
WE DID IT!

LIVING ABOARD WITH KIDS



by Michelle Elvy

Making the Shift from Land to Sea

Most people planning to go sailing with kids wonder how they will feel living in a small space 24-7 with their spouse and offspring. Moving from house to boat is a major transition, no matter how much planning and dreaming you've done. People who don't live on boats can't get past the image of cramped quarters and shared bathrooms. Indeed, in today's world where the average American home has more than doubled in size since the 1950s and plenty of kids

are accustomed to their own private bathrooms, flat-screened TVs, and cars, it's hard for some to imagine life aboard a space that's not much larger than a walk-in closet. For those of us who embrace this lifestyle, however, there's no question of the upside: our shared space creates an opportunity for greater harmony, the family unit is strengthened, and every day we look forward to what's just over the horizon.

For my husband Bernie and me, the decision to leave land life was already deeply ingrained even before we became homeowners. We bought our first boat, the one we would

eventually live aboard, before we even contemplated house or kids. Then, we sold our Baltimore house and everything else we owned in July 2002 and moved with our baby Lola onto our 1961 Pearson Triton, which we had affectionately named *Simplicissimus*, the simplest of the simple. Compared to the house we had owned, everything about the 28' Triton was on a much smaller scale. No complicated systems just a 3hp outboard (we had removed the old Atomic Four some years earlier), a kerosene lamp for light, and a two-burner kerosene stove which we had built into the table top. The



living space was small, to be sure, but so was the workload. The scale was so dramatically different from the house, we rejoiced every time we had to search for a tool (many of which we misplaced in our house, never to be seen again) or tidy up (a task that was never complete in the house). Fiberglass repair replaced plaster work; painting the hull was easier than painting our bedroom. And sure, we had no heat, but we also had no heat bills. In short order, a sharp realization came to light for both Bernie and me: this small but rugged boat was better suited to us and would allow us a kind of freedom that life on land never did.

We now live aboard a Mason 43, a boat larger than *Simplicissimus* in all ways (we have doors! A shower! A galley!). But starting out on the Triton was one of the best decisions we ever made. On that boat, we honed our sailing skills and learned the routines of living aboard. We loved its quirky personality, and we were in our element. When we were ready to purchase a larger boat to accommodate our growing family, we knew what we were looking for. Indeed, it has become our firm belief that starting small helps you figure out exactly what you need in a larger boat. And, psychologically, the move to a larger vessel creates a whole new positive perspective on size. Moving from house to boat is always a dramatic downsizing in your life, but going

from the Triton to the Mason created the impression, at least, that we were now living in luxury. When we moved aboard *Momo* back in 2003, our daughter Lola, then two, announced her approval after she ran up and down the center aisle between the settees the first time: Big boat I like it! It's all a matter of perspective.

Fitting Your Family Into Your Boat

Whether aboard a 30, 40 or 50 foot boat, we haven't met a family yet who has complained about the space. The distances you plan to travel and the time you plan to spend on board will influence the size of your boat. Deeper pockets at the outset might get you more boat and more equipment, but a modest budget will not keep you from going. We've met families willing to put up with tighter quarters for a two-year cruise, because the timing is right. If you and your family are committed to going, choosing a smaller or simpler boat because of budget limitations will not stop you. And kids adapt wonderfully no matter what the space: there is always a way to fit them on board a boat. A quarter berth makes a cozy space for a small child, and a pilot berth can be turned into a private play or sleep space. We met a family aboard a Pearson 36 who had cleverly built a bunk out of the starboard pilot berth which created a bed and play space for their 3 month old. They sailed with their baby and one other adult for extra crew, and

their boat accommodated all of them comfortably. Other friends who took off sailing aboard a Swan 35 (a small boat, by most liveaboard standards) made space for their 7 year old and 11 year old in the port and starboard pilot berths in the main salon. Another couple we met aboard a Tayana 37 have created a cozy space in their starboard quarter berth for their two year old, complete with a net for her animals and bright colorful sheets and they still have space in the bottom half of the bunk for a month's worth of toilet paper, paper towels, and diapers. Any of these families might have chosen larger boats if their budgets had allowed, but for each of them, the time was right. Their boats, all under 40 feet, have gotten them where they wanted to go.





Sharing Space, Sharing Things

The reality, of course, is that most of the space on any boat is shared space, so being comfortable with your children in close quarters is something you will have to adjust to quickly. Besides, living with a little chaos keeps you healthy. We tell ourselves that, since by the end of each day, *Momo's* settee and pilot berth area is cluttered with books and toys, games and puzzles. And the shell collection outside seems to grow every day, even when we haven't been to the beach.

