

Cruising with PWDs By Heather Stockard

Two people, two Portuguese Water Dogs, and a 43 foot sailboat. Sound like a nightmare? It's not; it's an adventure! Since May 2003 my husband, Chris, and I have been cruising aboard our Saga 43 sailboat with our PWDs, Kira and Minnow. It has been a great experience and we've learned a lot along the way. By sharing our experiences, I hope that we can inspire you to plan your own adventure with your fuzzy companions.

We left Juneau, Alaska in May 2003 and spent the summer sailing down the Inside Passage and then the Pacific Coast of the U.S. Sailing south from San Diego on the "Baja Haha" (a cruiser's rally) in October 2003 we spent the winter cruising the Sea of Cortez and the Pacific mainland coast of Mexico. In the spring of 2004, we hauled our boat out of the water in Mexico for hurricane season and took to the roads in our VW van. We look forward to another winter in Mexico before voyaging further afield.



Minnow watches the scenery as we approach the Golden Gate Bridge.

Safety and comfort:

Both dogs have sailed with us since they were fairly young, so we knew that they would be comfortable underway. From puppyhood, the dogs wore life jackets whenever we were underway, even though they are good swimmers. After trying a few different kinds, we settled on jackets that ride high on the shoulders feeling that they may be cooler and more comfortable than ones that cover the entire back. The most important part of a life jacket is the loop on the back that allows you to snag the dog with a boat hook to lift it back aboard. Kira and Minnow's life jackets are made by Extrasport.

Another important safety feature is the lifeline netting we added to our boat. This keeps the dogs (and us!) from falling off the boat underway. Without lifeline netting, I recommend having dogs tethered to a harness when underway. Lifeline netting allows the dogs to have more freedom of movement. When the motion of the boat gets boisterous we use leashes to restrict the dogs to the cockpit, and put them below when conditions get extreme.

While our dogs don't get seasick, Kira occasionally gets anxious when conditions are rough. We find that a half Dramamine helps her settle down and sleep. Check with your own vet before using Dramamine or other medication.

Cruising in Mexico, another important consideration is keeping us and the dogs cool and out of the strong sun. We have three different awnings – a 70% mesh cockpit awning that we use underway, a canvas dodger extension used at anchor, and a full boat suspended "Shadetree" awning we put up when remaining in one place for more than a

couple of days. The dogs love hanging out in the shady area of the deck. We use 12-volt fans in the cabin to keep it cooler. For both comfort and cleanliness we keep the dogs clipped short, grooming them in the cockpit or on docks.

Food and water:

We always make sure that the dogs have plenty of water available. We keep two water bowls filled – one on deck and one in the cabin below. Our favorite is the Buddy Bowl, which is the most spillproof bowl that we've found.

We generally feed our dogs a high-quality kibble supplemented with meat or fish and veggies. When possible, we feed Wysong or Wellness but those brands are generally unavailable in Mexico. Once we exhaust our supply of kibble, we have to rely on what is locally available, usually Purina or Pedigree. Then we use a smaller proportion of kibble and larger amounts of meat and veggies. We do know folks that feed raw foods while cruising, but that takes more freezer capacity than we have available.

Cruising dogs must be adaptable when it comes to food and water. We've never believed in keeping our dogs on only one type of food and bringing water from home when we travel. That just isn't practical for our lifestyle. We feed a variety of foods and change foods gradually.

Potty training:

The issue that we are most frequently asked about is potty training. As a puppy, Kira was trained to a doormat. As she got older, her "sortie range" increased and she much preferred to go ashore. Traveling down the coast, we tried a number of options – door mats, coils of rope, grass- and dirt-filled litter boxes. Nothing worked and finally we decided to force the issue, since we would have some multi-day passages on our way down the coast. We anchored out for the weekend, fed the dogs generous amounts of chicken broth and water, closed off the cabin and settled down on deck to out-wait the dogs. Believe me; this process was much harder on us than the dogs!

The girls paced, stared anxiously at the beach, and barked at us. We put them on leash, walked them on the foredeck, and kept repeating their potty words. Finally, after about 30 hours, Minnow gave in and peed on the foredeck. Kira couldn't leave that unanswered, so she added to the puddle while we praised them highly. They still don't like to defecate on the boat, but will when desperate enough.

Since they won't use mats or other devices, we let Kira and Minnow choose their own potty locations. They each have a spot on the foredeck, which we rinse down with the wash-down pump or a bucket after each use. Solids are picked up and disposed of appropriately depending on our location. This has worked well for us, although we've seen a number of other doggie potty arrangements that are successful.

Diversions and activities:

We all know that PWDs are happiest when they have a job, so we ensure they have a variety of diversions and activities. Kira and Minnow love to blow off steam running the

beaches when off the boat, but are generally mellow and quiet aboard. We do have the occasional bout of “butt-tucking puppy crazies” around the deck, however.

