



# Stepping up to Day Skipper

One partner in a couple often tends to take the lead, even if both are competent sailors. With her husband, Theo, out of the way, Georgie Stocker showed on her Day Skipper course that she is more than capable of taking charge

I've grown up sailing, and even worked as a dinghy instructor for six months, but my yacht sailing career started as a competent sunbather on family charter holidays in Greece. Later, I progressed to longer trips in cooler climates with my boyfriend, now husband, Theo, where, being just the two of us, I had a more active role and learnt far more. We have done multiple trips on different boats: I have rounded headlands, dodged fishing vessels and stood night watches. As with many sailing couples, however, I defaulted to crew and left much of the navigation and pilotage in Theo's capable hands.

My recurring nightmare when planning sailing trips with Theo is, 'What would I do if he went overboard and would I be able to get him back? Would I manage if



**Crew and instructor kitted for bad weather**



**Georgie in control at the helm**

he was ill? Could I manage a boat on my own? These thoughts have been bugging me for a few years, so Theo suggested I take my Day Skipper course.

I hoped the course would increase my confidence in my sailing ability, help me to brush up on skills such as man overboard and coming in and out of berths. I also wanted to learn and practise how I would go about planning a passage and navigating a boat on my own. I wanted to know that I could go sailing without Theo and be an equal partner in planning, preparing and skippering our trips.

Theo was happy to help me prepare and I set about studying. It was only when I started looking through the RYA course books that I realised the extent of the task I had taken on. Tides, secondary ports, pilotage... it all seemed pretty

overwhelming at first. However, after a week's holiday grudgingly spent doing navigation exercises and going through the theory, I began to feel like I was finally getting the hang of navigation.

I still felt a bit rusty though. I had the course booked for the beginning of August and realised I hadn't been on a boat, excluding the Norfolk Broads, for nearly a year. Thankfully, a sailor at a local club offered to

take me out on the water for a day to knock the rust off. It was so useful to go over basic boat handling, safety, the engine and practical chartwork to get my sea legs back before the course.

After all this preparation I felt ready, albeit a bit nervous, especially after being grilled at the last minute by my dad on the phonetic alphabet. Apparently 'A for apple' doesn't quite cut it on VHF radio.

I did the course on the Solent with Commodore Yachting from Gosport, who were brilliant. They had me on a shiny new Bavaria 37, which, considering most of my sailing had been on a 31ft yacht or smaller, was a bit daunting at first.

As the only woman and probably half the average age of the rest of the crew I was initially rather intimidated. The other two on the course both had their own boats and had been sailing for far longer than me, but they all were very friendly and I soon felt at my ease as one of the crew. After some introductions I was set the task of planning the passage from Gosport to Cowes. Equipped with my notes, and with the promise of a drink in the pub with the crew, I managed to get a passage planned in record time — for me.

The first two days were intense. We took it in turns to skipper and plan the passages and pilotage. We enjoyed great sailing and practised picking up mooring buoys — the lasso technique was my favourite, although I did get in trouble for not saying the required 'Yee-hah!' after

throwing the line. On the first night we conducted a night navigation exercise from Beaulieu to the Hamble. I had done night passages before but never pilotage into a harbour at night. I loved working out what all the lights were and using the leading lights to navigate in. With the help of lots of cups of tea and biscuits, we managed to find our way safely into Swanwick Marina. A slower start followed the next morning, with a full English breakfast and some time looking at engine maintenance and checks on board.

With growing confidence in my abilities as a skipper, we were informed a storm was on its way. Force 7-8 winds were forecast. Yikes! Theo and I had been out in some windy conditions before, but it was going to put the first two days' skills to the test, as well as my waterproofs. Although I prefer sunshine and calmer waters, the thrill seeker in me relished the exhilaration of strong-wind sailing.

It was a great opportunity to practise

*I wanted to be an equal partner in planning, preparing and skippering our sailing trips*

coming alongside berths, picking up buoys and anchoring in adverse conditions. I was surprised, however, when our instructor

John shouted 'Man overboard!' and said the manoeuvre should be done under sail while the wind was gusting over 34 knots.

