

Keys to Foul-Weather Comfort

If you have to sail in undesirable conditions, at least do it in quality foul-weather gear that keeps you warm and dry yet allows you the freedom to move unencumbered. Foulies aren't cheap, so be sure to give any prospects a good examination before taking them to sea. Here are some key considerations:

Hood: The hood should be smoothly deployable and should be florescent green, orange, or yellow for increased visibility on or in the water. It should repel water, have a visor, and have a semi-rigid peak that deflects water. Bungee cord or other fasteners should be easy to adjust and should cinch enough to keep rain from entering the jacket.

Reflective: Jackets should have a fair amount of prismatic piping and reflective tape placed in areas that would be visible should the wearer fall overboard (hood, shoulders, neck). Every garment made for sailing should have some reflective properties.

Pockets: Check pocket design and construction. Hand-held devices tend to fall out of slash pockets, so self-draining cargo pockets with flaps and velcro closures are recommended. Also a set of lined pockets to warm hands is a must in cold-weather sailing areas. Keep in mind that pockets totally lined with cotton- or fleece-like material can stick to salty, wet hands. The best combination seems to be a slash pocket interior lined on one surface with fleece, the other with the same material used for the jacket exterior.

Wind-resistance: The jacket should have a drawstring or other tensioning mechanism at the waist and hem to help keep out wind. The collar should extend up to the chin to protect the neck, but it should not feel like a cervical collar.

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Look for beefy, easy-to-grab zippers like this one on the Henri Lloyd Biscay jacket we tested.

Internal cuffs: Often made from neoprene-like material, adjustable inner cuffs at wrists and ankles will keep out water.

Bibs/Trousers: Bibs should incorporate wide, comfortable suspenders that don't cut into the shoulders. They should allow for quick, easy trips to the head and should have a front zipper and gusset to keep the wearer dry. Suspenders should have strong, quick-release plastic snap buckles or velcro tabs for adjustment.

Fabric: Each maker's top-of-the-line product usually is a breathable, waterproof fabric, and some companies have a better track record than others. Fabrics that are micro-porous to the extent that vapor can escape but water is kept out, vary in quality and durability. The fabric should breathe, and seams should be taped, not just sewn.

Mesh: Jackets should have mesh liner to prevent sweating and promote aeration. Mesh at the hem, wrists, and ankles allows any water that gets in to get out quickly.

Vents: A quality jacket will have vents that can be zipped.

Cut: A foul-weather jacket should be roomy enough to accommodate a fleece or thick sweater beneath.

Color: Black may be the height of style, but if you fall overboard, you'll have a better chance of getting found if your jacket is red, orange, or yellow.

