



# CONNECTIONS

NEWS AND TRENDS  
FROM THE WORLD OF MARINE COMPUTING

## Client Spotlight

### Escape: A Project Post-Mortem

By Tim Hasson (thasson@marinecomputer.com)

#### **In This Issue:**

Escape: Project Post-Mortem	1
Navigating VNS	3
Tech Tip: Fax Dividing Lines	4

#### **In Brief:**

If you call either of our offices over the next few weeks and we sound a little hoarse, it's because we have so many engaging presentations lined up for March and April we're apt to be left speechless. It all starts with the OCENS Weather Seminar in Portland 2/22-23. Visit our web site at [www.marinecomputer.com/seminars](http://www.marinecomputer.com/seminars) for more, and consider joining us if you can.

The team at Maptech have unveiled their new *Marine Navigator* bundle. The package includes the venerable *Offshore Navigator* charting software along with a Maptech Digital Chartkit plus Contour Charts for a single chart region, at a savings of \$200 over what the individual components would cost purchased individually. Call us for more info.

**Think Spring!**

*Many clients wind up becoming friends of ours—here's an interesting story of how just the opposite happened with friends of Tim's who later became clients. -DP*

Lew Buckminster had a boat for sale, and my wife and I bought it. The boat, a '70's-era Cal 27 that sailed like gangbusters and suited us just fine at the time, is no longer a part of our life. But Lew, his wife Catherine and daughter Melissa have remained friends ever since. The story of how they also became clients, right after I first teamed up with Dan to expand Marine Computer Systems here in the Mid-Atlantic region, is what follows.

The aforementioned boat transaction took place in the late 1990's. The Buckminsters soon traded up to a newer Elite 36, renamed her *Escape*, and took about a year to learn the boat and make fitting-out decisions — all the while plotting their own escape in the form of a year-or-so sabbatical down the ICW to the Bahamas and return. That trip happened last year, and they've been back home for about eight months now. That's long enough to put some perspective on the adventure and offer some "post-mortem" analysis of what worked and what didn't.

The Buckminsters were very interested in "staying connected" while off on their journey, for a variety of reasons. For one thing, Lew's a consultant and needed to remain in touch with clients and colleagues ashore enough that there would be some business to come home to eventually. Also, they were home-schooling Melissa during the trip, and anticipated the possibility of having to coordinate with the Calvert School in Baltimore. Both have parents and family in the Midwest who they wanted to keep tabs on. And, as it turned out, daughter Melissa ended up chronicling their trip with her own column in a regional boating publication — which meant stories would have to be filed by deadline every few weeks.

For the long legs up and down the ICW, Lew and Catherine relied heavily on a tri-mode cellular phone from Verizon, equipped with a data connection to their on-board laptop for Email. They set this up with one of Verizon's "mega" plans to avoid any roaming or long distance charges as they travelled the Eastern Seaboard. While there were some gaps in coverage, Lew described the service as more than adequate for their needs while coastal cruising in the U.S. But Verizon's coverage would not extend to their ultimate destination, the Bahamas...

## Escape: A Project Post-Mortem

We also set Lew and Catherine up with a new Icom M710 SSB transceiver, along with a PTC-IIe pactor modem and HF Email service from *CruiseEmail* in Florida. Lew and Catherine both reported that the SSB Email worked very well in the Bahamas, where it saw the most use. Beyond Email, the Buckminsters mostly found the SSB (and, in some parts of the Bahamas, their VHF) useful for checking in with various cruising nets to keep track of new friends on other boats they'd met along the way, and as a source for weather information (more on that below).

Finally, Lew and Catherine carried an Iridium 9500 satellite phone as a backup to the cellular and SSB setups. The sat-phone was cheap insurance in Lew's mind. Reasoning that something "faster and better" will likely be available by the time they set off on extended cruising again, Lew was able to liquidate the Iridium using an on-line auction service on their return. Believe it or not, he managed to sell the phone for a little more than he paid for it!

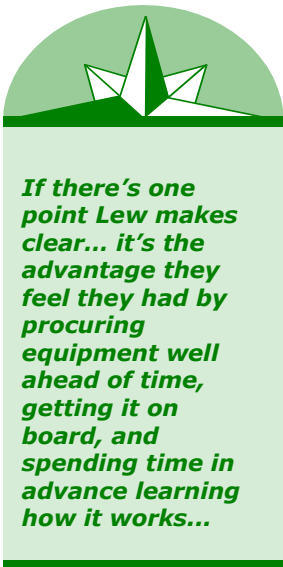
For weather information, we set the Buckminsters up with Xaxero's weatherfax and NAVTEX software — an easy choice, given the SSB and pactor modem aboard. Candidly, Lew reports that on a trip of their nature this setup got little real use. Instead, they relied mostly on NOAA Weather Radio via VHF while in the ICW. In the Bahamas, and for the crossing to/from, they used the SSB to listen in on the advice Herb Hilgenberg was giving other boats cruising in their general area. BASRA (the Bahamas Air-Sea Rescue Association) also broadcast a summary forecast every morning, and they were able to catch voice broadcasts from the U.S. Coast Guard's November-Mike-November (NMN) on a daily basis as well. Lew pointed out that they came across a handful of other boats in their travels who were using a less-expensive SSB receiver-only to acquire this kind of weather info in much the same way.

