

Islander September 2007 Technology Update

Are we being controlled by technology? Is technology making us less capable or just lazy?

Having spent most of August travelling for fun rather than on business I have been able to try out various bits of new technology and have seen how they are ruining our conventional skills.

The first, the best and the most fun was the car navigator. We travelled from Mallorca to half way down Croatia and back via some of the cities of Italy one way and the Alps on the way back. I used a TomTom One Europe with the tiniest of screens but it worked straight out of the box. A lot of manufacturers could learn a lot from this product. It is small and simple, self installable in seconds, has very straightforward "to get started instructions" and has an intuitive and easy to use user interface. An almost perfectly simple creation. Very rarely do I wax so lyrically about a piece of kit. I am sure a number of you have had a similar experience.

You switch it on, wait 20 secs for it to find your position using the GPS satellites, then select "Navigate to" and enter where you want to go by name, address, a point on the map, postcode or whatever – press go and it works it all out for you avoiding tolls, or via a particular place depending on your selection. Stick it on the dashboard and you are away. It then talks to you and shows you where to go on a 3D map which is actually easy to see. If you take the wrong turn it tells you how to get back on the right track almost immediately. If you need fuel you can ask it to take you to the nearest filling station. Brilliant!

"More alert, less stress and safer navigation" is one of their sales by-lines. Our youngest daughter will verify this. Towards the end of our trip we were discussing with friends how often we, as couples, argued and our youngest piped up and said "they've been much better since they got the navigator". My wife and I were blown away, we hadn't realised our minor disputes in the front seat were so apparent!

Another interesting study is the irritation caused by the female voice, Carol, when instructing lady drivers where to go, especially if they make a wrong turn. You can select from a range of voices and we settled on the posh eloquent tones of "Tim", nice but dim, "Ken" from Oz and know it all "Carol". Honestly they do all have these names. We had to switch Carol off after she politely told us for the fourth time, with a touch of sarcasm in her voice, to "turn around as soon as you can", to which my wife retorted "shut up you stupid b***h". You can also have some fun with it as I did when driving through the Mont Blanc Tunnel. I secretly changed the voice to French so that when we arrived on the Chamonix side it really impressed my family by giving instructions in French and for a second they did actually think it knew which country we were in!

When you are back home or in a familiar area you keep testing it to see how good it really is, and it's not that bad. It may not choose your favourite route as it cannot make decisions based on your personal preferences.

It takes the whole mystery, and to a degree fun, when on holiday, of getting the map out and navigating conventionally. Due to the advent of the calculator our mental arithmetic powers have been reduced significantly and as a result of such navigators will we loose or will our youngsters never gain the ability to navigate using a map?

Obviously in yachting we have had chart plotters for well over a decade and they have become more sophisticated and integrated with every other system on the yacht to become the hub of an integrated bridge system.

When we were in Croatia we chartered a Beneteau 373 and sailed around the Kornati national park. We navigated using a typical chart plotter and everyone else we met did likewise. We did have a paper chart on board but we only used this to look at the "bigger picture". In the old days we used to work a passage plan each day, take an hourly position and write it in a log book. You can tell how old I am as when I first started sailing we found our position by dead reckoning, radio beacons, transit satnav, then Decca and then onto this marvellous GPS system, but we always worked a passage plan. Technology is de skilling all our traditional arts. Is this good or bad? Does it leave us time to have more fun or have more time to invent new things?

However, technology is also allowing us to do things we could never do before. One of our sales by-lines at e3 is "Good communications are the excuse most owners need to get afloat". This is so true. In my case good communications allow me the opportunity to go on holiday and now that technology has improved so much this summer I was able to operate the PC on my desk in Portals from my laptop, on a yacht anchored off an island in Croatia. I have been trying to do this reliably using the cell phone network for years without success. With 3G and HSDPA wireless technology it works and is cheap, maybe I should say, a lot less expensive than last year.

This time last year I sailed back from Croatia and studied the cell networks off the coasts on our trip and this year massive improvements have taken place again. Croatia is a little behind the main western European countries in a lot of areas but it has a cell network to die for. The new infrastructure means that they have implemented HSDPA broadband almost everywhere, even in places where you can only see trees and sea. No need for wi-fi hot spots, just use your mobile phone or data card everywhere. It makes sense.

To enable remote communications you need good software as well as the communications and I have to say that Microsoft Remote Workplace works well. You can access your complete office PC using any web browser anywhere in the world or just your Outlook using web Outlook and it doesn't just include your mail, but calendar, contacts et al. Well I think I am pretty unusual, having to keep in contact when on holiday to be able to relax, but there you go. I normally use Remote Workplace when travelling and it does enable me to work from anywhere, giving me complete access to my desktop and server.

Whilst asking these questions, I also need to ask what all the new technology is doing for us on today's latest cars. We don't have to switch the lights or windscreen wipers on anymore. The radio volume adjusts automatically with road noise. We

have cruise control. So what are we to do with our spare time whilst driving? I suppose it gives us time to operate our navigator!

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For any answers, questions or information on any of the above, please contact us. email on info@e3s.com and website www.e3s.com

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