



LIFE RAFT STANDARDS

As of yet, there are no fixed standards specifically targeting life rafts for U.S. recreational cruising boats. Instead, life rafts are usually built to one or more of the following standards for commercial ships, European recreational boats, or International Sailing Federation (ISAF) events. None of these standards fully address the needs of cruising sailors.

SOLAS (Safety of Life at Sea) statutes are the “top gun” of life raft regulations. They apply to commercial vessels governed by SOLAS rules, have international standing, and are the most stringent. These regs specify that raft manufacturers use heavy-duty material and large volume inflation bottles. Even ISAF special regulations recognize that SOLAS specs trump all the rest. Sailors competing in transoceanic or high-latitude races (Cat-0) must carry SOLAS life rafts.

Canopy structures get close scrutiny under the new ISAF standards.

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the ISO in 2005, it classifies rafts as either coastal or offshore. The latter are built to carefully chosen specifications that spell out factors such as the tear strength of the tube material (800 N warp/ 750 N weft), breaking strength, and porosity. They also are parameters for stability, canopy structure, inflation system, etc.

ISAF (International Sailing Federation) regulations have recognized that most smaller and mid-sized boats competing in offshore (but not transoceanic) events need a rugged, light raft small enough to be stowed aboard a racing sailboat. Previously, racing rafts that met the size and weight criteria fell short in strength and safety features, so the ISAF generated its own set of specs that use the structural guidelines of ISO and some key design criteria all their own. Mandates include “semi-rigid boarding aid... one person righting... stable in a seaway with from 0 to a full number of occupants.”

The U.S. Coast Guard promulgates life raft regulations for domestic inspected vessels, and in many ways, these are similar to SOLAS statutes. Passenger-carrying craft must meet these specs, not just for the raft, but for how it is stowed and deployed. These regulations are oriented toward ships and larger craft, so the weight and bulkiness associated with the required ancillary gear do not transfer very well for use aboard sail and smaller power boats. However, these regulations do underscore the need for tough tube material, rugged inflation systems, and high-visibility fabric and reflective tape.

ISO 9650 is the International Standard Organization’s criteria aimed at the makers of recreational craft life rafts. Adopted by