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Don't know a jibe from a jib? Check out The Sailing Museum in Newport

By Diane Bair and Pamela Wright Globe Correspondent, Updated August 11, 2022, 3:39 p.m.



These kid-sized Optimist prams are a great introduction to sailing. You can find Opti racing fleets throughout New England. DIANE BAIR

NEWPORT, R.I. — “Good choice! You stole some wind,” the screen read on the race simulator at The Sailing Museum. “Woo-hoo!” hooted participant (and non-sailor) Paul Kelley of Marstons Mills, as he maneuvered the tiller and sailed his 12-meter avatar/boat, “Resolute Jewel,” into third place in the virtual race on Montana’s Flathead Lake. Kelley also proved to be an ace grinder, a crew member on a racing yacht who hand-cranks the winches that raise and trim the sails and move the boom. “Everyone loves this exhibit,” says Heather Ruhsam, executive director of the Sailing Museum. It takes some muscle to grind the winches, as you compete against a fellow museum-goer, or a virtual sailor, to raise the sails first.

The high-tech grinder gizmo is just one of about a dozen interactive elements here. Opened on May 10, the nonprofit museum occupies two levels of Newport's historic c.1894 Armory building. (The city owns Newport Maritime Center at the basement level, which fronts the harbor shoreline, the beach, and the Ann Street Pier.) The Sailing Museum is a fitting addition to Newport's Thames Street. "When you come over that bridge, you can tell that Newport is a sailing town," Ruhsam says, thanks to the vessels dotting the harbor. The city known as the Yachting Capital of the US isn't just about big, fancy vessels, though. "We have super motor yachts, off-shore racing, in-shore racing, the power yacht contingent, big boats and little boats in Newport," she says. There's a public dock behind The Sailing Museum so you can take a boat into town, and hop on and off the Newport Harbor shuttle, she notes.

Don't have a boat, big or little? You'll be in good company here. "We did a demographic study in 2019 that revealed about three-quarters of the people coming through the doors would be non-sailors," Ruhsam says. Although the sport's rock stars visit and share their sailing stories, those who've never hoisted a sail can have a good time, too, in this 8,000-square-foot space. You enter the self-guided museum and immediately face a larger-than-life video screen of a sailing race, produced by America's Cup champion and National Sailing Hall of Fame founder Gary Jobson. You can almost feel the spray in your face as you watch. In another dome-like exhibit, you'll get a sense of what it's like to capsize. A virtual regatta experience, on a big screen, is coming soon, designed to capture the thrill of the sport. Jobson's vision helped bring this museum to life, Ruhsam says, with involvement from industry partners who donated the gear and boats that dominate this space.

After answering a series of personality questions, you select a boat that becomes your avatar. Along the way, in no particular order, you undertake sailing challenges that will help you collect digital awards, deposited into your sailing locker. "Yesterday, we had a family here from the Royal Swedish Yacht Club, and they got very competitive with each other," Ruhsam notes. Other guests have no sailing experience whatsoever, and the idea is, they'll learn about wind and water, the anatomy of a sailboat, points of sail, and more as they tour the museum. "We try to tie sailing into everyday life and demystify the sport," she says. There's always a staff member on the floor who can answer questions, and the majority of the employees are sailors.

Trophies, foul weather gear, even the Jimmy Buffett album, "Son of a Sailor," and a pair of Sperry Topsider shoes, crop up here. Exhibits highlight the National Sailing and America's Cup halls of fame. One of the most affecting exhibits is a touch-screen video monitor featuring "Great Sailing Stories," in which top sailors discuss aspects of the sport that are meaningful to them. Bill Pinkney, the first African-American to sail around the world solo via the Capes, on his 44-foot cutter, *The Commitment*, said, "The sea treats us all the same. That should be a lesson to us."

And that's really the point of all this, says Ruhsam, noting that the museum will work with local schools to open up the world of sailing to young people. To underscore the point, an Optimist pram is on display, a bathtub-sized vessel that offers the first sailing experience to many kiddie sailors. "There are so many life lessons that come from sailing — everything from STEM concepts to teamwork — that can be so valuable to kids." One of the last exhibits you encounter — by design — is a touch screen that shows you where to sail, and learn to sail, by state. "Our hope is that people will leave here wanting to sail, or wanting to know more about the sport," she says.

"Your age, race, gender — none of that matters when it comes to sailing."

The Sailing Museum, 365 Thames St., Newport, R.I.; 401-324-5761; www.thesailingmuseum.org. Currently open daily, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Fall and winter hours TBD. Adults, \$18; age 11-18, \$12; age 10 and under, free.