

# Jess Lloyd-Mostyn

Sailors have learnt to adapt and develop a strange symbiotic relationship with electronic wizardry yet it's important to remember that, at heart, sailing is a fundamentally human activity

In a world where technology surrounds us, where 'Siri' leads us to the nearest café, 'Alexa' puts on our favourite music and a series of electronic beeps enables us to reverse park without denting the rear bumper against a wall, have we grown far too accustomed to surrendering some aspects of our seamanship to the anchor alarm, the autopilot, or the depth sounder?

Imagine relinquishing the steering and speed controls of your car to an automated system, taking your hands off the steering wheel while you happily sat back and relaxed as your vehicle cruised comfortably along the motorway. Perhaps you could even nod off? It sounds crazy and of course the world of cars is significantly faster and busier than that of sailboats. And yet there are always stories of sailors, perhaps many of them singlehanded, relying too heavily on their autopilots only for it to lead to a catastrophe.

When we sailed just as a couple we hand-steered everywhere. However, life afloat with young children inevitably means that we appreciate the extra help offered by our autopilot or Hydrovane. It allows us an extra pair of hands to nip down below for the all-important snack or to assist the kids with some urgent desire. Yet, rather than fully integrate the electronic steering into our chartplotter route, waypoints and instruments, we prefer to keep it on a very simple 'point and shoot' operational level.

Perhaps this is symptomatic of where we are currently sailing, in south east Asia. Because no matter what AIS sounders, radar beeps or wind responsiveness these controls may have, they simply cannot be prepared for the inevitably messy, bitty and unexpected fragments of occurrence that the cruising life is full of. The unlit wooden fishing vessels that are invisible on radar; the heavy logs swept out to sea after monsoon rains; the shifting sand banks at an anchorage entrance that have moved following a storm; the fishing nets or detached moorings that seem to drift everywhere here. Add to that the topography of an island nation strewn with steep volcanoes and channels where currents rage without warning and you begin to realise that Siri's abilities to read aloud an email or check your appointments is of little comfort in the multifaceted world of sailing.



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I suppose it's a lesson in learning the limitations of the tools that we use. Because it's true that a GPS alarm can be helpful to avoid a dragging incident, but so can a good, heavy and well-set anchor and ample scope, coupled with an awareness of the weather conditions. Similarly, AIS is a necessity in busy shipping lanes or in reduced visibility and it's a mandatory requirement in many countries, but don't be surprised if there are many small and large craft not listed on your screens that are still very much present in reality. And you certainly won't see our boat going under engine for too long without the trusty autopilot being turned on. However, there will always be someone in the cockpit too, looking out and keeping watch.

It's all too easy to be caught off-guard and blindsided by

the sudden katabatic gust, the rogue wave, the high-speed cargo boat, or the uncharted coral head. In fact, the marine environment is really quite littered with hazards and potential disasters all around us. I wonder if that is actually part of its appeal? That no matter how advanced we make our boats, with sophisticated sensors, sonar sounders, advanced iPad charting or integrated mobile weather routing, sailing is still essentially a fundamentally human pursuit. By choosing to learn to sail we begin to cultivate an attentiveness and an understanding of the constantly fluctuating conditions that we need to respond to.

The ease of the automated systems and push button operation can certainly remove some element of exertion from our everyday sailing adventures. Yet the feel of the wind, the lean of the boat at heel, the assessment of how best to trim the sails or alter the angle involves a far more cutting edge and technologically complex device than anything that Apple or Raymarine, Google or Simrad have managed to come up with yet. Time and experience on the sea develops an instinctive vigilance in each of us, an understanding of how best to react to changes and an underlying excitement of what the next challenge will be.

The robots, machines and computers are great, but it's the awareness of the person sailing which is the most powerful tool on the water. It is that human element that keeps me on the water.



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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](http://water-log.com)