



## Another Look at Those GPS Rangers in the National Parks

Posted August 22nd, 2008 by [Kurt Repanshek](#)



*Ready to rent at a national park near you: the GPS Ranger. BarZ Adventures image.*



It was just about a year ago that I wrote about the invasion of "[GPS Rangers](#)" into the national parks. Back then I wasn't so keen on this hand-held, rent-by-the-day electronic tour gizmo, but there does seem to be a hidden blessing in it.

Manufactured by [BarZ Adventures](#), these devices use GPS coordinates to trigger a video commentary of the immediate area. Already the devices have been deployed at [Vicksburg National Military Park](#) in Mississippi, [Cedar Breaks National Monument](#) in Utah, [Shenandoah National Park](#), and [Death Valley National Park](#), as well as [Independence Hall](#). If not already, the device soon will be available in [Zion National Park](#).

My main concern with GPS Ranger is probably old-school. I think park interpretation should be delivered by in-the-flesh rangers skilled in interpretation, not some electronic device cued by a GPS location and not a question. Too, I worry that this sort of technology makes it easier to remove the interpretative ranger from the national parks and, in the process, automate interpretation.

Now, the creator of GPS Ranger, Lee Little, commented on the *Traveler* last September that he was prompted to devise this unit because he found himself in a national park without a ranger in sight.

"The goal of our system is to offer an educational tour for visitors that they most likely would not have gotten given the cut backs in staffing in our national treasures," Mr. Little said at the time. "Did you know that the GPS Ranger tour in Death Valley has over 3 hours of video content all approved by the Death Valley interpretive staff?"

Now, I'm sure the debate over the propriety of this unit in a park visitor's hands can, and likely will, continue.

But here's an interesting twist I learned just this week: The units can tell park managers where visitor traffic is greatest. Too, managers can alter tour content on a daily basis and so possibly direct traffic to your so-called "off-the-beaten-path" park feature or resource or away from an over-taxed or over-crowded site. Park managers can even drop sites that are closed for maintenance.

Beyond that, the devices can offer tours in American Sign Language (ASL) for the deaf/hard-of-hearing visitor.

With that said, the question remains: Is this a good move for the National Park System?

in [Bryce Canyon National Park](#) [Cedar Breaks National Monument](#) [Zion National Park](#)  
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## Comments

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Anonymous (not verified)

On August 22nd, 2008

Many people today are comfortable with this type of technology and would likely get out of the cars and follow some trails to use the device. Something that is not as likely to occur with a scheduled tour given peoples desire for independence and time management. We made an effort our most recent National Park trip to do 3 separate programs, but I must say that we might have done more if we could have done it on our own schedule.

[reply](#)

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Pat (not verified)

On August 22nd, 2008

This is a great addition to the services provided by the NPS. It should not replace ranger lead tours, but is a great option for those who would prefer tours of a different pace from the norm, or would choose a less traveled path. And, as pointed out, makes it easier to accomodate the hearing impaired. I'm happy to have my tax dollars used in this fashion.

[reply](#)

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Chas (not verified)

On August 22nd, 2008

I think this is a good idea. My family and I enjoyed using portable audio tour guides at Carlsbad Caverns some years ago as well as similar devices at the Van Gogh museum in 2000.

[reply](#)

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Bill Bowen (not verified)

On August 22nd, 2008

I have used hand held electronic tour guides in many museums and other points of interest in Germany and Austria. They were available in different languages and very helpful in providing information about the location visited. They also allow the user to explore a location at his own pace.

[reply](#)

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Jean (not verified)

On August 22nd, 2008

I love this idea. So many times while traveling with my husband, the guided tours just do not fit into our schedule.

It is nice to have the rangers available for people who want ranger led tours, but it is also great to have this option available also.

We will make sure that we use the GPS tours on our next trip

[reply](#)

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Kim Hansen (not verified)

On August 24th, 2008

As an educator I feel that this is a wonderful way to enhance a students experience. It allows students to get specific information in a format that they are more comfortable with. Students will be more into using the GPS than a guidebook.

[reply](#)

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[Ted Clayton](#)

On August 24th, 2008

When I walk in the creek-canyons and woods surrounding my home here on the Olympic Peninsula, I come across many specific specimens & sites that I want to remember & revisit, to watch how they develop and further pursue thoughts & questions that they stimulate.

Long ago, I began to take notes on my walks, first describing locations in terms of dead-reckoning and triangulation from other features (it is often very hard to return to a given site within the trackless 'jungle' here).

Later, I began using my GPS to record the location of ... great ancient snags, robust patches of Devil's Club, the stray Dogwood, a Wild Ginger bed, nurse logs ... it's endless!

I am going to investigate this GPS Ranger product to see how it works, and how they try to implement the 'mission' ... which seems fairly close to my own activity.

