



All we could see was pink flamingos. Pink flamingo cup holders, pink flamingo straws, pink flamingo cocktail flags. . . . We detected a theme here. Boats were circling the anchorage, waiting to be called into the raft that was in the making. And people (wearing pink flamingo duds) were ably manning those boats. Someone in a pink flamingo hat was shouting orders so that each vessel miraculously maneuvered into position to create a perfect sunflower—the elusive circular formation that every boat club tries but not every boat club manages to pull off. This one seemed to be forming up without a hitch. We were

Boat Clubbing at Its Best

Forming a perfect circle raft is no small task; wearing a flamingo hat doesn't make it any easier.

by Jane Meneely



impressed. I was impressed, anyway. Paul didn't know enough about what was going on to have an opinion one way or another. He just took it in stride like a two-year-old takes a bow wave. "A circle?" he said. "What a smart idea! Which one's the bar boat?" He's a quick study, I'll give him that.

We had been invited to a gathering of the Chesapeake Bristol Club, a society of eighty or so Bay boaters who, club name notwithstanding, may or may not own a Bristol yacht. The club was founded in 1974 by people who owned and raced those venerable vessels (built in Bristol, R.I. in the 1960s, '70s and '80s) but it has long since evolved into a cruising club open to all. The majority of club boats now are not Bristols, and one isn't even a sailboat; it's a trawler.

Our friends Joel Gross and Tom Finnin had invited us along for the day's revelry—a big blowout of a party in Mill Creek, not far from where Joel keeps his Bristol 32, *Chantey*. (This is the Mill Creek just south of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, near Annapolis.) The theme was flamingos (duh) and everything was pink—pink food, pink napkins, pink punch. Someone gave me a flashing pink flamingo brooch to wear. Paul was holding a pink flamingo cup. "Bottoms up," he said cheerily. He wasn't toasting; he was saluting some blonde babe who was bending over the life line to rearrange a fender. "Swell party!" he said.

I decided that a cup filled with some pink frothy stuff might be just the thing to slake my thirst, and, well, you know how easily those pink frothy sips slide down a parched throat—I got pretty happy. So did Paul. So did the guy in the flamingo hat. (I think he's the one who went swimming at some point. He made a big splash—some of the spray landed in my drink.) As evening approached the designated drivers maneuvered out of the circle, one by one, and found their own anchorages. And we, with a decidedly sober Joel at the helm, eventually slid back to *Chantey's* dock and called it a day.

"So . . . you're saying we could do that *every weekend*?" Paul asked me incredulously. He was quite impressed by this whole boat club business. "And they'd actually let us join?"

"We'd have to prove ourselves," I said.

"Hey, I can jump in the water without spilling my drink, same as the next guy," Paul said.

"I think it's a tad more involved," I said.

But the truth is, we *could* join that club. We could join any number of clubs hereabouts. And we probably should. "Proving" ourselves would be about as onerous as ponying up the dues, providing a tasty casserole on occasion and being serious about boating. We wouldn't have to be experts; we'd just have to *want* to be experts someday. We'd have to be willing to learn, willing to share, willing to help. . . . In the end, we'd be better off for the experience. Better sailors, better boaters, better boating partners.

Boat clubs are as prevalent as boat designs. Ostensibly founded to promote seamanship—you'll see that in just about every club's manifesto—they are first and foremost (I don't care what their literature says) social entities, where like-minded individuals open their hearts, their cockpits and their liquor lockers to each other on a regular basis. And that can happen on the docks of some fancy clubhouse, huddled around someone's kitchen table in January or rafted up in a quiet anchorage. But of course the benefits go far beyond the social realm. That is, boat clubs really do make better and more knowledgeable boaters. It's inevitable, with all the impromptu cockpit seminars, all the weekend academies, all the website chat rooms full of pithy tips. Add to that the camaraderie—casseroles and rum recipes are just a bonus.

Can anybody spell flamingo? ↴



The Chesapeake Bristol Club welcomes all

sailboat owners. If you have a Bristol or non-Bristol sailboat and are interested in investigating an active, friendly, cruising club, please see this website: www.CBClub.info

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