

Prelude: On Seas Flat

How to ease one's spouse into the cruising lifestyle

By Bob Roitblat

Sailing throughout the Ionian Islands or living aboard and circumnavigating the globe is the dream of many a sailor—though less often the dream of their significant other. As a way to gauge my wife's interest in sharing these dreams, she agrees to go on a test vacation. We will test whether we are compatible with the cruising lifestyle; test whether we are compatible with each other within the confines of a small sailboat.

Believing in the axiom that if you want people to go sailing with you, avoid terrifying them, several new items are purchased for the trip: To calm any fears my wife might have about falling overboard and being eaten by a shark, we get the latest combination foul-weather jacket/PFD, harness and tether; and add a jack line to our charter boat. The peace-of-mind is worth the cost.

We spend several hours going over every system on the boat before departure, to ensure a safe passage. We also inventory the pots and pans and purchase the one missing saucepan we are sure to need during our four days away.

Though the charter boat was advertised as fully equipped with all the latest electronics, the hand-held GPS supplied is both inadequate and inoperable. Never mind my proficiency with both nautical and aviation charts, we must have good positional awareness at all times. We are departing on Thanksgiving Day; all the marine stores are closed. Disaster is looming, but just before we leave the dock, the charter company owner miraculously appears with a new GPS. Our vacation officially starts.

During the first leg of our trip, down the Atlantic coast from Ft. Lauderdale to Biscayne Bay, my specially ordered fair winds and flat seas arrive as planned. With my wife securely attached to the jack line, we are sailing on the ocean—about a mile offshore.

After a few hours, a simple lunch underway, and our new friend Otto Helm driving, we have passed a small part of the test. My wife is relaxed enough to take a nap. Life is good.

The next big test: anchoring. The only formal sailing instruction my wife has taken is from an *Annapolis Book of Seamanship* video. She watched it on her video Ipod during our flight to Ft. Lauderdale. We discuss the concepts of anchoring, as we get closer to our destination. We had practiced once, a few months earlier, using our powerboat on an inland lake. This time we have a much bigger boat, with many other boats likely near-by.

Who should drive and who should operate the electric windlass? On half the boats we have seen operated by only one couple, he steers while she drops the hook. It makes sense—if the more experienced sailor is at the helm, he (traditionally) can quickly move the boat to safe water if something goes awry. On the other hand, the windlass can be more dangerous and, sometimes, anchoring just takes brute strength. I take the bow. She takes the helm. She performs flawlessly. I don't make her cry. Life is still good.

Soon after we anchor, another couple arrives to take the spot next to ours. After two tries, with their anchor dragging both times, they move to a different spot. The other skipper asks if we were able to anchor on the first try. I offer a few hints, which he uses on his next, and successful, attempt. By offering good, workable advice to a fellow sailor, I make a few points with my wife. These points immediately go into the bank, for use later when I screw something up.

We arrived at our first night's anchorage too close to sundown to visit the lighthouse we came there to see. We take a short walk in the park that surrounds No Name Harbor, and then it's back to the boat to prepare Thanksgiving dinner.

Tonight's menu: Turkey (loaf), mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, vegetables and dinner rolls. We are used to having two ovens, a microwave and a four-burner cook-top. Trying to figure out the timing of what goes in the galley oven when and how to make it all fit

requires a degree in geometry, efficiency or both. So does juggling three pots on two burners. Somehow it all comes together and we enjoy a delicious turkey dinner alfresco. Another test passed.

Living aboard a sailboat is roughing it for some. Others prefer to think of it as living in a charming little apartment with a great view. If we intend to spend any more than a few days on a boat, we are going to have to make the apartment-style living work.

The new day brings new winds and a changing forecast. The only desirable destination we can make before nightfall requires anchoring against a lee shore. Our best option is to skip the next stop and spend a second night right where we are. We head off to visit the lighthouse and enjoy the park.

Another test arises on Saturday morning when it is time to set sail for a new destination. The day before, two sailboats anchored too close to us, then rafted together. They are now right over our anchor. This test is getting our anchor up without it fouling and without a collision—with the other boats or between spouses.

Fortunately the water is only 10-feet deep. With the small amount of chain rode we have out, we swing in a tight arc. Weighing anchor is tricky, and we come close to colliding with the rafted boats, but we eventually get underway without a mishap.

