

Boating Smartphone Apps

By Keith Wohltman, U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary Flotilla 95

MARCO ISLAND, FL – Our lives have been forever changed by the introduction of smart phones and whether we like them or not, they do have a multitude of uses to make your boating safer and you a more knowledgeable skipper. They also have some limitations, so I would not want to rely solely on a smart phone while boating.

Just as when driving or for some of you while walking, using a cellphone while in motion is not a safe practice if you are at the helm. Things happen pretty fast on the water and the lack of brakes on a boat can get you into serious trouble if you are starring at the screen and not keeping your eyes on the water.

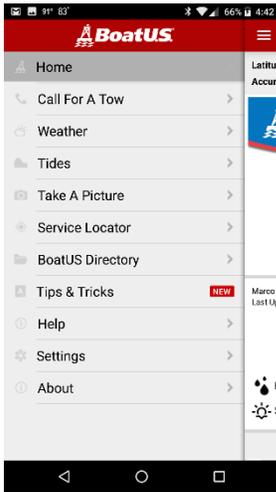
However, the applications (apps) written for use on the smart phone do have their place. We get asked by our students quite frequently what apps do we use or what apps we would recommend. Some are very useful here in the waters around Marco and some are niche applications that might work for a limited activity. Like anything, your personal experience with an application will be the deciding factor for whether you use it or uninstall it. Also, some apps are maintained and updated, others are not and you may find a newer app that would supersede something you have used for some time.

As a disclaimer upfront, the apps I will mention are those that I personally have found to work for me. This is not an endorsement or recommendation from Flotilla 95 nor the US Coast Guard Auxiliary nor the US Coast Guard. It is simply my personal experience.

Boating Safety

It should be no surprise that I list the **US Coast Guard** app as my favorite boating safety app. That was the design built into this application. It is available free, for both Android and iOS platforms. The app provides a very clean interface from the home screen and you can identify the boating safety laws for your home state; request a vessel safety check from the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary; determine what safety equipment you are required to carry by law; file a float plan; review the boating “rules of the road;” access weather information for your current location; report a navigational hazard; report pollution; even report suspicious activity to the Coast Guard. Plus, there is a button to use should you need emergency assistance by using your phone’s GPS to send you location to the Coast Guard or connect you to 911 services.

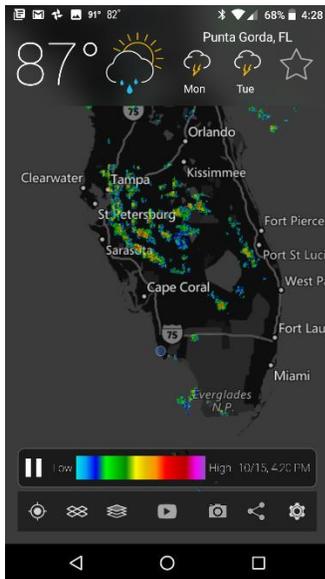




The next two apps would be selected depending on which boating assistance company you utilize, either **BoatUS** or **SeaTow**. Like the US Coast Guard app they both utilize your phones GPS to provide them with your location. Should you not use either service provider, you can still contact them in an emergency. The benefit of using the app comes from the ability for you to add in your profile information so they have your account number coverage information. This saves you trying to find it while you are dealing with your emergency. The app can also help you file claims and find service or repair facilities nearby.

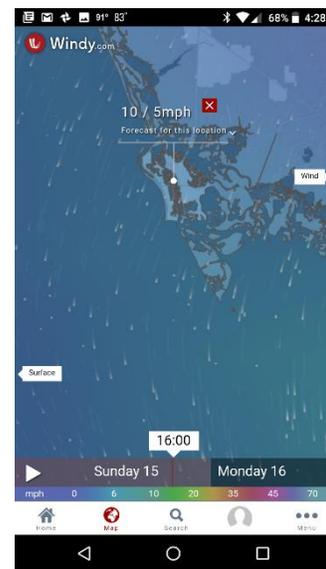
Weather

Something we all need to check before, and during, our boating day is the weather. I start watching TV weather shows well in advance of the cast-off time. But I augment that with several very useful weather applications. I like to see both the forecast and radar sweeps since our local TV stations will report the weather for a broad area with comments like “scattered showers or thunderstorms.”

