

Tracking with the SPOT

By Paul Nickerson

In 2011 I (no my wife) decided to purchase a SPOT II for tracking and emergency use. This seemed to be the perfect way to have family and friends follow me at a reasonable cost and it had an emergency locator mode.

SPOT consists of the device itself which sends out a signal and a service account which puts your data online. Once you own the SPOT it's yours forever. The service account must be renewed on an annual basis.

The SPOT device is very simple. Power it up and it finds your location through the built in GPS. There are then a couple of buttons to push and activate the various modes. Some of these functions are controlled by the service account which will determine things like who gets sent emails. It is import to remember the SPOT does all of its data through satellites, NOT WiFi. This gives it capabilities around the globe so it is not limited to your boat. It is powered by 3 AAA Lithium batteries and using mine a lot including a MAC and the Lake Erie Challenge including deliveries I was on my 3rd set of batteries in one year.

The first function is the OK button. This simply sends a message determined by the SPOT that says you are fine along with your position to a list of people that you program with your account. The list is limited to 10 accounts but you can include things like Facebook and Twitter. So your friends on Facebook or followers on Twitter will all get the message if you wish or just an email list. The message includes a link to your current position which will come up on Google Earth and show people where you are.

The Custom Message button is similar to the OK button but allows you to send a more personalized message to a list. This personalized message is programmable in the account but not from the SPOT. Mine just includes a link to my tracking page (which we'll get to later) as you are limited in characters and the tracking page link is very long. Here's mine <http://share.findmespot.com/shared/faces/viewspots.jsp?glld=0nYRDCV21dZOI4PWsQO1Wged8gxdgtixp> and it can be programmed to include any tracking in the last 7 to 30 days.

Another function that is available is the Help Button. This is not the SOS button but a separate function which can automatically notify a towing service like Boat US that you need help. There is an additional fee for some of these services but the button can also be programmed just to notify someone you have an issue. Mine is simply set up to notify my family to call me on my cell phone.

Next is the Tracking Button. When active it sends your position every 10 minutes to your tracking page where folks can follow you. The tracking button will only remain active for 24 hours as a battery saver function, so you must send a message or turn tracking on and off to keep it from going into a sleep mode.

Finally is the SOS button. Activating this notifies Coast Guard and International Search and Rescue and you can designate a Primary and Secondary contact.

That's the basics of the SPOT II device. Now I'll try to explain what I understand about the Internet setup and account you will need. To activate your SPOT you will need to go to the www.findmespot.com site and create an account which basically activates a service subscription. It is here you register and enter contact data and messages. Jot down your account information because you will need it later. This area also controls which data will appear on your personal tracking page so you can also set filters to show the last 24 hours, 7 days, or 30 days. You will need to create a shared page to be able to send the web location (which is permanent) to your friends to view. My understanding is that the tracking companies get access to your account to read your position data and then use that in their tracking software.

Another part of a SPOT account is the www.spotadventures.com site. I have never figured out the full usage of this site but again you set up an account and think of this as a blog and social network account, sort of a Facebook type account. You can set up a profile with picture and as much information as you wish. I'm not big on the social networking thing but I have done a little bit of playing with this site to try to figure things out. You can create an adventure and have people follow you while you post notes and pictures. You can also go back into your account and collect positions and create adventures. Here are my adventures that I made for the 2011 Lake Erie Challenge http://www.spotadventures.com/trip/view?trip_id=275212 and the 2011 Port Huron Mac http://www.spotadventures.com/trip/view?trip_id=263887 and you will notice there are speed and distance graphs available. The SPOT does not send out speed and direction information so these are computed by the software.

Another aspect of the Spot Adventures site is that anyone can go there and "Find Adventures" etc. Go to www.spotadventures.com and the "Find Adventures" and search for "Nicknack" and you should find my adventures. Enter "sailing" and you find all the adventures with sailing as a keyword and you can see some have posted pictures and comments. If you are registered you can log in and post or create adventures or groups. You can create or join a group and post your adventure within a group. Not knowing just how this worked I created a GLSS group and posted some of my adventures there. I do not profess to be an expert on the capabilities and part of that is I have not been part of an active group and avoid social networks as a rule.

One thing to remember is that SPOT is not designed just for sailing and that sailors are in fact a small part of the market. It is a great tool but if you are looking at the blogging and adventure aspects more people may find Facebook a better or more familiar alternative. Plus, this is a relatively new part of SPOT usage and people are still figuring out its capabilities. When I sail singlehanded, which is often several days a week after work, I always turn the SPOT on and track so my wife can follow as I'm always on the open waters of Lake Erie. It's also great for the deliveries to and from GLSS Challenges whether it's a cruise or just flat out getting somewhere. I have not seen SPOT software which integrates nautical charts, but Google Earth is a good alternative for the public.

For all the other safety gear we carry for GLSS events, I think if you look at the SPOT as a safety tool first that it is a great value and how you use the web tracking and other aspects is just an add on bonus.