

Blue note

From Mormons to babysitters, Jess Lloyd-Mostyn has shipped the best and worst of casual crew during four years of bluewater passage-making

“So which one of your tequilas is best?” Yes, I can safely say that after having 26 different casual crew on board, we’ve seen the full spectrum of good, bad and downright ugly: the guy with an enthusiastic interest in our booze cupboard, the woman who never helped with the meals on a long ocean passage and the bloke who was so used to catamarans that he moaned about our speed. Inviting someone to share in your sailing can be daunting. But ocean crossings or long offshore passages make an extra set of hands very useful. Our sailing has mainly been done as a twosome, although we’ve had friends, professionals and family signing on for parts of our journey, giving us a good idea of what makes for ideal crew.

The professionals were sailing instructors and delivery skippers. This helps you relax, knowing that if the passage gets harder they have solid skills you can count on. You can learn new abilities, compare ways of doing things and discuss them, debating the merits of one over another. Andy, one of our first crew, was a pro with his own sailing school, who not only coached us but kept everyone entertained. When we hit fog and doubled up on watches he provided endless games and jokes, keeping our spirits up as we laughed into the night. He became a great friend as a result because he made the passage so much fun.

We’ve also had crew with a little sailing experience, recognising enough terminology to understand instructions but not wanting too much responsibility. They might know different ways for trimming sails or using the engine so it’s important to express your preferences from the beginning. The flaw is if they claim to know things that they don’t. We found ourselves stuck with somebody awful on one crossing who had given the impression she was an experienced sailor. In reality she knew very little but, worse still, would argue back at every instruction, turning what could have been a straightforward passage into one fraught with hostility.

Another possibility is the total novice who is keen to learn, travellers who use the seasonal boats to hop from place to place. They’re young and tend to have great



ILLUSTRATION: ANNEE JEWITT-HARRIS

“HOW DO YOU TAKE YOUR TEA?” IS MUSIC TO A SKIPPER’S EARS’

energy, which is a real asset. It also means you can make new friends, offering rides to people longing to get out on the water. We met Chris in French Polynesia, who proved to be a fast and competent learner-sailor as well as a natural with our daughter, acting as part crew, part nanny. We showed him exactly how we wanted the boat to be handled and the arrangement worked so well that he stayed aboard for five months. He also had the coffee already brewing each morning when I woke up, a definite bonus.

Often it’s the liveboard element of long passages that’s hard, particularly if the crew overuses resources like fresh water, electrical power or food. Good crew, like Chris and Andy, are generous with their efforts in terms of domestic duties as well as sailing work. Finding people who are self-starting and proactive is like a breath of fresh air, adding new motivation to everyone on board. Questions like “How do you like your eggs?” or “How

do you take your tea?” are music to a skipper’s ears and it’s not surprising that laziness or sulkiness about meals or cleaning won’t go down so well. Camaraderie is essential. Enjoyable sailing requires team players; it’s not a staff and employer relationship.

The right balance is all about personality – dynamic and different backgrounds or values can trigger conflict. We even had one nightmare crew who chose to criticise every aspect of our parenting, which meant that she was swiftly rowed ashore at the next island. If you’re hearing alarm bells before you leave the dock, it’s an indicator that there may be problems down the line. You don’t want to be in the position that we were, one week into a four-week crossing, when our extra crew turned our faces pale by bringing out a book saying, “Can I read to you from the book of Mormon?”

Living and working together in close-quarters is a challenge for anyone so you do have to keep a sense of humour and perspective. Our worst crew combinations were, in hindsight, when we didn’t ask enough questions at the start. But ultimately it’s a short-term arrangement and if it’s not working out then hopefully you can grin and bear it for the passage in question.

And, if nothing else, it will make a good story! ✨



HAVE YOUR SAY

What makes a good crew?

facebook.com/sailingtoday

@SailingTodayMag

comments@sailingtoday.co.uk