



A Cruising Wife's A to Z

By Emmanuelle Buecher-Hall

PART 2: M - Z

I have been living on *Merlin*, our 44' Dean Catamaran, for the last five years, two of them spent cruising across two oceans with three kids. I would like to share some of my cruising experiences, ideas and tips, especially for women. However, I do not consider myself an expert in cruising or in sailing.



Multi-tasking

I am never bored and always busy. Being able to multi-task was for me a must and required good organisational skills. I was sometimes cooking and teaching the kids and had to suddenly leave everything because my help was needed on deck or in the bilges. I became a skipper, a baker, a teacher, a translator, a communication officer, a navigator, a trip advisor, a medical officer, a hairdresser, a mechanic apprentice and a weather router. So don't be afraid of discovering new skills!

Navigation

I like reading other sailing blogs, sailing books and magazines, then imagining new places where we could be by ourselves, visit a city, do a good shop, enjoy a beach, explore some waterfalls or go diving. I was the one planning the routes and then we'd discuss it together. It is useful to have reading material on board to guide you with your routes and what to see and do once you reach your destination. On the other hand, going to places without knowing much about them pushes you to explore with a new eye, and you might be surprised by your discoveries and encounters.

While we were doing navigation by sight, I was the one at the bow checking for coral heads, while Gregory was happy steering. I liked the responsibility of checking the water and giving indications where to go.

Overnight

Few people asked us if we slept at night while sailing. Being only two adults most of the time meant watches were shared. We were doing three-hour watches. From 24h00 to 03h00, I would knead the dough, prepare

yoghurts, enjoy my quiet time watching the stars and listening to some music.

I was woken up around 06h00 with the smell of the freshly baked bread. After breakfast, I would start school with the kids and usually didn't go back to sleep at 09h00. Lunch was followed by playing family games, reading a lot and enjoying our sail till 15h00. Around 18h00 we would all watch the sunset, have dinner in the cockpit, read stories to the kids and start my new night of sailing.

I liked sailing at night. I felt empowered being the one in charge. With the darkness, all my senses were on high alert. The sound of the water was reassuring, I felt protected by the stars and I was feeling the energy of *Merlin* going forward. My hearing was the most aware of changes. Even when I wasn't on watch I would wake up because the sound of the waves had changed and I wanted to understand the reason for the change.

Passages

First I thought that P could be for pumps such as water pump, bilge pump, shower pump, sea water motor pump, watermaker pump, hydraulic auto helm pump - there are so many on board and they are so important for your general happiness. You could associate them with patience when they don't work properly! However, I left Gregory to worry about the pumps.

So P is for passages. As we fear a storm or a breakage, long passages can appear frightening. It is important to trust yourself, your partner and your boat and be well prepared. The technology is so good nowadays that anywhere anytime the weather can be checked (we used grib files via our e-mail system). Study and learn the

minimum about the weather because it will be so much part of your life and decision making. Even squalls can be avoided if detected with the radar.

Leave only when you feel ready to leave and when all the conditions seem fine to you. Your boat should be well maintained, so in case of gear failure you only have to deal with a new problem not five at once. You should have enough spare parts on board. Frightful events can happen and their impact will be amplified by the fact you are by yourself and must work it out with what you have on board.

I panicked once during our Atlantic crossing when our DC to DC converter fuse blew leaving us at night in complete darkness without a sailing instrument - and a smell of burnt plastic. The other time was during our longest crossing from the Galapagos to the Marquesas when I found a trickle of sea water in the starboard passage. We had a cross swell that we hadn't had before and a tiny pilot hole under the sink was letting some water in. On both occasions Gregory found the causes of the problems and fixed them, proving to me again that I had the right sailing partner.

Problems can happen, but they are not the norm. Overall, passages are fantastic. You are by yourself on a deep blue ocean, under the most wonderful skies, and you feel so small in the middle of a beautiful environment. You are amazed by a flying visitor and you cheer proudly when you catch a fish. Then you realise you are living something special.

Questions

It all started when one day, I asked my husband "how about going sailing around the world?"



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Cooking like crazy ahead of the customs visit in Nomeau.

