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Lingo Navigator

This gadget aims to make multilingual exchanges easier, but is it worth purchasing for your next international trip?

by Todd Haselton on April 15, 2008

The Promise

When traveling abroad, you don't always want to look like a tourist, fumbling around with a travel guide and a language dictionary. The Lingo Navigator (\$69.95) promises an [all-in-one](#) solution that translates 9,000 phrases in 12 languages: Arabic, Chinese, Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Turkish. It also offers travel guides for popular destinations.



The Gear

The unit is a small 4.3 x 2.3 x 0.5 inches, with a two-line backlit LCD display. As if the color and size weren't enough for it to remind us of a first-generation [iPod](#), it also has a circular spinning navigation wheel with a central "Enter" button. When you turn the Lingo Navigator on, the first screen displays your preset city as well as the time and date. If you hit Enter, you'll see a selection of options: Alarm, Converter, Dictionary, Games, Sentences, Settings, Sightseeing, and World Time.

To use the gadget, go to the Settings screen and set your home language and then your target language. We tested using both Chinese and Italian. The actual translation occurs in the Sentences section of the device; selecting this function will allow you to choose what type of sentence you'd like the unit to speak. For example, the Navigator is preprogrammed with common sentences in the following categories: Accommodations, Activities, Conversation, Dining, Directions, Emergencies, Shopping, and Transportation.

We chose Conversation, then General Conversation from the Menu and said "Hello" and "How much will that cost?" to fluent Chinese speakers. The voice sounded somewhat robotic, but was more fluid than we expected. You can store 25 of your most commonly used phrases in the unit, for example, "What is your name?"

The Results

The Lingo Navigator works as advertised, but it could lead to awkward conversations. Out on the streets of New York City, we tested the device with fluent Chinese and Italian speakers. Most people just awkwardly looked at the gadget, as if they were trying to figure out what it was while answering the human-voiced question that came out of it.

In the device's defense, it offered dead-on accents and correct pronunciation. But it wasn't always good at English. For example, instead of asking "how far is the hotel," or "how much does [it cost](#) to get to the hotel," in a taxi, the Lingo Navigator's menu simply says, "How much to the hotel?" which left us confused.

We also wished that the speaker on the unit was louder. On crowded streets in New York City that would be akin to an international market, we found that the volume simply wasn't loud enough. That means you'd have to literally hold the unit to someone's ear while shopping outdoors or in a busy place, which is inefficient and awkward.

The Sightseeing app is really just offers descriptions of selected destinations. We've spent time in Italy, and have been to the Campo dei Fiori market in Rome. Instead of telling you much about the area, the unit just says, "Plunge into daily life in Rome at this open-air market, where meat, fish, fruits and other products have been sold for centuries. A lively, colorful atmosphere, surrounded by enticing small shops and cafes, the market opens early and is completely gone by mid afternoon." The unit doesn't mention that the famous Giordana Bruno statue is also in this area, or even who he was. (Bruno was a philosopher killed in the piazza by public burning during the Roman Inquisition.)

The Verdict

The reality of the Lingo Navigator is that it's not a bad investment for the price. Nevertheless, you might wind up confusing the very people with whom you are trying to [communicate](#), because they'll be fixated on your gadget instead of what you're attempting to say. Plus, using a book at least demonstrates that you're trying to speak the language yourself, even if you do get the pronunciation wrong.

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