

Driving

GET LOST – IT COULD BE GOOD FOR YOU

John Silcox



My problem with satellite navigation is that I can't bring myself to trust it. Maybe it's got something to do with the way it

barks out directions in a smug robotic tone, or perhaps I'm simply not made for following orders. Either way, I prefer to embark on a car journey without computer assistance and, when the sat nav is activated against my will, I will happily ignore all advice given because I'm convinced I always know a better 'shortcut' – regardless if it's right or not.

Initially, I guessed my reaction was a man thing – a bit like my assumption, to which many wonky shelves and bent nails can attest, that I am naturally gifted at DIY. But witnessing many male friends at the wheel happily obey their vehicle's commands debunked that one. Then I suspected I'd inherited a special pathfinding gene from my father who used to navigate aeroplanes in the Royal Air Force, but even Dad has recently started using the sat nav in his new car, so maybe it's time I do, too.

On paper, the sheer benefits of GPS coordinates are simply too compelling to ignore. In the 50 years or so since they were first invented by the American military, their usage has expanded exponentially to cover an incredibly wide range of things and they're helping us map our world and whereabouts in even more detail than ever before. Indeed, it seems as though getting lost could soon become a thing of the past: according to the US National Park




Service, search-and-rescue missions are dropping fast as a result, from 3,216 in 2004 to 2,568 in 2014.

However, the headlines aren't all so great. Last year, a Mexican-American tourist became a local celebrity in Iceland after driving more than 230 miles in the wrong direction because of a typo in his sat nav. This isn't an isolated incident – in the past five years, there have been a series of reports about people driving grossly off-course, up one-way streets and even into the sea. In Chicago, a man reportedly drove his car off a bridge, killing his wife in the process, because he was blindly following instructions. It sounds like the perfect alibi: 'The machine told me to do it, Your Honour.'

These types of extreme cases may be rare, but it does raise the question about what our increasingly heavy dependence on automatic navigation tools is doing to our minds. A growing body of research suggests some unsettling possibilities. By allowing devices to take total control of navigation, we are beginning to ignore vital real-world cues that humans have always used to deduce their place in the world. As a result, we are losing our natural wayfinding abilities and possibly

more: compulsive use of mapping technology may even put us at greater risk for memory loss, it is posited.

A 2006 study scanning the brains of London taxi drivers found that the hippocampi, the regions responsible for direction, increased in volume and developed neuron-dense grey matter as the drivers memorised the layout of the city. Individuals who frequently navigate complex environments the old-fashioned way, by identifying landmarks, literally grow their brains. Additionally, many studies show that having a smaller, weaker hippocampus makes you more vulnerable to brain diseases such as Alzheimer's, since it's one of the first regions affected. Although no direct links have yet been made between memory loss and the habitual use of sat navs, the implications are interesting, to say the least.

So, it seems getting lost could actually have a number of benefits for you and your brain. Well, at any rate, that's what I'll be telling my passengers next time I take them up a dead-end road. 

John Silcox is the Features Editor of Audi Magazine

THE PASSPORT OF THE FUTURE

Anna Hart



What do you feel when you pick up your passport? It's hard to think of any other document that stirs up emotions in quite the

same way. As daydream fodder goes, travel is a winner, so it's hardly a surprise that many of us have a sentimental attachment to this document. Sure, it might just be a few dog-eared pages of paper, yet this compact wine-hued booklet represents freedom, adventure, rights and community.


But let's face it, a passport can also be the cause of untold strife – even for a travel writer, who should surely be a bit of a pro at making sure they have theirs to hand. I've had mine replaced while I sobbed in the British embassy in Warsaw after it was stolen. I've cheerfully handed it over at check-in at Heathrow before an important work trip, only to be gently informed that, when I'd dashed out of the door at 4.30am, I'd picked up my boyfriend's instead of my own. And I've waited, fidgeting nervously, on a train platform in Budapest as said boyfriend sprinted back across town to retrieve both of our passports from where we'd left them in the hotel safe.

At times like these, it seems oddly archaic that a small sheaf of papers can possess such power. So when I hear speculative talk about paper passports being replaced by retinal or fingerprint scans, or even a microchip in our arms, the disorganised traveller inside me insists that this is the future.

