

SUPERYACHT CAPTAIN

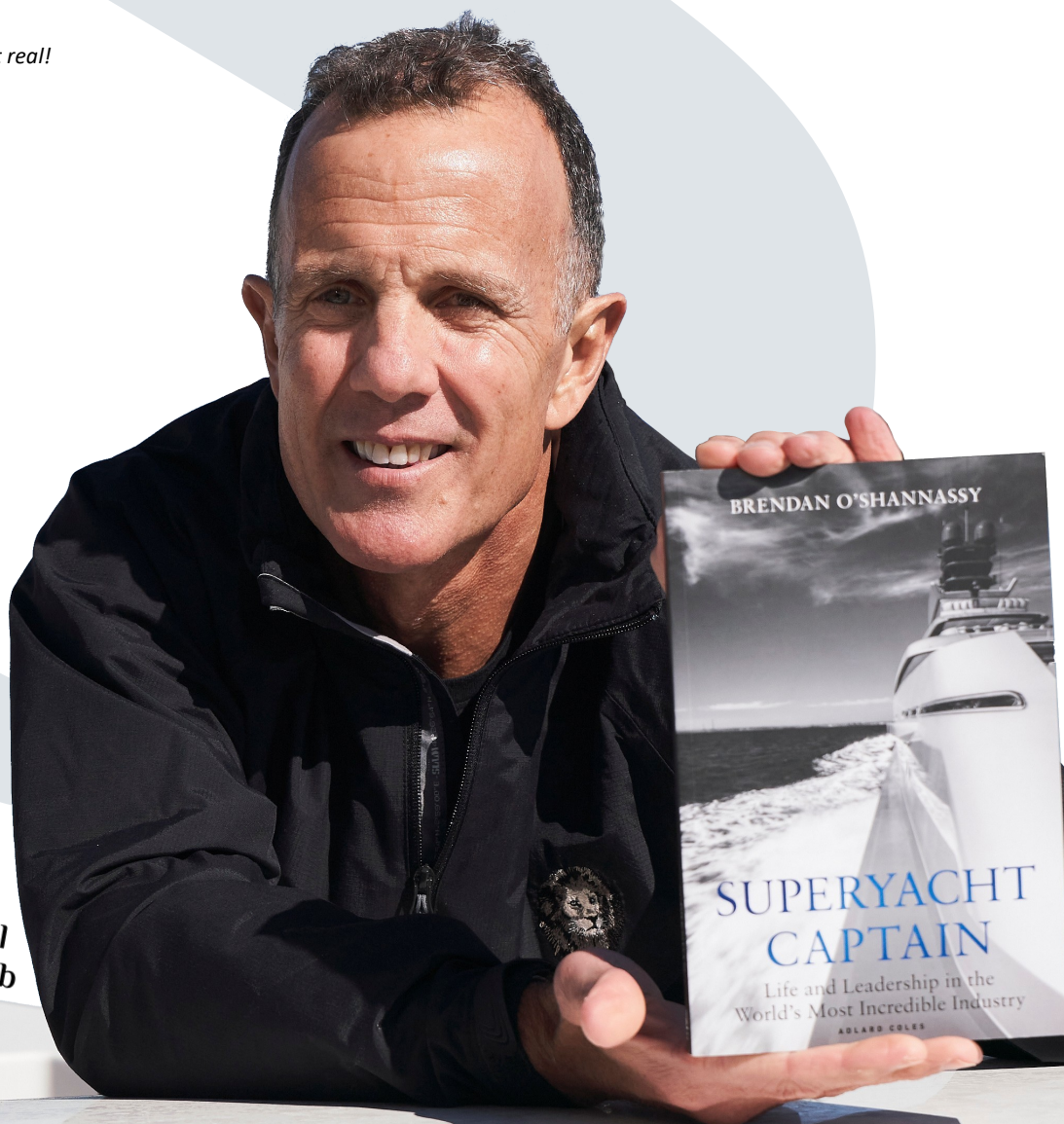
by Brendan O'shannassy

Brendan O'Shannassy has spent decades at the sharp end of yacht operations, commanding some of the world's most sophisticated superyachts and managing the complex systems — and people — that keep them running safely. In *Superyacht Captain*, he lifts the lid on what it really takes to operate these vessels, where meticulous maintenance, disciplined procedures, and calm decision-making are not optional extras but daily necessities.

While most readers won't be running a 60-metre yacht with a full crew, the principles behind safe and reliable boating remain exactly the same. From preventative maintenance and system redundancy to handling failures under pressure, the lessons from the superyacht world translate directly to privately owned cruising boats.

We spoke to Brendan about what everyday boat owners can learn from professional yacht operations — and how adopting even a fraction of that mindset can make boating safer, more reliable, and ultimately far more enjoyable.

Unedited—Let's keep it real!



Preventive Maintenance & Boat Management

In *Superyacht Captain*, you describe how the success of a yacht often comes down to disciplined maintenance rather than heroic problem-solving. For private boat owners who maintain their own vessels, what are the most critical preventive checks that should never be skipped?