For navigation, Lew and Catherine fitted their nav station with a Garmin 232 GPS chartplotter equipped with Garmin's Bluechart cartography chips. Lew's take on the cartography is that it was generally "dead on" in the ICW, but not nearly as good in the Bahamas (they also had paper charts). One practical use for the Garmin in the islands was the "tracking" feature, which let them retrace a known safe route back out of a tricky harbor entrance on more than one occasion.

If there's one point Lew makes clear whenever we discuss their trip, it's the advantage they feel they had by procuring equipment well ahead of time, getting it on board, and spending time in advance learning how it works. In a note he sent me shortly after their return, Lew wrote "*The e-mail worked great! All the systems you helped with were great....thanks for your help!! We saw many people struggling and we felt kind of smug*".

We did spend a lot of time aboard *Escape* beforehand, mostly tweaking the SSB installation and going over operating procedures for it and the Iridium phone. I think that if we'd spent a little more time with the weatherfax software, they may have found it more useful. In turn, on their trip the Buckminsters encountered people who were beset with problems with HF Email and Iridium data services in particular.

It's nice to know that, at least for them, our efforts made a difference.



## New Products

# Navigating VNS (Visual Navigation Suite)

By Dan Piltch (dpiltch@marinecomputer.com)

Nobeltec recently lost their Manager of Tech Support & Training when Dan Bessmer left the company. While they might be mourning the loss over at Nobeltec's headquarters in the "other" Portland (in Oregon), they're also likely to be celebrating Dan's new venture. He took all of the valuable knowledge he gained from years of experience with teaching people how to use Nobeltec's Visual Navigation Suite and compiled them all into a multimedia CD-based tutorial called "Navigating VNS".



The CD course takes you through three sections:

1. Getting Started
2. Route Planning
3. Underway

In each section you see examples of how to use the software, along with actual screen shots of what you should expect to see on your own computer. You'll see video clips of Dan himself explaining concepts, followed by a narrated tour through each feature of the software along with tips on how to get the most out of your charting system.

For those new to electronic charting, there's even a section on setting up and configuring your system. And yes—there is plenty of explanation on how to get your GPS talking properly to your computer.

Though the CD has only been available for a couple of months, early feedback is excellent and magazine reviews are positive. Even after years in the business, I find that I learn something new every time I go through the Navigating VNS tutorial.

Call us now to order your copy—the 2 CD set is \$149.

For those interested in a face to face approach, consider our one-day hands-on seminar focusing on electronic navigation using Nobeltec. The next class is on Saturday, March 29 in Portland, Maine. Cost is \$295—with a 20% discount for a family member's registration. Stay an extra day for the offshore communications seminar on the following Sunday

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TO:

### Tech Tip

## SSB Weatherfax—Snapping Away the Lines that Divide

Just about everyone who's captured a weatherfax chart over SSB radio has encountered it — that thick black line running vertical through the image, splitting it in half.

In the old days of paper-based dedicated fax receivers, the solution to this problem involved scissors, scotch tape and an abundance of patience. While not immune to the problem, today's computer-based fax software packages offer a snappier cure. The precise solution depends on which weatherfax program is at hand. With the offending image on the screen:

Users of *Mscan Meteo Pro* use the *Mark Left Border* tool. This is the button marked with a left-pointing arrow aimed at a vertical line. Press the button, and the mouse cursor turns into an icon like the image on the toolbar button. Position the vertical line along the edge of the black line, and left-click with the mouse once. Presto, the image snaps into one piece, with the dark line along the left edge.

Users of *OCENS WeatherStation* or *SeaStation* software have a similar tool. From the *Weatherfax* option on the menu, choose *Adjust Weather Chart*. A thin, vertical blue line appears on the screen. Use the mouse to position this line along the edge of the offending black dividing line, and left-click. The image "snaps to" this line, and is unified once more.

This problem is universal, and other weatherfax software products offer a similar feature to restore the image. See the program documentation or software help file for details, or just give us a call. We've worked with just about every weatherfax software product available on the market.

- Tim Hasson