

Deckhand

Work the deck of a tug, ferry or cargo ship. No degree, but you live where you work.

TYPICAL PAY

\$51,520

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$35k to \$84k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

up to 1 year

after high school

DEMAND

Limited

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

Yes

regulated job

WHERE YOU WORK

**Tugboats, ferries, cargo ships,
offshore supply boats, harbor and...**

How you get there

- 1 High school diploma** Grade 12
Not always required, but it opens far more doors and every union program wants one.
- 2 Get your documents** 2 to 3 months
A Transportation Worker Identification Credential from the Transportation Security Administration, a medical certificate, and a drug test.
- 3 Merchant Mariner Credential** 1 to 3 months to process
Apply to the United States Coast Guard National Maritime Center for the entry level credential, rated Ordinary Seaman.
- 4 Get hired and go to sea** First hitch
Tug companies, ferries, offshore supply boats and unions all hire green hands. Expect to start at the bottom of the crew.
- 5 Build sea time and upgrade** 6 months to 3 years of sea time
With enough days at sea you can test up to Able Seaman, which raises your rate and the boats you can work.

Pros and cons

- + You can start within months of high school with no degree
- + Free food and lodging while aboard, so you can save hard
- + Half the year off in an equal time rotation
- Weeks away from home, missing birthdays and holidays
- Cold, wet, heavy work with real danger from lines and machinery
- Six on, six off wrecks your sleep for the whole hitch

Optional boosts

Able Seaman. Lifeboatman. Tankerman. Radar observer.

Good to know

A 1920 law keeps these jobs American

The Merchant Marine Act of 1920, usually called the Jones Act, requires that cargo moved between two United States ports travels on ships that are American built, American flagged and crewed mostl...

Six on, six off is the normal clock

Most American workboats run two watches. You work six hours, sleep six, and repeat for the length of the hitch. There is no such thing as a full night's sleep at sea, and crews say the first few days of every hitc...

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Sailors and Marine Oilers (53-5011.00)

Transportation Security Administration: Transportation Worker Identification Credential

Massachusetts Maritime Academy

Apprenticeship.gov: Registered Apprenticeship, United States Department of Labor

Numbers checked September 2026. Pay figures are typical full-time annual amounts in United States dollars, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics wage data and published pay scales. They vary by state, employer and experience. Tuition is for in-state students at public schools unless the card says otherwise. Sources, links and the click-through version: <https://career.help/us/careers/deckhand>



Scan for the full clicker