

Easy ways to sail better

Rupert Holmes shares some expert tips on how to make your boat easier to handle, sail faster and safer with better manners



Rupert Holmes's own boat *Ammos* under spinnaker on a gloriously sunny day in Greece

Photos: Rupert Holmes

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The best way to get a better boat is to improve the one you already have, I have long believed. Given many vessels are not set up as efficiently as they could be, this a realistic proposition for many owners, often without spending a great deal of time or money. The result can be that less effort is needed to sail the boat, along with simplified and quicker manoeuvres such as reefing and in some cases even tacking or gybing.

As a first check it's worth taking a careful look at the running rigging to ensure it all works smoothly. One of the most common problems I've seen is with lines that at some stage in the boat's history have been replaced with those a size (or even two) larger than blocks and other fittings were designed for, resulting in a full-on festival of friction. Happily, in this case the problem is easily remedied with rope of the correct dimensions.

In any case, it's always worth taking a close look at anything that might create friction in the system. Strategically replacing low-grade blocks, or changing to a Dyneema line a size smaller can make a huge difference. You may also find blocks, or even masthead sheaves, that have seized, or where plastic pulleys have succumbed to UV degradation. In the latter case many of these may have to be replaced, although with patience it's

often possible to get seized blocks working again.

Sticky sail slides can make hoisting, lowering and reefing the mainsail a bigger and more frustrating task than necessary. Usually a quick application of spray-on lubricant is all that's needed to get them working smoothly, making a dramatic difference. A so-called 'dry' lubricant is best, but silicone spray or even WD40 will do at a stretch.

If the issue persists it may be worth cleaning the mast track. For this I use a short length of old rope soaked in a solvent such as methylated spirits. This is then pulled up the luff groove using the halyard and retrieved with a downhaul. Very occasionally other problems may be encountered. With full-length battens, for instance, incorrect adjustment of batten cars or tension may cause problems. Equally, I've occasionally seen sail slides that are not a good match the profile of the luff groove.

There are also good reasons why boat owners spend large amounts of money on high-end roller bearing luff cars. While these are by no means essential, a well set up system is a joy to use. As an example, I have a friend with a Sigma 362 where, even with a following breeze, if you sheet the main on tight, flake the halyard and release the clutch the sail will rattle down into the lazybag in only a couple of seconds. Do it

right and it works just as well in 25 knots, even with the wind right aft.

If you ever sail single-handed a cam cleat on the mast is a useful addition on boats with the main halyard led aft to the cockpit. This enables the halyard to be bumped at the mast using your body weight, then secured temporarily before you go back to the cockpit for final tensioning. On most boats the geometry of the blocks at the mast base is such that when the halyard is tensioned it pops out of the cleat. This means you can never forget to uncleat at the mast before dropping or reefing the sail.

To facilitate dropping the mainsail most cruising boats have lazyjacks, though I've never bothered on *Ammos*, my Discovery 3000 kept in Greece, which at 30ft long has a small enough mainsail that it takes only a few moments to flake it, even when single-handed. Sailing a larger boat without lazyjacks may be a problem when short-handed, but it's easy to rig a temporary arrangement if there are a couple of spare spinnaker or jib halyards. A strop each side of the boom, lifted with a halyard flipped aft of the shrouds, will make quick, improvised lazyjacks.

Mainsail reefing

Slab reefing systems ought to be straightforward to use, with one person on deck able to easily drop a reef in, or shake one out within a minute or two. This is true even on a boat without an autopilot if you simply heave to first. However many boats, especially those built in the 1980s and 1990s, have lines led aft to the cockpit, but still require someone at the mast to

'One of the most common problems is lines that have been replaced with a size larger'

Roller furling systems allow even big headsails to be rolled away quickly, but sail shape can suffer when reefed



hook an eye in the luff of the sail over the rams horn at the gooseneck. This violates a key principle for easy handling; that everything necessary for reefing should be in one place – either handled at the mast, or led aft to the cockpit.

The easiest option is usually to lead separate reefing pennants from each luff cringle back to the cockpit, though this may require extra clutches. Newer boats may have so-called single-line reefing in for the first two reefs. However this adds friction, which in my experience increases dramatically with time. If your boat is set up this way it's therefore worth putting time aside to remove the boom end caps every couple of seasons to clean the cars up and ensure the hidden parts of the lines are in good shape.

