

# SAILING

# LETT



## When Family Becomes Crew

**ONBOARD LIVING** The people you love are about to cook, eat, sleep, and live in an area that's probably smaller than your current bedroom. Ready? **BY SUSAN DETWILER**

**T**HE WARM OCTOBER SUN was a welcome sight after the storm and rains that followed us down the California coast. We were anchored off Avila Beach, near San Luis Obispo.

"We could just skip Santa Barbara and head right to the Channel Islands," I mused as we contemplated the next leg of our journey. We'd left San Francisco earlier that month, hopping down the coast for an eight-month cruise to Mexico. The three of us—my husband, Todd; our 10-year-

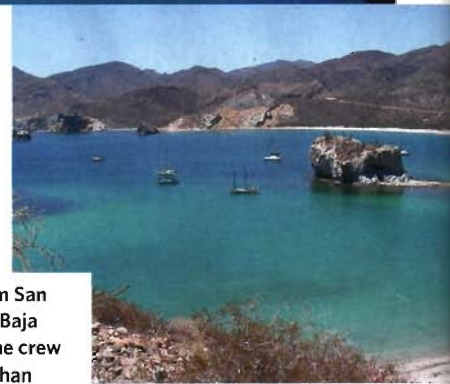
old daughter, Sequoia; and I—had been sailing on San Francisco Bay since buying our boat in 2000. Though we'd chartered in the British Virgin and Leeward islands of the Caribbean, this was our first cruising adventure aboard *Sugata*, our Hans Christian 38.

"It's quite a bit farther to Santa Cruz," Todd claimed.

"It's like 20 miles farther," I said, dismissing his concern.

"But we need diesel," he threw in.

**En route from San Francisco to Baja California, the crew faced more than seamanship issues.**



"The forward tank is totally full," I retorted.

He sighed. "You know," he finally admitted, "I really just need a couple of nights in a marina. I want to tie the boat up, have a hot shower, then go to a restaurant and get an ice-cold beer!"

Luckily, my compassionate brain censored my salty tongue, which would've responded, "Oh, does Captain Princess need a shower?"

Instead, I quickly ran the numbers in my head: The slip would run us about \$30; at about \$5 a burrito, we could get dinner for \$15; decent beer was \$4 a pint, and there was no way Todd would stop at one. Our eight-month cruise would soon be a four-month trip if we kept spending at that rate!

Still, eight months of sailing with a miserable captain is more like a prison sentence than a fun-filled adventure.

This called for diplomacy. "Of course, honey," I said lightly, hoping my tone didn't convey my thoughts. "And I hear Santa Barbara is beautiful."

We plotted a course for Santa Barbara, and we motored around Point Conception at midnight in a dead calm. I had to admit that the hot shower felt great, and the omelet at the Breakwater Cafe not only hit the spot—it also buried it in cheesy goodness.



With communication channels clear and open, even the captain can enjoy the downwind run.

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When we prepared for cruising, we read all the standard books and dutifully watched the Lin and Larry Pardey DVD library. As we'd anticipated, in the weeks since we'd cast off, we'd learned new sailing skills and figured out how to schedule night watches and stay fed while under way. But there was another, unanticipated dimension to our voyage: Our family was becoming more than a family. We were becoming a crew.

Being a crew means working together, as a team, to reach a shared goal. On a raceboat, captains can rule with total authority, yelling and screaming at the top of their lungs. The race is over in a couple of hours, and the crew can have a beer at the clubhouse before heading to separate homes. Not so on a cruising boat—try that yelling and screaming with the family, and a captain might as well hand the helm over to his divorce attorney.

As a cruising family, we've had to learn to be more considerate of each other. To be a happy crew, we have to accommodate everyone's needs. Sometimes that means staying in a marina because Captain Yacht Club needs a good night's sleep and Internet access, even though I prefer anchoring out. It can also mean that after a long passage, when both of us would rather be nap-

ping, we instead launch the dinghy and go ashore so Sequoia can run on the beach.

These things sound easy when you're sitting on your big, comfy couch while reading a sailing magazine, your kids off in their own rooms playing video games and your spouse out drinking wine with her book-club friends.

But consider the changes that cruising brings. Your family is about to cook, eat, sleep, and live in an area that's probably smaller than your current bedroom. You'll no longer go to work, school, or the gym, so you'll be together all the time.

