

## PROS AND CONS OF BIGGER BOATS

You love your boat. She's easy to handle, forgiving to sail, not too expensive to maintain. She's taught you and your family almost everything you know about sailing. You always look forward to your time aboard; always feel sorry when it's over. Yet lately you and your sailing partner keep finding yourselves voicing traitorous thoughts. "If we had just a bit more stowage space... now that the kids are bigger... another cabin for guests..." "Just another knot of speed and we could reach..." "If she were just a bit more stable I'd be willing to..." Though you may have hardly admitted it to yourself, you're starting to wonder if your boat's just a bit too small, if perhaps it's time to make the leap to a bigger boat.

In the last two decades, average boat size has increased quite dramatically, both for coastal and offshore boats. My sailing career started in the early 1980s aboard my parents' 25-foot Bristol Corsair—they're now sailing a 32-foot Ericson and all of their sailing friends from that period have stepped up to bigger boats. During our circumnavigation from 1992 to 1995, our Shannon 37, *Silk*, came in about average in size. Over the course of the last year cruising aboard our new 47-foot Van de Stadt Samoa sloop, *Hawk*, we've again found ourselves of about average size in anchorages from Nova Scotia to the Caribbean. Indeed, in the 1999 ARC the boats averaged 46 feet in length.

Size certainly does have its advantages—and they're quite obvious to anyone who's ever spent time on a sailboat. But size has its disadvantages as well. Whether going from 25 to 35 feet or 45 to 55 feet, a bigger boat costs more—to buy, to dock, to sail, to maintain. But the disadvantages don't stop there. By sharing our experiences in making the ten-foot leap from a 37-foot to a 47-foot boat, we hope to help you take a good look before you leap so you can make the right decision for your situation.

### **What we expected—the good news**

We expected certain benefits from our ten-foot leap, and we haven't been disappointed. We have indeed gained stability, speed and space. But our ranking of the importance of these along with exactly how they've translated into pluses aboard *Hawk* has in many cases surprised us. The biggest overall benefit has been a radical increase in our self-sufficiency, something we had only implicitly considered before we moved aboard.

**Space.** Most of *Hawk*'s ten feet of extra length have been devoted to watertight compartments in the bow and stern and a large sail locker forward. As a result, we don't have much more usable interior length than we did on *Silk*—but we do have much more space. *Hawk*'s three feet of extra beam translate into a tremendous amount of interior volume. Some of that volume has been dedicated to our rather idiosyncratic needs: an engine/work room for Evans and a writing desk and credenza for me. The majority became stowage: twice as much water and fuel as *Silk* carried, three times as much clothes storage, twice as many large compartments dedicated to food, four times as many book shelves and five times as many tool boxes. This in turn translates into much greater self-sufficiency. We carry the tools, spares and materials to fix just about anything on board. We have adequate diesel, food and water to effectively double our cruising time away from “civilization.”

**Stability.** Size does have its advantages, as dynamic stability increases with the 4<sup>th</sup> power of length. But smaller boats can still be perfectly safe so long as their limits are respected. In conditions where *Hawk* will happily keep sailing, we would have hove-to on *Silk*. We might not have been making miles toward our destination, but we would still have been perfectly safe. *Hawk*'s stability and her ability to sail well to windward keep us sailing in a lot of conditions where she's far happier than we are. For the conditions we've so far encountered, increased stability corresponds more to increased seasickness than to increased safety. On the other hand, given our high latitude sailing agenda, we just might encounter the extreme conditions where increased stability will in fact make the difference between upright and over, and that was a prime consideration in our decision to make the ten-foot leap.

**Speed.** Here again, size does matter but perhaps not as much in the real world as theory might indicate. In the 1999 ARC, boats finished an average of five hours earlier for each additional foot of length overall, a half knot increase in boat speed. Offshore, we've averaged 175 nautical miles per day on *Hawk* compared to 135 on *Silk*. Yet what does that speed really buy us? On a 2,000 nautical mile passage it means we spend 11 days at sea instead of 15. Yet after the first five days, once we're acclimated, we've never cared whether passages lasted two weeks or three. We're still not fast enough to avoid low pressure systems—boats need to sustain 200-300 nautical miles per day to achieve that. Our increased hull speed actually benefits us most where we least expected it: by increasing our range during daylight hours. We can now sail some 30% further between ports during the day which has greatly reduced the need to sail at night in reef- or iceberg-strewn waters.

