

Jess Lloyd-Mostyn

Blue water cruising can be haptic but it also offers long periods of peace to enjoy the finer things in life – such as cloudspotting

Living on a boat bestows upon you an extraordinary relationship with the sky. The sheer expanse of it, greeting you each morning, makes your relationship with its fluctuating moods and rhythms both intimate and extensive. You have to engage with the sky in the same way that you have to engage with the water; after all, it makes up half of your backdrop when living at anchor.

And in the same way the sea's ever-changing temperament and colours have always fascinated me, so too do the patterns and shapes, textures and light of the clouds captivate and absorb my attention as another layer of patina that guides our boat experience.

I like to start each day with popping up on deck, just to assess what the world looks like today. Even when we've been in the same spot for a long time this is in constant flux and sets the pace for what our plans will be. Today the sky is a bright, saturated azure blue, flecked with fleecy patterns of white shimmering clouds. This painterly, dappled effect, gives the morning light a magical quality and I decide to sit and linger on deck, sipping my tea. Sure, the scientific side of my brain could be thinking about the rippling layer of cirrocumulus and the potential warm front and chance of rain later that they may herald, but today I'm drawn to the more romantic notion of the name "mackerel sky". So-called because of the lines of clouds resembling fish scales, or even fish shoals some say. And my sleepy brain is playing with the comforting and charming concept of fish both above and below us.

On our most recent sail, a half day trip down to a nearby island anchorage, the sails were set nicely and I stood at the helm gazing upward, assessing the sky. This time it was a pale cerulean (and yes, I'm very particular about my colour hues) marked with high-up cirrus clouds. I like that these are the clouds that can indicate change, and marvel for a moment that we interpret clouds well enough to know that, when my eldest daughter comes to join me in the cockpit. She asks what I'm looking at and I explain about these lines and wispy strands, how they're actually made up of ice crystals, how the strong winds blow them into these streaks and streamers, that swoop like aeroplane trails. Then I



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tell her that they are sometimes called "mares tails". "Maybe they're the tails of the white horses on the waves, mama?" she says simply, connecting yet another animal weather metaphor for me and then skipping back down below, leaving me pondering all sorts of horses.

Then there are days when we are greeted by a blanket of cloud. It smothers almost the entire sky, diffusing any light from the sun, and paints our surroundings dove grey. This deepens and darkens to slate, and the water below goes steely, reflecting back the gloomy mood of the clouds. These are the nimbostratus, an undulating layer of murkiness with no pattern or shape, just a heavy mass draped overhead, now choking any glimmer of sunshine. The blanket of this cloud layer brings out the blankets from our cabins as we declare that it's time to hunker down, close the hatches,

and maybe build a den to snuggle up in instead of heading outside for a while. The inevitable rain from this giant sprawling cloud layer is steady and set-in, clearly planning to stick around for hours yet.

The monsoon rain season produces even more impressive downpours from the huge boss of the clouds: the cumulonimbus. These start off as oversized big billowy white cumulus clouds which bunch up more and more, stacking higher and higher until they are gargantuan, towering forms, forbidding and ominous, growling with angry thunder rumbles. The bottom may be totally flat or ragged, glowering a dark grey and the sky behind this edge may take on a strange orangey brown hue, a Yorkshire tea colour. We watch the dark plumes of rain streak down from various points along this monster and jump at the blinding sudden lightning flashes and forks that hit the water underneath.

And I mustn't forget our most common sight, the puffy, friendly-looking fairweather cumulus, that my husband calls "Simpsons" clouds. These roam about the baby blue sky like softly grazing sheep, yet more animals to include in my cloud menagerie.

I'm most fond of these creatures when the sun begins to dip and their cotton wool flanks become tinged with hot pink, orange and gold, their tops tinted purple as another cloud-spotting day draws to a close.



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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