SINGLE-HANDING AN ALOHA 32

Aloha 32 “Meriah”

Some people sail single-handed because they prefer it and some because circumstances dictate but many of us also sail single-handed even when we are not alone on the boat. I am sure every skipper has experienced the situation where the “crew” are really passengers who take little part in helping to sail the boat. Some couples sail like this for years, one partner never helps to sail the boat but enjoys being out on the water. Even if there is a competent crew onboard, there are situations where one person is sailing the boat alone e.g. on a night watch. For all these real or virtual single-handers I thought I would write something about how I have equipped my boat for sailing alone.

In my case I have single-handed round Newfoundland and to the northern tip of Labrador so not everything I say may be appropriate for day sailing or lake sailing. Sailors are an independent group anyway so I am sure you will pick and chose from my suggestions. I am also writing as a 100% cruising sailor. The racing community would not accept many of my suggestions.

I will take some photos when Meriah is rigged in 2002 to illustrate these suggestions. In the meantime you can see photos at
http://www.wright-photo.com/meriahO.htm

Lead everything to the cockpit

Meriah came with many of the controls lead back and everything I have changed since then has built on this concept. The more you can do from the cockpit the better. It gives you great peace of mind and you are more likely to make necessary adjustments, like reefing, if you can avoid leaving the cockpit. Meriah now has the following lead back –

all halyards, boom vang, topping lift, first and second reef, gybe preventers, roller furling and downhaul line for hanked on foresails (I also have an extra removable forestay) All these lines can create a spaghetti problem in the cockpit, it works with an Aloha 32 but may be more difficult with other boats.

Roller Furling

Doesn't everyone have roller furling? Some purists may claim that they prefer the efficiency of separate foresails but for single-handed cruising I feel that roller furling is absolutely essential. Some may also point out that furling gear can fail but the hazard from fighting sails on the foredeck on your own presents a far greater risk of disaster. I moved my furling line from the cabin top to a turning block on the stern rail. It is important to be able to work freely while pulling the furling line very quickly.

Gybe Prevention.

An inadvertent gybe particularly in a strong wind is one of the worst things that can happen to a single-hander. My system has prevented a gybe on numerous occasions and allows me to relax while running downwind in strong or fluky winds. You can rig the whisker pole on the foredeck or go below without worrying about the boom

I simply run two lines from the cockpit round blocks on the toe rail or a stanchion base just forward of the mast and up to a snap shackle which clips onto a main sheet eye in the middle of the boom. The cockpit end of the lines remain tied off on the edge of the cockpit and the lines are long enough so that both can remain rigged to the boom and allow tacking or gybing. You can leave the lines clipped to the boom all the time if you want (you have to duck under them on the side deck) or clip the boom end to a stanchion base when not in use. Most importantly, when they are rigged you can adjust the length and tie them off from the cockpit.

Single Line Reefing

The need to reef usually creeps up on you in spite of all the advice to reef before you need to. It took me a couple of attempts to get my first and second single line reef working properly but now I wouldn't be without it. The ability to reef from the cockpit is a great comfort. The system is hard to describe, but here goes.

Each reefing line runs from the boom up to the leach, back to a cheek block on the boom, along separate sides of the boom to a cheek block on the mast, up to a block on the luff of the mainsail, down to a block at the base of the mast and back to the cockpit via a rope clutch on the cabin top. There are small metal loops on the side of the boom to prevent the line drooping down. It is important to get the rope angle from the leach just right so that the pull on the leach is both down and back. The blocks on the luff are essential to cut down friction, blocks on the leach would have been nice but are not essential. The luff blocks are shackled to small rings that are sown to ties that go through the reefing cringle. The two reefing lines can be winched on the cabin top and it is essential to mark the main halyard to show where to drop the main to for each reef. I jam the main halyard opposite the mark then tighten the luff by winching on the reefing line.

The system worked fairly well until I discovered the magic bullet – you also need to lead the topping lift back to the cockpit – see next item.

I also have a third reef but decided not to make this one into a single line – too much rope! It is an anomaly that I still have to go on deck for the reef that I am most likely to need in a storm, but that's life!

Topping Lift

As I said above, the single line reefing was only a partial success until I realized that with the topping lift lead back I could take all the load off the leach while reefing and the friction in the system was much less. You have to have the topping lift adjustable because the boom is raised as you apply the reefs. I simple wrap the end of the topping lift round a cleat on the cabin top.

Jack Lines

Need I say these are essential to prevent falling overboard?
I use 1 inch wide nylon webbing from bow to stern along the side decks. I NEVER stir out of the cockpit without hooking on. I use separate lanyards for each side that are left hooked onto the jack lines. It is easier to grab the end of a lanyard hanging inside the cockpit than grope around on the side deck trying to grab the jack-line. It's difficult to test a jack-line system without throwing yourself overboard and risk damaging the lifelines and stanchions. I would be interested to know of anyone who has fallen overboard when hooked to a jack-line.

Man Overboard Recovery

I made up a long floating line fitted with floats to tow behind, thinking that this would give me a chance to grab something if I ever did part company with the boat. I only deployed it a couple of times and once got in a real mess when I forgot it coming into harbour. It is probably a good idea for long passages, I don't really have an excuse for not using it more.
I also have rope loops fastened to the stanchion bases opposite the cockpit (the freeboard is lowest here) I leave them hanging over the side and can climb aboard by putting a foot in the loop.

