

Life Rafts

First - Get Ready for Your Last Resort

The absolutely last thing any Vic-Maui competitor wants to think about is abandoning the ship half way to Hawaii. Which is precisely why thinking about the life raft should happen early in the process.

While “stepping up into the liferaft” off a sinking boat has not happened in a Vic-Maui (touching wood here), it is still something that needs to be thought through. What kind of raft do I need? Where do I store it? How do I deploy it? These are all questions that need to be considered.

The first decision is type of raft. Readers of Rousmaniere’s book *Fastnet, Force 10* will remember a picture of 2 sailors barely hanging onto a chunk of a disintegrated liferaft surrounded by foam - you don't want one of those liferafts. The correct liferaft (and required by safety regulations) is one built to the SOLAS LSA Chapter IV or to ISO 9650 1-A standard and designated for ocean passages. Rafts built to lower standards and/or sold as “coastal” or “cruising” could leave you in a bad situation. Major marine safety companies including sell and rent approved rafts. But if the specification sheet does not specifically say SOLAS or ISO 9650, then the raft is not for you. And this seems obvious, but the liferaft(s) must accommodate all of the crew – no one wants to swim!

The second decision is where to store the liferaft. It is bulky, heavy and awkward, but it won't do any good stored in the forepeak when the boat suddenly hits an object and starts sinking. Before where, there is a decision on soft valise or hard shell liferaft packing, but knowing that the liferaft has to be protected and out of the weather, having a hard shell provides more storage options. With modern materials the difference in size and weight for the hard shell is minimal and it provides better protection from accidental damage.

The best option for storage is in a dedicated cockpit locker. Most modern boats built to the ISO 12217 standard (ie; most Beneteaus and similar boats) come with a shallow cockpit locker. While this is a convenient place for spare sheets, fenders, cleaners, etc., it is really designed with liferaft storage in mind. Second choice is strapped into a dedicated rack bolted to the cockpit floor. Third choice is a rack on the push-pit or transom (assuming it is strong enough). But along with the fourth best choice of using an exposed rack on the coachroof, storm waves can rip the liferaft off and sweep it away – just when you need it. Keeping in below is no longer an option – you cannot get it launched quickly enough in challenging conditions. And remember the painter and activation rope needs to be securely attached to the boat.

The last decision is deployment. This is something entirely dependent on its location, but is something that each boat needs to think about, write down, and practice. While the decision to abandon ship rests solely with the skipper, the crew needs to be very familiar with their responsibilities for launching the liferaft, bringing key items including the ditch bag, and boarding the raft. Training and practice makes perfect. Finally, Murphy says that practice with a good liferaft stored in a good position increases the likelihood of it never being needed.