



Voyaging in a boat with young children..

Readers of the magazine regularly ask us: is it sensible to set off on a voyage aboard a boat with young children? To answer this question, we asked a Franco-South African family who have been at sea since 2008 to give us their opinion. And the least we can say is that it makes you want to do it!

Text and photos: Emmanuelle Buecher-Hall



solutions, but it is a good idea to think about it seriously before the big departure.

As far as we are concerned, we have fitted out Merlin in the knowledge that there will be at least 5 of us aboard, and that we will be sailing long passages. Once the boat was finished, we lived aboard for 6 months, in the marina, before setting off. This allowed us to get our bearings, to allow us a gentle transition from our life ashore to life afloat, as well as to adapt to our new living space and note what needed improving or changing. The children thus continued to go to school for a few months, then the correspondence courses arrived. We then found another rhythm. This first changes were so

in this area. Ourselves, we have perhaps invested too much with respect to this subject, but finally, we have found all our purchases useful. Aboard, we thus have an EPIRB as well as AIS (receiver and transmitter), a SeaMe (comparable to a MerVeille), a satellite phone, and a personal man overboard alarm system (Lifetags from Raymarine – much appreciated when alone on watch). The children know the usefulness of each piece of equipment, and know how to use it if necessary. There are also a few simple, logical, golden rules which have been established without difficulty, because each time we have explained the point of them to the children. There are basic rules which apply once we are aboard; others vary depending on whether we are at sea, at anchor or in a marina.

We were lucky enough to meet Thomas Coville shortly before we moved aboard. He shared this old



AT SEA

One of the advantages of the catamaran is that it doesn't heel. The children nevertheless hold on when they are walking on deck, and put on their lifejackets as soon as they are out of the cockpit. So that they don't feel hunched up in big lifejackets, they all have automatically inflating lifejackets, like



obvious and prepared that they went off without a hitch. One of the keys to the success of any adventure is without a doubt good preparation, a lot of reflection and a positive attitude.

Here is how we have undertaken our trip aboard Merlin with three children, in a bit more detail.

I - SAFETY

As safety is of the utmost importance, we didn't skimp on it either in the design of the boat or during the voyage itself, whether concerning the safety of the children (e.g. preventing them falling overboard) or that of the boat (e.g. avoiding collisions). It is however easy to be taken in by all the technological advances and gadgets which seem to be indispensable

sailors' saying with the children: 'One hand for yourself, one hand for the boat'. This was the first safety rule applied aboard Merlin, at first both at sea and in the marina.

Just after moving aboard, we also encircled Merlin with nets (volley ball nets made to measure) around strong stanchions. Cléa was then just over 2 years old, and was in an exploration period. The nets offer an impression of safety that we have never found superfluous. They have also allowed us to retrieve flying towels or slippery tools.

There are no exits or entries via the hatches. The main door thus serves to check who is inside or outside.

The children know how to use the VHF as well as the SSB, and can therefore call in case of need, (and not just to communicate with their pals).

their parents. We have even put on our lifejackets ourselves several times, when the situation was not 100% comfortable. According to the sea state, the children clip on to the jackstay which runs around Merlin, thanks to easy to operate snap links. At the start, we were relatively strict and they clipped on as soon as they left the cockpit. The children are growing up, and as they have acquired the reflex actions, they have been on deck a few times, for example to go and watch the dolphins, in very good weather without their lifejackets,

We have been living on Merlin, our Dean 440, since May 2008. We meaning a little Franco-South African family made up of Gregory, Emmanuelle and our three children: Victor, Félix and Cléa (today aged 11, 9 and 6 respectively).

We left Cape Town (South Africa) in November 2008 and are currently in Brisbane (Australia). Living aboard and going cruising with children inevitably implies many questions, notably with respect to safety, health and education. Everyone will find their own

1 : The whole family in the anchorage at Fakarava. The children have already grown a lot.

2 : The cabin turned into a playground and a construction site: the box of Lego has been well used.

3 : Cruising with young children: a real pleasure for both adults and children...

CRUISING: CHILDREN ABOARD

but always keeping one hand for the boat. You must also know how to judge the various situations.

Before our big departure, we had several conversations with them about safety. We also did many man overboard exercises, involving the children to the maximum of their possibilities. Throughout the voyage, these discussions and exercises have been repeated. The children have grown up and are now capable of carrying out the manoeuvre almost by themselves, in good weather conditions.