No matter whether you currently sail lakes, coastal or offshore, if you make the ten-foot leap you can expect to enjoy more space for special activities, guests or growing children. Your cruising range will increase both in terms of the miles you can cover and the amount of water and food you can carry. Greater stability will increase your comfort, if not your safety, in windy weather. If you sail the Chesapeake Bay, greater range and self-sufficiency will allow you to reach the next scenic river or enticing anchorage on your weekend jaunts. If your summer vacations have been spent on Long Island Sound, a bigger boat could lead to your first trip to Maine; if in San Diego you might head for Baja. A bigger boat does offer tangible advantages—but it still may not be right for you.

## What surprised us—the bad news

We knew there would be downsides to a larger boat, though for our higher latitude, liveaboard agenda, we didn't think they would begin to compare to the benefits. We assumed the biggest disadvantage would be the cost, and indeed costs do tend to triple. Yet a year after we moved aboard, we're still growing into our new boat, still coming to grips with all the implications of our ten-foot leap. None of what follows should have surprised us, but as with the advantages we envisioned, the reality hasn't always matched the theory.

**Seamanship.** Though *Hawk* is much more stable than *Silk*, and therefore much “safer” in extreme conditions, *Silk* was much more forgiving. If we misjudged a squall and didn't get the chute off in time, we could wrestle the sock down over it and manhandle it to the deck. If we wrapped the jib during a gybe, we could unwrap it by hand in light air and with a winch in windy conditions. We could react without facing dire consequences. But brute force gets us nowhere aboard *Hawk*. She requires much greater forethought, because the forces she generates quickly become unmanageable and dangerous. The 750-square foot mainsail needs to be reefed before the squall hits; the 1,500-square foot chute needs to be down before the wind freshens. If we wrap a headsail, we must look at how it's wrapped and tack the boat, using the force of the wind to free it. *Silk* offered the perfect learning environment while we made every mistake in the book; *Hawk* demands all the skills we've acquired to sail safely and efficiently.

**Fitness.** Before we started sailing *Hawk*, I'd been of the “bigger boat, bigger winches, no problem” school. But we quickly discovered that bigger winches won't carry a bigger, heavier sail bag to the bow; won't wrestle a larger, weightier anchor out of a locker; won't flake and tie down an oversized, ill-mannered mainsail; won't claw down and secure a furling sail if the furler

breaks. Even where bigger winches do make a difference, *Hawk* still requires greater fitness than *Silk*. On *Silk*, we could pull in the mainsheet by hand in a light air gybe; on *Hawk*, we have to winch in the sheet which can take three to five minutes of solid aerobic exercise. On *Silk*, we could raise the mainsail by hand, then use the winch to get it tight; on *Hawk*, we can get the mainsail to the jumper stay with a two to one halyard, then we're back to grinding for minutes at a time. Only after we moved up to *Hawk* did I start to notice the direct correlation between the waterline length of racing boats and the size of the crews' necks and biceps—and they have *big* winches!

**Reliance on mechanical aids.** No matter how fit we are, we still have to rely on mechanical aids to handle the forces generated by *Hawk's* sails and anchors. Some sort of mechanical device needs to be between us and those forces at all times: a self-tailing winch, rope clutch, furler or windlass. In some cases, we need the additional leverage from some sort of mechanical advantage—on our checkstays, vang and even our main halyard. Mechanical advantage has its disadvantage: our two to one halyard requires twice as many turns of the winch to raise the sail a foot, which means raising the sail takes more time. All of this equipment costs money, but more than that, all of this reduces our reaction time when trying to control a sail (put the main sheet on the winch, take the pressure off the clutch, open the clutch, use the winch to control the sheet while easing the main) and decreases our independence and our options. We find ourselves constantly walking a fine line between controlling the forces on *Hawk* and becoming dependent on mechanical aids. Adding mainsail furling would greatly facilitate handling our mainsail, but would leave us with few options if it broke.

