



CHARTER LIFE

Making Contact

The charter contact was tough, impatient, and imperious. He also was, by necessity, my new best friend.

Nine boats, nine captains, nearly 70 people, and about a million problems. That's the mayhem we faced as we prepped to leave on a group charter from Martinique bound for Grenada. As captains, our single assigned point of contact to help us ready our boats for departure was a Frenchman named Alain, and he was something else altogether.

Short, thin, leathery, and barefoot, he had the unenviable task of getting all of our boats off the dock before nightfall. It looked like maybe he had never owned a pair of shoes in his life. A lit cigarette with an inch of ash perpetually dangled from his lips. He exuded exasperation in a way that only the French can master, and in our captains' meeting, he barked boat facts at us like a crusty drill sergeant. My presence in the group of male captains seemed to agitate him, and he frowned at my note taking as I wrote down the location of freshwater manifolds, genset starting procedures, the tool inventory, etc.



But he was a crucial contact—and befriending key contacts is a lesson I've learned over and over with each trip I've led. The first day of a sailing charter is tough on captains who need to manage guests/crew/friends, check for provisions/tools/spare parts, and make sure they have a sound boat before untying the docklines. There are chart briefings and tech walk-throughs and multiple personalities to manage, especially those of the base personnel who are often stressed to their limits on changeover day. One point of contact was a stretch to manage all of us.

Alain was a tough nut. At one point, I made the fatal error of asking about any peculiarities of the reefing

system on the one "sample" boat that he had deigned to walk us through. "If you don't know how to reef, zen you shouldn't be on zees boats," he snapped. The other captains (who clearly had the same question about the unnecessarily complicated rig) looked at their feet.

I walked to my own boat where I thoroughly stepped through all of its systems, because once we pulled out on our one-way charter to Grenada, there would be no calling for help. I couldn't start the genset. I tried everything from clearing the lines to swearing at it. Each time, it sputtered to life, coughed, and died. That meant I had to ask for help from my French friend. I waved him down on the dock where he was working hard at pretending not to see me.

I stepped directly in his path, and we locked eyes for a brief, tense, and slightly hostile moment. "I can't start the generator," I said. He rolled his eyes and muttered something about women. I continued to stare and then pointed at the swim platform of my cat. With a shake of the head, he exhaled a cloud of smoke, stepped aboard, and ducked into the engine compartment.

Thirty minutes later he was still there, realizing that perhaps I had a legitimate problem. Every failed attempt at coaxing the genset to life made him suck in air, and the end of his cigarette glowed a little brighter.

At one point, he clearly contemplated escape, saying he needed more tools. I wasn't going to be shaken off that easily. In the end, I was rewarded with a semi-functional genset that I would nurse over some 200 miles and 10 days, all thanks to Alain. Once I heard the genset running longer than a few minutes, I smiled and dusted off my best French. "Merci bien, monsieur. Je suis reconnaissante," I said with genuine

gratitude as I produced a pack of cigarettes I had run to buy. He swiped at the cigarettes as quick as a cat and I swear he almost cracked a smile.

I have nothing but respect for charter base personnel. They work impossible schedules on short turnaround times and have to make do with limited spare parts and boats that work hard and break often. It takes a mix of honey and vinegar to work with these folks, and each situation dictates its own approach, but if you can win over your base contact, you'll be ahead of every other boat on the dock. If your French (or Spanish, or Croatian, or whatever) is rusty, try smiling, crying, or even proffering cigarettes. It all works. Bonne chance, mes amis.

A few of the group charter boats at rest in Chatham Bay, on the way from Martinique to Grenada.

Red Tape at Morning, Sailor Take Warning...

In some places, bureaucracy and logistics can be the toughest part of a charter.

Often, the trickiest parts of a charter have nothing to do with ticklish navigation, lousy weather, or seasick crew. Instead, they are about logistics and bureaucracy, and I was remembering this as the two female Cuban customs agents with hot pink nails dug through my bag with gusto. On discovering my handheld VHF radio, they lit up with a mixture of excitement and confusion. This was something to be confiscated.

“Qué es?” one demanded adjusting the fishnet stockings part of her uniform.

“It’s a radio,” I said, demonstrating how to talk into it, as if that was going to help.

“Is illegal,” she said. “No puedes tener. We keep.”

I countered with, “No, it’s safety equipment.” She shot me a look and called over a male agent who declared the radio a walkie-talkie and demanded to see its counterpart. “It’s a radio, for boats,” I said. “There’s only one.” We went back and forth a few rounds.

He demanded that I surrender it. “No, I need it for the safety of my passengers,” I said. Two more agents came by and a loud conversation in Spanish faster than I could follow ensued. I wasn’t giving up my radio, so I dug deep into my most defiant “Karen” reserves. “I need this. I’m the captain of a boat.”

Exasperated but needing to make a show of it for his colleagues, the leader shoved a form into my hand, writing “walkie-talkie” across the top, and told me that once I reached Cienfuegos (a town three hours away where the charter base was located) I had to go to the police station and surrender the radio until I was leaving the country. I smiled, nodded, took the form, the radio, and my bag, and exited to the taxi stand. I never saw the inside of that police station.

Havana wears its centuries of history with ease, from forts built by the conquistadors to the bullet holes from the Castro revolution in the walls of the Hotel Nacional, where we ordered strong mojitos after our first encounter with Cuban regulations. We had five boats in our charter group, and this was the first trip to Cuba for all of us. We were warned to “take it seriously and do it right” so we had handlers to grease the skids, but nothing prepared us for Cuba’s particular flavor of bureaucracy and the perpetual supply chain and distribution problems where everything, from boat parts to provisions, is scarce.

