

# EXPERT ON BOARD

Professional skipper Simon Phillips has cruised and raced over 325,000 miles, including 34 Atlantic crossings



## Take the stress out of sailing shorthanded

Once underway, coping without crew isn't too hard but manoeuvres can be tricky. Professional skipper Simon Phillips shares his shorthanded experience

**T**here is a great sense of satisfaction to be derived from a successful shorthanded trip – even a simple sail down the river can be immensely satisfying when you're on your own. Getting the dinghy out of the car, inflating it and getting on board after a short row is a lot of work, however, especially when doing it alone. As a delivery skipper, I've sailed hundreds of thousands of miles with minimal crew and I've learned a few tricks for coping shorthanded along the way.

The most important factor is safety, which must always be paramount. This is especially important if you are on your own as nobody else is there to help. You must have a different mindset as you will probably need to overcome obstacles that wouldn't necessarily be there if you were sailing with crew. Your on-the-water mantra should be:

if something isn't safe, don't do it. Think about the problem and find a safer way to solve it.

There are always different ways of doing things on board and some are better than others. Being safe and staying safe is one thing, having safety equipment and understanding how to use it is different. Safety and being prepared are the most important aspects of shorthanded sailing.

Preparation is crucial to the success of the outcome. We sailors do not like surprises and being prepared helps to eliminate these as far as possible. Good mental preparation is also very important. Having some prior processes in your thinking before berthing, for example, will help enormously; being ahead of the game and knowing what is coming next is key.

Let's look at a range of onboard tasks and explore some techniques to help you do things in a smooth and safe way.

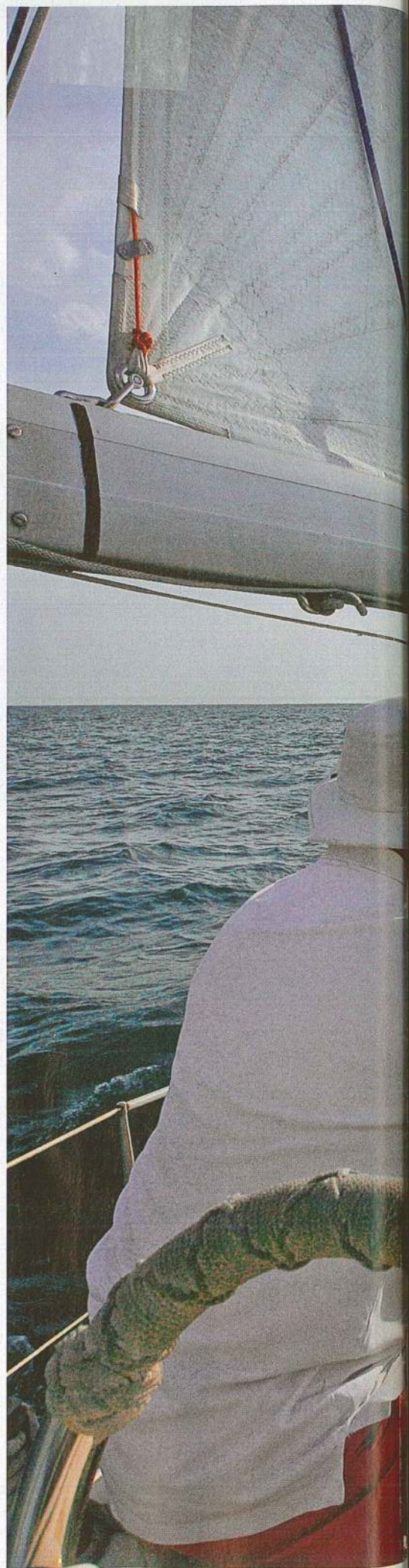




Photo Bob Aylott





# Hoisting the mainsail

## 1 PREPARATION ALONGSIDE

There are many variables here, like your starting point, the direction and strength of the wind, so let's take a closer look.

