

A woman with blonde hair tied back, wearing a bright red sailing jacket with yellow accents and sunglasses, is looking upwards. She is on a boat, with a white rope and a blurred sail visible in the foreground. The background is a clear blue sky.

# Sailing Clothing The Definitive Guide

The clothes you wear while sailing can make or break you and your whole experience. We at [Desert Wind Sailboats](#) have put this guide together to help you understand the different options and use cases for clothing you might need for situations from Offshore Racing and Dinghy Sailing, to a nice day sail out with your friends.

# Why What You Wear When You Sail Matters

How can you tell someone is really into any sport? They look the part, right? They have the right shoes, the right shorts, the watch, the hat, even the right undies sometimes!

Well, it is the same in sailing. Performance clothing makes your sailing experience more enjoyable because it is a matter of comfort. No one I know actually likes sailing cold. Being wet and cold not only is not fun, it can be a dangerous combination leading to hypothermia. By the same token, getting too much sun and overheating can be an equally difficult problem. How do we address these issues? It's simple - what you wear matters.



## Warm Weather



It may come as no surprise that here at Desert Wind Sailboats we do a lot of warm (hot) weather sailing. The sailing clothing you choose for warmer climates is just as important as the layers you choose for the cold. Just like being cold and wet is no fun, neither is being hot and sunburned. The sun and the spray have no mercy in the heat of summer. SPF Protection is key as is a layer that cools quickly. Here are some of our suggestions for summer sailing.

Knee length shorts. In typical "sailor tan" fashion, we recommend shorts that cover. Generally, clothing in lighter colors will be cooler. Board Shorts tend to be lighter but they also tend to have fewer pockets. Under my shorts, we suggest some "tech undies" made of fibers that wick away wet and sweat (read - not cotton).

Long sleeve shirt. Yep...generally we recommend a loose fitting, light colored long sleeve shirt in a tech material. There is one exception though. If you are racing small boats and/or wearing a full PFD you may want a tight "rash guard" style shirt with spandex in it. Spandex tends to hold water v/s polypropylene which tends to wick it away. They both can cool you off, just in opposite ways. You'll probably want a dry shirt to change into after sailing if you opt for the rash guard. Keep reading for more information on the difference between the two materials.

Hat - Most of us sail with hats. Floppy hats or some hat with an all-around brim help keep the sun off better than the ball cap. On larger racing boats I'm usually a bowman. I actually prefer not to wear a hat up there as it can restrict vision, which puts the top of my head at risk for sunburn. A neck gaiter can be used as a "doo rag" to provide some protection.

# Why What You Wear When You Sail Matters

Shoes - We always recommend close-toed shoes when sailing. We don't always wear close-toed shoes when sailing. Boats bite and they like to bite toes and feet, but many people prefer to take the chance. The sole of many sailing shoes are specifically designed with non-slip grip for wet environments and they uppers protect the tops of your feet from the sun.

Most manufacturers advertise and SPF ratings on any warm weather sailing gear. If you are cruising, you may see light colored loose fitting shirts, designed to block the sun but not hold in the heat.

## Cold Weather

The key to cold weather sailing is layering. Every brand of clothing out there has their layering system. It usually breaks down into 3 layers:

1. Base Layer - designed to keep you warm and dry, wicking moisture away from your body and insulating.
2. Mid Layer - this one is usually fuzzy and is worn over a base layer and almost always under a waterproof layer. The goal is to trap more warm air in that space to retain more heat.
3. Waterproof Layer - An outer layer that is designed to keep the wind and the water out and the warm in.

With that in mind, typically each brand also has their A, B, and C level products, especially in that last waterproof layer category. Typical differences in the levels of waterproof gear include things like taped seams, elastic or cuffs at the wrist, waist, and ankle, quality of fabric, quality of zippers, etc...It is worth the time to evaluate the benefit of the differences between these product levels based on your frequency and style of sailing and consider stepping up if you think you'll get benefit from it.

## Base Layer

Here is our Rooster Brand Ambassador and Dinghy Sailor Steve Cockerill on the advantages of Polypropylene v/s Spandex as your base layer.



As you can see, these two materials work very differently. PolyPro sheds the water and Spandex absorbs the water. PolyPro drives the water away from your skin and Spandex tends to hold it against the skin. Depending on the range of weather you sail in you might even need to have both.

# Why What You Wear When You Sail Matters

Shorts can also be a base layer. For those who prefer a snug fit, there are "impact shorts" or "hiking shorts" that are usually some sort of form-fitting shorts that have extra closed-cell foam padding on the backside and legs. If you don't want to show off your "assets" with form fitted shorts you can wear them under another pair of shorts, or you can opt for what we'll call "regular" shorts with optional padding in them. The advantage of the more form-fitting ones is that the padding is exactly where you need it and doesn't have the chance to move around while working from one side of the boat to the other. In any case, if you are hiking a lot, the material your shorts are made of is important. The cloth should be durable and water repellent.