Add to that the stress of inevitable boat problems and financial worries. Throw in the exasperation of learning that your calendar is useless for scheduling, as the weather gods now rule your movements. Top it all off with the physical discomforts of being tired, hungry, and seasick.

If you face those challenges as opportunities, it can make the difference between the trip of a lifetime and a trip that just feels like it's taking a lifetime.

Families about to become a crew can benefit from these tips:

**Don't be an indispensable captain:**

On our first overnight passage from Monterey to Morro Bay, the wind was light as we headed out at sundown. Gradually, the breeze filled in right on our stern, and with it, the seas increased. This combination of wind direction and seas was too much for our autopilot to handle, so we had to steer by hand. It was thrilling, feeling the boat rise and charge ahead as she rode each wave. The moonless sky sparkled with stars, and our wake glowed with bioluminescence. My three hours on watch flew by.

Unfortunately, Captain Worrywart hadn't slept a wink; he was too concerned that the wind and seas would keep building and I wouldn't be able to handle the boat. I went below, tucked myself into the lee cloth, and fell asleep right away. At daybreak, the roll of the boat woke me. I put on my foul-weather gear and headed up into the cockpit. Captain Sleep Deprived was like a zombie at the helm. The wind had died, and with it our speed; each swell caught the boat and rolled us uncomfortably. When I suggested that we bring in the jib and start the motor so he could go below and get some sleep, Todd didn't argue. After just two hours of shut-eye, he was a new man.

**Encourage crewmates to learn something new:** It's amazing how just a tidbit of knowledge can get crewmem-

bers much more involved with the boat. Early on in our cruise, Todd asked Sequoia to flip the switch to turn on the solar charger. After she found the knob and turned it, he asked her to look at the battery monitor and tell him how many amps we were generating. After a short explanation of what "amps" are, Sequoia was hooked. Now she keeps an eye on the monitor, and on sunny days she'll exclaim, "Wow, we're making 10 amps!"

An added bonus is that she's now much more careful about leaving lights on than she ever was on land because she can watch the monitor and gauge the light as it draws amps.

**Talk it through:** It was a perfect fall day when we headed to Marina del Rey: sunny and warm, with just enough wind to sail. As we approached the harbor entrance, Todd seemed quiet. "What's bothering you?" I asked. "Oh, I'm just

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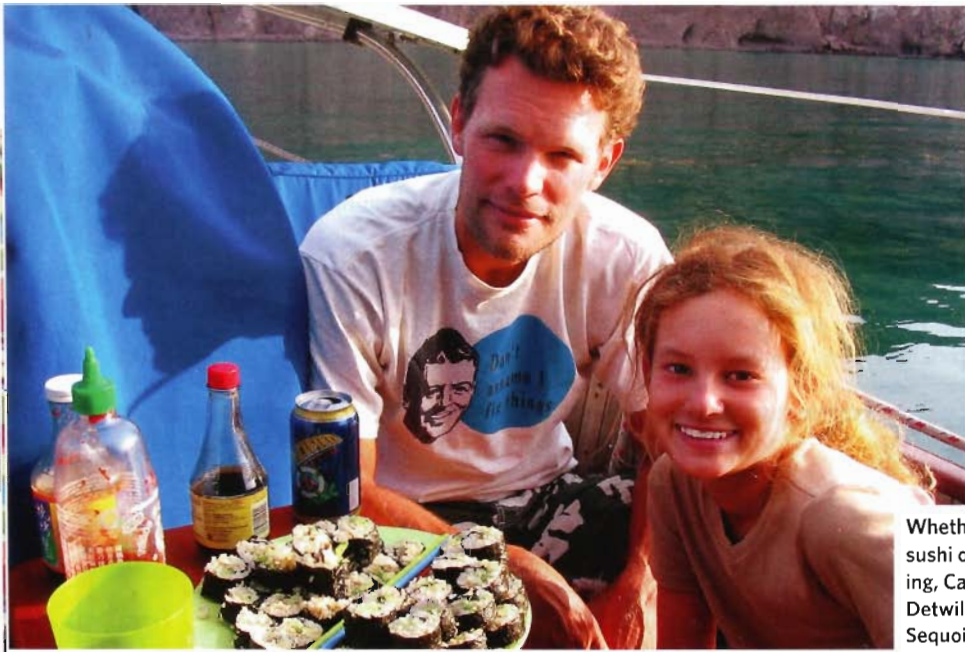
Richard Mulvania installed a UK-Halsey Flasher asymmetric poleless (honest, Richard, you don't need one) cruising spinnaker on his Golden Skye in 2002 and sailed off to Mexico, winning PHRF in the Ensenada Race along the way.

