

REVIEWS

New technology, boats, and gear for the cruising sailor

GEAR REVIEW BY EVANS STARZINGER

Buyers Beware

The latest edition of a gear survey from a respected cruising association searches the Seven Seas for candid advice on equipment

AS SAILBOAT OWNERS, WE SPEND thousands of dollars a year on equipment for our boats, often shopping amid a wide

A lack of breakdowns earned Winslow life rafts a high rating with cruisers.

range of brands in every possible product category. Unfortunately, very little objective information is available on reliability and performance over the long run—*Consumer Reports* has yet to conduct a comprehensive analysis of products in the marine industry.

So what's a smart shopper to do? Fortunately, every year the Seven Seas Cruising Association (SSCA) publishes an equipment survey of its members, who provide unique real-

Alpenglow cabin lights won the most kudos from Seven Seas members.

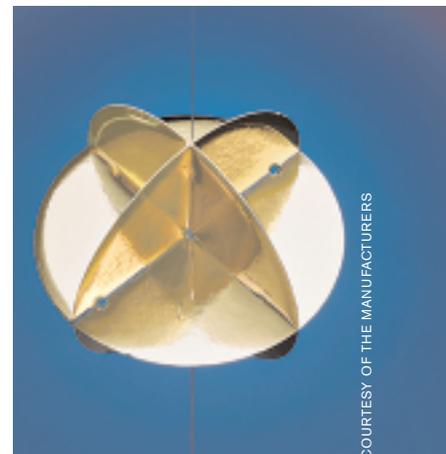
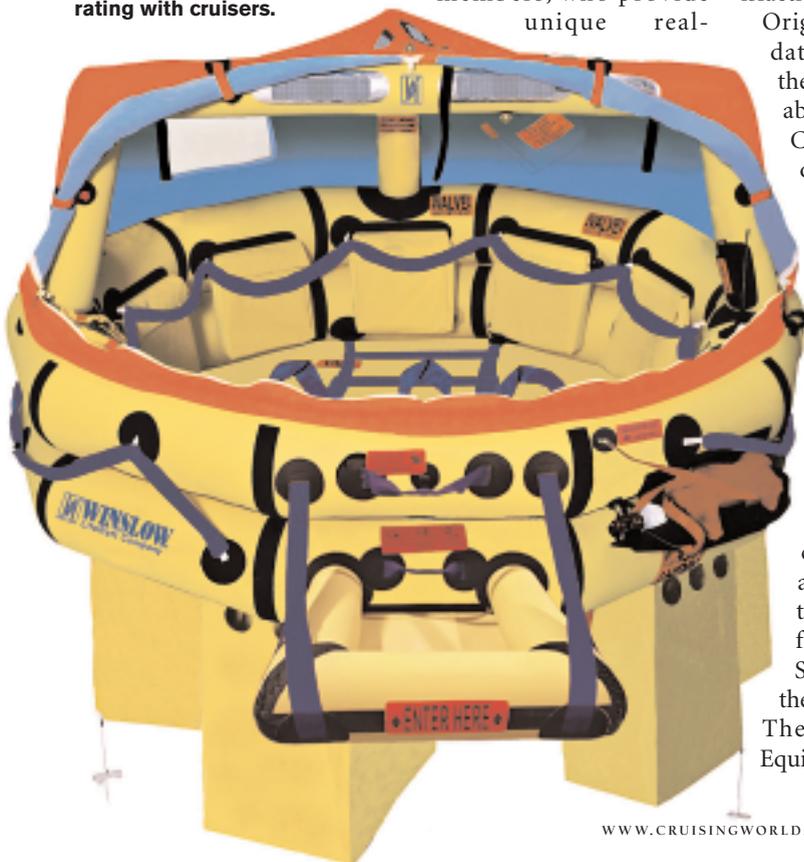
world data on marine-gear reliability and customer satisfaction based on use.

Origins of the association date back to 1952, when the crews aboard six live-aboard cruising boats in Coronado, California, decided to share their sailing experiences with one another in the form of a monthly bulletin. Today, the SSCA consists of nearly 5,000 sailors cruising their boats in just about every corner of the globe. And it still publishes a monthly bulletin containing invaluable, up-to-date cruising information and other tidbits of interest to sailors in the form of letters from SSCA members around the world.

