

ARE POWERED WINCH HANDLES A GIMMICK OR A GODSEND? EXPEDITION AND ADVENTURE SAILING COMPANY RUBICON 3 PUT THEM TO THE TEST OFFSHORE. **BRUCE JACOBS** REPORTS

Who hasn't looked at that soggy luff tension or imperfectly trimmed genoa and thought – 'so be it, that'll do for now'? Apologies to all the racers out there, but there comes a time in every cruiser's day when adding some extra tension to the main halyard or sheeting in a big sail another inch or two becomes just too much of a slog to make it happen. As one of our older crew members pointed out, the older you get the earlier in the day that moment arrives!

The problem is of course exacerbated for couples cruising without any additional help on board. Hoisting a mainsail solo is a big effort and whether it's then reefing or trimming, it can all quickly become fairly off-putting.

The electric winch has long been the solution to this and has been around for many years. While they are notoriously power hungry, there is undeniably something wonderful about pushing a button and watching that big, heavy mainsail head up the mast.

Electric winch downsides

There are inevitably some seamanship and safety concerns associated with electric assistance: first and foremost you do not feel an unusual load developing. A sail caught in rigging or a line jammed in a block would be felt immediately if you were applying the traditional elbow grease to the job, but an electric motor hides the issue – sometimes until it's too late and a serious problem has occurred.

They are also expensive, require considerable space below decks for the motor and gearbox and, most frustratingly, are immobile. Unless you are aboard a fancy yacht with multiple powered winches, it is usually a case of one powered winch and get on with it.

Enter the electric winch handle. These have been around in various guises for some years now but could not be described as mainstream. The launch of the French-designed Ewincher, however, piqued my interest and I decided to give the electric winch handle market the ultimate test. Could I get Rachael Sprot, my co-founder of Rubicon 3 and a dyed in the wool advocate of hard work on a boat (often mine) to be persuaded of their value – or even to want one?



The Ewincher being given a rigorous test in the Norwegian Sea

EWINCHER

The Ewincher is a sophisticated product that can actually be used as a manual winch handle as well as an electric motor. It has a variable speed reversible motor and generates a useful 80Nm of torque.

We tested it in the Norwegian Sea, en route from the Faroes to Arctic Norway, just as the winds hit gale force. The crew were feeling a bit breathless after swapping out our yankee 2 for the yankee 3, the yacht was screaming along and I was feeling guilty about asking them to trim the sails yet again. I brought out the big yellow handle to general looks of astonishment and amusement, but this died down as I effortlessly trimmed in our headsail and the double-reefed main while drinking my tea.

Suddenly there was a host of crew trying to grab the handle for their go and I had my first inkling that this



could be a big success. I did worry we might drop it overboard or that it would run out of battery now my crew had become lazy, but neither happened.

After two hours of hard sailing and trimming, it still had plenty of power, and these were big sails in strong winds. When the warning light did finally come on it took only seconds to swap batteries and we were off and running again.

WINCHRITE

Rachael agreed to try out the WinchRite on the Ocean Crossing Masterclass she was running from Spain to Madeira.

This was a crew full of aspiring Yachtmaster Oceans and a serious test for any piece of kit. Again, it was tactically deployed as the winds reached Force 6 and the loads all became that much heavier.

As a reef was called (a skipper's perk and what skipper in their right mind would go forward where the hard works happens and it's bouncy and wet) one of the crewmembers commented that he'd been to the mast so often he was now on first name terms with the deck fittings up there. He was given the WinchRite and the change in mood was conspicuous. He



came back beaming and there was no going back thereafter.

The powerful motor made short work of the next reef and the genoa too. Bearing in mind we are sailing 60ft expedition yachts and the genoa sheet is on a 66:1 ratio winch, this was pretty impressive. The WinchRite doesn't have the capacity to be used as a normal winch handle, and the battery is built in so when it runs out the unit is unavailable until recharged.

WHAT WE LIKED ABOUT THE EWINCHER

- The motor is disengaged when at rest, meaning the handle can be lined up in the ideal position prior to operating.
- The removable and rechargeable battery, meaning a fresh one can be simply be plugged in ready for it to go again.

Price: £1,900
www.ewincher.com



★★★★★

WHAT WE LIKED ABOUT THE WINCHRITE

- Powerful at 110Nm torque, and, quite apart from normal winching tasks, that power makes it possible to hoist a grown man up the mast.

Price: £649
www.winchrite.co.uk



★★★★★

CONCLUSIONS

So, would Rachael be persuaded to buy the powered handles for the Rubicon 3 expedition yachts? "I wouldn't", she said, "but only because we have so many crew on board and it's one more thing to charge. They are also pretty bulky. But I have changed my view overall and would recommend them for long-distance, short-handed sailing.

"They're amazingly powerful, very functional and could definitely get you out of a scrape".

Perhaps most tellingly of all though, she gently suggested we could leave one of them on board for her forthcoming expedition to Cuba.

The Ewincher is more sophisticated than the WinchRite, which is big, basic but powerful.

Both seem to charge quickly (1-2 hours), but are undeniably bulky and not the easiest things to store in the cockpit ready for quick use.

Of the two, the Ewincher is definitely the more convenient. It is no surprise to hear it has won the Pittman Innovation Award for 2018.

It is just that all that sophistication comes at a whopping great price. At £1,900, it is nearly three times the price of the WinchRite and may well be too expensive for many sailors.

Because of that we couldn't really choose between the two. Either one, however, would be a great addition to short-handed cruisers.

Bruce Jacobs co-founded Rubicon 3 adventure sailing expeditions, which now has three yachts and places an emphasis on training and exploring. Find out more at www.rubicon3.co.uk

