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Ask The Captain

Capt. Lyman Louis

Fresh out of the boat show we're starting to see more activity on the waterways here in Portland. For those of you who are taking the first opportunity to use your newly purchased boat—and for those who just can't wait for the first sunny day—here's a couple of tips.

If you're new to boating, or just new to your new boat, have your dealer or sales person go over the boat with you from stem to stern. It is important that you know the specifics of your particular boat before you get out on the water.

I have run into far too many instances of boaters with newly purchased boats who don't know or understand the systems onboard. Things can happen quickly on the water so make sure that you are prepared with a thorough understanding of your boat and all of its features.

While there are many ways to break this understanding down, here's one suggested approach.

First and foremost, know where the holes in your boat. Nearly all boats have holes in the hull that allow different systems to draw water or discharge waste. On inboard/outboard powered vessels there's a huge hole that is filled with the lower unit and its mechanics.

All of these holes have the potential for failing and all of them need maintenance of some sort. Have your dealer (or if you have an older boat, your mechanic) go over these

items one-by-one until you know what they're for and how to maintain them.

You should also know what to do if you're onboard and they fail. Anytime water is coming into a boat unexpectedly there will be a sense of panic. If you're prepared for the possibility with materials to stuff into the hole(s), then the panic will be accompanied by a sense of having something to do rather than just a feeling of hopelessness.

By each of my boats' thru hulls I have an appropriate plug that could be stuffed into the void if the seal failed. I have also painted or taped the area red around these holes so they stand out against the gray bilge color. Anything I could think of to remind me where these potential problems are and what I will do to save my boat has been done before the problem occurs.

After you've found the holes, find the lubricants. The oil in an inboard engine is a starting place. Most boats these days also have power steering, trim tabs, power tilt and trim functions on the engine, and in some cases a multitude of other hydraulic systems. Knowing what these systems are and how (and when) to service them will help keep you out of the shop and on the water.

It seems obvious, but make sure you understand what types of cleaners to use on your new baby. Is that windshield glass or some sort of artificial product? Window cleaner may damage the product. Ask your dealer to show you how to keep any canvas and isinglass windows clean and scratch free.

These are expensive items to replace so keeping them in good order from the start will make your investment last longer and improve its value when you decide to move up.

If your boat comes with a trailer, don't forget to ask about its service. Trailers that are thrown in with the boats are still an expensive addition should they need to be replaced. You can keep your trailer longer by following the

manufacturer's directions for care. Is there a way to wash down the hubs after you've launched or retrieved in salt water? You should know!

If your boat comes with any electronics make sure you understand how to use them. If not, go purchase a VHF radio so you can have emergency communications at the ready. The US Coast Guard monitors channel 16 at all times and has excellent reception all along the Columbia and Willamette Rivers. Having a radio is the second most important safety tip.

Having PFDs (personal flotation devices or life preservers) is the most important safety tip. Your dealer may well throw some in with the purchase of the boat. That's great, but make sure that they are appropriate to your use. These are giveaways for a reason so take some time (and spend some money) to make sure that they will save YOUR life if something goes wrong.

Your dealer may also throw in dock lines, fenders, a fire extinguisher and other basic equipment. Make sure you understand what this equipment is and how to use it.

Here's a good tip: designate one line as your bow (forward) line. Many times these lines are left attached to a cleat and, through wave action and the movement of people in the boat, they can end up overboard and tangled in a prop. While the boat is on the trailer, cut the bow line such that if it does go overboard it stops short of the propeller. You'll still have plenty of line for tying up and one less thing to go wrong while underway.

Before you launch your boat, stop by your favorite chandlery and get an additional line that is equal to three times your boat's length. For example, if you have a 26 foot boat, get a length of line 75 feet long. It doesn't have to be expensive and a poly or nylon product will be excellent. This line should be stored with your safety gear, not used for tying down the tarp you use for a picnic umbrella.

A long line is useful for many situations including transiting locks, launching while single-handed, and rafting up to other boats at an anchorage. Keep it handy and keep it clean.

If your boat has a shore power electrical system make sure you know how to do a polarity check. Particularly at older marinas, it's easy to have an electrical problem that's hard to spot. New boats come with a built in test at the shore power panel. Ask your dealer to describe the panel and how you can know if the power you're connected to is properly wired. Since every fire on a Portland area boat in the past five years has been attributed to the shore power system or connection, this is something not to be taken lightly.

Boats with cabins and stoves must come with a carbon monoxide detector. Make sure yours is installed correctly and that you understand how it works, how to test it, and if there is any maintenance involved.

If you have a head onboard, make sure you know how to use it and how to pump it out. Dumping human waste overboard is illegal and your boat may not even be capable of pumping overboard. If it is able to pump overboard, the discharge must be secured in the off position. That means that while underway in inland waters it is not possible for someone to "accidentally" pump waste overboard.

Also make sure you understand which deck openings are for which tank. There is no end of stories about getting these mixed up with one another even on boats that have been owned by the same owner for years.

I recommend getting some of the brightly colored decals that read "gasoline" or "waste" or whatever the case may be. Putting diesel into the fresh water tanks is expensive. Trying to siphon fuel from the black water tank can be worse (yes, it's gross and it has happened).

I enjoyed meeting many of you at the Portland Boat Show. It was a good turnout and I look forward to seeing you out on the water soon.

Fair Winds and Following Seas,

Capt. Lyman Louis

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