

## **Cruising the Crew Lists**

By Sherry McKillop

It is no small commitment of time and money to leave your “land life” behind to pursue a cruising lifestyle. Whether you desire to crew on someone else’s boat, or are the skipper of your own, you are most likely out to have fun and adventure, not expose yourself to mutiny.

How does that population of men and women with sailing aspirations near and far, find a cruising partner who embodies that rare combination of intelligence, humor, sense of adventure, freedom, ability, and courage to sail, possibly in the open seas? It’s the stuff a sailor’s dreams are made of, yet all too often difficult to find. The reasons for seeking sailing partnerships are varied. Some skippers are seeking assistance in getting the boat from one place to another; others are looking for company and possibly romance. Some crew want to gain experience sailing to exotic destinations, while others are looking for a vacation. With the expansive reach of the Internet, sailors are no longer limited to postings on yacht club bulletin boards to find crew or a boat looking for crew. However, with increased access come associated pitfalls.

There are many things sailors can do to more successfully navigate the waters in securing a crew or passage. The following advice has been compiled from the author’s personal experience, as well as from interviews with both full and part-time cruising skippers and cruising crew.

### Aids to Successful Cruising Partnerships

An invitation has been extended and responded to – the excitement and anticipation of sharing a sailing adventure permeates your thoughts. While the sort of person who undertakes this type of journey could be classified as a risk-taker, there is no need to put your self in harm’s way. We’ve all heard a story or two about cruising partnerships gone horribly wrong; women in particular seem more vulnerable to the risks. To help prevent that from happening to you, there are clear steps to take in the due diligence process. The longer the cruise the more detail you may want to collect. The point is, spend some serious time performing the research; what you find may delight or surprise you.

### Learning about Skipper or Crew

There is no substitute for meeting a potential sailing partner in person - ahead of time. However, in many cases, skippers are already in transit and this is not possible. A place to begin gathering information on a prospective sailing partner is on the Internet. This step should be taken even if you’ve had a chance to meet in person. The following excerpt from an e-mail I received demonstrates why. “I’m writing to warn you to be careful. In 2001 a man responded to my listing, we met and I thought life was grand...Unfortunately, I wasn’t aware that this man had a history - a very serious one. After he got all my money and ID, he beat me, tortured me, and left me for dead - penniless, with only the clothing on my back and no ID in a foreign country.” While this is an extreme case, it emphasizes the point that it is worthwhile to be serious about gathering information. You may want to consider purchasing an Internet background check which range anywhere from \$10 - \$300+). You can get this information from sites like: [www.efindoutthetruth.com](http://www.efindoutthetruth.com), [www.knowx.com](http://www.knowx.com), [www.usapeoplesearch.com](http://www.usapeoplesearch.com), [www.peoplefinders.com](http://www.peoplefinders.com), and [www.zabasearch.com](http://www.zabasearch.com) to name a few. You can also post a query on the sailing forum section of a crew list site.

Basic information can be gathered by communicating, either by e-mail or phone. Use the opportunity to ask a wide variety of questions regarding sailing experience and/or cruising program/aspirations. Pay attention to the attitude being expressed – is it positive, hopeful, pessimistic, excited, controlling, energetic?

Given the large percentage of single male sailors pursuing their cruising dream, and if you are a woman, it may be appropriate to determine if either one of you is interested in the possibility of romance. Crew lists like those in “Latitude 38” provide the opportunity for skippers to list “unattached and unopposed to the possibility of a friendship blossoming” as one of the attributes of potential crew. If romance is not a consideration for you, be clear about it up front.

Questions to ask regarding experience and objectives:

- How long have you been sailing?
- What kinds of sailing experience do you have?
- How long have you been on, or planning your cruising journey?
- What is your objective in having crew aboard?
- What is your cruising style?

- What is your objective in crewing?
- What skills, talents or abilities can you share that might enhance the cruise?

Asking the right questions is a good place to start but there are occasions when someone will tell you what they think you want to hear. A good way to get a third party perspective is to request contact information of the last 3-4 people with whom the skipper/crew has sailed. This is different than asking for references, which are usually selected from people who are guaranteed to say something nice. Speaking with people who have most recently sailed with your potential skipper or crew will provide a current, and hopefully more accurate picture. Try to get a sense of how the person handles him/herself while at sea. If you are a female, I recommend you ask to communicate with any women the skipper has sailed with recently.

