

# Officers Put Safety First for Tampa's Gasparilla Fest

Story by PAI Tasha Tully, St. Petersburg, Fla.

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. -- Each year Tampa Bay-area residents join in an unusual celebration, one that marks the beginning of a new year as well as a reminder of times long ago. The Gasparilla Pirate Festival was named in honor of the pirate Jose "Gasparilla" Gaspar, who is said to have terrorized Florida's west coast during the late 18th century and early 19th century. On the last Saturday of January, the city of Tampa is "invaded" by Gasparilla and his men when the motley crew (made up of residents of the city) arrives in downtown Tampa on a 165-foot pirate ship, the *Jose Gasparilla*. The mayor of Tampa relinquishes the key to the city to the pirate captain and a victory parade gets underway through the city's streets.

On Jan. 27, an estimated 400,000 landlubbers attended the street parade while thousands of seafarers took to the bay, creating a unique environment for area marine law-enforcement units.



Each year the Gasparilla Pirate Festival draws thousands of boaters to Tampa Bay. "At one point there were so many boats in downtown Tampa you could nearly walk from one boat to another across the bay," said Cliff Martin, Operations Officer for Auxiliary Division Seven in St. Petersburg, Fla. Photograph courtesy of [gasparillapiratefest.com](http://gasparillapiratefest.com)

"During Gasparilla, the bay is saturated with recreational boaters maneuvering within a close proximity of each other," said Chief Warrant Officer Kevin Coyne, Coast Guard Sector St. Petersburg's law enforcement officer. "Boating safety is a major concern for our agency, our partners and, we hope, for the boating public."

Coast Guard crews from the Tampa Bay area, along with marine units from the Tampa Police Department, the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), conducted random safety checks on vessels throughout Tampa Bay.

"Boats were checked for the proper number of lifejackets, functional fire extinguishers, working navigation lights and overloading,"

Coyne stated. "Many vessels were loaded to their maximum capacity, and some were overloaded, potentially causing the vessels to become unstable and capsize."

In addition to safety and equipment checks, officials targeted boaters operating erratically or carelessly, as well as those boating under the influence (BUI) of drugs or alcohol.

Collectively, law-enforcement teams issued more than 35 safety citations and arrested 16 people for BUI during Saturday's celebration.

According to Florida law, by operating any vessel on Florida waters you have consented to be tested for the presence of alcohol, drugs, or other intoxicating substances, if requested to do so by a peace officer. Refusal to submit to testing is punishable by a civil penalty of \$500 and is a crime if you were fined for a previous refusal.

"Alcohol affects judgment, vision, balance and coordination which increase the likelihood of accidents afloat," said Coyne. "Our (Coast Guard) statistics show that alcohol is involved in about a third of all boating fatalities, which is why there are stringent penalties for violating BUI laws, such as fines up to \$2,500 and possibly imprisonment."

Furthermore, the operator responsible for a boating accident causing property damage, injury, or death while boating under the influence, has committed a felony. "Despite the number of arrests, the vast majority of boats that law-enforcement teams encountered had designated drivers," added Coyne. "This could attest to why there were no tragic accidents."

Coast Guard Auxiliary Division Seven, from St. Petersburg, Fla., and Division Eight, from Cortez, Fla., contributed a fleet of 21 vessels and more than 60 auxiliaries who helped monitor Tampa Bay's security zones, provided valuable public safety support and ensured that any manatees were clear of the parade route.

"Manatees are a federally protected species, and with the number of boaters who were expected to be underway that weekend there was concern that they (manatee) could be injured," said Cliff Martin, Auxiliary Division Seven Operations Officer. "Although no problems occurred, at one point there were so many boats in downtown Tampa you could nearly walk from one boat to another across the bay."

Law enforcement officials and boating safety experts have several recommendations for those interested in becoming safer boaters.

- Wear a life jacket. - The U.S. Coast Guard estimates that life jackets could have saved the lives of over 80 percent of boating fatality victims.
- Never boat under the influence of drugs or alcohol. - It is **ILLEGAL** to operate a boat - any boat, from a canoe, rowboat, and kayak to the largest vessel - under the influence of alcohol or drugs.
- Take a safe-boating course. - You will learn how to file a float plan, how to maintain your boat, casting off, docking, anchoring and much, much more.
- Get a free safety vessel check. - It is your best way to learn about potential problems that might put you in violation of state or federal laws, or worse, create danger for you or your passengers on the water.

All sailors, including ye ole scurvy-dog pirates, should heed safety rules and regulations. Knowing your vessel's abilities and limitations, understanding and applying safety rules,

and making sure your boat has the proper safety equipment will help ensure you and your family enjoys many future Gasparilla invasions.

Additional information on safe and secure boating practices can be found at the Coast Guard's Office of Boating Safety web page at <http://www.uscgboating.org/>.

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