



Advisory for Vessels: Understanding Vessel Searches

Customs, law enforcement, and maritime security officials have the authority to board and search vessels under various circumstances. Understanding these regulations can help ensure a smooth process when navigating international waters.

When and Where Can You Be Boarded?

Territorial Waters & Sovereign Rights

Once a vessel enters the territorial waters of a country, local authorities—including Customs, Navy, and Police—have the right to board and interview those on board. If suspicions arise regarding illegal activities, including drug trafficking, officials can conduct a search without a warrant.

Applicable Laws

Vessels are subject to international maritime law (UNCLOS), the laws of their flag state, and the regulations of the coastal state they are visiting. The boarding process follows the laws of the enforcing nation, or in some cases, the conditions agreed upon by the vessel's flag state.

Key Maritime Zones & Boarding Rights

1. **Internal Waters (Ports, Bays, Rivers, Inlets)** – There is no right of innocent passage. Vessels must not stop or anchor before clearance unless in distress, and local laws fully apply.
2. **Territorial Sea (Up to 12 Nautical Miles)** – Innocent passage is allowed, but the coastal state has full jurisdiction. Authorities can board if there is reasonable suspicion of illegal activity.
3. **Contiguous Zone (12-24 Nautical Miles)** – The coastal state has the right to board vessels to enforce customs, fiscal, immigration, and sanitary laws.
4. **Exclusive Economic Zone (12-200 Nautical Miles)** – While primarily for resource management, vessels may still be boarded with flag state consent if suspected of criminal activity.
5. **High Seas (Beyond 200 Nautical Miles)** – Generally beyond national jurisdiction, but vessels can still be boarded with flag state consent under specific circumstances.

What to Expect If Boarded

1. **Cooperation is Key** – Always remain polite and comply with instructions.
2. **Identification & Protocols** – Officials should arrive in a marked vessel, introduce themselves, and request to board via VHF or direct communication.
3. **Questioning** – Authorities may ask about the skipper, crew, flag state, travel itinerary, and weapons on board.
4. **Consent & Procedures** – While consent may be requested, authorities typically do not need it to proceed with a search.
5. **Use of Force** – If boarding is refused, officials may use force, particularly if there is strong suspicion of illegal activity.



6. **Safety Considerations** – Boarding officers must act in a manner that does not endanger the vessel, crew, or environment.

Your Rights During a Search

- **Request Contact with Your Embassy** – You can ask authorities to inform your flag state before the search begins.
- **Request Search Documentation** – You may ask for the search to be recorded if intrusive procedures are undertaken.
- **Protection Against Unjustified Damage** – If your vessel is damaged during a search and no illegal activity is found, you may seek compensation for any loss.
- **Receipts for Seized Items** – Any confiscated items should be documented, and you should receive a record of what was taken and why.

By understanding these protocols, vessel operators can better navigate international waters while ensuring compliance with maritime security measures.