

## An App That Helps You Find Your Way Is a Great Find

You many have noticed that GPS navigation units are deeply discounted this holiday season. The manufacturers and the stores know what customers are thinking: "Why do I need one if I

### PHONE SMART

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can get the same technology, for a lot less money, on smartphones?" But now even the \$10 monthly fee for those mobile phone apps doesn't look like a great buy. Google began giving away navigation software that turns any smartphone running its Android 1.6 (or later) operating system into a GPS unit. That means that for now it works only on Verizon's Droid, T-Mobile's MyTouch 3G and G1.

But is the Google Maps Navigation app as good as Garmin or a TomTom device, and is it really cheaper? The Google app is a data hog, so you'll need an unlimited data plan if you want to actually use the app. It's also a battery hog, so you'll need to pay extra for a car charger, not to mention a bracket for holding the phone.

As far as the quality of Google's directions, during the week I tested it on the highways and back roads of Connecticut, I had only minor problems. Other users, who posted Android reviews through their smartphones, had bigger complaints — like the driver who was told by Google to turn into traffic on a one-way road.

If you spend a little time perusing the user comments of nearly any mobile navigation application, you'll find similar complaints. That's why it's always smart to make good use of trial offers before committing. Since Google uses the same data for both its mobile navigation apps and its online maps service, you can basically test some online navigation searches for your home area to get a sense of how well the mobile app would do for you.

Since this is a free app, I was expecting less than I've seen on the paid navigation apps like AT&T Navigator, or VZ Navigator on Verizon.

But that wasn't the case. The interface was easy enough to use, with the buttons in all the logical places. Equally easy, and pleasantly surprising, were the app's extra features. After typing in

my destination, for instance, I typed "coffee" and then "hotel" into the search box. It stuck icons onto my map for a Comfort Inn and several coffee shops — both chains and independent — along my route and nearby. If I tapped on the icon for one of them, it offered to navigate me to that spot, and it presented the phone number so that, in one tap, I could call.

I loved how, when I approached my destination, the app offered me street-level photography to help me find landmarks. With a flick of the screen, the image rotated 360 degrees.

Directions, again, weren't perfect. On one leg of my trip, I left the highway one exit early to see how the app would re-route me. Rather than put me right back onto the entrance ramp no more than 50 yards from the exit, it steered me to a side street and a series of back roads that added probably 10 minutes to my trip.

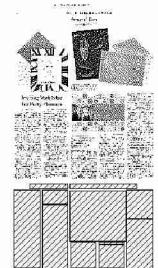
Still, it got me there.

Google recently added a "Report a Problem" button in the app, and the company says it tries to fix those problems within a month. Users might be tempted just to scrap the software after a nightmare trip, but forgiving souls will most likely help the company improve it.

Google's competitors in the navigation category point out that the service lacks some important features. TelMap, which builds the technology behind the MapQuest Navigator app, will offer directions even when you've lost your cell connection. MapQuest navigator works on a handful of smartphones, including the iPhone, the BlackBerry Curve on AT&T and the HTC Touch Diamond on Sprint.

The same is true for the Ovi Maps by Nokia application, which, incidentally, you'll get with a free lifetime subscription if you buy the new Nokia 5800 Navigation Edition (\$300 on NokiaUSA.com). Google downloads maps for your prospective route, so navigation can continue when you lose a connection. But if you become lost, it can't find an alternate route until the connection resumes.

It's an important consideration if you live in an area with spotty reception.



The VZ Navigator app and AT&T Navigator provide directions with a more pleasant voice than Google, which directed me in a tinny, robotic voice. Maybe Google was going for a retro effect, but in a market where apps typically feature realistic voices, this was a puzzler.

Another, more pleasant, puzzler was the complete lack of Google ads in the service. (The company has to pay for it somehow, right?) Carolyn Penner, a Google spokeswoman, would not say when the company would start running ads. Nor would she say when the turn-by-turn navigation feature would reach iPhones, BlackBerrys and other smartphones.

Users of iPhones, of course, never lack for navigation options, but many of them are either cheap and poorly rated or expensive and well reviewed. One good alternative is the Magellan RoadMate, from the company that specializes in hand-held GPS devices. It costs \$80, but for that price you get perpetual software updates and a very refined service. The average user review at the Apple App store — four stars out of five — is significantly higher than those for competitors. After a few problem-free runs with the app myself, I'd offer only

a slightly less generous rating.

Compared with a \$10 monthly subscription, the RoadMate is a stellar deal. That is, at least until Google's navigation app makes its way onto the iPhone.

## Quick Calls

For people constantly misplacing their Bluetooth headset, the MoGo Talk for iPhone is a headset that attaches to an iPhone shell. The headset features a hinged boom and noise-canceling technology, and the shell doubles as a protective case (\$129 MogoTalk.com). . . . If you are comfortable handing your BlackBerry to your baby, Baby Go!, a free app from Zeebu Mobile, is made for children 2 years old and younger. As letter blocks move around the screen, a speaker pronounces the name of the letter. The app shuts off the child's access to e-mail or the phone's dial pad (www.zeebu.com). . . . Super Dreidel, a new \$1 iPhone app, simulates the traditional Hanukkah game, and includes a full set of rules and a score tracker to cut down on arguments. In case you're wondering, the game does not involve spinning your phone — swipe the screen and an animated dreidel twirls.



Google's software can turn a smartphone running its Android 1.6, or later version, into a GPS unit that lets users see a wide area or a single street.