

# My 5 Top Garmin Tips

from Francis Cooke

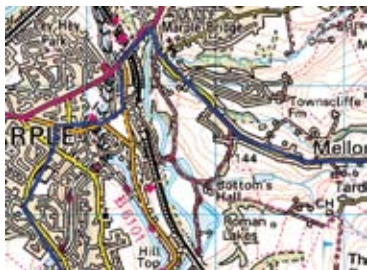
I'm really very much a GPS newbie, compared with many Auks - I know some who have been 'paperless' riders since the turn of the millennium. So I'm very much indebted to other knowledgeable types, particularly AUK members Jo Wood and Claire Ashton, who set me on the right track as I felt my way into this brave new world. GPS devices are incredibly configurable, and you can easily lose yourself, if not on the road, then in the deep morass of options in the Setup menus ... so here are my five top tips:

## 1. Get a Garmin, get an Etrex C, get the right software.

Although there are several manufacturers of 'leisure' GPS units, and I have no idea which if any is better than another, I do know that Garmin has become the preferred make for most cyclists in the UK. I think there's a lot of advantage to using kit that is 'standard' and compatible with others so that's the only reason I say "Get a Garmin".

Garmin have models in their range that are designed specifically for cyclists, however from the randonneurs point of view they have limited battery life, because they use a rechargeable Li-ion battery. If you never do more than a day-ride, then these types (such as the Garmin Edge) will be a good choice. For longer rides, or even more so for long tours, the Etrex range which is the smallest type to run on AA cells is a much better choice. They are really for walkers but the handlebar-mount accessories work just fine. There are better-performing models from Garmin (eg the '60' range) but you wouldn't want anything this big on your handlebars. The Etrex models designated C (for colour screen) or Cx are newer designs and, despite having a colour screen, deliver much better battery life than the older mono-screen versions. Sheila has no trouble getting 24 hours continuous use - including night which means using the backlight - out of her Etrex Legend C, with a set of good NiMH cells. On tour she runs it for 3 days at a time between battery changes. Models which include a barometric sensor and compass are slightly more battery-hungry - but not hugely so, and both those extras are nice - but as a randonneur, Sheila went for maximum battery life as the top priority.

Mapping software seems to be a source of much confusion. There are at least four OS-based brands of software (Anquet, Fugawi, Memory Map, Tracklogs) competing for your custom, plus the more established routeing programs such as Autoroute, plus a proliferation



of online options which are developing and improving almost before our eyes, many of which are free, plus for Garmin there is their own Mapsource. All of these can, with varying degrees of ease or difficulty, be used to program routes into your GPS. I can't deny the attraction of a big computer screen-full of OS 1:50,000, scrollable and zoomable and often with beautiful aerial photography as well. Anyone who loves maps will adore any of these OS-based programs, and some now stretch into France as well, using IGN maps. I've never yet found any independent assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the four brands, but the three that I've tried all have decidedly quirky interfaces which I think spoil them to a large extent, and. Given that they are all expensive, its hard to recommend any one of them.

Mapsource at first sight looks expensive for what it is. The maps look very crude, sketch-map-like, and will not impress anyone used to OS maps. But think again about what you get, in the 'Europe' package. The maps cover all of Europe, with only a few outlying areas being less than fully-detailed. When you start to zoom in, you find

this is a very different deal from what you get with OS mapping. You can zoom all the way from a map of the world down to street name level, where the level of accuracy seems better even than OS 1:25,000 mapping. To illustrate the level of detail, my road has rather strange house numbering - I live in No.33 and the house opposite is No.2. Garmin Mapsource can display this house numbering correctly. Plus, unlike other maps, all this level of zoomable detail is transferrable into your Garmin GPS and accessible to you as you ride.



