



The Gifts of Sailing Solo

Now crewing and exploring with her partner on a shared boat, a former singlehander reflects on what going it alone taught her. **BY TERESA CAREY**

THE SECOND-BEST THING that my partner, Ben Eriksen, has ever done for me was to refuse to sail with me.

When he purchased *Elizabeth*, his Bristol Channel Pilot Cutter, I thought it was sensible that we sail together aboard her. Two hands make lighter work and better company.

But Ben had different goals. He'd long dreamed of sailing solo, and he wasn't ready to abandon that dream.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. The best thing Ben ever did was ask me, "Why not sail your own boat?" He did it so matter-of-factly that I also thought, *why not?* I already had my captain's license from the U.S. Coast Guard. Four days later, I purchased

the first boat I could. I was the proud owner of *Daphne*, a 27-foot Nor'Sea.

The skipper (above) sands plywood for a portable chart table. *Elizabeth* and *Daphne* (right) anchor side by side in Huntington harbor, on Long Island Sound, New York.

Ben and I lived aboard our pocket cruisers for several years, sailing solo yet together along the entire Eastern Seaboard, from Maine to Florida and the Bahamas. We dropped our anchors side-by-side in over 100 harbors

and coves. We adjusted our sail plans to maintain the same speed and to stay within sight of one another; we helped each other with repairs, planning, and rough weather; and during long offshore passages, Ben and I were able to keep a three-hour watch-standing rotation, hailing and waking each other on the VHF and to warn of approaching vessels, course changes, and even





Teresa tackles a tough job in the cramped engine compartment, replacing a bent connecting rod. Here she cleans the fire deck before putting everything back together. Even a speck of dust could cause a change in compression and a problem for the engine.

Introspection

Many couples viewed Ben and me as an oddity in the sailing community. With few exceptions, most cruisers are couples sailing together aboard one boat. “Don’t you get lonely?” they asked us. Ben and I seldom felt lonely. I could nearly always see the tanbark red of Ben’s sails in the daylight or the red and green glow burning atop his mast at night. And at any moment, I could hail his vessel on the VHF to converse about sail plans or anchorages or the like. No, I couldn’t always touch his hand or see his face or talk for hours, but VHF check-ins, even with their radio-communication formalities and brief public talks, were plenty to remind me that I wasn’t alone.

One of the strangest remarks on our manner of paired solo sailing came from

the wife of a young newlywed couple who together had just purchased a boat. “We love each other too greatly to ever want to be apart that much,” she said. I didn’t reply. I knew the strength of Ben’s and my love, and I knew it was that strength that kept us devoted and affectionate, even from a distance. I didn’t equate togetherness with love. Instead, I enjoyed the solitude I had aboard *Daphne*.

Without many of the distractions that clutter life, I was able, even forced, to sit and think for long periods of time. During these stretches, the splash of the bow wave or the soaring flight of a gull no longer seemed familiar. I watched in amazement at every sunset; I stared long at the illusions on the horizon, and unexpected thoughts took flight within me. I found that the heart can best be cultivated through introspection and solitude.

Respect

The notion that women sailors aren’t as capable as male sailors represents backward thinking, but it still exists. With only one exception, every solo sailor I’d ever met was a man. With a few excep-

waterspouts. Everything we did made sense to us, yet everywhere we went people questioned us. “Why two boats?” And “Are you two a couple?”

Now we’re sailing together on *Elizabeth*, partly for financial reasons. It’s helped me realize that sailing solo blessed me with three unique gifts.

tions, every sailing couple I'd ever met was chasing a dream that had been first seeded by the male. It doesn't surprise me that people assumed the same for Ben and me. They assumed that we sail together on one boat, that the boat is his, and that he knows more than I do.

Last year, Ben and I sailed our two pocket cruisers to the Bahamas for the winter. Once anchored, we often met our neighbors in passing for a potluck dinner or a drink. It was a matter of course that the men would chat about ground tackle or engine maintenance or performance under sail, and I was left out of the conversation.

I felt like I was branded with a scarlet "L" for lubberly, and I was frustrated that my clout as a sailor was diminished because I lacked hair on my chest and have tiny arms and hands. Noticing this, Ben would often say something like "On Teresa's boat, she prefers to . . ." his way of subtly inviting me into the fraternal conversation.

As soon as he spoke, three things would happen: First, the men's eyes would widen

and they'd say, "You're sailing your own boat—alone?" Second, they'd ask, "Why?" Finally, I'd be included in the conversation as a full-blooded sailor capable of doing what most women could do if they chose to. In only a moment, I grew hair on my chest and muscles in my arms.

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But you don't need large muscles to sail a boat solo; you need a large spirit. Sailing solo was like having a V.I.P. pass that automatically earned me respect and a stronger identity within the sailing community.

Inner Resources

During the first year that I sailed solo, a blog reader wrote to me for advice. She knew that heeling on a monohull was a natural result of closehauling sailing, but even so, she panicked every time it happened, and her husband took the helm to soothe her nerves. "How do I overcome this fear, so I can sail the boat myself?" she asked me.

I suggested that she go sailing with another woman or head out alone on

a calm day. "As long as your husband is available to help you," I told her, "you'll rely on him when you're scared and fear that you or the boat is in danger."

Even those couples who break the barriers of gender convention and share equally in the responsibilities aboard will never stretch themselves quite as much as the solo sailor. Never have I been tested in sailing as I have been while solo sailing.

It's the moments when I worked hard to take care of *Daphne*, when all the elements of the ocean were testing me, and when all the strength of my body was gone that I found resources in myself that would've remained undiscovered and still buried today had I not sailed solo.

These three gifts have made me a stronger, more independent, and more confident person. I'll always think of my time sailing solo as a rite of passage in sailing and in life.

Teresa Carey and Ben Eriksen speak about their quest to find icebergs together and on the same boat at the Mystic Seaport on March 15, 2012. For details, visit the seaport website (www.mysticseaport.org).