About Offshore Water Vessels
Large passenger water vessels include ferries, cruise ships, tour boats, sport-fishing boats, airboats, whale-watching boats, pontoons and yachts over 30 feet long. They can be either commercial or recreational vessels.

Amphibious boats known as duck boats are not recommended due to the hybrid (land to sea) nature of these vehicles, the notable lack of regulation around safety and evacuation protocols and the severity of loss with recent duck boat accidents.

Know where to go on a voyage. Look for ports with access to oceans, lakes, rivers, and coastal waterways.

**Note:** Small craft, such as canoes, kayaks, rowboats, and small sailboats are not considered offshore large passenger water vessels. If you plan to use these types of small craft, see specific chapters about them in *Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints 2020-2021*.

Learn More:
- Find life jackets to borrow in all 50 states: [Boat U.S. Foundation](#)
- Resources, regulations, and statistics: [U.S. Coast Guard*](#)
- Federal requirements for recreational boats: [U.S. Coast Guard Boater’s Guide](#)
- Free basic boating safety courses for each state: [Boat U.S. Foundation](#)

*The United States Coast Guard app (IOS and Android) provides state boating information, a checklist of required safety equipment, and a way to report hazards, pollution, or suspicious situations.

Include Girls with Disabilities and/or Special Needs
Talk to girls with disabilities and/or special needs and/or their caregivers, and ask about needs and accommodations. Connect with the ship or boat operator to determine any access or safety steps that need to be arranged in advance. Additionally, the [United States Access Board](#) has relevant resources and information for people with disabilities and/or special needs.

Safety Gear
The gear you will need will depend on the type of vessel, length of your trip, location, and weather.

**Choose life jackets or Coast Guard approved personal flotation devices (PFDs) carefully.** Must be Coast Guard–approved. Find approval on the label located on the inside back of the jacket.

**Ensure life jackets fit snugly.** Check the “user weight” on the label to make sure a jacket is the right size for a child. If the label is not readable, do not use the jacket—and do not use inflatable life jackets for youth or
Review and document your Emergency Action Plan (EAP) ahead of time before taking girls out for this activity. Think through scenarios of what can go wrong such as an accident, physical injury to a girl, missing girl, or sudden illness.

**Teach girls these general safety rules:**
- Do not run at any time while on the vessel, dock, or near the water.
- Listen to the orientation and follow the rules noted.
- Use the buddy system.
- Follow instructions in an emergency.
- Find out what to do if someone falls overboard or if other accidents occur.

**Select a qualified operator.** Commercial vessel operators are licensed through the U.S. Coast Guard. In foreign waters, the “flag of the ship” (the country under which it is registered) dictates the training and licensing required. These standards can vary widely. In the United States, ensure passenger vessels (ferries, cruise ships, and whale-watching boats) that carry more than six passengers are licensed by the U.S. Coast Guard. The Coast Guard examines operator training and certification, vessel condition, and safety equipment. Federal laws and regulations are supplemented by state laws and international navigation standards.

**Passenger Vessel with a Commercial License**
In the United States, you can expect a passenger vessel with a commercial license to:
- Give a basic safety orientation, possibly through a loudspeaker. The orientation should cover the location of life jackets and other critical information. On cruise ships, an evacuation drill will be held.
- Have a professional, licensed crew that has training and experience in handling emergency situations.
- Possess current liability insurance.
- Be a well-maintained vessel being used as it was designed to be used.
• Know about state and federal regulations for life jackets. If you are instructed to use a life jacket, you must do so.

Privately Owned Recreational Vessels (Yachts)
In the United States, privately owned recreational vessels (yachts) are governed by Coast Guard requirements and by state training and licensing requirements, which vary by state. When in doubt, follow the guidelines that are the strictest. Check with the owner about these items:

• The operator must have sufficient training and be licensed to operate that type of vessel. Contact GSNorCal or the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary for guidance. Training includes safe operation, weather conditions, emergency response, navigation, and rules of the waterway.
• The vessel must have had a U.S. Coast Guard safety check within the last year.
• The vessel is currently registered by the state or is “documented” (a federal registration type) by the U.S. Coast Guard.
• Life jackets or Coast-Guard approved personal flotation devices are available for the number and size of all passengers on board.
• Adequate liability insurance ($1 million or more) is in effect.
• The vessel is well maintained and has all safety equipment required for its type and purpose.
• Passengers must wear a life jacket while the vessel is moving, unless in an enclosed cabin.
• A throw-able floating device (i.e., a Type IV cushion, horseshoe buoy, or life ring) is available and placed where it is easily and quickly accessible. Ask about the procedures to follow if someone falls overboard.
• File a float plan to communicate your route.

