

Preparing for Blue Water Cruising

Captain Joel R. Stern

When you talk about this subject, what are you referring to exactly?

What things are there that we really need to be prepared for?

Blue Water Cruising can mean different things to each of us. I am not just talking about just a long weekend adventure. I'm referring to extended passage making. Potentially, weeks at a time. Traveling to different locations and countries that have no idea what an anti-siphon or exhaust elbow are. I'm talking about being self-sufficient. About being prepared to handle whatever it is that mother - nature and fate are going to throw your way.

Everything I am going to mention will be greatly affected by two main issues. The first is budget. We all know that we can spend an absolute fortune trying to be properly prepared. The second issue is the restraint of space.

Each skipper will need to prioritize for himself.

- 1. Of course, everyone thinks about having the vessel prepared**
- 2. YOU, the Captain**
- 3. Your Crew**
- 4. Provisioning program**
- 5. Maintenance program in place**
- 6. Safety program in place**
- 7. An "abandon ship" program**
- 8. Create a spare parts inventory**
- 9. Sail inventory**
- 10. Dinghy**
- 11. Tools**

Preparing for Blue Water Cruising

Captain Joel R. Stern

When you talk about the vessel, you need to be sure that you possess a fair knowledge about how to use all of the equipment on board.

Your electronics are a must. You need to have a working knowledge of:

**Radar, AIS, GPS, VHF, SSB, Computer, Electronic charts
Compass,**

Make sure that all of your navigation lights are working including your running / steaming light and your anchor light.

When talking about lights; have some type of lights aboard that will separate your boat from any other. When you are returning from shore to a very dark anchorage, finding your boat can be an issue. Many cruisers hang neon lights from the end of the boom or from a halyard. My favorite is to have a string of Christmas lights wrapped around the boom.

It never hurts to have redundancy on board. Multiple GPS units, a Hand held VHF to back up your onboard unit, an extra computer, and most importantly, paper charts to back up your computer charts.

Your choice of your main anchor is important. Do you have a stern anchor? A storm anchor? Appropriate rode? Are you going to use rope, chain or a combination of both? Does the electronic windlass work well? And, if it fails, do you have a manual system on board to help haul up you chain? Know far in advance what the typical ground conditions are that you are going to be cruising in.

Do you have the appropriate knowledge to check your standing rigging and are you lines on the running rigging all in good shape?

Do you have a written plan, a diagram, of the location of all of the through hulls fittings on your boat? Draw a rough blueprint showing their locations.

Preparing for Blue Water Cruising

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Basically, every system, whether it be the water - maker, the gen set, the engine, every system needs to be operational and performing to the specs that it was designed to run at.

YOU

You as the Captain are ultimately responsible for the safety of the vessel and the crew. You are going to be wearing many, many hats.

You need to have all of your ships papers in good order. Do not forget, have your personal passport up to date as well.

One very important aspect of the trip is that YOU are in good physical condition and that you are capable of having the strength and stamina to perform under stressful and very physical conditions.

If you wear eyeglasses, do you have enough pairs in case you loose a lens or a pair of glasses? Do you have enough medication on board, i.e. high blood pressure meds., insulin, heartburn pills? Of course you see my point here. Just make sure you got it covered. Do not think that all of these meds are available to be purchased no matter where you are. Also, make sure that all of your shots and inoculations are current for the areas that you intend to visit. Have ace bandages, thumb splints, finger splints, wrist, elbow and ankle supports on board as well.

Preparing yourself to go Blue Water Cruising should begin at least two years before your departure. As I mentioned above, make you sure that you are physically up to the task at hand.

If you can, take courses on diesel mechanics. Learn to be as proficient a mechanic as you can be. Have you ever felt that people whom you have hired to work on your car or home were just plain incompetent? Well, do not look for that to improve in 3rd world countries. Most mechanics in 3rd world companies can hold your pickup truck together with chewing gum and rubber bands but that is not who you want working on your engine or generator.

Preparing for Blue Water Cruising

Captain Joel R. Stern

Take a course on reading the weather, both weather maps and satellite maps. Consider having a weather fax program on your computer that plugs into your SSB or Shortwave radio.

You will find that you decide when and when not to leave a port strictly because of the weather. When underway, receiving and studying weather charts will help you to prepare the boat and crew for what is ahead. Pilot charts are inexpensive and uncannily accurate. They are almost as good as real time weather charts. I found their forecast unbelievably accurate.

Learn how to really use your electronic equipment.

Radar is invaluable. In tight places at night, rely more on your Radar than your GPS. GPS locations can actually put you aground. The satellite co-ordinates are accurate but our charts are not, Many of them are still based upon what was created nearly 300 years ago by the “Square Riggers” of the day.

Knowing how to use an SSB is very important. You can communicate with other cruisers and obtain valuable weather and sea state conditions all around you. You can join cruising nets and keep in touch daily with scheduled nets of cruisers doing the same passage as yourself. I received two Tsunami warnings via my radio when I was in The Kingdom of Tonga. You can also tune into radio broadcasts such as the BBC to keep informed as to what is going on in the world around you.