A common misconception is that it's impossible to reef with the wind aft, yet

'Smaller jibs need fewer wraps to reduce sail area in strong winds'

that can lead to the operation becoming unnecessarily wet and uncomfortable when you round up from a downwind course to bring the wind forward of the beam. This massively increases the apparent wind, which powers up the boat enormously at just the wrong time.

It's important not to underestimate this effect. The power of the wind increases with the square of windspeed, so sailing at 5 knots on a dead run in 18 knots of true wind and then rounding up with the wind 60° off the bow sees the force of the wind experienced by the boat increase by a factor of around 2.5.

However, if you shorten sail with the wind well aft of the beam the apparent wind is minimised, as is the amount of water on deck. I've successfully done this



Marks for a third reef on Zest's main halyard



Putting the third reef in while sailing downwind

on hundreds of craft, ranging from a classic 1970s Nicholson 55 to the latest offshore raceboats. It's easiest with in-line spreaders, but will also work if they are swept well aft.

On boats well under 25ft it's possible that no special hardware will be needed – the sail can often simply be manually dragged down to the reefed position. However, single line reefing, or additional reefing pennants on the luff, will allow the sail to be winched down if necessary. Zest has swept back spreaders and standard luff slides, plus simple roller cars on the top two full battens. In 25,000 miles we've never found reefing when downwind a problem, even though when racing we may carry the full main downwind until gusts are well over 30 knots.

Granted it may not always look pretty, especially when dropping the first reef in, as the leech of the sail will fall forward of the shrouds. But rounding up and flogging the sail hard while reefing is not a good look either.

Some may worry about damage to the sail when pressed against shrouds and spreaders, however, my experience is that's only a worry for those who are



Protective UV sock over a furling headsail

engaged in a tradewind circumnavigation. For example, Zest's last mainsail, made of a high-tech membrane material, lasted for 24,000 miles and it was flogging, not spreader chafe, that was responsible for its eventual demise.

One factor that's rarely mentioned outside racing circles is the benefit of having marks on the main halyard at each of the reefing positions. This rapidly speeds up reefing: you can drop the halyard immediately to the relevant mark,

Partially reefed genoa with poor sail shape



ABOVE Hank on jib with sail cover enabling it to be stowed on deck

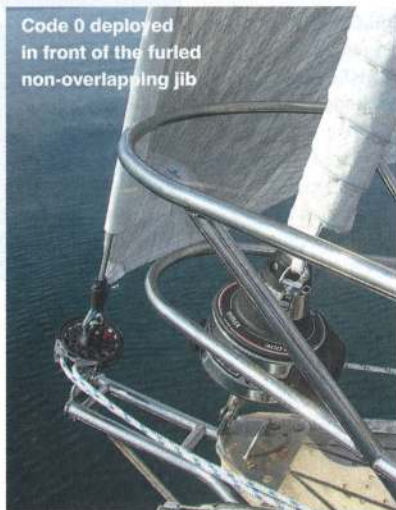
then tension the luff pennant. A similar mark on each reefing pennant is equally helpful for efficiency.

Handling headsails

While it's generally reasonably quick and inexpensive to sort mainsail handling systems of reasonable efficiency, the same is not always true of headsails. Of course roller furling systems enable even the biggest of genoas to be rolled away quickly and easily, but sail shape when partially reefed may leave a lot to be desired and in too many cases it's diabolical.

It's easy to think this shouldn't be a big problem for cruising boats. After all, few of us relish a long beat to windward in a hefty breeze and I know people who won't leave port if there's a Force 4 or more forward of the beam. But they all have the luxury of plenty of time and will stay in port for a couple of weeks if necessary. Sadly few of us have that option, which makes the ability to sail to windward reasonably efficiently in a decent breeze important. This is also a reassuring safety factor that would enable a boat to beat off a lee shore in the event of engine failure, for instance.

Code 0 deployed in front of the furlled non-overlapping jib




There are two common issues with many headsail set-ups. Firstly, the heavy UV strip on the foot and leech of a genoa adds thickness. At first sight this may appear harmless, but it means these parts of the sail roll up fastest, leaving the middle baggy when the sail is reefed. That, in turn, creates extra power, increasing heel and weather helm just at the time you

want the flattest sail shape possible.

This is why a lot of modern performance cruisers have a sock to protect the sail from UV degradation instead of a UV strip. It's more expensive, and more time consuming to use, but the difference in sail shape is amazing. In addition, they are more likely to have non overlapping (or minimally overlapping jibs) rather than the big genoas that were standard until about 15-20 years ago.

