Product Report

Garmin Zumo 550
The First GPS Made Just For Motorcyclists

by Steve Larsen

Last month, LT Snyder compared the Garmin StreetPilot 2720, TomTom Rider and Lowrance iWay 500c as we awaited the arrival of Garmin’s new Zumo GPS device, designed especially for motorcyclists.

GPS units by Garmin have long been among our favorites. Although back in 2004 we found other units easier to use, the StreetPilot 2610 won the top spot and was prized for its ruggedness, ability to work in inclement weather and route planning ability (Bike-Mounted GPS: Face-off Between Two Top Units—Garmin StreetPilot 2610 vs. Magellan RoadMate 700, October 2004). Last month, the Garmin StreetPilot 2720 again nudged out the Lowrance iWay 500c and bested the TomTom Rider as the overall winner.

Garmin’s venerable StreetPilot 2610 and 2730 have been discontinued and a new Garmin Zumo 550 has been designed from the ground up for motorcycle use. Although not cheap, it is a clear winner. Every feature of the Zumo benefits from a motorcyclist’s perspective: controls are on the left side of the unit and the touch-sensitive screen is designed to be operable while wearing gloves. Even the triangle icon to show your progress on the map has been replaced with a miniature graphic of a motorcycle. As GPS options go, the Zumo 550 stakes out the high end of the spectrum in terms of rugged build, advanced features and premium price.

Feature Overview

The Zumo includes all the standard GPS features you would expect, including a nice sized touch-sensitive screen, rechargeable lithium-ion batteries (up to four hours use), solid-state pre-programmed internal memory with detailed maps, voice commands and text-to-speech so audio prompts give the names of upcoming streets or highways.

Garmin has also made a host of design changes and smart tweaks which motorcyclists will appreciate: both motorcycle and automotive mounts are included; left side controls mean left-handed operation; a glove-friendly touch-sensitive screen; and console trip information, including a fuel gauge. Add to this a rugged waterproof case that has been subjected to stringent vibration testing and built with fuel-resistant plastics to withstand not only the elements but sloppy gas station antics as well. And if you like to customize things, for a few extra bucks you can change its case color and pattern to match the color or design of your bike with carbon fiber, racing stripes or flames.

Future Proof

Pushing the inevitable need to upgrade far into the future, the Zumo comes with a built-in mp3 player and jpeg picture viewer. Plus, it supports such options as XM Satellite Radio, XM weather and XM NavTraffic. In addition, FM Traffic Message Channel traffic alerts are also optional, and would allow the unit, theoretically, to route you around traffic snarls, finding the best alternate routes if traffic is jammed ahead. Bluetooth technology is also built-in, to provide wireless navigation audio prompts. An SD card expansion slot makes adding storage easy and simplifies route sharing. You can even export and review your routes in Google Earth with a free account at www.motionbased.com, a Garmin company in Sausalito, CA.

Mounting

Unlike earlier units that did not come with required mounting hardware, everything is included with the Zumo. In an innovative departure from earlier mounting schemes, Garmin has created a new base plate which works with the ubiquitous RAM mounting hardware. This base plate (the Zumo comes with two), acts as a cradle into which the Zumo is clamped when you are ready to go. One base plate is designed to attach semi-permanently to your bike; the other is a dashboard kit with suction cup mount and a 12 V auto plug for your car or truck. Once both mounts are in place, transferring the unit from bike to car and back is simple.

Mounting the Zumo base plate to the motorcycle is a breeze: The U-bolt, bracket and nuts are included. And its fused power cable is plenty long enough to connect to your fuse box or reach all the way to the battery.

Once the mount is on the bike, it feels plenty solid. Four pins attach the Zumo to the base plate: two at the top and two on the bottom. Set it on the bottom and then push it into the top where a lever ensures a secure fit.

There is even a special security screw on top that locks the unit onto the plate. Garmin supplies a unique screwdriver (with a tip unlike any of the leading drive systems on the market) to make this final connection, significantly reducing the chances of your unit going missing—for whatever reason.
Unlike earlier Garmins which worked only when attached to a 12 V power source, the Zumo comes with a built-in rechargeable battery good for a claimed four hours.

Testing in the canyons of downtown San Francisco, I removed the unit from my car and carried it as I walked around looking for Cafe De La Presse on Grant Avenue. It easily led me six blocks from the parking garage to this popular coffee shop near Chinatown, although it needlessly tried to keep me from walking the wrong way on one-way streets. This is no small feat given the difficulty many GPSs have in downtown San Francisco.

