

SKIP NOVAK

WHY EVERY YACHT'S USER MANUAL IS A VITAL AND EVER-EVOLVING PROJECT

In the last column I wrote about 'manual' skills training for aspirant sailors, the practical, hands-on knowledge you need. Lately I've been reviewing another manual – the one for the boat. My experience with boat manuals written by the manufacturers of production boats is that they're wholly inadequate. They're more of an operator's manual, the sort you get with your car and full of advice that tells you if such and such fails, contact your dealer.

Even custom-build manuals – by nature much more elaborate – make the assumption that everything will function as designed simply by pressing the right button. But if you are at sea and things fail, you need all the 'what if' scenarios imagined and elaborated on.

On my boats we have filed away the shipyard operator's manual and have written our own. It is an axiom that as soon as you take your first sail, the shipyard's manual will be out of date. The

variables that immediately surface when operating a vessel are inevitable and procedures on how to use the equipment as well as how to conduct operations, are dictated by the style of how the boat is run.

The homegrown boat manual should be a living document, always on the desktop of the computer and added to continually, all changes dated and signed off on who made that change, and of course with a hard copy print-out. This is especially important for skipper and crew changeovers in the case of a professionally run yacht, and not least of all a fundamental report for a new owner if the boat is sold.

It's easy nowadays to drop in photos and technical drawings, and cut and paste important routine service protocols from equipment manuals. Your boat manual should also include a detailed stowage plan, routine maintenance schedules and troubleshooting procedures for every piece of equipment. When *Pelagic Australis* was sold, the manual ran to over 100 pages.

Procedures are as important as the technical details of the equipment. We have Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) as annexes for things like

making sail, reefing, launching and recovering tenders, hoisting people aloft and anchoring – and how to lift the anchor when the windlass fails, which it will do eventually. You can't have enough SOPs.

The introduction to our manual says it all: 'The intention of this Manual is to provide a "cookbook" guide for a new skipper and crew coming on board completely "green" with no-one on board to brief them. This means no operational procedure should be neglected nor implied. Full explanations of how this boat is run (not in a general sense) must be listed. Particular attention should be paid to quirky systems, special tools required to affect a repair or adjustment etc, which are not evident at first glance.'

Although the exercise in getting this all down is a major work, it's not onerous as the content will grow over time. It is an evolution of mistakes made and lessons learned.

Take the simple case of starting the engine. How many steps do you normally observe? In our manual it is

12, and finishes with the heads-up safety message redlined: 'It is essential that when you are working in the engine room you take out the ignition key from the start panel!'

You can make it an amusing read. Here's a gem for changing the propeller in the water. It starts off: 'How to change a prop at anchor in South Georgia – as done by Miles, November 2010. If you have to do this, you are a poor miserable @#!*#@\$, and should be more careful of ice in future.'

This job description is several pages long, meticulously documenting the procedure, beginning with: 'If it is bent, motor slowly, or sail, to a secure anchorage before attempting to change it. It's best if the anchorage is not prone to glacial meltwater as this makes visibility much worse, and the job more difficult.'

It finishes with, among others, two 'Top Tips' added after a successful operation: 'Go to Antarctica without a spare prop to give yourself more incentive to be careful around ice,' and 'While doing this send any charter clients away on a very long walk (without a Zodiac ashore) so they can't give you any helpful advice.' ■

'The homegrown manual should be a living document'

