

Fatigue and Short Cruises

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By Chris Edmonson

When I went with the last club cruise from San Carlos to Mulege and Bahia Concepcion there was no doubt we were going to have fun. In crewing for Rex in Shellback then racing on our return I had time to contemplate our schedule and it reminded me of several lessons involving safety. Our way across was started around noon on a Friday and we had excellent conditions. During daylight we had worked out which watch we each would take for the rest of the trip over to the Baja side of the Sea of Cortez (Gulf of California). Since there were just the two of us and we each felt a three hour watch was right for us we headed into the night time hours. When you head out, especially on a short trip like this one was, it is hard to break into the habits of on-watch/off-watch routines right away. You know right off the bat that you aren't going to be following the routine for very long and it's hard, in the initial excitement of getting away to slow down and get the rest you are going to need to stay alert during your watch.

If you leave the dock in daylight you feel you do not need any rest because you are fresh and the day is not any different than any other day... or, at least, that is what your body is telling you. It turns out that my favorite watch is the midnight to 03:00 (3:00 a.m.) stretch of time. There is solitude and the night sky can be, as it was during this cruise, incredible. I enjoy that time on the water but there are hindrances to safety that have come along to give me thought. In the right conditions we modern sailor types use tools like autopilots and while this is a wonderful instrument it can lead you astray too. So, here is the scene; we are motoring along in extremely calm conditions at about two in the morning and Otto is working for the crew on deck... that is, I am willing away the time on watch while the autopilot is keeping us on course. The night sky is providing one of the best displays of shooting stars I have ever seen and the moon has just gone down. I regularly glance around from side to side and fore and aft to be certain of seeing any portents of potential problems (PPP) and catching the full meteor shower on what had become a very dark night.

I glance off to starboard for 3 or so minutes looking for the glow of anything on the Baja shore and when I glance back to port there is a funny set of lights a lot closer than seems possible. It is a set of lights, really, that seems wrong. There is a masthead light of white and it is WAY high with a red light lower and near the water. It is getting closer so this does not square with what I know about navigation lights. In learning about Nav lights I was told if I saw a red light it meant I did not have right of way and that I had crossed the centerline of the other boat AND that the configuration should be moving away from or parallel to me – or, at least, that I was not on a collision course. This set of lights was coming straight at me however and becoming larger and increasingly more clearly on a collision course. It took a minute of staring and considering before I knew what action I needed to take.

Now, on a small boat with one crew(person) on watch there are some assumptions that have to be made. They all involve a basic belief that the crew knows the boat well enough to make good choices while the off-watch stays resting. One problem with that is that any change in motion or sound will inevitably bring the off-watch out to investigate. I punched the Standby button on the autopilot and turned down the volume on the motor while I got ready to pull the autopilot off the tiller and turn the motor back to full roar (probably on a new heading). I also began to shine the largest flashlight aboard on the mains'l while I watched for any sign of change in the on coming boat. The stand-on boat was getting close indeed but I could see that it would now pass in front of us. About that time the skipper (Rex) is in the hatchway wondering what is happening. The crossing boat is in front of us and I can now see the white masthead light, no bow light and a red glow showing the cockpit of a sailboat under the bimini/dodger... no people visible and as it crosses it turns to the same heading we are on with what looks like a red stern light!! I point forward and Rex sees this boat as it moves away from us about 50 or 60 yards off the bow. I think that what I saw was a boat with a masthead light and somehow I was looking at some light (red) in the cockpit from all directions.

When we got to Bahia Concepción we learned the rest of the story. It turns out that we had, in fact, seen a light in the cockpit that the crew

was using to read by and the crew had not noticed that the autopilot had gone off line and taken the boat off on a 60 degree heading when the proper course was about 208 or so!! I felt that the boat had to be one of our group because when it changed course it went right to the same heading we were on. Being a much larger boat it moved off at a greater speed and was soon gone. In all this I had thought about using the radio to hail the other boat but it would have meant leaving the cockpit to locate the portable or getting to the main radio. In either case I would have been away from the tiller and motor and real control of Shellback. One of the many things learned on boats is that illusions happen easily and the more tired one is the more readily you can buy into that sort of deception. Had I kept the idea that the red bow light was actually a bow light my judgment of correct action could easily have led to a wrong choice. When I am tired I can more easily be persuaded that what I imagine is the correct view rather than some other just as plausible story.

