

Blue note

Jess Lloyd-Mostyn has only had to turn back once – in the teeth of a Papagayo wind. But there's no shame in it, she says

In more than four-and-a-half years of cruising we have always been moving forward. On to the next anchorage, the next country, or the next ocean. We've been smart in our weather window timings and lucky in our choices. But once, and only once in our sailing so far, we turned tail and retraced our watery wake for several hours. Why? Because sometimes the most sailorly course of action is to be a bit of a coward.

Years ago we were sailing up the Pacific coast of Costa Rica. We were watching the weather for the local 'gap winds' named after the Gulf of Papagayo, which lies near the border with Nicaragua and is where their force is most clearly felt. The effect occurs when high-pressure systems move into the Caribbean, reinforcing the trade winds, which then sweep over Central America. The intensity depends on the power of the background wind and topography of the coastline. Papagayo winds are unusually gusty and turn on and off in an instant, producing blasts of double the normal wind strength, making you heel suddenly without warning.

It was early March, approaching the end of Papagayo season, and we were pottering northwards. Our plan was not actually to cross the gulf itself on this trip but to arrive and anchor in a nearby bay for a few days, waiting for perfectly calm conditions to cross the notorious stretch of water with relative ease in as short a hop as we could manage. The forecast for the day in the Papagayo was for around 20 knots – quite manageable if we were to skirt the edge of it.

So far the passage had been uneventful and all spent under engine as the wind was always less than 5 knots. Just then, still well south of the forecast wind zone, we saw a distinct gust line in the water, marking where the breeze increased starkly from a lazy lolling 3 knots to a punchy and wild 25 knots in an instant.

Quickly, we turned in order to change our sail plan while in milder conditions. We set up with caution, putting three reefs in the main and swapping our genoa for our staysail as we wanted to be ready for the



ILLUSTRATION: AMIEE JEWITT-HARRIS

'IT IS GOOD TO REMEMBER THAT WE ARE ALSO DOING ALL OF OUR CRUISING FOR PLEASURE'

wind being even stronger than the gusts we had just seen.

With nicely reduced canvas we headed back towards the wind line, prepared for a brisk run of 20 to 25 knots all the way up into the bay. But, less than an hour into our headway northwards we were consistently getting a base wind of 35 knots. It was already night-time and, disturbingly, we were still several miles shy of the cape which marks the southernmost point at which the Papagayos can be felt.

Now, 35 knots is nothing dangerous. It counts as gale force but, properly reefed, the boat is still manoeuvrable and can be kept to course well. We've been in stronger winds in storm conditions and at least this time there was no rain. However, 35 knots is also not that fun when it's dark and you're standing solo watches. It meant that with every mile of progress

we made forwards the wind was more likely to increase to 40 or 45 knots, which is the sort of wind that puts more stress on everything on board – not least the crew.

One thing that makes any decision easier for us in such situations is to remember that even though we are passage-making, eating up some serious mileage to get somewhere, we are also doing all of our cruising for pleasure. Ultimately, we are choosing to sail for its experiential value, and neither of us could see anything positive likely to come out of the night that we had ahead of us.

So we turned back. For the first and only time in our sailing to date we decided that even though the nearest viable anchorage astern was 20 miles away, it would be well worth it on balance. We could tackle the big bad Papagayo on another day, preferably in the light and when we were well-rested.

By dawn we pulled into a tiny sheltered bay where we were greeted by the sight of wild horses running on the beach, a happy and dramatic contrast from the night we had just experienced.

We soaked in the view, dropped the hook and flopped gratefully into our bed, sleeping soundly in the knowledge that sometimes it's ok to be that little bit chicken. ✦



HAVE YOUR SAY

Have you ever had to take a sailorly option to turn back?

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