Smaller jibs also need fewer wraps to reduce sail area in strong winds than a 130% overlapping genoa, so the shape suffers nowhere near as much. The downside, however, is that a Code 0 and/or spinnaker is needed for reaching and downwind sailing in light airs.

Fortunately, there's much that can be done to improve many existing arrangements without replacing sails. Again, make sure the basics are in order before going any further. Increasing halyard tension in stronger winds will help to flatten the sail and draw the depth forward. If you have an adjustable backstay, increasing tension will reduce forestay sag, which again helps to flatten the headsail. And make sure headsail 

sheet cars are properly adjusted.

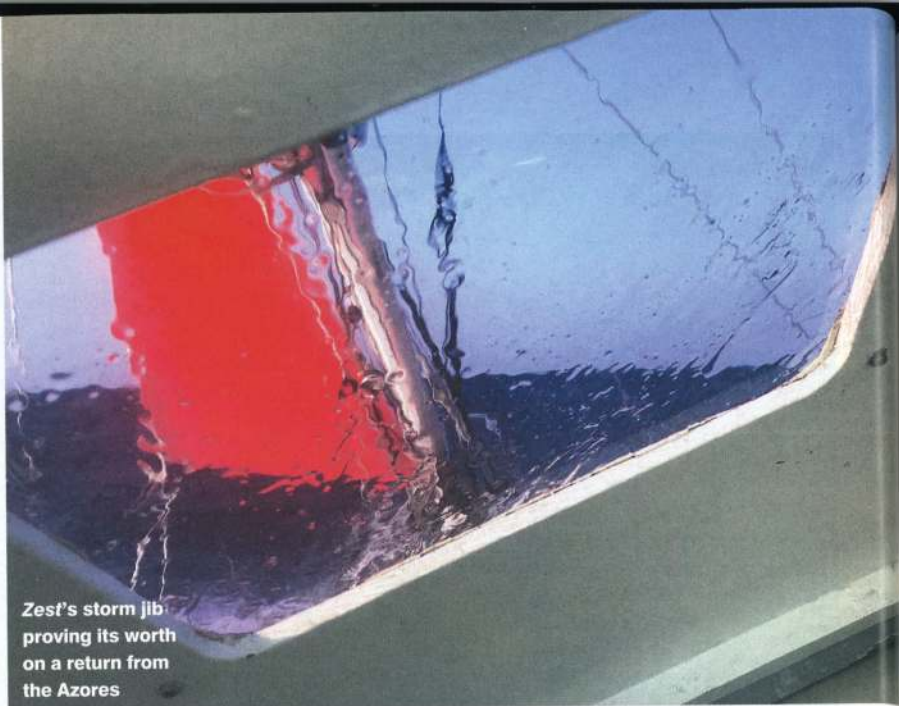
In stronger winds a decent heavy-weather jib can transform the feel of the boat, and markedly reduce the length of a long slog to windward, compared to sailing with part furled roller genoa. The easiest way to rig a heavy weather jib is to hank it to a removable inner forestay, using a Dyneema stay with a 2:1 purchase led back to a coachroof winch for tensioning.

This kind of arrangement can often be set up for couple of hundred pounds on a 30-40ft boats, especially if your mast section will accept Seldén's neat inner forestay fitting that's easily retrofitted. If it's set just below the main forestay running backstays are very unlikely to be needed. Some hank-on sails that change hands on ebay in the £50-£200 range could be worth exploring if you're on a tight budget.

The sail can be set up, hanked onto the stay and bagged at the mast, ready to be pulled forward when needed in a rising wind. This greatly facilitates the sail change, with minimal effort. This is the set up we have on *Zest*, and it works extremely well. A refinement to consider is putting a slab reef in this sail, which makes for an easy transition to an almost storm jib sized sail.

Another viable option for a smaller budget, especially if furling gear needs replacement, is to switch back to hank-on jibs. Fortunately, this doesn't need to be the step back to the 1970s that it might first appear.

Today they can be fitted with slab reefs that can be set up so the sail can be reefed without going forward. The ideal set up might be a 108% jib with a 20% reef for light and moderate winds, plus a smaller sail (that's also reefable) for windier days. This can create a very flexible and efficient set up that requires minimal deck work. A custom sail cover would enable the sail to be left tied to the guardrail when you leave the boat, rather than packed up and stowed below.



Zest's storm jib proving its worth on a return from the Azores

I have exactly this set up on *Ammos* in Greece and I see it increasingly frequently on cruising boats in France as well, though on this side of the Channel it still appears to be the preserve only of the short-handed offshore racing community.

