



After 15,000 Miles

LESSONS LEARNED
FROM HARDCORE OCEAN SAILING

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The Sparkman & Stephens-designed Swan 48 Isbjörn is a tough and capable ocean cruiser



In his book *After 50,000 Miles*, renowned cruiser Hal Roth wrote about the changes he made to *Whisper*, his Spencer 35, after he and his wife, Margaret, had crossed oceans on her many times over. It's an illuminating look at how an old-school sailor who only learned the sport in his 40s never rested on his laurels, and never accepted that his "experience" alone made him a better sailor, but constantly evolved to meet the increasingly difficult challenges he set for himself.

I borrowed the title of that book for this essay, adapting it to the two years my wife, Mia, and I have owned and sailed *Isbjorn*, our 1972 Swan 48 on which we run offshore passages with paying crew.

Mia and I have sailed more during this period of time than we did in the previous 10 years—from Connecticut, where we bought the boat, to the Chesapeake, south as far as Guadalupe, west to Havana, north to Newfoundland, back again to our homeport in Annapolis, then across the Atlantic this summer: over 15,000 miles of ocean sailing in all. We've set a relentless pace that's required superhuman hard work and emotional fortitude, not to mention the help of friends and family, in spades.

Some of the miles were easy, daydream sailing downwind in the Trades, like our 1,100-mile run from Puerto Rico to Havana last year. Others were uncomfortably difficult, like the 150-mile beat from Key West to Ft. Lauderdale, when easterly winds of 30-plus knots kicked up a ferocious, wind-against-current Gulf Stream sea that shot fire-hose blasts of water at the helmsman every few minutes. And then there were those that were downright emotionally distressing—on more than one occasion I told Mia I was ready to sell the boat and move ashore permanently.

But you've got to take the ups with the downs. Paradoxically, that's the best part about it—you simply can't experience the glorious high points of any passage without first enduring the excruciating low points that accompany them.

What follows is a reflection on the past 15,000 miles, with some insight into what we learned about the boat, about sailing in general, and about ourselves. Learn from us what we've learned the hard way.

LESSONS ABOUT THE BOAT

Isbjorn (Swedish for Polar Bear) was 45 years old this past April. She was in great shape when we bought her, but we still immediately completed a six-week, \$60,000 refit before going full-time with the passage business. That said, as the maxim goes, she was never really "ready" when we left the dock, and we've been catching up ever since.

Right off the bat, on our first passage of 2016 from BVI to Grenada, we ran into trouble. Mia was back in Sweden visiting family, so I had my friend Clint Wells along as mate, the guy who'd crossed the Atlantic with us in our first boat, *Arcturus*, in 2011 and who was with me when I first met Mia in New Zealand over 10 years ago. The weather was brutal—the Trades, which



A strong boat and a willing crew can overcome many obstacles

DISTILLING THE FUNDAMENTALS

Philosophy aside, we've learned a lot of practical do's and don'ts in 15,000 miles and I've distilled them down to actionable bits of advice. These are specific to ocean sailing—it's the real deal out there and must be taken seriously. Here goes:

- Nail the fundamentals—keep the rig up and the water out, learn how to navigate the old-school way and always have a plan B.
- Keep your emotions in perspective—it might feel like life or death, but it's usually not.
- Trust your gut and act immediately when something doesn't feel right.
- Manage seasickness ahead of time. Learn which medicines work for you, which don't and which might actually do harm if you're allergic.
- Stuff will break and need maintenance. Learn how to do it yourself, get your friends involved and make it part of the fun!
- Be wary of "experience." There is always more to learn, and bad habits born of "lucky" experience is dangerous.
- Take the advice of my mentor John Kretschmer: "Thinking like a sailor is what makes you safe. Gear is just an adjunct to that."

typically swing slightly to the northeast in winter, were stubbornly stuck in the southeast and blowing hard. We couldn't even lay a course for Grenada. With squally gusts cresting in the high 30s, the going was rough, tiring and wet.

Clint and I were complemented by a full crew, four plus the two of us, all in their 30s, a fun, fit bunch who didn't mind the tough conditions. Nonetheless, I wasn't feeling it. I had a nagging sense of dread that worsened as we got set farther and farther west of the rhumb line. As the conditions continued to challenge us, I couldn't sleep.