Some questions to ask of previous skippers/crew:

- Describe your experience in sailing and working with Skipper/Crew.
- What, if any, were the negative aspects of the sail? Were there unusual circumstances contributing to that?
- How did the skipper/crew conduct themselves with you?
- Was the consumption of alcohol an issue?
- Is the skipper/crew organized?
- Did crew follow directions?
- Did crew get seasick? Did they recover or become incapacitated?
- Is the skipper competent?
- Was the boat well maintained?

Logistics permitting, select a date to meet, preferably on the boat, and go for a sail. One skipper requires his crew to arrive three to seven days prior to departure. His boat is ready for the voyage and during that three to seven day period they depart the dock each day for training and shakedown. "I tell my crew everyday to be prepared, because today we may not come back to the dock." Sailing together ahead of the departure date allows both skipper and crew to observe first hand how each person operates. Both parties can then make an informed decision on whether to continue.

The biggest regret sailors express, having to do with skipper or crew, is not trusting their instincts. "Gut feelings" are most commonly ignored when a skipper is working against a departure deadline, or otherwise rushing headlong into their dream of sailing with a partner. One skipper, who found himself in that situation, took the only crew person available. After suffering a long list of sheer bungling by the crew, which created several hundred dollars worth of damage, the crew was put ashore at the earliest opportunity.

Taken to the next level, going against your instincts can be dangerous, even life threatening. I participated in a delivery where the skipper was being pressured by the owner to select a final crewmember before airfares increased. Running out of time and going against his instincts, the skipper chose a person who seemed to make a continual point of disrupting the atmosphere on board. In addition, this person's lack of quality sailing skills likely contributed to a dismasting, resulting in major injury to himself and a mid-ocean rescue. I have collected numerous stories which illustrate the importance of paying attention to your instincts!

### Learning about the Vessel

The condition of the vessel is of great importance. Those who have had a mishap in the open seas know it can be many hours before help may arrive. Depending on the financial means of the boat owner, you will find vessels in a variety of conditions, from meticulously maintained to those needing immediate and major attention. In addition, some boat owners sail with a minimum of safety equipment while others have back-ups. Most sailors are keenly aware of the safety issues at stake when maintenance is neglected. However, there are those willing to take more risks. As potential crew, you may want to know which type you are considering sailing with. In addition to asking for a copy of a most recent survey, the following are some questions to ask regarding the vessel.

- What kind of boat do you have?
- When was it last hauled out?
- What passages has it recently completed?
- How old is the rigging?
- When was the engine last maintained?

- Do you have/use a water maker?
- Do you have: a life raft, dinghy, outboard, Radar, GPS, EPIRB, SSB?

### Clear Communication and Expectations

Once under way, a lack of clear communication can be a significant cause of conflict between skippers and crew. This is especially true in the areas of expectations, rules, routines, and jobs onboard.

Skippers, your crew arrive expecting you to give direction. This includes a boat orientation, communicating watch schedules, rules, jobs on board, and how you prefer the boat and crew to operate. While observant crew can easily pick up on a routine, if you see they have missed something, let them know. In the words of one crew who expresses it well for all, “Tell me what you want, don’t make me guess.” It’s unfair to expect crew to perform to standards and expectations you, the skipper, have not clearly communicated.

I recently had an experience where I had been on a boat for eight of fourteen days when I learned the skipper was irritated by the way I offered to help. He acknowledged my desire to be helpful and contribute. However, rather than saying, “Do you need help with that?” he wanted me to say, “Here, let me do that.” (Equally offensive to me) explaining that he didn’t “need” my help. While most agree this is nit-picky given the short length of our voyage, however, over a longer period of time it is just these sorts of issues that can create an atmosphere of tension.

In order to mitigate situations like the above, a good practice is to have a crew meeting within 48 hours after departure; on longer voyages plan to meet on a regular basis. The purpose of the meeting is to learn if everyone is happy with the way things are going and what adjustments might need to be considered. It is important to be honest with yourself about your motives in bringing up issues. If your motive is to simply make someone wrong, forget it – unless it has to do with safety. If you are bringing up an issue with the sincere hope of improving life on board, do it in a way that is kind. Be aware it can be disheartening for anyone to learn, after many days into the voyage, someone else is irritated by something they are doing.

