

Summer cruise preparation

A reliable boat is a prerequisite for a relaxed and enjoyable summer cruise. Rupert Holmes outlines some key checks and easy, useful improvements



Sailing greater distances and spending longer periods than usual on board can trigger some of the breakdowns and breakages that are, to some extent, an inevitable part of boating. However, there's much that can be done a few weeks in advance of a summer cruise that will dramatically cut the odds of encountering problems.

A couple of well targeted hours spent looking at critical systems is key to ensuring the boat is in as good a shape as possible. The following checks will enable you to have as much confidence as possible in the reliability of the boat and its equipment in any reasonable weather conditions you might encounter.

Electrics

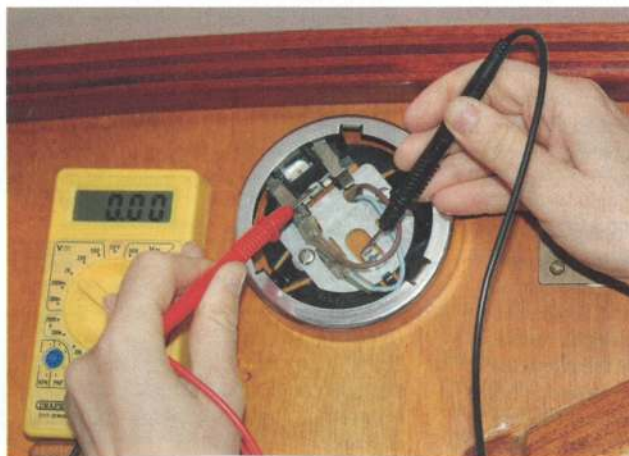
The events of the last 12 months mean it could easily be close to a year since you've used many of the systems on board, whether they are mundane such as the light in the heads, or more critical to the safe operation of the boat.

Next time you're on board a quick check that every electrical item works will minimise any problems that need to be sorted at the last minute. It's easy to forget items that may not be used on an average weekend, so make sure you include autopilots, windlass and the bilge pumps.

At the same time take a quick look in the

spares box. Is there a complete set of bulbs for every type of light fitting? What about spare fuses? And, in case you do have to troubleshoot problems while away, does the battery in the multimeter need to be changed?

It's also worth making an assessment of the boat's batteries. Do they still seem to



Rupert Holmes

Troubleshooting electrics is best done comfortably in advance

Heidi Stewart/Alamy



Rupert Holmes

Whatever the material they're made from, sails usually start falling apart at the leech

For peace of mind on your planned summer cruise some preparation now will pay dividends



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A trip up the rig to look for potential problems is a wise precaution

'Checking sails often gets relegated to the bottom of the list'

should be given attention comfortably ahead of departure.

If a headsail furling line breaks in strong winds it can create a bigger challenge than most of us would choose to deal with, especially on boats with big overlapping genoas. If the line hasn't been completely removed to check its entire length (including the attachment to the furling drum) that's well worth doing before departure. If you don't know the age of the line and it could be over 10 years old the safest option is to replace it.

Standing rigging

Visual checks don't reveal everything about standing rigging as hairline cracks invisible to the naked eye can cause stainless steel to fail, but visual checks are still essential and have averted many potential disasters. Check all terminals and fittings for condition and security, paying attention to spreader roots and rigging attachment points. In particular look for loose strands at the exit points of swages.

Problems with the upper swivel of headsail furling gear, or an incorrect headsail halyard lead, can result in the top of the forestay rotating and the lay of the wire opening up. While you're up the rig this is any easy and very worthwhile check to make. Also take a look at the condition of the gooseneck fitting, plus vang and mainsheet attachment points.

Engine

While we're all familiar with basic daily engine checks and annual servicing requirements, a month or so before a summer cruise it's worth taking a

be holding charge well? Are they nearing the end of their life? If close to the end of their useful life it makes sense to replace them before you leave.

Summer sails

Carefully checking sails for problems all too often gets relegated towards the bottom of the jobs list. Yet a lot of summer cruises are compromised while waiting for sail repairs.

There are two key elements that cause sails to degrade – flogging/flapping and UV damage from sunlight. Both tend to be seen first in the leech, which is also the most highly-loaded area, so this should be checked particularly carefully.

In some cases the stitching will be visibly degraded compared to areas that have not been in the sun.