Late one night the furler broke. It was the one piece of rigging we hadn't replaced during the fall refit, a 12-year-old Harken unit that we had instead disassembled, lubed and rebuilt. It seized up as we were taking in yet more of the small genoa in another squall, the worst-case failure mode of any roller-reefing setup—the sail was stuck, half-in, half-out. Clint and I clambered onto the foredeck in the dark to set up the removable inner forestay in case the headstay parted. Then we altered course back toward the BVI to take the upwind pressure off the unit and resigned ourselves to returning to our starting point.

Still, we persevered. In the span of four days, our crew mates rearranged their travel plans—not one of them canceled—I had a new Harken furling unit shipped from Miami; Clint, Ryan Finstad (one of our crew) and I built the new unit in the grass at Nanny Cay Marina; and we



“You don’t have a choice,” said owner and skipper Ross Appleby. “You just have to get it done, no matter how hard the work is or how long it takes. And you will get it done when there is no alternative.” Ross sails his boat far harder than us and has endured a full-on rudder failure and a complete dismasting. Through hard work and pure ambition, though, he came out the other side in one piece.

I’ve learned that when the pressure’s on, you either come through or you fail. I’m proud to say we came through.

LESSONS ABOUT SAILING

I have a hard time distinguishing what I’ve learned about sailing in the past 15,000 miles from what I’ve learned about sailing from the people I meet and speak to and the books I’ve read. I feel sometimes like the articles I write are just a reorganization of other people’s thoughts on various subjects, that I don’t have much more to offer other than summing up and reminding everyone what I’ve learned from those who have come before me. I touched on this in the profile I wrote for *SAIL* about Don Street. Street is a living legend, has an opinion on everything to do with seamanship, and a lot of the time I think he’s right. Same with people like John Kretschmer, Gary Jobson, Sir Robin Knox-Johnston, or any number of the people I’ve had the privilege to talk to. There’s not much more to add.

Reflecting on the past 15,000 miles though, I believe I have learned a few things about sailing on my own. For example, I’ve learned never to leave for a voyage on a Friday, ever, despite what some of the “greats” have told me to the contrary. Both Pam Wall and Etienne Giroire said the Friday superstition was totally bunk, to just go for it when the time is right, and day of the week be damned. We took their advice and left Ft. Lauderdale on a Friday in May with a good forecast, and proceeded to have the toughest 900-miles of the whole year beating our way up the East Coast to the Chesapeake. I learned that I like having our own little quirky rules to live by. It’s fun.

I’m reminded, over and over again, not to take what we do for granted. That’s the benefit of always sailing with new crew on each passage, the vast majority of whom have never sailed on a long overnight passage in their lives. Mia and I get to see things through fresh eyes each time we leave port. It’s easy to sleep through dolphins playing at the bow when you’ve just come off watch and are stupidly tired. But the excitement of our crew who are seeing that for the first time is contagious, and its

were back in business ready for Leg 2 to Antigua.

“Thanks to our most determined captain, amazingly we’re heading back offshore tomorrow,” Clint wrote on his Facebook page. After the emotional distress of Leg 1, that was a sense of accomplishment.

Of course, this wasn’t the only crisis with the boat. Later that year in Antigua, we had to abandon the RORC Caribbean 600 race after sailing 400 of the 600 miles when I noticed the rudder stuffing box had delaminated from the hull. Water poured in when we were going hard at it, and the top of the rudder post began wobbling back and forth in a truly alarming manner. Long story short: we had to haul the boat, drop the rudder and rebuild the entire bearing arrangement to the tune of four weeks and \$15,000.

On a more positive note, we now have if not the nicest, then definitely the most well-equipped S&S Swan 48 sailing today. I’m over the hump emotionally, fully committed to the boat (which is my dream boat, after all), have an amazing base of crewmembers who have had faith in us and helped us pay for the whole thing, and an incredible network of family and friends who are inevitably there for us when we need them most.

