

Sailing the Summit

Every year the Black Boaters Summit introduces new sailors to the sport with a lot of fun and fraternity thrown in

By Joan Gilmore with photography by Adam Colson

Seeing someone go from student to sailor is one of the biggest thrills for a sailing instructor, and I especially enjoy seeing that transformation every summer when I lead a group of black sailors, many of whom have never sailed before, in a sail training course in the British Virgin Islands as part of the Black Boaters Summit.

“Never in my 54 years has a transformation of such magnitude occurred in such a short time,” said Audrey Peterman, who along with her husband Frank and three other students, not only learned to sail, but became certified by the American Sailing Association to skipper 30- to 50-foot sailboats in coastal waters. All in just two weeks.

Audrey’s “transformation” is just one of the magical moments that comprise Black Boaters Summit, held each August in the British Virgin Islands. For nearly a decade African Americans have been meeting to sail together as part of an annual, weeklong floating party, dedicated to learning, networking, making friends and simply having fun.

The success of this unique event rests primarily with the summit’s organizer, Paul Mixon. A sailor of 30 years, Mixon started out in 1998 with a one-boat event that grew to two boats the next year, and is now a growing fleet of 24 charter sailboats.

Early on Mixon was approached by Sun Yacht Charters at a Strictly Sail conference in Oakland, California, which offered to front him six boats if he could fill them with African American sailors. Mixon contacted the National Brotherhood of Skiers, a predominantly African American downhill skiers’ organization with a membership of 16,000, and ended up filling 10 boats, charging just \$350 per person for the week.



Mixon attributes the growth of his event partly to the size of the market. “African Americans represent \$540 billion in annual income, and of that, \$40 billion is spent annually in the travel industry,” he said.

After watching the event grow for six years, Mixon started having trouble finding captains for all the boats that were filling up. The idea of training new captains was considered, and as an ASA instructor evaluator I talked to Mixon about starting a training program that would take those new to the water up to the level where they would be able to skipper a boat of BBS participants.

Previous to the sail training, the BBS was held on chartered yachts carrying eight to 10 crewmembers. I told Mixon that I felt his students needed to start out learning on smaller

boats. Lots of people who learn on big boats try to sail smaller boats and flip them.

“That’s me,” Mixon replied. “I learned on a big boat and I couldn’t sail a small boat to save my life.” So we decided to create sailors with excellent all-around skills that they could take back home, teach others and inspire more new sailors. Each sailor would learn the basics on a small keelboat, then move up to the bigger liveaboard boats after their sailing skills were fine-tuned.

We contacted the Bitter End Yacht Club, which had recently purchased a fleet of brand new Hunter 216s. These small, stable yet responsive keelboats were perfect for introducing sailing to our group of summit attendees, whom Mixon describes as being “50-ish.” Now, new sailors spend a week at



the Bitter End Club and learn all of the basics on the Hunters while living aboard a 40- to 45-foot monohull that will become their teaching boat for the second week when they learn Basic Cruising and Bareboat Cruising.

Although created for the black community, BBS is open to people of every ethnicity. The yearly event provides a good chance for singles to meet each other, and romances tend to develop. Many couples and families also participate.

BBS participants come from all over the United States, mostly hailing from major cities of Washington D.C.; Chicago, Illinois; Atlanta, Georgia; Miami, Florida; and Oakland, California. Students come determined to pass the ASA certifications being offered. When not partying on shore, cooking,

The Black Boaters Summit is a time for learning and socializing. Clockwise from top left, Frank Peterman takes the helm; the crew enjoys a rousing sail while relaxing in the cockpit; a fellow charter boat sails under main alone; Frank practices tying a clove hitch; Audrey Peterman enjoys the view from the rail; the crew studies together in the cockpit.

socializing, or of course, sailing, they anxiously hit the books and study, study, study.

“That was one of the best sailing experiences of my life,” said Alan Johnson when I rejoined his group after their week of basic keelboat training. “Our group really bonded. I had such a wonderful time.” An instructor evaluator for the ASA, Johnson has worked with many student sailors from around the world, and is eagerly looking forward to working with another group during the 2006 BBS.

Instructors involved in the training often beg to be included in future BBS events. They even offer to teach without being paid and pay their own airfares. Why the enthusiastic reaction? The same reason this event has been going strong for eight years. BBS is all about community, friendship and reaching out to others in the close confines of a liveaboard situation.

Whether it’s kicking back and enjoying the scenery and gourmet meals cooked aboard, or perfecting sailing skills, there’s room for everybody at BBS. Some of my students this past year explained it well. Joyce, a graduate of last year’s bareboat training who returned to take the cruising catamaran course, noted the appeal of sailing with strangers. “When you do a trip like this, in close quarters, you get to know people quickly,” she said.

