Night sailing – the essential guide for offshore cruisers

Chris Tibbs on how to prepare for and enjoy offshore night watches

Yachting World April 19, 2017

<http://www.yachtingworld.com/practical-cruising/night-sailing-the-essential-guide-for-offshore-cruisers-106195>

With a full moon and following wind, night sailing can be one of the great pleasures to be had when passagemaking; but on a dark night in a gale it can be very stressful and leave you longing for dawn.

Whether you are crossing the Channel or crossing an ocean, sailing in the dark is something that everyone experiences at some stage in their sailing career and with some simple preparations you can make it easier and safer.

Have you ever been asked by a non-sailor: “What do you do out on the ocean at night?” It often comes as a surprise to find that sailing has always been a 24-hour pastime.

Traditionally, passages were made at night and planned so that landfall was at dawn to assist with identifying the lights and confirming the yacht’s position. Then the skipper could enter port safely during daylight.

With GPS we now rather underestimate the usefulness of lights for position fixing and, as more yachts are fitted with AIS, crossing shipping lanes has become less difficult now that you are not solely reliant on identifying each ship’s navigation lights.

Of course, not all vessels have AIS!

### ****How to prepare for long passages****

Generally night sailing falls into one of two categories: the first is a one-off night sail, such as the start of a summer cruise to get the boat to your cruising ground, or perhaps a RORC or JOG cross-Channel race. The second is a long passage where there will be a number of days between the start and finish with consecutive night sails.

For me there should be little difference when setting up the boat although there will be a difference in watchkeeping.

Whether cruising or racing, the crew spending consecutive nights at sea requires a more rigid watch system – covering the full 24 hours – than the one-night crew. But the principles of watch-keeping do also apply to single nights at sea.

One of my pet hates used to be the Friday night cross-Channel races. Crews would arrive all enthusiastic after a hard week at work, but by 0200 tiredness had set in and we would see ourselves slowly working our way to the back of the fleet with only one or two awake enough to be competitive.

Most boats are logical in their layout and it is always a pleasure when a new but experienced crew comes on board as they will rarely need telling twice which rope is which.

Yes it is good to label clutches but soon after joining everyone should know by feel and position which rope is which.

Close your eyes and feel – size becomes very apparent and the covers will feel different. Hold the spinnaker halyard in one hand and the topping lift in the other; feel the different sizes and textures.

It is always good to keep the same ropes in the same position so at night in the dark, when the label is obscured anyway, it is easy to pick up the right one.

Humans are not particularly good at seeing at night and it takes a long time to get full night vision.

The eyes are incredible complex and there are three phases in adapting to the dark.

Initially our pupils dilate to allow as much light in as possible; this may take from a few seconds to a minute to happen.

The next phase takes place in the cone cells of the eye. In the absence of light we get chemical changes in the cell and it can take ten minutes for the cone cells to adapt to the dark.

Lastly we have rod cells which are responsible for black and white vision and these contain rhodopsin which is reactivated in the absence of light. This will take several hours to fully adapt to the dark.

Although we are all different, as a rough guide it takes about ten minutes to get most of our night vision, which gets slowly better over the following few hours. This can be put back to zero very quickly by the use of bright lights.

### ****How to use lights on board at night****

All crew members should have a flashlight and it’s worth keeping a powerful spotlight on deck for rig checks and emergencies.

When sail trimming try and use as weak a flashlight as possible and also warn the helmsman and lookouts before using it.

We have had great success in painting the lenses of flashlights with red nail varnish: the red light is much kinder on the eyes and nail varnish is more readily available than red flashlights.

Red lights are also crucial below. Some yachts will have split lights with red to be used at night. In the past, I have used stick-on red film from a photographic shop.

Generally we cover half of the lights red when cruising, but for long offshore passages we will cover all the lights with red film to avoid the wrong switch being used.

It would be nice to have two complete circuits to turn off the white lights completely, however ten minutes with a pair of scissors and all lights are covered.

Head torches leave both hands free, but I actually hate them on deck when sailing. If spoken to it is the natural reaction to turn and look at the person speaking, instantly ruining their night vision. Some head torches will have red bulbs but any bulb shining straight into your eye is damaging for your night vision.

Use light sparingly as the less you use, the less you tend to need. With the latest instruments and multifunction displays you can control the brightness of the image: keeping it to a minimum helps night vision and also consumes less power.

I am told that in training, some Mini Transat and Figaro sailors will practice sailing blindfold.

### ****Night sailing tips for cruisers****

I have been involved with the ARC for many years and it seems that most crews will routinely drop spinnakers and reduce sail for the night. All very prudent but nights are long in the tropics – approaching 12 hours of darkness.

I am not one for fixed rules, so I would rather see a boat set up for simple sail handling and allow conditions to dictate the sail plan. This also depends on the number of crew on board and the watch-keeping regime.

It makes sense to mark halyards and control ropes. I like to sew in a whipping of a contrasting colour onto the line marking the correct position just out of the clutch. This can be felt as well as seen and is particularly useful when reefing.

I also like to mark halyards at the maximum hoist to avoid anyone getting too enthusiastic and winding the splice or knot into the sheave. This is something racing boats have done for years and for cruisers would be useful for both day and night sailing.

