VMS GPS receiver

Nifty Navigator

Off-road GPS navigators are becoming more common and are into their second generation such as VMS Touring 500.

Words and Photos by **Robert Pepper**

VMS have been around the 4WD navigation market for a while, offering navigation units with real off road capability. The Touring range is their latest development, and these can run either in road mode as an autorouter, or off road mode displaying topographic maps. A point of differentiation is the reverse camera feature which allows one or two cameras to be connected for viewing on the screen. There are two models, the 4.3-inch diagonal screen 430 and our review model, the 500 with its 5-inch screen.

The 500 is supplied with a USB cable, screen protector, suction mount, 12v and 240v charger, quick-start manual, 8Gb SD card and a DVD containing a copy of the desktop GPS software Memory Map and VMS's iTopo maps, for $990. The only thing missing is a carry case. The USB is used only for power and is a standard mini-USB connector, and there's a single button for power, everything else is touch-screen.

Memory-Map's full-screen mode.

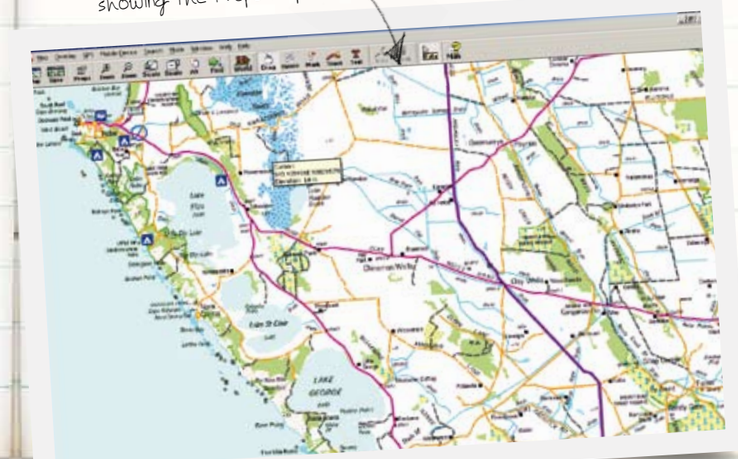
The on road autorouting works very well. It is easy to use, quick, plenty of features and customisable, using the Sensis Wherels maps. We have found the Navteq maps to offer much better off road coverage, but the 500 can be switched to off road mode where it runs Memory-Map Navigator instead. This mode offers all the features you'd want on an off-road in-car nav system; waypoints, routes, placename find, tracklogs, and it can also show a full-screen map. The desktop version of Memory Map, also supplied, does all that and more so can be used to create your trip and then download the details to the Touring. This will need to be done by removing the SD card and placing it in a desktop PC card reader. There's around 5.5Gb free on the 8Gb disk, so plenty of space for extra maps. The Memory Map system is, for this class of software, fairly user-friendly, but the smaller icons require use of the supplied stylus rather than the autorouter's finger-tap interface. We did notice that the 500 was impressively quick to respond to input most of the time, not something that can always be said about these devices.

The iTopo off road map.

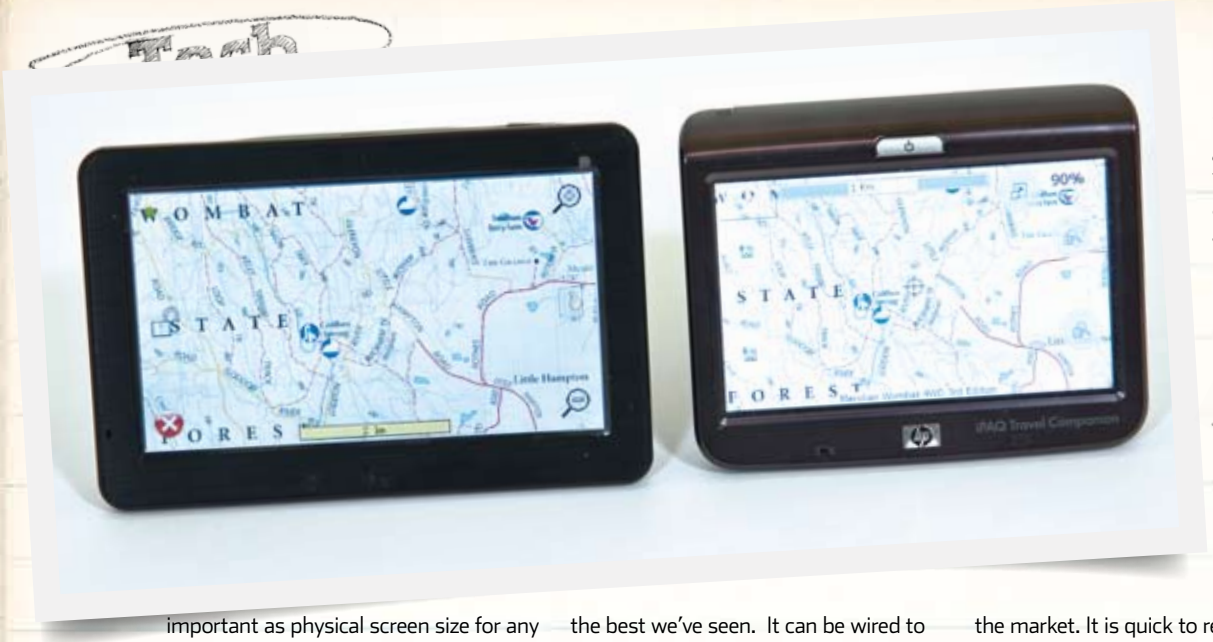
The iTopo maps are new and, overall, excellent. They are at a good scale for the unit, colour is used effectively, and the maps strike a reasonable balance between detail and an overall sense of where you are. In some state forests we're familiar with not all tracks were marked, but in the High Country the majors are all there, although some of the intersections would be hard to read at that scale. Still, you'd manage, and if we had to pick just one map to navigate all of Australia this one would be pretty close to the top. Additional maps can be added easily, for example we copied Meridian's new maps onto the SD card and they loaded after refreshing the map view. For an extra $249 per state there are 1:25,000 topo maps for Vic, NSW and Tas which should give you very good detail everywhere, and for Victorians, the excellent Rooftops maps for $199. These are all supplied locked to an SD card, which unfortunately means you must swap cards depending on what map you want, but it does mean pre-configured simplicity. Alternatively, you could buy the maps yourself and create your own card. The autorouter's maps aren't on the card so are not affected. There are also marine charts, and while not supplied, Hema's maps can be added in the same way.

