

Blue note

Sailing the world with a young family creates many unexpected firsts, finds Jess Lloyd-Mostyn

One thing that I've learned is that sailors are suckers for ritual celebrations. Crossing the Equator, cutting over the International Date Line, transiting the Panama canal and 'closing the circle' upon circumnavigation are all commonly understood as grand achievements. However, I never expected to find so many other important firsts and targets scattered all over our cruising life.

Even now, six years on from slipping the lines at Falmouth, I still get a sort of nervous stage-fright with every move of the boat. It's an excited, restless, bubbling energy, not entirely separate from my continual low-level seasickness. My stomach will feel tense and my heart rate flutters every time we pull on to a fuel dock; I get all wired at each first port in a new country; and my skin still gets goosebumps at every single deft dropping of the anchor. My brain keeps checking in with whatever monumental moment this purr of the engine or hoisting of the mainsail represents – our first passage back out in the tropics, first overnighter with two children, first sail with a new baby – each one a pertinent landmark, loaded with meaning.

When we crossed the Atlantic we experienced both our first Christmas Day at sea and toasted our first New Year's Eve on the ocean. The sheer otherness of those days, the ways in which they were totally different from the traditional Christmases back home, made them extra special. At the time we were a week or so into the passage – nothing but thousands of miles of blue waves in every direction – which added a sense of wildness and newness to this unique celebration, which we marked with a steak dinner and a cheeky glass of red wine. A few days on we marked the chart and found ourselves placed exactly in the middle of our voyage: cause for more festivity this time solemnised by my baking of 'halfway biscuits'. In the days that followed we were soon straining our eyes for that first glimpse of land that would signal our arrival into the Caribbean. And, once safely tied to the dock, a friendly neighbour saying "well done!" and offering us a congratulatory cold beer felt like the acknowledgement of yet another sailing achievement.



First fish, aged 4 2017

'A fish! she beams, her chest swelling with pride... My FIRST fish!'

Perhaps it has something to do with stepping outside the normal understood structures that define most people's lives. Full-time cruising sees your time of day only relevant in terms of tide, your weekdays and weekends blurring and your years being split into storm season and sailing time. There are no exams to sit, no big reports to submit, no deadlines to meet and no punctuation of annual leave to break one day's sail from the next. Sailing day in day out starts to become all about rhythms, the sway of the waves, the rock of the hull, the patterns of mealtimes. We simply need something to help us distinguish one swathe of time from another.

So, I suppose we are left to create our own language of significance. I reminisce over past birthdays in terms of where we were: Cuba, Mexico, mid-ocean, Bora Bora.

The Panama canal did make my heart flutter. And yes, our crossings of both the Equator and the Date Line did feel momentous and important. We even commemorated having three years at sea by tying that most consequential of knots and marrying in Fiji. We returned to the boat to see that friends in the fleet had draped Diwali garlands across the cockpit to decorate it for the occasion. Of course, our two anchor babies born along this journey have made for fairly key entries in the boat log.

But, equally poignant moves to us now are the times when we've simply dawdled in one particular anchorage, marina or country for quite some time and, to leave from that comfort suddenly seems like a major fracture from what so quickly has become routine. That first lolloping roll of the ocean swell beneath my feet again makes that same stage-fright feeling bubble up.

Sailing with children brings many opportunities for new firsts. I hear James yell and then our daughter lets out a squeal of delight and calls me up on deck. Her face is bursting with anticipation of sharing the eventful news.

"A fish!" she beams, her chest swelling with pride and awe at having managed it. "My FIRST fish!"

Catching and landing any fish is a cause for celebration for us but this particular prize, a tiny snapper, prepared with such reverence, tasted miraculously good purely because of the pleasure of her triumph. The first of many such firsts, I'm sure.



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.