

Bar crossings can be dangerous

Be aware, be prepared and be experienced.

Bar crossings

Queensland has many dangerous coastal bars. Bars form at the entrance to rivers and inshore waterways where sand has accumulated. They are often the only way boats can access, or reach shelter from, open waters.

Conditions offshore can be ideal for boating, but the conditions on the bar can be dangerous. Never underestimate a coastal bar as weather conditions can change quickly without warning. Do not try to cross a bar if the weather looks bad or in heavy swells, strong wind, or on a run-out tide when there are usually the most dangerous wave conditions.

It's compulsory for everyone to wear a life jacket while crossing designated coastal bars in open boats under 4.8 metres. Designated coastal bars include:

- Curumbin Bar
- Mooloolah River mouth
- Tallebudgera Bar
- Noosa Bar
- Jumpinpin Bar
- Gold Coast Seaway
- South Passage Bar
- Round Hill Creek
- Caloundra Bar
- Wide Bay Bar



Before crossing a bar

All bars are different. Local knowledge, experience and the right kind of boat are critical when trying to cross a bar. Only experienced boaters should try to cross a coastal bar and, even then, you should be very careful.

You need to learn about each bar by asking local boaters, volunteer marine rescue groups or the local marine authorities who cross it regularly for advice. Make sure you ask about any leads or beacons that may help you navigate over the bar. Become familiar with a bar by crossing it with an experienced boater before trying to do it by yourself.

Make sure the boat is seaworthy and can handle impacts from waves.

Checklist for crossing coastal bars

Before you cross a bar, use your marine radio to log on and off (once you have safely crossed) with a volunteer marine rescue group. You also need to check:

- the tides and weather updates (for both trips)
- the steering, bilge, hatches and drains
- lifesaving equipment is ready for an emergency
- all crew/passengers are wearing life jackets
- the decks and secure all lines and movable items
- your boat is in trim and test the engines and controls
- for a position marker or leads so you can find the entrance on your return trip.



Going out

Slow displacement boats and high-speed planing boats may handle crossing a bar differently.

The boat must match the energy of each incoming wave by maintaining a speed that will lift the bow over the wave and reduce the chance of the wave breaking over the bow into the boat.

Do not hit waves at high speed, but take them as close to head-on as possible. Be prepared to take a wave head-on and take water over the bow if there is no other way.

When crossing a bar, you should:

- cross on an incoming tide when possible
- look for lulls and choose the line of least wave activity and avoid breaking waves (the calmest water)
- look for the deepest water to avoid grounding
- keep your boat head-on to approaching waves. Do not let your boat turn side on to approaching waves
- head up into the waves and accelerate where possible, but avoid getting airborne
- head for the lowest part of the wave and continue until clear.

Coming in

When coming in, high-speed boats (capable of at least 18 knots) should travel at the same speed as the waves. Slow displacement boats may have to come in very slowly to avoid surfing and getting caught side-on to a wave.

The aim is to travel in on the back of a wave and stay ahead of waves that break behind the boat. Watch for patterns and deeper areas.

When returning over a bar you should:

- look for lulls and choose the line of least wave activity
- look for the deepest water to avoid grounding
- increase power to maintain speed within the set of waves when approaching from the sea
- position the boat on the back of the wave – do not surf down the face of the wave
- adjust the boat's speed to match the speed of the waves, but do not try to overtake the waves.

In bad conditions, it can be safer to stand off in deeper water, or find another shelter, instead of re-crossing the bar.



Safety tips

Wear life jackets while crossing a bar in any boat at any time. Your boat can capsize quickly and it is almost impossible to put on a life jacket in choppy waters.

Assess the wave patterns and choose your route carefully, avoiding high standing waves.

Once you have started, keep going – trying to turn around in front of an incoming wave can be dangerous.

Never underestimate a coastal bar. Even small waves can capsize, swamp, or sink a boat. If you are unsure or inexperienced, why go out and risk lives? Wait until conditions are good for you to cross safely.