Small offshore boat set up tips

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Offshore fishing can be some of the most exciting and incredible fishing that an angler can experience, once you get past seasickness... You can catch small baitfish to sea monsters – it's all out there for you, as long as you can get to where they are.

Most anglers think you need a big boat to fish offshore comfortably, but that's simply not the case. Smaller vessels from 4-5m can comfortably fish offshore and get you where you want, as long as the conditions are suitable.

Big boats have some positives, but also a few negatives. You stay dry in a bigger boat, it's more comfortable, they ride better offshore and have more storage for gear. However, they are harder to tow, use a lot of fuel and usually require a small crew to operate and take out.

Small boats on the other hand are easy for one or two people to operate, easy to tow, cheap on fuel and relatively comfortable to fish out of. In a small boat, you will get wet and they don’t ride as well as bigger boats in slightly rougher conditions, but if you take your time and wear the appropriate clothing it’s not so bad. When conditions are perfect smaller boats are great to fish out of. You may also surprise yourself with what you can catch out of a small boat.

Setting up

Safety gear

The biggest part before taking a small boat offshore is setting it up properly so you have the appropriate safety gear, fuel and enough storage so everything is stowed away nicely and the deck is clear and safe to move around on.

When I set up my boat the biggest thing I had to focus on was making sure I had enough storage for all my safety gear, fuel tanks, fishing gear and have it so the deck was clear and easy to fish out of, and that all the added weight was balanced around the boat. You want the weight balanced and positioned in the right areas so the boat can ride nicely and safe into and with the swell offshore. You don’t want the boat to be too heavily weighted to one side or to the bow or stern as it can be very dangerous and cause the boat to broach, nose-dive, struggle to get on the plane and even flip.

For my boat I set up a dry storage unit at the bow of the boat that houses most of my safety gear like flares, life jackets, tools, fire extinguisher, and rope, in an easily accessible area. At the stern of the boat, I designed a rear storage module to store other bits of gear, but it also has a live bait tank incorporated into it with rod holders.

The ocean is a dangerous place at the best of times and it can become very rough very quickly. That’s why an EPIRB is paramount to your safety and others while fishing offshore. It’s a good idea to have the EPIRB in a spot where you can access it at short notice. I’ve placed my EPIRB in a side pocket near the console, so it’s easy to get to when I need it.

A marine radio is another safety feature to have on board. You can get mounted ones that take up a lot of space and require an antenna, which can get in the way and once you lose power they are useless. Most small craft users prefer portable water proof VHF marine radios that float, so if the worst is to happen, they still have contact with the VMR and other vessels offshore with marine radios.

Another safety feature that I have on my boat is high rails, as my boat doesn’t have very high sides. This is great because it gives me a little more added security so I don’t fall out. High rails are fantastic when people are standing on the deck throwing lures and there is a bit of swell around.

The number of people you take out is very important. You don’t want to take any more than what is recommended for your boat. I personally don’t take any more than one other person, as its becomes uncomfortable taking more than two people as I run out of room and it’s a lot of added weight to take in the boat.

You can go solo, like I sometimes do, but taking one other person is a lot safer. If you do go solo you need to keep your wits about you, don’t try anything too dangerous and definitely wear a life jacket. It’s also a good idea to invest in a personal EPIRB that you can carry on your person.

A good bilge pump is another important bit of gear to install into your boat, so if you do cop a bit of water in the boat you can get it out quickly. A dodgy bilge pump will back up and cause you problems.

A good sounder with a GPS is also an absolute must for all types of offshore work.

Fuel

Underneath the stern I made sure I had enough storage for my portable fuel tanks, of which I carry 3-4. I also have an inboard fuel tank, which is great and keeps fuel stowed away under the deck but I only use it for long distance trips. Fuel is a big consideration when going offshore in any boat.
I predominately use my portable fuel tanks, so I can keep an eye on my fuel usage and also take the fuel out of the boat when I’m not using it.

When going offshore, you usually travel relatively long distances, so you must take enough fuel with you. Every boat has a different fuel usage, so it’s a good idea to gauge how much fuel your boat uses before you go offshore.

I usually take 75L with me, which fills three portable fuel tanks, but most trips I’ll use about 25-50L depending on how I fish and where I go. You never want to run out of fuel offshore, so get a feel for your boat and figure out how much fuel it will use, plan the trip and take extra fuel for your first outing.

It’s a good idea to keep an eye on your fuel levels while offshore, and this is why I use portable fuel tanks, so it’s easy to gauge how much you have used and how much you have left. It’s a good idea to make sure you have the space to take extra fuel and have enough room to store all your fuel away safely.

Tackle

I store most of my fishing tackle in a dry bag, but you can use anything like tackle boxes or large bins to store your gear, because you want to keep your tackle dry and away from salt spray. In a small boat, everything will cop spray. I like to keep my tackle bag out of the way and stored in a relatively dry area in the boat so I can’t trip over it.

In a small boat you’re not going to have enough storage to take every bit of gear out with you, so take what you need and if you have a plan of what you want to fish for, stick to it so you can limit your load. You are more likely to be successful if you stick to your plan and only take what you need for your target species.

Extras

When you finally get outside and catch a feed of fish, you want to ensure it’s kept cool for the best eating quality. An esky is the best way to keep your catch cold, but they can take up a lot of space in a small boat. To combat this, I use an esky but it also acts as a seat for the driver and is fixed to the deck with straps so it can’t slide around.

If you don’t have enough space for an esky in your boat, another great alternative is a fish kill bag, as you can store them anywhere, they don’t take up much room, you can move them around easily and they can keep your catch very cool.

I have other areas to store important items such as gaffs, fish dongers and knives in the side pockets. I also have dry storage on the console, but this is just how my boat is set up. This is where I put my car keys, phone, wallet, and any other small items that need to stay dry.

into the blue

All boats are different and are set up differently, so there’s no one-way to set up your boat. Hopefully this can give you a good idea of how to organise your boat and have everything stowed so that your boat is effective and efficient to use offshore and is safe to operate out of. One of the most important things to remember is to keep it simple and don’t overthink or complicate the way you set up a small offshore boat.

Offshore fishing doesn’t have to be for the rich, you definitely don’t need a big boat and all the gear to catch big fish.

It can be fairly cheap, as long as you set up your boat properly with the right gear. It should get you out there, but also gets you back home safe. There’s nothing stopping you, set up a small craft and head out into the blue!
Dry storage is very important, and the author keeps the majority of his safety gear in dry storage up the bow.

Under the rear deck is a great place to store portable fuel tanks, as this will help to balance out the weight.

One of the most important considerations is making sure you can store everything out of the way so you can do battle with some big ocean monsters.
A sounder and GPS is something you really shouldn’t go offshore without, particularly in a small boat.

Small boats in the 4-5m range can comfortably go offshore if they are set up right, but also need to be looked after. The author takes great care of his craft, and has grown very attached to it… maybe a little too attached.
Just because you can’t afford a big boat doesn’t mean you can’t tangle with big fish offshore.