Suspect government cheese and brown lettuce sat in the hot sun in front of each boat at the base when we arrived. I dispatched my crew to go find mint and Havana

Club rum to get us through the week, and then turned my attention to the bare-bones bareboat in front of me.

I noticed that the VHF radio wasn’t working and that the bilge pumps made howling noises as if they were injured. I called over the base mechanic who spoke not a lick of English. Eventually, we communicated, and he climbed the mast to replace the radio antenna that had gone missing. However, his solution to the broken bilge pumps was to 1) tell me that’s how variable speed pumps worked, and 2) just turn them off. Umm, no on both.



I towered over the short man and shook my head. He sighed and disappeared. About an hour later he came back very excited with a brand new pump in a box. There were smiles all around as he installed it and grabbed his tools to leave. I shook my head and led him to the other hull. “La otra también?” he cried.

“Lo siento, pero sí,” I said without a hint of giving in. He told me he had no more, and I said he’d have to find one. About three hours later he appeared with a dirty pump that had clearly been cut out of another boat. Post installation, he was gone without a trace.

A few hours later, I headed to the head on shore to wash the sweaty day off me. I walked up and pulled hard at the door. It swung open with my friend clinging to the inside handle. When he recognized me, he grew pale. Maybe he thought I was relentlessly pursuing him to the restroom with another problem.

But later that evening, I walked up to the boat where he and his coworkers were relaxing. He shrank into the corner of the cockpit hoping to hide from “la capitana loca.” I put a bottle of Havana Club on the deck and started laughing because he looked so panicked. Then he started laughing. Then we were all laughing.

Some rum, a little laughter, necessary agreement on what is and isn’t a walkie-talkie, and lots of gratitude. That’s how the skids of bureaucracy and scarcity are greased.

Charter boats at rest at the base in Cuba. A little rum, adaptability, and laughter went a long way to help alleviate logistical complications.

Swearing Like a Sailor, and Then Some

In the wild scrum that is Med-mooring in Croatia, expect some salty word salad to get tossed.

I must admit, I cracked. The last voice shouting mansplanations at me about how to work the bow thruster that we didn't have was the last straw. A long, imaginative—indeed, inspired—string of expletives shot from my lips, and definitely not in my “inside voice.” My crew froze, eyes widened on the nearby boat from which all the “helpful advice” was emanating, and the fuel dock personnel were suddenly fully attentive.

It was the last day of our Croatian charter, and the fuel dock at the base in Trogir was a mad scene—part Formula 1 pit crews turning boats around and part “Game of Thrones” characters jousting for survival, as no fewer than 30 boats stole one another's place in the so-called line.



Earlier that week, I thought I had won the lottery when I was given the newest boat in the charter fleet, but when I saw that the electronics weren't calibrated and the bow thruster was still in the box, I realized I had drawn the short straw. A week of blustery winds awaited us, and surely we would have benefited from that bow thruster that everyone else had to assist with the unrelenting Med-moorings in this part of the world.

Thousand-year-old harbors weren't built for flocks of 50-foot charter boats, yet that's what awaited us each evening no matter which island we visited. Tying up stern-to is never easy, but in Croatia, with its small harbors and macho Eastern European captains, it's truly not for the meek. With each passing day, we grew more skilled—or at least more brazen—when coming into the dock.

On the third day, we arrived in the harbor at Vis Island where we had scheduled a sightseeing tour through the relics of the former Yugoslavia. The weather was lousy, and dozens of boats circled the windswept harbor, deciding whether or not to attempt a run at the stone dock. I took the risk during a brief lull and aimed right for the last boat in the line. I kept coming until I saw the whites of their eyes, and when

they put down their coffee cups and stood up, I knew I had their attention. I threw the helm over, put the engine in reverse, turned a perfect 90 degrees, and nestled up to the quay like Captain Ron.

It was a thing of beauty—for about a second and a half. Then a 35-knot gust slammed us cattywampus. We never touched the other boats, but the quay touched us as we chipped a bit of fiberglass from a corner of the stern. Nevertheless, we were tied up while other boats circling in the choppy waters headed out of the harbor, abandoning visiting Vis altogether. We, on the other hand, were rewarded with a land trip to Tito's submarine tunnel in Parja Bay where two boats had apparently found much easier side-ties, rather boldly right at the tunnel entrance.

On another morning, we were tied up in Stary Grad when I heard commotion outside and stuck my head out the companionway. On our bow was another charter boat, backing toward us at 6 knots. The Croatian men onboard shouted as they came barreling into our orderly line of Med-moored boats, aiming squarely between us and our German neighbor. One of the incoming pirates was holding a line in one hand and a bottle of vodka in the other—at 10:00 in the morning.

Their stern shoved our boats apart, fenders flying, and then ample reverse thrust wedged them farther into the gap that was about half the width necessary to accommodate their beam. They tossed their lines onto cleats, set out a long passerelle, and their captain jumped ashore with a look of smug pride. This was too much for our neighbor, who also jumped ashore, and then a full-throated soccer-foul screaming match started with noses only inches apart.

Scenes like this repeated themselves daily but nobody seemed overly bothered, and soon we, too, developed emotional callouses and joined the mooring mob with gusto. Our rewards included walking medieval streets, reliving Yugoslavian partisan days, and eating cevapcici—the Croatian meat dish on every menu.

Croatia is beautiful, engaging, and chock full of history. It also seems to be the place where sausage, toxic machismo, and hellish Med-moorings were invented. To visit these waters, you must have thick skin, be willing to take a risk, and always be ready to defend your turf. And if you toss a profane, salty salad in the process, embrace it. My crewmembers still remember mine—with painful accuracy—and it has been put into comical play whenever something has gone awry on the many trips we've taken together since.

A marina in Croatia is chock-a-block with Med-moored boats, above. The country's small harbors often make for a tight squeeze and some exciting maneuvers.