While still alongside, take off the mainsail cover and clip on the mainsail halyard. Next, raise the boom. Ease the mainsheet and vang and then tension the topping lift. This takes the pressure off the sail as it is hoisted, making it easier and quicker to do; the more reefs you put in, the higher the boom will need to be. If you reefed the main when the boat was last used, it may help to pull through a few handfuls of reefing line to reduce friction while hoisting. If you have lazyjacks, then it is best to take these forward and hook them under a horn of a cleat on the mast, for example. This stops the battens of the mainsail fouling the lazyjack lines. This can all be done in the marina or on your mooring.



## 2 UNDERWAY

For ease and safety, have the halyard led back to the cockpit. Once underway, motoring slowly and just off the wind about 10°, undo the sail ties as you walk towards the mast. The sail is likely to drop to the leeward side as it falls off the boom. With halyard winches at the mast, if the halyard exit is on the port side, keep the wind on the port bow so you're slightly on the high side and away from the falling sail.

## 3 HOISTING

The task now is to hoist as quickly as possible. Having the boom raised means the sail cannot power up during the hoist. The last part of the hoist is always harder as there is more sail aloft, more of the sail is being caught by the wind and your arms are gradually becoming tired. Be sure to keep control of the reefing lines to prevent them wrapping around the topping lift.

## 4 TRIM THE SAIL

Once you're happy with the halyard tension, return to the cockpit to ease the topping lift and lower the boom with the vang. You can now trim the sail. Tidy up the reefing lines and halyard tail so that they're ready for use and won't get tangled or go overboard. Then get sailing!



# Setting the headsail

Whether you have a hanked-on headsail or a furling headsail, the preparation for either of these can be done before slipping your mooring lines. If you have a furling headsail, the hard work has already been done.



## 1 CHECK THE SHEETS

Have a quick check of the sheet bowlines on the clew of the sail, the car positions (particularly if you are reefing) and the stopper knots in the ends of the sheets, make sure the furling line is clear to run, and that's just about all that is required.

## 2 UNFURLING THE SAIL

When unfurling the sail, keep some friction on the furling line. A turn around a winch should be sufficient to prevent the sail unfurling too fast. With hanked-on headsails, get them hanked on while still in the marina, lead your sheets and attach them to the clew with bowlines. Use a couple of sail ties to secure the sail on deck and run the halyard under a sail tie to stop the sail from raising itself. When hoisting the sail, a little pressure on the leeward sheet helps to prevent the sail flogging as you are hoisting. Two to three turns around the winch should be enough. It is prudent to be on the same tack as the side on which your genoa halyard exits the mast. This ensures that you are on the high side and away from any flogging sheets.



# Reefing the mainsail

The key to successful reefing is preparation to keep time on deck to a minimum.



## 1 FLAKE THE MAINSAIL HALYARD

Make sure the main halyard is flaked out as this will need to run free to lower the mainsail. The new reefing line needs to be around a winch ready to be hauled in.



## 2 EASE VANG AND MAINSHEET

Next, ease the vang and mainsheet then raise the boom with the topping lift as this takes pressure out of the sail, which makes reefing easier.

## 3 LOWER THE SAIL

Lower the sail no further than necessary as you'll only have to winch the halyard back up. It helps to mark your halyard so you know how much to ease. Attach the cringle to the ram's horn. Here's a top tip: try to be on the opposite tack to where the reefing line goes over the sheave and into the aft end of the boom. For example, if the first reef uses the port sheave then the port ram's horn is used. This will help to maintain a nice and unpinched sail between the tensioned reefing line and the now redundant sail material. Tension the halyard to the desired amount, then tension the reefing line.



## 4 SET THE SAIL AND TRIM

With the cringle pulled right down to the boom, ease the topping lift, or crank on the vang if you have a rod kicker, to lower the boom and trim the sail. Tidy-up and settle down.



