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A Guide to Renting Your Own Boat, Sensibly

Peer-to-peer boat rentals sites make it much easier to book an afternoon sail on a whim, or a private yacht for a week. Whatever floats your pontoon.

MY BOAT OR YOURS? The 116-foot Azimuti is available for rent, along with six crew, from $11,500 a day at GetMyBoat.
PHOTO: GETMYBOAT

By Kelsey Ogletree
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AFTER months of grudgingly sheltering in place, Daniel Cohen and Joey Vincent, who both work in sales for a tire company based in Southern California, wasted no time as soon as the state lockdown was lifted. In early June, they took to the sea. Mr. Cohen and Mr. Vincent booked a 52-foot cruiser yacht through GetMyBoat, a peer-to-peer rental site, for a daylong sail from Newport Bay to Emerald Bay in Laguna Beach. They invited 10 friends and spent hours happily drifting around the bay while listening to Kygo and sipping White Claws. In calmer spots, they'd jump off the boat for a swim. So satisfying was the excursion that the friends booked a second boat the following week: This time, a 40-ft VanDutch luxury yacht named Skyfall. "It was a total head turner," said Mr. Cohen. "It had everyone feeling like a million bucks."

With crowded coastlines rendering social distancing nearly impossible in many popular spots this summer, would-be beachgoers like Mr. Cohen and Mr. Vincent are venturing beyond the shoreline. For the month of June, GetMyBoat—which operates like Airbnb for watercraft—reported 350% year-over-year growth, with only slightly over half of its 9,300 locations open for business. Boatsetter, a rental site with locations in 600 destinations around the world, has enjoyed more bookings this year than at any point since its 2012 launch, said co-founder and CEO Jaclyn Baumgarten. She attributes the surge to the fact that boating lets you enjoy the outdoors while safely social distancing. That said, there are still Covid-19 concerns, said Michael Consuelos, M.D., a pandemic expert and senior medical advisor with NeuroFlow in Philadelphia. "When the boat is in motion, the airflow of a boat does help [minimize] the risk of Covid-19 transmission," said Dr. Consuelos. "But when it's stopped, it's the same risk as standing next to others on a small deck in a backyard." He recommends the same preventive measures you'd take on land: standing 6 feet apart, wearing masks and washing hands.

Boat renters are encouraged to bring their own food and drinks. This is where canned wine comes in handy.

Unlike traditional boat charter companies, services such as GetMyBoat and Boatsetter with thousands of varied listings offer more of a choose-your-own-adventure experience. Over the past year alone, Boatsetter's inventory quadrupled.

You can choose among entry-level, 1950s-era wooden picnic boats, classic sailboats and obnoxiously long yachts with a crew at your disposal.

Both GetMyBoat and Boatsetter say that their staffs prescreen the boats listed on their site, taking things like age, value and any prior insurance claims into consideration.

At Boatsetter, day rates range from as low as $200 up to about $3,000. Depending on the size of your party, you can spend a Saturday on a $500,000 boat for as little as $50 a person.

For those new to the aquatic life, here are a few pointers:

Booking Basics

Both GetMyBoat and Boatsetter have easy-to-navigate websites and apps. Select your location, then browse boat types—like power boats, pontoons, fishing boats, sailboats, houseboats and yachts. You'll need to specify how many passengers will be in your party. Airbnb also lists limited overnight boat options, like a houseboat on Jamaica Bay in Queens or a sleepover sailboat in Bay City, Michigan.

While Boatsetter recommends booking two to four weeks in advance of your planned excursion, especially for holiday weekends, you can usually book 24-48 hours ahead without much trouble. Most rentals work like Airbnb, where you must inquire with an owner and get approval; other requests are instantly bookable.

Pesky Fees

You pay up front for the cost of the rental. Boatsetter gives you the option to split payments among friends. However, most rental fees don't include cost of fuel, or gratuities for the captain or crew (if you're using them)—so factor that in. Tack on anywhere from $25 to $250 a day for fuel, depending on your vessel, said Ms. Baumgarten.

O Captain. My Captain!

The boat owner dictates who's allowed to drive, and some states require boating licenses and completion of a boating safety course. But typically, larger boats will require a licensed captain and possibly a crew. No matter the size of the vessel, if you have zero or minimal experience operating a boat, choose the captain option. You'll pay about $50 to $200 more per hour but considering the spike in accidents involving personal watercraft this year, it's worth the extra cost. All Boatsetter and GetMyBoat U.S.-based captains are licensed by the U.S. Coast Guard.

Don't Forget the Cooler

Perhaps the most crucial piece of advice: Bring snacks.

Ask the owner to be sure, but for most boats, it's OK—and renters are encouraged—to bring your own food and drinks (this is where canned wine comes in handy). Captained boats will have bottled water and ice at minimum, but it's a good idea to pack more sustenance for a day on the water. Catering is also available on most Boatsetter boats.

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