

Technophile

A navigation aid so robust that you can drop it in a stream has made getting lost in the hills a lot harder

Satellite navigation is OK for driving. But take the average satnav into the countryside on foot or bike and you realise how motor-orientated they are. Road maps only show the roads, so they are of little help if you want to go orienteering, climbing or trail biking. If you want to go boating, road maps are no help at all, most showing no rivers or coasts.

You can download Ordnance Survey (OS) maps onto laptop computers or palmtops, but they are delicate beasts and difficult to use with gloved hands in driving rain. Which is why I like the £300 Satmap Active 10 so much. It looks like a palmtop computer with a battery compartment stuck on the back and a GPS sensor on the top, but is rugged and waterproof enough to survive being dropped onto a rock or in a stream.

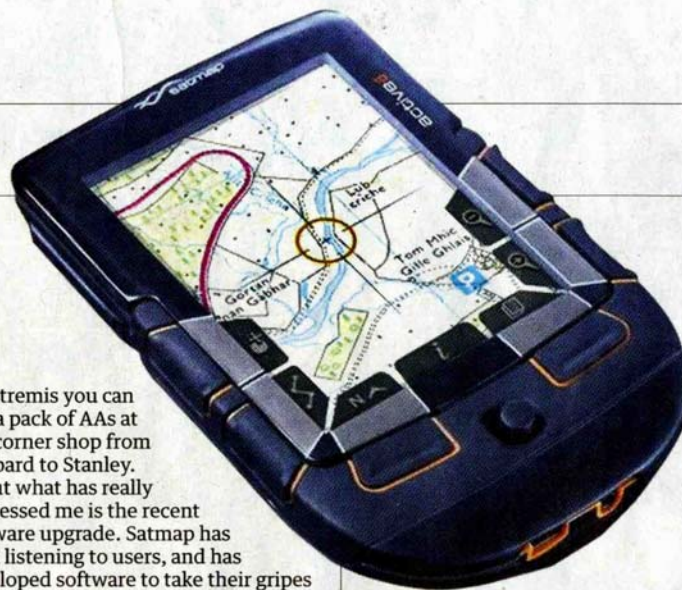
But the great joy is the map: full OS maps at either 50,000:1 or 25,000:1, with all the detail and the almost magical ability to orientate itself to north and place a "you are here" dot in the right position. Getting lost in the hills just got more difficult. The Satmap is designed in Britain by outdoors people for outdoors people. The battery case may be a bit lumpy, but contains three AA batteries instead of a mobile phone-style flat job. Carrying spares is no problem, and

in extremis you can buy a pack of AAs at any corner shop from Svalbard to Stanley.

But what has really impressed me is the recent software upgrade. Satmap has been listening to users, and has developed software to take their gripes into account. One of the top grumbles was battery life: a new power management system has been built to improve that. Another was the lack of synchronisation with a PC, so routes could be created on desktop software and downloaded to the Satmap unit before departure.

The new firmware is a considerable file, however, so rather than just put it on the website, the company sent every registered owner the update on an SD card. Even though SD cards are cheap (about £3 each in this case), the effort involved in burning the cards and mailing them out is significant for a small company. But it made life much easier

Pros: Tough, weatherproof unit; real OS maps
Cons: Expensive maps, a bit bulky
satmap.com »



and I'm grateful. Computer and mobile phone companies take note.

Something the company has not been able to do anything about is the cost of the maps. The digital OS maps are, in fact, cheaper per square mile than their paper equivalents, but because they cover much larger areas have a much higher price tag – a 50,000:1 map of Central England costs £50. A 25,000:1 map of a National Park costs a stiffish £100, and knowing it would be almost double to buy the equivalent paper maps does not make it feel any cheaper.

Satmap founder Richard Calthrop-Owen says that removing the OS's royalty payment would make the maps significantly cheaper – but worries that removing the price incentive might impact on quality. "OS mapping is the best in the world, and you get what you pay for," he says. **Chris Partridge**