

A sailboat is visible on the right side of the image, sailing on the ocean. The background is a sunset sky with scattered clouds, and the sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow. The overall scene is serene and peaceful.

Sailing LESSONS LEARNED

By Riley Whitelum
(and contributions by Elayna C.)

READ FIRST!

We are not here claiming to be some sort of sailing authority doling out advice. I still consider myself a student and fear I will rue the day I say aloud that I am not.

This is intended for the RANK AMATEUR who may not have possibly never even been sailing at all. Hopefully you may gain confidence from the following information especially knowing that Elayna and I learned it on-the-fly ourselves.

This is in no way, shape, or form, something that you should use to 'learn how to sail' as there's plenty of good material on that available from people who are qualified to teach these concepts much better than I.

This brief guide is just something I made for simple entertainment and pleasure, coming from someone who went from not knowing how to sail to crossing the Atlantic a little over a year later.

- Riley (and Elayna).

Living on board a sail boat

- Love Elayna

The Transition

The first question I get from girls (and some boys) when I tell them my situation is “whats it like living on a boat, like, how do you shower and stuff?!” Which I for one think is a silly question to be the first that comes to mind, as we are SURROUNDED BY WATER.

Lucky for me, I grew up doing a lot of camping on the coast; sleeping in a tent, sometimes in a ‘swag’ (a small tent kind of thingy), and cooking my food over an open fire.

Plus, prior to meeting Riley I lived in my van and traveled Australia for five months, so I would say I’ve adjusted quite well.

For someone who likes the comforts of barista made coffee, throwing your toast in the toaster, enjoying air conditioned or heated spaces, washing your clothes in a washing machine with fabric softener so they smell nice and pretty, and updating your Facebook status regularly with “Oh my god, best day sailing! look at this pic of me sailing! (obnoxious picture here of yourself sailing with a sailors hat on here)” ... I suggest you book a room on a cruise ship for a few weeks.

This is whats up.

Eating

We have very basic utensils on board, you know those basic kitchen sets you can buy at Target thats usually 20 pieces or less... Ours are of decent quality and stainless so they don’t rust in the salt water—because on crossings we use saltwater to wash all of our dishes and lightly rinse off with fresh water afterwards.

We don’t have any appliances that need to be plugged in like a toaster, slow cooker, rice cooker etc.

We have pots, pans and a gimbal stove for cooking. We also have a medium size fridge and small freezer which we are extremely grateful for, which are considered luxuries on most sailboats.

Jobs in the kitchen seem to take five times as long as they should on land in a house. Something as simple as making eggs on toast can take up to half an hour on passage. Removing numerous objects from fridge to reach for the eggs, searching for appropriate utensils in our utensils cupboard, boiling a pot of water to poach eggs and lightly oiling a pan to flip bread several times before they’re burnt enough.

I won’t even begin to tell you how I walk up the stairs holding the plate when we are on a hardcore

lean, to deliver it to Riley.

Since being in the Caribbean, our diet mostly consists of fruit, veg and fish. Most of the islands are very green, tropical and are home to hundreds of different fruit and veg plants. Going for a trek through the forrest with no provisions would be no dramas at all, you would have enough food and fresh water for weeks. Just watch out for the Rastafarians, you don't want to be stealing there cocoa beans!

Since buying our awesome fruit nets that hang from the gally roof, keeping fresh food 'fresh' has never been so easy (and decorative). I recommend buying one or two of these. I love walking down into the gally and smelling the aromas of pineapple and coconuts. We find most of our fresh food at the markets or in little road side stalls that seem to be everywhere in the Caribbean. Super cheap and always local fresh produce. We catch our fish by trawling or speargun and we eat everything we catch.

In the Mediterranean fresh produce is harder to find, but there are these massive supermarkets that sell anything and everything that we do have fun shopping in when stocking up the boat. Riley gets a bit excited when its a french supermarket and they have good ham, cheese and wine. On the hunt underwater, fish were a lot harder to find. However, after throwing a few lures off the back of the boat Tuna seemed to be jumping on board for us to eat constantly. We ended up getting a bit sick of tuna.

