

So, You Want to Work as Delivery Crew

By Russ Fritsch

Getting Started in this type of sailing life. In the fall of 2016, I was presented with an opportunity to retire early with a sweetener to help make the decision easier. I took the offer and left. After 46 years in telecommunications, I was now retired so what's a guy to do? My son suggested I go sailing and told me there are a bunch of Crew Wanted pages out there on the internet. I jumped in with both feet.

Most American sailing however, is on the east coast of the United States. There are millions (no exaggeration) more boats on the Atlantic Seaboard than out here on the Pacific Coast. My first sail as delivery crew was in May of 2017 on SV Allora. She was a 2000 Passport, Royal Passport 43 and what a boat she was. I was hooked. As luck would have it, I was picked for crew because, at 5'9" I fit into the sea berth in the salon. If I were 6-feet tall, I might not have been doing this.

How I got my start in sailing and how I got where I am now.

I started sailing in 2003 at the OCC School of Sailing and Seamanship. I started in Lido's and after a year or so received my US Sailing Bareboat Certification which was followed by multiple Moorings charters, Marina Sailing day trips, and a few sails with friends in Mexico as well as a class or two with Marc Houghston Santana Sailing.

Keeping in touch with new crewing opportunities.

I started an online search for "Crew Wanted" web pages and I found several including Find-a-Crew (www.findacrew.net), which is the one I have used to locate my crewing opportunities. I entered my resume, paid for my membership (optional but beneficial) and watched the ads from captains.

There are other methods by which the more adventurous among us find their way on to boats. There is a Facebook page, *Sailboat Hitchhikers and Crew Connection* and sites like *Crewbay.com*. Many of the "crew wanted" web pages are international, including Find-a-Crew. These pages will show a disproportionate number of international opportunities along with quite a few Western Hemisphere opportunities but, as I said, there are many, many more back east than on the West Coast.

The Facebook page usually contains a statement somewhere in the text, "adventurous, person wants to learn to sail". Trust me, this is not a great way to learn to sail though the docks in Las Palmas in the Canary Islands may not reflect that my opinion is widely shared. There are hundreds of young "travelers" with little or no experience looking to get from one side of the Atlantic to the other.

I have enough experience now and a bit of a reputation so now I get pretty regular calls from captains and owners.

Are you a good enough sailor?

I had a bit of a leg up on the competition in that I actually had some experience as a charter captain through Moorings and I had sought some training as mentioned to improve my skills through the years with Marina Sailing and Santana Sailing.

That being said, and this sounds pretty bad, but some captains will also settle for a body to pull ropes. I saw plenty of this in Las Palmas last Fall in the aftermath of the Atlantic Rally for Cruisers (ARC). Those who did not make it on a boat for the ARC as qualified crewmen, were still hanging around, looking for a ride, any ride as long as they get across the Atlantic.

Obviously, if my case is any indication, the more experienced you have, the better your opportunities will be.

The good and bad of crewing

A best and worse trip thing can be complicated to calculate for me. My best sailing trip, strictly from a sailing standpoint, was my Atlantic crossing last December. This trip was on an Outremer 51 catamaran and this boat really showed me what a performance sailboat can do in the right hands, this boat could fly. 10-15 knots, Speed Over Ground, was not unusual. 25 knots surfing, actually happened, and was a safe speed for this boat. This trip however, had me at sea over Christmas and away from my family. I was a little homesick for a few days.

My best trip was a short 5-day delivery from Beaufort, NC to Portsmouth, RI in June, 2018. This trip, from the very beginning, was like a reunion with your best friends from high school. There were four of us aboard a Jeanneau SO 44-DS and it required your sense of humor to be fully engaged and was a great time from dock to dock. This was a dream trip from beginning to end. We had a great time.

My worst trip, a trip from Honolulu to San Diego, goes more to crew attitude, failure to provision adequately and a boat with a sail plan that was way overpowering and uncomfortable. The crew issue was with a single person who came unprepared for weeks at sea. He had no foul weather gear, no sea boots and furthermore, had NEVER been sailing on an ocean and after a few days, wanted to go home. This guy was consistently late for watch and early to go below near the end of his watch. Provisioning was limited to Cup of Noodles, lots of cookies, instant Oatmeal and stovetop pasta meals in a bag. The boat was "rigged for racing", and the mainsail had only a single reef point which limits a crew's ability to trim the boat to reduce the strain on the rigging in rougher wind and sea conditions.

