

Beginners' Guide to Lagoon Racing



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Introduction

This guide is written by me with a background of being a member at LSC for the past 2 seasons and sailing dinghies for 3 years, when I can, balancing the time with family and other aspects of life. I have my RYA L2 certificate so I can sail a boat to a basic level of competency.

During these few years there have often been challenges to both self esteem and confidence but also times of wonder, exhilaration and relaxation. Learning to sail, it seems, never stops. We are always getting better no matter how long we have done it.

So with all that in mind, this guide aims to share my experiences and a bit of knowledge I have picked up going from a real newbie to one that completes their first Lagoon Race and on to completing a Sunday morning race, all at LSC.



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1. You don't have to be Sir Ben Ainslie

Sailing a boat without any real goal for that time on the water is often what people enjoy, it's the fact of being on the water and enjoying the elements. For some though they quickly need to have a target or reason for going out, at least for most outings. For me, I realised quickly, having joined LSC, that there is a big difference between sailing a boat and sailing a boat knowing you have the skills for that trip to one of the islands and importantly getting back. I don't have huge amounts of time, am pretty new to this, and I also live about an hour from LSC, so needed to find a way of improving but in a way that would give me a target to aim at and know it would happen, i.e not reliant on me deciding when it would happen, or chickening out.

This is when I heard about Lagoon Racing. 4 or 5 events in a season, usually 2 or 3 short races each event, sailed within the lagoon just outside LSC. All are welcome.

Yes but it's racing! Gulp!

Will I get shouted at?
Will I know what to do?
Will I look like an idiot?

No you won't get shouted at,
Eventually you will know what to do
We all look like idiots at times so we won't care

I knew I could sail a boat on the three angles to the wind (up, down and across) so decided to take the plunge (not literally) and give it a go. **If I didn't like it then I wouldn't do it again.**

2. Overcoming the doubts

This is a hard one to get over. Racing generally does have this reputation for being manic, only for the great and fully committed, and low and behold you if you get it wrong. I can assure you, this is so not the case for Lagoon Racing. If you can sail a boat like me, you can learn how to race, and Lagoon Racing is like having someone holding the back of your bicycle seat when you first ride without stabilisers. The more you do, the lighter the grip until you are on your own. Comforting, friendly and forgiving. You can do it.

3. Getting started - What you need and how it works

Firstly you don't even need a boat. The club Pico and Magno can be used. However if you do have a boat it doesn't need to be a racing dinghy. You will find an array of types joining in, from a Scow, to a Solo, Laser to RS Quest, Toppers, Guls and Wanderers.

You don't need a racing watch either as you will hear the race officer shouting the minute countdown, and you will see the other boats gathering together at the start line.



So what can you expect from Lagoon Racing, based on my experiences?

This is what I remember from my first Lagoon Race event. Keep in mind I was sailing a two person Wanderer so, from memory I was also learning how to manage a crew at the same time or at least this was definitely the case for the following events. But these points stand when solo as well. First race impressions were:

- Oh man there is too much to think about
- It's so congested with no room
- How do people know how to get to the line on time
- Why is it only me getting stuck in Irons (i.e. stopping dead in the water and not being able to get the boat going again)
- My brain is going to explode!
- How many laps have I done?
- I am just glad to have stayed upright!

It's fair to say that even in Lagoon Racing, the first time racing a dinghy is a bit hectic. But the second time it's better and so on... After a couple you start strategising the start of races, then you notice that grin on your face as you hunt down the boat in front..... It's addictive.

Lagoon Race format

A three point course is laid out usually on the Salterns side of the lagoon (left side of the jetty and moored boats). At a high tide, there is a surprising depth of water, although those with center boards need to still be a little bit conservative. The start line consists of one of the orange support boats and the red start flag, usually 90 degrees to the wind in a straight line (approximately 50m apart). The other support boat is used to make sure everyone keeps safe.



After the initial welcome and instructions from the race officer, often given on a white board on the slipway, everyone launches. No major rush as the racing starts when everyone is out there but there is no harm being one of the first out if a newbie. Check your boat is set up how you want it (if unsure, Feel free to ask others for assistance with rigging your dinghy and any other queries) and get out on the water, helping others with their trolleys as appropriate.

Once launched, with the weird transition from land mammal to water mammal has completed (taking a minute in my experience!), use the time to settle into your boat and the current weather and location conditions.

Sail about the Lagoon, finding the shallow bits, the areas where there could be more wind or less wind (blocked by buildings or flowing through gaps), try some tacks, and especially a couple of gybes to get that out of your head. Once you start enjoying yourself, have a look for the start line. As mentioned, usually an orange boat one end and red flag the other.

