



Into the Wind

The best way to beat the summer heat is to get onto the water and do some sailing as our writer discovers

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NOT FAR FROM downtown Saigon awaits the most unlikely of activities for those willing to brave the drive to Cat Lai, just beyond Ho Chi Minh City's boundaries. Less than an hour from the city's center, and happening every Saturday on the water, are sailing sessions.

Established in 2005, High Tide Sailing is the brainchild of Frenchman Bruno Ury. Bruno recently hired Noelle Iles, who spearheaded the effort to get the Saigon Yacht Club established, to run and promote the sailing program. Word is getting around, as they recently hosted 32 sailors on the water in a single session, the highest number yet.

"We're building interest here; it's not Phuket or Hong Kong, but every single Saturday we have people on the water," Noelle exclaims. "We have 22 boats, and we get enough participation that we are now sailing every week instead of every other week."

The greatest obstacle to enjoying a day on the water, she says, is getting to the venue. The traffic, to be polite, can be daunting. Once you arrive at the dock, which sits adjacent to the site for a yacht club that is about to break ground and is scheduled to open in mid-2014, the rigors of traffic slip away. The excitement for a day on the water, where the greatest worry is capsizing, takes its place.

High Tide's flagship boat, the Bao Kha, encompasses 20 plus meters of charm and comfort, ready to ferry sailors and a small armada of dinghies into the open expanses of the Saigon River. After a pleasant ride to a wide spot in the river, she moors and High Tide's staff rigs the fleet of one- and two-man boats. A generous windward-leeward course marked with inflatable buoys offers a full day of fun, provided Mother Nature supplies a bit of wind. Despite the occasional day where there is no breeze to be found, a typical afternoon can see 10-12 knots of wind which is more than enough to make small boats go fast while still allowing crews to keep control of their vessels.

Sitting in a dinghy puts one only inches from the water, until the sails fill and the boat heels over at 30 degrees. All of a sudden you're several feet above the surface and traveling at a speed that feels much faster than it really is. The exhilaration of sitting on the high side of a small boat while directing it where to go by adjusting the tiller and sails is pure joy for the initiated. With the wind in your ears and the spray of water in your face, the only regret you will carry away from a day of sailing is not applying more sunscreen.

Get Carried Away

Most of the participants are expats from countries that have familiarity with the sport, such as France, Australia, and New Zealand. Marie, who has lived in Vietnam for two years, discovered High Tide last year and has been a regular over the last three months.

"I started sailing in Thailand about three years ago when we lived there," she explains. "Friends told me about High Tide and my husband and I have alternated weekends taking our kids along to get them involved."

Ten-year-old daughter Collee sums up her feelings after just her second time on the water. "It's so cool," she beams. "My favorite part is when we flip over!"

Indeed, capsizing a dinghy is all part of the experience, but warm water and plenty of help nearby take the worry out of such eventualities. With two chase boats on the water, and more to come to help right capsized dinghies, High Tide will soon also offer a water taxi service to bring people from the Saigon Bridge directly to where the Bao Kha is moored.

Tacking up a long course in a boat without instrumentation of any kind offers ample opportunity for humility. It takes only a few mistakes to come to grips with how out of practice living far away from a sailing venue can make even an experienced sailor. Simple things

like scurrying to the high side, or getting the trim right on a sail, can prove challenging until the rust shakes off. And it's going downwind with the centerboard up and accidentally sailing just a bit too far to the lee when the certainty of capsizing hits you in the face, along with the surface of the river. It's these very things that bring sailors back to the water, and lure people to give the sport a try.

Pascal, a recent arrival from France, is quick to share his happiness at finding somewhere to sail regularly without having to wrestle with the logistics of getting to the coast and back in a weekend. "I love getting away from the noise of the city," he says. "I used to sail quite often, until I met my wife, who gets very seasick on boats." That's a fate that has claimed more than a few sailors around the world.

For those without such obstacles, High Tide is equipped to handle any level of sailor, children and adults alike. Rigging, life jackets, some food and refreshments, and all the bottled water you need, are provided. Whether you're a sailor without a home, or someone who has always waxed romantic about what it's like to participate in one of the most storied activities in human civilization, there's a place, and a dose of reality, awaiting you every Saturday.

Visit www.hightidesailing.vn for more info. ■

