



Many weekend cruisers dream of the day when they will give up work and go cruising for an extended period. Transitioning to living aboard and exploring further afield is exciting, but also a little daunting. So how do you prepare yourself and your boat? **CHRISTINE DANGER** gathers some pearls of wisdom from a group of cruisers with a wealth of experience on the subject.

There is something about the challenges and rewards of living aboard a boat that enhances your feeling of well-being. You are doing something that not everyone does, and it is also something many people are interested in doing. A lot of the attraction is about the freedom to live just about anywhere you want, as long as it is on water, and the ability to go for a sail anytime the mood hits you. But when you first consider the move on board, it can be a bit like standing on a high diving board and deciding whether or not to jump!

INITIAL ADJUSTMENTS

When quizzed on what the initial challenges to living aboard are, most cruisers talk about financial management and some loss of personal independence. This is an issue anyone stopping work has to deal with of course, but this is even more so when moving on a yacht. Sjanya and Paul Dow, on their 46ft catamaran *Skellum*, highlight: "The uncertainty around the finances is the biggest adjustment. We have a budget, avoid

expensive marinas and live frugally but comfortably." Sjanya adds: "You go from having your own job, your own car, coming and going as you see fit, to being confined to the boat, totally reliant on your partner. That is a major change." And Andrew and Trish Ebert, on their Leopard 46 *Sengo*, concur: "People on land are never together for that long in one space. 24/7 takes some getting used to."

On a boat where couples experience isolation and extreme togetherness everyone says the key to getting along well is in being sensitive to the other's needs and to cultivate a private and independent self. John and De Deegan, who cruise on a motor cruiser called *At Ease* ensure they give each other time alone. "You have to be willing to say to each other – I would like the boat to myself today, or I would like to go ashore without you." Some couples have instigated separate routines like going for a morning walk alone, or exploring in the dinghy without the other. A mix of activities you undertake alone and others you share seems a good way of maintaining harmony.



DREAM IT, PLAN IT, LIVE IT

Some couples talk about their rhythms and routines. Trish and Andrew start the day feeding their two cats, checking the all-important weather forecast, having breakfast and mapping out their activities. Trish adds “I like to do one job a day, which gives me structure and a sense of progress on our to-do list. It relaxes me too”. One thing everybody says is that most tasks take much longer on board than on land. Sjanya points out: “Things like doing the laundry, running minor repairs, doing the groceries, topping up water and fuel, are always an expedition. But then, you are no longer on a schedule, so it does not matter.”

And then there is the adjustment around the use of finite resources. David Nicholson and Mary Sheehan who cruised for many years on *Medina*, a 46ft Radford, comment “You have to be careful with power, water or gas which are in limited supply.” Mary adds: “It took me back to my childhood when I was told to turn the lights off when I left a room, or to not let the water run when I cleaned my teeth.”

PREPARING YOURSELF

When it comes to preparing yourself, the first step stressed by John and De, is to build your cruising kitty well in advance, but not sell assets to go cruising. “Never sell your house to buy a boat. Keeping a base gives you more choices and provides a safety net.”

Secondly, all couples agree that a critical step in preparing yourself for life aboard is to build your boat handling skills. With all couples interviewed, the male

was a more experienced sailor than the female. De points out: “What made me love sailing and made it both our life and our dream, is that I learnt everything about running the boat; radio, navigation, sails trimming, steering ... It is a partnership”. Mary recalls her early days learning: “We’d reef in 5kts of wind; people would wonder what we knew that they did not. We’d hoist and lower the sails, including the spinnaker, we’d put the dinghy in the water only to lift it up again a few minutes later, we’d do Man Over Board practice, we’d drop and raise anchor ... everything you needed to know.”

WHATEVER OPTION YOU CHOOSE TO BUILD YOUR SKILLS, IT TAKES TIME AND PRACTICE, AND IT IS ESSENTIAL TO LEARN AT YOUR OWN PACE, BUT LEARN YOU MUST

And that is the key. If you both know the sequences in good weather and daylight, you can apply them in strong weather or at night. It is as much about participation and enjoyment, as it is about safety. Both team members need to be capable of running the boat alone, in case their partner is incapacitated. You can learn together, teach each other, read widely about seamanship or take formal courses. For most couples, the most experienced or skilled in a particular

task has to be able to teach the partner until he or she becomes competent. That also means learning how to deal with frustration, how to delegate, and accepting for example that even if a manoeuvre is not done perfectly, it is good enough. Whatever option you choose to build your skills, it takes time and practice, and it is essential to learn at your own pace, but learn you must.

