

Father's Day: A Dad with His Girls



The outboard motor purred evenly and with a deep resonance as we motored away from the Waukegan boat launch, along the north side of the government pier, and east toward the open water of Lake Michigan. The flag by the Waukegan Waterworks was rigid, and saluted toward the northwest as the 25 mph southeast wind buffeted it into submission.

I pretty much knew what would happen once we got to the end of the pier, away from its protection and into the full force and fury of the waters blowing up from Michigan City.

When you get to the mouth of Waukegan harbor, at the ends of the government and Johnson Motors piers, there's a wicked vortex. Kind of like the Bermuda Triangle, but only in Waukegan. It's rougher there than any other place on the Illinois side of Lake Michigan. Winds and waters and currents meet in an unfriendly alliance.

I motored into the vortex, turned the boat south to head toward Lake Forest (where some good perch fishing has been of late), and was pummeled by the worst waves I've seen in a long time on the big lake.

They were only three feet high, maybe four, but very short, very close together. The stern went up. The bow went down. Before the bow could go up again, we caught a roller which broke over the bow and drenched the girls, who were all in the front of the boat. I hid behind the console and watched them get soaked. It was funny. I laughed.

And then it happened again. And then again. And then a fourth time. There was now four inches of water in the boat and the bilge pump couldn't keep up. A boat full of water is hard to control, especially in the wind and waves. This outing was not intended to be a Kon-Tiki experience.

I told the girls it was no big deal, but we needed to get out of there as soon as possible. It was quickly becoming very dangerous. As most of you loyal readers know, once in a while I will elicit the writings of others to add the spice of something different to this column. My older daughter, Laura, whose writings have graced these pages before, offers this view of that day:

On Father's Day, my sister Katie, her best friend Theresa Macrowski of Gurnee, and I went on a boating trip with my dad on Lake Michigan. Although I'm not really the outdoorsy type, a relaxing day on the boat is a great opportunity to enjoy the beautiful summer weather of which we don't get enough.

I used to go on boat rides quite often during the summer while growing up. But I didn't realize until Sunday how long it had been since my last boat ride. As a kid, we took annual summer vacations to Minocqua, Wisconsin, where boating is almost required transportation. I'm a city girl now, and the only boats I ride here in the Loop are the overcrowded buses on Michigan Avenue. So, to help others like me out, I have a few boating tips to share.

Wear a swimsuit and layers. Bring towels.

Trust me. Your life will be so much easier if you do this. Not only will you be able work on your tan, but you'll also be appropriately dressed if your boat turns into a water ride at Six Flags Great America like ours did.

Those choppy waters you just read about made for three very soaked, shrieking girls when the waves came crashing into the boat. Not only were we swimsuit-less, but also had no layers to cover up with. (Dad's note: What would more layers do? Add more wet clothes to the pile?)

No matter how nice the weather is, shivering in a soaked tank top and shorts is no fun. In calmer waters, Theresa and I finally stood up for several minutes in hopes of air-drying our clothes as the boat moved. It was exactly as uncomfortable as it sounds.

Always wear SPF.

This may seem like a no-brainer when you're heading out for some sunshine, but many folks still consider sunscreen optional. I recommend a waterproof SPF 30 for boating trips, as it's strong enough to stand up to prolonged sun exposure, and won't easily wash off. As a skin care junkie, I learned long ago that sunscreen is one of the best anti-aging products you can buy, so those of you worried about wrinkles and sun damage have a built-in incentive. More importantly, sunscreen can prevent sunburns and skin cancer, so it's crucial to protect your skin, the largest organ of your body.

The newest spray sunscreens out this year are perfect for these occasions, and often include cooling, skin-soothing ingredients, so you can't lose. And that's my public service announcement and shameless product plug for the day. Make sure you have enough life jackets for everyone on board.

This may also be one for the "obvious" category, but life jackets are the boating equivalent of seat belts in cars. Certainly, good swimming skills never hurt, but a life jacket is priceless when you're struggling to stay above water.

You can also rest assured that you'll be complying with boating safety regulations. Which leads us to my next tip'.

Learn and follow boating safety regulations.

There are almost as many safety regulations for boating as there are for driving. It's important to know and follow them all, regardless of whether you're an avid or novice boater. You can get tickets on the water for speeding or faulty equipment, just as you can on land. What happens if you get stopped by the water cops?

Well, hopefully, the outcome will be better than the time my dad was stopped on the Chain O' Lakes when I was 12. As the officer recited my dad's safety violations (Dad's note: I don't remember it this way at all!), my 5-year-old cousin Scott looked up at the officer and innocently asked, "Do you have all that stuff on your boat?"

Luckily, Scott was let off with a stern "I'm conducting the investigation here, son," from the officer, although my dad was not so lucky. He walked or trolled, in this case away with a ticket for failing to comply with safety regulations.

Don't bring valuables.

Leave it at home if you don't want it to get wet. We weren't expecting to get waterlogged, but luckily, the girls and I were able to stow the bags with our iPods and reading material into some dry storage compartments before they were ruined.

Our stuff was fine, but would I risk my video iPod or copy of *The Devil Wears Prada* again to such an extent? Definitely not. This also applies to pets. As much as I wanted to bring along our golden retriever, Jake, my dad wisely said no. The possibility of a retriever overboard was too great. Indeed, it would have been an even bumpier ride trying to keep Jake from either jumping into the water or calming him down as he got drenched with flotsam and jetsam from overboard. So leave Fluffy at home where you know she'll be safe and sound.

Go to the bathroom, eat and be prepared before you head out

Unlike the Chain O' Lakes, Lake Michigan isn't "day boater-friendly." By this, I mean that there aren't multiple harbors with hot dog stands, bait shops and bathrooms. Eat before you leave the boat launch or bring lots of food. If you're planning to fish, make sure you have all the bait and tools you'll need. (Father's note: Duh.) And what about a fishing license? And for God's sake, make sure you go to the bathroom beforehand, even if you don't have to go. This may not bother the male readers of this column, but nothing is worse for a female than an outdoor "create your own bathroom" incident.

Hopefully, these tips will help you make the most of your boating trip. Above all, the most important thing to remember is to have fun while you're out on the water. And what's more fun than enjoying a boat ride in dry clothes when you don't have to go to the bathroom?

As a doting father, I can only remind you to take what is offered to you, whether it be an experience in the outdoors or otherwise. You only get so many chances. Do you want to squander any of them? You can write to Jim at outdoors@zegar.com