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THE ULTIMATE "GOING OUT"

Two years on a sailboat:
Living, traveling, and learning,
the Montessori way

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The Ultimate “Going Out”

By Paula A. Prosper, MA

Our two children are doing the ultimate “Going Out.” For 2 years, our family is living, traveling, and learning aboard our sailboat, *Daystar*. For us, living on a boat is not a vacation—it is real life, albeit in a very different place. Our cruising sabbatical involves new experiences and fun but also hard work, sacrifice, and, of course, school. This adventure has been an amazing education, combining traditional academic coursework with real-world learning in our wide-open classroom.

Maria Montessori created a purposefully limited environment in which children learn. Students at the Elementary level may exhaust the resources of the classroom when exploring a topic of interest. Montessori developed the Going Out as a way for children to go beyond the limits of the classroom and enter the greater world to delve more broadly and deeply into their work (Lillard, 1996). The Going Out is not just an opportunity to gather additional information but one that gives children the chance to experience the world by immersion, and to be awakened to that world. A Going Out opens a child to real-life experiences in which they can acquire culture, interact with the natural world, and actually try out what they have learned. These deeply personal explorations foster independence, resourcefulness, responsibility, and good citizenship—and allow children to see how they fit into the larger community.

Our own Going Out started when we moved aboard our 43-foot ketch in the summer of 2013. We left the dock of a Chesapeake Bay marina in mid-October to travel down the U.S. Intracoastal Waterway as far as Miami (including an unplanned 2-month layover to replace the engine). Once out of the U.S., we spent months exploring the islands of the Bahamas and the Turks and Caicos. From there, we jumped to the Dominican Republic, where we sat out the 2014 hurricane season in the protected harbor of the small town of Luperón. Onward, we sailed to Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, St. Martin, St. Barts, Saba, and Antigua, with plans to continue further south in the Caribbean.

*Daystar at anchor
at Hoffman's Cay
in the Berry Islands
of the Bahamas*



PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAULA A. PROSPER

Before heading out to sea, my husband, Greg, and I lived in a Virginia suburb of Washington, DC, with our two children. Our son, Cash, attended a Montessori school from age 3 through sixth grade and went to seventh grade at the local public middle school. He is now in his first year of high school. Our daughter, Nicole, now a seventh grader, attended a Montessori school from age 2 through fifth grade. As a family, we valued the abundant cultural and educational opportunities available to us in the DC area. At the same time, we found that daily life had devolved into a stressful rat-race existence. Life was more hectic than we hoped it would be, with less time than we would have liked for leisure, quiet reflection, and family. Having previously taken a 2-year sailing sabbatical as young adults, my husband and I had always hoped to repeat the experience with our children. This was a good time to break free from our traditional lifestyle and expose Cash and Nicole to different perspectives. Their Montessori education laid an excellent foundation for our sailing Going Out. And Greg and I had Montessori backgrounds as well: I had



Nicole, with her art project with the Outer Banks Fiber Guild



taught in a Montessori school, and Greg had attended an Early Childhood Montessori program (which, incidentally, his mother later headed).

I investigated a wide variety of options for home-schooling (or rather, boat schooling). These ranged from all-in-one grade-level curriculum packages to online programs to self-made coursework. I opted to combine a few different sources in addition to creating a large portion of the curriculum myself. As a former high-school math teacher who also spent 5 years developing and teaching the technology program at a Montessori Primary and Elementary school, it was fairly easy for me to step into that role. Our varied approach allows us the flexibility to make the most of our experience while guiding learning in a way that closely parallels a Montessori education.

The transition to boat schooling was fairly smooth for Cash and Nicole because of the foundation laid by their years in Montessori school. Like all children, they are naturally eager for knowledge, and their time in school enhanced this enthusiasm. They welcomed our voyage, ready to dive into boat-living, new places, and schoolwork. My task of integrating academic learning into our days was easy, given their Montessori skill set. Both are self-directed learners, capable of initiating work

themselves. They each have an ability to concentrate, a strong sense of order, and intrinsic motivation. Of course, there have been a few bumps, but, overall, we have found our learning experience to be successful and rewarding.

Boat schooling fosters the development of the whole child—physical, social, emotional, and cognitive. Every moment is part of learning. The physical self is nurtured with activities such as sailing, hiking, and snorkeling. Nicole practiced balance, coordination, and overcoming physical fear when she was hoisted 54 feet to the top of the mast to replace the anchor-light bulb. Social development is strengthened in a variety of settings. Cash and Nicole have become comfortable making their way with new people—adults and children, locals and other cruisers—when we sail to a new harbor. Since most cruisers are retired adults, time with peers is less frequent than we would like. Still, there are times in which they must navigate peer relationships with other cruising kids. At the other end of the spectrum, there are days or weeks with just the four of us, and we must learn to get along, given the close quarters.

