

I'm glad to report that I'm back on terra firma after my first foray into the world of sailing. By that I mean proper big boat sailing. I've crewed on dinghies before but always within sight of land. My introduction to the art was while I worked as a cook at an outdoor centre. All the instructional staff climbed, skied and kayaked but the man in charge of the stores was the sole sailor in the centre. His sailing buddy had left before I arrived, and after I showed a polite interest in his boat I was forced into a wetsuit and hung from a harness an inch from the water before I knew what was happening. I grew to love the sheer terror of it, and was perfectly happy to do what I was told without any understanding of the theory. Of course I have no idea what sort of boat we raced, but I know it was fast.

I've never sailed since, mainly because of my susceptibility to travel sickness. As a child, I couldn't make it from home into the shops in Glasgow without being very poorly. My long suffering mum had to take me off the bus half a mile from the shops and trudge over the bridge in the city centre with a child who perked up within a few seconds of fresh air. It was worse on the homeward trip, weighed down with bags and in a hurry to get home for dad's tea.

The only water borne vehicles I use are ferries with the help of sea-bands, a newspaper to sit on, fresh air and a good supply of appropriate medication. I have even managed to cross on the Kylerhea ferry with no aids apart from concentration.

So it appears to be a mystery why I ever agreed to accompany my husband and some friends last week on a 60 foot Dutch sailing barge. He was semi-working, in that he may be running some courses from the boat, and wanted to spend a few days getting to know the boat and planning whatever it is they needed to plan.

We met up with yacht-owning friends in Kent, a very long way from home, in brilliant sunshine.

Hubby gave me a quick tour of a sailing boat on the beach, and tested me on various terms. I still don't understand why port being red would help me remember it was on the left but perhaps I wasn't

listening. After boarding the skipper gave us a quick lesson in the various jobs that the four of us, and a mechanic who had less sailing experience than me, had to do every time he shouted at us. The important thing was that we all had to do our jobs at the same time and right away. We then had two days of no wind at all, and as he had to get the boat back to their yard in London, I spent an enjoyable time lying on the deck with my book and endless cups of tea while the others motored us gently along the coast.

Finally we got a wind and were able to sail on the last day, by which time we had entered the Thames Estuary and were speeding towards central London. What an unusual way to approach the city. I have been to London countless times, but arriving along the river gave me a real picture of what it must have been like when it was first growing. There were an incredible number of container ships and lorry ferries moving goods in and out; a whole industry that I was totally unaware of.

The river was pretty busy by this time, along with other pleasure boats and those fast water buses used by riverside commuters. Probably not the best time to realise I had forgotten all the instructions from the first day and to discover that the skipper (who is German) used Dutch names for everything. This initially pleased me as it brought everyone's level of knowledge closer to mine. What it turned out to mean was that sometimes he would shout an instruction that none of understood and resulted in us all looking puzzled as we headed straight towards a container ship. The boat was slow but not too manoeuvrable and I got the feeling people sail with as much tolerance of others as they drive in London.

We got there safely, and had the bizarre experience of tying up next to the Millennium Dome for our last night. We even managed to cross to a little beach of sorts and walk up to a pub for our first landing of the trip. The Ferry Inn it wasn't.