You Can't Miss It! Goof-Proof Navigation
Writer Karen Catchpole and photographer Eric Mohl quit their jobs to embark on a more than 70,000-mile (112,654-kilometer) drive of a lifetime. Here the couple shares lessons from the road. Text and photo by Karen Catchpole

Trans-Americas Journey driver Eric Mohl looking a little lost on the Denali Highway in Alaska.

Some people are born with a compass in their heads. Here's how to get where you're going even if, like me, you're not one of them.

THE SECRET LIFE OF YOUR GPS
GPS devices really do offer a ray of hope to the map-and-atlas-challenged, but it's my experience that those of us who struggle to read a map also struggle to read tech gadget manuals. That's why I've been learning the ins and outs of the GPS navigation systems Eric and I have taken along on the Trans-Americas Journey by trial and error as we go.

I'm getting pretty speedy when it comes to inputting a specific address or using the "points of interest" databases (which include things like post offices, grocery stores, hotels, restaurants, etc.) in our Magellan RoadMate 3000T North America GPS (www.magellangps.com) and Navman iCN750 (www.navman.com). But useful as they are, GPS devices are not without their quirks.

For example, if you tell your GPS to find you a route, but select the "avoid toll roads" command, it will likely take you the long way around national and state park entrances, which it registers as toll points since you generally have to pay to get in. That's how Eric and I ended up on a dirt logging road outside Canmore, British Columbia, on a painfully slow route into Banff National Park.

Then there's the issue of misleadingly named "points of interest" listings. I'm struggling with some serious Trader Joe's (www.traderjoes.com) withdrawal, so I routinely search our GPS databases for any

Did you know?
As a surveyor for the Hudson's Bay Company and the Northwest Company in the early 19th century, David Thompson spent decades exploring and mapping huge areas west and northwest of Lake Superior all the way up into Canada. He died in 1857, but 77 of his meticulous journals were published 59 years after his death and the accuracy of his more than 100-year-old hand-drawn maps continues to stun modern map makers. Well into the 20th century, Thompson's maps of the Columbia River Basin east of the Cascade Mountains were still regarded as authoritative.

Trans-Americas Journey Dispatch:
Up Next: How To Stay Connected On The Road: Internet gadgets, new cell phone services, and more.
How to Be A Good Co-pilot
Finding Cheap Fuel Prices

Back to Road Trips Main Page >>
nearby locations of the grooviest grocery store on planet Earth. So you can imagine how thrilled I was when I discovered a "points of interest" listing called Trader Joe's in our Navman iCN750 database as we were passing through Great Falls, Montana. Approaching giddily, I commanded the thing to navigate us there posthaste.

Things were fishy almost immediately, but Eric and I persevered until the device announced that we had "reached our destination.

What we'd reached, however, was not a glorious emporium, but a falling-down barn and cattle yard next to a ramshackle bar that was inordinately proud of its dancing girls. Disappointed does not begin to describe it.

GPS devices are also beginning to add more to your road trip than just straightforward navigation. The Navman iCN750, for example, can take a digital picture of a location (the Capitol Building, your best friend's house, your favorite hotdog stand in Chicago) and automatically embed the image with its geographical location using a feature they call NavPix. Take a NavPix with your Navman and an image of the destination and its exact latitude and longitude is stored in your Navman GPS for easy future navigation. The next time you want to return to the Capitol Building or that hotdog stand, just select the NavPix of the location and, voila, you are on your way without any tedious searching or data inputting.

You can also share your NavPix destinations and embedded coordinates one-one-one with anyone else who has a Navman model that's NavPix ready. Or share your NavPix with complete strangers by posting them on the newly launched NavPix section of the Navman site (www.navman.com/navpix). On the site you'll also have access to an ever-growing catalog of photos from the extensive Lonely Planet archives. Each LP image includes a snippet of irreverently useful info and the exact location and navigational coordinates for the destination. Talk about sharing the road ...

