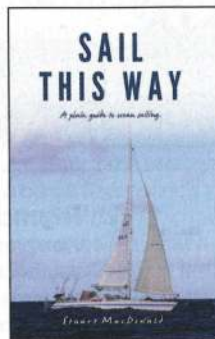


# Heavy weather sailing

Circumnavigator Stuart MacDonald shares essential tips in this extract from his book *Sail This Way*



***Sail This Way* – a plain guide to ocean sailing by Stuart MacDonald, £9.99**  
[www.beyondsailing.co.uk](http://www.beyondsailing.co.uk)

**O**ceans of print have been expended on how to get by in bad weather. The best course of action will depend on your boat, your destination in relation to the wind and the strength of the crew. So I will just tell you, in simple terms, what I learned during my circumnavigation, as a single-handed sailor in his late sixties.

## Look and listen

There's a lot of psychology to dealing with bad weather. Very often it's the noise that's the most wearing, particularly at night. If it's very windy, and pitch dark outside with no moon, you will feel more vulnerable than in the same wind and sea conditions on a sunny afternoon.

Sit up in the cockpit under the shelter of the sprayhood and watch what's going on. That way you will become more at ease with the conditions. If she's not taking water over the top you can hook on and sit on the coachroof for a while. Don't concern yourself with the great mass of white water and rolling swells that seem to stretch from horizon to horizon. Ninety percent of it will never affect you. Anything to leeward is history, and anything outside a 50m circle around the boat is unlikely to bother you.

The more time you spend in the open, facing into the wind and watching what's going on, the more you will become at ease with the conditions and the more you

will feel able to cope with them. Stay in control. Don't be a victim.

A yacht with a mast and a tensioned rig is like a stringed instrument with a large hollow body. Being down below in bad weather is like being inside a cello with someone scraping a bow across the strings and hitting the instrument with a stick. After a while you will be able to screen out the routine background noise. What should make you take notice is an increase in an existing noise, the occurrence of a new one, or the fact it's all gone very quiet.

## On deck, if you feel insecure, just kneel or sit down

'One hand for yourself and one for the ship' is a pretty worn cliché, but is as true today as it was back in the days of the sailing ships. No matter how strong, experienced or smart you are, if you get injured your chances of getting your boat safely through a spell of bad weather are reduced. In bad weather you're more likely to get hurt when you are down below than when on deck because you tend to relax. You need to be able to hold on wherever you are on board, and when moving around, both on deck and down below. I do what I call the gorilla swing, and never let go of one handhold until I have a grip on another. On *Beyond*, my 1991 Comfortina 38, I added several additional handholds below and up top to allow me to do this.

You are particularly vulnerable when coming off the deck into

the cockpit, and down from the cockpit to the cabin. I have added fore and aft handrails either side of the top of my sprayhood, and additional handholds on the deck head just inside the hatch so that I can hold on as I come down the companionway.

## Take the high side

If I have to go up on deck in bad weather I always go up the weather side. The boat is more likely to be heeled to leeward, so if I do slip, gravity will move me towards the middle rather than outboard towards the side. Once, during a mid-Atlantic gale, I had to go up to the mast to replace a shackle on the kicker. I hooked on and sat on the weather side of the coachroof. I became so immersed in trying to thread the pin that I did not see a large wave coming. The wave burst over the boat flinging her over on her side. I did a forward roll and came to rest with my legs out under the leeward rail. If I'd started that little piece of gymnastics on the leeward side, I would almost certainly have gone overboard and been dragged along by my tether until I drowned.

On deck, even when hooked on, if you feel insecure just kneel or sit down. Your chances of falling are greatly reduced and if you have to move around just slide along on your backside: that's why your

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stuart MacDonald left school at 16 to work for a Glasgow-based shipping company. He became Master of his first ship at the age of 30 and spent shore leave cruising the west coast of Scotland where he learned many of the lessons described in his book *Sail This Way*.



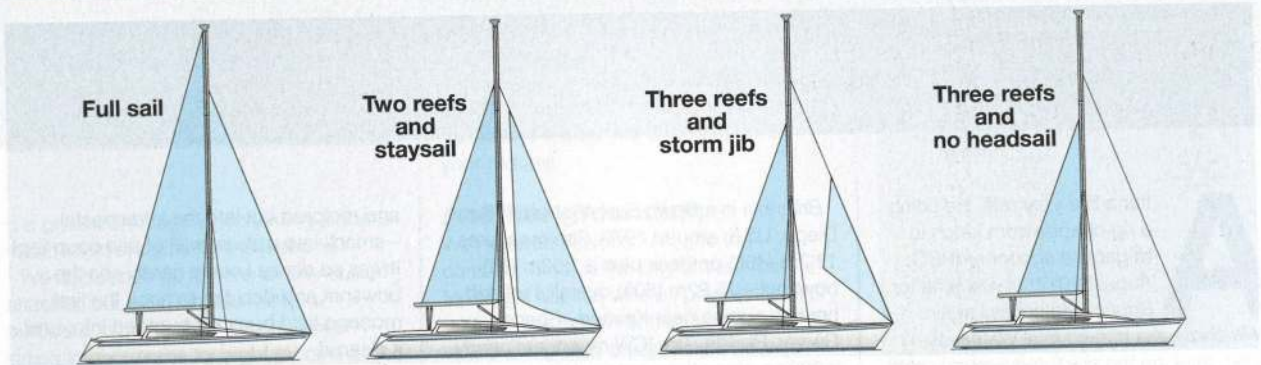
David Harding







If the boat is struggling, reduce the sail plan in stages



If you're sailing downwind or across the wind, and the boat is struggling, reef the main

oilskins are reinforced.

Down below, you need a back strap to lean against when working at the galley, and one to keep you in the seat when at the chart table. These are to prevent you being thrown across the boat – it has happened to me a couple of times.

Inevitably, you will eventually get into bad weather where wind and sea conditions are such that you need to change the boat's course, alter her speed, or both, to make her comfortable. Take whatever course of action puts the least strain on her.

On the open ocean, if you and the boat are comfortable it's unlikely that you'll get into any serious trouble, but on the coast conditions tend to change much more

rapidly. You can get into far more trouble trying to beat round a bad headland against a foul tide with a steep sea than on an ocean passage. Land to leeward presents a threat and limits your movement, and you must round it with a sufficient safety margin, taking into account the foul tide. A wind shift or a problem with the boat could put you in real danger.

### Simply slow down

A boat crashing along and taking big impacts from the sea will eventually damage herself, whereas in the same conditions, the same boat slowed down and sailed a bit freer will probably find her way up and over the waves with relative

ease, putting much less strain on herself and crew. If you feel the boat fighting the conditions it's time to take action.

If sailing downwind or across the wind, and the boat is struggling, reef the main, or better still take it down altogether and sail on the headsail alone.

Above all else, remember you're cruising, not racing. You're supposed to be having fun, and your aim is to get to your destination in good shape with no damage to the boat. Sailing in strong winds and high seas might be exhausting, but remember each period of bad weather prepares you better for the next and the more experienced you become, the less the weather will worry you.