

The New ISPS Code – Increased Protection or Higher Risk for the Private Yacht?

Electronic systems required for ISPS compliance

Under the new International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) code, over 30,000 SOLAS vessels must be equipped, by July 2004, with both an Automatic Identification System (AIS) and Ship Security Alert System (SSAS). Upon installation of this equipment, as well as compliance with various other rules and regulations, they will receive the compulsory **International Ship Security Certificate**.

This new code relates to security issues and is primarily designed to guard vessels against possible threats such as terrorism, piracy and armed robbery. Today, the danger of hijacking by international terrorists, or boarding by pirates, is not limited solely to large commercial vessels. A glorious white super yacht, which potentially has someone very famous, rich or important on board, undoubtedly appears a most attractive target on the high seas.

During a recent meeting with the MCA in London, I was informed that any red flag (UK and territories) yacht over 300 tons, which charters for even 1 day must comply, for that day, with the ISPS code. However, as neither AIS nor SSAS equipment can be “temporarily” installed, a permanent installation is the only option for compliance.

The Panama Canal Authority and others have made AIS compulsory for ANY vessel of ANY flag over 20m to transit the Canal Zone.

What is AIS (Automatic Identification System)?

The weak link in the current generation of collision-avoidance electronics is the inability to identify any given radar target when multiple contacts are being tracked, especially at night or in reduced visibility. This also applies when vessels have impaired visual and radar visibility due to a harbour wall or bend in a river or canal. This inevitably leads to confusion, and has been cited as a contributing factor to many collisions and near-collisions at sea.

AIS helps resolve this difficulty by providing a means for ships to exchange identity, position, course, speed and other important data, with all other nearby ships and shore stations, through a standardised VHF transponder system. The data exchange is totally automatic and transparent to the users. The result is a dramatic improvement in situational awareness for officers of the watch, who will have a clear and unambiguous identification, as well as other vital information, from all other AIS-equipped vessels.

What is SSAS (Ship Security Alert System)?

SSAS is a very simple, small and inexpensive method of tracking a vessel or fleet via satellite (Inmarsat D+ or C) and the Internet. The unit is installed simply and discreetly.

Information on your vessel's position, speed and heading is transmitted back to the host server. The information is then converted into a simple visual format and displayed on electronic charts. All that is required is a computer with Internet access to connect to the website in order to view past voyages as well as the current position of your vessel.

In addition, if a discreet security alert button is activated, a covert signal can be sent to the host system within 11 seconds. The alarm can immediately be communicated by text to a mobile phone or pager, and/or to an email address, and/or to a fax machine of the company/persons responsible. In the event of hijack or boarding by pirates, this could prove to be a lifesaving device.

The system is secure and anonymous. Only the host system and the selected persons or company designated by the owner are able to receive the information or view the position on the website. The vessel's identity is transmitted in code and the host system translates this to the appropriate parties.

This system can be used to prove past voyages, and as an excellent recovery device, allowing you to direct a recovery team to your vessel's location.

Pros and Cons of the New Code?

Cons

As we all know, a large number of our clients are very security conscious. Once AIS has been installed, the yacht will be transmitting her identity and precise position to anyone, friend or foe, within VHF listening range. Albeit the actual name of the yacht can be omitted from the transmitted sentence, the IMO number and Call Sign are compulsory. It is simple to translate this information into the identity of the yacht.

So, the identity of the vessel has been confirmed, together with a continuously updated geographical position, plus lots of other optional information such as the number of persons on board. To many owners, and their captains, this is a matter for major concern.

It is not only private yachts whose security may in fact be compromised by this new code. Some cruise lines have also expressed their concern, as they see themselves as increasingly vulnerable to acts of terrorism or piracy.

Pros

If we're honest, we must realise that a determined terrorist or pirate probably does not need the help of electronics in order to find a large 100m yacht, with its name emblazoned in gold leaf on the stern, helpfully illuminated at night! These yachts are notoriously difficult to hide. Pirates have been locating ships, yachts and treasure for years without any electronic aids. Their most essential equipment is still just a decent pair of binoculars....

Most captains I have spoken to welcome the introduction of AIS. They want to be able to identify every target around them in detail, and look forward to the day when they no longer need use VHF to call an unknown vessel and ask for her intentions, only to receive silence, static or complete gobbledygook in response.

Is this the 9/11effect?

Due to concerns over privacy and security, some yachts are installing AIS with "receive only". They are quite happy to take advantage of the information being transmitted by the rest of the shipping community around them in order to ensure them of a safe passage, but they are unwilling to contribute in any way to the safety of others around them.

In my opinion, the essence of **AIS** is that it enhances the **safety** of a vessel at sea. As mentioned above, it will help to prevent many collisions and near collisions by improving the situational awareness of a vessel. **SSAS**, on the other hand, is designed to protect the **security** of a vessel and all those on board. I realise there may be grey areas where these two matters cross, but am still left wondering why AIS has been included in Part A of the ISPS code, and was not included in the International Safety Management (ISM) code? Whichever code they come under, AIS and SSAS are two pieces of electronic equipment which will enhance both the safety and the security of your yacht, her passengers and crew.

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