

Long-range comms reports

In the February issue of *YM* we looked at how the fleet was tackling the issue of long-range communications – how did Single Side Band (SSB) radio perform compared to satellite phones? Some of the boats we spoke to in Las Palmas got in touch to let us know how the crossing went

SATPHONE AND SSB RADIO

Nutmeg, Nicholson 38

Our system worked well,' said skipper Ollie Holden, 36. 'We used the Iridium for email and SSB for voice, with a couple of radio scheds each day. A lot of people had problems with Pactor modems struggling to connect because of the volume of people trying to use their SSBs for email at the same time. This may only be a limitation on events as large as the ARC, I don't know.

'The satphone is extremely easy to use and was very reliable, with only a couple of dropped calls in the entire trip. If you did need to use it for voice – we didn't – it is just like a mobile phone.

I probably used about 150 minutes in total, almost all for data, which cost about £150 – money extremely well spent. Whilst Iridium costs money per call, the SSB costs a lot more in amp-hours, which on a long passage are probably more valuable.

'I can sell the Iridium phone on eBay, so I have more chance of recouping my investment when I finish my trip, and it's pretty easy to rip out of the boat. It's not necessary for cruising round the UK.

'The SSB is an old one, an Icom M700UK, that won't take a Pactor modem. In theory it would do weatherfax but downloading weather files was so easy on the Iridium, especially when applying the amp-hours argument. The SSB was fine for voice and had better reception and transmission quality than many others. I replaced the ground system and the aerial wires to the backstay, which probably helped. Ironically, the only interference it got was from the Iridium phone – when I turned that off it was crystal-clear! The key message is, if you have an old system don't follow the advice of all the radio specialists in the UK who tell you that you need a new Icom 801 – the set you've got is probably fine.'



Rob Neild, Pam Neild, Sally Murphy, Ollie Holden

Offspring, Bowman 48

(Owned by Ocean Youth Trust Scotland)

'We spent £250 downloading the GRIB files via Iridium,' said skipper Malcolm MacArthur, 59. 'They were to some extent useful but expensive as we didn't use Mailasail email compression. Inmarsat C was effective and worked for most of our emails and free weather from Météo France twice daily. It was our most reliable system on board.

'The SSB was great for chat with other boats and had a very good signal strength. It's a shame that fewer boats are using this system each year as it's free and others can help with problems as there's usually someone listening who can offer advice.'



Erica Kemmet, Matt Roche, Malcolm MacArthur, Sandy McNeill, Andrew Jasso, Ross Crawford

SATPHONE ONLY

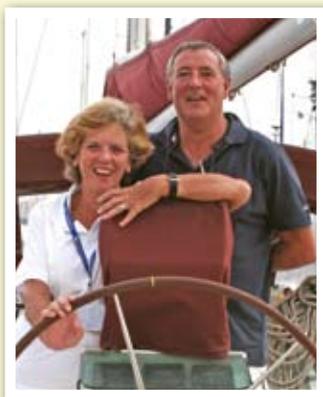
Amour de la Mer, Bénéteau Océanis 393

'Generally, the Iridium setup worked well,' said skipper Lee Goulder, 57. 'We received weather from ARC Control and used Mailasail forecasts as well. Somewhere we lost a day but this could have been caused by reduction in signal strength during transmission.

'If I did it again, I would get an external aerial. This would speed up the sending and receiving and would make the system quicker.

'We didn't miss the radio net because we never had it. For the first third of trip, we had VHF radio contact with other boats. During the middle bit it was a little lonely out there, especially in the light winds, when you wanted to know if it was as slow for everybody else. When the wind went westerly, the twin poles had to come down, the mainsail came back out of the bag and we were beating to windward, I couldn't find anybody to talk to. In the last third of the trip as we headed towards St Lucia the VHF came to life again.

'For us, Iridium was cost-effective. It's about half the cost of SSB, required very little training, no licence and if we had had to abandon ship, it would go in the liferaft.'



Barbara and Lee Goulder

Blue Tarn, Nicholson 35

'We have been delighted with our comms setup,' said crewman Tony Leighton, 58. 'The satellite phone worked without problem and was easy to use, and it allowed us to chat to our nearest and dearest at any time. We were not worried but they were, and it was immensely reassuring for them.

'We sent and received about 15 emails a day. The Mailasail software compresses the messages so that they can be processed by the slow data

connection. Messages included those from ARC control, and GRIB files from saildocs.com.

'What it didn't do was let you chat, free of charge, with other competitors. We didn't miss this facility – in fact, we got irritated by chats on Ch77 about how many eggs to put in the omelette, and so on... usually when I was trying to sleep!'



Tony Leighton and Robert Foreman

SATPHONES – WHERE TO BUY

The intricacies of long-range marine communications are many and varied and the author received a great deal of help from Ed Wildgoose at MailaSail, who has the gift of making extremely complex information easily understandable. In Las Palmas and in St Lucia, the MailaSail clients I spoke to had nothing but praise for the service and support provided personally by Ed. If you are thinking about buying a satphone, Ed will help you work out what you need.

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