

Always at hand

A fully charged handheld VHF isn't just a handy back-up, it's a lifesaver. We assess six entry-level models, to find out which is best

REPORT BY CHRIS BEESON AND CARL RICHARDSON



A submersible handheld VHF is a grab bag essential for many reasons. Boats will rely on a handheld for general marine communication, but it's also an excellent back-up if your batteries die or you develop an electrical fault. We looked at some of the latest units on the market to see how they compare.

The test

We tested six waterproof handhelds from five manufacturers. Our position (the end of Yarmouth Pier on the Isle of Wight) was logged as a



MOTOR BOATS TESTED

Entel HT640 £149

Performance: Both transmission and reception are loud, clear and uninterrupted at close range. With greater distance, there's a little more interference. There's a slight sense of muffling on transmission and more hiss on reception, but both remain more than acceptable. Definitely one of the better performers.

Operation: It's the lightest model by some way and doesn't feel very robust, but it's built to withstand greater depths for longer than the others. The Push to Talk (PTT) button lacks a distinctive click, which isn't very reassuring. The PTT panel also includes the 'H/L' power button and the lamp button. The screen is big and well lit and the buttons, although labelled for an American market, are big enough and well separated.

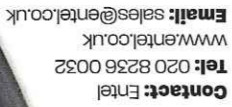
Best feature: Performance and price make this a strong contender, plus there's a huge range of extras for hands-free use.

Worst feature: The on/off knob turns very easily and sits prominently on top, so it would be easy to change setting (or turn it off) accidentally.

The hands-free ear piece is optional

There are a whole host of optional extras to compliment this VHF set

The on/off/vol knob can easily be switched accidentally



The on/off/vol knob can easily be switched accidentally



The hands-free ear piece is optional

Icom IC-M33 £200

Performance: At one mile, the Icom performed perfectly and transmitted so clearly that it sounded as if we were sitting right there. By three miles, though, the signal was significantly weaker. Reception was loud and clear with little distortion, but there was a lot of background hiss.

Operation: It feels good in the hand, well sculpted and solid. The PTT button is a single function and gives a clear, unambiguous click when pressed. All the buttons are big, well separated and labelled for ease of operation. Selecting favourite channels and scanning is straightforward.

Best feature: Not only does it float, it has a useful 'AquaQuake' feature that shakes water from the speaker after a dunking.

Worst feature: There are 31 volume levels.

The buoyant Icom IC-M33 performed well on a recent trial & tested experiment



All the buttons are big, well separated and well labelled for ease of use

MBM rating

The Icom feels high-quality and performs perfectly at close range

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Mobile vs VHF

significant difference to battery life, we ignored the instruction manuals, too. To simulate the typical scenario, someone at the other end. Yes, many people in distress have used a mobile to summon help from halfway around the world, but relying on a mobile phone involves too many 'ifs' to be safe.

If the boat's need greater range than your handheld allows, you can increase range by removing your aerial from the main connector and plugging in the main

waypoint. We then motored up the Solent, stopping at distances of one and three miles to test each unit's transmission and reception on Ch77 using low power. As VHF works along line-of-sight, range varies with aerial height, so testing range on high power would have been academic. We tested at various ranges simply to see if some transmitted and received better than others over distance. Most handhelds are used when approaching marinas, so all units were tested on low power, (1W) as this ensures you don't override other traffic in the area and makes a

best, even when laid down.

the models had cockpit. But none of the handheld on deck. Most units hissed with the aerial horizontal, as it would be if you put it down in the

A mobile phone is no replacement for a handheld VHF radio

aerial lead using an adaptor. Keep the aerial with the unit in case you need to replace it, and make sure the extension is long enough to use the handheld on deck. Most units hissed with the aerial horizontal, as it would be if you put it down in the cockpit. But none of the models had articulating aerials, which would allow you to keep the aerial vertical, and reception at its

PRODUCT TEST
HANDHELD VHFS

MBM rating

The lightest model on test, the Entel can withstand greater depths for longer

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