HOW WE TESTED

Each software package was installed on a Windows XP Pro-equipped laptop with 2 GB of memory and an Intel M processor running at 1.86 GHz. Each product was used as the primary navigation software over various actual routes in the Mediterranean Sea and Chesapeake Bay. During this ocean testing, *Practical Sailor* examined and compared each package's features as well as overall performance.

PS attempted to answer the following questions during each evaluation: How easy is it to operate the chart display controls? How easy is it to access and edit routes? Which programs can measure a leg or a route without it actually being saved? Which ones can include a bearing to the waypoint in that calculation?

PS also checked how easy it is to create marks or symbols with descriptive labels directly on the chart. Testers evaluated how effectively the software dealt with low-light viewing.

Alarms drew a close evaluation. Are they user-configurable and clearly audible alerts? Are there multiple alarms, not just an alarm for a lost GPS signal? As a minimum, alarms should include alerts for off-course conditions or cross-track error (XTE) and waypoint passage (apart from lost GPS signal). An anchor alarm is a convenient addition. If AIS or radar targets are being plotted, a closest point of approach alarm (CPA) can be a key safety feature.

The most important alarm these products can provide is one that assists with MOB situations. Ideally, the MOB function would be conspicuously displayed and always on the screen where it can be quickly accessed. When activated, the position of the vessel must be saved, and a large, easy-to-read display should provide constantly updated bearing and distance to the recorded MOB position. The ability to use the MOB position as a waypoint and receive steering guidance for the helmsman or autopilot is a big plus, especially for shorthanded crews.