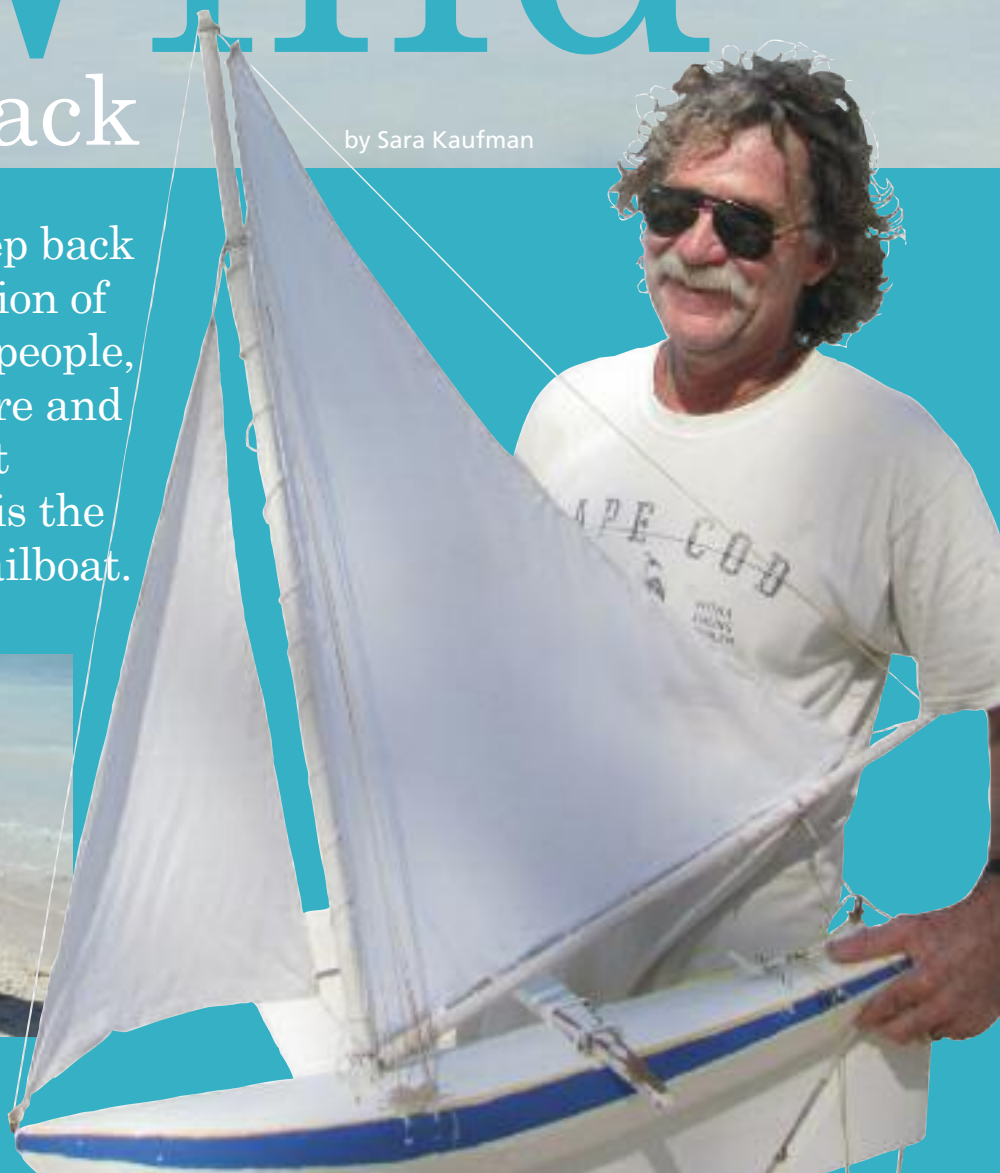


With the Wind at Your Back

by Sara Kaufman

Middle Caicos is a step back in time; a quiet isolation of 50 square miles, 300 people, and a wealth of culture and spirit. One of its most intriguing traditions is the hand carved model sailboat.





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There's something about model boats that captures the imagination. Whether they be made of paper and floated down a drainage ditch, or complicated works of art from a production kit, kids and adults around the globe love model boats.

The Turks and Caicos is no different, but our model sailboats are small masterpieces, carved from Gum-elemi tree limbs, by fathers and grandfathers.

Faithfully rigged to reflect the sail plan on a full sized native sloop, with stays and shrouds, working halyards to haul up the sails, and sheets to trim them, these valiant little boats sail remarkably well. Gum-elemi is a very light wood so a weatherboard (like an outrigger) is attached to the hull to keep the boats on an even keel as they sail.

With the intrusion of progress (TV, plastic toys, and modern ways), these priceless relics of childhood almost disappeared. But in the mid nineties the Middle Caicos Co-op and the newly formed Maritime Heritage Federation

embarked on programs to encourage model builders and ship wrights to take up their craft once more.

In 1999 seven model sailboats were commissioned by the Middle Caicos Co-op. Since then over 100 model boats have been carved from the native gum-elemi, sold to enthusiasts, or donated to the growing fleet cared for by the MCSA.