I wasn't scared of the answer because it was what I had dreamt of doing since I was a teenager. It was suddenly clear for both of us. We had to go cruising and preferably with our kids still young, which meant soon. This simple question quickly multiplied into hundreds of others. Every thought turned into a when, a how and a where.

If you are motivated, inspired and willing to throw the lines to live your dream, you will find the answers to make it possible. We met people who weren't even sailors a few months before their departure; some with very small budgets and others with small and simple boats. The cruising life is open to all. There is no right answer, but there will be one or a few that will suit you. There are also some delayed answers and lots of changes that will happen along the way, and the questions will never stop coming.

Repairs

Having a new boat we did have some fine tuning to do. With proper maintenance we were able to cut down on the time and money spent on repairs. However, a boat will always keep you busy and TLC is always on the agenda. Again we didn't plan our man/woman jobs division. It came naturally.

Rough Seas

We didn't have really bad conditions during our travels. When we left Cape Town in November, the winds were strong and seas high. It took us a few days to find our sea legs and once we were in the trade winds it became much smoother. We had 15' seas during our passage from Brazil to the Caribbean, but the swell was regular and we got used to it. Generally you try to sail when it is pleasant, with the wind in the right direction and during the right season so conditions should be good.

You are out there to have fun not to prove anything.

School

Sailing with school age children meant we had to home school our three kids. Growing up in a bilingual family, our kids followed a French correspondence system, which has been in place for more than 50 years. At the start of each school year, we received all our books and tutor guides. The children followed the appropriate curriculum and were sending an evaluation every three weeks, which were then marked by the teachers. As it was in French, I was the one wearing the teacher's hat every morning for a few hours.

We met a few boats where teaching was a shared exercise between the parents, but it seemed that most of the time it was more of a maternal occupation. Having done some teaching before, it seemed logical for us to proceed that way. Our school time wasn't all fun and I gained a few grey hairs, but it was part of our sailing project.

Storage

Space could be limited so try not to take too much. Remember it is not just because there is more room that you need to carry more stuff. Think of your waterline!

My great grandmother used to tell me "Everything has its place and every place has a thing". It stayed with me. I don't like clutter and I prefer order. I use boxes and plastic bags and I try to be very organised. Gregory does the same with the tools and the spares. In case of emergency it would be a great help to know instantly where things are.

For food or clothes, *Merlin* offers enough storage. Storing could also mean packing away for a long time. I stored some basic food like

flour, oats, and sugar in vacuum-packed bags and then packed them away in our big lockers. As this is a great way to avoid bugs I wish I had done the same with rice and pasta. If you want to keep your storage areas free of bugs do not allow cardboard and other packages on board.

TIP: Buy lots of bags for your vacuum pack machine as you might not find them again on route.

TIP: It is now easy to find big vacuum-packed bags for out-of-season clothes and bedding. I didn't think of them when we left Cape Town and then I couldn't find any. We left our duvets in some lockers in normal plastic bags but had a bad surprise when we next wanted to use them. These bags will need a vacuum to take the air out but they are really practical.

TIP: We have a few hard drives on board to store our photos, music and movies. The photos are saved at least twice, kept in two different spots and in a dry bag in a safe place.

Safety

My husband thinks that usually women worry more than men. He might be right on that one! Safety is a very important issue for us and I made sure, for example, Gregory was wearing his man overboard tag and strobe when he took over the night watch. I made sure he was also wearing his life jacket/harness and was hooked on with the life line when he had to go on deck for manoeuvres at night or during rough weather. The safety gear on board will help you feel secure. However, your behaviour should be the first thing to be on the safe side.

TIP 1: have enough hand holds around your boat.

Terrific Travels

Travelling is stimulating, but it could bring excitement mixed with fears. Will I catch my plane, how about my visa, where will I sleep, how long will I need to get over jet-lag, etc.?

Cruising is different; different excitement and worries. Travelling with a boat is a very gentle way to go from place to place (no jet lag as you change time hour by hour over a few days), meet new people and cultures. We travelled with European passports and never needed visas, but like any travellers, our first stop was the customs office when arriving in a new country. You will get used to the customs formalities for yourself and your boat. It might take some time but it is usually a stress-free obligation.

