



Catching the Breeze

Goizueta program
culminates in a sail
on the high seas

BY CHRISTOPHER WANG O3BBA O9MBA



 Crewing the *Laurasia* (from left), Katherine Liu 09MBA, Tyler Crain 09MBA, Christopher Wang 03BBA 09MBA, Mike Kocan 09MBA, Serena Moore 09MBA, Goizueta development director Jeff Colburn, Paul Coloma 09MBA, and instructor William Baird.

Our taxi driver never lifted his foot from the accelerator as we sped around Beef Island, even though the minivan shook violently from surfing deep scallops in the roadway. I'm not sure exactly when we veered from the road, but we suddenly found ourselves bouncing along a gravel path through the woods. I clenched my hand tightly around the handle in front of me until the taxi finally emerged from the dense vegetation, revealing an astounding panoramic view of the island's southern bay.

Up ahead, our sailing instructors gathered on a heap of boulders at the edge of the path. In the luminous blue water behind them, a cluster of white sailboats swayed gently with their bows nodding up and down, as if to salute us.

The six of us leapt from the taxi and raced to find our skipper, William, who waited with his arms crossed and a dinghy's yellow towline in hand. Aboard our assigned boat, the *Laurasia*, we crammed bags into cabins and stowed food and drinks wherever they would fit. I marveled at the efficient interior of the ship, a fifty-one-foot Beneteau, with every flat surface opening to reveal something different: emergency gear, the freezer, electrical switches, or even more doors.

I looked over the similarly compact sleeping quarters before clambering back on deck to begin our training. As I glanced at the island, I saw the last team to arrive unloading their gear.

 THE DASH TO BOARD THE *Laurasia* was the start of five days of sailing in the British Virgin Islands, the capstone activity of this year's Goizueta Advanced Leadership Academy (GALA). The seventy-eight MBA students in GALA spent the year examining the dynamics of teamwork and learning behaviors that influence how groups interact. Isolated on sailboats for a week, we tested our ability to work together in an unfamiliar environment

as we tackled a series of challenges. The competition began the minute we set foot on Tortola, with students hurrying to be first to assemble their six-person crews and locate their vessels.

That a Caribbean sailing trip posed questionable academic value had served as occasional fodder for speculation among the MBA class throughout the year, but the adventure was hardly a relaxing tropical cruise. Only a few GALA participants had sailed before, and in many of the challenges, our instructors were not allowed to assist us. Placed in command of our ships, we had to organize ourselves and find ways to compensate for our sparse knowledge of sailing as we tackled the various assignments. We had to adapt to terminology that is obscure to the landlocked, a world where equipment is secured by *lines* and location determined on *charts*—don't ever call it a map!—and even left (*port*) and right (*starboard*) are called something else. The test was not unlike what we experience in business school and what we often encounter in our professional lives; the circumstances fit squarely with the notion of dealing with situations in which information is insufficient or vague, a common theme of Goizueta's MBA program.

Anxiety gripped our throats as we sat quietly and waited for our hands-on training to begin that first afternoon. I looked over the web of lines spun across the boat's deck. It had been fifteen years since I learned to sail a small Sunfish at Boy Scout camp and more than a decade since I last set foot in a sailboat. The names of components and almost everything else about sailing conveniently escaped me.

Sailboats don't enjoy the luxury of forces like gravity pulling on a downhill slope; they require a succinct orchestration of their components to achieve and maintain speed. Even though operating sails and steering are simple actions, proper timing is critical to preserve a boat's momentum. Two hours into our first sail, the frustration showed in our slumped shoulders as we struggled with our coordination. "That's what you want," William barked, pointing at a boat with full sails tacking gracefully in front of us. "You want to be sailing pretty." A moment later he called for a starboard tack and turned the ship, but the jib, still trimmed to the windward side, inverted itself and brought the boat to a halt.

Eventually we managed a handful of crisp maneuvers and ended the day on a positive note as the sun made its colorful descent to the horizon. I felt encouraged by our progress, but wondered if we'd have a comparable performance the next day. After we anchored, the facilitator accompanying our team, Jeff Colburn, asked us to voice some thoughts about our first time sailing together, but few of us had the energy to speak. Exhausted from a long day of traveling, we anticipated a hot meal and a peaceful night in the secluded bay.



