



# EXOTIC EXAMINATIONS

In the second instalment of her quest to attain her Yachtmaster qualification, **Ivory Hackett-Evans** grapples with weeks of Yachtmaster prep and endless theory. Does she pass? Read on to find out.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Having spent 6 years as a dinghy instructor Ivory Hackett-Evans has decided to take the leap into the world of professional yachting. She hopes to add to her sailing skills and ultimately become a superyacht skipper.

Getting my Yachtmaster Offshore certificate has always been one of my key life ambitions. Very modest for a life ambition some might say, but it is the certificate that opens doors for the sailing career I plan to follow. It is worth mentioning at this early stage that no part of this career plan involves staying in the UK. I learnt to sail in the UK and loved it, however, once I experienced sailing in warmer climes it became difficult to imagine sticking around in a world of full of foulies, knitted hats and thermals.

This aversion to sailing in the UK has developed to such an extent that merely the idea of doing my Yachtmaster Offshore preparation and exam in British waters seemed a step beyond what I was happy to let my soul and body go through. I am well aware the Solent is seen by many to be the prime location to take the Yachtmaster exam due to the huge number of navigational hazards it poses to the

student. To me though, the biggest hazard is the drizzle. It is also wrong to say it is the only place in the world that can be a touch tricky to work out. It was due to the aforementioned factors that I quickly made the decision to search for other locations slightly further afield when considering my options.

## STRAIT TO THE TOP

Almost immediately, the place that jumped out at me was Gibraltar, where Allabroad sailing academy boasted a sailing area spanning the Moroccan, Spanish and Portuguese coasts. This not only provides a huge amount of variety, but it is also tidal, a key shipping route and a stretch of water notorious for its strong winds. I had sailed in Gibraltar once before and I must say my jaw positively dropped on leaving the marina to be confronted with a barrage of tankers. This memory convinced me Gibraltar Bay could provide just

as many navigational challenges as the Solent.

Due to the amount of sailing I had done in the past, Allabroad offered me the option of doing either a one or two week preparation course prior to the exam. This helps the student get used to the yacht they will be examined on, and have a recap on the things the RYA expect you to demonstrate.

I was pretty confident in my ability to take control of a boat, having my own small yacht and a very downtrodden boyfriend as crew. However, I was also strongly aware I had slipped into a variety of bad habits and short cuts in my personal sailing, all likely to make an RYA examiner burst into tears. In light of this, I decided it would take two full weeks of prep to get me sailing the prescribed 'RYA way'. At Allabroad this involved nine days of intensive sailing, followed by a 12 hour (approx) exam on the final day (followed by a minimal amount of time in the pub to celebrate afterwards).

On arrival in Gibraltar I found there was one other student preparing for the Yachtmaster exam with me, and for the first week the pair of us were to be training with the fast track students who had just reached Day Skipper standard. Now I (and as far as I can tell a large proportion of the sailing world) have a huge amount of prejudice against fast track students. There is the nagging feeling that it is impossible for someone to learn in 14 short weeks what has taken the rest of us decades to learn. However, this snobbery was quickly proven unfounded. Allabroad had trained their students to such a high standard, their level of knowledge showed mine to be sorely wanting. It wasn't long before the panic set in and I realised what I had let myself in for.

## DESPAIR SETS IN

The amount of theory knowledge required for the Yachtmaster is essentially endless and I began to wonder how anything but 14 weeks of intensive study could prepare anyone for this exam. Allabroad had pre-warned me about how much importance the RYA place on theory knowledge prior to my arrival and sent me huge amounts of information on what to revise and how to prepare for my exam. I looked through this in a very relaxed manner. I arrogantly assumed the practical exam would test my ability to be in control of a sailing boat, not my ability to differentiate between a Mercator and Gnomonic chart.

The shock revelation of what the Yachtmaster exam actually involves left me feeling pretty unprepared and convinced there was no way I could pass. What produced the most despair was the discovery that the RYA has recently decided sailing is actually a minute part of the Yachtmaster for sail qualification, and it is extremely important that the candidate is essentially an expert in diesel engines. I have always been under the impression that on a sailing boat, knowing what to do with a sail is key to success, and have therefore been less than inquisitive about the workings of a diesel engine. Time to panic.

As is often the case, with panic comes productivity, and I was up every day at 07:00 revising flags, lights, engines, radar, etc. (the list is infinite). My poor instructor, who was staying on our boat and clearly not a morning person,



Taking blind navigation to a new extreme.



Pulpit transits with instructor Nick.

soon found himself bombarded with endless questions from daybreak to nightfall. All the staff at Allabroad were equally helpful and I felt I could corner anyone at any time to ask a question.

I'm not sure if Allabroad are used to having students arrive as entirely unprepared as I was. They did seem incredibly good at dealing with me, so perhaps it is not all that unusual. Either way I felt I had an extremely high level of support every step of the way. I was most impressed that evening revision sessions were put on the week before the exam so as to help us with any of the theory work we were particularly stuck on.

