

Start Sailing

Learn to Sail by Crewing on a Keelboat

Have you ever wanted to learn to sail, but not sure where or how to start? Crewing on a keelboat is a great way to get involved in the sport and learn the ropes.

In this document we cover some basic things you should know before joining a yacht for the first time.

Whether you have aspirations to conquer a long ocean race or just interested in a casual twilight sail, the first step is to get out on the water and start sailing.

Sailing is a sport that truly offers something for everyone. Whether you're old or young, male or female, competitive, social, looking to learn something new or experience the wonders of the ocean – sailing has it all!

Crewing on a sailing yacht is a great way to get out on the water and learn how to sail at a very reasonable price tag.

When racing, a keelboat might have anywhere from 2 to 20 crew, so like any team sport you need to work with your fellow crew under the guidance of the skipper, tactician or crew boss.

To help you get started, here are a few things you should know before heading out on your first sail:

Boat Etiquette & Expectations

If you've been invited along for a sail, or heading down to the yacht club to find a spot, make sure you arrive on time.

There will be work to do to set up the yacht before you can go sailing. Pitch in as much as you can and use this time to learn where things are on the yacht. At the end of the race things need to be packed away, which is generally the responsibility of the crew as well.

Smoking may not be acceptable, so before you do, ask the skipper if this is OK.

The skipper or crew boss will often provide a briefing before the race to assign crew positions and explain the rules of the yacht. Unless help is requested by a fellow crew member, crew are expected to work within their assigned positions. Be ready to help your teammates, but try not to interfere with other people's roles.

Good communication onboard is important – ask questions and communicate clearly when you need to, but again try not to interfere with other people's roles.

What to Bring

The right clothing will make sure you're comfortable and warm throughout the race. You don't need anything fancy, especially if heading out for a twilight or casual daytime race, but here are a few basics to keep in mind:

Comfortable clothing - Wear comfortable, quick-dry shorts or pants and a short or long sleeve shirt. Remember this is a water sport, so you will likely get wet and will want to be able to move around and stay comfortable.

Stay warm and dry - A spray jacket will help you stay dry, and on cold days you'll want a fleece or vest to keep warm. On very cold days thermal pants and tops are also great to layer up for extra warmth!

Sun protection - Sunglasses and a hat will protect you from the sun and help keep salt-water spray out of your eyes. You'll also want to wear sunscreen if out in the day.

Footwear - Wear boat shoes or sports shoes that have a light-coloured, non-marking sole. The deck can be quite slippery when wet, so something with a good grip is important (yachting deck shoes are designed for this).

Lifejacket - When racing the yachts a required to have a lifejacket onboard for all crew, but if you have your own that you like to wear, bring it along as well.

Gloves - Sailing gloves will protect your hands from rope burn and provide better grip.

Nourishment & hydration - It's a good idea to take some water, and for a longer race, something to eat. Some yachts will provide food, some ask crew to bring their own and some share the responsibility around week-to-week. If you're not sure, just come prepared and ask the skipper what you should bring.

Check the weather before heading out; on the water it can feel several degrees colder, and on hot days the sun tends to feel more intense.



Basics of a Yacht Race

There are a lot of things to learn about how a race is conducted and managed, but we'll just cover a few of the basics here.

Like any race, there is a start, a course and a finish.

The start line can be set-up between an anchored boat and laid buoy, between two designated points on land, using leads, or other method as designated in the Sailing Instructions (SI's). Yachts will either start as a group at the time indicated by sound and/or flag signals, or individually at a pre-determined time based on their handicap.

The course will be described in a Sailing Handbook or Sailing Instructions published by the Race Organiser, and will generally use laid or existing marks that yachts are to pass as specified in the Sailing Instructions. There are usually a variety of course options available; the course to be sailed will be announced before the start of the race on a notice board or by flag or other signal.

A finish line will be established similar to the start line.

The final results will be determined by the yacht that crosses the line first (in a count-up start), or by adjusting each yacht's actual finish time using their handicap rating. In one design racing, all yachts start at the same time and the first across the line is the winner.

Does all of this sound a bit complicated? To begin with, just try and understand when and where your yacht will be starting, the course, and where you will finish.

