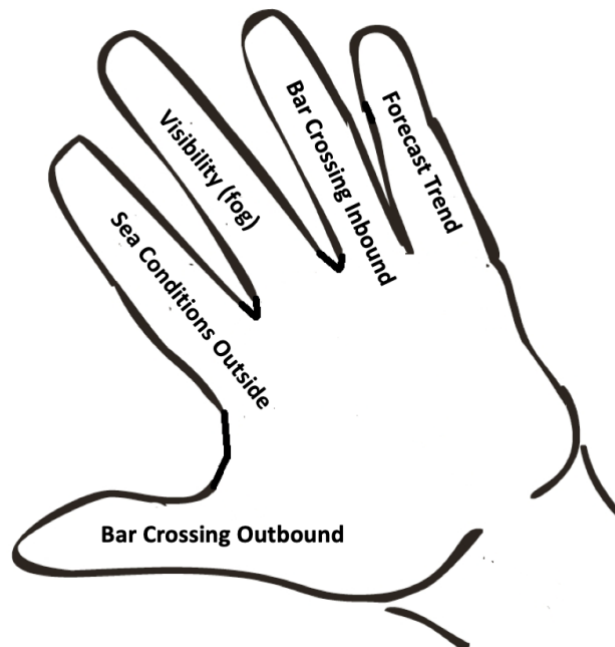


Ocean Coach Guide: Captain's Five Five Finger Checklist

Spread your fingers and look at your hand. Behold your checklist for making the go or no-go decision the night before venturing onto the ocean. There are five separate weather-related factors to consider, one for each finger.



Each of the five factors are separate and unrelated to the others. For example, the outbound and inbound bar crossings happen under different tidal conditions, hence the bar might be open outbound and closed when you return. Trickster fog, often overlooked in the planning process, can compromise a trip no matter how glassy calm the sea.

The power of the five factor approach lies in its completeness. The hand checklist ensures you won't *overlook* anything when planning a trip. Granted, you may *misjudge* some of the factors, or the forecasts may be wrong, but that's less consequential than failing to even consider something major. Let's examine each of the factors in detail.

Bar Crossing Outbound

What does it mean if the Coast Guard (CG) declares a bar open? It only means that the waves on the bar do not threaten to swamp or capsize boats. That depends almost entirely on the swells, water depth, and tidal current direction. Wind can kick up some chop, but seldom enough to affect the CG decision. The wind could blow a gale just offshore, even though the bar is open.

It is possible to predict, with a high degree of confidence, whether a bar will be open at various times of day. This is because the underlying forecasts, tide and swell, are generally accurate. Hence a skilled skipper should seldom be surprised by a closed bar. That said, there's no shame in being optimistic about making an early crossing, but ending up having to delay until conditions improve. Having a fine breakfast at a harbor coffee shop is a time-honored way to kill time until the tide comes in a bit and the CG opens the bar.

Sea Conditions Outside

Sea condition, meaning the "lumpiness" of the water, depends on wind, swell, and the interaction of the two. Interpreting the various online forecasts is a skill bordering on art.

Winds of 10 knots or less are pleasant and manageable for almost everybody. I like to say, however, that the fun ends when winds reach 12 knots. At 12 knots, small whitecaps are well-established, the drift is too fast for bottom fishing, and some inexperienced crew members might be anxious about the rougher water. At 15 knots of wind, most people would rather be at home due to the substantial whitecaps and the high potential for falling on a pitching deck. At 19 knots and above, it's miserable, frightening and dangerous out there.

It's much harder to come up with general rules for swell height. That's because multiple swell trains are always arriving from different part of the world, with infinite variations in height, period and direction. As a very general rule, however, most captains are happy when swell is four feet or less. Five to six feet is the great gray zone, and seven foot swells are a no-go for most boats and captains.

The above recommendations assume the boat is well-maintained, competently operated, suitably designed and not overloaded.

Visibility

Few of the popular wind and swell forecast websites include fog predictions. Furthermore, fog is seldom mentioned in social media debates about small boat

safety. Hence it's easy to overlook fog entirely in the planning process, only to find pea soup at the ramp in the morning.

Faced with unexpected fog, a captain may have to cancel the trip on the spot. An uninformed captain won't even know if the fog is expected to burn off early, or linger all day. It pays to check the fog forecast, even if it takes some digging to find one.

The CG seldom closes bars due to fog.

Bar Crossing Inbound

The ideal time to cross is near the top of an incoming tide. However it isn't possible to make both crossings at high slack unless your inbound crossing is 12 hours after your outbound crossing. As a practical matter, captains often must choose crossing times when tidal conditions are "good enough" but not ideal. For example, a captain might cross outbound in the first hour of the incoming tide, and return at high slack, for a five-hour trip. When in doubt, reserve the better conditions for the return crossing rather than the outbound crossing.

If you return to the bar, only to find it closed by the CG, consider it an error on your part. Swell forecasts are fairly accurate, and you could have reasonably predicted a closed bar at your planned return time.

Forecast Trend

Beware the "sucker window", which is a one-day period of good weather, followed immediately by high wind or swell. It's tempting to go fishing and plan to dash back before bad weather hits.

The problems with sucker windows are; 1) bad weather often arrives early, and 2) anglers often return late. Either way you face worsening and potentially dangerous conditions, "suckered" by want of a quick trip.

Forego the sucker windows, and wait for forecasts that are stable or improving in the ten-hour period *after* your planned return. This provides a buffer of good weather in case anything goes wrong.

Note that sucker windows are invisible unless you look for them. Unless you consciously check forecasts for the evening after your return, you risk being blindsided by deteriorating conditions. This again illustrates the utility of the finger-based checklist.

Recap

The finger-based checklist is foundational to the go/no-go decision. Just as each finger is separate from the others, each of the five factors require completely separate consideration. An open bar in the morning *does not* imply safe conditions all day.

This brief guide introduces the checklist only. Beyond lies the actual process of studying weather forecasts, cross-checking various websites, applying judgement, creating a mental model of likely conditions, and finally making a go- or no-go decision. Proficiency in this challenging process is one of the most satisfying parts of a captain's journey to mastery. [Ocean Coach](#) stands ready to help.

Helping you become the captain everyone trusts

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