



STORY BECCA GUILLOTE

The Ultimate Relationship Challenge

LIVING ABOARD IS AN INTENSITY TEST FOR EVERY COUPLE'S SKILLS, NERVES AND PATIENCE.

Wherever your relationship is headed, cruising will get it there faster.

These words, which an arguably jaded cruiser friend uttered with a smirk, become more compelling the more I consider them. Cruising seems to be the Ultimate Relationship Challenge. I can imagine the reality show: Two people who claim to love each other, cramped onto a tiny, floating mass of leaky fiberglass and temperamental equipment, must work together through third world countries using the power of the wind, battling tempestuous weather, seasickness and pirates. (Of course there are pirates.)

I can attest that cruising poses an impressive array of trials. My husband, John, and I live and cruise on our 40-foot Valiant monohull with about 340 square feet of living space. It is nearly impossible to move around without bumping into each other, stepping on toes, and twirling around like awkward teens at a middle-school dance. Our bathroom does have a door, but it also shares a wall with our living room. Personal space is hard to come by.

Sometimes, entire weeks go by in which we are never farther than 40 feet from each other. This intense togetherness is not on purpose; it happens by default unless we consciously choose to be apart. I'd argue that being with another human 24/7, even one you love with all your heart, is a tougher challenge than the average pirate encounter, albeit significantly less glamorous for TV.

For starters, insignificant quirks add up. Nightly, when the day is done and I want nothing more than to snuggle into bed with my book, I must go on a treasure hunt for the toothpaste. It's impressive how many inadvertent hiding spots he can find for the tube in 340 square feet.

Then again, I like a well-lit boat, and *maybe* I tend to leave those lights on well after I need them. This is, according to John, quite unnecessary. Lights require power, and power is something we must conserve. He is sure to remind me of this each time he flips a switch off.

Without a stable community of friends, coworkers, family and social media, the demands on each of us intensify. We must be the funny friend, the empathetic ear, the stimulating conversationalist, the diesel engine specialist, even the Google when curiosity piques. It is draining, carrying

around all those hats. I often lose one overboard in the wind and exhaustion, or sometimes choose to leave a few behind. It takes gentle prodding, or occasionally a dramatic reset, to reorganize our hats and step back up into the role of partner.

And yet, John and I continue to choose paths that entail concentrated time together, living in tight quarters and working through stresses side by side. From several months in a West African village (punctuated by a week in a West African hospital) to finding housing and jobs in a new city (at the crux of the recession), our shared history has created a detailed and colorful chart illustrating "how to" and "how not to" be a good spouse. Each moment, each decision and emotional response, each lesson learned adds a safe harbor, a few depth soundings, a hidden shoal or a well-marked channel.

Here are a few of the practices we try to integrate into our daily lives to keep our relationship healthy and moving in the right direction, no matter where our bow is pointed next.

Spend Time Apart

It takes intention and planning to spend time apart, and the alone time is crucial. When tensions rise, when I suppress the desire to epoxy the toothpaste to the counter, when John hands me a headlamp, when the nitpicking and bickering begin, there is almost always a correlation between the level of tension on the boat and the number of consecutive days we've spent together.

And so, even in a lonely anchorage, we deliberately separate. I do yoga, go for a paddle or grab my book and head to the beach. John tends to go snorkeling or fishing, find a quiet table and a cup of coffee, or crawl into the V-berth with a movie and headphones. When we come back together, we are refreshed. We have new experiences to talk about and new energy to share.

Swap Roles

When a new boat maneuvers into the anchorage and the curse words carry not only from cockpit to bow but also across the whole bay, other cruisers exchange a knowing smile. Anchoring is the quintessential boat-couple-team-work test. There is a boat length of difference in opinion,

perspective and misinterpretation between the skipper and the mate. There is a fine line between yelling to be heard and just yelling.

If voices are raised on our boat, we know it's time to swap roles. The process of anchoring may not be as efficient, and could take a few tries, but once the skipper becomes the mate and vice versa, those differences in opinion and perspective melt into understanding and patience. We do this not just with anchoring, but also anytime we've fallen into a job-dividing habit that encourages disparity or frustration. Once the roles are swapped, we quickly remember that both jobs are tough, dirty and time consuming.

Show Appreciation

There are chores that we share and plenty we divide. They all have to get done. It is no use exclaiming how one person's chores are tougher, dirtier and drearier than the other's: Your partner probably feels the same way. It's crucial to keep perspective on all those boat chores, and to offer appreciation instead of complaints.

When the engine quit for the fifth time on the same 250-mile passage and John once again had to fold himself into the engine room to snuggle with a 180-degree sputtering mess of a motor, I felt helpless. I am competent in the engine room, but under pressure, it is John who can get our engine running again. While he suffered in the diesel-soaked heat, I sat in the cockpit in the wisps of breeze doing my best to keep the sails from flagging. I offered encouragement, fetched tools, poured countless glasses of juice and water, and waited.

I didn't have to be in that engine room, but I could empathize with how incredibly unpleasant the experience was. I wanted him to know I appreciated his capability to tackle that dreaded chore (for the fifth time). Hopefully, my encouragement shaved the edge off his engine-room misery.

Meet People

Community is one of the most important tools we have for our relationship. Meeting new people injects new influences, new stories and new energy into our experience. We nearly climb over each other to jump in the dinghy and greet a new boat in the anchorage (sometimes before the anchor is even

Without the luxury of physical separation, we have learned to shake it off, to take a deep breath (or a dozen), to change the subject and to come around from being frustrated to being content. There is no space for grudges on a boat.

set, our eagerness trampling basic cruising etiquette). We are on a first-name basis with the owner of the local coffee shop. We plan activities and outings as an excuse to invite nearby cruisers to go with us.

If you're not adding people to the mix, then there is only the one imperfect human to be your everything. And my husband does not make an empathetic listener when I need to grumble about my husband. I'd imagine he'd say the same about me. It is impossible to carry all of those hats every day, especially while demanding the same of your partner.

Move On

We still bicker, because we are human and strong-willed. When a situation arises that demands a choice, we often formulate opposing hypotheses. John was ready to hoist our big symmetrical spinnaker, anticipating faster speeds and a better heading. I was envisioning a building breeze, an overpowered boat and a spinnaker I could no longer control. Without knowing what the wind would do, we stood at odds.

So, we squabble. And one of us must defer to the other, always a blow to the pride. But then, we move on. Without the luxury of physical separation, we have learned to shake it off, to take a deep breath (or a dozen), to change the subject and to come around from being frustrated to being content. There is no space for grudges on a boat.

No couple is immune to the trials of the liveaboard lifestyle: The stress, the storms and the pirates challenge us all. But it's worth it. Our partnership is stronger today than it ever has been. We make a great team. He understands the engine; I understand the plumbing. He tweaks the mainsail; I lead the lines and hoist the spinnakers. He knows which goop to use for what project; I know where we keep all the required goop. And when the proverbial goop hits the fan, we keep each other sane.

If our first year of this Ultimate Relationship Challenge is any indication, then I feel pretty good about our chances of prevailing. ✨