So, for a Garmin user, Mapsouce is the software I would recommend, above any other. There are three 'families' of maps within Mapsource, there is the 'Topo' range, the 'Metroguide' range and the 'City' range, and they can work together if you want, and can afford it. I know a lot of cyclists have gone for the 'Topo' software, but really this is designed for walkers and off-roaders - it displays all the roads (and the contours) but it really has too much memory-hungry detail in places where you don't need it (in open country) and not enough in places where you do (towns). 'Metro' and 'City' give good street-level detail as their names imply, but are equally informative even in very rural areas. They are



rather similar to each other, and really 'City' is a newer version of 'Metro' with a few more tricks, but the mapping itself is almost the same in either. Garmin do not recommend Metroguide for their Etrex C range of GPS, saying it is incompatible.

Sheila and I have Metroguide, which is far cheaper than either Topo or City. The incompatibility exists, but it only relates to some auto-routing capability which we find we have little use for - as cyclists we prefer to define our own routes anyway. In normal cycling use, the supposedly incompatible combination of Metroguide and an Etrex C model presents absolutely no problem whatsoever - you get 98% of the functionality that you would have with City Select, at half the price. *Update Note 1 - see notes at end.*

## 2. Edit your page sequence down to a minimum.

The Garmin Etrex Legend C offers a whole range of configuration options, some quite deeply hidden in the menus, and a few of these are not well explained in the manual. Its a great little device straight out of the box, but it pays to put some thought into setting it up the way it works best for you.

For starters, it is set up to display several screens of information in sequence, you page through them using the Quit key. There are also several other pages which can be accessed less directly, via the Main Menu page which is the last one in the sequence.

This, I suggest, is 'too much information'. Especially for the befuddled randonneur who needs to keep his attention on the road.

Delving into Setup, I have reduced the Page Sequence to just two pages, so that the Quit key now simply toggles between the Trip Computer page and the Map page. I also set it to go to the Computer page on switch-on - this acts as a reminder to do any trip resets necessary, because this is the best page for that job. The important Main Menu page is cut out of the sequence - but it can still be reached easily, by pressing the Menu key twice, and from there you can access any of the other pages if and when needed.

You may well differ as to what pages are important to you - everyone uses their GPS in a different way - but I suggest the same general principle applies - cut out the stuff you don't use much.



Obviously it depends on each of the two pages being meticulously set up to give maximum information, and for me really it only works because of the large amount of info that can be made available on one page on the Trip Computer, which displays 8 data fields.

### 3. Put your two favourite data fields on every page.

When you study the appendices of your Garmin manual, you find a huge number of data fields are available to you - nearly 50 on the Vista - its a wonderful wealth of information about your ride. The first temptation is to set up each page on your GPS to give a different view of all this stuff. My next tip is to dedicate the top two data fields on every page, to the same information. Once again its all about befuddlement. At my advanced stage of mental decrepitude, I find I need an 'anchor' on-screen as I flip around the many options.

Again, everyone will have different favourite bits of info - it might depend on whether you also have a cyclecomputer or not - or wear a watch - I don't do either so one of my 'fixed' fields is Trip Distance. My other favourite is 'Distance to Next Waypoint' which is a real GPS feature - one of those things you simply couldn't do any other way than with the help of all those satellites that those kind Americans have put up for us. (Even more wonderful is the 'Time to Next' field - you may well prefer this to 'Distance to Next' - either is a really fantastic navigational aid.) I have these two fields at the top of my Map Page, and the same two at the top of the Trip Computer Page, which of course features 6 more nuggets of information. (I have Speed, Time of day, Height, Heading, a little pointer which always points towards the next waypoint, and the waypoint name.)



### 4. Name your waypoints.

A lot of people won't bother with this. I do it because I started with a Garmin Geko, which is a nice little GPS but simply lacks a lot of the features of the bigger models, and particularly the on-screen maps. Instead, all you see is a line with kinks in it (denoting your turns) running across a blank grey screen. So, to give myself more of a clue, I started naming the waypoints to include a 'L' or 'R' or even 'SO'.

It all takes a bit of care. Every waypoint must have a unique name, and although in the Etrex the name can be quite long, for maximum compatibility with other models the limit is just 6 characters. So I use the first 2 chars to deal with the uniqueness. I start with A1 through to AZ, then B1-BZ and so on, this gives 1000 or so unique names - enough in practice, though only just. Then a dash which denotes that the remaining 3 characters are instructions. Then usually just a L or R will do.

