

Great Job

Can I do it?



Ever fancied turning your hobby into your living? Paul Glatzel talks us through what it takes to become a commercial skipper and the qualifications needed.

Each year I speak to loads of people who are keen to turn their hobby of boating into a source of revenue. Many simply want to keep their current job and lifestyle but want to be able to do the odd bit afloat whilst a good number more want to achieve a fundamental change of direction and make their hobby in to a full time occupation. It seems to divide fairly evenly too between those keen to work in the UK and those keen on setting up abroad.

In this article we'll look at what you need to do to qualify as a commercial skipper, we'll look at the experience you need, the qualifications and how you go about getting those qualifications.

If you are one of the many thinking about such a change in direction, then the first thing to do is to start to gather information and form a plan. RYA Training Schools, their websites and existing skippers are great sources of information and should be bled dry of their knowledge. Once you have a clear idea which direction you want to go in then you can form your plan, it is probable that you will need to acquire a good number of qualifications along the way so a plan including timescales makes sense.

In this article we'll assume that we are considering vessels up to 24m in length and with a maximum of 12 passengers, as beyond this we are looking at a different ball game. You will also need to think about the type of vessel that you would want to Skipper as 8m RIBs and 46ft Motor Cruisers might necessitate different qualifications.

Assuming that you are looking at helming a RIB, then where you intend doing so will determine the qualifications

you need. If you are looking at working abroad, then you will need to clarify precisely what qualifications are required as it varies from location to location. Speak to other local operators to see what requirements are placed on them and speak to the local equivalent of the MCA. On the whole, RYA qualifications are recognised worldwide although you may need to evidence their equivalency to local qualifications.

Generally speaking you will need the RYA Advanced Powerboat Certificate (Commercially Endorsed), your RYA VHF Licence, RYA First Aid Certificate, RYA Sea Survival and a Medical. You might also need an approved Engine Maintenance Qualification – typically the RYA Diesel Engine or MCA Advanced Engineering Certificate.

In January 2005 there was a change to the RYA Advanced Powerboat Certificate in that certificates awarded before this date can be commercially endorsed whereas those awarded after this date cannot. Those seeking their Advanced Commercial Endorsement nowadays need to undertake their Advanced Powerboat Examination – see box.

There are actually a variety of RYA qualifications that can be commercially endorsed, these are Powerboat Level 2 & Advanced and Motor Cruising Dayskipper Practical, Coastal Skipper or Yachtmaster. When commercially endorsed, each of the qualifications allows you to helm a craft 'Coded' to operate within a certain distance of a specified point or from a 'Safe Haven'. Whilst it appears in theory that an Advanced Powerboat Certificate allows you to operate a twin engined motor cruiser up to 20 miles from a Safe Haven, realistically you should expect to qualify on the type of vessel that you will be helming – after all your employer will need you to demonstrate capability in that type of craft. Whilst Powerboat Level 2 and Dayskipper can be commercially endorsed (subject to certain criteria) they have very limited value and are not likely to be considered particularly seriously if you intend working in the sector given they are entry level qualifications.

All the qualifications in the world though are no substitute for experience and having 'been there and done it'. Part of your plan will need to include getting time

ADVANCED POWERBOAT EXAMINATION:

As mentioned, this was introduced in January 2005 and now must be undertaken by anyone seeking to gain their Advanced Commercial Endorsement. The Exam is run by either a RYA Powerboat Examiner or a RYA Yachtmaster Examiner with up to 3 people being examined in one session. Examiners have guidelines from the RYA in respect of how to run the exam but have the latitude to decide its exact make up themselves. A typical exam might be: Initial conversation with examinees to determine boating experience, background knowledge etc, on to water to assess ability in close quarter situations and with subjects such as man overboard. Back to land to undertake an exam paper (some examiners do this verbally) then plan a night passage. The night passage will typically require the examinees to find a number of unlit marks using a variety of navigational techniques. Then back on to water to execute the night passage. Throughout their time with the examinees, the Examiner is looking for evidence of someone who is clearly at home in the vessel both at night and in the light, who manages a safe vessel and will be able to deal with whatever eventuality is thrown at him or her when working. They will want to see evidence of good theory knowledge and practical application of a variety of navigational techniques. Examiners will not try to catch a student out with pretend 'problems' however, nor will they seek to instruct any areas if the examinee is deficient in them – after all it is an exam!

