

# Seamanship

## Practice...and Be Prepared



by Bridy/DaMeek



**Being caught in rough weather is never something sailors look for, but it's one of the realities we face each time we head offshore. Strong winds and rough seas can whip up at short notice and the only thing worse than being caught by surprise is not knowing how to handle the conditions.**

Put simply, being prepared and knowing your boat can save your life. With that in mind let's explore some active and passive tactics you should consider the next time a rapidly falling barometer confronts you.

Before we look at some of the practical things you can do when the wind picks up, like heaving-to or running under bare poles, first understand that most tragedies occur because of fear. People do not think straight when they are scared and they get scared when confronted with unfamiliar circumstances. I have spoken with many sailors on this topic and most of them agree that sitting timidly waiting for perfect weather is not the right approach. You have to get some experience with strong winds to understand them, to respect them and to gain some confidence in your own ability.

So, rather than sit tied to the dock, you are encouraged to head out, deal with the weather, and the next time you find yourself in even worse conditions you will have some point of reference. It's that point of reference that's critical to making good decisions and it goes without saying that getting that reference as crew with an experienced skipper is the best possible situation.

Let's assume that you have some heavy weather experience and you have confidence in your boat and crew. You have come to terms with the likelihood that one day you will run into bad weather. Suddenly you find yourself staring at the closely packed isobars on your latest weather forecast and you know that a gale is on the way. It's time, if you have not already done so, to prepare the boat and crew. This starts with a methodical stowing of all loose equipment and a detailed look at all lines to ensure that there is nothing that will chafe. If you have done a storm trysail drill then by all means get the sail out from where it's stowed and get it ready for deployment. If you and your crew are unfamiliar with the trysail it may be best

to leave it stowed. With the wind rising it's not the time to be trying to figure out where the lines go. You will be putting yourself in more danger standing at the mast feeding the sail than leaving it off altogether.

As skipper and navigator you need to look at some practicalities. Check your chart for any nearby dangers, particularly to leeward where you are certain to drift should you have to take the sails down. Look for reefs, strong currents or shallow water and also look for shipping lanes. All of these obstacles will play a part in how you decide to manage the rising wind. It's important to fight the urge to head for shore especially if the closest land is to leeward. There are many accounts of boats floundering as they attempted to negotiate a harbour entrance. If the entrance is downwind and the wind is blowing gale force, it's unlikely that it will look the same as it did when you left in calm, sunny conditions with unlimited visibility. Most storms are best ridden out far away from land. You may be uncomfortable, but it's better than a disaster.

As far as sails go, you have a few options. You can set your storm sails and ride the gale out with some measure of comfort and manoeuvrability. You can heave-to, in other words sail with your headsail backed and your mainsail drawing to keep some way on. You can lie a-hull, or drop all your sails and let the boat find its own sweet spot in the wind and waves, or you can keep some sail up and run off downwind. Each remedy has its own merits and drawbacks and your decision is based in part upon your proximity to land and/or navigational obstacles.

For these examples we will disregard heaving to keep a course, unless you are looking to avoid an obstacle, in favour of choosing a point of sail that's safe for the boat and crew. In all cases it's a good idea to rig a 'preventer' on the boom to stop it accidentally swinging across the boat and hitting someone. A good preventer runs from the outboard end of the boom, through a block mounted on the bow, and back to a winch in the cockpit.

### Storm Sails

Although this may not sound like it,

being able to deploy your storm sails is your best option. It's always better to keep the boat moving so that you have some steerage and manoeuvrability to avoid particularly unpleasant waves. Sails will dampen the rolling motion, making life on board more bearable. It's important to set the storm sails early. You should have conducted drills setting both the storm jib and trysail so that you know where the sheeting points are. Once you have the sails set, find a point of sail that suits the boat. Those boats with long keels will ride quite nicely 40 to 50 degrees off the wind. Boats with narrow fin keels may ride better with the wind from astern. Fin keel boats are usually lighter and can surf easily allowing the boat to stay ahead of any breaking waves. If you find yourself careening on the edge of control down a wave then it may be time to try something else. The danger with running away from waves is that you are exposing your rudder to a sudden errant wave that could disable you if the rudder is damaged.

