

What Is It Like, Living on a Boat?

For every fulfilled dream of sailing off on some grand adventure there is a disaster caused by one of the many things that can go wrong on a boat. In our experience, the planning and anticipation of the great adventure is often better than the actual adventure itself.

Living on our boat is fun, rewarding, and we enjoy the freedom to move around see new places and meet interesting people. But it is not a vacation. It is a lot of hard work.

When people ask us our plans for the next season we always respond, "We have no plan, and we are sticking to it." We do not buddy boat. We have plenty of our own problems to solve without taking on other people's problems too. We also like to select destinations and depart or stop without notice so coordinating with other people would not work for us. This is not because we are antisocial. We enjoy frequent impromptu gatherings with fellow boaters to share yarns and a few laughs – and hopefully they will not be dressed up as pirates.

Living on a boat is a test of relationships. Few couples can live together in a confined space for long periods of time under emotional conditions that range from exciting to boring, uncomfortable to stressful. Living on a boat requires the ability to adapt to the inevitable stresses and misfortunes of boating. There is no freedom from these afflictions, only one's ability to cope with them. We have our own emotional support system of encouragement when one of us is feeling down. We practiced this beforehand by living on our previous thirty-five foot boat with two cats for six to seven months each summer for several years.

Our boat is luxurious and livable. It has all the comforts of home and plenty of storage space. It is a truism of boating that there is never enough storage space, but we have plenty. We designed it to have heavy displacement so that we do not have to worry so much about weight. Space and carrying capacity are a luxury but it is also not unlimited.

Mundane things such as managing mail and paying bills requires a lot of planning and time. Banking is entirely internet based. The internet with e-billing, e-tax filing and online banking has made much of our cruising life possible but internet connections are not always available in many of the remote places we go. I would be remiss to omit a mention of boat insurance. It is a pain in the you-know-what but necessary. Insurance underwriters control much of what boaters do by confining the geographic area of coverage, the number of people required aboard, and the seasons during which some areas, such as the tropics during summer, must be avoided.

Provisioning is an ongoing and a major process. We plan our provisions for long periods of time using Excel spreadsheets to generate shopping lists using formulas applied to the inventory of items aboard and the number of forward days planned. Buying groceries in strange places involves finding transportation or hauling groceries in a cart, often for long distances. Getting groceries aboard the boat at a dock or by dinghy when anchored off is physically exhausting

and sometimes a wet experience in the rain. Storing provisions, in remote parts of the boat is a challenge and also requires using more Excel spreadsheet lists because it is easy for old people like us to forget where we put all the stuff.

All the provisions that come aboard are in packages that create a colossal amount of trash to haul ashore and dump. Our boat is equipped with a watertight deck locker that holds weeks of trash. At the infrequent times that we tie up at a marina the dock hands will often ask if they can help with our trash. I usually reply, "No, just bring down a big dock cart and tell me where the dumpster is."

Living on a boat is a daily weather project and an occasional bad weather period is inevitable. We forecast the weather every day. Some cruisers rely on weather forecasters to make their decisions about routes and destinations. We do not. No weather forecaster can zoom down to every local weather zone accurately. We have learned that weather forecasts are frequently wrong. Weather can be quite different in two places that are very close together. We monitor all the weather data that is available by radio, internet, and satellite connection when we are offshore. There is a lot of it. We also monitor our own weather conditions, using a barometer, temperature, wind speed and direction, and other visual clues. Collectively, this all goes into our own forecast model for where we are and where we intend to go, and we rely on it with a fairly high degree of confidence.

Still, decisions must be made about keeping ourselves and the boat safe in the inevitable bad weather. The recent 2019 hurricane season was particularly intense and a reminder that if we remain on the east coast it will only a matter of time before we are in the crosshairs of a major storm. Anchorages must be selected based upon the protection they provide. There is the challenge of navigating to new and strange places. Planning the destination and route each day is time consuming. In addition to the weather the plan must include allowances for tides and currents especially in higher latitudes where the tides can change as much as twenty-five feet and currents run swiftly. If we are planning a passage of several days we try to time the passage during a good weather window. Sometimes we will wait days for a good window. Other times it means we leave sooner than expected before bad weather arrives. It is a lot of work, but it is also a lot of fun.

Maintenance, repairs and upkeep is a daily chore. We keep lists of work to be done and tackle the most immediately necessary ones first. This is a big subject so I will devote an entire paper to that subject titled Maintenance, Repairs, and Upkeep.

We often miss family and friends and have guilt about missing important events. Events that we do attend require a lot of effort and planning. Unpredictable weather and mechanical breakdowns make scheduling arrivals and departures challenging. If we must arrive at a certain port at a certain time, say to catch a flight, we give ourselves several extra days to allow for unexpected weather and mechanical delays. We must locate a secure marina to leave the boat and it has to be near a major airport.

That is some of the negative stuff. There are many positive things. When something breaks, we fix it. It is fun to fix things. There is satisfaction in fixing something and standing back, admiring the work with a sense of accomplishment. When I say we, I mean we. I do not know how solo sailors manage repairs by themselves. Many tasks take more than two hands.

There is joy in having the independence and freedom to decide where we want to go, and we can literally go almost anywhere, and then getting up in the morning and deciding on a whim to go someplace completely different or perhaps just remain where we are because it is so nice. We travel with our home so there is no bag packing and making arrangements necessary for closing up a house.

Anchoring in a safe harbor after a long passage gives us a great sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. Enjoying a great sunrise or sunset from the deck of a boat in calm weather cannot be described with words. We are still thrilled every time we see whales, dolphins, seals, fish and birds play around the boat. We like seeing these wild critters up close in their own environment.

Our list of places we would like to go is so long that it would take many lifetimes to see them all. This brings me to the last point and that is how much more time we will be enjoying this lifestyle. We straddle the line between cruiser and voyager because we are reminded of our age all the time as routine things we have always done become a little more difficult. We make accommodations for this by adding features to our boat and planning our voyages differently. We designed our boat with aging in mind. We continue to adjust as we go and are occasionally reminded that our future will be a little less adventuresome which is why the saying goes, "do it now." In fact, medical issues have already crept into our lives and curtailed some of our more adventurous plans for now.