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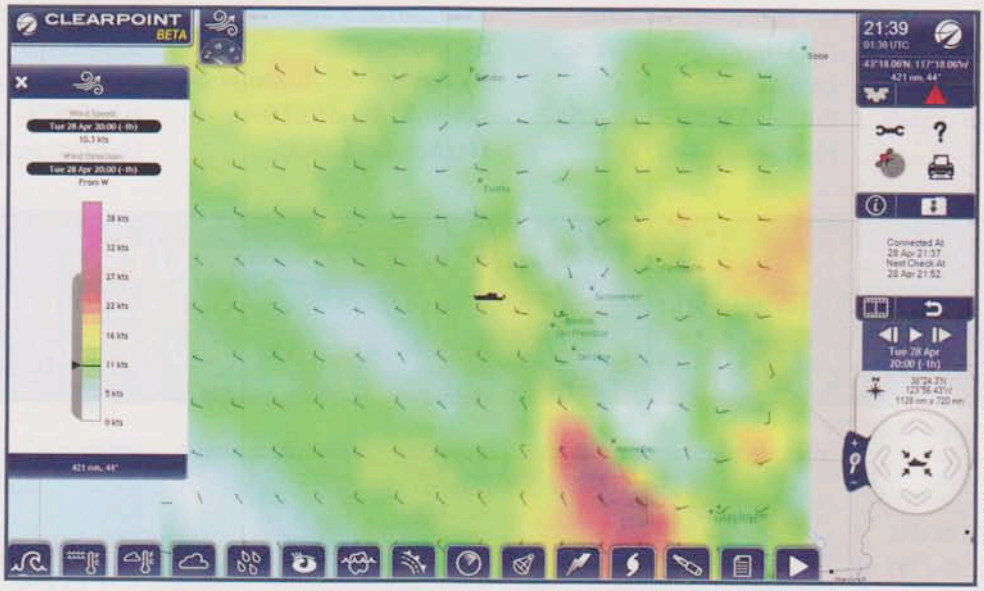


Courtesy of Jeppesen Marine

A Wide-Ranging Look At Products That Work

Story By Peter Swanson

In the spring I crewed on the first Nordhavn 56 motorsailer during her delivery from Southern California to Anacortes, Washington, where she made an appearance at Trawler Fest. We were fortunate, given prevailing conditions on the West Coast, to have made the 1,100 miles in a single seven-day passage.

Naturally, the voyage gave me great insight into the N56, which in many ways is a reincarnation of Robert Beebe's *Passagemaker,* the inspiration for today's trawler lifestyle as well as the magazine you now hold in your hands. More to the point, it was an opportunity to try out some of the products that I write about.

I envy the electronics writers who understand precisely how electrons dance around inside the hardened cases of our radars and chart plotters, but my lack of theoretical savvy has forced me, whenever possible, to use the stuff in real-world situations. Often, these tests will form a perspective for set-piece articles such as those you may

Courtesy of Nordhavn

The Nordhavn 56 motorsailer under way off the California coast.

have read in the last two or three issues of *PMM*.

Today I am departing from that format, as I hope to from time to time, to catch up on some products and services that are worthy of coverage but perhaps aren't new or complex enough to merit an entire article. Let me also use this departure as an opportunity to share my philosophy toward electronics so that you can put what you read here into some kind of context.

First of all, having spent 20 years mucking about in the newspaper business, I am a huge skeptic. My boating began in the 19th century (figuratively, please), navigating the bold coast of Maine with only a watch, compass, and chart—depth sounder and VHF would come later. I never did get radar until I moved to Florida, though I sure could have used it up north. Each new miracle, from GPS to AIS, has had to prove itself to me. For the most part, each has.

Along the way, I have become a huge fan of the marine electronics industry and its people. Not one of these companies is selling us junk. When buying for my own boat, therefore, I am happy to get the least expensive equipment that can do the job, whatever the brand. Yep, I'm one of those cheapskate cruisers.

Which brings me back to the importance of real-life testing. Attending manufacturer-sponsored product demonstrations is good, but the longer you live with a piece of equipment, the better you appreciate its strengths

and weaknesses. So, besides writing for a living, I try to captain or crew on two or three vessel deliveries a year. Power or sail does not matter, but newness counts, because that means being able to use the whizziest late-model navigation and communications gear over a period of days or weeks.

