

**Dancing with Lenny:**  
*Reflections on hurricane tactics at anchor*

by

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Lenny has been upgraded to a category 4 Hurricane (114-135 knots) and it will hit somewhere between Antigua, St. Martin and Tortola within 48 hours. We are tied into the mangroves in English Harbour, Antigua, with torrential rains and 30-35 knots of wind right on the beam, waiting to see if we are going to get hammered. The tension is unbearable. I have plenty of time lying in my bunk to review all the decisions that have gotten us into this spot.

Several years ago I wrote a letter to the editor of a British sailing magazine saying the best hurricane tactic was simply to avoid being near the hurricane belt during hurricane season. That's still pretty good advice, but our experience this year suggests how difficult it is to execute on the East Coast of America. We spent hurricane high season (August and September) up in Maine, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, as far from the tropics as we could. We still had to sit out the remnants of two hurricanes (Floyd and Dennis). Then we waited until mid-November before sailing down to the Caribbean. Usually the hurricanes are well over by mid-November and waiting any longer increases the risk of encountering a winter gale, but here we are, against all the odds, running afoul of "Wrong-way" Lenny. So even being careful with the seasons one must be prepared for the possibility of running into a hurricane.

There is a lot of discussion on the radio among the super-yacht skippers about leaving and trying to make a run south away from the storm. The general consensus, agreed to by the local met office, is that the storm path is so unpredictable that there is just no way to be certain which way to run and, in any case, English Harbour is the safest hurricane hole within 300 miles.

When planning where to spend Christmas, Beth and I tossed a coin between Antigua and St. Martin. The coin came up Antigua. In English Harbour the local procedure is to get all the boats tied either bow or stern-to the mangroves, unlike in most harbors where the boats swing on their anchors. I really like this because it virtually eliminates one of the biggest uncontrollable risks – e.g. the possibility that an upwind boat drags its anchor, slams into Hawk and takes us both on the beach. If stuck in a harbor like Simpson Bay Lagoon, St. Martin where everyone swings at anchor, I would try to anchor in a corner that was upwind from the fleet during the strongest initial winds. However, it is not always clear what wind direction to plan on. We should have SW winds right now with Lenny's center WNW of us, but instead we have SE winds driven by a 'feeder band' of strong squalls. In addition it's not clear in St. Martin whether Lenny's center will pass north or south of the island and that will determine where their initial winds come from.

Hawk is heeling over in the 40-knot gusts but is creating a protected spot in her lee. Tied up just next to us is a little Vancouver 32 cruising boat from the west coast. Bob, the skipper, just yelled over "Hawk is acting like a big, aluminum breakwater for me." Our boat shelters the Vancouver's hull from most of the wind and from the foot-high waves which have developed even in this protected anchorage. Bob and I have situated our boats so that a hill to the SW will act as a windbreak during the strongest forecast wind direction. However, I notice that all the locals, who have vast experience with hurricanes, have snuggled into two particular spots where the mangroves provide close up windbreaks from three sides. If I have to do this again I will look for a spot where I am right up against windbreaks (mangroves, cliffs, very well secured bigger boat, etc.) on at least two and preferably three sides. These close-up windbreaks provide much better lees than further away hills. And, as we learned up in Newfoundland, some hill/ravine shapes actually funnel and accelerate the wind rather than break it. Buildings on the shoreline can provide windbreaks, but the island buildings are prone to shredding in 100 knots of wind and sending a steady stream of deadly projectiles down wind. So, we have stayed away from buildings.

Hawk is secured stern-to the mangroves. I did that because its much easier to handle the heavy ground tackle over the bow with the windlass and rollers and I wanted the rain and wind to blow over the front of our hard dodger so we can keep the companionway open. Both of these are valid, but I am concerned about our rudder. Now that Lenny has been upgraded to Category 4 and is heading due east toward Antigua, I visualize 135 knots of sustained wind, our anchors dragging and the mashed rudder pounding up and down on the bottom just before the hull splits open. Next time I will go bow in and then if the anchors drag it is likely that the bow will get wedged in the mangroves and mud before the rudder hits bottom.

