

Safety Activity Checkpoint Offshore Water Vessels

HIGH-ADVENTURE ACTIVITY: Trip or High-Adventure Approval Form Required



Large Passenger Vessels

Includes:

Ferries / Cruise ships
Chartered fishing boats
Air Boats
Pontoons
Whale watching/Tour Boats

Council Approval: Required

Activity Permitted For: D B J C S A

About Offshore Water Vessels

Large passenger water vessels include ferries, cruise ships, tour boats, sport-fishing boats, airboats, whale-watching boats, pontoons and privately-owned boats and yachts. 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, waterski, or wakeboard boats 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 2023-2024](#).

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.

Making Activities Accessible

In order to make your activity accessible to girls of all abilities, it's important to communicate with all girl attendees and their caregivers to learn about and accommodate their varied support needs. For resources and information on accessible sport and adventure activities, visit [Move United](#). Additionally, the [United States Access Board](#) has relevant resources and information for people with disabilities and/or special needs.

Equity

In addition to physical and social-emotional disabilities, consider the history, culture, and past experiences of the girls in your troop that could affect a girl's ability to equally participate in an activity. Work with girls and families to understand how an activity is perceived. Ensure that all girls and their families feel comfortable that they have access to whatever is needed to fully participate, such as the proper equipment, prior experiences, and skills needed to enjoy the activity.

Safety Activity Checkpoints

Standard Safety Guidelines. Refer to the “Standard Safety Guidelines” in the [Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints](#) which apply to all Girl Scout gatherings and activities. When the adult-to-girl ratio, or other safety parameters, are stricter for a specific activity than in the Standard Safety Guidelines, always follow the stricter parameters in the activity chapter.

COVID-19 Guidelines. Review the “Coronavirus Safety in Girl Scouts” section in the [Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints](#) under the “Standard Safety Guidelines” section and be certain to consult with [GSNorCal’s specific COVID-19 guidance](#). When applicable, always call ahead to the vendor, property or facility involved to check for their COVID-19 safety requirements as you prepare to take girls for this activity.

Emergency Action Plan (EAP). 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.

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 adults. Once you have found the right fit, fasten all clips, zippers, and straps, then pull up on the shoulder straps. The jacket should be snug enough that the chin and earlobes cannot slip through. Tighten straps as necessary.

Be vigilant. Check to see that all life jackets are in serviceable condition: no broken clips, straps, or zippers. Make sure the life jackets are not waterlogged or torn.

Ensure each child and adult wears a life jacket at all times while on a recreational vessel, unless in an enclosed cabin. They must also wear one whenever a commercial vessel operator instructs them to do so, even on the dock.

Follow your state’s laws about the use of life jackets. Laws may differ depending on a child’s age, the type of boat, and the type of boating operation.

Use safety gear as required by the U.S. Coast Guard or by your state’s boating and waterways regulations. Reputable ship operators will comply with these laws. Specific gear varies by ship size and use. Ask for an orientation on how to use safety gear, if appropriate. Take care when engaging ship operators outside the United States.

Additional gear/supplies:

- Layered clothing to protect from wind, sea spray, and other weather
- Non-slip, closed-toed shoes
- Seasickness remedies (see below), if needed
- Bottled water and healthy snacks
- Binoculars
- Hat or visor

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.

All Vessels: Carbon Monoxide Warning

Never allow "teak surfing," swim platform dragging, or bodysurfing behind any vessel. Do not operate a motor or generator while anyone is on or holding onto a swim platform, swim deck, swim step, or swim ladder, except for a very brief amount of time when docking, or entering/exiting the vessel. Carbon monoxide emitted at the stern (back) of the boat can cause death in these situations.

Passenger Vessel with a Commercial License (Ferries)

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.
- If over 30 feet in length, the vessel should also:
 - Have had U.S. Coast Guard safety check within the last year.
 - Adequate Marine or Boat Liability insurance (one million dollars or more) as effect.

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 2023-2024](#) 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, have a current background check, completed the troop chaperone course and troop driver course (if transporting girls), and completed the [California State Mandated Reporter Training](#). 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.
 - The **Trip & Outdoor Advisor Course** is required for all overnight and [high-adventure activities](#).
 - 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:** If using an outside vendor for backpacking, GSNorCal troops 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 GSNorCal's and volunteer's legal interests.