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Where Families Learn To Harness the Wind



WYATT GALLERY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Landlubbers on Friday, old salts by Monday: Students from the Offshore Sailing School learn the basics of maneuvering a boat along the Hudson River during a three-day course.

By DAVE CALDWELL

THE sun cast a dreamy orange glow as it settled toward the horizon, and a parade of pristine sailboats began slipping back into the marina at Liberty State Park after a spin around New York Harbor. The Gonzalez family of Chatham, N.J., was on one of those boats, and Tony and Maryury Gonzalez and their three children were more than just passengers.

With the help of an instructor, all five Gonzalezes — including Ryan, 12, Alec, 10, and Anthony, 7 — had actually pi-

lotted the 26-foot boat on their second day of a three-day, learn-to-sail course offered by the Offshore Sailing School. Tony and Maryury had watched their children play sports plenty of times, but this was an athletic activity, a warm-weather challenge, that all of them could do together.

"None of us had a sailing background," said Tony Gonzalez, who works for Murex, a financial software company in New York. "We know people who have boats, but we don't do any of that."

SAILING TOGETHER

A select look at schools and other sites that offer lessons for families. Page 31.

Offshore is one of several companies in the New York area that offer sailing programs for families — not just children and not just parents. Families can also take courses at, among other sites, Atlantic Yachting at the 79th Street Boat Basin in Manhattan, the Manhattan Sailing Club in Battery Park City,

and the Port Sailing Center in Port Washington, N.Y., on Long Island.

"No PlayStations, no GameBoys, nothing like that — it's just a chance to get out on the water," said the Gonzalezes' instructor, Jonathan Wehrung, a 10-year veteran teacher known as J. W. to his students.

Family sailing lessons have a different vibe than group lessons with strangers. For starters, children are better students, said Miles Pincus, an owner of Atlantic Yachting, which offers, among other programs, a three-hour Introduc-

tion to Sailing for curious families.

"Kids are very used to learning," Mr. Pincus said. "They're used to being taught. Adults are not used to that. They tend to take their own route. A lot of adults try to manhandle the situation. It just doesn't work that way."

Relatives are also more likely to pitch in for one another than are strangers. "You stick them in a boat, and they kind of stick together," said Chris Nihill, owner of the Port Sailing Center, which offers family discounts for several sailing

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY WYATT GALLERY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Tony Gonzalez, from left, his son Ryan, wife, Maryury, and their two other children, Anthony and Alec, take turns piloting a 26-foot boat with the help of their instructor, Jonathan Wehrung (right).

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classes, beginning with Basic Sailing 101.

The Offshore Sailing course is not just a ramble. The first 90 minutes of each day is spent in a classroom near the Liberty State Park Marina in New Jersey. The family sails one session in the morning and another in the late afternoon, finishing by 6 p.m. The course ends with a basic keelboat certification test. (Certified sailors can rent boats and take them out on their own.)

The Gonzalezes took lessons on a Colgate 26, which was designed by Steve Colgate, an America's Cup competitor and founder of the Offshore Sailing School, and the naval architect Jim Taylor. The boat was meant to be low-cost and durable, but also challenging. Foam-filled compartments make it virtually unsinkable and steel railings make it hard to tip.

"The boat teaches the students a lot," said Rogier Intres, the branch manager of Offshore's Liberty State Park operation. (It also has a base at Chelsea Piers in Manhattan.) "It's pretty decent to handle, and you don't get scared a lot. If you can sail over here, with the current, the traffic in the harbor and the ferries, you can do it everywhere."

On the Gonzalezes' days out, the Colgate passed the Dad Test — "The one thing about this boat is that you feel safe in it," Mr. Gonzalez said — while still providing thrills for the boys. Alec said: "I liked how the boat was always tilting in the wind. I was like, 'Oh, my God, this is so much fun. This is going to tip over.'"

Much to his regret (and the relief of his parents), the boat stayed upright, and surprisingly, the youngest, Anthony, was probably better at piloting the boat than his brothers, Mr. Wehrung said.

But Anthony was also the most reluctant to get on the water. While the rest of the family was on deck, trying to

learn how to maneuver the boat through high winds, Anthony decided to take a break below deck. He arranged the extra life jackets into a makeshift bed and took a nap. The children bought sailing gloves after their first day, and Anthony's became known as his sleeping gloves. But when his turn came to steer, he was sharp and attentive.

"After he woke up, he was full of energy and steered the boat back to the dock," his father said.

Steering and starting the motor, Mr. Gonzalez said, was a big hit with the entire family, and the adventure went a lot more smoothly than they had expected.

As Ryan said, "When you get out on the boat, you find out that it's not that hard."

The family's voyages, Mr. Wehrung said, were pretty typical. Mothers, he explained with a laugh, initially spend more time keeping an eye on the active harbor, warily watching other boats

that veer near theirs. Although New York Harbor looks busy from the land, there is plenty of room. "My job is to take their focus away from the other boats and focus on the sailing," he added.

With a smile, Mrs. Gonzalez agreed, saying, "We were all so nervous at first that we weren't paying attention to the scenery." But she said the family actually knew enough about their responsibilities on the water that she could peek

out and enjoy the view. On calm days when the Hudson River current remains placid, Offshore students can sail to the George Washington Bridge. They had learned to use local points of interest — the Empire State Building, for example — as landmarks for their excursion through the harbor, and they all agreed they would never look at New York, a city only a half-hour from their suburban home, the same way again.

Learning the Ropes

ATLANTIC YACHTING 79th Street Boat Basin, Riverside Park, Manhattan; (212) 518-4604, atlanticyachting.com. Three-hour class, \$440 for two people, \$149 for each extra student. Nine-hour certification course, \$990 for two people, \$200 for each extra student. Families receive 10 percent discount.

CROTON SAILING SCHOOL Senasqua Boat Basin, 2 Elliott Way, Croton-on-Hudson; (800) 859-7245, crotonsailing.com. Two-day course, \$395 a person for families. Pay for three people and a fourth or fifth person sails free.

MANHATTAN SAILING SCHOOL Three locations: North Cove Marina, Battery Park City; Shipyard Marina, Hoboken, N.J.; Liberty Harbor, Jersey City, N.J. (212) 786-0400, sailmanhattan.com. Introductory course, one weekend or five weeknights, \$390 a person for a limited time.

OFFSHORE SAILING SCHOOL Liberty Landing Marina, Audrey Zapp Drive, Liberty State Park, Jersey City, N.J.; and Chelsea Piers, Pier 62, West 23rd Street and the Hudson River, Manhattan; (800) 221-4326, offshoresailing.com. Three-day "Learn to Sail" course, \$895 each for two adults, with up to four children 7 to 17 years old enrolling for free.

PORT SAILING SCHOOL Brewer Capri Marina, 86 Orchard Beach Boulevard; Port Washington, N.Y.; (516) 767-7245, portsailing.com. Three-day classes for families, \$600 a person.



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