

## Garmin Motorcycle GPS – N6JCB (Updated - Originally published in the June 2019 Newsletter)

I've done some research on the latest Garmin GPS's designed specifically for motorcycle use and thought I would share my results.

I previously had a Garmin 550 and currently have a Garmin 660.



Both are dedicated motorcycle units and have served well. Had a couple of display problems with the 550, but Garmin was very good at replacing at little or no cost. The 660 has been flawless for many years. But Garmin is ending hardware support for the 660's I thought I'd see what their latest offerings are.

They have two motorcycle specific units – the Zumo 595 and Zumo 396. In fact, when I contacted them for some info, they offered me a discount on the 595 as a “loyal” customer. (List price on the 595 is \$699, available on Amazon for \$569 and they offered it to me for \$489.) However, their new 396 is listed at \$399 but is available everywhere for \$299 – so still \$190 less than the 595.) So, I ordered both the 595 and the 396 from Amazon, knowing I could return them with little or no trouble. (Can't find either locally. Though Cyclegear sells both – but at full list price.)

The Garmin 595LM (all come with lifetime maps these days – i.e. “LM”) – has a 5” screen vs. the 4.3 on both the 660 and the 396. And the body is “huge”. It's a big unit. The first thing I noticed is the display – it is “dull”. Not very much contrast. I compared it to both the 660 and the 396 and both of those have much better contrast. (A caveat – there are “Map Themes” that I later discovered – which might improve the 595 readability. But I had already returned the unit, so I couldn't check. However, on the 396 – the default was much better than the default on the 595.)



Also, when on battery power, when the battery reaches a certain low level, the display dims to about 40% and cannot be overridden. This is also true of the 396, but not the 660. And at 40%, you'll never be able to read the display during the daytime. And, speaking of batteries, the 595 has a removable battery, the 396 does not.

Another limitation of the 595 (as well as the 396) is a maximum of 29 waypoints on a route. If you build a route in Basecamp with more than 29 points, it will load into the unit, but when you import that route on the device itself, it will break the route into multiple routes. The good news is – the end point of the first segment is the beginning point of the next segment. I have since worked an event with this limitation, and it was not a big problem, though I'm spoiled by the 660 not having this limit.

Checking with Garmin on this 29 waypoint limit – those I’ve “talked” to can’t explain why the limit is there, however, they did give me an alternative. There is apparently a way to set a waypoint to a “shaping point” (they call it) – basically set it in Basecamp to “Don’t alert on arrival (shaping point)”. Which theoretically means – I can now load a route with more than 29 waypoints, but I have to set the “Don’t Alert” to enough of them so that the total “Alerts” is 29 or less. A quick test showed that this appears to work. When I open the route, all the waypoints are there – but some are marked differently as no “Alerts”. That seemed to work on this last event as well.

Another annoying limit on both the 595 and 396 – there are no labels on the waypoints on the display map of the unit. Very distressing. So, you can’t tell from the map which waypoint you’re approaching. There may be another display that you can bring up to show you nearby waypoints, but still working on that. Again – not a problem on earlier units.

The 595 comes with their traditional motorcycle wiring harness - with several cables (single harness out of the unit/mount, but eventually spreading out over several wires.) In addition to the power cables (+/-) there’s a USB cable, a microphone cable, a stereo in cable and a stereo out cable. This pretty much matches the earlier cable for the 660 and 550. The 396 only has a single power cable – 2 wires. Interestingly, the 595 power cable has an inline fuse. The 396 manual shows an inline fuse but that was eliminated and there is a small inline box that is a power converter – from 10-30v down to 4.9-5.5v (USB levels.). And that box apparently has a built-in auto-resetting fuse. (See the update at the end of this article. Ed.)

Also – on the 660 there are two data displays in the bottom left and right corners of the display. Both can be customized to show whatever data you like (e.g. Time to Destination, Distance to next turn, Elevation, Sunset etc.). On both the 595 and 396 – only the right one can be customized. On the left one you can dig down through some menus to show many other data fields in new window – but none can be selected for the default. (A bit distracting. And, BTW – the left one defaults so Speed – somewhat useless given you a speedometer just a few degrees away in your line-of-sight.). On the other hand – there is a “tool” option on the map that gives you the ability to quickly some other information, but, still..... (This “feature” has since been submitted to Garmin.)

One of the more disappointing things about the 595 is the lack of ability to turn off Auto-recalculation. This seems to be a hit and miss item for Garmin units. I can turn off Auto-recalc on both the 396 and 660 (and old 550) but not on the 595, or my wife’s 3590. And Bill Douglass reports similar results – some units have that ability, some do not. For our purposes in supporting events and following routes – being able to turn off auto-recalc is significant. Seems like the Garmin designers don’t talk to each other?

Another disappointing thing about the 595 – while it does come with both a M/C mount/cable and an Auto mount/cable – the cable for the auto mount is proprietary. At first glance it looks like a micro USB cable, but it is not. Go figure. So, if you move it from one car to another – you have to take the cable with you. Not a huge deal, but I hardwire my GPS mounts so I can freely move the GPS without messing with cables.

As for the 396 – as noted it is brighter, more contrasty and, in general, easier to read. The big difference between the 396 and the 660 is the definition of the lines (roads etc) on the display. They are much finer, so easier to read. Again – according to the published specs, the resolution and display type are supposedly the same on the 660 and 396 – however, there is a clear difference between the two. And for me – this is a “difference” maker. The 396 is a nice compact unit. While the display is the same size as the 660, the unit itself is a little smaller and lighter. This unit I could carry around as a handheld if needed. Though the battery life is listed at only about 4 hours (as is the 595 – the 660 is listed at 5 hours.).



One other improvement on the 396 over my 660 is its touch sensitivity. It is much more responsive (sometimes too much so) such that it is a pleasure to use.

Both the 396 and 595 are supported in the Garmin Smartlink app (for both iPhone and Android) but I have yet to mess with that very much. Supposedly you can get some traffic and weather info from the app to the device, but I haven't checked that out yet. (Update – It picks up the weather nicely from my iPhone.)

I have generally limited my discussion to points I think are important to us in working events. There are many reviews online for both devices, so I won't go into those.

In my case, I've settled on the 396 as enough of an improvement (primarily the display and touch sensitivity) to warrant the upgrade price of \$300. I could not begin to justify even the \$489 price offered by Garmin. I'll hang onto my 660 as a backup – though it's starting to act a little flaky.

Interestingly – I just did a quick out-and-back (300 miles round trip) with Zippy (Mark – KE6ZRP) to Santa Ynez and back and had both the 396 and 660 mounted. Both worked well on the route Mark setup, but he didn't use as many waypoints as we would normally use and, between us we had 4 GPS's running. And there were times when all 4 were saying different things. Some of that had to do with whether auto-recalc was on or not (I had one on and one not). But it was interesting to see how well they tracked with turns etc.

Don't hesitate to holler if you have any questions about these units – especially the 396 now that I've put a few miles on it.

John Beckwith, N6JCB  
[jbeckwit47@gmail.com](mailto:jbeckwit47@gmail.com)

Update: Per a later article – I mounted an Aux electrical box on the front of my handlebars. It has a 12v Aux port and 2 5v USB ports. I modified the 396 cable – cut it to about 6" and installed a waterproof connector. I then made up a 6" USB cable with the matching waterproof connector on the other end. So, I have about a 12" cable from the GPS to the Aux box. Simple and clean (though not fully waterproof because the 5v USB ports on the Aux box are not waterproof. Well, you can't have everything, now can you? Or can you.)