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Adventure TRAVEL

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learn it



brighton uk

Rosie Fuller almost learns the ropes on a sailing course

Learning to sail has been on my to do list for a long time, although nearer the end that says 'settle down in a cottage in the country' than 'get a haircut'. I never thought I'd get round to doing it. So when Brighton-based Lagoon Watersports ask if I want to try one of its courses, I say yes quicker than you can say shiver me timbers. (None of them say that by the way. So disappointing.)

Lagoon Watersports offers courses in sailing pretty much everything, from paddle-boards to yachts, but I want to keep it real and start at the beginning – in a dinghy. I also figure I'll be more likely to go dinghy sailing in the future, as my ISA set aside for buying a yacht, er, doesn't exist. And the Swallows and the Amazons could do it when they were, like, 10 years old – how hard can it be? I'll work up

to the Pirates of the Caribbean stuff later, I think to myself.

The two-day beginner dinghy sailing course at Brighton Marina begins with, you guessed it, learning the ropes. Or trying to. There are millions of the things, and boat-makers try to make it simple by colour-coding them, until they run out of different colours, and then it's a free for all. Our instructors, Ed and James, who've both been sailing since they could walk, are very kind while we forget everything they tell us as soon as they move on to the next rope. And this is only the start of the complicated-ness.

The boats are called Laser Stratoses and are apparently keeled dinghies. This means they have a big blob underneath them (technical term) to stop them from capsizing – great news for me. Not that I believe the instructors in the slightest. They

have evil glints in their sea-hardened eyes.

Our first taste of the open sea comes after we manage to rig our boats, with more patient help from Ed and James. There are six of us on the course, with three plus an instructor to a dinghy. Adventure Travel's designer Gez and I team up with a Polish chap called Peter; the other three on the course live in Brighton and have decided it's time to get to know the salty playground on their doorstep.

The first outing is to get a feel for the boats, sailing and the great open sea. A sailor's nightmare, there isn't much breeze. It's wonderful. We pootle around outside the marina practising steering, and with two boats in convoy, sails flapping, it really does feel like Pirates of the Caribbean but in miniature. And then the hard work begins.

WHERE:
Brighton

ACTIVITY:
Learning to sail

TOTAL TIME:
Two days

DIFFICULTY:
Brain draining

LOOK OUT FOR:
The boom, winds above force six, Captain Flint



Peer pressure: a theory lesson

a massive one on day two. It's mega windy, and utterly different from the day before – so scary and exciting it makes you grin because you can't do anything else. We try tacking again. It's more terrifying in waves, but easier as the boom moves faster in the wind.

And then disaster strikes. I start to feel queasy. I ask James for advice, and he says, "If you're going to be ill, do it over the side." Considerate chap. I stare at the horizon and think happy thoughts. Ones that don't involve our pub-crawl the night before, that had ended with a drink involving rum and ice cream. Why would we do that?

After a lunch break, and a stomach-settling pot of tea, we're back out again. The waves are bigger still – we can see white horses as we leave the marina, and spray crashing up the harbour wall. It's about as rough as they like to sail in, says Ed. The dinghies look tiny in the swell. I'm too scared to think about being sea sick. We're practising jibing, and I try to squirm out of my turn and stay clinging to a sturdy point of the boat. Ed won't let me. I don't look quite terrified enough to not have a go, he says. I complete two successful jibes and love him for it.

Back at base for the final time, we're shattered from concentrating. Everything's swaying. We're soaked, and invigorated. But it's made me want to do more, to properly get the hang of it, and to try sailing in a non-lesson environment.

And I have so much more respect for the Swallows and the Amazons. ■



Rosie locking green

Back at the floating base, Ed begins to explain the intricacies of turning. You can't sail straight into the wind, which even I had grasped, so you have to tack – zig zag up it. But, harder to get your head round, it's not a good idea to sail directly with the wind either. This isn't because you go too fast, as I guess, but because it's not actually effective – sails work better if they have air flowing around them. And it's dangerous, as the boom (the bar that holds the bottom of the sail and swings around at head level) can lurch in the wrong direction unexpectedly. So you have to jibe – zig zag so you end up going the same direction of the wind.

Sea still calm, we go out and try the tack. You have to juggle the tiller with a rope that holds the main sail, and get to the other side of the boat without being smacked by the boom. Roger from Swallows and Amazons could do this when he was seven – I'm 27 and my brain's spinning. Luckily the Stratos spins just once, in the right direction – I've done it.

As well as the actual sailing, the course covers how to decipher shipping forecasts and other useful stuff like knots. At the end of day one we loiter around the Lagoon Watersports HQ, chatting about wind direction and other stuff we hadn't considered before the start of the day, a little baffled by it all by happy. But the evil glint is back in our leaders' eyes. Wind's up tomorrow, they tell us.

They're not wrong. "There are waves bigger than this in my paddling pool," says instructor James in response to my girly shriek as we hit

need more info?

» BRIGHTON

Brighton's a wonderful place for a weekend jaunt. Along the waterfront, the faded splendour of the Regency buildings clashes with neon lights, the iconic pier and chipolies. Further into the city you can amble around the Lanes – winding streets lined with pubs, restaurants and arty shops. The marina is picturesque, and has more restaurants and shops. On a warm day the beach is packed and the town's full of buskers.

» GET THERE

Brighton's easy to find – take a wrong turn and you'll be off the end of the pier. From the north, get to the M23 from the M25; this turns into the A23 that leads into the centre. The railway station's central and the city's well served by buses too.

» STAY THERE

INSIDE: Umi Hotel, www.umihotelbrighton.co.uk, 01273 323221. The three-star Umi Hotel's right on the seafront, a short walk from the pier. Despite being in the thick of things, it's quite quiet and rooms are spacious, clean and comfy. And breakfast is delish.

OUTSIDE: Blackberry Wood Campsite, www.blackberrywood.com, 01273 890035. If bright lights and stag dos aren't for you, this cool campsite (well, it is Brighton) is eight miles outside the city, and each pitch is in a private little clearing. Or you can rent a gypsy caravan. We wouldn't expect anything less.

» EAT THERE

Bistro, The Lanes, 01273 324584
The Lanes is a hive of perfect-looking restaurants. # Bistro does yummy seafood as well as non-fishy dishes and has outdoor tables.

» THE SAILING

Rosie went on a level 1 dinghy course, which is RYA (the national body for all forms of boating) recognised. The course objective is to be able to sail in all directions in light winds, and set the boat up. It's recommended you follow the course with level 2, which involves improving your knowledge, what to do if you capsize and other safety stuff. After the two courses you can Lagoon Watersports' boats. A Start Sailing package for both courses costs £299; if you book and do them separately they're £187.50 each.

» CONTACT

Lagoon Watersports runs courses in everything from windsurfing to yacht sailing to power boating. www.hovelagoon.co.uk, 01273 424842.

» MORE INFO

Visit Brighton offers the latest Brighton and Hove tourist information and tourist guides – see www.visitbrighton.com.