



PHOTO CARLO BOHLENGHI/ROLEX

Start **offshore** racing

Wet, cold, sometimes boring and sometimes dangerous... but mostly a whole lot of fun. Offshore racing is a great way to set yourself a new sailing challenge, but how do you get started? **Rupert Holmes** looks at routes in...

As well as the challenge of pitting yourself against the elements, and other crews, offshore racing offers opportunities for a degree of travel and to visit other places. Some owners, for instance, will choose an offshore as the starting point of a cruise, while for others it's a chance to enjoy a meal in a French restaurant on a Saturday night before returning home the following day. Other races, however, are a long thrash around the buoys – the RORC Myth of Malham, for instance, is 245 miles from the Solent to the Eddystone Lighthouse (15 miles south of Plymouth) and back again. Many offshore races involve sailing hard

through the night, and some are of several days' duration. At the extreme are trans-ocean races, which may involve two or three weeks at sea – we'll cover those in a later issue. Those who race offshore need to be prepared for a wider variety of conditions than inshore racers are likely to encounter. While inshore races will be postponed in a calm, if the wind drops to 3-4 knots for a few hours when offshore you continue racing. Similarly, as you're sailing for a longer period when offshore, there's an increased risk that you'll meet heavy weather. When racing offshore we also meet a wider range of wind angles. Most inshore courses have true windward legs, followed by a run dead downwind. These courses can be set just before the start, to reflect current wind conditions. However, when racing offshore you'll find you may spend more time on white-sail reaches, or relatively tight spinnaker legs and will need to be able to trim for maximum speed at these wind angles. In addition, the boat will have a different motion in the taller, but longer, seas typically found in less sheltered areas.

Night sailing
Night sailing can be a truly wonderful experience and holds enormous appeal for many people.

However, at times it can be challenging and disorientating to those without experience of sailing in the dark, especially on windy and overcast nights with no moon. Night vision is crucially important for efficient deck work, but it takes a long time to establish and may not be fully developed even after 10 minutes. Many people don't give it sufficient time and over-use torches, which can be counter-productive. Other than on a very bright moonlit night, a torch will of course be needed to check sail trim, but make sure you don't switch it on until it's pointed exactly where the light is needed, and anyone whose vision might be affected by the light is warned in advance.

When offshore the lookout for other traffic and competitors needs to be more focused than for inshore racing – shipping may not be following the predictable paths vessels take in confined waters such as the Solent and Thames Estuary, so more time is needed to confirm whether a risk of collision exists. In addition, when crossing the English Channel, or southern North Sea, you'll be racing across some of the busiest shipping lanes in the world. It's therefore vital to be able to identify at the earliest possible stage whether a risk of collision exists (when the other vessel is on a constant compass bearing) and to be able to identify vessels by their lights at night.

Watch keeping systems on an offshore race need to balance the need to drive the boat hard, with the crew on the rail to provide stability, and the need for everyone to be adequately rested so they perform as near as possible to their potential, and avoid accidents. Don't be misled into trying to mimic the pros who manage to drive their boats hard on minimal sleep – it's a skill that takes time to learn, and these are people who can snatch anything from a 20-minute break to a full hour and a half's sleep at any time and any place, no matter how unlikely or uncomfortable.

On a race that involves a single night at sea opportunities for sleeping below will be limited. This means it's worth starting the race as well-



PHOTO DAVID BRANIGAN/OCEANSPORT

“ **If everyone stays up for the first night, the entire crew will soon be below par** ”

rested as possible. A couple of hours sleep in the afternoon, for instance, can often prove to be time well spent before an evening start.

In a longer race it's important to get into the rhythm of the watch-keeping system early on – if everyone stays up most of the first night, the entire crew will be well below par by the second evening. It's far better to get some sleep in as early as you can – even during the first afternoon if possible. And certainly after dinner on the first day there should be people going down to get some rest. Many cruiser-racers have a limited number of bunks on each side of the boat, which reduces the number of people who can get sleep on the windward side. Out-and-out raceboats, however, often have two pairs of bunks on each side, enabling at least four people to get rest, with their weight continuing to make a contribution to stability.