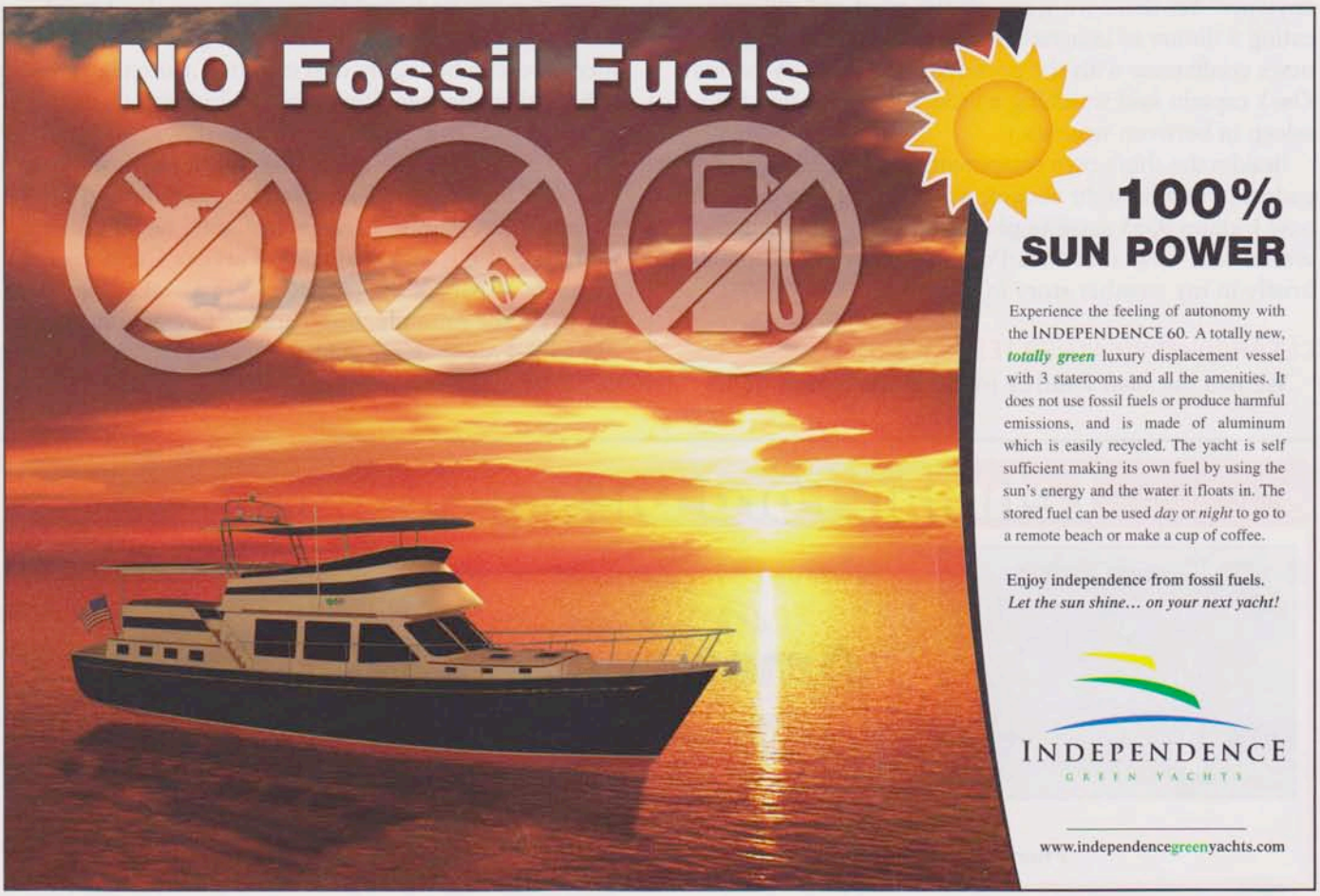
NAVNET 3D IS A POWERFUL FRIEND

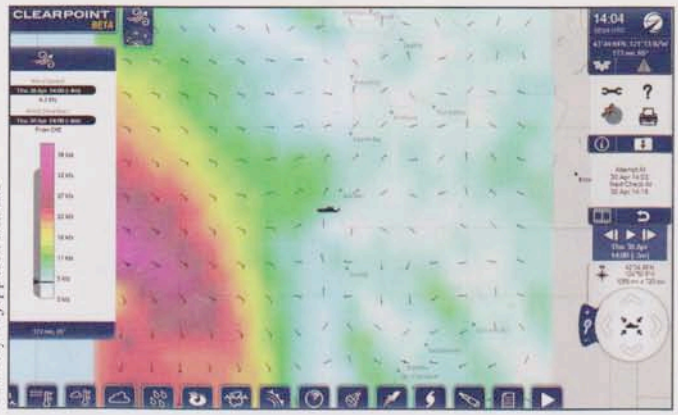
The Nordhavn trip affirmed my respect for Furuno and its U.S. product manager. Ever since Erik Kunz loaned me a Furuno radar/plotter for a 45-day delivery from Florida to California back in 2002, I have appreciated the brand's ruggedness, reliability, and ease of use. On the Newport Beach-to-Anacortes trip, we navigated *Nord Sail One* with the help of two Furuno multifunction displays in the pilothouse and a third in the sailing cockpit. It was the first quality time I had spent with NavNet 3D, toggling from a conventional chart presentation to its impressive three-dimensional view. "Time Zero" is how Furuno describes the NavNet 3D panning and zooming features, and as near as I can tell, that description is accurate. In truth, seven days was not enough time to explore this system to its fullest.

