HOW TO SAIL BETTER

Safer boating

Seasoned boat owner Gilbert Park shares his tips for making your time on the water as safe and stress free as possible

The safety of the boat and the people on it have been my priority for the last 50 years, having cruised both sailing and power boats. Plan for the worst and hope for the best has become my mantra, first when I was a doctor in ICU/anaesthesia and now as a recreational sailor. By doing this I get more enjoyment from being on my coastal hops knowing if something does go wrong I am prepared.

If coastal cruising is new to you, get trained first. The RYA has many courses for those starting sailing or wanting to take their skills further; these will increase safety, enjoyment and proficiency. I speak from experience having done almost all!

I recently spent six weeks coastal hopping from Emsworth to the Isles of Scilly in my Mitchell 28 motorboat and used this opportunity to note what I did to make the trip as safe as possible for me and my crew.

Checks before leaving

Several weeks beforehand, I thoroughly checked the boat over, including the lifejackets, making sure I had one for each crew member and checking for leaks, cylinder content and – for any that had automatic inflation – that the capsule was in-date. Some crew members prefer manual lifejackets because they are mostly in a cabin and if the boat sinks they don't want to be trapped inside.

As a minimum, each lifejacket has a knife, whistle and MOB Lifesaver. The latter is a length of Dyneema that is attached at one end to the lifejacket; at the other end is a large loop that can be picked up with a boat hook and dropped around a cleat, preventing the man overboard (MOB) from drifting away while other methods of rescue are deployed.

This is also the opportunity to check first aid kits for out-of-date contents and that the first aid book is readily available. Fire extinguishers found in the engine compartment and near each exit from the boat are checked for adequate pressure and expiry date.

Similarly, I checked I had an adequate toolkit and engine spares. Even if you don't know how to use the spares, if you do break down you won't then have to wait

Make sure your crew is well briefed – it will make the voyage a lot less stressful

Lu Heikell

Gilbert Park

Let's Go in Falmouth Yacht Haven. After this photo was taken, a yacht got into difficulties and impaled itself on my anchor. The skipper did exactly the right thing by using STOP: Stop what you are doing, Think about the problem, Observe what's going on and Plan to extricate

Gilbert Park

RIGHT Lifebuoy stored under the seat in the cockpit – it has the boat's name so if it's found floating in the water the Coastguard knows where it came from

while a mechanic orders the spares for your boat.

I don't carry pyrotechnic flares as I believe they are unsuitable for leisure sailors and are potentially dangerous. There is no legal requirement to carry them on British-flagged leisure boats under 13.7m. Instead, I have a DSC radio, a PLB (Personal Locator Beacon, registered to an individual), an EPIRB (Emergency Position Radio Indicating Beacon, registered to the boat) and an AIS-SART on two lifejackets. These are all checked so that if attention is needed there is time for this. In the liferaft and the grab bag, I have an LED Position Indicating Beacon and spare batteries.

I have a fixed DSC radio that enables me to speak directly to the Coastguard and in the event of grave and imminent danger, I can press the red distress button and the radio will send my position and MMSI number from which details of the boat can be looked up.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gilbert Park is a regular PBO contributor. He has been sailing for almost half a century and taught himself to sail in a Mirror dinghy on the River Tamar. He has owned numerous boats over the decades including RIBS, cruisers and several boats in the Drascombe range; arthritis meant a permanent move from sail to power boats. He now owns a 28ft Mitchell, moored at Emsworth.

Plan your passage

About 10 days before departure I started looking at the weather forecasts for my departure and arrival ports, often with some points in between. Weather forecasting has improved dramatically with computer modelling.

However, computers have been known to get things wrong! I always look at several models and, nearer to the time, study a forecast that has been overseen by a human. If the forecasts are in agreement and don't change, then the degree of certainty increases.

I also look at the forecast the night before leaving and the morning of departure as part of the passage plan. Many forecasts now have wave height and direction which is invaluable when briefing the crew about what to expect.

The night before, I'll plot my route on a chartplotter, often with a backup on a paper chart. I like to do this in case all the electronics fail, as they did on this trip.

