

SKIP NOVAK

HEAVING TO IS A NECESSARY SKILL, BUT IS A PARACHUTE-TYPE SEA ANCHOR AIMED AT REDUCING DRIFT WORTH THE INVESTMENT?

To be honest, when in heavy weather verging on extremis I was never a fan of sea anchors, nor drogues trailing off the stern: all too complicated. At least with the size of vessels I am dealing with I have always found it easy just to heave to when strong headwinds and seas made forward progress unsafe or just plain too uncomfortable. Heaving to is a simple manoeuvre and when conditions get even worse there is nothing more that can be done.

In the days before GRIB files, while on the 54ft, 28 tonne *Pelagic*, we hove to often when getting caught out in the Drake Passage. Every boat heaves to differently (some not at all) depending on the hull, appendage and rig configurations. We simply dropped the main, backed the staysail, lashed the wheel to windward and that was about it (see the results for yourself in the Storm Sailing Series series on Yachting World's website and YouTube channel).

We gently rolled around, at a reasonable angle to the wind and sea but of course sailing backwards at 1-2 knots. If we had to wait 12 or even 20 hours for the system to pass, this was more than acceptable rather than bashing into it and going nowhere.

Having said all this, to heave to for any length of time in extreme weather you need ample sea room. The alternative to mitigate the risk of fetching up on shore is deploying a sea anchor. I was asked to test a parachute-type sea anchor during our recent trip to South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, filming the deployment and recovery and commenting on the exercise.

In view of our science charter commitment I left this task to last, knowing that throwing tackle over the side can have unwelcome consequences, not to mention, to be frank, my inexperience with this equipment. We had a good look at the sea anchor on the dock in Stanley before we started and made a plan.

From a hove to configuration the bag it lives in is simply thrown off the windward bow attached to an anchor line. The other end of the parachute is the trip end and that is attached to a float or fender big enough to support the weight of the parachute and anchor line in the

deflated mode for recovery. Another floating line is attached to the main float and ends in a smaller float, the scope of which is long enough to provide a wide target for recovering with a boat hook. You can begin to appreciate the complication.

We first did a trial in 15 knots of wind and flat sea off the coast of South Georgia. Deploying it in this condition was straightforward, and the sea anchor on 50m of our 22mm floating polyprop shore line did hold the bow dead into the wind. So far so good. On recovery, though, after snatching the floating line the weight of the tackle was such that we had to attach our gennaker halyard and hoist the main float to the masthead. The aim was to raise the contraption up and over the lifelines and land it on the

foredeck – but we had too much line between the parachute and the float, so that line had to be shortened for the real trial.

The mission was to test this in more wind and a moderate seaway, which we left until

just before arriving back in Stanley. This we did (expletives have been edited out of the film) but it took three of us on the foredeck to deploy and pay out and for the recovery another body on the wheel steering up to the small float.

There's no doubt the sea anchor cuts the drift to leeward substantially, I would venture to say by half – reason enough to have this rig stashed away somewhere. But the caveats are many. The load on the main rode is enormous when paying out after the parachute catches. Even with our clean leads forward, run to a coffee grinder, it was a dangerous manoeuvre to ease the rode under load and with full turns on the drum you could just hold it. There

are chafe issues to consider, and a lot more. Does the average family production cruiser measure up to handling this tackle safely? I doubt it.

In the final analysis, this manoeuvre must be practiced and, even more important when used for real, it must be deployed well before the storm hits and recovered well after it has passed. To pull this off at the height of the storm is a big ask for a full crew, even more so for a single- or short-handed sailor. And the temptation to cut it away instead of the difficult recovery is great – but it would be a very bad meal for a sperm whale. ■

'There's no doubt a sea anchor cuts drift to leeward'