A third aspect to think about is hobbies. All couples concur this is important to develop, particularly for when you are weather bound. For instance, Paul is heavily into photography, Sjanya likes painting. John is a keen woodworker, while De enjoys needlework. Trish likes writing, while Andrew likes fishing. Dave and Mary love Sudoku, fishing and reading. Tinkering is always high on everybody's agenda, as is socialising with other yachties. Regardless of what you choose to do to occupy your non sailing days it is good to have an absorbing hobby that also provides some 'me' time.

WORKING AS A COUPLE

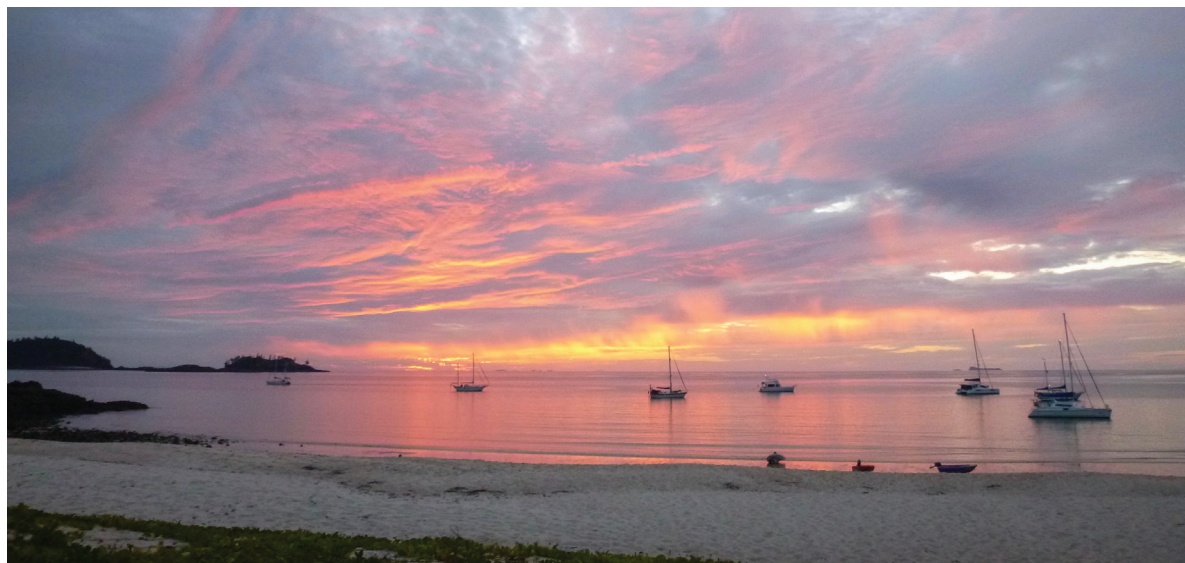
Treating each other with kindness and respect was a piece of etiquette emphasised by all. Andrew and Dave both point out: "The Great Barrier Reef is full of men sailing by themselves; their partner won't go with them anymore because they don't enjoy going in uncomfortable conditions, not knowing what to do, or being yelled at by a bully." Nobody wants to share a dream that is scary, uncomfortable or unpleasant. It is not a dream, it is a nightmare.

Allocating roles and duties is something that has to be negotiated. There are preferred jobs on board or jobs that one is better at than the other. There are also

chores that nobody likes and that are best rotated. It is important to talk about those things and not assume they will happen spontaneously. A clear agreement also helps keep away resentment.

Playing to your strengths as a couple is a point often made. Dave recounts a time when Mary was helming their boat into the marina. "I am stronger and better able to jump onto the jetty. So it makes sense for me to be at the ropes while Mary is at the wheel." He even said to a bemused onlooker: "If I am good maybe she will let me take the boat in one day!" So although all jobs should be interchangeable, thinking about who is best suited for a particular task is common sense.

Another aspect talked about is deciding on rules and processes together. Peter Dunn, a volunteer coastguard and instructor highlights: "They are your operating



TOP: *Sengo and Skellum sharing an anchorage at Middle Percy Island. Image Trish Ebert*

ABOVE: *An unusual view of Bums Bay; all is calm at midnight. Image Paul Dow*

procedures on board. Settle on them before you start cruising, and then follow them. You can always vary them, but not in the heat of the moment. You have to anticipate what might happen and take preventative measures. Ask yourself what are the consequences for my partner if I get hurt, fall overboard or break something.”

Examples of rules and processes identified by most couples include deciding on the maximum wind speed you will set off in, only leaving an anchorage when both partners are happy to do so, when to reef or to clip on while working on deck, routines for night watches. Procedures keep you safe, and are all designed to make things automatic and habitual. It means less chance of omission or error and better capacity to deal with pressure.

