



Andrew Simpson

Monthly musings

Yacht surveyor and designer Andrew Simpson cruises with his wife Chele in his own-design 11.9m (39ft) yacht *Shindig*. Read his blog at www.offshore-sailor.com

Don't wait for the warmth

An increasing number of British sailors are alleviating wintry frustrations by heading to the Canaries for boat charters or refresher courses

Once again we find ourselves on the threshold of winter. The doors to our waterborne activities are closing, and thoughts of exchanging our deck shoes and sun hats for slippers and log fires become ever more attractive as the days draw in.

Enthusiasts – particularly those who have recently come to the sport – can and do get involved in the undeniably useful but somewhat distanced activities offered by the RYA evening theory courses which typically run from October to May. But some would say that textbook learning is a pallid substitute for the sensory thrills offered by being afloat under sail.

Unfortunately, at this time of year the weather can conspire against us. My own memories of wintry delivery trips (a voyage from Berwick-on-Tweed to Poole being one I recall with particular horror) cooled much more than my enthusiasm for such jaunts. In terms of personal comfort and physical pleasures, this is far from the ideal time of year for sailing.

Yet we are comparatively fortunate. The warming influence of the Gulf Stream spares the British Isles from arctic extremes, but what remains is not exactly to be relished. For it is not just temperature: pilot charts show the chance of gales in the English Channel area to be 0% in July rising to 7% in January – the latter month usually being our windiest and coldest. Mean wind speeds almost double over that period, rising in knots to the high teens.

Of course we all know that freakish conditions can occur

at any time, but at least these figures tell us when we are most likely to be faced with the sternest challenges. The indisputable truth is that the odds on getting hit by the bad stuff are higher in winter. And since most of us sail for pleasure, not pain, common sense tells us we should schedule our cruises to spare us such punishment.

Naturally there will always be wonderful days amongst the bad. Anyone who can cast off at short notice can still enjoy great sailing. But, for those who must choose their time slots well in advance, there's a significant risk of disappointment, often at very short notice.

Not so in Lanzarote. Here *Shindig* is currently enjoying almost spring-like conditions. In the Canaries the windiest months are August and September, when the north-east trades that blow through the islands become blustery and petulant, stirred into instability by the summer heat. The winter months – if you can call them that – are notably calmer than high summer. The winds are steadier, with the predicted

Economy flights have made access to the Canaries affordable and convenient

likelihood of gales being an agreeable 0% – matching the summer averages for the English Channel. Zero, of course, doesn't mean that gales will never occur at that time – simply that they are too rare to impinge upon the statistics.

Given the unpredictable weather and the much shorter spans of daylight in midwinter Britain, it's unsurprising that the Canaries' favourable comparisons with our own



For the Endeavour Sailing School in the Canary Islands, winter is by far their busiest period: and it's getting busier

northern climatic pains haven't escaped the attention of British sailors. Every year significant numbers make the pilgrimage to the islands simply to alleviate wintry frustrations by chartering a boat for a few days. Others seek knowledge, wanting to advance their skills

by signing up with a sailing school – either informally or following the

well-trodden Royal Yachting Association trail from Day Skipper towards Yachtmaster. And since the Atlantic is tidal hereabouts – a requirement for certain RYA qualifications – there are none of the limitations that come with, say, sailing schools in the tideless Mediterranean.

Keith Charlton of Endeavour Sailing told me the winter period was by far their busiest and getting busier, and frankly

I'm not surprised. Despite being some 1,500 miles from the UK, economy flights have made access to the Canaries both affordable and convenient. Visitors I talked to included a skipper returning to sailing after a few years washed up ashore. 'I realised that I needed a refresher course,' he admitted. 'Boats have changed. It's all become so technical since I last sailed. The electronics alone are way outside my comfort zone.'

One lady confided that she and her husband would soon be retired. They were selling their seaside hotel and were almost in a position to think seriously about implementing their long-distance cruising plans. 'We could never get away in the summer,' she told me. 'But we will soon.' She paused. 'We come here every year, you know. The sea looks so inviting in the sunlight.'