

Preparing Your Boat for a Hurricane.

The best insurance a boat can have.

Being that I have been the owner and operator of a sail loft for the last 12 years in La Paz Baja California, Mexico, I have some suggestions for helping you ready your boats for hurricanes in the Sea of Cortez. Most of the advice given here will apply to preparing a boat anywhere there is a hurricane.

As a sail maker I will first concentrate on with the above deck preparations, including sails, canvas, and rigging. Then follow with a discussion of general preparedness for any sailboat or motor vessel that is preparing to ride out a hurricane in port or in a marina.

To begin, get your sails down and off the decks. It is a perfect time to wash and store your sails and canvas to be ready for after the season. At [Velas de Baja](#) we offer a wash, inspection and of course, repair or maintenance service if it is needed. We also offer storage at our loft for our clients during their off season.

Whether you bring them to us or just store them below, it is best to get your sails off the rigs. In fact, lately cruisers have been finding out that if you have a mainsail or headsail installed on your boat during a hurricane you may have voided your insurance! Yes, unfortunately many people found this out only too late after the devastation caused by [Hurricane Marty](#) just a couple of years ago.

One thing is for sure, leaving your sails up can not only causes damage to them, but it puts an unnecessary increased force on your rigging with the added resistance of the rolled or furled sails. Leaving sails up also has caused more than one boat to break from its anchoring (mooring) as the roller furling headsail gets loose and powers up the boat.

During the last 12 years of owning Velas de Baja I'm always amazed at how many headsails there are to be repaired after a hurricane comes into the Sea of Cortez and or up the "Pacific Side". Many of the clients aren't in town and haven't been for quite sometime. This makes no sense to me cause if I'm not planning on using my boat for week's, or maybe months I "brick'em" and "bag'em".

Now of course, after reading the first part of this I hope you also realize all canvas, awnings, tarps and whatever is loose should be stowed.

Dodgers in many cases when correctly built and installed can easily withstand the forces of hurricane winds and if you plan being on your boat you will want the protection from wind, waves and the blasts of liquid smoke. However, you should also consider the additional strain on your lines, anchor or mooring should you choose to leave your canvas installed.

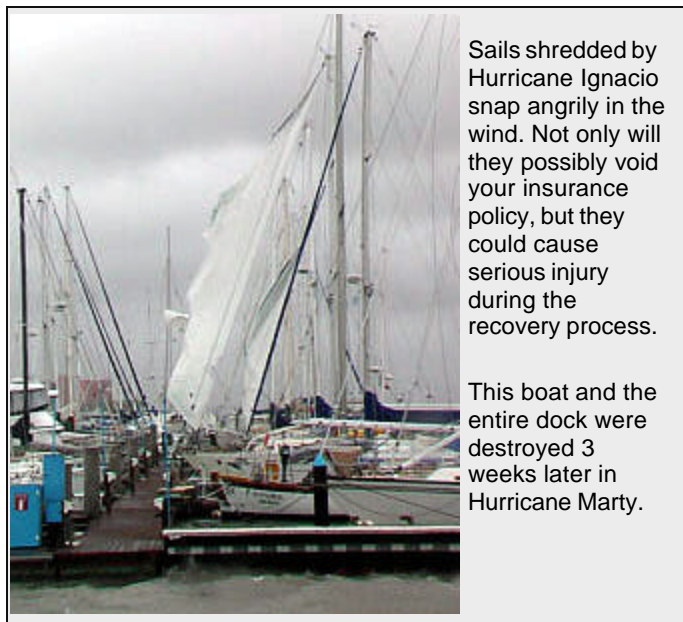
After downing the sails and canvas it is a good idea to check all rigging and halyards to be sure they are not got to bang away at the mast or other areas. You may find tying the halyards out to the outer shrouds or stays will help keep them out of the way and from chaffing. Also be sure your booms and spinnaker poles are well attached and anchored.

At this time you will want to down and store, any, extra lines, flags, antennas, radar deflectors, anchor lights and whatever else that you can. Of course if you are staying on your boat you will want you're radio and anchor light functioning.

In fact everything that creates wind resistance, takes up space on the topsides and adds weight is best stowed below or off the boat if possible. Fuel and water containers, BBQ's, wind generators, dinghy's that won't be needed, outboards, dive tanks, hammocks, rocking chair and everything else cruisers seem to collect on deck. Think of high winds and breaking seas from all directions hitting



your vessel and your decks awash with gallons and gallons of water. Then you have an idea of what goes and what stays. Get the decks clear!



