

SKIP NOVAK

A CURIOUS SKIPPER'S MIND WORKS IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS,
AND NEVER MORE SO THAN IN EXTENDED LOCKDOWN

For nearly seven years now I've been writing this monthly column. When asked to climb to the masthead of *Yachting World* I thought to myself that this would be a good opportunity to grind a few axes, offer up some opinions to wake people up on various issues (not always welcomed) and so forth.

In fact, in the beginning I banked up a reserve of column pieces so I could just press the button and dish them out, well before the end of month deadline.

Things then settled down and evolved into a routine whereby I'd come to grips with an idea on the deadline and bang it out. There are always plenty of topics around; racing, cruising, big events, types of craft, safety issues, maritime disasters with lessons learned (or not), to foil or not to foil, etcetera... 'Write whatever you like,' I was told.

That was when all things were happening. Now we have void spaces everywhere in our bilges. Cancelled events are legion, speculation on further cancellations and uncertainty or downright over-optimism about others. Cowes Week without a beer tent is sort of like a football match without the fans in the stadium.

Other preposterous ideas have been implemented like limiting the number of crew on board certain boats in certain races for social distancing.

Cruising boats are still stuck in the Caribbean, some denied an exit and others with no place to go with the hurricane season coming on.

Our sailing world has been reduced to webinars, Zoom meetings, virtual yacht races, tutorials and unending vicarious experiences displayed in rectangular screen-shaped format.

Meanwhile my charter fleet has been more or less stranded, but we have at least survived as a business. *Pelagic Australis* managed to make ends meet based from Cape Town with special projects, all needing quarantine.

Pelagic has been on the hard in Maine and will remain so this summer, with nowhere to go in Arctic waters. Canada has closed its borders to recreational craft at the time of writing. Greenland is still waffling about how to 'open up'.

Our new build, the *Pelagic 77 Vinson*

of *Antarctica* has been sea trialling in Holland without me, while I'm stuck in red-listed South Africa. It is not very satisfying commenting on gear placements and modifications via Whatsapp during a fit-out. No fun at all!

With this deadline looming I went to bed contemplating a column subject. In search of inspiration I lost myself in Joyce's *Ulysses*, a tome that needs a lockdown in one form or another to take it on.

I'm always in two minds whether to look up the meaning of all those obscure words (some learned and forgotten) or to just let the narrative flow – the latter always recommended. I eventually drifted off in a mild sense of insane pleasure that Joyce always engenders. Bloom was, apropos to me at that point in time, thought streaming about water.

'Preposterous ideas have been implemented'

Early next morning I had a dream about a recurring theme that I have promoted often in this column – simplicity of systems on board.

It went like this: I was surprised to see that the engine

on *Pelagic* was being turned off with the stop button, which controls a solenoid that shifts a lever on the injection pump, which cuts off the fuel. A standard configuration on every diesel engine.

Years ago, we eliminated this solenoid which is prone to failure; read electricity plus saltwater plus movement.

This can fail at the most inopportune of moments, not so much when you need to shut down the engine but when you try to restart as, if the solenoid doesn't retract, no fuel goes to the pump – think man overboard, or some other critical manoeuvre.

Instead we eliminated the solenoid and installed a simple push-pull cable operated from the pilothouse and it never fails. Ditto on *Pelagic Australis*.

The dream ended with me convincing my crew to reinstate the system and I woke up not in cold sweat – it was more dream than nightmare – but with an epiphany on a topic.

That wasn't so much about diesel engines and simple systems, but rather on how sometimes the weird and wonderful ways of getting to your subject happens in the first place. ■

