

STAND UP PADDLEBOARDING ON THE TIDAL THAMES 2013



POSITIONING ON THE RIVER

The most important thing for safe paddle boarding is to look around frequently. Observe where the main river traffic flows are and position yourself well away from them. Large vessels will usually be near the center of the river where it's deepest so beware if you are paddling in mid current and return as soon as possible to the starboard hand side of the river. However in a number of places the main navigational channel is not in the center of the river and as such large boats can appear to be in the "wrong" place on the river, especially at low tide. You should familiarize yourself with where the navigational channel is before going out and if stay clear of it. **Keep a good lookout at all times.**

There are PLA guidelines for where you should be on the river with respect to other vessels. You should observe these and position yourself accordingly where safe to do so. However, you should always assess risk at each stage of a journey and position yourself to minimize risk to yourself and nuisance to other river users. At low tide take care to avoid shallow water near the riverbanks. You are likely to ground your fin(s) on these and this often results in falling in. There are a number of pontoons and moored barges along the tidal Thames. These are potentially very dangerous towards high tide and should be avoided as the current is strong enough to pull small vessels and people underneath such obstacles.

KIT

Make sure that the board you are using is suitable for your level of confidence and experience. The tideway is not generally a good place to try out a new unstable race board unless you are used to paddling something similar. 11ft – 14ft boards can be paddled against the current in most tidal conditions by strong paddlers. Should you fall off your board, you can become separated from it by the wind and tide very quickly. As such it is recommended that you use a knee leash.

Personal Flotation Devices are very useful equipment and novice paddlers and weaker swimmers should always wear one. They provide extra wind protection on cold days and will be helpful if you fall in and become separated from your board. Stronger paddlers could consider an impact vest style PFD. When paddling at night or whenever risks are increased always wear a PFD appropriate to the sport.

Think about the thermal properties of clothing for the river, manmade fibres are much better than natural. Cotton has virtually no insulation value when wet, dries slowly and creates drag when swimming. Lightweight thermals designed for water sports insulate better and dry quickly. Most water sports shoes are fine for SUP, but bear in mind that you may need to walk around on the riverbank where there can be glass, metal and sharp stones so barefoot paddling is not recommended! You should also consider choosing clothing that makes you as visible as possible, with hi-visibility attire being especially recommended.

WHY SHOULD I READ THIS GUIDE?

The tidal Thames is not a safe place for unrestricted paddleboarding. It is therefore not permitted west of Shoebury in Essex (West of Sea Reach 1). However the PLA has agreed that if this guide is followed carefully, then paddleboarding is allowed between Teddington and Putney Pier.

Paddleboarding downstream of Putney Pier is not allowed. In very exceptional circumstances, the PLA will consider one-off 'Special Event Proposals' to paddle east of Putney Pier but no further than Wandsworth Bridge. Such event proposals would need to be submitted well in advance of the proposed event, together with full navigational risk assessment and passage plans.

In any event, stand up paddle boarding will not be permitted in any circumstances on the Thames in central or east London.

Prone paddleboarding is not allowed.

PLANNING A TRIP

It's very important to take account of tide and wind. Long trips work best with the tide. Plan return trips around the change of tide – taking account of the stage of tide. Towards the end of ebb tide the current will be relatively slow.

LAUNCHING

Finding a safe place to launch near high tide can be difficult. Make sure you are not up tide of moored barges or obstructions unless you are very confident that you can paddle clear against the tide. Stay kneeling until you are in clear, open water.

TIDES

The tides in this area can rise and fall by as much as 7m and run up to 3 knots in the main channel (and considerably more around bridges and piers). Depending on the land water flow the ebb tide can take up to 7 hours to flow out with the flood tide coming in over roughly 5 hours. Getting off the river 2 hours before or after high tide can be difficult, as there is little or no foreshore exposed and in places there are few egress points. When you plan a trip find out where you can exit safely. There are a lot of draw docks above Putney Bridge but very few below, details of which can be found on the interactive map on the PLA's leisure website. Pontoons and piers are privately owned and should only be used to exit in an emergency or with permission. It is vital that you understand the tidal conditions and its sets and maintain situational awareness at all times.