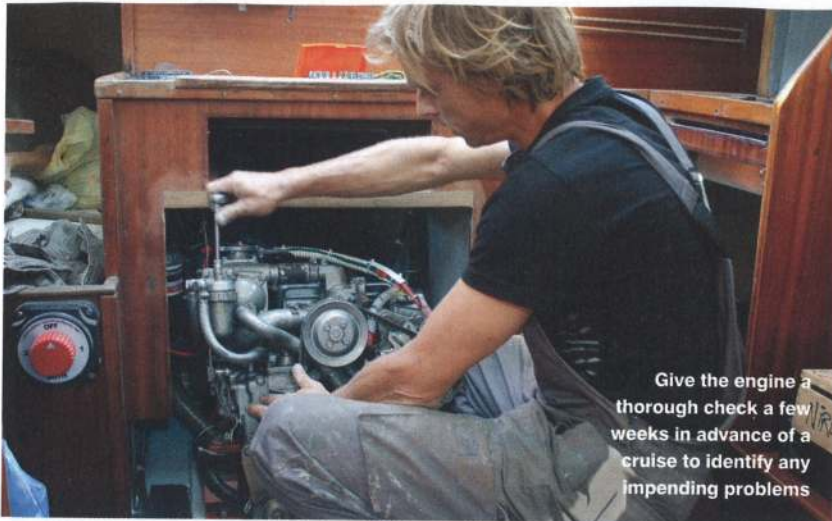
But it's worth giving any stitching more than a few years old a gentle mechanical test with a fingernail or the tip of a pen. If the thread breaks, or becomes loose, it has already lost much of its strength and the seam is therefore critically weakened.

If the problem is caught at this stage it's a quick and easy job to simply over stitch the existing thread.

Fluttering of the inch-wide leech tape at the very back of a sail seriously weakens the cloth, so it's worth taking a careful look for damage in this area. The classic test is to poke a needle through the cloth and then try to pull it sideways. If the cloth is too weak to resist it needs urgent attention. Fortunately it's a reasonably quick job to add a long and narrow reinforcing patch that will have potential to significantly increase the sail's lifespan, although this won't improve the shape of a badly stretched sail.

Running rigging

Again, this should be given an early check to ensure there are no areas of chafe and that systems run smoothly with minimal friction. Halyards and reefing lines are at risk of chafe where they pass over sheaves and it's also worth checking that all blocks run freely. Similarly, any winches that are overdue for servicing



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Give the engine a thorough check a few weeks in advance of a cruise to identify any impending problems

'Motor sailing in rough seas is renowned for stirring up any crud that has settled on the bottom of fuel tanks'

closer look at the motor for any early signs of impending problems.

Is there any evidence of fluid leaks? Is all the wiring secure and in good condition? A blown cooling system hose can create expensive damage that may not be quick to repair. It's therefore important to take a careful look at all hoses to check for chafe, other deterioration and secure attachment at each end.

At the same time confirm there are appropriate spares on board, especially drive belts, raw water pump impellers, fuel filters and engine oil for top ups. A quick check that all the tools needed to replace these items are still where you expect to find them is also sensible.

Fuel system

Motor sailing in rough seas is renowned for stirring up any crud that has settled on the bottom of fuel tanks. This is especially the case if water has found its way into a diesel tank as a result of condensation or bunkering with contaminated fuel.

The problem is that it can promote the growth of bacteria (commonly known as 'diesel bug') that live at the interface of the fuel and the water, and which then falls to the bottom of the tank.

Fortunately, many tanks have either a drain at their lowest point, or an access point (often for a dipstick) installed directly above this part of the tank. If so, taking a fuel sample from the bottom of the tank is a five minute job, using either the drain or a small hand pump.

Often you'll find a little water, followed by neat, clean diesel. If that's the case you know the system is in reasonably good shape. However, if you're seeing lots of water, black sludge and other grot it's a clear sign the tank needs to be properly cleaned before you go far.

Steering

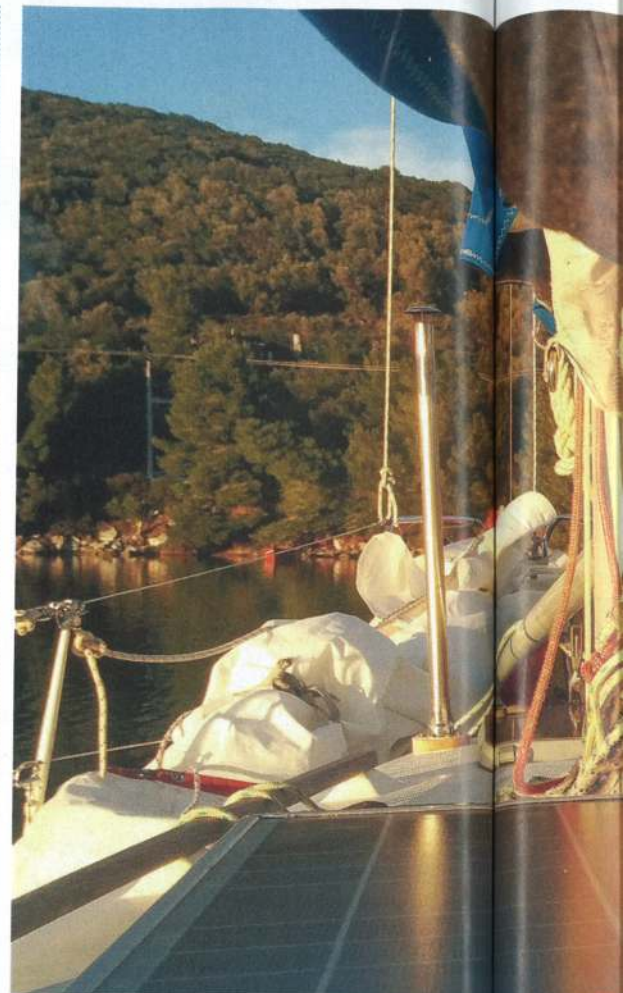
For boats with wheel steering a quick look at all elements of the system will highlight any wear or damage that could cause a problem at a later stage. At the same time it's worth double checking the emergency tiller works as it should and that all crew know how it is rigged and operated.

