

PURCHASING A RECEIVER

The shortwave radio marketplace has changed a lot in recent years. Many of the longstanding manufacturers of shortwave receivers are getting out of the business, due to the decline of shortwave as a mass medium, at least in the affluent west. This isn't to say that shortwave radios are somehow in short supply, however. You can still find suitable radios.

Where to Start

One of the first questions any radio hobbyist will ask is "What radio should I get?" Well, it all depends on what you want to listen to with your radio, how you listen to it, and how much you have to spend.

Start by looking around to see if you already have a shortwave radio lying around somewhere. Some of the old 1980s-era "boom boxes" have a shortwave band. Maybe a friend or relative has an old radio squirreled away at home. Certainly worth asking about.

What about all the cheap little shortwave portables one sees all over the internet, especially on Trademe or eBay? By all means, snag one of these, but don't pay more than about \$20 for them. For the most part, these are not the best performers, but can give you a small idea about what shortwave is all about. Be patient with them, especially if you are new to shortwave radio – some of these radios can be a little frustrating.

Buying a Radio

Buying a shortwave radio isn't exactly like buying DVD player or microwave - you generally can't go down to the local "big-box" store look see an array of models and prices. These radios are specialty items, and there's not a lot of information about them in the mainstream consumer electronics world.

But the information you want is available. You just have to know where to look. The information in this column will hopefully give you a lot of what you need to make an intelligent decision as to what kind or model of radio to get.

The best ideas as to "what radio should I buy?" can be shown with a scientifically proven six-step process:

1. Decide what you want to listen to. Are you most interested in the major international broadcasters? Or maybe you're more interested in the hunting of hard-to-hear shortwave stations from exotic locations? Pick a single focus to start out with. After all, you can always look into another aspect of radio monitoring (and get the appropriate equipment) later on.

2. Read everything you can get your hands on regarding shortwave radios. Acquaint yourself with the esoteric lingo of radio: superheterodyne, SSB, tuning steps, squelch, noise blanking. There are several very good books on shortwave listening in public libraries which describe receiver features and types in detail. Subscribe to and read the email discussion groups about shortwave radio.

3. Once you have a working knowledge of what radios are all about, it's time to start gathering catalogs and looking at web sites to gather intelligence on the various models on the market. Use the Internet or Magazines for radio retailers that sell shortwave equipment. If they have a printed catalog, send for it.

4. Now that you have a nodding acquaintance with shortwave, make a list of some of the things you want in a radio: frequency ranges, number of memory channels, portable or desktop, approximate price you want to pay, etc.

5. Pore over the print catalogs and/or on-line catalogs of the various sellers. If your town has a store catering to ham radio or shortwave enthusiasts, be sure to go down there and check out their offerings. Don't be afraid to ask questions if you have them.

By now, you will have likely have come up with one or two models which meet most of your criteria as far as features and price. But, before you buy:

6. Ask others who have used your chosen model of radio what they think. A good place to do this is through one of the aforementioned radio-related discussion groups. (Be prepared for a variety of opinions, and be ready to take some of them with a grain of salt.) One particularly level-headed site is eHam.net.

A good way to start is to look at past postings to see what has already been said about the model of radio you are interested in via Google

If you don't find what you want in past newsgroup postings, then post a question or two regarding the radio you are interested in. If you're a subscriber to a service like Yahoo Groups don't forget to check what are dedicated to radio hobbies.

The early 21st century on Earth can be characterized as the beginning of the sunset years for shortwave radio. Many countries are cutting back (or altogether eliminating) shortwave broadcasting and many of the major manufacturers are getting out of the receiver business. But you can still find interesting radio programming on the shortwaves, and interesting shortwave radio receivers.

For decades, the name "Grundig" meant fine German radio engineering. Today, it is a just a brand name, one that has been applied to a line of Chinese-made portable radios marketed by the Eton Corporation. In just a few short years Eton radios have become best sellers worldwide. Though they have nothing to do with the Grundigs of old, many of their models are very good performers, and are superb values.

Kaito (also branded under the name "Degen") is a Chinese manufacturer and exporter of portable radios that are making waves in the shortwave market. Many of their models provide good performance at quite reasonable prices. Their KA-1102 (pictured above) is a particularly good performer in the under \$100 range.

If you spend any time on eBay, you'll run into Tecsun radios. If they look familiar, it's because they are - Tecsun is the OEM (original equipment manufacturer) company for Grundig-branded radios sold by Eton. Tecsun is another example of how Chinese-made radios are coming to dominate the market and for good reason – It's hard to find better-performing radios for the money.

Sangean continues to offer about a half-dozen portable models, most all of which are very good performers at reasonable prices. On their web site you can compare features.

As of early 2005, the Japan Radio Company was one of the last manufacturers of true communications receivers left on the planet, although Icom recommenced manufacturing the IC-R75 after some pressure from hobbyists. The NRD series of communications receivers

have been very highly regarded by serious enthusiasts for years. The current (and maybe last) offering is the NRD-545. There are of course any number of other brands of receivers still available in the mid to higher priced bracket including AOR, Kenwood, Yaesu, Sony, Drake and Lowe to name but a few.

Now that you have a shortwave receiver where do you need to listen? Some radios don't include all the Bands listed below so your ultimate choice will need to take this into account. These are the Frequencies used currently.

Shortwave Broadcast Bands

Freq kHz Meter Band

2300-2495 120 meters (Note 1)

3200-3400 90 meters (Note 1)

3900-3950 75 meters (Regional band, used for broadcasting in Asia only)

3950-4000 75 meters (Regional band, used for broadcasting in Asia and Europe)

4750-4995 60 meters (Note 1)

5005-5060 60 meters (Note 1)

5730-5900 49 meter NIB (Note 2)

5900-5950 49 meter WARC-92 band (Note 3)

5950-6200 49 meters

6200-6295 49 meter NIB (Note 2)

6890-6990 41 meter NIB (Note 2)

7100-7300 41 meters (Regional band, not allocated for broadcasting in the western hemisphere) (Note 4)

7300-7350 41 meter WARC-92 band (Note 3)

7350-7600 41 meter NIB (Note 2)

9250-9400 31 meter NIB (Note 2)

9400-9500 31 meter WARC-92 band (Note 3)

9500-9900 31 meters

11500-11600 25 meter NIB (Note 2)

11600-11650 25 meter WARC-92 band (Note 3)

11650-12050 25 meters

12050-12100 25 meter WARC-92 band (Note 3)

12100-12600 25 meter NIB (Note 2)

13570-13600 22 meter WARC-92 band (Note 3)

13600-13800 22 meters

13800-13870 22 meter WARC-92 band (Note 3)

15030-15100 19 meter NIB (Note 2)

15100-15600 19 meters
15600-15800 19 meter WARC-92 band (Note 3)
17480-17550 17 meter WARC-92 band (Note 3)
17550-17900 17 meters
18900-19020 15 meter WARC-92 band (Note 3)
21450-21850 13 meters
25670-26100 11 meters

Notes

Note 1 Tropical bands, 120/90/60 meters are for broadcast use only in designated tropical areas of the world.

Note 2 Broadcasters can use this frequency range on a (NIB) non-interference basis only.

Note 3 WARC-92 bands are allocated officially for use by HF broadcasting stations in 2007. They are only authorized on a non-interference basis until that date.

Note 4 WRC-03 update. After March 29, 2009, the spectrum from 7100-7200 kHz will no longer be available for broadcast purposes and will be turned over to amateur radio operations worldwide.