

# YACHTMASTER IN 105 DAYS...

Do fast-track Yachtmaster courses turn sailing 'zeroes' into heroes, or merely produce second-class sailors? Lucy Fitzgeorge-Parker investigates

Lucy at dawn in mid-Channel after 350 miles at sea in the middle of winter - fast-track students gain experience that most of us lack



**A**fter 36 hours of nerve-racking tension, the moment of truth had arrived. Our examiner looked up from his notes and gave us the verdict. 'I'm happy to say that I can recommend all of you for your Yachtmaster Offshore certificate,' he said. We were almost too exhausted to celebrate.

For more than three months, my four fellow fast-track students and I had been well and truly 'beasted' by a series of brilliant but ruthless instructors from Hamble School of Yachting. We had spent endless 'skills and drills' weeks in the Solent, piloting into every harbour by day and by night, sailing on and off pontoons, anchors and scores of mooring buoys, and berthing at least twice in every unoccupied berth on the River Medina.

The mile-building parts of the course were even tougher. At the beginning of January, we sailed 450 miles in four days, battling back and forth across the Channel in sub-zero temperatures. Staying in harbour

wasn't an option unless there was a Force 9 in the forecast, and when the weather was right, a stopover of more than a couple of hours in any port was a rare luxury.

We all learned an enormous amount about sailing, seamanship and ourselves, and, of course, gained our Yachtmaster certificates. Yet for some members of the yachting community, the fact that we did it on a fast-track course makes us second-class sailors. But why should experience gained over several years be any more valuable than the same amount of experience



Leaving Salcombe at dawn in mid-January, after a 90-minute stopover

packed into three or four months?

'Before fast-track, people thought you'd earned your stripes by sailing for, say, five years,' says Rob Gaffney, principal at Hamble School. 'But if you look at the actual experience over those five years, it was probably not that much, maybe only three or four weeks a year. By the end of four months, our fast-track students have had a lot of experience, albeit in a condensed form.'

What's more, the experience gained on a fast-track course is very different from that of the average leisure sailor. As Simon Jinks, the RYA's chief cruising instructor, points out: 'On a fast-track course, every week you're doing as much seamanship as other sailors do in six weeks. If I go sailing for pleasure, I don't spend all day picking up mooring buoys - I just pick one up and crack open a beer!'

And fast-track students are not only out all day and all night, they're out in conditions which would send most yachtsmen scurrying for the nearest bar. In our final mile-building

Photos: Tom Walker

week, I had to skipper us out of St Peter Port, Guernsey, in a Force 7, with a high Spring tide running through the Little Russel Channel. As an amateur sailor, I can't imagine doing that out of choice - even the local fishermen were telling us not to go out - but as a learning experience it was invaluable.

Gaffney, who is also a Yachtmaster examiner, says this is a noticeable advantage fast-track candidates have over many more 'experienced' sailors. 'I've examined fantastic sailors who've been sailing for 20 years and have really pushed the boundaries,' he says. 'But there are a lot who, because they only sail with their families, or on weekends, have never been outside their comfort zone. They don't sail at night, and they've never gone out in bad weather.'

They also run the risk of forgetting what they've learned from year to year, according to Tom Wilkinson, one of the RYA's senior examiners. 'If people are put through intensive training, where they are repeating everything they've learned regularly, it sinks in much better,' he says. 'I did sail training for

12 years in the Navy, and we trained our skippers very quickly. We didn't call it fast-track, but we'd take someone as second mate and they'd sail intensively for a season, and when they were deemed competent we'd move them up. There's no reason fast-track shouldn't work, if the training is good.'

So if fast-track is such an effective training method, why is it still so unpopular with

**'Our average age was over 40 and there were more women than men'**

many leisure sailors? Partly, this attitude dates back to the early days of fast-track, when courses were designed to take aspiring sailing professionals through from beginner level to Yachtmaster in one intensive burst. As a result, the programmes were relatively short (usually only 12 or 14 weeks), there were no options for joining after the start and no breaks during the course.

Some schools have stuck with this format, but many have changed their syllabuses over the past few years to make them

more relevant to leisure sailors. Several have introduced modular courses, precisely because there is demand for intensive training from people who already have experience. 'I've started to get a lot of calls from people who are at good Day Skipper level and want to push on in an intensive blast,' says Rob Gaffney.

'There's a huge perception that people are just walking in off the street,' agrees the RYA's Simon Jinks. 'Some are, but a huge number are already at Day Skipper or Coastal Skipper level. They've been happily bumbling around for a few years, and they've got to the stage of having the time and the money, and wanting to get more experience.'

Certainly, my fellow students and I could not have been more different from the cocky, young 'zeroes to heroes' that many people expect to see coming out of fast-track courses. Our average age was over 40, there were more women than men, and only one of us was a relative beginner. Of the rest, two of us had our own boats, one had raced





Sailing with dolphins was a highlight of Lucy's course

Photo: Lucy Fitzgeorge-Parker

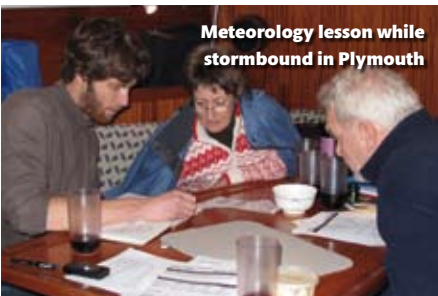
HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF A FAST-TRACK COURSE

- If you can afford the time and money, do the whole course – you'll go back to basics and be drilled in every aspect of boat handling. If you have never hauled an anchor up and down two dozen times in one day without a windlass, now's your chance!
- Make the most of the instructors – you'll have access to a range of extremely experienced sailors all day, every day. Find out what each instructor's special subject is, and learn as much as you can from them. Keep asking questions, and ask them again the next week.
- Read around the subject extensively, both before and during the course. This will not only help bring everything together, but also means that you'll be able to ask the instructors to explain anything you're not sure about.
- Visit the schools you're interested in before signing up and choose the one you like the feel of. Remember, you're going to be spending a lot of time at close quarters with these guys.
- Don't enrol as a complete novice. You'll get more out of a fast-track course if you already have some sailing experience – you'll understand the concepts more quickly and be able to make the best use of your time and the instructors' time.



