

# Getting Lost

I recently participated in a symposium in Prague, Czech Republic, on early warning and emergency management (more about this inspiring conference in our report section). I hardly had a moment to find my feet in Prague, but luckily the conference dinner was in the old city centre. I was reminded of a school outing as we set off, en masse, for the subway. After a pleasant evening, the waiters made it pretty clear that it was time for us stragglers to go home.

We split up into three groups, soon leaving the dawdlers behind. We planned to find the nearest metro station and so get back to our hotel. One colleague set out to guide us using Google Maps which he had downloaded onto his Blackberry. Little 'Ms' marked the metro stations, and it was up him to determine the best route to the nearest one. The trouble was, there were many stations (dots) on the map, and we ended up at the wrong one. Here the group split up again. One followed the Google Map guide to another station, while we remaining adventurers opted for the old-fashioned way; we took the subway to the next station, where we had to switch lines for the one we wanted. On the platform we found the 'dawdlers' already waiting, while the 'Google group' only managed to arrive a little over ten minutes later.

With the conference theme fresh in our minds we discussed what would have happened if, instead of trying to navigate back to the hotel, we had needed to find the closest shelter after a disaster. We would have had no time to make a mistake like the one we just had. Google Maps appeared to be a good tool, but had just demonstrated its limitations. It can put dots on a map, but it can't provide analysis. It is not a mobile GIS, which operates on a server and analyses location based services to give users information relating to their current geographical position.

Mobile GIS can provide tourists with emergency alerts, much like these provided for firefighters. In a time of crisis, foreign tourists need to know where to go for safety, where the nearest shelter is, and the evacuation route(s) to reach it. Had an emergency arisen while we were in Prague, the wireless network would have logged that we were there, as opposed to our home country. Governments and telecommunications network providers working together are capable of providing this type of service. Doing so saves lives. A reassuring thought, I concluded, as I found my hotel bed.