



THE ESSENTIALS OF  
LIVING  
ABOARD A  
BOAT

*The Definitive Guide for Liveaboards*



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Mark Nicholas  
*Aboard Morning Fog*  
In Coastal Waters in New England

## Introduction

**So you want to be a liveaboard.** Or maybe you are just examining the lifestyle or maybe you have already taken the plunge. In any event, let me welcome you to what I believe is a truly terrific lifestyle, a lifestyle that offers many challenges in addition to its benefits.

The good parts of life aboard include the gentle movement of the boat, smell of the air and breeze, ability to leave civilization at any time, freedom of movement, sunsets, unity with nature, and terrific neighbors. Other benefits might include the sounds of the water, view of a skyline, or just the open water. We can go on and on. This is oceanside or waterside living at its best, at a fraction of the price.

Despite all of these benefits, living aboard is an endeavor that is typically outside of our comfort zones. While some decide on this lifestyle for practical reasons, many of the reasons are not as practical—falling for the romance and allure of the water and waves. The romance is presented to us in movies, television, and magazines. We see the pictures and dream. We fall in love with our boats just as we do with a spouse, although we more rarely divorce our boats. The lifestyle, however, has its share of challenges and surprises.

We can learn a great deal from those liveaboards who have preceded us. The art and practice of boating by its nature demands experience, not for the summer days when the water

is calm and the breeze fresh and light, but for those moments when things aren't going as smoothly. If you are cruising, the difference between a beautiful experience and a life-threatening one may be separated by only seconds. An unexpected gale or a broken piece of equipment or a drunk or clumsy person on board can turn a great day into hell. Anticipating that the weather may turn and that equipment might fail requires experience as well as a calm mind. While many problems can be fixed, or at least improved with common-sense solutions, there are true complexities that only the words of our ancestors and years of experience can teach us.

When I first decided to live aboard, I wasn't aware of either the common-sense issues *or* the issues that come with experience. All I knew was how to sail, and though I studied books on sailing and seamanship, none provided me with any true insight into the practical subtleties of boating or living aboard. For me, this lifestyle was a true trial by fire – and in the beginning I was burned more often than I wasn't. It was easy for me to think that I was alone, the only one learning the harsh lessons this way, but in talking to other liveaboards it became clear to me that we all learn this way, and it is a true shame that the most prominent issues were not encapsulated in a meaningful, educational, and commonsensical way. And that is how this book was born.

The bottom line is that there are essentials to living aboard, although even many of the most experienced liveaboards don't often realize how *many* essentials there really are. We are all very similar and experience the same challenges as our neighbors.

A prominent boat broker told me that most decisions that must be made when choosing a boat are simple common sense – and yet it is amazing to him how many smart and logical boat buyers must be reminded again and again what common sense really dictates. Our objectives are often clouded by our dreams, desires, and emotions as we fall in love with our boats

and become absorbed by our aspirations. And we forget our practical needs, ignore our budget requirements, and forget what we were trying to do in the first place: have a place to live.

As new liveaboards, we face the question of how best to survive and enjoy our day-to-day lives. In the liveboard endeavor, there are few resources that speak about achieving the status quo. Issues such as safety and sanitation and methods of enhancing comfort are generally not able to be effectively learned from books or videos, but only from sporadic magazine or website articles and from social visits to our boating neighbors. There are so many of us, we do deserve better.

While I want this book to be an *all-inclusive* resource on the essentials of living aboard, that would be an insurmountable standard to set. All you have to do is visit the Internet and you will see how many different opinions exist as to the right solution for our day-to-day problems. On an e-mail discussion list, the type of toilet recommended for use might generate days or weeks of Internet conversations that will probably result in hurt feelings caused by peoples' strong beliefs (note: I vote for manual toilets – less potential for breakdown, less maintenance, and little energy requirement). While I am only one person with an opinion, there are many others with equally valid opinions – some are better for your needs, and some are worse. Find a salesperson at your marine store who likes to talk, and then take the time to ask questions and listen. Talk to your boating neighbors. Walk the docks at local marinas. Use the Internet. Luckily, boaters (especially liveaboards) love to talk. Unfortunately, boaters (particularly inexperienced ones) sometimes forget to listen.

