



Islander September 2010 Technology Update

Autumn refit, Caribbean or Indian Ocean? Some new technology to be aware of.

If you're heading for the Caribbean or Indian Ocean this winter, then here are a few technology tips which you will hopefully find useful.

TV

Upon arrival in the Caribbean, most yachts switch off or downgrade their Mediterranean satellite TV service, and switch over to DirecTV. This involves swapping out the decoders and subscription, plus re-programming the AV touch panel controls for the remotes. This year, DirecTV has introduced a new HD box in addition to their standard decoder. On a number of current yachts the TV distribution is for HD, should it exist, and physically use HDMI connectors. Albeit there are currently no HD programs transmitted in the Caribbean area, these decoders are available for yachts which have HDMI connections.

All DirecTV decoders plus LNBS should be pre-ordered to be picked up in Antigua or in Martinique (Dock Express arrivals) with technicians available in both locations to carry out the conversion. These can all be ordered here now.

Last year we launched the use of The Jetstream at the Antigua Charter Show. The Jetstream allows yachts to watch their home TV in the Caribbean or anywhere else in the world via their VSAT. Last winter, we had yachts watching live Sky and Orbit Showtime whilst in the Caribbean. We organised a demonstration of Sky live on a large plasma screen in the Copper & Lumber Hotel at the opening party for Charter Week. It was fun to see so many people do a double take as they walked past and realised they were watching Sky Sports live in the Caribbean!

Last year, The Jetstream was only available for 12 month contract periods. This year, short term contracts are available for a minimum period of two weeks. Short period bandwidth VSAT upgrades are also available now to match the Jetstream service period required. Both these can be arranged remotely and do not need a visit to the yacht, but they do need to be reserved at least 30 days in advance.

An alternative is also to use Apple TV and download movies for short rentals or TV programs, again using the VSAT, Fleet Broadband or some of the good wi-fi services.



Communications

Inmarsat handheld IsatPhone

For yachts of all sizes, the new Inmarsat IsatPhone is a must. It is a small handheld phone that costs less than the average smartphone and is much cheaper to use. It doesn't even need installing. You just take it out of the box and insert the SIM card. There are options for cradles, chargers etc.

If I was to sail the Atlantic again, as I did in 1994, this would be my comms device of choice. On large yachts cruising over the horizon they should have a few for use to communicate back to the yacht when ashore on remote desert islands and as a backup for their main systems.

Note the data speed is still no faster than the Iridium at 2.4 kbps and like the Iridium it is a "blue sky phone". A "blue sky phone" is one that doesn't work inside. There is a docking station option with an external antenna.

A working cell phone system is now available for yachts

Access to cell phone networks in the Caribbean and Indian Ocean is sporadic to say the least. Just launched at the Monaco Yacht Show is a system that works wherever the yacht has VSAT service. In a lot of cases, this is virtually global.

This is not new technology as it has been in use on cruise ships and ferries for a number of years, but has never been successfully introduced to yachts before as the model for cruise ships doesn't work for yachts. The new "eCell@Sea powered by MCP" system is designed specifically for yachts and uses proven equipment from Altobridge and a service from MCP that allows over 400 different cell phone service providers to use the system from all around the world, so most guests can use it. The unique feature about this is that important phone calls will never be missed as the recipients own phone will ring when they are over the horizon.

This service will solve the problems with poor cell phone coverage in areas like the Maldives and the Caribbean islands, and any yacht with the service should be more attractive as a potential charter yacht particularly for clients who are worried about being out of touch in the current financial climate.

A number of these new services I have mentioned have become available as a result of the proliferation of marine broadband and specifically VSAT.



With regard to coverage, the north Atlantic VSAT service came up just in time for the later autumn crossings to the Caribbean last year. A number of yachts whose VSAT service provider could supply this new coverage reported huge satisfaction with the service from owners and crew alike.

So, as a tip, if you are heading for the Caribbean on your own hull and you have a VSAT, make sure you have T11N mid-Atlantic service. Also with regard to VSAT, make sure you have ABS (Automatic Beam Switching). This makes transiting from one satellite beam to another painless, as all the switching is done automatically.

Inmarsat new huge investment in VSAT

Finally, a major announcement was made by Inmarsat in the last few weeks which stands to turn the whole maritime comms market on its head by about 2015.

Some readers may be aware that Inmarsat launched three new I4 satellites to provide more capacity and broadband over the last few years.

They have just issued a press release to say that they have agreed a deal with Boeing for the construction of three VSAT satellites to offer global 50Mbps coverage in the Ka-band to supplement its existing L-band (Fleet Broadband) services.

In layman's terms, the new satellites will be able to provide download speeds of 50Mbps with upload speeds in the region of 5Mbps on 20cm to 60cm dishes globally!

Global operations are planned to start in 2014, and this deal is likely to have a huge impact on the maritime communications market.

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