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**Connecting**
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Mapping 'Car Wars' strategy

I JUST GOT BACK from a trip with my husband. We drove around the fat midsection of France for two weeks, in Burgundy, Brittany, and through the green, river-abundant country that lies in between. This is the amazing thing: We did not fight in the car. Until recently, we have had serious navigational problems, leading to what we call "Car Wars."

Frankly, I was concerned that our trip would be ruined by murderous attempts to pin the blame on either the map reader or the driver.

Three summers ago, we took our first trip together. We had only known each other a few months when we rented a car and drove it all over Italy. The boot was not a good place to take the relationship for a test drive. The Italians do not believe in road signs.

We had our first fight in a white Renault with bad shocks. I woke up from a red-wine-soaked sleep and discovered that Ron had made a profoundly wrong turn. We were heading in a direction that could not possibly take us to Florence, which was where we had left our luggage. It is a miracle that we did not break up before we got home.

ON THAT FIRST TRIP, Ron's travel technique drove me nuts. When he needed to consult a 5-inch section of the Michelin map, he found it necessary to unfold the entire document, which measured 4 feet square, filling the front seat and often obscuring my view by covering my head.

When I was searching for critical turns onto tiny country roads, he zoomed past signposts laden with information, as if I could speed-read in Italian. He urged me to pass tempting-looking restaurants, promising that we'd eat later, when we had some solid mileage under our belts.

When we finally stopped, white-aproned chefs who were wiping their hands looked at us and shrugged.

"Chiuso," they said. No more food until dinner.

To be fair, I did my best to alienate the man who I hoped would become my husband. I am an inveterate scenery-watcher, but for some reason, Ron didn't like it when I'd swing around hairpin turns while pointing out herds of goats on distant hills.

My fear of getting lost also drove him crazy. On this subject, I am obsessive. I love back roads and remote beaches, but I do not find anything amusing about pulling into provincial gas stations at midnight to ask directions in a language I cannot understand. I consider it a personal failure.

TO KNOW WHERE I'M heading, I buy the most detailed maps I can find. I have stacks of these. In Italy, I'd start out bravely, but after one winding road, I'd be in a green and dolorous state. The only thing that could save me was lunch and, of course, we weren't having that.

I suppose that the trip to Italy was required to get the bugs out. Before we left this time, we made some rules: No unbridled map-unfolding; no searching for hotels in the dark; no off-the-cuff navigational guesses; no hairpin turns if they can be avoided; no forgetting where we parked the car; no snoozing permitted for the co-pilot during critical map-reading periods; no looking at the map and driving at the same time — and no missing lunch.

After the first few hours on the road in France, we fell into a pattern. The ideal place for me, we realized, was in the navigator's seat. I watched the map intently and called out the turns. I am not any better at this than Ron is, but if the map is in my hands when we get lost, it's my fault, not his, and I am considerably less wrathful.

Ron's place, we decided, was behind the wheel. He drove manfully, missing nary a turn in two weeks. He got a little excited when I demanded that he slow the car to a crawl as we approached a looming signpost. There were a half-dozen cars behind him, he said, and they were bearing down. They'll just have to go around, I said.

And, to our astonishment, they did. ■

Cathryn Ramin's column appears on Mondays and Thursdays.