Boaters, particularly liveaboards, have far more in common with each other than they do with our landlubbing neighbors. While homeowners might make choices that show very little correlation to each other, almost no boat or boating system is unique. Though we, as liveaboards, are entirely unique in

terms of our desires, needs, and goals – and most dramatically, our lifestyles – our boats are all very similar. Many of the same conversations occur with our neighbors day in and day out, regardless of whether our boats and those of our neighbors are powerboats or sailboats, wood or fiberglass, luxury or practical, cruising or dockbound, big or small, bluewater or coastal. While not every system is the same, many systems are, and the ones that are different often work on exactly the same principles.

For example, there are typically only two kinds of marine heads (a.k.a. toilets), manual and electric. All boats have holding tanks and the same concerns with the storage of waste, including how to ultimately get rid of the waste and how to avoid the smell which is sure to invade our living quarters, which are often just a few feet away from our waste holding tank. NOTE: Liveaboards seem to enjoy talking about our septic systems because this issue is paramount to the enjoyment of our lifestyle.

**Who is the author?** (See “About the Author,” page 273)

**Nobody, really, just a guy** who decided to live aboard a boat – and who then bought the wrong boat, hired the wrong boat inspector (surveyor), and wasn’t prepared for the problems that would soon be experienced.

For instance, I had shore power and two batteries, but had no idea that plugging a boat into the dock did not automatically charge the batteries. Only running the engine and using the alternator will automatically charge the batteries. A liveaboard (or any boater for that matter) needs a separate battery charger to charge the batteries for periods at the dock or during other times when the engine isn’t running. And here in the Northeast, once the engine is winterized, it cannot be operated. As my batteries died, there was no way for me to use my 12-volt systems, which included all of my lights. Funny, but as the lights got dimmer

and dimmer, I didn’t understand why, even though my boat was plugged in. Then there was no more light. That battery charger cost \$120 that I hadn’t bargained on.

Unfortunately, that wasn’t the first expense, nor the last expense, nor the biggest expense related to the things that I had not expected. I lived in the Northeast, took ownership of the boat in the winter, and wasn’t prepared for the temperature or the systems necessary to heat the boat. For goodness sake, I didn’t even know exactly what “shrinkwrapping” meant to a winter liveaboard!

The stories I can tell are egregious examples of what can happen to an unprepared liveaboard. The advantage to my experiences is that I survived and learned my boat, *The Morning Fog*, and all of its systems and quirks at a dramatic pace. After only a few months, I had already rebuilt and reinstalled all of the electric lines and systems of the *Fog*. If I had done this myself, I would have done this entirely wrong, thinking that wires were connected in a similar fashion to those of a house. They aren’t. I paid an expert \$50 per hour for his time to help me do this. While the cost of my boat was going up exponentially, the work was being done right and I was getting one hell of an education.

Speaking of expenses, I hadn’t bargained on all of the new tools I would need, either, such as a heat gun (used for electrical work) and stuffing box wrenches, and it was a shock to watch my good tools rust away in the salt air.

Before that winter had ended, we (my hired marine technician and I) had rebuilt the entire plumbing system, except for the holding tank, which I replaced myself in one of the most disgusting, horrendous activities that I have ever undertaken. (Visualizing a casual swim in a septic tank, my neighbors all decided to spend that day somewhere else.) We added a diesel heating system, resealed and bedded key sections of the deck, worked on the rigging, updated the engine, installed a new

alternator, replaced many of the lines, and on and on and on. Under the tutelage of my trusty and well-paid marine technician, I made tough decisions for the things that we just couldn't work on, such as fixing a delaminated deck.

