

HIN 101 for boat owners.

Every recreational boat sold in the USA and Canada, and many other countries, must have a Hull Identification Number (HIN). This is a unique number identifying each boat, in much the same way that every automobile has a Vehicle Identification Number (VIN). The US and Canadian rules for HINs are the same and the European Economic Community (EU) has adopted very similar rules. But some boat owners get confused about HINs, especially on older boats, that weren't required to have them, and for home built boats.

In 1972 the Federal Boat Safety Act went into effect and as part of the act the U. S. Coast Guard was required to propose regulations for the safe construction of boats. As a way to determine if a boat was in compliance, an HIN was required on each boat. The HIN identifies who the manufacturer is and when the boat was made. It is a twelve digit number. The first three letters (in some MICs numbers) are the Manufacturer Identification Code (MIC) and the last four numbers show the date of certification. You can look up a MIC here. http://www.uscgboating.org/recalls/mic_database.htm The date of certification is the date the manufacturer certifies that the boat meets all the rules that the particular boat has to meet. But this kind of legal jargon is confusing to most people, so the last four digits, to most people, indicate when the boat was made. Look here for the US Coast Guard's own version of HIN 101.

<http://www.uscgboating.org/recalls/pdfs/BSC70.pdf#basics>

The rule was intended for boat builders and manufacturers, not boat owners. But over the years boat owners became involved because all the states included the HIN in their registration process and wanted an HIN on every boat, even old and home made boats. So part of the rule allowed states to assign an HIN to boats that didn't have one. Each state is assigned its own MIC to use when assigning an HIN.

To further complicate the issue, the HIN became a tool for law enforcement agencies to detect stolen boats, insurance fraud and other crimes involving boats. Insurance companies also use the HIN to identify specific boats. So it became more important for all boats, old and new alike to have an HIN.

Normally a number is assigned by the builder or manufacturer and they keep a list of who the boats were sold to, by HIN. This is an effective tool for defect recalls, and for law enforcement checking bogus HINs.

So where does the boat owner come in? This is not normally an issue with a brand new boat. The boat comes with the HIN on the transom, on most boats, or at or near the stern on boats with no transom.

A **HIN** looks like this:

ABC12345L409

So, what does it all mean? **ABC** is the **MIC**.

The next five characters are anything the builder wants to assign. It can be 12345, or 00001, or 0000A, or 32001. Whatever they want to put in there **except: O, I or Q**. These characters look too much like zeros or ones. Some manufacturers use a sort of code in this area. For instance, if they build a thirty footer and this is the first one then they would use 30001. Others just assign consecutive numbers, 00001, 00002, 00003, etc.

The ninth character identifies the month when the boat was certified (or built, I will explain this later) as shown in the chart below. So if it's built in May the ninth character would be an E.

It works like this:

A: January	G: July
B: February	H: August
C: March	I: September (yes it's an I, but it's ok)
D: April	J: October
E: May	K: November
F: June	L: December

The tenth character is last digit of the year when the boat was certified (or built), for example if the year is 1997, then the tenth character would be a 7, or if it is the year 2009, it would be a nine.

The last two characters are the model year. A builder can assign any model year they want but it better be pretty close to the year it was built. Most manufacturers start their model year in August, but some use June or July. It's up to them. However, if the boat was built in 2000 it shouldn't say 1997. Every time someone tries to register that boat, alarms will go off all over the place. The cops will come and start asking nosy questions. Also, the owner will have a difficult time insuring the boat. The agent will suspect some sort of fraud if the model year is significantly different than the actual year built.

There have been some additions to the HIN since 1984. A builder can add info before and after the number. For instance, many imported boats have a country code before the number.

US - ABC12345L409

This is a boat built in the USA. If the two letters were CA it would be Canada. The International Standards Organization (ISO) publishes a list of country codes.

http://www.iso.org/iso/country_codes/iso_3166_code_lists/english_country_names_and_code_elements.htm

Additionally they can put up to five characters after the HIN.

US - ABC12345L495 H326

See this link for what those characters mean.

