

Manasquan Inlet, New Jersey, from the air. Inlets like this are often the most demanding part of a coastal leg — and the most likely reason to change the plan. *1

PASSAGE PLANNING / OPERATIONAL WORKSHEET

Pre-Departure Risk Assessment

Plan A, Plan B, Plan C — realistic bailout points and clear triggers for changing the plan.

A passage plan is a series of decisions, not just a line on the chartplotter. Each leg should have a preferred route, realistic alternatives, a point where you will turn back or divert, and enough time and fuel to do so safely. This worksheet walks through how I assess a leg before departure: the vessel, the crew, the weather and the route — and then the triggers that will change the plan once we are under way.

AT A GLANCE

Plan A Intended route, window, fuel stop and destination.	**Plan B** A sheltered alternative: inside route, shorter leg or alternate inlet.
Plan C Delay, hold at a safe harbor, or terminate the leg.	**Bailout points** Reachable ports and inlets along the route, with their limits.
Triggers Pre-agreed conditions that force a change of plan.	**Authority** The captain decides; anyone may call a stop.

*General guidance only. Always follow vessel manuals, current regulations and the judgment of the vessel's master. * See photo & reference credits.*

Assess the Risk: the GAR Model

The Coast Guard and its Auxiliary use a simple scoring tool, **GAR (Green-Amber-Red)**, to make risk visible before a mission. Each crew member scores six elements from 0 (no risk) to 10 (maximum risk) and the totals are compared and discussed. It is quick, it surfaces concerns that a quiet crew member might not volunteer, and it is just as useful on a yacht delivery.[1]

Element	Ask yourself	Score 0–10
Supervision	Is the captain experienced on this boat and route, and able to supervise rather than be tied to the helm?	
Planning	Is there time to plan properly? Are charts, tides, bridges, fuel and alternates worked out?	
Crew selection	Are the crew experienced, and do they know the vessel and each other?	
Crew fitness	Rest, seasickness, health, hydration and fatigue — now and at the end of the leg.	
Environment	Wind, sea, swell, visibility, temperature, daylight, current, inlet conditions.	
Event complexity	Length of leg, offshore exposure, night running, traffic, unfamiliar equipment.	

Total	Rating	Meaning
0–23	GREEN	Low risk — proceed with normal care.
24–44	AMBER	Caution — reduce risk (change route, timing or crew) before departing.
45–60	RED	High risk — do not proceed until the risk can be reduced.

Build Plan A, Plan B and Plan C

	What it contains	Example: Manasquan Inlet to Cape May, NJ
PLAN A Intended leg	Preferred route, departure time, expected speed and fuel burn, arrival time with margin before dark, destination berth confirmed.	Outside, roughly 70–80 nm down the coast, departing on a fair tide with a forecast of light westerly winds; arrive with daylight in hand.
PLAN B Alternate	A sheltered or shorter option: an intermediate inlet, an inside route, or a refuge port. Confirm depth, bridges and hours.	Bail out into Barnegat or Atlantic City if seas build; inside route on the NJ ICW for shallow-draft boats only, after checking current depths and bridge clearances.
PLAN C Stand down	Stay in port, hold at a safe harbor, or terminate the leg. Pre-arrange a berth so this is a comfortable choice, not a scramble.	Remain at the departure marina and wait for the next window; nobody is late enough to justify a bad inlet.

*General guidance only. Always follow vessel manuals, current regulations and the judgment of the vessel's master. * See photo & reference credits.*



Inlet jetties: in an ebb current against an onshore swell, an inlet that looks fine from the beach can be dangerous at the bar. *2



The plotter route is only Plan A. Mark alternates, hazards and turn-back points on the chart too. *3

Before Leaving the Dock

Vessel

01	Propulsion, steering, bilge pumps, charging, generator and navigation systems checked (see the AYD Marine Diesel & Generator Tips guide).
02	Safety equipment: life jackets for all, throwable device, fire extinguishers in date, flares/visual distress signals, EPIRB or PLB registered and in date, VHF/DSC tested, life raft service current where carried.
03	Fuel: plan using the rule of thirds — one-third out, one-third back or to the alternate, one-third reserve — and verify the actual tank level.

Route

01	Plot the route and alternates with charted depths, air-draft restrictions, bridge opening schedules and fuel points. Read the U.S. Coast Pilot for each inlet and harbor.[2]
02	Check the Local Notice to Mariners for shoaling, dredging, aids-to-navigation changes and bridge closures.[3]
03	Identify an immediate refuge, a mid-leg bailout and a final alternate; confirm access, depth at low water and practical hours.
04	Calculate tides and currents for each inlet. Plan to transit inlets near slack or on the flood when swell is running, and in daylight if unfamiliar.

Weather

01	Read the NWS coastal waters forecast and offshore forecast for every zone you will cross, including the synopsis and any advisories.[4][5]
02	Compare the forecast with real observations from NOAA buoys and coastal stations along the route.[6]
03	Note the wind direction relative to the coast and the inlets, swell height and period, and timing of any front. A forecast is a range; plan for its upper end.
04	Set the operating envelope for this boat and crew before you see what tomorrow looks like — e.g. maximum wind, sea height and minimum visibility.