### Heaving-to

For cruising sailors heaving-to is a great option especially if you do not want to lose any ground to leeward or if there is a hazard to leeward. The boat stops making progress to windward but that's not a problem as your aim is to be safe. It's also a good option if you are tired or sailing with a limited crew. Heaving-to essentially means sailing along with the headsail aback, and the mainsail drawing. The mainsail drives the boat into the wind, but as soon as it gets to a certain point the backed headsail takes over and forces the bow down again. This back and forth motion is quite comfortable and very safe especially if the boat has a long, fixed keel. Boats with fin keels are a lot more lively and may require someone at the helm to keep the boat on track. In my experience I have found that the best way to heave-to is to 'half tack'. With a storm jib set I build speed, tack the boat, but do not release the headsail. The backed jib blows the bow down. I then sheet the mainsail on so that it provides a little bit of forward motion and then cleat it off. If you have balanced the boat properly, i.e. you have the correct amount of main-

sail trim for your particular boat then life on board should be reasonably comfortable.

A perfectly acceptable means of controlling your boat when you are hove-to is to use the engine. By running the engine at low revs you will be able to keep the bow of the boat at a steady angle to the approaching seas. This is one more way of balancing speed with manoeuvrability, and if done right can make life on board much more tolerable. A slow running, fixed prop with a low pitch like those found on cruising boats, will work the best. Modern folding props tend to cavitate at low speeds and you may not be able to generate sufficient thrust.

### Running Under Bare Poles

In some cases your best bet will be to give up any thoughts of making progress to windward, or at least remaining stationary, and run off downwind. This can be done either with a small sliver of sail set, or in extreme conditions, under bare poles. The difference between some sail and no sail depends upon the boat you are sailing. In most cases you will need to deploy a drogue to keep the stern of your boat towards the approaching seas and to slow you down so that you do not go careening off at a dangerous speed. Setting and retrieving a drogue is not a simple process, but as with your storm sails, some practice when the conditions are mild will make all the difference. The drogue can be as complicated as a parachute sea anchor, or as simple as warps trailing from astern. The key to running off is to balance your speed. You need to be moving fast enough so that you can stay ahead of

big waves and retain the ability to steer, but not so fast that the boat is out of control. You also need to ensure that you do not have too much drag so that waves approaching from behind can swamp the boat or worse yet, damage your rudder.

### Lying a-hull

This is probably the most risky manoeuvre and unfortunately the one many sailors opt for because it requires the least amount of effort. Lying a-hull simply means dropping your sails and letting the boat find its own way through the storm. Without sails to steady the boat the motion is very unpleasant, but usually the crew are below in relative safety. The discomfort may be better than the risk of being washed overboard. Some boats lie a'hull better than others. Those with long keels and plenty of directional stability on their hull shape fare quite well. Racing boats do not. They yaw and pitch and often find themselves in a dangerously beam-on situation where the side of the boat is exposed to breaking waves.

All of the above scenarios require you to plan in advance. Lowering sails, setting a sea anchor or raising a storm jib is easier to do before the real force of the storm hits. There will be times when you get caught unawares and find yourself with too much sail up and have difficulty getting it down. In fact the sheer friction of luff attachments and the updraft experienced when a strong wind hits your sails will often keep the sails up even after the halyard is released. If this is the case you are going to have to winch the sails down. Your best bet will be to reduce

friction as much as possible. In other words head into the wind. If you are trying to drag a sail down and the fabric is plastered up against the rig you will either rip the sail, or at the very least struggle more than necessary to lower it. Use the engine to keep the boat head to wind and begin lowering the sail a bit at a time. You need a strong line attached to a secure point at the base of the mast or on the boom. The line is fed over the highest mainsail slide or hank you can get to and led down to a block on deck and aft to a winch. With the boat head to wind and the pressure off the sail, slowly crank the winch to drag the sail down.

It's a slow process but often the only way you will get it lowered. Be aware of the pressure on your winch so that you can feel if the sail snags on something. A winch is a powerful piece of equipment and will rip the sail without hesitation. For this reason it's always best to hand crank rather than use an electric winch. The sail that is lowered needs to be lashed as soon as possible so that it does not go overboard. Be sure to check that the halyard is free to run at all times.