Showering

We have two heads on board. They consist of a toilet, sink and shower.

The heads are quite small in space, you can't sing and dance around in them whilst showering and the basin tap actually doubles as the shower head. You just pull it out and up as its attached to a long hose, clip it to a little attachment on the wall and you can shower under it. When we don't have guests and it's just Riley and I (which is most of the time) we space out and use a head each. But rarely do we actually use the showers since being in the sunny, hot Caribbean.

We shower outside, off the back of the boat each morning or afternoon using biodegradable/enviro safe soap products so we don't kill all the cute little fish swimming around and just rinse off with fresh water inside.

In the Mediterranean when the weather got cold and we couldn't swim, we showered a lot inside with hot water that gets heat only from running the engine for a short period of time. Which meant we hardly ever had hot water because Riley refuses to use the engine most of the time. I will admit, those times we stayed at marinas I hugged the jetty and shower key we received on arrival.

Music

Music is very important for sailing! We value it highly on our list of essentials on board. It can turn your cold, awful time on watch where you're getting splashed with each wave into one of the best sails you've had to date.

tent and your sailing comfortably. Losing your sense of hearing can be dangerous when conditions are quite rough and you need to concentrate and listen to whats happening!

Riley and I have different tastes in music, so we've had to make compromises and sacrifices when picking appropriate music for sailing. Here is what we both like, but if Riley were to write this list he would throw in a fair few different and in my opinion 'strange' artists that I refuse to listen to, but I still love you Riles.

We mostly listen to:

Cloud Control

Bob Dylan

Rodriguez

Boy and Bear

John Butler

Broken Bells

Elliot Smith

The White Stripes

Tame Impala

Fat Freddies Drop

Pink Floyd

Nick Cave

Gareth Lidiard

Neil Young

London Grammar

Jake Bugg

Elton John

Eddy Current

The Doors

City and Colour

Cat Stevens

Bon Iver

Big Scary

Ben Harper

The Beatles

Beach House

Angus and Julia Stone

Xavier Rudd

Nick Cave

And the list goes on... Personally, my favourites plus the albums are:

Beach House - Teen Dream

Cloud Control - Dream Cave, Bliss Release

John Butler - Tin Shed Tales

Boy and Bear - Harlequin Dream

I like to rotate and repeat these on repeat lately and Riley sometimes gets annoyed.

Lessons Learned!

1. WHAT BOAT TO BUY
2. GETTING STARTED
3. MAINTENANCE
4. TIME TO LEAVE
5. INSTRUMENTS
6. WEATHER
7. ANCHORING
8. BOOKS
9. HINTS, TIPS and TRICKS



INTRODUCTION:

Sailing, if you mean “moving a boat using the wind” doesn’t take much. If you pull your sails up, you’re going to start moving ... so long as there’s some wind.

I described it when I was still working offshore to some welders; it’s similar to welding in that anyone can pick up a welder and join 2 bits of metal but to become an expert will take you the rest of your life.

That being said, it only takes a quick stroll around a marina to come across some of the drunken lunatics who have done huge crossings to see that it can be done by nearly *anyone*, including yourself.

One thing I should mention here is that if you plan to be making passages outside of a well-trafficked harbour or inland waters, and decide to venture into the open ocean, buy an EPIRB!

*buy an EPIRB

*contact people on channel 16 on your VHF if you’re in the shit; this is a no nonsense emergency channel monitored by most authorities and other sailors.

WHAT BOAT TO BUY:

La Vagabonde is a Beneteau Cyclades.

She likes to travel at 5-7 knots and has 75m² (816ft²) of sail area. She has 2 separate toilets and 4 cabins.

This was good for me in the beginning as I was thinking that I could charter the boat but that has proved to be difficult. To organise two separate couples to holiday on your boat is very difficult, involving hundreds of emails back and forth until we could work out a date and place that suits all of us.