Peter Swanson

Snotty weather dominated during the N56's time off the coast of Oregon.

Nord Sail One came with a Simrad autopilot, which performed flawlessly even when taxed. At one point, the wind had clocked around behind us and freshened. Following 12-foot seas developed, closely spaced. Until we remedied the resulting bow-steer by unfurling the jib, the





Courtesy of Jeppesen Marine

This ClearPoint screen shot shows the wind forecast during the delivery of *Nord Sail One* up the West Coast. The scale on the left gives conditions at the cursor location. The user can toggle forward to see computer-model forecasts up to 5½ days ahead.

boat fought the autopilot. We waited to see whether the Simrad would admit defeat and sound the alarm for lost course, but it never did.

While respecting the capabilities of KVH's stabilized satellite TV antenna systems, the skeptic in me had always asked, "Who the heck watches television on a passage anyway?" Yet there we were, off the coast of California, eating a dinner of lasagna and salad and watching a live news conference with the president on CNN. (*Nord Sail One*'s captain said watching a little TV helped him fall asleep in between watches.)

Besides the ship's own equipment, I had access to several gadgets I had brought aboard: a SPOT tracking device, a new Iridium 9555 satellite phone, and a laptop loaded with a beta version of ClearPoint, a service I mentioned briefly in my weather story in the August issue.

CLEARPOINT WEATHER TESTS WELL

We had our own weather router in the person of Jim Leishman, Nordhavn's vice president, but ClearPoint, with its graphical predictive wind and wave presentation, gave us a lot comfort as we pressed northward. This PC-based service is priced at a remarkably low $99 for an annual subscription, with no charge for the software.

We used my Verizon AirCard Internet connection to download data, but had we been outside the Verizon footprint, we could have used the Iridium phone instead. In fact, ClearPoint is a dealer for Iridium service and offers it at 59 cents a minute. ClearPoint allows the user to select which weather info gets downloaded in order to economize. Anyone who sticks to the basics—wind and wave predictions to 5-1/2 days out and government weather forecasts—spends an estimated $5 to $10 a day on Iridium service, according to ClearPoint President and Product Manager Linda Kruk. "Iridium service is not something we make money on. We basically offer it at cost," she says.

For us, Verizon's unlimited service meant that, in effect, the download time was free, so we went for the whole package each time. You figure that, while cruising, there are times when you have AirCard service, times in foreign countries such as the Bahamas or Mexico when you use wi-fi, and times when you don't need daily weather because you are staying put. ClearPoint, therefore, can be highly cost effective, particularly when using cheaper alternatives to Iridium.

I have only one nit-pick with ClearPoint, and I shared it with Linda Kruk at the end of my monthlong trial. For those many East Coast cruisers bound for the southern islands, ClearPoint would be so much more useful if it included Chris Parker's Caribbean forecasts as part of the package. ClearPoint competitor OCENS, for example, lists Parker's forecasts in its download menu. Kruk said she would look into it, so I'll let you know what happens.

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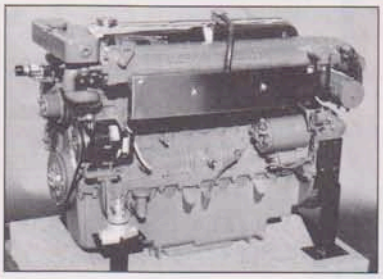

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MONITOR AIS ONLINE

By now most readers have probably heard about AIS, the Automatic Identification System for shipping, which provides a description of participating vessels, as well as their position, course, and speed, and displays each vessel as an icon on plotters and radar screens. Mandatory for commercial shipping in the form of Class A, AIS has been integrated more and more with the systems aboard recreational vessels (as Class B).

Nord Sail One's owner has a Class B AIS transponder. One way to check whether it's working is to visit the website that displays AIS returns throughout the United States, Europe, and other high-traffic areas of the world. Despite concerns that such websites threaten security by revealing the whereabouts of so many potential targets, www.marinetraffic.com provides a fun demonstration of AIS in action. While writing this article, I plugged "Nord Sail One" into the site's search field and found where she was docked in Seattle. Ferryboats crisscrossed the area nearby. Very cool.

