

Pleasure Craft Regulations & Equipment

The Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA), on behalf of the UK Government, enforces the regulations to which vessels in UK territorial waters and under UK registration must adhere.

The Merchant Shipping Regulations apply to all vessels under the UK flag and vessels in UK waters or operating from UK ports.

Exemptions to the regulations are granted within the legislation; the size of a vessel, the number of passengers it carries on board and whether or not the vessel is used for financial gain are all factors which determine which of the regulations a vessel must comply with (such as manning requirements or mandatory equipment)

There are many terms used within the merchant shipping regulations to classify vessels. These are defined in full in the regulations. The following are a selection that you may come across with an indication of their meaning:

"small vessels" - under 24m in length (usually load line length but not always);

"pleasure vessels" - used for sport of pleasure (as opposed to financial gain);

"passenger ship" - carries more than 12 passengers regardless of its size;

"class XII vessels" - pleasure vessels of 13.7m in [registered*] length and over; * if a boat is not registered, length is measured from the forepart of the stem to the aft side of the head of the stern post or, if no stern post is fitted the fore side of the rudder stock at the point where the rudder passes out of the hull.

"categorised waters" - waters that are not classed as sea (see MSN 1827);

going to "sea" – proceeding outside categorised waters.

Many of the regulations that apply to pleasure craft stem from international conventions, such as:

International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea (IRPCS or COLREGs)

Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS)

Marine Pollution (MARPOL)

United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)

They are brought into UK law through the Merchant Shipping Regulations.

COLREGs

If you go boating on or near the coast the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea (IRPCS or COLREGs) will apply to you, as the COLREGs, as defined in rule 1, apply to all vessels upon the high seas and waters connected to the high seas which are navigable by seagoing vessels.

It is essential that you know these rules well enough to be clear when you are the stand on vessel, when you are the give way vessel and what the of correct action to take is when in close quarters with other vessels and to avoid a collision.

As well as the steering and sailing rules, the COLREGs dictate what day shapes and navigation lights a vessel must display to indicate its status to other vessels and when and what sound and light signals it must make. Yachts should note that although a tri-colour is permitted under the COLREGs (under 20m in length) using deck level port, starboard and stern lights in certain circumstances helps the officer of the watch on a larger vessel to identify you against background lights and establish the distance you are away from them more easily. Although the absence of a steaming light indicates that you are a sailing vessel, the COLREGs also have a provision for yachts to show an all round red over and all round green light at the top of the mast in conjunction with deck level port, starboard

and stern lights. This instantly identifies you as a sailing yacht and your deck level lights remove the ambiguity a tri-colour can cause.

Many nautical publications include core information from the COLREGs. The full text of the regulations is available from the RYA Shop in our publication G2 - International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea. This book has been prepared with the pleasure craft skipper in mind and includes notes to help yachtsmen interpret and apply the rules.

Before you can apply the COLREGs you need to establish whether or not a potential collision situation exists. Then you need to establish what action is expected of the vessels involved, when the action should be taken and whether the action of the give-way vessel alone will be sufficient to prevent the collision. A key element in this process is deciding whether the other vessel has seen you.

Questions such as "Have the people on the yacht sailing towards you checked under the genoa recently?" should spring to mind. If the vessel in question is large commercial ship, consider the size of your vessel and the distance it is away from you. If you cannot see the bridge of the ship from your boat, the chances are that the Officer of the Watch on that ship cannot see you!

The COLREGs do not give one vessel "right of way" over another and are clear that the stand on vessel must also take action if the action of the give way vessel alone is not sufficient to prevent a collision (or if the give way vessel takes no action). All the rules, relevant to a situation must be considered before decisions are made, as must the situation and the handling characteristics of the boats involved.

SOLAS

There were many issues contributing to the significant loss of life that occurred when the Titanic sank. These were addressed by the Safety of Life at Sea Convention (SOLAS) which is intended to preserve life onboard any ship or craft that goes to sea.

