

# Baby ON BOARD

Words and photos by Jess Lloyd-Mostyn



There are many ways to get extra crew: some take on professionals, some put up a sign at the local backpackers – and some grow their own.

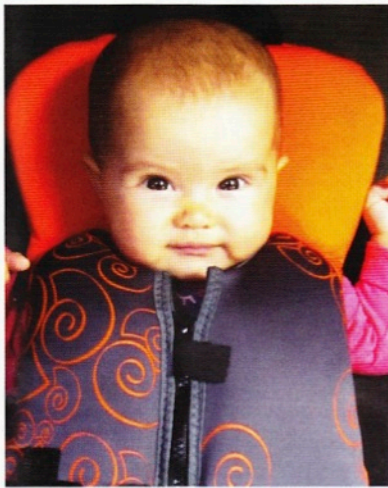
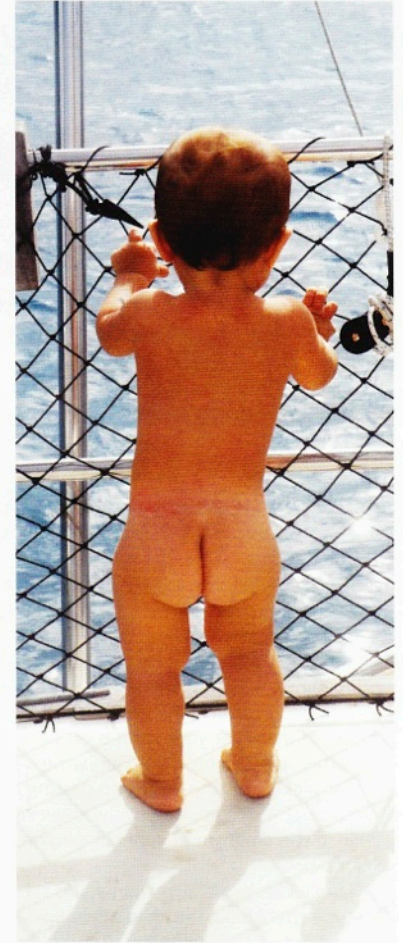
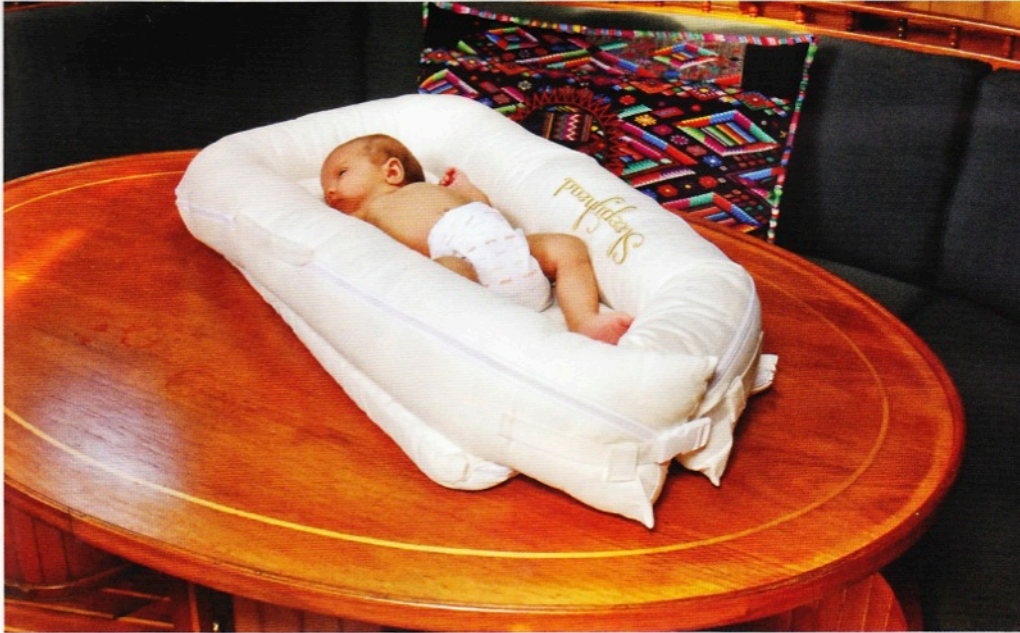
Over three and a half years ago we threw off the docklines in Falmouth, England with the intention of sailing around the world. We planned a circumnavigation of roughly two years before returning to London with some amazing memories. We rented our home, bought a boat with money we'd put aside for an extension on the house, and set off. We had a little sailing experience, a limited understanding of boat maintenance and a healthy amount of optimism. We joked about returning with children.

