

SUMMER SAILING

Dinghy Seamanship



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There's much more to it than
flip flops and a bathing suit

BY FAY MARK

There's an old saying that some of the most dangerous moments in sailing occur when people are in their dinghies. Over the years we've had lots of opportunities to see dinghies being handled well and poorly, and we've seen a lot more good and bad examples since we have

been cruising in the Caribbean aboard our 54-foot cutter *New Morning*. We carry an 11-foot Zodiac inflatable and two outboards; a 2-hp motor that I can lift and attach to the dinghy and a 15-hp that we use when we have guests, carry heavy loads or travel longer distances. The small motor is stowed on the stern rail with a lock. The bigger one lives in a transom locker. When we are making a passage, we deflate the dinghy and stow it in a locker forward. On shorter passages, we usually keep it



We carry extra gear such as fuel, tool kit, spare spark plug, running light, and flashlight in a waterproof pouch



Never face the dinghy when getting into it; this could cause the dinghy to suddenly lurch and toss you in the water



Face the boat, grasp the ladder or stanchions, and then step backwards into the dink, pushing the dinghy towards the boat

inflated and stowed on the foredeck. We've evolved a set of safety rules to follow when we are in port and need to use the dinghy.

WE MAKE SURE OUR PLANNED DINGHY routes stay within 1,000 yards of a shoreline barring exceptional circumstances. If one of us travels alone in the dinghy, we always tell the other when we are departing and what time we plan to return.

IN A NEW HARBOR WE CHECK OUT THE TERRAIN and any water hazards such as shoals or buoys; if necessary, we'll take a paper chart with us in the dinghy. We also check the weather forecast and make sure we know the currents, tides, and wind conditions.

WE KNOW HOW FAR WE CAN GO WITH A full tank of fuel and carry an extra canister of fuel in our waterproof pouch as a backup.

IF WE HAVE GUESTS, WE EXPLAIN ALL THE dinghy procedures and make sure one of them can operate the dinghy in an emergency. All non-swimmers must wear life jackets.

BEFORE WE GET UNDERWAY IN THE DINGHY we check that the load is properly balanced, and we never exceed the recommended number of passengers or weight. If that means making two trips, so be it.

IF THE DINGHY ENGINE IS NOT GOING TO BE used for a period of time, we close the fuel tank vent to keep out water and moisture.

WE NEVER OPERATE THE ENGINE UNLESS THE kill switch key is in place. This is a lot less painful than having the propeller hit you, or having the dinghy go off on its own. Our kill switch is attached to a piece of 1/8" line with a snap hook and float that's always attached to the operator's clothing.

IF WE'LL BE RUNNING THE DINGHY IN POOR light, we make sure we have proper flashlights. And we never "drink and dink."

EXTRA EQUIPMENT

We carry some additional gear that is permanently stored in a waterproof pouch and storage bin. We always carry our VHF handheld in a backpack so it always comes back to the boat for recharging. Equipment that stays in the dinghy includes a tool kit with a spare spark plug, handheld depth meter, flashlight, running light, and extra fuel. Call it overkill, but in a lonely anchorage, you can't be too careful.

DINGHY SENSE

Whether you board your dinghy from the side of the boat or the transom, the first thing to do is to securely attach the dinghy painter to the boat. Whenever you get in or out of a dinghy forget the ego; there is no stigma attached to squatting, sitting, scooting, kneeling, or crawling when getting into a dinghy. Slow and safe is the rule. Keep the bow clear of gear and clutter. Doing so allows easy access to the painter and provides a clear spot for feet.

If people are entering or leaving the dinghy from the stern/transom, we attach a second security line running from the dinghy to a pushpit stanchion base. Our line is a 5-foot length of 1/4" Maffioli Swiftcord with overhand knots spaced one foot apart. It provides extra security for someone who is getting in, or out, of the dinghy. *AM*



Fay Mark, a former high tech marketing executive, is cruising with her partner, Russ Irwin, on *New Morning*, their 54-foot cutter. For more information about Fay, Russ, *New Morning*, and their cruising adventures, see www.newmorning.info

PRE-FLIGHT CHECKLIST

- ✓ When putting the motor onto, or removing it from the dinghy, we tie a safety line to the engine handle and to the boat. If the engine should go into the water you won't lose it. Use a tackle with heavy engines.
- ✓ Check the engine clamps for tightness before starting the engine.
- ✓ Check the dinghy's inflation pressure. Inspect the valve caps and self-bailer plug or valve.
- ✓ Make sure oarlocks and oars are well secured.
- ✓ Check fuel and oil levels; is the fuel tank properly secured to the dinghy floor?
- ✓ Make sure the motor's kick-up lever works correctly so the motor will tilt up easily.
- ✓ Start the engine before you cast off and make sure it is pumping water. Note: If you've forgotten the kill switch, it won't start. Don't ask how I know this.