

Jess Lloyd-Mostyn

The tradition of a ship's cat aboard goes back as far as anyone can remember and remains popular among blue water cruisers. Plus there are more exotic options these days...

My three kids adore pets. In fact they're pretty much nuts about all animals, big or small, scaly or fluffy. But the repeated tune of "please can we have a pet, please can we have a pet, pleeeeeease?" has recently been playing almost non-stop.

And I can understand it. The fact of the matter is that although it doesn't seem practical for us to have a pet on board right now we do know plenty of folks that have had furry friends on board so I'm starting to run out of good excuses.

When James, my husband, was first sailing in the Caribbean, he lived on a 42 foot yacht where there was a cat on board called "Half hitch". The rule was that the cat always got the first share of any fish caught by the captain or crew and so this lucky feline lived off the fresh catch each day. He was a rather large black and white cat who looked incredibly healthy.

Then there was "Kemah". Kemah was a solidly built ten-year-old pitbull, who's Texan owners had bought a small catamaran and couldn't bear the thought of going cruising without him. He took to the change in lifestyle amazingly well and liked nothing better than to swim off the boat at anchor. They even crafted a special net at their swim steps so that he could climb back up more easily when he got tired. We buddy-boated with them for several months and this gentle dog was so clearly ecstatic when we all swam in the sea together. He would even take trips on the stand-up paddleboard.

Friends we made in Panama had one of each on board; a long-haired collie dog called "Koa" and a tortoiseshell cat named "Patches". The animals were best friends and each demanded hours of daily grooming from their doting human parents, who were sailing both coasts of central America with them. And neither pet liked thunderstorms one bit and each had a specific hiding spot that they would hunker down in when the weather got rough.

Sailing pets are not only limited to cats and dogs either, we learned when we made friends with a couple who sailed with their African pygmy hedgehog who was called Sid Vicious. Despite his punk rock name, the little



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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

critter lived happily aboard their sailboat but was a constant cause of confusion for officials whenever they arrived in a new country. "Eeez like a pig, but a small one, bit like a rat but covered in spikey. I don't think you can eat him..." was what they overheard one Customs officer in Costa Rica saying, trying but failing to explain the strange creature to his superior. Ultimately, the poor puzzled chaps in uniform decided to stamp them in and listed him as "cat" on their papers.

Other friends of ours in South East Asia don't live aboard full-time but regularly bring their pet rabbit, Charcoal onto their yacht for long weekends and holidays, sailing the southern islands in Singapore. Apparently, the bunny doesn't behave any differently from when he's in their house in town.

We even have friends who cross oceans with pets. Boots is a large, handsome ginger tomcat, with an ostentatiously fluffy tail who claimed some friends of ours as his

own when they were swapping their old monohull for a far newer catamaran in Brisbane, Australia. He stomped on board and never left so they soon found themselves plying across the Indian Ocean with him nonchalantly balanced on the boom, licking a stripy orange paw. But when covid hit, and they were en route from Sri Lanka to the Maldives, they found that his presence was an unexpected comfort, especially for their two children, as the pandemic resulted in them being restricted and boat-bound for nearly 200 days. Once free movement slowly became allowed again they set off towards South Africa where he patrolled the docks of the Cape Town marina.

Some folks even have a pet on board for a bit of additional security. A boat guard dog needn't be a very large or aggressive breed, as sometimes just plain noisy will do. We spent some time at a marina in Mexico where one particular yacht was kept safe as houses by a very loud and rather paranoid pet chihuahua. This tiny little dog would howl and yodel like a screeching, shrieking banshee every time you walked anywhere near it, stationed with its big bat-like ears pricked, perched at the stern of the boat, fiercely guarding its home.

So, do we give in and finally end up with a real salty sea-dog or ship's cat? Watch this space.



ILLUSTRATION: HOLLY ASTLE