



Abu Dhabi Week sends a would-be deckhand to try a day's sailing we've yearned for a little boat to sail along the beautiful blue waters and around the many surrounding islands.

Hearing about an informal sailing race around Lulu Island that happens each month, we went all nautical and jumped aboard with Captains van Rijn and Smyth to set sail for the day.

I'm a little apprehensive in the week leading up to setting foot aboard Eid, the 42ft South African yacht that will be joining the eight other competitors. It's done nothing but rain and storm, and I'm not yet sure if I suffer from sea-sickness.

To add to my growing list of inabilities (can't drive, terrible eyesight, not fond of heights) I'm a less than competent swimmer. How do I always find myself in these situations?

However, on arriving at the marina opposite Marina Mall the sky is beautifully clear and the impossibly blue water is calm. That sets my nerves at rest a little.

I climb aboard the smaller than imagined yacht (I also have no sense of scale, apparently) and am greeted by a dozen keen boaters all with varying levels of sailing knowledge. As for me, I have absolutely no experience of sailing; suddenly I am hoping I'm not expected to shimmy up

the mast to sort out the huge sails, or be called upon for navigation points.

After a quick safety brief and a tug on the engine, we're soon chugging smoothly out of the marina. The breeze is gentle and the air is wonderfully fresh. My eyes are glued to the sea, hoping to spot an assortment of sea life, but the water is crystal clear and fish-free. The owner of the yacht, Michael Ekin Smyth, informs us all that it's common to spot dolphins – he knows of three particularly tame ones that swim off the Emirates Palace – as well as there being other smaller-finned creatures.

We've been cruising along calmly for twenty odd minutes when the wind suddenly fills out one of the sails and we're tilting at a rather severe angle. I quickly decide that the right side (or starboard in sailor-speak) of the yacht is more preferable to try and catch the sun from – as it's distinctively further away from my toes skimming the water – and I slide across to safety.



As much as I'm still holding on to the edge, I watch on with admiration as the men of the group clamber around pulling ropes and shouting orders. I quickly realise you've got to be pretty fast-footed as the slightest change in wind can completely alter the course. Everyone runs about making alterations. Captain Smyth obviously reads my expression as he starts regaling me with tales of bravery and adventure from his previous sailing expeditions.

"I've had some pretty scary experiences," he says. "I've been hanging on for dear life from the tops of masts and swinging around on ropes in stormy weather. And I've found myself neck high in water on one occasion!" he laughs. "The thing is, when you're sailing for fun, it's all part of the experience!"

With an extra, lighter sail now added, we breeze along at a quicker speed. The pace is still relaxing enough to enjoy the sound of gentle waves lapping at the sides of the yacht, while the

panoramic view of Abu Dhabi gradually gets smaller on the horizon.

As the skyline becomes hazy, the former dots on the water become sails and then yachts as we catch up with some of the other competitors sailing their way towards Lulu Island. We encounter a few more gusts of wind and once again there's a flurry of hands and feet to adjust ropes and maintain our course following the streamlined row of sails not too far ahead of us. Intrigued as to know how the captain works out his course and stays on top of making accurate adjustments to the wheel, and now feeling brave enough not to cling on to the railings, I climb over to join him behind the steering.

I'm assailed with more jargon than I thought possible as different parts of the yacht and different sailing techniques are pointed out to me. I do note, with some interest, the tiny red and green tadpole-shaped tassels discreetly attached half way up the inside of the main sail. These 'tell tails', as they're called, let the sailor know exactly when the wind and yacht are rightly aligned to make sudden adjustments.

I'm impressed by the tiny details that go into sailing – it seems more of an art form that it does as simply a way to travel.

We finally near Lulu Island and slowly come to a stop as the anchor is dropped and we float, almost completely still with the calmness of the water. We all sit in near silence, except for the odd comment about the beautiful view of Lulu Island and the distant skyline of Abu Dhabi. We've actually completed the race, but no one seems fussed as to who won or what position we've finished at. We are informed that we completed the route in just under two hours, but everyone seems content enough just to be aboard and enjoying the sun reflecting off the water.

It's the perfect time for a dip in the sea and a couple of the crew dive overboard for a swim and a little explore of the beach on Lulu Island. I'm told Lulu Island is actually home to 17 permanent residents, something I was unaware of. Despite my slightly sunburnt shoulders, I'm not brave enough to dive into the water, and I look on with some envy as everyone splashes around below.

Eventually everyone climbs back on deck to dry off and watch the sunset. It's a remarkable sight and watching from the sea seems to make it that little more magical as it sinks into the

water.

As the temperature quickly cools, the anchor is lifted and we make a slow return to the Marina. We all climb back slowly on to land in rather sleepy fashion, the fresh air and sea breeze seemingly having relaxed us into a near slumber. We all exchange goodbyes and promises to return. We may not be able to afford our own boat, but we all certainly enjoyed a day at sea – and with a bit more practice, we reckon we could be quite a good crew.

Your turn

The sailing race takes place every first Saturday of the month. To book your place on the sailing race or for more information call 050 661 2176 or email [berend@belevari.com](mailto:berend@belevari.com)

*[Caption] The race begins ...*, photography: Chris Kennedy  
[Writer] Charlie Kennedy

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