As you are travelling with your home, you will always sleep in the same bed. You don't have to pack, unpack and acclimatise to a new space every time. You are self-sufficient. In fact, you are not the typical tourist.

Underwater

Water will be your new world. Before leaving I didn't think I would spend so much time in the water and didn't prepare well enough for swimming costumes and sun protection. I also needed a good pair of fins. However, I found some along the way.

Try as often as you can to explore the underwater world. If you sail in the tropics, the water temperature will be just perfect. The diversity of the corals, the colours and shapes of the fish, the feeling of being so close to sharks or manta rays, the silence, are a few of the wonders of the underwater world. Swimming together, all five of us, exploring the sea life, was something

we really enjoyed.

TIP: If you like snorkelling or diving then it is worth investing in a good underwater camera and flash.

Victory

On a daily basis, there are so many little victories bringing a feeling of pride and achievement. It is not only about making a safe journey. Victories can be as simple as finishing home-schooling early and smoothly, catching a fish, buying a spare part that we were searching for, or anchoring before darkness.

Vegetables

Whenever possible we were buying fresh veggies and fruits, especially before longer crossings or when we knew we would need to be self-sufficient for a while. Like most of the cruising boats, we had small nets to hang the veggies, hammock style, in the cockpit. Potatoes, onions, pumpkins, apples and oranges were stored in our 'shop' (our spacious pantry) in two big plastic boxes with holes for ventilation. Fresh products were kept a long time that way.

Wind/Water and Washing/Winch/Worries

They are all part of your daily cruising life. Wind will dry your hair and will push your boat forward. Wind will take away some of your badly pegged clothes. Wind could scare you, but will also blow away the bad weather.

We have a watermaker on board. However, we are still quite water conscious and try to save as much as possible. We were doing our dishes with sea water and only the final rinse was done with fresh water. We had some water saving features on our taps, especially those used often.

We bought a garden spray container which was a great way to get wet before applying soap. I could even 'shower' three kids with only two litres of water! I did a wash with our big washing machine (9kg) at least once a week. The big deck brush was also out with every rain and once the boat was cleaned, we collected extra water for our tanks.

TIP: If you can have one, an electric winch is great. It helps me to winch Gregory up the mast without too much sweat. It helps me hoist the main sail by myself. It helps us lift our dinghy and motor on deck before a long passage. It reassures me, as I know that my strength is not a limitation in my sailing.

TIP: Worries are natural, but try to control them as much as you can.

Xmas

We had four Christmases on board. After the first one we realised that Christmas and birthdays need to be planned well ahead of time. You don't easily find presents on remote islands, especially the sort that your kids are dreaming of. The same applies if you would like a special meal. We always tried to decorate our boat and it is a perfect occasion to keep the kids busy with craft activities.

For me it is also a great time to keep up my family traditions. So even if the weather is humid and hot, we have the oven on for a few hours baking Christmas biscuits and we have been very inventive with our Advent calendar. Every December, *Merlin* is decorated and we don't escape some obvious festive excitement. Even if very simple we've had very memorable Christmases. It is good to feel that you don't have to be part of the consumerism to have a perfect Christmas.

Yacht

Your boat is your companion and you should have confidence in her.

The type of boat doesn't matter too much. It is more important to get out there. You don't need to go fancy or big. Try to find the one which suits your needs and your budget, the one you think you can sail in heavy weather. You will have the feeling that your yacht is never ready, which is normal. If the essentials (motor, batteries, rig, and instruments) are in good working order, you should be ready to start your new life. You'll have plenty of time while sailing or during your stops to finalise some overdue jobs or find new ones to do. Your yacht will become part of the family and you will feel her soul.

Years

Life on board is not always a dream and it has a few challenges, but it is worth it. Time seems to fly even faster on a boat and it is important to appreciate every minute of your adventure.

Zest

Sailing and particularly cruising is a good recipe if you are looking for a zest for life. Even a short experience of it will open your eyes to so many possibilities and will start new dreams. One of my new dreams is to do it again!

If you have any questions contact me through our blog: www.merlinsvoyage.net
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I am looking forward to reading your cruising stories! ↓

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