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Awhile back I was in La Paz and watched part of a drama unfold that told me a few things about the lack of a watch system and fatigue. There had been a single-handed sailor bringing a boat up from Cabo to La Paz. He had actually been singlehanding down from San Diego and from talking to a few people he had gotten to know in Cabo I found out that many had been worried about him because of his high constant fatigue level. Without an active watch set on board he regularly dozed off on a passage. In this instance he was making a short passage (Cabo to La Paz) and had gotten as far as Los Muertos at the point just before the turn into the Cerralvo channel. Long story shortened, he went to sleep and basically ploughed into the beach at Muertos thus managing to sink his boat, Irish Mist. The cruising network in La Paz responded and refloated the boat then towed it to La Paz. The cruisers got together in figuring out what need to be done to save the boat and its equipment. They also filled the diesel motor with oil and got it to turn over again. This was (and as far as I know, still is) a beautiful wooden boat. Fatigue had almost lost the boat and its crew. It's more common than one might suppose for boats to run while the crew sleeps. It is more common than you might

think for a boat to run without any Nav lights. It's more possible to encounter a boat like this in the Sea of Cortez.

My view for a long time has been that it is the crew's job to see to it that the skipper gets more rest than they do. In an emergency I want to know that the person with the most knowledge of the boat has a clear head. If I can facilitate the skipper getting a few minutes of extra sleep or not having to do a job that I can do that is a little more difficult then I have fulfilled some of my part of signing on as crew. As a single-hander I am obligated to get sleep and see to it that I am not a hazard when I do sleep. For this I am prone to heaving-to and catching some rest. I turn on the anchor light and sleep in the cockpit. This may not be the best practice but it is what I have come to in finding a way to be as safe as I can be.

The return trip from Bahia Concepción was a further example of on-watch handling. We had been in light air for most of the day. It had taken from around 10:00 in the morning until dusk to find ourselves perhaps five miles outside of the headlands of the bay. We did not want to motor because we had a limited gasoline supply and felt it would be better to conserve this. Around this time (dusk) we finally relented because the wind had gone away and was getting directionally challenged; we started the motor and set the autopilot. The skipper had let me sleep in a bit and I started my watch around 01:30 while we noticed that the seas were building the wind driving it had not yet arrived. By 02:30 we were getting a taste of what was to follow and it was time to reduce sail some. I like sailing in good wind but in the middle of the night, even with a good moon, it does not make sense to blast along under full sail with rising wind speed. The boat was doing well but every less than 30 foot boat I have ever been on is a wet ride and this was no exception! My goal was to let Rex get below as soon as I got changed into something semi-appropriate for a dousing and get us to first light. We were a somewhat challenged because we needed to be on the side of the boat where we could not see the GPS read-out clearly and the compass on our side of the boat had a very dim light.

I was steering best by the moon (almost full at this point) but it finally set behind us and I needed some other way to keep to a course. About that time the glow from Guaymas showed dimly on the horizon and a smaller glow that I assumed to be from San Carlos was a little to port of the larger glow. If I had been tired I might not have noticed this. One thing about autopilots that I appreciate is that they do not always work in more radical conditions. I like steering the boat myself at those times because it keeps me aware of what is going on. This is especially true when things get more exciting. In the dark you cannot necessarily see when the next sea is going crash over the top and get you wet but you can feel when it might be about to happen. By sun up I was a fairly wet crewman and ready for some time off the tiller. Rex had probably not slept much but had been out of the weather for some of the time so was as rested as one could reasonable expect for being tossed around in the hull.

As much as anything I needed to dry off and warm up. That constitutes rest in my book. A bit later Rex said, "Whales" and I struggled to get out of my sleeping bag and get my head out of the hatch. There was, indeed, a pod of whales that had just crossed in front of us and fairly closely! I was fully awake and after a change of clothing (again) was ready to take a turn steering. Rex prepared a breakfast of sorts (we opened some canned fruit cocktail) and enjoyed a wonderful morning slamming our way to the now visible San Carlos. For a short cruise you can become over fatigued but we were in pretty good shape when we finally got to San Carlos. It had taken about 28 hours but with a watch system we had shared the burden of getting there and it meant more that we had shared the fun of it too. We will see you out there and maybe next time you will have the opportunity to take in the cruise. Ask anyone who took this one on and you will find a lot of different and wonderful stories from the same event!