up in the morning and therefore at what time to have some hot chocolate and go to bed. It is usually an early night.

The first day's sailing is always a challenge. We tell them it will be and we warn them that they will be taken out of their comfort zones where everything is warm and familiar. They may end up tired, sick and cold but despite this there is work that must be done to sail the boat. Each crew member must stand a watch. It normally takes a long time to get the boat ready and to get the sails up as it is their first time and they are not yet working as a team.

Then comes the man-overboard drill. Here they learn their roles in a recovery and how difficult it is not to lose sight of a person's head bobbing in and out of the waves. They observe just how much other work is involved in transmitting a Mayday on the radio while stopping the boat and manoeuvring it back alongside the person in the water, then physically getting the casualty back on board and treated for hypothermia and shock. The casualty may then need a transfer to a helicopter or the lifeboat. The conclusion? It is best to stay clipped on to the safety lines!

On passage we teach the crew how to steer a compass course, or to the wind, and what to look out for when they are on watch when they are responsible for the safety of the ship. They learn how to complete the ship's log every hour on the hour.

When we arrive at our destination everybody is involved in getting the sails down and preparing the boat to come alongside with lines and fenders. Once secured, we tidy up on deck and go down below for a hot drink. It's often been a long day. Most people in some measure have been sick, cold and tired and may be wondering just what they have let themselves in for.



Dusk ~ James Cook riding at anchor



Steering a steady course

After supper we reflect on the day, look at the chart and trace out where we have been, relating our experiences during the day to places on the chart. Then we discuss tomorrow. I ask them what they want to do. If it's been tough, they may decide they want some time ashore or they may decide that in order to get to their dream destination they need an early start.

They also need to learn that they cannot always get what they want. If the wind is in the wrong direction or the weather is too bad or the tides are wrong, then we simply cannot get there. Disappointing but that's life. They also learn the need to compromise because it has to be a group decision.

We encourage the young crew to talk to each other, to negotiate and to discuss, to take into consideration individual wishes and the strengths and weaknesses of the individual members of the team. For example, if it has been a windy day someone who has not been sick might be really keen to go out for a long sail in similar conditions whereas someone else who has been sick several times might want to go home. In the end it is a group decision and everybody has to agree and be a part of it.



Once more, all hands on deck

Each day we encourage the crew to get more involved in the running of the boat. They learn how to navigate, plot the ship's position on the chart using GPS and radar and help with pilotage in and out of harbour. Of course we don't spend all of our time at sea. We explore the places we visit, sometimes going ashore in the dinghy from an anchorage to have a barbecue and go swimming.

We organise activities in the ports we visit, and we have a big stock of games on the boat. Time is also needed for learning for those who want to achieve their RYA Competent Crew award, and time to just chill out.

We are an RYA teaching centre and are able to award nationally recognised certificates. We take learning seriously and have a professional development programme for all our sea staff and volunteers. People who have sailed with OYT are recognised in sailing circles for being well trained and doing things in a professional manner. Some go on to have careers at sea.

Those undertaking their DofE Award Silver or Gold expedition will take over the running of the boat, under the watchful eye of the sea staff, appointing their own skipper, mate and watchleaders, doing all their own passage planning and executing the plan. OYT North is a DofE Approved Activity Provider

At the end of the week we give the boat a thorough clean down and have a de-brief. Everybody shares their high and low points and their lasting memories. We award voyage certificates to all and Competent Crew certificates to those who have achieved. Then it's up on deck for a group photograph and time to go home.

This is usually an emotional moment with tearful farewells, promises to keep in touch, and to come back next season. Many do come back, others stay in touch by email and through our Facebook page, visiting the boat when she is in port.

Others sign up as potential volunteers to our Young Leadership Programme. They receive formal training and help out with refits sailing as bosuns and trainee mates. Many an OYT skipper including me started out like this. By the time they arrive home their photographs and a voyage report are on the OYT North website.



The end of a successful week at sea

We believe that the 'Challenge of the Sea' can help people to learn teamwork and mutual trust. We make them take responsibility for their own actions and decisions, and encourage them to develop a sense of equality and fairness, with an understanding of the different needs and backgrounds of others. The young people will learn a range of seamanship skills and acquire an awareness of the environment. Most of all they will have had fun..... This is our mission.