At every scale of boat – look into as many spaces as possible before sailing. It is the simplest things that determine success or failure. Make sure bilge pumps are clear and working. Check filters on engines are clear / cleaned / changed regularly. In our modern world, check all settings on electronics that updates are always up to date. Plan for rough weather before it happens, secure all items on a sunny day as you would on a dark and stormy night in the Atlantic.

Superyachts operate with strict maintenance schedules and logs. Do you think smaller cruising yachts should adopt similar systems, even if it's just the owner keeping records?

I think the simpler the better – one solid sit down with the equipment maintenance schedules of the boat that will determine a calendar of service intervals and then overlay some simple regular checks based on your own knowledge – this can be a notebook – so long as you look at it.

MY FAITH at anchor - author's own photo and last captaincy

From your experience, what systems on yachts tend to fail most often due to neglect rather than design flaws?
Almost all. Design flaws are rare and often used as crutch when really it was a lack of operational awareness. Very expensive heat exchangers block due to lack of use and likewise, outboard engine gearboxes break when the user manoeuvres aggressively.

On smaller vessels safety systems are seen as a cost-point, not an investment. Extinguishers (fixed and portable) need checking / moving, EPIRBs need testing and liferafts need annual servicing.

Safety equipment is expensive, boring, ugly, takes-up space and fulfils only one function – but they will save your and your family's life. Your choice.

Many owners only address problems when something breaks. What mindset shift separates a professional yacht captain's approach from that of a typical leisure boat owner?

We are lucky, we have professional engineering teams, but this aside it is because we are accountable to another for their asset. For a private boat user / owner, treat the boat as though you are accountable to someone else for its safety. When I am at sea I am legally accountable for the lives of those onboard, as is a private boat owner – give pause for the responsibility to settle in.

Look to every piece of equipment with the thought, "if this breaks, then what do I do?" After a while this will be such an automatic



On a superyacht, redundancy is built into almost every critical system. For owners of 30–50 ft cruising boats, where is redundancy most important — steering, electrical systems, pumps, navigation?

This is true, but on large yachts we operate over-horizon, for coastal boaters there are alternate redundancy paths. You may need to drop an anchor at short notice, think in advance where you can extend the chain with mooring lines if the water is deeper. Practice (in kind conditions) coming into a port with one engine if you usually have two. If you lose lighting, where is your strong battery powered torch?

What onboard system causes the most unexpected trouble during long passages or charter seasons?

The toilet and air-conditioning systems. Don't be embarrassed to tell your guests how the marine toilet works and what can and cannot go into it — the alternate outcome is far more embarrassing.

When something fails at sea, how important is system familiarity versus having spare parts onboard?

There is a place for knowing the why of a system and the how. Before the event, look at the piping and electrical runs — this will give some insight into why a system runs as it does. The how is knowing a fuel system's components, an electrical system's main hubs. This higher level knowledge will speed the fault-finding tenfold when something goes awry.

From a captain's perspective, what spare parts should every cruising yacht carry but often doesn't?

Drive belts break and are simple to change. Fuel filters are small and are too often the cause for a breakdown. A decent set of tools (complete and that you know how to use). Very basic personal protective equipment (PPE) — glasses / gloves / a set of overalls. No use fixing the problem only to need the boat to take you back to go to the hospital to get your eyes flushed. PPE is one component, but a drop-sheet and a work bucket are also important, set your work area for success.

Also, have a small oil spill response kit — some absorbent pads and depending on the boat, a 3m boom. It is environmentally responsible and might save an enormous fine from local authorities.

“There is a place for knowing the why of a system and the how. [...] This higher level knowledge will speed the fault-finding tenfold when something goes awry.”

Brendan O'shannassy

MY FAITH Crew Safety drill in Antigua prior to Atlantic crossing - all smiles, safety can be fun



Electrical Systems & Power Management

Superyachts often carry extremely complex electrical systems. In your experience, does increased system complexity improve reliability, or does it simply create more potential points of failure?

I think we know the answer. The simpler the better – rocker switches are better than complicated touch screens and mechanical locks better than electrical. You may not have a choice with a production boat, but at all times err to the simplest solution over the shiny electronics that look best at the yacht show stand.

Many modern cruising boats now carry large electrical loads – refrigeration, water-makers, electronics. What are the most common electrical issues you see developing over time?

Earth faults and then the ultimate – a fire caused by an electrical arc. Too many boats in too many marinas have caught fire through elec loads and earth faults not being monitored.

For an owner managing their own boat, what are the early warning signs of electrical problems that should never be ignored?

Fuses are an indicator of a problem...resetting is not the solution. Intermittent faults are trying to tell you something, warmer than normal operating temperatures, modern systems are sensitive to voltage fluctuations – they are trying to tell you something is wrong in the system. Be alert to the messaging.

“ Fuses are an indicator of a problem...resetting is not the solution. ”
Brendan O'shannassy

Handling Breakdowns at Sea

In *Superyacht Captain*, you recount situations where mechanical issues needed immediate solutions. What's the key to staying calm and solving technical problems under pressure?

