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## The Inn Place to Sail

A father and son get schooled at the Tides Inn on the Chesapeake Bay

The silence is always a shock. On that first day sailing every year, there's a moment when the sheets fill, the lines creak tight, and the boat lurches forcefully and almost mutely forward with the wind. And yet—each year—the thought still arrives: Sailing is so *darned quiet*.

It doesn't matter if it's a Hobie Cat in Arkansas, an oceangoing yacht out of Tortola, or, like today, a 30-foot racing day-sailor on the Chesapeake Bay. Each time, as wind gets purchase on the sheets and begins to push us along, it's amazing.

"I think we should let a little sail out," our instructor Arabella is saying to my son, James, sixteen, who sits at the tiller, steering us toward the bay's mouth. "You're fighting to steer a little too hard. If the boat is designed well, and has properly sized sails, you shouldn't have to fight the tiller at all."

James—who has officially been a sailor for forty-five minutes—reaches authoritatively toward a rubberized bit that clasps the mainsail line. He pops the rope free and lets some out. Within seconds, the boat rights a bit without losing speed and sails more easily. Then he bites the line back down.

"That's it," Arabella is saying. "Do you feel that? Can you feel the *difference*?"

James nods and smiles. He looks slightly starboard: downwind and to our south. Out that way, where the Chesapeake opens into the Atlantic Ocean, there is only horizon: blue on blue. It's a big world out there.

### **Sail Away**

At some point in life, everyone should go to sailing school. If only because it gets you outdoors while also forcing you to interact with nature as you learn from it. In coming to know sailing, and getting to *sail* in the bargain, you remind yourself that you can cut your own individual route across the world.

And while there are some good sailing schools around—in Annapolis and Fort Myers and Nassau and St. Barts—few approach the sumptuous yet professional pleasures of the Premier Sailing School at the Tides Inn, in Irvington, Virginia. Established in 1998, the school is overseen by its two Irish owners, Phil and Arabella Denvir, who have been sailing all their lives. Before fetching up at the Tides, they owned a sailing school on rocky, gorgeous Malta, in the Mediterranean. At Premier Sailing, you can learn to sail anything from dinghies like Sunfish and Lasers to 24-, 30-, and 36-foot “big boats.”

“But the main point,” Arabella confides as James continues at the tiller on this afternoon, “is always the same: Get out on the water, get some understanding of how sailing works, and enjoy it.”

With classes that can comprise two-hour afternoon knock-arounds or full-on five-day race training shakedown, Premier Sailing also happens to be the only accredited sailing school associated with a luxury hotel on the East Coast.

“We’re the only one,” says Peter Regan, director of marketing at the Tides, a 106-room all-amenities resort, originally built in 1947 and recently refurbished to the tune of \$18 million. As Regan is saying this, we’re having a sunset refreshment on the hotel’s peaceful bay-facing brick patio, sailboats filling the sixty-slip marina. He stares out across the thick lawn in the foreground: past the precisely shorn rectangle of the croquet pitch to our right (where the inn regularly hosts Croquet and Chardonnay weekends) and onto the shimmer of the Chesapeake beyond.

Between where we sit and the bay, a large swimming pool area and the glass-walled Pool Grille are tucked into a hillside below. James has already headed back to the room. Later, we’ll eat crab cakes and a steak in the hotel’s formal East Room (gentlemen, please remember to wear a jacket) as we watch day become night across a scrim of cloudless electric-blue sky

### **Lessons Learned**

But for us on this trip—despite the awesome food and the placid scenery, the eighteen-hole championship golf course and the par three, the bicycles available to explore local back roads, the Egyptian-cotton linens and the flat-screen TVs, the antiques stores in nearby Irvington and Kilmarnock, and the top-drawer local striper and bluefish fishing—Arabella is right: Getting out and sailing remains the point. And while the quiet pleasures of sailing are certainly part of the experience, a Premier Sailing School visit is nothing if not active.

From the moment James and I stepped aboard our floating classroom—the 30-foot *Apollyon*, a name that means Destroyer (not a shabby handle for a sleek racing boat)—the learning came fast and furious.

And James wasn't the only one taking on new skills. While I've been sailing since childhood, the mastery Arabella displayed meant I was getting a knowledge upgrade, too.

Our learning began at the get-go. "Well, James," Arabella said as we began to untie from the dock, "why don't you take us out?"

He looked at her...shocked.

"No, it's okay. The best way to learn is to start."

As we headed for the larger waters of the bay, Arabella moved from the basics—how the tiller worked, how to rig the mainsail and jib, how to coil and stow lines—to more sophisticated lessons. Before long, using winches and handles was second nature, as were sailing reaches up and across the bay and hauling close. Arabella also pointed out that running and steering a boat required a captain to involve his vessel in the conversation. "The boat, it doesn't know you want to change direction," she said. "Think about the boat and how it moves. It won't react as quickly as you can. Work with that."

Soon, we were tacking to turn upwind and jibing to turn downwind. As the wind blew stronger with the afternoon's rising temperature, Arabella showed James how to reduce or "reef" sail, keeping the boat moving at its most efficient speed. Soon, James was managing lines and steering his way in the world on a 30-foot keeled racing boat, saying things like "Prepare to come about...coming about now," with no self-consciousness—as if he'd been doing it all his life.

In a short time, James had become comfortable as captain. Not bad for a sixteen-year-old who, days earlier, hadn't known a halyard from a spar or a d-shackle.

By late in the day, after we'd sailed back to the Tides Inn—dropping the mainsail and getting it under cover; folding and stowing the jib in its sail bag—James was a different kid.

"You know, Dad," he said that night as we sat down for dinner, "I think we should try and figure out how to keep a boat in the water down here." After watching the change come across my son at sailing school, it seemed like a fine idea.

For reservations and information, visit [tidesinn.com](https://www.tidesinn.com); or call 800-843-3746.