WE ROSE THE NEXT DAY

energized and anxious about the first race of the trip, which involved circling several small islands and then sailing to the finish line at Anegada. It was arguably the toughest challenge we would face: Not only did we need to sail in circles—a mildly difficult maneuver

that we had not yet practiced—our skipper was not allowed to help us during the race. Without William guiding us, everyone needed to contribute whatever knowledge he managed to absorb in our crash course the day before. The lack of a defined leader

 Below: The crew of the *Spindrift III* listens for directions from its skipper on how to operate a winch. For five days, the GALA teams competed in challenges in pursuit of the winner's flag, shown below.



meant we faced the thorny dichotomy of being both leaders and listeners.

Whatever energy we began the day with dissipated quickly when a mechanical problem kept us from starting the race on time. A sense of defeat lingered over the crew as we watched our rivals fade into the distance. Rounding the first of the Dog Islands, however, we passed a boat from our fleet zigzagging aimlessly and another sitting motionless, its sails flapping noisily in the strong easterly wind. Although we suffered a rough beginning, we sailed increasingly



well as we circled two more islands and then turned north to Anegada, the boat keeling sharply until water spilled onto the leeward deck. Later that day, we made the bittersweet discovery that we



 Top: Shaun Caldwell 09MBA drives the *Tanis Marie* while Prasanth Ramani 09MBA and Darren Pham 09MBA prepare to lower anchor. Above: Aboard the *Spindrift III*, Meredith Swartz 09MBA mans the helm as Alok Gupta 09MBA checks the jib sail for proper trimming. Although most of the students had never sailed before, the crews were on their own after just a few hours of instruction.

had sailed from last place to second, missing first by just four minutes.

With a less technically demanding challenge before us, the third day felt somewhat anticlimactic. Paired with another ship from the fleet, we were racing to put as much latitudinal distance between us as possible before finishing at a cove near Jost Van Dyke. Our linear path of travel meant little maneuvering and thus a leisurely day aboard the *Laurasia*, with a restriction on talking compounding the idleness. In silence we sailed ten miles into the blue nothingness northwest of Anegada before returning south on a downwind course

over roiling swells that pitched our boat in every direction.

Despite turning in the day's strongest performance, we were disqualified because our partner vessel, *Mythos*, used its motor to power through rough waters from a passing storm. For a while we dwelled on the disappointing result, but the six of us eventually stole away in the dinghy to explore our surroundings.

Beyond a nearby outcropping we found a shallow cove shielded by a wall

of rocks battling the sea and waded into knee-deep water. The day's debacle faded from my mind as I listened to ferocious waves exploding against the rocks and watched the sky fill with shades of orange.

Strong winds came racing from the east the morning of day four, beating the waters around Jost Van Dyke into rough waves that slapped at the *Laurasia's* hull. Mike and I made our way to the mast to put in a second reef, which shortens the main sail to provide better control of the boat. Our crew seemed to have found its rhythm that morning, with everyone promptly rising to the deck and picking up whatever tasks needed to be done.

The scene on the water was comical during the fourth day's challenge: The fleet slowly circled the bay barking Morse code at each other through plastic horns like a flock of lost geese. Our objective was to relay a series of messages to their correct recipients, with the added complications of our vessels being renamed and restrictions on radio communication. Unable to speak directly with each other, we used frenzied hand gestures and horns to trade information before heading to our destination, Peter Island. We sailed through turbulent waves, the ocean spraying us as we slammed into each rising swell. As we neared Peter Island, we convened with the rest of the fleet before parading single file through the island's picturesque bay.

 AT THREE O'CLOCK THE next morning, I flipped on the cabin lights and started a pot of coffee the crew would certainly need for the final leg of our voyage. A light rain began to fall outside as we readied the boat in almost total darkness. A half hour later, we raised anchor for the last time and slipped away into the predawn mist on a return course to Tortola.

The dark face of Tortola slowly morphed into silhouettes of sailboats as the sun crept higher behind the island. From behind the wheel I thought about how our crew had evolved during the trip and felt immensely proud that we overcame our anxieties and learned to run the boat independently in a handful of days. I had no doubt that what we experienced with regard to communication and collaboration would prove invaluable, and many of those situations lingered in my head for weeks afterward.

Reunited with our classmates in Tortola, we couldn't help but assign ourselves one last challenge: finding a time to return together to the Caribbean's pristine waters. ■

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