Owners of tiller steered boats should not be complacent either: tiller steered offshore racing yachts are required to carry a spare for good reason. At the very least inspect the area where the tiller connects to the rudder stock. Is the timber in good condition around the bolts and are there any broken welds on the metalwork?

What would happen if someone fell on the tiller in heavy seas and snapped it? On many boats under 32-35ft a short length of 2in x 3in softwood, shaped to match the fitting at the rudder stock, may be all that's needed to create a viable emergency tiller. It's a job that can be completed in 30 minutes at a cost of less than £5.

Safety equipment

This is just as important as a reliable boat, so now is the time to check that bilge



pumps operate properly and that essentials such as lifejackets, liferafts, EPIRBs and PLBs, fire extinguishers, flares and so on are in good condition and recently serviced or in date. Equally, check lifebuoy lights operate properly and have decent batteries.

You probably won't be planning to use storm sails, but if they've been languishing at the bottom of a locker for a couple of years it's worth getting them out to check their condition and that piston hanks, trysail luff slides and so on still work as they should.

Trying to install mission critical software at the last minute is rarely fun, so it's worth confirming that all charts – both paper and electronic – that you may need are on



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If winches would benefit from a service that's a job best done at an early stage



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A summer cruise really can be idyllic if you're relaxed enough to know your boat is thoroughly sorted

board, fully installed and up to date. The same applies to pilot books and almanacs.

If you're venturing further afield than usual and are wondering what safety equipment is appropriate the RYA has a useful list here: bit.ly/PBO-RYA-safety-list

World Sailing's Offshore Special Regulations for those racing offshore have more detailed prescriptions based on the degree of self sufficiency that will be needed, ranging from inshore sailing in protected waters to crossing oceans: see bit.ly/PBO-OSR

Extending electrical capacity

Over the past decade the amount of power we use on board has increased rapidly, often without battery capacity or charging inputs keeping up. A decade ago I was happy to cruise with a service battery capacity of around 100Ah, but today I have almost 2.5 times that figure. And a boat's electrical system is most likely to be found wanting during a summer cruise, when systems are used more intensively than usual.

Fortunately at the same time as power requirements have increased, solar power has dramatically reduced in price to the extent that adding a 100W flexible panel on the coachroof is an easy decision. Even though this will be in shade at times it will still contribute enough power to be

useful – I routinely get enough to run my work laptop for eight hours a day. If you already have one and it doesn't keep up with your needs then a second 'roaming' panel that can be placed strategically on deck when at anchor or when sailing in easy conditions will give a worthwhile further boost.

It's also worth analysing whether there are any ways in which energy can be saved. If you've not already changed to LED lighting, doing so can make a big difference for a modest outlay. Improving fridge insulation can also have a huge effect – on a two-handed trade wind Atlantic crossing a few years ago we

realised (rather late in the day) that the fridge accounted for two-thirds of the boat's total power consumption, including running the electric autopilot.

Ground tackle

Last summer many more boats anchored overnight than in previous years, thanks to a combination of the glorious weather and COVID restrictions that limited rafting in many harbours. If you have worries about whether your boat will stay put at anchor it's worth assessing whether the ground tackle is up to spec.


The most recent generation of anchors are hugely more powerful than earlier models. They also reset far more readily after a wind shift, change of tidal stream, or being fouled by another vessel's anchor. Changing to a better anchor is therefore a worthwhile and easy upgrade, but check the new one will fit your bow roller (see New Gear, page 48).

Equally, there are few things more disappointing than lying awake at high tide in the early hours of the morning, with a rising breeze, and the knowledge that you're lying to a minimal amount of scope. If you are set up with an all-chain rode, splicing 20m of nylon warp to the end can be a big help if forced to anchor in deeper water than usual. It won't add much excess weight in the bows and doesn't come with a scary price tag.

Finally, if the tender hasn't been pumped up since last summer it's worth inflating to see if it holds air for 24 hours. Give the outboard some fresh fuel and try it out at the same time.

Refamiliarisation

Of course, none of these checks will guarantee 100% reliability, but you have a very good chance of identifying latent problems that would otherwise go unnoticed until too late. The process will also help you get to know your boat in greater depth, or refresh your memory of key systems, which can be a great help if anything does go wrong.

Going through this process four to six weeks before departure gives time to correct any problems that are uncovered. Happy sailing! 



Rupert Holmes

Does your tender need any TLC?