

# Garmin Dakota 20

review by Francis Cooke

This is a Garmin's newest cyclist-suitable GPS - compared here with the popular Etrex Vista HCx which has a similar specification. The Dakota manual is downloadable from Garmin's website.

If you wish, you could save yourself a long read because there is a Bottom Line to this report - which is, sadly, that despite the many new features, the older, cheaper Vista HCx is the one to have.

But now, if you're still with me, read on ...

It wasn't very long after my first play with a GPS, about 4 years ago, that I sprung for a **Garmin Etrex Legend C**, which had already gained the reputation of being one of the best for cycling purposes. Since then Sheila and I have bought 2 more similar ones, so that when cycling long trips together we generally have one each and one packed as a spare. On long tours this is far lighter and more compact than carrying spare maps.

But even back 4 years ago, after owning the first Legend C for a short while, whilst I thought it was pretty good I also had a lengthy mental wish list for what the future of this young technology might bring. Things such as - just one more front button, perhaps assignable to whatever is the user's most common operation, track up/north up maybe, or swapping between direct and autorouting modes. And - automatic detection of the correct time zone. And - a less reflective screen. My list was quite long, but, not being in the pay of Garmin I did nothing about it other than live in hope and expectation.

Mid-2008 Garmin announced, at a premium price level, their new **Oregon** range which are only slightly larger than the Etrex and appear to use the same high-sensitivity receiver as the latest HCx models - it rather looked as though the Oregon with its trendy touch-screen interface might signal the end of the Etrex C line.

Well that hasn't happened, and in a surprising move, last summer Garmin announced their **Dakota** model which is to all intents and purposes a scaled-down Oregon. The Dakota is slightly smaller and lighter than an Etrex (though still with a bigger screen), and priced just where you'd expect any new top-range Etrex to come in. It's an attractive package on the handlebars and has options for heart-rate and cadence monitoring, so, although Garmin haven't admitted as much, it really is tempting to see this as the future - and, possibly, the current Legend and Vista HCx as the last of their line.

### Performance

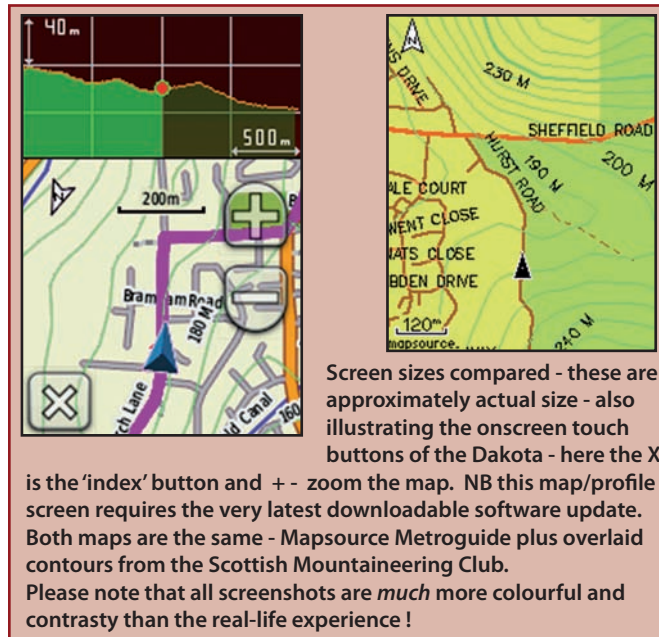
Accuracy and so on are a given really in any Garmin GPS, no problems there. Under the hood, the receiver is the same as the Vista HCx. In terms of facilities - menu options and things you can do with it - the Dakota 20 loses very little to its big brother the Oregon, and it does tick some of the boxes that were on my wish list 4 years ago.

### Dim Screen

The screen is a real problem area with the Dakota. At best - which to be fair is most of the time - brightness and general readability is about the same as the Etrex C models. That is, without using the backlight in either case. Contrast is poorer - whites go mushy grey and blacks are muddy, er, grey - but this is just about compensated-for by being bigger and with better colour rendition. This 'best' is achieved in overcast conditions, or with the cyclist's body shielding the screen from bright sky - easy to manage by angling it towards you a bit on the bars. In bright head-on sunlight the Etrex C is a clear winner - but, as anyone who has used it knows, that's not saying a lot.