In the daytime we spent long days on the water, which were a welcome break from the classroom. The boat we trained on was a Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 40 and was a joy to sail. We had variable winds, which ranged from practically nothing, to a force 7 on the day of the exam. The sun shone constantly and I felt a nasty sense of smugness at the idea of the South coast flooding while I was chilling out in shorts and sun cream.

## HONING SKILLS

Our days were spent honing our skills in manoeuvres and putting to practice our chartwork and pilotage abilities. This was taken to a new level while night sailing and I was relieved our instructor was willing to take us out on several occasions to familiarise us with the lights in the bay prior to the exam. Day or night, this time on the water was essential for getting to know the boat and perfecting our boat handling skills. It was also a lot of fun. We spent most of our time making jokes at our instructor's expense (although I'm sure he liked the attention) and we were pretty much constantly laughing. Despite the stress of the Yachtmaster exam preparation, the friendly atmosphere at Allabroad meant I felt very relaxed most of the time.

Generally, every evening was spent in a bar where a pint could be paid for in shrapnel. Compared to prices back home, it seemed impossible to do anything other than take advantage of the joys of Gibraltar. Though I think



Plenty of ship movements to keep us on our toes.

## TOP TIPS

- ▶ **Be prepared for what the Yachtmaster syllabus actually entails.**
- ▶ **Revise your theory before you start your Yachtmaster prep**
- ▶ **Go for the longest prep course you possibly can.**
- ▶ **Don't expect to do loads of sailing in the countdown to the exam.**
- ▶ **Look further afield than the Solent for your exam, there are plenty of other alternatives.**

### ALLABROAD SAILING ACADEMY

Allabroad Sailing Academy is a family run business that has now been in operation for over ten years. They offer a wide range of RYA theory and practical cruising courses and are also MCA approved to run the STCW95. The high quality service they provide is readily apparent in the standard of their yachts, the expertise of their instructors, and the satisfaction of their clients. A huge range of people come through their school, from families starting sailing on competent crew courses, to fast track students who are training for 14 weeks and will end up with STCW 95 Yachtmaster Offshore.



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### GIBRALTAR

Gibraltar has so much more to offer than just being a great sailing location. There are a huge number of busy bars lining the waterfront, all selling low-priced beer and making for a fun nightlife. If exploring is more your thing then a stroll up the rock will take you past a great range of historical sites, and I would recommend coming down the Mediterranean steps on the steep south side of the rock for fantastic views. The wildlife is great too, with monkeys and dolphins everywhere you look.



← Europa point.

↘ Preparing for a night sail in Gibraltar Bay.

↓ Gibraltarians in full jubilee mode.



my instructor did begin to panic at my slightly too relaxed attitude and definitely tried to bring the whip cracking down on the last few days.

The truth is, by the time the exam came around I had more or less resigned myself to failure. I knew I was a good sailor, and my boat handling was good. But I simply hadn't been prepared for the level of theory knowledge required for the Yachtmaster. Despite this, I had seen the forecast for the exam day was for strong winds and I was determined, once out on the water, to just enjoy myself.

It is worth mentioning here and now that, surprisingly to me, I actually did pass. Of all the days I spent in Gibraltar, the exam day was actually the most relaxed and the one that felt least like I was being examined. So why is the prep so much harder than the exam? The answer is, in part, thanks to Allabroad's reputation for producing extremely strong candidates for Yachtmaster. Their pass rate for fast trackers seems to me exceptionally high, and the examiner even mentioned to me that he really admires Allabroad's level of teaching. The RYA dictates a vast syllabus and the only choice is for Allabroad to face up to the challenge of somehow ramming it down their students' throats

in whatever timeframe they are presented with.

Although the level of knowledge I was first being presented with did dishearten me somewhat at the time, I now know a staggering amount of things: For example, I can recite the flags, meanings and Morse code for the entire alphabet, and spot a minesweeper at night without so much as a seconds hesitation (you never know).

The Yachtmaster course is undeniably difficult; much more difficult than I had anticipated. But that is what Yachtmaster prep courses are for. Allabroad offered such great tuition and so much support that even if I had failed, I would not have felt any great sense of bitterness. I still would have learnt so much and had a tremendous amount of fun in the process. We certainly worked hard, but we also played hard and there was a definite sense of being on holiday throughout the entire experience. Pretty much every single day was spent sitting in the sun and every night was spent in the pub so I can't really whinge about how hard it was. Allabroad definitely had the right balance of fun and work in the structure of their course and if I had failed, I have no hesitation in saying I would have been back there in a second to do it all again. ■

## JUBILEE STYLE



The Diamond Jubilee happened during my time in Gibraltar. While the Queen took to a drizzly Thames, 100 boats took to the waters off 'The Rock' be-decked in red, white and blue in a distinctly sunnier celebration.

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Read the article about Allabroad on pages 44-47



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