The recently released Equipment Survey contains

information on over 100 categories of marine gear, from radars to propellers. While other reports of this type might focus on new products, most of the equipment discussed in the SSCA publication has been in use for years and has seen rugged service in out-of-the-way places where

The Davis radar reflector gets the job done, without moving parts.



COURTESY OF THE MANUFACTURERS

▶ MOST RELIABLE PRODUCTS

Product	Breakdown Rate	Product Rating
1. Alpenglow cabin lights	1.3%	1.27
2. Winslow life raft	0.0%	1.29
3. Siemens solar panels	0.4%	1.29
4. Racor fuel filter	0.6%	1.33
5. Davis radar reflector	0.7%	1.42
6. CQR anchor	0.0%	1.48

1 = most satisfied and 5 = least satisfied



is \$20, and they can obtain purchasing information via e-mail

(memberships@ssca.org) or by phoning (954-771-5660).

In 2004, 159 SSCA members completed the equipment questionnaire, a comprehensive document some 10 pages long. Based on this data, the compilers of the equipment survey calculated breakdown-frequency and customer-satisfaction ratings

A diesel engine is only as reliable as its fuel supply, and Racor filters rate highly with users.

fixing things can be at best frustrating and at worse impossible. As we've outfitted and upgraded our boats, we've found this data to be extremely useful as a guide.

Would-be consumers can get a full copy of the survey by spending some time at the SSCA's website (www.scca.org). There you'll find information about the SSCA's monthly bulletin, the 2004 and 2000 surveys, and some 40 additional publications of special interest to cruising sailors. Members can order a copy of the 2004 survey for \$10 at the Home Base online store; the cost to nonmembers

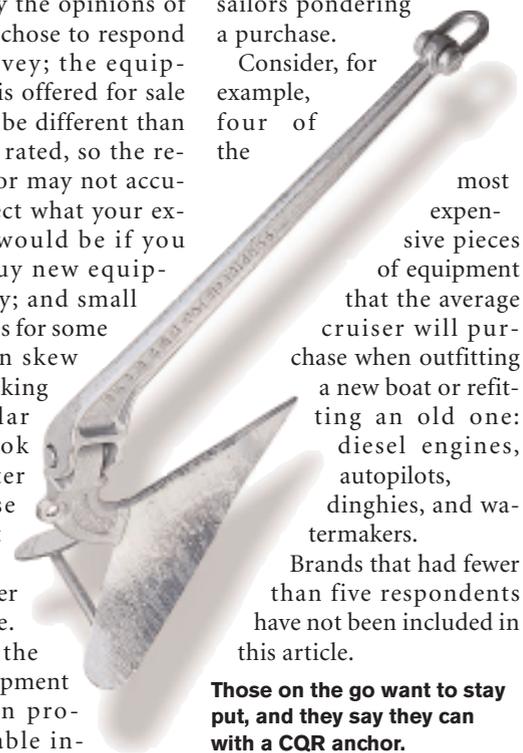
on a scale of 1 ("totally satisfied, would buy again without hesitation or comparison shopping") to 5 ("wouldn't buy again under any circumstances") for each brand within a product category. Any product with a rating over 2.0 is having a problem with owner satisfaction.

Of course, those using the survey should remember the usual caveats related to studies of this type: The results

reflect only the opinions of those who chose to respond to the survey; the equipment that is offered for sale today may be different than that being rated, so the results may or may not accurately reflect what your experience would be if you were to buy new equipment today; and small sample sizes for some brands can skew results, making a particular brand look much better or worse than it would with a larger sample size. That said, the SSCA Equipment Survey can provide valuable information for those

sailors pondering a purchase.

Consider, for example, four of the



most expensive pieces of equipment that the average cruiser will purchase when outfitting a new boat or refitting an old one: diesel engines, autopilots, dinghies, and watermakers.

Brands that had fewer than five respondents have not been included in this article.

Those on the go want to stay put, and they say they can with a CQR anchor.

Diesel-Engine Breakdowns Per Year



COURTESY OF THE MANUFACTURERS