Model sailing sloops come in three





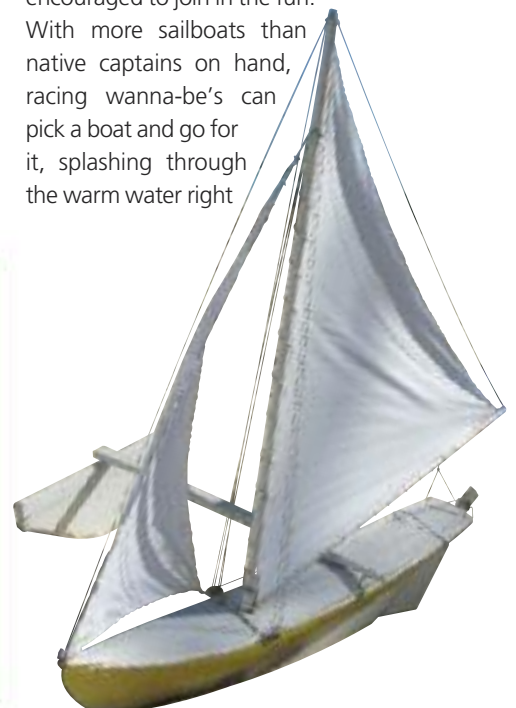
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classes: from about eighteen inches to nearly six feet in length, and competition is very serious. Each model sailing sloop is hand painted in bright colors and most have a name lettered on the hull – great for local promotion and sponsorship.

Since 2001 the Annual Valentine's Day Model Sloop races, at Bambarra Beach on Middle, has given these elegant little sloops, and their captains and builders, a perfect venue to strut their stuff. This stretch of blindingly white, velvety sand stretches for several miles along the north coast of the island, and the barrier reef creates a huge, protected lagoon of warm shallow water. It is backed by a forest of elegant casuarina pines which provides

shade for spectators, musicians and vendors.

Now in its 11th year, the Valentine's Day Cup Model Sailboat Regatta draws crowds from all the other islands, and visitors from every corner of the world, some arriving to TCI specifically for this event. They infiltrate Middle Caicos in surprisingly large numbers for the event. One reason why the event keeps growing is that spectators are encouraged to join in the fun. With more sailboats than native captains on hand, racing wanna-be's can pick a boat and go for it, splashing through the warm water right



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along with gnarly old salts and shrieking kids as they vie for the finish. It's a lot of work and a lot of fun. Each 'Captain' sloshes through the shallows, tethered to his or her boat by a light line which adjusts the rudder angle. It only takes one race to hook new captains.

The folks on Middle go all out for race day, and the whole community hits the beach. Chicken, fish and burgers are cooked over smoking barbeques, a live band set up on a raised wooden stage accompanies the piping voices of excited kids and cheering parents, and there's plenty of cold beer. The ladies bring out their intricate straw and grass so you can buy one of their amazing hand woven hats, baskets or bags as a special keepsake of the day. And of course, you must buy a commemorative T-shirt or cap.

Prizes are awarded in each class, including cash, trophies and medallions to keep the competitive spirit high – with the youngest and oldest captains specially noted.

Middle Caicos is not for the fainthearted. Mosquitoes, a dearth of modern conveniences, bumpy roads, expensive fuel and unreliable communications systems bring challenges. The



rewards, however, are tremendous – a pristine island of fascinating diversity with a warm and welcoming population.

Middle Caicos provides outstanding views and hikes along the cliffs of the west, the central beaches or the coves and the lagoons of the east. A visit to this heart of the TCI seafaring community is one you'll treasure long after you return home. For general information or day trips contact middlecaicos@tcway.tc, tcnationaltrust@tcway.tc or any of the commercial tour operators. ■



Information you need to know for Middle Caicos

■ Ferries from Provo to North Caicos
Caribbean Cruisin' ☎ 946-5406 or 231-4191
"My Girl" Brantford Gardiner ☎ 241-0599

■ Car Rentals

includes pick up & return to ferry/boat landing

Al's Car rentals ☎ 946-7232 / 241-1355

Pelican Beach Hotel ☎ 946-7139

Mark's car rentals ☎ 241-8275

Old Nick rent a car ☎ 232-1053

Easy Car rentals ☎ 241- 2137

■ Taxis

M & M ☎ 231-6285,

Tiger Taxi ☎ 231-4859,

Cardinal Arthur ☎ 946-6107

■ Tour Operators

Middle Caicos Co-op ☎ 231-4884

Gibbs Bonefishing ☎ 232-4141

Five Flamingos ☎ 231-3483

Big Blue (Provo based) ☎ 946-5034

Amphibious Adventures ☎ 232-4966

■ Restaurants

Daniels' Café, on the seaside in Conch Bar ☎ 946-6132 or 232-6132

Dillon's Café, at Middle Caicos Airport in Conch Bar ☎ 946-6128

■ Major Attractions

Mudjin Harbour, Middle Caicos

Crossing Place Trail, Middle Caicos

Bambarra Beach, Middle Caicos

Conch Bar Caves, Middle Caicos

Middle Caicos Co-op, Conch Bar, M.C.