Riding out a gale is not as bad as you might think. Remember that if you are running with a storm it will usually take longer for the gale to abate. If you are able to hold your ground against the storm it will blow over quicker. Balance the need to have people on deck versus below. It may be rougher going without anyone to thread the boat between the waves, but it may also be safer. The whole question of heavy weather sailing is one of balance and a rested mind will make better decisions. ⚓

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## Taking A Small Boat to Sea

### SAFETY FIRST!

**The more one sails, the lazier one gets! We're all guilty of it to a greater or lesser degree, and we all have in the back of our minds the earnest hope that nothing untoward will happen 'this time'!**

But in all honesty, a quick but comprehensive preparation schedule is worth its weight in gold, both in terms of the actual safety of boat and crew, and in peace of mind as we enjoy ourselves. And if that check routine becomes repetitive, then so much the better, since it is the experienced eye that spies the problem, almost instinctively after a while.

And please don't fall into the trap of believing that the piece of paper in your pocket that says you're a Yachtmaster, or the other piece of paper in the Ship's File that says your boat is cleared for Category X, Y, or Z, contributes one little iota to the Safety at Sea of you, your boat or your crew. That is solely in your hands as the skipper, so best we conduct ourselves to minimize the risks - nobody else will.

Let's assume that the boat is 'in survey' for her registered category, and that all her papers and equipment are 'in date'. Those aspects are a home or office diary matter. And let's also assume that we're going offshore on an extended voyage including an overnight passage.

It's probably best to do one's 'passage plan' once you are on board. In that way, you are forced to refer to the correct charts and almanac carried on board, to plot your intended route and do your GPS entries and extractions/re-plots for check purposes. A separate list of lights en route is always useful, on the basis that we are going to be good, disciplined little navigators, and time the flash characteristics before identifying them on the chart (aren't we?!).

Before arriving on board, father will have told mother the likely passage time - and must ensure that, however optimistic his tale, there are sufficient supplies being loaded on board for 'Passage Length + Contingencies' (I usually work on somewhere between 30 - 50% extra). So whilst mother is busy stowing the supplies below, father can get on with his system checks.

Your mind is still on 'supplies', so let's immediately set-to on the vessel's supplies. Fresh water tanks - all topped up, plus spare bottled water in the fridge or bilges. Diesel - topped up, plus spare in jerry can in the deck locker. Gas - full, or nearly full bottle on line, plus spare in adjacent locker. Spares - none used last time out, or else replaced immediately. Spare bulbs for nav lights, ship's torches, compass light, Interior lights; and make sure while you're at it that the MOB lights are working, that the emergency nav lights also work, and that you have spare batteries on board to



power them.

Are tools all present and correct, and properly stowed? Seacocks all free, and softwood bungs to hand?

Now go over the engine and its immediate services. If the engine receives a regular pat and a wipe, you will soon detect any abnormalities such as fluid leaks, so do your checks with a clean rag in hand. Engine and gearbox levels first, then a penetrating stare at the primary diesel filter, perhaps backlit by a torch to check for sediment or water in the bowl, followed by a wipe around all filter bowls - primary, secondary and the LO filter.

Give all the belts a good pull to check tensions, whilst looking for any signs of water dripping from the pump gland, and run your fingers over the control linkages to check security of clevis pins and split pins. It doesn't take all that long if done regularly.

How are the batteries and their connections? And just make doubly sure that the securing straps are firm. A rogue battery rocketing around inside the cabin after a knock-down can bash out a window and sink the boat as quickly as winking (if it doesn't brain you first).

When stowing any food and water underneath the floorboards, first ensure that the bilges are dry, limber holes are clear, keel bolts secure (at least visually), and make sure that nothing going into the

