

# Weather to go or not?

It's always the way, isn't it? You've planned a great day out in the hope that you will get one of those flat, calm winter days, but then you get the weather report the day before and it's going to be blowing a hooley. Pretty predictable, perhaps, so what do you do - do you stay put or do you go?



**E**ach year we're all faced with this sort of decision; it's never easy to be sure that you've made the right choice even when you've got where you're going and are in the bar reliving the hairy moments. In this article the aim is to give you some guidance on how to approach the question of whether to go or not, and also hopefully provoke some thought about how to ensure that you, your crew and the boat are up to the job.

As a skipper you have responsibility for your crew, for yourself and for your boat. Equally, you also have a duty to others, as it really isn't fair to force the RNLI and coastguard to come to your assistance just because you wanted to blatt around in some grotty conditions that you weren't really suited to or prepared for.

Faced with less than ideal weather, the factors that you might consider in coming to the decision as to whether to go or not might include: how able and experienced are you? Experience develops over time, and whilst undoubtedly training helps to ensure that you are doing things the 'right' way, the key has to be spending plenty of time on the water. We all learn from the good times we have but we also learn lots



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from the times it doesn't go quite to plan. If you have your own RIB you are, of course, going to spend plenty of time afloat with it, but do ensure that you get out on other craft and under the guidance of other skippers. We each have our own way of doing things, and all of us have gained many

of our best ideas and ways of doing things by pinching them from others – after all, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery! The sign of a good skipper is knowing when to back off and say no; it is often a far braver, bigger decision to say no than to 'go for it' and regret it later

The crew need to be up to the job too. They will be placing their trust in you, so ensure the passage you intend making is within their capability: be certain that you understand their particular strengths and shortcomings. A crew that has a proven track record of working together before is

## CASE STUDY

A few years ago I took a RIB from Lymington to Portsmouth in daylight during a force 6-7 in a following sea in order to meet a yacht race that was due to arrive after midnight. The following sea made for a fairly fast run but lured me into a false sense of security as my speed steadily climbed until I got a wave wrong and stuffed it, filling the 8 m RIB up and almost rearranging my face on the console in the process. Suitably chastened, I made my way to Portsmouth somewhat slower and wary of what appeared to be worsening conditions.

At Portsmouth I picked up my four passengers and we headed off to meet the yacht off Cowes at about 1 am. It was clear that the wind had strengthened, and the Solent was its usual horrible self when faced with strong winds, and we encountered short

aggressive waves during the unpleasant run up to Cowes. The run back to Portsmouth alongside the yacht was extremely hairy, as it was running at probably about 13-15 knots in the dark, with 10-15 sponsors' boats jostling for position in the rough confused seas surrounding the yacht. The final straw was seeing an unlit yellow mark slide past the side of the RIB, close enough to touch while we were keeping up with the yacht - I was glad to reach Portsmouth and discharge my passengers. This then created the next big challenge - my brief was to return back to Lymington, but this meant punching straight into what was now a force 8 at 3 am single-handed in a deserted Solent.

The decision I faced was either to leave the RIB at Portsmouth and get a very expensive cab back or to go for it and 'not be a wimp'! When

I'm faced with any form of difficult decision in life, my tendency tends to be to follow my gut feeling. This told me to leave the RIB, as my great fear was being ejected if I got it wrong in the dark, standing no chance of surviving. At the time, whilst I was happy with the decision, it didn't stop me feeling a bit of a fraud, being of the opinion that I should get the boat back. Without doubt, though, the decision was the right one and I'm pleased I took it; okay, it meant needing to recover the RIB the next day, but this was a small price to pay. A skipper often needs to take tough decisions, and more often the harder decision is not to go, rather than to make the trip. In my experience, when you take such a decision, 99.9 per cent of the time it will prove to be spot on.



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far more likely to gel and deal with an issue than a group of individuals, each doing their own thing, who have never boated together before. It may sound a bit boring, but crew need training and practice to deal with incidents effectively. A fun day on the water can be enhanced by you, as skipper, creating various challenges for them to deal with. A pretend man-overboard scenario, where you test their response – throw a weighted fender over, then sit

at the back of the boat holding the kill cord (it will have gone with you!) to see how they react – will be great practice for them. Do this in various sea conditions; get them to do it a few times until they nail the approach and recovery – after all, your life may depend on it. Also let them helm – a good skipper doesn't monopolise the helm and never forgets that everyone is there to have fun!

It goes without saying that your RIB needs to be up to the

passage that you want to make. A 4.8 m RIB might be hugely capable but is a very different prospect to an 8.5 m diesel inboard. Choose a passage that suits your particular craft, and factor in the effects of fatigue, given the vessel you are using and how it is going to impact on you and the crew, and bearing in mind the seas that you are likely to face.

The set-up of the RIB is key too. Whilst RIBs are awesome sea boats, inevitably not all craft are equal, and some makes are far better suited to the rough stuff than others. Look critically at how your RIB is set up. Is everything stowed really well? Do you have enough of the right safety kit on board? As already mentioned, have you tested and practised your procedures to deal with difficult issues such as man overboard, steering failure, a loss of all electric nav systems etc? Whilst you are not quite the Royal Navy, remember that a well-practised, drilled and tidy boat will look after you far better than one that gets little-to-no



Photo: © Paul Hollander

input and care. In many ways, 'you get what you pay for'!

The planning process will embrace every aspect of the trip, but when planning the actual route some forethought could make all the difference to the conditions you face. Setting a course to benefit from the shelter of a shore or headland makes sense, as does avoiding tidal races around headlands and constrictions that, when coupled with a chunk of wind, make for a potentially dangerous passage. Whilst your RIB may be able to cope with pretty much anything the sea can throw at it, each wave that you can avoid will make all the difference in terms of wear and tear on the crew, prolonging their ability to keep going.

Given the title of the article,

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clearly more than a quick glance at the weather forecast has to be made. A fast RIB close to base can generally avoid bad weather, but when on passage you will have to deal with what you are faced with, so you need to know what the conditions are likely to be over the duration of the passage and how they may evolve. This is where an understanding of weather charts (synoptic charts) and the intricacies of the shipping and inshore waters is essential. To fully understand and be able to interpret them you need to become bilingual. The forecasts, whilst written in English, contain numerous words that have very specific meanings. For example, the words 'very poor' when referring to visibility actually



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specifically mean that the visibility is less than 1000 m, which is perhaps better known as fog! The word 'moderate' when referring to wave height indicates waves of 1.25 to 2.5 m, which in the scheme of things for a small RIB are pretty large. In short, unless you can translate from 'weather' to 'English' you cannot derive the full value from these forecasts.

Whatever the weather

forecast, you as skipper have to draw together all of the information about the weather, crew, boat, and nature of the passage, and decide whether or not it is safe to go. My general advice would be that if it feels wrong, then it probably is, and good skippers are not ashamed or scared to make difficult and potentially unpopular decisions. You may never know whether the decision you made

was right, but you can hold your head high and say it was certainly made for the right reasons.

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