The flexibility in our curriculum meshes with our itinerant lifestyle to allow our work to be easily context-driven. The children can apply their knowledge to real-world experiences. This school year, we all began to learn Spanish, as we settled in the Dominican Republic, where Spanish is spoken. Not only do the children clearly understand *why* learning a second language is important, they have the chance to put it into action in a real-life setting. Reef fish identification is fun and easy, and both kids dig into the reference books after we go snorkeling. History lessons are created to align with our location and include local landmarks. We celebrated Columbus Day by visiting the site of Columbus's first house in the New World, at La Isabela. When traveling on the eastern coast of the U.S., history lessons were focused on sites we visited, such as the Roanoke Lost Colony, in North Carolina, and the Castillo de San Marcos, in St. Augustine, FL. A math lesson in vector addition makes sense when applied to wind and current forces acting on the boat. Writing assignments include creating new posts for our blog, *Close Quarters*. Nicole applied her art skills when she joined an *Art Bomb* event in Manteo, NC, put on by the Outer Banks Fiber Guild.

I utilize a variety of resources to create schoolwork. Both children use a standard textbook for math, and I guide the lessons. Nicole uses a textbook for history, supplemented by additional reading material that includes sources both primary and secondary. The Internet, when available, offers a variety of resources as well. Last year, Cash learned physics using *Basic Physics: A Self-Teaching Guide*, by Karl Kuhn. Currently, he is taking ninth-grade World History and Biology, using an online course from





Clockwise from top left: Climbing the mast; Cash takes the wheel; Homework on deck; Retrieving water from a natural well; Capturing shells underwater; A weaving lesson with a local Bahamian; An electronics project



the North Dakota Center for Distance Studies. Nicole's science lessons come from many sources, with a focus on marine biology. The wealth of information in the American Museum of Natural History's reference book *Ocean* and the complementary website Ocean Portal sparks her interest and serves as a jumping-off point for research in other books, videos, and Internet resources. Spanish is learned from a textbook, which I supplement with additional exercises, and which is reinforced in conversations with the local Spanish-speakers.

English lessons focus on reading, writing, and vocabulary. I use *Vocabulary from Latin and Greek Roots*, by Elizabeth Osborne, as a foundation for many vocabulary lessons. This workbook is too basic on its own, so I supplement the work with additional exercises, in which I insert humor and personal details to maintain a higher level of interest. Other vocabulary work is based on words from novels they read. Both Cash and Nicole read a great deal for pleasure. When the Internet is available, e-readers allow us an unlimited flow of new books. I also assign specific novels that are the basis for analysis lessons and writing assignments. The children practice writing across the curriculum, with essays and papers in science and history, as well as writing for blog posts.

The basic structure of our academic workday closely mirrors that of a Montessori environment, allowing independence and freedom within limits. On Sunday night, I write the week's assignments in the children's planners. They have the week to finish their work, with days off if they complete it early. Sometimes, they choose to do 1 of the 5 math lessons each day. One week, Cash, excited by his geometry proofs, did all his math lessons in 2 days. Some lessons are quite specific, while others are open-ended, allowing each child to be an active participant in deciding what the focus of learning will be. For example, Nicole could be assigned to research and report on any topic that she finds compelling in *Ocean*. At times, they determine the type of work product to complete for a given history lesson. The progression of work is fluid and allows each child to learn at his or her own pace. Lessons can be extended or condensed easily, based on understanding and interest, and I prepare them to accommodate each child's different learning style. If an assignment doesn't capture his or her interest, we work together to adapt the work to be more compelling.

Within the workweek, Cash and Nicole are given the freedom to determine how and when they will complete their assignments. Our daily schedule is often open-ended, allowing for uninterrupted blocks of work time. This schedule easily accommodates their teenage body clocks. Gone are the days of waking Cash from

a sound sleep to catch the 6:50 bus to middle school. We allow him to stay up until 2 a.m. if he is absorbed in a computer-programming problem and then let him sleep in until he wakes on his own.

While there are just two students on board, our extended learning environment allows for multiage groupings that foster peer learning. The kids work together on some assignments. They quiz each other on Spanish verbs. One week, they each selected a topic to research from *Ocean* and created 20 questions for the other, which served as the following week's assignment. Each was tasked with reviewing the sibling's work. Nicole was very interested in the palm-frond weaving done by the people of Black Point Settlement in the Bahamas. She asked for a lesson from a lovely older woman and sat with her all afternoon to learn how to weave the long plaits. Later, she taught her friends on a nearby boat how to weave. Cash plays guitar in jam sessions with other adult cruisers, and he performed rock and blues songs with a British retiree for a crowd at a local bar. In the Dominican Republic, we all have spent time volunteering in an English class at the local high school.

