

MULTIHULL Q&A

NIKKI HENDERSON REVEALS WHAT YOU REALLY NEED TO
KNOW BEFORE GOING BLUEWATER CAT CRUISING

It has become routine now for me to bookend the summer sailing season with a trip to the south of France for the biannual 'Outremer Week'. This hugely popular event gathers 100-plus new Outremer catamaran owners for five days of training, both in the classroom and on the water, and three days of friendly racing. The goal is to educate future owners so they are as prepared as they possibly can be for their

upcoming bluewater cruising plans.

It's an intensive week of 12-hour days, with a lot of information to absorb. Unsurprisingly there are some discussions specific to bluewater cruising in a catamaran that come up repeatedly, and they apply to owners or prospective owners of all brands of bluewater multihull. Here are some of the most common questions people ask me: ▶





Q1 WHAT SAILS SHOULD I BUY?

Every day after sailing an owner will come up to me and say, “Nikki, I’d love to take up some of your time and rack your brains about sail selection.”

To pitch my advice appropriately, I always ask some key questions and I’d encourage you to ask yourself the same.

• What is your route plan?

Tradewind sailing will be predominantly downwind. So, focus your attention on downwind sails. A route involving more upwind requires more focus on headsails. Routes involving more upwind tend to be more coastal routes, or schedules with strict timings that will reduce the option to wait for downwind weather windows.

All bluewater plans will need storm options. Three reef points in the main is a must, or at the very least an extremely generous second reef. A storm headsail is another key component. Ideally it should be possible to hoist the storm jib up over the top of your furled foresail. In very big conditions, reliance on the thin furling line gets quite nerve-racking.

• How performance-orientated are you?

Performance catamarans are designed to sail angles downwind, ideally with an asymmetric spinnaker wardrobe. However, there is a cost to the incredible speeds that you can attain reaching on these boats: comfort. So, a key question is what is your attitude to speed versus comfort?

Performance-focused sailors are typically racing sailors, sailors without kids, or sailors who are in good physical shape. If you fit this category, then I’d advise purchasing one heavy weather flat-cut asymmetric sail that can withstand a squall up to 40 knots, and a rounder, lightweight sail that you can sail quite deeply in light to moderate conditions.

If you don’t have a taste or attention span for speed, then one heavy weather symmetric spinnaker (approximately up to 40 knots TWS) should be enough. This will allow you to sail a rhumbline course, and make night-time take-downs less of a worry because the kite will survive a squall.

For upwind, if you will enjoy fine tuning your boat to get that extra half a knot, your ideal option is a large genoa for drive in light to moderate conditions, and a small flat blade-shaped jib for heavier conditions – small enough that it does not need to be furled to an inch of its life to cope with a Force 6. If an inner forestay is an option, the latter could be a staysail which will keep the centre of effort low and reduce sideways drift.

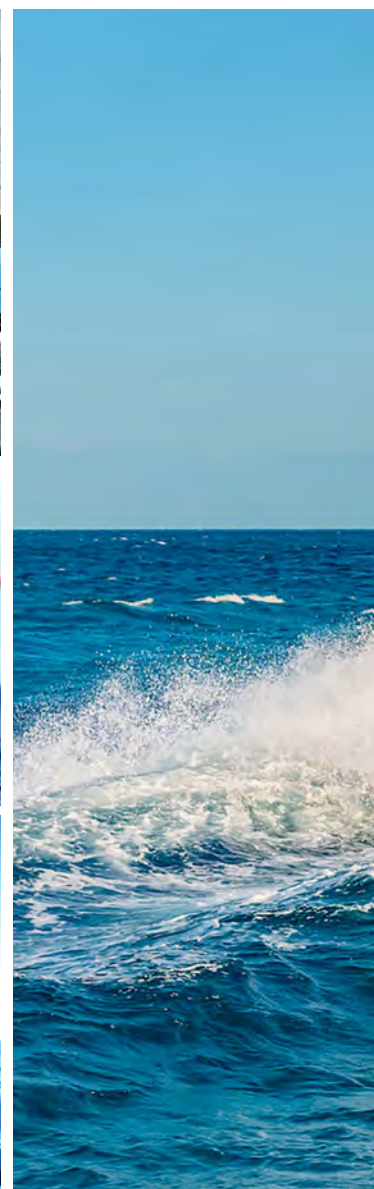
For anyone less performance orientated, the key for upwind sailing is a strong, flat jib that is not too big. Mark three reef points on the foot with sail tape. Keep an eye on how much it stretches and don’t be surprised if you need to change it every few years to avoid losing 5-10° of height.

