

Jess Lloyd-Mostyn

The poet Masefield once wrote that 'all I need was a tall ship and a star to steer her by'. Certainly the magic of night watch is something to be cherished, as Jess reflects

love sailing at night. There can be few things in life that I honestly find as thrilling and sense-tinglingly wild as cutting along through the water under sail with the cloak of nighttime all around you. We've sailed some long passages since living aboard and crossed two oceans so we've had our fair share of nights at sea and they all have a distinctly different flavour from their daytime counterparts.

On our first ocean crossing, the Atlantic, we sailed with two friends and it was long before we had any kids. With four on board the watch system was a luxurious 2 hours on, 6 hours off schedule, which meant we were all well-rested. We'd gently wake one another when it was time, give a brief rundown of conditions during our shift and offer to make tea or bring up biscuits for the new helmsman. In those days we had an unreliable autopilot and no Hydrovane so we hand-steered. I remember so clearly the feeling of holding the wheel for those stints, how it felt like taking the reins of some untamed horse, how the darkness around heightened every one of my senses and just how utterly bonkers it seemed that I was now in control of this 41ft being.

Years later the routine was a little different, juggling sleeping toddlers or breastfeeding babies with standing a turn at the helm. The balance had changed, with my husband taking longer shifts, a self-steering system in place, and shorter voyages where possible to make night sailing easier on the family. I've stood at the wheel with a child strapped to my front or my back, gently jiggling or singing to them as we glide through the blackness. But that wild feeling still lingers and excites me in a way that I struggle to describe.

We both agree that whenever we listen to music on night watch it suddenly becomes more dramatic and poignant, an intense soundtrack to the rhythm of the sea. A gentle song is ruthlessly juxtaposed by a sudden fierce squall, as salt spray stings your face and rain blurs your vision. Or a loud, bold anthem is made all the more epic by the flashes and forks of lightning on the horizon.

Actually no, because you lose the horizon at night, out at sea. And the lightning, though it can be seen



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from maybe a hundred miles off on a clear night, makes you feel vulnerable and terribly small all of a sudden. It scared me so much in the early days, each flash causing me to flinch and silently hope for a benign weather god to take pity on our little bobbing boat.

But clear skies also mean stars and our ocean nights have shown me more stars than my eyes could comprehend. Endless stars, clusters upon clusters, stretching further up and out and beyond with just little me on the helm, gazing gape-mouthed up at them. And I've sailed through nights where the waters were eerily still, and the stars were doubled in the water beneath us, and the boat was suspended amid a white-studded black backdrop. And, like any good story, the nightwatch has a beginning, a middle and an end. The spectacular shades of the sky streaked at sunset or first glimmers of sunrise

are astonishing at sea. Made all that more special by feeling that your unique geographical position allows you a completely rare and exceptional view.

I've had visitors at night. Invisible dolphins whose sudden sharp breath alerts me to their presence and they dance alongside our beam. Sometimes they have glittering outlines and trails from the phosphorescence or their leaps and splashes spill light onto the ocean. Often we get birds swooping round us, looking for a suitable spot to land and rest for the hours of darkness. Most common are the little swallows, exhausted from flying so far off land and tucking under our sprayhood where they perch in a wary half slumber. Larger ones, brown boobies or frigate birds, would try to land on our A-frame solar panels or mast spreaders. And then there is the company of other boats far off in the inky distance. The coloured lights or faint engine thrum help to punctuate the long hours of solitude and provide a sense of company. But, if none of these make an appearance, there is always the camaraderie provided by the moon.

And yes, of course, there have been rough nights, wet nights, hardworking, never-ending, "when will we get there?" nights. But, on balance, the magic of our nights lingers in my memory, knowing that while the world was sleeping, we were out on the wild sea.



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

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