

## Misadventures of voyagers learning to fish

Right, for England! James holds up the first fish he and Jess ever caught. Below, gutting and filleting on deck keeps the scales, blood and smell out of the cabin.

**To the editor:** It's an unspoken rule, almost a seafaring law, that those who are live-aboard, long-term, world-wide cruisers can catch the freshest, finest fish that the oceans have to offer. Any old salt can throw out a line and reel in dinner with the ease and polish of one who has made those same moves and gestures since they were small fry. However, those of us relatively new to the cruising life — who are learning all the lessons of the sea simultaneously — have a far less stylish, less effective and unsophisticated approach towards the obligatory fishing activities.

Neither James, nor I, had even attempted to fish in our landlubber, pre-boat lives. But the thought of catching food for our table while living on board had a certain appeal and we were keen to experiment. Armed with a few shiny new hand reels that we bought in the Canary Islands and a simple fishing rod gifted

to us by a friend, we tried our luck for the first time when crossing the Atlantic. We had brightly-colored and fun assortments of lures — ranging from pink toy squids to silver imitation flying fish. Much to our amazement we succeeded in landing and identify-

ing our first mahi-mahi, also known as dorado, and managed a quite nifty technique of reeling it in close to the boat, scooping it on board with a net and delivering a swift blow to its head with a winch handle. It was the most delicious fish and was large enough for two days of eating for the four of us on board.

During the next two weeks at sea we caught two further mahi-mahi, each bigger than the last and significantly harder to land. The net broke with fish number two and, as we had no gaff

on board and, at that time, no functioning autopilot, our somewhat shambolic method of securing our dinner involved reeling in as much as possible by hand and then hurling the catch into the cockpit, whilst whoever was hand-steering did their best to duck. Then you are left with a wildly thrashing and angry fish at your feet while you try to dispatch it as quickly as possible. Chaotic, yes, but we did at least get three gorgeous fish that fed all the crew on that crossing.

In hindsight, my conclu-



Jessica Lloyd-Moestyn



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sion is that mahi-mahi are a particularly stupid breed of fish that, although undeniably beautiful, like to follow boats on the Atlantic crossing route just to lull voyagers into a false estimation of their own trawling skills. Because, upon our arrival in the Caribbean, everyone had experienced the same accomplishment — many catching far more than we did and all with little skill or knowledge. The Atlantic also brought the added bonus of our first encounter with flying fish. These iridescent lovely little creatures literally fly onto your decks and get stranded, meaning that for no effort whatsoever you can have fried fish for breakfast.

Just in case it wasn't apparent, I should point out that we are solely interested in catching fish for necessary food. We never attempt it if the fridge is full or with any idea of fishing as a sport. So, after this crossing and returning back to our crew of two, it was some time until we tested our talents again. Or perhaps the fairest way to put it is that it was some time until we actually managed to catch anything again. I remember several toy squids and plastic fish being eaten

by unseen fish who then promptly swam away. Our next score was in Cuba and I was the poor soul at the helm trying to keep our course while James unceremoniously flung the fish over my head onto the cockpit floor. It was a tasty bonus and meant we could extend our stay in the southern islands but, to this day, we have absolutely no idea what kind of fish it was.

Which brings us to a major hurdle of the novice cruiser fisherman — identification. Granted, there are times when it's not too vital to know what you're catching and eating; fortunately for us that time in Cuba was one such time, but I'm only able to say that as neither of us had any ill effects from the mystery fish. We hadn't even given a thought to whether or not it might have had ciguatera, a gamble that we wouldn't take now that we're sailing and fishing with an infant.

There are times when catching food for the table is an ability that even we can carry out with total cool and aplomb. The most satisfying of these times are, undoubtedly, when you have visitors on board. Catching some-

thing fresher than your land-based friends and family have ever tasted is the climax to the cocktails-on-deck-at-sunset, picture-perfect, cruising holiday experience that we all relish giving to our guests, even though the live-aboard reality is often a far cry from this scene. But, I should probably admit that we've only managed this with sheer dumb luck.

The biggest fish caught on Jess and James' boat *Adamas-tor* to date, was landed by crewmate Chris.



Jessica Lloyd-Mestyn

In Panama we got serious and invested in a small spear gun. Brilliant, we thought, you have a nice time on a snorkelling adventure and simply take the spear with you and then point

and shoot at anything that looks tasty. It's actually quite tricky to even arm the spear underwater and then you have to adjust for everything looking magnified. So much so that you think you've caught

something sizeable but it's revealed to be tiny when you resurface.

