



Why I sail

By Stephen Gauer

The sky over the strait is black and gray and threatening rain as the wind suddenly picks up, pushing my sailboat faster and faster towards Bowen Island. It's 4 o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon in late April and I'm alone on the water, not a boat in sight in any direction.

The boat groans and tilts closer to the water. The sails protest. I struggle to stay on course because there's so much pressure on the wheel. I'm new to this boat, which is bigger than my last one, and not sure what to do. I curse the wind, and for a moment I feel doomed because surely the mast will break and the boat will sink and I will die a watery death within eyesight of my marina.

Nothing of the sort happens of course. As I get closer to Bowen, the wind drops and the sky brightens. I furl in the jib and the boat immediately straightens up. The pressure on the wheel lightens and I relax.

Ahead I can finally see Seymour Bay, a tiny notch on the island where I can find shelter from the wind.

But I don't need shelter now. The boat is moving perfectly under my control. I'm in love with the wind again and happy as a lark. What could be finer than sailing on the ocean on such a fine spring day?

This swing from joy to fear and back to joy is one of the things I love about sailing. I mostly single-hand, meaning I sail alone, so I have no one to help me handle the boat when conditions get rough. And when conditions get rough I get a little scared.

This must sound strange. I'm a 65-year-old man who's been a sailor for most of his life. To be honest, I can't explain the scary part. Sailing makes me feel alive, and fear is part of that feeling.

There's more to it than that, of course. Sailing has tremendous intensity and immediacy. You sail with your body and your mind in perfect partnership. You escape your life. You stare at nature face to face. You meditate on the horizon line. And you solve problems.

One time, halfway across the strait in big wind, I watched the furled jib at the bow of the boat suddenly come loose and flap madly in the wind. Worse, the lines connecting the jib to the winches in the cockpit became tangled, so I couldn't wind the sail in or let it out.

I turned on the autopilot, so the boat would steer itself, and carefully made my way to the bow, now bouncing with every slap of the metre-high waves. It took two or three minutes to straighten everything out. I tied off the jib so it wouldn't flap and finally made my way back to the safety of the cockpit.

In a situation like that you are so intensely focused that you feel no fear, no emotion at all. You are pure Solution addressing the Problem, and afterwards you're pleased because you didn't fall in the water, sprain your ankle, or wreck the boat.

Sailing creates a powerful dance between humility and pride. Learn to do something well, like docking in reverse in a crosswind, and you feel a genuine sense of accomplishment.

But the weather and wind and waves constantly remind you of who is in charge. Alone on the ocean in a 28-foot sailboat you can curse the wind all you want but nothing will get you home again except your own wits. The ocean cares nothing about you and never will.

I don't mind that. It keeps me humble.

Sailing never fails to remind me that every decision has consequences, and consequences can never be ignored. Anchor in the wrong place, or ignore the tide tables, and you will be up at 3 am correcting your error when the wind pipes up or the keel touches bottom. You can curse your own incompetence but you cannot ignore the hard-knock reality of your situation.

On another trip, in a smaller boat, I'm trying to get back to Vancouver. A feeble dawn has revealed a colourless sky, but the wind is full of passion and fury.

The small bay of an island protected me overnight, but to get home I must leave that protection and sail down the strait, into the wind, while the boat shudders beneath me and the rigging and sails raise a terrible racket. As soon as I clear the island, the waves turn to whitecaps and the wind is howling.

The boat is strong and hobbles along, into one wave, spraying me with water, and then veering away, rolling off the next, and then heeling in a sudden gust, going over so far that I can just barely hold the tiller with two hands and continue to steer. I'm soaked and my arms are aching. It's impossible to sail like this for the ten hours it would take to get home.

I give up. I turn the boat around and sail back towards the bay of the island that sheltered me. As I reach the shelter of the island, the wind begins to drop.

I enter the bay and the water flattens. I drop the sails, start the engine, and find my anchorage again. I drop the anchor and put the engine into reverse. The anchor catches, and then the bow swings once to the right, and once to the left, and I know I'm safe for the night.

