

## SOUND OF DREAMS

A MOVEMENT IS UNDERWAY IN NORTH CAROLINA TO ESTABLISH PAMLICO SOUND AS THE NEXT BEST REGATTA DESTINATION.

**WHEN PETER JOHNSTONE**, owner of Gunboat Catamarans, arrived in North Carolina, he discovered not only an ideal location to set up his operations in the manufacturing infrastructure left behind in the economic recession, but the untapped potential of Pamlico Sound as a regatta destination. In 2013 he joined forces with local sailing advocates and businesses to establish SailNC, a non-profit dedicated to bringing competitive sailing to the region. With the best year-round sailing conditions on the East Coast, he says, and with a long-term plan now in place, North Carolina will soon rank among sailing's best dinghy racing venues.

Pamlico Sound, protected by the Outer Banks, is shallow, with an average depth of six feet, but the water is warm and the winds are reliable most of the year. "From April to August the wind is always on," says Johnstone. "I'm not exaggerating when I say the sailing here is unbelievable."

"It's an absolutely exceptional place to sail," says Ben Moon, an A-class Catamaran sailor who finished second in the A-class North American Championship in Man-

teo, N.C., this past summer. "I wouldn't hesitate to go back for any opportunity that arises. It was great; predictable conditions made for truly excellent racing."

The A-class championship was a pilot event for SailNC as the group dipped its toe into regatta hosting. Given the area's shallows, SailNC will focus on attracting catamarans and smaller boats. With an extended temperate season they've got plenty of space in the calendar to accommodate classes outside the peak summer months of the Outer Banks. "It's ideal for racing," says Barry Wickre, President of SailNC. "On the sounds, you can sit on the banks and be able to watch the events. They're pretty much no more than three miles across, with easy beach launches. There are a lot of pristine areas that you can sail in here, either in the sound or on the ocean."

"Once you show up to an event here, you will come back every year," says Jon Britt, a North Carolina native. "We've been known for years as a great windsurfing and kiteboarding destination, but now it's time that sailors discover what we have to offer. It's not crowded by fishermen; these waters are a sailor's playground."

Britt owns NorBanks Sailing, a watersports rental facility in Duck, N.C., and is on the board of SailNC, working with state Department of Commerce in an effort to brand the state as a racing destination.

"There's a whole lot of areas with 5 to 10 feet of water, and 10 to 20 knots of breeze, which is fantastic for any small boats, skiffs, multihulls," says Britt. "Even in July, the wind stays up. You can surf in the morning, sail all day, and surf again at night."

Johnstone, an avid A-class racer himself, is credited for awakening the region's business community to the benefits of embracing sailing and spreading the word. "A lot of sailors seem excited that there's a new destination to try," says Britt. "We're ideally located—we're not close to the Midwest, the Northeast, or really to Florida, but we're equally far away from everyone so it's a great compromise for hosting events."

With the Laser and the Club 420 North American championships in 2015, it won't be long before this venue gains notoriety. "When we choose venues, we look for a family experience," says John Morgan, President of the Club 420 Association. "We look for a place that can provide good, large-fleet racing conditions. We need a venue that has the credentials, and the experience to do it. They have the people in place to execute these large-scale events."

In November, SailNC was in negotiations with state agencies to acquire what Johnstone describes as a "huge" parcel of land that will allow them to host world championships by 2017 and eventually establish a sailing and maritime center with an educational component.

The locals are happy about the attention the area is getting. "With help from the state, we're focusing on developing more events here," says Britt. "We want to walk before we run and make sure we're doing everything right. With five or six upcoming events next year, it should be a good start. But, we have wind all summer and you can sail here in the shoulder seasons. There aren't many other places you're able to do that." ▲

The Outer Banks provide shelter from the Atlantic, but not the wind. Low bridges and shallow spots make these waters ideal for small crafts, like the A-class cats, to come play.

Photo: Ocean Images

