

Review: Automatic keeps tabs on driving habits to cut gas use

November 8 2013, by Jim Rossman



This is going to be a conflicted review. Today we're looking at the Automatic (\$100), a very interesting combination of a smartphone application and a Bluetooth dongle that reads information from your car's computer. The Automatic app is available for devices running iOS and Android (in beta).

After a month with the Automatic, I'm torn - it works exactly as advertised, but I'm not sure that's enough to warrant its price tag just yet.

WHAT IT DOES: The Automatic is a system that shows you information about trips you take in your [car](#).

The included Bluetooth dongle connects to your car's OBD II port, which is usually under your dashboard on the driver's side. All cars made after 1996 should be compatible.

The dongle links up to your iPhone or Android phone each time you take a trip in your car - if you have your phone with you, of course.

The Automatic will tell you the length of each trip, time behind the wheel, miles per gallon that you drove and how much each trip cost for gas.

It also tracks three driving behaviors that will contribute to lower gas mileage: hard accelerations, hard braking, and minutes driven faster than 70 mph.

Every time you do one of those things, your weekly "score" will take a hit.

The Automatic beeps every time you get on the gas too fast or slam on the brakes. It's a reminder to try to be smoother with your driving to save gas - and it works. I do try to be smoother with my acceleration and braking just so it won't beep.

The Automatic also plots your trips on a map. For some cars, it can detect when you fill up your car with gas.

It can also detect if you've been in a crash. Agents from Automatic will

report the situation to local authorities as well as call or text up to three contacts of your choosing.

The Crash Alert system is still in beta testing and is optional.

The Automatic also reads error codes if your car is showing a "check engine" light. The [app](#) will send you a push notification when the errors occur and tell you the code to help your mechanic diagnose the problem. The app can also show you what it thinks the code means and possible ways to solve the problem.

The app can also clear the error to turn off the engine warning light.

Finally, Automatic remembers where you parked and will show you on a map, but parking garages give it a hard time.

WHAT IT DOESN'T DO: The Automatic doesn't show you any live information when you're driving.

During a trip, if you have the app open, all you see is a small status window that says you are currently driving.

When you turn off the ignition, the data for the trip is sent to the app.

You can't see your route live on a map or see how your gas mileage changes if you slow down or speed up on a long stretch of interstate.

Even after a trip, when our trip data is available, the map of your route is the size of a postage stamp.

Maps of your trip can't be zoomed in and examined, and route maps are not 100 percent accurate.

To save power, Automatic doesn't use the phone's GPS continuously, so it gathers your position every so often and makes a best guess at your route. I've had the trip data tell me I drove down a certain road when I was a few blocks over. Automatic says because the maps are not 100 percent accurate, zooming in on the maps would just cause confusion.

The gas price data is also not input by the user.

Automatic says if your car's computer can report when a fill-up happens, they'll know the price based on what gas station you're using.

If that data is not available, they'll use a localized average price.

That's great, but not accurate, and if you can't be accurate, why report a price at all?

Automatic doesn't tell you what price they're using. You have no idea how close that number is to reality.

You also can't see any of your trip data or maps on anything but your phone.

All your trip data is locked inside the Automatic app.

WHAT I'D LIKE IT TO DO: I want the Automatic app to show me live views of my speed, engine rpm, current [gas mileage](#), mileage for the trip so far, distance of the trip and a running cost for each trip based on a gas price I provide.

I'd also like each trip mapped accurately. Perhaps use constant GPS if my phone is plugged into a power source?

I'd like to be able to export the trip data and the route data to other

programs. I'd like the data and route info to be uploaded to a website regularly so I can access it anywhere.

I'd like to be able to load a week's worth of commutes onto a map and compare how fast I got to work each day and which route is best.

Automatic says it's working on adding most of these wish list items, but there's no timeline.

The company has a good Web community of users who are not shy about telling the company what they expect.

Until some of my wish list features make their way into the app, I'm not sure I can recommend a buy.

If you'd like to pick one up for yourself, they're available at Apple retail stores.

THE AUTOMATIC:

- Pros: Great link from your car to your phone. Easy to set up.

- Cons: No live data, no Web view, all information locked inside the app.

- Bottom Line: A device of fantastic potential. I can't wait to see what they have in store for version 2.0.

- Price: \$100

- On the Web: automatic.com/

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