

# Jess Lloyd-Mostyn

The shipping lanes and commercial ports of this world are not generally the most desirable destination for cruising sailors but they do hold a certain fascination

As a sailing yacht you are very and acutely aware of just how small and flimsy a vessel you are compared to the big guys. The tankers and container ships dwarf us, making our well-found ocean-going boat suddenly seem as insubstantial as a bath toy by comparison. And yet there is something rather fun and wonderful about sharing waters with these massive boats, trying to dodge around them, predict their routes and interpret their loud foghorn signals.

From the waters of the Solent to other important shipping pinch points such as the straits of Gibraltar, the Panama Canal and the Port of Singapore, our sailing journey has had a few moments where we interact with these much larger boats, and each place has brought about new challenges.

The English Channel is busy and, as a new crew setting out for the big blue, it is an inevitable step towards mainland Europe and beyond that you must first traverse this waterway. The tidal stream is pulling you this way or that and you are also trying to navigate your way around considerably faster traffic than before as well as getting to grips with proper protocol for crossing shipping lanes. Throw into that mix a hefty and not uncommon bout of British fog and this short passage can be a nervy one for an inexperienced crew. However, it's relatively short distance comes in handy as there is no need to stay on high alert for too long. I remember flicking my eyes between the AIS display, the radar, the charts and straining to make out the lights in the fog ahead. What at one moment appeared to be a far-off cliff turned out to be a wall of steel, a large container ship passing to one side of us, only to be followed by a huge ghostly trawler to the other side. Needless to say we took it slowly and cautiously amid these invisible giants.

In Gibraltar we arrived at night, testing our COLREGs and light knowledge to their limits as what was first a huge, glittering Christmas tree display of a city slowly separated into shoreline and moving shapes within the port waters. Goliaths of 50 metres or more were headed the same way as us, ploughing the waters far faster than we ever could. Massive tankers and even minesweepers



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all criss-crossed the entry to the harbour and it made for quite an impressive arrival. Each ship pinged up it's information on our screens, "Look this one's come from China! That one is headed to Argentina!" we would marvel as we made our slow, steady headway towards the yacht marinas.

But both these encounters were at a relative safe distance. In Panama we had to deal with getting up close and personal with these monsters. This time there was no escape. We were tied together, rafted up with two other sailboats, with one towering giant chugging along ahead of us and a second growling behind. They were simply huge. The canal locks seemed to mirror their size, everything big and powerful, massive cleats to tie impossibly large coils of rope onto, enormous tyres instead of fenders, the thunderous clanks and grinding sounds of

machinery. Our boat has never felt quite so fragile.

And in Singapore it seemed as though we were witness to a never-ending parade of gigantic ships. There were tankers and container ships but also strange research vessels with cranes and submersibles mounted on their decks, giant drilling boats, ships with helipads, colossal barges working on land reclamation, pleasure cruise ships as big as floating cities and all around them an array of different tugs and pilot boats pushing and pulling and guiding these leviathans into position. We had to not only cross the shipping lanes amidst these beasts but also get used to sailing past them or weaving within their stationary hulks at anchor. Each one created a massive wind shadow to be avoided, and we'd keep our eyes peeled for the initial puffs of smoke or deluge of water washing down the oversize anchor and chain as a signal that they would start moving and begin the mass of swirling currents and eddies if they turned.

In the grand scheme of our decade at sea so far we've had very few of these moments where our paths cross with these giant boats and we try to steer clear of them as best we can. But, when we get the chance, it can be truly rather fascinating getting that little bit nearer and learning a bit more about these other sea monsters we share the water with.



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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)