

Painless Boat Launching

Getting your boat off the trailer and into the water without delay is a skill that every boater should master.

BOAT LAUNCHES CAN EASILY BECOME BATTLEFIELDS, particularly when stupidity is the order of the day. But you can make sure you're never the cause of a potential dockside dust-up by having a launching system in place, and sticking to it.

First, prep your boat prior to heading for the ramp. Make sure that your engine, battery, electronics, trailer, and safety gear are in good repair. There is nothing more frustrating—and sometimes infuriating—than watching a boater charge a dead battery, install a new bulb for his running lights, or fill an oil reservoir while occupying a slot in the ramp.

When you're ready to go, pull into an appropriate loading area. There's an embarkment order to follow at every ramp, and the guys who arrived before you launch before you. Set up your boat while you wait by storing your rods, tackle bags, charts, binoculars, coolers, and coffee in the boat before it's your turn to launch. Get your fenders and lines ready (have extra long lines for use in a cross-

wind), pull on your boots, put in your drain plugs, and wait patiently for your turn. Have spare keys and drain plugs handy, as they are commonly misplaced. Don't walk away from your rig, and when your turn comes, get going right away.

Inspect the ramp before you launch. Some ramps have steep drop-offs; others have no docks on which to tie off your boat. Check out everything ahead of time, and make sure that you know what you're getting into. (The Maptech Embassy Guides are great resources for both public and private boat launches, by the way. Various guides are available covering the entire Atlantic coast and the Bahamas. Check out the list at www.maptech.com, or order the guides at 1-888-839-5551.)

Watch for seaweed or algae growth on ramps, particularly on wooden ramps, as this can make for slippery surfaces. Use blocks behind your tires so that your vehicle doesn't slide back into the water as you're freeing your boat. And make sure your tailpipe isn't headed underwater.

Of course, be sure that your vehicle has the proper tow package to begin with. Clutches and transmissions should be in good working order so that they don't slip, and side-view mirrors should be large enough so you can see around your boat while backing down the ramp.

About Timing

Each ramp has a particular traffic schedule; figure it out, and work that schedule to your advantage. At my ramp, the clam diggers go in two hours before low tide and generally haul two hours after low tide; on weekends there is a predawn rush, first at 7:00 a.m. and then again at 9:00 a.m. Avoid peak times by getting up earlier or staying out later.

Some ramps are shallow and cannot be used around low tide. Push your luck by hauling when it's too low, and your boat or even your truck may get stuck. Some ramps are split between launch and haul sides; make sure you use the correct side for the task at hand.

The onus is on new boaters to familiarize themselves with trailering and launching practices. A good idea is for new boaters to practice backing down a ramp and launching their boat at a slow time of season—midweek, midday, or in the early year are times when the ramps are less crowded, which is a good time during which to practice.



A little practice and preparation will save you from making gaffes while launching your skiff.

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