We also explained to them that they may find themselves in situations where they must obey without asking questions. We have never experienced such a situation, but meeting under the saloon table is never out of the question.

AT ANCHOR

Falling into the water seems to be quite rare at sea, as we are generally careful. It is less exceptional at anchor. Cléa fell in the water one evening, when we were drinking an aperitif on a friend's boat. This rang alarm bells: we must never relax our vigilance, especially on a boat where the layout is different. This also alerted the children, who, since then, have not had any similar accidents.

We also have classic lifejackets aboard, which the children use when they go discovering the surroundings on their own, in the kayak or the dinghy. Here again, we set the example.

IN THE MARINA

In a marina, there is a tendency to relax your attention, and accidents can occur more quickly. During our period of adapting to life aboard, Cléa never walked on a pontoon alone, and always had to hold our hand. The boys had their lifejackets on if they wanted to play on their own on the pontoon. Yet all three have fallen in the water! Each time, they had the good reaction to shout (loud but without panic) and to hold on to whatever they could. As they are all good swimmers, they didn't panic (too much), and finally were more disappointed to have lost a bike or soaked

their school bag containing their homework. Without a doubt, they reacted well because here again, we have often discussed the possibility of falling in, and what they should do in such a case.

II - HEALTH:

Leaving for a long period at sea can be a source of numerous worries, notably concerning everyone's health. Two of our children were seriously affected by seasickness at the start, and I was worried about dehydration. We have therefore embarked various syrups and tablets, acupressure bracelets and lots of re-hydrating drinks. In fact the children are never too bothered by seasickness; they lie down and wait with a bucket close by.

There are also the essential vaccinations, which were a bit frightening for the children, because of their number, mainly. There were the classics, which were checked (tetanus, polio, measles, mumps, etc.) and the voyage-specific ones (hepatitis A and B, yellow fever, typhoid). It is best to keep your vaccination book up to date.

Gregory and I have completed a refresher course in first aid. I also completed a week's medical training, intended for ship's captains and oriented towards accidents at sea. I then spent a Friday evening in the emergencies department of a Cape Town hospital, to put the theory I had learnt into practice. I thus put in a drip, and stitched a cut, but I learnt above all that in the case of an emergency, adrenaline allows you to remain calm.

I also made up the on-board first aid kit, by comparing several voyagers' sites. I drew up several lists and asked advice from two doctors. In the end, our GP came aboard, so we could target together our precise needs, notably according to our medical past. We also tried as often as possible to have wide spectrum medicines, which can be used for the children, by reducing the dose appropriately. A pharmacist friend (you make lots of new friends before your departure!) got together the tablets, cream and bandages, using generic products where possible.



Aboard, we had various medical guides and dictionaries, including the two volumes of J-Y Chauve's 'Guide de la médecine à distance', which allows you to describe

symptoms correctly when calling a 'Centre de consultation Médicale Maritime' (www.chu-toulouse.fr/-centre-de-consultation-medicale). We have never



been in an emergency situation needing their services. Nevertheless, it is very comforting to know that such a centre exists and that they will do all they can to help you treat the person in need in the best way possible and with the means at your disposal. For minor problems, we have sometimes asked for advice from doctor friends by e-mail.

On a boat, the risk of a possible accident and its consequences makes us more attentive, and vigilance is always obligatory. In nearly 4 years aboard, we have used an antibiotic treatment just twice (for children's sore throats) and have only broken three toes. Cuts and bruises are frequent, and tend to heal badly in this wet environment. We therefore always have a tube of a good anti-bacterial cream within reach (one tube lasts around 6 – 8 months). The children know where it is and what it is



used for. Our big first aid kit is today in more or less the same

state as when we left, and so much the better! However, I don't regret having a comprehensive kit, as we are never free from the possibility of a more severe accident.

Another element which can be very harmful to your health is the one we often go looking for, the sun. We have a tube of factor 30+

have discovered new fruits and vegetables, accompanied by new recipes. During long passages or prolonged stays in remote areas, fresh products kept for a while, then tinned food took over, without provoking a mutiny. We often did overtime at our big stove to make cakes and pizzas, even

Concerning school aboard, we would be lying if we said everything went smoothly every day!

cream at the exit from the saloon, and everyone knows that they must cover themselves in it as soon as they go outside, and use it again several times throughout the day. There is also the hat drawer and the sunglasses drawer. The cockpit is surrounded by sun protection and we try to pay attention to the timing of our outings. On the beach and in the water, the children always wear their 'sun tops' (t-shirts which act as sun protection).