**Scale.** On a bigger boat, everything is bigger. On *Hawk*, everything seems to be just one size too large for me. The last three loops of our 5/8- and 3/4-inch docklines and sheets spill out of my hand. I'm too short to carry the light air sails in their bags—I end up dragging them along the deck. I can't reach the top of our boom so I have to throw sail ties over the sail and hope for the best. I can just barely reach the headboard of the main by climbing five feet up the mast. While things initially felt large on *Silk*, I was physically able to hold a coiled line in my hand, reach the top of both booms, carry a sail without dragging it. I've been surprised at how frustrating I find it to always be wishing I were two inches taller. Unlike on *Silk*, I have to depend on Evans to flake the mainsail or put on the sail cover.

This list translates into more money, more time and more effort to sail a bigger boat than a smaller one. When I used to daysail with my parents aboard their 25-foot Bristol Corsair, we'd

dump ice in the cooler, whip the sail cover off and be sailing in less than half an hour. When we came back, we'd throw the sail cover back on, hose off the boat, toss our duffel bags in the car and be on our way. If they didn't use the boat for several weekends in a row, they didn't feel guilty. But a larger boat means more effort to get off the dock, more time to tidy up and more money to keep. If the only time you have to sail is on weekends, your free time is precious. A bigger boat will almost guarantee that you spend less of it under sail and more of it at the dock. In our experience, the happiest crews sail the smallest, simplest boats, whether up and down the Chesapeake, around the Great Lakes or across the Atlantic.

## What's right for you?

The attitude today seems to be you should buy the largest boat you can afford, especially for offshore work. But in considering the pros and cons of our ten-foot leap, we've come to four conclusions. First, it would have been a mistake to have started out on *Hawk*. Given our almost total lack of experience with offshore sailing, we needed a boat that would help us get out of trouble, not one that would help us get into it. Second, somewhere around 40 feet seems the optimal length for a "first" offshore boat—large enough to allow some privacy, small enough to be controlled without too much reliance on mechanical aids. Third, it's obvious when the time comes for a larger boat. In our case, the list of requirements for a comfortable home we would be willing to live on for a decade or more simply would not fit in 40 or 45 feet. Fourth, moving from a small, simple boat to a big, complex boat would have been a mistake for us. In keeping *Hawk* simpler than *Silk*, we've managed to minimize the increase in cost, time and effort. But it takes discipline and dedication to keep a big boat simple, and most people don't choose to do it.

Even given lots of money and experience, boat size should still be limited by the fitness and strength of the regular crew working without mechanical aids. Can they drop a jib in gale conditions and gather it on deck if the furler breaks? Can they retrieve a storm anchor using the manual over-ride on the electric windlass? Unless the answer to these questions is "yes," the crew is actually decreasing their overall safety rather than increasing it by going to a larger boat.

But these criteria serve only to define the upper limit on boat size for a given crew, not the optimum. If you're still wondering whether you should make the ten-foot leap, thinking through the answers to the following questions may help you come to a decision.

**Crew size.** Has your regular crew size increased in some way? Are your children getting bigger and in need of privacy, or have you added another child to the family? Have you begun to regularly sail with guests aboard? Have you started racing and can't find room for all the bodies?

**Cruising itinerary.** Are you planning to greatly extend your cruising range within the next five years—from Long Island Sound sailing to summers in Maine or from coastal sailing around San Diego to a year in Mexico? Long term, do you hope to head over the horizon for an extended period of time? Are your anchorages typically deep enough that the greater draft usually associated with bigger boats will not restrict your gunkholing?

**Liveaboard lifestyle.** Have you decided you need to increase the comfort level aboard if you are to continue to enjoy sailing? Do you need a more stable platform as you get a little less nimble in order to feel comfortable moving around the boat? Is a real shower, a dedicated navigation station or a generator and watermaker essential to your future well-being aboard?

**Sailing budget.** Can you afford to spend at least half again what you currently are on insurance, dockage and fuel? Do you want to tie up two to three times as much capital in the poor investment a boat represents? Would you rather own a bigger boat than keep your current boat and charter once a year in an exotic location?

If you've answered "yes" to any of these questions, and especially if you've answered "yes" to several of them, a larger boat will likely increase your sailing pleasure. But if you're still on the fence, don't leap. Only when the issues making you consider moving up become compelling are you likely to feel the increase in time, money, complexity and effort have not reduced your sailing pleasure. You'll know when it's time.