Perhaps you are thinking that I did not get the boat properly surveyed prior to purchase. Regardless, I did pay top dollar for a survey. My surveyor told me that replacing five gate valves with seacocks would cost \$750; they ended up costing upwards of \$2,000. He also missed about 20 moderate to major problems with the boat, a few of which did end up putting at risk my life as well as the well-being of the boat. I was paying dearly for my education.

As a new boat owner of three weeks, I had a major flood aboard when it turned out that the wires to the bilge pump had rusted away and I had a stuffing box that had been over-tightened (causing a moderate leak). The surveyor never noticed that the wires were falling off and rusted. [This is just an example of my early problems. The letter to the surveyor included a list of items four pages long as well as a recap of the events that put us in a highly precarious position at sea for things that were missed or surveyed incorrectly.]

After the flood (which damaged the floor and other key components of my new floating home), I replaced the bilge pump in subfreezing weather, rewired the pump, and installed a manual pump to the cockpit deck. What made this process particularly painful was that I had thought that I had purchased a turn-key boat with every system in good shape on the day that I took ownership of the *Fog*. What an unfortunate surprise.

This book came about because I decided that if there was anything I could do to help ensure that future boaters and liveaboards might benefit from many of the preventable mistakes that I made, then it was my obligation to write this.

So am I an expert? Yes. I'm an expert at what can go wrong.

## Is living aboard a good thing?

**An emphatic yes!** Maybe. It depends.

This is a romantic life, different than the norm and possibly more economical than life ashore. The lifestyle offers all of the benefits mentioned above. And these are truly amazing benefits.

So what does it depend on? Well . . . are you doing this by yourself or with your mate? If you are doing this with someone else, then it depends upon whether your mate wants to do this as much as you do. In the course of my discussions with liveaboards, this seems to be one of the most significant reasons why some couples that commit to this lifestyle cease living aboard after just a month or two.

It depends on whether the reality of living aboard is acceptable once you realize that the lifestyle is not all romance. The deck still needs to be maintained, wood varnished, systems maintained, and so forth. Unless you have a boat that you don't want or need to maintain, which many liveaboards do, this lifestyle is not entirely about sitting on deck off of a beautiful tropical island with a drink in your hand.

And it depends upon whether you can handle the motion of the boat, particularly in storms. And if you live in a setting with other boats going past, it depends upon whether you can stand the wakes that are thrown off by those boats. I have a friend who, for instance, gets thrown into the air every morning at 0800 when the police boats speed past heading out for their patrols (in a coastal no-wake zone).

After a couple of years living aboard in a marina that was well protected from the rough waters of Boston Harbor, I moved to a marina in Salem, Massachusetts that was exposed to the elements. I thought that I could handle any motion, but had to leave after four days of bouncing more than three feet up

and down under what I would have considered steady but not overwhelming 12-knot winds. To make matters worse, my cat (Max The Cat) was getting seasick. It was horrible – and the only time I have ever gone to a motel room to get off the boat.

And it depends on whether you can take the boating problems in stride, and find some enjoyment in the repairs and routine maintenance without letting the little things drive you crazy.

Another challenge of being a liveaboard with a faulty boat (and all boats are – or will be – faulty) is that there is no place to go when you need to perform repairs or upgrades. Many liveaboards allow nonessential problems to persist, since it is so difficult to perform repairs and concurrently live in such a small space. If you need to drill a hole, for instance, to run some wires or plumbing or install equipment, it is likely that your possessions will spread onto every flat space and you will be inhaling fiberglass fibers and dust for days. That's not a good thing, let me tell you. It's even worse if your mate spends those days complaining about the clutter and smell.

Do you think those are your only challenges? They aren't. My lockers (closets) were forward, toward the bow (the pointy tip at the front of the boat), where the hull sloped both forward and down. Boats can be damp because of both humidity and condensation. The suits I wore to work every day were thoroughly wrinkled on the right side, while the left side was pretty nice. I then started keeping every suit jacket in my office and had my shirts put into boxes so that the wrinkles were more predictable (there was no room aboard the *Fog* for an iron). At least I was symmetrical. Funny, isn't it?

