

# Jess Lloyd-Mostyn

The joy of sailing takes on many facets but it is safe to say that a visit to the heads is rarely one of them. Nevertheless, the sea toilet is an integral part of the blue water cruising experience

W e British have a reputation for being rather demure when it comes

to... ahem... toilet matters. We disguise this most basic of needs by our choice of vague language such as “using the facilities” or “spending a penny”, even referring to “lavatory” or “wc”. And why not? In a normal home you discreetly use the bathroom, press the flush and walk away, modesty intact.

Yet when it comes to toilet use on a sailing boat you need to be frank, direct and pretty comfortable with being open about these things. It actually always makes me giggle that shortly after welcoming any guests to stay onboard one of the first things I say is “now, let me talk you through using the loo...”!

But far from me actively seeking any involvement in our visitors’ ablution habits, my interest is purely one of practicality to make sure they don’t cause any problems. This is down to two major differences between land toilets and boat toilets.

Big difference number one is flushing. Many boats use manual hand pump toilets or they may have an electric flush via one or two buttons. Either way, operation of these is not necessarily intuitive and it would be easy to have them on the wrong setting. And, although that doesn’t sound like a big issue, boats have been sunk by their marine toilets being left with the wrong valves open.

Number two, and perhaps the most crucial difference, is that unlike in a land dwelling, when it comes to boats every boat owner is also the plumber that fixes the toilet if a problem arises. And yes, that open-ended, seemingly light and harmless word “problem” will actually refer to beyond hideous, utterly stinking, dreadful and messy blockages of all sorts cropping up every so often. Plus, there is nothing that takes the shine out of having guests onboard quite like having to don rubber gloves and tackle taking the head apart thanks to one of them.

A lot of boats operate a policy of not flushing toilet paper down, but using a small bag or bin to throw this away (much like on a small Greek island) as paper is one of the main blockage culprits. But then there are also many things that can get sucked up into the toilet system from the outside marine environment that cause



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obstructions: plastic bags are sadly a more common problem than they used to be; small mussels growing near the seacock outlet; but seaweed and small fish tend to be most often what gets jammed.

Even when your marine toilet etiquette is spot on and your boat visitors always follow your careful instructions there are the inevitable problems that occur with long-term regular use. The pumps will wear out, and will need to be replaced. The pipes will get blocked up with limescale, significantly reducing their diameter. I remember seeing someone periodically removing these from a sailing school’s boats and hitting them repeatedly against the concrete dock to try to loosen up the scale, a really nasty job.

And then, to top all that off, there is the issue of where the waste actually goes. A lot of boats use holding tanks, and indeed it’s a legal

requirement in some countries, but there are still large numbers that discharge straight into the ocean. This necessitates another type of boating decorum about what you should and shouldn’t do in certain anchorages, particularly with swimmers in the water...

Lastly, boats are really quite intimate and small spaces. Their bathrooms tend to be almost impossibly small. It can be a real struggle to navigate getting down below and using one underway, particularly with stripping off foul weather gear. We actually chose to remove the door from one of our boat bathrooms as it always seemed to be in the way, and the gain in privacy didn’t seem worth the sacrifice to the space.

But it’s not all bad. The gentlemen on board relish the freedom of being able to relieve themselves over the side, with a pretty stonking sea view, a 360 degree urinal. And it is quite amusing going to use the toilet and finding a small crab or tiny jellyfish bobbing about, swimming around in the bowl.

So we take the inevitable gross jobs as par for the course, we forgive our wayward and forgetful boat guests for accidentally flushing their paper down and leaving the pump on the wrong setting, and keep some marigolds and disinfectant on standby. Besides, at least we have the luxury of our marine heads to complain about instead of resorting to “bucket and chuck it”.



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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)