

Satellites help beat traffic jams

99/tech



Electronic dashboard route information, courtesy of AA's satellite technology

Britain's largest motoring organisation, the Automotive Association (AA), is harnessing computers and military satellite technology to ease members' journeys over the nation's increasingly congested roads and motorways.

Latest developments being offered to drivers include dashboard-mounted route-finding systems, an in-car mobile phone traffic message channel, and a rapid means of finding your car if you forget where you parked it!

The AA has a long background of services to motorists and its service of supplying routes at the specific request of members spans some 90 years.

Now the AA's Roadwatch database, compatible with radio data system traffic message channel (RDS-TMC), is already fully coded in anticipation of the launch of the new-generation digital telephones, radios and route guidance systems that will allow traffic information to be delivered locally as a text message.

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the earth and which were developed for defence purposes during the Cold War and used during the Gulf War to pinpoint bombing mission.

In the future, these systems will allow vehicles themselves to call the AA for help. For example, a call could automatically be made for an ambulance the moment an air bag inflates, or summon an AA patrol before a car runs out of fuel.

AA managing director responsible for in-car technology, Pete Johnson, says: "These 'beam-me-up-scotty' systems mean motorists are never alone, need never get lost again and dare I say it need never get struck in a major traffic jam."

He explained that, using the global positioning system (GPS), the AA could pinpoint a motorist on a map and either despatch, or provide over the system, the appropriate assistance — an AA patrol, the police, an ambulance, or simply Roadwatch traffic advice.

"This new system means that, if you are on the edge of a city you don't know, you can call for assistance and be talked in to your destination. And we will be able to guide you around the traffic hold-ups as well."

But, he emphasised: "While all this technical wizardry can deliver emergency signals to a control centre, there will still be a human voice to deal with a call for help."

Another sophisticated service to motorists is provided by the AA's participation in a new consortium formed to run a UK (RDS-TMC).

of the AA Roadwatch database. I car information experts at the AA are currently testing personalised traffic information that will help motorists to avoid traffic jams, including a new AA Roadwatch Short Message Service for mobile phone users.

AA Roadwatch is also designing technology to syphon information, at will, about traffic problems from the vehicles that are causing them. AA Roadwatch will take "snapshots" of traffic conditions by calling up vehicles fitted with global positioning satellite and mobile phone, "asking" the vehicle where it is, how fast it is travelling, and whether it has become stuck in traffic.

The first vehicles to be connected to the system will be the 3,456 strong AA fleet of yellow patrol vehicles which travel a total of 96 million miles every year.

Other drivers will give permission for their vehicles to be remotely interrogated by the AA, but will be unaware that they are helping other motorists by providing instant traffic information.

Among other space technology services being offered by the AA is a system to aid absent-minded motorists who can't remember where they parked their vehicle to locate it by phoning the AA using a secret password.

The operator then sends a message to the vehicle over the satellite global network to make the car's light flash, making it easier to locate in a packed car park!

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Dashboard devices using the mobile phone system, like Vauxhall On star, launched in partnership with the AA, mean that today motorists can send a call for help to an AA control centre at the touch of a button, using satellite technology to pinpoint their exact location.

To provide such a comprehensive service the AA is enlisting communication facilities offered by the 24 US government satellites orbiting

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Mr Johnson explained the partnership was the result of five years of work using AA Roadwatch technology and experience to make possible in-car traffic broadcasts for motorists, when they want them, where they want them.

RDS-TMC is just one application

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And the AA's Milemaster scheme makes CD-ROM stored route planning, mapping and tourists information available to members using their own PC.

It also connects to the AA's Internet pages, accessing information on 8,500 AA-inspected hotels and other accommodation and allowing forward booking. It also gives detailed lists of 2,500 golf courses and 2,400 places of interest. — LPS