

1, 2, 3 forecasting

When your plans are wholly dictated by the elements, picking which forecast to put your faith can be a true test of resolve, says **Jess Lloyd-Mostyn**

If you stop and think about the actual word ‘forecasting’ it sounds like something ancient and magical. The art of predicting what is to come, accurately calculating the cadence and pulse of the atmosphere and projecting educated guesses of what weather we will experience seems like an almost mystical skill. And as forecasts get more precise and detailed, the more the world of sailing gets opened up. We can now pick and choose our moments, opting to avoid the rougher conditions or stronger winds. Or perhaps deciding to go out in them anyway, but with a better prepared crew and vessel, in full anticipation of a lumpy voyage.

The trouble that I have with weather forecasting is the element of human interpretation that it is subject to. Or, more specifically, that I can all too easily fall into the trap of seeing what I want to see in those sorcerous runes of GRIB files and synoptic charts.

When I was doing my sail training an instructor told me you should always consult at least three or four forecasts for your passage. But that the real trick therein was to not believe the sole one that matches your plans perfectly when the other three are saying something different.

In practice that’s a very hard skill to master. Naturally we make plans, all cruisers do. The shape of our sailing season might be dictated by tropical storms, trade winds, monsoon directions and peppered with real world milestones of family visits, visa extensions or cruising permit limitations. Rarely but occasionally we even carve out room for places we’ve always wanted to go to, anchorages recommended by friends, towns with striking architecture, cities holding festivals or islands of spectacular beauty.

It’s testing that the reality of boat life is that we have no power over the conditions and we will sometimes have to relinquish our meticulously planned-out schedules and bow down to the gods of weather. So it’s tempting to cling on to the shreds of information, the little snippets of fact that might make things work out according to our hopes.

“See here, Windfinder and GFS both agree for Saturday that there *will* be westerlies,” I muse aloud to James, already aware that I’m adding a bit too much of a convincing tone to mask the truth of the other forecasts I



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cannot pretend not to have seen. Chances are that there won’t be westerlies, but that we’ll be hit by wind on the nose from the east, which will then dwindle and we’ll be forced to motor. My false enthusiasm peters out and our plans to move change yet again.

It’s taken a while but I’ve learned my lessons in this respect and, to an extent, we’ve grown comfortable with surrendering our plans to what the forecast holds.

In Borabora, in the South Pacific, we were getting fidgety waiting on weather. The steady southeast trades had abandoned the cruising fleet on what’s affectionately known as the ‘coconut milk run’. Folks around us were getting panicky about the stall in their plans as day after day of weather predictions came in with the wrong sort of winds for any of us.

The moans were for good reason; from that point it’s no short hop, putting up with adverse conditions for a day or two. It’s more like a minimum 500 miles to Rarotonga, closer to 700 for Suvarrow, more than 1,000 to Niue or a 1,100 mile slog to American Samoa’s Pago Pago. When each forecast came in with 25-30 knot winds from the west we all mentally weighed up a week or more of bashing upwind versus the French gendarmerie’s wrath at overstaying our visas.

It was a tough call, choosing to see the true general consensus of conditions that were actually predicted rather than what we so wanted to see instead.

In the end we delayed nearly four weeks for a favourable passage and got one. Friends of ours who couldn’t wait endured a horrendous trip, with winds gusting up to 50 knots, which cost them considerably in damaged gear and frazzled nerves.

The big jumps load even more pressure onto your decision-making. Picking the right moment to step out into either the Atlantic or Pacific ocean passages was a daunting prospect. You so want to see the right pattern in those GRIBs, with the trade winds established and playing ball, with the predictability of steady weather, consistent winds and, to resort to the cliché, ‘smooth sailing’.

But powerful though mankind might be, it’s sobering to submit and accept that our talents in forecasting may be greater than our willingness to embrace change. And besides, why travel by sailboat if you’re in such a hurry? ✦



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Jess and James left the UK in 2011 in their Crossbow 42 and have sailed halfway round the world, growing their crew en route. Follow their journey at water-log.com

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