



'There's no room onboard for girlie girls'

Landlubber **Andrea Smith** always thought sailing was only for people who quaffed Pimm's and wore boaters. A trip around Dublin Bay proved otherwise

I've always quite fancied the idea of sailing off romantically into the sunset on a boat, in the style of Simon Cowell poncing around St Bart's on his luxury yacht, but the nearest I've achieved to that scenario was as a passenger on the Dun Laoghaire to Holyhead ferry.

Growing up in Greenhills in south-west Dublin, the nearest we got to a body of water was when the Walkinstown Roundabout flooded. Sailing was for rich, posh people, I thought, a tad bitterly — the type who quaff Pimm's and get off with one another while wearing boater hats at regattas.

So when I was invited to Dun Laoghaire to try out a sailing experience, I decided to go, just to check out if it was all as ridiculous as I suspected. What to wear, I wondered, thinking along the lines of a floaty dress and strappy sandals, and was somewhat perturbed when advised to don a waterproof jacket, trousers and trainers.

It was a gorgeous, sunny evening when I arrived at the Royal Irish Yacht Club. I was met by the fabulous Irene Sorohan, who brought me down the marina to the boat — a handsome, modern J109 cruiser called *Jigamaree*. The crew joined us, and the second shock of the evening was discovering how normal and lovely they all were. There were no snooty toffs among this bunch of six guys and two girls, so there was my first prejudice quashed.

While actually owning a boat can be a costly business, each skipper needs

a committed crew of eight to race with, they explained. Therefore, you don't have to be loaded to be part of a team, and the costs involved as part of a racing crew are low, and work out the same as they would with any other sport. Even better news for anyone interested is that many teams are actively looking for enthusiastic new members.

By the way, the first shock was trying to get my life jacket on, but once I squished my boobs in, and ran the straps dangling from the back through my legs and back up to clip in at the front, like the straps on a baby's high chair, I was good to go.

While I laboured under the illusion that we were going to be mucking around the bay, I soon discovered that we were taking part in one of Dublin Bay Sailing Club's races, which take place every Thursday and Saturday during racing season (May to September).

The crew changed into their gear, and while the two women, Nessa Coady and Irene, arrived looking glamorous and sophisticated, once they tied their hair up and donned boiler suits and shorts over leggings, they were transformed into determined, high-performing athletes. We also had a father and son duo on board, Gordon and Nicholas Judge.

I sat on the side bench behind the cheery Dave Stewart, who was at the helm at the back of the boat. With the engine on, we motored over to the starting line, and as I took in the stunning vista that stretches from Howth to Dun Laoghaire and breathed

in the bracing sea air, I could see how you could fall in love with this boating malarkey.

Irene works as a recruitment consultant, which is a pressurised job, and she took up sailing six years ago and loves it. "It's wonderful," she says. "Once you are out on the water, you have to totally concentrate on what you're doing, so there's no time to think about anything else."

When she began sailing, she learned the ropes from Tim Goodbody, chairman of the *The Volvo Dun Laoghaire Regatta*, Ireland's biggest sailing event, which takes place from tomorrow to Sunday. It's set to be an exciting four days of racing in Dublin Bay, he says, with four sailing clubs, 400 boats and 2,500 competitors coming together for the biennial event. While Irene loved her five years on Tim's boat, *White Mischief*, she moved to *Jigamaree* last year, as she is friends with its owner — but he wasn't on my trip as he's on holidays. She manages the crew and, while they're only in their second season, they're doing very well so far. There are four women among the wider 15-strong team, she explains, and more are always welcome.

We turned off the engine as, once the race began, the crew had to propel the boat to five designated markers around the bay, using only their skills and the power of their sails. I didn't understand most of what was being said, because it all sounded Swahili to me, but managed to glean that there are three sails — the main, the jib at the front, and the

spinnaker, which fills with wind and balloons out when deployed.

As we were in a bay, the wind kept changing direction, and I was exhausted looking at Brian Hare, Gus Legge, Ed Cook and the crew who kept tirelessly and speedily putting the sails up and down, and pulling on ropes and levers to keep us going.

What I noticed is that racing is very much an equal opportunities sport, with no room on board for 'girlie girls'. As the smallest and lightest, Nessa was the 'bow' and was based up the front to observe what was happening, but she worked as physically hard as the rest. At one point I cringed as she coolly dangled head-first over the edge to free something that was caught, while Irene sat on her legs to hold her steady.

The strenuous on-board action is not for the faint-hearted. Irene had big bruises on the backs of her arms, and explained that when she began sailing her worried parents feared she was in an abusive relationship because she was covered in marks and bruises. Sailing has really strengthened her arms, she says, and improved her overall fitness.

Dave explained to me that when they "tacked," i.e., changed the direction of the boat by turning the bow of the boat up through the wind I would need to quickly move to the other side of the boat. I nodded blithely, but when he shouted the command, and the boat suddenly keeled over practically sideways and sliced through the water, it

was a miracle I didn't drop into the sea with shock. The crew expertly clambered onto the upward side with their legs over the edge to weigh the boat down, while I hauled my fat arse over to the bench on the opposite side, and clung for dear life to the metal handles behind me.

We were out for about two hours, and the command to tack was given what felt like 20 times. I didn't have the luxury of feeling seasick, as we seemed practically vertical at times, and I was too busy concentrating on not falling overboard. I would have been morto if the crew had to stop and fish me out, thus wrecking their chances of winning the race.

It was a gorgeous, calm night, so I could only imagine how tricky things would get if the sea was unsettled or it was wet and miserable. My admiration for this crew knew no bounds as, thanks to their skill and stellar teamwork, we sailed in to the finish line seconds behind the leader. The final strait was thrilling, but it probably didn't help their cause having my hefty weight on board, I mused afterwards.

"What appeals to me is the excitement of competition and the great social life that comes with sailing," Irene explained later as we enjoyed a BBQ back on dry land. "Competing really gets the adrenaline going."

While I enjoyed my trip, notwithstanding the clinging-on-for-my-Jaysus-life part, I've concluded that I'm not nimble enough or strong enough to take it up as a sport. I have completely revised my opinion of those who do sail, though – they're truly amazing athletes!

The [Volvo Dun Laoghaire Regatta](#) takes place from tomorrow to Sunday. See [dlregatta.org](#)

Mind the boom, trim the jib and wear the right waterproofs: what you really need to know before setting sail

1 Wear the proper gear. Your fellow crew members will be too polite to laugh when you rock up in glittery, silver pumps. These are not suitable sailing shoes. You'll realise this when you spend the trip slip-sliding awkwardly all over the deck.

2 Don't stuff your face before you set off. I was never as grateful for my empty stomach as when I found myself dangling from the side looking down at the waves as we "tacked".

3 Tie your hair back. It's wild and windy out on the water. You may have a big moon face when your hair is tied up into a ponytail, but it's preferable to arriving back to dry land sporting a full 'fro.

4 Nobody is actually looking at you anyway. You may want to fulfil your Captain von Trapp fantasy by hooking a sailor, but all the men on board will be too busy launching the spinnaker or trimming the jib to even look at you.

5 Mind the boom! As the wind catches the main sail, the horizontal pole at the bottom has a penchant for swinging dramatically from one side to the other. When that happens, for the love of God, duck!

6 A cry of 'tack' means you have precisely two milliseconds to spring across to the other side, before the boat keels to one side. Once there, hang on for dear life, while bitterly resenting the nimbleness of your fellow crew.

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Oh buoy!: Andrea Smith
at the helm of the
Jigamaree cruiser boat
in Dun Laoghaire.
PHOTO: ARTHUR CARBON