To do this properly one would have to postpone your circumnavigation and set up a legitimate business which just isn't part of the plan for us.

Boat Size

If I had my time again I would have bought about a 38 foot boat instead of the 43 foot one that I have. I could have saved a lot on the actual price and with only one toilet and three rooms instead of two toilets and four rooms the whole boat 'feels' the same size.

The total sail area on a smaller boat is going to be less which makes everything easier when things go wrong (and they will).

This is the advice I am giving to a friend of mine from school right now actually who is going to buy a boat in Europe and meet up with Elayna and I somewhere ... Fair winds Oakey!

One of the reasons for buying a bigger boat is that as length decreases so does the comfort level in bad weather, so the bigger boats are more pleasant to spend long amounts of time in but don't let that stop you if you can only obtain a smaller vessel.

We met a French guy in Cape Verde single handing a 25 footer who was anchored in the best spot because his keel was so shallow.

We also met a girl who tried to get from the Canary's to Cape Verde in a canoe!

It will all depend on what you intend to do on your yacht, if you're sailing in smaller lakes or even sticking to somewhere like the Caribbean, a very small boat would be fine.

If you want to live aboard for a decade and cross some big oceans, the boat is now your home so something a little bigger might be wise.

Manufacturer

Unless you know what you are doing or have a good friend who does then the run-of-the-mill production line boats are best, I think.

The more common and popular the vessel model is, the easier to re-sell and you'll have an easier

time knowing what you should be paying roughly.

Also, with popular vessel makes, because there are so many of them made, any problems have been published online somewhere.

Research here is paramount, obviously.

A great website to look for Yachts is:

www.yachtworld.com

This is where I found La Vagabonde.

GETTING STARTED:

After I bought La Vagabonde and the paper work was finalised, straight away I set sail off the coast of Monopoli (Italy), making all the mistakes, reading books, and learning from others as I went.

It was how I wanted to do it but also perhaps a little reckless and there were times (particularly anchoring) when I could have done serious damage to her.

If you lack this confidence or are a little more circumspect than I, have a play around on your Yacht in calm conditions; in this way you will enjoy yourself and become familiar with your vessel.

The last thing you want is to get blasted and scared after your first sail.

A place like Croatia or the Caribbean is the perfect place to learn as there are plenty of islands and nice spots to see that aren't too far apart.

If you're sailing in a lake or a protected bay or harbour, just go out and have some fun messing around.

Don't be afraid to make mistakes, everyone makes mistakes (I still do).

Do manoeuvres like tacking and gybing, man over-board simulations, and try to always have in mind *'if the wind was to pick up by 10 knots here what would I do?'* or *'if that containership alters course here what do we do?'*

I had only intended to do very easy and small sails when I first started but as your confidence grows you start thinking bigger and realise what these boats can actually accomplish for you.

This will give you time to practice everything in a safe place where you feel comfortable. Gaining confidence in all departments of sailing is the main thing here. Practice anchoring, coming alongside a quay, dock, or wharf, practice 'mediterranean mooring,' and maybe even head out in rough conditions.

Also, get to know the people in the area you bought the boat.

Have a beer at the bar because if you have someone to call if the engine doesn't start you will feel a lot happier!

If you are in a hurry to learn like I was, then live onboard and sail all day.

I flatly refused to turn on the engine for most of our Europe trip and it still hurts me deeply when I have to. By living onboard you will familiarise yourself with the systems that are really the key to happy cruising.

MAINTENANCE

Maintenance of your Yacht's systems is the hard part.

I'm talking about power, batteries, fridge, plumbing and all the other things that make life bearable onboard.

Sailing is the easy part in my humble opinion.

You will either have to be able to repair these systems yourself or have the money to pay someone to do it for you.

It's best to have a basic knowledge of the electrics, mechanics and simple sail repair to be able to make repairs if help is a long way off. Further comment here is out of the scope of this small report but if you keep reading I'll share with you some good books to have a look at.

