

Which VHF marine channel to use on pleasure boats and why?

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Marine VHF radios have 54 channels for a few different purposes (pleasure, commercial, SAR, port operations, government). Below are the channels we can use as pleasure boaters.

Channel 16--international distress, emergency calling and hailing channel. All boaters underway, if not listening to another channel or in communications with another boater are required to monitor ch 16. Since everyone is listening on 16, that is THE channel to make a distress call. Ch 16 is NOT USED for radio checks. There are 3 levels of distress:

Mayday--used for life threatening situations such as **a person**, or boat is threatened by grave or imminent danger, man overboard, medical emergency, fire aboard, boat capsizing, taking on excessive water.

Pan-Pan--international urgency call indicating that someone aboard a boat is in a situation that is not an immediate threat to either the vessel or the people on board. Some examples are being adrift, mechanical issue on a boat, lose your navigational equipment, tangle with a line, or experience any other non-life-threatening emergency

Securite--In fog or heavy traffic situations, Securite may be issued by a ferry or commercial vessel leaving or entering a harbor or narrow channel. As a prudent mariner, I issue a securite under those same circumstances – when the coastline is socked in by fog and I want to alert others of my coming passage through a high-traffic choke point, dangerous debris in the water.

To make a distress call, say “Mayday, Mayday, Mayday, this is vessel XXX at position (GPS lat/long), a 42’ sailboat with X persons aboard and (are sinking, have fire, have person with heart attack...).

Channels 68, 69, 71, 72, 78A--these are the only channels pleasure boaters may use between boats.

Channel 9--basically an overflow of ch 16. Technically it can be used for hailing another vessel, but very few boaters monitor it. Probably its biggest use would be for radio checks. Ch 9 is also used at the Isthmus to reach the harbor patrol.

Channel 6--safety. This channel gets very little use so it is a good channel if, say you're buddy boating and one vessel has a safety concern.

Channel 13--navigation safety bridge-bridge. Automatically changes from 25-watt transmit to 1 watt. This is a great channel to call a freighter if you want to know their intentions, especially near the shipping lanes. Vessels over 20 meters are required to monitor 13.

Channel 14—Marine Traffic. Vessel Traffic Services (VTS) runs a complex network of radars and AIS stations tracking vessels in our Separation Zone. Feel free to call Traffic on ch 14, especially in low visibility, as they are happy to inform, even small boat operators, of vessels near you. Their goal is to prevent collisions.

Channel 81A--turn on fog horn. It is up to boaters to turn on fog horns at designated harbors. To do this, tune to ch 81A and push-to-talk 5 times within 10 seconds. That will turn on the horn for about 30 minutes. This is officially supported in CIH, MdR, King Harbor, Alamitos Bay... Angel's Gate and Queens Gate do not use MRASS, those horns are on at all times.

Channel 27—CURRENTLY NOT AVAILABLE--radio check. In MdR, SeaTow provided a free service to check your radio. Tune to ch 27, push-to-talk and say something like "this is vessel XXX testing on channel 27 one, two, three, four, five". They will play back a brief advertisement then play back your actual audio. This station is currently turned off in MdR, but may resume or be available in other harbors.

Channel 12—CIH&Avalon harbor patrol. Don't use 12 outside of these, 12 is active as a Port Operations channel.

Dual/Triple watch--most radios have at least dual watch. These are used when a club or buddy-boaters decide on monitoring a channel other than 16. It is OK to have your radio on, say ch 68 as a cruising channel, provided you turn on dual/triple watch with the Priority channel set to 16.

Channels ending in A (such as Coast Guard liaison 22A) are in the process of dropping the A and adding 10 before the number. Newer radios will show ch 22A as ch 1022.