



# SKIP NOVAK

HOW CAN YOU HAVE AN INTERIOR THAT'S COMFORTABLE IN PORT BUT ALSO SAFE OFFSHORE? SKIP NOVAK ADVOCATES SIMPLE MATERIALS AND SOME CREATIVITY

**I**f your playground is an ocean environment in a true wilderness, accidents can happen offshore. If you don't accept that, best to stay landside. No matter how much safety equipment you have and how you use it, often it's a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time as something gives way. That's pure bad luck.

Or you might have just plain good luck. In my long ocean sailing career, I have had very few trauma injuries on board with people working the deck. And luckily no one has gone over the side. I'm certainly not complacent about any of that.

The funny thing, though, is that I can recall even up to recently several injuries that happened below deck. And this was in spite of being aware of the risks of getting knocked about below and implementing some mitigation measures.

When you are on deck, at least if you are not sleeping on watch, your senses are naturally heightened. Anticipation of motion in a big seaway should be a given. You hang on at the right moment. You try not to sit with your back to the sea. You position your lifejacket or harness tether so as

not to have slack in the wrong direction.

Below decks it is much easier to be caught off guard simply because you just don't know what is coming at you. To be thrown across the

width of a boat in a violent roll, or come off a companionway ladder as she pitches, can be serious. Unlike on deck, I have not heard of anyone wearing a harness, helmet and body armour while below, at least not yet! The problem is that when we go down the companionway, especially in heavy weather, we have the false sense of security of entering a secure cocoon – and that is true enough. But it is also when you relax and your guard is let down.

I'm pretty sure such statistics don't exist, but if there were any comparing injuries below to injuries on deck on sailing yachts it would tell a cautionary tale. Banged heads, bruised and twisted limbs and plenty of cracked ribs come to mind. Although rarely life threatening, they are all

cause for concern, especially when far offshore and help is days away.

Every yacht is vulnerable no matter how safe you design and equip the interior. The conundrum is that, if the interior is ultimately safe at sea, you would not be able to move around it and live aboard at anchor or in port as the spaces would be too constrictive. Open floor space is always desirable to live in but this needs to be mitigated when offshore.

## Grab handles

Most yachts big and small have some handholds, but never enough it seems. And there are examples of interiors with almost no handholds. By the way, for me a handhold is a 25mm tube that you can get your big fist right around and is strong enough to swing on with your full weight – it might be ugly and utilitarian, but necessary. Take a lack of proper handholds coupled with expansive designer interiors and furniture with sharp corners aplenty and you have the perfect storm below.

There are ways to make these void spaces safe and this can be accomplished right in the design phase if not retrofitted using removable safety features. Pipework at chest level from bulkhead to bulkhead can break up and divide the big spaces. Ropes can do the same. Chest level is important because at waist level a handhold/grab bar can become a trip point causing people to fly over the top.

These temporary fixtures need to be quick to install and also have dedicated stowage so they are easy to use and be used often.

Likewise with seating that can become launch pads with no way to wedge yourself in. No matter how many times you remind people to sit to leeward, they will still sit to windward, nodding off and then off they go in full flight.

On *Pelagic Australis* we have gone one better, after years of experimentation. We now have a custom webbed cargo net arrangement tensioned by handy billies to break up the main saloon into two. This extends from deck head to cabin sole and you pass from port to starboard through a narrow gap between the net and the saloon table.

It's not pretty, but it is a sure way to catch flying bodies with a soft landing, plus cheap as chips to make and easy to install. With some simple materials and some creativity your below decks will be much more enjoyable at sea. ■

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