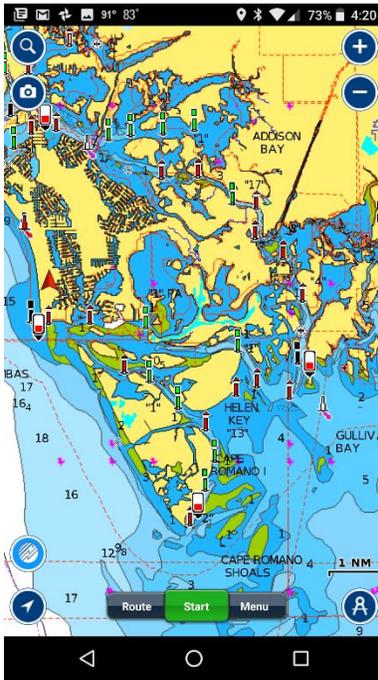


If I’m boating in the 10,000 Islands, knowing that Fort Myers might get rain doesn’t provide me with the details I need to know if the weather will impact my plans. The following apps (and I use them all) give me regional or very localized weather depending on how I expand or focus in the screen display. Top of my list is **MyRadar**. It utilizes a map background and shows the place names. It zeros in to my current location and I can see any rain clouds from the radar. It even showed the path of the recent hurricanes. There is a full range of weather data available from the various screens.

The next app is **Windy**. You see this tool used by many of the weather channels as it shows the direction and speed of the wind in a very graphic display. Once again, it uses the phone’s GPS to find your location, but you can change it by pinching or expanding the screen. You can also switch from Wind to Waves or Rain. You can select a location by tapping the screen. If I wanted to know the conditions 20 miles offshore, I just need to tap the screen and it moves the reporting indicator. Windy uses the meteorological modeling tools you all heard about with the hurricanes. And you can change the model being used if you like.



I do use the **Wink Weather** app but mostly for the daily forecasts, not the radar anymore as MyRadar does a far better job with that process.

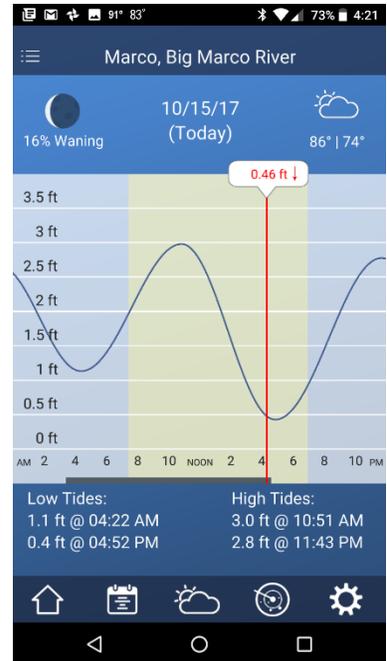


Navigation

The only navigation app I use is **Navionics**. This app will turn your smart phone, or tablet, into a chart recorder. It has the marine charts displayed like any of the GPS units on a boat. It will track your trip and save it if you like. You can set routes and waypoints. I can also use it to show someone the location of an interesting place on the water, like my favorite fishing spots. There is a free version of the app and a subscription version with the latter providing higher quality charts. There's also a high definition version for use on a tablet. You could use this as your GPS on your boat, as long as you have telephone service. Depending on your type of boating this is a very useful tool.

Tides

For our waterways you better have very good tide data, or you will find yourself running out of water. One quick comment before I mention the app. Our area has some really shallow water normally. Hurricane Irma moved a lot of debris and other materials during her visit to Marco and the depth reported on charts or depicted on your GPS may be very different from what is actually present today. Be very mindful of that. In addition, we experience fluctuations in our water depth in addition to the effect of the tides. The ever-present breezes on Marco move what little water we have either into the bays and backwater, or into the Gulf. You can have a high tide and yet have no water in the 10,000 Islands due to the wind. If the wind is out of the Northeast, it will push the water into the Gulf and impede its return on the incoming tide. That is why you need both a wind app and a tide app. The tide app I rely on is **Tides Charts Near Me**. I can set various locations and have the tides available for today depicted as a tidal curve image. I can also scan ahead to see what the tide will be at a specific time. I can also check days or months ahead, which is critical when planning trips into the 10,000 Islands. There is also a view that lets me choose the date and then switch back to the tidal curve view. Using this graphical display is so much better than just knowing the time when the tide is high or low.



Are there other apps folks on Marco use? Yes. Many of my friends use **FishWeather** or **NOAA Buoys** to obtain wave conditions offshore. Some also make sure they have the **FishRules** app loaded that keeps them current with what species of fish is in season and what legal size and bag limits are set for each species. You may already have a favorite that I did not list. But the ones I did list will give you the basic information you need to become a more informed and, therefore, safer boater.

For more information about safe boating courses contact, Joe Riccio, (239)-384-7416 or CGAUXCOURSES@GMAIL.COM.

To schedule your **FREE** Vessel Safety Check, please call: John Moyer, (239)-248-7078 or Coast Guard Auxiliary Station – Flotilla 95, (239) 394-5911 or email John at jmoyer1528@aol.com.

For those interested in joining Flotilla 95, USCG Auxiliary, please call Bob Shmihluk at (215) – 694-3305