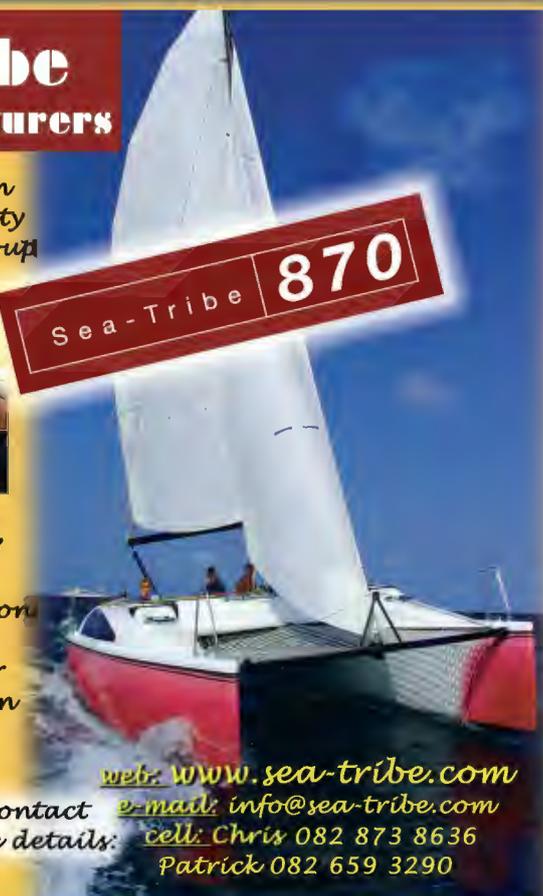
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bilges has labels that can wash off and clog bilge pump strainers.

As an aside, I used to crew many years ago on an Ohlson 38 based on the east coast of England, and this ship used to throw the most awesome end-of-season dinner parties on board. The boat was moored off on a trot mooring, so it meant a dinghy trip out in freezing October weather, rain or snow notwithstanding. The routine when we got below was that no lights were allowed on to start with. One crew lifted up the floorboards and started handing up cans (all label-less after a season swilling around in the bilges), a second attacked them with a can-opener, a third dumped them into the largest pot he could find, and proceeded to stir over medium heat. The rest of us would set-to on the red wine.

I can quite honestly say that those were some of the most memorable meals I have ever enjoyed on board a boat - stewed steak with potatoes, peaches, carrots, pineapple rings, curried lamb, pilchards in tomato sauce, rice pudding, savoury mince - the lot! One course - one plate - no leftovers!

But I digress. Okay, we're getting pretty organised down below now, so batteries ON, systems on line, and let's go up on deck. We're going to be out overnight, so let's have all topside lights ON, including anchor and steaming lights. Fine? Turn them OFF then.

Deck inspection next. No worn or loose shackles? Guard wires taut and secure? Jackstays sound? Shroud bottlescrews secure? Rigging sound, taut and even and mast straight? Anchor and rode ready to deploy? Do pay special attention to the forestay and jib furler (if you have one), and the kicking strap and mainsheet traveller. These all take quite a hammering, so should be inspected carefully.

Once you have done your 'walk round' and are happy with the general state of things, start the crew on preparing the sails you have selected for the weather conditions prevailing, or expected as per the forecast you got hold of before arriving on board! Do you need a reef or two in the main to start with? It's a lot easier to shake them out under way than it is to tie them in.

You can now fire up the engine and run at fast idle to warm things through. And don't forget to check immediately that you have good sea water flow through the exhaust, that your ammeter/voltmeter are showing a decent charge rate, and that your oil pressure is normal.

Now get all your crew together and run through your safety checklist together:-

**Skin Fittings - location.** Soft wood bungs to hand.

**Bilge Pumps - location.** Operation. Suction & Discharge routes.



**Gas System - bottle location.** Shut-off valves. Fire blanket.

**Fire Extinguishers - location.** Operation. Batteries - location. Switching.

**Liferaft - location.** Deployment. 'Strong Man' appointed.

**Grab Bag - location.** Contents. Flare use. 'Scrounger' appointed.

**Electrics - location.** VHF operation and procedure. GPS readouts.

**Survival Gear - location.** Lifejackets, harnesses, heaving line, MOB gear.

Any questions? Right! Chart out on the table. Deck log at the ready. Speed & Distance Log lowered, and we're ready to go!

Close all hatches and portlights. Slap on the sunscreen, and let's go sailing!!

## Preparing for the Night

Above we described the sort of preparations advisable for taking your yacht to sea during daylight hours, but with the expectation of an overnight passage before us.

During your day's sail, you will NOT have forgotten to listen to the shipping forecast and the reports from coastal stations, will you? On the assumption that all is set fair weatherwise, there are one or two disciplines to follow in order that the ship may continue to sail safely and efficiently through the night.