But although some rules are necessary, all couples stress the need for flexibility. Paul emphasises: “You need to be adaptable and be prepared to change plans at the drop of a hat, because you are subject to the weather and sea state. You might have to go later or earlier, or head for a different spot.” Andrew adds: “You become a bit obsessive about the weather. If you are on a schedule, chances are you will get nailed. But when you have flexibility, you can pick your weather. You have time.” Staying flexible keeps you safe and ensures you go in conditions you will enjoy. No point scaring yourselves.

PREPARING THE BOAT

The main differences between equipping a yacht for weekend cruising and extended cruising relate to the length of the passages you will do, the unfamiliar waters you will be in and the fact that you might get caught in bad weather. However Mary points out: “Anything can happen at any time, whether you are on a weekend trip or an extended cruise.” The consensus is that you should get the best gear you can afford. But as John puts it: “Realise that the boat will never be totally ready. If you wait for that to happen, you will never go.”



New piece of equipment under installation: a radar.
Image Chris Danger

An essential piece of gear on everyone's list is an auto-helm that frees you from being glued to the wheel or tiller for hours on end. It is also required for insurance when only two people are sailing the boat. An AIS has become a most important piece of equipment – “Worth its weight in gold, and should be installed as a priority,” says Andrew.

A strong rig and sails, reliable engines, a stable dinghy with oars and outboard, are obvious requirements. GPS/chart plotter (as well as the paper charts), depth sounder, wind instruments and VHF radio are automatic inclusions. Beyond this, radar, sat phone, and a satellite based weather system are seen as nice to have, particularly if sailing to remote areas.

Plenty of ground tackle is a must. A modern primary anchor and a couple of backup anchors are



TOP LEFT: The rewards of cruising life; sunset at Magnetic Island.
Image Paul Dow

TOP RIGHT: Role allocation – enough said! *Image Chris Danger*

ABOVE: *Skellum* at Thomas Island, with Shaw Island in the background.
Image Paul Dow

recommended (particularly one for weed), at least 50m of chain and 50m of rope, an electric winch to make life easier, long coils of extra rope (50-60m) to tie yourself into the shore if need be.

Good offshore wet weather gear keeps you warm and dry, and so does a covered cockpit where you can steer out of the weather. Offshore cruising equipment also includes a third reef in the main and a dedicated storm sail, plus

things you hope to never use like a parachute anchor and a life raft.

Provisioning is another aspect to think about. Having a freezer as well as a good size fridge makes things easier and allows you to be away from port for longer. Most have developed their provisioning checklist and keep track of their supplies. Useful implements cited by cruisers include a sprouter for greens, a yoghurt maker for breakfasts, sauces and dips, a pressure cooker

to reduce cooking time and gas consumption. The more water, fuel and food you can carry, the more autonomous you are, and the less frequently you need to come into port to re-provision. As a rule, the catamarans have a routine of topping up their water anytime they can, using jerry cans to collect water ashore or a rainwater collection device, whereas the monohulls with bigger tanks and no weight restrictions are less concerned. Similarly topping up fuel is a regular affair for cats. Most cruisers avoid expensive marina bowsers and favour the less convenient but cheaper service stations. Paul suggests carrying manageable size jerry cans for both fuel or water and a trolley.


Carrying a supply of bits and pieces for running repairs is useful. However Paul makes this comment: “We don’t need to carry a lot of spares. Instead, we rely on our marine supplier. They can ship everything we need to the next port on our itinerary within a couple of days. And there are lots of people around who can fix anything.” The camaraderie and resourcefulness of the cruising community is often commented on and is a great source of support.

IN CONCLUSION: THE GOLDEN RULE

Cruising is more fun when it is shared. If you want to live the dream and go cruising with a partner, **MAKE IT ENJOYABLE FOR EVERYBODY.** This means:

- Go out in nice weather
- Include your partner in the running of the boat
- Encourage but don’t demand
- Develop your skills and experience
- Play to your respective strengths
- Stay flexible
- Make the boat safe and comfortable

If you follow the golden rule, the reward is a wonderful nomadic life, full of discoveries, adventures and enduring friendships.



Golden hour at Yellow
Patch. Image Paul Dow

Chris and her partner Wade Bishop have been sailing on catamarans of various sizes for over 15 years around Bass Strait, Tasmania and some of Australia's east coast. They have spent the last few months getting ready to cruise full-time on *Take It Easy*, their 11.6m Easy catamaran. They will soon cast off the mooring lines and become sea gypsies. You can follow their adventures on www.sv-takeiteasy.com