The crew on the rafted boats watched in amazement and ignorant bliss as we flipped one way then the other to get our anchor up. No offers of help. No offers to move. No apologies for being rude. If it wasn't obvious that these people were the exception rather than the rule for cruising sailors, this one incident could have been the end of all hope for long-term cruising.

A quick, routine stop at the pumping station and we are on our way. We spend several idyllic hours sailing Biscayne Bay. My wife has reached enough of a comfort level that she decides to lay out on the bow and catch some sun. She wears a harness and stays

tethered to the jack line the whole time, but at least she has gone forward for a while. Progress is being made.

Anchoring has its challenges, but some would say it is easier than docking at a busy marina. We are about to face that test. On the way into Dinner Key Marina, we receive detailed instructions over the radio: which pier and which slip we are to use, even which side we are tying up to. Fenders are placed; dock lines are set.

After a review of the charts and cruise-guide aerial photos, and with good instructions from the dockmaster, we make our way to the intended slip. We discuss taking turns wide and the way sailboats pivot on their keel. We also discuss kinetic energy and what it takes to stop a 7-ton boat before it hits an immovable pier. After a few blasts of reverse thrust and acrobatic use of a boat hook, we are in the slip without so much as a bruised ego.

It's a short walk from the marina to the tourist section of town and an easy transition to life on solid ground. We have dinner, take in a movie, and then it's back to the boat. After a brief but intense rain shower that clears out the late night revelers, we get a quiet night's sleep.

On the morning of our last day out, we listen to the weather forecast: winds mostly on our nose and waves forecast at two to four feet with moderate chop. I leave that last part out. Our choices are to go up the Intracoastal or go "outside." The ICW route is smoother, but it will take us far longer to get from Miami to Ft. Lauderdale. The ocean route is faster, but choppy.

We agree to try the ocean route first. If it is too rough when leaving Government Cut, we will turn around and head to the Intracoastal. Though by the time we get to the Atlantic, we have no choice but to continue on the ocean route. As much time as it will take to get back to the ICW and then head up to Lauderdale, we will miss our flight home. Will the

last leg of our trip be so rough that it ruins any future possibilities? With fingers crossed, we head North.

The weather forecast is very accurate—especially the moderate chop part—and our 39-foot Dufour has a lackluster 23-horsepower engine. The trip up the coast is slow going. We still may miss our flight.

To steady the boat's rocking, we raise the mainsail to the second reef. We get a little lift out of it, so we raise the main all the way. After about an hour, the wind veers ever so slightly, giving us enough lift that we unfurl the jib. At one point the winds freshen enough that we start to heel over. Though the speed is nice, heeling, in combination with the chop, is too much of a strange sensation. The jib is reefed; the traveler eased.

We keep as close to shore as we dare, looking for the smoothest water. The ride up is rougher than the ride down, but it is tolerable. We even manage to avoid a small rainstorm. After a light lunch and lots of crackers, the Outer Bar Cut entrance to Port Everglades is in sight. We may actually make our flight.

Three challenges lay ahead: the fuel dock, getting a drawbridge open and docking at the charter office. My wife is at the helm. As she crosses over to get fuel, she dodges traffic going the opposite way on the ICW like a pro. Kinetic energy still takes some getting used to and we tag the fuel dock with a glancing blow. It has probably been tagged before—and will be again. A little fuel, a little scuff mark and we are on our way.

We try to hail the bridge operator on the hand-held VHF and only get static. After some radio-use coaching, my wife is able to inform the bridge operator of our arrival, using the ship's radio. It is 25 minutes until the next opening—the published 15-minute interval just a suggestion. We do a few 360s—penalty turns for arriving early—and eventually the bridge opens. Just a few miles and we are at the charter dock.

On a Sunday night after a holiday weekend, the charter dock is hull to hull. It being on a river with a steady current across the end of all the slips is no help either. Thankfully, the charter operator is there to catch the dock lines. I take the helm, maintain minimum steerage speed, use a touch of reverse thrust, and we are in the slip with no one hurt and nothing damaged.

We make it through our test vacation. My wife will go on a sailing trip again. Next stop, the BVIs. See you there.