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For Those in Paris About to Park, a Service That Tells Them Where

By JETHRO MULLEN

PARIS, Nov. 19 — A service starting next month may help soothe the nerves of harried Parisian drivers: it could help them locate a nearby parking spot using a cellphone or GPS navigation device.

The system will monitor about 120 garages across Paris. Using their cellphones, drivers will be able to find out whether a nearby garage is open and has available parking spots.

If all goes according to plan, drivers prowling for parking will not be the only ones who benefit.

“At certain times of day, 20 to 25 percent of vehicles are in search of a parking space. With this service, we should be able to improve the traffic flow,” said François Le Vert, a representative of the Fédération Nationale des Métiers du Stationnement, an organization of parking garages that helped develop the system.

Eight companies are participating: Orange and SFR, the two leading French mobile networks; Canal TP, Navx and V-Traffic, which specialize in travel and navigation software; the consulting firms Setec and Carte Blanche Conseil and New Technology for Citizens, a group of companies that provides travel services.

Participating parking garages are linked via Internet to a central server, and when the status of a garage changes — open or closed, full or offering a needed spot — it sends a message to the server, which sends updates to the service providers.

At Orange, customers will be able to consult the parking database free via the Orange World portal on any compatible cellphone. The only charges will be for downloading the data. Orange can find the caller’s approximate location by determining which antenna the phone is connecting to, or the user can simply enter an address.

Alexandre Nepveu, Orange’s director of marketing for telematic and automobile applications, said the company planned to add a service for cellphones equipped with GPS receivers early next year that will allow drivers to be guided to the nearest available garage much more precisely.

Mr. Nepveu left open the possibility that the service could be made available to customers of foreign networks, but for now, the service will be available only in French to Orange customers with contracts in France.

Jean Cherbonnier, a founder of Navx, said any driver could sign up for the package offered by his company.

Navx’s service is compatible with about half of all personal navigation devices on the market now, and Mr. Cherbonnier said he expected this to increase to 80 percent within six months. The company also markets a service that tells drivers the locations of speed cameras.

Navx has plans to spread the system beyond France.

“We’re already in touch with parking garages in Germany,” Mr. Cherbonnier said. “The German project is for February and will include about 800 garages across the country.”

After Germany, Mr. Cherbonnier said Navx would like to take aim at Switzerland, Italy, Britain, Austria and Spain.

But similar systems are cropping up in the United States as well. A Massachusetts company, SpotScout, is working to create a virtual marketplace for parking spaces in high-demand areas in Boston, New York and San Francisco. Using cellphones and the Internet, customers will be able to provide offers and requests for private parking spaces. Farther in the future, SpotScout hopes to allow users to trade information about the availability of parking spaces on the street.

Andrew Rollert, chief executive of SpotScout, said he had received inquiries from Europe and Asia.

The system is free to join, he said, but the company intends to adopt an [eBay](#)-like business model, taking a small percentage of each transaction and letting the market determine the price of a parking spot.

Meanwhile, mobileParking, a company in Maryland, has started a service in more than 40 American cities that lets drivers call an operator who guides them to the garage with spaces closest to their destination.

Might drivers be putting themselves and others in danger by using these services at the wheel?

In Mr. Cherbonnier's opinion, the use of cellphones and personal navigation devices is preferable to rummaging through the glove compartment for the right guide book.

"I don't think it's a danger," he said. "It's just a way of replacing books, guides and maps."

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