

“Blue water sailing”, said Alan Boyde, veteran of many solo transatlantic races, “is like standing under an ice-cold shower, tearing up five-pound notes.” Guy Norwell writes of the pleasanter kind of sailing.

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Have you ever noticed that so many of our competitive sports, and pastimes, have their origins in activities that are now out-moded, out-dated, or just downright obsolete? After all, there is really no longer any practical purpose behind throwing a javelin, and if you wanted to get a message from Marathon to Athens today you wouldn't send a runner. You see, we have become so darn good at all the practical things – thank you, modern technology, for container ships and guided missiles - that we are obliged to turn to the impractical to demonstrate our skills. Hello, sailing and archery. It's a nice little irony.

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Sydney to Melbourne is infinitely quicker by plane than by sailing boat. So what is it about a (relatively) slow way of moving about on water, propelled only by the frequently fickle vagaries of the wind that captures the imagination of so many people? After all, every sailor will tell you that the wind is always blowing from the direction that you want to go, which means that you can't go there – or not directly, at least. If you want to get from A to B, take a motor boat; if you want to make the trip in style, sail.

Sailors love to talk about 'challenge' and 'freedom'. Oh, and going sailing – sometimes. I once sailed in a racing crew that included a radio journalist. He asked everyone why they were there, but nobody said, “Because I like sailing”. It was all about camaraderie and the crew (and the challenge and the freedom).

Of course, it doesn't really matter where you go in a sailing boat. “It's the journey that counts,” said Montaigne, “not the arrival.” Anything that is too easy is merely functional. Sailing is like trying to solve a puzzle with an endless number of variations, and the fun is in the solving, not the answer. You can conduct the same exercise from the cockpit of a 10' dinghy, or the deck of a 100' superyacht (although in the latter case you may be paying someone to do it for you – but that's hardly the point).

A cruising yacht will carry you silently and peacefully into the quietest cove for an overnight stopover, or it will take you across an ocean. A racing boat will take you across the same ocean (a great deal faster) or a racing dinghy and a 20-knot breeze will give you the ride of your life, ending up exactly where you started – proving once again that the journey is more important than the destination. Bruno Peyron proved this even more conclusively recently: his crew of 12 flew from France to America, got onto the maxi-catamaran Orange II and then sailed it back across to France as fast as possible – setting a new distance record for a sailing boat over 24 hrs (766 nautical miles) and a new time record across the Atlantic (4 days, 8 hrs, 23 mins, 54 secs). So, it's nothing to do with where you go – just how you get there.



Actually, the cruising sailor does care about destinations as well, and very often a sailing yacht will take you to places that might otherwise have been passed by in a faster vessel. 'Gunk-holers' or 'mud-skippers' are the fraternity that takes delight in exploring each and every cove and inlet along a coastline. These are the people who know about a hundred forgotten bays on the Hawkesbury and the very best place to drop anchor behind Vancouver Island.

Sailors are people who proceed quietly and without fuss in the most environmentally friendly of vessels, appreciating moment and place, and moving within their environment rather than through it.

Try sailing. You might get there less quickly and see more along the way. You might arrive somewhere that you would otherwise have passed by. And you might discover, as Kenneth Graeme did, that “There is nothing, absolutely nothing, half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats.”