

Within the vastly simplified domain of a boat at sea at night, we're treated to adventures, sensations, and secrets that relatively few people ever experience. Anyone who's been aboard a boat underway, between dusk and dawn, far from the lights and loom of modern life, knows that night crossings are one of the most delightful aspects of owning a boat. Even with the added skills and precautions necessary to enjoy it (see sidebar), a night crossing is one of those "life list" milestones that will not disappoint.

Long-distance sailors have told us for centuries that night sailing is a playground of the mind, a place where imagination soars. Joshua Slocum, the first man to sail solo around the world in 1898, had his spectral Spanish pilot who came to him in the odd hours and con-

versed on all manner of nautical subjects and philosophy. Bernard Moitessier, the beloved French solo sailor and truth-seeker, wrote beautifully about his apparitions. Even the hardheaded contemporary British writer Jonathan Raban reported internal "discussions" with long-dead mentors and relatives as he wandered the darkened waters around Great Britain in the 1980s.

You don't need to be a well-known nautical writer or mystic to encounter unexpected dreams, memories, and reflections during a night crossing. During my first overnight sail down Long Island Sound, alone at the helm for hours at a time while my shipmates slept, I recalled long-forgotten conversations and events in astonishingly minute detail. Even with the lights of navigation aids and other vessels to keep track of, my mind danced to long-forgotten moments —

NIGHT



the day my uncle explained his dripless paint brush invention, or the whopper I made up in kindergarten to avoid sitting next to Ida May Williston, or the clarification of the true reason I succeeded, then failed at football, or the whispered words of encouragement from my late mother.

Far out at sea, there are no man-made land lights interfering with the sky's hit parade of heavenly diamonds. Newcomers to a night crossing always comment in awe on the profusion of stars to be seen on a clear night at sea. One night, somewhere between Provincetown, Massachusetts, and Mt. Desert Island, Maine, my wife Melissa and I pulled out *Reed's Nautical Almanac* and found several pages that helped us identify Pollux and Capella. Later, toward dawn, the *Old Farmer's Almanac* helped us identify rising Mars, then Venus, while meteors from the early

stages of the great Perseid showers of early August flashed in droves across the moonless sky.

When I'm not eavesdropping on the colorful VHF conversations between offshore fishermen — the radio is always on for safety reasons — or musing about life, Old Man Neptune's creatures entertain. Seeing bioluminescence in your wake is a mesmerizing show. On one nearly calm night, as we sailed along, flashes came in odd streaks in the water, and there was a strange whooshing sound — the breathing of bottlenose dolphins playing tag with our boat! Every time their tails whisked through the water, they agitated millions of tiny dinoflagellates, which glowed their disapproval, showing up as streaks of diamond dust. First-time night sailors are impressed with how much they can see with just the light of the stars and moon to guide them.

Most deck objects, landmasses, and even the horizon are easy to see on clear nights.

By picking the right weather window and preparing your boat properly, a night crossing can give that indefinable feeling of detachment and autonomy, increasingly rare in a busier and more crowded world. And once found, you'll come back to that special freedom again and again, as much to soothe your spirit as to increase your cruising range.

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VISIONS

A magical world awaits you on a boat, at sea, in the dark by Ken Textor



What You Need To Know For A Night Crossing

Maybe you'd like a predawn departure to get to your favorite fishing spot. Or maybe you've been out for the afternoon, your schedule backs up, it's after sunset, and you're still two hours away from home. Whatever the case, navigating in the dark doesn't have to be difficult. It just requires some new skills and preparations.

Skills: Identification of marine-related lights, and exactly what they mean, is important to operating in the dark. Two books, *Reed's Nautical Almanac* or *Chapman Piloting*, have well-illustrated pages that explain the lights you may see on other vessels, as well as the light characteristics of navigation aids you may encounter. Know these patterns before you go and have one of these books aboard.

Lights on other vessels tell you where they're headed, what they're doing, and how their maneuverings may affect you. The nautical Navigation Rules, or, as they're commonly known, the Rules of the Road, indicate how you should respond (if at all) to another vessel's lights. These rules are included in *Chapman*, among other places. Check that your boat's navigation lights are in good working order.

Sounds indicate to a night sailor what lies ahead. Despite how heavily or lightly trafficked your night-crossing route, turn on a VHF radio and scan the frequencies for ship-to-ship communications (VHF 13 and 6), emergencies (VHF 16), and port-traffic management (VHF 12). Horns and bells of navigation aids also help orient night navigators, while the thrum of a large vessel's engines may be heard even before its lights are seen; so periodically throttle down for regular quiet "listening times."

Preparations: Your body's heat-producing mechanism normally slows

down as night wears on, so even in midsummer, operating at night can be surprisingly chilly and damp. Have heavy flannel, fleece, or even down garments aboard. Likewise, hot drinks in a thermos are smart to have ready well before midnight. Rather than trying to prepare hot food in a darkened galley, concoct these items before sunset.

Avoid night blindness by having on hand at least one flashlight with a red-tinted lens. Even if below deck have tinted nightlights (regular lighting destroys your night vision); a nighttime flashlight comes in handy. Regular flashlights can be converted to nightlights by painting the lens with a smear of red fingernail polish. Dim chart plotters and radar screens in advance.

Operating: Be sure to have a reliable compass and a paper chart, and mark your route on the chart as you go through the night, even if you have a chartplotter. Also be sure to stand up and scan the horizon with binoculars every 15 minutes, 360 degrees, to check for fishing boats and other vessels coming into your range of travel. When you spot other boats, watch them, establish their direction, and if they're going to pass you closely, go on the radio and identify your boat by name, type, position, speed, and heading, and ask them if they "see" you on their radar; you won't always get a response, so give all other boats wide clearance, even if you have right of way. Don't operate the boat under autopilot near shore; it's too easy to fall asleep.

If you're operating an open cockpit boat after dusk, wear a harness and life jacket. If you must leave the cockpit, keep your harness clipped in, and tell someone else aboard before venturing forward. Keep common night navigation items such as binoculars, signaling horn, spotlight, whistle, and the like near the helm. Give your departure

time and date, and estimated arrival time and date to a friend, in case you're overdue.

Lastly, keep your speed low, and then slow way down as you approach your harbor entrance. Avoid alcohol while operating a boat.

The Dry Run: For nighttime neophytes, a short, post-sunset cruise or two in familiar waters is useful training for your first overnight open-water crossing. The most critical consideration before you set out is the weather; make sure you have a crystal clear 48-hour forecast, and, if possible, a full moon — nature's floodlight.

If you've never seen your homeport from sea in the dark, try it and take note of the land lights, and how they may interfere with or mimic navigation lights. The bigger the port, the more likely that multiple land lights, called "backscatter," will test your ability to follow navigation lights safely into the harbor. This gets easier with practice. Just proceed very slowly, keep your eye on your depth sounder and GPS, and follow the chart. If you get nervous or confused, no worries; just turn around, reorient yourself, and *very slowly* approach again.

During a dry run, you may find your interior nightlights are insufficient in placement, number, or intensity. You may also find important cockpit or flying bridge items such as binoculars, signaling horns, spotlights, and safety harnesses aren't as handy as you originally thought.

Experienced boaters agree that one of the safest places you can be on a boat is offshore with plenty of "sea room," in deep water, where there are no obstacles, reefs, rocks, and nowhere to go aground, only you and your boat and your thoughts, surrounded by one of the most beautiful and peaceful places on earth.

— K.T.