[reply](#)

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[Kirby Adams](#)

On August 24th, 2008

I have trouble seeing anything negative about this. I just got back from an extended trip through Olympic, Theodroe Roosevelt, Badlands, and Yellowstone National Parks. I saw a lot of the old-school interpretation you speak of, Kurt. And I hate to say this, but old school isn't always the best school. Yes, I saw some beautiful interaction between rangers (perhaps volunteers?) and families at Hurricane Ridge. I was also warmly engaged by several rangers at the Hoh VC. I was really impressed by the knowledge of these folks and their willingness to say "I don't know" when the subject at hand exceeded their knowledge. I mean no arrogance by this, but I usually walk into a national park knowing more about specific aspects of natural history than a lot of the rangers. I spent two years studying Olympic natural history before going there. That's just my thing. I love probing the rangers to find any morsels they have to add to my book learning. Unfortunately outside of my experience at the rainforest in ONP, I've run into some rangers that don't seem to grasp more than the list of memorized facts they regurgitate. I also saw a lot of verbal regurgitation that lacked any enthusiasm. While a ranger at Hurricane Ridge had a bunch of ultra-hyper kids all excited and focused on sub-alpine meadow ecology, there was another young ranger stumbling through a monotone presentation about the mountains that was painful to watch.

Like teachers in our schools, there will be rangers with the talent to interpret and those that simply can't. I think electronic interpretation filling in some gaps that lack of funds or lack of skill create can only be a good thing. And just as the Internet hasn't sent books to their grave, GPS units won't replace rangers, be they grand or mediocre.

-Kirby.....Lansing, MI

[reply](#)

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[Sunny Smith](#) (not verified)

On August 25th, 2008

Hi Ted,

My name is Sunny Smith and I am the Marketing Manager for BarZ Adventures, the maker of the GPS Ranger multimedia tour guide device. For a primer on the product and how it works, you can visit the Products page of our website:

<http://www.barzadventures.com/GPSVideoTours/Products.html> and the

Technology page for more technical information:

<http://www.barzadventures.com/GPSVideoTours/Tech.html>.

We implement our mission by working with various organizations within the National Park System, such as cooperating associations, like the Death Valley Natural History Association, Zion Natural History Association, or Shenandoah National Park Trust, contracted concessionaires within the parks like Eastern National, or independent tour operators that are interested in creating tour products for national park visitors, such as our relationship with Utah based, GeoQuest Tours. Please feel free to contact us with any specific questions you may have.

[reply](#)

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[Sunny Smith](#) (not verified)

On August 25th, 2008

My name is Sunny Smith and I am the Marketing Manager for BarZ Adventures, the makers of the GPS Ranger multimedia tour guide system. We appreciate your interest in our GPS video tours at the National Parks and now have tours operating at 8 different resources within the National Park system. In addition to those that you mentioned, we also have tours at Zion National Park and Bryce Canyon National Park that both launched August 19th. We also have a tour at Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site in Atlanta, Georgia, which actually was our first tour to be installed in 2007. I would like to respond to some of your comments if I may. Our aim with the GPS Ranger in National Parks is not to replace Ranger-led tours. In contrast, we feel as though our products are a great supplement to the other interpretive services that the parks offer. In MLK National Historic Site, for example, a visitor that would like to tour Martin Luther King's birth home can only do so through a live, ranger-led tour. Our tour product alerts visitors of this along with the times and schedules so that they can take advantage of this offering. To this effect, our tour goes hand in hand with the live tours, and actually encourages participation by delivering event information. Also, as mentioned by others in the above comments, our tours offer an alternative for those visitors that may not want to be in a large group tour, would like to travel at their own pace, or would like the flexibility of different start and stop times that better coincides with their schedules (the GPS Ranger is always ready to go as needed).

In response to Kirby's commentary above, consistency and quality are two of the main benefits of a GPS Ranger tour. Instead of getting the mediocre park ranger, you always get the best and most informative version. Our Vicksburg tour is a prime example of this. Hosted by Terrence Winschel, the foremost Civil War historian and park ranger, tour-goers get a compelling and informative tour with a Civil War expert to over 70 points of interest! On a ranger-led tour, you may or may not get such an informative and engaging experience.

The GPS Ranger is a perfect way to open up access to interpretive information to even more visitors. As tours can be delivered in any language (indeed our Independence, Zion and Bryce tours are all available in 6 different languages) non-English speaking or foreign visitors to the parks can take a tour in their native language. And as you mentioned, Captioning and American Sign Language are also opening up tours to the deaf and hard of hearing. BarZ Adventures is committed to increasing accessibility to the National Parks for visitors with disabilities and are

starting our foray into Audio Descriptive tours for the blind and visually impaired. The interactive GPS maps are also beneficial for listing accessibility information and locations (handicap parking, ramps, accessible trails and picnic tables, etc).

We feel that our tools are a supplement and alternative to other forms of interpretive information (with the additional added benefit of making National Parks more relevant and accessible to the younger generation through technology), as well as a way for parks to counteract reduced funding while still meeting their interpretive missions. Please feel free to contact me with any questions you may have about our systems or current tour venues. Thank you.

[reply](#)

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