Not much to do on deck just now, if all has been going well thus far, except to bring up one of the waterproof torches and stow it safely but accessibly, preferably within reach of the helmsman.

Make sure that all halyard and line

falls are neatly made off on their proper stowages. There is nothing worse if hit by a line squall at night than to have essential lines foul up.

We checked nav lights before setting off, didn't we? No matter. Switch them on while you still have enough daylight left to change a bulb if Murphy's Law has come into play and one of them has chosen this moment to go down. Compass and Instrument lights okay?

Perhaps the lion's share of the prep work for the night sail occurs in the galley. If we've been enjoying a nice, gentle sail all day, then the ship's cook will probably be quite happy to dish up one soup plus one meat and two veg plus one pudding plus one tea or coffee per head for dinner, but don't count on it. It is probably much safer all round to plan on some simple, but hot food that purely requires heating before serving, and that can be eaten with one hand. Something like a hot cup-a-soup (pre-prepared and stored in a Thermos flask, perhaps), followed by a Cornish pastie usually works quite well.

I used to look forward to a Shepherd's Pie or Cottage Pie - liberally laced with Sherry or Whisky - to ward off the night chill.

Ask the cook to prepare some chunky sandwiches and pop them into a large biscuit tin with some Mars Bars, a couple of apples and a banana or two - one tin per watch, perhaps. It does wonders for the night watch's morale, not to mention keeping them quiet, well fed, and, hopefully, alert! They can brew up their own hot drinks, of course, but if each watch has its Thermos of preferred beverage, then so much the better all round.

Do a check of the 'house electrics', and if there is any doubt about the battery's capacity to last through the hours of darkness, why not run the engine whilst washing up the dinner things and clearing away. In that way, you can give the battery a really good top-up charge before the nav lights come on.

Now, as the daylight fades, the lights that you designated in your 'Passage Plan' will start to become visible, so get on deck with your stopwatch and hand bearing compass, and get yourself a visual fix to confirm your GPS position, and plot it to define your Twilight Position.

The sort of Watch List you prepare will be governed by both the number of crew on board and their levels of experience. So you have a variety of choices from, say, two experienced watch leaders with a watch apiece and the skipper floating between the two being responsible principally for navigation, to one watch headed by the skipper and the other by the next most experienced crew on board. A larger yacht with plenty of crew may even go to a three-watch system, provided the conditions allow.

Similarly, whether you time watches

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for four hours on and four off, or three on and three off, it is very much a matter of personal preference and agreement. An easily driven yacht with six experienced crew on board may well go for a two hours on and four off, or even a three on and six off system - very easy and gentlemanly.

And when the night gets chill, make sure that the lookouts do a frequent and regular 360° sweep. It's all too easy, particularly with rain about, to pull up the hood, draw the string tighter, and avoid looking dead to windward. And you can bet your bottom dollar that that is precisely the direction from which any danger will

come!

Night watches tend to bring out the story-tellers under the stars on deck, but try to keep it down! The guys below are trying to sleep, jealously guarding their precious few hours of rest before their turn up top, and they will not be quite as amused at your 'there-I-was' story as you are. Nevertheless, these can be magical times on a fair night with a good sailing breeze, half a moon overhead, phosphorescence sparkling in the wake and the tracks of dolphins, penguins and seals clearly visible.

Some people are a trifle apprehensive

about sail trimming at night, but it really doesn't take long to get the hang of it. If you have got the boat nicely set up at sunset, and have taken note of sheet and traveller positions, you can readily get a course adjustment set up for any relative wind angle change. A quick scan with the torch after that will let you see if any fine adjustments are warranted, but do keep the beam out of people's eyes in order to preserve night vision. Reasonably experienced night sailors often develop an instinctive 'feel' whether all is correctly set, but a quick peek by torchlight does no harm. Some boats, especially the earnest racers, have a low powered spotlight set in the foredeck and directed up the jib luff so that an eye can be kept on the telltales, but one has to be very careful that this light is not such as to blind the watchkeepers. It's probably okay in a fully crewed racing boat with all the bodies sitting like canaries on the weather rail, but perhaps not warranted for 'gentlemen sailors'!

