

# TURNABOUT ON CAPTIVA

by Frank Sargeant

Can a diehard powerboat skipper find happiness at sailing school

**A**s a powerboatman of some experience, five years a charter boat skipper and skiff guide, and owner of an even dozen "stinkpots" over two decades, I have always tended to view the sailing crowd with a jaundiced eye.

What would make an otherwise intelligent man or woman fool around with a contraption that will not move at all half the time and when it does it will not go in the direction you want it to, and if it does go it will run aground in any water shallower than the Gulf Stream itself? Besides, with all those lines hanging everywhere, there is obviously no room aboard these seagoing mules to get out a good cast should a fish come along, no space at the stern for a pair of outriggers, and absolutely no place in the cockpit to lay even a medium-sized billfish.

Too, I wondered about folks who got excited about "racing" along at nine knots. This is racing? Friends of mine own drag boats that go faster than that at idle . . . in reverse, even.

Another thing I didn't really trust about sailing people was their language. ➤





## CAPTIVA

"You don't necessarily have to sheet in the jib to jibe," I once overheard one of them say. Now, nautical terminology is not foreign to me; I learned what to call the pointy end years ago. But this sort of double talk would give Abbott and Costello sour stomachs. No, forget the tall ships and the tall talk. Give me a rather stubby sportfisherman, a tank of diesel, and an ignition key, and I could be very happy.

But, the wheel turns, time passes. About the middle of last summer, the opportunity arose for me to visit Captiva Island, on Florida's southern gulf coast. I didn't know much about the island at that time, but I did know that Redfish Pass, one of the better snook holes in the state, ran by its northern end, right off one of the best boating resorts in the state, South Seas Plantation.

The only catch to this appealing invitation was that I was to attend sailing school during the visit. And not just any sailing school, at that; the Offshore Sailing School, originated by Steve Colgate, Olympic sailing team racer, crewman on two America's Cup contenders, and one of the country's best-known sailing writers.

Feeling nervous, I signed up, and a few weeks later checked in at South Seas. I towed along a 15-ft. skiff with its trusty outboard, perhaps as a sort of waterborne security blanket. Just in case I became a sailing school dropout, I didn't want to be caught in the middle of all those fish without a boat.

I liked South Seas Plantation immediately, with its lush Caribbean jungle setting and waterfront villa accommodations. I also liked my sailing instructor, Pat Reischmann, ex-Coast Guard rescue squad crewman (he understood powerboats) and one of the top young sailing racers from St. Petersburg, 150 miles up the gulf beach. Reischmann used a lot of those strange sailing-crowd phrases in our first two-hour classroom session, but turned out to be a regular fellow over a cup of grog afterwards.

Next morning, I slipped out of my villa before first light, tiptoed down to the marina, and got my powerboat "fix" for the day. I ran down to Redfish Pass, less than five minutes from the dock, and on my third cast nailed a five-pound snook. I hooked and lost two others in short order, all off the same rock jetty. By the time the sun was well up, I was back in the luxurious King's Crown dining room enjoying a breakfast of tropical fruit and grinning like a canary-stuffed cat, despite the fact that I now faced three hours aboard a "blowboat."

The boats were 27-ft. Solings, I discovered down at the docks; sleek, trim craft that looked as if they belonged there next to the tennis courts and swank villas.

The instructor and the rest of our crew, a college professor and his wife from Mis-

souri and a young lady from New Jersey, arrived and we set about the comedy of errors known as "raising sail." Even though all the lines on the training boat were labeled, none of them meant anything to any of us. Reischmann told us that we would best learn by doing, so we bumbled about pulling and pushing on things and generally behaving like a pack of baboons in an electronics plant for the next 30 minutes.

Finally, our instructor pronounced us ready to push off. One minor problem; no wind. I knew it! If God had wanted man to sail, he never would have caused Mr. Evinrude to invent the outboard motor.

We could not move at all. There was not a breath of air in the protected waters of the marina. What to do? Paddle. A multi-tonned 27-footer dragging an enormous chunk of lead from its belly, you paddle. This, I thought as we boomed along at a



Frank Sargeant photos



headly ½ knot, is the joy of sailing. I stared wistfully at my powerboat as we glided past.

After about 15 minutes we eased around the corner of the island and into Pine Island Sound. There was a good breeze out of the southwest, and suddenly the boat came alive. One second we were sweating, batting gnats and straining at the paddles; the next the sails were full and we had taken a pleasant heel to port and water was

hushing by the bow and the thing was actually moving.

I felt much like that first Phoenician sailor must have when his animal skin hung on an oar to dry accidentally caught the Mediterranean breeze. Wow! Not only was it sailing, but I was making it sail, at least partly, handling the jib sheet at the order of the young helmsperson from New Jersey, who seemed as amazed as I that we were underway.

It was all short-lived, however; suddenly a scraping crunch vibrated the hull and the boat came to an abrupt halt.

"Aground," Reischmann duly informed us.

Aground? We were a mile from shore, in four feet of water. How could we be aground? But we were; the Soling draws 4½ feet. Would this have happened in my bonefish skiff? Now I ask you?

