

How to Conquer the Ballard Locks and Maintain Your Sanity.

Have you ever experienced a near nervous breakdown while going through - or even just anticipating going through - the Ballard Locks? It can be scary all right. But it needn't be. Just keep your wits about you and follow a few simple guidelines. The next time you transit through the locks, you will be better prepared, more confident and less stressed. More than 1 million people a year visit the Hiram M. Chittenden Locks (better known as the Ballard Locks), at the entrance to Salmon Bay and the Lake Washington Ship Canal in Seattle. If you have not been through the locks before, a good place to begin is to join the crowd of people who observe others going through - and ask questions about things you are unsure of. While you are at the locks, ask for a copy of "Guidelines for Boaters", a handy booklet that outlines what you need to know about locking through. The booklet covers such basics as the equipment required, where to wait, the traffic signals, priorities and the "locking through" process itself. Keep this handy in your boat, so you can refer to it. It is also very useful to help inform unseasoned guests or crew members. An even better way to learn is to go through the locks your first time with a fellow boater who has had the experience. You can either go as a deckhand on his or her boat or ask your friend to assist you in bringing your own boat through.

~~Looking through the locks~~ ~~reparation~~ While you are waiting in line, take the opportunity to prepare guests or passengers who are to take part in the mooring. They should be trained in advance of the events to come, before you begin your entry. Give them the "Guidelines for Boaters" booklet to read, plus any special instructions you might have. You'll be too busy during the locking through procedure to wait until then to train people from scratch. It also isn't safe to try doing so. It can be pretty frustrating for the lock operators to deal with boat crews standing on the bow or stern looking lost and asking what to do. This is especially true when the operators know the skipper has been through before, or that the boat has been sitting outside the locks for some time waiting to come in.

**Waiting in Line** As you approach the locks, assume that you will be using the Small Lock (to the south). The tower personnel will tell you if you should come over to the Large Lock. Watch for the traffic signals, which operate like vehicle traffic lights: Red means wait, green means come ahead. If you have a red light or there is traffic ahead of you, the best thing to do is tie up to the holding pier and wait for either a green light or instructions on the public address system. Do not call on Channel 13, as FCC restrictions prohibit the locks staff from responding to non-commercial vessels unless it is an emergency. Locks personnel will spot you at the waiting pier and will get to you as soon as possible. If you do have an emergency situation, state so when

calling. Your wait will be dependent upon two factors: safety and priority. The priority order for vessels waiting to lock through is: government and commercial vessels of all types first, then pleasure craft. Stay alert for a green light. Frequently, the locks crew is standing ready to take boat traffic when boaters aren't paying attention to the traffic lights. You should stay aboard your craft while you are awaiting your transit. Save your viewing of the locks, gardens, and fish ladder for when you come back as a visitor to watch others go through.

**Heading In** Entering the locks seems to make people the most nervous - but this should be easier than tying up at your moorage slip because there are trained personnel to assist you by giving instructions, taking your line and fending you off, if need be. Don't let your anxiety put you on edge and set you up for a ruined weekend - or a big argument. The speed limit is 2.5 knots in the Small Lock and three knots in the Large Lock. Take it easy as you come in, but do make sure you are under power. If you are just drifting, you'll have no effective steering control. Stay on your controls until your vessel has come to a stop. Numerous accidents and near accidents occur when the skipper leaves the controls before coming to a stop. It's not any different than driving your car: You don't get out of your car while it is still heading toward the house. Just before you enter the locks, check your reverse gear to make sure it is working and watch for a lock operator to give you hand signals as to which side to tie up on.

**Mooring** You should be prepared with fenders and lines to tie up to either side. The operators will try to accommodate your wishes, but their decision as to which side to put you on is based on safety, staffing and best utilization of space. It helps for you to repeat the directional signal when you see it, so that the operators know that you have seen it. As a lock operator, I particularly remember one stubborn skipper who learned his lesson. He was piloting a boat coming into the locks from the Sound. We signaled him to tie up on the north wall of the Small Lock, which is where lock personnel were. The skipper was all by himself and disregarded the request, continuing to head for the south wall. When he came out to tie up his vessel, he not only didn't have any help, he also didn't have anything to tie up to, because the maintenance crew had pulled the floats for servicing. In a panic, he clutched at the moss-slimed wall, trying to stabilize his boat. He was embarrassed, to say the least, and vowed to never again ignore the operator's directions. Usually in the Large Lock, you will get verbal instructions, as well as hand signals. If you don't understand where it is you are being directed to, ask for clarification. There have been many instances when instructions to a vessel operator weren't understood, so communication can be a problem. It's not unheard of for operators to give instructions for someone to raft alongside a black sailboat on the south side, only to watch the skipper tie

up to a white power boat on the north side. We don't mind you asking for a repeat of instructions, but we do tend to get a bit miffed if you end up where we did not want you. Filling the locks, especially on a busy weekend, is like putting together a giant jigsaw puzzle, with perhaps 100 or more boats in a locking. Operators have to take many factors into consideration; including the size and weight of the boats, experience of operators and crew, cleat locations and accessibility, and the total number of boats. Your cooperation in the following directions makes this process go much smoother. Of course, clear communications is a two-way street. There have been times when I noticed that a boater was headed in a different direction than one I had requested. I would ask, "Where are you going?" only to get a reply like "Port Ludlow" or "Lake Washington". Not really what I wanted to know. A rephrasing of the question would certainly be in order.