To keep a handle on the natural trend toward entropy, we maintain a few loose rules and, most important, keep in good humor. Neither adult on board *Momo* is a tremendous disciplinarian, but a few simple routines go a long way toward maintaining some semblance of order. The table and floor are cleared before every meal, for example (let's face it: who would want to place their feet on play-do bits and jacks anyway?). We encourage our kids to put away one set of toys before others come out (though this rule never works with our tools, dishes, or books either, but it's a sound in principle). Often it's easier (and always faster) to clear the space ourselves, but you can't start too early teaching your children to tidy up the boat with you, because maybe they'll be better at it than you are. We are not experts at any of this, by the way:

sometimes our kids spend more time pulling long faces and protesting than actually putting things into shelves. But kids do that in a big house, too. But don't let the small space overwhelm you. When you are fed up with stepping on train sets and dolls and shoes, look outside and breathe. And then laugh at yourself, and smile at your good fortune.

In addition to sharing the space, you have to share things. Just as you don't need two cars any more, or a television in every room, you also learn how to make one item serve multiple functions. On *Momo*, the kids' rubber bath is also the fish tank for spear fishing off the dinghy, the beach box for snorkels, masks, and shovels, the washing machine, and the recycle bin while we are underway. The laptop is our work space as well as our family entertainment center. As I am writing, my daughters have commandeered a laundry basket and several of my hand-sewn cushions to build an elaborate fort on the floor between the settee and the table. If we put fish in their bathtub, they can use my cushions. This doesn't mean that certain items are not off limits the sewing machine and power tools are generally not toys, and we ask neither Lola nor Jana to share their baby dolls with us. But on a boat, your ability to economize is tested on a daily basis, and getting everyone behind the idea

that we share our things makes life more enjoyable and more creative too.

The smaller space of your boat means, of course, that your children will have fewer things than when they lived in a house. There is no garage to house the Big Wheel, ping pong table, or playhouse. The entire living space is in fact much, much smaller than an ordinary play room. When we accumulate new toys or books, there is no attic to accommodate the older ones. The same solution has been discovered by every sailing family we know - at regular intervals throughout the year, the kids routinely go through their old toys, books and clothes to make room for new ones (and the parents have to do the same). In doing so, we underscore the value of need over superfluous junk, and that the accumulation of stuff is not the key to happiness. We're not overly zealous about this point - our kids love getting presents like all other kids (that's what grandparents are for, no matter where you live). But we've grown up understanding that cleaning out their cupboards and rotating things off of *Momo* is a natural part of their lives.

Sharing this new and smaller space with your children requires a psychological adjustment, to be sure. New challenges and tensions might come with close proximity, but so does the opportunity for unity that most families come to cherish, even as the

parents are tripping over the legos or wishing they hadn't surrendered their bed for an afternoon of pirate ship.

Sharing the Space Beyond the Cozy Cabin

You are not limited to the space inside the boat, of course. On any boat, the cockpit becomes a back porch on which to enjoy a cool sunset beer or dinner al fresco. On *Momo*, the foredeck and boom serve as practice space for acrobatics, and the cabin top is the front yard where shells are collected and sorted, tea parties are organized, abstract art finds its way from brush to paper, and laundry is washed and dried. You can make good use of your entire vessel, but even more than you, your kids will see the whole boat as an adventure, if you let them, and they will learn better than any one else how to use every inch of space, inside and out.

The space at your disposal actually extends far beyond the confines of your own boat, too. Even if you are concerned about the small space of life aboard, the reality is that your space grows very quickly beyond your own vessel. If you stay in marinas, your reality extends quite quickly onto the dock around you. We've known numerous boats who end up sharing a whole dock space as an affinity develops between neighbors and a community quickly grows. And of course, land and all it has to offer is literally a few steps away as soon as you step over the toe rail.

For us, the same thing happens at anchor: your immediate space around you becomes like your front yard, and your connection to other boats in the anchorage provides you with a neighborhood. In any anchorage with a critical mass of boats, we have encountered people eager to help with each other's projects or throw together a spontaneous potluck. For kids, a visit to another boat is an open-ended adventure. Sometimes a short chat on a dinghy ride evolves into an afternoon of activity a coffee on board, a fishing excursion, a hike in the hills. Then

of course there's the large swimming pool just off your transom, if you are in warm climates, or the beaches that beckon each afternoon.

Shifting Your Focus: Making the World Your Home

In the end, when you move aboard, your space is expanded, not diminished. Your vessel creates your immediate personal space, however small, but the space you can explore while sailing the world is limitless. You might sleep each night in a bed that is much smaller

than your king sized futon back in your house. Perhaps your children now play only steps away from you rather than in the den down the corridor or in the third floor nursery. But space ultimately has little to do with LOA or beam. This requires a monumental mind shift, of course: to imagine that your space is now larger, not smaller, than when you lived on land. But it's true. And the world opens up one hundredfold as soon as you leave your home port.

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