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Sailing San Francisco Bay Like a Pro



A view of the Golden Gate Bridge from USA 76, in San Francisco Bay.

By CHRISTOPHER HALL
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WITH a whoosh of water against its sleek, black hull and a thundering crack of wind-whipped sails above, USA 76 came about on San Francisco Bay. Almost immediately, the 115-foot mast — about as tall as a 10-story building — dipped 30 degrees, and I found myself riding the high side of the heeled-over sailboat as we sped under the Golden Gate Bridge. Unnerved by the sudden shift but trusting in the former America’s Cup racing yacht and its crew, I gripped the rails as we entered the towering swells just outside the Gate.

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Behind the wheel, Brad Webb, the boat’s square-jawed owner, ceased all banter with the passengers and focused intently on maneuvering his 84-foot craft. “Ease the jib, Josh!” he yelled to one of the four crewmen from behind the wheel.

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Drew Kelly for The New York Times
Passengers and crew on board USA 76.

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Drew Kelly for The New York Times
USA 76 sails in San Francisco Bay.

The boat sliced through the rough sea, cresting watery peaks before plunging into troughs whose translucent, gray-green walls temporarily blocked views of San Francisco gleaming in the spring sun. On Mr. Webb’s command, USA 76 came about again. With a stiff wind behind us this time, we shot under the bridge and back into the bay. A quartet of porpoises began to surf our large stern wake.

In 30-plus years of living in San Francisco, I’ve learned that there’s no better way to experience the bay than by sailboat. I’ve made countless crossings on engine-powered ferries and have taken the big, rumbling boat to tour Alcatraz with scores of visiting relatives. And while simply being on the water has made all of those trips a pleasure, they can’t compare with my handful of outings on a friend’s 32-foot sailboat.

Down close to the water and its inevitable surprises, I’ve always been struck by how intimate and elemental San Francisco’s connection with the bay becomes, how luminous its sky even on an overcast day. On a wind-powered craft, there is no thrumming engine to drown out the sound of rushing wind or splashing water or crying gull; there are no diesel fumes to mask the air’s salty bite. You sense the pull of tides and the rhythm of swells. You feel the tingle of spray on your face.

For months, sailing has been much in the news in San Francisco. Two America’s Cup World Series regattas this year (Aug. 21 to 26 and Oct. 2 to 7) will bring top sailors and catamarans with huge wing sails to the bay. The events will serve as a prelude to the big show next summer, from July 4 to Sept. 22, when the city hosts yachting’s premier event, the America’s Cup. Monster vessels from around the world will battle for the right to challenge the reigning champion, Oracle Team USA, during the September finals. And for the first time in America’s Cup history, the racecourse will be close to shore, allowing thousands to watch from rooftops, hills and waterside roosts.

All the talk in town about sailing had me wanting to get back on the water. Though my friend would have happily taken me out again, I decided to investigate what is available to those without easy access to a boat. The options, I discovered, are many and diverse, from two-hour trips on an 87-passenger schooner (\$30 per person; [rendezvouscharters.com](#)) and sunset drink-and-hors-d’oeuvres cruises aboard a 65-foot catamaran (\$50 per person; [adventurecat.com](#)) to beginner’s lessons in 22-foot keelboats (\$400 for 12 hours of instruction; [spinnaker-sailing.com](#)) and private all-day charters of a teak-decked multimast ketch (\$3,850 for up to 28 passengers; [sailsf.com](#)). Sailing San Francisco ([sfsailing.com](#)), a comprehensive Web site aimed primarily at the local sailing community, lists several dozen other choices.

USA 76 immediately hooked me with the prospect of a two-and-a-half-hour sail (\$140; [acsailingsf.com](#)). The advantages, beyond price, were clear: I could actually take the helm and help hoist the sails of a boat that competed in the 2003 America’s Cup challenger races in Auckland, New Zealand. I booked online for a Sunday morning departure three weeks later.

The night before our departure a fierce storm had lashed the region with rain and howling gales, so I was relieved to wake up to clear and breezy weather. I had read that morning that a huge ocean swell was making its way through the Golden Gate, and as I approached



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USA 76’s berth near the Pier 39 tourist complex, I could see whitecaps frosting the bay.

“It’s a great day to be on the water,” said Jonathan Buser, the ship’s affable captain, sharing duties that day with Mr. Webb, who usually does not accompany the ticketed public cruises. Mr. Buser then asked the full complement of 20 passengers to introduce ourselves. Most of us admitted to little boating experience — “I’m feeling a little nervous now,” confessed one woman in designer jeans with Dior sunglasses propped on her head — though a few wore what to my landlubber’s eyes looked like serious sailing jackets with lots of complicated zippers and drawstrings.

After a quick safety briefing (feet on the deck at all times, no touching ropes unless instructed, hands on the chrome railing if needed for balance), we motored into the bay, stopping in a fairly calm patch behind Alcatraz where Mr. Webb, who had been a crew member aboard USA 76 in 2003 and is currently part of Oracle Team USA, recounted the history of the boat.

THE all-carbon monohull was launched in 2002, and after coming up short in Auckland won a rematch on San Francisco Bay against the Swiss boat that had taken that year’s cup. “That made our billionaire owner very happy and kept him writing checks for a while,” Mr. Webb said, referring to Larry Ellison, the Oracle chief executive and sailing enthusiast. Mr. Webb bought USA 76 in 2010, made minor modifications to convert it to a passenger vessel and began public sailings in June 2011.

With three other passengers, I took a turn at one of the two “coffee grinders,” two-person winches used to raise sails. After we muscled the 1,800-square-foot mainsail to the top of the mast, the boat was turned to catch the air, the engine was cut, and USA 76 took off. The boat heeled over as the wind filled the mainsail and we cruised back toward the city. A gargantuan tanker crossed our path, momentarily blotting out the sun. Cormorants skimmed the swells, and a few sea lions poked their heads above water and watched our progress. We raised the jib sail and felt the boat suddenly pick up speed.

We tacked and jibbed — moving into and away from the wind — zigzagging around the bay for another hour, with passengers eagerly taking turns at the helm as USA 76 made its way toward our brief encounter with the rough seas outside the Gate. Back inside the bay, after porpoises surfed our wake, I finally got behind the wheel.

“This will likely be the fastest stretch today,” Mr. Webb told me as we clipped along at close to 14 knots and I grinned like a kid on Christmas morning. The boat, a powerful, finely tuned machine, responded to my slightest turn of the wheel. Sailing close to the waterfront as we headed to the berth, Mr. Webb pointed out that we were following what will be the final leg of the 2013 America’s Cup course. “All along the shore fans will be yelling as the boats race toward the finish line,” he said. “Can you hear them?”

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