Google Maps displays traffic light locations

July 10 2020, by Peter Grad

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For millions of motorists around the globe, GPS traffic guidance has become indispensable. This week, Google confirmed it has been testing a feature that will make getting to where you want to go even easier:

traffic light locations.

Many motorists often rely on GPS recommendations for the quickest or shortest routes to their destinations. But one issue frequently crops up for users who weigh alternate routes: Sometimes the lighter traffic on otherwise lengthier routes along local roads are preferable to clogged highways, and ultimately faster, especially during rush hour. But are those local roads heavily populated with traffic lights? If so, numerous lights could outweigh the advantages of a lighter traffic load.

In addition, poorly timed traffic signals—that is, signals intentionally designed to throttle traffic and force stops every few blocks—can be a great drawback.

Drivers on the Upper West Side in New York City, for instance, know that congestion along the West Side Highway turns the major thoroughfare into a parking lot fairly frequently. Savvy drivers know they can alternately cruise north along Amsterdam Avenue unimpeded by traffic lights situated on every corner for large stretches if they maintain a cruising speed of about 20 mph. On the other hand, there is no escaping frequent stops at red lights along Broadway, regardless of speed.

So the introduction of traffic light locations is welcome news for users of any of the several GPS apps popular on today's smartphones.

Although it has not officially been announced, traffic light locations are appearing on at least some users' Google Maps apps. Google appears to be testing the feature before a formal rollout. It has been seen recently on Android phones only.

Google is said to be testing the feature, which will also denote stop signs, in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Chicago. Traffic light

locations have been available on Japanese Google apps for a few years.

But Google is not the first to offer traffic light locations. With the launch of iOS 13 a year ago, Apple Maps provided traffic signal and stop sign locations.

GPS is used not just for auto navigation but for such varied purposes as military operations, disaster relief and emergency search and rescue missions, earthquake detection systems, cartography, geofencing, photographic geotagging, robotics, assessing the spread of disease and tracking the mating habits of butterflies.

The GPS tracking system consists of more than two dozen satellites. GPS units must connect with at least four satellite to ensure the most accurate positioning data. Mountains, buildings and severe weather can compromise accuracy.

A multi-billion-dollar project is underway that will bring more accurate and longer lasting satellites into the GPS constellation. Currently, GPS guidance is accurate to about 16 feet. The new system will bring accuracy to about 3 feet. It should be fully operational by 2023.

The U.S. Department of Defense began research on GPS—Global Positioning System —in 1973. The department drew heavily on research by one of the only black mathematicians in the agency at the time, Gladys West. She was inducted into the Air Force Space and Missile Pioneers Hall of Fame in 2018 and has been referred to as the mother of the GPS.

Citation: Google Maps displays traffic light locations (2020, July 10) retrieved 2 May 2024 from https://techxplore.com/news/2020-07-google-traffic.html