**Installation And Setup**

In the box you find:
- The Zumo 550
- Motorcycle mount, RAM and mounting wires for motorcycle mounting
- Motorcycle, home and car chargers
- A car mount with suction cup
- A heavy-duty carrying bag
- A USB cable for connecting the Zumo to your computer
- The City Navigator maps and owner’s manual on CD
- A small, one-of-a-kind screwdriver for securing your mounts

The manual for the Garmin Zumo is 70 pages and comes only on a CD. The unit offers a host of features, so it’s worth spending some time with the manual. The 550 comes preloaded with street maps and a comprehensive points of interest (POI) database, including motels, restaurants, fuel stops and ATMs for the continental US. The preloaded maps save you from having to load maps from your computer as was necessary on earlier units.

When powered up, the unit offers just a few customization options: the amount of map detail you want to see; a 3-D or bird’s eye view; and your choice of screen icon—a motorcycle, a mini-truck, a car, or the old-style triangle.

**Sacrifices**

Making things easier often means compromising and not including every feature possible. Missing on the Zumo (versus the StreetPilot 2610/2720) are customizable tabs that, when selected, allowed you to see additional speed and routing information transparently over either side of the map display—things like time of day, time and distance to the next turn, heading, elevation and continually updated estimated arrival time based on your destination.

Some of these items: speed, tripmeter and heading, along with the new remaining fuel feature, are available on the trip information page, but it means switching from the map page. Some users of earlier units will miss seeing their favorites at a glance on the main screen. But the overall result of these changes is an easier to use GPS. Another item missing on the Zumo compared with the 2610/2720 is the remote control. I don’t see this as a big loss either, especially for a motorcyclist.

**Navigation**

Once the unit is turned on, you are offered two simple choices—“Where to?” or “View map.” Select “View map” to see your current location. Select “Where to?” and enter a destination address to see a highlight line showing your route. If you’re wired in to the audio (directly or via Bluetooth), you get turn-by-turn voice directions that speak street names. Buttons on the left (remember, “motorcycle-friendly”!) serve dual functions depending on which menu you’re viewing. They either help you browse through the menus, zoom the map in or out, turn the volume of the voice prompts up or down or toggle the trip counter on and off.

The unit comes preloaded with maps of US, Canada and Puerto Rico when purchased in the US. Buy the Zumo 550 in Europe and it comes preloaded with full European mapping, while the Zumo 500 version comes preloaded with select regional maps of Europe.

The process of entering destinations into the Zumo quickly reveals Garmin’s attention to the gloved motorcycle rider. After pressing the “Where to?” button, you’ll see six icons from which you can enter an address, go home or go to a POI. When you choose “Address,” it defaults to the state where you are.

The traditional triangle icon on most GPS devices has been replaced by a small motorcycle. Users can opt for the bike, a car, the triangle or a mini-truck.

You can also choose to spell a different state or province. After state, you “spell city.” Now you see five letter icons on top with a scroll bar below that scrolls through the alphabet. When you scroll, the big letter icons change. This lets you easily enter the city and street—even wearing gloves. As the letters are entered, it narrows your search to what is in the database. It takes a while to get used to, and at first seems a bit slow, but it is worth it to be able to enter things while wearing gloves. And if you don’t like it, you can disable it and use the ABC keyboard layout instead.

**Advanced Features**

The Zumo 550 is at the leading edge of a number of advanced technologies that will have gadget freaks in heaven. In the area of navigation, advanced users can upload customized points of interest offered as special services by others. Things like school zones, emergency services, speed camera locations, bed & breakfast directories and recreational areas can be added.

I suspect the strongest initial demand for this feature will be speed camera locations. Australia, Europe and many Scandinavian countries make extensive use of speed cameras. Should your vehicle be photographed speeding, you get a costly ticket (many times the amount of speeding fines in the US), which you are required to pay irrespective of who may have been driving your car. Using Garmin’s free POI Loader software, these camera locations can be put into the 550. You then set the 550 to alert you should you approach one of these camera zones going faster than a speed you’ve pre-selected. These sites typically offer both free and paid
Included with the Zumo are motorcycle and car mounts, RAM and mounting wires for motorcycle mounting, chargers for bike, home and car, a USB cable, pre-loaded maps, owner's manual on CD and a unique screwdriver to attach the unit to your bike.


