



Author Diane Selkirk and husband Evan Gatehouse are co-captains of their boat, *Ceilydh*.

I studied the chart then stared ahead, trying to discern the island's shoreline through the veil of fog. I checked the compass, depth sounder and calculations one final time, and told my husband Evan to put the boat back into gear and head for the one tree we could actually see.

"I don't think so," he said. "I think we're off by a few hundred metres."

I knew I was right. But I was about to capitulate. Something about being on a boat brought out the doubt in me. Instead of giving in, I quietly took the wheel, put the boat in gear and steered for the tree. I held my breath and waited for the sickening crunch, then let out an audible sigh as we pattered past a shadowy marker and entered the little cove. I kept the wheel and decided where we would drop the hook, giving Evan clear directions and staying confidently in charge.

As Evan tidied up the boat I went below and poured myself a measure of rum. I was still doing a jig and singing, "Woo-hoo, I'm the captain and I rock!" when Evan came below. The "Make me dinner, Boat Boy!" comment that followed just sort of slipped out.

I took my time promoting myself to captain. Technically, we were co-owners of *Ceilydh*, and equally experienced on the water. But for some reason, once I jumped aboard, I left my chutzpah on land. Gender equality was replaced with the acceptance of pink and blue roles.

BY DIANE SELKIRK
PHOTOS BY LYNNE WILLIAMS

Who's the Captain?

These days more women than ever are taking the helm. So when couples go cruising, who's really in charge?

TRADITIONAL ROLES In the grand scheme of things, it wouldn't have been the end of the world if I had never stepped up and learned to change the oil, run the outboard or navigate across oceans. But I have to admit that whole first mate/captain thing just wasn't working for me. I was raised in the era of feminism. I wanted to be captain.

Not so long ago you wouldn't have found the likes of me on a boat, in any role. Historically, women stayed on shore. The only way to get work on a boat was to dress in men's clothing and keep your femininity a secret. There were a few exceptions—and the reason we know this is because they made the news. In 1856, Mary Patten

“ HISTORICALLY, WOMEN STAYED ON SHORE. THE ONLY WAY TO GET WORK ON A BOAT WAS TO DRESS IN MEN'S CLOTHING AND KEEP YOUR FEMININITY A SECRET. ”

received accolades after taking over for the ailing captain, her husband, on a trip from New York to California. After her husband's collapse, Mary navigated the clipper ship *Neptune's Car* around Cape Horn and into San Francisco Bay, where she became something of a folk hero for the feat. For the most part, though, back then a woman was never the captain, nor for that matter was she even the cook.

But things have changed with the era of pleasure boating. In the 1920s, wealthy women started joining their husbands for outings and casual races, and the age of travel by steamliners was in full swing. Fashion magazines began to show women in sailor suits and at the wheel. When Sir T.O.M. Sopwith's *Endeavour* challenged Harold Vanderbilt's *Rainbow* for the 1934 America's Cup, both Phyllis Sopwith and Gertrude Vanderbilt took part in the races—an historical first. Images of these sophisticated women at the wheel made it finally possible for girls to openly play “Captain of the Ship.”

CAPTAINS AND COUPLES When I think about how far we've come in such a relatively short time, it's not that surprising

that sorting out the captain gig can be a bit tricky for couples. I've met more than a few women who think of boating as a man's thing and are simply along for the ride (and to provide tasty hors d'oeuvres and sundowners). Most of these women say they actually like boating, and don't mind not being the captain. They don't have an interest in changing the oil or knowing how to navigate. “After all, there only is one wheel,” one woman pointed out to me.

Modern double-wheeled race boats aside, she had a point. While I've talked to many couples that claim to co-captain their boats, I know from my own experience that sometimes it would be easier

to have just one person in charge. There are moments in boating when you don't have time to reach a consensus—like when the engine dies and you're being swept sideways through Seymour Narrows, for example. In cases like that it really helps to know just who is responsible for ensuring you don't get dashed to pieces on the rocks.

