

# A FAMILY TAKES TO THE WATER

BUT NOT BEFORE MOM LEARNS THE ROPES



BY MARLENE FARRELL

Last spring I wasn't yet even aboard the *Hale Kai*, 41-foot sailboat, but I was already queasy.

I had huddled over sailing manuals the whole drive from Leavenworth to the Bellingham marina. I quizzed my husband,

Kevin, and he answered as calmly as he drove. I, on the other hand, was in a slightly nauseated frenzy.

We had taken a sailing class 10 years ago, before kids. I remembered the difference between a tack and a jibe but little else.

Now, we were taking a re-

fresh sailing course and I had given myself two weeks to read three dense manuals before this trip — still I needed to cram. So much terminology had my head reeling: two types of luff, two types of head, lee everything, leeway, lee helm, lee shore, and of course the sail's tack, the

Alice, 7, and Quentin, 9, look pretty comfortable on the Farrell family's passage to Socia Island. Photo by Kevin Farrell.

boat's tack and to tack!

It didn't seem fair that Kevin could use the terms with such

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ease until I remembered he's been dreaming about sailing for awhile, waiting for my reluctance to ease. *Mutiny on the Bounty* and a shelf of other such books fed his dream.

We had signed up for a Learn-N-Cruise one-week class through San Juan Sailing and I was cramming for the exams — the first before we even left the dock.

We passed that one and were welcomed aboard.

There were five on Hale Kai: Kevin and I, two other eager guys hoping to certify and then teach their wives, and our instructor, Mike. I knew the ratio would be lopsided and Mike confirmed it. "A woman who likes to sail is a precious thing never to be taken for granted."

I was in a man's world, full of crisscrossed rigging to be clutched and winched like toys for the mechanically minded. For me it was a puzzle to be worked out methodically. The guys, fearless of mistakes, would jump up to trim a sheet or loosen the downhaul while I was still contemplating the best course of action.

Sailing also requires a basic understanding of diesel engines. Mike opened the engine compartment and I leaned in,



Alice prepares to take the wheel of the Hunter 340.

breathing fumes and scribbling notes about fuel pumps, belts, heat exchangers and strainers while the guys simply nodded their heads.

Don't get me wrong; I love a challenge. This was something new, stepping out of my comfort zone.

Gradually it came together for me.

Between lessons, when I was at the helm, in the cockpit, or on the foredeck, the splendor of the boat skimming quietly through the water lured me.

As the wind picked up and the boat heeled, I would feel that tug on the steering wheel. It was a taste of the sweet balance between opposing forces,

rudder against wind, a give and take with the gusts, as the boat rushed upwind.

We studied current and tide tables and charts to decide where to go each day. Everywhere we looked, the San Juan Islands were verdant with firs and cedars. As we approached, the madrones' shiny red trunks stood out atop rocky shelves that jutted from the water.

We weren't alone; freighters plied the shipping lanes, and we saw fishing boats, yachts and other sailboats. Seals popped their smooth heads above the surface, blinking black marble eyes, their whiskers tickled by little waves. Pods of porpoises swam by, arcing sequentially

near our bow, then at our stern, then gone.

Yet there was a peaceful solitude in going our own way. We were self-sustained and not obligated to anyone but ourselves. I thought of our kids who were back home with Grammy.

###

Four months later we found ourselves raising the sails and cutting the engine on *Wave Dancer*, a 34-foot chartered sailboat, just our kids and us.

We had checked in at 9 a.m. that morning for a captains' meeting but did not anticipate four more hours to go through an extensive checklist and stow clothing and provisions in a

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**On the summit of one rocky bluff we could see to Canada and some of the 120 nautical miles we had covered in our week's trip.**

stuffy cabin. Meanwhile our kids had become desperate zombies from hunger and prophylactic Dramamine.

Finally underway, we were all transformed. We had friendly winds of around 20 knots. Quentin, 9, and Alice, 7, scrambled to the foredeck, sucking in lungfuls of fresh air, wearing life vests and heeding the rule of one hand for the boat.

They took to sailing life.

Each night was a slumber party in the V berth beneath the bow. We all slept well, the boat's swinging on a mooring or anchor line like blissfully maternal rocking.

Quentin and Alice learned to do their part. Since they were missing school, they had homework to complete while the morning rain clouds dispersed. They helped with the tricky business of anchoring and mooring. They studied charts and identified islands and warning buoys near rocks and reefs. They trimmed the sheets and Quentin took some turns at the



**This black-tail deer on Jones Island waited patiently for the family to shake down apples from abandoned orchard trees, then accepted them by hand.**

helm. It was still more work with kids aboard. But it makes for a more boisterous, memorable trip.

One time we pulled into a quiet bay on Jones Island. Quentin had turned on the stereo and suddenly we were blasting golden oldies. When we noticed the other boaters, some with binoculars, staring at us, we cut the music.

Before going ashore, the kids hopped in the dinghy, still tied to our stern, to practice rowing. They were zigzagging and laughing raucously, so our neighbors' peace was dispelled again.

Ashore, we wandered to an

abandoned orchard where deer knowingly loitered.

Kevin climbed a tree to shake down the last high apples. We heard we could hand-feed the deer. The deer hesitated so we rolled them apples from two feet away. Deflated, Alice's body sagged from her lost opportunity. Then, with one last apple she waited for the bravest, scruffiest deer to nibble from her palm. She lit up like she'd been caught in a sunbeam.

We played on rocky beaches and walked trails over mossy windswept cliffs and through woods strewn with fallen leaves and plump banana slugs.

On the summit of one rocky bluff we could see to Canada and

some of the 120 nautical miles we had covered in our week's trip.

My fears of taking kids on a boat journey were abated.

Quentin and Alice should have worn ski pants a few times instead of complaining of the cold and wet. But they learned jobs, buckled down to homework, and followed the inviolate safety rules.

The last morning of the trip I heard them murmuring in their berth. They talked of how they would miss *Wave Dancer*. Alice said, "When I have a family, it will be a family of sailors."

That's not a bad impression from one week of sailing. We'll nurture and grow the dream, in ourselves and in our children, by continuing to sail, chartering until the day we can get our own boat and explore wherever the winds and our desires lead us.

*Sailing is still new to Marlene Farrell, a Leavenworth writer, but she enjoys this new way of exploring with her family.*

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