

## Another kind of self-isolation!

In 2012 we gave up our jobs, sold the car, packed up our furniture and most of our belongings into storage, rented-out our house (Parkhouse Cottage on Sea Lane) and set off on a sailing adventure. We'd initially thought that we'd be away for about two years on *Maunie*, our 20-year-old sailing yacht, but ended up living aboard her for nearly six years. We crossed the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans, visited amazing places such as Panama and the Galapagos Islands and spent months going native in remote Pacific islands until we finally finished the voyage in Australia. Our longest period of non-stop sailing was 24 days (from Galapagos to the Marquesas in French Polynesia), but we also spent weeks in remote anchorages with few others for company.

The reaction to this trip, amongst many friends and family members, could be generalised as: "Wow, that sounds amazing! I'd love to do that.... but I'm not sure I could spend all that time cooped up in a small space with my wife / husband / partner!". I guess that the Coronavirus lockdown is now providing them all with the answer to that particular question!

At 38ft (11.6m) long and 12ft (3.6m) wide, *Maunie* is large enough to cope with heavy weather and to carry the necessary stocks of food, water and fuel for long ocean passages but small enough to make her sail-plan manageable for a husband and wife crew. In terms of living space, however, boats are designed primarily for efficient sailing rather than for commodious accommodation, so the pointy end (that's the technical term) has an anchor locker and a v-shaped berth, which we generally used for storage of sails and other equipment, whilst the blunt end has a small guest cabin but is otherwise taken up with lots of technical equipment such as engine, generator, water-maker (which converts sea water to drinking water at about 20 litres per hour) and so on.

Our main living space therefore consists of: a pilot-house 'sitting room', with a u-shaped sofa and a dining table; a galley (kitchen) with 3-burner cooker, a small fridge, storage lockers and a sink; a bathroom (the 'heads') with a toilet, sink and low-pressure shower; and our 'bedroom' cabin. Of course, in good weather and at anchor, we'd have the whole deck space as a patio that boasts ever-changing views plus the biggest and deepest swimming pool in the world. Becalmed mid-Pacific, I once jumped over the side and looked down into the dark blue of water more than 2,000m deep. Rather disconcerting.

Living in such a confined space took some adjustment. The concept of weekdays and weekends became meaningless and we found that time seemed to pass more slowly; this may sound familiar to many of you right now. It took quite a while to slow down from our hectic work lives and we gradually worked out a routine that helped us adapt to our new reality.

First and foremost, we wrote daily 'to-do' lists and it's a habit we've kept up. The lists gave us some structure to our days and, equally importantly, allowed us the positive feedback of ticking things off when we'd done them. By keeping the lists in a notebook, rather than on random pieces of paper, we could also look back on the things we'd achieved, rather than wondering exactly what we'd done last Tuesday. I trained as an engineer so my to-do list would initially consist wholly of maintenance and repair tasks, but we quickly realised that we needed a shared list that encompassed every aspect of life aboard, so we started to use five main categories for each day's tasks. I think that they are equally applicable to life in locked down Kilve today:

### 1. Navigation

On board *Maunie*, we'd record our position hourly but reviewed our planned course each day, taking into account the weather forecast and current conditions. We used old-school paper charts for our passage planning, marking our daily midday position to draw a slow line of progress, but used a high-tech GPS chart plotter to give us detailed information closer to land.

Here in Kilve we are blessed with beautiful countryside and plenty of footpaths but, as creatures of habit, we probably all tend to use routes we know. There's a great joy to be had in spending some time with a decent map to plan new routes and we love the Ordnance Survey Explorer series (4cm to 1km). The latest ones come with a one-time, scratch-to-reveal code that allows you to download a free OS App to your phone with the full map detail and GPS centring, but Kilve Stores sell handy pocket-size, waterproof versions of the map as well.



## 2. Communication

On the boat we had a satellite phone which was superb but ferociously expensive. We could send and receive emails from anywhere in the world and, most importantly, download encoded 'GRIB' files which our laptop would decode into vitally important weather forecasts. However, our most economic, £60 per month package, would give us only 5 megabytes of data (yes, 5 *megabytes* – most phones take photos that are 10 megabytes each!) so we had a clever piece of software which would convert all incoming emails to plain text and strip off any attachments.

We also had an SSB long range radio – a marinised version of Ham radio – which, given favourable propagation conditions, would allow our signal to bounce off the ionosphere and around the curvature of the earth. The signal would often be full of static and unworldly beeps and whistles, but we once managed to chat to friends on another yacht nearing the coast of Chile while we were in New Zealand – a distance of over 5,000 miles! It also allowed us to hear the BBC World Service and Australian and New Zealand national radio broadcasts; the daily broadcasts from China, in a curious semi-American accent, were entertaining, in short doses, for their propaganda content.