## Tacking



Heaving to for a couple of seconds means only handling one sheet at a time

Tacking can be done with ease singlehanded as we only have one sail to worry about; the mainsail will look after itself. After checking to make sure there are no boats close by, we can turn the boat through the wind and effectively heave to, giving us time to ease the old sheet and haul in the new. This will prevent any flogging of the headsail.

## Gybing



Watch the leech start to see when the mainsail will gybe

First, make absolutely sure that the traveller, if you have one, is centred and secured. If you don't it will hurtle across the boat when you gybe and could cause harm.

Haul in the mainsheet to bring the boom onto the centre line, then slowly bear away and keep an eye on the mainsail's leech as that will gybe first.

When the main gybes, ease the mainsheet to the desired trim. With that done, gybe the headsail across by easing the old sheet and hauling in the new as the clew goes gently from one side to the other.





# Dropping the mainsail



## 1 PREPARE TO DROP

First, flake the main halyard and grab some sail ties. Next, hoist the boom with the topping lift and make fast. Securing the topping lift is extremely important to prevent the boom from falling down. Now haul on the mainsheet to centre the boom, then turn the boat about 10° off the wind so you stay on the high side and away from falling sail. Now you're ready to drop.



## 3 FLAKE THE SAIL

With no lazyjacks, flake sail over the boom if possible or put the sail on top of the boom as tidily as you can, and secure with sail ties. Tie them in the same direction and on the same side as the halyard exit at the mast, as it makes it much easier to undo them as you walk towards the mast from the cockpit.



## 2 LOWER

Lower the mainsail, trying to flake the luff as the sail comes down. When it's lowered, loop the halyard under a winch on the mast and haul the halyard by hand to make fast. This stops the wind hoisting the sail again. Lazyjacks help as they guide the lowering sail on to the boom, which means you don't need to climb on top of anything to secure the mainsail.



Tidy up the flaked sail and tie with sail ties all on the same side

## 4 TIDY UP

If you have reefs in the main, ease the load off the reefing lines. If you had no reefs in before you dropped the sail, resist the urge to pull reefing lines through so all the line is in the cockpit. This will multiply the friction when you next hoist. Just tuck the lines into the sail or the main cover. At a later stage, when moored, for example, it is easier to finish this job of flaking the main. Lower the boom as far as possible to flake the main, as this makes it easier to pull the sail cloth around rather than trying to stretch over the boom. To prolong the life of your main, flake this differently every time.



# Berthing

Coming alongside is the source of most damaged dignity in the marina and has potential for some very expensive repairs. Planning and preparation will ensure that it will go as smoothly as possible.



## 1 CALL AHEAD

Call the marina to find out which berth you are being given. Ask where it is as some berths are not numbered logically, which side to you will be, and whether you will need to come in bow or stern first.



## 2 FENDERS OUT

Put your fenders out on both sides while outside the marina if you can, just in case. Ideally, have at least four lines ready: bow and stern lines on both sides, and midships lines.

## 3 MANOEUVRE INTO YOUR BERTH

When you know where you're going, the helm's job is to get the boat in and to stop it so she can be moored. If the space is between a pontoon and another boat, this can be advantageous, even though the space is smaller, as you can gently lay alongside the other boat, then step across this one and walk around to your pontoon. From here, lines can be thrown across and made fast on the cleats, simply warping yourself across the few feet to your berth. If you are alone, this is just as easy: throw the lines across and step over the other boat and warp your boat across. Once the breast lines are on, make fast the spring lines.



Have a simple way to secure alongside with one line initially

## 4 SECURE ALONGSIDE

There are many ways of coming alongside alone, regardless of wind or tide. You can get a midships breast line on first, or you can approach stern first and drop a stern line over a cleat on the pontoon. Once this is on, your boat cannot go very far, so throw a midships line on to the pontoon, step ashore and warp yourself in. You could also put a long stern spring on first, running through a midships fairlead or a bow fairlead. Tie a bowline in the working end and bring it to the stern outside everything and have the other end on a winch near you. Once you are parallel to the pontoon, drop this bowline over a cleat and make fast the onboard end. Motoring gently ahead with the helm hard over, hold the boat alongside the pontoon, giving you ample time to sort the lines.



