

Navigating Safely

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If you are a regular rower, you will be familiar with the navigation rules and local hazards on your own stretch of water. On a tour, you will probably not know the water well, if at all, so whenever you go afloat you will need to decide whether the conditions are safe to row in. As always, the following should be taken into account:



Current and Tide

This will determine which direction you launch your boat and might affect the navigation rules. Remember that you should normally boat with your bows pointing upstream unless there is a good reason why this is impractical.

If the water is tidal, there are quite a few things to think about, in particular:

- What is the variance between high and low tide as there may be a risk of running aground?
- What is the strength of the tide and could it cause problems for you?

You can check tide tables for high and low water times and levels - also handy to make sure that you won't spend all day rowing against the current! UK tide tables are available on this website: www.tidetimes.org.uk

Strong streams can make navigating dangerous. Warning boards are sometimes displayed at locks if the river flow is likely to be troublesome:



On wide rivers be careful of the stronger currents in the middle of the stream and on the outside of bends. If you are staying close to the banks to avoid the stream, be aware of the depth of the water.

Make sure you're well prepared if you know your route will take you into fast flowing rivers or tidal waters. Remember that conditions can change quickly, even on non-tidal rivers which are actively managed.

The Water

Diseases in the water are very rare but some such as Weil's Disease (leptospirosis) can be really dangerous so be sensible. Cover up any broken skin as best you can and use antiseptic cream. If you go swimming, take a shower as soon as possible and wash any wet kit before you wear it again.

If you have any flu-like symptoms within two weeks of rowing, see your doctor and mention that you've been doing water sports, as not all GPs will think of Weil's Disease straight away.

Bridges

Look out for clearance under bridges. On smaller rivers or canals you may need to operate a swing or lift bridge to pass through. If clearance looks tight, stay in the middle of the channel.

Take care operating moving bridges, as the ground may be slippery and there are many moving parts that could cause you trouble.



Watch for signs – and don't hit them!



Other possible hazards will depend on where your tour takes you. This sign was spotted by rowers at the entrance to Lake Zambezi!

Navigation Rules

Rowing clubs are generally very helpful and can be contacted for information about local navigation rules. The British Rowing website has a club finder tool and lists contact details for secretaries. If the area has no clubs nearby, the local Waterway Authority will provide information

Most waterways have a “right hand rule” so in general you should keep to the starboard (bow) side of the river and pass other boats port to port (stroke side to stroke side). Overtaking should be on the left.

On rivers, boats coming downstream have right of way. When approaching a narrow stretch or bridge, slow down in plenty of time and listen for sound signals from powered boats.

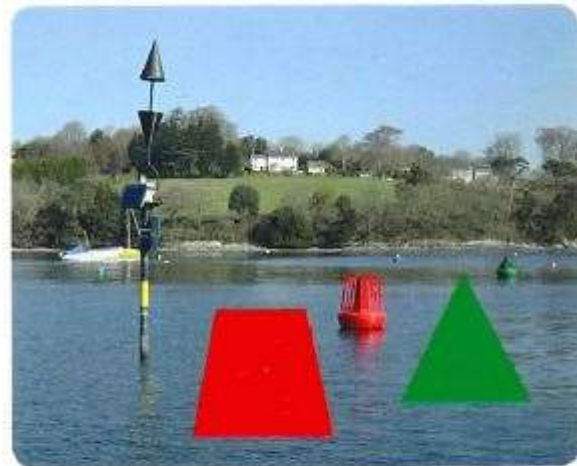
Navigation channels on a river are marked by red or green buoys or markers. Facing upstream, red marks the port (left) side of the channel and green the starboard (right), so you should pass green buoys on bow side and red buoys on stroke side. Coming downstream, vice versa.

Around islands, river junctions etc. there will be signs to direct river traffic but as long as you have a map and stay alert, it is extremely unlikely you’ll run into trouble. And if you take a wrong turn, the worst that will happen is that you have to row back the way you came!

The Appendix has a list of common river signs and their meaning.

Passing dredgers or works

Stick to the side with green or white shapes or lights. Don’t pass on the side with red markers except on canals where both sides might be signed red. In this case follow instructions from the workers.