The SOLAS Convention did not apply to vessels of less than 150GT. Such conventions are however periodically reviewed and since 1 July 2002 SOLAS Chapter V which looks at the Safety of Navigation, has applied to "all ships on all voyages" except warships, other government owned or contracted ships and ships navigating solely on the Great Lakes of North America. SOLAS V therefore applies to UK pleasure vessels, although there are many exemptions leaving the following applicable regulations:

Regulation 19 - RADAR REFLECTORS

Regulation 29 - LIFESAVING SIGNALS

Regulation 31 & 32 - DANGER MESSAGES

Regulation 33 - DISTRESS MESSAGES - Distress Situations: Obligations and procedures

Regulation 34 - VOYAGE / PASSAGE PLANNING - Safe navigation and avoidance of dangerous situations

Regulation 35 - MISUSE OF DISTRESS SIGNALS

An explanation of these regulations can be found on the SOLAS V Regulations page.

MARPOL

Along with COLREGs and SOLAS, MARPOL the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships, stems from the United Nations (UN) and more specifically for marine matters the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), the UN agency which looks after maritime safety and preventing pollution from ships. A pleasure

craft's obligations under MARPOL are detailed in the Planning & Environment Section of this web-site and holding tanks are discussed within Boating Abroad.

UNCLOS

United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provides a frame work for the use of the oceans. It is this convention that defines the territorial waters of a country and whether a vessel is under flag state, coastal state or port state law. For more information see the Boating Abroad area of this web-site.

Manning

Exemptions to the Merchant Shipping (Safe Manning, Hours of Work and Watchkeeping) Regulations 1997 have been granted to pleasure vessels of less than 3000GT. For vessels of or exceeding 24m load line length and 80GT or more, MSN1802 details the manning requirements and MGN 156 the deck and engineering requirements. Craft of less than 24m (load line) length or less than 80GT simply need not comply. Therefore if your vessel is not used for financial gain and is either less than 24m (load line) length or less than 80GT, there is no requirement for you to have a certificate of competence to skipper the vessel in UK territorial waters or on the high seas.

Equipment

Similarly, there are exemptions for pleasure craft from the Merchant Shipping (Fire Protection: Small Craft) Regulations 1998 and the Merchant Shipping (Life-Saving Appliances For Ships Other Than Ships Of Classes III To VI(A)) Regulations 1999. Class XII vessels (pleasure vessels of 13.7m in length and over) are required to comply with these regulation, however practical problems came to light and owners now have the choice of complying with the existing Merchant Shipping Regulations or agreed equivalent standards as detailed in the Exemption in relation to Life-Saving Appliances on Class XII vessels and the Exemption in relation to Fire Protection on Class XII vessels.

The exemptions are published by the MCA in their "Information on the regulations applicable to pleasure vessels" leaflet. A summary of the exemptions compiled by the RYA is provided in the downloads area.

For pleasure craft of less than 13.7 metres in length, there are no statutory requirements for safety equipment other than those required under SOLAS V. That said, although safety equipment may not be required by law, it is essential that you properly equip your boat prior to putting to sea. The RYA Boat Safety Handbook (C8) makes recommendations on equipment for sail and motor cruising is a useful guide for owners of boats under 13.7m. Commercial vessels (used for financial gain) must comply with the appropriate "Code of Practice" which details both the equipment that must be carried on board and the certificates of competence required by the skipper of the boat.

Boats that are not "going to sea" i.e. remaining within Categorised Waters (as defined in MSN 1827), may come under the jurisdiction of a Harbour Authority, a Local Authority or a Navigation Authority. Further information can be found under Inland Regulations.

Byelaws and Local Regulations

Harbour Authorities may have local byelaws in force which apply to leisure boats such as speed limits within the harbour, restricted areas, and requirements to monitor specific VHF channels. Establishing what these are should be part of your passage planning. Some Harbour Authorities may have their own website and publish small boat guides e.g. The Port of London Authority website www.pla.co.uk. In addition, there are usually details

of byelaws in Almanacs and pilot books and the more important rules, such as speed limits are posted up on notices within the harbour.