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SEAMANSHIP

No Crew Required Large-yacht innovations let couples enjoy going it alone safely.

By Chris Caswell

A growing number of yachts are being operated "short-handed," the nautical term for a voyage with fewer than the usual number of crew members. In the yachting world, it was not long ago that owning a 70-footer meant having a dedicated captain and at least one crew member.

Today, however, there are a growing number of yachts in the 60- to 80-foot range being handled by husband-and-wife teams. And this isn't just weekend marina-hopping, either, but voyages that stretch the lengths of continents and span oceans.

John and Linda Langan who, in 16 months, have ranged from Alaska to Mexico and are currently in the Caribbean aboard their Nordhavn 47, are now accustomed to short-handed cruising. "At first it was daunting, now it's no big thing," they happily report.

A multitude of factors have not only made this possible, but desirable. Modern technology has provided warping winches that can turn a 100-pound woman into Arnold Schwarzenegger when it comes to handling dock lines, while bow and stern thrusters make docking easier. There are more young couples acquiring larger yachts these days, yet not really wanting paid crew. And at the other end, there are "empty-nesters," who want to be able to take out family or friends occasionally, yet still remain independent.

Regardless of the reasons, boatbuilders are seizing on this new market, creating fleets of yachts aimed at short-handed cruisers. We talked to a number of owner-operators, as well as boatbuilders, to gather some of the hard-won tips and techniques that make short-handed cruising possible. Here's a look at what we learned.

PICK THE RIGHT YACHT

The design features needed for short-handed cruising are a matter of common sense. One of the keys to simplified boat-handling, according to one skipper, is the ability to "be everywhere at once."

This means you need wide side decks that allow you to move easily from bow to stern, with bulwarks or rails high enough to make movement underway safe. It requires having doors on each side of a pilothouse so the skipper can step out to lend a hand quickly. Look for flying bridge stairs that are conveniently located and safe in all conditions. Inside, a pilot berth or convertible settee might be a good idea, so a second person is close at hand during night passages.

OUTFIT THE YACHT

Once you've chosen the yacht, you need to outfit it with short-handing in mind, which generally falls into two

FOUR HANDS: John and Linda Langan cruise their Nordhavn 47 without help (above). John and Lydia Biggie have no trouble handling their Outer Reef 73 *SeeYa* (below).