THE PRUDENT SAILOR In our case, after my first taste of power we began to co-captain *Ceilydh*. Unfortunately, our differing opinions tended to cause arguments. When the weather was good and decisions not life-threatening, we could bicker until the cows sailed home. But the day we tried to decide how to cross the Tehantepec in Southern Mexico, it became clear we needed a better way. “What would the Prudent Sailor do?” I asked Evan.

I always visualize The Prudent Sailor as Anne Bonny, the notorious 18th-century pirate who started off her career dressed as a man. When Anne was caught in her disguise, her excellent sailing skills led the crew to accept her, despite her being a woman. Evan, being less fanciful than me, simply plays along

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A "wee Blackbeard" in the making, the couple's daughter Maia has no problem taking the helm.

and keep one foot on the beach. From that day on, the Prudent Sailor made life aboard a bit more civil. But we still don't have the perfect solution.

LEARNING EQUALITY Considering the number of women-only boating and sailing classes available, it seems I'm not alone in my effort to bring equality to the boat. Something happens to perfectly nice men and women when they step aboard. Docking is where the dynamic becomes most obvious—a formerly pleasant man gets behind the wheel and begins to yell at his formerly assertive mate. Why more men don't end up swimming home is beyond me.

Boating courses like Herizen Sailing for Women in Nanaimo try to bridge the gender gap by giving women the skills and confidence they need to captain their boats. By offering training "in a yell-free environment," women can learn how to run their boats. But what happens when

with the idea that we now have a mythical third person aboard, a cruising guru known as the Prudent Sailor. The Prudent Sailor always argues for the safety of our boat and crew above the desire for

comfort and convenience.

The Prudent Sailor said that even though the wind was perfect for a direct crossing of the dreaded Tehautepec, we needed to follow local knowledge

these newly minted captains return to life aboard with their Captain Blighs?

Valma Brenton, the owner of Herizen, explains that newfound skills and confidence are only one part of the equation. “Women need to know how to apply the skills directly to their boat,” she says. They do this by understanding exactly what they want to achieve. Once a woman decides she wants to be captain and does the work to get the skills, the people around her start to shift.

THE BRANDLMAYR SOLUTION Vancouver racers Leslie Brandlmayr and her husband Grant seem to have sorted out the whole captain question. Leslie explains that she grew up racing, and while at times she was the only woman out there, she never doubted she was equal. “Both people have to *want* to be equal for it to work, though,” she says. She tells me she has been on boats where the captain was the Captain—and no one else had a say. “I couldn’t do it that way.”

Leslie recalls that becoming the co-captain of her boat happened gradually, “I never asked Grant. It was just a position I had to take on.” When Leslie was a teenager, an accident on another boat propelled her to sharpen her boating skills: “I knew a woman who raced with her husband. He fell overboard, and while she was

“WOO-HOO, I’M
THE CAPTAIN AND
I ROCK!”

a skilled sailor, she wasn’t skilled enough to save him.”

Leslie says once she had children it was their well being that pushed her even further. “I began to focus on safety and navigation.” Today, Leslie and Grant may have the ideal, argument-free co-captain arrangement. While both are capable of doing everything aboard, they each have very specific roles. When racing, Leslie manages navigation and crew safety while Grant skips, and when

cruising only one of them is the captain at any given time.

While Leslie and I, and women like us, have had to puzzle our way from mate to captain, it looks like the process will be effortless for our daughters. Leslie’s daughter is just as skilled as her parents, and never hesitates to take on the captain’s role. “She simply lets us know that she wants to run the boat that day,” Leslie says.

Ilike the idea that the nautical progression of women from unwanted crew to captain of the ship might reach its conclusion with my daughter’s generation. For her part, five-year-old Maia is ready. She recently caught on to the fact that Evan and I often switch roles on the boat and decided that her turn had come to be the captain. Her version of captain was well versed in pirate lingo—and we had to let our wee Blackbeard know she would need to learn to navigate before we obeyed her command to “weigh anchor and make for the nearest playground, you scurvy mates!” 🏴‍☠️