

GROUP TEST Chart Plotters



SEIWA BARRACUDA

Performance ★★★★★

Value for money ★★★★★

Seiwa is a Hong Kong based company that celebrates its 20th birthday this year and which has specialised in GPS and chart plotting systems for fishing boats and pleasure craft from the very outset.

Its Barracuda is one of three in this group that appear to be very closely related, with a number of features in common with both the Interphase 169CS and the VDO Map 7 Wi. Its quick disconnect bracket, with power and data connections built into the mounting bracket, is exactly the same, and the antenna—while not quite the same as the Interphase version—appears to be identical to the external antenna pictured in VDO's instruction book. The overall layout is similar to that of the Interphase: the wide screen, 7in display is set well over to the left-hand side, leaving a couple of inches for the control panel to the right and room for a row of soft keys below the screen.

The control panel looks considerably simpler than that of the Interphase, with just seven large and well spaced buttons, and a stubby little joystick in place of the cursor control pad. The purpose of the 'Power' button is self-evident, as are two zoom keys in the bottom right-hand corner. The 'MoB' button is

pretty obvious, too. Everything else is achieved through the main menu - reached by pressing the relevant button - or through sub menus that are reached by using the joystick to highlight an item on the main menu, and then flicking it to the right to move into the next layer. It's very much the same as the Interphase, despite the different names on the buttons, and is far more obvious and intuitive than the rather convoluted manual makes it seem.

The screen image is bright and clear, with four different colour schemes to achieve maximum visibility in bright sunlight, paper-chart subtlety in shaded daylight, or to preserve your night vision in darkness, and familiar chart symbols. As is pretty standard in CMap plotters, the amount of chart detail can be varied to suit particular circumstances selecting one of CMap's standard levels of detail (Full, simple, fishing or low) or a customised chart to suit your own preferences. There were times, though, when I would have liked to see more details - particularly buoys and beacons - without having to zoom in quite so far, and it would always have been nice to see some indication of the scale of the screen image.

One other snag is that although the widescreen display is fine when you're going from east to west, or vice versa, it leaves one feeling a bit short-changed when you're heading north or south, particularly if you have data boxes showing your position, course, speed, and so on, taking up 20 per cent of the height screen. Why, I wondered, didn't Seiwa make use of the extra width by putting the data boxes down one side, instead?

Sailing Today Verdict

Another powerful but economical plotter, with a look-ahead grounding alarm and the option of adding a modem to receive and display weather and sea-state forecasts. Despite the similarities between this and the Interphase, I found Seiwa very slightly easier to use: there aren't so many buttons to choose from, so they are more clearly labelled and more widely spaced, and the joystick is much more controllable than the usual cursor control pad. Whether those advantages are worth the extra money, or whether they are offset by the letterbox layout caused by displaying data across the top of a screen that is already vertically challenged, is a matter of individual preference.