I learned that stuff is always going to happen. Always. When you’re sailing 10,000 miles a year, stuff wears out. Stuff breaks, no matter how conservatively you sail. Friends who’ve run *Scarlet Oyster*, their Oyster 48, on similar passages, though more focused on racing, inspired us to just keep working hard and making it happen.



Passage-planning in Isbjorn’s snug saloon (above); Mia supervises the haulout for repairs to the rudder (right)



equally satisfying seeing the joy on their faces at the opportunity of being that close to wildlife in its truest form.

We've also learned how to adapt to a much bigger boat. *Arcturus*, our Allied Seabreeze yawl, at 35ft and 13,000lb felt like a handful when we sailed her across the Atlantic back in 2011. But *Isbjorn* is an entirely different beast. And she is a beast. At 48ft and 36,000lb, the loads on her lines, rigging and sails are exponentially bigger than anything we ever experienced aboard *Arcturus*. Yet we've gotten used to her quite easily. In fact, when Mia and I returned to *Arcturus* in June 2016 to help rig and test sail her with her new owner Neil Fletcher, I was shocked at how we ever thought handling and furling her mainsail was a problem—it was like sailing a dinghy! I'm sure Neil doesn't want to hear this, but it really felt almost silly after having gotten used to *Isbjorn* over those 11,000 miles.

We've definitely "leveled up."

LESSONS ABOUT OURSELVES

I'm an emotional roller coaster in daily life, and offshore it's even worse. It's a blessing and a curse—I think my strong emotions allow me to be so passionate about the things I believe in and how I want to live my life, but they also tend to backfire when things don't go to plan. And they rarely go to plan offshore.

Mia is much more even-keeled. We've evolved together as a team and complement each other well. When we've got crew onboard who have paid to be there, we have an extra responsibility to at least appear to be on an even keel, in control. It's to Mia's credit that she keeps me buoyed when I'm on a downswing, whether due to weather, sleep deprivation, boat problems or any number of things that may be bringing me down.

We love the art of sailing itself, and there is nothing better than a good day and night offshore. However, equally important for us is that the fact that sailing is also a means of seeing the world. Shoreside, once we reach our far-away destination, we love going for long hikes, enjoying the local

food and exploring new places that most people will only dream about.

That said, I'm very conscious that "experience" is only as good as one's ability to reflect upon and analyze it. Too often "experience" becomes something that is simply used as a resume-builder—the more miles you've sailed, the better the sailor you are. That's a dangerous fallacy. Captain Andy Chase, master mariner and an instructor at Maine Maritime

Time to reef; the loads on a powerful boat like *Isbjorn* must be respected



Academy, eloquently described this fallacy in an article he once wrote about the sinking of the tall ship *Bounty*.

"Every voyage carries a degree of uncertainty," experience or not, Chase wrote. "Experience in a vacuum doesn't make us smarter. Experience has to be processed. It has to be considered with full disclosure." He goes on to say that undistilled experience often simply leads people to become "bolder," or do things they might not otherwise have done in similar circumstances.

So while we're definitely more confident after 15,000 miles on *Isbjorn*, we're also constantly critiquing our experience to see how we could have done things differently, done things smarter, done things safer. It's this reflection that has ironically led us to be even more excited about the future.

Pilots rely on checklists for nearly everything they do, from preparing their planes to starting the engines to take-off. Checklists remove the thinking process and are a fantastic tool in preparing for and executing long voyages, and Mia and I have come to rely heavily on them. We have checklists for everything—pre-departure provisioning lists, safety checklists, watch-keeping checklists—things that need to happen weeks in advance of a passage and things that need to happen in the moment. We have checklists for our contingency plans when things go awry, like when I got appendicitis 90 miles south of Newport last year (see *SAIL*, November 2016).

Finally, and most importantly, I've learned to live in the moment. Staying present is the only way to handle the stress. I know from experience that it will not be a perfectly smooth ride. Stuff's going to break, the boat is going to need maintenance, I'm going to have my emotional ups and downs. The past 15,000 miles have taught me how to deal with it.

Bring it on. **S**

Andy Schell & Mia Karlsson run offshore passages for paying crew aboard *Isbjorn*. View their full calendar on 59-north.com.

And this is what makes it all worthwhile...