Far be it from me to conjecture about the possible reasons why, but I have toyed with more than my share of GPS devices and they all have one thing in common: directions are given in a female voice, Period. What's even more interesting is that these voices are not created equal. The Magellan RoadMate 3000T North America voice is so sexy that Eric and I have taken to referring to her as Mistress Magellan, while the voice that comes out of our Navman iCN750 sounds a bit, well, school-marmy.

But now there's a way to break out of this mold. Pick up a TomTom GPS (www.tomtom.com/index.php) that is TomTom Plus ready, then download a voice from their growing catalog of both male and female options (free to $29.95). Selections range from the famous (John Cleese, Mr. T, Dennis Hopper, Burt Reynolds) to the classic, like some tough guy simply called The Don, or Holly, who is ALWAYS in a good mood, or Bodie Stone, a tousle-haired surf hottie who'll tell you where to go with plenty of "dudes" thrown in for good measure.

BYWAYS, NOT HIGHWAYS

Navigating is a particular challenge on a road trip like the Trans-Americas Journey since one of our goals is to avoid interstates and major highways in favor of byways and country roads. This means that sometimes we have to pull out the big gun: a road atlas. We've found DeLorme atlases (www.delorme.com) have the most comprehensive and accurate coverage of secondary roads and are almost as detailed as topographical maps.

The National Geographic Road Atlas; Adventure Edition is another great option when you might not need the pedantic detail of DeLorme. Honestly, this was one of our few pre-departure must-buys and its hardy plastic front and back covers have proven tough enough to stand up to even 70,000 miles (112,654 kilometers) of abuse. I mean, use,

GET THERE THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY ...

Right before Eric and I left New York City to embark on our Trans-Americas Journey, my parents gave me my grandpa's compass. In addition to being a wonderful heirloom (this is the same compass that went along with my grandpa and my father on countless outdoor adventures), my parents rightly point out that a simple compass is a means of navigation that does not require batteries, an owner's manual or a direct line of sight to a satellite in order to do its job handsomely. Just don't hold it in a hand that has any jewelry on it when you're reading it since the metals will pull it hopelessly out of whack.

... OR THE NEW-FANGLED WAY

The newest miracle for navigational knuckleheads is OnStar (www.onstar.com), a subscription-based service that will be a standard feature on most General Motors vehicles in the United States and Canada by the end of 2007. Push the little blue button that comes installed in your car and the all-knowing being on the other end of the phone knows exactly where you're calling from and, better yet, exactly where you want to go.

Recently, low-fuel warning bell clanging away, we pushed the blue OnStar button in our Chevy Silverado and asked for directions to the nearest Flying J Travel Plaza (www.flyingj.com) for a fill-up (see info in the two previous Drive Time dispatches to learn why it had to be Flying J). We were directed there with fuel to burn.

TO HECK WITH IT
Wherever you're headed, please don't forget that getting lost along the way is also a crucial part of your road trip and it will probably yield the best stories of your entire trip. For example, Eric and I were recently driving out of Nelson, British Columbia up toward the entrance to Valhalla Provincial Park (www.koootenayrockies.com) in Canada when we accidentally turned in Stocan Park, 23 miles (32 kilometers) shy of Stocan City where we should have turned. After driving quite a few miles down a road that felt increasingly wrong, I began to notice women's swimsuits stapled onto power poles along the side of the road. Some of the suits were even stuffed to give the impression of curves and many were captioned (a lovely one-piece simply said "Paradise" while a lone pair of bikini bottoms was labeled "topless").

We eventually figured out our mistake (by asking a local—another key weapon in your navigational arsenal), found the correct turn and got ourselves to the Ginti Ridge trailhead in Valhalla Provincial Park (highly recommended, by the way). But because we spent an hour getting "lost" on the "wrong" road, we pulled up just as a ferocious rain and lightening storm descended. We sat it out, warm and dry in our Silverado, then proceeded to have a lovely hike while those who had arrived earlier got drenched on the trail (and missed out on the free swimsuit art installation).

So if you happen to pass our big black Chevy Silverado on the side of the road and notice a map spread out on the hood, just smile and wave as you drive by. We'll get there eventually!