

Sign In | Register Now

The Washington Post

TODAY'S NEWSPAPER
Subscribe | PostPoints



NEWS | POLITICS | OPINIONS | BUSINESS | LOCAL | SPORTS | ARTS & LIVING | GOING OUT GUIDE | JOBS | CARS | REAL ESTATE | RENTALS

CLASSIFIEDS

SEARCH: washingtonpost.com Web: Results by Google | Search Archives

washingtonpost.com > Arts & Living > Style

» THIS STORY: [READ +](#) | [Comments](#)

Happy Trails With a Handy Guide

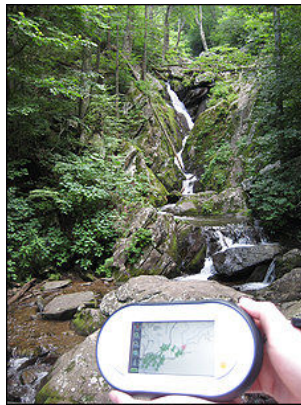
By [Christina Talcott](#)
Washington Post Staff Writer
Wednesday, July 8, 2009

If a GPS unit talks in the woods, will anybody hear it?

THIS STORY

Happy Trails With a Handy Guide
[Where to Go, What to Do in Shenandoah National Park](#)

Not my family, apparently. On a recent hike down to Dark Hollow Falls in Shenandoah National Park, I poked haplessly at the gadget slung around my neck, trying to watch a video on the small screen, while my mom and my boyfriend loped along ahead of my dad and me on the trail. My father, meanwhile, was half-listening to the chipper female voice coming from the machine, but mostly he was checking out the scenery, not the screen.



Let a GPS Ranger be your guide to Dark Hollow Falls and other Shenandoah sites. (Jay Dater for The Washington Post)

[Enlarge Photo](#)

My family and I were at the park for our annual Father's Day getaway, and I roped them into trying out GPS Rangers, which the park introduced last summer. Each paperback-size Global Positioning System device, created by a company named BarZ Adventures, contains recorded tours of four popular hikes: to the top of Hawksbill Mountain, down a hill to Dark Hollow Falls, along a one-mile portion of the Appalachian Trail and on a ramble through Big Meadow.

They were all hikes I'd been on before, most of them with human rangers, the park's green-clad, tan-hatted guides whose frankness, humor and expertise make ranger-led hikes the highlight of every trip.

So I'll admit it: I was biased when I rented my first GPS Ranger at the Harry F. Byrd Sr. Visitor Center, across from Big Meadow. Could these gadgets truly replace or match the experience of a ranger walk?

According to Lee Little, who designed the GPS Rangers and runs BarZ Adventures, "Our product complements, it doesn't replace, the rangers." Little dreamed up the gizmo after traveling around Europe and Asia and U.S. national parks. "I was amazed by how little information was available to tourists to answer questions like, 'What am I looking at?'" he said. Other common questions: "Where are the bathrooms?" and "Where can I get a Coca-Cola and a T-shirt?"

"There is a place for technology" in the parks, Little says. "A one-to-one relationship is always preferred, but it's not always possible."

Advertisement GPS Rangers do fill in some gaps in park rangers' busy schedules, since the devices are available all day. But one snag is that the battery lasts only three to four hours. (We had one that conked out after two, unfortunately.) Another hitch is the cost: Ranger walks are free, but you have to shell out \$9.95 for a GPS Ranger. And where a real ranger

Advertisement » Your Ad Here

Get the most from everyday purchases with the **Add It Up™** program +

[Learn More](#)

Bank of America



MEMBER FDIC

Find Your Dream Job Now!

keywords location

[FIND JOBS](#)

Jobs by [SimplyHired](#)

FEATURED ADVERTISER LINKS



can project his or her voice to a big crowd, the mechanical version is better suited to smaller groups or individuals.

The technology, though, is cutting-edge. As you walk along a trail, your location cues videos on the roughly 4-by-2-inch screen through a GPS antenna on the back of the device, which gets signals from orbiting satellites. The videos, which feature park rangers, historical photos and music, correspond to sites along a trail -- a pile of rocks where a house used to be, for instance -- and the on-screen maps tell you how far you are from the next stop and the next video.

(That's as the crow flies, though, so if the trail is winding, the distances won't be exact.) If you miss a point along the way, you can also manually play the videos from anywhere in the park. That ended up being helpful, because we missed points on all three walks, probably because we didn't follow directions and watch the whole introduction. (See "Escape Keys" for tips on getting the most out of your electronic guide.)

The first GPS Ranger outing we tried was the Meadow Mysteries tour, which features a whopping 17 points scattered throughout the 137-acre Big Meadow. There's information about the camp where members of the Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps lived, the soldiers who trained there for World War II and the Weakley family, who had to leave their land when the park was established in 1935. Some of the natural history points were interesting, too, and pertinent: We listened to facts about the meadow's marshy area as our shoes sank into the mud. My father pointed out, though, that some meadow features, such as the wildflowers, are seasonal, which the preprogrammed message can't address as thoroughly as a ranger could.

