

OLD YACHTS MAKE NEW FRIENDS

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BOATING SPECIAL, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

Professionally crewed yachts do battle on our bays every Australia Day weekend but it's the lesser known boats from generations past that really put colour into the summer yachting season; and give unskilled land-lubbers like me the chance to get amongst the glory.

My first experience sailing was the result of someone I knew who needed crew, and I figured he must have been pretty hard-up to have asked me. That's the great thing about people who own yachts, they always need a hand to sail them. I turned up to the yacht club with some warm clothes, some bread-rolls for lunch and very little idea of how to sail.

There were more knowledgeable characters on the boat with me, and I made myself useful and discovered a new pleasure. After ten years of being told which rope to grab and where to put my feet to avoid falling over I can call myself a yachtie.

I still marvel at the pleasure of getting onto the bay for a sail. In less than an hour you can leave the office in the city and be out on the water with views of St Kilda and beyond.

Several yacht clubs operate twilight races during the summer, which encourage yacht owners out for a mid-week sail and lets anyone with an interest join a crew for the evening. If you go sailing with one of the slower boats, the bonus is a little extra time on the water to enjoy the sights. As the sun gets closer to dusk you may even hear that chatter of fairy penguins rafting up near the breakwater at St Kilda. It's time well spent.

I had the pleasure to begin my sailing on a classic wooden yacht, a living piece of history hand-built in a Geelong backyard. The yacht in question is called "Scimitar", and she is the product of three generations in the Purcell family. A true labour of love, and a family heirloom now enjoyed by a fourth generation of the family.

Her current custodian and skipper is a white-moustached "old salt" by the name of Barry Purcell, one of those truly remarkable individuals whose talented career in engineering is matched only by his dedication to the boat. It was Barry's father who commissioned construction in 1956, and it took another 30 years before she finally entered the water.

Sadly Barry's father did not live to see the yacht launched, but to this day his photo is carefully preserved below the decks to join the crew on every voyage.

I have sailed with Barry from Williamstown to Geelong many times, making the Australia Day Weekend passage race that marks the great spectacle of Skandia Geelong Week. To be out on the bay with some of the big boats is pretty special, no matter where you finish up in the rankings.

I can't say that "Scimitar" sails any faster when I'm in the crew, but I must admit that I wasn't on the boat last year when she won the overall division for classic yachts.

Racing seems a funny word to apply to these timber yachts and their crew of gentlemen. On any downwind leg the sails are loosened off to run with the wind and crew relax on deck with drinks and a sandwich. I've enjoyed a few cat-naps on the foredeck during this stage of a race, occasionally to be awakened by playful dolphins or idle chatter from a passing competitor.

It's not a bad way to work on your tan.

Gaining some skills on the water can be a stepping stone to bigger things of course, and the dream of sailing across the world or in a Sydney to Hobart race is always a possibility. But with a few big events headed our way this summer there's enough action and twilights on our own bay to keep me busy.

Besides, I still haven't learned what all the ropes are for.