There are also a number of rules that govern how a race is conducted and how competitors should conduct themselves. These include the Racing Rules of Sailing (RRS) as well as the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea (COLREGs) that determine who has the right of way (kind of like the rules of the road). Australian Sailing publishes the Racing Rules of Sailing with Australian Sailing Prescriptions - this includes rules specific to racing in Australia.



Safety

There are lots of ways you can get hurt, so you'll want to know how to stay safe while onboard. Fortunately, there are a few simple precautions you can take to make sure you stay safe and have fun.

Firstly, watch your hands and head – these are the two most likely parts of your body to get hurt.

Keep your head away from the aptly named boom (the heavy spar that holds the foot of the main sail) and your fingers away from winches and other moving parts of the yacht.

Secondly, before heading out, know where the safety equipment is and how to use it. A couple of the basic pieces of equipment are the lifering and lifejacket:

1. The lifering is usually attached to the back of the yacht, and can be thrown to someone in case they end up in the water;
2. A lifejacket is worn by each sailor and will keep you afloat if you end up in the water.

Finally, if you're not sure about anything, ask the skipper or an experienced crew member.

Moving Around the Yacht

When moving around the yacht, try to keep a solid stance with feet at least shoulder width apart, and knees soft. A good rule of thumb is to keep 'one hand for you and one for the yacht.' This means you always have a free hand to help steady yourself as you move around.

One of the key times you'll need to move is when the yacht is 'tacking' or 'gybing.' Both of these manoeuvres include turning the boat, and the sails will switch sides. When this happens some of the crew will need to help with the sails, and the rest will generally need to switch sides.

When tacking or gybing watch you head on the boom as it comes across the boat, and if you are near the mast keep your fingers away from the gooseneck (where the boom attaches to the mast).

Shrouds and solid parts of the yacht are generally good things to hold onto. Winches, sheets and blocks (anything that moves), are generally not.

While sailing, be aware that the yacht can move suddenly due to waves or wind gusts, or if the skipper needs to alter course in a hurry. Keeping an eye and ear out at all times will help you avoid unexpected surprises.

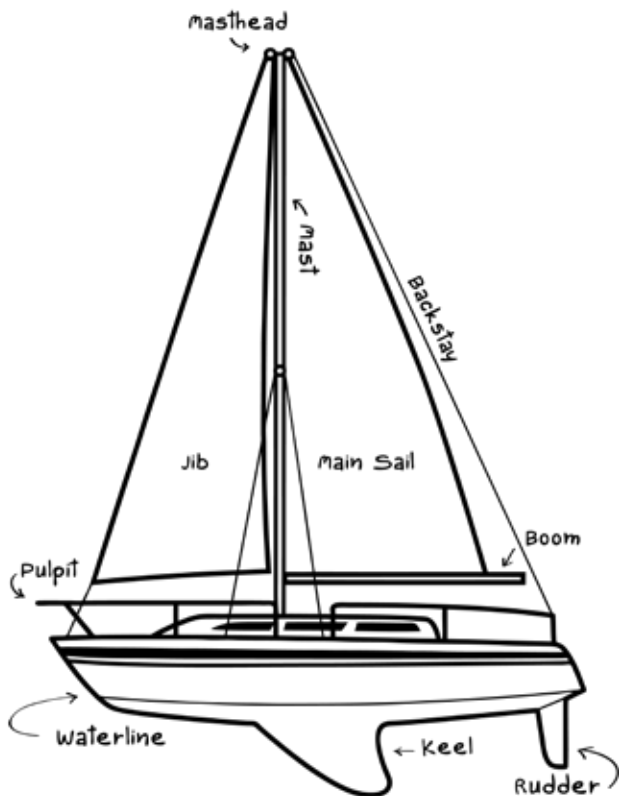
Sailing Terminology

Sailing terminology is one of the things crew often find the hardest when they first start sailing.

As well as learning how to sail and figuring out what's what and who's who on the yacht, you also need to learn a completely new language! Well, sort of.

