

Losing control of my boat

Memories of a passage from Tortola to Newport, Rhode Island

Peter Craig-Wood



Peter then and now, with Veronica

We were enjoying relaxed sailing in the ENE trades on day two of our passage but the call from the cook was about to unsettle everyone aboard.

“Hey skip did the potatoes have these marks on them when you bought them?”

“What marks?”

“Looks like teeth.”

“Let me see. It must be just a mouse.”

On day four we find bigger marks. We were in touch with home (via SatC) and were advised that the marks were big enough to be a rat ...

The voyage continued with an unspoken atmosphere of apprehension. Will it (they) run over you at night?

I then started to be concerned about the immigration and health regulations in Bermuda, our planned stop. Might the vessel be impounded?

The crew trained the skipper by asking “Are there any animals on board?”

To which I had to reply “No, only the crew.”

Came alongside the customs berth in St Georges and various uniforms come on board.

No embarrassing questions. I then tackle the arrival forms and find the question:-
“Do any of the rats on board have bubonic plague?”

So, not only were rats expected, but I was meant to be familiar with them. I answered “No”.

We berth at Ireland Island in the old dockyard. The passage to New England was delayed as we discover that we are not insured if we have a rat caused incident. Some of the crew leave.

Warwick and I are left on board so we try to catch the rat(s). SSB and VHF hum

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with suggestions. Sticky paper. Slippery paper. Stay up all night with torch and a hammer. Mouse traps. Rat catching dog. We try lots of mouse traps and sticky sheets covering the main cabin floor. After many days of no success I decided to look in to the possibility of gassing the vessel.

So I catch the ferry to Hamilton and go to the Royal Bermuda YC office to see if we could book a berth and also a room while the treatment took place. At this stage I had not explained to the office what the problem was. I had forgotten what a small village Bermuda is, as the RBYC secretary turned to me and asked where were we berthed? On my reply of Ireland Island he asked had I met the boat with a rat on board?

Anyhow, we gave up the idea of gas or poison due to the problem of trying to find a smelly corpse in all the inaccessible places on a boat.

All the chewed packaging showed us that Ratty was enjoying helping himself to any of the 'soft goods' which were stored on board. On a crewed boat ready for two long passages we had good supplies. So it then became necessary to gather up all the fruit, vegetables, biscuits, cereals, snacks and chocolate and find secure storage ashore. The fridge was secure for breakfast items but otherwise the two of us ate ashore.

By now we were into June and the hurricane season. We had about ten mouse-traps throughout *Island Moon* with all sorts of tasty morsels including peanut butter, bacon, chocolate and sweets but nothing worked. Our insurance stopped as we were too far south

On a surprisingly still night, Warwick and I got back on board and heard a rustling noise in the galley. Our luck changed, by which I mean we actually 'see' a creature almost fly to the aft cabin. What to do?

Warwick says he is off to his bunk in the fore cabin. I am sleeping aft and take a little while to get to my bunk. I can't sleep and so return to the galley to see what was 'rustling', and find that Ratty was enjoying MY Trebor Extra Strong mints, which I had left out (against regulations).

Aha. Let's load up several traps with Trebor mints. An hour later there is a satisfactory snap as a mouse-trap closes. One down but is there a whole family? More traps set. We wait three days but no more traps are taken.

So how to check the boat for gnawing damage to essential pipes and wiring? We produce a list of all pipes on sea-cocks, fuel pipes and all heavy duty wiring. It took us both two full days to check everything as we formally signed off each item. As we took *Island Moon* to bits we realised how lucky we had been to accidentally leave lots of 'soft' goods for Ratty to enjoy in food depots throughout the bilges. It had food stored for ages. We think that this probably stopped him from gnawing on pipes etc.

Now we had to re-instate some insurance and find crew. Two of my brothers (Ian and Rick) dropped everything and had to get American visas. We are ready to go and on 11 June 1999 as the first Tropical Storm of the season formed; 'Arlene' was close to Bermuda. The harbour master helped us find a mooring in a very

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sheltered cove off Hamilton Sound. The fee for using it was to replace the chain for the owner. Despite a horrendous forecast for the approach to St Georges, it all fizzled out and we leave for Newport RI, a delightfully uneventful trip and our first Gulf Stream crossing.



Island Moon, a Hallberg-Rassy 42

On arrival in the USA we had to go alongside for a customs check, where a chatty officer came on board. No inspection of the holding tank but concern about any citrus fruit we had brought in. These were confiscated and I asked the officer what would he do with the fruit. “Put them in the freezer for a few days. Then take them out; cut them up and use them in my G&T!”

With the help of the Blue Book we had contacted Stanley Livingstone RCC and he allowed us to use his mooring in Newport Harbour which increased our enjoyment of Rhode Island a lot.

I hope this helps any members who may have a similar experience, but I also have to confess that I found the rat experience quite devastating as I ‘lost control’ of my much-loved boat.