If you're in a position where the headsail, or hardware such as the furler, are nearing the end of life it's worth having a careful think about how to modernise the whole set up, rather than spending a lot of money replacing like with like. It's important to recognise there's no compulsion to keep exactly the same sail plan as when your boat was built. Sail design, materials and fashion – good and bad – all change with time.

BELOW Preventer rigged on *Zest*
RIGHT Preventer line backed up on a winch



A preventer should run from the aft end of the boom, outside the shrouds, forward to the bow, then back to the cockpit for easy adjustment. It's often tempting to attach the preventer to the mid point of the boom, but that's a recipe for a broken boom or gooseneck. It's even worse if the

preventer is taken from the middle of the boom down to the toe rail, as the line acts downwards, which dramatically increases mid-boom bending loads.

Equally, a preventer should never be made fast on the foredeck. In order to have freedom to luff up or gybe to avoid collisions it must be possible to adjust the line from the cockpit. In the event of an accidental gybe it's also important to be able to safely ease the preventer when it's under load. If it can't be taken to a convenient winch, then a mooring cleat of a style that allows a rope to be eased with one turn around the cleat will suffice.

At the most basic level you probably don't need any extra fittings or equipment



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ABOVE Comfortable, easy and efficient sailing downwind with a poled out jib
RIGHT *Ammos* slipping along at four knots in only five knots of true wind under a much repaired cast off asymmetric spinnaker

to rig a preventer. On scantily equipped charter boats I normally use a long mooring line led through the bridge of a foredeck mooring cleat and then to the windward primary winch or a transom mooring cleat.

In fact this is the type of arrangement I still use on *Ammos*. At 30ft the boat is small enough that it's easy to sheet the mainsail in and attach the preventer to the boom end without perilous gymnastics.

Larger yachts are a different matter, as it's usually impossible to easily reach the end of the boom in safety when at sea. This is when a permanently rigged two-part preventer system is a far better bet.

The first element is a strop roughly two-thirds of the length of the boom that's permanently attached, usually with the front end clipped to the vang fitting. The second part runs from the cockpit to the foredeck and then aft outside the guardrail. When not in use I usually tie the free end to the stanchion aft of the shrouds. It's then an easy 30 second task to connect the two elements, with no need to lean over the lee side of the boat.

Just as I'd not use a snap shackle on a halyard for climbing the rig, I also avoid them for preventers. Instead the two elements can be joined with bowlines, which is quick and easy, even in challenging conditions.

Poled out headsails

When running downwind poled out headsails reduce rolling, making a boat tremendously more stable and comfortable, especially in big waves. However, in anything other than the smallest of yachts this needs to be done the proper way.

Important factors are to keep the pole



triangulated with an uphaul, and a downhaul led through a block forward and, on big yachts, an after guy. A third sheet should also be used, as this allows a quick course change, with the headsail ready for use in its normal fashion once the outer end of the pole has been lowered to the deck. However, this may be impractical on larger yachts where the clew of a furled genoa is too high to reach safely.

In combination with a gybe preventer, poled out headsails are usually both the fastest and more comfortable way of going downwind in more than 20 knots of true wind, even when racing offshore. When cruising, even if a spinnaker is carried on board, there's often little benefit to be gained in using it in more than 15-16 knots of breeze as a poled out genoa and mainsail combination will blow you downwind almost as fast, with no risk of unwelcome drama.

Spinnakers and reaching sails

These are often not thought of as sails for easy cruising, yet they can be transformative on light airs days when you would otherwise be motoring. Good light airs sails allow you to make the most of

quiet, relaxed sunny days with gentle sailing that just wouldn't be the same if you were under engine.

However, many cruising yachts are not set up to make the most of their potential in light airs.

Older boats may also lack more recent efficient and easily handled reaching sails such as Code 0s, while old-school cruising chutes are nowhere near as effective downwind as a modern asymmetric spinnaker. There's also still a place for symmetric spinnakers set from a pole.

Budget conscious owners of cruising boats can often repurpose old downwind racing sails. The reason for this is that, to be competitive, racers need to use their kites even when it's blowing hard, but the biggest gains for cruising yachts are in gentle conditions, with the apparent wind under 10 knots.

The much-repaired big asymmetric spinnaker on *Ammos*, for example, is a cast-off from a 1720 sportsboat that cost £150 more than 10 years ago. Equally, an old racing Code 0 with a damaged leech – the part that invariably fails first – can have the weakened area cut away for use as a cruising sail without loss of efficiency or sail shape.