

SKIP NOVAK

SHOULDN'T WE ALL BE GETTING OFF OUR PHONES
WHEN AT SEA? SKIP MAKES THE CASE

The June issue article ('Stay Connected', ARC survey results on communication at sea) was timely as I need to upgrade the antiquated Iridium system on the original *Pelagic* (currently in Greenland). Based on feedback from the ARC, this was a superbly informative technical piece.

But the lead photo of the young sailor in the cockpit staring into his mobile phone provided me with an open goal for what can be construed as the sad, inevitable story of how we curmudgeons like to continually lament, 'Well, that's just the way it has all gone...' As sure as an incoming tide is unstoppable, more sophisticated onboard communications are inevitable and I'm in no way advocating turning back the clock. However, read on...

I'm sure there must be at least one other reader who, on seeing that picture, said to themselves: 'But what about that magnificent sunset? Surely better to stare into?'

Possibly this young man had recently trekked to both poles and climbed the seven summits and he was on a sailing holiday to recover, in which case I'd let him off the hook. But I couldn't resist, with no disrespect, in thinking, 'Why don't you go play outside, son?'

Although author Toby Hodges does make the point that some of us still relish the idea of turning off the comms when we go sailing, the philosophical argument of such a dilemma falls to each individual. Well, someone needs to push back (I welcome plenty of letters backing me up, please) as counterbalance to trends that are clearly unstoppable, but can be mitigated and in this case by review of how we spend our time at sea.

So I will propose a separation of comms on yachts for utility and discourage comms on yachts for amusement. You'd be a fool not to have the latest affordable comms, not least for basic safety considerations. But in my view it should all end there.

Let's face it, constant communication has become an addiction. This is obvious whenever we arrive back to mobile coverage along the coast: the phones come to life and instead of savouring those final days or moments up to making the dock, your senses are sadly turned off to

wind, sea and current and that delightful motion they all bring to the vessel. Why distract yourself from those simple pleasures?

We all default to our phones when there is a signal. Why? Because we can. But I'd hazard a guess that when the Whatsapps, Instagrams and emails start cascading to your device there will be some welcome news from family and loved ones, but also some bad – bills in arrears, insurances expired, overdrafts left unattended, a flood in the kitchen, the dog at the vets and all the usual frustrations. In my view it's best to finish a voyage cleanly and get to your office or desk at home to clear the backlog.

One bit of kit barely mentioned in the article was the proliferation of the Inreach system by Garmin. For expedition types on land and at sea this has become the system of choice, superseding a handheld Iridium satphone, although using the same Iridium satellite array. It is a

text only system, limited to 160 characters per send, and as Garmin's publicity states, allows you to stay in touch globally, send and receive messages, navigate your route, track and share your journey and, if necessary, trigger an SOS to a global emergency response coordination centre.

What more can you possibly need? I'm certainly sold on the device as an unobtrusive solution for those basics, and although it's cumbersome to type in a message you can link to your cell phone via Bluetooth.

On the most recent projects on *Vinson of Antarctica*, the scientists and film production staff all had one, claiming

it's now required for work. In other words we could have 10 Inreach units on board between clients and crew, hanging on carabiners in the cockpit or the pilothouse next to the windows.

Although I sometimes found all six people in the cockpit or pilothouse staring into phones when they should have been looking out for whales, it seems about the cheapest solution for doing the bare minimum of communication in this day and age when going remote.

No need to point out that with this recommendation I've been hoist by my own petard. So I give up on my pushback on comms on board. Maybe. ■

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