A fun part of our day would be to write a daily blog update, plus some individual emails, and we'd avidly read emails from friends and family. We'd then take part in a daily radio 'net' with maybe 20 other boats, sharing tips and news, and just enjoying the welcome sound, however distorted, of another human voice. Some of those voices became life-long sailing friends when we finally met in person and several of them have since come to visit us in Kilve.

By comparison, we are now presented with an almost overwhelming option of communication streams with unlimited internet data, so I guess we are all learning about the opportunities and pitfalls of Face Time, Zoom, Houseparty and Skype, whether for work or for pleasure. The time we've suddenly been gifted is a great opportunity to contact long-lost friends and to share creativity. A chat over the garden wall with our lovely neighbours is also a fun part of our day.

## 3. Work

It's not all fun, you know! Covering thousands of miles on *Maunie* we were always conscious that we were sailing further in one year than most yachts might do in ten, so maintenance and repairs were an ongoing, daily thing. Blue Water cruising is often described as 'boat maintenance in exotic places' and, if something went wrong, we were usually the only people around to fix it. The daily radio net became a very useful point of reference as you could bet that someone on another boat had experienced a similar issue – if we were at sea, we couldn't ask Google! We both had our specific repair skills.



Back here in Kilve at the start of the lock down, we wrote a long master-list of maintenance jobs for the house and garden and now build one or two of them into each of our daily to-do lists. So, we hope you've noticed the freshly painted window frames and re-varnished shutters and front door as you walk past? It can be daunting to attempt some of these jobs, particularly if DIY isn't really your thing, so I'll share a tip that kept me going through some particularly fiddly and unpleasant jobs on the boat (fixing a blocked toilet comes to mind!): Imagine that you are being paid £50 per hour (the going hourly rate charged by a boatyard) for the job. The longer and fiddlier the job, the more you're being paid. Then, when it's all over, tot up the total hours and replace the word 'paid' with 'saved'.

## 4. Food

Eating well and healthily is vital but was often a challenge on board *Maunie*. Our small fridge and tiny freezer would be stacked with military precision before we left port on a major passage and we'd have fresh veg and unripe fruit (carefully washed in Milton fluid to remove any nasty bugs and their eggs) in net hammocks to allow airflow around it. Friends made the mistake of buying a huge hand of green bananas as they left the Canary Isles only to have them all ripen together, for an overwhelming glut of banana-centric meals, about seven days later. Once at sea we'd throw a fishing lure out on a long line and would sometimes catch wonderful mahi-mahi and tuna. The trouble was, they'd be huge, so we'd use a vacuum-packer to keep fish steaks in the fridge for a few days and we'd eat a *lot* of fish pie and fish curry.



Here, now that the worst of the panic-buying has passed, getting food stocks is less of an issue but there are still the challenges of shopping safely. We're finding it impossible to get on-line supermarket delivery slots but there's lots of sharing and cooperation going on with friends and neighbours and Kilve Stores are doing a sterling job for those not keen on the frankly surreal process of shopping at a supermarket. Whatever the method for getting your fresh provisions, if you're anything like us, you'll be discovering interesting things lurking at the back of the store cupboard and in the depths of the freezer! It's a new opportunity to spend time with the cookbooks and do some creative adjustments to the suggested recipes.

## 5. Fun and relaxation

It took us both quite a few months to feel that it was absolutely ok to relax and have fun – that's why we went voyaging, after all. However, we were initially so conditioned by the pressures of work and then the challenges of getting the boat and house ready for our departure, that it felt oddly wrong to be sitting reading a book or just watching the wildlife. So, we started to build these kinds of activities into our to-do lists and, of course, we managed to enjoy some amazing places. When you live for long periods at sea level, any hill or mountain just has to be climbed.

At home now, we have our daily exercise walk as a key fun element on our list and we are thoroughly spoilt with our coastal path, particularly as we mostly have it to ourselves.



However, reading a book or choosing a specific film (rather than falling into the trap of TV channel-hopping) are on the list too. But we do really miss our sailing!

### Getting back to 'Normal'

After 6 years away, coming back to the UK and to the world of work was a difficult transition, we'll both readily admit. We've both changed our outlook on life and things that were once important to us are less so now. However, coming back to Kilve was definitely a good thing. We both commented that the village seemed 'more friendly' than we'd remembered but soon realised that, actually, it was us that had changed. Having been used to the welcome and friendship shown to us in remote Pacific islands, we have become more open and relaxed with others.

The Coronavirus lock down will end, sometime soon we all hope, and things will get back to something that is still not 'normal'. Lots of businesses will be terribly troubled financially, people will tragically have lost loved ones and we'll have a huge level of debt in the UK economy. However, lots of elements in our lives will, I hope, be a lot better than the old 'normal'. The real value of the NHS and front-line services will be properly recognised and rewarded, and the spirit of neighbourliness and mutual support will be stronger than ever. I hope we'll all look back at this period in our lives, get out our to-do list notebooks and say, "Just look at what we achieved!".