



R. Langdon/ywpx

ongoing cases, but it's not appropriate for me to say what we are looking at."

At the other end of the scale to courses and weekend race charters are buy-a-berth, long-distance or mile-builder charters with yachts that are making an ocean passage. This is a building block for many companies' annual programme, enabling them to profit while positioning yachts for a winter season of Caribbean races.

Private skippers

In addition to these are semi-professional charterers selling berths or private skippers trying to cover their costs. There are many more of these, although it is difficult to estimate numbers as they are unofficial and the arrangements shade all the way from friends or acquaintances sharing expenses.

According to Jeremy Wyatt, director of ARC organisers World Cruising Club, 18 of the 220 yachts on the 2011 rally were officially chartering, as well as an unknown, probably greater number offering berths on an unofficial basis.

Asked for his advice on finding a good charter, Wyatt says: "I would make sure the boat has been properly coded, the skipper is qualified and the boat is insured because then you have better

Courses allow sailors to refine their skills

protection and can expect a level of skill and experience. I would avoid the semi-professional charter. The fundamental difference is that these boats are less likely to be insured and you have no comeback if something goes wrong."

Wyatt makes a clear distinction, however, between both these types of experience and the widespread practice of sharing expenses, usually between a private owner and crew who may have found each other on crewfinder websites or World Cruising Club's own online forum. "Sharing expenses is a bona fide way of getting an

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experience and that's obviously a case of buyer beware," he says. "With an official charter, you are expecting someone else to have done the checking and the investigation, the skipper to be qualified and for the boat to have met certain standards."

Payment received


There is, however, a very significant grey area of which owners and crew alike need to be aware: owners of privately operated British-flagged yachts can only sail with family and friends.

"It's a bit more than just the money," confirms Captain Smart of the MCA. "There's a definition of a pleasure vessel. The owner must not receive any payment other than a contribution to the cost of that particular trip, such as fuel, food or berthing, and if you're not sailing with friends or family, the money isn't what matters."

This becomes a problem if you are intending, as many do, to take a stranger off the dock to boost crew numbers, fill an extra place or make a contribution to costs. For a UK-registered boat, if something goes wrong, you are investigated and go to court, you would have to prove a pre-existing friendship.

"There was one court case where someone was picked off the dock to do a race and the district judge said





CHARTER CHECKLIST

- Follow up references and recommendations from previous charterers
- Go and look over the boat you will be sailing, if possible
- Ask the charter company lots of questions about the yacht and what to expect
- Search online for logs and reports from previous voyages
- Check out any RYA-endorsed establishment online, searching by name or location at www.rya.org.uk
- To check that a skipper has the claimed RYA commercial qualifications, call the RYA with their name and they will be happy to check. Tel: +44 (0) 2380 604100.

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