



## Cruising Safety

**Q:** I have been living aboard a 65 foot Sea Ray for most of last year. I never thought to inspect the life raft before I bought the boat. Since I am getting ready to take the boat on an extended cruise, I thought I should inspect the raft. What type of life raft service do you recommend?

**A:** Besides looking to see if the life raft is actually in the storage case (hopefully it wasn't replaced with sandbags) you should contact the manufacturer or local dealer for an inspection.

Different manufacturers will give different advice but most will agree that if your life raft is vacuum packed in a valise you will only need a inspection every year. If your raft is stored in a canister it can probably last for about three years before you give it the first inspection.

The inspection should not be something that you take lightly. A life raft is a very important piece of safety equipment. Most manufacturers require that the inspection and service be done by a qualified factory representative.

You will also want to check with the manufacturer as to the life span of your raft. Many rafts have a life limited in years.

For example, Zodiac, one of the largest raft manufacturers, gives their rafts a 12-year service life.

Zodiac also recommends that even though you do not perform your own inspections and service, you should be at the service facility when they take the raft out of the valise or canister. A safe rescue relies on knowing how to remove and use the raft.

A Zodiac service station should complete the following at each service:

- Open the container
- Unfold and inflate the life raft
- Test the inflation system (firing head, tubes and valves)
- Weigh the CO2 bottle
- Check the emergency equipment
- Re-pack the life raft and its equipment in a shrink wrapped waterproof pocket



As the raft gets older, Zodiac also recommends:

- Hydrostatic test of the gas bottle
- Replacement of equipment which is out of date or will be before the next service

Make sure these recommendations are in accordance with any state and national regulations.

Zodiac also recommends that you look at where your raft is stored. What good is it stored in a locked compartment, below a lot of other items or in a location that can wear or damage it? Make sure the raft is easy to access and use. When it is needed, time is of the essence.

([www.zodiacmarineusa.com](http://www.zodiacmarineusa.com))

Send your questions or comments to  
Scott Sky Smith at [sky@skysmith.com](mailto:sky@skysmith.com)

**Q**: I have picked out a used boat I want to buy. The seller is upgrading and keeping a number of the accessories such as skis, life jackets and ropes. I will be replacing the life jackets. I am looking for a style of life jacket that is comfortable, meets safety requirements and can be used for skiing. In addition, the boat does not have much storage space. Is one type of life jacket better than the rest?

**A**: If you check the Coast Guard's website ([www.uscgboating.org](http://www.uscgboating.org)) you will find the following information. Be sure to check with your state boating safety officials as they may have additional safety requirements.

#### **“Personal Flotation Devices (PFD)**

*All recreational boats must also carry one wearable PFD (Type I, II, III or Type V PFD) for each person aboard. A Type V PFD provides performance of either a Type I, II, or III PFD (as marked on its label) and must use according to the label requirements. Any boat 16 ft and longer (except canoes and kayaks) must also carry one throwable PFD (Type IV PFD). PFDs must be Coast Guard approved, and in good and serviceable condition, and the appropriate size for the intended user.”*

The type of personal flotation device (PFD) is definitely important, but just as valuable is accessibility and usability of the PFD. If you are not going to use the PFD or they are stored in an area that is hard to get at (under the seats, in the engine compartment), the PFD will not do you much good. In 2002, the Coast Guard estimates that over 70 percent of boating fatalities drown. Over 85 percent of the victims were not wearing a PFD or life jacket. In

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addition, the Coast Guard estimates that just wearing or having an accessible PFD could have saved over 400 of these victims.

Which one should you buy? Not everyone will agree, but I think if you are trying to save space and still have a good ski jacket, supply all the passengers in your boat with a “water sport” vest. The orange, “Type II Near Shore Buoyant” vest (remember when they were called the Mae West vest?) is inexpensive and they do the job as a flotation device. However, they are also cumbersome, uncomfortable and most passengers do not like to wear them. Why offer a safety device that people do not want to use? Additionally, they take up a lot of storage space.



Outfit your passengers with a comfortable water sport vest, and they will become accustomed to wearing a PFD anytime they are boating. Additionally, access and storage space will not be a problem if everyone is wearing his or her PFD at all times.

One last thing, make sure that any children, inexperienced swimmers, or first time boaters, have a PFD available for them to wear. A personal flotation device will provide a higher level of safety and security and make their overall boating experience more enjoyable.

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**Scott Sky Smith** is freelance writer, columnist and the author of “Ultimate Boat Maintenance Projects” published by Motorbooks International, and the owner of an aviation and marine insurance agency.