**Review of Day Skipper/Competent Crew Course, Glencoe Outdoor Centre**

In June 2022 I completed the Day Skipper/Competent Crew Course with Glencoe Outdoor Centre. We sailed out of Dunstaffnage and covered around one hundred miles of West coast waters over five days and nights.

I hadn’t done anything like this before and I wasn’t sure what to expect, but the course was great and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I hope this article will be helpful to anyone looking for an exciting outdoor experience.

**Why go on a Sailing Course?**

Here are a few reasons:

* You’ve never sailed before but you’ve always thought it would be fun to try
* You used to sail but your skills are a little rusty
* You’re an experienced sailor. You’d like to charter a yacht some day and you need the right qualifications for the charter agreement
* You’ve sailed before but the experience mostly consisted of someone shouting ‘Pull that rope NOW!’ and you still have no idea why, or what would have happened if you’d pulled the wrong rope, or pulled no rope at all, and it still bothers the heck out of you that you felt like a total twit…

**Why choose Glencoe Outdoor Centre?**

The tuition is excellent. Our tutor was endlessly patient, unflappable, knowledgeable and encouraging. It’s immensely reassuring to know that your teacher has decades of experience and knows the area extremely well. Fortunately no question was too daft for her to answer. It’s worth mentioning that our course tutor Debbie Williams has sailing in her blood. When other four year olds were pushing out the boat with blobs of poster paint and glitter, Debbie was literally pushing out her own boat and learning to sail. If you’ve ever wondered what the girls from ‘Swallows and Amazons’ did when they grew up, they probably morphed into someone very much like Debbie.

The boat itself is a sturdy 38ft British-built Westerly, beautifully maintained and comfortably appointed. You’ll be amazed at how much kitchen equipment can be stored in an area not much bigger than an old-fashioned telephone box.

**What’s the course like?**

Be prepared to work hard. Your trashy reading material is likely to remain unopened, your bikini/mankini probably won’t see the light of day. The pace doesn’t let up and you can expect to be busy with practising manoeuvres, drills and general boat handling during the day. Bear in mind that everyone on the course needs to practise the manoeuvres individually, which can take time, but it’s very useful to learn from each other. Evenings are spent at a mooring, anchor or pontoon, and after dinner there’ll be chart work to do as you plan passages for the next day. You’ll learn how to navigate, how to handle the boat, how to safely manoeuvre in confined spaces, what to do if someone falls overboard, how to manoeuvre in the event of engine failure, how to do engine checks and many other useful skills.

It helps if you’ve familiarised yourself with the course syllabus and RYI handbooks in advance. If you’re doing the Day Skipper Course it would be very useful to do a bit of Passage Planning in advance as this is the most challenging part of the whole course. It’s not difficult but it does require concentration; you’ll be looking up several kinds of data to piece together a coherent plan. A familiarity with reading tide tables is helpful.

This course teaches you more than how to sail. It teaches you about good teamwork and good decision-making. It trains you to work competently when you’re tired and stressed, to navigate efficiently and to always keep in mind the safety of everyone onboard. It will leave you with a sense of achievement and a new appreciation of the power of wind and tide. It might even fill you with admiration for the sailors who worked out the principles of sailing thousands of years ago, concepts which are still relevant today.

**What’s it like being on the boat for five days?**

You’ll probably be sharing a confined space with total strangers. Luckily, sailing people are generally nice considerate people so this isn’t as problematic as it might sound. There are loos (heads) on board which are operated with a pumped system. Most evenings you’ll have access to loos and showers onshore which are fairly basic but clean (and heavenly after a hard day’s work.)

If you’re inclined to be seasick, take some medication with you. The tiny shops you’ll encounter are surprisingly well-stocked but shopping opportunities will be limited.

You’ll be provided with a very good kit list. It’s worth paying attention to the suggestion that you bring manmade materials and go for lots of layers. Our course was held in June but even so the weather was chilly. It’s worth getting hold of some really good waterproofs. If the weather is bad it may be difficult to dry items out so take this into consideration when you’re packing.

Dietary requirements are noted and food is prepared accordingly in advance. Food is brought on, pre-prepared and frozen by the excellent Jenny. Everyone takes turns at being chef for the day. Basically this means taking a large dish of deliciousness out of the fridge, turning on the gas and putting the dish in the oven, then sitting back and accepting the compliments when everyone says it smells fabulous. (Totally fool-proof and not at all scary even for non-cooks.) No matter how cold and wet you get, there’s always a hearty soup or casserole to look forward to, followed by a stonking sticky toffee pudding or crumble.

**And finally…**

The wildlife on the West coast of Scotland is amazing. There’s every chance you’ll see porpoises leaping by the boat and guillemots diving right next to you. You’ll see seals basking on the rocks and grey herons staking out their territory by the misty water of a secluded bay. You’ll have moments of absolute peace and silence and know that you’re in the middle of nowhere but also – somehow - in the middle of everything that matters.

This course may not be for you, especially if your ideal sailing week involves sunning yourself on a pristine deck while a liveried butler rustles up some cocktails (although if you’re lucky you might snaffle a sneaky cappuccino in Tobermory.) If, on the other hand, you enjoy a mental and physical challenge, you like to be outdoors and you’re prepared to put up with whatever the Scottish weather throws at you, this course might be just what you’re looking for.

So whether you’re a complete novice or a confident self-improver, give it a go.

You might surprise yourself!

Ruth Howell

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