**Tying Up** In the Small Lock, hand or toss the middle or end of your line to a lock operator, who will place it around the bollard. After that, you can secure it to your vessel. Be careful when you toss your line - it's no fun to get hit in the face. In the Small Lock, there are floating tanks that will go up and down with your boat and the water level. During the locking process, keep an eye on your lines just in case the floats hang up, as will happen from time to time. If this does happen to you, slacken your lines, call it to an operator's attention and the flow of water will be stopped. In the Large Lock, hand an

operator the eye of your line and he or she will place that eye on the top of the wall. If you are coming into the ship canal from the Sound (headed east) or are too far away, the operator will throw you one to the locks' lines so that you can tie it to the looped end of your line; your line can then be pulled over. Because there are no floats in the Large Lock, you will have to either pay out or take up your line as you go up or down. It is important to pay attention because, unlike with the Small Lock, it takes several minutes to stop the flow of water in the Large Lock. In that amount of time, the water could drop four or five feet. This would either leave you hanging high and dry, or pull the cleats out of your deck. Lock operators try to stay vigilant to make sure everyone is tending their lines properly, but sometimes there are only two operators available to watch 800 feet of lock wall. When the gates are ready to be opened, you will be asked to secure your lines for safety, as there are strong currents in the locks (as much as six knots). If your lines have been handled properly, they will not have any slack in them when you tie them down.

**Casting Off** It is important that you never release your lines until instructed to do so by a lock operator. If you are rafted alongside another boat, do not let them cast your lines off until you have been given the OK to go. To your inexperienced eye, it may look safe to go, but the operators often see things that aren't evident to you. It can be comical to see a boat take off without realizing

that there is still another boat tacked alongside. It can also be dangerous. When you do cast off, the easiest way for many people to remember which line to take off first is to use this simple rule: saltwater line comes off first. "Saltwater line", in this case, means the line on the west end of the boat; that would be the bow line heading out to the Sound and the stern line when heading into the ship canal. This rule is important because of the direction of the current flow. If you do it the other way around, you might find yourself spinning down the locks, crashing into other boats. That's not a pretty sight and it can be quite embarrassing when you have a large audience.

**Teamwork** The lock operator's job is to assist you in getting through the locks as quickly, safely and easily as possible. Bear in mind that the emphasis is on safety. Remember that personnel at the locks have to make a lot of assumptions when they are dealing with you. There are more than 75,000 vessels locked through the Ballard Locks each year and the operators don't always recognize a particular boat. Sometimes, due to noise or poor acoustics, they are not sure if you have heard the instruction - and they may repeat the instructions in an increasingly louder voice. Other times, certain actions are taken and instructions given because the operators are unsure of the skipper's and line handler's capabilities. If it seems like your boat handling skills are being questioned, don't be offended. The operators are making assumptions on the side of safety. One final

recommendation about boating safety in general: It is a good idea to have all hands trained in operating your boat. Think about this scenario: If something were to happen to the skipper, such as falling overboard, having a heart attack or suffering a severe accident involving loss of consciousness, would someone else on board be able to turn the boat around and pick the skipper up or drive to the nearest dock? Take the time to train everyone, so they could respond appropriately. Remember the locks personnel are there to help you have a pleasant and safe passage through the locks. Your cooperation and preparation are needed to make it safe and sane.

**Basic Equipment List:** The following basic equipment aboard your boat will help ensure the safety of passengers, your vessel and others around you: Two 50 foot lines with an eye at least 12 inches in diameter on one end An adequate number of fenders for both sides of your vessel Fire extinguishing equipment One or more personal floatation devices (PFDs) for each person on board

**10 Tips for Locking Through:** 1. Stay calm and relaxed. This will help out more than anything. 2. Line up at the waiting piers and wait for a green light or instruction on the public address system. At the locks, Channel 13 is for commercial traffic and emergencies only. 3. If using the Small Lock, short lines of 15 or 20 feet are sufficient. In the Large Lock, two 50 foot lines,

with a loop in one end to give to the lock operator, are required. 4. Be prepared to tie up on either side, so you don't have to scramble at the last minute. 5. Have adequate fenders in place to protect your boat, as well as other boats you might tie up to. 6. Stay alert. Watch and listen for directional signals from the lock operator. 7. Acknowledge the signals from the lock operator by a hand signal or verbal repetition so that the operators know you clearly understand them. 8. Come in slowly, but don't drift in. If you're not under power, you won't have good steering control. 9. For safety's sake, do not untie or cast off your lines unless a lock operator tells you to do so. 10. When you do get instructions to leave, always cast off the line closest to the salt water first. That would be the bow line first when you are heading west and the stern line when heading east. Article reprinted by permission of Waterfront News

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