Red buoys
are can
shaped

Green
buoys
are cone
shaped

Locks

People new to touring are often wary of locks but most can very easily be navigated. More information, including how to operate them, is included on separate pages. When you are planning, guides to the waterways are really useful as they have information such as whether locks have keepers, what the access is like etc. The Appendix lists some good publications.

A traffic light system may be used at locks, where amber will mean the lock is on user operation, i.e. it is outside the lock-keeper's hours.

Lock Safety

Touring rowing is very safe but care should be taken at locks as there are so many things to think about at the same time. However, as long as you pay attention to what is happening around you and how this affects your boat and you are patient with what you are doing, you shouldn't have any problems.

The main risks are the boats getting caught on the cill below the gates as the water level falls, or being washed down by water entering the chamber as the water level rises. To avoid trouble, open the paddles carefully and slowly (if you are operating the lock) and keep a good distance from the gates.



Weirs

Weirs can be dangerous, especially when the water level is high and moving quickly. Make sure you know which way the water flows and don't get too close. Some will have safety barriers, but not all.

Operating Injuries

Obviously on a tour you have the exertion of rowing but there is also the exertion of general boating tasks to consider. It's easy to strain a muscle operating a lock or lifting a bridge if you aren't concentrating as you will be using different muscles and you will probably also be tired from rowing all day. You can help yourself by making sure you are confident in how to use equipment and by checking it is in good condition before you use it.



Landing Stages & Pontoons

Most public landing stages are designed for motor boats so are much higher off the water than is convenient for rowing boats.

Be aware that it may not be possible to launch or land at every stage. Slipways are great to use, however many are privately owned and there may be a charge for using them.

Again, a waterways guide will contain necessary information to help you plan stopping points.

Mooring

If you are tying your boat to the bank, moor with the bows pointing upstream and tie both the stern and bows with enough slack so that if the water level changes the boat won't get caught.

If you're using mooring spikes, look out for evidence of cables and push them in securely, making them obvious to passers-by.





Can I moor here?

Watch out on rivers as many banks are private property. Wherever you can, use designated mooring points or if there is a towpath use that. For safety reasons you shouldn't moor in the following places:

- The approach to a lock or weir
- Near swing or lift bridges
- Near sharp bends or any blind spot
- At turning points or junctions
- To the bank on a tidal river – the tide might go out and leave the boat!
- Established angling spots – try to stay at least 50 feet (15 m) away.

Think: if the waterway was a road, would you leave your car there?

River traffic

Other river users can affect your trip – large volumes of motor boats and cruiser traffic can disturb the water making it difficult to row, and in areas around sports clubs you could find yourself in the middle an event! If you can visit the waterway in advance, it's a good idea to talk to any boat owners you meet and you can consult the local Waterway Authority to check for any planned events.

On busy waterways, it is advisable for the bow person to wear a hi-viz top and for the cox to have a horn or whistle to alert oncoming traffic when approaching bridges or areas of restricted visibility.

Sailing boats should be approached with caution especially when there is little wind, as they will have less control over their movements. Don't pass in front of them unless they indicate to do so. Remember that they may turn suddenly if they are tacking.

Powered boats may use the following sound signals to indicate their movements:

One short blast – moving to starboard

Two short blasts – moving to port

Three short blasts – stern propulsion (going backwards)

4 blasts – pause – 1 blast – turning round to the right

4 blasts – pause- 2 blasts – turning round to the left

1 long blast + 2 short blasts – I can't manoeuvre

Five short blasts – they don't know what you are doing!

One long blast – warning as they are approaching a bend where vision is limited.





Trees & Plants

Overhanging trees and branches are obvious but also check for things like reed beds and banks where the water could get shallow and make rowing difficult.

Weather

What is the weather likely to be on the date of your proposed tour?



Check the forecast on the Met Office website
www.metoffice.gov.uk

You should plan for any eventuality if the forecast is for changeable weather. Touring boats have plenty of room to store all sorts of kit so you can be prepared.

Having a GPS on tidal or other large water bodies could be important particularly if there's a chance it may turn foggy.

