



# Skip Novak

When it comes to sea trials for a new or refitted boat, it's a case of don't do what I do, do what I say



nyone who owns a boat knows the subject. We've all done it, setting out to sea on an extended voyage, with little or no sea trials. I can consider myself an expert on this subject.

To be honest, neither of my four Whitbread entries had been extensively tested before the events. *King's Legend* in 1977 spent most of her time on the dock in Cowes in constant preparation in anticipation of the great unknown. *Alaska Eagle*, ex *Flyer I*, had been extensively modified in error and was late out of the shipyard in the Netherlands.

*Drum* did have a go for a month in Solent waters, but her summer's work-up and big test offshore ended upside-down in the 1985 Fastnet Race and put us back to square one five weeks before the start. On *Fazisi*, the Soviet entry in 1989, we just beat the bailiff to the start line.

*Pelagic* and *Pelagic Australis*, my two expedition boats had similar chequered histories coming off the starting blocks.

My racing career culminated in the The Race in 2001. It is one thing to start a delivery unprepared, or even Leg 1 of the Whitbread to Cape Town, but another to start what turned out to be a 64-day non-stop race round the world on a state-of-the-art maxi catamaran.

How we survived these adventures and came through is a testament to the qualities of the crews, who were always experienced sailors and/or technical experts able to deal with things on the go. I never felt unsafe in a sense, but rather the various predicaments that inevitably arose had to be simply embraced as we carried on.

But safety certainly can be an issue when starting a long voyage untested, especially for debutante boat

owners and their crews. New boat launches and post-refit situations are particularly vulnerable.

The scenario goes something like this: the boat is launched, the rig dropped in, systems run up and then day after day the sea trials are postponed owing to the thousand and one other jobs big and small, important and less so.

It is the endless list syndrome – no matter how many things you tick off, at least the same or more are added as the scheduled departure time draws near. Add to this the usual delays from suppliers and technicians, plus inclement weather, or no wind at all, and there is every reason not to leave the dock.

When I speak about sea trials, they should be just that – sailing or motoring in sheltered waters offer little difference from hoisting sails and running up systems at the dock. It is almost an irrelevance. Sea trials should imply going to sea, with enough time in hand to observe properly.

The high-pressure hose test for deck leaks is a classic case in point. That is a static test of little value. It is much more conclusive to sail hard offshore with green water on the deck and the boat working to the max, to reveal where the leaks might be.

Plumbing is another aspect that should be always be fundamentally suspect. Given the motion of a boat offshore in heavy weather will the engine cooling system work, ditto will the exhaust riser be sufficient in a big following sea? Will the port heads suck seawater on port tack? Are the through-hull hose fittings really secure under load and motion? Chafe points on running rigging, sails and ultimate mast tuning can only be resolved after a reasonable extended thrash in high winds and big seas.

In order to achieve this utopian situation, two requirements are evident. Clear priorities – get offshore when the conditions are right. The guy delivering the cockpit cushions, already late, can come back another day. The second is willpower; to muster the troops and willingly go out in gale conditions takes some.

I must try it one day.

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