Everything was about educating ourselves: sailing better and more efficiently, interpreting the weather more capably, becoming more skilled and less flustered when it came to running repairs.

We became a great team of two and developed as sailors.

Having rushed through our first 8,000 miles we stayed in Panama for eight months. Only then did we begin to appreciate what living on the boat truly meant. We enjoyed slowing down a bit and the new-found freedom of long-term cruising seemed to suit us.

I was 30 and James, my husband, was 42 when we started talking about starting a family. The idea of the normal life back in London with kids, a home and career seemed less and less relevant to us. James would need to be working longer hours to support our new family. We'd be doing something which is meant to be about togetherness, but we'd have to go about it in a way that would mean we would often be apart. We were happily spending



ABOVE LEFT: A cozy place to nap at anchor. FAR LEFT: A lifejacket for baby; don't be tempted to get a size too big. LEFT and ABOVE: Baby netting was the major change we made to the boat. OPPOSITE PAGE: Our chief navigator: she's got the whole world in her hands.

24 hours a day in each other's company and wanted to continue that in our parenting.

There's a traditional way of having babies on land, which seems to involve buying an immense amount of gear. But where was the manual for expectant parents on a yacht? How do you baby-proof it and what equipment is really necessary in a home where space is at a premium?

While still in Caribbean Panama we agreed that if we were lucky enough to get pregnant soon it might be wise to delay our next ocean passage, so we put off cruising the South Pacific for another year. By the time we went through the Panama Canal in January, I was at the end of my first trimester so we turned right, explored Pacific Central America and fought against wind, current and all seafaring commonsense to reach Banderas Bay in Mexico. We spent three months sailing more than 2500 miles to where we planned to give birth and had to deal with a medical system in a language we'd only just started learning.

We already liked what we saw in cruising children. They are generally friendly, conversational, undaunted by interactions with other adults and relatively hardy. Without exception, cruising children have always looked us in the eye when they speak and can scramble up the mast, onto the boom or jump off the boat with ease.

A boat baby, however, seemed like a more overwhelming prospect. When our daughter was born we had the boat in a marina while we got used to the new arrival. The usual kit – a crib, a stroller and a carseat weren't going to work onboard so we

focused on strategies for sleeping, feeding, carrying and changing. Surprisingly, all of these are fairly simple with a newborn.

Our cabin has a wall-to-wall bed so was perfect for co-sleeping with no worry of her falling out. I breastfed her, so that meant no bottles to sterilise or formula to buy. A sling or soft-structured carrier was the easiest way of getting her on or off the boat and for lulling her to sleep as we walked the docks. We chose to use cloth nappies and had plenty of water for laundry, while in the marina. We began to think that we'd got the hang of being boat parents.

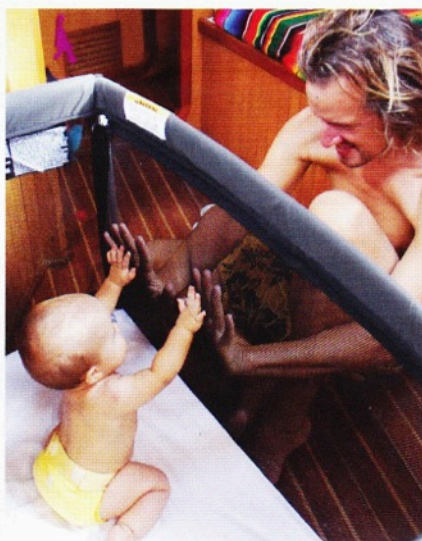
But two things changed that: the boat moving and the baby moving. As savvy sailors we'd timed our new arrival for hurricane season. But, once the seasons changed, we couldn't afford the high season rates so we had to start cruising again. Resuming our lives at anchor with an infant meant that every trip ashore needed a strategy. We had to have a bag packed full of nappies, wipes, snacks and extra clothing.

