

Review: New Google Maps boasts big improvements

December 14 2012, by Bree Fowler



These file product images made available by Google show the new Google Maps iPhone app. The world's most popular online mapping system returned late Wednesday, Dec. 12, 2012, with the release of the Google Maps iPhone app. The release comes nearly three months after Apple Inc. replaced Google Maps as the device's built-in navigation system and inserted its own map software into the latest version of its mobile operating system. (AP Photo/Google, File)

(AP)—Like a lot of people, I was happy and relieved to see Google Maps return to the iPhone.

I'd been frustrated with the Apple mapping software that had replaced it three months ago. For one thing, it didn't have public transit directions, a feature important for New Yorkers like me. Apple's mapping [app](#) also wasn't as good as the old [Google](#) app in finding destinations. I often had to type full addresses rather than just the name of a business.

I tried to get by with maps on Google's mobile website instead, but I found that clunky and slower to start up. So when Google Maps returned this week as its own app, I installed it right away. Although it may not be perfect, it is a big step up from both Apple's current software and the old Google-powered Maps app that Apple kicked off the iPhone in September.

For the first time, Google Maps has turn-by-turn voice navigation on the iPhone, and with that, automatic recalculation of routes whenever you make a wrong turn. The feature had been available on Android phones since 2009, but Google's previous refusal to bring it to the iPhone is believed to be a key reason Apple decided to develop its own technology.

The new app also offers public transit information for more than 500 cities around the world. That's a feature Apple's own mapping software lacks.

The turn-by-turn driving directions work exceptionally well. It quickly and accurately calculated the most direct route from The Associated Press' headquarters in Manhattan to my home in the Bronx. It offered a variety of routes for traveling from New York to Boston.

The app's voice directions came in the form of a pleasant female voice

that sounded much more human than the [GPS system](#) my husband had in his car years ago. She was also more pleasant to hear than Siri, the virtual assistant on my [iPhone 4S](#).

The maps themselves are clear and easy to read, and directions were easy to understand. But don't worry if you're the type of person, like my husband, who finds voice directions annoying. There's a mute option.

Google's app usually gives you the choice of a couple of routes. Unlike Apple's app, Google Maps lets you automatically exclude routes that involve highways or tolls. You can also add an overlay showing how bad the traffic is along the way, along with satellite and extensive street-level photography of the area you're traveling through. Those features are much more limited in Apple's app.



In this Thursday, Dec. 13, 2012 file photo, the new Google Maps application is demonstrated in New York. The world's most popular online mapping system returned late Wednesday with the release of the Google Maps iPhone app. The

release comes nearly three months after Apple Inc. replaced Google Maps as the device's built-in navigation system and inserted its own map software into the latest version of its mobile operating system. (AP Photo/Karly Domb Sadof, File)

To test out the walking directions, I took to the streets of New York. I didn't get as many bells and whistles as the driving directions. For instance, there was no nice lady to tell me which way to go, because the voice directions only work for driving. In addition, the app doesn't automatically recalculate your route if you miss a turn. The little blue dot marking your location just continues on its merry way in the wrong direction.

To get the voice and the recalculations, you'd have to walk with driving directions, but you might then find yourself walking farther as the app won't let you walk against traffic on one-way street or through a park on recreational paths.

Google's mapping service is typically adorned with multitudes of landmarks such as tourist spots, dry cleaners and bars. To test this out, I took a walk up Ninth Avenue toward Hell's Kitchen. I found that while Google knows this neighborhood pretty well, it doesn't know it as well as I do.

A pawn shop that closed and was replaced by a Dunkin' Donuts a month or two ago is still shown as such on the map (then again, it's not even listed in Apple's mapping app). A bar that changed its name last summer still is listed under its former identity, the same as in the Apple software. And only about half of the many restaurants on the roughly 10 blocks I walked are listed. There doesn't seem to be a whole lot of rhyme or reason as to what made the [map](#) and what didn't. Still, there appears to

be more landmarks in Google Maps than in Apple's app.

Back at the office, I did searches using both Google Maps and Apple's software for 10 places by entering just the names, not the addresses. The locations included my daughter's pediatrician in the Bronx and some of my favorite restaurants in New York City and my much smaller hometown of Okemos, Mich. I also threw in my parents' house.

Apple's software found seven of the 10 locations. It couldn't find my daughter's pediatrician or one of my doctors in Manhattan without an address. It couldn't find my favorite restaurant in Okemos, until I added the town's name to my search.

Google Maps easily found eight, including that restaurant without the town's name. I know people have complained about Apple's maps showing landmarks at the wrong location, but Google Maps is the one that goofed: While it has the right address for the AP's Detroit office, where I worked years ago, the pin marking its location is about a block off. Apple's pin was much more accurate.

As for my parents' house, Apple is able to find it because it accesses the contacts on my phone. Google Maps doesn't do that.

For people like me who live in big cities or travel a lot, the addition of public transit information is a big plus. For basic directions, [Google Maps](#) works very well. It's able to find my apartment building in a far-flung neighborhood of the Bronx (though Google still thinks my building is about half a block north of where it actually is). It gives me a couple ways to get there on the subway and bus, along with pretty accurate travel times.

If you have a preference of subway, bus or light rail, you can filter out the other options. The app shows me the correct express bus routes from

my office to my home, but fails to mention that it costs \$5.50 to ride that bus, rather than the usual \$2.25. It also doesn't mention that regular monthly transit passes don't work on those buses.

I also asked the app for light rail options as I live about a five-minute walk from a Metro-North railroad stop. But instead of sending me across town to Grand Central Terminal to catch a 25-minute train ride home, the app offers a convoluted set of instructions that involves taking an Amtrak train to the suburbs and then heading back into the city on another Metro-North train. While technically faster, the directions are far from practical (or cheap).

It's also worth mentioning that unlike what you get with HopStop.com or the public transit agency's website, you can't ask for a handicapped accessible route. That means you can't find out if the subway stop you're traveling to has an elevator (hint: many in New York still don't). This can cause big problems for everyone from moms with strollers to the wheelchair bound. But the bigger problem is not having the transit directions at all, as Apple's mapping app is guilty of.

As with any mobile app, you're at the mercy of your wireless connection. While out walking in midtown Manhattan, I lost my cellular signal several times, putting a stop to my little blue dot's progress or sending it way off the street I was traveling down.

I knew where I was going, but if you're a tourist in an unfamiliar city, this could be a problem. That's the case whether you're using Google's or Apple's product.

The one clear advantage that Apple has is style. Like Apple devices, the maps are clean and clear and have a fun, pretty element to them, especially in 3-D. But when it comes down to depth and information, Google still reigns superior and will no doubt be welcomed back by its

fans.

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Citation: Review: New Google Maps boasts big improvements (2012, December 14) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-12-google-big.html>

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