

Pioneering sailing in the Gulf of Thailand

By Scott Murray



Gulf Charters was formed in October, 2004. Captain Tim McMahon was nearing the end of his stint as skipper for the 104-year-old schooner *Seraph* when into Jimmy's Lighthouse in Ao Chalong, Phuket, walked Phil Harper. Turns out that Phil was looking to buy a boat as he planned to retire from his job in the construction business and set up a charter company at Ocean Marina, just east of Pattaya.

Phil had a partner named Robbie Gilchrist and the two owned one boat already

called *Double Trouble* that they kept in Ocean Marina. *Double Trouble* had made a number of local overnights to nearby islands and Phil knew that because Ocean Marina was a great facility it was just a matter of time before it became a major yachting center in Southeast Asia.

The chance meeting between McMahon and Harper paved the way for a three-way deal between Mark Horwood, who owned *Seraph*, Tom Howard, who was going to buy *Seraph*, and Phil who would lease the boat.



Gulf Charter students Jonas Pina checks the wind direction while Todd Speer pulls in on the jeab (**above**). Instructor John Stubbs goes over some knots with Todd Speer (**far left**) while the whole class participates in a man-overboard scenario (**left**).

“It’s one thing to teach people how to visit a beautiful beach and drop anchor in a sandy bay, but building people’s confidence in dealing with big ships out at sea is one of the things that makes us unique,” says Captain Tim McMahon



Sailing School Director Tim McMahon explaining how a diesel engine works (top left), Captain Tim going over wind flow in class (middle left), Captain John Stubbs explaining to Jonas Pina and Keith Bradley how to chart a course (bottom left). Roger & Geraldine, two more Gulf Charters students, prepare for a man overboard drill with the buoy substituting as the person in distress (middle right). Roger & Geraldine again, this time checking for luffing in the sails (right).

It was one of the reasons that Tom bought the boat, as he had someone to lease it to immediately at a good monthly rate. Captain Tim would be the skipper and Operations Manager for the new Gulf Charters company, Phil would be the Business Manager and Robbie Gilchrist was a silent partner.

So Captain Tim sailed *Seraph* from Phuket down through the Straits of Malacca around Singapore to her new home at Ocean Marina in the Gulf of Thailand. And the focus of the new Gulf Charters company was day

trips, using a business model that had proved very successful to Tim for seven years in Hawaii, where he had managed a fleet of classic sailing yachts, sailing 50-100 people daily to Waikiki from the Keehi Lagoon area. Gulf Charters figured that with the big expat and group tourist population based in Pattaya, they could tap into that market, but the problem was the groups didn't mix well e.g. a group of Russians didn't want to sail with a group of Japanese, or vice versa.

Cambodia

Gulf Charters was the first company to offer bareboat yacht charters in Cambodia. In late October, it will be taking another liveaboard join-in cruise into Cambodian waters. It's a great place to go sailing, whether it's in the resort areas around Sihanoukville or the outer islands (names?). As Tim McMahon says, "You are really pioneering yachting there. There's no one out there, there's plenty of clear water and great snorkeling and diving."

Then the law changed in Thailand in 2004 and it became possible to import boats into Thailand without having to pay a huge duty. At the time Gulf Charters was able to come into the possession of ten boats.

With the acquisition of these boats, Gulf Charters now had the answer to the tour company who said, "I have 3 Russians who want to go on a day tour." The company immediately hired a few Thai skippers and started sending out independent smaller groups on trips.

So Tim and Phil decided to give *Seraph* back to Tom Howard, As Tim recalls, "We moved away from the day-trip business and started focusing on bareboat liveaboard charters. And what goes with that: a sailing school. And since we had ten boats for sale, we wanted to get a piece of that as well. But we were motivated to find people who would buy the boats, but keep them in our fleet, so we would have the basis for a decent charter company."

Gulf Charters has dabbled in all aspects of the marine business including join-in day trips, yacht-owner contracts, yacht sales as well as selling and installing electronics (Gen Sets, Air Con, Radar & GPS), before settling on its current three-pronged structure: yacht charters, a sailing school, and yacht brokerage.

"We have been very adaptable, we have bounced around many corners to come out where we're at now," says Captain Tim. "There was a time when we were running a sailing school, a brokerage, doing day trips & installations, taking out liveaboard trips and even doing retail in our shop. We and Bill Gasson were the first companies in Ocean



Marina. Then along came people like Gary Baguely with a proper chandlery and we said ‘If we are going to compete, let’s really compete’, so we found our niche in our three-sided business. We really defined what we do today, when we started our sailing school four-and-a-half years ago.”

Nigel Harford, a former Gulf Charter employee, was instrumental in starting the sailing school with Tim and the pair surveyed schools like RYA, & ASA before settling on IYT, feeling it was the most progressive and offered students the best opportunity to get internationally recognized sailing qualifications. IYT not only offers recreational licensing and certificates, but it also goes deep into professional qualifications offering skipper’s licenses of up to 3,000 tons and up to unlimited tonnage engineering certificates.

At the time, Gulf Charters approached IYT, it was still a young company and its main thrust was professional upper-level licensing preparing an accreditation program for crew and captains in the megayacht industry.

“I’ve learned a lot about teaching sailing by teaching the sailing school,” says Tim. The first thing I had to learn was what to teach, because the field of sailing covers a lot of territory. For example, I could probably spend a week teaching anchoring. It’s really easy to spend too much time on any one aspect of sailing.