Creating the curriculum allows me the flexibility to adapt to the children's sensitive periods, when learning is most naturally absorbed and internalized. I can modify lessons to focus on their interests. There are weeks during which I have allowed Cash to spend hours each day teaching himself Java programming and the use of 3-D modeling software. If Nicole is focused on an art project, we let her put her other lessons on hold while she completes her creation. We integrate their ideas for assignments into their work plan, such as

Venturing into the barren and sparsely populated islands of the Bahamas allows all of us to see, firsthand, the subsistence existence common to many people here.

Cash's interest in making a fuzz box (a sound-distortion device) for his guitar, an excellent electronics project.

This freedom is not without limits. If the week's work has not been completed by the end of the week, I institute a more structured work schedule the following week and require schoolwork to be completed each day before guitar, reading, or leisure activities. It is not all a bed of roses; there are certainly days when motivation is lacking. I try to manage these days as best I can, and

adjust accordingly. Sometimes, though, they simply need to get their work done. Finding the right balance continues to be a work in progress.

Learning while traveling aboard a sailboat involves more than academic studies. One goal of our voyage is to broaden our understanding of the big world we live in and to find insight into other ways to live. Until we set sail, Cash and Nicole lived in just one place, a fairly affluent suburb of a diverse and cultured city. Our passages along the Eastern Seaboard of the U.S. and into other countries have exposed them to many different people and places. We have seen isolated fishing villages, lazy coastal towns, booming metropolises, and gritty suburbs, each with its own unique cultural experience.

Venturing into the barren and sparsely populated islands of the Bahamas allows all of us to see, firsthand, the subsistence existence common to many people here. Cash and Nicole are able to more fully grasp the nature of a life lived without all the material goods so commonplace in the U.S. In the poor but lively town of Luperón, in the Dominican Republic, they have experienced a very different culture among these proud and gracious people. Simple cement buildings sit alongside one-room wooden shacks with thatched roofs, many of which have no electricity or running water. People work and socialize in the streets throughout the day and night, and only a few cars share the roads with motorcycles and

Cash and Nicole each have a small space for their personal belongings, and they had to choose carefully what they brought on board.

donkeys. We pass by laundry (sometimes our own) hanging to dry on barbed-wire fences, and chickens cluck their greetings to us as we shop at a dusty vegetable market. Even some bad examples provided by other cruisers offer an occasion for learning. In some places, the main socializing opportunities exist at the local bar. We see other sailors spending their days aimlessly or watch them drink too much night after night. This firsthand look at adult lives that Cash and Nicole might not see otherwise has prompted in-depth discussions of the possible pitfalls and realities of those habits and has helped us focus our own goals and desires.

Daily life aboard *Daystar* has required an adjustment in expectations and priorities; fundamental needs are no longer taken for granted. Long gone are the days of turning the tap to a never-ending flow of water. *Daystar*

holds just 170 gallons of freshwater, in tanks that connect to our galley sink, head (bathroom) sink, and cockpit shower. We have learned to be stingy with water use, but the supply diminishes more quickly than one might imagine. Dirty dishes are rinsed from the saltwater foot pump in the galley before a soapy washing and a rinse with freshwater. The careful rinse with just a thin stream from the faucet requires patience but can be done effectively with a minimum of consumption. When possible, we shower by jumping into the sea, washing up, rinsing, and then taking a final rinse with freshwater using the cockpit showerhead or our sun-shower (a hanging bag for water that uses a black panel to absorb the sun's energy to heat the water). Freshwater usage for a shower is just 1 to 3 pints per person, and it is *not* a daily occurrence. Having to shower crouched in the open cockpit has helped relax our preteen daughter's heightened body-consciousness.

Finding water to fill our tanks is often a great challenge. In the U.S., water from pier-side spigots is mostly free and unlimited. At anchor in the islands, it is a very different story. Many Bahamian islands struggle to find freshwater themselves, with none occurring naturally on the numerous dry cays (low islands made of sand or coral). Most marinas sell reverse-osmosis (RO) water, but it can be expensive. Some towns have spigots of RO water available for cruisers to take for free, which means we haul heavy 5-gallon water jugs from spigot to dinghy to boat. Once, we filled our tanks from a naturally occurring freshwater well on Shroud Cay, in the Bahamas. Cash hauled all 516 pounds of water down a rocky path, across the beach, and to the dinghy.