Without a doubt, good health also comes from a balanced diet. As we are with the children, we try to have three real meals per day. There are also a few 'emergency' meals available (a tin of ravioli, for example!) which are served if the cook is seasick. At stopovers, we

though this raised the temperature in the saloon by a degree or two. We have also established the tradition of pancakes on Sunday, and the children always enjoy tossing them. As good food is synonymous with a happy crew, we just have to apply the maxim as best we can.

Throughout the whole voyage, we

4 : A voyage in a boat is great, but doesn't exempt the children from a real education...

5 : Merlin at Moorea... The 440 has fulfilled its mission as a blue-water cruising boat and a home for the whole family

6 : Relaxing moment as a family whilst watching an eclipse on the beach at Bora Bora.



CRUISING: CHILDREN ABOARD

have only drunk water from the watermaker. The problem with this water is that it is so pure that it no longer contains the necessary mineral salts. A pharmacist in Polynesia advised us to drink half a glass of seawater every day to get our essential mineral salts. We didn't even succeed in doing this once! In fact we have started to use sea water to make our bread. But above all, we regularly take courses of vitamins and mineral salts.

fore very comprehensive. We have 'tested' the lessons of the section from nursery school to the first year of secondary school, and have never had any major problems. The lessons are made up of booklets for each subject, sometimes accompanied by a CD and a little 'instruction book' for the parents/tutors. For the last two years, there have also been activities to be carried out on-line, which can obviously present a pro-

blem when you are at sea or in an anchorage with no connection. The CNED however sends CDs with the corresponding exercises, thus allowing the children to follow their lessons with no problems. From this year, it is easy to put the oral tests on-line. There remains a series of written homeworks be sent back to France about every three weeks (you therefore have to find a nearby post office!). This homework will be corrected by the same teacher all year. We have always had very understanding and extremely competent teacher-correctors. The advantages of the CNED are numerous: cheap, the lessons are well-structured and all the subjects are assessed. But above all, if the results are satisfactory, they are recognised for the passage into the next class. The children can therefore return to a normal education system at the end of the voyage.

This system has a few disadvantages, however: the main one being the necessity of having an address to receive the lessons around September. Several times we had a late delivery which obliged us to stay in a place longer than planned. The system is sometimes a bit rigid, and very academic. You quickly learn to adapt aboard a boat, even to these minor disadvantages.

In practice, it's school time every morning from Monday to Friday, both when we are at sea and at anchor. The children have to do

four subjects per day (including maths and French). When they are motivated, this only takes two and a half hours, but we have also known mornings which dragged on laboriously into the early afternoon. We have had a few studious weekends when we were close to a post office and the lessons were ready to be sent. These lessons require an investment from one (or both) parent(s). As Victor, Félix and Cléa are following three different levels and as I was the only one looking after their tutoring (simply because Gregory doesn't speak French well enough!), they have also learnt to work very independently. But we would be lying if we said that everything went smoothly every day! There have been tensions, arguments and a few crises! It was sometimes hard to separate the roles of mother and teacher (as much for me as for the children). The programmes were always finished at the beginning of May, leaving four weeks of enforced holiday, where we revised or consolidated the weak points. We met a few boats which used another system, or made up their own lessons, but finally the CNED suited us very well.

And afterwards? Our children have been going to an Australian school for a few months now. They have had no problems adapting, understanding (they are bi-lingual; however they have never been to an English-speaking school before). They don't seem to have any gaps in their basic apprenticeship; on the contrary, they are still continuing their French apprenticeship



with the CNED, which also offers 'a la carte' lessons.

