

Crewing on Other People's Boats

By Charles J. Doane from Sail Magazine December 2019 issue



One of the first things I noticed when I started mucking about on sailboats big enough to be manned by more than one person is that it is much easier to crew than to skipper. Being one step removed from primary responsibility for the many things that can go wrong on a boat always makes for a more relaxing experience. Having twice crewed on boats that had to be abandoned, I can assure you such adventures are much more entertaining when you are not in charge.

Not that crewing on Other People's Boats (OPBs) is necessarily simple. People who are very good at it are not as hard to find as truly great skippers, but they are still valuable commodities. If you aspire to be one of these people, assuming

you already know a thing or two about sailing, there are a few discreet guidelines to follow that will keep crew invitations flowing in your direction.

First, always be honest about your capabilities, limitations and expectations. If you have limited experience, are prone to seasickness, have specific eating habits, need various medications to survive, etc., you must share that information with your skipper upfront. Similarly, if you need daily showers, a hair drier and an internet connection to make your stay aboard tolerable, you should make that clear before rather than after casting off.

It is clichéd to say so, but it really is true: the best crew leave a boat better than they found it. This may not be possible on a short race or day sail, but if you're spending days on an OPB, look for extracurricular jobs you can do that will improve the boat's condition. Whip the ends of lines that are fraying; clean up and organize some neglected locker or cupboard; wipe up behind the stove. Any action you take demonstrating that you care about the boat is sure to be noticed and will earn you major brownie points.

When it comes to line handling, make an effort to learn the skipper's habits. Watch what knots he or she uses and how lines are made up when not in use. Normally there's no one right way to do these things, but it's best on any OPB if they are done the same way. This is particularly important when coiling lines. If the skipper is flat-coiling lines left hand to right and you do it the other way, soon all lines will be nicely hockled and hard to use. When in doubt, or if you simply can't do it the skipper's way, coil down lines in a figure-8 so there is no bias in them.

As for the galley, you should never let the fact that you are a miserable cook excuse you from taking on chores in this department. Even if you can't cook a meal, you can help prepare and clean up after one. And when cleaning the galley—or yourself for that matter—it is best to use freshwater sparingly, even if the boat has a water maker. Likewise, even if the boat has a generator, be sure

to conserve electrical power whenever possible. Do not leave lights on or taps running. Water makers and generators do sometimes break down, and any alert skipper will notice and appreciate your careful use of resources.

Lastly but not least: never be shy about how the toilet works. If you encounter any sort of problem, ask for help. Regardless of your gender, it is most polite to sit down to pee. Or, if you're male, you might try kneeling before the bowl, which allows you to squirt waste directly into it while simultaneously pumping the toilet, which is a great advantage. If your pride prevents you from doing either of these things, you should at least carefully clean up any mess you make.

I remember one rough passage I skippered with one crewmember who pretended to be very experienced at the dock, but proved much less so once at sea. The defining moment of his tenure aboard came after he went below to relieve himself our first afternoon out.

“I accidentally pissed all over everything,” he announced sheepishly, sticking his head up into the cockpit. “What should I do about it?”

You can imagine my answer. And no, I did not ever invite him aboard again.