There is much more that I could write about this but as a warning I will say this, ask questions:

- How do you provision?
- Are my other crew members experienced?
- How long do you expect this trip to take? i.e. The Outremer 51 can do 250 NM days and we did that on several occasions on our crossing. I knew because I asked.
- How is the boat rigged, and equipped, do I need to bring my personal PFD?
- What is your tolerance for pain (rough seas, high wind/seas)? Will we duck into port (if necessary) if the conditions dictate?

- Are we trying to meet a schedule? This is important if you have a captain who has a case of “gotta get home-itis”, regardless of conditions. Hey, it’s your life we’re talking about here.

Getting paid and pay to play

I have not yet been paid for my time, so far. However, I do expect to be fed while on board and on land while I am a part of a crew. If a captain is going to dinner while in port, they almost always bring the crew and pick-up the tab for food. I am considering a USCG captain’s course and upon completion, I will be looking for more professional crewing opportunities where I would expect to be paid for my time and money spent on the deliveries.

Regarding “pay to play”: on Find-a-Crew ads you will see, fairly far down in the ad, a line that says, *Positions Offered*: Paid, Unpaid, Contribute. When you see contribute, this might just mean, “I want you to help me pay for my vacation”. You will still be required to stand watch, clean, cook, repair what breaks and get the boat ready when the captain’s “real” friends come on board. Just like when you are unpaid crew. For contributions I have seen the daily requested contribution to be from \$5/day to as high as \$100/day.

If you are just out to enjoy a fun week of sailing, reach out to Marc of Santana Sailing, he arranges great sails where you have the option to help with the tasks onboard or just watch the sea roll by beneath your feet.

If you see an ad that catches your eye just scroll to the bottom so you will know what the captain has in mind when you read the “What’s Required of the Crew” section. This is how you will know what to expect on this delivery or cruise. These folks do not lie, believe what you read.

You may be asked to leave a review of your experience while on the delivery/cruise. You don’t have to leave a review but if asked, be honest, don’t be a jerk or be dishonest. Captains want a good review from crew members just like you as a crew member, want a positive review from a captain. If the food was bad enough to mention, be judicious in your criticism of the cuisine.

Paying for my travel expenses.

After two years and several thousand miles, I am now in a place where my airfare is being covered at least partially by owners/captains. I say partially because captains and owners will go to Kayak, pick the lowest airfare they can find (naturally) and leave it to you to get your luggage aboard, and pick a seat. All of which can cost money in these times. Some international carriers even require their passengers to pay for checked bags.

I also obtain travel insurance for some of my longer trips. Hey, stuff happens and you may want to recover some of your out of pocket expenses. I am also a member of DAN Boater to help with major medical emergencies.

To date, I have spent about \$10,000 on airfare and the occasional hotel room. My captains have paid for about \$2,000 of my flights and expenses.

Linking deliveries, or, getting off one boat to walk on to another boat

I managed to do this once in 2018. Well, almost. I delivered a Jeanneau SO 44-DS from Portsmouth RI to Marsh Harbour, Bahamas then, one day later, flew from Marsh Harbour to Malaga, Spain where I joined a crew in Malaga for my Atlantic crossing from Malaga to St. George's, Grenada via Las Palmas, Canary Islands. I was away from home for almost 8-weeks over the Thanksgiving and Christmas Holidays. This is extremely hard to do, but it is possible if you are located on the East Coast.

Generally speaking, captains/owners are always more optimistic than the reality of their schedules, especially when they are having work done. Marine repairs always, always, always, take longer than the owners think. Beware, you can spend a lot of money on airfare and hotels waiting for a boat to be ready to go. So, my recommendation would be to go with a boat that is in the water with fuel in the tank and food in the freezer (sort of).

My two cents...so do you think this is for you? My final thoughts and suggestions.

- Have fun, let yourself be amazed by the beauty of the sea, make new friends, find your happy place. I still hear from my former crewmates and we are constantly sending each other crewing leads that don't work for us but may work for them.
- Keep a journal. I always look back in my journal to remind me of my trips. I record anything that struck me about my day. I generally report the weather, sea state, time of day and location and any "unusual events". Unusual means stuff like a pod of 200-300 dolphins swimming around your boat near Las Palmas or a USN nuclear submarine surfacing ½ mile from your position near Norfolk, VA. Cool stuff.
- I have really enjoyed my time at sea but make no mistake, you are at sea and, unless you have an emergency, you could be at sea for weeks at a time, especially on a crossing. Be careful. Be aware of your footing and handholds, watch what you are doing.
- Kindle is your friend. Stock up on books especially on a crossing. I read eight books over 7-weeks last year from November to January. There can be a lot of downtime between watches. There are times when you won't be sleeping.
- Dig in with chores on the boat. Keep the boat clean, keep the lines tidy. Help with the sails. It makes the time fly by and is greatly appreciated by everyone. If you're not on watch and you hear a lot of activity on deck, drag your butt out of bed and go help. You can always go back to sleep when conditions allow. Don't forget your PFD when dashing up on deck.
- If you can't cook, you can help the cook with prep and/or the clean-up. Keep the galley clean, always. A greasy galley floor is a true hazard at sea.
- If you think this is something you really like and are considering a career as a USCG licensed delivery captain, get your TWIC or Transportation Workers Identification Credential from the TSA. This will help you with the TSA guys when they ask why you have so many electronic gadgets and your PFD tucked away in your carry-on baggage.

