

Nora Vittoria, a high-speed passenger catamaran operated by Boston Harbor Cruises, collided on Aug. 13 with two pleasure craft, sinking one of them and destroying the other.

Shortly after 2100 hours, four friends were returning to their hometown of Quince, Mass., amid thunderstorms, in a former lobster boat and a recreational motorboat, when the lobster boat's engine quit. The motorboat pulled alongside to help, and they anchored in a busy waterway, the West Gut in Hull Bay. Each of the vessels was about 30 feet long. The group was trying to start the engine when one of the boaters looked up, spotted the catamaran, and shouted for everyone to jump overboard to get out of the way. The four boaters plunged into the water just before the 100-foot-long catamaran collided with their boats.

Shortly after 2100, Nora Vittoria issued a distress call. Within a half hour, a 25 foot U.S. Coast Guard rescue vessel from Point Allerton in Hull pulled three boaters from the water. One boater was already on the deck of Nora Vittoria. All were covered in fuel, said Petty Officer Daniel Farina, a member of the rescue party.

The lobster boat sank. The fiber glass motorboat, left crumpled and partially submerged, later was towed to Quinsy.

"Those boats just got demolished," Farina said. "They were all in pieces by the time we got there."

It is unclear why the captain of Nora Vittoria did not spot the boats from the bridge or on the radar. Alison Nolan, general manager of Boston Harbor Cruises, said the captain is experienced and drove that waterway frequently. The Coast Guard is looking into the possibility that weather

conditions contributed to the accident, Farina said. According to weather observations at Logan Airport that night, thunderstorms created hazy, overcast conditions and decreased visibility.

Coast Guard PA3 Luke Pinneo said it is not known whether the boaters displayed any lights indicating they were at anchor and "not under command," in accordance with the ColRegs.

Captain Joe Murphy, associate professor of marine transportation at Mass Maritime, noted the boaters had a responsibility to warn other vessels of their position and keep a lookout for any other vessel that posed a threat.

"Did they display lights of any kind?" Murphy asked. "in addition, what lookout did they keep? Did they sound any sound signals to warn other vessels of their position? Did they in fact have their VHF radio on?"

The boaters' lawyer, Sheila McCarvey, refused to comment on the incident until the investigation is complete.

As for the catamaran, it had a responsibility to operate at a safe speed, Murphy said. "What speed was the catamaran making at the time?" he asked.

The Coast Guard has declined to say how fast the catamaran was going, while the accident remains under investigation.

The catamaran also had a duty to keep a proper lookout, sound a signal and use all available means to make sure the channel was clear.

"Everybody has a responsibility for vigilance," Murphy said.

Nora Vittoria, capable of carrying up to 400 passengers, was carrying no passengers at the time of the incident.

The vessel recently had dropped off its

passengers at Boston's Long Wharf after a three-hour whale-watch cruise. The captain and five crewmembers were on their way back to the Hingham Shipyard, Nolan said.

Three of the four boaters were treated for minor injuries and released from South Shore Hospital in Weymouth. Nolan said no members of the Nora Vittoria crew were injured.

No arrests were made, and no citations were issued, Farina said. The captain of Nora Vittoria passed an alcohol test at the Quinsy Police Department immediately after the collision, Nolan said. Boston Harbor Cruises placed the catamaran's captain on leave pending the outcome of the investigation.

-Nicki Noble

Lessons to be Learned

- Display all required lights for all conditions as per regulations.
- Always keep a lookout unless you are anchored in a chartered anchorage.
- Always keep your VHF on Channel #16, unless you are in an anchorage. (remember to adjust volume using the 'Squelch' method.)
- Accident investigators assume that all boaters – even non-professional pleasure boaters – are fully knowledgeable and observant of the 'Rules of the Road'.
- All boaters are held to this (Rules of the Road) standard in any court action. Accidents that occur if a boater willfully disregards the rules will NOT be covered by marine insurance (same as with DUI). Any judgment against someone in this circumstance will come out of the boaters own pocket.