

The Long Way Home

Giddyay there.

Your old mate Barry Slack with you once more through the time-honoured medium of printer's ink and glossy paper. Well I'm presuming the paper's glossy. If the magazine's all nice and new and straight out of its plastic wrapper, I can pretty much guarantee it will be. If you're reading this in February when the mag's been lying around the boat for two months in the sun and being used as a table mat, it probably won't be quite so pristine. Anyway, scrape the bits of breakfast off these two pages, rip them out and nail them to the mast. Or if you haven't got a mast, tape them to the wheelhouse windows. Or if you haven't got a wheelhouse, I suggest strongly that you shouldn't be in the sort of places we're going to talk about here. We're going to talk about serious fishing you see, at serious distances offshore.

It's a happy fact that the further you venture out to sea, the better the fishing gets. It's a hard fact that the further out you go, the chances of things not going quite right – or going horribly wrong even – are vastly multiplied. It's a bit like an inverted pyramid with its point on the shore. As you head further out on the trackless billows of Tangaroa's mighty realm, you're heading into the wider part of the pyramid. There's a lot of room for things to go wrong out there, and then things will rapidly go pear-shaped, rather than pyramid-shaped.



If you're lucky enough to have a boat big enough for serious offshore fishing, there are a few things you should keep to the forefront of that amazing organ we call the brain. Bruce, the challenged barman at the Brewer's Droop is reading this over my shoulder as I write – No, I said that amazing organ we call the *brain* Bruce... *the brain!*

Basically, the further out you go the more you can expect from the unexpected. We're talking 20, 30 and 40 kilometres plus here. It's not wise to be heading this far out in a small boat unless you're a highly experienced and skilled seaman. Too much can go wrong – especially in single-engine outboard craft. You see, there's such a thing as cause and effect, and this natural phenomenon sets off a chain reaction of problems. One thing happens, which leads to a bigger thing and then the next thing. Unless you've had the experience it's hard to understand how fast things can snowball out of control.

There are a few things you can do to try and cut down the operation of the cause and effect law. Briefing everyone on board is a good start. Where's the safety equipment? How is it used? How does it work? You *have* got safety equipment haven't you? You should have. You must have. Make sure these things are easily and quickly available. When a boat starts to go down suddenly, there's not a lot of time for shagging around in the cabin trying to get your jackets out from under the spare anchor and 30 metres of chain, all wrapped up and around in that flounder net you meant to take off the boat last season. On a big boat there's no need to wear life jackets and personal flotation devices (pfd's) all the time, obviously. But in times of heightened risk – and often you'll be able to see it coming – put them on or keep them somewhere handy where everyone can get to them very quickly, especially in

the dark. Most of the unfortunates who join the marine food chain are drowning because they can't get into their safety gear in time – not because they're not carrying it.

If you're in a smaller type boat, engine breakdown is a major cause of foundering. So make sure you've got a serviceable sea anchor on board. At least you'll be able to stay pointing in the right direction. And if you're in a big boat - well that means there are just so many extra things that can or might go wrong. If you don't perform preventative maintenance you're really asking for trouble. When was the last time you checked the fuel lines, the clamps and the hoses. The bilge pump is your friend, but unlikely to be of much use with the wiring and float switches corroded to buggery. Remember without batteries you ain't going nowhere. Don't mess about with old ones. Replace your batteries at the first sign of weakness. And do these things at home or in the marina, not out the back of the Barrier in a force seven gale. Think of the stresses and strains on your boat. A big boat is never still really. It's shifting and moving continually, even in the marina. Loose wires and dodgy connections are a happening thing, all the time. Take these out rocking and rolling at sea, and you put a hugely increased strain on everything. Treat your systems like your life depends on them. Have a think about that. It does.



If you're a serious fisho with a serious boat, heading out a serious distance, there are a few crucial things you should have on board as well as the all important contents of the chilly-bins. Communication and safety equipment becomes more and more important the further from home you venture. The jackets and pfd's we've already talked about. A working VHF radio is essential – and if you're the skipper, make sure your mates know how to work it too. If you're overboard or unconscious in the scuppers after a fall off the hatch cover, the radio's not going to be much use to anyone concerned if you're the only one who knows how the fickle beast operates. Give your crew a quick course in communications.



An EPIRB is an excellent part of your emergency arsenal. A 'what?' I hear you cry. This is an Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon, for the uninitiated. These things have saved heaps of lives the world over. A tip: your EPIRB is best set off slightly before you disappear under the whitecaps for the third time. You should have visual distress aids on board as well. Apart from the obvious flares, flashlight, and spare batteries, a signal mirror is a good thing, when you're desperate, for attracting the attention of other boats. Not much use at night though, remember. Fire on a boat, a long way out, is probably most skippers' worst nightmare. You'll have extinguishers unless you're an idiot. Make sure they're full and serviceable. Check your navigation lights. Remember you're out in the shipping lanes, or not far off them, and a Taiwanese log carrier takes a long time to stop. Make sure you can be seen – otherwise it could be 21 days on sushi and sake before they drop you in Taipei and tell you to find your own way home – and that's if you're lucky.

Just a few other things for the offshore adventurer: check the weather forecasts obviously, and file a float plan with your marina. Keep a very close eye on the weather while you're out there. Things to watch for are a build-up of threatening, dark, clouds, an increase in wind strength and a steady increase in seas. Squalls,

thunderstorms and other weather related hazards form very quickly, so have an escape plan in mind. Where will you run to, and how long is it going to take you? A sudden storm can cut off your route back to land, so think of an alternative. Above all, know the limitations of your boat. Once you're committed and far from home, it's all you've got. Don't push the envelope too far, because that's all your boat is really – an envelope keeping you in, and the water out. Finally – you've checked everything, your maintenance is done, your mates are briefed and you're ready to get serious – ask around to see if another boat wants to come along as well. Chances are there'll be another crew wanting to do pretty much the same thing as you're planning. You can look out for each other this way. The chances of a double disaster are vastly reduced. You might even enjoy the company.

Good fishing, have a good one this Chrissie, and let's be very careful out there.

Hooray.
Barry Slack.

