

Jess Lloyd-Mostyn

A squall at sea can be a fearsome and unpredictable thing that brings with it a fascinating mix of fear, exhilaration and intense relief once it has passed

We're good at being well-prepared for storms. We watch the forecasts

and stay out of cyclone belts and play the game of the cruising season properly. But a squall is a far more elusive creature than a storm. A squall can appear out of nowhere and alarm you with its intensity and force only to pass over and be gone before you can catch your breath. A squall is the one dramatically dark and ragged cloud, stacking higher and higher until it looms ominously above your boat, threatening a downpour. And, as they are relatively small in real weather terms, you never truly know when to expect them to pop up.

A coastal passage forecast that speaks of "chances of thunderstorms" is the type that I truly dislike. It's like saying "you're going to have to deal with something nasty and we have no idea where or when". We are cautious sailors, even more so these days given that the children make us rather short-handed, so we always prep for the worst case scenario. With staysail ready, foulies out of their lockers, and spare dry clothes to hand we push out to sea and cloud-watch.

In the daytime you can easily see the sky grow moody. Bluey-purple bruise-like clouds gather more dark grey tones to them and get progressively gloomier and shadowy, and the mood of the helmsman mirrors them in sombre expression. I do quite like it when it feels as though you're squall-dodging though. Black clouds to the left and right of us but we are managing to skirt through the slim bluesky middle, like an expert manoeuvre by the millennium falcon. I like seeing dark grey, painterly streaks of rain coming down from giant cumulonimbus ahead on the horizon as you see the clouds dumping their heavy loads somewhere else. And it's always strange to hear deep, growling thunder rumbles or sharp, whip-like, deafening thunder cracks, that shake the hull. In the daylight, lightning is confusing. It feels like an unintentional blink of the eye, an uncertainty, a feeling of "did I really see that?". There's something that seems rather futile about its presence, like letting off fireworks in broad daylight.

At night a squall is far more mysterious. The inky black



'I've always found quite hypnotic about watching lightning at night when out at sea'

sky is smothered by clouds but how light or dark they are is often hard to discern, especially if you can't see a moon. The thunder claps are far louder, it seems, in the dark and it's here that the lightning comes into its own. If its clear enough, you can see lightning maybe 100 miles away and there's something I've always found quite hypnotic about watching lightning at night when out at sea. Forks and flashes are dazzlingly white or sometimes seem to burn with bright orange or red. Their jagged branches fracture the sky, striking down to the sea or across to another cloud, reaching out to cause trouble.

Then there is the anticipation. The bracing yourself, the reefing down, the line of white-out rain on the water edging nearer, the scramble to shut fast all the hatches at anchor, the sharp inhale, the "here it comes!". It's actually quite

exhilarating, that acceptance when you know the squall has your name on it and you find yourself squaring your shoulders towards it, knowing that it will be just another brief test of your skill and adaptability that the sailing life teaches you so well. Sometimes you hear the roar of the rain ahead on the water, or else a distinct howl of the wind whistling through the A-frame or the rigging, like a war-cry. Occasionally the boat bucks forwards, overly keen to meet this next challenge, expectantly ready for the wild and whipped up waves that will accompany the squall.

And then it hits, you're smacked in the face with the pelting rain and the spray of the surf, as you switch from autopilot to hand-steering and your fingers grip the hide-covered wheel with a steadfast resolve. The washboards are in, the family shelters below and you are alone, battling it out one on one in the cockpit. The lightning flashes momentarily blind your eyes and you glance at the instruments to your side, recording ever-increasing figures of wind and speed. The tropical air suddenly cools and you're aware of the unusual rain-sodden weight of your sailing jacket, seldom worn, on your shoulders.

But sooner or later it passes over you, the sea calms, the rain lightens, the dawn breaks and the changeable, fickle weather gods get bored of messing with this little sailboat bobbing around on the water and move on to another target. And you can breathe again and relax, because it's gone.



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