

Chartroom Chatter

Teaching Voyagers

JOHN AND AMANDA NEAL sail more than 10,000 miles every year aboard their Hallberg-Rassy 46, *Mahina Tiare III*, teaching sailors to become offshore sailors. John Neal, 63, has 340,000 offshore miles, including six Cape Horn roundings plus voyages to Antarctica and Spitsbergen. Since 1976, John's passion has been sharing his knowledge of ocean cruising through 175 sail-training expeditions worldwide (see www.mahina.com).

Amanda Swan Neal, 51, completed the Whitbread Race as rigger aboard *Maiden*, and has 30 years involvement in international racing and sail training.

She has worked as a rigger and sailmaker in England, Australia and New Zealand.

Currently John and Amanda are sailing from Sweden to Svalbard, Jan Mayen, Iceland, the Faroes and St. Kilda, returning to Sweden this September.

ON: You have decades of experience and hundreds of thousands of offshore sailing miles, what do you think are the most important things offshore voyagers need to know?

J&AN: Firstly, the basics: rules of the road, sail trim, navigation and an overview of weather. It's also logical for them to learn if

» Amanda stands polar bear watch in Spitsbergen, with binoculars and a rifle at the ready.



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they really enjoy sailing and boat life before making the time and money commitment that offshore voyaging requires.

ON: What is your philosophy regarding voyaging gear? Do you like a systems-rich approach or do you prefer to keep it simple?

J&AN: We both started out on very simple boats; me on an Albin Vega (four years and 14,000 miles through the South Pacific)

« Above, John and Amanda Swan Neal. Left, their Hallberg-Rassy 46, *Mahina Tiare III*, in Spitsbergen.



Tor Johnson



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and Amanda on a Bruce Roberts 50 she helped her parents build in New Zealand. As we do as much of the repairs and maintenance ourselves, we have a relatively simple approach to voyaging gear. We don't have a generator, relying instead on two powerful alternators and a towed generator for power, have a traditional slab-reefing main, no powered winches, a simple 12-volt Katadyn water-maker, 24-volt cabin fans instead of air conditioning and simple keel-cooled Frigoboat refrigerator and freezer. We added a much-appreciated Side-Power bow thruster eight years ago as we've learned that trying to pull and push a 38,000-pound, 48-foot boat into small spaces can be a challenge if wind and current

aren't cooperating.

ON: Do you rely exclusively on electronic charts or paper charts or do you use both?

J&AN: We always use both. Well, nearly always. Last week we made a 120-mile voyage from north of Gothenburg, Sweden, up to Oslo to give some talks at the maritime museum. It was the only time we planned on sailing up Oslo Fjord and, after pricing the paper charts, we decided to go strictly with only one form of electronic charts: C-Map running on Rose Point Coastal Explorer on two identical laptops. I felt nervous navigating without paper charts and it was a relief when we returned to Swedish waters for which we have paper chart coverage. Normally we also have Navionics charts running on our Raymarine MFD, but we haven't been able to find ancient CF-format chips of Norway and Sweden for our 15-year-old C-80 display.

ON: What types of weather data do you use when making an offshore passage? How do you gather weather information?

J&AN: We regularly use a Furuno weatherfax that we supplement with GRIB files

from saildocs.com. On passages with a higher percentage of volatile weather, such as our early season crossing of the Skagerrak and North Sea from Sweden to Fair Isle in three days, we'll ask Commanders' Weather for an extended forecast. We also find good coastal information, particularly in Europe, the Med and Scandinavia, on Navtex and appreciate that forecasts are in English. Before departure, while we still have Internet, we frequently ask local sailors what they use for regional weather forecasts. This morning I was given www.yr.no, a brilliant site covering nearly all of the area we'll be sailing in this season.

ON: How many voyaging students have you taught over the years? Have you noticed any trends in what students want to learn?

J&AN: We've had more than 1,100 students join us on sail-training expeditions since 1990. We have noticed more interest in understanding and learning about marine weather. Most sailors now really get the fact that, while on passage, their level of comfort has a lot to do with the weather conditions they encounter.

» Amanda working at the mast in the tropics.

We still have a high percentage wanting to gain heavy weather skills with someone more experienced before setting off on their own and a surprising number are still interested in learning celestial navigation, which we teach on each expedition.

ON: Do you think the experience of voyaging has changed now that voyagers can stay more connected at sea?

J&AN: Without a doubt. We've seen cruisers sitting in an anchorage emailing each other. We also think there is less interest in exploring ashore and interacting with people of different cultures.

ON: What inspired you both to go voyaging?

J&AN: For Amanda, it was her parent's inspiration. Her dad had long dreamed of building a boat and sailing up to the islands of the South Pacific from New Zealand and managed to do that at a fairly young age — and they are still at it, well into their 70s. For me, it was reading Robin Lee Graham's articles in *National Geographic* and then his book, *The Dove*, while in



high school. I'd grown up messing around in little boats and setting sail for the South Pacific from Seattle when I was 22 seemed like a grand adventure — and it was!

ON: What keeps you voyaging?

J&AN: We both enjoy sailing, teaching and adventuring, and voyaging seems like a perfect mode of travel. We also both enjoy living and working on and around boats.

ON: What's next in your voyaging plans?

J&AN: Our first training expedition this season is from Sweden to the Orkney Islands. Future expeditions include Shetland, Lofoten, Svalbard, Jan Mayen, Iceland, the Faroes, Outer Hebrides of Scotland, then back to Sweden for the winter. Next year we'll visit the Faroes again, west coast of Ireland, Spain, Portugal and Gib, then the Balearics, Morocco, Canaries, Antigua, Panama, Hawaii and home to NZ in Oct. 2018.