

Alexa, are you ready to live in the car, too?

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There's a reason a new product announced by Amazon 12 months ago never got released to the public.

Echo Auto just isn't ready for drive time.

The product has an unbelievably affordable price at \$25 and was offered initially by "invite-only" on a first-come, first-served basis. I did get my invite recently, forked over the big bucks, and tested the unit in my 2012 Hyundai. (The price goes to \$50 when, and if, Amazon releases it to everyone.)

The tiny unit, which looks like the old iPod Nano, but with an Amazon smile splashed across the front, connects to the 12-volt car socket for power, and your smartphone's Bluetooth to bring the Internet to your car, thus bringing audio through your car stereo without having to hassle with wires.

The good: You can bring Amazon's personal assistant to the car, to play on-demand music, news and podcasts for you, read back your latest e-mail, find the nearest gas station, tell you what's on your calendar and help you find the nearest Starbucks.

It can tell you your next calendar appointment, let you contribute to shopping and to-do lists and read audiobooks from Audible.

But on the basic selling point of Alexa—a personal assistant who talks to you to save time on you peering your head into your phone or typing away—it often falls down.

What's the No. 1 thing we drivers need more than anything else? Turn-by-turn, spoken directions. Alexa can do that. Sort of.

Say, "Alexa, find me the nearest gas station," and you'll get a choice of three nearby locations. You have to then ask again to select your choice. And, instead of the spoken directions that we thrive on, Alexa directs you to open your smartphone and look at the mapping. Ditto for requests for a local restaurant.

How does that help me when I'm cruising 70 mph down the freeway?

There is a workaround, but it's not pretty.

To get the directions, pull over, open up Google Maps or Waze, click the microphone on the phone with your request, and the app will then read the directions to you, through the car speakers.

But who wants to pull over to do this?

Amazon isn't the first to offer car service for Alexa. Anker offers the Roav Viva, which we reviewed earlier in the year when it sold for \$50. Now it's just over \$23 and compatible with Apple and Google devices. Garmin also offers the Garmin Speak, a similar unit for \$50.

We prefer the Viva to the Speak and Echo Auto for one simple reason: It plugs into the 12V directly and offers two USB charging ports as well, accessories that really come in handy. The Echo Auto has one extra USB slot.

Plus, the Viva is available for sale now. The Echo Auto isn't.

Consumers might be interested in the extra microphones in the Amazon device, however. It offers eight microphones, which it says helps it to be understood even with the window open and people screaming in the car. The Viva has two microphones.

For folks with [privacy concerns](#), remember that these units capture your voice every time you say the "Alexa" wake word, on recordings that are stored by Amazon. You can either turn the microphones off while driving, which would make the unit worthless, or go into the settings section of your Alexa app and manually delete your recordings. There is no way to stop Amazon from making recordings of you if you use the product.

Also note that if you use these units and hit known dead spots when you're driving, you'll have no [internet access](#), as you're victim to however good a signal you can get from Verizon, AT&T and the other carriers.

Amazon said it has no update on release plans for Echo Auto.

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