

First Edition

THE
BOAT BASICS
COLLECTION



Mooring Balls Explained
A checklist for a secure mooring



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The Boat Basics Collection: Mooring Balls Explained

A checklist for a secure mooring

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Mooring Balls Checklist

A mooring ball is a ball floating on the surface of the water that is attached to some sort of anchor. Often the anchor is a concrete block or slab. There is no standard for mooring balls. Some are relatively easy to tie onto and others are downright difficult. Some balls have a painter or line attached that is floating and easy to pick up whereas others have no line at all. Some mooring balls are maintained and safe and others are ignored and in a state of disrepair.

The objectives of using this guide are to enable you and your crew to:

- Properly prepare to moor safely and securely
- Set up good lines of communication
- Understand how best to secure the mooring
- Avoid making common mistakes

A checklist for a secure mooring

- Gather information.** After locating a mooring ball, field, or bay filled with mooring balls, determine if the balls are private or for public use. Also determine if there are any weight or length restrictions – often balls are color-coded (white might be private but yellow could be public). Information about restrictions and/or phone numbers can often be written on the actual balls. Information prior to arrival can often be obtained from pilot books, plotters, maps, cruiser guides and cruiser websites. If you can't get any information tie onto the mooring ball and eventually someone might tell you to leave or ask for money.

- ❑ **Scope out the scene.** Before entering the mooring field, take note of any empty mooring balls and pay attention to how other boats are lying to their balls. If there are no other boats to visually inspect, make a note of wind direction and the flow of the current. You'll want to aim into the wind or the current when picking up a mooring ball – whatever is strongest.

- ❑ **Prepare the lines.** Position a crewmember at the front of the boat, preferably with an extendable hook. Also ask the crewmember to attach a line each to the bow's port-side and starboard-side cleats reminding him or her to make sure the line goes from the cleat away from the boat and then back over the toe rail (in preparation).

- ❑ **Approach the mooring ball.** Approach a free mooring ball in the direction that surrounding boats are lying. If there are no other boats, head into the wind or current (whichever is stronger).

- ❑ **Count down the distance.** Ask the forward crewmember to count down the distance between the bow of the boat and the mooring ball while using verbal clues or hand signals to indicate the boat's direction. (Remind the crewmember to aim his or her voice towards the back of the boat so you can hear him or her).

- ❑ **Put boat into neutral.** Shift into neutral when you feel the boat will drift close enough to hook the mooring ball painter, or line handing off the mooring ball. Be careful of using your bow thruster (if you have one). The painter or the line attached to the boat can be a hazard. If you miss the ball, which happens often in stronger conditions, communicate that you're going to go around again. Make sure to make a wide circle making it easier to approach the mooring ball head on.

- ❑ **Attach at least one line.** The aim is for the forward crewmember to grab the attachment located on or near the ball (often it's loop), hoist it up to the bow, slip at least one of the lines through a pennant eye loop and back through to the same cleat. When the weather is calm, there's often enough time to slip the other line through the eye and bring that back to it's same side. Note that the port side rope goes down to the loop and back to the port side and the starboard side rope goes down to the loop and back to the starboard side.

- ❑ **Attached the second line.** If only one line is put on (either the port or the starboard side), the boat will be held in place however it will be lopsided. The second line can be added by using the engine to create slack, pulling the loop back up and inserting the second line. You can also drive your dingy to the bow to install the second line.

- ❑ **Tidy the lines.** Once both lines are attached, or pulled through the eyelet and back on the boat, the crewmember then needs to make sure the boat is as close to the mooring ball as possible, so to not encroach on other boats in the field. The crewmember also needs to ensure that each line is equally looped back so the boat doesn't lay lopsided. If the weather is heavy the use of the engine might be required to create slack so the ropes can be tightened. Never attach one line only – if the line gets chaffed and breaks your boat will float away.

- ❑ **Leaving a mooring ball.** To leave a mooring ball, the forward crewmember waits for the helmspersons 'go-ahead' and then he or she unties one side, pulls the line in and then the other. On occasion the second line will be too tight to untie so the captain needs to be prepared to use the engine. Once all lines are in, the crewmember instructs the helmsperson on where the ball is, so to not run over it, and the helmsperson exits in the safest manner possible.

15 Tips to Avoid Making Mistakes with Mooring Balls

When you're in a car and accidentally drive over a curb or make a mess of parallel parking there's usually only a few people watching. When picking up a mooring ball, however, there might be times when you have a full bay of semi-tipsy onlookers.

What's important to keep in mind is that everyone makes mistakes.

Seasoned sailors put in several hours to get things right and even with loads of experience that still doesn't guarantee a 100% success rate.

If you're new to mooring balls, enter a mooring field when most boaters have already left for the day or get in before the rush. Also, spend time in a mooring field and watch others to learn what to do and not do. Additionally, consider the following 15 tips.

