

THE LANGUAGE OF *Sailing*

Story by ALMA TASSI

Photography by JASON MOORE

I have a confession: Although I've lived on an island for over a decade, I am *not* a water baby. My relationship to the ocean lies somewhere between a deep, abiding respect for its magnificence, and my considerable limitations as a swimmer. The offer of a sailing lesson aroused both my anxiety, and my hope that this would be a step toward embracing its watery wonders.

Which is why I find myself, on this Friday morning, driving to Kā'anapali to meet with my instructor, Captain Chuck Johnson of West Maui Sailing School. I glance at the windmills dotting a ridge of Kahala-

wai, West Maui's mountain. They are stock-still. The coastal palm trees I'm used to seeing swaying in the breeze are motionless as soldiers standing at attention, awaiting orders from Mother Nature. No wind. This does not bode well for my first sailing lesson. Sure enough, when I arrive at Kā'anapali Beach in front of Aston Maui Kaanapali Villas, the ocean is crystal clear, azure, and flat.

Captain Chuck is undeterred. He starts my lesson on the beach, introducing me to our vessel: a seventeen-foot Hobie Cat named the *Getaway*. Built for speed and entertainment, the sailboat has twin hulls,

With me safely perched on deck for my first sailing lesson, Captain Chuck Johnson gets some help pushing our vessel into the surf along Kā'anapali Beach.





Opposite page: West Maui Sailing School's Captain Chuck Johnson gets my lesson off to a colorful start, hoisting the mainsail as we prepare to head into channel waters. In no time, our Hobie is cruising calm seas between Maui and the island of Lāna'i. Above: Captain Chuck has me pick a point in the distance to help me guide the direction of the boat. I keep a steady eye on the sail to see how it reacts as I move the tiller with my right hand, the mainsheet with my left.

outriggers for balance, and a trampoline (deck) stretched between them that provides additional seating. Captain Chuck unfurls and ties down a small, triangular sail that he says is the jib. He raises the mainsail to the top of the mast, starting with a pull on the halyard (what landlubbers like me would call the rope that hoists a sail), then cranking the rest of the way with a winch. When I ask why we need two sails, he says, "The mainsail is your primary sail. The jib helps for turning and adding speed." I notice how tidy he keeps everything as he works the lines (not ropes, he emphasizes) and he explains: "Everything needs to be organized in case the wind picks up. You don't want things loose or flying out."

While he regales me with the technical terminology of sailing, I think about a Steve Martin skit. Returning from Paris, the comedian complains, "It's like those French have a different word for everything!" The same is true in sailing, only I'm not laughing. Halyard. Jib. Winch. Tramp. A knot that's not a knot, but a bowline. Trim . . . let's see, that helps with speed and something else. . . . The terminology washes over me without sinking in. Noticing my pained expression, Captain Chuck gently says, "For your first lesson, the goal is to get a feel for the basics of sailing. It will make more sense when we're on the water."

He has me sit on one side of the deck, my feet dangling, positions himself on the other side and pushed the boat into the water. When the vessel is afloat, he instructs me to sit on one outrigger while he sits on the other. "On a boat this small, where you sit matters," he explains. "We adjust when needed to keep balanced." Surprisingly, as we move out into the channel, we catch some wind, and I admit I feel a tiny thrill as

we speed along. In a strong wind, water would be splashing up onto the boat, but the day is mellow and we manage to stay dry.

Away from the bustling beach, sounds magnify: water lapping against the sailboat, the rustling of the billowing sail. Above us, rays of light embellish a cloudless, deep blue sky. Below, through the transparent water, I notice the ripples in the sandy bottom. In a flash, we are about a mile offshore. My nervousness ebbs as I realize how lucky we are to be out on the ocean on such a perfect day.

Captain Chuck shows me how to adjust the mainsheet—a line that controls the mainsail, and with it, the speed of the boat. The harder you pull on it, the more taut the sail and the faster you go. I'm starting to get the hang of the terminology: The tiller arm, attached to the rudder, is responsible for steering. You hold the line with one hand and adjust the arm with the other. I ask how he knows which way to position the boat for catching the most wind.

"Think of a clock," he says. "When you face so the wind is at noon, the space between 10 and 2 is the dead zone. You will not be able to move. You want to position yourself outside of this zone." He tells me it's not always possible to move from point A to point B in a straight line, but assures me that, with more lessons, I can learn more advanced techniques, like tacking (sailing into the wind).

Captain Chuck has me watch him sail for ten minutes, then hands off the mainsheet and the tiller to me. It's my turn. He says, "Pick a point on land as your target and head towards it." I pick a collection of umbrellas on the beach, carefully pull the tiller until the boat faces them squarely,

“Come Chase some Rainbows with us!”



FRIENDLY TRAIL GUIDES

A GREAT TIME FOR ALL AGES!

HONEYMOON & PRIVATE RIDES AVAILABLE

AMAZING VIEWS OF LANAI & SUNSETS

All rides take you along the foothills of the West Maui Mountains. You will be treated to extraordinary views of Molokai, Lahaina Town & Lahaina Harbor. We ride into Launiupoko Valley where we dismount for refreshments at our picnic table which is perched upon a ridge situated next to an acre large pond fed by clear, cool mountain stream water.

“THE BEST HORSEBACK RIDE ON MAUI”



Book Direct At:

mauihorse.com

Or Call Us Today:

808.667.2222



To my surprise—though not my captain’s—I’m soon confidently navigating the vessel, which now feels aptly named the *Getaway*.

then slowly tug on the mainsheet. The wind fills the mainsail and we speed towards the umbrellas. Hey, this is easy!

Once near shore, Captain Chuck talks me through turning the vessel: cleating (securing) the mainsheet, holding onto the tiller while I switch sides with him, then releasing the mainsheet to find the wind again. Off we go, this time heading toward Lāna’i. With the navigation in my hands, I fret about hitting a buoy, another boat, or, worse, a standup paddler. But Captain Chuck is fearless, even lying down on the tramp to enjoy the ride. “You’re already sailing,” he reminds me. With each turn, my confidence grows. Captain Chuck was right. I begin to relax and, dare I say, have fun.

Back on shore, he tells me that most people he takes out either just want a fun day cruising on the water, or have a little sailing experience and want to deepen their knowledge. His company also offers a package that takes you sailing four different times, gaining new sailing tips—and confidence—with each outing. After my brief foray into sailing, you just may catch this landlubber on the ocean again. ✨

IF YOU GO

Book a lesson: Call West Maui Sailing School at 808-870-7308.

Prepare to get wet: Wear a bathing suit (and rash guard, if you’re prone to sunburn), sunglasses, hat and sunscreen. A life jacket is provided and is mandatory during the sail.

Who can go: The sailboat accommodates up to four adults, including the captain. Minors must be accompanied by an adult.

Cost: \$85 for a one-hour sail or lesson. Discounts for multiple lessons.