

Jess Lloyd-Mostyn

Climbing up the mast can offer a unique new perspective for the sailor yet it is not without its trials and tribulations

All of us love a good view. A sunset at anchor, a white sand beach with ubiquitous palm trees or a full moon reflected in the water; the sea makes an outstanding backdrop. However, things get a little different once you're 17 metres up.

Climbing the mast is never just to take in the view. It's always a practical task needing to be tackled. Measuring a fitting or checking an electrical connection. It could be repairing or replacing something. And, like much of the cruising life, any trip up needs to be balanced with what the weather and the sea-state have in store for you.

On one of our early forays up the mast we switched out our old incandescent navigation lights for LEDs prior to crossing the Atlantic. There was no great drama as we picked a flat calm anchorage in the Canary Islands with ideal conditions so we made swift work of it. However, it was only once we had our first night out on the ocean that I recalled looking up and then mentioned to James,

"You did remember to put the tricolour lens back on the right way round, didn't you?"

Mid-ocean, large rollers, with sustained winds of 25-30 knots we saw a green light merrily shining on the port side of our mast and realised what needed to be done. I'll glaze over the rest of this anecdote by simply saying that these were less than ideal conditions for scaling the mast again.

We are fortunate enough to have mast steps, although we were unaware of their true value when we first bought our boat. This makes every trip aloft far easier. We have a good harness too and have only recently purchased a bosun's chair, after more than 10 and a half years of living afloat. It's always James going up and me at the mast controlling the halyard he's attached to. There's a nifty little dance we do as, once he's up, I duck out of the "drop zone" but stay within earshot. I nip back and forth as inevitably he'll have forgotten a tool or need an additional one or something else which I send up to him on another line, often our courtesy flag halyard.

Communication can be slightly tricky though, and we've had to master our clear but calm shouted requests



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between us to be heard over the wind. Because of course, the wind will start to pick up, or a large black cloud will rumble towards us just as I've hoisted him up there. Try getting exact measurements for a new stay or sail when the tape measure is flapping in the wind! We've even had lightning storms getting closer and halting our work. Yet, the reverse of this, the sunny skies, also hinder progress. Life in the tropics offers only a slim window in the early morning or late afternoon when it's possible to work on the mast without the sun's glaring blaze interfering.

Sometimes going up is a simple affair; just nipping up to put on the new spreader boots. Occasionally it's underway, to aid navigation, climbing up to the first spreaders to see the reef or a sandy spot to anchor in more clearly. On rarer instances still it can afford a better glimpse at wildlife as I'll never forget

the loud excited shout of "dugongs ahoy!" when we were approaching an anchorage in Vanuatu, blissfully unaware of how close we were to these gentle creatures.

More often than not though the trips up the mast involve a series of unexpected challenges to overcome: the nut on the tang bolt has seized and won't budge; it turns out the sheave has degraded in the sun and that's why the halyard is jamming; the shackle on the genoa has bent, etc etc. A barrage of swear words drifting down while I shrug apologetically at passers by on the dock.

And of course, there is the dreaded scenario of the all-important part or fitting being dropped. Trust me, a South African boat with as many miles under her keel as ours, we have fittings from all over the world, metric and imperial. Anything dropped from aloft would not be a simple thing to replace. Especially not when dawdling at anchor in the outer atolls of Papua New Guinea. So lanyards are tied onto everything up there just to make sure.

Luckily the only thing the skipper has dropped from above was a tiny bottle of Loctite, easily found on deck and sent back up on a halyard moments later. Just as well really as I often have to bat all the tiny crew away from the mast base, proudly looking up at their dad perched at the top.



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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