

## Safe Boating Tips for Lake Tahoe

For boaters unfamiliar with Lake Tahoe, or boating in general, the following information could be of value in preparing for an outing on Tahoe in a small boat. Lake Tahoe furnishes excellent boating opportunities under generally safe conditions. There are, however, unique hazards of which boaters should be aware and which are detailed below.

### Safety Equipment

Should you be planning a boating trip on Lake Tahoe, first and foremost make certain your vessel, whether it be your own or one you are renting, is equipped with the minimum safety equipment required by federal law. That would include, but not be limited to, the following items in good working condition:

Required Equipment	Boat Size: Less than 16 feet	Boat Size: Less than 26 feet
Life Jackets:	One Type I, II, III, IV, or Type V (Special Use Device) for each person on board. Type V must be worn at all times to meet Coast Guard regulations.	One Type I, II, III, or Type V (Special Use Device) for each person on board or being towed on water skis, etc., plus one throwable Type IV PFD. Type V must be worn at all times to meet Coast Guard regulations.
Fire Extinguishers	At least one Type B-1 Coast Guard approved hand portable fire extinguisher. Not required on outboard motor boats less than 26 feet in length if the construction of such motorboats will not permit the entrapment of flammable gases or vapors.	
Whistle, Bell, or Horn	Any device capable of making an "efficient sound signal" audible for 1/2 mile	
Visual Distress Signal	Required only when operating at night (N). Same night equipment choices as for larger boats shown at right.	Orange flag with black square-and-disc for day (D) and an S-O-S electric distress light (N); or 3 orange smoke signals, hand-held or floating (D); or 3 red flares of hand-held, meteor, or parachute type (D/N)
Ventilation	At least two ventilator ducts fitted with cowls for the purpose of properly and efficiently ventilating the bilges of every gasoline inboard engine and fuel tank compartment of boats constructed or decked over after 25 April 1940. Boats built after 31 July 1980 must have operable power blowers.	
Backfire Flame Arrester	One Coast Guard approved device on each carburetor of all gasoline engines installed after 25 April 1940, except outboard motors	

Failure to have any one of the above on your vessel can result in a fine if you are stopped! The following items, though not required by law, are highly recommended for prudent boaters:

- Handheld flares
- VHF marine radio
- Cellular phone
- Anchor and line
- First aid kit
- Flashlight
- Fenders
- Extra clothing (warm)
- Tool kit
- Sunscreen (SPF 25, minimum)

### Underwater Hazards

In some areas close to shore there are many underwater obstructions, such as rocks and old pilings, which may be exposed or barely covered when the lake level drops in the summer. Most dangerous shoreline areas have been marked by the U.S. Coast Guard with red buoys, which should be kept between your vessel and the shore. These dangerous areas and buoys are shown on the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) chart, No. 18665, of Lake Tahoe.

One of the most frequently traveled of these hazardous areas is the narrow entrance to Emerald Bay. Be sure to stay between the red and green channel marking buoys when passing through the mouth of Emerald Bay.

It should be remembered that, during heavy wind and wave conditions, buoys can be dragged off their charted positions. Extreme caution should be used around all shore areas. Water beyond the buoys is free from underwater obstructions, but generally too deep for anchoring.

## **Wind**

Sudden, high gusting winds of sufficient intensity to capsize small craft occur at times on Lake Tahoe. In addition, wind-driven waves can build to considerable heights causing small boats to capsize or swamp. Mornings can produce deceptively calm conditions and winds which frequently and most commonly come from the west in the afternoon can catch boaters by surprise. Keep an eye peeled for a long dark wind line appearing in the distance on the surface of the lake. When spotted it is best to head toward a sheltering harbor.

A wise boater will consult the local TV Weather Channel 31 or a local radio station such as 93.9 FM or 590 AM which provide frequent weather forecasts before heading out. Boaters with VHF radios will find a continuous weather broadcast on Channel WX1.

Should wind be forecast from any westerly direction in excess of 15 knots, boaters in smaller vessels will find travel close in along the west shore of the lake to be the smoothest, safest, and most comfortable.

## **Anchoring**

Lake Tahoe's bottom is mostly sandy with rocks in some areas that are generally visible through the clear water in good light and relatively calm conditions. Look for the light colored bottom to indicate sand and avoid the dark areas. A fluke style (i.e., Danforth) anchor gives the best holding power when set in Tahoe's sandy bottom. If planning to anchor overnight or to leave the boat at anchor and unattended while ashore it is best to carry a spare, smaller anchor to set astern.

## **Boating and Alcohol**

Alcohol is a contributing factor to many boating accidents, injuries, and fatalities. Studies indicate that the hazardous side effects of alcohol are more pronounced when operating a boat. Alcohol combined with wind, boat noise, vibration, wave action, and sun glare have a tremendous adverse influence on judgment and response time in boating. Do not drink and drive a boat! If necessary, select a designated driver who has not been drinking to operate the vessel. Operating a recreational vessel while intoxicated is a federal offense punishable by a fine of up to \$5000, one year in prison, or both!

## **Water Temperature**

The water in Lake Tahoe is very cold. Its surface temperature is approximately 40° Fahrenheit (4° Celsius) from December through April, although during the summer it may reach 70° Fahrenheit (21° Celsius) near the shore.

Sudden immersion in ice-cold water can cause hypothermia after only a few minutes, resulting in numbness and helplessness, and making self-rescue difficult. Swamping, capsizing, or falling overboard creates not only the problem of staying afloat but also of surviving exposure. Consequently, the boater must be prepared at all times for adverse wind and water conditions. The wearing of personal flotation devices (life jackets) by all passengers aboard and wearing of wet suits for water skiing is recommended. If you must enter the water, button up your clothing, wear a PFD, cover your head if possible and enter the water slowly.

## **Boating Safety Classes**

Classes explaining required and recommended equipment for small boats and offering training in good seamanship are conducted throughout California by the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, the U.S. Power Squadrons and certain chapters of the American Red Cross. For information on Coast Guard Auxiliary and Power Squadron classes call:

- U.S. Power Squadron (888) 367-8777
- Boating Safety Hotline (800) 368-5647
- Northern California (510) 437-3310
- Southern California (310) 980-4300, ext. 501
- Lake Tahoe area (530) 544-2221 or (530) 541-6887

A boater at Lake Tahoe may also receive a courtesy safety check (CME) of his vessel to determine whether it meets all local and federal requirements by calling Thurston Ott at (530) 544-2221.

The Department of Boating and Waterways offers a home study course for \$2.00, entitled California Boating Safety Course. For more information write Department of Boating and Waterways, 2000 Evergreen Street, Sacramento, CA 95815-3888, or phone (916) 445-2616.

Much of the above information was provided courtesy of the California Department of Boating and Waterways.

Copyright © 1999-2008 Web Zeppelin. All Rights Reserved.