The low contrast is largely due to the extra layer of screen material needed to make it into a touch screen. This is no iPhone, but the interface is nice and works well even with thin gloves on. People with very big hands will find some of the touch buttons a bit cramped - for example those zoom buttons are very close together and its quite easy to hit the wrong one.

**NB - using these touch screen controls while cycling requires you to take your eyes off the road to watch the screen** - much more than on the older models where the controls work by feel and it's easy to, say, zoom the map while still keeping an eye on the road ahead.



Screen sizes compared - these are approximately actual size - also illustrating the onscreen touch buttons of the Dakota - here the X is the 'index' button and + - zoom the map. NB this map/profile screen requires the very latest downloadable software update. Both maps are the same - Mapsource Metroguide plus overlaid contours from the Scottish Mountaineering Club. Please note that all screenshots are *much* more colourful and contrasty than the real-life experience !

### Dumbed Down

So the screen is good and bad, but overall I wouldn't let it put me off if everything else was right. **Do try to see one before you buy.** However another major problem area as I see it is that the Dakota is just very dumbed down. Anyone used to the Legend or Vista will find the lack of configuration options rather perplexing. I'll illustrate this with just two examples, out of several -

Here are two useful menu screens from the Etrex C types, followed by the two equivalent screens from the Dakota.



All these options - simply don't exist on the Dakota. It's not just that they are displaced to another page.

Other missing options include the Satellite menu page and the Reset All page, and some of the other Routing options, and some Track-related options including the option to auto-save a daily log.

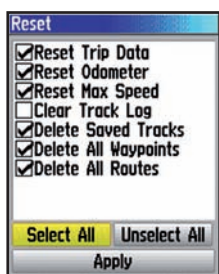
I might be inclined to put some of this down to 'immature product' - and so

hopefully to be corrected using software updates (this review using v2.41, issued December 09) - but as this new model is just a slightly cut-down version of the Oregon which has been around for a while and has already had several downloadable upgrades - the Dakota should really have started from a higher baseline.

Actually I think this dumbing-down is more about the older Garmins being found by some people to be just too complicated. It is certainly true that it's easy to get swamped in the plethora of menus, sub-menus and options, to the point where one small wrong deep setting can really throw a GPS off-kilter, and then be hard to rectify without resort to manuals, online guides and help forums.

So it's possible that this simpler interface would be, by design, good for a new adopter - however I really feel that the simplification process has been taken too far, and anyone who has grown used to





an older Garmin will wonder why, for example, it's no longer possible to delete all Tracks and/or Routes in one fell swoop (see Etrex screenshot, left).

Still, maybe you don't miss what you never had, and maybe I should be concentrating on the positives instead, and some shots of the undeniably pretty Dakota screens.

**What's Good?** - Well the screenshots on this page will give an idea of what to expect. Out of a very long list of minor improvements over the Etrex C models, these stand out:

\* **Nice sleek styling** more like the 'Edge' type of GPS - bigger more colourful screen, generally a bit more room for additional 'data fields' on each page - more data fields are always useful.

\* **Much easier to move around** all the many screens and setup options - all centred on a single 'index page' reachable from most other pages by tapping the X in the corner of the screen.

Actually this page is scrollable to reveal more options - 24 buttons in all. You can rearrange these buttons to get your most-used options onto the 1st page. Then, from any favourite page it is just 2 dabs to get to any other favourite page.

There is a downside to this simple, centralised approach - some operations can get rather long-winded with multiple dabs of the 'back' button to get from one branch of the setup tree to another.

\* **The Where To button** leads to this one-stop shop (right) for following a Track or Route or doing a Find-and-Go To. This is a big improvement in usability compared with the Etrex C way of doing things.

\* **The 'Target' button** at the bottom is found on several screens and enables you to project your Find to another location - for example to find the nearest Halfords to Gloucester Station. It's a useful new feature.

\* If you are someone who likes to navigate using the Compass page, this is now nicely styled and rendered, some real eye candy. With the very latest software upgrade, you can combine compass/map on one page.

