



Sailability

Offshore Cruising

A 100% disabled crew has raced around the world through the Southern Ocean, a blind sailor has crossed the Indian Ocean single handed, and we have won Gold Medals for sailing at the Paralympics, The World Blind Sailing Championships and the World Disabled Sailing Championships. Many of these elite sailors also sail competitively in their own right in able bodied competition. They all had to start somewhere – could it be on board your boat?

Because this is such a large and varied subject, this is very much a first steps guide to cruising. It is very important to know that cruising for everyone is nothing new, it has all been done before, and that expertise is to hand to give advice and assistance. If you need, please ask RYA Sailability to put you in touch with sailors who have experience in this field. They will be happy to help with the detail that you may require.

Most coastal clubs and organisations have cruisers that are available, and crews and owners who would love to be able to share their enjoyment and love of the water with everyone. However it is only natural for there to be a high degree of apprehension about taking along “disabled” people, especially as very few skippers have any experience of disability. Please realise that we often take very young children out for a trip without thinking, and also people at the opposite end of the age scale. We never label them as disabled, but they are often far more vulnerable than fit people who have a disability!

First and foremost it has to be appreciated that a standard cruiser will not be specially modified to provide perfect access for everyone. Equally important is the fact that nearly everyone can be accommodated on a cruiser through good seamanship and a little lateral thinking. Naturally there are exceptions as some people need large amounts of assistance with mobility. Fortunately there are some specially built craft around that can usually cater for that need.

So here we come to the crucial factor in taking anyone on board – communication. Just because someone uses a wheelchair does not mean that they are unable to get on board. It is essential to discuss a person's needs and it is usually very simple to solve any problems. As a last resort, you can use the Bosun's chair by lowering it to wheelchair height on the pontoon, but this is rarely vital, just useful. Please ask searching questions as to your crew's physical strong and weak points – if they are willing to go to sea, they will certainly be willing to openly discuss their needs. If for any reason they are reluctant, then as skipper it would perhaps be better not to invite them on board!

Another frequently asked question by those new to cruising for all is in relation to insurance. The Disability Discrimination Act does not allow an insurance company to differentiate between people, so there is no problem here. However our strong advice is for an owner to advise his insurance company that disabled people will be on board. We have known of the odd case where

a broker has attempted to increase a premium, but in that case do refer the problem to us; we have never failed to resolve any such issue. The reason for this precaution is that if a crew member is material to any claim it prevents any new avenue of argument being employed by the insurer.

Skippers often ask what qualifications they have to have and what safety equipment they have to carry. So long as there is no charter fee involved we are free to take who we wish on any boat. That does not mean that your crew cannot help with mooring fees or food expenses though! It would be very foolish to take any inexperienced crew on your boat if you are a novice sailor – competence comes through experience and is very often proved through having gained a voluntary qualification through the RYA. Safety equipment is essential and standards are laid out in the RYA publication C8, but hopefully you will be so equipped in any case. Any skipper worth their salt will always give a safety briefing, and will almost certainly require life jackets to be worn by all on board.