Unbeknown to me, the alternator that supplies the domestic batteries failed on the way to a mooring that had no shorepower. After two nights, the batteries just had enough power to start the engine but there was no charging so everything else failed; only when underway did I realise what was happening.

I now check the engines are charging before I leave the dock. It turned out that a connector had not been properly pushed in when the alternator was manufactured 16 years previously – it was only held on by a coat of paint which eventually worked itself loose.

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ABOVE Note that this fire extinguisher is located near an exit so if you can't put the fire out you're not trapped

Gilbert Park

ABOVE Always check the lifejackets on board before setting sail

Mr Ramsgate

I always write down a passage plan in the log book that I photograph using my phone and send it to my shore contact. A useful mnemonic that I use is **MR RAMSGATE.**

M = meteorology (see above)

R = route plotted

R = radio channels for the Coastguard and marina where you will arrive, along with times of safety broadcasts from various stations. I use the National Coastwatch Institution (NCI) lookouts along the way to provide me with real-time information about sea state and wind in their area. You can also use them for radio, AIS and radar checks.

A = alternative ports in case of bad weather, breakdown or other emergency. On my recent trip, I omitted the tidal gate at Portland Bill (we all make mistakes!). At first, the NCI reported good conditions but in the space of 30 minutes that sea state changed to horrible. We abandoned going to Dartmouth and instead went to a diversionary port, Portland.

M = mooring; details of an anchorage or marina. I like to have a plan of any mooring or marina (so I can see the lettering of the pontoons) from a *Reeds Almanac* or a pilot guide with the page bookmarked. I will often look up the site on an app, such as The Cruising Association's CAptain's Mate.

S = special hazards. On my trip, there were Traffic Separation schemes, military exercise areas, channels into big ports etc

G = gas. Do you have enough fuel for the voyage plus a contingency for rough weather? My boat uses an extra 0.5lt per mile in moderate waves.

A = alimentation or food for the voyage. Don't count on being able to use the stove to heat drinks or food. If it is rough, then boiling water spilling can be dangerous. If you are out for some time and need a meal, consider cooking food in a thermos flask. I carry lots of snacks, such as KitKats as well as fruit, plus plenty of drinks. The only drinks not allowed when underway are alcoholic ones. Alcohol, along with excessive speed and failure to keep a good lookout, are the three most common reasons for fatal accidents in the USA.

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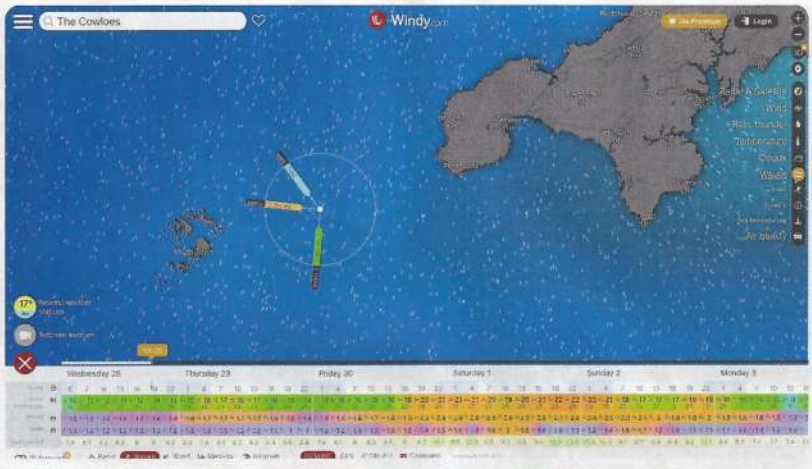
Be prepared for simple fixes such as corroded connections in navigation lights. The bucket will catch dropped components or tools



ABOVE Windy can give you detailed information showing wind and wave heights for a particular spot
LEFT Make sure you carry extra fuel
BELOW Faulty alternator connector prevented charging of the batteries and resultant loss of electrical power

T = tides; not just at the beginning and end, but also tidal streams so you can use them to your advantage. You can also see if you have wind against tide on the voyage that might cause rough conditions. It's also important to look at tidal gates.

