

Like a virgin sailor

As comfortable as you may be manoeuvring a chartered yacht in and out of a berth, being at the helm of your own boat for the first time ramps up the fear factor, as **Jess Lloyd-Mostyn** notes

There is nothing quite so daunting as suddenly being at the helm of your own boat for the first time. When it came to the 44 footers that I had first sailed on, I was comfortable that my steering was effective; that my understanding of wind direction, the state of tide and my innate 'feel' of the yacht's size and volume was such that I could allow enough space for her turning circle and gently guide her into or out of any berth, dock or anchorage position needed.

Doing the same thing when you are acutely aware of now owning a boat, being fully responsible for every inch of her fibreglass hull, and you are exiting a marina that appears to be full of gigantic, priceless, gel-coated icebergs, festooned with protruding fishing gear, projecting davits and overhanging tenders is suddenly a very different prospect.

I remember leaving a marina in Spain, and it was the first time that the two of us were alone and motoring out on our boat. I distinctly and irrationally felt that every other yacht in there was somehow in our way and that we would be lucky to get out without causing damage. However, looking back on it, I can appreciate that a certain amount of fear, even if it is unfounded, can be quite a good thing when you are a novice.

A fear of making a mistake and causing damage produces a great respect for what you do and do not know when it comes to sailing. My rational brain was reassuring me that I had some amount of experience in controlling a sailboat, that the moves and responsiveness necessary were definitely within my capabilities. However, just as wisely, the same brain was now listing the elements to this choreography that I was less skilled at. Most fundamental of these was that I didn't know this boat yet. I wasn't aware of how she would move in any given situation, I didn't know how quickly she would react to wind on her beam, how fast I'd need to turn the wheel or how much time I would have to correct any errors in this. And that was just motoring out of a harbour on a fine day, nothing to do



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with sails, navigation or weather to be thrown on top of it yet at all.

Annoyingly, so much of getting comfortable about the cruising life and operating your own boat comes down to getting familiar with how it feels. Once you've done anything enough times on a yacht – and I do mean over and over again – you experience the result with your whole body. You can feel when there's too much sail up and you need to reef down because of how the whole boat moves in those conditions; you feel it if you're turning her on a sixpence under engine but need to combat wind on your stern with a bit more power; and you can feel just as much when the boat's in the right position for you to drop the anchor in terms of where you'll come to rest when you've laid out all your scope.

Plus, I wasn't alone. Sailing as a couple transforms you into a tight-knit double-act. You fall into

well-rehearsed roles, playing on each others' strengths – James will guide the helm and I'll stand ready at midships to lasso a cleat, I'll steer us out while he fends off – it's a short-hand that we have become fluent in.

That respect of our limitations, of choosing what we were and were not confident in getting the boat to do, would also guide our decisions of when and when not to move. We would always pick times or days with lighter winds when entering or leaving a berth, or consult diagrams to work out just which finger in the marina to aim for. I remember having several extra VHF calls once my pregnant belly made my lassoing docking technique a little imbalanced, in order to make sure there were extra hands ashore to help us tie up.

And of course these plans wouldn't always work out – the wind would pick up, a line would get dropped, a throw to a cleat would miss and we would find ourselves clinging to someone else's pushpit, fending off all 18 tonnes of boat. But by trying repetitively, whenever we could with the best conditions, that confidence of directing our boat to dance the way we wanted her to grew and grew.

Such close-quarter manoeuvres can still give me jitters from time to time, all these years and miles later. So? I pause, I breathe, and I ease her forward.



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

ILLUSTRATION: MICHAEL PARKIN