

USA TODAY

Passengers outnumber lifeboats and rafts

Gary Stoller. USA Today. Arlington: Jan 11, 1999. page 03.B

SPECIAL REPORT: PASSENGER BOAT SAFETY

USA TODAY investigative travel editor Gary Stoller rode 10 boats on both sides of the USA to learn about their out-of-the-water lifesaving equipment. Most carry far more passengers than their lifeboats and rafts can handle. However, all met Coast Guard regulations for lifeboats and rafts. Coast Guard officials say passenger boats should publicly post inspection certificates that disclose the number and capacity of lifeboats and rafts aboard.

Anacortes, Wash., to Orcas Island, Wash.

Aboard the Hyak: The lifeboats and rafts could not be seen from the public areas on the ship, but ferry officials say there are enough to accommodate 195 of the 2,500 passengers permitted on board.

Stan Stumbo, a naval architect for the ferry system, says: "We wouldn't want to add any more survival craft" because all state ferries operate 2 miles or less from land and 15 minutes or less from a ferry slip. Stumbo says other options can be used in an emergency, including intentionally grounding the ferry or evacuating passengers onto nearby ships.

The boat's inspection certificate was inside a frame. Only its first page could be read, and it did not include any information about out-of-the-water lifesaving equipment.

Clinton, Wash., to Mukilteo, Wash.

Aboard the Cathlamet: Ferry officials say the ship, which shuttles commuters north of Seattle, carries out-of-the-water equipment for 195 of the 1,200 passengers permitted. The equipment and inspection certificate was out of public view.

Hyannis, Mass. to Nantucket, Mass.

Aboard the Eagle: On a 135-minute trip to Nantucket in early December, the Eagle is carrying out-of-the-water equipment for 945 passengers. The boat carries a maximum of 945 passengers in the winter and 1,494 in the summer, says Jim Swindler, director of maintenance for the Woods Hole, Martha's Vineyard & Nantucket Steamship Authority.

On the mezzanine deck, a safety placard that once said "Keep off stairways when vessel is docking" is broken and unreadable.

"That's a safety item that should be taken care of in 24 hours," Swindler says.

The ship's inspection certificate is not posted in public. A crew member says it's in the captain's office. Swindler says it should be posted publicly.

Nantucket, Mass. to Hyannis, Mass.

Aboard the Grey Lady II: Out-of-the-water safety equipment is available for 75 people -- enough for everyone on board. Though the catamaran can accommodate 150 people, the Grey Lady II is limited to 70 passengers.

Murray Scudder, vice president of operations for Hy-Line Cruises, says Hy-Line's traditional ferryboats, which carry 450 to 800 passengers from Cape Cod to Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard during the summer, carry no out-of-the-water equipment.

He says the inspection certificate is kept in the pilot's house and, contrary to what Coast Guard officials say, doesn't have to be publicly posted. "We'd let in anyone wishing to see it," he says.

Woods Hole, Mass. to Martha's Vineyard

Aboard the Islander: This 192-foot ferry, which makes a 45-minute run between Cape Cod and Martha's Vineyard, carries out-of-the-water equipment for a total of 620 people.

In the cold-water winter months, the number of passengers is limited to 620, ensuring 100% out-of-the-water protection, Swindler says. In summer, the same amount of out-of-the-water devices are carried, although the boat can carry up to 796 people. The boat does have an inspection certificate publicly posted that lists out-of-the-water equipment, but the information is difficult to understand.

Hingham, Mass. to Boston

Aboard the Nora Vittoria: The out-of-the-water equipment on the high-speed catamaran accommodates 250 people -- 105 less than the boat's maximum occupancy. Rick Nolan, managing partner of Boston Harbor Cruises, says no out-of-the-water equipment is needed on the route, but it's carried because the Nora Vittoria sometimes goes on winter whale-watching excursions.

The Nora Vittoria has a crystal-clear sound system. A detailed safety announcement points out where the "life rafts" (actually inflatable buoyant apparatus) and life jackets are.

The boat's inspection certificate hangs in the boat pilot's house, a restricted area. Coast Guard officials at the agency's headquarters in Washington say the certificate should be posted in an area where it is "likely" to be seen.

Boston to Hingham, Mass.

Aboard the Laura: Although it travels the same route as its sister ship, the Nora Vittoria, the 101-foot Laura carries no out-of-the-water safety equipment. The boat seats a maximum of 350 passengers.

A diagram posted on a wall points out the locations of life floats (which don't keep passengers out of the water) and fire extinguishers. The boat did not have life floats, however, and fire extinguishers were not in their designated positions.

Nolan says the life floats are not required on the Laura's current route and were removed several months ago. The discrepancies will be caught in an upcoming internal safety audit and corrected, he says. On the same route last December, a fire broke out in the engine room of another of Nolan's commuter boats, the James Dougherty, which was carrying no out-of-the-water equipment. All 39 passengers had to don life jackets and evacuate onto another vessel. Nolan says the inspection certificate is posted in the pilothouse.

Boston Harbor

Aboard the Foster: This 38-foot boat, which shuttles passengers from downtown Boston to Logan airport, carries a maximum of 28 passengers and has no out-of-the-water lifesaving equipment. There is a life float for 15 people to hang onto in the water. No out-of-the-water equipment is needed, the captain says, because the boat operates within a mile of shore.

Instructions are posted on a wall in the indoor seating area if someone goes overboard: "Throw a ring buoy overboard as close to the person as possible." There are instructions for life jackets made by a manufacturer named APCO. A company named Stearns made the jackets aboard the ship. "With those directions, passengers could still figure out how to don the life jackets, but the Stearns directions should be posted," says Richard Hiscock, a marine safety consultant.

Its certificate is not publicly posted. Boston Harbor Commuter Service, which operates the Foster, did not return calls for comment.

Bridgeport, Conn., to Port Jefferson, N.Y., on Long Island

Aboard the Park City: The 288-foot ferry has out-of-the-water equipment for 500 people -- two lifeboats that can each carry 25 people and 18 life rafts that can each hold 25 passengers. The capacity of the equipment is half the maximum amount of passengers allowed on board from May 15 through Oct. 14. The boat would be required to carry more out-of-the-water equipment during the rest of the year, but its operators instead choose to restrict the number of passengers to 500 in the cold-weather months, says Fred Hall, vice president of Bridgeport & Port Jefferson Steamboat.

There are no signs saying where the life rafts are located.

"I have no idea why there are no signs," Hall says.

"I've seen some life rafts on a lower deck, but the public generally knows that life rafts and equipment are usually on the top deck."

The certificate of inspection is not posted in a public area.

Port Jefferson on Long Island to Bridgeport, Conn.

Aboard the Grand Republic: Like its sister ship, the Park City, the Grand Republic has out-of-the-water equipment for 500 of the maximum 1,000 passengers allowed on trips from May 15 through Oct. 14.

During the rest of the year, Hall says, the maximum is 500. He says that since he joined Bridgeport & Port Jefferson Steamboat in 1976, no emergencies have required the out-of-the-water equipment.

The Grand Republic pulls out of the Port Jefferson harbor with only one of two engines operating. No signs inform passengers that they are traveling on a boat with only one engine working.

"Maybe we could have communicated that better," Hall says.

A certificate of inspection is not visible in a public area on this 261-foot ferry.

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