Mooring ball tips

1. We position a third person midway between the helmsperson and the forward crew to help with communications. We've also seen other couples that use hands free headsets to provide instructions to each other. Within the cruising community they've been aptly named 'marriage savers' and it reduces the shouting that happens without them.

2. Never do you want to use only one line to affix your boat to a mooring ball due to redundancy purposes. Lines can easily chaff and by having two lines affixed the chances of coming unhooked are drastically reduced. Furthermore, if you use only one line chances are that another boater will visit you and ask for you to add another line – especially if you're lined up to hit them if you break free.

3. If possible, dive on the mooring line and make sure that the integrity of the rope and 'anchor' – usually a cement block – look in tact. In many areas of the world, mooring balls are not serviced or maintained. It's important to find out what you're tying your boat to!

4. There is no local or international standard for mooring balls. One bay will have balls with long ropes and easy to lift pennants and others will have heavy balls with only a metal ring at the top. In some cases it's impossible to pull the ball up to the deck to tie a line on. When that happens, make a very large loop with one of your lines, throw it around the whole ball and tie the line back to the boat. Make sure that the wind and/or current keep the line tight and then drop your dingy to affix the lines to the ring on the ball. Once one line is secured, remove the other line and properly feed it through the hoop.

5. Note that some mooring balls have floats near the end, or in the middle, of the line that needs to be picked up. Often these floats are a bit of a distance from the actual mooring ball. The forward crewmember needs to direct the helmsperson to a position where the floating rope can be picked up rather than on top of the mooring ball.

6. It can be advantageous on occasion to back up to a mooring ball instead of going bow first. The same set-up and directions apply however it's easier for the helmsperson to see and it's easier for the crewmember to simply grab the ball pennant line out of the water. Care needs to be taken in relation to any ropes getting caught in the prop and the crewmember needs to be careful not to fall in the water. An added benefit of picking up a mooring ball from the stern is that the wind will blow through the cabin providing more fresh air down below decks.

7. In calm situations it's possible for the boat to bump into the mooring ball causing noise and possible damage to the hull of the boat – especially on colored hulled boats. If this happens you can affix a third line from the bow of your boat through the top of the mooring ball, run it up through your anchor channel and attach it to your windless winch. When you tighten the line, it will force the mooring ball to stay clear of the boat.

8. In no-wind situations it's very common for boats to swing randomly. When this happens there's a possibility for collision. In other words, it's possible for two boats to actually swing into each other – especially if there's a monohull next to a catamaran (they swing differently). When this happens, you can either leave the mooring field or sleep in the cockpit keeping one eye open. If boats hit each other it's often just a little kiss but one time our bow hooked up with the bow of a catamaran and locked together! It took us a while to break the bond (the two boats were in love!).

9. When leaving a mooring ball, there's often a situation where the forward crewmember cannot get the line untied due to tension. If this is the case, the helmsperson needs to engage the engine and get closer to the mooring ball.

10. Don't use bow thrusters if there's a possibility of a line being in the water when tying onto a mooring ball.

11. NEVER leave the helm if the forward crewmember is having difficulty. It's far easier to let the line go and try again than it is to rush back to the wheel to avoid a collision. Prepare your forward crewperson to drop the line if need be. It's much better to circle around rather than getting rope burns, cuts or bruises.

Inexperienced crewmembers can, from time to time, get the hook stuck in the mooring ball which could result in a loss of the hook. It's something to keep an eye on.

12. If you undershoot the mark, just engage the engine for a few ticks. If you overshoot the mark, just let the boat be pushed back with the wind and or current. If you totally miss the mark, make a big circle and do it again.

13. If help is provided in a mooring field, someone on a boat will come up to the bow. Hand the bulk of the rope (coiled) and the end of the line to the person and they will feed it through the mooring ball attachment giving it back to you to secure back on the same side. When you're grabbing the first rope back, you can often give the helper the coil and end of the other rope or position it in a place for them to grab it off the deck. In some parts of the world the help comes for free and in others there's a fee. We almost always accept help with mooring balls – for the small price you pay it makes mooring much easier.

14. Tying onto a mooring ball can be hard work for new learners. If you ever see someone struggling, make sure to get into your dingy and head over to help them! Always pay it forward as you never know when you're going to need help.

15. Lastly, when leaving a mooring ball do so under engine and not under sail. Ropes can get caught and a gust of wind can come from nowhere. Mooring fields are often busy, confined spaces. You'll want to have the most control over the boat as possible.

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If you have any suggestions, additions or improvements to this checklist and subsequent tips, please email them to me at: [Kim@SailingBritican.com](mailto:Kim@SailingBritican.com) and I'll add them to future updates.

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