



PLUGGED IN by Tim Hasson

GADGETS TO BRING ON YOUR CHARTER VACATION

It's December, so

this must be the annual Great Cruising Destinations edition of *BWS*. In keeping with the theme, what follows is a “grab bag” of ideas and gadgets you may want to consider for your next charter adventure.

For starters, consider some of the tools available to help you decide where to go and what to do (or not do) when you get there. The Internet offers some great resources for travel research and planning. Just about every charter company or broker offers an informative website with details on available boat inventory, provisioning and destinations.

Another resource is the Travel Talk Online website (www.travel-talkonline.com), a group of forums where users share their thoughts and opinions on travel destinations around the globe. The site includes a section devoted to Charter Boat reviews and ratings, and several other discussion groups focused on destinations in the Caribbean and Mexico.

While it's not geared to chartering per se, another one of my



favorite Internet destinations for researching and exploring a new cruising area is a fairly-new website called ActiveCaptain (www.activecaptain.com). ActiveCaptain is a graphical database—picture an aerial photograph dotted with push-pins marking Points of Interest (POI, in industry parlance) for cruisers. These points might note a marina, a good anchorage or a valuable bit of local knowledge. ActiveCaptain is a “wiki,” which means the users who register to access the site (it's free) can contribute new items or edit and review existing information. This website is less than a year old, and in its present state there are good details posted for the U.S., Bahamas and Caribbean. The site's developer recently added information on about 1,000 marinas in Europe, and it will only get better as more users discover the site and contribute their own observations and experiences.

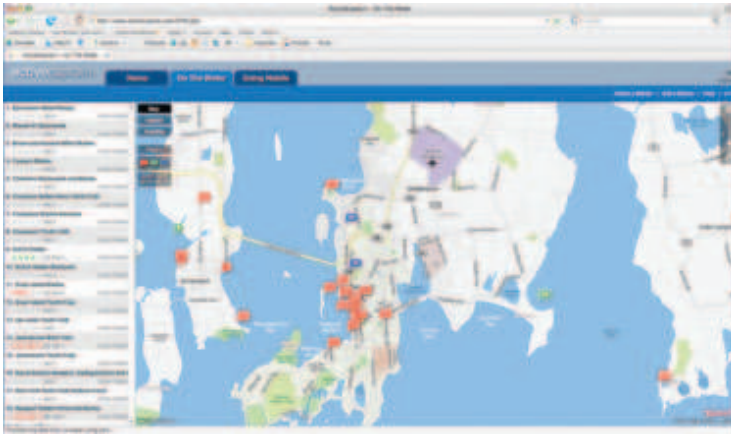
In short, there's a lot of good, first-hand information available on these websites and many others like them around the Net. I mention these two as representative examples, and would appreciate learning about others you've found helpful.

NOW ON TO THE GADGETS...

If you have one, pack along the handheld VHF if for no other reason than to let the members of your crew who are off exploring in the dink know that dinner is about to be served. If your charter destination is outside North America, just remember to set the radio to the international marine VHF channels and make a note to return it to U.S. (or Canadian, as appropriate) frequencies on your return.

Some of us just can't go away without remaining at least nominally in touch with business associates and clients. The trusty cell phone you rely on for this may or may not work, or you may get hit with extreme “roaming” charges depending on variables like your destination, your cellular provider's network and your calling plan. Check with your cell company for details in advance. If that doesn't pan out, there is a good chance your charter operator can rent you a cell phone that will work for the duration of your cruise.

Another option is to rent a satellite telephone. Just about every vendor who sells sat-phones also offers a rental option. Do an Internet



ActiveCaptain is a great website for researching anchorages, marinas and other marine services. Thuraya, previous page, is a popular sat phone for the Med

search on the terms “satellite phone rental” and a wealth of opportunities will present themselves. Expect to pay anywhere from \$35 to \$70/week to rent basic satellite equipment, with airtime charges from \$1.50 to \$2 per minute for calls.

For those headed to Europe or the Med, one satellite system worth considering is Thuraya. Thuraya doesn't get a lot of press here in North America because their satellite footprint is limited to Europe, the Middle East and North Africa.

Service within this footprint is excellent, and the Thuraya handheld phone will also work as a GSM cell phone when within range of a tower on land.

As you're exploring sat-phone rental options, consider the cost/difficulty of returning gear when you're through with it. Will you return the phone from your charter base, or extend the length of your rental contract and fly it home with you? Is the cost of return shipping covered under the rental agreement?

The boat you charter will likely have a decent electronics package, including a plotter with local charts. Even still, consider packing a handheld GPS—it's a good backup,

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and you're already familiar with its operation. Bear in mind that if you've moved the GPS more than 600 or so miles from home it will likely need to reinitialize on startup, a process that can take a few moments.

Examine all the electronics carefully when you're going through the checkout process with your charter operator. You may find it more convenient and safer to change the display settings to units like feet and degrees Fahrenheit. Ask the charter folks to assist you with this if necessary. Changing the settings back to the way you found them at the end of your trip is a nice touch.

Don't forget the iPod/MP3

player, either. It's great for the plane ride, and chances are good that the boat's entertainment system will have an auxiliary input for hooking up onboard.

A lot of the gizmos I've mentioned take batteries that charge from an AC adapter. If the AC is different where you're going, remember to bring along a travel voltage converter. Not having one could mean the difference between enjoying your favorite music that you've brought from home or listening to the Reggae version of "Muskrat Love."

One final observation that doesn't require batteries—if you'll be chartering abroad, call your

bank or credit card company ahead of time and advise them of your plans. To guard against fraud, many financial service firms prevent cash withdrawals from overseas ATMs—a little fact I learned the hard way while on a charter in Australia about a year ago.

Oh, and don't forget the sailing gloves!

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