“Early on, we just offered a 5-day crew course, then when we could get enough people together we’d hold the Watchkeeper course, and then when we could get enough people together, we’d hold the Skipper’s course. But it

“We have the best of both worlds: good anchorages for quiet overnight trips and for liveaboard chartering and then the shipping, which adds a whole new dimension to learning how to sail and makes it more realistic.”

just didn’t work because we had little success matching dates when people were available. But the school was enjoyable, and we loved teaching it – we knew we had a market for it. We just had to perfect our model.

“At about the same time we dropped the other businesses we were in as we had established ourselves as a bareboat charter company by picking up our Koh Chang base, and the brokerage had taken hold.”

Then Tim’s Thai wife Noi got pregnant with their daughter Jeni, so he decided to

The Zero to Hero Programme

Gulf Charters “Zero to Hero” Programme is divided into three parts: the 5-day IYT Crew Course Programme, the 4-day IYT Watchkeeper Programme and the 4-day IYT Bareboat Captain Programme.

The Crew course deals with classroom theory, basics, yacht & systems orientation, sailing drills (tacking, reefing), and an overnight voyage.

The Watchkeeper course also has classroom theory with a stress on navigation, then moves on to close quarter marina practice (docking), finishing with an overnight voyage.

Then the Bareboat Captain course starts off with classroom theory including how to read the weather and work a radio. Then there’s more close quarter practice and a 3-day offshore training cruise.



It's not all work and no play, as sometimes Gulf Charters students find themselves in some beautiful spots and they do have the chance to enjoy them.

What Students Say

Keith Bradley from Perth, Australia, writes, "I participated with eight other trainees on the Gulf Charter IYC Crew & Watchkeeper Course. From the start, we were made to feel welcome by the two instructors, and we soon formed up into a happy team of trainees. "The course director, Tim McMahon, proved that he could deliver a very clear & pertinent lecture on the technical aspects of our training, which was followed up the next day when Captain John Stubbs showed us how to put that theory to practical use on a 46-ft yacht."

Todd Speer from San Antonio, Texas, says, "I chose Gulf Charters Zero to Hero Sailing Course because the way Tim McMahon described the program... Tim said this is a course for people who want to learn how to live aboard a boat and understand the basic fundamentals of sailing...this is perfect start for someone wanting to circumnavigate the world. I plan to accomplish this someday, so this course was perfect.

"Tim's vast amount of sailing experience that he brings to the course is astonishing. The way he delivers the course content, by applying it to everyday real world situations and experience, is exceptional. Because of Tim's detailed explanation of the engine and its components I feel much more confident going to sea and being able to conduct an emergency repair. "John Stubbs' commercial and sailing experience is unrivaled and demonstrated throughout the course. He guided us through sail boat emergency actions during harsh weather conditions. Because of this, I feel confident that I know the proper actions to take during stormy sea conditions to keep myself and crew safe. "John's hands-on teaching techniques and positive attitude facilitates easily understanding the sailing material, especially, during the chart reading portion of the course. Because of John, I have a better understanding of charts and can navigate a sail boat safely through the waterway in difficult channels. "This course has given me a greater understanding of the skill and experience required to sail. Even though I have the confidence to begin sailing on my own, I fully understand that this is only the beginning and there is so much to learn and can only be obtained through sailing experience and time.

"The knowledge gained from Gulf Charters Sailing school is invaluable and worth every penny."

return to the continental US for the first time in 15 years to check out his career options and help his brother start an art business in Tucson, Arizona. Phil gave him a year sabbatical, and he ended up doing a cycle of 3 months in America, then a month back in Thailand. In the interim, one of Tim's students, Ron Patston, who was based in Oregon, invested in the company and became the new CEO (one of Ron's ventures was to buy the company's *Glooy Yai* boat in Baja California and trailer it up on the back of his private Greyhound bus). Ron renegotiated Tim's role with Gulf Charters -he was now going to take over as Director of the Sailing School and be a shareholder, putting years of experience as operations manager behind.

While back in the US, Tim attended IYT's course in Florida and met the owner & CEO, Mark Fry. He wanted to see the biggest sailing school in the US, first hand. Actually, he wanted to see how it ran, and how it worked. This experience turned out to be a valuable lesson and he now he had a much better idea of how he should run Gulf's Charter's school. First, he scheduled the courses for every month, so people could then plan around those course dates. Then, he redefined the programme: stating exactly what they would cover and how they would deliver the product, a 14-day programme, called "Zero to Hero".

Learn to Sail – really!!

So what makes Gulf Charters school special? "We are located in the Gulf of Thailand, north of the inter-tropical convergence zone, so we have excellent and steady winds for most of the year from the south-west, and in the high season we typically have good steady wind from points north," says Tim. "And as we are in the Gulf of Thailand we are in relatively protected waters, so we can have strong steady winds, and relatively small seas. In fact, it's rare for to have swells of over two metres. We also have the industrial port of Laem Chabang, 20 miles up the coast, so we can pretty much guarantee that every student will deal with shipping, tow and tug traffic, plus lots of fishing boats. So students are given first-hand experience in dealing with big boats which builds their confidence in future encounters they may have with other shipping.

"It's one thing to teach people how to visit a beautiful beach and drop anchor in a sandy bay, but building people's confidence in dealing with big ships out at sea is one of the things that makes us unique. This heavy traffic also leads to many navigational aides; there are a dozen big lighthouses, channel markers, a traffic separation scheme and buoy markers. Really, if I had to sit down and draw a learn-to-sail area it would look like this, it's just perfect. You also have a nice selection of remote, quiet islands like Koh Krahm, Koh Phai and Koh Rin.

"We have the best of both worlds: good anchorages for quiet overnight trips and for liveaboard chartering and then the shipping, which adds a whole new dimension to learning how to sail and makes it more realistic. Students leave our program feeling that they have really seen a full range of sailing conditions." 📍