PADDLING ALONE

It's always safer paddling with a group. Make sure you stay together and avoid spreading out widely across the river and getting in the way of faster river users. Carrying spare lightweight thermals and a first aid in dry-bags makes sense.

NIGHT PADDLING

Paddling at night is more hazardous than in the day, always make sure that someone knows you are out on the water, call the Duty Officer at London VTS, (VHF Ch.14 or 020 8855 0315) and for preference always paddle in a group. Please see the guide to lighting at night for full details of how to make sure that you can be seen. If you are going out for an evening paddle, even if you intend to return in daylight you should take lights with you as the light can fade very quickly.

BE SAFE BE SEEN

Being as visible as possible is one of the best ways to avoid incidents. The PLA has produced "a practical guide to lighting and other safety tips for small leisure craft" with tips on how to be as visible as possible which can be found at <http://www.boatingonthames.co.uk/Canoeing>

OTHER RIVER USERS

Wash and draw-off from power driven boats can be difficult to handle if the wash is coming from the side or unexpectedly from behind. Turn to face the wash and paddle straight through it. Always keep well away from large commercial boats as they take a relatively long time to stop and change position. More information can be found in the recreational users' guide which can be found at www.boatingonthames.co.uk.

Rowers are the most numerous single group of river users on the Tidal Thames and as such are likely to be your most common hazard. Between Putney Pier and Syon Reach there is a code of practice in place for all oar or paddle powered vessels. Paddlers should be aware of this code which can be found here: www.boatingonthames.co.uk/Rowing

Between Teddington and Putney a rowing eight should be the fastest boat you should meet, travelling at speeds up to 15 knots. Due to the nature of rowing craft the vision of the coxswain is often obscured. If you are in doubt as to whether you have been seen call out "take a look" followed by the size of boat i.e. "take a look four". Unlike your board, rowing boats can't easily stop and turn so when overtaking or crossing in front of them make sure you give them a clear berth. Rowing boats are often accompanied by a powered vessel used by rowing coaches which should also be kept a good lookout for. They are required to pay attention to their wash at all times, but they can create a significant wash which can be hazardous to less experienced boarders.

There are a number of active sailing clubs along the tidal Thames. They tend to train and race on the river around high tide. A number of the clubs train novice sailors which combined with the prevailing light winds and strong tides can often lead to sailing boats with little control. Whilst travelling up and down the river you have priority over vessels tacking back and forth, but to avoid collision it is best to give them a wide berth particularly during race events or when winds are strong. Shouting to gain attention may be the best defense to avoid a collision situation developing.

BRIDGES AND CLOSED ARCHES

There are 16 bridges over the main channel between Teddington and Vauxhall Bridge. The height and width are no concern to paddleboarders, but currents can be stronger around the bridges and you should always keep well away from bridge piers and avoid passing other vessels close to a bridge who will often be very limited in their manoeuvring room. More detail of bridge navigation can be found in the recreational users guide.

POLLUTION

The Thames is a lot cleaner than it used to be but it can still be affected by heavy rain. Most of the time the pollution is at safe levels and falling in is not risky – but after heavy/prolonged rainfall, raw sewage is often released into the river from combined sewage outflows. Avoid paddling when pollution is likely and risk of infection is increased. Pollution alerts can be received from Thames Water. Also a visual check of the river will generally give you a good indication if it's polluted. Excess litter and debris is a clear sign. Also the river tends to have a greasy brown film on the surface after sewage discharges. Weil's disease is rarely caught from paddling the tideway but risk is increased on all rivers after heavy rainfall when pollution from rats' nests is flushed into the river.

RIVER CLOSURES AND EVENTS

The Thames is closed to traffic from time to time for races and events and you will not be permitted to paddle during a closure. Regular river users should sign up to receive Notices to Mariners which give details of these. The sign up page can be found at <http://www.pla.co.uk/notice2mariners/index.cfm>.

TRAINING

Before paddling the tidal Thames alone or without an experienced lead paddler you should be a confident SUP paddler and know the river well. You should be stable, confident and not fazed by wash. You will need the help and advice of a very experienced paddler or qualified coach to prepare you.