Sails shredded by Hurricane Ignacio snap angrily in the wind. Not only will they possibly void your insurance policy, but they could cause serious injury during the recovery process.

This boat and the entire dock were destroyed 3 weeks later in Hurricane Marty.

At this time I'll discuss a few things about where you are going to "ride out" a hurricane as this has much to do with your preparations. First, one of the safest places sailors and yachtsmen know to be for a hurricane, is out at sea with lots and lots of miles to leeward (that's the downwind side where you are likely to blow). Now this is definitely true for larger vessels and many of the yachts do have to leave marinas for "hurricane hole" anchorages or just power on out and around the worst of the storm.

With today's weather reporting capability (see [Tropical Watch](#)) weather fax, radios, satellite communications skipper's can have a very good idea of where exactly the storm is and approximately where it will go (that's the tricky part, predicting where a spinning top is going). This may sound crazy to some but talk with professional skippers from around the world and many will tell you there insurance is void and their job will be as well if they don't go to sea!

As a very good friend, very knowledgeable sailor and boat builder from Texas once told me "Everyone knows, docks don't sink boats, boats sink docks". As witnessed in the marina disaster in [Marty in La Paz](#), this is true. Now that is not to say everyone should run to open water. Many, many boats survive just fine at anchor or properly tied up at the dock.

So if you are to stay at anchor what else needs to be done? Everything you can do to make sure vessel can still function and keep floating. In other words make sure the bilges and motor are working. If you are a real sailor and feel that you may need the back up, install your storm jib and ready your storm trysail. In many cases sailors and yachtsmen use their engines during the height of the storms attack to counter the forces on their anchors and keep their boats under control as the winds and surges can be very strong.

As for how to anchor for storms it is too much for this article to discuss completely. As many yachtsmen and sailors will tell you, with great opinion, on what to use and how to anchor. Just sit around with a bunch of skippers and ask "what the best anchor is these days?" You'd better be ready for a spirited discussion and have sometime on your hands. I will assume for this article you have already made your choices and may soon see just how good a choice you've made.

One thing I will add is that I have not known that many boaters make use of a kedge weight. This is a hefty weight generally added at the end of the rode and chain connection or 50' or so from the anchor, if all chain rode is used. What the weight effectively does is helps keep your anchor from moving and bouncing with the surge as much, making it way more effective.

In any case you should have hopefully two good large anchors set with at least one back up ready to be deployed. It is a good idea to have that back up anchor ready even if you are in a marina as more than once they have been set during a storm to keep the boats from slamming the docks and pilings.

As for being in marinas for hurricanes you really want to be careful at how you tie up your vessel. Many people who tie their boats too tightly to the docks putting a huge strain on the docks and vessel. You should tie them with at least a few feet of extra play on the bow and stern lines and then use spring lines (both fore and aft) to bring the boat in closer. This allows for the boat to move some independently from the dock during the surges.

Also be sure to use your cleats properly. Winding up the cleats with lots of wraps and knots does make them hold any better and can be a disaster when you may need to get loose. I also don't recommend stacking lines from lots of boats on the same cleat if it can be avoided. If it cannot be avoided then do it with consideration for each other and don't just pile the wraps or knots on. More wraps don't hold better, they just make it more difficult to release them in an emergency. The reason there is a standard and correct way to tie a cleat is so that *any sailor* will know how to release that knot, in blinding storm conditions.

Making use of the "rubber snubbers" and line protectors can be helpful and be sure to protect all lines where they may be able to chafe. It is really amazing how fast a good heavy line will chafe through if not protected. This is also why it is a good idea to have extra lines easily accessible so that they can be quickly added if needed.

There really is a lot more that can be said but I believe it is best to just get the concept. Get your decks and rigging clear, double check bilges, radios and engines and anchor or moor your vessel as best you can. One thing I will add after seeing what happened in Marty. Of all the boats that ended up in the back bay, on the beach, most had little to no damage caused them by the beaching. I'm not suggesting you purposefully beach your boat at high tide before the storm hits but I definitely would consider it after what I have seen. Then of course I owned a beachable trimaran for years that was on her trailer during Marty's wrath and all other hurricanes to pass La Paz in the last 12 years.

James Glover

James Glover is a long time Sea of Cortez sailor and resident of La Paz. His company, Velas de Baja has been serving the needs of cruisers in the Sea of Cortez for more than 12 years.

Visit the [Velas de Baja Website](#)

