



SatNav and GPS (01/2007)

As a result of some VVV readers expressing an interest in knowing a little more about Satellite Navigation Systems, here is a little résumé on the subject.

GPS stands for Global Positioning System, and was invented by the American military. It is a system that tells you your exact longitude and latitude, speed, altitude and heading, which it gets by triangulating the information it receives from a world covering network of orbiting satellites. A SatNav, or Satellite Navigation System, is the device that transforms the information supplied by its built in GPS unit, into a nice handy interactive map for you and me to use to get from A to B.

There are 3 main types of SatNav available:

- the one built in to your car: looks nice, but typically is short on features, expensive to buy, expensive to purchase updated maps, and probably designed at the same time as the car model originally came out
- the one on your PDA or smartphone: great if you have a compatible PDA, and you just download cheap software that you can run on your PDA with a built in GPS unit (or an external GPS unit running via Bluetooth)
- the stand alone units: these are the most common and best sellers, can be moved from vehicle to vehicle and generally the most practical.

There are many SatNav systems on the market today, ranging mainly from €200 to €800, with some units reaching €1,500. Basic units will get you from A to B quite easily, but the more you pay the more features you will get built in. These features range from the useful to the just plain useless, the most useful (beyond telling the unit where you want to go and in what manner: quickest, shortest route etc.), in my humble opinion, being:

- voice instructions
- built in battery
- road safety camera locations
- live traffic information
- postcode search – though not very useful in France!
- 3 dimensional map mode – much easier for following routes
- find me the nearest petrol station, hotel, etc.
- find an alternative route, road blocked in 100 meters etc...

Some units will allow to watch video clips and view pictures, why you should want to do that while driving is beyond me, while others incorporate the Michelin hotel and restaurant guide so you can find out what kind of food they serve, what credit cards they accept and whether dogs are allowed; all before you get anywhere near the door. My SatNav can control my mobile phone, and when I ask it to find me the nearest hotel, I can if I want, at the press of the button, give the hotel a call and find out whether there are any rooms available – a useful feature? well, maybe, in an emergency? or when you get too tired to go all the way home? The features are varied, and how much you value each gizmo is down to the individual.

Once you have got yourself a SatNav, it takes a bit of learning to get going, and you will ideally need a computer to update maps, download traffic camera information – most of the these additional services normally need to be paid for on top of the price of the unit. There are many sites with details and links on how to use such systems, including: <http://www.radars-auto.com/> , but to be honest, you are best sticking with the manufacturer's website and their services, as downloading something contaminated/corrupted and uploading it on to your new toy, is asking for trouble.

This all sounds great, however there are a few downsides to SatNav units:

- first and foremost (though I was unable to find any statistics) they can lead to careless driving as users divert part of their concentration from driving to watching the SatNav screen
- none of the maps are perfect, many containing outdated road information, leading drivers the wrong way down one way streets, down dirt tracks and across private land If you are lucky you will be directed over a roundabout that doesn't exist yet, or into a rockface where perhaps they intended to build a tunnel at some point
- those units now displaying speed limits, when not kept up to date, lead to traffic violations and fines
- speed Camera detection: in France, it is illegal to have a device that detects a traffic camera, but legal to have a device that warns you where cameras are located by displaying a POI (Point of Interest) on a system such as a GPS – i.e. the system is not detecting cameras, it knows they are there. However you need to regularly update the maps, the company you buy the camera data from will not pay your fine if you get one, and if the camera is in a tunnel, you may not be warned as GPS units lose their signal once you enter a tunnel
- theft: as expected SatNavs are easy to steal from a parked car, and their theft is rising rapidly – St John's ambulance has even had several of their units stolen from Ambulances! Obviously you need to remove the unit from the car, then detach the cradle, and most importantly wipe the windshield clean to remove the mark of the round cradle sucker, as just the round mark is sufficient to get your side window smashed on the off chance there is a SatNav inside
- don't buy one of these SatNav units if you expect it to function perfectly. Most will at some point (and some units regularly) lose the GPS signal, crash and hang, have software glitches, need regular updating, refuse to connect to the computer, take 5 minutes to detect where they are when you switch them on, take you down the wrong roads, add to your journey time when you are familiar with the area, switch themselves off every now and then, tell you to turn left when the arrow indicates right...

- in general the software for your PC supplied by the manufacturers is not particularly easy to use or efficient, though improving. The best feature I have been told about is the TomTom home software, that has a “Disconnect Unit from your Pc” button, that when clicked, actually crashes the SatNav unit, which, indirectly...does disconnect it from your computer!

SatNavs are by no means perfect, they are expensive compared to a map, at times erratic, inaccurate and unreliable, but they are very helpful in getting you from A to B when you don't know the way, and I certainly find mine, even with its faults, really quite useful.

Edward Marshall

Marshall Consulting
21 Résidence St Martin
Chemin des Faisses
83300 Draguignan
Mobile: 06 26 98 03 12, Tel: 04 94 84 12 90

www.marshallconsulting.fr

© Copyright Edward Marshall 2007