

Review: A rearview camera may be closer than it appears with this app

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Did you know that starting in May 2018, all new vehicles sold in the United States will have to have a backup camera?

Every time I drive a car with a backup camera, I really like it. Unfortunately, my 2009 Honda didn't come equipped with a backup camera system, and even though I have a screen for my Honda navigation system, it doesn't have a video input port, so I can't add a camera to the screen that's already on my dashboard.

If I want to add a camera to my car, I'd have to mount a second screen on my dashboard - no thanks.

I've been waiting for a backup camera that would wirelessly beam the video to my cellphone, which is usually mounted next to my steering wheel.

Earlier this year I learned of a system called the Pearl RearVision (\$500), which is exactly the system I wished for.

Pearl was founded by Bryson Gardner, Joseph Fisher and Brian Sander, formerly executives with Apple's iPod group, and the Pearl team has more than 50 former Apple employees.

THE SYSTEM

In the box you'll find a frame for your rear license plate with two cameras - one for daylight and one for night. The system will automatically switch to the appropriate camera. There are also parking sensors that will alert you when you get too close to objects behind you.

The system is powered by a rechargeable battery in the frame that's kept charged by small solar panels.

The cameras connect via Wi-Fi and Bluetooth to a dongle that plugs into your car's OBD port under your dash.

The dongle also uses Wi-Fi or Bluetooth to beam the image to your smartphone, where you use a Pearl app to see the camera's view.

Pearl also includes a pretty slick magnetic phone mount you can use in your car's vents or directly on the dash.

THE APP

The Pearl app is designed to be launched when you get in the car and to be the only app you need while you're driving.

The app not only shows you the view of the camera, it can also launch four other apps that might be appropriate to use while you drive.

By default, the app has buttons to launch Maps, Waze, Apple Music and Spotify.

The buttons to launch the apps are nice and big so they're easy to press while you keep your eyes on the road.

You can swap out the apps. I replaced Spotify with Pandora. You can also place the buttons in any order you like.

When you are ready to go into reverse, you open the camera view by pressing a button in the app. The camera view stays on your phone until you start moving forward and the app buttons reappear.

IN USE

The Pearl RearVision picture is very clear. When your phone is oriented vertically, you'll see two rear images. One is a "normal" view, and one is wide angle.

You can touch the wide angle view to make the "normal" view pan left or right.

You can also touch arrows on the screen to tilt the view up or down.

When you have the phone mounted horizontally, you get one large wide-angle image that you can adjust with arrows on the screen.

If you've been in a car with a built-in backup camera, you may have seen lines superimposed on the screen to show where your tires are headed. The Pearl does not have these lines, and I wish it did.

I also hoped the backup camera image would automatically pop up on my phone's screen when I shifted my car into reverse, but it didn't.

I had to press the camera button on my phone's screen every time I wanted to see the video.

CONCLUSIONS

The Pearl RearVision is a great product. It that does what it says it will do. It's easy to install, and the hardware and software are well thought-out.

I mentioned a few things I wish the app would add. I'm sure the Pearl team is working on the next version.

It's nice to see Pearl's first auto product be such a good one. I do wish it cost \$300 instead of \$500, but I know innovation costs a bit more for early adopters.

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Pearl RearVision

Pros: Super easy install. Clear, helpful video, backup sensors.

Cons: Expensive. The camera view doesn't automatically launch in reverse.

Bottom line: The Pearl RearVision sets the bar high for backup cameras.

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