We started using a baby lifejacket, as anchorages are not necessarily still. Even when your journey ashore is calm the wind can kick up, giving you a wet and bumpy ride back, which is daunting with a baby. We had to get used to being at the helm with her strapped to us in the carrier, learn how to change nappies underway and find a safe place for her to doze, taking into account the heel of the boat and unpredictability of the sea. However, all of that seems simple in retrospect once your baby becomes mobile. No longer can you turn your head away and expect the child to be in the same place when you look back.



## Baby safety tips

**INVEST IN A** clamp-on high chair. It doesn't take up much space and keeps the baby secure at the dining table. Once the baby becomes a toddler, be prepared to spend more time keeping track of his/her movements. Wrap-around baby netting is essential, but children soon learn to climb, which is where a baby harness comes in. Ideally a harness should be used whenever your child is on deck, but remember to clip it on. The harness is handy for picking up the baby and passing him/her through the companionway, lowering down into the dinghy and generally moving around the boat. Lifejackets must fit correctly and be of a type that keeps the child's face upwards and out of the water. Resist the temptation to buy a lifejacket for your child to 'grow into' because, in the water, the lifejacket will actually float higher than the child's face, putting them in more danger, and they can easily slip out of it.



TOP: Boat dads can be full-time dads. LEFT: Baby gear onboard included a playpen. ABOVE: Many cruising kids are home-schooled and learn geography as they sail the world.

Our first passage as a family was the 26-day, 2,850-mile crossing of the Pacific Ocean from Mexico to the Marquesas in French Polynesia. It was then that our eight-month old daughter learned to crawl which meant that I saw a lot less sea and a lot more of the cabin than before. We made one major concession and enlisted an extra member of crew. It was a smart decision. After arriving in French Polynesia we picked up casual crew again for our passages across the South Pacific. It worked well as it gave extra sailing support to James, which made up for my energies being needed elsewhere.

Sailing with an infant is hard, but the payoff is huge. Our daughter has had two, engaged and attentive full-time parents since she was born. My husband has witnessed every milestone: first steps and first words, and is a supportive teammate for me as we adjust to being parents. Touching base with family and friends back home makes us conscious of how unusual that is for a father.

Our one major change to the boat was to fit baby netting all along the guardrails, pushpit and bow. This allows Rocket the freedom to roam without needing a parent hovering over her. A boat is already remarkably baby-proof; there are rounded edges, drawers are fitted with features that stop them flying out at sea, and there are no live electrics at toddler-height.

The issue of what to do when your children reach school age is also fairly straightforward. A boat is a highly complex, stimulating environment for a child and the schooling options seem relatively simple. Widespread internet access in even the most remote

islands allows for effective distance learning. Quite often the parents choose for the kids to go into the local school in whatever town, whatever country they stop for a time, which allows them to have immersion learning, meet other children and pick up a new language faster than their parents.

There's also the option of choosing a more instinctive curriculum generated by the journey: learning about the French language, Captain Cook, European foreign policy or even local species of reef sharks and manta rays.

Just because they're still too little to hoist the mainsail or stand a watch at the helm doesn't mean that children can't get involved. Watching for the mainsail luffing, helping catch a fish, answering questions about the figures on the instruments or identifying a bird can all help younger kids to join in.

We've known children aged just six years old to steer competently under engine. As they get older their responsibilities can evolve and, with them, their sense of satisfaction.

The realities of sailing with a baby can be tough and we've adjusted our cruising plans in terms of what will be most comfortable for all of us. Our daughter has completed her first ocean crossing and learned to walk despite some lively sea conditions. We don't wish to always sail with extra crew so we'll probably have a year or two of coastal rather than ocean sailing.

We're expecting our second boat baby in New Zealand and believe a life afloat is working well for our young family. Other children in our cruising fleet encourage us that there are even more enjoyable times ahead. ☐