

The Crew Report

Satellite Communications – Can you afford it? Can you afford not to!

Ever made one of those satellite phone calls where the Captain stands behind you with a stop watch and as soon as the last number of your call is dialled, your time starts? When the handset is back in the cradle and locked, your time stops! Weeks later, some astronomical amount of money is added to your mess bill. Well, things have moved on and there is competition among satellite operators, which means that the relative cost of a satellite phone and call minutes has dropped enormously in recent years.

Let's look at some 'givens'. Communications prices increase in relation to the freedom they give the user. The land line at home is the cheapest, next up are mobile phones, and satellite phones cost the most because the market is tiny - all the satellite phone users in the world would fit comfortably in the Albert Hall - and the cost to market enormous. So what brings the cost of satellite communications down? Like any other business, efficiency, economies of scale, competition and growth.

Inmarsat used to have the maritime communications market sewn up. The service was synonymous with communications at sea. But now there are options using Iridium, Globalstar or Thuraya. I will leave VSAT out here as it is only really 'crew communications' when the regime on the boat allows it.

Inmarsat voice prices have decreased by 30-40% over recent years. There are special offers for 'Off-Peak' and 'Happy Hour' with ship to shore call prices as low as 99c per minute. The big Inmarsat operators like Stratos and Telenor have pre-pay calling card services. With permission, crew can use the ship's Inmarsat phone dialling in a code without a penny appearing on the phone bill and zero admin for the Captain. Some vessels even keep a mini-M or other terminal specifically for this purpose. This can be a godsend on a long voyage.

Iridium has the only satellite network with *global* coverage, although only the hardiest yachting will be venturing out of Inmarsat range beyond 70° North or South. Several pre-pay calling card services include calls via Iridium. There is a range of prepay and contract plans as low as 99c per minute. They are used on many yachts as backup to Inmarsat and there are a good few crew with one in the kitbag. You can buy one with a data kit to plug in to your laptop for that all important internet access. But what they really do is give you that bit of extra piece of mind and flexibility at around \$1000 a pop. Iridium has been used in emergency to save the lives of several yachtsies

There are two other satellite operators who offer regional services. These are Globalstar and Thuraya. Globalstar is not actually global but covers North and South America including the Caribbean, Europe, the Med and the Middle East. It also covers Australasia. There are however gaps on the North Atlantic which will lessen its appeal to a transatlantic sailor. The Globalstar phone is less than \$700 but like the Iridium, is more expensive with a data kit. You can also buy a version of the handset with dual GSM/Satellite capability. You can buy different bundles of minutes with the minimum being 75 minutes per month for \$50 of ship to shore calls although the minimum contract is 12 months. That makes it the cheapest in terms of voice rate per minute.

Thuraya is a Middle Eastern company offering single satellite coverage of an area covering Northern Europe, the Med, Gulf and down as far as the Maldives. One of the Thuraya satellite phones is very small compared with the others mentioned and they are planning to introduce a model normal cell phone size with dual Thuraya/GSM capability. The device may have limited appeal to yachties who are seldom more than 24 hours away from a GSM signal. However the fixed price per minute, security, and compactness of this package may have a few takers. And like Iridium, you can choose between prepay or contract.

So, there we have it. Without any cost to the boat, and allowing you all the privacy in the world, you now have several options for making voice and data calls via satellite. Who'd have thought?

You can find out more about the products in this article by using the links below:

www.e3s.com

www.inmarsat.com

www.stratosglobal.com

www.telenorsatellite.com

www.ast-uk.com