Solve for the immediate issue and make yourself safe. – put your anchor down / settle everyone onboard / isolate a damaged system / radio for assistance / use an extinguisher to stop a fire. Once you are safe, your timeline opens and you are back in control.

There is a saying amongst paramedics “never run to the emergency”, the same metaphorically is true for maritime – slow it down and own the event.

Author on his own boat in Croatia - storm front rolling in as forecast

Do you believe most boat problems offshore are preventable, or are failures simply part of life at sea?

Their frequency can be greatly reduced. I speak to colleagues who seem to lurch from emergency to emergency and are forever getting caught in extreme conditions where things break. The planning is as much a key to success as the execution.

What's the most ingenious or improvised repair you've seen aboard a yacht?

The 'Brookfield Bucket' – when the rudder stock started to break apart on a southern ocean race the crew wedged a bucket into the hole and fibreglassed it into position. It remains on show in the Fremantle Sailing Club.



Superyachts demand precise boat handling in tight marinas and difficult anchorages. What boat-handling habits do you think smaller yacht owners could learn from professional captains?

Drive to the conditions, have a plan and communicate the plan. Going slow does not work with a cross-wind and if your team onboard (maybe your family or friends) don't know how you want to tie the boat up, it will end up in a dangerous place with much yelling.

What mistakes do you most often see recreational skippers making when manoeuvring in confined spaces?

Over correcting and over-driving. Use the minimum amount of power that matches the conditions and take your hands away from the controls to watch what is going on. I also listen when in a marina as recreational skippers yell at their friends and family to 'fix' errors caused by their lack of having a plan.

Oh...and bringing your ego into the story. If it is very windy and you shouldn't make the entry – don't !

Anchoring is a fundamental skill for any skipper. From your experience, what are the most common anchoring errors?

This is a huge skill often misunderstood. The swinging circle is critical, don't anchor where you want the boat to sit – anchor up-wind of this position. You must "pull-up" the anchor into the seabed, no pull-up means you are not truly anchored. Even on a smaller boat, carry a second anchor – it will give you a much better sleep.

“ Oh...and bringing your ego into the story. If it is very windy and you shouldn't make the entry – don't ! ”
Brendan O'shannassy

The Human Factor

A superyacht captain manages not only the vessel but also crew and owner expectations. For owner-skippers, how important is leadership and decision-making onboard?

More so as they do not have a professional team. Where appropriate give a brief to your family and friends and give them specific tasks and teach them this one task. 1 x person points at the anchor if you drive from the flybridge, 1 x person operates anchor windlass and if tying up in a marina – everyone knows what line they handle and where it goes – put coloured tape on your line lengths if it is a home-berth.

In stressful situations, what qualities separate a calm and capable skipper from someone who struggles?

They approach the event with a plan, they have thought through what could happen in advance – most events are very foreseeable – and when things go wrong it feels as

though they are executing a plan, not falling into panic.

Have you noticed differences between professional sailors and private owners in how they approach risk at sea?

I am a professional risk manager, I am not in my workplace with a "hey, watch how Good I am" attitude. I am onboard not to show off to my crew and my guests, I am there to relax them and be intentional with all my behaviours so they may relax and enjoy.

If you step onto your boat of any size with even a slight thought of "I must look really great here" – you are one step closer to an accident.

I am always looking out for error chains, these are the small seemingly non-correlated events that when linked can make for a major safety incident. You are tired, the kids need to be fed and you just realised you forgot to bring that extra container of fuel. It is time to acknowledge these are linked and you may need to reverse or end your outing.

MY OCTOPUS— Crew (author as Captain) - taken during refit in St Nazaire



Advice for Boat Owners

If a reader asked you for the three most important upgrades or improvements they could make to their boat this year, what would they be?

- *Safety Equipment as an investment not expense*
- *Better anchor and possibly a second on standby with 100m of good line attached.*
- *Storage – everything in the same place every trip and every place is correct for what is stored.*

Is there a piece of equipment that owners often spend too much money on — when good seamanship would matter more?

Complex electronic systems that look fabulous in trade shows but do not stand up to the rigours of a salt-environment. The same comment on hydraulics – in most cases they can be done away with.

Finally, what's the single best habit a boat owner can develop to ensure their boat remains safe, reliable, and enjoyable to sail?

Use it!! The more a boat is used, the better the knowledge and the better reliability. Engage your guests with the boat, they are your crew and 9/10 really want to assist, but need clear guidance. Be eternally inquisitive about the systems you take for granted, make a mental game of thinking "If this breaks now I would..." If you sail with the same friends and family bring them into the game and do some drills – drop an anchor in deep water – pull the emergency stop on the engines to make sure they work – when your liferaft needs a service see if you can inflate it and see it... sometimes this has to be at the service centre as it gets a bit big.

This interview was conducted between Ariadna Pons from Nautical Book Club and Brendan O'Shannassy, author of *Superyacht Captain*.

Superyacht Captain
by Brendan O'Shannassy

Available at
Nautical Book Club website



MY OCTOPUS— Author taking sun sights on Pacific crossing