One of my first moves, when I have to layer up for a colder temp, is to add my base layer polypropylene bottoms underneath a pair of sailing shorts. The shorts protect them from the deck, and then I get the added benefit of the warmer layer.

## Mid-Layer



# Why What You Wear When You Sail Matters

This layer is usually the optional layer. It is the one you use to regulate your temperature as things warmer or colder. Typically your mid-layer consists of something fuzzy. Maybe you choose a fleece garment for this layer. Fleece is a great material because it doesn't absorb water at all. Fall overboard and when you get back in, the water just drains off and your fleece is ready to keep you warm. And yes...first hand experience.

One of the most recent trends in mid-layers is "knit fleece." This material is less "fuzzy" on the outside and has more of a smooth texture. This also helps make it pill-resistant and water resistant (think spray or light rain...)

Another consideration in less frigid climates is combining a Waterproof Layer with a light liner for a hybrid. Common in areas that are cool but not "cold", these come in all sorts of varieties and names. Look for terms like "jacket" or "insulated" but be sure to read the description. If you are a dinghy sailor you might find a fleece lined smock or spray top.

## Waterproof Layer

Waterproof layers come in many forms but usually, you're going to choose a top, and a bottom. In some cases in really cold conditions you might choose a single piece drysuit, but personally, I don't want to sail anywhere that would be required! Also, for dinghy sailors, we'll talk neoprene at the end of this section.



Your top is either going to be a coat, with seals at the edges, a high collar, and hood or it might be a spray top, also with seals at the wrist, waist, and neck, but more form fitting and will be a pullover. Coats are more common on bigger boats where you might be wearing it or might not, depending on the weather and the sea state. Spray Tops are more common for dinghy sailors who get wet because they are in a dinghy so you aren't in and out of it as much.

The exact features of your waterproof layer depends on what piece we are talking about. Here are some examples of features to look for when considering different pieces for your gear bag.

### Spray Top or Smock

- Double or triple laminate construction
- Neoprene waist and wrist seals (possibly adjustable with Velcro)
- Waterproof taped seams
- High neck adjustable collar that keeps out the water
- Pockets and if appropriate for your climate, fleece lining

### Coat or Jacket

# Why What You Wear When You Sail Matters

- Triple Laminate Construction
- Abrasion-resistant panels/cloth
- Collar that protects from ocean spray
- Hood that is adjustable, stows easy, and is a bright color
- Reflective panels/logos to provide extra visibility
- Large zippers with waterproof backing
- Adjustable Cuffs with inner elastic seals
- Fleece lining as appropriate for your climate

## Trousers

The bottom of your waterproof ensemble will usually fall into one of two categories. Either you're going to wear some sort of overall (called by several different names like salopettes, hi-fit trousers, or bibs) or you're going to opt for a more casual waterproof trouser. In either case, they should be reinforced at the knees so they can take some abuse on deck and have pockets enough for your liking. If you opt for the waterproof trousers, make sure your top more than covers the top of the trousers. No fun is had with a wet backside all day because water got in there! Also, most of the different manufacturers have a warmer weather one and one with more insulation for colder climates. Let's go through them.



The most basic bottom is a **waterproof pant**. These are great if you are casually sailing in a colder climate and don't expect to be beaten by rain or having to take spray on the rail all day. Reason being is that water tends to find its way into the waistline and nobody likes that. I use these mainly for layering up on cold cruising days.

**Bib Overalls or Hi-Fit trousers** are often a better choice for wet sailing than waterproof pants. Straps go over your shoulders like suspenders, and the material typically goes up to about mid to high chest making it more difficult for water to find its way up under a coat and down into your underwear. These are great for big boat wet sailing. Many small boat sailors find them a little bulky to move around in a dinghy with and opt for a more form-fitting neoprene option.



**Salopettes** are typically the next step past bib overalls.

They are almost like a "sleeveless onesie" and offer additional warmth and protection from the elements. I see some small boat sailors opt for these as they can be a little more form-fitting than the bibs. Some of the nicer ones have more pocket options and reinforced knees and seat areas.



Just like with the different tops, there are usually different "levels" of these garments offering different upgraded features. Zippers, reinforcements, type of material used, and seam taping are all upgrades that might come with the next better option. These levels are often called things like Inshore v/s Offshore or Coastal v/s Ocean. Some manufacturers have lines specifically for racing as well. In any case, pay close attention to the advantages to moving up in the class of garment given your typical sailing conditions.

# Why What You Wear When You Sail Matters

## Shoes



Your footwear is important as well. There are many options when it comes to footwear. From trainers that let the water pass through them to calf high waterproof boots.

Whether you are cruising, racing big boats or dinghies, what you wear on your feet matters. As a US Sailing Instructor, our beginning classes require close-toed shoes. If you've ever stepped on a sailboat you probably already know why - Boats BITE! Deck fittings, winches, fairleads all seem to reach out and grab for toes and unprotected feet. Let's be honest...we all sail barefoot sometimes. It is just kind of the thing to do, but there are times it is not the thing to do. So what kind of footwear is out there and which one is right for you?