Like water, electricity is no longer taken for granted, and consumption is controlled. Powering our laptops draws heavily on the boat batteries, second only to the refrigerator. *Daystar* generates power with solar panels and by running the main engine to fill her large batteries via the alternator. Using the computers is still a necessary aspect of daily life, but we must share and conserve their use. Internet connectivity is not a guarantee; some spots have no Internet at all, and, in others, availability is costly and limited. Even food is not taken for granted. The Dominican Republic abounds with fresh fruits and vegetables, but the dry Bahamian islands grow very little. Choices at small island stores are severely limited, with entire stores just four times the size of my Virginia pantry. In many places, fresh and frozen food comes just once a week on the mail boat. We spent 16 glorious days at uninhabited spots in the Bahamian Land and Sea Park, with nothing but ourselves and the land and the sea. But as each day passed, our supply of fresh food dwindled to nothing, forcing us to be creative with our dry stores.

Our home is just 43 feet long. A Mason-built ketch, *Daystar* was designed as an oceangoing cruising sailboat, with plenty of storage. That being said, its ample storage spaces are nothing like those we had in our house-owning days. We have little room for *stuff*. Cash and Nicole each have a small space for their personal belongings, and they had to choose carefully what they brought on board. Nicole's storage is filled mainly with books and art supplies, while Cash's holds musical instruments. At times, acquiring something new requires getting rid of something else. Focus has shifted to new experiences rather than new things.

Life aboard a boat brings opportunities for Cash and Nicole that demand more responsibility, build resilience, and foster more independence than might be the case in a traditional, land-based life. Back in Virginia, we didn't let our children take the car and drive into town. In many island locations, however, they regularly drive the dinghy in to the local town to play pool, shop for groceries, or spend time with other cruising kids. Both take turns on the helm, driving our 14-ton sailboat through choppy seas, narrow channels, or fog. We all work together to anchor or dock, raise sail or navigate.

A recent incident reflects just how meaningful this real-world education can be. The harbor in Luperón is crowded, with many people leaving their boats on mooring balls for the hurricane season. Finding a spot to anchor amidst the moorings is possible but not ideal. For an anchor to hold, it must be lowered on a chain or line with sufficient scope (the ratio of chain length to the depth of the water). The more scope, the better, since it keeps pull on the anchor horizontally and helps it dig in. We normally use a conservative amount of scope and have no trouble staying put. In this harbor, however, the tight spots meant we had to use lower scope than we would have liked, lest we swing into other boats.

One afternoon, Nicole, my husband, and I headed into town while Cash stayed on the boat to get some schoolwork done. Just as we walked from the dinghy dock to the street, Cash called on the VHF radio: The anchor had failed to hold on the bottom, causing the boat to drag and drift downwind. He had been below deck and saw out the portal that there was another boat close beside us that should have been many yards behind. *Daystar* was dragging and could have hit other boats or run aground. The situation called for immediate action, and there was no one but Cash to deal with it. He kept his cool. He immediately switched on the starting battery and lifted the engine cover to turn on the raw-water intake (necessary steps before starting the engine), while simultaneously calling us on the VHF. To make matters worse for him, we had previously removed the boat's wheel for a repair project, so Cash needed to figure out how to put



Cash and Nicole, exploring a rocky beach at White Cay in the Bahamas



it back on before being able to maneuver the boat. Within minutes, he was steering *Daystar* away from the other boats and then idling in forward to keep her in place.

We drove the dinghy back as quickly as we could, but it took more than 10 minutes with our slow outboard against the strong wind and waves. In the meantime, a local named Papo had seen *Daystar* moving in an odd way and guessed what was happening. In his much faster skiff, he headed to the boat and joined Cash on board. With Cash at the helm, he hauled our anchor. Cash repositioned the boat in a safe spot and then had Papo hold the helm so that he could go forward and drop anchor again. Once secure, they waited for us to arrive. Cash reacted calmly and effectively in a serious and time-critical situation: resilience, critical thinking, and responsibility in action.

The time spent living and learning aboard *Daystar* has given our children an opportunity to participate in their own education in a way that is highly personalized and deeply meaningful. As in their previous Montessori education, they have the freedom and support to pursue topics of interest, to probe deeply, to question, and to think critically. They work collaboratively with others of all ages and make real-world connections. They are becoming engaged, competent, and respectful citizens. Their daily experiences foster independence, responsibility, and resilience. Here, every moment is a part of their education. Cash and Nicole have come to deeply understand and appreciate that life is learning and learning is for life.

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