



# Bumps and scrapes!

There's probably no aspect of boating that causes more stress for many boaters than the return to their berth or pontoon at the end of a fun day on the water. In this article we'll look at leaving and coming alongside berths and how to make it all a bit more relaxing and straightforward.

**W**hether it is a marina berth, the need to come alongside a pontoon to have your RIB lifted on to a dry stack berth or perhaps just a visit to the fuel berth, it's guaranteed that when you come back in there will be a gallery of people watching your every move – or at least so it seems! This audience, coupled with a bit of tiredness and a healthy dose of wind and tide, is guaranteed to make life a bit more challenging than you'd really like it to be.

Before looking at the detail of manoeuvres that will hopefully help to take the stress out of this situation, let's look at the process that a boater should go through before undertaking any task afloat.

## Think APE! – Assess, Plan, Execute

**Assess:** Look around you. What is the wind doing? In what direction is the tide going? Are you near shallows? What other boats are around? Are there any other factors that need to be considered?

**Plan:** In light of your assessment what is your plan to complete the task? Don't forget the escape plan, too, in case it doesn't go quite right.

**Execute:** Obviously the execution of the plan. Be prepared to change.

APE merits remembering and applying simply because many people tend to quickly skip the assessment element and jump straight in with "right, what I'm going to do

is..." Generally a bit more assessment will lead to a better plan and a more successful execution. Given that we are talking about bringing your precious RIB alongside a pontoon or wall, then making sure it goes right is pretty important.

With this in mind let's look at the issue of coming alongside a pontoon. Initially we'll look at a long, straight pontoon with plenty of space. In an ideal world you would look to approach against the wind and tide, using the elements as a 'brake', helping you slow your approach. Whether you can use this brake or not, try to approach the pontoon at an angle of roughly 30°. Choose a point on the pontoon to aim at and start as far away as feasible – at least six boat lengths



– to allow you to line up and adjust your line as you approach. Use the minimum amount of power that you can by alternating between ‘ahead’ and ‘neutral’ – after all if you need more momentum you can always ‘add it in’ later, whereas if you have too much, then you will need to ‘scrub it off’ at some stage. As you move through the water you will be able to steer the RIB in alongside the pontoon, hopefully stopping alongside having judged it perfectly. If you haven’t and you still have a bit of speed, then momentarily engage ‘astern’ to arrest your forward movement. If need be, do so again if you didn’t initially leave it in gear long enough. You should now be alongside, stopped and able to secure your lines. The

sign of a good skipper at this stage will be fenders and lines rigged and the crew ready to deploy them. Don’t let the crew jump towards the pontoon, though, avoid mishaps by briefing them to lasso and secure to cleats from within the RIB.

If wind or tide is pushing the RIB off the pontoon then you may need to approach with slightly more speed to overcome the force pushing you off. Once again, line up your approach and alternate between ‘forward’ and ‘neutral’. When you are about half a

boat length off the pontoon turn the wheel towards the pontoon and momentarily engage ‘astern’. As in the previous example, repeat this action if you need to do so. With practice you will slide effortlessly alongside and parallel to the pontoon! How much you turn the wheel towards the pontoon before engaging ‘astern’ depends on the angle of the RIB to the pontoon; if the angle is minimal but you fully turn the wheel then the effect will be to pull the stern in too fast and to push the bow away from the pontoon. Practise this to get a feel for how much you need to turn in.

Of course, long, straight pontoons with plenty of space do exist but they are sadly pretty rare! More often than not you will need to approach a pontoon from a more pronounced angle. The fundamentals are the same but there is an extra technique that can prove useful. Approaching at roughly 45° it is unlikely that simply turning the wheel at the pontoon and going ‘astern’ will get the stern alongside. The problem is that as you keep the ‘astern’ on to pull the stern in, then the bow tends to move away from the pontoon leaving you a bit far off. To avoid this, as you approach the pontoon and are about a boat length short, turn hard away from the pontoon and momentarily choose ‘forward’. The effect will be to kick the stern

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towards the pontoon, however it will also increase your speed, so immediately and rapidly turn the wheel towards the pontoon and select a dab of 'astern'.

Remember though to KISS – Keep it Simple Stupid! If the wind or tide is helping you on to a pontoon or if you can use the wind or tide to help you 'ferry glide' towards it then use the elements to your advantage.

Another likely scenario is the finger berth. The principles are the same, however preparation is key. Facing forward in the berth you can refer to it as either a 'port side to' (the berth will be on the left) or 'starboard side to' berth. Apply APE and decide whether wind or tide is pushing you on to or away from the berth, or potentially into it, or perhaps acting as a brake. You will want your angle of approach to be roughly 30°. However, rather than simply driving into the berth, take the time to position yourself so the face of the berth is 'open' to you. For example, as you approach the berth can you see where you are coming alongside? If not go past the berth, turn, then approach. Taking the time to do this has the advantage of: 1) Giving you the chance to see and

assess the berth closely; 2) Approaching the berth so that your momentum carries you on to it rather than away from it, obviously enhancing the chances of getting it right.

So we've got into a berth, but what about leaving one in the first place? Once again keep it simple. If wind or tide is pushing you off, then use these forces to plan to drift into clear water. Ensure, too, that your crew use lines slipped around cleats rather than leaping into the RIB.

Aside from the elements pushing you off, generally speaking there are three ways of leaving the berth. Leaving by going 'ahead' on a straight pontoon might be okay, but bear in mind if you turn away from the pontoon and go 'ahead' all of the boat behind the helm position will kick towards the pontoon, potentially damaging the RIB. Often, leaving 'astern' is best; point the engine away from

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the pontoon and engage 'astern' to 'drag' the boat neatly from alongside. If you are pinned on to a berth by wind or tide consider using a line to 'spring' off the berth. Slip the forward line around a cleat ahead of the RIB and bring it back to the RIB. Reverse away taking up the slack, with the engine positioned so that it 'pulls' the RIB off the pontoon. Once the stern is clear then slip the line and reverse into clear water. Whilst there are other methods of springing off a pontoon this tends to be best for most RIBs.

Don't forget, though, that practice makes perfect. Certainly understanding the mechanics of coming alongside and leaving is useful, but if you really want to be that ribster that always seems to nail the perfect manoeuvre, then take a day off and practise coming into a variety of berths 20 or 30 times each. It's only by doing this that each manoeuvre will start to become second nature.

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