

Mooring Buoys: How to hook up to one

Most moorings consist of a ground chain attached to a heavy object that is buried in the sea bed or to anchors at either end. On some moorings this weight could be a block of concrete or old engine block.

Well managed moorings are lifted annually so they can be serviced and assessed for damage, but in many places this is not done. If you are on such a mooring during strong winds the mooring may fail because of lack of basic maintenance.



Preparation

You will need a boat hook ready to hand, and it is worth briefing the novice crew to pull along the length of the boat hook, not to lift with it at arm's length. It is easy to break a hook if it is used like a crane rather than to pull with. If a heavy weight is lifted in this manner there is a good chance the hook will bend or snap.

It is also useful to have a mooring rope ready when you approach the buoy. Sometimes the mooring has a ring on the top and you will need to attach your line to the buoy ring as quickly as possible.

Approach

Aim into the tide or if there is no tide, into the wind. If it is not clear where to approach from look for a similar type of vessel and approach the buoy on a parallel heading. If there are no other vessels, the direction of the pick up line will indicate the direction of the tide.

As you are approaching the buoy it is best to keep it to one side of the bow slightly off center of the buoy/ This will enable you to see it for longer. The crew should be on the other side of the boat and only step forwards at the last moment to avoid blocking the helm's view. It is vital that the vessel does not pass between the main buoy and the pick up line; you don't want to snag that line on the propeller or the rudder.

Some skippers like the crew to count the distance to the buoy down in feet. This can help once the buoy is out of sign under the bow, This works best with a familiar crew that is used to sailing on the boat. With an unfamiliar crew there is a adjustment time until everyone is "on the same page".

The best judgment of speed will come from looking to one side to create a transit with a nearby stationary object or boat. Once the buoy has disappeared under the bow, speed is very hard to estimate. But if you look to the side you can easily see if you are still moving or not.

If the crew with the boat hook is briefed to point the hook at the buoy it may help the driver to position the boat.

On a larger or high decked vessel, it is easier to pick the buoy up at the lowest point of the deck and this is normally about 2/3 of the way aft. Once the crew has the buoy, the vessel needs to be gently reversed until the buoy is on the bow. On some vessels or if you are alone it may be best to reverse on to the buoy, just take care not to foul the propeller.

Mooring

Once at the buoy, the boat must stop and stay stopped relative to the buoy long enough that the crew can attach the boat to the buoy. Frequently you see a boat slowly dropping back until the load is fully on the boat hook, the crew can not release the hook from the buoy because of the pressure and when it is ripped from the foredeck crew's hands the skipper blames the crew. This situation it is always caused by poor boat control, the helmsperson must keep the boat stopped, this may mean subtle use of the engine and steering.

The mooring rope should be pulled in until the main mooring line is reached, this can then be attached to a boat cleat. If there is no pick up line available, the yacht's mooring line must go to the big ring on the top of the mooring.

There are several mooring tools that can make life much easier, especially when you are short handed. There are some that clip a carbine hook directly to the ring on the buoy and others that will feed the line through the ring on the buoy for you.



Staying attached

Many boats are left with a single line through the ring on the buoy. That is fine for a few minutes but in gusty conditions the rope will cut through in no time. The best approach is to tie a round turn and two half hitches to the ring on the buoy, and if staying overnight always tie two lines to the buoy (one knot fail but never two!). The round turn and two half hitches are ideal because the rope does not move very much around the ring on the buoy.

If a bowline is used (much easier to undo), it should have an extra turn round the ring.

Mooring maintenance

A well maintained mooring should be lifted every year and inspected for corrosion. Commercial moorings are normally lifted and any damaged areas repaired, however moorings laid out by yacht clubs may not get lifted so often unless the club owns a lifting barge. Moorings laid by private individuals may never get any maintenance.

If you pick up a mooring that you know nothing about, there is a chance that it may be in a very poor condition.

Take care when using an unfamiliar mooring! :=)