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Water, water, everywhere

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By Vicki McLeod

Photos by Oliver Neilson

Sailing is a natural thing to learn to do in Mallorca: we're surrounded by water and some of the world's most expensive and fabulous yachts. But it's not just a pursuit for the rich and the royals. You can find a genuine "salty seadog" down the way in Port Andratx who has taught thousands of people how to handle a boat since he first arrived on the island 11 years ago. Eric Murray, from Solaris Sailing School, first took to the water when he was 14 years old. "I was on an Outward Bound course on a square rigger in the Moray Firth." (That's the North Sea to you and I.) "That was my first experience, and I loved it."

So, over 50 years ago, an obsession with the sea began both on and in the water as a sailing and diving instructor. He's earned his reputation as one of the best sailing and motorboat teachers on the island. "I've had pupils from all walks of life and all ages. I think the oldest person I've taught was 78 at the time." He's also taught several celebrities, but is rather coy about revealing names.

They do say that there are two great days in a sailor's life: the day he buys his boat and the day he sells it. But that's not always the case. "It's certainly an expensive hobby, and I've seen a trend for more people wanting to learn to sail who don't own their own boat. Having said that there is still a high demand to learn, and we already have a lot of bookings for both sailing and motorboat tuition this year."



Eric and his team (Dennis Evans and Russ Force) offer Royal Yachting Association qualifications, ranging from Competent Crew up to Yacht Master Coastal, and for Powerboat level 1 and 2 (which is very popular with professional crew who need to get licenses to run tenders for super yachts). In addition, pupils can study weekend shore-based courses in navigation, radio and first aid.

Going on a sailing course can be a life-changing experience; many of his students have "sold up and sailed" after studying with him. "I know of several people who've done the romantic thing of sailing off into the sunset; they're living their dream and it feels good to have been able to help them learn how to look after themselves onboard and in charge of their boat.

"When I bought my first boat, back in the late '70s, I learnt as I went. I went to night school for three years to qualify up to Yachtmaster; these days it's not possible to study that way, and many people wouldn't have the time to do it. So week-long courses are an efficient way to study."

A regular week onboard with Solaris Sea School starts on Sunday night when you settle in on the boat. Monday morning sees the security drills and health and safety details, and then it's time to weigh anchor and shove off. Over the next four and a half days you learn about navigation; night sailing (which is beautiful... imagine you are in a snow globe, there is sea as far as you can see in every direction, and it's just you, the moon and the stars); man overboard procedures; anchoring; and pilotage.

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It's a full week and a serious course with a serious qualification, yet because you're sailing around the Mallorcan coastline, anchoring in bays and exploring the island, it still feels like a holiday. This is convenient because many of his pupils travel from the UK to learn to sail with him as their yearly break. "Of course, it's pleasanter to learn in Mallorca than off the North Sea – I should know! The sailing conditions here are ideal, and you don't have to get up at 3am to catch the tide, because the Mediterranean isn't tidal."

Many of his pupils have also accompanied him on longer training sails. "You have to build your mileage for the more serious qualifications, and just to gain more knowledge and experience, so we've done a variety of trips to help them accomplish that, including Atlantic crossings. You would imagine that sailing across the Atlantic would be quite exciting, but some people find it boring as they don't see land for three weeks. I guess if you find watching dolphins and whales every day boring then, yes, it could be tedious, but I'm happy to do that!"

I ask him where in the world he would sail to, given the opportunity. It's heartening to hear his reply. "I'm quite fond of Sant Elm myself; it's a beautiful spot. It's nice to go ashore to eat at the restaurants there, and it's a lovely place to swim."



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