

# INSTANT SAILING?

*How people go sailing is changing, but the future of yachting looks easy, says Theo Stocker*



**ABOVE:**  
Are easy-entry sports such as paddleboarding putting sailing under threat?

**E**veryone knows that sailing, specifically yacht cruising, is one of the most enjoyable and rewarding pastimes that exist on this blue planet of ours. The sheer simplicity of being propelled across tracts of water by nothing more than a few zephyrs and arriving safely in an idyllic harbour, guided solely by your own navigation, is a miraculous experience.

The essential qualities of sailing have changed little, but yachting as we know it in the UK is facing something of a crisis. Participation is declining, and the structures of clubs, associations, training schemes, manufacturers and dealers are all under threat as a result. Sailing isn't about to disappear, but the tremendous work that has gone into building the sport from the ground up could be frittered away.

Why does it matter? Of course, we want to share it with others who haven't yet discovered the joys of sailing, but without a healthy and diverse sailing community across the country, the clubs, training

centres, chandlers, boat builders and marinas that facilitate our own sailing will be at risk too.

Making sailing attractive, accessible and affordable to newcomers to the sport is crucial if we want to avoid yachting from becoming the reserve of an elite few. Clearly how people spend their free time and money is changing, while competition from new sports, a changing demographic, a digitally connected society, and demand for spontaneous and easy access all present challenges for sailing.

If I may, I would like to put my head above the parapet with some suggestions of how these challenges might be met.

## **PAY-AS-YOU-GO SAILING**

The research shows that people want instant, spontaneous, and affordable access to boating without the cost or time commitments of buying a boat and joining a club. Many clubs around the country are finding novel and effective ways of removing barriers, but to do this, they have had to let go of the lingering 'members-only' attitude. They

are instead open, welcoming and accommodating, offering a range of activities that can easily be dipped into – hiring a paddleboard or a dinghy for an hour or two, for example – without being a fully paid-up member. Sailing clubs can offer schemes more like monthly gym membership, giving the newcomer access to various boats, instruction and facilities. Clubs that have done this have found that these people often then pass through into conventional club membership and boat ownership.

### SHARED OWNERSHIP

If people are spending just under £500 a year on their chosen sport, expensive equipment is going to put them off. Facilities that can be easily used or hired will be increasingly important. Armed forces sailing clubs have owned affordable charter yachts for members for years. It would be great to see more clubs doing this too.

The yachting industry could help by supplying yacht clubs and sailing centres on a lease basis, to be renewed every few years, and this might help ensure a healthy boat-building industry and keep up an attractive and modern hire fleet. Of course, members who already own yachts and volunteer to take novice crews out as part of club events are vital.

Similarly, boat syndicates are flourishing. Sailors are opting for shared ownership, meaning they can get a bigger boat with more space for their families, while the costs and time needed to run the boat are shared.

### EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES

Experience-based events such as half-marathons, cycle sportives and obstacle races have exploded in popularity in the recent years. People

are more likely to have a go at a challenge that seems exciting, particularly if they can post pictures online afterwards. Events like the Three Peaks Yacht Race, the South West Three Peaks, and Round the Island Race, are likely to appeal if they can be opened up to newcomers.

On a smaller scale, local club events that are exciting, well publicised and open to the public might draw in new participants. A family cruise to a local beach for a barbecue lunch and then back in the evening for example, made affordable by a fleet of club members skippering their boats, could see lots of new sailors take to the water for the first time.

### MAKING IT EASY

Anything that can be done to reduce the daunting amount of time and money required to keep a boat has to be a good thing. Having recently spent a day trailer sailing, I was sold instantly. The idea that I could be sailing on Chichester Harbour in the morning, have the boat out of the water and ready to tow in 30 minutes, and at anchor on the west coast of Scotland by nightfall was hugely appealing. The lack of lift-out fees, simple maintenance, and the ability to dry out all help keep costs down, too. New ways of sailing that offer adventure on tap seem to fit the zeitgeist particularly well.

**BELOW:** Trailer sailing can be quick and convenient

**BELOW LEFT:** We're used to hiring bikes with the tap of a card, why not boats?



### COST OF MOORING

The average cost of mooring a boat needs to be reduced, certainly at the entry level. UK marina charges are often far higher than those on the continent. Most marinas have a number of berths that are not filled each year. Why not allocate these as family moorings, grouped together to make it sociable, where a family with children at home and a boat of under, say, 36ft might only pay a fraction

of the full cost for the first year or two. Couple this with some SUP boards and little sailing dinghies to borrow, as well as discounted entry to local attractions for rainy days, and going down to the boat becomes an attractive proposition for the family. Why not combine this with a yacht that can be booked out by members for the day or week?

For those who prefer swinging moorings, ensuring that these have a high level of facilities ashore, with a water taxi available, might provide a convenient, affordable alternative to marina moorings.

### COMMUNICATION

The whole sailing community needs to look at the products it offers to the general public, and at how it communicates these in an attractive way. For yacht clubs, they need to ensure they are offering activities that are attractive locally, and to publicise these in an effective way to new audiences. If it can be linked in to a national resource for finding and booking on-the-water experiences, so much the better.

