

All Systems Go. Sort of.

Sailing long distances with a dog on board gives new meaning to the term “holding tank.” BY WENDY MITMAN CLARKE

WE WERE FIVE DAYS INTO A PASSAGE from Bermuda to New England, closing with the U.S. East Coast, when our dog, Maya, climbed into the cockpit of *Osprey*, our 45-foot steel cutter, and went on point. She’s always on the lookout for this and that when we’re offshore; shearwaters and petrels mystify her with their swooping visitations, and dolphins drive her to complete distraction. But this was different. She sat on the coaming, ears up, eyes alert, facing west, directly upwind. The only thing moving on her was her nose.



I zoomed out the chart plotter and measured the distance from *Osprey* to the coast: 160 nautical miles. “Do you think it’s possible,” I mused, “that a dog could smell land from this far away?”

“Well, it *is* New Jersey,” Johnny, my husband, said.

“I think I smell it, too,” said our daughter, Kailani, and pretty soon we were all sitting there, sniffing the air, trying to discern what was so obvious to Maya. For a dog who, it’s fair to say, tolerates offshore sailing but doesn’t particularly seem to enjoy it, this olfactory intelligence was important news. Land was over there. Beaches, grass, sticks!

And most important of all, the canine equivalent of a flush toilet: terra blessed firma.

It’s been my experience while sailing offshore—whether racing with a bunch of guys or cruising with my family—that all things inevitably boil down to food and the process-

ing thereof. What you’re eating, when you’re eating it, how often, and when you’re getting some more. And then the inevitable reciprocal: whether you’re keeping it down and/or whether you’re putting it out.

Now that we have a dog among *Osprey*’s crew, this food issue—particularly the output aspect—has taken on even greater significance and consumes hours of conversation time. Obviously Maya can’t talk in words, so observation of her bodily functions, or the evident lack of same, is our only way of keeping tabs on her general health. In thousands of miles of sailing, she’s never gotten seasick. She has, however, perfected the art of holding it, which leads to a growing anxiety among the rest of us as the days tick by.

We’ve resorted to all manner of inducing production. When the seas are calm enough—and sometimes even when they aren’t—we go on daily on-deck walks up and back, up and back, making ridiculous noises and gestures, which I am grateful that no one but we and the dog can witness. More often than not, her response is the equivalent of eye-rolling at our silly behavior. On the five-day passage from the Bahamas to Bermuda, a rousing game of tennis-ball tag down below did the trick after 48 hours, while on the trip to New England, it took a visit from a pod of dolphins to get her so agitated that she let loose all over the side deck. Among the notes about position, wind, sea state, and SOG, the ship’s log is sprinkled with comments about poop, pee, how, and when. My friend Roberta chided me that on a trip from Panama to Florida, my emails became daily reports focused less on our travels and much more obsessively on did she or didn’t she.

I’ve met people who won’t sail offshore for longer than 48 hours because they fear that their dogs won’t go. However, I think that prolonged sea miles are ultimately harder on the people than the dogs. It’s true that during one particularly long spell of inaction on Maya’s part, I did fire up the satphone and call my brother, begging him to call his vet and ask her if I was going to injure or kill my dog this way.

The word came back via email: “Dog will poop when required. Suprvet says no worries, they can’t hold it long enough to do any damage. Best advice is to stand far back to windward.”

Maya probably has her own opinion on this advice. But for now, standing to windward is the best we limited human sailors can do.

All about the nose: Maya, who joined *Osprey* in Panama, sits ever alert to scents, especially those of land, delivered to her on the breeze.

After her offshore efforts on board *Osprey* in the spring, Maya spent the summer delighting in meandering beach walks with the Clarkes along New England shorelines.