

Wireless World: Lifestyle now for boaters

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Captain Roger Sardina navigates the Sea Ray Run, a 40-foot-long Sundancer motor boat made by Brunswick, through the "Danger Spot A" of Burham Harbor on Lake Michigan, using the wireless global positioning system. We've just completed a quick cruise of the lake, on a very rainy morning here in Chicago, but the sea state -- the height and movement of the waves -- was relatively steady.

Today's luxury motorboats are outfitted with networks, wired and wireless, making them quite advanced, although not as state-of-the-art as one might encounter on a ship in the U.S. Navy. There are no anti-torpedo countermeasures, but there are GPS plotters, with prevalent color features, MP3 devices, satellite radio and TV systems, and satellite phones, as well as wireless Internet access systems, said Geoffrey W. Storms, vice president, high performance product development at Brunswick, during an on-board interview with Wireless World.

"You can communicate, if you're still in the harbor, via the marina's WiFi network," said Storms. "If you are out on the lake, you can use satellite links to send and receive e-mail, or surf the Web."

As the summer boating season arrives, consumers are increasingly demanding the same electronics capabilities that they have in their cars in their recreational boats.

Last year boating increased nationally, as 2.3 million more adventurers took to the waves than in 2004, for a total of 71.3 million participants. New boat sales increased to \$820 million, up 8 percent, approximately,

from the year before, according to the National Marine Manufacturers Association, a trade association in Chicago.

The wireless electronics are part of the answer to the question of why the boating industry is growing after something of a decade-long slump during the 1990s.

"The latest accessories go a long way towards better accommodating the boater who wants to create the ideal space for entertaining," said Thom Dammrich, president of the NMMA.

One electronic feature that families seem to like -- especially wives -- is the electronic maps that are accessible on flat panel, touch-screen computers either in the cockpit, or below deck. "If the husband is seemingly off course, the wife can now look at the computer and get the directions," said Storms. "We all know men won't stop to ask for directions."

This particular boat, the Sea Ray Run, is equipped for just that, and more. The boat costs about \$600,000, and most of the latest consumer electronics are incorporated into the vessel by the manufacturer, before it is transported to the retailer for sale. Most interestingly, though, the wealthy aren't the only boat owners gaining from the trend toward lower-cost electronics. About 76 percent of families that own boats have a household income of less than \$100,000, according to NMMA. Boats that are 26 feet long or smaller are considered "trailerable," meaning they can be hooked to a car and taken over land to the lake or river.

Over 90 percent of Americans live within an hour's drive of a navigable body of water. Lake Michigan, one of the world's largest bodies of water, for example, is accessible by boaters in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and Wisconsin, quite easily.

The motor boat industry is raising awareness of the availability of the latest consumer electronics on its Web site, discoverboating.com. During April of this year, 346,860 visitors logged onto that site, requesting free information about getting started in boating.

According to Joy Koch McPeters, president and CEO of Baltimore-based Marinalife LLC, thousands of active boaters use online marina reservation systems to book a berth for their boat, and then, after the weekend is over, take their boats home. "Our clients use the online reservation services when they are on the water as well as at the marinas," said McPeters.

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