There is a wonderful story of *St Barbara*, a rather pretty yawl of about 45', that belonged to the Royal Artillery Yacht Club, sailing in a North Sea Race out of West Mersea, I think. The story gets better with every telling, I'm sure, but legend has it that she was enjoying a sparkling spinnaker run by night across to the Dutch coast, when the helmsman, Major The Honourable Double-Barrelled Somebody, heard a strange knocking sound up forward somewhere. A young Subaltern was sent to investigate, and found that the forestay had become detached from the mast, was hanging down through the spinnaker net and banging around on the deck as the ship rolled. The Sub was promptly ordered up the mast with a new clevis pin to put it back, working on the quite reasonable assumption that the forestay does nothing on a run with the spinnaker up.

That would have been all very well if Major The Hon. D-B S had kept his eyes on the compass and the course to be steered, and not on the Sub up the mast. Needless to say, the yacht went into a monumental broach, and dumped mast plus Sub into the North Sea! The story then relates how the Sub clawed his way back on board across the floating wreckage, and immediately made his way aft, where he proceeded to plant one upon the jaw of the Major. Unfortunately, history does not recall which promising army career was prematurely shortened by the affair!

It's true what they say about the hour before dawn being the darkest and the coldest, but if your turn extends over 'Morning Twilight' and day-break, with a clear sky and an open ocean, then you are truly blessed.

Now, get a final fix on the last set of lights in your Passage Plan, and confirm your Dawn Position with your GPS plot.

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# An Unsolicited Refresher Course

by Charles Reynolds by Di Mee

**This summer has certainly seen the return to Cape waters of the traditional 'South Easter'. And as a result, sailing over the holiday period can probably be best described as having been 'character building', particularly as we seem to have witnessed an unusually obstinate pattern of south-westerly swell at the same time.**

One memorable sail this past December served also to prove the adage that one is never too old to learn, or at least to re-learn, a couple of fundamental rules of the sea.

I had set off from Port Owen for Saldanha on a fabulous morning - wind about Force 3 northerly in St Helena Bay, forecast to go SW 20 knots during the day. The sail to Stompneus Point was one of those glorious full sail, smooth water romps, with crystal clear air as it always is in a northerly, a deep, deep blue sea, and the West Coast sea and bird life out to play.

The engine came on at Britannia Rock, just to punch *Starfire* up to Seal Island as the wind slowly backed. At least that's my explanation - nothing to do with sighting the Holiday 23 *Morning Wings* ahead and desiring a little competition! The sea was quiet enough to thread my way through the rocks at Seal Island, listening to the grunting and barking of the offended seals as we came through, full and bye on the starboard tack, with Cape Columbine light nicely settled on the bow.

A long leg inside Jim Crow Rocks and under Columbine was accomplished before tacking onto port for the leg out to sea, with the wind now sitting at about 20 knots from the SW.

As *Starfire* cleared Cape Columbine, we became aware that there was actually quite an appreciable SW swell running, probably in the order of 2 - 3m at this stage, but it appeared to be reasonably regular with a longish period, so actually quite nice sailing. We had caught up with *Morning Wings* by this time, so settled in for a good session of open water match racing!

Soon another inshore starboard tack was indicated in order to stay in the counter current and, if possible, obtain a bit of shelter into Jacobsbaai from the SW swell. Part One might have worked (I didn't want to leave the helm to check the GPS), but Part Two was not successful. As we crossed the 30m contour, the seas started to shorten and steepen quite appreciably, and the amount of sideways set became very noticeable. So out to sea on port we went again, and although on this leg the sea was dead on the bow, it was all quite manageable the further offshore we got. But the wind continued to increase. It was early afternoon by now. If it's going to come on to blow, this is sort of the time it's going to make itself felt.

The sailing was still quite enjoyable - one of the joys of *Starfire's* unstayed, fully-

battered rig is that you can flatten off the main, track down the traveller, and rely on mast flex to open the leech, de-power the sail and still have oodles of power on hand to drive through the chop. But there was a nagging thought creeping into the mind that perhaps one should have tucked in a reef by now - just to be safe. But - what the hell! Saldanha was just around the next headland.

