Don't Get Lost on the Way to Thanksgiving

I get it. Portable navigation devices (PNDs) are a bit archaic at this point. In a world where every smartphone and tablet [1] has some sort of GPS receiver built into it and most cars [2] offer some sort of navigation option, buying a standalone GPS navigator seems both superfluous and archaic.

Yet, the PND market is far from dead. There are still a number of good reasons to choose a standalone GPS device. So if you're interested, here are our top picks.

Garmin Nuvi 3490 LMT

The Garmin Nuvi 3490 [3] is the flagship of Garmin's line of GPS navigators, featuring an ultra-thin form factor, great voice command, and a crisp 4.3-inch color touch screen. Opt for the LMT version and you'll also get lifetime map and traffic data updates. This unit debuted at a lofty $399 MSRP, but it's not difficult to find it for as low as $299 to $349 these days.

TomTom 2535

TomTom's 2535 isn't as thin as the Garmin 3490, but it does pack a larger 5-inch screen. For your $299, you can get the 2535 M Live [4], which features TomTom's Live data service for fuel prices and weather updates, HD Traffic updates, and travel apps including Yelp, TripAdvisor, Expedia, and Twitter integration. For that same price, you can eschew the data service and get the 2535 WTE, which adds European maps to the U.S., Canada, and Mexico maps already present, making this the navigator for international road trippers.

Garmin Nuvi 50 LM

People looking to save a few bucks should take a look at the Garmin Nuvi 50 [5] LM. This simple GPS device still manages to offer a largish 5-inch screen and lifetime map updates included in its 179.99 price point. Those looking for an emergency GPS device to keep in the glove compartment can save even more by stepping down to the 3.5-inch Nuvi 30 for $109.99.

Why would you even want a PND at this point? Standalone GPS navigators are, for starters, simpler to use for nontechies. You don't have to multitask, the interface of a PND is usually more straightforward than that of a smartphone app and, incoming calls and messages won't interrupt your route guidance. Also, tech-averse drivers can avoid the fear of breaking something or needing tech support.

It's also been my experience that smartphones aren't exactly infallible. I've seen updates and carrier data blackouts cripple a phone. A careless drop into water or onto concrete can transform a handset into a useless lump of shiny plastic and

glass. Keeping even a cheap PND in the car is a good backup plan in the event that your phone fails you when you're on the road; it's the modern day equivalent of a paper map.

Standalone GPS devices are also easier to share than a smartphone, which is a fairly intimate piece of tech. Most of us wouldn't loan our phones to a visiting relative or share a phone with a significant other, but a GPS device can be left in your vehicle's glove compartment for use by anyone in the family who uses the car or loaned to a roommate who's heading out of town on a road trip.

Tips for choosing the right GPS device 1. Screen size matters. You may be tempted to save a buck by opting for a device with a tiny 3.5-inch screen, but a larger screen is helpful for being able to view the maps and turn-by-turn directions at a glance, which means that you'll potentially end up spending less time scrutinizing the screen and more time scanning the road ahead. However, be careful that you don't go too big for your needs. It's possible to obscure too much of your windshield's real estate with an ill-placed 7-inch unit, reducing visibility and vehicle safety.

2. Traffic data isn't a must, but you should consider it. If the GPS device that you're looking at offers free lifetime traffic data, then this issue becomes a no-brainer. Just know that the free traffic offered on these devices is often of a lower quality when compared with the premium/paid traffic services offered by the same provider.

For those who live in areas where traffic isn't a huge issue (or those who only plan to use their GPS device sparingly), maintaining and paying for a subscription to a premium traffic service is probably not the best idea. However, for drivers in major metropolitan areas where gridlock can be an issue (such as San Francisco, where we do our GPS testing), traffic services like TomTom's HD Traffic can mean the difference between getting home in time for dinner and sitting in a jam caused by a baseball game.

3. Look for lifetime map updates. This is probably the most important thing to look for as your GPS navigator is only as good as the map data that it uses to route your trips. Map updates not only add new roads to the locally stored map, but also fix errors in older maps (street names, traffic directions), and refresh the database of points of interest (POIs), removing dead entries for closed businesses and adding new destinations. Paying for these updates can get expensive over the long run, but paying a bit extra on the front end for lifetime map updates can save you money and dramatically lengthen the lifetime of your GPS device.

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