

# Barbarians at the gate: guest etiquette

IT IS ALWAYS A JOY TO SHARE THE LIFESTYLE WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS BUT MAYBE A FEW GROUND RULES FROM BOTH SIDES IS A GOOD IDEA.

**HEATHER FRANCIS**



**RIGHT:** Try and meet your guests when they arrive. This sign says it all!

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** What better way to get your visitor involved than in catching dinner.

**WE** all want to share our onboard adventures with family and friends. E-mails, photos and blogs are a great way to stay connected but can often fall short capturing the whole sailing experience. In my opinion the only way to truly give people a slice of life onboard is to invite them to sail with you.

Inviting people into your floating world is exhilarating but it can be daunting as well. Managing personalities, responsibilities and expectations is a delicate task. Choosing when and where to have guests join the boat can make the difference between a memorable holiday and a trip everyone would prefer to forget.

## TIMING IS EVERYTHING

One of the most difficult things about having people visit is actually getting them to the boat. It is true, transportation to some sailing destinations can be challenging and expensive, but often just finding a mutual time in everyone's schedule can seem impossible.

Constrained by work, school and seasonal flight prices our friends and family back home are used to planning vacations several months in advance. However dates on many cruising calendars are mere suggestions. Our schedules are more likely dictated by seasonal sailing routes, weather windows and boat maintenance.

When flights are booked and a deadline is looming many sailors put to sea in less than favourable conditions, rushing to make port before their guests. This frenzied momentum is not only contrary to the laidback lifestyle that everyone is coming to enjoy, it can put you at serious risk of breakages and injury.

## ETIQUETTE RULES OK!

### HINTS FOR HOSTS

- asking visitors to carry parts and spares to the boat is common practice but don't take advantage of a kind gesture and overload your guests with non-essentials
- sending out a brief questionnaire to guests before arrival will alert you of any allergies or medical conditions, and let you prepare for food and drink preferences
- extra people onboard can be stressful so give yourself a break after they are gone: send laundry ashore, go out for a meal or just treat yourself to a guilt-free quiet day.

### GUIDELINES FOR GUESTS

- choose soft-sided luggage that folds flat for easy onboard storage
- swimwear is suitable on the swim platform but may not be acceptable ashore. Ask your hosts about cultural dress codes in the area you'll be sailing
- be pro-active; researching your destination and asking questions before you arrive will ensure you get the most out of your time onboard.

To avoid getting boxed into a specific date or location many people recommend letting the guest pick the when, or the where, they want to join the boat, but never allow them to control both variables. This will allow you to either already be at the destination they choose or to have ample time to get the boat there.

Another solution is to invite people to visit when you are planning on spending several weeks sailing a particular area or island group. This way your guests can plan ahead and book a flight into the major hub airport well in advance. Later on, if you are unable to make it to their destination they can hop on an internal flight or ferry and rendezvous with you at an outer island.

### SAFETY FIRST

With everyone finally onboard it is a good idea to give guests a thorough safety briefing. Bear in mind, however, bombarding visitors with too much information when they first arrive can be overwhelming, especially if they have limited boating experience.

A short how-to explanation about flushing the toilet, lighting the galley stove and general rules of the boat

should be covered on the first day. Many yachties like to post written instructions in the head so that no one has to ask embarrassing questions later and, more importantly, a blocked head does not get in the way of a good time.

The location of the medical kit and fire extinguishers are also good introductory topics.

After a hearty meal, a good sleep and a chance to decompress a little you can delve into the finer points of liferaft deployment and man overboard procedures. Sailing friends will be well versed with standard safety practices; nonetheless they should be familiarised with your vessel and equipment. For non-sailing friends these worst-case scenario topics can be frightening but they are important, so keep the conversation light.

You should have a proper fitting lifejacket for everyone onboard and show people where they are stowed and how to use them. Children and infants require special lifejackets as well as other safety items to kid proof the boat. Whether your guests bring them or you provide them, details should be ironed out well in advance so nothing is forgotten.

If your guests will be onboard for passages they should also be briefed about the safety procedures you follow at sea, including wearing a tether and moving around on deck.

### WHAT'S YOUR NORMAL?

Having lived on boats for over a decade I can attest that what is considered normal onboard may not seem quite so normal for those who are just visiting.

For instance many cruisers regularly shower on deck. While the general rule in an anchorage is not to stare while someone is standing on the swim platform lathering up, your guests might not be so comfortable scrubbing their bits in front of an audience. Taking a few minutes to think about your daily routine from an outsider point of view will help you discover any 'normal' habits that are worth mentioning before your guests arrive.

Showers can be a contentious issue even if they are a more private affair. Water is a precious commodity on a sailboat: how much you have, how much you use and where can you get more are constant concerns.



Safety first at all times is the number one priority.