*This is another reason to make friends with the locals. I got a German single handed sailor to teach me how to mend a sail for 15 Euro.

TIME TO LEAVE

Once you know what ropes to pull and when and you have gained confidence, you might like to try a few overnight crossings.

My first overnight passage was down the coast of Albania singlehanded and I didn't sleep for about 28 hours!

One thing I learned before I bought my boat is that at night if you see a red light, the vessel in question is heading to the left and if you see green the vessel is heading to the right. They have green and red lights the same as your yacht.

We always have someone on watch at night and the rule of thumb is to check 360 degrees for other vessels every 15 minutes.

15 mins is roughly how long it would take for a fast moving cargo ship, or ferry in Mediterranean waters, to get close to you from out of site originally.

There is an entire book on 'Collision Regulations' but I just try not to hit anyone. It would become more important in Sydney Harbour but if there is that many boats I don't really want to go there anyway.

When you have got a few overnight crossings done you will start to feel more confident. You will realise that the Atlantic is just like doing a few of these in a row. It is a seminal moment, as the world seems to shrink.

I think that it is a bit like falling in love in that when it is time to head off for good you will just know.

*try don't hit anyone!

INSTRUMENTS

Depth Sounder

Your sounder will tell you the depth of the water that you are *currently* in.

Chart Plotter & GPS

Your chart plotter will tell you the depths of water *everywhere* around you.

There's an app for both Android and iOS called "Navionics" for your smart phone or tablet and is a good backup and is perfectly acceptable even as a primary GPS & Chartplotter.

The inbuilt GPS on the iPad and iPhone work fine as well, they just use a lot of battery.

*ON SOME CHART PLOTTERS if you haven't zoomed in enough it won't point out that there is a rock there. Zoom in!

WEATHER:

The main website that we have used for weather has been:

www.passageweather.com

This gives a large outline of the weather conditions that you can expect for a passage or general area.

There are other websites that we have used that are good for specific locations like **poseidon.com** when we were in Turkey and Greece or **windguru.com** for the Caribbean.

One time we saw purple on the weather chart that we were encountering on our first overnight sail from Crete to Malta.

It was from the passage weather website and I sent it to my cousin on Facebook with the caption “haven’t seen purple before!”. Elayna and I were planning to leave Crete and I had never seen Purple on the chart before.

I had seen plenty of red but never purple. It was 50Knot winds! We were sailing against the prevailing winds and there were storms popping up all over our area of the Mediterranean. Fortunately we found a break in the weather and got a tail breeze most of the way to Malta.

We even had to motor for a while.

REEFING

Reefing is when you make your sail smaller so less wind is blowing against it.

Most all sails have one or two reef points but if your Yacht doesn’t have a third reef in its main sail then I would highly recommend getting one put in by a local sailmaker.

Before getting this done in Sardinia, La Vagabonde started to be completely overpowered in about 30 knots of wind.

Since installing a third reef, we have since sailed in over 40 knots on the beam and felt pretty comfortable, so if you’re planning to sail in heavier weather, get a third reef in your sail put in!

*Always check the weather.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Another website that I should mention here is:

www.cruisersforum.com

It is an encyclopedia of information.

Its a forum where you can ask a question and often hours later there will be half a dozen replies from genuine sailors/cruisers/mechanics etc who are only too happy to help.

I've used this and received very helpful answers!

ANCHORING

If you're new to all this then when its calm and your in a nice protected anchorage, don a mask and a snorkel and watch how your anchor behaves as its trying to set itself.

You will see as the anchor bites, and it is good to have a picture of whats happening underwater rather than just imagining it.

When you repeat this process from onboard you will be able to "feel" when your anchor chain slides over rocks or if your anchor has jagged some reef rather than dug down nicely into the earth.