Using your GPS plugged into your computer allows you to use electronic charts for navigating. Oh, what a wonderful thing that is! Also, know how to set your alarms on both your radar and GPS. You will sleep better at night.

Speaking of sleeping, Have a couple of mechanical egg timers. During night watches it is a good idea to set them to go off every 10 to 12 minutes. Have an exceptionally good pair of binoculars in or near the cockpit.

Preparing for Blue Water Cruising

Captain Joel R. Stern

Do not forget the compass in your binnacle. Also, have at least one spare such as a hand held bearing compass. Always have a pair of dividers and parallel rulers to navigate with your paper charts as well. Cruising Guides are a great tool and give much needed information. Before you leave on your trip, download (and print) harbor entrances or coves that you think that you may visit from Google Earth. We have the ability to really create our own geographic maps.

If you can have an AIS system aboard, (Automatic Identification System) it can come in handy when you want to hail a ship. They are great resource to turn for updated weather forecasts because they have excellent equipment aboard.

If you have a water-maker on board, make sure you know how to operate it and how to change the filters. By the way, drag used dirty filters through the water behind your boat for a couple of hours and then, let them dry out. You can now reuse them.

You need to bring other talents to the table as well.

You need to be able to appropriately provision the boat. Not only with food and water, but with spare parts, tools, safety equipment, medicines and medical aids such as braces and bandages. There are physicians who when you give them an explanation of why you are trying to put together a small pharmacy, they will help you out. Vanctamicin is a great anti-biotic to have aboard. (MERCA).

A great piece of equipment to have onboard is a food vacuum machine. You will find that food that has been vacuum-sealed will last 2 -3 weeks longer.

Do not forget extra filters. Oil filters, fuel filters, water-maker filters and if you can, install a simple pure water carbon filter in the galley.

Preparing for Blue Water Cruising

Captain Joel R. Stern

Do not forget oil, antifreeze, spare containers of water, fuel and an ample amount of propane.

Have extra hoses for the head, for fuel, for water, for the engine and exhaust system along with various hose clamps.

Also, what is your sail inventory? Are you planning on bringing extra sails along in case you blow one out?

Have a length of tubing with hose clamps and purchase a valve that fits a foreign (European) propane tank. You can then hang one upside down and fill your own tanks. This is really important!!

It is also a good idea to bring trinkets to give to little kids while you travel. They love candy, little bracelets, any costume jewelry and “T” shirts as well.

I used to carry a huge supply of fishing hooks and small spools of fishing line. They take up no room at all but are precious to people who’s diets are largely dependant upon the sea. A great gift!

Think about what tools you may need to bring. As an example, consider the following:

- **Full set of Standard and Metric box / open end wrenches**
- **Pipe wrench with a length of pipe for leverage**
- **Torch with solder and copper fittings / valves**
- **Soldering gun for repairing wires**
- **Wire strippers, crimps and cutters**
- **Don’t forget the connectors and wire nuts as well as spare wire**
- **A portable drill with plenty of bits and an extra battery & charger**
- **A standard drill with lots of torque to drill through S.S.**
- **Wood cutting tools along with some lumber and plywood**
- **Resin and cloth to repair fiberglass**

Preparing for Blue Water Cruising

Captain Joel R. Stern

- Lubricant for plumbing fittings – especially for deck fittings with fine threads
- *** A vice
- Hammer, various pliers, tubing cutters, hose cutters, hacksaw
- Electrical testers – volt meter
- Thread and a sewing kit that is made for canvas.

- A SEWING MACHINE, with thread and sailcloth.
- Sail tape for quick repairs to tears in the sail or canvas
- ***Nylon strapping such as seat belt material (8000 psi)
- Refrigeration service equipment
- Fire extinguishers

Remember, to change a screw in your home, you need a screwdriver. On a boat, it seems to usually require a hardware store!

You need to create and maintain a maintenance program. A scheduled safety check of all of the running and standing rigging should take place at least once a week. Check your engine and gen set fluid levels every time you start them!

Daily safety equipment such as Life jackets, inflatable PFDs, safety harnesses, individual strobes, a throwable life saving ring, a life sling, man overboard pole, and jack lines are a few to mention. Having tapered wooden plugs to shove into a broken hose and some heavy duty rubber matting and lumber is good to have aboard in case you need to plug up a whole in the hull. Have some 2-part waterproof putty that you can use around leaking through hull fittings.

You can run aground on coral and cut your hull open or you can hit something floating in the water. Remember, 10,000 containers wash overboard from cargo ships each year. Also, whales do not see you and collisions take place every year.

Preparing for Blue Water Cruising

Captain Joel R. Stern

I know of 7 boats that went down in the three years I was out on the water. There was an additional vessel that went down in flames off of Catalina Island the month before I left.

