

Spot Passes Bermuda Test

Position reports take 10 to 20 minutes, but data is accurate and device holds up well.

To confirm satellite coverage and to followup on our first report on the Spot Satellite GPS Messenger (September 2008), Technical Editor Ralph Naranjo used the Spot during a five-day passage from Bermuda to Newport, R.I.

The tracker function didn't miss a beat as it forwarded position updates during the passage. Rainy weather tested the unit's moisture resistance and signal acquisition capability. Several times a day, a signal was manually sent by simply turning on the unit and pushing the "OK" button. It typically took 10 to 20 minutes for the Spot to acquire a satellite and upload the GPS position.

The unit worked well from under the boat's canvas dodger but did not acquire satellite signals below deck. Each time a position report was sent, it was automatically forwarded via e-mail from the Spot homepage to pre-designated contacts. The reported positions were later confirmed (to within 100 feet) with logged data from the onboard GPS.

The tracker was wet much of the time, but the three Lithium AAA Energizer batteries and their contacts were dry when inspected, and there was no sign of any moisture intrusion. The test unit has been updated with an even more compact model, but the basic function remains the same. The simple array of buttons provide a dedicated on/off switch, an "OK" message button with lat/long coordinates and time, an OK plus short pre-written text option button, and a "Help" button for non-life threatening/non extreme situations. Those facing life-threatening/extreme danger situations press the "SOS" button for dire emergencies.

The Spot tracker signal utilizes the Global Star sat-phone array of low earth orbit satellites, and its control center is a private corporation whose main mission is tracking the location of subscribers in the various parts of the world. Though promotional literature touts worldwide coverage, a close look at oceanic regions off the Cape of Good Hope, Cape Horn,



Thumbtacks on a Google Earth page (above) mark positions posted using the original Spot (right). PS has not yet tested the Spot2 (above right), which has a new look (including a much-needed cover for the SOS button), but its introduction was marred by a recall.

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and along most of the east African coastline shows there's no coverage at all. For this reason, and a couple of others raised by engineers and communications experts at the NASA Beacon Center, a case can be made for this type of tracker beacon being a back-up emergency signal device but not a replacement for an EPIRB.

Shortly after Spot introduced the Spot2, the company issued a voluntary recall stating that some of the new devices might not meet battery and messaging specs. The new units are now available.