### Compatibility

Second to good communication, compatibility issues are considered very important by both skippers and crew. The areas most commonly mentioned are: food, attitude, smoking, drinking and drugs.

When sailing, food is rightly considered a ritual reward and, short of arriving in port, the one thing that can aid in keeping morale high during difficult passages. Skippers unanimously agree that special dietary needs by crew add unnecessary headache. “On my boat everyone eats together and we eat the same thing,” says Captain Richard. In addition every crew, unless they work out an agreement with the skipper, is expected to share cooking chores.

Good attitude is spoken of often among sailors. People (skippers and crew) who are easy going, positive, willing to teach and learn, helpful, dependable, and flexible greatly contribute to the positive experience desired by

all. In addition, a sense of humor and not taking oneself too seriously, ranks very high in this category. Skippers and crew who possess these attributes are valued. In contrast, no one likes sailing with someone who operates independently and thinks they know it all. Veteran cruiser George Bakkus sums it up nicely by saying, “It is easier to get nice people who are inexperienced on board, and teach them to sail, than to bring on ‘rock star’ sailors who are jerks, and teach them to be nice.”

Lastly, it is safe to say all skippers have definite rules about smoking, alcohol and drugs; some forbid all of them. While cigarette smoke is offensive to non-smokers, some skippers will allow smoking on deck as long as it is downwind from fellow crewmates.

Because alcohol impairs agility, judgment, and safety, conservative skippers do not allow the consumption of it while under way. Other skippers allow a small amount of beer and wine to be consumed with meals.

As for drugs, no responsible skipper will allow them on board. Captain John Hill has only one rule written in stone: “No drugs on my boat.”

### Expenses

Who pays for what depends on a number of things. If the skipper seeking crew is earning money from the passage, sailing upwind for long passages, or needs the extra help, it is customary to pay travel and food expenses of crew. Beyond that just about anything can be negotiated. The most common arrangement for island hopping and destination cruising is skippers/owners pay boat expenses,

including dock fees, customs fees, fuel, and repairs. Crew pay their own travel expenses to and from the boat and share in the cost of provisions. It is advisable to come to a specific agreement about this before a commitment is made.

### Early or Unexpected Departure

Unfortunately, there are circumstances when crew or captain has to alter course. Personality conflicts and incompetency can create situations where a crewmember may be asked to leave the boat before reaching the agreed upon destination. If this happens, it is important to know that international law states the “ship” is responsible for paying to repatriate crew to their home country. One skipper who found himself in just that situation now has crew sign an agreement stating they have sufficient funds to get home. While this does not legally bind the skipper, it provides a place to begin negotiating.

### Casting Off the Bowlines

Preparing a boat for the cruising life involves a considerable amount of time. I recommend spending a proportionate amount of time preparing yourself for the human aspects you are likely to encounter. With any luck, you will avoid many of the pitfalls and increase the pleasure of the experience for everyone. If you feel, like many do, the potential rewards of finding someone to cruise with outweigh the potential risks, then pack your sea bag and set sail.

#### 1. Tips For Skippers:

- Give your crew a thorough boat orientation including M.O.B. procedures
- Communicate watch schedules, rules, jobs on board and boat operation preferences (preferably write them down and post them somewhere visible.)
- Have a crew meeting within 48 hours after departure to provide a feedback opportunity
- Communicate expectations for the passage/cruise

#### Tips For Crew:

- Don't assume your way is the “right” way
- If the Skipper has not given you a boat orientation, ask for one
- Ask for a crew meeting if the skipper has not initiated one
- Communicate if you lack experience or capability with anything being requested of you.
- Purchase additional trip insurance for injury
- Follow directions
- In most cases you are sailing in someone's home, treat it as such.

#### Popular Crew Lists:

- Sailing San Francisco: [www.sfsailing.com](http://www.sfsailing.com)
- Find A Crew Marine Crew & Boat Database: [www.findacrew.net](http://www.findacrew.net) (a subscription service)
- Boatcrew.com, An Ocean of Opportunities: [www.boatcrew.com](http://www.boatcrew.com)

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