

Creating Crew Ground Rules

Richard H: Chesher

An inflexible crewmember can ruin a cruise.

We finally reached the Solomon Islands from the Philippines after a long haul with either no wind at all or wind right on the nose. When we arrived, there was a letter waiting from our friends Patty and Lowell who left Key West bound for Spain shortly after we left Taiwan aboard our cruising yacht Moira.

They wrote, "We finally reached Spain after a long haul with either no wind at all or wind right on the nose. We left Florida with two of our good friends aboard. Never again! Paul left us in Bermuda - got off without even saying good-bye - and Stephen is packing now and we are not speaking. It's no good taking non-sailors along and day sailors don't quite know what to expect on an extended cruise."

Freddy looked up from the letter, laughing. "It's incredible; their trip was exactly like ours!" she said.

"Well, not exactly," I answered. "We did have one crew out of three that was OK. Our crews just didn't know what to expect. It was partly our own fault for not realizing their lack of knowledge and filling them in."

"They wouldn't sit still for a lecture on how to behave," Freddy insisted. "I can't imagine you examining them on what they know and don't know. It would be too awkward. And besides, how would you know that our ex-friend Doug might act like a spoiled brat or a clumsy clod?"

"That's not quite what I meant," I said, "but I see your point. Perhaps if we could let them read an article on how to be a cruising crew, we could avoid unpleasant situations." I decided then to write one.

Weekend sailors, racing sailors and non-sailors often mistake a cruising boat for a means of conveyance and adopt a certain set of behavior patterns associated with using someone's vehicle as opposed to the behavior they would adopt if they were staying in someone's home. Really, a cruising boat is better thought of as a compact, neat, little house and when you agree to visit aboard one you should behave accordingly. Being small, cruising boats generally do not have all the conveniences of a land-based home. Before embarking on a cruise you'd better find out what conveniences will be lacking and consider how you will fare without them. If you go, don't complain later about the lack of some luxury you were denied.

Freddy and I, for example, were astonished when our friends from Hong Kong abruptly left the ship at our first port in the Philippines. Their parting comment was, "If we'd known we would be without ice, or a freshwater shower every night we never would have come along." I told them before we left that our refrigeration system wasn't working and that we did not carry enough freshwater for showers at sea, but I guess they didn't know what it was like to be deprived of these luxuries.

Let's assume you decide to go along with your friends on a cruise. Unless you are on a ship which has its own hired crew to take care of everything, you are going as a crewmember. A crewmember on a cruising sailboat is not a pampered guest but one who is expected to be helpful, cooperative and willing to carry his own load plus do a little extra whenever possible.

At first glance, it may seem like a life of leisure and endless fun, but it isn't. There is much hard work keeping a boat afloat, clean and comfortable, and still more when making a long ocean

crossing. As one cruising fellow quipped. "Really enjoying yourself is a full-time, exhausting occupation."



There are some little things cruising people learn which make life easier on board a boat. To help you be a long-remembered and happy crewmember, here are a few pointers starting with the first moment you step aboard.

Take off your shoes.

Sand, salt, mud and sandspurs are a constant problem shipboard. Common elements in a marine environment, they must be kept off the boat at all costs. Simply stated, take off your shoes before getting aboard and rinse them overboard if they are dirty. If you are barefooted, wash your feet before you come aboard. I am reminded of spending a blistering hot morning in Palau scrubbing Moira's decks, only to have our new crewmember come aboard with shoes packed with grimy red mud. The long trail of footprints went right down the deck and into the cockpit where (by the grace of the Sea Kings) they ended at the companionway where he finally took off his shoes.

Keep Baggage to a minimum.

Cockroaches are another problem on boats. The infinite nooks and crevices of a sailboat offer an ideal habitat for the little monsters. Therefore, most cruising people take great pains to keep them off. Cardboard boxes often are loaded with roaches or roach eggs. If you carry a cardboard box aboard, expect it to stay on deck until it is unloaded.

Baggage should be kept to an absolute minimum and suitcases (impossible storage items) should stay at home.

Dry off before going below.

When swimming and diving you get covered with salt. When salt gets on cushions, floors, books, etc., it is very hard to get rid of and since it attracts moisture, salt leads to mildew and corrosion in tropical climates. Veterans automatically dry off before going below but crewmembers often forget and wander below with wet bathing trunks and drip all over the place, sit on pillows or even bedclothes.

I remember one who kept forgetting about such trifles as taking off shoes, wandering below with wet, dripping trunks, and so on. Whenever he started aboard with shoes on Freddy would stop him with, "Hey, take off your shoes!" or, as he started below with saltwater dripping down the companionway, "Are your trunks dry?"

Finally, on the fourth day, he purpled and exploded, "Quit treating me like a child, telling me to take off my shoes, dry myself, do this, do that! I'd like a little respect. There is no pecking order here and, if there is, I refuse to be at the bottom of it!" At that point, of course, he indeed was on the bottom of the pecking order and was destined to depart the ship at the very next port.

Respect the Captain

This brings me to my next point. There is a specific order of authority on a boat. The head of the boat, usually the owner, is the captain. Next in line and master of a whole host of responsibilities is the first mate. Aside from the engine and perhaps navigation, the first mate generally is in charge of everything that goes on below decks. The crew comes next, and there usually is a pecking order here, depending on experience levels. Vessels that operate on a non-authoritarian basis - where a crewmember is in charge only of himself and does only what he wants to do - are short-lived phenomena. Either they change quickly to a more workable system, they are abandoned in port or they vanish at sea.