Don't worry, you'll learn this as you go, and can always ask someone more experienced for help if you don't understand a term. To get you started, a few important words to know are:

1. **Bow** – the front of the boat.
2. **Stern** – the back of the boat.
3. **Starboard** – the right hand side of the boat, or the direction, i.e. to turn right.
4. **Port** – the left hand side of the boat, or the direction, i.e. to turn left.
5. **To tack, or tacking** – this is used to indicate the yacht is changing direction, turning through the wind (the sails will move to the other side).
6. **To gybe, or gybing** – this is used to indicate the yacht is changing direction, turning away from the wind (the sails will move to the other side). Gybes happen when you're going downwind, so the sails will have farther to move across the yacht in this manoeuvre.
7. **Mast** – the tall spar erected vertically near the center of the yacht that holds up the sails.



8. **Jib, genoa or headsail** – a triangular sail at the front of the yacht that is set on the forestay.
9. **Mainsail** – a large triangular sail on the back of the yacht that attaches to the boom.
10. **Forestay** – a cable that runs from the bow to near the top of the mast, that holds the jib.
11. **Boom** – a horizontal spar that attaches near the bottom of the mast and holds the foot (or bottom) of the mainsail.
12. **Halyard** – a rope used to raise and lower sails.
13. **Sheet** – a rope used to control the trim of the sails, or in other words to tighten or ease the sails.
14. **Winch** – a cylindrical mechanical device used to help bring in (tighten) or let out (ease) a sheet.
15. **Winch handle** – a handle used to turn a winch.

Race Positions

When racing, there are a number of different positions – or jobs – that need to be done.

Depending on the type and size of the yacht, and how many people onboard, these can vary, but here are some of the key positions:

Helm - the helm is the tiller or wheel used to sail the yacht. The position ‘helm’ is the person who steers the yacht. This is often, but not always the yacht’s owner.

Main trimmer – a trimmer is someone who controls the movement of the sail. The main trimmer controls the main sail. They use the main sheet to bring the sail on and ease it out, and may work other controls such as the traveller, outhaul and boom vang.

Headsail trimmer – the headsail trimmer uses the headsail sheet (also known as a jib sheet) to control the movement of the headsail (or jib). They may also use a jib car, barber hauler and other controls to fine-tune the sail trim.

Pit – the person in the pit works the halyards and other lines that run along the deck of the yacht around the cockpit and gangway.

Mast – the person on the mast helps hoist the sails using the halyards that run up and down the mast, and works with the bow to help bring them down after the race or during a sail change.

Bow – in a two-sail race the person on the bow is generally responsible for hooking up the headsail and helping guide it up the forestay at the beginning of the race, and hooking up a pole to the headsail for downwind legs.

Grind – keelboats use winches to provide mechanical help for sheeting in (or brining on) sails and other lines. A crew member assigned to ‘grind’ will help operate these winches using a winch handle, or on some yachts a pedestal or coffee grinder.

Ballast – when going upwind keelboats heel (lean over). The amount of heel depends on the direction of the yacht in relation to the wind, the amount of wind, and the type of yacht. To help keep the yacht flat, crew often sit on the side of the boat – or rail – with their legs out over the side, to provide ballast. Keeping the boat flat will improve its speed, but don’t worry – the weight of the keel (under the yacht) will prevent it from tipping all the way over!





Get out and Start Sailing

One of the most beautiful things about sailing is that, no matter how experienced you are, you learn something new every time you get out on the water. So don't think you can't get out there because you don't 'know enough' – the best way to learn is just to start sailing.

On the flip-side, when you're new to the sport, it's also good to recognise there is so much that you don't know, and to be open to learning and discovering that knowledge as you go.

So... how can you find a yacht to go sailing with?

The MySail crew search platform provides a great way to connect you with skippers to find your first sailing spot. Go to www.mysail.team to get started - it's free to sign up, create a crew profile and message suitable yachts.

Another great way to organise your first sail is to head down to your local Yacht Club. There are often skippers looking for an extra crew member or two, and the staff at the club can usually introduce you or point you in the right direction.

If you would like to continue learning in a formal environment before joining a yacht, sailing schools offer Discover Sailing, Competent Crew and other courses designed to teach new sailors the basics.

Now, get out on the water and start sailing!