Downwind the tradewind route logic applies: performance sailors should invest in asymmetric and

Photos: Robin Christol/Outremer



Outremer Week crews receiving coaching on sail handling, furling sails (top), headsail changes (right) and manoeuvres (below)



Left: taking videos and photos to remember key points of spinnaker handling technique

non-performance sailors in symmetric spinnakers.

• Who’s the crew?

At this point, the conversation often goes full circle. Sailors get enthusiastic about performance, and then remember that the kids will need home schooling, or that this is a retirement plan with potential health and fitness considerations.

Most sail changes will require more than one person, and conditions at the bow can be bouncy. Crew also have to be able to sleep, cook, and live on the boat while it is thrown about.

If you are short-handed, you could compromise for downwind sailing by choosing furling sails.

A furling asymmetric such as a Code D can replace the ‘hoist and drop’ asymmetric. Or you can make the sock

Robin Christol/Outremer



Multihull sail options range from symmetric spinnakers (above) to Code sails for reaching performance (right), depending on whether comfort or speed is your priority

line on a symmetric long enough to route back to an electric winch.

Upwind sailors could compromise by returning to a single jib and consider altering routing to sail slightly off the wind but faster; optimising for VMG. If you have a staysail, ensure it could be furled and therefore left rigged at sea – though make time to speak to the yacht designer about the impact on stability that having two heavy furled sails up continuously could have on the boat.

• How ‘eco’ and time-conscious will you be?

Do you care about motoring? Increasingly for many of us, awareness of climate change is a strong motivator to avoid using the engine. And will you be more focused on the destination or more interested in the journey?

If you are keen to avoid motoring, and you are free of time constraints such as fixed crew changeovers or grumpy children who need to stop and swim, then I’d recommend you invest in a Code 0. A Code 0 can double



Balance Catamarans

Nicolas Claris

or even triple the boat speed: in 6 knots of wind, an Outremer will sail at 2-3 knots with a jib, but 5-6 knots with a Code 0. It’s a great sail and worth the investment, but first work out if you will use it. They often have low wind limits – around 15 AWS – which upwind could be 10 knots TWS.

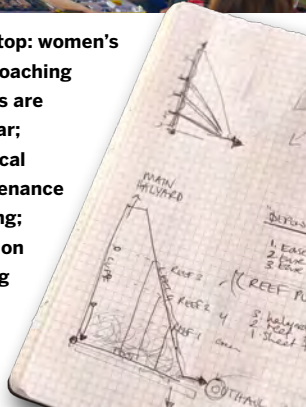
Q2

WHEN TO REEF?

Many bluewater cruisers will reef down before dark every night. I’m not a huge fan of this as a rule; reefing should be straightforward enough to not be an intimidating manoeuvre in the dark. But all new catamaran owners who are planning to go bluewater



From top: women's only coaching groups are popular; practical maintenance training; notes on reefing skills



sailing are concerned about knowing when to reef, especially if they come from monohull sailing, as a catamaran communicates whether it is overpowered or not in a much more subtle way.

You want to conserve your equipment while sailing the boat effectively. So aim for the least amount of sail necessary to achieve your target speeds and angles. The best way to get to know this is to put reefs earlier or later each time and take note of whether it was beneficial or not. Over time you will know your boat very well.

Sailing favours guidelines over hard rules, but it's good to have a starting point so here are some general ranges. For more cautious sailors or bigger sea states, use the more conservative side of the wind range.

- Reef 1 in at 15-20 knots TWS
- Reef 2 in at 20-25 knots TWS
- Reef 3 in at 25-30 knots TWS

Note that I am using true wind and not apparent. When sailing downwind it's tempting to fly more sail because the apparent wind is so low. However, if you need to turn

upwind – perhaps to reef – the 12 knots AWS in 20 knots TWS will quickly become closer to 25 knots AWS.