Chartered or Rented Vessels
The group rents a chartered vessel for a specified length of time. Charters may or may not include a captain and/or crew.

If a boat is chartered with a crew, use the guidelines (above) for privately owned recreational vessels.

If a vessel is chartered without crew, you will need to provide your own captain and crew. Both must meet training and licensing standards designated by the U.S. Coast Guard. The standards that apply will depend on the size and type of the vessel.

Cruise Ships
Before you book, check the Vessel Sanitation Program ratings of the Centers for Disease Control CDC Vessel Sanitation Program, which routinely inspects ships for cleanliness, repair, food preparation, and storage.

Book cabins in a block either across the hall from or next to one another so that your group stays together. Teach and use the buddy system and have a plan for communicating if members of the group are separated. Be aware that cell phones may not work on board.

Also, be sure to secure valuables in the ship’s safe.

Follow Girl Scout standards and the guidelines in Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints 2020-2021 for use of swimming pools, climbing walls, snorkeling, and other higher-risk activities. Choose shore excursions carefully, keeping in mind that cruise ships and related vendors are not aware of Girl Scout standards. Be thorough in asking questions about safety.

Know, too, that often other countries do not maintain the same strict boating laws as the United States does. Research the standards of the country you are planning to visit; if standards seem poor, find out how to best ensure safety, or avoid unsafe situations completely.
Additionally, suggest that girls and adults who get motion sickness consider taking a remedy. Dramamine, Bonine, or a homeopathic remedy are all options. Let troop families decide whether to use these, and if they do, let them know that the remedies are more effective when taken in advance. Other tips:

- Bring mint, ginger candies, gingersnaps, or plain crackers to settle queasy stomachs.
- Have seasick persons stay on deck in the fresh air, if possible. Have them keep their eyes on the horizon. Going below deck can worsen symptoms. The stern (back) of most boats is usually calmer. However, avoid this area if exhaust fumes are a problem.

Respect the environment. Choose responsible operators who follow local environmental laws. Whale-watching boats should respect wildlife and should not aggressively chase or harass the whales.

Check weather with ship operator. If lightning or high winds are expected, consider rescheduling.

**Girl Scouts of Northern California’s Approval Process for going on an Offshore Water Vessel**

Going on an Offshore Water Vessel is considered a high-adventure activity and must be pre-approved by the council.

- **Trip or High-Adventure Approval Form:** Submit the online Trip or High-Adventure Approval Form to council at least 4-6 weeks prior to your activity. Gather the following information to complete this form:
  - Confirmation that your chaperones are registered members of Girl Scouts of Northern California and have a current background check. Troop Leaders can find this information in their Volunteer Toolkit.
  - Name of First Aider and a copy of their current CPR/First Aid certification card. Certification needs to be renewed every two years. If you are hiking or backpacking farther than 30 minutes from a medical facility, please have the information of the member, who is certified in Wilderness First Aid, accompanying your troop.
  - Confirm that the necessary online and in-person courses have been completed for this trip. You can find more information or register for these courses in your Volunteer Learning Portal in the section called Trip & Outdoor Advisor.
    - For example, the **Camp Out course** is required for all camping trips that involve advanced outdoor cooking or camping trip with girls to a campground or other non-GSNorCal outdoor facility for longer than 1 night without indoor plumbing and electricity. Girls should have already had practice sleeping and cooking outdoors.
    - The **Extended Trips course** is required for troops traveling three (3) nights or more.
    - The **Backpacking course** is required before you take girls on an overnight backpacking adventure.

- **High-Adventure Approved Vendor List:** GSNorCal troops/groups must select a high-adventure vendor from the High-Adventure Approved Vendor List, which consists of organizations that meet Girl Scouts safety and insurance requirements for the activity. For the safety of our members, before a troop uses a high-adventure site/vendor for a troop or service unit event, the council must approve the high-adventure site/vendor. This process is designed to ensure a safe experience and protect the council’s and volunteer’s legal interests.