

November 2014

Sailing

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Handheld VHF radios

With DSC and GPS, portable handhelds are much more than backup radios

Handheld VHF radios are becoming the jackknives of the electronics world. Small enough to clip on a belt of a lifejacket, handhelds now do some big jobs: relaying phone calls from smartphones, hailing other boats with digital selective calling, flashing SOS with built-in LEDs and vibrating to clear water from their speakers. The problem is that no one handheld does all these things. Sailors must assess their needs and the pros and cons of each radio before purchasing one.

The latest trend is incorporating digital selective calling and GPS capability into handhelds. DSC is the technology that sends boat identification and location information digitally, which requires less bandwidth and provides greater resistance to fading and noise. The best feature of DSC capable radios is push-button distress calling, which uses the built-in GPS for location information. The monochrome GPS screens and step-through menus are reminiscent of early handheld GPSs, but that's not really a problem because the primary reason for GPS aboard a handheld is for DSC, which needs location information.

DSC also needs a dedicated maritime mobile service identity number that links

a DSC-capable radio to a particular boat emergency contacts and owner information so that the Coast Guard knows what kind of boat it is looking for when it receives a DSC distress call.

Sandy Willis, the MMSI administrator for BoatU.S., one of the organizations that assigns MMSI numbers, said that the Coast Guard's original intent was for handhelds to share the primary boat's MMSI number.

If the handheld is routinely moved off the primary boat, say to a dinghy, Willis recommends a separate MMSI number for the handheld radio.

"It would be most appropriate to get separate MMSI for the handheld, indicating its intended use in the remarks section



	Cobra	ICOM	Lowrance	Simrad	Standard Horizon
Model	MR HH 500 FLT BT	IC-M73 Plus	Link-2	HH 36	HX 300
Price	\$149.95	\$219.99	\$199	\$249.99	\$249.99
Power (watts)	1, 3, 6	1, 3, 6	1, 5	1, 5	1, 5
Digital rewind	20 seconds	1 minute	No	No	No
Noise canceling	Yes	No	No	No	No
Submersible	IPX7	IPX8	IPX7	IPX7	IPX7
Battery life (hours, depends on watts)	16	16	7	11	10
GPS/DSC	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Wow factor	Bluetooth pairing with a smartphone, BURP	Loud audio and bass boost, AquaQuake	Get Buddy sends handset location to other Link-2s	Dedicated GoTo button	USB charging, water activated LED
Weight (in pounds)	0.6	0.7	0.6	2	0.5
Contact information	773-889-3087 www.cobra.com	800-426-7983 www.icomamerica.com	800-628-4487 www.lowrance.com	800-628-4487 www.simrad-yachting.com	800-767-2450 www.standardhorizon.com