Another student named Celeste agreed, saying, “There’s no ownership of space.” In other words, the students are happy to relinquish their privacy and personal space in return for the camaraderie and support liveaboard sailing provides.

A tight-knit crew

At the beginning of the 2005 Black Boaters Summit week I met my new crew, who had just finished their week of basic keelboat training. They included Audrey, originally from Jamaica, and her husband Frank, a lawyer. Based in Atlanta together they head an organization devoted to introducing African-Americans to the wonders of America’s National Parks. They have traveled widely, but were experiencing sailing for the first time on this trip.

Also onboard were Shelly, a music teacher from California, Denise, from Washington D.C., and Dru, who is from St. Thomas. Both Denise and Dru hold doctorate degrees in education. Caroline, a childhood friend of Dru’s, was opting out of sailing lessons and came along just for the ride. Adam Colson, also from California, was onboard to relax as well and was busy documenting our trip with photographs.

The boat my new crew had shared during their first week had quite a few problems, so we moved our gear onto a beautiful Moorings 494 named *Seaduction*. After a quick course in navigation rules at the dock while waiting for our new boat, we set off for Gorda Sound and the first party of the week at Leverick Bay. From the start, the students did all of the steering and crewing.

The next day, we were enjoying a fine Sunday morning bobbing on our mooring ball, watching the little cove awaken, when a boat moored on a ball behind us put up both sails without starting her engine, and sailed straight into our bow. We had a life jacket and fender handy in the cockpit and used them to soften the impact, but the boat’s stanchion post was already lodged under our lifeline, as she was slightly

heeled over when she ran into us, and was still sailing.

I asked the boat's crew to loosen her jib and start the engine. Unfortunately, they immediately put the engine in forward gear, causing them to nearly run over our mooring ball. When I asked them to use reverse instead, they reversed away quickly, causing their forward stanchion post to bend into an upside-down L-shape as it scraped out from under our lifeline.

After this bit of excitement, we surveyed the damage and found that other than a big scratch on our bow there was no visible damage, though our entire bow pulpit wobbled a bit, as the stanchion post seatings had been enlarged by the stress. Both boats agreed to report to their respective charter companies.

After this experience our crew became handy with fenders, and attuned to noises, approaching boats and anything out of the ordinary at anchorages. In fact, when *Amistad* Capt. Bill Pinckney, who was skippering the catamaran I had trained students on the previous week, sailed off his mooring ball, with the engine running and a clear shot out with an offshore wind, our crew immediately mobilized to the topsides, bearing armfuls of fenders. The somewhat overly cautious students even put in a call to Pinckney on the VHF, warning him of the imprudence of sailing through a mooring ball field.

That afternoon we practiced docking at the Leverick Bay dock. Fourteen-knot winds were right on our nose at the dock, which made maneuvering tricky. A busy traffic day at the dock provided us with excellent practice.

After all the excitement of the day, we spent the night anchored in front of the Bitter End Resort. At The Pub, facing out over Gorda Sound, we enjoyed the self-accompanied guitar music of a man who called himself Prince.

Monday morning we set sail for Cane Garden Bay on a mostly broad reach along the north side of Tortola. We got a chance to practice dead reckoning navigation, triangulating our position along the way using our handheld compass, to ensure the correct anchorage was reached. We sailed into Cane Garden Bay at about the same time as the other 23 boats in our flotilla.

That night was dinner and a big party at Myett's on the beach. Coincidentally, our group of nearly 200 ended up at the same restaurant as another group of about 20 teenagers from a tall ship that was anchored in the bay that night. This was an unusual amount of business to descend on Myett's at a time of year when many resorts were closing for the season,

but the mix of mostly middle-aged BBS sailors and high-spirited teenagers, all dancing to upbeat Caribbean music, gave a great vibration to the night.

As our master of ceremonies, Mixon was enthusiastic and highly energized. Unlike many tour operators who practice "expectations management," Mixon just keeps tell-



As an instructor, it's hard work for the author. When not teaching the finer points of navigating, top, she's grading papers in the saloon, above left. But there are some rewards, such as receiving a relaxing massage from Audrey and washing hair with student Dru on the swimstep.

ing everyone how much fun we are going to have. He gets each night's party rolling with music and dancing, and by God, we do have as much fun as he promises.

Pinckney, the first African American to sail alone around the world, skips a BBS boat every year and he addressed the crowd at the party. "The sea is the only place

where it doesn't matter if you are rich or poor, black or white," he reminded us. "The only thing the sea cares about is whether you are prepared."

