

THE OPTIMIST

Losing direction?

Richard Asher



THE AVIS DESK at Frankfurt Airport doesn't give out maps any more. How silly of me to ask. I could hear them tittering as I walked away: "Haha! Ze prehistoric dinosaur! Get zis, Werner, he vonts a map! Ja, ein map! Vere is his GPS? He must be from ze dark ages!"

This sort of attitude starts with the technologically-advanced Germans and Koreans, but be warned, it's heading our way. Soon you'll

get the same shrug when you try to pick up your hire car in PE. No GPS-enabled iPhone with limitless data? Tough luck, sunshine. Get an upgrade.

Since the Frankfurt episode, I try to bring my own maps along when I hire a car in Europe. I've tried printing Google Maps at home, but this is a hopeless strategy for advanced navigation. It won't print all of the on-screen detail unless you use a page the size of your lounge. I get a better map by hand-drawing a copy off the screen. I kid you not ...

There are times when the old-fashioned approach of using maps can be utterly tiresome and costly. Classic example this year. I had a morning to kill after covering a race meeting at Mugello, and thought I might do my long-overdue Maranello pilgrimage on the way back to Bologna. My bright idea was to use the back roads, thus avoiding the autostrada tolls and seeing a bit of the countryside.

The Europcar people had given me a map, but it didn't have anything like the detail I needed. I kept reaching junctions with lots of signs — to places that weren't on my map. And having a natural sense of direction (which I do) isn't much use. When crows fly, they don't find their path suddenly turning into a dead-end construction site at the bottom of a 10km valley descent.

To cut a long story short, I did a lot of driving that morning without really going anywhere. I never did make it to Maranello for lunch at Ristorante Cavallino. I was crying out for some GPS action.

Trying to read a map while you're driving is a great way to have an accident. I know. Once upon a time in Sydney, I slammed into the back of a car at a robot while I had my nose in a map. Navigational distractions might also have led to me sideswiping a parked car in Brussels. I can definitely live without that sort of excitement.

Since those incidents I've tried to avoid reading and driving. On my failed Ferrari expedition that meant pulling over about once a minute. Try though as I might to internalise target towns like Trasserra, San Damiano, Burzanella or Castiglione dei Pepoli, the names

would vanish out of my mind the moment I dropped the map. And besides, like I said, I'd usually arrive at a gaggle of signposts pointing to none of the above. Which meant pulling over again.

In cities, it's worse. You generally can't even get out of your lane, never mind pull over. Everyone is honking at you, which doesn't help. You're sweating and hating every minute of it. That's usually the moment I discover that the map is upside down. And then...crash!

So yes, there are times when I'd love to have that calm, rational voice telling me where to go and letting me concentrate on the road. But it won't be in my budget any time soon, and I'd appreciate it if the likes of Avis didn't assume it was. They of all people should know that it's an 'economy' car I've just hired.

Anyway, there's a part of me that rebels instinctively against GPS. One reason is that map-reading is one of the last traditional male roles left, and that GPS lady is stealing it. But also, I've learnt that the best adventures usually start with getting lost. We live in a world where you can check out your Indonesian cousin's back garden from space ... if you want to enjoy true discovery you have to say 'no' to the devices.

I'm wary of being dumbed down by machines. One day I may be lost in the desert and need to navigate by the moon and stars. Or at least be able to read a map.

I love taking wrong turns and stumbling upon unexpected things. Or, better yet, just going where the road takes me. That's all very romantic when there's no time squeeze, but infuriating when you need to be somewhere.

So ja, sure, GPS has its time and place. But I'll not be a slave to it. I would not want the day to come where I spread a map out on the kitchen table and can't tell you where I drove that morning.

Did I mention that I happened upon the Futa Pass whilst failing to find Maranello? That I lost time sipping an unscheduled cappuccino at the top of the Mille Miglia's most famous stretch of road? That it was all the better for being unexpected? I'm not sure GPS would have let me go that way ... **TC**

If you find a smiling man on the side of a road in the middle of nowhere, chances are it's Richard



ILLUSTRATION: CAINE SWANSON