<http://newboatbuilders.com/pages/hin17.html>

It is rare to see a 19 character HIN but they do exist. The last five characters are a description of the boat and especially useful to law enforcement in tracking stolen boats. The International Association of Marine Investigators has been trying for years to get the last five digits adopted by the US and the EU. So far they have not been successful.

What if you buy an old boat made before 1972, and it doesn't have an HIN, or you built it? If you bought the boat make sure you get a valid bill of sale from whoever sold it. If they have previously registered the boat you should also get the old registration. In states that Title boats you should get the title transferred as well. If you built it you will not have any of these. The state will ask you to fill out a form. This form attests that either you built the boat, or that it was built prior to 1972. They may also ask for a Manufacturer's Statement of Origin (MSO), or a Manufacturer's Certificate of Origin (MCO). Old boats or home built boats simply do not have these documents. Only new or factory built boats have them.

They may also require someone to actually look at the boat and verify it exists. This may mean bringing the boat on a trailer to their office, or if it is a large boat, having a law enforcement officer look at the boat.

They will then assign an HIN to the boat. You will have to put the HIN on the boat in two places. The requirement is for the HIN to be on the upper right corner of the transom, or if no transom, at or near the stern on the right side below the gunwale. A duplicate has to be put in a concealed location. Remember where this is. If you ever sell the boat you will need to pass this on to the next owner.

It must be "permanently affixed". This means put on in such a way that any efforts to remove or change it will be obvious. It can be burned, etched, carved, or stamped. You can put it on a plate or label as long as the plate or label can not be removed.

Just to confuse the issue even further, before 1984 there were two ways to put the date of certification on the HIN; it could look like this ABC000011272, or ABC00001M73E. Both of these are valid and indicate a boat built in December 1972, (hence 12 and 72 on one, or M for model year 73 and E for the month of December). This was very confusing so in 1984 the current HIN was adopted.

Registration rules vary from state to state. So contact the state's Boating Law Administrator.

http://www.nasbla.org/i4a/member_directory/feSearchForm.cfm?directory_id=3&pageid=3335&showTitle=1

To make this even more muddled, imported boats are now entering the country with HINs that appear to be valid. They look just like US or Canadian HINs and they are valid in the country of origin, but not in the USA. All Canadian HINs are valid in the US and vice versa. Why aren't most foreign HINS valid? It goes back to the MIC. The US and Canada have a shared MIC code database. Since 1972 they have assigned approximately 40,000 MICs. At any one time only about 4500 are active but companies go in and out of business daily.

Then the ISO adopted the MIC assignment system. The EU incorporated this in their code called the Recreational Craft Directive. Each EU country is now assigning MICs to their boat manufacturers. Many of these are identical to MICs assigned by the US and Canada. So a boat with a MIC of ABC may have been made in any of several dozen countries.

The rule in the US is that the importer is supposed to get a MIC from the US Coast Guard and assign valid MICs to the boats. Unfortunately this is rarely done and there are thousands of imported boats sold each year in the US with invalid HINs. This usually comes home to roost when the boat is registered with a state.

So if you buy an imported boat and it has a foreign HIN (other than Canada) you may get asked a lot of questions when you try to register it, or document it with the US Coast Guard. They will run the HIN through their database and the manufacturer will not be correct. If the HIN is not valid, you may have to contact the US Coast Guard (or Canadian Coast Guard) to get it straightened out and get a valid HIN for the boat. If you import the boat yourself, you will have to get a valid HIN. If you are going to register it with a state they will assign a state HIN. If documenting the boat the USCG may have to assign a valid HIN.

So, what to do if you get a boat with a bogus HIN, that is, there is a valid error in the number, or someone altered the HIN? People have been caught altering HINs to make the boat a newer model, or to try selling a stolen boat. The best thing to do is contact the boating authority in your state, and the US Coast Guard Office of Boating Safety **202-372-1073**. Make every attempt to get this straightened out, because if you don't it will come back to haunt you. Suppose you get boarded and they run the HIN. Or, you get a safety check by local law enforcement at a boat ramp and they discover the bogus HIN, or you try to sell the boat. The boat may get impounded, and you won't get it back until the investigation is complete and you are cleared. So, get it fixed as soon as you discover the problem.