Luckily, one way to practice is the local custom of shooting lionfish. These striking fish are indigenous to the Pacific and managed to infiltrate the Atlantic by mistaken human intervention. They eat just about anything they can swallow but almost nothing eats them, which makes them a very easy catch. They pose a real threat to reefs, as many corals rely on herbivore fish that are no longer there thanks to the lionfish. There are now huge numbers of them in the Caribbean, in much greater densities than in their native Pacific waters. So, they make for a good deed and target practice all in one. Plus, once you get past the venomous spines, they make for good eating.

The real snag to our all-or-nothing luck with fishing has to be that the lures we put out bear very little relation to the size of fish we eventually land. On the Pacific coast of Costa Rica we landed a 17-pound (8 kg) mahi-mahi, which we ate for a week. That was with a really simple, three-inch metal "spoon" lure, which had only ever caught us much smaller fish before. But to gut and fillet so large a beast on the aft deck, while sliding around in a roly sea is quite a challenge. Fresh sashimi on day one became breadcrumbed fish and chips on day two, and we ended the week with fish curry. We even fried the roe in butter and had it with toast for breakfast.

Our most recent catch, another mahi-mahi, dwarfed that one by

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comparison as it weighed in at a whopping 27 pounds (12.5 kg), so we donated some to other cruising families to ensure none of it would go to waste. To wrestle and kill a fish of that size isn't something we'd be keen to repeat anytime soon.

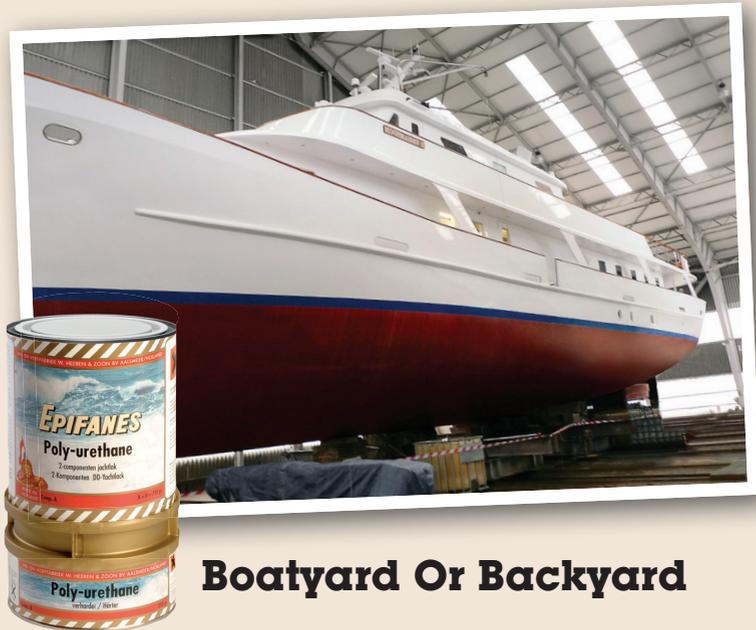
Our techniques have at least improved but, though we now have a trusty working autopilot and a wind vane, we still don't have a gaff on board. So now the helmsman is spared the fish missile being aimed at them, but we still have the issue of how to land the thing. Happily, we've discovered that the baby netting around the guardrails stops the friskier of our catches from wriggling away and we've upgraded from using the winch handle to strike the final blow, to using broken stanchion. And a length of "tracer" wire attaching the lure to the line has stopped us from losing quite so many fish and lures. The plastic squids have even become a favorite toy of our baby daughter — minus the hooks, of course. We've even learned a thing or two about the best places to attempt fishing, with reef passes from deep to shallow water yielding the best results.

But, in truth, it's still total luck as to whether or not we have fish for dinner and, in spite of everything we've learned, there seems to be no rhyme or reason about when our efforts will come off. I think our chances are much like those of finding flying fish on deck when the sun comes up. We cross our fingers, cast our lines

and hope it won't be too long until we fill our bellies.

—Jessica Lloyd-Mostyn and James left England in 2011 aboard *Adamastor*, a Crossbow 40, intending to sail around the world. Their daughter, Rocket, was born

in Mexico and logged her first sea miles on their Pacific crossing in March of 2014. They got married in Fiji and are currently in New Zealand where they are expecting their second child. Follow their progress at [www.water-log.com](http://www.water-log.com).



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