There will be two other marks or buoys too, one upwind of the start line (windward mark) and one downwind of the start line (leeward mark). See if you can find those, especially the windward mark as it will be the one you get to first. There is likely to be a third mark to look out for too, often a big yellow buoy arrived at second. This is the gybe mark, where you will go from sailing across the wind to down wind and gybing in the process. Note that the informal nature of Lagoon Racing means that we find buoys that do the job so they may look different to my description and change each event. Their positions though remain the same relative to the wind.



So now that you have identified where the course is, feel free to sail around the marks, get used to how the boat feels when going around the gybe mark etc..... Just keep an eye out for other boats whilst doing it.

The most hectic part of the race. The start.

If you are like me, you will never have experienced sailing like the start of a race before. You will likely never have sailed so close to other boats, had boats aiming right at you head on before, or had to work out how to slow the boat down intentionally only to need to work out how to power it up again at the sound of the horn. It's crazy but huge fun, after your first one anyway. It's often suggested that a newbie hangs behind the rest of the fleet so they can experience what needs to happen without being in the middle of the mellay. I would agree, just don't be so far behind like I was the first time so that it's like you are not racing, more watching it from afar. The Lagoon Racing is very friendly, as already stated, so you won't have lots of shouting or boats being crafty blocking you out etc on the start line. Take your time, enjoy being part of something quite unique and settle in for a 30 min race. Things will settle down after the first or second marks and you can start to think about what you want to do next.

Finish Line and Returning Ashore

The race officer will let you know how many laps, how many races etc. As you pass the start line on the final lap the race officer will sound the horn. Feel free to punch the air, slap your knee or at least smile. You just finished your first race! As a note, don't worry if it takes a few races to finish your first one. Lots can happen during a race, stuck in irons, capsize etc. It doesn't matter. Lots of time will be given to complete the race but it may just be that to fit a few races in the time and tide available you will be asked if you are ok to cut short that race. It's really not something to be worried about though and happened to me a few times.

Once you hear your horn of the last race, gently sail back to the slipway and help/ get help bringing your boat ashore.

I can honestly say, the more you do, the less overwhelming it is, things start to make sense and your boat handling will improve exponentially. I believe it's the fastest way to improve your boat handling and confidence that you can do, time vs benefit, and as mentioned at the beginning, it's the reason I started racing.



4. Cruising vs Racing

The main difference I notice between cruising, or social sailing where you sail for the joy of sailing, with others or alone, and racing for me is discipline. Yes there is all the close action and sailing a set course and being timed etc but the real difference to me is the discipline of concentrating on how you are sailing the boat. When cruising, whilst I do concentrate on sailing the boat, I also often look at the wildlife, feel the sun on my face and generally just chill, but this, whilst very relaxing and really good for you, doesn't

force you to read the sails, tell tales, balance of the boat, how close you can get to the wind, when to tack or gybe and how to keep the speed going whilst doing so. The two types of sailing are very different, both with their appeal and benefits. You will be amazed how much you learn about sailing your boat when Lagoon Racing, and this can help you sail better when cruising too.

5. Basic rules of Lagoon Racing

As with any sport, there is a long list of rules and rights in sail racing (apparently), but for Lagoon Racing you only need to know a few basics.

- Avoid a collision. Don't crash into others. Even if it's someone else's fault, try to take avoiding action so as not to crash into them.
- Start line. Try not to go over it before the start horn goes off.
- Rights of way at the mark. If the inside boat is even partially alongside your boat then they have right to space at the mark (buoy). You can always try to overtake them at the next straight or mark.
- Starboard Tack. This is especially true when boats are sailing up wind but it's always a case that those sailing on a starboard tack (i.e. wind coming over the starboard side of the dinghy) have right of way over those on port tack.
- Finish Line. To finish you need to cross it having completed the correct number of laps. The race officer will sound the horn when you do. It's a lovely thing to hear!

6. Give it a go

In the words of Mrs Doyle, 'Awe, Go On'. Lagoon Racing, in case it's not been clear in this guide, **is for all**, no pressure, **great fun**, friendly and you will learn a huge amount from doing it. Go on, give it a go.



7. Hooked? It's all about the details from now on.

Once you have done it, got over the initial shock, and settled in you are likely to get hooked on dinghy racing. After a while you will realise that the art of making your boat go fast is all in the details. Boat setup, how you sail it and what course you take. But that's for then, Lagoon Racing is for now. See you on the water soon!