

WATERSPORTS SAFETY ABROAD

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Watersports while on holiday are a great way to pass the time in the sun. The adrenaline of paragliding and the fun of riding on an inflatable rubber ring are well worth a participating in with the right operators.

Sadly, fatalities have occurred to British tourists taking part in these otherwise exciting sports while on their holidays because of lax attitudes of operators towards safety.

This fact sheet offers some advice to keep you safe while enjoying your watersports holiday, providing details of what to look out for in your operator.



THE LAW

Unfortunately there is no European-wide legislation regarding the proper operation and management of beach watersports operations or the private use of beach watersports equipment or watercraft. Individual countries have their own legislation, beach regulations, standards and guidance, but these are not consistent and are often only enforced in the aftermath of an accident. New legislation has proved to have some effect in the past; for example, in March 2002 Spain introduced quite stringent legislation to control high-speed watercraft, particularly jet-skis. This has had a significant effect on both individual use and hire operations.

THE STATISTICS

- There are in the region of 65 million trips abroad each year, with Spain as the most popular European destination for UK travellers. The vast majority of these trips are for summer sun / beach holidays, about 8% are specifically for activity holidays (including watersport holidays).
- Over the period 2000-2005, 475 British tourists drowned on holiday.
- Almost a third of drownings abroad occur while victims are swimming. From the age of 15 the majority get into difficulty while swimming in the sea, or are swept away by strong currents and rip tides.
- Almost 20% of the cases are adults between the ages of 20 and 40 years and occur while the victim took a voluntary risk taking part in water sports such as diving, snorkelling and kayaking.
- A small percentage of fatalities (6%) can be attributed to the ignorance of, or disregard of risks. This mainly occurs to males aged between 18-30, is often connected with alcohol, and frequently relates to events such as stag parties.
- In line with events in the UK over half of all the drowning fatalities abroad are males across all ages and activities.

ASSOCIATED RISKS

Each activity has its own specific risks. Here are some points to consider:

Towed inflatable rides

These include 'bananas', where passengers sit astride the inflatable, and 'ringos', large doughnut-shaped rings, which are towed by a powered boat. The rides can be great fun, but many boat drivers like to whip the inflatable round in a sharp curve, which inevitably tips you off, so protective headgear and buoyancy aids are vital. Watch out for operators who are tipping passengers on top of each other and not retrieving fallen passengers in ample time, leaving them floundering in the water.

Parasailing

Whether you're launched from the beach, a pontoon or a winch boat, good kit is critical, as old and worn canopies and rigging may cause a fatal accident. Good take-off and landing techniques are essential, so watch the operator in action first and avoid operators that make a pig's ear of their flights by dragging passengers along or making them run before getting airborne. Launching from a beach needs two trained assistants, as well as a driver and spotter in the boat. Accidents occur through harnesses not fitting properly, problems with the parachutes stalling and tow-lines snapping in strong winds.

Jet-skis

Used properly, jet-skis can be great fun, but used irresponsibly they can be the cause of a fatal accident, and a nuisance to other water users. Also known as 'personal watercraft' or PWCs, jet-skis can leave a trail of deaths and injuries in their rowdy wake. Most accidents occur through collisions with other PWCs or watercraft, crashing into jetties, piers or rocks and failing to avoid more vulnerable water users.

Different countries have different laws regarding jet-skis. In Spain all jet-ski engines must be less than 55 horsepower and fitted with a remote control cut-out. All users must also be given instructions on how to use jet-skis. In addition, no jet-ski must come nearer than 200 metres to the coastline, except in specially marked zones. In Greece, jet-skis are regulated by the coastguard, cannot be hired to anyone under 18 years of age, and you must have proof of age, a driver's licence and complete a registration form. Remote cut-outs should also be fitted to jet-skis.

Water-skiing

If you're not familiar with water-skiing, a certain amount of tuition is needed. Even if you know what you're doing, the driver can't drive the boat and watch the skier at the same time, so there must always be a trained lookout in the boat.

Windsurfing

Look for observers on the beach, a dedicated safety craft, and good communication between staff – preferably by VHF radio. Especially watch for the operator providing a secure uphaul. Watch out for old equipment, torn sails, and that the condition of the rigging ropes are not frayed or severely worn.

