

Visually Impaired Sailors' Week on the South Coast – “Blind Week”

What's it all about?

Guidance Notes for and by Visually Impaired Sailors and would-be Sailors

Blind Week is an enjoyable and sociable week of cruising around the coastline in offshore sailing yachts. As VI crew, you are welcome whether they have sailed before or are a complete beginner.

1 What is Blind Week?

Over 20 yachts take part in the week and they are divided into smaller groups or 'fleets' to sail to different destinations each day. The week starts on a Saturday where you are greeted by your skipper and fellow crew followed by dinner at the host yacht club. Sailing starts on the Sunday and continues until Friday. The week ends with another dinner back at the yacht club on the Friday evening before travelling home on Saturday morning. Sailing is dependant on the weather and the coastline you are sailing. Depending on the plan for your fleet and weather conditions, sailing days can be long or short. Your skipper will talk through the plan for each day, and your first day will be a careful introduction to sailing and the feel of the boat and will often involve only a short sail.

2 Who will I be sailing with?

Blind Week is run by volunteers. Yachts are donated or chartered for the week and the skippers and sighted crew are volunteers who donate their time to sail with us. The money that you pay is not to cover the cost of hiring a boat or the time of the skipper – both are freely given for the event. Rather it is a contribution to the cost of your yacht's food and mooring fees for the duration of the week.

Sighted volunteers are from all different sailing backgrounds from local club sailors to those that race and those that cruise around the world. Many of the skippers and other crew have volunteered for over 20 years so have a great deal of sailing experience and of sailing with visually impaired people. On each boat there is a skipper, who is in charge of the boat and the safety of the crew on board. The number of sighted crew on board is at least the same as the number of VI crew. Before the event your skipper will be in direct contact to provide any information that you may need, and find out about any special needs or concerns you may have.

3 What is the accommodation like onboard?

No two yachts have identical layouts. The yachts on the week range in length from around 30ft to 50ft and vary in design from motor sailers to racing yachts.

Being a yacht, your accommodation will be compact to say the least. You may be asked to share a cabin with someone of the same gender and the accommodation may be either in bunk beds or next to someone in a cabin designed for two people. Whether you feel this is “nice and cosy” or “cooped up in a wardrobe”, it is not an environment for anyone with serious claustrophobia! There will not be much space to spread your belongings around so you will have to live out of your bag for the week. So a fold away or soft bag is key to stowing your kit. All yachts have a toilet and sink in a small compartment for use during the night and day.

On most nights you will be tied up on a pontoon, so you will be able to go ashore, socialise with crew from other yachts in your fleet and to use toilet and shower facilities there. However, for nights at anchor, you will be able to use the toilet and have a wash (but not shower) aboard.

4 Do I need to be very fit and active to come on a yacht sailing holiday?

You don't need to be extra fit and active to come on Blind Week and you can do as much as you feel comfortable with. However, you do need to be able to get up and down a short, steep set of steps from the deck to the accommodation inside the yacht, to be able to manage in a fairly confined living space and to be able to step over the guard rails on the side of the yacht. A reasonable yardstick would be if you feel you could climb over a stile or a 5-bar gate OK. In some locations it may not be possible to tie up to a pontoon and you may need to climb into and out of an inflatable dinghy to go ashore.

5 What is sailing on a yacht like?

All of the yachts are different and hence they sail and feel different but all are safe. You can do as much or as little on the boat as you want. This will always be under the supervision and subject to the consent of the skipper with safety considerations in mind, If you want to learn more about sailing or particular skills during the week, you are encouraged to discuss this with your skipper, who will try to facilitate this. As part of the yacht's crew, you can help with the sail trim, hoisting and winching, helming/steering and any other aspect of handling the yacht - your skipper and sighted crew will support you where needed.

The weather conditions and sailing area can be different each day, and they can change quickly. All boats will heel (lean) to a certain point whilst sailing. This can feel strange at first but it is perfectly normal and should not be a cause for concern. By the end of the week you will have tried something new, been challenged in a supportive way and experienced the camaraderie of sailing with the rest of your crew and with people on other yachts.

6 What should I bring with me?

Your luggage should be packed in a soft bag rather than a suitcase or trunk to make it easy to stow on board. Note that it is usually cooler sailing out on the water than on land so it is a good idea to bring plenty of layers of clothing and

to be prepared for all weather and a range of temperatures – we're sailing in England rather than the Mediterranean after all!

Here are some suggestions of items that you should think about bringing in addition to the items that you would pack for any other trip:

- sleeping bag and small pillow or soft clothing that you can use as a pillow
- waterproof jacket and trousers (let your skipper and the organiser know in advance if you don't have waterproofs as you may be able to borrow a set)
- boots or non-slip footwear (many people prefer to wear footwear that protects your toes to avoid stubbing them or hurting your feet; footwear with a good grip helps to avoid slipping on a wet deck surface)
- layers of clothing to keep you warm (synthetic fleeces etc are best for keeping dry and warm)
- swimwear (in case of an opportunity to go swimming!)
- a small or quick-dry towel
- sun cream, sun glasses and a hat (as you are more likely to get burnt when sailing)
- RYA log book (if you want to start recording your sailing miles)
- 1 set of smart casual clothes for the dinner at the end of the week
- Some spending money – the amount you pay for the week covers all your meals taken on board and you will not be expected to pay any more for this – however any drinks or other additional items will be subject to a boat kitty or as agreed with the skipper. One pound coins are particularly useful for showers and trolleys ashore.