

Cruising clubs are everywhere, no matter where you live



CRUISING CLUBS

Live inland? Try offshore cruising

They are one of sailing's best-kept secrets. While cruising clubs are prevalent around the coast, as you move inland, a big boat sailor's interests aren't confined to jumping in the car at weekends and heading seawards.

Cruising clubs are actually everywhere, and play a huge role in getting more people yachting, wherever they live in Britain.

'I think people – boat owners especially – are surprised to find there are these opportunities,' explains Judy Lambourne, Commodore of the Heart of England Offshore Cruising Association, in Balsall Common, between Solihull and Coventry.

'But we're just one club in the West Midlands alone, and we have more than 150 members – people who, whether interested in cruising, yacht racing, training or just the social side, want their love of the sea to be more than just an every-now-and-then thing.'

Each club has its own niche, but most have at least monthly meetings and

organise rallies and charters; some arrange offshore race entry, too. Some are, or have excellent relationships with, RYA training centres to offer access to practical and theory training from Competent Crew, Day and Coastal Skipper, and Yachtmaster qualifications to VHF, Diesel Engines, Radar, Sea Survival and First Aid.

The social side is also a massive draw for these clubs, with the strength of their speaker programmes, especially over the winter, ensuring they remain vibrant, relevant places for people wanting to widen their seafaring horizons.

Such luminaries as Chay Blyth, Tony Bullimore, Lisa Clayton, Tom Cunliffe and Clare Francis have graced another Midlands club, Bromsgrove Boaters' speaker nights in the past, for example. Meanwhile, as well as welcoming high-profile maritime guests, all clubs invite experts from the marine industry to talk about practical 'how to' subjects, such as electronic navigation, charts, meteorology and more.

Until three years ago, Droitwich-based Alan Gilmour was a dinghy sailor with an RYA Competent Crew certificate he didn't know what to do with. But a bit of Googling later, he discovered Bromsgrove Boaters and is now Vice Commodore. Alan believes there are many more people like him lurking inland.

He said, 'First and foremost, I wanted lots of sailing opportunities. I wasn't a boat owner, and don't have any intention of becoming one, so how would I sail regularly? I've now done around 2,500nm of sailing, including around the French coast and in the Scottish Highlands – I wouldn't have done this without the club.'

'The social events are key for keeping you in touch with people who want to sail and hear of more sailing opportunities coming up. For me, sailing on the sea is about discovery and personal challenge. But we have members who just want to socialise or enjoy cruising weekends ending in a good

pub, while some want to do the Fastnet or sail around the world. We cater for all – our mantra is "no experience necessary".'

As well as social, cruising club membership has financial perks, too. Clubs tend to be able to negotiate better charter rates and discounts than individuals. And how many non-sailing weekends away cost as little as £100-200, including accommodation, too?

As Judy, who is also Cruising Representative for RYA Midlands, concludes, 'How people find us varies; most traditionally come through RYA training courses and personal introductions, while the club's website has become increasingly important, too.'

'Keeping membership healthy is obviously vital, but making sure members are doing more regular sailing is our biggest aim. That is about providing opportunities.'

Go to www.rya.org.uk/wheresmynearest to discover your local cruising clubs.