

How to survive as a castaway

I write this from somewhere off the coast of Alaska, as my wife and I are busy knocking one item off our bucket list. Actually, this could be considered to be a two-generation bucket list, as my dad always wanted to go on an Alaskan cruise, but never did. I hope, wherever he is, that he can be happy knowing that I managed to do it.

Going out on the ocean in a cruise ship gives one a great opportunity to reflect on their own personal survival. Cruise ships have a long list of things that they don't allow passengers to bring aboard, including several important things we need for survival. These range from the obvious, like firearms, down to anything that can even remotely be considered a fire starter. They even confiscated my clothes iron, because that could cause a fire onboard the ship. I guess that makes sense, considering that fire is historically the biggest danger to any ship.

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But without being able to bring along fire starters and knives, or any other type of blade, we lose two of our most important survival tools. Should something happen, putting us into a survival situation, our ability to fend for ourselves would be severely limited.

Looking at the potential risks, there are two basic survival scenarios that being on that ship could have put me in. The first, and most obvious, is to be adrift in a lifeboat or even hanging onto a piece of wreckage from the ship. I'm not sure

where that floating wreckage would come from, as the boat, including most of the internal partitions is made of metal, not wood; but there are lifeboats.

Interestingly enough, there are more than one type of lifeboat on modern cruise ships. There are two types of totally encapsulated lifeboats, each of which will hold roughly 300 people. There are also smaller, open boats, which look more like a modified pleasure craft, with a "roll bar" to roll it back upright, should it capsize. I imagine that type of boat is intended to "herd" the others, like cowboys herding cattle on a trail drive. Finally, there are various inflatable rafts, interestingly enough, not all the same size.

Each passenger is given a "muster point" they are to go to, in cases where the ship might have to be abandoned. From there, crew members will take them to their designated lifeboat, assuming everything goes according to plan. I have no idea how they decide which passengers get to ride in which type of lifeboat, but I'm curious as to their process.

It's clear however, that if one is on any of those lifeboats, there is little they can do to ensure their own survival. That will be in the hands of the crew, the planners, and whatever rescue craft come to the aid of the downed ship. The old image of being in an open lifeboat, depending on your wits to survive, are not the image those lifeboats portray.

The second scenario is one which could depend totally on your survival skills. That is, to find yourself ashore in some remote place. Considering that we were pretty much always in sight of land, it would have been possible to drift or even swim to land, if the ship went down. In such a case, one's wilderness survival skills would be of supreme importance. But how to use them, without knives and fire starters?

A Modified Survival Kit

The first trick is coming up with a survival kit that we could actually manage to get onto the ship. With any sort of blade or obvious fire starter out of the questions, we have to be a bit more creative. Fortunately, we preppers are a creative bunch.

There is one fire starter that is talked about in the prepping community, which we could probably slip by the ship's security people. That's steel wool. While not the world's best fire starter, it is functional. 0000 grade steel wool doesn't look like a fire starter, nor does a 9v alkaline battery. Should it become necessary to start a fire ashore, this would give us the capability of doing so.

In case you're unsure how this works, the first thing you need to know is that it only works with 0000 steel wool. You take a small amount of the steel wool and spread it out with your fingers, creating air space between the individual strands. Then you brush one end lightly over the poles of the 9v battery, causing the steel wool to start burning, like a fuse that has had too much current passed through it. Once it starts, it will burn through the entire piece. Just make sure you have some good, dry tinder to pass that fire on to.

A sharp blade is a bit harder to come up with. There are some plastic knives around and the folding credit card knife that was so popular in the prepping community a few years ago. While either of these stands a fair chance of making it through security, if they get found, it will peg you as a potential problem. If they don't throw you off the ship, security will be keeping a close eye on you.

Another option is to take something with you, a thin piece of metal, which could be sharpened against a stone, making it into a blade. While not perfect, that would provide something that could be used to clean a fish and prepare it for cooking.

As for the other blade, something to cut wood with, you could probably get a wire saw through security, as they would not recognize it as a threat on the x-ray image.

