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AT LARGE/BY STEVE THOMPSON

Smaller Can Be Better

THE AMERICAN AUTOMOBILE Association and Networks in Motion recently released "AAA Mobile," a package of GPS-based navigation services available through Verizon and Sprint on selected cell phones for \$10 a month or \$3 a day. As part of the PR effort for the release, I was contacted by a Networks in Motion rep and given an LG phone loaded with the software to try for a few months on the East and West Coasts.

I was so impressed with the results that I signed up for myself and my wife. To say that's unusual is an understatement; I've evaluated several portable GPS units and have not been sufficiently convinced to prefer them to paper maps. You can find out why I like AAA Mobile at www.aaa.com/aaamobile. There, a demo program explains in detail what I cannot in this space. But one feature alone captured my attention: the roadside-assistance one-button call to AAA, which automatically provides a service operator with your AAA member number and location. For



via the "Get It Now" screen] uses "assisted GPS" (Google the term for details) to find and track the cell phone, it can be run successfully indoors, though precision is somewhat degraded. Likewise, because the database providing the geographic information system (including AAA-specific features such as diamond-rated restaurants and lodgings and the usual items of its famous Tour Books) is resident on base-station servers, CD or DVD updates or downloads are not necessary.

No fan of anything that creates distraction in the cockpit, I was initially skeptical about the ability of a cell phone to provide what the PR promised. However, in part because the small size of a cell phone's screen discourages a particularly dangerous kind of driver distraction—trying to watch an in-cockpit screen while at speed—the application programmers and AAA achieved what I think of as a real success, as made obvious by my signing up (and no, I didn't get a discount).

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