Not as funny, though, as when the mold started setting in. Because of the condensation in the closet, the clothes that weren't worn as often started to get a bit funky. Mold provides for a lovely aroma that presents its own set of challenges. I then turned my aft (toward the stern, or the back) berth (bed) into a

locker (closet) to avoid the wrinkles and mold, because I could heat the cabin much more evenly. That meant that I lost a main storage area and second berth – but at least my home and I didn't smell. Now, however, the boat always looked cluttered, something I hated. I soon employed solutions to the mold problem in the locker, although I never did overcome the problem of the left half of every outfit being wrinkled.

That leads me to one of the biggest challenges of all: storage. On a boat there is no attic, no basement, and no walk-in closet. I own nine guitars – and could take only one aboard. I had a great sofa – once. That went into storage along with my hundreds of CDs, paintings, desktop computer, printer, dining room furniture, big TV, and photo albums.

And no discussion of life aboard is complete without a discussion of the toilet (head). It is uncomfortable and cramped. If you don't remember (having been sheltered on land for too long), sewage smells – worse as the temperature gets warmer. Unlike a homeowner's, a liveaboard's septic tank is stored very close to his living room and sleeping quarters.

In return for these and other challenges, you get some wonderful benefits. You're outside every day. You get to watch the rain bounce off the water. You get rocked (hopefully gently) to sleep. You get interesting and quirky neighbors (whether they are liveaboards or not). You get to be a part of the sunsets, and you are in a perfect position to take sunset cruises because you are, after all, already on your boat. As a matter of fact, you can go cruising any time you want! You get to experience the sounds and smell of the water. And you get the freedom to move your home wherever you want.

**The philosophy of this book:**

**The first questions I faced** when deciding to write this book were what needed to be discussed, and the corollary to that, what should not be discussed.

When discussing the essentials to living aboard, it is necessary to consider the process of choosing a boat, choosing a location for that boat, lifestyle issues, amenities, sanitation, and so forth. These are truly all essential to your undertaking.

It doesn't, however, make any sense to spend much of our time discussing the benefits to living aboard. I think the fact that you are reading this book means that you are already prepared (or preparing) for this undertaking; consequently, I suppose that you already know the benefits to living aboard. You probably already know how wonderful sunsets can be. And of course you are looking forward to the gentle motion. You might even be so focused on the benefits that you are about to undertake this endeavor without knowing or preparing for the challenges that might be forthcoming. Therefore, we will spend the majority of our time talking about problems, costs, concerns, and issues.

It would be easy to conclude that I am trying to scare you away from this lifestyle. That couldn't be more wrong. This book is about preparation: trying to educate and prepare the future liveaboard for the challenges that this lifestyle will present.

The bottom line is that I love the lifestyle and everything about it almost. I have had some brilliant days. I have also faced some significant challenges and unexpected costs. But don't confuse our spending time on the challenges of living aboard with thinking that I believe this lifestyle to be less than ideal. I do not. I just don't want you to think that it is easy.

Another important point is that you need to learn how to be a boater on your own. The Coast Guard, for instance, has safety rules that apply to all boaters. If you plan on taking your boat

out for a cruise, then it is incumbent upon you to take the Coast Guard's safety course. You need to know the navigation rules and rights of way and how to captain and master your own vessel, if not for your own safety, then for the safety of your passengers and neighbors. You need to know how to handle engine maintenance and emergencies that may arise. This applies to all boaters, and there are many courses and books and videos already out there that will teach you this. We're here to focus on issues that affect liveaboards. And while sometimes there might be some overlap, this resource is not a definitive source of safety requirements or other legal requirements for boating or boaters.

Now that I've told you what we *won't* cover . . .

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