

Missing a lucrative section of the market



Geoff Holt

The former professional yachtsman who was paralysed in a swimming accident and inspired sailors when he became the first quadriplegic to sail the Atlantic.

SAILABILITY boasts that 20,000 plus disabled sailing experiences were delivered last year across 140 Sailability sites in the UK.

It's a phenomenal achievement and all credit to those clubs and groups. But just about every one of those sessions was in a sailing dinghy.

Across those sites, there are nearly 1,000 boats; a mix of disabled classes including the Access, Challenger, Skud, Sonar, 2.4, Laser, Drascombe longboats and many others, all of them dinghies. That's a lot of investment being well utilised.

But what about cruising? Getting out on to the sea for a prolonged period on a proper sailing yacht? It's a completely different experience to sailing a dinghy and one which many disabled sailors have yet to enjoy.

“Disabled people have an estimated £62 billion of disposable income”

Having benefitted from an international wave of publicity a few months ago with my Atlantic crossing, I received scores of emails from disabled people around the world all asking the same question; “Where can I find a boat like yours to go cruising?”

This is nothing new. A decade ago as Chairman of RYA Sailability, our committee wrestled with the same question but the challenge still remains. There are a few, highly specialised, custom-built, privately owned vessels in the world, Impossible Dream, the boat I chartered for my Atlantic crossing, being one of them, but I was lucky enough to be friends with an obliging owner.

Being privately owned usually rules the boat out from the possibility of general charitable use or charter by other disabled people. From my research, there are only a handful of these privately owned disabled-accessible yachts in the world and as few as six wheelchair accessible boats available to public charter anywhere in the world.

That is an amazing but disappointing statistic. Out of those six boats, three are in the UK and are owned by charities.

Knoticat is a 30-foot catamaran run by the Sports Forum for the Disabled based in Dorset and is mainly used for day sailing by members of the charity. The other two, Verity K, a 35-foot monohull, and Scott Bader, a 35-foot catamaran, are both owned by the Thomas Morley Trust and much of their disabled sailing activity is organised through the Gwennili Trust out of Port Solent.

Both of these boats are now several years old but they see a lot of action with disabled sailors coming from across the UK and overseas.

Wheelchair users wanting to charter something in warmer waters have to venture to Greece or Mallorca where there is just one monohull yacht in each venue modified to take wheelchairs.

Of course, not every disabled person uses a wheelchair. Many blind people, for example, prefer cruising to dinghy sailing. There are several blind sailing events including Blind Week, a long-established event held in the UK each year which is always oversubscribed.

Owners bring along their yachts and allow the blind sailors to crew with them during the week. One advantage is that blind people can adapt to almost any type of sailing craft which makes the physical accessibility of the yacht less important to their sailing experience.

The same applies to those with intellectual disabilities. The Sussex Fleet of Rotary holds an annual “Kids Out on the Water” day in Chichester harbour for just such a group.

Again, yachts of all shapes and sizes are provided by the owners. So



long as the kids are ambulant to some degree, the physical accessibility of the boat is not such an issue. Deaf people too have their own sailing association and competition. Although facing their own specific challenges on a boat, once again the type of boat presents less of a problem to deaf people than those in wheelchairs.

So are yacht charter companies missing a trick? Yes, I think they are. Not only for wheelchair users but disabled people in general including the deaf, the blind, those with an intellectual disability and those with other physical disabilities.

There are countless thousands of yachts around the world operating within charter fleets. Many of these fleets include catamarans which, from my personal experience, provide the most stable platform.

If there was a corporate will, either new boats could be designed or existing boats could be modified to accommodate disabled guests, regardless of disability.

Disabled people have an estimated

£62 billion of disposable income each year according to Disability Matters Ltd. Disabled people take holidays too and disabled sailors would take sailing holidays if they were available.

It's a massively untapped market but despite my efforts, some of the key players in the yacht charter game

turn a blind eye.

It's a shame because not only are many wheelchair users around the world missing out on a sailing holiday with friends and family but the yacht charter industry itself is missing out on a very lucrative section of the market.

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Makers of Impossible Dream: www.multimarine.co.uk/

Very K / Scott Bader: www.gwennili.org.uk/

Knoticat: www.sportsforum.org.uk/sailing.html

Greek sailing: www.disabledsailingholidays.com