

TRIED AND TESTED

First-hand experience at fighting fire and floods on board in a half-day course

Vortec Marine Fire Training



What would you do in the event of a fire on board? Greg Goulding finds out first hand

Most fire safety courses (such as the week-long STCW-95) are aimed at professional crew of commercial vessels, but leisure sailors are largely forgotten. So when we heard of a half-day course that demonstrates the dangers and difficulty of a fire on board, I was keen to give it a go.

The course starts with the basics: knowledge of fire extinguishers and which to use when. We got our hands on what seemed to be the best all-rounder, powder. But a short blast outside and everyone spluttered from the residue. It's doubtful a crew could breathe inside a boat if one is set off.

The number of attendees on the course is kept small to give bespoke advice on fire safety aboard their own boats. One attendee was advised to drill holes into the engine room, allowing extinguisher access without allowing too much oxygen to feed the fire.

RIGHT: The navigator sends out a mayday as another crewman extinguishes the fire
BELOW: Temperature at 53°C and rising



Once we'd covered the theory, we donned fire suits and entered the ex-RNLI training pod. Downstairs is a room with access to the engine room and a ladder up to the bridge. After a brief instruction on how to control the alarms, we took positions within the bridge. The radar screen burst into flames. The navigator attempted to silence the excruciating alarm, while the other crew attempted to extinguish the fire.

What seemed initially to a simple task turned out to be incredibly difficult: to locate, remove and pull the pin on the fire extinguisher while the flames rapidly heated the room

and the alarm suppressed concentration. It took a lot of effort to get the gas-powered fire under control. Our attempt was shameful. Had it been a real-life emergency, things would not have ended well.

Over and over again we tried until a new alarm sounded. Now a stopcock had failed, flooding the lower level. Armed with the bag of emergency bungs, the navigator clambered down the companionway to plug the hole. He emerged soaked in water, only to be sent back down to tackle an engine room fire.

The afternoon finished with the room being filled

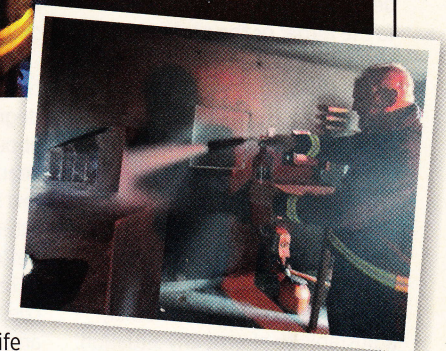
with smoke-like vapour to demonstrate the difficulty of being able to see, the intense heat and how the smoke offers protection from it but causes severe difficulty in breathing. The room reached in excess of 55°C and the heat from the fire was unbearable on uncovered skin.

Price From £75
Contact Vortec Marine
Tel 01489 854850
Web www.vortecmarine.com

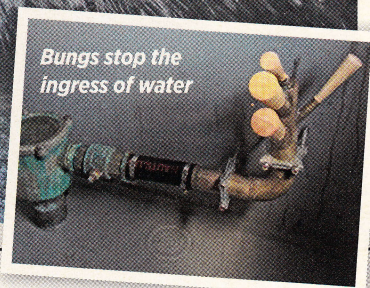


PHOTOS: GREG GOULDING

RIGHT: It took more effort than expected to extinguish the fire



Hammering the bungs in against high pressure is a challenge



Bungs stop the ingress of water

OUR VERDICT

The fire safety course from Vortec is an excellent way to experience fire first-hand, while understanding how to deal with the danger you may find yourself in. Unlike the intense five-day minimum STCW, the Vortec course isn't an official qualification, but at half a day is more likely to attract leisure sailors.

RATING
9/10

PROS

- First hand experience of fire
- Qualified instructors
- Just half a day

CONS

- Not an official qualification like STCW95
- Intense heat will be unbearable for some
- Faint-hearted folks may find it scary