

LEVEL TWO POWERBOATING

Is it really possible to teach the basics of powerboating and navigation in just two days? We sent Adrian Porter to find out.

The problem with having an experienced crew of people on the magazine's writing staff is that it can be hard to assess a training course from a novice's point of view. This is where I come in. My dirty secret (well, the one I am currently willing to share) is that my experience of powerboating only amounts to some spells as a young teen, carting my family in our tender to and from the family's boat. To make things right with the world, and to stop the rest of the magazine's journalists putting razor blades in my tea, it was time to ramp up my expertise.

Cobbs Quay

I travelled to the Powerboat Training Centre at Cobbs Quay Marina in Poole, where I was to attend the Powerboat Level Two course, otherwise known as the National Powerboat course. It requires no experience or prior knowledge and yet promises to impart all the skills necessary to pilot your own boat with confidence, in just two days.

It's a steep claim and yet the only thing asked of you is that you practise four knots: the clove hitch, the round turn & two half hitches, the sheet bend and the bowline. Instructions on how to tie them are sent out to all course participants prior to the start date and, thanks to a bit of practice, I started the course with a smug inner glow and extraordinarily secure shoelaces.

My fellow trainee, Alistair Sutherland, had already arrived when I walked in, and was attending to a coffee. The course is limited to a maximum of three learners per instructor, so groups are always small. I was greeted by the smiling figure of Don Roper, our instructor for the next two days. Mug of much needed caffeine in hand, the course officially began.





Training RIBs

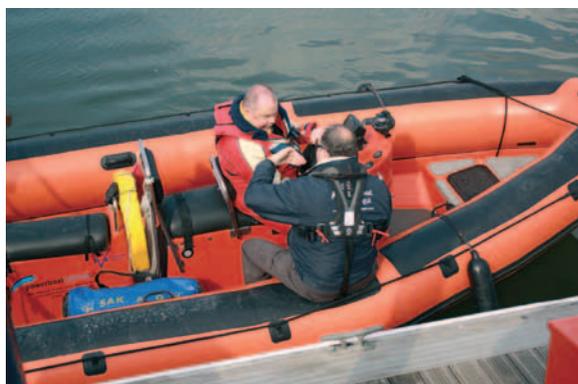
RIBs are used for the entirety of the course and, when you're bouncing off jetties during your first attempts to moor, it makes sense. The inflatable tubes mean you don't have to worry about stressed fenders or the sound of a splintering hull. Of course, you can choose to learn on your own boat and that's a great way to do the course, as familiarity with the boat will help your learning curve both during and after instruction. But if you do it that way, make sure that, in addition to all the standard equipment, you are well kitted out with protective fenders.

The red button

Only 20 minutes after having left the classroom, Alistair was nervously put at the helm of Nova and told to start the engine. And as soon as we shoved off, the first helmsman lesson began - the art of throttle control.

The idea is to minimise the possibility of accidentally slipping the lever straight from forward into reverse (or vice versa) and missing neutral. Missing neutral is very easy to do and can lead to red faces and insurance claims when manoeuvring in tight spots. We were also told to keep one hand on the wheel at all times and one hand on the throttle. Sounds simple doesn't it? But it actually took most of the two days to master, helped along by numerous offers from Don to bring out the gaffer tape.

Leaving Cobbs, we picked up the main channel, travelled past the impressive Sunseeker factory and got out into Poole Harbour. On the way, we were shown buoys, cardinal markers and



Day one on the water

I fully expected to be sat down for at least the first part of the morning and taught the basic theory regarding buoyage, navigation and manoeuvring. How wrong I was. Alistair and I had barely climbed into our foulies when we were marched to the docks. "I don't like to keep people in the classroom," Don explained. "Teaching theory will often go over the heads of those with no experience, so on this course, you spend 99 per cent of your time on the water". We were both pretty happy with that.

We reached the jetty and were introduced to a 5.6-metre Avon RIB with a 90hp four-stroke Mariner outboard. Before clambering aboard, we were shown how to check our lifejackets. We were then introduced to the features and functions of the RIB, briefed on what kit was on board and why it was there, and also given a quick overview of the engine and shown how to check it before starting. This may sound almost tedious, but it is extremely useful information and all things that a good skipper should know.

examples of who has the right of way. We would later study these basic elements of Rule of the Road back in class, but seeing them in action first certainly helps.

Buoys to men

The rest of the morning was used focussing on vital mooring buoy and man overboard drills. Starting with picking up a mooring buoy, we inevitably overshot, underpowered or completely missed our target at first, but with just a bit of practice and instruction, Alistair and I were lining up the RIB as we were supposed to and enabling the other to pluck the mooring buoy out of the water.

Before a sense of over-accomplishment set in, we moved on to man overboard procedures. A fender with a small chain attached (and a smiley face drawn on for good measure) was used as the token damsel in distress - or MOB. After the fender was unceremoniously tossed from the boat, we ran through the drill of shouting to alert the skipper,

and pointing at our fallen fender comrade, while the skipper manoeuvred into place. Using the 'Beam on Approach', we learned to place the vessel upwind of the MOB and allow the wind to push us alongside for the rescue.