Seriously, a PFD gets lots of attention in the security line especially if, like mine, it has a MOB alarm attached.

- Get a good PFD and tether. My PFD is a Mustang with a HIT actuator. It will only go off if it knows it has been submerged and should not deploy if merely splashed. Keep your PFD inspected and ready to use. I also travel with a Garmin InReach to keep in touch with my family while at sea. A dimmable headlight with white AND red lights is a must have.
- Get decent foulies. I got mine on sale at West Marine along with my boots and warm socks. Being wet and cold at sea is REALLY miserable. Carry them with you always. Let the crew laugh at you but the time will come when they are cold and wet and you will be warm and dry. Trust me.
- Register with TSA and CBP Roam to get your Known Traveler Number (KTN) and Verified Traveler numbers. This greatly speeds your airport check-in on your way out of the country and simplifies your arrival when you come home on a boat that has been overseas.
- Talk to the captains ahead of time and ask lots of questions. Remember, there are no dumb questions and a good captain will appreciate your questions. You may just ask a question about something he/she forgot. If the captain gets upset, oh well, you probably don't want to be on that boat after all. BTW, I have only had one captain think he was above the questions from the "unwashed".
- If you see something that seems unsafe, it probably is unsafe. Ask about it and if you are not satisfied with the answer, get off the boat and don't look back. A return airline ticket is much cheaper than a funeral and much easier on the family. 500 miles from shore, in 20 knots of wind and 10-foot seas is not a good place to find out your extra fuel has broken loose on deck and the captain wants you to go out there and lash it down.
- Keep yourself clean. Use deodorant, you may be at sea, "finding your better self", but nobody wants to smell you while you do it. Brush your teeth, comb your hair, wash your face. You may not be able to shower, but you would be surprised how good these small things make you feel after a few days out there. Baby wipes are also really nice to have on hand for a quick, personal clean-up. FYI, some baby wipes have plastic in them so don't toss them overboard.
- Sunscreen, chap stick and a hat. The sun is relentless at sea, even in the winter. Pack extra chap stick and I don't know if I've mentioned it, but...bring sunscreen.
- Never ever assume that just because you have just completed your ASA cruising course, you know it all. I always assume that everybody on the boat knows more than me and I do a lot of listening. If your captain asks for your opinion, the door is open and they actually want to know what you think. Answer politely, screaming and crying is frowned upon.

- Every single boat is different. Two identical 2015 Jeanneau, SO 44-DS boats that are one serial number apart are different. Don't be afraid to ask questions. The owner/captains are the NFA's for their boats. Ask them questions about their babies, they love to talk about them. And, ask them how they like to attach the fenders, make-up lines, stow gear, make coffee. Really, it's their world and if they are happy, you'll be happy. Afterall, you are a visitor in their home.
- Never ever miss your watch. Come on watch early and stay late, after your watch is over just to help your crewmate get a complete picture of what is going on. At the change of your watch, be ready to talk about the weather, wind, new noises, course changes, etc. This is especially true if your fellow crewman is coming on after a significant change in conditions or if he/she has been injured or is sick. If they seem to be having a problem getting in the groove, sleep in the cockpit for an hour or two just to be there to help if needed.
- Assemble a Ditch Bag Letter. This includes contact information, some medical information, insurance card(s). Copy of your passport and TWIC and copies of the credit cards you are traveling with. Make sure you give this to your captain and watch him put it in the Ditch Bag. Hey, you never know, you could go down and the only certain thing that is carried from the boat to the life raft, is the ditch bag. You will need the information in your letter if this happens.

Closing

I hope you have found this informative. Please remember, this has been my experience from my time with several captains over two years and it may not be identical to yours. I am a little older than most of the people doing this so I have a slightly different perspective of my travels.

Hey, we are all in this together, keep an eye out for your fellow sailors and they will keep an eye out for you. You could just make a friend for life.

Fair Winds...

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