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Griffin iTrip AutoPilot iPod car kit

Get iPhone tunes on your car stereo

by Chris Hall published on 23 January 2009

There was a time when getting an FM transmitter for your iPod was something of a challenge. Now you have more choices than you could possibly want. Can the iTrip AutoPilot from Griffin impress?

The iTrip AutoPilot is a single cable solution, running from the 12V plug on one end, through the control unit and out to an iPod dock connector on the other. This cable measures over 1 metre long in total so the first comment is that this is going to have to be housed in some way. You might be lucky and have 12V socket in your central console, with a neat cubby hole to house the rest, but if not you'll end up with wire all over your car.

Unlike some other solutions there is no mount for the iPod itself, so you'll either have to buy one, or accept that it's going to be loose. This does mean that a passenger can easily control your tunes whilst driving with no problems, however.

The 12V plug itself does more than just provide power - it also has basic control functions on the end, allowing you to play/pause and skip tracks back and forth, so if you are on shuffle, then you can easily flick past tracks without playing with the iPod/iPhone itself. They are also backlit, so easy to find at a glance, and cleverly change colour to indicate the charge status, something that will appeal to iPhone users.

But the main brains of the outfit is in that central pod, which features three buttons and small display. This houses the FM transmitter module itself as well as the scanner. As FM transmitters have grown in popularity, so too has their efficiency, and scanning for a free FM frequency is now just a press of a button and a very brief pause. The three identified stations are then stored in the corresponding buttons.



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Whilst the iTrip might think those stations are free, your car stereo might not agree, so it is worth tuning in to all the options. In our tests we found that some didn't work too well, but find the right one and you'll be listening to your music in no time. If you have an RDS radio, it will also show track information on your radio's display, which is a neat feature.

With any FM transmitter device you always have to consider that FM frequency usage around the country changes, so what works in your area might not necessarily work in elsewhere - so if you are driving any distance, you will almost certainly have to change the settings. If you stay in your local area, then you might be fine on just one frequency.

We found that even on the cleanest frequency there was some crackle in patches as we drove around. You'll find that the RDS information only works when you have a very solid signal, which can sometimes be problematic. You'll also have to crank the volume up on your stereo, suggesting that the transmission isn't the strongest.

There is also the option to switch between mono and stereo if you wish, to get optimal performance. As this uses the dock connector, volume is fixed, so you simply set the volume on your car stereo to your preference.

The iTrip AutoPilot will fit iPods (except shuffle) and iPhone, and also charge your device whilst connected.

VERDICT

Of course the performance of this type of accessory depends very much on the car you put it in. Whilst finding a clear frequency is part of the answer, we found that positioning of the transmitter unit also made a difference to performance. But a few minutes spent getting things right will lead to a happy listening experience once on the road on most occasions.

At a glance

What is it?

iPod FM transmitter car kit

Good

SmartScan works well, easy preset selection, works with iPhone

Bad

Can only be used in the car, bit of a messy solution, limited controls, overall performance depends on many factors, doesn't seem to be a strong transmission

Verdict

Simple scanning and easy to use, but ultimately performance from FM transmitters depends on lots of factors

Price £59.99

Our score

6/10

Your score

2/10

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This type of solution can also only be used where you have a 12V socket, so no good in your lounge. Some people might also want something with less cable, such as the RoadTrip with SmartScan, which is a tidier but more costly solution.

This is a simple solution if you accept the shortcomings common to all FM transmitters and bargains can be found online to make this an affordable way to hook your iPod or iPhone into your car stereo. For the ultimate, however, an aux in solution would be our preference.