One thing we do seem to have done well is chafe protection. On Hawk's shore lines I have taken round turns on all the trees before tying a bowline. These are not chafing at all whereas the folks who have just tied a loop around the trees are seeing quite a bit of chafe. On our anchor lines we are using long pieces of fire hose threaded over the line as chafe protection. This has protected our lines perfectly during the last three days of gale/storm force winds while the plastic/rubber hoses most people are using are splitting. The fire hose also stows more easily on coiled lines than plastic hose as it's more flexible. I got the fire hose very inexpensively from a commercial ship's chandlery. It has turned out to be very important to have gotten all the chafe protection on right at the start, since the strain on the lines now makes the chafe guards very difficult to adjust.

At Beth's suggestion we placed a second 'back-up' snubber line on our main anchor chain, and we will always do so in future storms since a few hours ago the primary snubber started tearing itself apart and the backup gave us time to replace it. A few hours ago we also noticed we had drifted a bit west. We quickly figured out the intense rain had softened the ground and one of our stern lines was pulling a mangrove tree out of the ground roots and all. We have three redundant lines led out to different anchor points on each quarter, so had time to retie the line to a bigger tree. We will continue to use

doubled or tripled lines, and in the future will look harder for 'thigh-sized' or bigger trees rather than the 'arm-sized' one we pulled up.

We carry five 100-meter warps on Hawk. These have made life a bit easier, as they allow us to set our three spare anchors with enormous scope and to reach in ashore as far as we need to find good solid things to tie to. Most of the other boats have been reduced to knotting miscellaneous lines together in order to drum up enough line for a secure spider web.

When we prepared for the storm we took our furling genoa down to reduce windage and avoid the possibility of it unfurling in strong winds. We tightly wrapped the mainsail with two lines to reduce its windage as much as possible and prevent the sail cover flogging. Now, with 135-knot winds a serious possibility, I believe we should have gone to the effort of taking the mainsail off and stowing it below. I did not because the initial forecast when we prepared the boat was for 'only' a category one (65-82 knots) hurricane and Hawk's 750 sq ft, fully-battened main is very difficult to remove. However, when dealing with the vast power and unpredictability of a hurricane, we should have buckled down and done absolutely everything possible to prepare.

We started out with three anchors out (port, center and starboard) and one in reserve. As the wind began building through 30 knots I quickly realized it was not going to be possible to dinghy out the reserve anchor if I waited till we started getting in trouble. So I took it out and set it as a second center anchor. We are going to have a mess of crossed chains and fouled anchors to sort out with our neighbors when this is all over, but the anchors, chain and line don't do any good sitting on the boat. When sailing I sometimes wish I did not have to lug their weight around, but right now I am quite content with my over-sized anchors (110lb Bruce, 55lb Delta, FX-55 Fortress, and 40lb Danforth). There are 70- and 80-foot boats in the harbor with this size tackle out. So I figure Hawk will be the very last boat to let go, though I wouldn't be willing to bet even we'd hold in +100 knots, especially if the wind stays on the beam. If doing this again, I would set two rodes out with two tandom anchors on each, which should increase holding while reducing complexity/tangles.

We just heard on the radio that Lenny has decided to hammer St. Martin rather than Antigua. My heartfelt prayers go out to those on St. Martin. I feel a bit guilty about my initial burst of joy when I heard we were 'only' going to get tropical storm force winds.

In the final analysis luck plays a big part in surviving a category 4+ hurricane. We didn't realize that our coin toss between Antigua and St. Martin would determine whether we faced 50 knots of wind or over 100. Neither of us likes having luck decide our fate. We still believe it's best, if at all possible, to avoid hurricanes entirely. But we now have to admit that may not always be possible. If we had to face a hurricane, we're grateful we had the experience and learned the lessons without having to accept the direst consequences.