



SKIP NOVAK

THE ADVENT OF SELF-DOCKING TECHNOLOGY THREATENS TO ERODE A VITAL AND ENJOYABLE SAILING SKILLS BASE, SAYS SKIP

Just when I started to agonise over a topic for this column with the deadline on the horizon, a windfall materialised – a subject that is irresistible: Volvo announced that they have developed and tested technology enabling self-docking of yachts.

The company proved this at the Volvo Ocean Race stopover in Gothenburg by squeezing a motorboat between two Volvo 65s, all hands-off. The idea, so explained the Volvo engineer on YouTube, is to remove the stress of these ‘tricky’ situations.

Another clip then popped up that said something to the effect that you can buy a \$9 million dollar yacht but you can’t buy the skill to bring it in. What will we, in our collective wisdom, think of next?

Marinas around the world are full to bursting point. Space is at a premium and boats seem to get larger not smaller. The technology addresses the need. But I remain sceptical, as I have about driverless cars. Technology is dulling down our skills base. Our senses are being sacrificed to sensors, not to mention that we’re sacrificing

the pleasure of hands-on control.

And safety? We are only now just beginning to realise the pitfalls of driverless car

technology as the companies roll them out on trials.

Software failures are unavoidable in the AI (artificial intelligence) game, even if you fail to question that the human brain can outdo an algorithm. Losing a few drones, as we have done on the ocean when the software went down is one thing – that’s nothing more than a shoulder-shrigger. But the death of a pedestrian recently due to a software failure in an Uber driverless vehicle trial is another matter. Those Uber trials had to be suspended.

The wider issue we are all facing is the unstoppable erosion of basic skills and whether these skills will be desirable to achieve in the first place, let alone enjoyable and satisfying to have. It seems like the answer should be an obvious yes, but technology is creeping in everywhere to compromise this premise.

The analogy that comes to mind that refutes my

paranoia is of commercial aircraft, which land and take off almost exclusively on auto. I dare to say, though, that the variables found on the runway are far less than in a marina and certainly less than driving round a town. And, more to the point, commercial air travel is a service – yachting is an activity and therein lies a fundamental difference of purpose.

There is also a trickledown effect. Self-docking technology on big motor yachts will eventually arrive as standard kit on small- to medium-size sail and power boats. If in doubt, witness the popularity of bow thrusters (granted, necessary on a superyacht). They are almost standard equipment on boats as small as 45ft. The result? A loss of those seamanship skills of bringing a boat into a dock or on to a buoy by gauging the wind and tide and getting the boat tacked down smartly.

Anyone who has been at the St Barths Bucket and watched the captains and crews manoeuvre the fleet of sailing superyachts stern to the dock in to a fresh Caribbean breeze with centimetres to spare cannot fail to be impressed. What a shame it would be to relegate this spectator spectacle to a non-event if technology made it more-or-less reliable.

For those on shore, the attraction in watching docking manoeuvres is in anticipating the unexpected – a euphemism for the possibility of a right balls up. It’s called *schadenfreude*, and is simply human nature. Admiring excellence but admonishing incompetence is as natural as enjoying any sporting event.

Every time a boat is about to dock you naturally drop what you are doing and prop yourself up into a comfortable position to enjoy the show. The explorer Bill Tilman described this very well back in 1955 while trying to leave the quay at Punta Arenas with his Bristol Channel Pilot Cutter *Mischief*. They managed to drop a jib over the side, went aground when the engine quit and then were rammed by a Chilean cruiser trying to help.

‘It was a Saturday afternoon and one could almost hear the happy sigh of the crowd as they realised how wise they had been to spend it on the jetty,’ he wrote.

On a serious note, if we assume this evolution results in captains, crews and owners getting out of practice for manoeuvring in confined spaces, would you trust them offshore to recover a man overboard? ■