Our anchoring process;

1. Drop your anchor onto the seafloor whilst GENTLY reversing, always aiming for a sandy patch.
2. Let out 3/1 of scope (this means if the depth sounder says 15 feet, you let out 45 feet (15x3) of your chain or rode.
3. Keep reversing and when you feel it 'bite' let out a heap more chain.
4. Now reverse back on it again and rev your engine up to 2 or 3,000 revs and hold it there for a while. Line up a few things with a stationary object and keep an eye on the boats around you. If your not moving, you're all good.
5. If you wish to go ashore and leave your boat or want to sleep then let out at least 7/1 of chain. 5m of water = 35m of chain out.

The more the better though. I rarely have any chain left in the locker anymore as I almost always use the full 60m just to be sure.

(Some things I wish someone had told me before I left:)

6. Attach a 'snubber' to your chain. This is essentially just a rope from the chain on the bow of your boat to a tie off point on boat, like a cleat. This takes pressure off your windlass (chain winch) and in case of nasty weather will reduce shock loading on your boat.

7. GO AND DIVE ON YOUR ANCHOR if possible.

When I say this I don't mean free dive down to look at it I simply mean to swim on the surface and have a look with a snorkel and mask.

Brands

What I have come to learn is that there are 3 anchors that are all very similar. Rocna, Mantus and Mantis. Get one of these and get it WAY heavier than your yacht needs. For example I have an anchor that is good for up to a 15T boat and my boat is 9T.

Consider a 'storm' anchor. We now have an extra 30m of anchor chain we attached by a chain link (don't worry these are stronger than the chain and run through the windlass {anchor winch}).

BOOKS

I have read and have onboard:

The Royal Yachting Associations Diesel Engine Handbook

The RYA's Basic Sailing

RYA's Offshore Sailing

Modern Marine Weather (David Burch)

Instant Storm Forecasting (Alan Watts)

Storm Tactics Handbook (Lin and Larry Pardey)

Boat Owners Mechanical and Electrical Manual (Nigel Nalder)

The Voyagers Handbook (Beth A. Leonard).

I found them all very helpful and have read the Voyagers Handbook several times, probably more.

Dove

Riddle of the sands

A voyage for Madmen (Peter Nichols) is a cracking good read. The heart wrenching slip into madness by the deuteragonist was memorable.

The old man and the sea by Earnest Hemingway MUST be the best book set on the ocean. I often talk to Santiago on passage.

*if you don't know stuff read about it

HINTS, Tips, and TRICKS

-RESEARCH AND TALK TO PEOPLE

e.g. When we got to Crete I didn't even know it was a wild spot weather wise but if I had of read the guide I had sitting next to me the whole trip I would have.

-DONT BE IN A HURRY any outside influences should be shut off whilst studying the weather report.

-WATCH THE SKY because a weather report won't tell you about a cloud nearby. If it starts raining take a reeve. It usually means a random gust of wind.

-WATCH THE OCEAN particularly around islands this will foretell wind acceleration etc. During the day you can see the line on the water where the wind changes.

-WIND ACCELERATION around an island is an amazing phenomenon and everyone should be aware of it. I might even do a bit of a youtube movie on this I find it so incredible. As an island splits a large volume of moving wind it is held up in places and accelerates in others. Believe me it can go from 5 to 30 Knots in no time at all.

-LISTEN TO YOUR BOAT she will tell you if something is wrong. An odd creak was the first sign our rudder stock had worn out its wooden surround.

-HAVE AN EPIRB first thing you get if you're going into the open ocean.

In summing up probably the best thing I could say is that your Yacht and your skills are never going to be perfect.

No person is ever going to be a doctor, mechanic, electrician, naval architect and sail captain. At some stage you are going to have to leave port.

The first time it is scary, but you will find it is equally rewarding.

The end

We hope you've enjoyed this guide and gotten something out of it. If you don't mind, give us any feedback you have on our FB page or website: sailing-lavagabonde.com

- Love Riley and Elayna and LaVagabonde and Bilgey and Alfred and Cunningham (R.I.P Cunno) and Cunningham II.