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More means less on boats under new weight rules

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Put down those chips and that 32-ounce soda and listen up. The federal government thinks we're all getting ... heavier.

An average of 25 pounds heavier, as a matter of fact.

That's the bad news. The good news?

They're trying to keep us from sinking -- or crashing, or plummeting to the ground -- because of it.

This winter, the U.S. Coast Guard -- using federal figures for typical male and female weights around the country -- announced that a new number will be used as the "assumed average weight" for people riding on some types of passenger boats.

The old weight allowance was 160 pounds.

Now, the Coast Guard figures folks average out to about 185 pounds apiece.

The change -- made in December, and being implemented now -- is the first one in assumed weights on such boats in decades.

"This is the first change like this I can remember happening," said Ryan Hayhurst, vice president of Buffalo Harbor Cruises, which operates tours on the "Miss Buffalo."

That's not to say Hayhurst is entirely surprised, either.

"The public is the public," he said, with a laugh. "I'm trying to look at the positive side of it."

But before fluttering with offended dignity, consider this: Local tour operators in Western New York -- and others whose jobs have to do with how much the public weighs -- said that people do seem to be heavier than they used to be.

"My balloon is rated for 10 passengers, but I usually fly 8, max, because people are bigger," said Sean Quigley, owner and chief pilot of the hot-air balloon touring company "Balloons Over Letchworth."

Quigley needs to ask people their weight when booking balloon rides in his seasonal May-to-October business, in order to calculate the physics that will allow for lift-off. He said he has developed a strategy that permits people to preserve their modesty while still answering the question.

"I ask everybody their weights on the phone. But I ask combined weights," said Quigley, who has run the business since 1987. "That lets the lady off the hook."

He chuckled.

"I've had people who are 300 pounds before. I've had people who refuse to tell me; then I tell them, 'You can't fly. This is FAA regulations,'" Quigley said.

Another area where weight matters is with elevators.

Elevators and weight

In the City of Buffalo, where he inspects a good many of the city's 3,000 elevators on a regular basis, Chief Elevator Inspector Joe Schiavone said that elevators have maximum weights, but that such figures are calculated in pounds, not persons. (Some of the inspections are contracted out by the city.)

"The elevator industry, it's the total weight," said Schiavone, who has been doing his job for 26 years.

That means, he said, that as Americans get heavier, elevators can still carry the same amount of pounds up and down.

It just translates to fewer actual people.

"Twenty-five years ago, it would take nine or 12 people to overload a car," said Schiavone. "Now it takes less, because people are bigger. Because people are larger, you're going to overload the car with less people -- quick."

Schiavone put it this way: "An elevator that used to take 10 people, now, with the obesity problem in America, it takes six people."

But don't worry, Schiavone said. The elevator will let you know if a load gets too heavy.

"When it exceeds the capacity," the inspector said, "an alarm bell will go off."

Quigley, at "Balloons Over Letchworth," said his customers tend to be middle-aged and older, because of the price of tickets for balloon rides.

That may play into the situation as well, he said.

"Let's face it, when somebody's in their 40s, they weigh 20 pounds more than when they were in their 20s," Quigley said, joking. "Including me."

At the same time as boaters are recalibrating loads to accommodate heavier people, one airline is redesigning airplane cabins to fit more -- not fewer -- people.

Southwest Airlines announced last week that it is reconfiguring the cabins of its 737-700s with thinner, less-tilty seats that will allow for 6 additional passengers per flight.

Increasing weights of typical Americans were not really a factor in the redesign, said a Southwest spokeswoman at the airline's Dallas headquarters.

Airline adding seats

But, said Brandy King, the renovated cabins may actually be more comfortable for all types of passengers now.

"The thinner seats, in combination with the pitch and incline being less, allows us to add six more passengers, so that takes us from 137 to 143 [per flight]," King said. "But there won't be a difference [in comfort]. There might actually be more room, because we were using (a different) design. Your personal space will actually be better."

At the Buffalo station of the Coast Guard, officers said that the changeover is going smoothly.

Coast Guard personnel said that most boaters have been happy to comply, typically by reducing the maximum occupancy for their vessels.

"A lot of the mariners out there agree -- America is getting heavier," said Lt. Andrew Sweeney, chief of the inspections division of U.S. Coast Guard Sector Buffalo. "It's kind of hard to argue that one."

Some boat operators are opting to have their vessel's stability calculations retested, to see if they can handle the same number of passengers, the Coast Guard officers stated.

At Buffalo Harbor Cruises, Hayhurst said that those are the two options open to his tour boat -- and that's a bit frustrating.

He said the weight guidelines really apply more to smaller boats, which are more affected by per-person poundage. For bigger boats like the Miss Buffalo, he said, a few extra pounds on individual passengers doesn't make too much of a difference.

"When it comes down to the weight issue, it's more of an umbrella rule," Hayhurst said. "The weight of a passenger affects a smaller boat much more than a larger boat. Our boat is so large, but we unfortunately fall into the same guideline, and it doesn't really affect us at all."

"There's no way out of it," he added. "The only way out of it is a very expensive way."

Miss Buffalo limit cut

That expensive way would be having a naval architect do load-testing on the Miss Buffalo to prove that the boat can handle more pounds. Hayhurst said there are no such recalibration businesses in Western New York, so he'd have to take the boat out of the area for the tests, which would be "very costly."

Thus, in part as a response to the Coast Guard change, the Miss Buffalo's capacity will be trimmed to 185 this season, Hayhurst said.

The boat has been operating at a capacity of 200.

Small price increases will be made to the hourly rates for cruises, Hayhurst said, "just to absorb a little bit of that change."

But there may be bright sides to the change.

"People might be more comfortable in the long run," he said. "With 185, it'll be little bit roomier, the bathrooms will be better, the bars will be better."

"We'd rather have 185 happy customers," he said, "than 200 unhappy customers."

News Staff Reporter Maki Becker contributed to this report.