With the dummy safely aboard, we made our way into the shelter of Gosport. After mooring up to a buoy we had chance to look at a bit more of the theory, including weather forecasts, towing and helicopter rescues. The final day was spent refining our skills as well as finishing off the food stores.

It was a great week and a chance to hone new skills. It was also the first time I had sailed without Theo in a long while and I think the course challenged me to step up to the role of skipper. I feel I can now fend for myself afloat and am a lot more confident in my boat handling skills, my leadership, theory and general boat husbandry. Theo was thrilled that I passed and relieved to know that, if he goes overboard, both his and my chances of survival have markedly improved. ➔



**Plotting a course at the chart table**



## Lassoing

We practised picking up mooring buoys in different conditions: approaching on a close reach under mainsail as well as against the tide, approaching downwind under headsail. A new technique I learnt was lassoing the buoy.

This is done by using a line and attaching to two cleats at the bow, ensuring that the line is forward of the forestay and over the anchor; then coiling the remainder of the line on the approaching side and using a two-handed throwing method to lasso the buoy on the approach. This is great in strong winds and tides as it gives time to use the lines to steady the boat so that the bowline/secondary buoy can be retrieved and brought on board without having to hold the weight of the boat on a boat hook.

*Georgie picks up a mooring buoy with a lasso. Yee-hah!*



## Heave to for man overboard pick-up



We practised a number of techniques for picking up a man overboard and this was probably my favourite. In this example man overboard is called, the helmsman should count for two seconds then go through the wind with the foresail cleated to back, while releasing the main sheet and starting the engine. After the mainsail has filled and the headsail has backed, steer into wind to keep the boat hove to. A short blast of astern power also helps to slow the boat and enable it to drift downwind onto the man overboard. The engine can then be used to line up the boat with the man overboard (this was mostly in astern) and retrieve the buoy.

I had never used this technique before but found it a much quicker and more reliable method. In my view, if sailing with just two of you on board, it is much easier than having to drop the sails completely, and means you stay close to the casualty.

*Hove to with the engine on for a MOB*

## 'Woble' your engine daily

On the course we learnt how to do an engine check, the parts that need checking and what to do if there was a problem. The acronym 'Woble', takes you through the checks in order:

W — water levels: check the filter and the antifreeze water level

O — oil: check both the gear box oil and the fuel oil

B — belts: checking the tension of the belts can be done by a short twist. If you can twist more than 90° it's too slack

L — look for leaks

E — exhaust is pumping water

I found this methodical approach helpful to ensure that I didn't miss anything.

**Being methodical with engine checks prevents any on board wobbles**





## Spring from a pontoon mooring

During the week we went in and out of different kinds of berths in different conditions, multiple times. Using a spring to leave a berth in either direction was something new for me. I had seen it but never done it myself and it worked brilliantly when the wind was holding us onto the pontoon.

In this technique we used a bow line, stern line and a spring from the stern to a cleat well forward on the pontoon. Having let go of bow line and stern line we powered astern, causing the bow to swing out away from the pontoon and bring the stern in. The engine is then put in forward gear to leave the pontoon.

Something I found helpful was to not remove the spring until there is forward motion to prevent the bow being blown back onto the pontoon. We also learnt that all the lines should be set up to be slipped from on board, and that the shorter end of a line is released to avoid lines fouling on the pontoon.



*Bow moves out whilst going astern*

## Navigation and pilotage into harbours — day and night

On board we planned pilotage into and out of marinas and harbours. While the planning seemed arduous at first, we soon got quicker at finding the right charts, calculating tide times and height, checking what lights or buoys to look out for, whether there were transits or back bearings to use and identifying any dangers and clearing bearings for these.

