

# Jess Lloyd-Mostyn

Rats and sailors share an uneasy relationship going back almost to the beginning of time. When Jess and crew received an unwelcome visitor, drastic action was required

A loud bang from the cockpit wakes me. Followed by a fleeting, scurrying sound, then a flurry of movement up on deck, a splash and my husband, James, shouting “Give me an oar!”.

“What the hell is going on?” I demand, scrambling up the companionway steps, blearily taking in the scene. But I can see from the chaos on the cockpit floor exactly what must have happened.

The rat escaped.

Let me backtrack a moment here. There is a long history of rats and boats. Indeed, most islands only have rats on them because they were transported by our sailing trading ships of old. And, in our pre-sailing life in London, it was said that you were never more than six feet away from one.

Although, I think that was more of an urban myth.

The cruising stories about rats are endless. Gossipy boaters eagerly swap tales about how if you go to this marina or that dock, one particular city or country, then you’re practically inviting the little critters on board. Sailors advise home-made ‘rat-guard’ contraptions on mooring lines, from physical objects to sprinkling chili to prevent them. Apparently the link between rats and boats is such that when we arrived into Caribbean Mexico we were questioned about them. We were used, by then, to the rigmarole of bureaucracy that accompanies entering any country by boat. But, what was new to us, was the question form including specifically “have any of the rats or mice on board died from plague recently?”.

“How should we answer this?” I questioned James. “Does this indicate that it’s okay if mice or rats have died from plague but it was a while back!?” To which his response was of course an eye roll and a look of “Let’s just get this finished so we can go and find some tacos and cold cerveza please”.

In truth we’ve never had any dealings with rats or mice trying to hop aboard without so much as a competent crew course to their names (if they had names..). Until, that is, our last haulout in Indonesia. We were enjoying the convenience of staying in shoreside accommodation while our boat was on the hard for a fresh coat of



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antifoul. And, after a dust-filled day of sanding, James reported that he thought that a rat had got aboard. “It must have climbed the ladder” he said, matter-of-factly. I shuddered, thinking of something small and decidedly malevolent, shimmying up the flimsy bamboo ladder lashed to the stern of our boat. It must now be frolicking about our home, scratching its way into cupboards to get at our food stores.

We put down a glue trap, baited with cheese but it didn’t fall for it. So we upped our game with a sturdy metal cage trap, upgraded the bait to include peanut butter and prepared to re-splash the yacht. Happily, that first night back on the water, this new trap worked and we awoke to find a very healthy looking but startled brown rat. He was squeaking nervously.

“Aw, isn’t he cute, Mama?” our eldest said, and all three children promptly fawned over the frightened creature and started posting food gifts of seeds, oats and fruit in through the holes of the cage.

Now what to do? If we reported the rat to the yard we knew it would be drowned. If we rowed ashore to release it further away we’d have to do it under cover of darkness. So, with a clandestine plan of humane (or possibly rodentine) disposal of mister rat we all went to sleep. Us in our cabins, the rat in its cage in the cockpit.

Except the bang that I awoke to was the cage falling down as the rat escaped through the perfectly circular hole it had gnawed through the metal during the night, followed by it dashing over the side and into the water. James and our son were watching it swimming out to sea and then, as if alerted to the foolishness of this by its inner compass, turning round and heading back towards the shore and also our boat. Hence the cry for an oar, to deter it from climbing our anchor chain.

He was a gutsy chap, swimming over 200 metres to the nearest dock. We actually started cheering him on, applauding his furry little efforts to survive. The last we saw he climbed a rope, hopped onto the dock and scampered away to land. James and I turned to each other, triumphant with our rodent’s success only to be faced with our crestfallen kids pleading “can we have another pet rat please?”.



JESS LLOYD-MOSTYN

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)