

Flying the flag

When you spend your time cruising so many different countries, you need to hone your DIY ensign-making skills, says **Jess Lloyd-Mostyn**

W e sailors love our special bits of rules and etiquette don't we? From

Colregs to radio speak, the yachting world is littered with hints and tips of best practice that help the novice adjust to this whole new language of sailing. But while some, like the use of a motoring cone, tend to fall by the wayside after a few years of cruising, others become an important tradition, even a ritual.

For us, there is a great significance to flying a courtesy flag. Although this is more of a custom than a regulation we've always taken great care in making sure we fly one. Which, after you've cruised as many countries as we have, can add up to an expensive total. So, we decided quite early on that we would make each flag we needed, when we needed it. In time this practice evolved into a bit of a game and James and I sometimes find ourselves competing over who's turn it is or which one of us made the best one.

When we moved on board we found a bag with a few European country flags already and a whole host of old burgees and regatta flags that we could plunder to make new ones from. Our clumsiest effort was our Moroccan flag as, on approaching Smir, we suddenly realised that we didn't have the flag we needed and hastily cut up some strips of green cloth, that frayed in seconds, and glued them in a star shape onto an old red T-shirt. By comparison the one I made for Antigua and Barbuda was a thing of beauty, hand-stitched and lovingly hemmed, which flew proudly from our starboard shroud for weeks.

Sometimes we skimp a little on our efforts when we're only going to be somewhere a short while. A quickly whipped up Colombian flag for a few days on Providencia island was a simple affair whereas we took more time over the Cuban one that was to be on display for over a month and a half. Our Panamanian flag was hoisted for so long that the colours all bleached out by the sun and we resorted to buying a pristine one to put on a good show for the canal authorities.



'Try as I might, my yellow bird of paradise still just looks like a fluffy chicken'

That's because there are a lot of false rumours sometimes about these flags. Myths about them needing to look perfect in certain ports, for particular officials, or having to be a particular size. I know a whole flotilla of yachts sailing round with an oversize Indonesian flag somewhere in a locker that they have never needed to fly, all because of a fiction someone spread that you must fly an Indonesian flag larger than that of your boat's registered country.

I painstakingly drew on the crest of Sint Maarten and relished a chance to fly it alongside both our French tricolour and our quarantine yellow when we sailed into Simpson Bay. Likewise it fell to me to replicate the Mexican coat of arms, the Dominican parrot, the French Polynesian canoe and the Ni-Vanuatu curling boar's tusk. And you have no idea just how many

attempts I made at the yellow bird of paradise that features on our courtesy flag for Papua New Guinea. Try as I might it still just looks like a fluffy chicken.

Fortunately, a small flag that sits high up on the standing rigging can get away with a certain amount of inaccuracy so we have pushed the limits of artistic licence on a number of occasions. Yes, the stars may have been rather hastily cut out of an old St George's flag and perhaps their shapes are all a little wonky and squashed. But 13 metres up, it still does the job and looks like a gloriously bright and proper New Zealand ensign.

We are, however, rather proud of the fact that we haven't bought a courtesy flag for years so we keep each and every one of these sailing craft projects on display, tacked up to the headlining in our main saloon. It's a cluttered, colourful, crooked mishmash of red stripes and green triangles sitting next to white stars and blue blocks, with a few very rare breed birds thrown in.

This is the stuff of autobiographical cruising, each one telling a story of our stay that we regale visitors with. Is it just because we Brits enjoy the customs of sailing? Or does the pleasure lie in that each flag is custom-made? A bespoke souvenir, an uncommon courtesy to each country as an important milestone and a glittering star in our voyage so far – even if it is a little wonky.



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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

ILLUSTRATION: MICHAEL PARKIN