

BDSG UK CHARTER BOAT GUIDELINES

What's this about? If you are thinking of chartering a dive boat for your club or on behalf of a group of friends or just for yourself and buddy, there are a few things you need to think about so that you have a safe and enjoyable day. This leaflet is intended to help you make your decisions and choices in an informed way to achieve that end. Don't forget if you are organising the trip on behalf of others you have a duty of care to make sure it is right.

Where do I find a charter dive boat? Most people want to plan a dive in relation to a particular port, area or even a specific wreck. You can look at the classified adverts at the back of most of the diving magazines or you can look on the internet.

How do I decide which boat is right for me? Having found a boat or two which fit your requirements, the easiest way to start is by having a look at websites, or you can contact by phone. You will need to ensure the boat you choose matches your requirements for local area, depth and cost. It is also important to check at this stage that the boat you are interested in is Coded.

What does "coded" mean? All charter boats are operated on a commercial basis. This means that they must comply with government regulations. For UK registered vessels these are "Codes of Practice" which are policed by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA). Coding defines the qualifications of the crew, how many people the boat can take, how far it can go out to sea and what safety equipment it must carry. It does not cover diving equipment such as ladders, lifts or compressors. If you book to go out on an uncoded boat it will probably be cheaper but it may not be there on the day you booked because it has been locked up by the MCA for being unsafe and uncoded.

How do I find out if a boat is "coded"? The easiest way is to ask the operator or skipper when you are discussing the booking. If you do not fancy doing that, have a look at the MCA website where coded boats are listed by name and port – go to <http://www.mcga.gov.uk>, and then click on Code Vessel Database. If a boat is shown here it means that it is definitely coded and you will also find a link to the boat's website and other contact information. If the boat is not on the website, it may still be coded but you will need to phone 023 8032 9549 and ask the MCA office directly. You can also e-mail your enquiries to HQ_inspection@mcga.gov.uk.

Will the boat have all the facilities we need for diving? The fundamental service a charter boat supplies is that of transport to and from the dive site. Most boats will have a way of getting you into the water and out again. If you need anything more than this, such as provision of gas, then ask when you are making a booking. Most liveaboards will have a compressor but may not be able to mix gases: few day boats supply gas at all. Dive boats are unlikely to carry spare equipment or hire it out. It is also important for you to tell the skipper if any diver on your party will be "at work", as further regulations then apply.

What about the dive plan? Here there will be quite a big difference between booking onto a dive boat on a “Space available” basis and booking a whole boat for a club or party. If you have booked a couple of “spaces”, then you will be committed to the dive site the boat has planned for the day you have booked. It is therefore essential that you have checked that the depth and any other factors are appropriate to your own qualifications, currency, experience and fitness. If you have booked the whole boat, you will have more flexibility and you can expect to agree with the skipper a dive site that is suitable for your party. You must therefore know the limitations of all the members of your party to make this selection. In any case you will be responsible for your own or your party’s dive plan for the particular dive site. The boat skipper will not act as dive marshal or supervisor. He or she can only give you general advice about the dive site, tidal conditions and any known hazards. Where the dive involves planned decompression it is important for you to agree with the skipper how any peripheral equipment such as deco trapezes are to be deployed. In addition you need to know what signals and recovery procedures are to be used. If you are uncertain about any aspect of the interface with the boat ask the skipper.

Will there be oxygen available? We all know that therapeutic oxygen should be available during any diving project. Most charter boats carry oxygen. However, just as the generation and execution of the dive plan is the responsibility of the divers, so ultimately is the provision of oxygen.

Will I be covered by any insurance? Present rules do not require charter boats to carry liability insurance although most do. Additionally any insurance the boat does carry is likely to be limited by an international agreement called the Athens Convention. This applies to all commercial passenger carrying vessels from cruise liners downwards and means that even if you were to be successful in a claim, the amount a Court will award is very small. Common sense therefore demands that you carry your own insurance against the risks of diving both for yourself and all your gear.

What happens if I need to cancel? When you make the booking, most charter boat operators will send you a booking form or charter agreement. This will normally explain what you need to do by way of paying a deposit, what payment stages are required and what conditions apply to cancellation. If they do not it is much better to ask at the beginning than become involved in a dispute at a later stage.

What happens if the weather is bad? For a day booking one of the important things to do is check with the skipper on the day before the booking. It may be that the booking will be cancelled if the forecast is bad. The final decision as to whether the boat sails is down to the skipper. The final decision to enter the water is yours but the skipper can decide to return to port should conditions change. It is better to have a debate about what might be owed for the boat trip rather than get in the water when you are unhappy with the conditions.