The popular SPOT tracker, which I brought on the trip, can do something similar by posting your position on a website and sending a preselected group of recipients an email that directs them to the site. With basic service, you press a button each time you want your position broadcast. With enhanced service, this happens automatically at 10-minute intervals. SPOT is a locator and one-way communicator whose 911 features have been justifiably touted, based on its role in numerous rescues.

The posting feature, which allowed the crew of *Nord Sail One* to announce its first stop at Neah Bay in Washington, is an easy way to let friends and family monitor your vessel's progress. My only caveat is to let your email group know they're on your list so that SPOT's messages will make it through their spam filters.

Less widely known is that SPOT relies on the Globalstar satellite network, which has suffered degradation in its ability to transmit voice signals. SPOT users should know that the device uses a different type of data transmission that has not been affected by Globalstar's problems. Globalstar has promised improvements to the voice system, but as it now stands, Iridium seems to be the handheld satphone of choice.

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Iridium dealers are taking advantage of Globalstar's difficulties by offering deep discounts on phones to anyone who turns in an old Globalstar handset.

WHITHER GPS?

Every one of the products and services mentioned above depends entirely upon GPS, or, in the case of ClearPoint, is enhanced by GPS, which uses a system of satellites maintained by the United States Air Force. Recently, a federal watchdog agency warned that GPS faces the possibility of failures and blackouts beginning in 2010 because the Air Force has delayed launching replacement satellites.

Investigators in the Government Accountability Office have told Congress: "In recent years, the Air Force has struggled to successfully build GPS satellites within cost and schedule goals as part of a $2 billion modernization program...If the Air Force does not meet its schedule goals for development of GPS IIIA satellites, there will be an increased likelihood that in 2010, as old satellites begin to fail, the overall GPS constellation will fall below the number of satellites required to provide the level of GPS service that the U.S. government commits to."

The Air Force fired back that the risk of substantial degradation is very small. It said the failures might result in a system that no longer exceeds the level of service to which the Air Force originally committed but that continues to meet stated goals. In other words, the GPS satellite system might not be as good as it was, but it will be good enough. There are 30 working satellites in orbit, the Air Force says, plus three older satellites that could

Courtesy of Nobeltec

This screen shot from Nobeltec Admiral showing the harbor at Cienfuegos, along Cuba's south coast, gives you an idea of the kind of charting that's available for the island nation.

be reactivated. Another satellite, based on previous-generation technology, was scheduled to go up this August. The $30 billion system has never been larger or more accurate.

My guess is that the utter dependency of entire industries on GPS service, not to mention the public at large, will spur the U.S. government to get next-generation GPS satellites into space before serious problems occur.

NOBELTEC GOING TO CUBA...WITH ME!

Cuba is a hot topic right now, so I planned a trip there over the summer to report on what kind of marine infrastructure awaits American cruisers once the travel ban is lifted. In order to better discuss coastal areas with my Cuban sources, I loaded Nobeltec's Caribbean region onto the notebook computer that I planned to bring along. Nobeltec Cuba mapping uses chart data provided by Cuba's own hydrographic office, which does excellent work, as you can see from the screen shot above of Cienfuegos, on Cuba's south coast. Furuno's MaxSea charting also uses Cuban government data.

Meanwhile, expect one of my next electronics features to investigate the cruising benefits of mobile phones. And, if I may briefly preempt myself, iPhone users would be crazy not to install Navionics Mobile on their phones, turning them into mini chart plotters, as I saw demonstrated at the Miami International Boat Show. I mentioned earlier that I'm a price-point kind of guy. Well, Massachusetts-based Navionics is offering complete regions from its Gold Charts collection (the East Coast, for example, is a region) for about five bucks each, including the application. Why wouldn't you?

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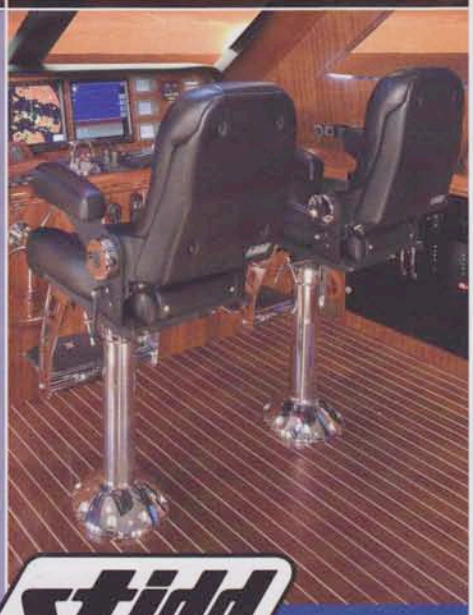

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