On-road navigation

Screenshot of Memory Map showing the iTopo map.



While the screen is a much-trumpeted 5-inch diagonal, one of the larger ones, that's not the whole story. The resolution is still only 480x272 pixels, so there's no more information on the screen than similar units at 4.3 inches. See the sidebar for an explanation of why resolution is just as



The Touring 500 compared with an iPaq 312 with a 4-inch screen at 800x400.

important as physical screen size for any form of screen. We'd have liked to see the Touring at 800x480, a resolution used by the 4.3-inch iPaq 312 which therefore matches the 500 for clarity with a smaller screen size. We'd also like a better mount, as 4WDers really need something more effective than the cheap suction mount supplied, and there should be a carry case. At some point hopefully we'll also see a sunshade for them too, but these are really the only criticisms of what is a very good unit. The performance of the GPS receiver is, like all modern units, excellent so there will be almost no call for an external antenna. The reversing camera works acceptably well but isn't the best we've seen. It can be wired to your reversing lights so the Touring will automatically switch into video mode when you select reverse.

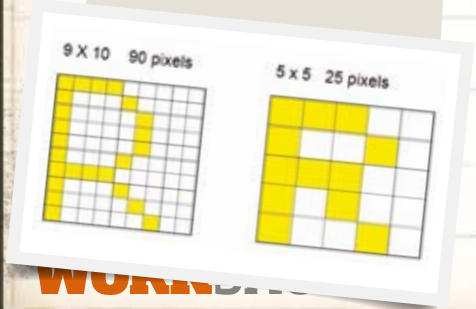
If you like the idea of a Touring but already have Oziexplorer the good news is you can buy a 500 with no software for $625 -- OziCE v2.31 is even preloaded, just enter your license key and you're away, and the excellent GA 1:250K maps are also supplied in Ozi format are preloaded as well. This is an important point, given many people have existing investments in maps and skills in Oziexplorer. The 430 is exactly the same unit for $690 but comes with a 4GB SD card although that could easily be upgraded.

Support is readily available from VMS's Melbourne base, and there's quite a number of support materials and YouTube videos available to get you started. Not that it's difficult, just switch it on and away you go. Speaking of videos, the Touring can play videos, show photos and play MP3s. It is not very good at any of this multimedia work – the low-res screen starts to really limit things -- so you're much better off buying a dedicated media player instead.

In summary, this is one of the best off-road/on-road navigation devices on the market. It is quick to respond, has some good software, you can buy it with or without various options, comes with some very useable Australia-wide maps and even a desktop version for trip planning, making it something of an all-in-one kit. You can also change it to Oziexplorer if you wish, and it's well supported. Definitely one to consider for your off-road navigation needs.

Resolution and screen size

Often in these reviews we talk about resolution, which is an important measure of screen clarity. Computer screens are made up of thousands of tiny lights called pixels, each of which can be lit in a different colour to create the text and images on a display. A screen of 480x272 has 480 pixels horizontally and 272 vertically. The more pixels there are for a given screen size, the clearer the screen as the graphic shows.



VMS Touring 500 (with StreetNav and iTopo)	$990
VMS Touring 430 (with StreetNav and iTopo)	$690
Camera	$199-$249

For more price options go to www.vms4x4.com

Also consider...

An alternative is the new Hema Navigator with the same 480x272 5-inch screen as the Touring 500, also handles a reversing camera but also offers Bluetooth for your phone and a FM transmitter, so a better specced device if those features are important. The Navigator also runs Memory Map, but additionally includes the feature-rich OziexplorerCE. It also comes with Hema's excellent mapset, and its autorouter uses Navteq maps. However, the memory card is 4Gb and no desktop version is supplied. The maps are interchangeable too, Hema's maps can be used on the VMS 500 and Memory Map's Topo can be run on the Hema as it has Memory Map included. This doesn't help you choose, so really it comes down to which one is the best price and has the best map bundle for your particular needs now, bearing in mind you can easily add maps to either.

The Porares NV618 is another option but has no off-road maps, but they can be easily loaded. A final alternative is simply creating your own for less than any of the above if you know how to install the software onto a PDA, but if you knew how to do that you wouldn't need us to tell you that you could! Many users will prefer to spend the extra and simply have it all set up for them ready to roll.