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Whether making sushi or navigating, Captain Todd Detwiler and crew Sequoia Detwiler are in it for the long haul.

thinking about this entrance” was his reply. I thought to myself, what’s there to think about? Keep red on the right, and go in. Trying to be supportive, I asked, “Really? What do you mean?”

I was blown away by his answer, which involved plans for engine failure, the ebb-

ing tide, a consideration of the current wind angle as well as speculation about the wind in the marina. He made no mention of dinner or margaritas. How could we have made it that far, when all along I’d been so clueless?

Upon discussing it further, it seemed

obvious that what we need to do is “talk it through.” Before doing a maneuver such as entering a harbor or anchoring, we talk about how we’ll accomplish our task and what we’ll watch out for while we do it. During the maneuver, we keep the conversation going so that Sequoia and I can learn about Todd’s thought process and Todd can benefit from all eyes and ears aboard; Sequoia is great at spotting hazards from the bowsprit. After we’ve finished, we talk about how it went, what we’ve learned, and what we might do differently the next time.

**Practice clear communication:** Relationship experts always stress the importance of “communication,” and on a boat, it’s even more important. Sometimes it happens that you think your message is plain, but your crew thinks your instructions are as clear as smoke signals.

Before leaving for Mexico, we decided to trade in our trusty old hard-bottomed dinghy for an 11-foot inflatable, which we carry on our foredeck. Early in our trip,

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we were still learning how best to launch the dinghy. Todd had tied a halyard to it and was winching it up, and he asked me to help him get it into the water. After he cranked it a few times, he said to me, "The bow is going to swing aft."

My mind raced as I tried to process this. Did he *want* the bow to swing aft? Would that be a good thing or a bad thing? Was he warning me to get out of the way? Or maybe he wanted me to intervene? I know it may have looked like I was just standing there doing nothing, but in my head, I was doing somersault after somersault.

After we got the dinghy in the water, I explained my confusion to Todd, who was surprised that I had trouble interpreting his statement. So we came up with a template for a sentence that would give the listener more guidance. It goes like this: "I want/don't want X to happen, so I need you to do X."

In our dinghy example, Todd would say, "I don't want the bow to swing aft, so I need you to grab one of the handles and guide it over the side." It sounds simple, and it is, once you get in the habit. And

it can save you a lot of yelling, screaming, and sleeping in the V-berth!

**Say "Yes" to the little things:** It's a rare captain who doesn't worry about space on the boat. Before we cast off, Captain Margarita was happy to hit our local Trader Joe's to stock up on tequila, and he had no problem finding space for it. When he saw how many kinds of specialty teas I'd stashed in the galley, he raised his eyebrows but let it slide. He really had to bite his tongue when Sequoia lugged aboard a duffel bag full of her stuffed animals.

When you're cruising, little things can become the highlight of your day. Whether we were on a long passage or had been swinging on the hook for days, I always enjoyed starting my day with a strong cup of black tea. When I ran out—it's not easy to find black tea in Mexico—I was dejected; luckily, we soon had visitors from home who brought me a fresh supply.

I'm not saying you should stuff the bilges with everything you can get your hands on. But a few extras can make your cruising days much more enjoyable. Whether it's a favorite candy bar, that special hand lotion, or fun water

toys like noodles or boogie boards, make sure every crewmember has a little something special.

**Outfit your boat with the whole crew in mind:** Because of my (lack of) height, I've always had a hard time tying the halyard onto the mainsail. Another sailor showed me her small folding stool, which she uses all over her boat. Todd, who stands taller than six feet, can't really understand the frustration of always feeling too short, and he hates anything cluttering up the boat. So I was thrilled when we came across a stool at West Marine and he said, "Sure, if it helps you out, let's get it!"

**Last but not least, find the way that works for you:** There's some truth to that old saying, "Ask 10 sailors the best way to do something, and you'll get 11 answers." When it comes to cruising and living aboard together as a couple or a family, it helps to keep this in mind. Don't worry about how other people do it; figure out what works for you and your crew. Happy cruising!

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After restocking the kitty, the crew plans to reunite with *Sugata* in Baja Mexico in the spring of 2010.

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