For the night pilotage into the Hamble, the GPS was really helpful, but we also

wrote up a plan to use on deck. This gave us a quick reference of the pilotage with the bearing to each buoy and light, and rough distances and times. I had never used using leading lights before, so this was really good to practise, ensuring a safe passage into the mouth of the Hamble avoiding Hamble Spit. Getting the lights for the different cardinal marks right – they can be difficult to identify – was also a key lesson to keep us safe.



*Teach your crew to check lifejackets*

*Pilotage into a new harbour can be a rewarding experience*



## Safety briefing

During the week we gave several safety briefings. Knowing what to tell a novice crew before sailing, without overloading them, is a skill, and having a clear outline of what to cover really helped. Demonstrating how to put on a lifejacket and how to check it fully is a good idea.

The briefing on deck included explaining how to use the liferaft, and how to move around safely on the boat. As we had strong winds throughout the week there were a number of times when we were clipped on, and making sure as a skipper that the crew are safe, as well as increasing safety precautions depending on the conditions, helps to avoid unnecessary man overboard drills. ➔





*Aye aye, captain: John Hopkins, Commodore Yachting's instructor, presents Georgie with her certificate*

## How did she do?

### Instructor John Hopkins gives his verdict

'The three crew on the boat were all working towards their Day Skipper and all had a lot of prior sailing experience. Martin and John both have their own boats and wanted proof of competence, as well as updating and checking their skills. Georgie obviously has a lot of miles and time afloat under her belt, so once I had introduced a task or skill and everyone had a go, we could spend time practising and refining it. We had a very windy week, but that's much better than no wind. It is no mean feat to pick up a man overboard under sail in a Force 7 as Georgie did. There were a few skills

that needed practice, and her pilotage got quicker through the week, but it is usually obvious fairly soon if someone is at the level needed for Day Skipper, which Georgie was. I think she finished the week much more confident in her own ability.'

### Commodore Yachting

Commodore Yachting is a leading RYA training centre and yacht charter company based at Gosport Marina on the Solent. It offers all RYA sailing courses, taught by an experienced team. Stuart Cooper started the company in 1999 with one yacht after leaving the Navy and now operates a fleet of seven Bavaria yachts from Gosport and has another boat based in Greece. ▲

## RYA Day Skipper syllabus

### What you need to know before you get on the course

5 days, 100 miles, 4 night hours on board a sailing yacht. Theory to the level of Day Skipper. While it is recommended you attend a Day Skipper shore-based course beforehand, which includes an exam, you just need to be confident in doing the theory to the required level, as there isn't time to learn this on the course.

### What you will learn on the course

- preparation for sea
- deck work, navigation
- pilotage, meteorology
- rules of the road

- maintenance and repair work
- engines
- victualling
- emergency situations
- yacht handling under power
- yacht handling under sail
- passage making
- night cruising

### How you will be assessed

Assessment will be by your instructor throughout the course. There is no terrifying exam at the end of the week, so you should get feedback as you go along as to how you are getting on with each of the skills and tasks.

## Georgie Stocker



Georgie, 26, works as a junior doctor in Newcastle upon Tyne and hopes to become an anaesthetist. She qualified as a dinghy instructor during a gap year working in

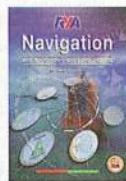
Greece, and has cruised yachts in the UK, the Mediterranean and the Baltic with her family and her husband Theo. Georgie and Theo are currently without a boat, but are hoping to find suitable small cruiser soon.

PHOTO: MARTIN HANSFORD

### Commodore Yachting

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[www.commodore-yachting.com](http://www.commodore-yachting.com)



### Recommended reading

*RYA Day Skipper Handbook Sail (G71)*, RYA, £18.49

*RYA Day Skipper Practical Course Notes*, RYA, £11.99

*RYA Navigation Exercises, Second edition*, RYA, £21.49

All available from: [www.rya.org.uk/shop/](http://www.rya.org.uk/shop/)

Thanks to the Royal Naval Sailing Association for providing a boat and driver for our photoshoot