



Hiking out on a breezy day (Photo by Dave Baxter, Baxter Sailmaker)

Sailing in the Hampton Roads Area

by
Captain Dave Wilbar



Author and crew get a good start during a Thursday evening race on Willoughby Bay. (Photo by Ed Darling)

Most of the world knows Hampton Roads as a fishing mecca and family resort destination. But more and more folks have discovered the beauty and excitement of sailing in the southern Chesapeake Bay. Examples include the just-completed VELUX Ultimate Solo Challenge stopover, as well as the annual Great Schooner Race and the infamous Cock Island Race. Longtime sailors will remember the Low Rent Regatta. Clean water, low boat congestion, and marine wildlife are the enticements that attract many northern Chesapeake mariners, as well as global sailors, to our little piece of blow-boater heaven.

As all locals know, any time can be a great day to be outside in the Tidewater region. Seventies in January is not uncommon. Having said that, mid-January to mid-February is the coldest time here. The very best time to sail is mid-September to mid-October. Heat, jellyfish, and summer sailors are generally gone, leaving the best anchorages and destinations for the smart sailor.

Where to Sail

The Hampton Roads Harbor area does have freighter, military and tug traffic. As long as you are aware of the traffic separation lanes in and around Hampton Roads waterways, you should be fine. Keep track of the weather. Tidewater, and particularly Virginia Beach, get some real thunder boomers in the summer. Thankfully, they come through pretty quickly, then leave a great sunset.

The southern Chesapeake Bay is loaded with destinations and anchorages to discover. Check out Mobjack Bay and its several tree-lined creeks. Run up the James to Jamestown. How about Waterside Marina and Hospital Point, Smithfield or Hampton? Or slip over to the laid-back Eastern Shore: Onancock or Bay Creek, just north of Cape Charles. Head up the York River or the Rappahannock. Closer to

home, Broad Bay and Crystal Lake offer some of the prettiest and safest small boat sailing anywhere. The parks (First Landing or Seashore) even have boat ramps.

Don't forget ocean sailing. Sail along the Virginia Beach resort area. It's a whole different perspective. In the winter months, whales come close to the shore. Although you can't launch your Hobie directly off the Virginia Beach resort area, you can further up the coast or around the corner in the Chesapeake.

Learn Before You Buy

If you are going to buy a sailboat, or any boat for that matter, get formal training first from a U.S. Coast Guard licensed and certified sailing instructor. Much to the displeasure and apprehension of the veteran boating community, the number of new boat owners who buy first, then consider learning to sail is increasing. In addition, boats longer than 30 feet are being purchased, generally too large with too many internal systems for the novice sailor. That sweet purchase price turns sour when the first-time owner maxes out his credit card within a couple months of ownership.

Do the smart thing: Learn to sail first and then buy the boat. Not only will you have a better time on the water, you will probably buy a boat much better suited to your own tastes and skill level. One of my deliveries was from Little Creek to the top of the Chesapeake Bay on a 45-foot sloop. The owner had never touched the wheel! He was, "going down to the Caribbean soon to take sailing lessons." The kicker was when he informed us that he had already sold his home and was moving aboard.

Come Sail with Us

If you don't own a boat or have friends with sailboats, search online for "sailing Hampton Roads" (or Virginia Beach or Norfolk). There are a couple sailboats in town that offer captained day sails, and even Chesapeake Bay live-aboard



Proper sail trim and good sails make for a fine day on the water. (Photo by Dave Baxter, Baxter Sailmaker)

cruises. If you Google "sail lessons Norfolk" (or Virginia Beach) you'll find local sail training that is convenient and not nearly as expensive as you've been told by your friends who have never taken lessons.

Those of us who are water people know how lucky we have it here in the Tidewater area. Between the beaches, the bays and Mother Ocean, the only excuse anyone might have for not getting on the water is -- well, heck, I can't think of one.

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