



Q. I have a nice autopilot. My marina neighbor has recommended that I get a new autopilot with a remote control. What is the advantage of a remote control and do I need a new autopilot or can I add it to my current system?

A. Auto pilots in a boat or an airplane are just nice backups to have. Too bad we can't get one in a car! Autopilots give the operator an opportunity to relax a little during the operation of the vessel. Autopilots act like an extra hand when you need to find a chart or do something that requires more than one hand. Don't get me wrong, I am not advocating leaving the bridge or cockpit unattended, it just makes some actions or operations a little easier to manage.

Sometimes an autopilot can actually provide an additional level of comfort for an operator that is in rough water and is being strained from the workload.

But even with an autopilot there are times that you will need to move to a different location on the boat and you will not have access to the autopilot controls. You can always ask one of the passengers to watch the controls and make corrections, or you can make the next move and add a remote control.

*Send your questions to:
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A remote control will allow the captain to move around the vessel but still have control of the vessel. Many of today's remote control units will give the captain the complete function of the main autopilot control unit from almost anywhere on the vessel.

That said, you do not need a brand new autopilot, there are numerous manufacturers that have add-on units.

ComNav (www.comnav.com) is one of those companies. They offer a number of different models to fit the user's needs and add on to just about any autopilot.



While you are adding a remote control to your autopilot, you should also consider linking your GPS navigation system to your autopilot. What a great way to utilize the autopilot! Not only can you operate the autopilot from almost any-

where on the boat with a remote, it will also follow a preprogrammed GPS route.

If the autopilot follows a typical compass heading, wind or current can change the course. Just because the autopilot keeps the bow of the boat pointed in the right direction (via the compass) this does not mean the boat will actually get to that location. By using a GPS, the course will be more accurate. A direct route using the GPS can reduce fuel usage and increase the speed of the trip.

Send your questions or comments to
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Dock Talk Q & A continued

Q. When I moor offshore I am constantly worried about drifting from my position. Are there any types of devices available to monitor anchor movement?

A. Yes, there are a couple of ways to monitor the anchor movement. You will need to have an “anchor alert” system. Some anchor alert systems connect to the GPS on your boat. Typically, the GPS linked units will give the operator an alert or indication whenever the boat actually changes location or position.

The disadvantage to a GPS only system is that the boat can swing around in different locations yet the anchor never moves. When the movement triggers the alert because of the GPS location of the vessel (not the anchor itself) it will not truly indicate if the anchor is moving. The alerts will be set off anytime the winds or currents change the position of the boat (not the anchor) via the GPS.

Anchor Alert from Ascend Marine Inc. (www.ascendmarine.com) is one system on the market that actually connects to the anchor itself.

The system consist of a boat display unit, boat transducer (which is available in either thru-hull or over-side configuration) and an anchor transducer.

As Ascend Marine’s description states, “the boat display unit provides

an interface for system setup, information display, and serves as the primary anchor movement alarm enunciator.”

The boat transducer is the boat part of a wireless two-way communication between the boat transducer and the anchor transducer.

Ascend explains that the anchor unit actually connects between the anchor and the anchor chain. It monitors the anchor movement and distance from the unit to the boat unit. There is a movement sensor in the anchor unit which detects anchor movement.

Ascend Marine has put the anchor unit in a 12" x 2" waterproof enclosure that is rated for 200 ft. Two “D” cell alkaline batteries



(that Ascend states should provide an operating life of up to 60 days), power the anchor unit.

The user establishes basic limits of movement and the alerts activate when these limits pass. A neat feature is that the sending unit on the anchor will actually tell you if the anchor moves.

Ultimately, a combination of the anchor based alert system and the GPS based system would give you the most information.

Scott “Sky” Smith is freelance writer, columnist and the author of “Ultimate Boat Maintenance Projects” and “How To Buy A Single Engine Airplane” published by Motorbooks International, and the owner of an aviation and marine insurance agency. © Scott Sky Smith, 2004