

Maritime Safety Queensland

How to ride a PWC as a passenger safely

Riding a PWC is exhilarating and sharing the experience with friends is a blast. However, it is important to know how the ride changes when more than one person is on a PWC.

Some practical tips can help both the operator and the passenger stay safe.

- Passenger experience
- Communication
- Capacity
- Conditions
- Balance
- Keep it on the water with a passenger
- Take it Easy - Start slow, but not too slow.
- Keep a proper lookout.
- Falling Off
- Stay Safe.

Passenger Experience

Combining a beginner PWC operator with an inexperienced passenger could be dangerous

When the PWC operator is experienced and the passenger is not, the ride may need to be short and gentle to allow the passenger time to adjust to being on the back of a PWC. This should help decrease the chances of the passenger falling off or getting hurt.

Inexperienced passengers may not understand that waves and sudden, unexpected changes of direction can impact their balance. They may not have the skills to know when to brace and how to prepare themselves for the impact of large waves. It is important that the PWC operator performs a briefing with the passenger raising any potential concerns including how to hold on, and what to do in an emergency such as recovery or capsize so that the ride can be tailored in a way that is fun for everyone.

Younger passengers

When riding with a child onboard, the operator needs to understand that the child is not as strong as an adult and may tire more easily. Children may not remember to hang on tight or have the strength to do so for long periods of time. The operator is responsible for the safety of all persons onboard.

Communication

It is important to ensure the passenger has a clear way to communicate with the PWC operator.

The best way to ensure good communication is to discuss the ride before setting out. The PWC operator should ensure the passenger knows how and where to hold on whilst underway. It is also important to agree on signals for bracing for impact, slowing down, accelerating and turning at speed.

Communication should also extend to what to do in an emergency and how to reboard the vessel should one or both riders end up in the water. The passenger needs to communicate clearly their level of knowledge and skill, so the driver knows what to expect.

Capacity

Do not exceed the number of people that can safely ride the PWC.

Passengers need something secure to hold on to, the typical choices are rear grab handles, or the operator's waist or lifejacket handles. When riding with young passengers, wearing an operator's life jacket with passenger handles should be considered.

Each PWC has its own maximum number of riders and weight limits. It is important that all operators and passengers check the manufacturers specifications for their vessel and ensure that only the correct number of people ride the PWC. Overloading the vessel may not only harm the PWC but is can also be dangerous for passengers and operators.

Three seats mean 3 people - no matter the age.

MSQ's marine incident data shows us this is the safest practice for your family. Operating outside of these points may leave you liable to prosecution in regard to your general safety obligations, under Transport Operations Marine Safety Act.

Younger passengers

Operate your PWC only with the passengers seated behind you, never between you and the handlebars

Only allow younger passengers who can place both feet at the same time firmly in the foot wells of the PWC to ride.

Conditions

Be aware of the water conditions that you will be riding in.

Busy waterways, choppy seas, wash and other conditions can cause the operator to make sudden changes of direction. These water conditions make the feel of ride less predictable and more likely to unseat an inexperienced passenger.

Even with an experienced passenger, the combined weight must be considered as a factor that will impact responsiveness. It is the duty of the operator to constantly assess conditions and determine they are within safe operating limits.

Wave jumping with a passenger on a PWC has seen many back injuries occur to the passenger. If you are planning on wave jumping, consider letting the passenger take photos from the shore.

Balance

Passengers need to understand their role in maintaining balance.

When the passenger and driver do not work together especially during turns, it can result in both landing in the water. Whilst the passenger has no control over the direction or speed of the vessel, they must be able to read the operators signals and lean correctly to prevent capsize.

The slower the PWC is going, the more likely it is to become unbalanced. It is especially important around docks, shores, other PWC, and any other places that prescribe slow speed. The PWC will be slower to respond and slower to turn when riding with passengers.

Keep it on the water with a passenger

Maritime safety Queensland has investigated too many serious impact injuries to passengers on PWCs after wave jumping. There is international hospitalisation evidence that confirms the passenger on a PWC is at much higher risk of serious spinal and other life changing injuries from landing stresses after jumping a PWC as the passenger has less hold points, less seat density and less control of their person during a jump. The operator of the PWC must consider the safety of the passenger and discuss their intentions to the passenger before considering such dangerous activities.

Take it Easy – but not too easy

Part of the stability of the craft comes from movement through the water. The craft needs a minimum speed to be able to maintain course through any wash or waves and respond to steering commands. The minimum speed will vary with different crafts and depend on the weight of passengers and equipment, make, model, and horsepower of the engine and conditions.

Even when the craft is moving faster, an experienced operator and passenger must continue to communicate and slow down when making turns until they have fully learned how to work together.

Keep a proper lookout

Don't wait for the operator to notice a problem, passengers can point out potential hazards too.

It is the PWC operator's responsibility to alert the passenger to any change of direction. If the passenger is alert and assisting the operator in keeping a proper lookout, they may notice these situations or hazards and be of valuable assistance in identifying a close quarters situation before it develops into an emergent situation.

When taking in the scenery and sights, remember that four eyes can do a better job of watching out for threats, such as changing conditions, buoys, and other boats

PWC's share the water with many others, including swimmers, surfers, water skiers, and other watercraft that do not have the agility and speed to get out of another craft's way. It is the responsibility of the PWC operator to avoid collisions with other watercraft, structures and people in the water and to obey speed and distance regulations.

Safe Speed - Distance Off

You must reduce your speed to no more than 6 knots if you are within 60m of:

- people in the water
- anchored or moored boats, structures, boat ramps, jetties or pontoons
- the boundary of a bathing reserve (check with your local council for locations)
- the shore*.

* Exceptions apply only to the 60m from the shore rule if:

- (1) the waterway is less than 120m wide, and:
 - you operate the PWC as close as practical to a straight line to transit the area
 - you stay as close as possible to the centre of the waterway or a marked channel
- (2) the PWC is being used in waterskiing or towing.

You must keep a distance of 30m from any other moving ship or reduce your speed to less than 10 knots unless you're involved in an approved aquatic event or where doing so would endanger you or another person.

In coastal waters, freestyling or wave jumping is restricted to:

- beyond 200m of the shore if homes are within 100m of the shoreline where you are operating. (This does not apply to dams and inland waters.)

Wherever you are, the way you operate your PWC affects the people around you.

Falling Off

Passengers need to know how to reboard the PWC.

Getting back on a PWC can be difficult and requires a great deal of upper body strength. You need to be able to pull not only yourself out of the water but also the added weight of your soaking wet clothes which can be heavy. Combine this with the bobbing motion of the PWC moving about in the water and reboarding can be quite difficult.

Typically, the operator gets back on first and then helps the passenger re-board. When climbing on from the back, use the step until a knee can be placed on the back of the craft. The nose of the craft will often raise up when a person is climbing back on from the rear. It will take some balance to move the rest of the way forward until once again seated.

Take into account if your PWC is fitted with an esky and/or fishing rod holders, these can make it near impossible to reboard a PWC.

Stay Safe

Many people do not consider a PWC a boat, but they are registered watercraft that require a licenced operator.

This means many of the restrictions are not just suggestions but legislative requirements with penalties for contravening requirements.