

Blue note

Life at sea means fighting a constant battle with the damaging effects of the sun, says Jess Lloyd-Mostyn

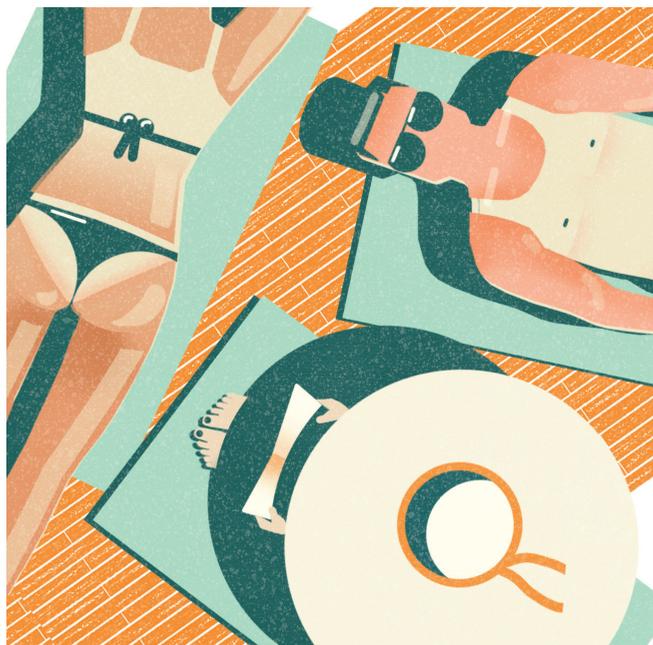
“Ooh, aren’t you lovely and brown!” our families cooed in awe soon after we started our sailing adventures.

Funnily enough, their admiration actually made us turn rather pink with embarrassment as, in our books, that meant that we weren’t protecting ourselves enough.

A bronze tone to your skin is a desirable thing when you’re an Englishman snatching a brief two-week sojourn from your desk job; it acts as an advertisement for your health, wealth and vibrancy and suddenly renders your smile even whiter by contrast. But when every moment of your ‘job’ or rather your daily life takes place under the glare of the sun’s rays then it becomes less about basking in the warm light and more about managing your exposure.

Years ago, when we arrived in the islands of the Caribbean, you could tell at first glance who had arrived there by boat and who had simply stepped off an aeroplane. January in St Lucia saw the docks and bars filled with tanned yacht crews fresh from a solid few weeks at sea crossing the Atlantic. In those days we were very European about our cruising; never sailing with the bimini up under the assumption that it was somehow ‘un-sailorly’. This meant that in the last week of our first ocean passage, the four of us onboard could only bear to steer at the wheel for an hour each in shifts. The tropical sun beat down on us, scorching the back of our necks, the tips of our ears, the tops of our feet. We fashioned makeshift awnings to at least partly shelter the helm, wore floppy hats, loose long shirts and donned sunglasses all day long.

We had to stop thinking of sun tanning and start thinking of sun management. Soon after, we became hooked on using our bimini in all but the strongest winds. The shield that it provided from the glare of the sun was well worth the slight inconvenience of having to peek out from underneath it to monitor our sail trim. It suddenly made the cockpit bearable again and stopped us from getting scorched and toasted for 10 hours a day. Our eyes could relax back from the wrinkled up squints we’d adopted.



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When we eventually left the tropics to cruise around New Zealand we had two infants in tow to consider as well. Our pre-departure regime involved a strict, methodical process of slathering each child in high-factor sunscreen. This was not your token parental effort suitable for a few brief glimpses of weak and pallid sunshine on a UK beach mind you. No, we approached the task at hand with gusto, fearful of the hole in the ozone layer that Kiwis warned us about and mindful of not becoming ‘those negligent parents’ who let their kids get burnt. We tackled, wrestled, plotched and smeared our wriggling, giggling offspring with lashings of the stuff each day, for each trip to land. We started carrying umbrellas everywhere we went for an instant shade fix. Our shore bags were already full at the start of each journey, holding hats, sunglasses, cold water and, of

course, the ubiquitous sunscreen tubes for topping up with.

It’s funny the way that over-exposure to the sun can really sneak up on you. I remember burning my back on a sail-training course in Portugal after only being under the sun’s strength for a short while. It was a silly mistake that was soothed by lotions and faded in days. A season, a few years, or even a lifetime at sea forces your hand and makes you take notice of the risks more readily. James and I gently elbow one another when we come across long-term cruisers with rumples of copper, leathery skin, looking like weathered handbags and it becomes clear that they’re only a year or two older than us. It’s a sobering reminder to take precautions.

Back in the tropics of Panama I was lounging in a bikini on our aft deck, chatting to a visiting friend of ours who was sunning herself in the hammock we’d strung between the boom and the A-frame. The balmy rays caressed my shoulders and warmed my legs as my friend let out a contented sigh, muttering about how cold it was back home.

“Okay, that’s enough for me.” I chirped, just a few minutes later, and slung my shirt back on, retreating to the cool shade of the cockpit.

“Don’t you want to get nice and brown?” she queried. “Nah, that’s okay.” I shrug. “I live here.”



JESS LLOYD-MOSTYN

Jess and James left the UK in 2011 in their Crossbow 42 and have sailed halfway round the world, growing their crew en route. Follow their journey at water-log.com.