

Eight dead, 26 missing in deadly boat fire off Southern California coast

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Eight people have been found dead with 26 others still missing after a fire engulfed a diving boat off the coast of southern California early Monday morning. A total of 39 people were on board the 75-foot vessel, the *Conception*, with 33 passengers and six crew members, for a Labor Day weekend scuba diving trip to the Channel Islands, a national park off the coast of Southern California.

A fire broke out on the *Conception* just after 3 a.m. PDT while it was anchored overnight just 20 yards off Platts Harbor on Santa Cruz Island. The fire quickly consumed the boat which was filled with sleeping passengers and air tanks. Authorities believe the fire broke out below deck where trapped passengers slept in close quarters in stacks of bunk beds.

Five crew members escaped the *Conception* by jumping into the ocean, retrieving a dinghy and paddling 200 yards to another boat where they placed a distress call to the US Coast Guard. Firefighters fought for hours to douse flames when the 75-foot vessel sank in 60-foot waters.

A desperate mayday call was placed at 3:15 a.m. by an unknown male caller aboard the ship who said he could not breathe and that there was no escape hatch for 33 people below the deck. “Mayday, mayday, mayday! *Conception* ... north side of Santa Cruz,” can be heard through noise and static. “...I can’t breathe!” the man said.

“You have 29 persons on board and you can’t breathe? What is your current GPS position?” the dispatcher asked. Loud noises and static follow before the man goes silent.

Of the 39 people on board only five of the six crew members survived. The crew, who slept above deck, were able to escape the fire. The remains of eight passengers have been found, four bodies have been

recovered and an additional four bodies have been located on the ocean floor in close proximity to the vessel. As of this writing the search is continuing for the remaining passengers.

The search and rescue mission will only last until dawn Tuesday morning before making “the unfortunate transition to recovery” in the morning, Mike Eliason, with the Santa Barbara County Fire Department, reported Monday night.

The boat was chartered by Worldwide Diving Adventures through Truth Aquatics, a Santa Barbara-based boating company which owns three charter boats.

The Coast Guard and National Transportation Safety Board have still not identified where the blaze began. Potential sources of ignition include gas kitchen appliances or even coffee makers. The diving tanks, filled with compressed oxygen or a nitrogen/oxygen mix known as nitrox, likely fueled the fire. Witnesses heard and saw the explosive bursts each time a tank exploded on the vessel.

USA Today reported that Greg Ricketts, a former manager with the Federal Aviation Administration and experienced open-water diver, suspects the cause was a “galley fire, making it impossible for the crew to reach the guests and the guests unable to evacuate.”

The Truth Aquatics website provides a map of the bunk layout on the *Conception* which shows that there is only one exit from the lower deck: a single staircase leading from the boat’s bunk room to the upper deck. The staircase is next to the galley. If the fire began there, it may have blocked passengers from accessing the only exit to the deck or the crew from reaching them.

Had the passengers been able to get above deck, guests would have had access to the boat’s life rafts and flotation vests and been able to jump into the ocean

to escape the fire. The Conception carried enough safety equipment for 110 people.

The Coast Guard reported that the vessel was in “full compliance” with safety regulations during its most recent inspections over the last year. Requirements for for-hire vessels, which differ from boats for recreational uses, include personal flotation devices, ring buoys, fire extinguishers, ventilation of engine and/or fuel compartments, and heating and cooling fuels aboard. There are no requirements for a secondary exit.

According to Coast Guard data, an average of about 650 people die each year in the US in boating accidents. However, the majority of those are from collisions with other boats or other objects, and only four of those deaths were the result of fires.

As revelations are unfolding, state politicians have been issuing empty platitudes about safety or praising first responders. California Governor Gavin Newsom released a statement that “Our hearts are with the families and loved ones affected by this tragic incident,” thanking “heroic first responders that are on site—working to ensure every individual is found.” Senator Dianne Feinstein issued a pro forma call for a federal investigation.

Given the high likelihood that the remaining passengers will not be found alive, the fire on the Conception will rank among the deadliest maritime tragedies in California and US history. Coast Guard Capt. Monica Rochester said the search would continue through the night, but she added a word of warning: “I think we all need to be prepared to move into the worst outcome.”



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