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Image: Sailing Holidays

Sustainable social distancing: sailing is the new green

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Saltwater has coursed through my veins for as long as I can remember. From childhood holidays spent immersed in the Indian Ocean on West Australia's countless beaches to an adulthood spent sailing around the South Pacific, the ocean is so much more than a mere body of water. Born under an astrological water sign (the crab), perhaps it was inevitable that I'd feel most at home in, on or under the sea.

But it wasn't until I serendipitously discovered sailing after hitching a ride on a cruising yacht through the Kimberley that I understood the soul-enriching serenity that comes from wind-powered travel. I was hooked from the moment



Image: Fiona Harper

Long-distance and round-the-world sailors have always known the true power of wind propulsion and solar energy. Completely self-contained within their small sailing vessels, this global cruising community has long embraced renewable energy. Ubiquitous solar panels, wind generators and desalinators on cruising yachts allow sailors to be self-sustainable for months on end.

Now, environmentally conscious travellers are hopping onboard too, embracing yacht charter as a viable means of exploring the world while minimising their environmental footprint.



Perhaps in the wake of teen environmentalist Greta Thunberg's wind-driven travels, sailing holidays are booming both here and abroad. That is, when there are no travel restrictions, of course.

According to Boot Dusseldorf, one of Europe's largest boat shows, yacht charter in the western Mediterranean region is booming. The eastern Mediterranean, especially Turkey, is also experiencing growth, while the Balearic Islands remain a sought-after charter destination. The Caribbean has suffered as hurricanes pummelled the region last year, but is bouncing back as yacht charterers return. Sailing holidays among the 115 islands of the Seychelles archipelago have grown enormously, and Tahiti remains a perennial favourite thanks to tranquil lagoons, palm-fringed beaches and an inviting, translucent ocean. As we return to travel post-COVID-19, sailing popularity is only expected to soar again as people seek out ways to travel without crowds.

Closer to home, the Whitsundays have never been more appealing for sailing holidays, with robust charter yacht fleets based at Airlie Beach and Hamilton Island, plus a balmy tropical climate and 74 beautiful islands to explore.

Aware of the delicate marine environment in which they operate, yacht charter companies have adopted eco-friendly practices well beyond dispensing with single-use plastic bags and plastic straws.

Sailing Holidays, which operates sailing flotillas in the Greek Islands, are committed to minimising their impact, particularly when it comes to recycling.

"We manage to recycle a lot rather than throwing items into landfill," says its director, Heidi Neilson. Duvets are donated to an orphanage, while worn sails are cut down to make tote bags or donated to a scout group for shade sails. Rescue dogs benefit from beds made from old pillows, and Corfu Donkey Rescue receives wood shavings from the maintenance workshop, out-of-date medical supplies, towels and bedding.

"We sail as much as possible but, especially when mooring, wind cannot power this. Ideally, we would like to have a flotilla of electric boats, but we have to wait for yacht manufacturers to build suitable yachts," Ms Neilson continues. "The other positive environmental thing about sailing holidays is that we visit places that you can only reach by boat. Our guests always eat in local tavernas in the evenings and buy lunches from small villages, so it helps local communities."



Major companies such as Sunsail and Moorings have taken the 'Make Holidays Greener' pledge – a campaign launched last year by ABTA, the UK travel association that encourages holidaymakers and travel companies to reduce, reuse and recycle. Sunsail and Moorings combined tend to lead the yacht charter industry, with bases in some of the world's most alluring destinations from Tahiti to Thailand, Croatia to the Caribbean. Aiming to reduce their 'yacht print,' fleets are now optimised for efficient high-performance sailing through optimum hull and engine design. Most are equipped with solar power to generate electricity, and desalinators to transform saltwater into fresh.

Experienced sailors may hire a bareboat yacht (which are self skippered) or if you're a novice and don't know your port from starboard, you could join a fully crewed yacht, where the only thing you'll need to concern yourself with is what time sundowners are served and where the best snorkelling is found.



Meanwhile, Moorings notes that the natural health benefits of 'salt therapy' are many; seawater is rich in minerals that nourish the skin, and exposure to salt-kissed ocean air has a calming effect that reduces stress and anxiety. Further, Moorings claim that breathing in sea breezes is good for the respiratory system and that saltwater and ocean air are Mother Nature's organic mood boosters. Who are we to argue with such reasoning?

As enriching as sailing is for the soul, utilising solar and wind power to both propel and power yachts benefits the planet exponentially, and Luke Johnston from Sailing Charters WA agrees. "We have technology now to make sailing more efficient than ever before, and it's all clean energy," he says. "I'm always talking about how sailing is the way into the future for boats."



Image Fiona Harper

That future is getting closer. *Energy Observer* is a former ocean-racing yacht paving the way to sail autonomously, powered by hydrogen produced from seawater with zero greenhouse gas emissions. The 30.5-metre vessel is powered by electric propulsion along with two vertical-axis, wind-turbine, sail-like 'Oceanwings' that allow hydrogen production during the journey – not just during stopovers – and that are set to reduce energy consumption by maritime transport by as much as 40 per cent or more. *Energy Observer* is on a six-year global search visiting 50 countries to meet people designing tomorrow's future in order to prove that a cleaner world is possible.

While these groundbreaking technologies are unlikely to appear in small sailing yachts any time soon, 'salt therapy' continues to be on the rise as a popular choice for travellers keen to minimise their impact.

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