

In case of tsunami, enter the pod

You can run but you can't hide. But maybe you can float your way away. By some strange synchronicity, this is the year of the tsunami pod. A basic two-person 300-pound spherical pod built by former Boeing engineer Julian Sharpe, similar to the size and interior of the Gemini space capsule, costs \$13,500; the four-person model sells for \$17,500. The Survival Capsule can be tethered via a 100-foot steel cable connected to a concrete plug in the ground, essentially turning passengers inside into a buoy.

On the same day the local and national news profiled the Survival Capsule, Pete Riedel of Reliable Emergency Shelters LLC came to Seaside with his two-seat RescuePod in tow to see "who's interested and who's not."

Like Sharpe, Riedel said he hopes to provide a way out for residents and visitors of coastal communities threatened by the quake and subsequent tsunami expected in the Cascadia Subduction Zone. "I'm sticking my toe in the water seeing who could be our strategic partners, who wants us in town and who doesn't."

The RescuePod sells for half of what you'll pay for a Survival Pod, listing at \$6,500. It can fit two adults weighing up to 300 pounds each.

"In a pinch you could put small children or animals in there, too," he added.

RescuePod Inventor Randy Harper of Camas, Washington, was inspired by a request from a Seattle billionaire with a Pacific Island home, Riedel said, to develop the best apparatus to survive a tsunami.

The pod is not airtight. Rather, it has closable vents on the top and a ballast at the bottom so the vents are always up and the hatch toward the sky. "It will act like a weeble-wobble," Riedel said. "It will always land upright."

With 10 cubic feet of flotation foam and high-density polyethylene, the RescuePod can fill up entirely with water and won't sink. The pod, in Day-Glo orange, has Lexan windows with holes in them. Spin the glass and the vents open; spin them again and they close airtight.

Riedel, a former officer with the Oregon National Guard, has a handshake that could crush limestone. He told me of his test ride as a passenger cascading off Husum Falls in Klickitat County, Washington, which drops 12 feet along the Salmon River.

"It was pretty scary, but it wasn't that bad," he said. "You're in a five-point harness racing seat. You don't feel the shock as hard. The round base on the bottom absorbs quite a bit of the shock."

The pod, Riedel said, is intended for homeowners or people in the tsunami zone. I asked him if he could envision selling it on a larger scale, to cities or municipalities in the tsunami zone. After all, for example, if the Seaside School District had bought tsunami pods at \$6,500 for each of their 1,000 or so students, they could have provided safety for \$6.5 million rather than the \$99.7 million required to move schools out of the tsunami zone.

Jon Rahl, the assistant general manager of Seaside's visitors bureau, said this week there are about 1,350 hotel rooms in Seaside. If every hotel came with a pod to match the number of rooms, the lives of many visitors could be saved for about \$9 million.

That's a lot less than estimates for bridge replacement, which run to \$35 million or more for the city's most vulnerable crossings.

"Once we get more economies of scale, we offer discounts for people who want two of them," Riedel said. "I would love to see it come down another \$2,000 if that's doable."

Is the pod worthy of serious consideration?

"Why not?" geologist and Seaside City Councilor Tom Horning said. "Work the numbers and see."

Those seeking shelter could ride out the wave, which, Horning said, would subside in between two to four hours near the epicenter.

But, he added: "I'd rather see a bridge. The thing is, you're trusting luck with these things. You give up all control when you get in it. If we had an east wind down, it would blow you out to sea, and then ..." His voice drifted.

Nevertheless Horning invited Riedel to come back to Seaside for a public demonstration. "Let the seller test it. Have him throw it in the Cove and see what happens. I'd be open to the idea."

So is Riedel. I told him of Horning's interest and he's willing to make a go of it.

"I figured we would get someone with a jet ski and tow us out the channel to the south and out to the break, have it go through the big waves and end on the rocks on shore and have it worked a bit on the rocks from the waves," Riedel said this week. "I will need to put together a safety crew, someone willing to help tow us out into the surf and have the proper conditions."

So if you see something bright orange floating along the Cove, it's not the latest exotic marine mammal swept up from the tropics. Maybe it's something we'll all be buying one day. Just in case.

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Pete Riedel brought two RescuePods to Seaside. Could they hold the answer for tsunami survival?

R.J. MARX/SEASIDE SIGNAL



Traveling with tsunami pods in tow outside the Seaside Civic and Convention Center.

R.J. MARX/SEASIDE SIGNAL



Yes, Pete Riedel is in this tsunami pod as it goes over Husum Falls in Klickitat, Washington.

SUBMITTED PHOTO



SEEN FROM SEASIDE

R.J. MARX

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