# Anchoring

An electric windlass makes life so much easier, particularly with heavier ground tackle. It's simple to do shorthanded, providing a few principles are kept in mind.

Having the correct size of anchor and tackle for the vessel is important, although a heavier anchor and chain is better than something too light, which may not hold the vessel well.

Your considerations when deciding to anchor are the weather, wind speed and direction, now and for the duration of your intended stay, type of sea bed and the depth and range of tide. Check for hazards in the vicinity: if you do happen to drag, then how far away are these dangers? These points will determine the selection of your anchorage. If appropriate, agree communications before you go forward as it can be very difficult to hear even 30ft away when the anchor or chain are moving. Hand signals are best.



## 1 FIND A SPOT, PLAN YOUR DROP

Decide approximately how much chain to put out in relation to the depth and prepare the anchor at the bow. Decide on your anchorage. In clear waters, the person at the bow can direct the helm so the anchor drops just where it should, on sand instead of weed.

Check the chart first, calculate the tide and make a plan



## 2 DROP THE HOOK

Drop or lower the anchor in your chosen spot, considering what is around you, and then release the agreed amount of chain. A minimum of four times the depth is what I would recommend. If you don't have a windlass, flake out the required amount on deck beforehand and make it secure on a cleat.



## 3 CHECK YOU'RE SET

If it is strong enough, let the wind pull the cable taught and dig in the anchor, or run gently astern with the engine to straighten the cable and then a short burst of astern power for a few seconds will get the anchor properly set. It will be obvious if the anchor hasn't dug in at this point.



## 4 FIX YOUR POSITION AND RELAX

Take some bearings or plot on the chart where you are. Set your anchor, depth or wind speed alarms – and relax! It is worth checking you position and your holding if the tide or wind directions changes.



# Picking up a buoy

This can be an amusing or frustrating task, depending how you view it. It's vital that you are aware of how the buoy and the pick-up line are lying so you don't foul the rudder or propeller.



## 1 PLAN YOUR PICK-UP

For a conventional bow pick-up, good communication between helm and foredeck is key, especially in the last few feet where the helm cannot see the buoy. Approach against whichever element is strongest – tide or wind. It can be tricky if either are strongly abeam. The ideal is to be stationary with the buoy just off the port or starboard bow. It is easier to pick up from one side or the other rather than dead ahead, so the person on the foredeck isn't wrestling with the forestay. Also, if the helm overshoots, they can turn away and not go over the top of the buoy, risking fouling the pickup line or, worse, the prop or rudder.



## 2 MAKE CONTACT

There are some very ingenious boat hooks that allow you to get a line around the loop on a buoy and bring it back to the boat. Some of these are expensive, but can be very effective in connecting to the hoop or ring of a buoy if there is no pick-up line attached. If neither pick-up line nor fancy boat hook are available, lasso the buoy with a line attached from one bow cleat, run outside everything and attached to the other bow cleat. Throw this line over the buoy. Use a line that sinks and puts itself around the buoy; a polypropylene one will float.



## 3 SECURE TO THE BUOY

Lassoing is only a temporary measure before your mooring line is secured. If you can reach the buoy by pulling it closer underfoot, then a single loop through the buoy's hoop should be sufficient for a short stay. Make sure each end of this line is secured to the bow cleats before removing the lasso line – ideally keeping each end on board so it can be adjusted or let go from either side, just in case. If you are staying for longer, a separate line from each side with a full turn will be preferable to stop chafe.

An alongside pick-up can eliminate the need for a boat hook on yachts with a low freeboard

## 4 AN ALTERNATIVE OPTION

One alternative method is to carefully approach the buoy astern, bringing it alongside. This can make attaching the line easier, but take care not to foul the prop.