Anyway, we heeled the boat over, and she finally came off due to Reischmann's judicious jockeying, and we were sailing again. After a while I began to enjoy it; it really was pleasant to go clipping along and not hear any sound except the wind and the seagulls, not worrying about the Arabs and the price of oil. Then we went aground again, and this time we stuck hard. We sat there until a friendly Boston Whaler came by and threw us a line. Powerboats, *uber alles*, I thought as we were trolled home behind him.

That evening, Reischmann patiently reviewed our mistakes (it was a long class), and began to get into the mechanics of sailing. Much of it started to make sense. All of us expected better things during the next practice session, on the following afternoon.

In the meantime, though, I went exploring, and found Captiva delightful. The island supposedly got its name from Jose Gaspar, pirate of renown, who kept his female hostages there to protect them from the clutches of his lusty crew (you would be lusty, too, after three months of trying to go somewhere in a sailboat), until he could obtain ransom; ergo, Captiva. Today, the island is still loaded with lovelies, most vacationing on the beaches. Most of them did not seem to desire rescue, as far as I could tell.

The beaches in this area are recognized as probably the best in the world for shell collecting, with some 400 varieties available. The beach itself is actually made up of crushed shells rather than sand, so many of the little creatures are washed ashore.

The history of Redfish Pass is also an interesting bit of Americana. Supposedly, an island carpenter by the name of Tobe Bryant had a home on the current site of the pass. His two sons wanted a "stream" running by the house as a convenient place to swim, despite the fact that the Gulf of Mexico was only 100 yards away. Their father's instructions to the contrary, the two lads hitched up the family mule one day when father Bryant was away and proceeded to dig a narrow ditch from the beach across to Pine Island Sound, a distance of some 400 yards across Captiva Island. When the tide began to flow, the sand along the ditch disappeared like melting ice cream. Within a day's time, it had opened up so wide the carpenter's home was swallowed, and Redfish Pass was born. What happened to the boys when old Tobe

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got home is not recorded.

In any case, the resulting pass annually produces some of the best snook and redfish angling anywhere on the gulf coast. The nine-hole golf course at South Seas Plantation runs right along the edge of the pass, and one golfer told me he regularly carries a spinning rod next to his nine iron in case the fish start to feed during a round on the links.

Beyond South Seas, the island has a New Englandy feel, with multistoried clapboard houses overlooking the sea. There are lots of shops, especially on Sanibel, Captiva's sister island to the south, and most have good quality merchandise; the locals have wisely acted to prevent the sometimes tacky development that has occurred elsewhere in Florida. In fact, when a causeway from the mainland was proposed in the early 60s, the residents battled it all the way to the supreme court before finally giving in.

As a result of this concern, the islands have remained a garden spot, with trees, bike paths, and unspoiled beaches everywhere. The Darling Wildlife Refuge on Captiva is alive with subtropical animals, including the beautiful roseate spoonbills and a good supply of Florida alligators.

This is pretty much the limit of the "wild life" on the islands however. The only

active nightlife is at Casa Ybel, on the beach road to Sanibel. Low prices on drinks, loud music and lots of young people; a good time if you're in the right mood. Quieter entertainment is available in the Ship's Lantern Lounge at South Seas Plantation, for those so inclined. The King's Crown dining room, adjacent to the lounge, is one of the island's best, and offers a pleasingly exotic continental menu.

All of us felt a lot less foolish on the second practice session and as a result things went much smoother. The sails went up quickly. There was a breeze in the marina that moved us away from the dock and no one fell overboard or got seasick. My impressions of sailing not being so bad after all were growing rapidly stronger. They continued to do so throughout the week.

The only black mark in the practice sessions was one against me. During one of my sessions at the helm I managed to put us aground twice running. For a guy who prides himself at following a knee-deep channel through the flats at 40 knots in a skiff, this was a bit hard to swallow. I began to have a solid respect for cruising sailors who find their way into unknown waters without the security of a powerful engine to push them off the mud bars.

By the end of the week, I also had gained a new awareness of the effect of wind and tide on any hull, power or sail,

and even had an idea of how to jury rig a sail on my skiff, should that inevitable day come when my trusty engine would not start.

But perhaps most importantly, I had relearned the simple fact that it's an awful lot of fun to just fool around with a boat. You don't really have to be going anywhere, or planning to ice ½-ton of fish, or racing someone, to feel the pleasure of a white boat on blue water, the smell of salt beaches and the cry of gulls.

My passing the course seems to indicate that the Offshore School can turn just about anybody into a passable sailor. Others who have tried the course indicate that someone with the basics can get to be pretty darn good taking the class. For the more experienced, the school also offers courses in cruising and in racing. For more information, write Offshore Sailing School, 820 Second Ave., New York, NY 10017.

You can get to Captiva via the causeway from the Fort Myers area, but the best way to visit is by boat. The marina at South Seas Plantation is one of the most modern and best equipped on the gulf, and has space for boats up to 100-ft. LOA. Controlling depth on the channel is six feet. Dock hookups, laundry, and showers are available for liveaboards, and the excellent villa accommodations are only a step away. Write South Seas Plantation, Captiva Island, FL 33924, for reservations. 