

OFFSHORE COMMS

directly from your smartphone's contact list. Many cruisers tell us it also works brilliantly with PredictWind routing software. (It's also possible to pull up a website, but impractical due to the data cost and slow transfer speed.)

Another small-but-powerful device that's immensely popular with cruisers these days is Garmin's InReach. In addition to serving as a mini-EPIRB or PLB (personal locator beacon), this handheld device allows you to send both pre-programmed text messages — i.e. "all's well on board" — and original notes pecked out on the device's internal keyboard, or — better yet — by pairing it with your smartphone or tablet. It can also receive incoming messages.

Although an InReach's screen is tiny, you can also use it to navigate in a pinch, including placing waypoints. Automating tracking (check-in) and text-based weather forecasts are two more of its many features. These impressive gadgets have worldwide coverage through the Iridium satellite system, and a variety of monthly plans are relatively affordable.

An older yet still popular device is the SPOT. It performs tracking (check-in) functions, and can send out (but not receive) both pre-programmed and custom messages by pairing with 'smart' devices.

While SPOT programs are more affordable than most competing products, it uses the older Globalstar satellite system which is not viable more than a couple of hundred miles offshore. But its coverage is adequate for coastal cruising and exploring Mexican waters.

Because most of us have become addicted to the Internet for everything from completing financial transactions to keeping track of friends and family, finding reliable Wi-Fi is one of the most frustrating aspects of the cruising lifestyle. Inmarsat now offers a solution at a price that at least some cruisers would consider affordable.

Inmarsat's Fleet One uses the same hardware as the high-end (and high-priced) FleetBroadband 150, which many serious race boats and commercial vessels employ (see sidebar). But our understanding is that it comes with firmware that only works in your local region, and it runs a bit slower than Inmarsat's top-end products. So you can't use it all over the world, but it's an excellent option for those who don't plan to sail beyond the West Coast — and want to stay connected as they travel.

Of course, much like having reliable Wi-Fi ashore, the better the signal, the

more time you or your crew are apt to spend online, which could ultimately drive your bill up to the moon.

With so many worthwhile communications gadgets on the market today, it's a challenge to decide which ones meet your needs and fit your budget — especially if you're an incorrigible gear hound. We suggest you have a closer look at the items profiled here, then follow up by doing some research of your own.

But forget about the slingshot method. Film canisters are just too darned hard to find these days.

— *latitude/andy*

TWO APPROACHES TO OFFSHORE COMMS

We don't know many top-notch racers who enjoy laid-back cruising as much as they love sprinting across oceans in multimillion-dollar speed machines. But Bay Area tech guru and world-class navigator Stan Honey isn't your typical sailor. When he's not routing the fastest course through the Southern Ocean or tweaking television graphics techniques for the America's Cup, he and his wife Sally often enjoy poking around the sun-baked anchorages of Mexico and Central America aboard their vintage Cal 40

Illusion — and getting to know like-minded cruisers through local radio nets.

Since Stan has uniquely comprehensive experience with both cutting-edge and old-school communications options, we checked in with him last month to see what devices he and Sally use aboard *Illusion*, compared to the comms arrays aboard nautical rocket ships like *Rambler 88* and the 100-ft *Comanche*.

On *Illusion*, he and Sally always carry an Iridium Extreme satphone, mounted in its charging dock, and ready to grab in an emergency. They use it for calling, texting and sometimes as a means to send and receive email (via Sailmail) and import weather data — but usually only when propagation is too funky to pull in mail and GRIB files over their SSB radio.

Although Sailmail still has plenty of subscribers, Stan laments the waning use of SSB by cruisers these days. "I remember when I was in high school and college, the cruising nets were jam-packed. There were fewer cruisers

out there, but they all were checking in to the cruising nets. Now, on the international cruising nets there are only a few boats checking in. Something important is being lost."

In terms of safety, Stan's top five recommendations to would-be cruisers are 1) an EPIRB, 2) a VHF, 3) an AIS, 4) an Iridium satphone, and 5) an HF radio.

What sort of gear would you find in the navigation station of a top-notch race boat today? "Most

racers boats use Inmarsat satellite devices," says Stan. "Usually the FleetBroadband 150 or the FleetBroadband 250, and they pay about \$10-\$15 per megabyte. They run fast, at about 150 or 200 kilobits per second." Translation: Smokin' fast!

But relative to their power, the domes that supply all that data are relatively tiny, "about the size of a volleyball."

"The other option is the KVH V3. This dome is somewhat bigger, about

the size of a basketball. The terminal costs about \$15,000, which is more than the Inmarsat devices. But the data is way faster and way cheaper — about a dollar per megabyte. So for any cruising boat that's big enough that the size difference between a volleyball and a basketball isn't an issue, the KVH V3 is the way to go."

As much as Stan is right at home with the latest, lightning-fast communications technology, we'd bet he misses the days, not so long ago, when every major ocean race required SSB, and the spirited chatter that came along with it.

latitude/andy



Master navigator Stan Honey checks the latest data aboard Jim Clark's 100-ft VPLP 'Comanche'.