How it works: Go to Garmin's site and download the POI Loader and install it to your computer. Once installed, find the specialized points of interest databases you want. Download it to your computer in .gpx or .csv format. Then use the PC Loader software to transfer one or more databases to the 550. Next, configure the Garmin to alert you when you are within a certain distance of a specific point. The next time you approach the school zone or speed camera area and you are driving over the speed you've preset, you're alerted. The PC Loader software is free, some of the databases are not, but most offer free trials.

The Zumo is also compatible with Garmin's Tour Guide. This is an initiative by Garmin to allow anyone to build and upload a database of POIs. Photos and mp3 files can be associated with these specific POIs. The result is that an audio file or photo can display on your Zumo automatically when your unit gets within the proximity of a particular point of interest. It is not hard to imagine this for hotels, real estate sales, bus tours, airports and other local attractions. The Zumo, Nuvi and several of the StreetPilots are compatible with this Tour Guide feature.

Display

The Zumo display is 2.8" x 2.1", (with a 3.5" diagonal). It delivers 320 x 240 pixels. A UV-resistant covering is intended to keep the unit looking bright for years. Garmin claims a super bright display to help make it readable in direct sunlight. In practice, I found it bright with excellent contrast, and on par with previous units. Garmin refers to the screen as QVGA which stands for Quarter VGA. Back when desktop computers conformed to a standard called VGA (video graphics array) this meant an “amazing” 16 colors and a resolution of 640 x 480 pixels. The QVGA is a quarter of that, 320 x 240 pixels, but, in this case, 64,000 colors.

Ease Of Use

As LT Snyder pointed out in his comparison last month, our standard for ease of use is how many times we have to access the owner's manual for operating instructions. The out-of-the-box experience with the Zumo is far better than earlier units.

In the past we dinged Garmin for not being as easy to use as some of its competitors. This is not nearly as much of an issue with the Zumo. Yes, the Zumo offers many new substantial features that require complex interactions with your computer and various Web sites to get them all working properly. Yet basic navigation — "get me from here to there" — is simple. Open the box, plug it in, and go. More complex operations are addressed in the manual or are hidden behind menu choices.

That said, Garmin is not all of the way home when it comes to support and usability. The Web site and manual would benefit from step-by-step directions on how to take advantage of the more complex activities. To be fair, the Zumo is brand-new. The longer it is out, the more complete the information on the Web site becomes. But as of this writing, the cool extra features are not as easy to access as they could be.

Trip Reviews

In contention for coolest new GPS feature on the planet is the "Google my route" feature. With the Zumo, you can review a particular trip and see it from the air using Google Earth. Imagine sending your route to a friend to preview—or a recent ride to salivate over. How cool is that? It takes a free membership at Motion-Based (www.motionbased.com). This company, now owned by Garmin, provides a Web application that translates GPS data into functional analysis and online mapping. Sensibly designed for the hard-core endurance Web and outdoor athlete, it works just fine for motorcyclists. After a ride, upload your route to the Motion-Based website, export it to Google Earth, then fly over it or see the route in 3-D. Like a lot of things, it's a bit more difficult than it seems at first, but here is how to make it happen:

1. Take a ride with your Zumo attached. It automatically records your route. It also records other data, such as the exact roads you travel, speed, elevation, weather, time and date, etc.
2. Open a free account on www.motionbased.com and download the software. Connect the Garmin 550 to your PC and select "synchronize activities" in the MotionBased software. This transfers the route data from your Garmin to the MotionBased Web site. Next go to your inbox at the site (free when you register). This is the staging and route preview area. Find the route you just uploaded. Name it and personalize it with details that will help you be able to find it again.
3. Click on your route to get a summary page with map, elevation, date, time, duration, distance, speed, weather conditions and GPS strength. Click on the Google Earth link. You will see your route overlaid on Google Earth. Click on the play button and you'll see your route replayed on the screen, with a flyover perspective. On MotionBased's site you can also replay your route against a variety of background maps, including street, photo or topographical.

This is totally awesome and addictive. Not only can you review a trip with
friends, you can plan a trip route and then e-mail it to those going on the ride. Once everyone likes what you have planned, transfer the route to the Zumo and use it to guide you along the route you’ve planned, including food and fuel stops and any local attractions.