Crucially, these exercises don't just teach you how to steer the RIB, but how a skipper and crew should interact in these situations, which is invaluable at a time of crisis. Our accident-prone fender now secure, we motored to Poole Quay harbour and tracked down some much needed lunch.

Slow is pro

On a full stomach, our next task was mooring to a jetty. "Slow is pro", we were told by Don. "If you have to use lots of power to manoeuvre, unless it's an emergency, you're doing it wrong." He was of course right. Mooring a boat can be done with an absolute minimum of engine thrust. Using no more power than the engine simply ticking over, we were shown how take the wind into account, plan your approach, and put your boat into a berth.

My turn at the helm. I approached the jetty at a good speed, angled the RIB like a pro and put it into reverse at just the right time to line myself up parallel with the jetty. Had it not been for the clear foot gap between boat and berth, it would have been great.

Back out in the bay we were taught how to deploy the anchor, both as the skipper and as the crewmember. We were told the difference between all-chain anchors and 'warp' (the line part of a chain and rope mix) and how much you should deploy of each. After a bit of practice, we motored back to Cobbs for the last challenge of the day - turning a boat in a confined space.

The day ended back where it began, back in the classroom, with another steaming mug of heavily caffeinated Black Gold. We went over buoyage and COLREGs in more detail, had a look at some (dummy) flares and were told when and how to use them. Mentally and physically drained, we stumbled away, amazed that the first day was already over.

Back out on the water

Once we had studied the charts and made our pilotage plans (see box, right) we donned our foulies and headed down to the dock. Here we were

If the first day was all about getting comfortable with the equipment and the basic manoeuvres, day two was about turning a pencil line on a chart into a physical journey on the water



Day two pilotage plan

Suffering from a good night's sleep, we rendezvoused back at the office for 0900. Coffee in hand, we revised what we had learned the prior evening before coming face-to-face with our first Admiralty chart. We were told how to interpret the chart. We found out what the funny numbers peppering the entire surface actually mean and shown how to use plotters and dividers. Next, we were given an explanation of tides, shown tide tables and asked questions to make sure we understood.

Don then picked a starting point on the chart and demonstrated how you would set out a pilotage plan between two markers. He then selected another marker far outside the harbour and asked us to make a full pilotage plan, one we would be following later that day. Armed with our new knowledge and endless supply of hot beverages, we set about the task.



Above:
The satisfaction you get from relating a chart to a seascape (and understanding what you see) is immense

Left:
The Ribcraft enabled us to get to grips with the feel of a larger, more powerful boat

introduced to 'Harrier', a 7.8-metre Ribcraft of black hide and tough looking chrome, all propelled by a 225hp Yamaha four-stroke outboard. A different animal entirely from the first day.

Checks made of boat and kit, we jumped aboard and motored to Poole harbour for further mooring and turning practice. By this point in the course, confidence was cautiously seeping in and we found our command of the craft had really improved. Pleased with our progress, we rewarded ourselves with lunch. Shortly after, we headed back out to Poole harbour and reached for our pilotage plan.

Proper Pilotage

Using the ship's compass in conjunction with our pilotage plan, Alistair and I alternated as skipper of the vessel while the other read out instructions, gave new bearings when the course changed and fixed our position against noted markers. A testament to the skill of Don's teaching, we completed the voyage without incident.

Now well out at sea, it was time for some high-speed manoeuvres. After performing snaking S-bends and fast U-turns at 25 knots, and still grinning from the effects, we were cajoled into returning to Poole harbour, with its now imposing speed limit, and navigated our way back to Cobbs. For the last time, we executed port and starboard-to mooring manoeuvres and performed competent confined turns (much to the satisfaction of our instructor). It was all over far too quickly. Soon after tying up for the last time we were presented with our certificates and given feedback on how we had performed over the two days.

Picture perfect

Alistair's final mooring manoeuvre of the day was of textbook quality and an excellent way to conclude the course:

1. Wind evaluated, the approach is set and the RIB is edged toward the jetty.
2. Keeping it mostly in neutral and just using nudges of forward gear to maintain momentum, Alistair starts to turn the RIB.
3. Letting it drift in, Alistair now turns the wheel towards the jetty. This will touch the nose of the RIB towards the berth, but as he puts it in reverse, will also pull the stern of the boat in, slowing the RIB.
4. With only a slight touch on the starboard fender, the RIB halts alongside the jetty.
5. The crew gets out and fastens the RIB, skipper turns off the engine, and you all report to the nearest pub for a celebratory pint.

Verdict

Whether you want to learn or re-learn your powerboating skills, the Level 2 Course is a great way to do it. Having completed the two-day session, I feel confident about practising what I have learned and, while I won't be planning any long voyages yet, I look forward to making short coastal hops. An awful lot is packed into just two days but if you need to brush up, the full syllabus is available on the Powerboat Training UK website, as well as in the RYA Powerboat Handbook, which comes free with the course.

01202 686666 / www.powerboat-training-uk.co.uk ■



The next step

Completing the Level Two course qualifies you to apply for your International Certificate of Competence (ICC), a requirement for those wishing to boat in Europe. The ICC costs £40 to obtain, but is available free to RYA members. Given that RYA membership costs just £39 per year, it makes good sense to join up. Just remember, if you own and use a VHF unit, you need to pass the dedicated VHF course.