'If students haven't been allowed to take a boat out on their own, they're not skippers'

Main Photo: Tom Walker



Meteorology lesson while stormbound in Plymouth



Even snow doesn't stop fast-track crews from sailing

dinghies for years and one had completed two transatlantic passages.

'The profile of people who come on our course has changed a lot,' says Rob Gaffney. 'Seven or eight years ago, the average age was under 25, the students were mostly male, and 80 per cent were planning on doing it as a career. That person is now the exception. The average age is over 30 and several of our students are in their fifties. It's people who want more confidence for sailing their own boat, or who want to build up confidence and skills before buying a boat.'

Nicky Ellis, course co-ordinator at the British Offshore Sailing School (BOSS), agrees that the image of fast-track students is often very different from the reality. 'We have a complete spectrum among our students,' she says. 'The youngest are 18 or 19, and we have all ages up to retired. It's a great mix of people and makes for a much better course – it's very good for younger students to get the experience of skipping older people.'

She sounds a note of caution, however, in

acknowledging that some criticisms of fast-track are justified. 'You do get a lot of young people who come off these courses believing they're able to do anything,' she says. 'We say to our guys at the end of the course, 'It's fantastic you've passed, but this is only the beginning of your journey.' But other schools are irresponsible, and that's part of the reason for the mistrust of fast-track.'

**'We certainly weren't allowed to get ideas above our station'**

We certainly weren't allowed to get ideas above our station. Our weekly debriefings from the instructors were constructive but brutally honest (I shall never forget being told that the Yachtmaster exam was not about finding out 'whether or not you're a smart-arse'), and we all came away aware of how much more we had yet to learn.

But it's true that schools and courses do vary widely, and anyone thinking of signing up for fast-track should look very carefully at both before handing over what is to most

people a sizeable amount of cash. Fast-track schemes don't come under the RYA's remit, so there is no control over course length or content. All that the sailing schools have to do is ensure their candidates turn up for the Yachtmaster exam with 2,500 miles in their logbooks, and their VHF radio, First Aid and theory course certificates.

One regular complaint from examiners is that some fast-track students have obtained the majority of their mileage on ocean passages in large boats. 'That's where I've seen the most failures when I've been examining, with people who've just been shoved on a boat to the Canaries and back and haven't been exposed to the nitty-gritty of skippering a boat,' says Rob Gaffney. 'With lots of people on board, you're just sitting on the rail and making tea. It's not valuable experience, and you don't learn much.'

Some schools don't allow time for 'self-sail' weeks, where students are sent out without an instructor on board. 'Going out into the unknown is one of the most fearful things we do as sailors,' says Yachtmaster

examiner Roger Seymour. 'If students haven't been allowed to take a boat out on their own, it is noticeable. They're not skippers – they're looking over their shoulder for the instructor.'

Similarly, many courses don't include instruction on yacht maintenance, so that students can become qualified Yachtmasters without being able to fix even the most basic engine or electrical fault. 'Any fast-track without maintenance is a waste of time,' Rob Gaffney says. 'As every sailor knows, one third of the time is spent sailing, one third sleeping, and one third doing maintenance. To have a Yachtmaster who can't bleed a diesel engine or unblock a toilet is scandalous.'

But if the limitations of some courses help to explain the general mistrust of fast-track, it seems a crying shame for leisure sailors to condemn the whole concept, or to imagine



Lucy and her colleagues Paul and Kirsten passed the final exam

Photo: Tom Walker

THE COST OF FAST-TRACK

The price usually works out at around £450-£550 per week. Hamble School of Yachting's Professional Sail Training is £8,470 for the full 17-week course (including two weeks off), or £3,200 for the Day Skipper module, £3,000 for the Coastal Skipper module, and £2,800 for the Yachtmaster module. Board and lodging are included for the sailing weeks, but not for the two classroom-based weeks. The Yachtmaster exam is £167. Waterproofs and lifejackets are provided, but if you're planning on doing the winter course allow for extra expenditure on piles of thermal underwear.



that they couldn't benefit from a few weeks of expert training

As a career break or a retirement treat, a fast-track course can be the ideal way to improve your sailing skills, hone your knowledge and expand your horizons. It may not make you an expert sailor overnight, but if you need the confidence to pursue your sailing dream – whether that's buying your own boat, taking off for a blue water cruise, or simply making the best of the British summer – it's a great place to start. ▲

LUCY FITZGEORGE-PARKER

Lucy, 34, is a freelance journalist based in London. She started sailing four years ago. Last spring, she and her partner Nick bought a Westerly Centaur called *Sea Hound*, which they sail out of Chichester. They were planning their first cross-Channel cruise as *YM* went to press.

