

Sleepless At Anchor

Sandra Colvard

If you're a light sleeper, a good night's rest could be hard to come by, if you're considering mooring at anchor. While other elements of the mental state are definitely factors contributing to sleeplessness (high levels of anxiety from lack of experience or general non-confidence in the situation); more than anything else, the anchor chain contributes to droopy morning eyes.

A proper anchor system includes an anchor at the terminal point - of the appropriate weight for the vessel - preceded by the anchor rode which is most often comprised of a length of chain, also of the recommended length and weight for the vessel and a majority of nylon or cotton line of the appropriate weight. The anchor and rode may be hauled by a windlass or winching system or is sometimes managed manually in smaller vessels. The heft of the chain serves to add additional weight between the anchor and rode in order to increase the bite of the anchor on the bottom. There are formulas relative to the depth of water, tidal changes and vessel weight to help determine the proper "scope" or length of rode to let out. The chain section is also less susceptible to abrasion from bottom conditions such as rocks, coral and the like. Different anchors are also available for the various bottom conditions. Usually the best all around type will be selected based on the bottom found in your most frequently visited waters.



The problem for light or nervous sleepers occurs from the chain scraping across the bottom as the craft inevitably swings on the anchor rode. Now you'd think the sound would be so muffled under water that it would be inaudible to the human ear. Normally, this might be the case accept the anchor rode and the point at which it contacts the hull act as a conductor, much along the lines of an electrical wire, causing the scraping sound to reverberate through the vessel. Even the most adept captain can't always control the conditions where he must "drop the hook". A thorough examination of the charts is vital in determining the type bottom (composition and configuration,) tidal ranges and weather balanced against the vessel's equipment.

'Rise-n-Shine', the Colvard's 38' custom Arno Day Downeast Lobster Style wood cruiser, Minstrel Island dock at the head of Knight Inlet British Columbia Canada.

While one might have the utmost confidence in the anchor system and the captain's expertise, conditions never remain constant in the ocean. The wind may come up and the tide always changes so you never know whether the anchor rode is playing along the bottom normally or –most terrible of horrors – you're dragging on a loose anchor!! Few who have been around boats and the ocean very long have not seen a photo of a vessel perched atop a pile of rocks; the tide having gone out from under it! This is among the terror visions that assaults the wakeful seaman in the wee night hours.

After some time aboard, the sleepless sailor becomes intimately familiar with the nuances of every sound. An anchored vessel is nearly always in motion and the resulting sound is not necessarily a soothing one. Anchor acoustics vary according to the type bottom you're hooked into, whether rock, sand or mud. Though a rock bottom (of the right kind and with the right anchor) is preferable for a secure hold, the resulting audible impact is vastly more dramatic. The night imagination might find a similarity with an ocean liner bearing down on the helpless craft! A sand or mud bottom, though producing a softer, gentler rumble (some might call it soothing!), creates it's own level of anxiety because the bite is not as secure unless you have a special anchor for sand.

As a general rule, a normal anchor swing sound is intermittent. It grinds for a few seconds, hesitates, and then scraps a little more. After several hours of this, a sense may even develop as to which direction produces which sound! The dastardly and fearsome DRAGGING sound is more constant and usually (but not always) coincident with higher wind velocities. Shrieking wind, of course, adds another element to the cacophony, usually sufficing to get the wakeful sailor out of the bunk, roaming the decks to check out the situation – real or imagined.



Sandy, "Buggs" – big yellow dog, Thom and skiff somewhere in the waters of BC look for a clamming spot.

From the aspect of safety, a light sleeper aboard is a bonus! In fact, after our cruising experience, a vessel of sound sleepers wouldn't be my recommendation. My husband can sleep anywhere and under nearly all conditions and while I sacrificed many a night's shut-eye, there were a few occasions when my wakefulness saved us from disaster.

Headed for Alaska, we were in the Inland Passage in British Columbia. We'd cruised later than usual that day and were eager to find a good cove, get hooked up and take the dog ashore. After checking a few spots, something was wrong with each; not enough room for adequate scope, too many obstructions, too exposed to the wind, wrong bottom, etc. Finally we selected what seemed the safest spot all factors considered – it was the muddy bottom site. This was a guaranteed long night ahead! Sure enough in the middle of the night the wind shifted and I began to hear that ominous continuous- though muted in the mud - scraping sound. It was my habit to check for visual landmarks before bunking down but when I scrambled to the deck momentary confusion set in because nothing looked familiar. To top it off, the shore was a lot closer than it had been! I yelled for my husband - who fortunately rousts easily - and through quick action, he started the engine and we maneuvered to a safer position. Wakeful wariness saved the day !



Sandy aboard 'Rise-n-Shine' wrapping lacing around the stanchions cruising at 8+ knots.

Nowadays, there are sound defusing devices available and such things as anchor alarms - it all depends on how much you trust technology. From my experiential viewpoint, all the trick gadgets wouldn't matter in the least – a light sleeper is not going to “sleep tight” no matter what!

The cruising experience is all about education in many forms - sometimes at a cost. If baggy eyes are part of the ride, I wouldn't recommend sacrificing the adventure for a good night's sleep. But if a sound night's rest is important, I'd advise only tying up in anchorages with fixed moorings or tie up at a dock. Happy - if not restful - cruising.