

Jamaica Bay's Jewel



Deserted islands, buzzing 747s, a wildlife refuge, and skyscrapers on the horizon draw sailors to New York's Jamaica Bay every year for the Sebago Canoe Club's hallmark race: the Sebago Cup. On Sept. 22, sailors participating in this open-class cruising race leave from the club's Brooklyn location, which is the only stand-alone dinghy club within the city limits.

The Cup kicks off the fall series and explores a relatively unknown corner of the Big Apple. Instead of rounding marks, the course typically traces an 8-mile, figure-eight through what was once rum-running territory: the bay's archipelago including Ruffle Bar and Canarsie Pol.

"It's pretty idyllic except for the sunken cars and floating coconuts," joked club member Dave Crompton, explaining that the coconuts are left after seasonal Hindu ceremonies in Jamaica Bay.

Crompton and his 9-year-old son Ben finished second in last year's Sebago Cup, which included a fleet of five Lasers, six Sunfish, and another father-son team in a Vanguard 15. Race organizers expect a similar mix and number of boats this September.

The Cup, which has been held for over 20 years, challenges experienced racers' local knowledge and also attracts novices. The format allows a more laid-back

Every September, a grab bag of dinghies takes to the waters just southwest of John F. Kennedy International Airport for an open-class cruising race through what was once rum-running territory.

jaunt for dinghies accustomed to racing, like Lasers, but it still keeps them on their toes: Once a Sunfish skipper beat the Laser fleet by 500 yards.

"It's an excuse to sail all-out, yet in a cruising format," said Jim Luton, the 2010 Sunfish champ and co-chair of the club's sailing committee. "It's always a lot of fun. And for the last few years, we've had pretty strong easterlies."

Strong winds are par for the course in Jamaica Bay, with its marshy islands and slight tree cover. Winds of 15 knots out of the northwest are typical, as are 60-degree shifts.

The Sebago Canoe Club's races are open to the public, but most participants are local members drawn by the club's affordable memberships and boat storage. The membership numbers just about 60 due to the limitations of the Paerdegat Basin location and facilities, giving the club an intimate atmosphere.

"It's the Sebago Canoe Club, not the Olympics," said Crompton. "The club is like a family."

—JULIA MARSH