Kitesurfing

Make sure you are provided with a helmet, buoyancy aid, kite leash and a quick release harness system. Before you begin to kitesurf you must be a competent swimmer, hold third party insurance and have undertaken proper lessons. Ensure your operator has an area away from congestion for the use of kite surfers, at least 50m downwind or upwind from where other craft or vessels (moored or in use), and away from bathing areas, swimmers, buoys and boat mooring. Ensure you are familiar with rescue signals. Carry a knife in case of the need to cut the flying line, and a flare to attract attention if necessary.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN AN OPERATOR

You're on holiday so don't be in a hurry. Time spent observing how a watersports centre is run is never wasted. If you have any doubts talk to the operator before you commit.

1. Have a look at the equipment

- Sun, sand and salty seawater destroy watersports kit. A well-run watersports centre will routinely store its gear out of the sun and rinse off sand and salt in fresh water.
- A sun bleached, sand-scuffed buoyancy aid (lifejacket) with hard or crumbling foam pads will not perform properly, and a knotted, fraying, sand-encrusted tow-line is on its way to breaking.
- If an operator is sloppy about looking after their own equipment, you're right to question how well they will look after you.
- Remember that shiny new kit by itself does not guarantee a safe operator.

2. Make sure you're given a life-jacket

- Whatever the activity, you should always be given a buoyancy aid, even if you're just riding in the towboat.
- Make sure your buoyancy aid fits properly and will stay on if you're in the water. If it's too small, it won't provide enough buoyancy; if it's too big, it will float up around your ears in the water, make it harder for you to breathe and could hamper you as you climb back on board.
- Protective helmets should be provided for towed inflatable rides.

3. Study where activities take place

- Keeping you away from other conflicting watersports is paramount to your safety.
- The operator should have a clearly buoyed lane for launching and a buoyed operating area big enough to keep you away from others, and to prevent other water users from straying into your path.

4. Does the operator know who you are?

- The watersports operator should always ask you for personal details - your name, where you're staying and any relevant medical conditions. These should be recorded in case of an accident.
- You should also be asked if you are confident in the water and be given a full safety briefing.
- If you're renting a jet-ski, you should be asked for ID, proof of your age and, ideally, of relevant training or qualifications.

5. Scan the safety procedures

- One-man operations are unsafe: full stop. Ask yourself the following questions - if the answer to any of them is no, you're looking at a potentially dodgy operator:
 - If someone is busy talking to customers, who is keeping a look-out?
 - Who is going to rescue you if you have problems?
 - Is the centre well-staffed, with an alert observer?
 - Is there a look-out, as well as a driver, in the towing boat to watch the parasailer, water-skier or those on towed inflatables?
 - Does the boat driver wear a buoyancy aid and use a 'kill cord' to cut the engine in an emergency? If he doesn't, imagine what happens if he falls overboard while swerving!
 - Is there a dedicated safety craft (boat or jet-ski - and a member of staff to drive it) to rescue someone in trouble?

6. Check out what's back at base

- Look for safety equipment at the operator's beach base and in the rescue craft: a pair of binoculars and a first-aid kit should be evident.
- Communication between observers on the beach and the driver or look-out on the boat is vital, so look, ideally, for a VHF radio.

WHAT IS RoSPA DOING?

To reduce the number of UK a tourist drowning abroad is a RoSPA key issue. We have conducted research into this problem and presented our findings Europe wide. We are working with key partners both in the UK and abroad to actively target this problem.

RoSPA is concerned that there is very little information for tourists to make informed choices about their safety when taking part in some holiday water sports.

Ideally we would like to see a system similar to the RYA recognised centre so customers are assured that the safety standards have been checked and the quality of service is high.

We believe that holiday companies can do more to help their customers access safe watersports activities.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents is a registered charity, which was established over 80 years ago. **RoSPA's mission is to save lives and reduce injuries.** More information can be found on www.rosipa.com or by email at help@rosipa.com.

Royal Yachting Association www.rya.org.uk

British Canoe Union www.bcu.org.uk

Sport England www.sportengland.org

Foreign and Commonwealth Office www.fco.gov.uk/travel