Traffic, Weather And Radio
An early Zumo owner remarked to me that what drew him to the unit was the opportunity to reduce the clutter of three units (GPS, mp3 player and XM radio) on his handlebars to just one—the Zumo 550. To use the 550 as an XM receiver you need to buy the GXM 30 hockey puck-shaped antenna (list price $267) and an XM subscription ($12.95/month). The 3" diameter GXM 30 processes all XM information, radio and traffic, and sends the data to your unit for display. Check the weather, move ahead of traffic and listen to the radio when you travel.

Cell Phone Integration With Bluetooth
The Zumo also incorporates Bluetooth wireless technology to enable talking on the phone without removing your gloves or helmet. Just a quick reminder: Never even think about talking on a cell phone when riding a motorcycle! It’s not a safe practice in a car, which makes it completely out of the question for a motorcycle rider. Studies have found that compared with drivers who are drunk or sober, drivers talking on cell phones have slower reactions, longer following distances and are involved in more accidents.

That said, if you connect the Zumo to a Bluetooth-enabled headset or helmet, you can make and receive calls hands free. You can even make phone calls to sites found in the points of interest database with the Zumo Bluetooth interface—while parked by the side of the road, of course. The real benefit of this feature is having navigational voice prompts sent to your headset so you can hear them (wirelessly). Listening to directions can also be safer than taking your eyes off the road to check the GPS screen.

Garmin connects to most Bluetooth ear pieces. The Zumo has a double Bluetooth connection so you can pair both a helmet-mounted ear piece (for GPS voice prompts) and a mobile phone to the unit at the same time and they both will work.

Summary
As LT noted in last month’s comparison, we questioned whether GPS devices be-longed on a motorcycle when they were first released. Heck, we’ve done tens of thousands of miles with a tank bag map. And wouldn’t a GPS be dangerous or distracting? In use, I’ve become a believer. Once oriented, a quick glance at the display to see the thick, marked line takes only a fraction of a second. I would now argue the GPS makes for a safer ride versus checking a tank bag map.

The Garmin Zumo 550 is a clear winner for motorcyclists. It goes right to the top of our wish list and onto our Internet price alert services. At a list price of $1076 (the same as the 2610 when it was launched) it anchors the high end of GPS options, although I think we can expect the price to drop quickly.

But for the gadget freak who must have the latest and the best, we suspect the 550 will be the unit to beat for some time to come. Just recently, Garmin announced the Zumo 450. The 450 retains the most important motorcycle features—waterproof, rugged, preloaded maps and left-side controls—but eliminates XM and Bluetooth. Its list price is $857.13, which saves buyers more than a couple hundred bucks.

Garmin International—$1076.91; 1200 E. 151st St., Olathe, KS 66062; (913) 397-8200; www.garmin.com

SMART WAYS TO USE A GPS DEVICE

T Snyder and I are two of the more gadget-oriented writers here at MCN. Although our initial reaction to mounting a GPS on a bike was “Why?,” we’ve both come to see it as a valuable tool that increases the fun of riding by reducing the need to worry about missing the next turn, the distance to our destination, or the proximity of the next gas station.

Keep in mind, we both do a good number of longish trips, which is where a GPS really shows its value. If you ride only in familiar surroundings, a GPS may be more difficult to justify.

Besides the cost, we’ve heard concerns about the potential distraction of a rider. Will looking at a GPS unit cause you to drive off the road or into oncoming traffic? In practice, a quick glance at the display to see the thick, marked line takes only a fraction of a second. And nearly all newer units feature audio prompt capability, so most of the time there is no need to take your eyes off the road.

And, one could argue that a GPS makes you a safer rider. How many times have you driven down a street, searching for an address by trying to read the numbers on the front of a building instead of paying attention to the car in front of you? Have you ever quickly changed course because you saw your turn at the last minute? GPS devices help eliminate these driving dangers. They tell you where your destination is and the precise time and distance to your next turn.

That said, it’s smart to get familiar with your new GPS in the car before attaching it to your bike. Read the manual and know how to use all of the functions. The better you know your unit, the faster you’ll be able to find what you need when riding.

An MCN reader once asked, “What can I use the thing for?” Here’s one: I frequently leave my apartment for a day ride here in Northern California, heading off into the hills between Silicon Valley and the coast, exploring any interesting road that presents itself. I wander for hours, getting totally lost, until I feel like heading home. Then I turn on my GPS, select “Home” and let it navigate me back. Great fun.