

Blue note

Jess Lloyd-Mostyn on the dangers of getting hung up on a boat maintenance treadmill – which could ultimately spoil your enjoyment of the cruising life

Some ruefully call cruising ‘mending your boat in exotic locations’ or say ‘boat’ stands for ‘bring out another thousand’. But despite an element of maintenance to sailing life, it needn’t be a discouraging amount of work or expense if you can keep things simple. Forget the freezer, ditch the generator and shelve plans to buy a much bigger boat; it could make the difference between enjoying the cruising life now – or never.

Our boat is the first one we’ve owned. From purchase to throwing off the docklines we only took four months – surely some kind of record. In retrospect it makes me laugh how little I knew about boats at all. I had dreams about how the yacht should look cosmetically and babbled on at James with my wish-list, “Can we retrofit a teak deck?”, “What about re-painting the hull dark blue?” and, my most ridiculous, “Do we really need all those winches on the mast?” Yet time and budget dictated other priorities and I was swiftly educated away from my starry-eyed view by realising that upgrading seacocks, batteries and standing rigging and overhauling the engine were the only ways of getting equipped for our plans.

Buying a yacht for liveaboard sailing means choosing one with a lot of cruising kit on board or factoring the additional cost of it into your budget. There is a balance to be struck; getting tunnel-vision, endlessly upgrading, spending out or simply tinkering further postpones actually getting out on the water. Besides, no matter how new or how ready, you’re kidding yourself if you think it stops there – you’ll still need running repairs to keep the boat in good condition once you go.

Because of the seasons for crossing both Biscay and the Atlantic, we would have been delayed an extra year had we not left when we did. The work that the boat needed had surprised us, leaving us feeling that we were haemorrhaging money; sometimes not even knowing the name for parts until our shipwright reported to us they’d broken. So we took the plunge and mended things en route. We still managed to make improvements to the boat but spread out over our sailing time in many different



ILLUSTRATION: ANNEE JEWITT-HARRIS

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countries: a wind generator in St Martin, new sails in Panama and replacement solar panels in Mexico.

Our fridge was constantly breaking, so we went without one for eight months. When coastal sailing it’s easy to get hold of fresh produce and keep topping up a coolbox with bags of ice. However, for some of our friends, this was a step too far. “You mean you don’t have a fridge or freezer? No ice for your cocktails?” remarked one astonished American cruiser. “How, um, retro.”

I once met a chap who boasted proudly, “I use my autopilot for everything. I only switch it off when we’re turning back into the marina”. His wife happily chimed in: “We had to steer by hand once, for 15 miles. It was terrible.” I nodded, silently thinking to myself what on earth would happen if their electrics failed? We hand-steered our first 11,000 miles largely because our autopilot wasn’t reliable. Some would be appalled but we learned so much about sail-trim and balancing as a result

that using our Hydrovane is easy, making short-handed sailing with infants a possibility rather than agony.

No visitor to the boat was able to avoid our requests to bring a suitcase crammed with boat gear in all shapes and sizes. My mother-in-law’s bag was so stuffed full with a replacement oven top, a new head pump, fan belt and Racor filters that she only had enough room for two changes of clothes! Even our own trip back for Christmas one year was combined with lugging a new electric windlass on a transatlantic flight, along with lots of puzzled looks and raised eyebrows from airline staff.

Yet our greatest upgrades have also taught us the most, as we’ve opted for doing all installations ourselves, saving money and learning more about the systems on board. We realised there are always ways of upgrading gear, making additions or even trading up your boat once you’ve already set sail. Spreading both the cost and the work over time or being strict with yourself about what kit counts as vital could get you going sooner. Had we rejected keeping things modest and perfected everything we’d probably still be in the boatyard now. And doing it out here on the water is a lot more fun. ✦



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