

# Safety minimums?

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JEFF MERRILL



This Kadey Kroger trawler is well designed for voyaging, but how well equipped is it with safety gear?

Elvis Costello’s song “Accidents Will Happen” is a catchy tune and, as it relates to boats, I like to focus on the “will” part. To comply with USCG regulations, your trawler needs to have some minimum safety gear aboard. These items must be identified or presented to the Coast Guard when you are boarded. Accidents *will* happen — they’re inevitable — so it’s wise to think this through and anticipate and accumulate what you need before you go out cruising, not just to follow the rules, but to be safe and prepared.

Preparation comes down to these three words: Are you ready? I overuse the expression “safe boating is no accident” when speaking to groups about offshore cruising, but it’s true. I believe your approach should be to do more than just the minimum as your family’s lives may be saved by your careful planning.

The USCG and other national authorities have developed fairly universal safety requirement standards, so you need to look ahead if you are cruising across borders to see what each country

demands. Regulations normally vary slightly due to boat length, so I encourage you to look this up online to see what rules apply to your specific trawler in the countries you plan to visit. Start with the USCG PDF pamphlet download called “A Boater’s Guide to the Federal Requirements for Recreational Boats and Safety Tips.”

## Loose items

For this article, my focus is on the “loose” safety items you need to have and other items for you to consider adding. I won’t review the boatbuilder requirements like navigation lights, air horn trumpets, backfire flame arrestors (for gas boats) and toilet/holding tank through-hulls. Remember, however, it is your responsibility to make sure your running lights are working since bulbs can burn out, and you also need to know when you can (and can’t) open your waste discharge through-hulls and how to position Y-valves. Hint: Leave all waste through-hulls closed at the dock.

Typical “loose” USCG minimum requirements include the following:

- Personal flotation devices (one wearable PFD for each person, and one throwable)
- Fire extinguishers (current dates, not expired)
- Sound-making devices (horn, bell)
- Visual distress signals (flares)
- Pollution regulations (oil and waste placards)
- USCG Navigation Rules of the Road booklet

As soon as you leave the dock, you are on your own, but this independence necessitates forethought. Sure, there are towing services and other boaters who may help you if you have an accident, but you should strive to be self-sufficient.

There is a good reason why safety is such a priority, and there are several common distressing situations that can happen on a trawler that would be mostly resolved by ensuring you have the mandated minimum safety provisions on board.

Here are a few disasters you may encounter and need to be prepared for. If you have a fire (most likely in the galley due to a cooking mishap), it would sure be nice to have a fire extinguisher close at hand. If your boat is punctured and sinking below the surface, do you have comfortable life jackets to wear that will keep you floating if you abandon ship? Do your life jackets have whistles attached to them so that you can be heard in a roiling sea with heavy winds? The whistle is not required, nor is a small strobe light, but I recommend they be affixed to your PFD.

Loss of your trawler should not

also mean loss of lives, so when you are going offshore it's smart to have a life raft and EPIRB. Neither is required, but both are common aboard properly prepared trawlers. My personal feeling is that the

minimum safety requirements are really not enough as you venture farther away from land.

If your vessel is stranded dead in the water, you can signal your location by using a flare. If someone

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### Safety items

- Inflatable safety harnesses (and tethers to jack lines rigged on deck)
- Comfortable life jackets
- Abandon ship "ditch bag" (complete with carefully selected necessary items)
- First aid kit
- Day/night flares
- Meteor/parachute flares
- Orange smoke signals
- Fire blanket
- Cyalume SnapLight sticks
- Waterproof flashlights
- Floating strobe
- Lifesling
- Immersion suits
- Carbon monoxide/smoke alarms
- Drogue
- Sea anchor
- Personal locator beacons
- Portable VHF
- Portable GPS
- Portable SART (search and rescue transponder)
- Binoculars
- Emergency bungs/plugs/cones for through-hulls
- Portable bilge pump
- Crow bar
- Signaling mirror
- Rescue tape
- Safety matches
- Survival food rations
- Drinking water
- \*Small metal pail (requirement in South Africa) for making a controlled signal fire
- \*Ax (requirement in Canada) to break through or cut away debris from a crash

Jeff Merrill

falls overboard, you're required to have a Type IV flotation device — typically a life ring. You can make this a more practical rescue device by connecting a waterproof strobe light on one end using floating polypropylene line tied to your life ring on the other end. This will give the MOB victim more to look and grasp for while reaching for the life ring. If you do have a MOB incident, sound the horn five times (DANGER). This will let the person in the water know you are aware they've gone over and are coming back to recover them.

