

## SJ BOATING



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### A SAILOR'S LIFE FOR ME YOU BUY A GREAT BOAT. THEN WHAT?

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by Dina Greenberg

It's a picture perfect day on the Delaware River in early summer. The water is like glass and the sky is blue and cloudless. You see yourself heading down-river from Riverside Marina and motoring into Penn's Landing on your newly purchased 34-foot Formula, twin engine power cruiser for an early dinner, then a lazy, twilight cruise back to the dock. There's only one problem...

You're not quite sure how to safely maneuver your new craft out of the slip on its maiden voyage. That is, while somehow dodging the surrounding pilings and – heaven forbid! – The other expensive boats docked on either side of yours. What you're feeling is a dizzying combination of buyer's remorse, stubborn pride, and self-doubt, none of which entered your mind when you plunked down the check at the boat show last fall!

Fortunately for SJ boaters, Capt. Russ Cohen, Founder & President of Moorestown-based Boatboy Marine Training, has a solution. Since 2001, when he first launched his company, Cohen, a U.S. Coast Guard Licensed Master's Captain, has been at the forefront of a movement to educate novice boaters and those "moving up" to larger, more complex vessels.

Growing up in Cinnaminson and cruising on the Southern New Jersey waterways since he was a kid, Cohen says he recognized a "serious gap in boater education" that is rarely filled once the customer leaves the dealer. "What you learn in a classroom course, like those offered by the Coast Guard, is not the same as being out on the water," says Cohen. Yet, some forward-thinking dealers like those at Riverside Marina and Dredge Harbor in Delran, now contract with Cohen and his crew of Boatboy Captains to provide much-needed training to new customers.

"It's not like buying a car," explains Cohen, "because there really is no licensing requirement for a boat." Other than what marine dealers refer to as a sea trial – when the salesperson takes the new owner out for a demo ride – it's common for people to show up for their first solo cruise with little knowledge of either the boat or the local waterways.

"The whole premise of Boatboy was to provide training for people on the boat they've purchased and on the waterways they'll be navigating," says Cohen. He based his initial concept – now finely honed into a four-hour, five-module training program – on other successful adult learning methods. "My wife is a senior instructor for a computer software company," says Cohen, "and it's really the same concept: as an instructor, you want to take the apprehension out of the activity and give people the knowledge they need to gain confidence and have fun – which is the whole reason people buy boats in the first place!" exhorts Cohen. "But if you're not safe, you're not going to have fun," he cautions.

Down on C Dock at Riverside Marina, it quickly becomes clear to the Mt. Laurel couple Cohen is instructing that they have a whole lot to learn before getting to the fun part of recreational boating. Cohen begins by covering the specifics of the hull and boat type. Together, the three work to complete an inspection of the safety equipment, including flares, fire extinguishers, air horn, and radio. Cohen explains the various types and purposes of Coast Guard-regulated personal flotation devices (PFD). He suggests having family members try on the appropriate life jacket and then label them with each person's name so they can be quickly located if adverse weather conditions arise.

In the next training segment, Cohen opens the engine hatch and calmly explains why it is important to do so before each voyage. "The danger," says Cohen, "is that fumes and vapors from the gasoline in the bilge can collect here." The boat is equipped with blowers to disperse the fumes. Cohen recommends operating these for no less than four minutes, it's the law. "You don't want to rush through the process," he explains. Skipping this process could lead to an explosion. So if this part of the training seems particularly thorough, it's likely his customers won't mind investing the additional time.

And though you needn't be an expert boat mechanic to own a boat, Cohen recommends having your boat regularly maintained by someone who is. "Hiring a professional to do regular maintenance at the beginning and end of each season is important, it's like having an insurance policy that your boat will run trouble-free and give you a full season of boating."

Opening the electrical panel down in the galley, Cohen points out the control center for such necessities as the bilge pump (a device that pumps sea water out of the hull and keeps the boat from sinking) to such niceties as air conditioning, a TV/DVD player, frig, microwave oven, and an ice maker. "Just learning all of the systems can be a little overwhelming," admits Cohen. The next lesson is on weather conditions. "There's no excuse for going out in bad weather," says Cohen. "You can listen to a marine forecast from land and on a VHF, Coast Guard-monitored channel on the boat." He stresses such factors as wave height, wind direction, and current strength. Boatboy captains also teach new boaters how to read charts of the waterways they'll be navigating.

"You don't want to run aground," says Cohen. Nautical charts give detailed information on the waterway's depth, land masses, and buoy locations. Now it's on to dock lines, fenders, and knots – when and how to release them, drop them, and tie them. Looming ahead is what Cohen describes as "one of the most traumatic aspects of boating," otherwise known as close-quarter maneuvering or, in layman's terms, getting in and out of the slip without hitting anything or throwing your spouse overboard. "No kidding," says Cohen, "If we can teach couples to dock – and we do prefer to teach them together because ultimately they're going to be working as a team on this – we can go a long way to maintaining domestic tranquility!"

Throughout the rest of the course – with lessons on rules-of-the-road, reading buoys, dropping anchor, and an emergency man overboard (M.O.B.) scenario – Cohen is amiable and patient, two qualities he seeks when he hires new Boatboy captains. "Having the ability to keep your cool and get the information across is a real skill," says Cohen. "Two of our captains are school teachers and this kind of background really comes in handy. "Beyond their amiable personality, all Boatboy instructors have a USCG Masters license and have been trained in CPR, first aid, Power Squadron, and U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary classes.

Cohen says that some of his favorite cruises are right here along the Delaware. "My wife and I head out around 7 p.m. It's just beautiful to see the Philadelphia skyline come into view and it's an incredibly relaxing way to go out to dinner."

But if you're still not quite ready to take the plunge into boat ownership, Cohen's company will provide you with their Captain-For-A-Day Service. "You and your family can cruise around the Delaware River, Dock at Penn's Landing, enjoy the Philadelphia Skyline, take a Sunset cruise or just meander down the Rancocas Creek," says Cohen. Burlington, NJ and Bristol, PA are just across the river from each other and you can take the kids to an old fashioned ship's store or have lunch in town. You can do a little fishing or swimming, and stop in at McCrossen's Dockside at Riverside Marina for some dinner and drinks. It's a great way to spend the day right here in your own backyard."

If you're wondering about the Mt. Laurel couple onboard to master the world of boating – Cohen is pleased to report that "They're still happily married and passed Docking 101 with flying colors!"