

WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

Boarding ladders

Boarding ladders come in all sorts of styles, sizes and prices. David Parker advises what you should look out for

Boarding ladders can be portable, fixed, hung on the transom, a swim platform or have a V-bracket for use on the bow.

I think a decent fixed ladder is far superior because it is always there. The hook-over crooks on some portable versions can be very prone to slipping but anything of course, even an emergency drop down ladder is better than nothing.

Some emergency ladders can be awkward to use at the best of times and perhaps impossible if your strength is ebbing and you have water trapped in your oilskins.

A friend was involved in just such a real incident. During a sail training exercise he voluntarily went over the side to free a mooring line snagged on the rudder. After 20 minutes in the water he freed it, but when he tried to get out he could hardly move. He was not only very cold but had 15kg of water down each leg trapped in his oilies. He had to be winched out of the water and could only lift his legs when someone released the tapes on his oilskins.

So a ladder not only needs to be securely fixed and easy to use, but you should also be able to deploy it from the water.

Having a retaining clip located high up on a fold-down ladder isn't going to do you any favours – neither is a badly tied retaining lashing.

Check out build quality too. A cheaper aluminium ladder which stows away easily may be ideal as a portable job, but aluminium suffers in a salt water environment, particularly on unanodised areas where tubing has been cut or modified. Look also at the quality of a ladder's hinges, welds, joints and rivets. Are any critical parts plastic which could suffer UV damage over time and fail without warning? Hinges

When buying, check welds, rivets and hinges for rough edges. Stainless steel or Monel rivets are better than alloy rivets which can be vulnerable to corrosion

The typical stainless steel folding boarding ladder is available in various lengths. If you've space, deck-mounted 90° crooks will also provide handholds when climbing aboard

Collapsible rope-type ladders are designed more for emergency use. They stow in a very small space but, lacking rigidity, can be awkward to climb

can have rough edges, as can the ends of rivets, which you can feel if you run your finger over them.

Avoid buying anything with unfinished edges that can snag

on clothes or fingers.

A final tip when buying a ladder for permanent installation: check out the fixing kit, either in the chandler's or before going to the boat. This isn't just to make sure all the nuts and bolts are there – it's also useful to have extra fixings just in case you drop or lose anything over the side.

This is a bow ladder. The steps can be adjusted so they remain horizontal to suit the most convenient inclination of the ladder

Aesthetics may affect your choice and this folding ladder for smaller craft has varnished wooden steps: it would sit nicely on something like a classic daysailer

This is a portable ladder which can be deployed when needed. Designed to be lightweight it would be handy for carrying in a tender, for example. It has plastic folding crooks and plastic steps



Quick release options are also available. The same typical D-shaped bracket is used but with slots over a mounting bolt fixed through a nylon hull pad. A tab is pressed to allow the bracket to slide up for removal



Images courtesy of Plastimo and many thanks for their help with this article