Autopilot

What can I say? This is an essential piece of equipment
My Autohelm 3000 has saved my bacon many, many times.

Wind Vane Steering

I didn't fit wind steering at first and didn't really miss it as I was only doing two-day coastal passages at the most. Then I sailed on another Aloha 32 with a Monitor wind vane and I was completely sold. I installed a Cape Horn wind vane and have been very satisfied with it. Meriah is now back on Lake Ontario but I still use the Cape Horn all the time.
The advantage for the single-hander is that the boat always stays at the correct angle to the wind so you can relax or have a nap knowing that the boat will follow the wind. At night I would set an alarm for 90 minute maximum and then go to sleep. As long as you have sea room the boat looks after herself. Once I woke up to find I had turned 180 degrees – try that with an autopilot. Wind vanes are no good when you have to follow a straight line between waypoints, that is why you need both methods of self steering.

Electronics

This is not about what to buy but more about where to place things.
I struggled with the choice of putting the GPS, and radar either at the wheel, at the navigation station or beside the companionway. (I don't like swing out brackets) and eventually decided on the nav station. When single-handing I spend very little time behind the wheel because most of the time the autopilot or wind vane are steering so instruments at the wheel are not really the ideal choice. Beside the companionway would work well but I hate cutting big holes in the cabin and cannot abide the mess of wires visible inside. My sailing instruments are at the wheel with a repeater at the nav station so I decided to keep the radar and GPS below but visible from the companionway without going below. This is a matter of personal preference but I do think the reasoning is different for single-handing.
Positioning radio controls and speakers is just as important and much more of a no brainer. I believe that speakers for marine VHF and ham/SSB (if you have one) must be clearly audible in the cockpit with the engine running. I have waterproof speakers set into the side of the cockpit and the microphones are accessible without going below. I can see the radio digital readouts from the companionway and the mics have buttons to change frequency so I can operate the radios from the cockpit.

Handling the Dingy and Outboard

This chore is easier if you are a virtual single-hander. Surely you can persuade your passenger to help! Because I would really be on my own I had to have a system that worked.
I will never tow a dinghy (that's another story) so I bought one that just fits in front of the mast and I can still get past on the side decks. The dinghy is launched using a halyard pulled at the base of the mast
I had a stainless steel "crane" made for the outboard fastened to the stern rail. With a bit of careful design I set up a 4:1 lifting tackle that can be operated when standing in the dinghy. This lets me lift the engine out of the dinghy and drop it back onto the stern rail bracket. The lifting tackle has a built in jamming cleat in case I need to stop in the middle of the lift. The outboard is an 8HP two stroke. I could have chosen a lighter model but I wanted enough power to plane the dinghy and give a reasonable range for exploring.

Anchoring

This is one of the more difficult tasks for the single-hander. It is almost impossible to anchor without walking up and down the foredeck between the wheel and the bow.
All the usual advice applies about anchoring with the added issue that you are more likely to get tired if you get into a difficult situation where the anchor needs resetting. Creative solutions like setting two anchors or running a line ashore are also quite difficult. My main advice would be to force yourself to think through exactly what you plan to do first – it is always better to have a plan.
I found that I was on my limit handling a 35lb plough and 100ft of chain particularly if I had to reset more than once, so I installed a powered windlass. I can operate the windlass from the bow or the cockpit, which is very useful when you have no help

Docking

This can be even more difficult than anchoring for the single-hander. You will probably know your own slip quite well but single-handing to strange harbours is totally different. I always dock port-side-to because the prop walk of the 32 pulls in the stern in reverse. I will go to great lengths to spin Meriah round to put the port side on the dock.

Always ask for help from anyone standing around but don't assume that the old salt on the dock knows anything about boats!

Have your fenders and lines ready a long time in advance, I have had several last minute panics in strange harbours. I leave the dock lines tied to the rails all the time to avoid struggling in lockers at the last minute.

If you have to allow for both wind and current and you are not sure which is more important, ALWAYS allow for the current first. The current affects the boat instantly whereas the wind has to accelerate the boat from rest.

The 32 has a centre docking cleat which is a godsend because it is often all you need to get the boat secured while you get the rest of the lines ashore. Always throw a second line ashore as you step off with the main one. It is embarrassing to be standing on the dock unable to reach the other lines. Finally remember the golden rule that with the wind astern get the stern line on early and with the wind ahead go for the bow line early. Plan your leaving carefully, particularly in strong winds. You may need to bring the end of dock lines on board so that you can cast off from the boat.Finally if things go wrong, conduct an investigation with yourself and decide how you will do it different next time.

On a general point, some readers may wonder why anyone would want to sail on their own. I often get asked if I get lonely or scared or bored. In fact I experience none of these feelings. There is so much to do on a boat that the time flies and when I get into port I seem to meet people more readily than people off other boats. I think it is because you are more introspective when you are in a group, you don't need the company of outsiders. Being on my own, I may appear more approachable to the locals.

You do need a certain level of experience and self-confidence in your sailing ability but I suspect that many sailors have the capacity to enjoy single-handing without realizing it. The sense of achievement I feel from completing a long passage is far greater than when sailing with a crew.

Tony Wright
Aloha 32 "Meriah"