The girls swim almost every day in Mexico. Frequently we take them to the beach and let them swim after their favorite retrieving bumper, “Mr. B”. Sometimes they swim from the boat to shore with us and we’ve even gone snorkeling with them. Since they refuse to stay in the dinghy when we swim off we discovered that they are perfectly happy to paddle around with us for 45 minutes or an hour, occasionally climbing out of the water onto a rock to rest. It is very cool to watch them swimming from underwater!

We also carry some agility equipment on board which we occasionally set up on the beach. We have 12 weave poles, 4 jumps, and a 10 foot teeter which break down into small pieces for storage. We did get some strange looks from the Mexican locals when Kira, Minnow, and an Aussie from another boat were having an agility play day on the beach in La Paz.



On the beach at Isla Espiritu Santos Chris prepares to throw a stick for Kira and Minnow.

Other training has also kept our girls happy and well-behaved. We sometimes have long days motoring along in light winds. Those days are perfect for shaping behaviors using clicker training. We spent hours training Kira to let us clip her nails without a fuss. Using a clicker and treats, we first rewarded her for letting us touch her paws, then touch her paws while holding the clippers, then touching the clippers to her paws, and finally clipping the nail without her jerking her paw away.

Boat stuff:

Cruising with dogs requires a good dinghy and motor. A dinghy is not only the “family car” to cruisers, but is especially important for running the dogs ashore to stretch their legs. We find that our walk-thru transom and swim step make it easy to get the dogs into and out of the dinghy, and also provide good access to the water for swimming.

Also very high on our equipment list is a high-capacity watermaker. Just about every afternoon we rinse the girls with fresh water to minimize the amount of salt and sand that they carry belowdecks. This keeps them comfortable and helps avoid skin problems. Having an adequate supply of fresh water greatly increases both our comfort and the dogs’ in the heat.

Our daily routine:

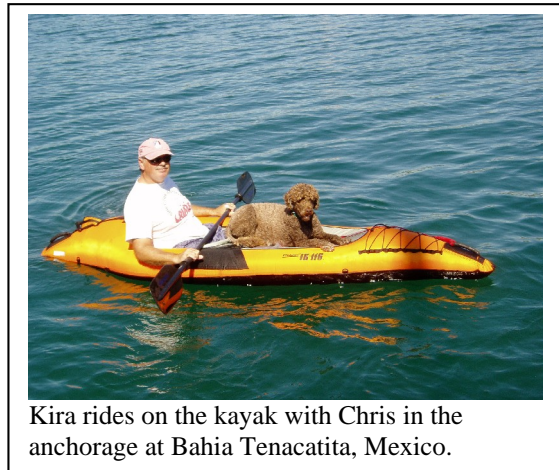
First thing every morning, Chris takes the dogs ashore for a potty stop and brief walk. Back aboard, the girls have their breakfast. Then we’ll either sail to a new anchorage or complete chores at our current location. Chores might include running errands ashore or tasks aboard the boat. The dogs sometimes come with us on our errands, but more

frequently stay on the boat. They bark when we leave, but then settle down in the shade to watch for our return.

In the late afternoon, we take them ashore to swim and romp. Back on the boat, they get their freshwater rinse, eat dinner al fresco, and stretch out on the deck to relax and dry. By sunset, they are dry enough to come below. Last thing before bed, we take them up on deck for a potty break.

Pros and cons:

We love having our dogs with us on board the boat, but there are definitely both pros and cons. On the “con” side, we find that we sometimes limit our activities because of the dogs. We don’t go out after dark much because the dogs tend to bark then, but we have found some other cruisers are happy to dog-sit if we want to go someplace. Also, having dogs aboard somewhat limits our cruising area. Many of the South Pacific countries still have excessive quarantine requirements. Therefore, we will probably go through the Panama Canal and into the Caribbean when we leave Mexico.



Kira rides on the kayak with Chris in the anchorage at Bahia Tenacatita, Mexico.

On the positive side, our dogs are wonderful company and a great conversation starter. When we are in tourist areas, we always find people that are traveling without their pets and need a “dog fix”. Also, we feel that our dogs are a theft deterrent. They are very protective of us and their boat. Anyone who wants to mess with a boat in an anchorage or marina will choose one that doesn’t have two barking dogs aboard!

Would I make the same decision again to cruise with PWDs? Absolutely! They bring us joy every day and are an important part of our lives. If you think you might want to cruise or travel with your dog in the future, start now to teach your pooch to be adaptable. Expose them to a variety of foods, water, locations, and experiences. Give them the training they need to be confident in different situations. Enjoy your dogs and most of all, develop a good sense of humor!

Heather and Chris Stockard, Kira, and Minnow cruise aboard their Saga 43 sailboat, Legacy. You can read more about their travels on their website: www.legacysailing.com.