In about an hour, we hit roughly half the points on the tour. Unlike the other GPS Ranger walks, Big Meadow's only paths are narrow deer trails that can be hard to pick out when the vegetation is high.

The GPS Rangers are better suited to more linear trails than to the meadow. The Appalachian Trail tour includes history about the trail and stories from people who hiked it, and it mentions the people who lived nearby, including the Weakleys, the Corbins and the Nicholsons, which is fitting, because the tour ends at a well-tended cemetery where some of them are buried. The Dark Hollow Falls tour was all about water, from the trickle in the stream near the trail head to the gushing waterfall at the bottom. The Hawksbill tour covers the park's geological history, plus the peregrine falcons that nest atop the mountain.

Overall, we found that the screen is easier to see under a tree canopy than in the meadow's full sun. But more often than not, we ended up just listening to the narration as we walked, eschewing the screen altogether for a little old-fashioned one-to-one time with the scenery. It's not the kind of ranger walk I'm used to, but it's a novel way to learn about Shenandoah, a high-tech guide to the park's low-tech charms.

[Attorney: Asbestos Lung Cancer, Failed Cochlear Implants](#)
[Lawyer: Mesothelioma, Fentanyl, Hydroxycut, Pain Pumps](#)
[Save Up To 75% On Cruises at Vacations To Go](#)
[Debt destroying your day?New Debt Wise helps you decrease your debt!](#)

Ads by Google

[Own a Small Business?](#)
 Apply for an American Express® Card & Earn Rewards—Browse Cards Here.
www.AmericanExpress.com/business

[Virginia ATV Trails Guide](#)
 Online guide to Virginia ATV riding trails & printable trail maps.
ATV-Riding.com

[Shenandoah National Park](#)
 Visiting Shenandoah National Park? Find articles, maps, & trip ideas!
www.gorp.away.com

More ways to share this Article...

Digg

submit Post

» THIS STORY: [READ +](#) | [Comments](#)

Understand more about...

- [Shenandoah National Park Goes High-Tech With GPS Ranger Trail Guides](#)
- [Scouting Shenandoah's Skyline](#)
- [Waterfall Walks](#)
- [Talk About Travel](#)
- [Va. Prosecutors Drop Link to 'Stalker' Probe](#)
- [Hooked on Hoover's Shenandoah Retreat](#)
- [VIRGINIA BRIEFING](#)
- [Gun Rules May Be Eased in U.S. Parks](#)
- [Escape Keys: Where to Go, What to Do in Shenandoah National Park](#)
- [Free Range on Food: Staffers Solve Your Cooking Conundrums](#)



From Our Partners

- [Shafer: The New York Times Says It's Cool To Be Chubby. Yeah, Right.](#)
- [The Judiciary Is on an Unprecedented Power Trip](#)
- [Call the Irony Police: Fahrenheit 451 Now Available as Graphic Novel](#)
- [Are House-Swapping Vacations Thrifty, Creepy, or Awesome?](#)
- [How To Fix Racial Disparities in Medical Care](#)
- [The Coming Sugar Shortage and What To Do About It](#)
- [The Four Things Hollywood Gets Wrong About Time Travel](#)

[Seven Clunkers We'll Miss](#)

More From Style



Blogs

Style writers riff on [music](#), [comics](#) and other topics.

- [Full Blog Directory](#)



Advice

Get words of wisdom from [Carolyn Hax](#), [Ask Amy](#), [Miss Manners](#) and more.



Reliable Source

Columnists [Amy Argetsinger](#) and [Roxanne Roberts](#) dish dirt on D.C.

© 2009 The Washington Post Company

Ads by Google

[Start A Handyman Business](#)

Learn About Basement Technologies Franchise Opportunities Today!
www.BasementTechnologies.com

[Become a Park Ranger](#)

Earn Your Park Ranger Certificate 100% Online. Save More & Make More.
EarnMyDegree.com/ParkRanger

[Shenandoah National Park](#)

Visiting Shenandoah National Park? Find Deals & Read Hotel Reviews!
www.TripAdvisor.com

[NEWS](#) | [POLITICS](#) | [OPINIONS](#) | [BUSINESS](#) | [LOCAL](#) | [SPORTS](#) | [ARTS & LIVING](#) | [GOING OUT GUIDE](#)

[JOBS](#) | [CARS](#) | [REAL ESTATE](#) | [RENTALS](#) | [CLASSIFIEDS](#)

SEARCH:



[washingtonpost.com](#)

Web:

Results by 

[Search Archives](#)

[washingtonpost.com](#): [About Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Advertisers](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Search Terms](#) | [Topics Index](#) | [Make us your homepage](#) | [Newsletters](#) | [Mobile](#) | [RSS](#) | [Widgets](#)
The Washington Post: [Subscribe](#) | [Home Delivery Service](#) | [Advertisers](#) | [PostPoints](#) | [e-Replica](#) | [Online Photo Store](#) | [The Washington Post Store](#) | [About The Post](#) | [National Weekly](#)
The Washington Post Company: [Information and Other Post Co. Websites](#)

© Copyright 1996- 2009 The Washington Post Company | [User Agreement and Privacy Policy](#) | [Rights and Permissions](#)

[Help](#) | [Contact Us](#)