Tuesday morning at 7:30 was our first written exam for the basic coastal cruising portion of the course. Since everyone passed, we were ready to smile for the official BBS group photo on the beach. At 9 a.m. a call went out on the VHF, "All BBS members meet at the beach. Wear your BBS shirt; and don't forget your do-rags."

"Do-rags?" I asked. These are the kerchiefs we were each given in our "welcome pack," which are tied around the pate, pirate-style. Each BBS participant also received a red tank top, with black tanks for captains. On the beach that morning we got to meet everybody, including several families with children. The youngest BBS sailor was 8 years old.

Back onboard, my 12:30 lecture on safety procedures seemed to have a soporific effect on the hard-working crew, so we all hit the hay for an afternoon nap while a Caribbean thunderstorm rolled in, bringing an afternoon of rain.

We had to turn away the man who motored over later with his 6-year-old daughter to collect our overnight mooring fee. "No, we're anchoring tonight," we explained, getting a mystified look in return. Tonight was our night to practice Bahamian anchoring. After measuring out our anchor tackle on deck, we motored away a short distance to anchor just beyond the mooring field in 22 feet of water. Our anchoring job didn't pass the backing under power test, so we decided to creep in closer to shore. Dru skillfully motored ahead just as we reached eight feet of water. We decided to set our first anchor, then drop our second anchor by dinghy to hold us away from the shore.

Our boat's auxiliary anchor was more a spare primary than a second anchor; a 40-pound Danforth with 100 feet of heavy chain attached. Adam and Frank loaded it into the dinghy and rowed out straight to seaward of our boat, wrestling the heavy Danforth over the side after stretching out the 100 feet of chain and line and dropping it into the better than 30 feet of depth.

With the second anchor down we were holding between our two anchors, moving not more than 10 feet in either direction. As the men stepped back aboard, Audrey handed each of them a double rum and Coke for their double-anchoring efforts.

That night Frank fired up the grill to create a symphony of Cornish game hens,

skewers of scallops and a delicious salad. Then Audrey, the world's best non-professional massage therapist, gave me a neck and shoulder massage that turned me into a cockpit jellyfish.

Meeting the landlubbers

Thursday night was another party at Norman Island. That night the BBS Landlubbers would be joining us. The Landlubber Special was a new twist for the BBS, allowing those who prefer earth to water to stay at the luxurious Westin Resort on St. John, then come by chartered boat to meet the rest of us for two nights of partying.

As we landed on the Norman Island shore that night in our dinghy, sweaty from our busy day practicing MOB maneuvers, we were met by 30 beautifully dressed and coiffed young women. Next to us and the rest of the salty BBS brigade crawling out of our dinghies, these ladies appeared to have just stepped off the set of a fashion photo shoot. BBS events of the past had attracted more male than female participants, but this year's Landlubber Special brought more women to BBS, resulting in a rather lopsided gender representation.

A large yacht deposited the 84 "Landlubbers" at Pirates Bar on Norman Island at 5 p.m., and by 9:30 the Bight was abuzz with cigarette boats, as the local men

began to catch wind of the arrival of the beautiful visitors. The only problem was that the big charter yacht returned promptly at 9 p.m., pumpkin coach-style, to whisk the ladies back to the Westin.

The powerboats' engines became increasingly louder and more frustrated as the locals who had jetted out that night to meet the visiting goddesses realized that they were too late. By this time, our tired crew was back onboard, so each round of buzz-



Summit attendees joke around at Cane Garden Bay.

ing, circling disappointment emanating from a cigarette boat's engine brought alert crewmembers popping out of the cockpit, bearing fenders like Minuteman rifles. My crew was still experiencing post-traumatic stress from our mooring ball ramming the

first day of the cruise. The positive result of it was that the crew had developed a sensitive ear for anything potentially menacing, and had become very spry about deploying deflective fenders at a moment's notice.

By the end of the week, everyone had passed the bareboat cruising certification and was ready to return home, practice their new skills, and start planning for BBS 2006. Audrey summed up the feelings of all of the students when she said, "I didn't know that I'd fall so passionately in love with this sport that now I want it to become our way of life."

"Until fairly recently, cruising has been an elitist sport," Mixon noted. "With the advent of the charter companies in the 1970s, sailing has become available to more people. The sailing industry tells us that the greatest crossover in any sport is between sailing and skiing. Guess which group is the fastest growing segment in skiing. That's right, African Americans."

BBS fills a need for many people who may be the only black people in their yacht clubs at home. This gathering provides a way for people to come together to share their cultural background and their love of sailing.

For more on the Black Boaters Summit, contact Honey Let's Travel at (510) 222-6308, www.honeyletstravel.com.

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