

GUARDIAN

THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY GUARDIAN

Get on the water

Smooth sailing for seaworthy landlubbers, and the legendary Beer Cans on the Bay

By Amanda Witherell

> culture@sfbg.com

It was my wise Uncle Arthur who told me: Cultivate friendships with people who have boats. He passed on this nugget of wisdom as we were reaching across Maine's Frenchman Bay in my tiny Tartan 27, Jane. In the bright afternoon sunshine, it was plain to see that my little vessel wasn't suffering from that other great sailing adage: Boats are holes in the water where you throw money. I had neither time nor money for pimping teak and painting decks, and when I left the East Coast for California, Jane stayed behind.

I've been lonely without her. No more excuses to hang around the docks or trawl the aisles of West Marine. Every time I cross the Golden Gate Bridge I see those sails cupped like friendly white hands waving to me. Maritime friendships can be hard to come by, but the most remarkable thing about sailing in the Bay Area is that once I was determined to do it, I was raising the halyard left and right. Opportunities abound.

I've never been more than deck fluff when it comes to racing, but who can turn down something called the Beer Can Series. John Super of the race committee of the Bay View Boat Club explains the Beer Can as "nonserious racing. It's introductory and a great way for the beginners to come out and be taken care of by the experts. It's racing without all the jumping up and down and yelling at each other. It's just an excuse to drink beer." He tells me I just missed Monday Night Madness. "But you wanna have some real fun?" he asks.

"Always," I say.

"Then meet me at the Treasure Island Sailing Center, Thursday at 5:30."

A southwest breeze is blowing a steady 15 to 20, and a fleet of Vanguard 15s buzzes like unmedicated kindergartners around John and me in the committee boat. Flush-deck and flat-bottomed, Vanguards are small enough to throw on the roof of your SUV and typically sail with a crew of two, dressed for dipping into the drink when a good puff pushes the sloop-rig onto its side. The race heats are fast and tight, and the best crews move like shadows of each other through the tacks, with the grace of paired figure skaters. Afterward, wet and shivering with adrenaline, they gather in the parking lot outside the clubhouse to rehydrate with Sierras and catch up on tactics. And they all want to know if I'm going to give it a try. Yeah, just as soon as I get a full-body wet suit and a TB shot.

From Vallejo to Sausalito, there are 27 yacht clubs that host a Beer Can, and if you have a particular thirst, it is possible to race in one every night of the week. And as long as you're deck fluff willing to upgrade to bottle-opener operator, it wouldn't be hard to find a berth. "Show up on the dock with a bag of chips and a six-pack, and let 'em know your ability," John says. "Someone will take you out."

On Friday I take that approach. Greg Nelson meets me at Doyle Sailmakers in Alameda and we take a Columbia 5.5 out for Encinal Yacht Club's version of the Beer Can, which races a course in the estuary along the Embarcadero between Oakland and Alameda. It's a diverse field of boats, from beamy cruisers to chipper Melges, and seems to typify the friendly competition you'd find at most Beer Cans. We place second in a class of three, and after the dock lines are tied fast, we hit the Encinal Yacht Club, where I discover I'm right at home. Hey, all you East Coast sailors: I've discovered where these westerners have been hiding the Gosling's, clandestinely enjoying coveted "dark and stormies." Belly up to the Encinal for a dram of this inimitable concoction of Gosling's Black Seal rum and ginger beer (not ginger ale!). It's a favored draft of sailors for the stomach-settling properties of ginger, the antiscorbutic lime, and the morale-boosting rum. This delicious cocktail has somehow managed to elude hipster exploitation, perhaps because of the great distance between Bermuda and California, but, damn, it's not like we have to round the Horn or travel by wagon train anymore ...

Saturday my boyfriend can't stop checking the anemometer on iwindsurf.com, so we head down to the Cal Sailing Club, where he has a membership. I'm willing to sit on the dock and play the fawning girlfriend, but he assures me that someone will come along and ask if I want to go sailing. Within half an hour, he's proven right, and I'm tucked into a life jacket with my hand on the tiller of a Precision, bucking over the chop toward Berkeley. My new friend Joel is trimming the boat like he grew up with jib sheets instead of finger paints, though he tells me he only learned last summer. I'm impressed, and when he drops me on the dock, I inquire about a membership. Cal Sailing Club, once affiliated with UC Berkeley, is now a nonprofit sailing cooperative. The organization's treasurer, Peter Kuhn, who's wearing a haphazardly buttoned Hawaiian shirt and straddling a spray-painted Kona, gives me a verbal tour of all the Lido, Precision, and JY sailboats they have, as well as beginner-to-advanced windsurfing boards and sails. Membership is \$60 for three months, with unlimited access to the equipment and free lessons. That's less than a dollar a day. A rich person's sport becomes cheaper than coffee.

Watching those windsurfers and Vanguards, I've definitely developed a hankering for speed. I don't think I'll be up to snuff for San Francisco's first annual speed sailing event, but from Crissy Field I'll be able to watch as windsurfers, kiteboarders, small dinghies, and skiffs compete to set the first speed records for the Bay Area. The point is to go a third of a mile as fast as possible. Held during the max flood tide of the season, in an effort to achieve the flattest conditions possible, if the wind cooperates, we should see some pretty sick speed. San Francisco doesn't have any speed records, so for a chance to set one, register at www.sanfranciscospeed.com.

And if you actually have a boat, register for the Summer Sailstice, a celebration of the longest sailing day of the year with yacht-friendly events all over the Bay Area. Hopefully I'll find a ride, but if you need any deck fluff, you know where to find me.

Bay View Boat Club