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sail away

NAVIGATE A DAY OFF IN THE DIRECTION OF THE SEA. **ELLE** DISCOVERED IT MAKES FOR AN INTERESTING MINI-GETAWAY

Cursing volubly, with dark gloom settling like a cloud over your head is perhaps not the best way to begin what's been called an "afternoon of exploration and fun". But then, noon on a blazing summer day is not the hour I would have picked for learning to sail.

FYI, I had been invited by Aquasail Sailience to experience its day-long sailing programme. So there I was, at the Gateway of India, waiting for a speedboat to take me to Mandwa Getty in Alibaug, and I have to admit, I felt the excitement building up. Confession A: I have never been on a speedboat. Confession B: I have never had the privilege to stand at the private gate (reserved for the über-rich who own yachts), waiting for my own little ride to jet me across. While there, I saw a spiffy Vijay Mallya disembark from his yacht, bestow smiles all around and glide away in a black Mercedes.

My ride arrived shortly after: A beautiful, compact Beneteau speedboat, which cut a graceful but thrillingly fast ride. Sitting on plush, beige leather seats, the wind in my face, with the salt spray glittering like diamonds in the sunlight felt, to me, like something out of a Bond movie.

Going on-shore at Mandwa involved one leg-over, followed by sliding (un-gracefully) onto an inflatable raft, which then took me the last few yards. The boat-house on the beach was buzzing with activity, and once on the patio, a learn-to-sail session got underway almost immediately. Shakeel Kudrolli, India's first-ever gold medalist at the Asian Championships in China, and his lovely wife ran us journalists through the basics, peppered with a variety of sailing terms.

The prawn-curry-rice served for lunch was simple and sumptuous. And just as I was beginning to feel drowsy, we were handed shorts and tees to change into – it was time to go sailing.

All thoughts of sleep were replaced by a smile when I saw the sail boats with their colourful masts. There were four types of Hobies – the Cat, Bravo, Pico and Fun boat – and a kayak. Under Shakeel's expert guidance we scrambled onto the boats and set off, balanced precariously on the edges. The last of my doubts diminished as the breeze gently pushed through my hair and the water began its playful assault as we went further in.

Contrary to popular belief, boats with sails are as thrilling as their speedy counterparts. On a breezy day, the sail – which is designed to gather the wind – will pick up speed faster than you can imagine. Handling the towering sails and guiding the craft in the direction you wish to go, using the ropes, can be a fun experience. Taking a U-turn involves an almost-acrobatic feat – you have to move over from one side to the other, slowly or fast, depending on the wind, and then duck as the sails change direction. With no barrier between yourself and the water, you get completely soaked by the time the ride's over. My favourite part was riding the waves up, over and down; the motion had me squealing with joy.

After three hours of the great outdoors, taking turns on all the Hobies and a quick round on the kayak (very hard work; it beats the gym any day), I was ready to call it a day. Sunburn and hitherto unknown aching muscles were testaments to my day at sea. I returned the same way I came – the only difference being that this time round, I was in a little bubble of happiness. Even getting off my swanky speedboat at the Gateway, waiting endlessly for a taxi and getting on a crowded train did nothing to dampen my euphoria. And I have decided never to crib about the heat when there is a promise of a day on the water. □

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