

The Accidental Lifelong Sailor

by Craig M. Kaminer



Growing up on cement, playing stickball in schoolyards not far from Yankee Stadium and spending much of my adult life landlocked in Missouri, I am the least likely person to become a sailor, coastal cruiser, and soon live aboard retiree. Even my family and friends ask me if I have hired a captain as they come aboard our sailboat or charter boat and wonder how someone with my upbringing could be worthy of piloting a 50 foot yacht.

My first taste of sailing came when I went to sleep away camp in New Hampshire. While most of the kids had been going to the same camp since they could remember, I went to this camp for only one summer after 7th grade. I was a scholarship kid at a prestigious private school in New York City, and I was invited to summer camp on a scholarship too. As the new kid in the bunk, I felt like an outsider and struggled to make friends. Luckily, the new sailing counselor, Steve, was in the same position, and we quickly found each other. He taught me everything he knew, and I spent virtually the whole summer on Sunfish and Hobies, quickly learning to sail, race and eventually winning the best and most improved sailor awards at the end of the summer.

But because I grew up in the Bronx, I didn't have the chance to sail again until I had graduated from the University of Michigan. I was in my 20s and worked down the

hall from a guy, Allen Nadel, who lived close to where I did on the Upper West Side. We occasionally shared cabs together when working late, and over time we built a friendship despite our more than 30-year age difference. Over cocktails one evening with his wife and my girlfriend (now my wife of 26+ years) he told us about his love of sailing. I told him about my camp experience and he insisted that we borrow his friend's 30ish foot sloop out of Port Washington and sail the Long Island Sound one summer day. And so we did. The winds were blowing that day, and despite needing to reef back, I rekindled my love of sailing, and more, my future wife loved it too. Looking back on it now, I think I knew at that very moment she was the one.

It was many years before we sailed again, but shortly after our second child was born, I remember telling my (now) wife that I wanted to learn how to sail a boat so we could bareboat on vacations, as our 2 young sons grew older. It seemed like the perfect adventure for a young family. She agreed and we signed up for a Fast Track to Cruising/Bareboating with Colgate in St. Petersburg, FL a short drive from where my in-laws were renting a condo on Longboat Key. In retrospect, she was quite a trooper considering our class was all guys and we lived on-board together for almost 10 days as we completed the program. We knew it was fate when our instructor Warren Trafton told us one night over dinner that he was the former CEO of our hometown Convention and Visitors Commission and that we had a number of friends in common.



Warren was probably the same age we are now, and spent half the year as a ski instructor and the other half as a sailing instructor. He was well-educated, experienced in business, and bit of a rolling stone...and there was just so much to like about him. He inspired us to live our lives fully, to do things less common, and discover the inner explorer in each of us. We sailed all day, and talked until the wee hours of the night. He told us sailing stories, answered my rapid fire questions about sailboats and what he would recommend for our first, and even showed us his (Tartan 30) where he lived when not teaching. He inspired all of us, but especially sparked something in me, and shortly after graduating from Colgate, my wife and I returned to St. Pete with our young sons and chartered our first bareboat alone

through Moorings. The first day started out great, but ended in a squall with 6 foot seas, 30+ mph winds, and in short a little more than we were prepared for for our first solo charter after Colgate with 2 little kids aboard. But it all worked out, we made it back wiser than we left, and with our first sailing story which we have retold hundreds of times since then to anyone who will listen.

Shortly after, we purchased our first sailboat, a Hunter 29.5, from an older guy who bought it impulsively at a boat show but had never sailed it. He planned to learn from a friend, but his friend moved away before ever teaching him how to sail. Fortunately for us, we were able to buy it with just a few hours on the diesel for a price we could afford. And we enjoyed many spring, summer and fall days on "Influence" with our 2 boys and their small dog Sammy. We started sailing as a family when the kids were young – too young to want to spend weekends on baseball fields or hanging out with their friends -- but old enough to learn sailing skills and always eager to help on board. We would leave our hometown of St. Louis and travel to Carlyle, IL every Friday afternoon, sleep on-board , and hit the lake all day Saturday and Sunday from May thru October.



Over the years we chartered many boats as a family in Florida, South Carolina, Northern Michigan, Texas, the Caribbean, Mexico and Pacific Northwest. We have had the Blue Angels fly overhead twice, run into a pod of Orcas, been beaten by 30+ knot winds, snagged our anchor on coral heads, and run aground more times than I like to admit. But each experience was memorable, educational and truthfully the greater the challenge the better the memory.

Sailing has been the highlight of my life because it was the perfect way to spend time with my family, living and working together, solving problems and watching sunsets. It has been the perfect metaphor for life and teaching 2 young boys that each time you leave the dock something unexpected happens. It showed them that preparation, continuous learning, hard work, and respecting Mother Nature are important life lessons and these experiences are more valuable than things.

These days, our children live and work in different parts of the country, and the opportunities to come together as a family are limited. Finding time for us to be together takes work. And when we're together, we want everyone to have what they need. This December we are sharing the Virgin Islands on a 48 foot Island Packet with our sons and if lucky, their girl friends. In my mind, sailing is still the perfect family activity. We get to spend valuable time together, doing something we all like, doing it in beautiful places, and something that is hard for our sons to turn down in favor of something with their friends. We'll do whatever it takes and we're not beyond nautical bribery.

I am also planning for some more extended journeys by sailboat. We are heading to the Annapolis Boat show next month and checking listings nightly to find that perfect boat to take us to the places we have only begun to imagine. We'll start by sailing for a couple of weeks at a time and then returning home to our careers and obligations. But each time we'll pick-up where we left off and hopefully have a chance to visit a lot of places before we are truly ready to retire. By then, who knows? Maybe we'll sail around the world, or settle down in one of the places we first visited by boat.



That's what's great about sailing...it teaches you so much about yourself, about the world, and expands your horizons in so many ways. This summer, while sailing in Northern Michigan, I turned to my wife and said, I can't wait for the day when we have grandkids and we take them sailing each summer instead of them going to camp. She looked back at me with a smile and I could tell at that moment that my first sailing lessons had changed my life, our life, and generations who haven't even yet sailed. And really none of it would have ever happened without Colgate, Warren Trafton, and my wife who always wanted to be by my side and co-captain every moment of every day with me.

Happy Anniversary Colgate!