

Boating advice from the Royal National Lifeboat Institution

Easter is the traditional start of the boating season. No matter where Easter falls the covers rarely come off earlier. The RNLI hopes all boat users have fair winds and calm seas during 2009. Whilst we can only hope for that, none of us have any control over the weather. However, we do have a control on the maintenance we carry out and the readiness of our craft to withstand whatever the weather might throw at it.

Wear a lifejacket

It can save your life but only if worn. A lifejacket is designed to turn an unconscious person face up on entering the water and then support them. Buoyancy aids do not do this. A buoyancy aid is the best choice for those who expect to go in the water (dinghy sailors, water-skiers, PWC riders, canoeists and kayakers). A lifejacket is a better choice for those who plan to stay aboard their boat (sailing and motor cruisers, angling and sports boats). Know how to carry out the necessary users checks as per manufacturer's instructions. 35% of lifejackets we see each year are unsafe. Corroded gas bottles, loose cylinders, chafed bladders and discharged gas cylinders are common defects.

Check your engine and fuel

A third of lifeboats launches each year are to vessels suffering machinery failure or simply running out of fuel. Many breakdowns could have been prevented if the engine had been checked before setting off. Make sure the engine is properly serviced at the beginning of the season and that you carry out regular checks on it throughout the year. Inspect the cooling systems raw-water strainers and remove any debris that could restrict the flow. Check the level of coolant in the freshwater cooling system. A reasonably clean engine allows tell tail signs of oil or water leaks to be spotted early on. Always carry a basic tool kit designed for your present engine. Modern metric engines

require different spanners to the older imperial models.

Before departure calculate the amount of fuel needed. One third to get there, one third return and the remaining third spare.

Tell others where you are going

Make sure that someone knows your plans and understands what to do if they become concerned for your well-being. Let them know as soon as you are safely ashore. The voluntary safety identification scheme (CG66) in the UK is free and easy to join. It aims to help the Coastguard quickly locate your boat details. Visit www.mcga.gov.uk and follow the links.

Carry some means of calling for help

A VHF radio provides the most reliable means of making immediate contact with the Coastguard and alerting other vessels if there is an emergency. A mobile phone in a waterproof case may be useful on a PWC or small dinghy but should not be relied on in an emergency. It may let you down with no signal in a 'dead area'. It will not show rescue services your position. A hand held VHF is a better option. Start with a fully charged battery and remember the battery only lasts for so long.

Flares

An essential part of your safety equipment. There are several types on the market designed for different water users. For coastal and beyond you should carry a full flare kit including rockets, hand held flares and smoke flares. Flares should be in date. Suppliers should take recently expired flares off your hands *whilst* purchasing replacements. The Coast Guard continues to take limited numbers of leisure users' out of date flares, pending a national review on use and disposal of flares which is to be undertaken in 2009. The RNLI has no facilities to receive out of date flares.

Keep an eye on weather and tides

Always check the weather forecast before you set off. Get regular updates if you are planning to be out for any length of time. It is important that your plans fit in with the

tidal predictions for the day of the trip. Passage planning is for all vessels and not just big ships!

Limitations

Be aware of the limitations of your craft. Do not over estimate its speed or ability to handle difficult conditions. The sea and weather can change rapidly. Take into account the experience and physical ability of your crew for the type of journey proposed and the weather conditions. Crews suffering from cold, tiredness and seasickness won't be able to do their job properly.

Commercial ships

Some large commercial ships and in particular container vessels can have some restricted visibility from their bridge. . See www.ryaeast.org/new-site/content/news_items/rundown.pdf

The message on the back of lorries 'if you cannot see my wing mirrors I cannot see you', is relevant. If you cannot see the ship's bridge they are unlikely to see you. Once you go out of sight, the bridge team are unaware of your actions. Always be wary of their speed of approach especially when leaving their berth as they need to get up to full manoeuvring speed as quickly as possible.

Grab Bag

Should the worst happen and you have to be taken off in a hurry have a grab bag handy. Passports and money make life a lot easier when you are landed in a foreign port. Hand held VHF, GPS, bottled water etc all help if you are in the liferaft.

Special Plea

A special plea from the Burnham Lifeboat crew. Don't only have a responsible person ashore who knows your planned itinerary but do please keep them up to date. On a number of occasions the lifeboat has been launched to search for an over due vessel. The vessel has subsequently been found safe and sound tucked up in a marina. Voyage completed, the crew had retired to the pub for a well earned celebration. Only no one

thought to update the contact point that became concerned for the 'overdue vessel' and contacted the Coastguard. If you update your contact before you leave the vessel the lifeboat crew will not be called out unnecessarily.

Talks and Advice

The Sea Safety team at Burnham Lifeboat station will be happy to talk to groups of boating people, either a group of friends or a Club on any or all of the aspects above. The aspects are contained in the Sea Safety Guide available free on 0800 328 0600 or via the web site www.rnli.org.uk.

If any boat owner would like particular information on sea safety and /or a discussion on equipment on the boat, a Safety Equipment Advisor will be happy to come to your boat and carry out a SEA Check, free of charge and in confidence. Either call the main RNLI number or ring the Local Sea Safety Team Leader to arrange a mutually convenient time and place. On mobile 07780815977 or e-mail cliftonwarry@dsl.pipex.com

With thanks to PTC (Isso Harwich)