E = emergency details with a shore contact. I send them a link to SafeTrx – the free RYA app that stores all the details of a boat as well as other details about the proposed voyage – and/or a photograph of my passage plan.

Finally, the night before I check the engine. I used to do this on the morning of departure but this allowed no time for adjustments. Twice during my six-week cruise, I had to tighten the belts and top up the oil; doing this when everybody is ready to go increases stress as well as delaying the start.

'I have a list to check I've done everything on the boat to make it ready for sea'

Checklists

On the morning of the trip, I check the weather again and deliver the crew briefing. I have a checklist for this and also for checking I've done everything on the boat to make it ready for the sea.

I have three sets of checklists. The two I have just mentioned are behind the cushion on my seat, because I use them every day. I have a red A5 loose-leaf book that has all the emergency checklists – Mayday, MOB, abandon ship, etc – stored near the helm. New crew members are asked to read this, but not memorise it – they just need to know where to find it. The final one, kept in the navigation locker, contains checklists for fog, night sailing etc.

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It's important to remember that in a crisis situation you may not remember to do everything. In addition, it may be the skipper who has gone overboard or is ill and a crew member needs to manage the situation with a checklist.

Crew members do need an induction to the boat when they first join.

I usually do this starting at the stern and working forwards, showing them emergency equipment etc and finishing up in the heads.

Some crew members need an explanation of how to use the heads and the importance of locking the pump shut, so that water can't find its way through the pump, into the bowl and then into the boat if it's rough.

It's best to contact the NCI on VHF Ch65 for radio checks before leaving as well as getting real-time information on sea state and wind

Fox Morgan

RIGHT Even when on a mooring, risk still exists. I was sitting in the cockpit enjoying a cup of tea when this happened

Gilbert Park

Once under way with new crew, we can rehearse some of the common emergencies, such as MOB. A watch system may be introduced so that on a long trip the skipper doesn't get mentally or physically fatigued and can be alert for mooring up.

Maintaining a good lookout at all times is essential, both in front and behind the boat. All aids should be employed including AIS and radar. However, the Mk1 eyeball still remains the best! A common distracter is the mobile phone, I turn mine off when in congested areas or in harbour.

Mal de mer

Seasickness is an awful affliction that can affect anyone. Some people are more susceptible than others, and the feeling is awful. If there is a member of the crew with it then putting them in fresh air, looking at the horizon may help; make sure they're wearing a lifejacket. If they are going to be sick, then the heads is the safest place to vomit.

There are many ways of preventing or reducing the effects of sea sickness. Taking drugs – as tablets or patches – to prevent it must start before leaving the mooring. There are other alternatives including, for example, acupuncture, ginger, and covering one eye.

If you are going away for a while with friends or family, make sure everyone has enough of any prescribed medication on board and ask them to provide a sealed envelope with their medical, medicine and allergy history in it. If they then need to go to the hospital the envelope can go with them as an aid to medical staff.

Keep calm and moor on

When it's time to moor up again there is a crew briefing about what's expected to happen. Sometimes things change and we use a walkie-talkie system to speak to each other, rather than shout which increases tension. As an alternative, you can use a mobile phone with a combined microphone and earpiece in a waterproof bag – so long as you have unlimited minutes in your plan.

During mooring there must be no jumping the gap clutching a rope. Falling between a boat and the shore can inflict severe, life-changing injuries. A boat hook works well in this situation. And a roving fender should be used – not hands or feet – if the boat is going to hit another vessel.

If things do go wrong, and they did for one experienced sailor when his boat impaled itself on my anchor in a marina, during a strong gust, then remember STOP. **S**top what you are doing, **T**hink about what has gone wrong and why. **O**bserve what's going on and **P**lan how to get out of the situation. Don't just panic.

There is an old military adage that says "Positive Pre-Planning Prevents Piss Poor Performance"; hopefully, this article goes some way to addressing the first four of these seven Ps. PBO