If the weather collapses and you find yourself in a thick fog bank, having a bell and an air horn helps signal your presence to other boaters who are probably also cruising along slowly. When we lose our sight, we instinctively turn to our sense of hearing. Most of the newer VHF radios have a horn/hailer built in that will sound at regular intervals. Of course, AIS on your chartplotter and radar significantly reduces the stress factor when boating with limited or no visibility.

A small portable mirror can be used to catch sunlight and flash your location. Smoke devices are also very effective in bringing attention to your small floating blip on the great big ocean. Most offshore cruisers prepare and continually update their "ditch bag," a medium-sized floating waterproof case kitted out with safety essentials that is always ready to go in a flash if they have to abandon ship.

Since fires are potentially likely in the galley, I also advise my cli-

ents to get a fire blanket so that they can smother a flame. You need to think about first aid for injuries and damage control for crashes. See the accompanying sidebar for a list of loose items you may want to have on your trawler (the list is only a start).

There are two loose items required for environmental compliance (think pollution, not safety): an oil waste discharge plaque and a trash/garbage placard. Any vessel more than 40 feet in length must also have a written trash plan on board.



Having a life ring, line and light available on deck like this is good safety planning for a possible man-overboard situation.

Are you aware that a copy of the U.S. Coast Guard Rules of the Road book is also a must-have?

Don't forget you may have some built-in safety components, like bilge pumps, fire suppression systems and an anchor with ground tackle — all three can save the day. Your nav/com electronics suite has many safety features built in with

GPS, radar, chartplotters, etc. All vessels must monitor VHF channel 16 while underway. Become comfortable talking on VHF; it is an incredible communication tool but it can be intimidating to the uninitiated.

Since most trawlers also have a dinghy aboard, don't forget that your tender should also be outfitted with safety provisions such as fire extinguisher, horn, life jackets, etc.

### Do the research

Safety preparation is a deep subject that we are only skimming, and there are always new safety products coming on the market (the See Rescue streamer and Sirius Distress light are two relatively new ideas). Surf the web and look up the safety selections in catalog websites like Landfall Navigation and Defender Industries. Peruse trawler blogs and see what type of dangerous situations your fellow cruisers have been caught in and how they handled it. Study the USCG requirements and read the ColRegs to remain familiar with right of way, overtaking procedure, head-on situations, etc.

When I sell a new or used trawler, I often suggest to my clients that, prior to heading out for their first big cruise, they should pick an off weekend and make an appointment with their local USCG auxiliary who will conduct a courtesy vessel inspection. These wonderful volunteers will go stem to stern and write up a "fix it" ticket so that you can make sure



**A fire blanket is a good option for dousing small fires before they can grow into large ones.**

your trawler is in compliance.

By researching boating safety products online, you will discover a broad selection of items you may want to have aboard your trawler. It is your job to keep everything current, so check your flares' expiration dates and make sure everything is ready to go — life jackets, for example, should be out of their plastic packaging.

For my trawler-buying clients, I have created a briefing that includes every piece of safety equipment they own and where it is stored on board. If you would like to receive a copy of this list in a "fill in the blank" MS Word document, please send me an

email with "JMYS Safety Locations" in the subject line. This list is designed for trawlers over 40 feet in length and includes the USCG minimums (i.e., what to show when boarded) as well as some strongly recommended safety items like a fire blanket, Lifesling, EPIRB, life raft, survival suits, etc. It is organized to identify each item and its location so that you can find things quickly in an emergency.

Please take this article to your trawler and review your own safety package to not only make sure that you meet the minimum requirements, but also consider additional gear that other boat owners have acquired to make sure you dial-in your trawler for safety. Preparation and prevention minimize accidents — a good minimum standard to achieve. ■

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