Reliance on numbers is great until the wind instruments stop working (it will happen at some point). Remember your RYA Competent Crew course and use the descriptions of the sea surface at various Beaufort Scale forces to identify how windy it is.

There are other telltale signs that the boat gives if she needs a reef. Although hulls don't fly unless you are at the performance level of a Gunboat or similar, you may feel the windward hull just slightly lifting. This is a sign that a reef might be needed. Another is if the bows are diving down when you are sailing downwind. Heel angle can be most obviously sensed while lying down.

The main hindrance to learning when to reef – and when not – is a hesitation to perform the manoeuvre. If taking a reef feels arduous, people avoid it. I admit I can find myself in this camp: I have to remind myself that it's a win/win, either it's the right decision and the boat sails better, or it's wrong and I've learnt from it.

The key to reefing is to practice. Taking a reef should be possible to do in under two minutes, especially if you



Robin Christol/Outremer

TEAMWORK

Holly and her partner, Stephane, are buying an Outremer, to be delivered July 2022, having previously owned a Fountaine Pajot. Stephane is an ex-racing sailor and Holly learned how to sail more recently. They run a podcast channel 'Covert Castaway' following their journey.



"The biggest thing we are trying to figure out is how to close the experience gap as a couple. We want to always get better at working as a team but because I have less experience, I also have a lower risk tolerance which doesn't always mean it's easy to get on the same page about weather windows or mooring conditions," explains Holly. "We also want the skipper's experience to continue to grow, which means my learning curve has to be twice as steep."

as much as she can. In addition, we discussed the idea of creating a 'handbook'. Together with Stephane, she'd build a go-to guide to cover anything from major emergency scenarios to everyday decisions such as how much wind to fly various sails in, or how to approach berthing manoeuvres. To avoid conflict – with couples decision making can be emotionally charged – they can refer to their handbook which takes the 'final call' out of their hands and forces them to share the decision. Any new situation should be debriefed and the handbook updated.

Holly already has plans to train

Q3 HOW CAN COUPLES CLOSE THE 'EXPERIENCE GAP'?

The argument for both halves of the partnership being competent on board has always been that if something happens to the skipper, their partner will know how to safely get to a port of refuge.

However, most people assume that this will simply never happen to them, or they practise parking a couple of times, pick a fender out the water – then never think about it again.

The difficulty with starting a bluewater sailing project with a large experience gap is that it tends to widen over time. Each day as leader will be a learning opportunity for the skipper. They will grow in competence and confidence. Meanwhile, the first mate's skills will suffer. They will get used to following instructions, their confidence will decrease, and a habit of helplessness will develop. Then, when an emergency does occur, they'll be in a worse position to take charge than when they started.

It's critical that couples approach buying a bluewater catamaran as a team exercise from day one – for both safety and enjoyment. Ideas on how to level up your partnership include:

- Rotate roles each day, or follow a rota. Who drives the boat into dock? Who makes the navigation calls (do this passage by passage)? Who does the safety checks? Who runs the watermaker?
- Divide the boat – maintain one hull each and



Right: how to share roles is a frequent question among couples planning a cruise

have fast electric winches.

It's handy to have the option to reef downwind, especially if you're tradewind sailing. Fully battened mainsails struggle to come down so set up downhaul lines from each reef tack point. Run them through the reefing point on the sail and through the reefing points on each side of the mast so the sail is pulled down in line with the track. Watch out for chafe on the back of the main if reefing a lot downwind, and add spreader patches to your sail where applicable. Centring the traveller during the manoeuvre can help, but keep your eyes looking up and check nothing is getting caught.

Also practice solo reefing; aside from the possibility of needing to reef alone, this also builds a big picture understanding of the whole manoeuvre. It means reefs are put in faster because anyone can work anywhere.

Gilles Martin-Raget

share the saloon. This forces you to both understand how everything works from bilge pumps and engines to steering gear and gear storage.

- Take a coach with you for the first few crossings. It can be hard to learn to sail from your spouse. A professional coach will force you into a learning environment. They will also create space for the less experienced to be able to take charge in a safe way.

