

Cruising mainsails

furling and handling options

What used to be one of the most difficult and dangerous jobs on board is now becoming easier and safer, **Andy Pilcher** lists the advantages and disadvantages of furling systems.

One of the questions that we get asked a lot is: “what is the best type of handling system for my mainsail?”

Well, as with anything to do with boats, the answer is not quite as simple as the question, because there are many different options and each has their own benefit. A number of factors will influence your decision, including size of boat, budget and what type of sailing you’re doing.

The options available can generally be broken down into three categories; standard slab reefing main, in-mast furling and in-boom furling.

I’ll try to outline the pros and cons for each option as follows, based on my experience.

Standard slab reefing

This is where the sail is attached to the mast by standard slides, or a car/track system and is also often complimented with a set of lazy jacks. This option is still the most popular on smaller boats, say under 40 feet, as it is cost-effective and reliable.



A Stratis GPC in-boom furling mainsail showing no compromise in sail shape due to furling system.

The benefit is that in order to drop the sail, all you need to do is luff up and let the halyard go. If you have a roller bearing car system on the luff you will probably have to control rate of ease on the halyard, to stop the sail free-falling onto the boom.

If you have the reefing lines set up properly, with predetermined marks on the halyard etc, then reefing should be a straight forward manoeuvre.

In-mast furling

This is most popular as an OEM supplied system on production boats.

The benefit of this system is that it is very easy to furl the sail in and out, in a similar fashion to a furling genoa. The downside is that the sail shape and sail area are compromised, because the sails typically have a hollow leech profile without any battens. Yes, it is possible to put battens in the leech of the sail, parallel to the luff so they go into the mast vertically. These enable you to regain a little sail area and also help prevent leech hook.

However, you need to be very careful and I have personally seen these battens catch on the edge of the mast slot and cause a lot of problems! If this happens, or you have any other problem with the furling gear when the sail is partially furled, then you can get into a situation where you can’t furl the sail in or out, nor drop it.

In-boom furling

This type of system has become very popular since it was first introduced into the market over 20 years ago.

There has been constant development over that time and the systems have become very reliable. The biggest benefit of in-boom furling is that you can have



a full roach profile with full-length battens, so there is no compromise in size or shape of your mainsail.

It is very important to ensure the sail is built to the exact instructions of the boom manufacturer and is set up correctly when installed. Boom angle is also very important to ensure the sail rolls correctly. This system works very well and makes sail handling very easy, especially on bigger boats.

So is there a simple answer? No, of course not! But if it were my own boat, under 40’ long, then I’d just go for a good quality car/track system with slab reefing, combined with lazy jacks and a cover. If the boat is bigger than this, then it is worth serious consideration of upgrading to an in-boom furling system, as it makes sail handling so much easier with no compromise on performance. **ch**

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Andy has been on or around the water his whole life. He left school to start a sailmaking apprenticeship. Now in native NZ, cruising Hauraki Gulf & South Pacific.