

Smartphone Directions May Put Novice Hikers in Danger, Experts Say

From New Hampshire to Scotland, services like Google Maps can direct ill-prepared hikers onto trails that would challenge even the most experienced climbers, mountaineers said.



Ben Nevis in Scotland, the highest peak in Britain, is a popular spot for hikers but it is also known for its treacherous terrain and shifting weather conditions. Thincat

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July 18, 2021

For inexperienced hikers, smartphones are a multipurpose tool: a flashlight, an emergency beacon and a GPS, all in one device. But it can be ill-advised, and possibly life-threatening, for hikers to rely solely on their phones as they head into the wilderness, experts say.

Apps and online maps have disoriented hikers on both sides of the Atlantic.

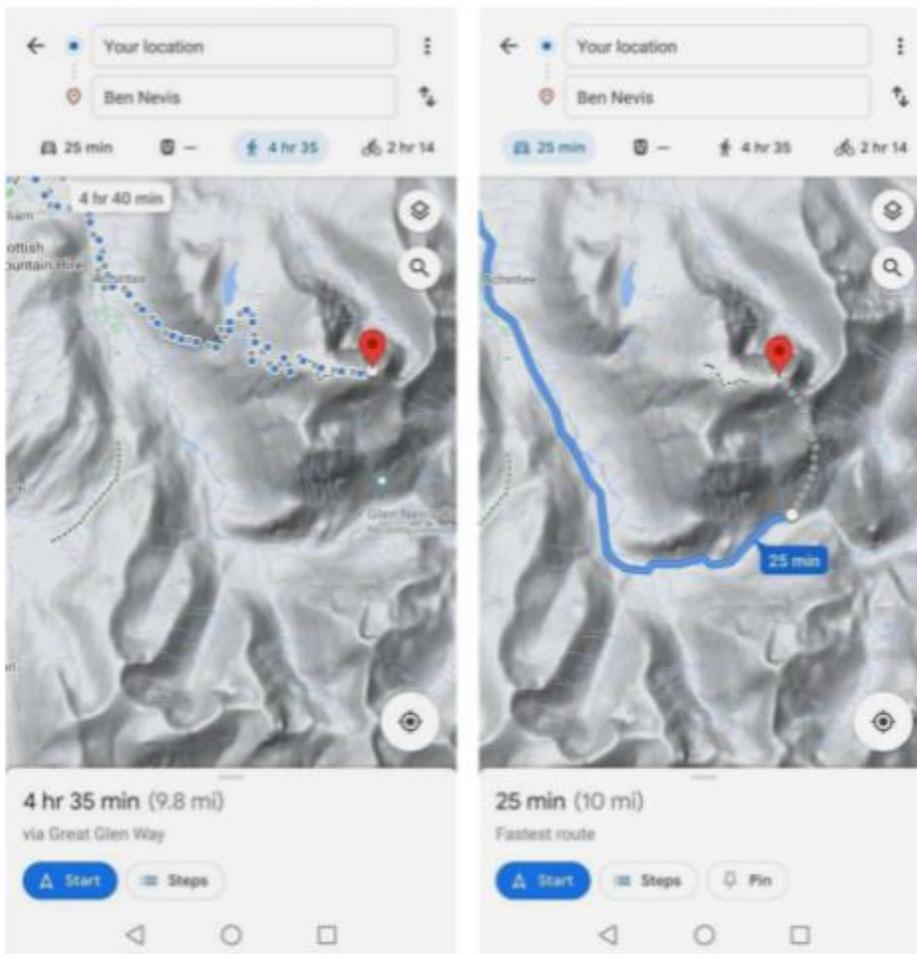
In Scotland, mountaineers are warning visitors that Google Maps may direct them toward “potentially fatal” trails that would force them to trek over cliffs and rocky, steep terrain.

A number of visitors recently have relied on Google Maps to reach the summit of Ben Nevis, a 4,500-foot mountain, according to a joint [statement](#) on Thursday from Mountaineering Scotland, a climbing organization, and the John Muir Trust, a charity that maintains natural areas in Britain.

Ben Nevis, a popular but dangerous climbing spot in the Scottish Highlands about 70 miles northwest of Glasgow, is the highest peak in Britain.

If hikers follow Google’s directions to the parking lot nearest the summit, the map points them to a route straight up the mountain. Even experienced climbers would struggle up that path, Heather Morning, a mountain safety adviser for Mountaineering Scotland, said in the statement.

“In good visibility it would be challenging,” Ms. Morning said. “Add in low cloud and rain and the suggested Google line is potentially fatal.”



Google’s directions point hikers to a route straight up Ben Nevis in Scotland. Even the most experienced climbers would struggle along that path, a mountain safety adviser warned. Google Maps

The trouble is that, while smartphones have made a lot of activities easier, from hailing a car to ordering takeout, the devices have complicated things for some hikers who don't realize they'll need much more than their phones.

Mountaineering Scotland reported that a number of people in the country have been injured recently after following hiking routes they found online. Ben Nevis has been the site of a number of deaths in recent years, including a [24-year-old woman last month](#) and [three men in 2019](#).

The mountaineers' warning comes as hikers have flocked to the outdoors and trails during the coronavirus pandemic. While hiking itself is a safe, socially distanced endeavor, [injuries have become an issue as more people hit the trails](#).

Ben Nevis isn't the only mountain where hikers have gotten into trouble. In New Hampshire, mountain rescuers said they have saved many people who were ill-equipped for their outings.

Hikers who have lost their way in the White Mountains call the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department at least once a week in the summer, said Sgt. Alex Lopashanski, a conservation officer for the department.

"They try to follow a trail on their phone, which takes them into the woods, and they get themselves so lost," he said.

These hikers cannot tell where they are because their screens are much smaller than paper maps, Sergeant Lopashanski said. If officers can't direct them back to a trail over the phone, it may take several hours for rescuers to find them.

Further complicating factors include wandering into remote areas without cell service or the devices running out of power, rendering them useless to summon help.

Rescue agencies join the operation if the hikers are in danger. Rick Wilcox, a member of the Mountain Rescue Service in New Hampshire, said many of the people he saves don't have a map or a compass.

"People think a magic cellphone is all they need and they go, 'Let me check Google,'" Mr. Wilcox said, "and that's where they go wrong."

Wesley Trimble, a spokesman for the American Hiking Society, said he was concerned about people using apps to follow routes that are not approved by experts.

"A lot of information on the internet is crowdsourced, so there isn't necessarily any input from land managers or parks or trail organizations," he said.

In Scotland, [the authorities](#) recommend that visitors bring a paper map and a compass to Ben Nevis, even on the novice trails.

For those willing to brave the mountain's icy terrain, steep climbs and poor visibility, it is an eight-hour round trip to the summit from the visitor center. But if hikers follow Google Maps to its recommended starting point, their journey will be far more treacherous.

The John Muir Trust posted signs in the area to direct inexperienced climbers to the visitor center, but people often ignore these postings, a spokeswoman for the charity said.

In a statement, a Google spokeswoman said the map's dotted line from the parking lot to the summit is meant to indicate the distance to the top, not a walkable trail.

“Our driving directions currently route people to the Nevis Gorge trailhead parking lot — the lot closest to the summit — which has prominent signs indicating that the trail is highly dangerous,” the statement said.

Regardless, the company said users will now be directed to the mountain's visitor center instead of the parking lot. The Google spokeswoman said the company was reviewing its other routes near Ben Nevis.

Organizations can update mapping information using Google's [Geo Data Upload](#) tool, the company said. Users can [report issues directly to Google](#).