For the casual cruiser "deck shoes" are probably going to be the right choice. These range from your classic Sperry dockside shoes to something more athletic like a "race trainer" from Gill or the "Seven Seas" line from Sperry. In any case, they should have a good non-slip grip bottom on them and be able to shed water quickly. As a bonus, most of these look good on and off the boat so that you can save a little space in your luggage.

Shoes for racing get a little more complicated. It depends on the size of the boat and your climate as to what will be the best, but a good all-around option is some sort of low cut boot. A waterproof one for colder climates and when more stability is desired, or a neoprene one for warmer climates (and typically smaller boats). You can usually pair this with a pair of polypro, neoprene, or waterproof socks that add another layer of warmth if you need it.



If you are sailing in hot weather, there are ankle height shoes as well. Typically the wearer will be racing small boats where long hiking sessions can take their toll on the tops of bare feet. They provide a little warmth and again can be paired with a warm sock for colder sailing.

Finally, for those who love to sail cold, there are also tall boots. Reminiscent of galoshes, these boots are designed to keep water out when it is coming in over the bow, and the deck is awash. As with all boating shoes, they have some serious non-slip on them as well.

Whatever you choose, take care of your feet! When you aren't on watch, get them dried out and warmed up. Wet feet for multiple days leads to not fun sailing.

## Gloves

This one you could write a Ph.D. thesis on. Cut finger, long finger, neoprene, dry glove, polypro, Amara, leather...the choices are endless. The most important thing about the glove is that they protect your hands (from working line and the cold) while still offering you the required dexterity to do your job. There is usually a trade-off in dexterity for warmth, but that is one that you'll have to decide on in the moment. Most people I know have several pairs for different conditions.

## Neoprene - Wet Use Cases

Up to now we've more or less avoided the topic of neoprene garments. These tend to be the genre of garment chosen by cold weather (or cold water) dinghy sailors. So why choose a neoprene over the options listed above?

First, if you immediately think about a scuba wet-suit, then you would be dead wrong. Those garments trap water in the garment and near the skin, then your body heat warms the water. They are designed to be worn in the water.

The newest versions of neoprene garments don't work the same way. Sailing Neoprene garments tend to have linings on the outside to shed the water and reduce wind chill as well as abrasion resistant panels in just the right places so your garment will last longer. The inside is also often lined with special attention at the neck, wrists, ankles, and waist (as appropriate) to reduce chafing but also prevent water ingress.



These new garments keep the heat in by keeping the water out of them. Your body heat warms the air trapped in the neoprene garment and that, combined with the wind chill reduction, is what keeps you warm. The expectation is that you will not be in the water for long periods of time (i.e. snorkeling or scuba diving) but they are designed to be worn in an extremely wet environment. So sure, capsize recovery is no problem, but then when you get sailing again, your garment still keeps you warm.

The next reason to choose neoprene over a more traditional garment is fit. As we said, these garments are chosen most often by dinghy sailors. On a dinghy, a bulky top coat or bib will get caught on things. These form fitting garments move with you and have less tenancy to snag. Also, they actually help with flotation in a capsize, as where the bulk of 3 layers of cold weather clothing will become a dangerous problem in the event of a capsize.

# Why What You Wear When You Sail Matters

The last thing to know about neoprene is that in addition to size, neoprene has different thicknesses for different climates. The thinnest are usually around 1.5mm with the thickest being about 5mm. If you sail in different climates, consider buying a bottom and a top separately and having the top be a little thinner. You can always throw a spray top over your top half, but for the bottoms, it's not likely that you'll have as many options. Alternatively, you can wear the top with some shorts on warmer days.

Here is Rooster Ambassador Steve Cockerill demonstrating the Thermaflex top from Rooster Sailing.



## Sailing Clothing for Kids



Like so many other sports, there is no substitute for having the right gear. And just like so many other sports, kids grow up and out of their expensive gear quickly. Most manufacturers offer reduced pricing on their junior apparel, but let's talk just a minute about why this is so important.

I think we all agree that **sailing teaches kids** (and adults) all kinds of life lessons. As adults, we understand the value of being out on the water with some friends or out for a solo sail and being in control of your own destiny. But if your kid is cold, soaking wet, and miserable, the only life lesson they are going to learn is that sailing isn't fun.

One suggestion is to work with your local sailing club and even just the parents of the kids in the program to build a pool of "doesn't fit my kid anymore" clothing. When something doesn't fit but is still in good shape, donate it to that pool (or keep it for their younger siblings). That way parents don't always have to buy the all the pieces new every time.

Another suggestion is to work with a local retailer on a gear rental program. That way every season they have the right size gear, and if they have a growth spurt and need a larger size, all you have to do is take it in and get the right size!

## Why Bother?

The point of all this gear is to make sailing more comfortable. Runner's buy good shoes...why? Because it enhances their performance and makes them able to do what they enjoy more often, with less injury. It is the same with sailing clothing. If you have gear that makes sailing comfortable, whether you are racing or cruising, you'll want to SAIL MORE!