

Episode #47: Safety Briefing for New Crew

a.k.a. Welcome Aboard, Don't Break the Boat

Bringing new humans aboard—especially those who've never set foot on a sailboat—means it's time for the sacred ritual: the safety briefing. Think of it as the pre-flight announcement, except instead of a polished flight attendant in a pressed uniform, you get me: barefoot, sunburned, and probably holding a coffee.

First Things First

This is where expectations are set. The ocean is no place for surprises, and clarity up front keeps everyone safer.

1. Before we get underway—whether for a day sail, a weekend, or a long-term passage—I always ask if anyone has any medical conditions or takes medications I should be aware of.
2. I also make it clear to crew, passengers, and guests: if I ask you to do something, there is a purpose. Instructions are never arbitrary. Especially in an emergency, tasks must be carried out exactly as directed.
3. In an emergency, it is critical to stay calm and move with intent. Do not run, do not panic, and do not create chaos. Listen carefully to the instructions you are given and carry them out with purpose.

Day Sail Basics

Every journey begins with the basics. A short sail may seem simple, but the risks are real. Preparation and awareness protect everyone onboard.

On my boat, everything important can be done from the helm. Here's what you need to know:

- Channel 16: Location and use. Radio is here, chartplotter shows position.
- Engine: How to turn on and off.
- Throttle & Steering: Operation of both.
- Autopilot: How to engage and disengage.
- PFDs: Location and proper use.
- Fire Extinguishers: Location and operation.
- Life Sling: Location and use.

- EPIRB: Location and activation.
- Man Overboard Drill: Yell 'MAN OVERBOARD,' throw flotation, stall the boat, follow masthead indicator, recover the swimmer.
- Navigation Lights: What they are, what they mean, and why they matter.

And finally, the most important rule of all:

If it didn't come out of you, it doesn't go into the toilet.

Seasickness

Seasickness can break even the toughest sailor. It's unpredictable, it's humbling, and it must be handled with awareness and care.

There's no need to talk about seasickness directly—mentioning it often makes people start to feel it. Just be prepared.

If seasickness occurs:

- Ensure hydration.
- Keep them outside in the fresh air, focused on the horizon.
- Place them on the lee side of the boat.
- Administer motion sickness medication if available.
- Have a bucket ready.
- Head back if the condition becomes severe.

Passage Briefing

When the trip stretches beyond a day sail, the stakes rise. Longer passages demand discipline, respect for the systems onboard, and clarity in communication. First, review everything from the Day Sail Basics briefing so the fundamentals are clear. Then move into the advanced topics that matter for long-term crew. Discipline with power, water, and watchkeeping keeps us safe across the miles.

I remind people: this is a boat, and it's meant to be fun—we're here to explore and see new things. But it's also my home, and I expect it to be treated with respect.

Pro Tip: The very first thing I do with new long-term crew or passengers is collect their passports and place them in the ship's safe. This keeps all documents together, secure, and ensures no one leaves the vessel without properly checking out.

Galley Etiquette

The galley is the center of life onboard. A safe, clean galley means safe, healthy crew.

- How to operate the stove and shut off propane.

- Safe use of appliances.
- Where to locate food supplies.
- Where dishes, cookware, and utensils are stored.
- Clean as you go—space is limited and hygiene is critical.

Sleeping & Personal Storage

Space is limited on a sailboat, and staying organized is essential. Every person needs to know where they will sleep and where they can stow their gear. With five people on board, clutter can quickly turn into chaos. Assigning sleeping spaces and storage areas keeps the boat clean, orderly, and safe for everyone.

Power

Power management is not optional—it is survival. Everyone must understand how we keep the boat running.

- Charge phones and devices during the day while solar is active.
- Locate the breaker panel and battery switches.
- No use of high-consumption appliances without generator running (hair dryers, curling irons, blenders, coffee makers, etc.).
- Understand AC vs DC.
- Inverter: location, purpose, and limitations.
- Generator: how to turn on and off.
- Instruments, radios, lights: how to power on and off.

Safety Gear

Safety gear exists for one reason: to save lives. Know it well before you ever need it.

- PFDs: Location and proper adjustment.
- Ditch Bag: Location and contents.
- Life Raft: Location and deployment.
- Flares: Location and use.
- Fire Extinguishers: Location and operation.
- Flashlights: Location.
- EPIRB: Location and activation.

Pro Tip: On my boat, I have five Mustang inflatable life vests. Each one is numbered for a reason. When new crew come aboard, I have them try on and properly fit their assigned vest. From that point on, it is their vest for the journey. In an emergency, there's no confusion—they know their number, and they grab it immediately.

Fire & Flooding

Fire and flooding are two of the most immediate threats at sea. Everyone must know where the systems are and how to use them.

- Bilge Pumps: Location and operation (manual and electric).
- Seacocks: Location and when to close them in the event of flooding.

Emergency Situations

Emergencies are rare, but when they happen, every second counts.

- Abandon Ship Protocol: The boat itself is the liferaft until it is no longer safe. Only leave in cases of uncontrollable fire or sinking.
- Medical Kit: Location and overview.
- Emergency Contacts: Who and how to call.

Make it very clear: the life raft is a one-way trip. You are never meant to return to the boat once you've deployed and boarded it. The vessel is always the safer option until it is absolutely no longer viable. The raft is for survival.

Crew Discipline

Order and discipline are non-negotiable at sea. They keep the crew safe and the vessel secure.

- No alcohol while underway.
- Narcotics are never allowed.
- Firearms are never allowed.
- Rest Schedule: Proper rest is a safety requirement.
- Smoking: If someone smokes, show them the designated area and ensure it's done safely.

Man Overboard Drills

Man overboard is the nightmare scenario. Recovery must be quick, coordinated, and practiced. There are a couple methods. Practice them with a flotation device. Never a human!

The Figure 8 Method

- Shout 'Man Overboard!'
- Throw flotation. Appoint a spotter.
- Beam reach six to eight boat lengths.
- Tack, then broad reach across your wake.
- Head up, ease sails, recover the swimmer at 1–2 knots.

The Quick Stop

- Shout 'Man Overboard!'
- Point into the wind, stop the boat.
- Backwind the jib, tack.
- Circle downwind, then jibe.
- Return close-hauled or head-to-wind, sails luffing, and recover the swimmer.

Watchkeeping

Standing watch is vigilance in action. It is the frontline of safety, and lapses put everyone at risk.

- Follow instructions precisely.
- Set a 30-minute alarm for checks.
- No sleeping on watch.
- Radar: identify targets and set range.
- AIS: understand CPA and TCPA.
- Do not leave the cockpit unless instructed.
- Always wear a PFD and remain clipped in.
- Know which steering system is active (autopilot, windvane, wind mode).
- No headphones while on watch. You must hear the boat, the crew, and the environment.

Additional Notes

Discipline and awareness extend beyond drills and checklists. Personal care and resource management keep the crew strong for the long haul.

- Conserve water even with a watermaker.
- Drink fluids regularly.
- Wear sunscreen.

Closing Statement

Safety is not a suggestion—it is the foundation of everything we do. Gear can be replaced, but lives cannot. Every checklist, every rule, and every drill exists to make sure we return to shore together. Take it seriously, respect the process, and we will not only be safer—we will also be freer to enjoy the adventure that brought us out here in the first place.