Of course, the other problem is if you have to abandon ship, you're not supposed to take anything with you. So, that over the shoulder bag you might be considering for a survival kit isn't going to work. You've got to be a bit more creative, like wearing cargo pants and putting your survival gear in the cargo pockets. I'm not talking about when you're getting on the boat; but rather while you're on it. Spread the gear out in your luggage, and then assemble it once you're in your room. That leaves us with the question of just what other gear should that be?

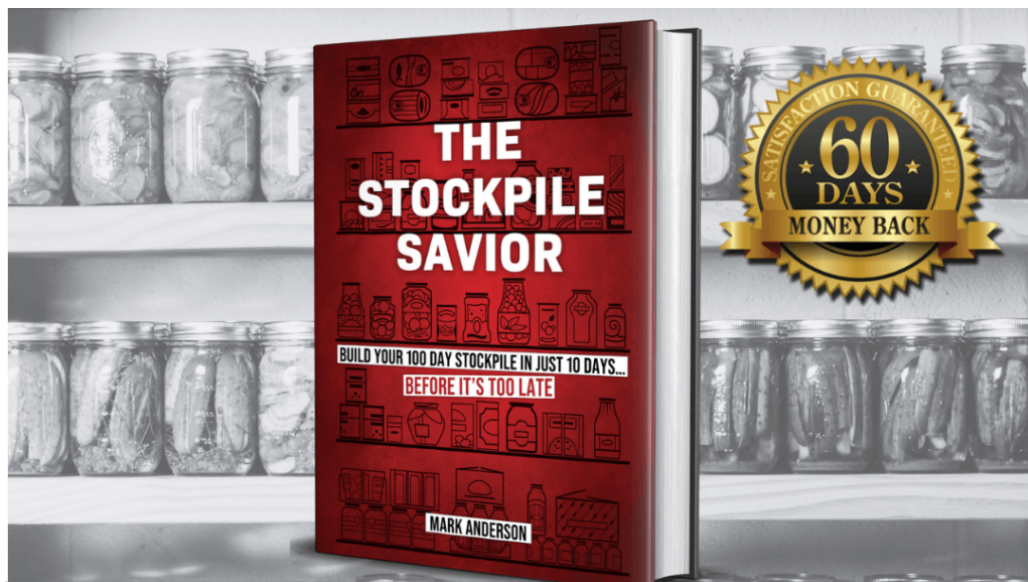
- Rain poncho
- Plastic zipper bags that can be used as a canteen
- Water purification straw and/or tablets
- Survival fishing kit
- Aluminum foil (for cooking the fish)
- Small first-aid kit
- Flashlight with extra battery
- Glass signaling mirror (to attract the attention of rescuers)
- Whistle
- Paracord or zip ties (to help with building a shelter)
- A couple of high-energy food bars

That may not seem like a lot, but you can do a lot with it. Remember that you can't drink salt water, as it will cause you to become dehydrated faster than if you're not drinking at all. This is a short-term survival situation, so your hope is in rescuers finding you, not in your ability to rescue yourself. You just need to survive until they can find you.

What About that Open Boat?

While I don't really see the open boat, adrift on the ocean, as a likely scenario, it could still happen. Should you find yourself caught in such a situation, your biggest problems are going to be water and keeping dry. If your clothing gets wet, you can end up losing body heat considerably faster than if you are totally naked. Hypothermia is still the biggest killer in the wild; so keep yourself dry. That's why the rain poncho was the first thing on my list.

Fresh drinking water is going to be a big issue as well. You might be surrounded by water and tempted to drink it, but you can't. Your only potential source for drinking water is rainwater. So, you'll want to be ready to catch whatever rainwater you can; whether that be from the floor of the raft or from water running off your poncho. That rain poncho can serve double duty, keeping you dry and helping you to gather rain at the same time.



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While there have been severe cases, where people were adrift long enough that food became an issue, it is unlikely that you'll find yourself in one. If a cruise ship goes down, a lot of effort will be made to rescue as many people as possible; meaning that you're likely to be rescued long before there's any risk of starvation. However, if it takes longer than it should, you can always try fishing. After all, you will be on water.

Your biggest tool in helping those rescuers find you is that signaling mirror. Airplane pilots can see the reflection from that mirror ten miles up. Any airplanes or helicopters flying lower than that will likely be rescue craft of some sort. Use the mirror and keep using it until someone finds you. That's the best thing you can do to help ensure your own survival.