

Jess Lloyd-Mostyn

Raising children afloat is both challenging and hugely rewarding. Jess cherishes the trials and tribulations of growing up with blue water beneath your feet

“Don't look it in the eye” says my seven year old daughter, her voice calm, reassuring and experienced.

She's dealt with monkeys in the wild before and this one, suddenly appearing somewhat aggressively in the middle of a marina playground in Singapore, doesn't faze her in the slightest.

So this is what it means to raise your children on a boat. I have a five year old son who told me this morning he'd choose to be a cuttlefish out of any ocean animal so he could camouflage by changing his patterns and colours; my two year old asked me if we're next seeing her newest playmate on our mooring or out at anchor; and our seven year old can stare down a wild monkey... except she doesn't as she's well-aware that that's absolutely not what to do when confronted by one.

I'm fully conscious of the fact that these are not your average kids and how could they possibly be? We crossed the Pacific Ocean with our eldest when she was merely eight months old. The rhythms of high and low tide, of prepping for a passage, of getting the anchor to 'bite' are the ebb and flow of their days. They are used to having to check various timezones of friends and family around the world before we can video chat, can cope with their home rolling and bucking around as the floor shifts and slides beneath them underway and they are aware that a sudden rainstorm means water collection in buckets as well as dancing in the downpour on the aft deck. We have no car but we have a dinghy and outboard; we have no back garden but we have an ever-changing vast swimming pool wherever we go; we have no pets but the children tame hermit crabs on the beach and attempt to lure geckos aboard to eat any mosquitoes.

Learning the ropes of life while living full-time aboard a cruising sailboat is educating them in unusual and unexpected ways. It's a world where there are very clear and explicable reasons for things – harnesses to be worn because we have a second reef in, toys to be tidied as we're casting off soon, lines secured like this so they're easy to undo. They understand that the wind is ours to harness, that the freshwater needs to be preserved and that the fridge runs on sunshine. Yes, they can read,



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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

and write, add and subtract, but also swim and steer, handle oars and decipher charts. Our fluctuating whereabouts means that words from other languages and cultures get absorbed into day-to-day life: the Māori for tummy "puku", the Bahasa Indonesia for cat "guching", the Spanish for ice cream "helado". And the tooth fairy has paid up in all manner of currencies.

These strange lessons and exposures seep into their play as they take on roles as humpbacks and crocodiles, komodos and hornbills in turn whilst some farmyard animals still seem foreign and exotic to them. The dinghy sits upside-down on the foredeck when not in use, directly above their cabin, creating an extra hideout den underneath or simply a way to climb up higher on top. Inside,

the handholds and grab rails become a gymnasium to swing off, balance on or reach out to. And they move so comfortably and confidently about the deck or lounging in a hammock slung across the cockpit, it's as if the fabric of the boat was a part of them.

Sailing gets into your skin that way. It forms you. It forces you to engage with the world around you in a present and connected way. It encourages variation and flexibility, the winds shift, the anchor drags, the cyclone season starts. Life with children is just as fluid; phases and stages pass, skills are honed and mastered, needs change and lessen.

And I know all too well that they are only briefly ours and the ocean's to influence and guide. That all too soon the 'normal' world will stretch out its creeping arms to envelope them in screens and phones, shops and noise, that they'll be donning socks, shirts and sensible haircuts and that their feral sea-life lessons will fade and dim. But for now, as we bob and dip with the waves, with fellow sloops swerving and heeling round us, I look at their smiling faces and silently wish that they always be barefoot, with wild, salty hair and a windburn blush to their cheeks.

May they always talk to the moon and want to dance in the rain. And I hope with all my heart that they will always take a little bit of boat life within them wherever we go from here.