Do your part

There always is plenty to do aboard a boat, especially on a long crossing. Everybody stands watches. Depending on how many people are aboard and whether the watcher has to steer as well as watch, watches can be a minor task or a major chore. On a small boat, with only three or four people and no autopilot or wind vane, the watches become a real grind. Everyone gets tired and it is difficult to keep things going smoothly. As a crewmember, expect to do more steering and watching than the captain or first mate. This isn't because you are being taken advantage of, it's just that the others are apt to be doing several other jobs as well as standing their watches.

Recently, on one long ocean crossing I was in the midst of taking a noon shot to plot our position when I noticed the boat was veering off course. The sun was right at its zenith and I couldn't even look around to see what was wrong. When I finally looked up from recording the sextant reading I saw the wheel abandoned. "Who's at the wheel?" I called. Silence. "Who's steering the blasted boat?" I shouted.

Freddy poked her head out a hatch. "I'm fixing lunch;" she said and vanished. I corrected course and looked below. Doug, our friend and crewmember, was reading a paperback book on his bunk. "Hey, Doug," I called above the diesel, "are you steering or what?" I had to get back to my sextant.

"My watch is over," he said imperiously, "It's her watch." "But she's fixing our lunch," I explained, "and I'm trying to find out where we are. Couldn't you steer a little longer?" I calmed myself, not wanting to lose my temper with a friend. "Well, you both always manage to be doing something whenever my watch is up and I'm not going to steer this boat forever," he declared and went back to his book.

Later I pointed out the obvious to him. I was chief engineer, navigator, radio operator, deck scrubber and I stood all my watches full time and steered whenever I was not doing something else which was essential. Freddy did all the cooking, cleaning, dishes, laundry, housekeeping and she stood her watches full time when she wasn't taking care of us. He, the crew, was the only one who had time to sit and relax and read books for hour after hour between watches. It didn't seem like too much to ask him to steer for a few extra minutes at noon or at dinnertime.

As if to highlight the fact that he was striving for the worst crew-of-the-year award, he proceeded to stick to his watches to the minute, appearing exactly on time and vanishing the second his two-hour vigil was up. Not once did he scrub the deck, clean the bilge, the heads or even his own laundry. He got off soon thereafter, without a single word of-thanks for transporting him 1,200 miles.

Contribute to the cost

The owner has a fantastic investment in time and money in his cruising boat. If you are along to enjoy the cruise and the benefits of his efforts, you must at least contribute your share in terms of helping out whenever you can. Without being asked, lend a hand at scrubbing the decks, hoisting the anchor, cleaning the bilge, keeping things shipshape and you will have a great time. Loaf and you will soon depart unloved. It is difficult enough keeping house at sea without having to support idle hands.

Food is something special at sea. You can't stop off at the corner market to replace something you forgot. When you're out, you're out. Stores usually are preplanned for long cruises and you should contribute your share of the food bill. If your hosts resist, insist!

Money is always hard to come by on a cruising boat and your financial aid can mean much better food at sea. If you are a finicky feeder and need a special diet, arrange things with the captain and first mate before you leave. If you like lots of between-meal snacks, bring your own. Whatever you do, don't raid the galley. If you get hungry, remember that the very best way to make enemies with the cook is to raid the stores without asking first. He or she will be glad to fix you coffee in a thermos for your watches, even provide you with snacks if you ask, but for heaven's sake, never invade the galley or the ship's stores yourself.

Conserve water

Along the same lines, drinking water usually is a precious item on a cruising boat. When at sea, most people do not risk their drinking water for freshwater showers, shampooing and other nonessential things. Saltwater baths work just fine and if you get caught at sea for longer than expected, that water in the tank might make the difference between life and death. People who live ashore usually have built-in habits of wasting water, such as leaving the water turned on while washing hands or brushing teeth or soaping up in the shower. Boat people don't waste water. They wet down, turn off the water, soap up, then quickly rinse off. Never waste water when on a small boat.

Learn as you go

Don't let inexperience stand in your way. Learn. Make an effort and you can learn almost all you need to know about cruising in a two-week trip. Don't be shy to ask the proper way to tie-up a boat, secure a line to a cleat, tie a bowline onto a bucket, set the anchor, use the sextant, start the engine, check the oil and water, clean the fuel filters, etc.

What would happen if there were an accident and you were the only one who could get the boat safely to port?

Notify the captain if you have a problem

If you have a problem, admit it. If you are seasick, don't pretend you're not. If you are prone to seasickness, bring along a good supply of pills and take them before you go to sea. If you are frightened in a storm, admit it. If you are not confident enough to do a task, just say so. If you have any kind of medical problem, even a small cut which possibly could get infected, tell the captain immediately. The captain is responsible for you and your frankness about any problem you have is a necessity at sea.

Have an Escape Option

One final suggestion, both for the boat owner and crew. Make the first leg of the cruise a short one and have a means to get off and return home if, after a trial period, things don't seem to be going well. To take off on a two-month trip with your friends may prove disastrous. If there is an uncomplicated way out after a short cruise you will save feelings and still part friends. Dr. Richard Chesher is a marine scientist and active underwater photographer. He is conducting an aquatic environmental research expedition in the Pacific and now is in New Guinea aboard his Peterson 44 cutter, Moira.