

Crew Report Issue 2

Getting connected and keeping in touch...

The yachting industry is a fast moving business. We all need to keep in touch with any number of people electronically to keep track of job opportunities, courses, births, marriages and the all important snaps of the party you missed when you were on watch a thousand clicks away!

Most crew members now have a wireless communications device of some sort. Let's start with the most obvious - the indispensable mobile phone. You can buy a 'mobile' or 'cell-' phone just about anywhere these days. (Pictures please of the most back of beyond place you could buy a phone card!) However, it is not everywhere that you can *use* them. There are four frequency bands used for mobile voice calls and they are not all used everywhere. Tri-band phones are programmed for three out of four of these frequency bands, so it is worth checking that your phone has the right three.

Email on the move is now widely used by yachties whose network offers either the Blackberry or other 'push email' service. This enables busy people to use the airport stop or the taxi ride to bash out a few emails without having to dig out their laptop. There are any number of mobile phones, PDAs and air cards now available with a packet data capability. GPRS packet data (which is the carrier for Blackberry data) is now available at European destinations, although it is not yet so widespread in the Caribbean. There are favourable tariffs offered by the operators to make this cheaper than accessing internet email via constantly changing WIFI services. You see, just about everywhere you go in Europe, you will pay for your WIFI. The big mobile operators will add any Airport WIFI service that you use on to your regular monthly bill, so you are even paying for that convenience.

On the western side of the Atlantic, things are a bit different. Access to high speed broadband wireless is now taken for granted in the United States. Marina owners, fully aware that there is competition for places in every position (sorry, slipping into FIFA World Cup jargon for a moment, then!) will throw in your wireless internet access as part of their customer service. The US definitely leads the field in providing wireless communications to marinas, realising that the modern yacht owner

increasingly wants to be able to enjoy the same communications and entertainment facilities on his yacht as he has at home. In Europe, things are not quite so customer friendly. Most marinas now make ADSL available for regular patrons, provided by the phone company, and passing trade will come equipped with some kind of GPRS device. Naturally, the big boats have their broadband satellite installations with fixed price permanent bandwidth. But WIFI coverage is by no means universal nor free.

So what is a crew member to do? The big boat sailors can piggyback on the ship's communications, if allowed to. WIFI connections, if available (current estimates run at about 60% of Mediterranean marinas) will cost anywhere between \$15 per day and \$30-\$40 per month, depending on your location. Availability of sufficient bandwidth on a 24 hour basis is another story altogether. Using the GPRS or 3G data in Europe can be very expensive indeed, especially if you are roaming and stray off your operator's network.

My best advice would be as follows. Make sure your communications devices are compatible with the host communications network for voice and data. Remove any network restrictions from your hardware, if possible and economical. Make sure that you have WIFI connectivity. Check beforehand that you know what services are available at each destination. Your home service provider may not be much help so you would be better talking to the communications company supplying the boat and of course, those who have been there before you. This is a constantly moving target. Communications products and service costs are changing all the time. It follows that the most recently informed will be the best informed.

This is all common sense of course but a little reminder doesn't hurt. Last, but by no means least, check out what the locals do!