

# Red Right Return... Right?

by [Vincent Pica](#)



*An answer to that age-old question, "What Side of the Buoy Do I Go On???"*

Here we go...

Imagine this. You are on one of those reality TV shows and you have won! In addition to the big job and the big bucks, the host throws in a beautiful penthouse apartment in a brand new 50-story condo overlooking the marina and harbor. You get so excited that you faint straight away. You wake up in the elevator and you see the elevator numbers flashing by...

If the numbers were going up, would you be leaving the building or returning to our new home in the penthouse? If the numbers were going down, would you be returning to your new home in the penthouse or leaving to go to work..? Clearly, if the numbers are going up, you are returning home. If the numbers are going down, you are leaving.

And the same is true of the buoyage system in the entire United States... While certain pearls of wisdom work in local waters ("keep the reds and the ocean on the same side of your boat"), they don't work everywhere and they also fail to educate you as a mariner as to "how the system works" and why...

Of course, many of us have heard and used the old saw of "red, right, return" – meaning when returning from sea/to your harbor/home, keep the red buoys on your right. But often harbors line cheek-to-jowl along a shore. Are you leaving one or returning to the other? So, let's extend the old saw and get it right forever more...

**"Red - Right, Return; Left, Leaving."** Keep the red buoys on your right when returning and on your left when leaving. And, if the numbers are going **up**, you are **returning**, If the numbers are going **down**, you are **leaving**.

Be wary of one thing – "discontinuous numbers", meaning big jumps between buoy numbers or the numbers starting to go the opposite way. This means you have entered a new seaway or road and you need to recalibrate the direction of the numbers. For example, if returning from sea via an inlet, you will certainly see the buoy numbers go up in step. But what if, for examples, pass Nun#4 and see ahead Can#15? That's a big jump and undoubtedly means you are entering a new seaway. Now, what side? Quickly check your chart. If the next buoy after this hypothetical Can#15 is Nun#16, you are still "returning from sea." If, however, it is Nun#14, you are "leaving harbor" as far as the buoyage system is concerned! Remember: **Red-Right-Return; Left-Leaving**. In this case (leaving), you would now take Can#15 to starboard so that you can subsequently take Nun#14 to port (left leaving!). Never fails (in North America).

Want to know why our reds are on our right when returning from sea and not the other way around as in Europe? Well, when we were at war with the mightiest navy in the world over 230 years ago, the revolutionaries turned all the buoys around so that the English men-of-war would run aground... and we just kept them that way ever since...!

"Red - Right, Return; Left, Leaving." If the numbers are going up, you are returning as far as the rules of the road are concerned... Always...

Free PDF NOAA Nautical Charts

<http://www.nauticalcharts.noaa.gov/pdfcharts/>