

Navigation in your Pocket

In my March editorial I took you along on my adventure with fellow conference participants as we got lost in Prague. Despite having to hand a GPS device, we ended up at the wrong metro station. Ensuing discussions centred on 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. So I'm happy to introduce an issue in which we focus in more detail on these subjects.

The first article (see page 17) comes from an author who wants you to believe that with the advent of navigation technology getting lost has become a thing of the past. I tend to disagree with him! He nevertheless clearly describes the concept of universal navigation; a navigation environment primarily accessible via mobile phones. I mentioned in March that our hotel search might have been more successful with a mobile GIS, which operates on a server and analyses location-based services (LBS) to provide a user with information relating to their current geographical position. In the feature on page 35 you will find all the details concerning LBS in emergencies.

However, I do want to make the firm point that getting lost is by no means a thing of the past. All the improvements in accuracy have lured people into placing all their trust in GPS devices. An American motorist and his family recently followed his GPS devices off the main road and onto a snowmobile trail. Though the road became narrower and the snow deeper, the man kept on driving. Then they ran out of road and sank in the snow. A snow tractor was needed to haul them out. Asked by the police to explain how he had roamed so far off track, the motorist replied, "That's what my GPS told me to do." This is just one example, but more and more such situations are reported.

The inventive business side of this example is that some companies are trying to map these obscure niches, unpaved roads and trails. Others are asking customers to correct inaccuracies and report changes on their routes. People tend to forget that GPS navigating devices are only as accurate as the map data supplied to them. Everyone in our field knows that even with the most up-to-date map there is a chance some data may not be completely accurate. However, many people nurture the mistaken notion that, since there are satellites in the sky that take pictures of the Earth, they must be beaming this information to GPS.

So, while I am very enthusiastic about the new developments and pleased to bring you them in this issue, I would like to make a strong plea for the continued use of common sense over navigation devices.