



Offshore Sailing School has graduated more than 130,000 sailors in its rich 50-year history, which includes a location in Southwest Florida.

COURTESY PHOTOS / OFFSHORE SAILING SCHOOL

Sailing the Southwest Florida way

BY NINCI THEORET
Florida Weekly Correspondent

Learn how to sail and you're opening your world to the poetry of wind and sea. "It was a truly amazing experience," says Elizabeth Hart of Buckingham, who took Offshore Sailing School's five-day learn-to-sail course this past August at South Seas Resort on Captiva Island. "I found out I didn't know I love being on the water."

Since Olympian and America's Cup sailor Steve Colgate opened the school with wife Doris in 1964, Offshore has graduated more than 130,000 sailors at five sailing-vacation campuses in Florida and the Caribbean and two locations in New York Harbor. The Fort Myers-based school offers three- and five-day introductory classes, corporate team-building programs and eight-day advanced courses enabling sailors for cruising aboard 26- to 47-foot cruising yachts. Sailors can also

pursue racing certification and passage-making for long-distance cruising.

February through April is high season for local sailing courses and optimal for cooperative weather and winds, according to Kevin Wensley, director of operations. The programs include classroom instruction and on-the-water experience.

Vacationers often take note of Offshore's programs at South Seas and the Pink Shell Beach Resort & Marina on Fort Myers Beach and schedule classes for their next visit, says marketing director Beth Oliver. The schools offer free instruction for up to three tweens and teens for families participating in its programs.

"It's a great opportunity for someone to learn a skill they can use the rest of their lives," Ms. Oliver says.

Locals such as Ms. Hart often plan their instruction as a staycation. She purposely selected South Seas so she wouldn't be tempted to drive home each night. Her



class included 17 others.

"It's one of the hardest things I've ever done and the best fun I've had with total strangers," she says. "This was a spur-of-the-moment decision and a huge step outside my comfort zone. Here I was in my late 50s, newly single and the kids have left home. Up until then, my only experience on the water was as a kid with my father getting the boat stuck."

Timothy Mitchell of Punta Gorda says he's always on the lookout for new experiences. "I'm from Kansas originally. We have the wind but no water," he jokes. "I always thought it would be fun to learn how to sail. I have my pilot's license and it was interesting to learn about the similarities between flying and sailing."

Mr. Mitchell completed the fast-track to cruising course, earning three certifications in eight days and the ability to charter up to 50-foot single-hull boats and catamarans. During the live-aboard experience, Mr. Mitchell and his classmates cruised along Southwest Florida's barrier islands from Fort Myers Beach to Charlotte Harbor and Gasparilla Island, preparing meals and spending nights on the boat. The all-inclusive price includes meals and the opportunity to sleep and shower ashore.

"A lot of international students complete fast-track so they can charter in the British Virgin Islands or The Moorings in Tortola," Ms. Oliver says. "We find there's usually one person in the family who wants to sail, learns and shares it with family members. Ultimately they want to be able to charter a boat on vacation, own a sailboat or enjoy sailing as part of their lifestyle. We take you from the couch to the captain's chair in one week."

Rick Lingsch, a part-time Naples resident, also enrolled in the fast-track course, learning advanced sailing skills on a cata-



COURTESY PHOTO / OFFSHORE SAILING SCHOOL

You don't have to be a veteran of the seas to learn how to sail.

maran about a year ago at Pink Shell.

"I had very little experience going in, so I was very diligent about reading the course materials in advance," he says. "I passed all the exams and eventually felt in control and pretty comfortable with the boat. It surprised me how much fun the class was."

Mr. Lingsch says he'd eventually like to buy a 40-foot catamaran and live most of the year in Southwest Florida on the boat. "I can now charter a boat for a week in the Caribbean and have a nice vacation."

Mr. Mitchell has taken the next step, purchasing a 29-foot Island Packet he's eager to use in warmer weather.

New sailors almost always learn something about themselves that they share on Offshore's evaluation forms. "Thousands of people still take the time to handwrite these lengthy reviews," Ms. Oliver says. "Almost all, 99,999 percent, are glowing and positive. They also talk about how it was a great family bonding experience."

The school's sailing bond extends beyond family. Offshore also offers corporate team-building programs, often for companies holding annual meetings or conferences at South Seas and Pink Shell. Half of its corporate business is repeat customers.

"(Sailing class) was a great chance to work collectively together in a new and different way. It was a little competitive, and at the end of our training we held a regatta. ... For us, any day on the water is more exciting than any day at a desk."

— Tamara Pigott
Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau

"There's a lot of synergy between business and sailing," Mr. Wensley says. "You have to perform as a team, have good communication and leadership, and adapt to a constantly changing environment. The whole is far greater than the sum of its parts. You have to think strategically and tactically."

That's exactly what Tamara Pigott and 24 employees of the Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau learned several years ago when they opted for a half-day learn-to-sail instead of the traditional holiday party.

"It was an amazing experience," says Ms. Pigott, executive director of the bureau. "It was a great chance to work collectively together in a new and different way. It was a little competitive, and at the end of our training we held a regatta."

"For us, any day on the water is more exciting than any day at a desk," she adds. "There were even a few people who'd never been on the water. It was invigorating, but tiring." ■



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