Not only will extra people tax your water supply, our landlubber friends do not usually share our appreciation for water conservation. People used to standing under an endless stream of water may not find using a shower bag, rinsing in salt water or turning off the tap between lather and rinse fulfills their idea of clean.

Laundry is another water related issue for guests that stay for more than week or two as extra bedding, towels and even personal items will need to be laundered.

When we had a friend visit in French Polynesia for a month she was happy to help schlep items ashore to hand-wash laundry in unlimited fresh water. This pro-active approach may not suit everyone and mentioning your regular routine when it comes to all things water related could eliminate any unwanted surprises.

## **“IT IS A GOOD IDEA TO GIVE GUESTS A THOROUGH SAFETY BRIEFING.”**

Power is another precious commodity onboard. The ability to plug in an endless number of electrical appliances and digital devices is something a lot of non-boat people take for granted. Telling visitors about power availability, as well as chargers and adaptors they might need for their devices, could be the difference between enjoying a quiet anchorage and listening to the engine while you charge the batteries.

## **GREAT EXPECTATIONS**

Unaddressed expectations are often our worst enemies. Not informing your guests about how you want them to help out or contribute while onboard can leave you feeling like you are playing tourist guide rather than host.

It is best to get financial issues out of the way directly by telling your visitors before they arrive what expenses they will be required to cover. It is routine for people to take care of their own travel costs, but if you are expecting your guests to contribute to the costs of fuel, food or marina fees it would be polite to inform them in advance of what charges to expect.



The bigger the fish the bigger the grin and the memory.

The same goes for any extra-curricular activities that your guests might enjoy while visiting such as: fishing charters, dive trips and equipment rental or sight-seeing tours. Providing some information before arrival will not only allow visitors to budget for such activities but also give them time to obtain local currency.

Asking guests about their expectations will also help you plan an itinerary for their time onboard. Do they want to spend time in more secluded locations? Do they prefer to be in a marina or near a resort where there are activities ashore? Are they iced-filled cocktails all afternoon type of people, or do they want to put some miles under the keel on longer passages?

Do they need reliable internet access to stay in contact with work, or are they coming to visit to completely unplug?

Asking a few poignant questions will help you map out a schedule, however it should be understood that the itinerary is not set in stone. There are many variables that can alter sailing plans, the most common of which is weather.

Non-sailing guests may not realise how much the weather effects life onboard. From making an anchorage untenable to making passages possible, sailors depend on and respect the weather.

Waking up to driving rain, or having windless days, are things cruisers consider disappointments but not deal breakers.



**ABOVE:** The opportunity to share such experiences is a joy for all.



### HEATHER FRANCIS

Heather Francis is originally from Nova Scotia, Canada and Steve is Victoria born, Queensland bred. They met on a boat in Thailand. In 2008 they bought *Kate*, a Newport 41', in southern California and have been sailing her full-time since. They are currently in the Philippines. To follow their adventure, log on to [www.yachtkate.com](http://www.yachtkate.com).

Your guests, on the other hand, may not react so calmly to having their tropical vacation rained out. Keeping a positive attitude and being willing to compromise during such occasions is paramount because as we all know: no one controls Mother Nature.

Including visitors in activities such as meal preparation and boat handling is a wonderful way to get them involved in life onboard. Incorporating them into everyday tasks will both make them feel at home and take a little pressure off the regular crew.

If you insist your guests sit back, put their feet up and relax then do not be

surprised when they do just that. Be careful, it is easy to resent people having a good time on their vacation when you are stuck in the galley.

## HOW LONG IS TOO LONG?

Everyone has a different opinion about how long guests can stay before they wear out their welcome.

Many people say that one week is the perfect visit, others think that two weeks is just long enough to get used to the rhythm of life onboard. Some people's guests are like fish; after three days, they begin to stink!

I think who you invite and where you are sailing are important factors in determining how long you ask people to visit. We have had various friends stay for two nights, ten days and even one month. I will not say that every moment of each trip was a success, but we are still on speaking terms with everyone and we've had them come back for repeat visits.

Space is a big issue when considering how long people can stay, extra bodies in a small cabin can make things feel claustrophobic after only a few days. This can be especially true if your guests are not used to living in a compact space or if your extra berth is in the main cabin.

Explaining that time on board will be a bit like a caravan or up-scale camping is a great way to convey to potential guests what they are signing up for.

Personal habits and personalities are often magnified at sea and that can make even loved ones hard to tolerate. Make sure you allow for a little down time each day so everyone can recharge their personal space batteries. Whether it is escaping for a solo dinghy ride, taking a splash or just a few quiet minutes on the bow you will be amazed how much better you'll feel after a quick reset.

Having guests onboard is about finding a balance between too much and not enough and only you can determine what tips your scales. Clear communication, respect for others, keeping an open mind and being flexible are all keys to having a great trip.

It might take a few days for everyone to find their feet on board so bear in mind the old saying: "it is the host's job to make a guest feel at home, it is the guest's job to remember that they are not." ≈