Crew and shore contact

01	Brief the crew on the route, watch schedule, safety equipment, man-overboard procedure, and the plan for each bailout point.
02	File a float plan with a reliable shore contact: vessel description, persons aboard, route, ETA and when to call the Coast Guard if you are overdue.[7]
03	Confirm everyone is rested, fed, dressed for conditions and has taken any seasickness medication in advance.

Triggers to Change the Plan

Agree on these before departure, write them down, and treat them as decisions already made. In the moment, fatigue and "get-there-itis" push crews to accept conditions they would have rejected at the dock.

Trigger	Typical response
Wind, sea, swell or visibility exceed the agreed envelope	Move to Plan B at the next bailout point; do not commit to an inlet in breaking conditions.
Unexpected fuel consumption	Recalculate against the rule of thirds at every waypoint; divert to fuel early.
Mechanical fault, alarm, overheating, steering concern	Reduce load, diagnose, and head for the nearest suitable harbor.
Crew fatigue, seasickness or injury	Shorten the leg; a tired crew is a risk multiplier.
Daylight running short for an unfamiliar inlet	Divert to a known, well-lit harbor or stand off until daylight.
Restricted visibility / heavy traffic	Slow to a safe speed, sound fog signals, use radar and AIS, and post extra lookouts.[8]



Know which Coast Guard stations cover your route and how to reach them on VHF Ch 16 and by phone. *4



Bridges set the schedule: confirm vertical clearance, opening times and restrictions for every bridge on the route. *5

Reassess Underway

- Reassess at each major waypoint and before committing to an offshore leg or an inlet. Ask: is Plan A still the best option?
- Update the shore contact if the plan or ETA changes.
- Log weather observations hourly; compare them with the forecast. A front arriving early is a reason to act now.
- A delay is a valid Plan C. There is no obligation to force an unsafe departure or an unsafe arrival.

*General guidance only. Always follow vessel manuals, current regulations and the judgment of the vessel's master. * See photo & reference credits.*

CAPTAIN'S NOTE

On every delivery, the captain retains final go/no-go authority based on the vessel, the crew and the actual conditions — but any member of the crew can call a pause. Owners are always welcome aboard; part of the job is making the decision process visible so everyone understands why we wait.

Further Reading & Official Sources

[1] USCG Auxiliary — Risk management: SPE and GAR models (Boat Crew Qualification) — https://wow.uscgaux.info/content.php?unit=O-DEPT&category;=riskmgmt

[2] NOAA Office of Coast Survey — U.S. Coast Pilot — https://nauticalcharts.noaa.gov/publications/coast-pilot/

[3] USCG Navigation Center — Local Notice to Mariners — https://www.navcen.uscg.gov/local-notices-to-mariners

[4] NOAA National Weather Service — Marine forecasts — https://www.weather.gov/marine/

[5] NOAA Ocean Prediction Center — offshore forecasts and analyses — https://ocean.weather.gov/

[6] NOAA National Data Buoy Center — real-time buoy observations — https://www.ndbc.noaa.gov/

[7] USCG Boating Safety — Float plan — https://uscgboating.org/recreational-boaters/floating-plan.php

[8] USCG Navigation Center — Navigation Rules (COLREGS / Inland Rules) — https://www.navcen.uscg.gov/navigation-rules-amalgamated

Photo Credits

*1 Manasquan Inlet aerial photograph 2022.jpg — James Loesch. License: CC BY 2.0. Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Manasquan_Inlet_aerial_photograph_2022.jpg

*2 Manasquan Inlet . Jersey Shore.jpg — Stinkie Pinkie. License: CC BY 2.0. Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Manasquan_Inlet_._Jersey_Shore.jpg

*3 OpenSeaMap auf Garmin-Kartenplotter GPSmap526 Screen 1.jpg — RheinSkipper. License: CC BY-SA 3.0. Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:OpenSeaMap_auf_Garmin-Kartenplotter_GPSmap526_Screen_1.jpg

*4 US Navy 030902-C-3948H-510 A U.S. Coast Guard Rigid Hull Inflatable Boat (RHIB) conducts a Homeland Security patrol near the Statue of Liberty.jpg — U.S. Navy photo. License: Public domain. Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:US_Navy_030902-C-3948H-510_A_U.S._Coast_Guard_Rigid_Hull_Inflatable_Boat_(RHIB)_conducts_a_Homeland_Security_patrol_near_the_Statue_of_Liberty.jpg

*5 Brielle Bridge, Manasquan River, Pt. Pleasant, N. J. (8510363924).jpg — Boston Public Library. License: CC BY 2.0. Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Brielle_Bridge,_Manasquan_River,_Pt._Pleasant,_N._J._(8510363924).jpg

EXPLORE MORE WITH ATLANTIC YACHT DELIVERY

Planning a relocation, an owner-aboard delivery or hands-on instruction aboard your own boat? Capt. Tom Ertle can help prepare the vessel, the plan and the crew.

Visit the AYD website | Captain services | Delivery-preparation checklist | Printable preparation checklist (PDF)

*General guidance only. Always follow vessel manuals, current regulations and the judgment of the vessel's master. * See photo & reference credits.*