In the UK, we've become accustomed to our burgundy passports – a colour change introduced in the late 1980s – and that they are now electronically readable. But, for security reasons, they are redesigned every five years, and the contract expires in 2019. That's the year we're due to leave the EU, so the future of the British passport hangs in the balance in more ways than one.

Besides being a disorganised traveller, I'm a sentimental one too. Romance is what travel is all about, after all. And in the 21st century, we're very short of things to get sentimental about. Fashion is so fast-changing that we rarely have time to develop a relationship with any garment before it is unceremoniously replaced. Letters, even emails, have been successively replaced by a constant stream of emoji-studded WhatsApp

messages. Few of us keep diaries any more because our Facebook updates scratch that particular itch.

As every traveller knows, a passport is so much more than just a form of ID. It's a badge of pride and a record of past experiences. It's a ticket to freedom, a totem signifying future adventures. And it's a physical reminder of the cherished rights we hold as citizens, the right to free movement, the right to cross borders, the right to work in other territories, the right to return home to our families at the end of our journey. I have to admit, whatever happens to the British passport, I'll be sad to see this one go. 

Anna Hart is a travel writer whose first book, Departures, will be published by the Little, Brown Book Group in January 2018



CAN WEARABLE TECH LIVE UP TO THE HYPE?

Chris Hall



Wearable technology. Sounds great, doesn't it? I'm sure I speak for all of us when I say that traditional fabrics

have always felt just so, well, analogue. I long for the day I can leave the house swaddled in microchips. Who doesn't want technology you can wear, like a video-streaming hoody or a wi-fi hat!

Sure, I'm being facetious. However, on a serious level, the biggest problem wearable technology has is managing expectations – and the name itself is a big factor. It might have had a degree of utopian cachet in a Silicon Valley blue-sky thinkpod, but a few years down the line, I predict the term will rank

alongside the likes of 'mobile device' as a lazy and unappealing catch-all phrase, clung onto by an industry that knows it has over-promised and under-delivered. Plus, as someone who spends more time than is natural writing about luxury watches, I can tell you mankind has been wearing technology for about 200 years.

Indeed, when we talk about wearable tech, we mostly mean wrist-borne digital watch upgrades. It's not on-message to talk about an Apple Watch or Fitbit as an evolution from the Casios of the 1980s and 90s, but in time, that's how it will seem. The birth of the mobile phone and then the smartphone – genuinely revolutionary technology – has given us a suite of hardware and software that can be reconfigured into other shapes; but for the most part, that's really all that wearables are: bits of smartphones repackaged into a bracelet, with a couple of extra sensors thrown in.

But is that so bad? People clearly love smartphones and now manufacturers have realised there is no appetite for actually speaking into your wrist (I have a friend who was accused of witchcraft in Brixton, South London, when testing the Samsung Gear smartwatch), maybe they have found a comfortable place in our lives. They fuel, and benefit from,


our generation's obsession with health and fitness – although there are doubts that striving for 10,000 daily steps brings any tangible benefits, for all that my fiancée is hooked on it.

I want more, however. I was sold a dream of gadgetry that would turn me into some kind of urbane Tony Stark, with an omniscient, disembodied robot butler that knows what's best for me, but is still at my beck and call.

And that's yet another problem. The rudimentary digital assistants emerging from Google, Facebook et al could surely merge with discreet biometric sensors to know what I want to eat before my stomach has even rumbled. But the kind of digitally quantified self that I really want would inevitably entail signing up to such invasive data-gathering that I might as well make out my last will and testament to Mark Zuckerberg now and be done with it.

A lot hinges on what we are prepared to accept in terms of changes to our habitual behaviour. Google Glass was a good idea – it was the logical next step in terms of augmented reality and the miniaturisation of camera technology. But no one in California considered that the public really doesn't want a bunch of nerds running around taking photographs of women on the beach simply by looking at them.

Likewise, we won't talk into a watch, but Bluetooth headsets – which I still find disconcerting, given they require users to walk around apparently talking to themselves – are now universal.

And therein lies the paradox. The best technologies go from being outlandish to mainstream very quickly – but it's nearly impossible to predict which will take off and which will remain weird. The world of wearable tech needs another breakthrough mode of use because, restricted to the wrist, it will never fulfil its true potential. 

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