

Gulf Boating and Fishing Safely

Sometimes it takes a tragic event to turn our thoughts from the satisfaction and pleasures found in the bluish green waters surrounding our state. Unfortunately, the wonders Mother Nature graciously provides Floridians come with a demand of respect for her awesome power and whimsical ways. Recent four day search and rescue efforts for fishermen 35 miles off Sand Key, brought a few boaters and old fishermen together as we waited and hoped the four fishing buddies caught in a vicious weather pattern change would be found and returned safely to the solid footing the shore provides.

By the fourth day, only one of the four had been found and those of us who kept vigil knew time had run its course for the rest.

As the nationally publicized tragedy unfolded, there was a lot of misleading, potentially deadly and silly information that came from reporters, inexperienced boaters and even, to a lesser degree, the Coast Guard. As we watched and listened, our many years of collective experience wanted to find a format to offer correct detail about safely bringing home that catch every dedicated fisherman spends hours, days and weeks pursuing. The result is below. Maybe it will save just one life sometime or somewhere.

Your Boat – Each boat has its safe limits. As a rule of thumb, single engine boats under 24 feet have no business beyond the sight of land. That is about 12 to 15 miles offshore on a clear day. The Gulf can change from calm seas to 8 feet of monster waves in less time than it takes to retrieve an anchor, secure gear and head home to safety. Boats in excess of 24 feet with twin engines, built for offshore fishing or pleasure, may venture to the limits of their communication and 30% of their fuel capacity. Most new boats are virtually unsinkable. That doesn't offer much comfort to passengers who may try to cling on the slick bottom of an overturned boat.

Communications – Do not rely on cell phones offshore. Most cells lose their signal anywhere from 7 miles to 12 miles offshore. Once the signal is lost, the cell phone will quickly lose its charge trying to find signal if not turned off. If distance doesn't render normal cellular communications useless, then the water in an emergency situation will. A cell phone using satellite communications may solve the distance problem, but not the susceptibility to moisture.

VHF radios, installed in most boats, are limited to about 25 miles of clear communications. After that, VHF signals are limited by things such as the height of the sending and receiving antennae, weather conditions and quality of the device. Some newer VHF radios are coupled with a distress system that uses the EPIRB system (explained below). It should be noted that handheld VHF radios have a limitation of about five miles and are useless as a backup emergency communications device offshore.

Many commercial boats install what is known as Single Sideband Radios (SSB) that broadcast on frequencies that can offer signals that can reach hundreds of miles. Most private boats find the cost prohibitive. If you venture further than 25 miles offshore, you must have what is known as an EPIRB (Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacons). In an emergency, this device sends a continuous distress

signal through satellite receivers to the Coast Guard (and other authorities). The signal from an EPIRB pinpoints the location of a boater in trouble. The Coast Guard mobilizes and broadcasts the emergency to all nearby boaters.

Life Jackets – While Coast Guard regulations require a life jacket for each person on board, that is not enough. Jackets must properly fit each person. An adult jacket may allow a child to easily slip through it. A 260 pound well built man may not fit in a standard cheap (but legal) adult preserver. If you want the proper fit, buy adjustable jackets that come in specific sizes. This single piece of safety equipment may make the difference of being able to survive for a few hours in the gulf to a few days.

Have more life jackets than you need. A broken strap, snap or aged seams may render them unusable. In an emergency, an extra jacket can help weaker swimmers.

Plans and Numbers - It is highly unlikely that enthusiastic day fishermen will leave a float plan with friends or relatives. That, of course, is what authorities recommend, but reality contradicts the recommendation. As an alternative, at least have a separate copy of your common fishing ground GPS numbers in a place that can be accessed by friends and relatives onshore if they needed to find you. If traveling, let someone know the general float path you plan to take to get to your destination. Most boaters are creatures of habit. Those habits can help locate you if necessary.

Other Equipment That Increases Safety – You must have the recommended safety equipment the Coast Guard requires such as signaling devices for your size and type of vessel. You can also spend thousands of dollars on backup equipment for GPS systems, radios and other electronics. If your budget allows, radar is a good way to track storms and get safely around or away from them. Radar also allows you to avoid collisions in fog and limited vision conditions. If you can only afford to buy one piece of backup equipment, use the money to spend on a good alternative VHF radio if you boat or fish out of the sight of land.

A basic first aid kit is a must. In rough seas, slips and falls on a boat are common. Be able to handle a bleeding cut, a hooked hand or finger and the damage toothy predators you seek can inflict.

Fishing and/or boating offshore demands you have an anchor sufficient for your size boat and rope that is 3 to 5 times in length as compared to the depth of water you plan to fish in. The excess rope is called “scope” that allows you to safely anchor your vessel. The amount of rope is dependent on the anchor type and weight coupled with the length of chain attached to it. Of course there are limitations as the water depth increases. However, in the relatively shallow water of the gulf out to about 30 miles offshore, adequate rope is easy to add. A boat without power, unanchored, 30 miles offshore can easily drift with wind and tides 100 miles in a day.

The focus above has been on things you buy to help you remain safe, but the two things you will need to have to stay safe in any boat is *common sense* and a *deep respect* for the waters you are in. If you have never watched your knuckles turn white as you grasp the steering wheel trying to navigate rough seas,

and if you have never faced wall after wall of water that crashes over the bow of your boat in seemingly never ending winds, and if you have never had to keep a forced smile to reassure your passengers as your gut twists in multiple knots, then you won't know what Mother Nature can do to even the captains of ocean going cruise ships or the captain of a 25 foot center console.

If you have been on the water all your life and never experienced the wrath of the Old Man in the Sea as he wrestles with Mother Nature to consume you and your boat, consider yourself fortunate, but not immune.