FREE TIME

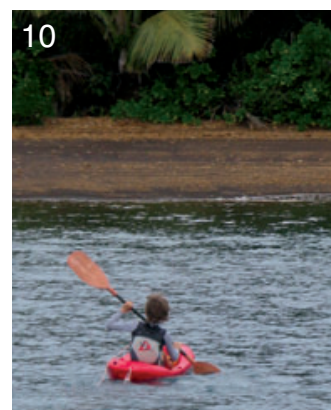
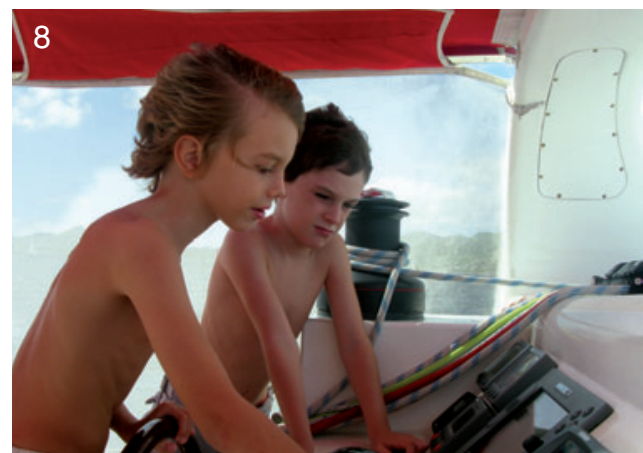
And what do the children do after school? There are the regular activities, whatever the situation (anchorage or on passage) and the essential toys which allow the children to occupy themselves for hours. On Merlin, Lego and Playmobil arrive in pole position. During the voyage, the collection has been enlarged regularly, and is now well-stocked. Cléa had a big cutting-out period, and we then collected lots of magazines. Félix invented many toys and had his painting/drawing phase; he went as far as selling his works in the little villages. Victor has become a fervent reader, devouring books at

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III - EDUCATION

SCHOOL ABOARD

To compensate for the disorganisation of the education system during the Second World War, a correspondence service was set up in France, in 1939. This system has been constantly perfected, to become nowadays the CNED we know, under the guardianship of the Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale. It is as well-thought-of, and allows French-speaking children to have a quality education whilst cruising. The courses are not very expensive. They cover the whole of the official programme and are there-





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7 : It's playtime... Everyone in the water!

8 : Victor and Felix quickly took on responsibilities, and were able to help with the navigation.

9 : Even though you're living on a boat, you still have to help your parents: washing up chores...

10 : The kayak, the means for the children aboard to enjoy their freedom.

11 : Board games as a family are real moments of pleasure on this voyage by boat. Here Cléa has just won her first game of Monopoly..

12 : Fishing is one of the children's favourite activities. And in addition, it fills up the food store...

13 : Washing whilst at sea... You must have something to change into before the next anchorage!

14 : A meal amongst friends aboard the catamaran... Children on a voyage always meet lots of other people..

the rate of several hundred pages per day. An electronic book would seem to be a good investment! During the long passages, the magic of the screen has also delighted the whole crew. Aboard, the television is linked directly to a multimedia player, and the children use a simple remote control to access their favourite programmes which have already been digitized. They (and we) have thus watched quite a lot of films and cartoons, as well

as a great number of reports, notably those by the BBC, which are very instructive. They have had their electronic games period (DS and GameBoy), but we tend to limit the time they use them. The long crossings have above all been the opportunity for us all to get together at midday for a board game. Monopoly sessions never seemed to be interminable. We learnt and discovered numerous card games. We held chess or mancala tournaments (a big word, given the number of participants). This is the time for complicity, time spent together playing or laughing which is so precious, and when the surrounding scenery is superb, these simple moments become quite simply magical.

At anchor, we were able to take full advantage of water games (diving, beach, kayak, hours spent

swinging off the halyards and jumping into the water...). We also tried to visit what all these places had to offer, museums, waterfalls, or local markets. If there were other children in the anchorage, they invited each other and didn't need to know each other for long to develop a complicity. The rhythm with the children nevertheless seemed to us to be slower than aboard the boats without children. But it is important to have fun together, respecting the rhythm of the whole crew.

Leaving aboard a cat also allows everyone to have their own space (aboard Merlin, everyone has their own cabin). This doesn't stop the tensions and tantrums, but we all have a place of our own. Of course, we have sometimes missed being able to go out as a couple. But the diving trips, the picnics on the beach with the family or the walks in the tropical forest

remain much more memorable than any film.

The space aboard has also allowed us to have a few gadgets which were not really essential, but very practical with three children, such as a real washing machine, a big cooker and lots of 'toys' (kayaks, sailing dinghy, surfboard).

Experiencing such a voyage with your children offers them countless riches. They open up to the world and its cultural, social and geographic diversities.

So, when Cléa asked me today when we are going to continue 'Merlin's voyage', because she would like to go sailing again, I tell myself that our little adventure was not a mistake.

MERLIN

You can follow Merlin's adventures on the family's web site.

And for your information, the Dean 440 is currently for sale...

www.merlinsvoyage.net



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