To attend the Exam the minimum requirement is 2 years relevant experience including night pilotage (as a guide 30 days, 2 days as skipper, 800 miles, 12 night hours). If you hold a RYA Advanced Powerboat Course Completion Certificate the seetime is reduced to: 20 days, 2 days as skipper, 400 miles, 12 night



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across a variety of vessels in a variety of places in various conditions. If you have your own craft then this might not be too difficult and you should look to create a plan to undertake a mixture of day and night passages to develop and hone your skills. If you don’t have a craft then you’ll need to be a touch more creative and look at investing time and effort in to getting the experience. A good idea is to frequent the various web forums offering yourself up as crew to others, look at the various powerboat clubs around and see if they’ll take non boat owning members, consider offering your services to Sailing Clubs as a helm – in short be inventive and determined!

Becoming a Powerboat Instructor is another option for those keen to work in the boating world. To become a RYA Powerboat Instructor you will need to undertake a Powerboat Instructors course run by a RYA Powerboat Trainer through a RYA Powerboat School. The course lasts three days and looks at the skills needed to instruct, the syllabus you are instructing and the key teaching points that you will need to get across whilst also assessing your suitability in respect of capability, knowledge and interpersonal skills. You will need to have been powerboating for at least 5 years (less if it is your full time job) and possess your Level 2, First Aid & VHF qualifications. Realistically though, to ensure the maximum ‘clear water’ between you and those you will teach, you would do well to look at having the Advanced Powerboat Certificate and Dayskipper Theory too. There are many powerboat schools around (particularly on the south coast) and for reliable good instructors there is a reasonable amount of work.

So here you are, it’s a year or three on, you’ve got all the qualifications and a good chunk of experience – where’s



the high paying international jet setting Skipper’s job? Like everything else we’ve looked at, getting the first few jobs takes time, effort and a concise, well written CV. You are quite likely to get your jobs through personal contacts and recommendations. Look to develop contacts with businesses and even if they don’t have work, stay in touch and seek recommendations from them Don’t be pushy though, and be prepared to take time and perhaps even some low level work to prove your capability and reliability.

Over time you’ll get there, you won’t earn millions, but being on the water will bring a smile to your face and give you great job satisfaction - particularly when your client asks what you do for a real job!

Paul Glatzel

Paul Glatzel is an Advanced Powerboat Examiner, is author of the RYA Powerboat Handbook and runs Powerboat Training UK in Poole.

ADVANCED POWERBOAT EXAMINATION Continued...

hours. Realistically though, these are bare minimums and most examinees have considerably more experience when they attend the exam. If you are just scraping through on the requirements you should consider whether you have enough experience. In respect of your theoretical knowledge the questions you will get asked (verbally and perhaps in a short test paper) are at the level of Dayskipper Theory and include subjects such as Course to Steer, ColRegs, Electronic Navigation etc.

You can book exams via the RYA website although more often they are booked via RYA Training Centres. Examinees will need to provide a vessel for the exam although may arrange with an RYA school the use of their’s. Cost is £123 for the exam plus £20 for the commercial endorsement payable directly to the RYA. Schools can make no charge for these exams although often examinees attend pre-exam work up sessions with a school to help them prepare.

More info: Entering “commercial endorsements” into Google throws up plenty of relevant information including the section on the RYA website.

CASE STUDY 1

Matt already worked in the boating industry in Malta but not as a Skipper. He’d been offered a job as the Skipper of a commercial vessel and needed to produce a variety of qualifications to do so. Whilst he had an acceptable number of hours across a range of craft, he needed to pass his Commercial Exam. To increase his knowledge and ensure he stood the best possible chance at the exam, he arranged a bespoke training package in Poole. He started with Coastal Skipper/Yachtmaster Theory (5 days), slotted in VHF, Sea Survival and First Aid before undertaking the Coastal Skipper Course and exam – a busy two weeks but he passed and is now back in Malta.

CASE STUDY 2

Island RIB Voyages was expanding its business with a new Channel Islands venture, having enjoyed success with its River Thames operation. John who runs the Channel Islands operation wanted two of the new Skippers for the Channel Islands – Tara and Jim – to get qualified. Tara was a Marine Biologist keen to work as a Skipper, whilst Jim wanted a wholesale change in direction from his former role as a Police Officer. Along with Jim they came to Poole to undertake their Course and exam and to fill in a few gaps qualification wise - like Sea Survival. After a week of strong winds and testing conditions the day of their exam dawned and they sailed through with Matt as their crew.