A harsh environment

All the personal safety considerations that apply to inshore racing – particularly keeping clear of the boom and mainsheet in a gybe (whether accidental or not) and staying on board are just as applicable to offshore racing. In addition, you'll be exposed to a harsh environment for much longer, which means there's more potential to get cold, potentially dangerously so. It also means that it's vital to have a suitable selection of quality gear – even in mid-summer, if you're sat on the rail for six hours on the same tack while being regularly hosed by spray, it's asking a lot of even the best clothing systems to keep you warm. It can be very difficult for those who don't have considerable experience to judge exactly what garments might be needed for the following few hours, so don't be

Above Offshore racing puts added demands on your fitness and endurance, so make sure you're as well prepared, well rested, and well kitted out as possible.



PHOTO DANIEL FORSTER/ROLEX*

Above Even legendary offshore races like the Rolex Fastnet Race have a sailing schools division, so that relatively novice crews can compete alongside top pro teams.

afraid to canvass advice from others. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the effects of all-day exposure to the sun must not be underestimated, even in UK waters.

Use of harnesses and lifejackets is more important than when sailing inshore, and is vital at night, when there is very little chance of recovering someone lost overboard. In heavy weather it should be routine to clip on while still standing safely below deck next to the companionway before going up on deck. A boat that's raced offshore will also have a greater amount of complex safety equipment than one which races inshore. Before departure you can expect a thorough safety briefing, with the aim being that any item can be deployed immediately should it be required, even at night.

Diet and nutrition are important factors for dinghy racing, but assume even more significance in a race lasting 12-24 hours or more. Plenty of the right kind of food is important – avoid sugary options that will give your blood sugar levels a short-lived peak, followed by a more sustained low. Instead, look for items high in complex carbohydrates, which have a slower release of energy. If the boat you're sailing has an oven it's a real bonus, as minimal crew time is needed to heat pre-prepared meals, and a hot meal on the rail before nightfall is a real boost to morale.

Feeling green

Although seasickness can be debilitating for some, it's very rare for it to be a barrier that prevents anyone sailing offshore. Many excellent sailors, including singlehanded round-the-world veterans such as Pete Goss, can succumb, but survive by learning what they need to do to avoid its worst effects. Also, your tolerance to a boat's motion will improve with time – some people find they're rough on the first windy offshore of a season, but are okay for the rest of the summer.

Generic advice about avoiding seasickness is to be careful about spending time below, which can rapidly bring on a feeling of nausea, especially for those who aren't accustomed to the motion. An important exception to this is if you're lying down with your eyes closed.

If you're starting to feel ill it always helps to look at the horizon. Also make sure you stay warm and be aware that you may tend to withdraw from

what's going on in the world around you. This also means you're less likely to take care of yourself and you may not even fully recognise yourself getting progressively colder and wetter. It also pays to look out for these signs in your fellow crew. If you do seriously succumb the best place by far is down below in a bunk, especially if you're also cold or wet. Many newcomers to offshore sailing are understandably resistant to this, because they know that being below can make matters worse. But the key thing is to trust that you will slowly improve when you're lying down with eyes closed. In many cases this becomes the only way of avoiding the dangers of hypothermia.

Training

Whatever your sailing background, before racing offshore it's normally best to start with doing some inshore yacht racing (see last issue) to gain familiarity with handling the boat as part of the crew and with various roles in different manoeuvres.

If you want your first experience of offshore sailing to take place in a less pressured environment, consider an RYA course that, weather permitting, may take you cross-Channel (if you want this, discuss it with your chosen sea school before making a booking).

There are also a number of short RYA courses that address important knowledge for those who sail offshore in any capacity. Sea Survival is a one-day course covering emergency situations, including abandoning to a liferaft, with a valuable practical session in a pool. It's a requirement for a proportion of the crew of some longer offshore races, such as the Fastnet, to have this training. Other useful RYA courses include VHF operation and First Aid at Sea.

As with inshore yacht racing, there are no RYA courses directed specifically at offshore racing, but a number of sea schools offer the opportunity to combine race training with an offshore event. This can be an excellent way of building experience in your first few offshore events.

In addition, the RYA's Yachtmaster scheme, although geared towards the needs of cruising skippers, also provides much of the background knowledge of seamanship needed by skippers and senior crew members of boats that race offshore. ■

Right Sleeping in short watch patterns takes some getting used to, but don't try and stay up continuously.

Contacts

- www.rya.org.uk
- www.isora.org
- www.rorc.org
- www.jog.org.uk
- www.eaora.org.uk
- www.uksa.org/racing

Further information:

- www.rya.org.uk
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