- Sail the boat without your partner. Creating a scenario where your leadership role feels natural is the optimum way to practice skippering. So, invite a few friends who don't know as much about sailing as you, and go for a low pressure cruise. It's a brilliant confidence builder, and a chance to develop your own style and your own voice on board.

Q4 PRODUCTION OR PERFORMANCE?

A common view is that you pay more for less when you buy a performance catamaran: fewer creature comforts, less living space, fewer berths, bathrooms, and instead get narrow hulls and sparse design. So, is the big price tag worth the upgrade in performance?

If you are lured by the comfort of a production catamaran, but plan to sail intensively around the world for the next five years, it might not actually be the most comfortable option. No dishwasher or air conditioning is going to make a boat feel safer in a storm. Conversely, why buy a performance catamaran if you plan to leave the boat at the dock for 10 months a year?

Ask yourself if you have the skills to harness the performance of a faster catamaran? And if not, how prepared are you to invest time into learning how to use the boat to her full potential?

A common justification for buying a performance catamaran is that it can outrun bad weather and therefore is safer. But you cannot take advantage of that option if you sail everywhere with three reefs in the main because you are nervous of the boat's power.

Similarly, the power of performance catamarans comes in part from how light they are. If you load the boat with extras – personal gear, kitchen appliances, heating, aircon – you will quickly reduce a lot of the speed and safety advantages you're paying for.

Q4 HOW TO HANDLE HEAVY WEATHER

A popular heavy weather strategy is avoidance: account for global weather patterns when planning your passages to ensure you sail during the more favourable months; invest in a good satellite connection to download accurate forecasts so you can see bad weather coming; use your boat speed to position yourself out of the predicted storm track; be flexible with departure windows and leave at an optimum time.

However, do not misinterpret avoidance of heavy weather as a safety net. With weather systems becoming increasingly extreme and unpredictable (see page 38),



Above: multihull designs at the ARC start cover a full spectrum of performance. Left: do you have the skills for a faster cat?

this risk management strategy is becoming less and less dependable.

- Develop scenario plans for the type of boat you have so that you don't have to start with a blank sheet of paper as a storm approaches.
 - In all scenarios, on all boats, avoid 90° wind and waves. Your boat is at its least stable in these conditions. Sail with the weather forward or aft of the beam.
 - Keep an eye on heel angle. Reduce sail if you start to see any more than 5° or so, unless you have a catamaran that is designed to lift a hull. Lower the centre of effort by reducing sail, starting with the main.
 - Set up and practice how to reef downwind in case the weather comes in more quickly than you were expecting.
 - If you can't sail as fast as the waves, consider trailing warps to slow you down and help with steerage. You should aim to keep the speed relatively high. The key is

Rick Tomlinson



James Mitchell/WCC

to reduce the erratic surfing which drops the bows into green-water troughs. I prefer warps to drogues where possible because we are more familiar with them. Unless you practice using a drogue regularly, you will likely need to read the instructions when you get it out, which isn't ideal in an emergency.

- If waves are breaking over your stern, consider turning into the seaway and holding steady. In a performance cat, you can drop the windward daggerboard, lift the leeward board, and pinch into the wind. In a production cat with no daggerboards, this will be difficult. Running the leeward engine might help you keep your bows into the wind. Watch that there is no back flow of water into the exhaust.

- Avoid lee shores at all costs, sea room downwind is key.

Q6 WHEN SHOULD WE GO?

How long should you wait after buying a boat before heading out on your first bluewater passage? Whether you spend £100,000 or £1,000,000 on your

READY FOR THE WORST

Magnus and Caroline Tallqvist from Sweden are buying an Outremer, due to be delivered in 2022.

They plan to sail in the Med for 1-2 years before doing a multi-year world tour. Previously they were members of a shared ownership scheme and cruised the Baltic on different boats.



"We're most interested in learning the 'non-happy-day' scenario," Magnus says. "If bad weather approaches fast, how do we deal with it? How do we take the spinnaker down in wind? What if it rips? You can't read the answer in a book in this kind of scenario."

Heavy weather sailing is not just long, drawn out storms. It also encompasses how to cope with unexpected scenarios such as massive squalls, injuries, ripped sails, or damaged rigging and equipment.