You end up with waypoint names looking like this: remember, you just ignore everything before the dash and everything after is route instruction: B9-R, or CM-SO (straight on), or D8-LR (that's a Left then Immediate Right), or DF-O3 (that's 3rd exit at roundabout). It all looks a bit cryptic, but 6 chars is very limiting. If you're not bothered about compatibility with others, you can be much more explicit.

What this all means on the road is, I have in front of me, the 'Distance to Next Waypoint' and, from the waypoint name, I know what the route instruction is at that point. Who needs route sheets?

(One criticism often levelled at GPS is that it might break down or run out of battery, so that you still need to carry route sheets and maps anyway. If this is a concern - why not just stash a spare GPS in your luggage instead? Smaller and lighter than maps. Your only possible problem is if the satellites fall out of the sky.)

### 5. Set your map thresholds.

This is about deep setup stuff again. There are a lot of options under 'map setup' and, while mostly they are set to very sensible default values straight out of the box, you can really improve the GPS mapping experience by attending to each of these settings. For example, the very first map setting you encounter is 'Track Up' or 'North Up'. Which you prefer will depend, I suspect, on whether you like to ride from a routesheet or a map. I'm a very definite 'Track Up' person, and Sheila is equally a 'North Up' person.

But there is a compromise which will give the best of both worlds for most people, you can set the threshold (in terms of zoom level) where the map drops out of 'Track Up' and back into 'North Up'. I have this set to 'below 300m'. I have to explain what this means - the zoom figure is actually rather misleading, typically you can see 3x to 4x as much map ahead of you on screen, as the zoom figure. A zoom of 300m actually shows about 1km of useful map.

If I'm riding with the map zoomed into 120m - which as a slowish rider is my typical zoom level on a laney route - I'll be in my favourite 'Track Up' mode - the map just scrolls past me as I ride - familiar to users of Sat Nav in a car. I can zoom in further (for close navigation of a tricky junction) or out a bit (giving me over half a kilometre of map) but when I zoom out to 300m the map switches to 'North Up' and is now much more like having a map strapped to the handlebars. For wide open country like the middle of France, the zoom might go right out to 2km and now you are just a speck crawling slowly across about 8km of viewable map, and by this point 'North Up' is the only way to be. But of course your own personal threshold could be anywhere in between - that's the whole point of having it available in Setup.

There are hosts of other settings like this under Map Setup so I'll just finish by listing the ones I think are important.

#### Orientation: Track Up.

**Below: 300m.**

**Auto Zoom: Off.** (important - 'On' will drive you mad.)

**Detail: Normal.** (worth playing with, more detail is nice but it can make the GPS feel slow in use. 'Normal' doesn't stop you seeing all the detail there is to see, it just affects the zoom levels where the detail kicks in. At a zoom of 30m you'll still see every little thing.)

**Lock on road: Off.** (I might have this 'On' if I was using the more compatible 'City' version of the maps.)

**Street Label: 200m.** (this is another very handy 'threshold' setting, the street labelling is incredibly useful, but at a zoom of 300m it starts to make for a cluttered screen.)

**Text: everything is on 'Small'**, again to keep clutter down.

You can display up to 4 data fields on the Map Page - Sheila likes 'none', ie just a clean map screen - and this only works because she knows that the Trip Computer is only one button press away. I like to display 2 data fields, but in fact we both normally ride with the screen in 'Trip Computer' mode. It automatically switches to a zoomed-in map every time you approach a turn anyway (this is another setup option) and then back to 'Computer' as you leave the waypoint behind you. At night the backlight comes on when it does this, takes you through the turn, then switches off again. Dead handy! *Note 2*

**UPDATE NOTES** - this article was published in February 2007.

It relates to GPS use in direct (or off-road) routing mode only.

**Note 1:** The limitation of Metroguide maps can be overcome using a freely downloadable patch called *Metrowizz* from [www.geodude.nl](http://www.geodude.nl)

**Note 2:** This turn preview map is only available on the older 'C' models. It does not function on the 'Cx' models in direct routing (or 'off road') mode. It does however work in autorouting or 'follow road' mode, on both models.

