

The Next Page: The wind and the Point ... A Downtown sailor's log

Our intrepid sailor (and Downtown loft resident) recalls a summer of river activity, powered by nature and not far from his front door.

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By John D. Norton



John Norton

Thoughts of sailing were far from our minds when my wife, Eve, and I moved into our loft Downtown a few years ago. We were busy exploring all that Downtown has to offer. First we tested the 10 bars and restaurants in the circuit around our block. Then Eve began biking the trails, while I began running over the bridges and along the river trails. There was water all around. As I watched it from the bridges and trails, I began to imagine taking a small sailboat round the Point, under the bridges and in the shadows of skyscrapers.

One breezy fall day, my son and I trailered our Hobie Getaway sailboat to the Birmingham Bridge launch, rigged it, launched it and had a great sail to the Point. I was hooked.

I began asking around and found out about efforts to start a sailing club at the Point and of some impressive demonstration sails. But I wanted more. I wanted a sailboat beached at the river's edge so that I could, on a whim, cycle over to it and plunge it into the water.

Finding a place to keep a sailboat within an easy sail of the Point is not easy. I used my runs to scout where this might be possible.

This past summer, it all came together.

The good folk at North Side's Newport Marina, about a mile downstream of the Point, came to the rescue. They were willing to host a little sailboat on a grassy flat at the water's edge, even if they didn't quite understand what I'd do with it. I'd need to share the spot with a bundle of muscle-bound canine happiness called Casey.

In mid-May, we took delivery of a small Hobie Bravo sailboat and set it up at the water's edge.



Was this really a prudent thing to do? There are monster barges, we'd been warned, and there are currents that will sweep you away. And stay away from the dams, was the repeated refrain.

All this was fair warning, but was it good reason to abandon sailing on the rivers? If there's any wind at all, a sailboat is powered and can move away from a barge's course. River currents are strong on some days and weak on others. Why not just sail on the weak days?

All this proved to be right, but it took a few failed attempts to figure just which conditions favor sailing.

The first time in mid-May, when Eve and I slid the boat into the water, we aimed its bows toward the Point. Under light breezes, we skimmed to and fro across the water. Since we were starting only a mile or so downstream, we would surely arrive soon at the Point. Sooner became later and we began to gauge our progress against landmarks on shore. We were making little headway against the current. The wind dropped and we gently drifted back to our starting point.

Clearly we needed a more systematic and informed approach. What does it mean when the Army Corps of Engineers Web site reports 37,000 cubic feet per second flow on the Ohio River, as they did that day? If the winds are light, we now knew, it means that we will sail endlessly to and fro and gain nothing against the current.



By June, I'd found the combination of winds and currents that worked. A very mild current is 10,000 cubic feet per second and it is easily beaten if the winds blow against the current. Choosing days like this, my excursions became more adventurous. On June 14, I docked and set foot on the Point for the first time. Columbus, wading ashore in the New World, could not have been more smug!

Then I set out to voyage farther up the Allegheny River. The three bridges at Sixth, Seventh and Ninth Street provide a riverscape unmatched in the world. There's something about the scale that immerses you completely in the bridges and Downtown skyline.

Could I sail under those bridges? Would the wind be blocked by the buildings that tower over it? Would the current press me back downstream? On June 27, with a gentle, steady breeze at my back, those three magnificent spans passed over my head. I was so excited that I called Eve on my cell phone. She cycled over to meet me where I'd docked just upstream of the Sixth Street Bridge and join in.

Over the weeks that followed, I completed an exploration of the rivers by sailboat. I managed to sail up the Allegheny, close to Washington's Landing, and up the Mon to the Liberty Bridge. A new companion on these voyages was a GPS receiver that kept a precise record of just where I'd been. These tracks have become the trophies that I now display proudly on my Web site as evidence of dangers faced and obstacles passed. They give a visual record of just how thoroughly and reliably a little sailboat can explore all the corners of our rivers.



The experience of sailing around Downtown Pittsburgh is different from any I've known. The sailing day doesn't start with a drive to a distant shore. It starts with the filling of a bicycle saddle bag with odds and ends. Then, wearing a lifejacket with a wind gauge draped round my neck, I wheel the bicycle onto the street, Ours is the 900 block of Liberty Avenue. So I never quite know what to expect.

One week, I walked straight into the gay pride festival, all loud music and rainbow shorts. The next week I was wheeling past a little cluster of hymn-singing demonstrators outside Planned Parenthood.

Then I cross a bridge on the Allegheny River. That is where I will stop to gauge the wind and peer at the water. No matter what the forecast of weather and current, nothing replaces seeing the water.

I'll share the bridge with whatever activity is under way. And there's always some activity. The riverfronts are buzzing. Even on those rare days when there is no special event, blue skies will turn out walkers, strollers, joggers, cyclists and families.

When you are on the water, there is plenty more. There are powerboats, riverboats and bright yellow kayaks. Kayak Pittsburgh, which rents kayaks under the Sixth Street Bridge, is transforming the rivers. Thanks to them, everyone can be on the water. On a warm sunny day, there is almost always at least one kayak in cheery waving distance of my sailboat.



Sailing is a visceral experience. You learn to feel everything. You know your speed from how hard the tiller pulls to re-center, from the feel of the water as it rushes under the hull, from how high the wake rises to your stern and how much the hull lists under the press of the wind.

It is also cerebral. It is you, the wind and the water.

If the wind blows this way and you want to go this way, it's easy. You just let out the sail. It is now a big bag catching the wind. But what if you want to go that way? If that way is across the wind, you let out the sail a little and it deflects the wind behind you, pushing you forward. The sail is now a great wing that lifts you forward, using the same aerodynamics as an airplane.

This fact is the secret of the magic of sailing. It makes it possible to sail into the wind. When you are sailing across the wind, all you need to do is point the bow a little up wind and the sail will continue to lift you, magically, into the wind. You cannot sail directly into the wind. But you can gain against it by "tacking" to and fro. With each zig and each zag, you get a little farther upwind.

All this means that a sailboat cannot be sailed like a powerboat. If you want to go from A to B, you are rarely able simply to point your bows at B and head off. You have to plot a course in your head, zigging and zagging according to how the wind is blowing. I enjoy these little puzzles. You soon learn that the wind is often funneled through the openings under a bridge span, so if you plot your tacks just right, you can come out the other side, just grazing the bridge pylon.

It means that when you sail through a collection of powerboats at anchor, you typically plot a course that grazes just past a stern here and a bow there. The powerboat sailors watch and wonder why you are meandering about. They have no idea of the little geometric puzzles you are solving.

You learn to read the wind and water. Downwind of a shore overhang or bridge pylon, there is often a wind shadow, an oasis of calm air. You can see it in the glassiness of the water. In strong winds, my little boat doesn't like to tack. I've learned to use these oases as convenient places to tack.

Then there are places where the wind blows onto shore. This is the dread of sailors, a "lee shore," to which mariners of old were blown to wrack and ruin. Sometimes you must sail close to a lee shore to complete the zig-zag of your tacking. You ponder hard, just how close you can come. Once I ended up so pressed by the wind into the bushes of a lee shore that a kindly powerboater came and towed me out.



If you are interested in sailing on the rivers, let me encourage you to try. You should already have some competence in sailing. There's also a lot to know about the river winds and currents. By trial and error, I've learned which river currents and winds favor sailing. All this information is collected on my Web site at www.pitt.edu/~jdnorton/sail/

See you next summer on the rivers!

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