It can be hard to train for these. Certainly practise different spinnaker take-down techniques to ensure you have some flexibility if things don't go according to plan: drop it to the deck, do the same when it's half furled or when the sock is halfway down, or even try retrieving it from the water. Do the latter on anchor and run the clew through the usual aft block and to the winch (rinse the sail afterwards in fresh water).

A good way to prepare for the unexpected is to go racing. You're sure to experience some hair-raising moments and need to quickly find solutions to unforeseen problems. You can practise fast manoeuvres, make all kinds of mistakes and figure out how to fix them.

boat, it's likely to need some fine tuning. I've never heard of a new boat that was perfect.

Some yards will cover the initial issues as part of the warranty, so staying close to the yard is a good idea within that period. Even if you don't have a warranty, proximity to the yard can help you access parts, boat builders and people who understand how your boat has been constructed.

The flip side is that you want to get going, and experience all the freedoms of your new yacht! Some serious bluewater sailing is also needed to test some of the systems.

Give yourself two to six months before you head out on the first crossing. This is enough to test the boat out, but not so long that 'passage-anxiety' builds up and you never actually leave.

Do not treat the first few months as a holiday. This is commissioning, and it is the last stage of the build. Test the boat as rigorously as you can before you leave the proximity of the yard. Complete a couple of substantial offshore passages of 48 hours or more to test the systems. Run everything, including the watermaker. ►



Robin Christol/Outremer



Top: the dream – cats in paradise!
Above: sailing with a professional can help you learn a new boat faster

Robin Christol/Outremer

Fly all the sails you own. Sail in fruity conditions relative to your ability (Force 6-8 as a guideline) to see how the boat (and you) cope.

Get some experienced people on board to bolster the crew for the early days. The ideal is to hire a professional coach, as this will make pushing the boat much safer and more fun for you.

Do some training; the MCA AEC four-day engine course is a really useful opportunity to explore the parts of the engine you are normally too nervous to. A safety at sea course is worth its weight in gold. Use this to put together a safety kit that you feel confident in and that is appropriate for your cruising plans. A basic maintenance course can also be helpful, ideally one that covers beginners' sail repair, rigging, splicing, and electrics.

Ask other sailors for a good tools and spares inventory list. On top of the standard parts that the equipment manuals recommend, current and previous owners of your boat model will have a plethora of advice.

CONFIDENT TO CAST OFF

Preparation for any type of bluewater sailing can feel daunting. Training courses and cruisers' seminars like Outremer Week are a little paradoxical – learning how to insert an IV line in a morning medical session, then toasting your upcoming lifelong dream in the evening. It's a bit like watching the flight safety demonstration before taking off on a once in a lifetime holiday.

The reality is that bluewater sailing is the most incredible opportunity in the world to be both savoured, and treated with an appropriate level of respect. But the most rewarding thing is to see sailors' enthusiasm grow as they learn. With the opportunity to make mistakes and ask questions in a supportive environment, everyone develops their own skipping style and mantras.

Knowledge nurtures confidence, and confidence breeds positivity – which all contribute to a safe, and successful bluewater experience. If in doubt, ask! ■

TRAINING DRILLS

"We learn safety at sea on land – learning about life rafts, equipment, and the medical side of things. But what about safety at sea from a



boat handling perspective? How can I best prepare myself and my crew for emergency situations at sea? I'd like to have some drills to practise," asks Caroline Tallqvist.

The more anxious you are about something, the more you should practise it. If it's in your 'panic zone', experience will bring it into your stretch zone so that it becomes manageable – not just practically, but also emotionally. Make sure you train on your boat so that you can optimise the plan for your set up. And train in all positions; the assigned medic might end up injured. Then add regular drills into your cruising schedule. No one who recovered an MOB at sea ever said they regretted all those times they practised.

Scenarios to build emergency strategies for, equip the boat for, and then practice include:

- Climbing the rig at sea.
- Short-handed man overboard recovery
- Short-handed tethered man overboard recovery
- Injury on deck – how to move the casualty to safety
- Fire drill
- Flooding drill



Robin Christol/Outremer



Nikki Henderson is a pro skipper and coach who was the youngest ever Clipper Round the World Race skipper (finishing 2nd), joined La Vagabonde to sail Greta Thunberg across the Atlantic, and regularly coaches for Outremer.