A “GO BAG” equipped with a Hand held VHF radio, GPS, flares, EPIRB, hand held compass, fishing line, a blunt pointed knife, water, protein bars, a flash light, glow sticks, motion sickness pills are just a few things to mention. If you can afford to have an Iridium phone or any brand of satellite phone, even better. It’s a good feeling to know,

that if necessary, you can always call the Coast Guard and ask them what time dinner will be ready. ☺

By the way, now that you have this go bag, where are you going? In other words, are you going to have a life raft aboard? Expensive, sure. But, if you need one, you are going to be happy that you made the investment. If you buy it used, check the inspection / packing date. It is a good practice to have it repacked every three years and especially before you leave the U.S. You do not really want it repacked in a 3rd world country.

There are a few more things worth mentioning:

Crew.

Sometimes I think that crew are a necessary evil. They can be an absolute drudgery or wonderful company.

As the Captain, you need to know how to interview crew. You need to know the right questions to ask. It is not a bad idea to have a form already made out with questions that can be e-mailed or faxed to a potential crew.

- Why do they want to crew?
- How much experience do they have and on what kind of vessels? Make sure they have experience on a sailboat, not a fishing boat.
- Have they done long passage making?

Preparing for Blue Water Cruising

Captain Joel R. Stern

- **Do they have open blue water experience?**
- **To what extent can they navigate?**
- **Do they feel comfortable at taking the helm and standing night watch?**

Basically, you want to know what kind of seamanship skills they possess.

Those were the obvious questions. But, how about;

- **How tall are they and what is their weight?**
- **How athletic are they?**
- **WHAT CONDITION IS THEIR HEALTH?**
- **When was the last time they had a physical?**
- **When and what was their last surgery?**
- **How often do you shower?**
- **What are your oral hygiene habits?**
- **How often do you like to have a drink?**

By the way, as skipper, are going to allow any drinking while underway?

Think that's too personal? Well I had one crew who after 16 days without showering, he was going overboard for a bath unless he cleaned himself up. He was proud that he did a 27-day passage and announced that he never brushed his teeth, not once!

I had another crew who lied to me about his health. He had a liver transplant performed 11 months before he joined me In Panama. He was taking a regiment of organ anti-rejection drugs and was subject to infection.

- **What personal equipment were they planning on bringing?**
- **Do they own foul weather gear?**
- **A harness?**
- **A PFD?**

Preparing for Blue Water Cruising

Captain Joel R. Stern

- An individual strobe?
- Do they like dogs? Especially if you have one aboard.
- Do they like to read?
- Play cards?
- Board games?
- Do they play an instrument? Were they thinking of bringing one along?
- Do they surf?
- Are they planning on bringing their board?

- What are their expectations of their responsibilities while aboard?

- How do they feel about sharing expenses?

- Does that include provisions, both consumables and food? Fuel oil, duties and entry fees?

- How far do they want to go? What is their destination?

The list can go on and on. It would be best if all of this was written down before you even left the dock.

*****I mentioned to ask if they like pets.** This brings up the question as to whether or not you are going to bring a pet along. Be aware of the additional aspects this brings to the boat. They pee and poop like the rest of us. Can your pet be trained to use a cookie sheet with Astroturf? Will you always be able to provide pet food for the animal? Will the pet be welcomed into other countries? If the dog is going to be in government quarantine, are you comfortable with the additional costs? If your pet cannot go ashore for months at a time, do you consider this to be a cruel punishment? **Think twice about bringing a pet along!**

The last item to mention is your dink.

Preparing for Blue Water Cruising

Captain Joel R. Stern

Your dinghy is your shore boat. Make sure it is operational and that you have a patch kit for it. Make sure that this is a two part adhesive. In a pinch, 3M's "5200" will usually work and hold up for a period of time.

One-part adhesives that come in a tube do not perform. They have no shelf life and you have no idea how long this sat on a shelf before you even bought it. I opened 5 different tubes of adhesive only to find that all 5 were no good!

When deciding on an outboard, do you want a 4 stroke or 2 stroke? Remember that hoisting an outboard over the side in bouncing conditions can get heavy so pick your engine wisely.

Make sure you have spare parts for your outboard along with a carburetor rebuild kit, shear pins, cotter pins and even a spare prop.

Speaking of props, are you going to bring an extra prop along for your boat?

Be sure to keep oars in your dinghy at all times! You never know when that outboard is going to die and it is a big ocean out there to be adrift in.

Mounting wheels on your dinghy for beach landings is a great item to have. They really come in handy if you want to haul your dink overland for any distance to go explore up some river.

There is so much to consider. Are you going to have an extra fresh water pump, an extra bilge pump, an extra alternator, an extra starter, an extra electric motor for the electric head and service kits for manual toilets? The list can rally go on and on. By the way, make sure that at least one of your heads is manual!

Are you going to have an autopilot onboard? Will it be wind vane steering or will it require power?

Preparing for Blue Water Cruising

Captain Joel R. Stern

How are you going to make electricity? Are you going to outfit the boat with solar panels, a wind generator or a gen set? Are you going to have refrigeration on board? Are you going to want to have an icemaker onboard? A real creature comfort in the Southern Latitudes!

As I said at the beginning of this talk, each skipper is ultimately responsible for his vessel and crew, so, choose and prepare wisely.

Happy and Safe Cruising,

**Joel R. Stern
Captain, S/V “Paradise Bound”**