

Tacking for Two

The size of crew needed to operate a sailboat depends on what you want to do. For racing, a crew of six or seven seems to work well, at least on a 30 to 40 something foot boat. For cruising, a crew of four seems about right: a helmsperson, a person on each jib winch and someone for the main. But for a romantic get-away the perfect crew size seems to be two. But when it comes to tacking, having a crew of two requires a bit of finesse.



My wife and I frequently take our 43-foot Jeanneau out with just the two of us and I thought it might be helpful to share the technique we use. The first decision we made was to always have one of us at the wheel. While it is possible to tack a boat using the auto-pilot we felt it was unwise to count on this as all too often we need to tack when other boats are close, we are near a shore or other hazards are present. So, this leaves just one person to handle the sails.

Here is a walk-through of our procedure (for the sake of clarity I will refer to the crew members as the helmsperson and sail-handler):

Once the decision to tack has been made the sail-handler eases the main traveler to leeward, down to the same position it was to windward. Basically, we are setting it so that when we tack it will be in the correct position. We do this for two reasons: first, it depowers and flattens the boat a bit, making it easier to get around and to steer. Second, it lets the wind do the work of setting the main for the other tack; if we waited until after the tack to adjust the traveler the sail-handler would be pulling against the wind.

Next, the sail-handler goes to the working jib winch and removes the winch handle (assuming it is there). Next they take the sheet out of the self-tailer and hand it to the helmsperson. The helmsperson keeps tension on the sheet so the jib will continue to fly in its current position.

The sail-handler then moves to the other side of the boat, loads the lazy sheet on its winch and inserts the winch handle.

The helmsperson then initiates the tack. As the boat comes into the wind and the load on the jib sheet lightens the helmsperson flips the jib sheet off the winch – all but the last wrap. We find leaving the last wrap on the winch prevents tangles or knots from getting caught in the jib cars. This “flipping” maneuver takes a bit of practice but can be done while standing six to eight feet from the winch.

All that remains is to finish the tack and tighten the new working sheet. The main will already be in position.

This procedure is not set in stone; you might need to adjust it for your boat or the situation. For example, our jib winches are a bit undersized so when the wind is blowing over ten knots my wife takes the helm so I can crank the winches.

Hopefully this will make those romantic sails just a bit smoother and more enjoyable.

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