"Won't be long now! Another starboard tack onto the layline to take us across the mouth of Danger Bay, past Tooth Rock and Cap Rock, aiming for South Head right on the bow. Lots of white water around now, and the occasional cheeky one coming over the weather bow, but really fast sailing across the seas rather than directly into them. If only it wasn't for this substantial set to port with every wave.

"Can't lay South Head now, which means I'll be getting close to North Head by the time I'm across Danger Bay, and might even tickle Cap Rock on the way - and I really don't like that one!"

Sooooo - out to sea again; and by now its starting to blow a steady 27 - 30 knots across the deck, the sea is building, and really it is quite nasty inside the 30m line.

I now fervently wished that, although faithful *Starfire* is perfectly manageable in these conditions, I had got that reef in earlier, and got some oilies on, because it's starting to get rather wet on deck and

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# Seamanship

I can't leave the wheel and trust the autopilot to look after her while I sort myself out.

So on we go; back onto starboard once I am confident that I have plenty of searoom past North Head and Malgas Island on entering Saldanha Bay. Late afternoon now. Still clear and sunny, but with the shoreline hazy under a blanket of wind-blown spume. That damn sea continues to set us dramatically to leeward, but no matter – we've got plenty in hand this time (I hope!).

Approaching Schooner Rock, all appears okay. The bottom shoals quite steeply here, but we'll give it a good 3 – 4 Cables, and maintain this course past Malgas before turning into the Bay. Wrong!

In normal conditions, this should be more than adequate to clear the island, but with the sort of swell running this afternoon, that was still too close. As *Starfire* approached the island, slightly cracked off and roaring along at over eight knots steady, I suddenly became aware that over my right shoulder, the horizon had disappeared. A swell of some six metres-plus with a near vertical face was looming over our starboard quarter.

Now - one reads all sorts of learned articles about Wave Height vs Ship's Beam/Length and the likelihood of capsizing/pitchpole. Well, this was one of them! Fortunately *Starfire* handles like a sports car, and I was able to flick the stern up the face of the sea, and off we went like the Tokyo Express, with me thinking "I hope this doesn't carry on too long, or we'll be apologizing to the gannet population on Malgas!"

Off we slid; back on course, but just as I thought we were clear of the island, blow me, another one reared up and set us off on another sleigh ride, this time dumping the top crest straight over me and half filling the cockpit.

Ah well! At least we were in - or nearly, wishing I had less sail now that we were freed off, but able to call Port Control in case they had been watching the wild gyrations of this hooligan who had appeared so suddenly around the corner.

But I was not to be let off without one final lesson. *Starfire's* engine can prove a reluctant starter from time to time – certainly when cold; and on this occasion, it decided to sulk, probably having been equally scared around the Point, and being a quiet installation, it's a bit difficult 'midst the sound of the Tempest to hear whether it has caught or not. Anyway, after one short attempt, I thought: "Sod it", or words to that effect, "I guess I had better plan for an arrival under sail", which can, in itself, prove an entertaining pastime when singlehanded in 35 knots-plus of breeze.

So now I am in the middle of the bay, wind against tide, trying to drop and secure the main, and being thrown all over the boat to boot. I am paranoid about trying to do this when I haven't got plenty of searoom, but perhaps it's wiser to sacrifice a bit of room to leeward in exchange for a steadier platform. Or is it? Don't know.

Will have to think about that one.

Eventually I got some semblance of order on deck, then headed off to get under the lee of the Causeway (and inside the mussel floats - I had a yearning for very calm water!), where the engine decided to play ball at last, and permit a rather more dignified arrival into the welcoming arms of the Saldanha Bay Yacht Club.

Lessons learned? Plenty! But principally:-

- If you think you need a reef now - it's probably too late!
- Don't delay setting up the boat or yourself if the weather begins to depart from the forecast.

• Don't underestimate leeway and set in a heavy sea.

Boy! Did that first beer taste good! As did the second and third, come to think of it. But at least we got there in one piece, without damage, a little older and a bit wiser.

I talked to Craig Middleton after arrival, and he knows the area better than most. He tells me that in a SW gale (or near gale, as in this case), the only safe route in is straight down the middle of the entrance channel, and even then, he has witnessed a continuous break right across between Jutten and Malgas - presumably when the tide is on the ebb. Now we know!! ↴

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