

# Downwind without the drama



There's nothing more relaxing than quietly sailing up a river or along a gentle stretch of water with the wind on the quarter. But how exactly should we trim our sails to get the best out of them when the wind is abaft the beam? **Duncan Wells** puts theory into practice.

**T**he minute we bear away from the wind we can ease the sheets and relax a little. Now we've stopped beating to windward our apparent wind speed will drop. In fact, depending on the strength of the wind, it may well be that we feel practically no wind at all, especially if we're travelling at 6kn over the ground with a 10kn wind. Closehauled this would have given us 14kn or so of apparent wind, while running, this will drop to about 5kn.

Also, once we're off the wind and heading for a broad reach with the wind on the quarter, we need to make the sails fuller and more powerful, so for the main we must put the kicker on hard to get the top batten to lie along the boom. Then we need to let off the clew outhaul to allow

the foot of the main to curve. We should then ease the mainsheet.

We also need to ease the sheet for the headsail and move the genoa car forward to close the leech and power up the sail. The telltales will tend to be jumpy, but as long as we have the luff of the sail at 90° to the fore and aft line of the boat we should be fine.

### Dead downwind

The more directly downwind we go, the more we need to ease the mainsheet until the main is resting on the shrouds – and the more we let it out, the more we blank the headsail.

At this point we can either pole out the headsail (with the spinnaker pole) on the opposite side to the main, the windward

side, and run 'wing and wing' or 'goose winged' (**Pic 1**) or we can hoist a spinnaker. If we pole out the headsail while we're on a broad reach we'll be making the sail work in reverse, because the air will be driving from the leech of the sail to the luff (**Pic 2**).

While experimenting with this set up it's worthwhile attaching a preventer to the main (**Pic 3**) to prevent the main accidentally gybing across should you end up running by the lee.

### The Preventer

Run a line from the end of the boom to a block at the bow, attached to the rail, or a D ring, or take the line round a bow cleat and return it to the cockpit so you can adjust it as you adjust the mainsheet. »

1.



2.



3.



1. Jib poled out on the windward side, goose winged.

2. Jib to windward working in reverse.

3. A preventer on the main.



- 4. An asymmetric spinnaker – a cruising chute.
- 5. Tackle outside pulpit and forestay.
- 6. Tack line running aft to cockpit for control.
- 7. Spinnaker sheet set so it can be trimmed by looking at the luff from the windward side.

Tack line leading aft to cockpit.



8. Not our usual style.



9. Tack set just above the pulpit.

**Running by the lee**

When you have the wind on the wrong side of your main (Diag 1).

Pole out the headsail with the pole horizontal and pulled to windward as far as possible. You may need a downhaul, uphaul and a guy to achieve this.

I used the word ‘spinnaker’ just now and by this I mean an ‘asymmetrical spinnaker’, or cruising chute (Pic 4). I have never tried gybing a full symmetrical spinnaker singlehanded or even short-handed, but with my trusty autopilot – George – I can easily handle a cruising chute alone and if I am lucky enough to have a crew then it is even easier. The difference between the two, apart from the cut of the sail and that the cruising chute

has a tack that you attach via a tackle to the boat, as opposed to the full spinnaker where the tack is attached to the spinnaker pole, is that the full spinnaker will work in conjunction with a main when sailing dead downwind, whereas the cruising chute won't, because it gets blanketed by the main. If you hand the main, the cruising chute will then work very well as a downwind sail and is even quite tolerant of running by the lee a few degrees. With the main up, a cruising chute really only works for apparent wind angles from 90° to 120°. One option is to centre the main so that it does not blank the cruising chute. This will allow you to increase the downwind angle from 120° to approximately 150°.



**The sheets**

Attach the sheets to the clew – I use snap shackles. The leeward sheet will be led outside the guardrail to a block on the quarter and then to the cockpit, round the winch on the lee side and up to the winch on the windward side, so you can trim while watching the luff of the sail (Pic 7). The windward sheet will be led outside the forestay and the chute tack line, then outside the guardrail on the windward side to a block on the quarter and then into the cockpit to keep it out of the way. Try to avoid trailing any sheets in the water at any point, because of their propensity to get wrapped round propellers or jammed in the pintles of the rudder and remember, no stopper knots on spinnaker or cruising chute sheets – these are powerful sails and we want to be able to let them fly in a hurry. We caught a gust of wind on our photoshoot before we had set the sail properly and, as you can see, the sail pulled eight tons of displacement boat over at quite an angle most unladylike (Pic 8). Start off with the tack just above the pulpit (Pic 9). Hoist the sail (Pic 10). Raise the sock or

**How do we set up the cruising chute?**

We need to set up a tackle at the stemhead, outside the pulpit (Pic 5) to which we attach the tack. Or, if you don't have anything to attach a tackle to on the stemhead and only have a D-ring on the foredeck just inside the forestay, you could attach two tackles – one for each gybe – which would allow the tack to fly outside the forestay. This will mean much toing and froing to the foredeck to adjust each of the tackles as you gybe.

Assuming you're able to use one tackle, the line from this – the tack line – can then be run back to the cockpit for controlling the height of the tack (Pic 6).

Diag. 1



snuffer (Pic 11) and the cruising chute will fly (Pic 12). Now sheet in. Then ease the sheet out until the luff starts to curl (Pic 13) and sheet in until it



stops. The curling of the luff is just the same as the lifting of the windward telltale on a headsail. It tells us that we're sailing too close to the wind

and need to bear away a little or sheet in. When it comes to gybing the cruising chute we can always snuff the sail, set it onto the other tack and then unsnuff it. It's a safe way of going about things »

# SEAMANSHIP



and there's nothing wrong with that, but we can also go for a 'live' gybe. Start by centring the main. As you take the stern through the wind, gybe the main and ease the cruising chute sheet allowing the sail to fly ahead of the boat. Then sheet in on the new leeward sheet. You'll turn the cruising chute outside itself ahead of the boat (Pic 14, 15, 16, 17). You can also gybe the cruising chute by turning it inside itself between it and the forestay, but you need a member of crew to feed the sheets through the gap. Allowing the sail to fly ahead of the forestay is by far the easier way.

If we don't have a main up then not only will the cruising chute be able to take us directly downwind on its own, but we

won't have the main to consider when we gybe.

From a handling point of view, I find that the cruising chute is workable short handed in anything up to 20kn of wind. After that the loads become too much. You only have to have a snuffer jam to realise just how much power there is in the sail as you try to wrestle it down to the deck.

When you prepare to hand your cruising chute, put on the donk and head for home under main and engine or 'Solent Rig' as I hear it called (although I expect it could easily be called East Coast, Largs, West Coast or West Country rig for that matter) remember to hoist your motoring cone (Pic 21). From the fact that you're roaring along head to wind it should be obvious to



everyone that you're under engine, but it's courteous to let people know that despite having a main set you are in fact a power driven vessel. Added to which, if anything untoward were to happen, not showing the correct daytime signal could put you at a disadvantage in court or with insurers, who may be looking for a way out.



## Who says that cruising chutes can't take us dead downwind?

Here we are without a main to blanket the chute and we're running at 160° (Pic 18), 180° (Pic 19) and then a bit further, by the lee, at 200° (Pic 20).