

What an ocean passage really sounds like

Jessica Barber reflects on life with the constant cacophony of wind and wave



Adamastor arrives safely in the Marquesas, French Polynesia, 2,850 miles after leaving Mexico



A taut jib sheet creaks and sighs with each movement of the boat

You've probably seen the CDs on the racks in high street shops, heard them in elevators, during a yoga class or if you've ever treated yourself and gone to get a massage. The general consensus is that the noises of the sea must be gentle, calming and peaceful, which should make them the perfect complement to a good night's sleep.

Nice idea, but I've got news for you. It's very far from the truth.

Crash! We roll over onto our port side and the fold-out chart table seat slides out. Bang! The boom tries to lurch back over to starboard but is held by the preventer. Smack! The block of our mainsheet wallops onto the roof of the aft cabin. Thump! Yet more objects slide from their neatly stashed locations and land like icebergs dotted across the cabin sole.

The day-to-day life on an ocean crossing can be many things. It can be exhilarating: a nice, consistent sailing wind, breathtaking night skies and the triumph of plotting those positions closer and closer to your goal. There are times when it's exhausting, when the thought of another hour on watch, a new sudden squall to contend with or the effort of making any further meals all threaten to crush your spirit. But, one thing is for sure, it's supremely unlikely to be quiet.

After sailing halfway around the world, we've found that the greatest cacophony occurs with big seas with not quite enough wind to match. These are the conditions in which we generally need to tie a preventer onto the boom, regardless of the point of sail we're on, as the sloppy waves constantly have us plunging from side to side, threatening to back the mainsail. This makes for a pretty noisy state – the kind of background racket that puts you continually on edge simply because it sounds so much worse than it really is. As the winds are low the boom isn't swinging with great load or force, but it still is falling from side to side, generating a rhythmic

clatter that stresses your shackles and your nerves. The headsail protests and collapses, noisily flapping all over as you plummet into the trough of the wave, the sheets whack against the steel of the standing rigging, the knot briefly snagging and making the metal twang.

Next come the smacks, the wave that catches you just on the beam or that whips its breaker against your keel or your rudder. The sounds here vary from a loud, sharp slap to a duller, more ominous sounding thud of a blow, which leaves you silently questioning: 'Did we just hit something? Was that a whale, a log, a sea container?'

Then there are the creaks, the more subtle moans and groans of the hull, the interior joinery and the floor panels. This is a more melodic but non-stop grumble, like a talkative old relative with an achy hip. You can try dosing various parts of the cabinetry with beeswax or rubbing candles on edges but nothing seems to cure this particular muttering.

At that point you get the screeches and squeaks of the rig and the hum of the mast. There's the bump-knock-clunk syncopated beat of the autopilot rocking from side to side under the bed. And then add the continual rush and glug of water running along the outside of the hull and the hiss of the foam as the boat surfs down a wave. A



ABOVE: The mainsheet block, ready to wallop onto our aft cabin roof, mid Pacific

RIGHT: The rush of water against the hull during the Atlantic crossing, 500 miles out from the Canary Islands



'We need the noises and all their glorious hullabaloo to keep us going'

gust of wind higher brings the slapping of lines against the mast, the vibration of so many different ropes and, for our boat, an almost mournful sounding, flute-like song that whistles through our A-frame whenever the wind rises to 17 knots or more. Then a thunderous rattle and shake of rain on fibreglass signals the arrival of the latest squall.



Consistent wind and happy sails still doesn't mean you sail along in silence

Try sleeping through all of that during your downtime. There's a reason we only ever use earplugs when we're at sea.

But, having said all that, some of the sounds that you only ever get hundreds of miles offshore do have a soothing note. If the winds are low but steady and the sea is flat you hear the comforting billowing of canvas as you're carried gently along by your sails. The far-off sigh of humpback whales or the high tin-whistle and urgent clicks and squeals of a pod of bottle-nosed dolphins can alert you to a forthcoming remarkable encounter. Your lines gently purr and they slowly flex in the soft breeze.

And then comes the strangest sound of all: the silence. The becalmed boat perches noiselessly on a sea where the water becomes a mirror and the horizon is just an abstract notion as the sky and the sea are all one. Or the stillness and quiet is during the night when the sky is starless, thick with cloud and the yacht seems to pause, a long intake of breath as one weather system passes and the next one is still building. It is a hush full of anticipation, when you strain your ears for the next breath of wind; that first surge of sound that you long for as that next gust means movement and life to get you sailing again. Because the reality is that we need the noises and all their glorious hullabaloo to keep us going. ▲



Jess, James and daughter Rocket who was born during their current circumnavigation

Jess Barber

Jess and her husband James left Falmouth in 2011 aboard *Adamastor*, a Crossbow 40, intending to sail around the world in a couple of years. After crossing the Atlantic and enjoying several months in the Caribbean they reached Panama, where they decided to take longer over the trip and also to start a family. Their daughter, Rocket, now a year old, was born in Mexico and logged her first sea miles on their Pacific crossing in March of 2014. You can follow the family's progress at www.water-log.com.