

Charter a Boat – Sail Away With Your Best Friends

by Susan Davidson

What's your idea of the perfect vacation? Photographing waterfalls in Tahiti? Exploring archaeological ruins in Greece? Scuba diving

ning the boat. You'll be welcome to take the wheel and experience as much of the sailing as your interest and ability permit. If learning to sail is a serious goal, consider a charter with an instructor aboard. Many of the U.S.-based charter companies have certification programs (ASA or US Sailing) that provide an organized approach to learning to *bareboat* (sailing without a captain or cook).

Pat Collinge courtesy Sunsail, www.sunsail.com



with sharks on Australia's Great Barrier Reef? Or perhaps you just want to unwind and catch some rays.

However you define the perfect vacation, it's bound to be even more memorable if you round up your closest buddies and experience the freedom of a sailing charter.

Sailing into a charming port and exploring the local culture, food and wine is far more pleasant than dealing with the hassles of rental cars, and hotel reservations. With a charter boat as home base, you're able to explore a new port everyday, or linger when you discover something special. Your cruising accommodations can be as spacious and luxurious as you choose. Charter boats are well equipped and depending on your size and preference, will have everything from icemakers to entertainment centers.

No sailing experience? No problem!

A fully crewed charter boat includes a captain and chef/host who handle the duties of run-

If you have sailing experience, but lack confidence or need to brush up on your skills, arrange to have a captain aboard for the first few days of your charter. Experienced sailors who want to bareboat will be asked to complete an application describing their navigation and sailing experiences. While privacy is nice, remember this is a vacation. Even if you are an experienced sailor, you might want to opt for a crewed charter as it allows you to sail as much as you want, without the responsibility of having to do the work. Wouldn't it be luxurious to be able to sleep in after partying into the wee hours, and still have the boat underway the next morning?

The other half

The chef/host is the other half of the crewed charter, and the person most responsible for turning your trip into a relaxing and pampered experience. From simple island fare to gourmet cuisine, your chef will provision the boat according to your personal preferences. There is a certain indescribable glow that accompanies a meal afloat, and it's not just the sunset. *Warning:* Being served exotic drinks or fine wines while dining al fresco with a fabulous view may be addictive, and could result in annual charter vacations.

The boat you choose will depend upon the number of people in your group and what type of sailing you prefer. Catamarans are pop-



Coldwater Bay, Turkey, is a picturesque respite for sailors.

TIPS

- ◆ Pack in soft easy-to-stow luggage.
- ◆ Check the boat's equipment list so you'll know whether to bring CDs or tapes.
- ◆ If you bareboat, a big flashlight may come in handy as well as a small pocket light for the dinghy or hatchway combo lock. (Charter boats are generally not permitted to sail at night and flashlights may not be part of the boat's inventory.)

BASIC TERMS

Bareboat: You're on your own. All the navigating, sailing, cooking and cleaning is your responsibility.

Captained: Your captain will handle the navigating, sailing, anchoring, etc.; however, you are always welcome to assist in sailing the boat. If you want to enjoy the pleasure of sailing without the work, this is an excellent choice.

Crewed: Typically means a captain who operates the boat and a cook/hostess who provisions the boat, cooks and serves meals, and handles the clean-up. This arrangement necessitates chartering a larger boat with more cabins.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

Sailing magazines such as *Cruising World* and *Sail* have annual charter issues that provide useful comparisons of the major companies. Or you can use a charter broker. These experts know which boats are new or well maintained, as well as the characteristics of each boat's crew.

ular, especially with non-sailors who appreciate the cat's ability to sail without heeling. And, in certain locations like the Bahamas, even more experienced sailors appreciate the catamaran's shallow draft which permits access to anchorages that would be difficult in deeper draft monohulls.

Whether you prefer a monohull or catamaran, it's important to check the layout of the available boats for the number of cabins and heads (bathrooms). Most charter boats include a dinghy for trips ashore, and if the location is tropical, snorkeling gear. Larger boats may include water toys like windsurfers or powerful dinghies with water-skis and wakeboards. Scuba divers can usually arrange for a dive boat to rendezvous with the charter boat.

When and where to go

Your charter location will depend upon the time of year you want to go, your hobbies, interests, and budget. Boats are available throughout the world, but are always more costly during high season, which is the time of year that offers the most reliable and pleasant weather. Bargain hunters will discover that rates plummet during summer in the Caribbean, but it's also hurricane season, and your vacation could be canceled. Trip insurance or a charter protection plan is available from most companies, and will help protect your charter fee should your employer, or stormy weather, cause you to cancel.

While exotic locations are alluring, don't overlook the possibility of chartering in the United States. Spring and fall are good times to explore Florida, while summer is the time to experience Washington's San Juan Islands or New England's quaint harbors.

But, whether your dreams send you island hopping through the U.S., Caribbean or the Greek Isles, when you're sailing with family and friends, it's all about the journey. ▲

Susan Davidson is a Florida-based writer and avid sailor.