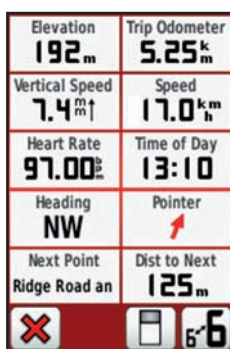
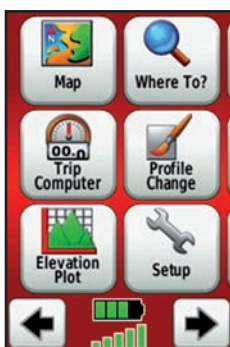
\* **The Dakota uses the modern 'USB storage mode' method of connecting** to computer and exchanging files - this is especially helpful for Mac and Linux users, and also for increasing numbers of people opting to use non-Garmin maps, such as OpenStreetMap. The Dakota does still connect with Mapsource as well, for those who have that software.

\* **User profiles** for quick switching between various setups - eg, walking, cycling, motorcycling etc. This is a great feature that was high on my wish list. Top Tip: give each profile a different background colour so you can always see which mode you're in.

\* **The map has a default white background** - more sensible than the khaki of the Etrex.

\* **Can store up to 200 Tracks**, and saved Tracks retain all data (including heart rate and/or cadence if this is enabled).

\* **Touchscreen key pad** for text/num entry.



**What's not so good**

\* **Screen fonts are smoothed**, which should be good, but as a result they look a bit less clear - blurry even - to my eyes. However Sheila has sharper close vision than me and the fonts don't bother her.

\* **The new map rendering** is likely to appeal to new adopters, but I have got used to the simpler 'wire frame' style of map and on such a small screen, I now prefer it.

\* **The backlight is much better implemented**, but this contributes to the reduced battery runtime - I haven't tested this thoroughly but it may be only half that of the best Etrex C models.

\* **The bike mount** (extra) is lightweight, secure and rattle-free - but looks rather crude and ugly when left on the bike without the GPS.

**What's Bad** - again this is a long list and for reasons of space and to retain my audience, I'll just concentrate on the main problem areas:

\* **As already discussed, people used to the Etrex will find the Dakota very dumbed down.**

\* **The low-contrast screen** combined with smaller fonts makes everything less legible than the HCx, to my eyes.

\* **The Active Track (breadcrumb trail)** is an ugly heavy black line, with no colouring options other than to turn it off.

\* **There's no option to log daily track to card** - though there's no need to lose anything, the track does always archive itself, and it's easy to manually save out any section, with storage for up to 200 saved tracks. But I find I really miss the simple automatic storage of daily tracks as GPX files named by date - a really convenient format.

\* **There's absolutely no software provided in the box.** I think a new adopter could find it hard to get going.

\* **That big screen looks a bit vulnerable** when tossed in a bag or a pocket - our oldest Etrex screen by contrast is just unmarked after 4 years use and abuse - very tough. The Dakota is a candidate for a nice soft slip-case - I often use a glove for this sort of thing.

\* **I do hope this next one is just a bug that soon gets fixed.** I expect the 'Next Waypoint' data field to display the waypoint name. I know many people, myself included, like this feature and use waypoint naming to display a hint as to what to do at the next waypoint - L, R, SO, etc. In the Dakota, if the Route is uploaded in the way the manual describes, this waypoint name is not displayed. I've spent some time working around this, and have written some more about it in a web page [www.aukadia.net/gps/lwg21.htm](http://www.aukadia.net/gps/lwg21.htm)



**Scrolling Map/Track Route Direct (off road) Route Follow Road**

\* **Autorouting** (that is, Follow Road mode) generally seems rather cranky to me and barely usable, even for a simple Find-and-Go-To. Maybe it's just me, because it's not a mode I use much, but I think the Etrex seems to work a bit better. Direct routing works OK though.

**Updated already** - Garmin's latest downloadable software update doesn't fix any of these issues, but it adds a lot of new display options including map-with-altitude graph (see title pic), or with compass, or trip computer (as left) with altitude graph. There are other very nice improvements related to Track-following. New units bought later this year should have this software built in of course. It's the same for the Oregon models. If Garmin continues to develop these models in this way, that will be Quite Interesting.

