

Blue note

To lie becalmed 'as idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean', as Coleridge put it, can be both disconcerting and magical as **Jess Lloyd-Mostyn** notes

W here has the wind gone? There's an eerie feeling to losing even

the merest scrap of breeze. We know the familiar adage "calm before a storm" so it's wise to be on the alert when the air goes so quiet. Sometimes, a stillness in the immediate conditions may not herald oncoming strong gusts for you, but might still mean they're occurring not too far away. Squalls can act like sponges, sucking all the wind out of one area only to squeeze it all out in one violent go in another spot.

But this is not the case today. There is nothing ominous or foreboding about this particular lull; the sky is clear, the sun is high, and the ocean has turned into a silent lake. Yes, of course, we can turn the engine on, keep going, push forwards towards the next wind zone. Or, we could linger, luxuriate a little in the calm, and open our eyes up to what this non-sailing kind of sailing can reveal.

The first time we were truly becalmed was the last day of our Atlantic crossing. It was at precisely the last moment that we wanted it – with land within sight, our first taste of the Caribbean life so close and yet out of reach. We were so ready for all of that to begin, to just start already and that silly wind, steadfast and reliable throughout the crossing, decided to up and leave us right at the end. We cursed and coaxed the sails all we could before uttering "dammit" and using the engine.

We were sailing between the British Virgin Islands and Cuba the next time it happened. A fantastic passage forwards suddenly started to get slower, and slower and then left us bobbing, pointlessly on the water's surface. We looked at each other, almost in panic. What should we do? Again, the sky was perfectly clear, nothing nasty lurking to catch us out. We were about a day and a half from our destination with no deadline waiting, or person to meet. So, for the first time, we simply floated for a bit. We furled the sails, shaded ourselves from the sun, had a cold drink, read a book, anything we wanted, just allowing the boat to sit and be.

Crossing the Pacific we were becalmed once more near a cluster of islands, 300 miles from the Mexican coast. It



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was so hot and stifling once the stillness kicked in that we went so far as to dive right into the ocean water to cool off, something we did again later in the doldrums on the same passage. We experienced another standstill en route from Fiji to New Zealand. The sheer magnificence of the non-existent horizon, the sky merging seamlessly into the sea, inspired us to get creative and we took a huge sequence of fantastic photographs, celebrating the spooky beauty of the shimmering azure surroundings.

Travelling north, up the coast of Costa Rica, we lost the wind yet again. We decided to drift for an hour or two before popping the engine on and settled in. We heard it first, a gentle sort of 'bonk' noise against the hull. We hurried to the bow to find the source and saw a large, leatherback turtle with a rather confused look on its face. Ahead

in the water there were more of them; scores and scores of wet, greenish brown humps, scattered all across the surface. The turtles were dozing; sleeping near the top of the water, and several of them coasted straight into the boat, bumping themselves unexpectedly awake as a result. They'd wave a lazy flipper at us, saluting a greeting, and then wander languidly onward on their way.

We continued to bob, like an enlarged version of the turtles, for a while longer and were about to resort to firing up the engine and burning diesel when we spotted turbulent water up ahead. Gleaming, glistening, grey shapes, writhing and squirming in the sea. A glimpse of fin, a leap, a splash and suddenly the still ocean all around us was alive with action. Bottlenose dolphins had suddenly appeared in a swarm from every direction; it was a superpod, at least 200 strong. They were feeding, jumping, spinning, playing and in such numbers as we had never experienced before.

Sometimes it takes the total immobility of zero breeze combined with resisting the urge to shatter the peace and start up the engine to open up your eyes to other goings on in the water. Sometimes, when carrying on isn't an option, then keeping calm when becalmed is simply the best thing you can do. In the grand scheme of things, it's the briefest of moments of true stillness, in a whole world of constant motion.



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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