Luminous draft stripes can be added to sails to help with sail shape and small amounts of reflective tape can also be stuck around the boat to help see and identify equipment.

Head torches leave both hands free, but I actually hate them on deck when sailing. If spoken to it is the natural reaction to turn and look at the person speaking, instantly ruining their night vision. Some head torches will have red bulbs but any bulb shining straight into your eye is damaging for your night vision.

Use light sparingly as the less you use, the less you tend to need. With the latest instruments and multifunction displays you can control the brightness of the image: keeping it to a minimum helps night vision and also consumes less power.

I am told that in training, some Mini Transat and Figaro sailors will practice sailing blindfold.

### ****Night sailing tips for cruisers****

I have been involved with the ARC for many years and it seems that most crews will routinely drop spinnakers and reduce sail for the night. All very prudent but nights are long in the tropics – approaching 12 hours of darkness.

I am not one for fixed rules, so I would rather see a boat set up for simple sail handling and allow conditions to dictate the sail plan. This also depends on the number of crew on board and the watch-keeping regime.

It makes sense to mark halyards and control ropes. I like to sew in a whipping of a contrasting colour onto the line marking the correct position just out of the clutch. This can be felt as well as seen and is particularly useful when reefing.

I also like to mark halyards at the maximum hoist to avoid anyone getting too enthusiastic and winding the splice or knot into the sheave. This is something racing boats have done for years and for cruisers would be useful for both day and night sailing.

Luminous draft stripes can be added to sails to help with sail shape and small amounts of reflective tape can also be stuck around the boat to help see and identify equipment.

The typical cruising yacht has a number of roles to perform, so the ideal deck layout in terms of sailing efficiency will be compromised by the requirements of the cabin space below.

This tends to encourage slow sailing: if it is hard to single-handedly reduce sail, it makes sense to automatically reef at night so you do not have to call anyone to help.

Two or three hours is long enough to be up on your own and with shorter watch times, there is the opportunity to change sail during a change of watch when there are two people on deck.

When my wife and I are double-handed passagemaking, we stick to three-hour watches, as this is as long as I can keep concentration. But it is tiring. For ocean crossings we tend to have an extra person to help.

### ****Night raids and the importance of the midnight snack****

When racing you have to push 24 hours a day to be competitive, although you can be a bit more conservative at night to help preserve the boat and crew.

When I skippered Concert in the BT Global Challenge, we would occasionally do a ‘night raid’. This involved handing out a few extra treats for dinner then, putting the best drivers on the helm, we would really push through the hours of darkness. This usually paid off with a few miles gained.

I would be happy to cross an ocean on freeze-dried food but I think I am in a minority! Food and drink is important for fuel and also for enjoyment.

Food at night is particularly important for energy and well-being. Sealed personal drink flasks stay hot for a couple of hours, the biggest danger being burning your mouth in the first hour. Snacks are also good on night watches: our bodies are used to sleeping at night and a snack helps to keep us going.

One trick that I like is a Cup-a-Soup in a wide-mouthed flask with a few teaspoons of couscous added. Put the lid on and leave it five minutes and you have a tasty and filling savoury snack!

### ****How to be a watchkeeper****

Watchkeepers should not take the responsibility lightly. You need an experienced watchkeeper crossing the Channel due to the level of shipping and navigation required on the passage. Further offshore a less experienced watchkeeper has more time to call the skipper.

### ****Why longer passages are easier****

Everyone on board has to get enough sleep. It may be possible, physically, to go 24 hours without sleep, but decision-making suffers and it is easy to make mistakes.

I prefer, if possible, to have at least two people on a watch, this avoids having to call extra crew for small sail changes or manoeuvres. It does also mean that when you are off watch, your sleep is not disturbed. With two on watch, three or four-hour watches pass quickly, split between steering, lookout, and navigation.

Racing is a bit different as there is generally a bigger crew. I am not a fan of everyone on the rail all night, and rotating the crew so everyone gets some sleep is important.

For longer races like the Fastnet I would have a rigid watch system so everyone gets some good sleep. If anything goes wrong then it always seems to happen at about 0400 when people are at their lowest ebb.

I would also get into the watch system early, probably before Portland, to get into a rhythm. Our bodies are very complex and need time to adjust; a short passage of two or three nights can be more tiring than a transatlantic.

Personally I find it takes about three days to get settled. I then get one really good deep sleep and I am fine for the rest of the voyage. I tend to find short passages – anything less than three days – more tiring, which is why I prefer a bigger crew for sailing a few hundred miles than I do for sailing longer passages.

### ****7 Top tips for Safety at  night****

• Prepare your boat: mark all halyards and brief crew on cockpit layout  
• Be patient with night vision: it takes three hours to fully adapt and moments to ruin  
• Red lights: either use red see-through film, red light bulbs or even nail polish  
• Get into watches early on the voyage: the body needs time to adjust to a new rhythm  
• Good food is especially important at night when the body is conditioned to be sleeping  
• Think safety and preparation: don’t run a one-person watch if the boat’s not easy to sail solo  
• Avoid getting overtired: concentration and decision making is essential at sea