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From a Sinkhole in Mexico to Jupiter's Watery Moon

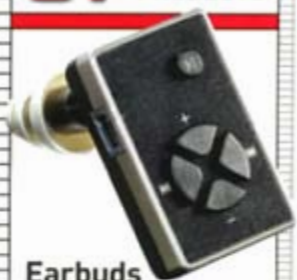
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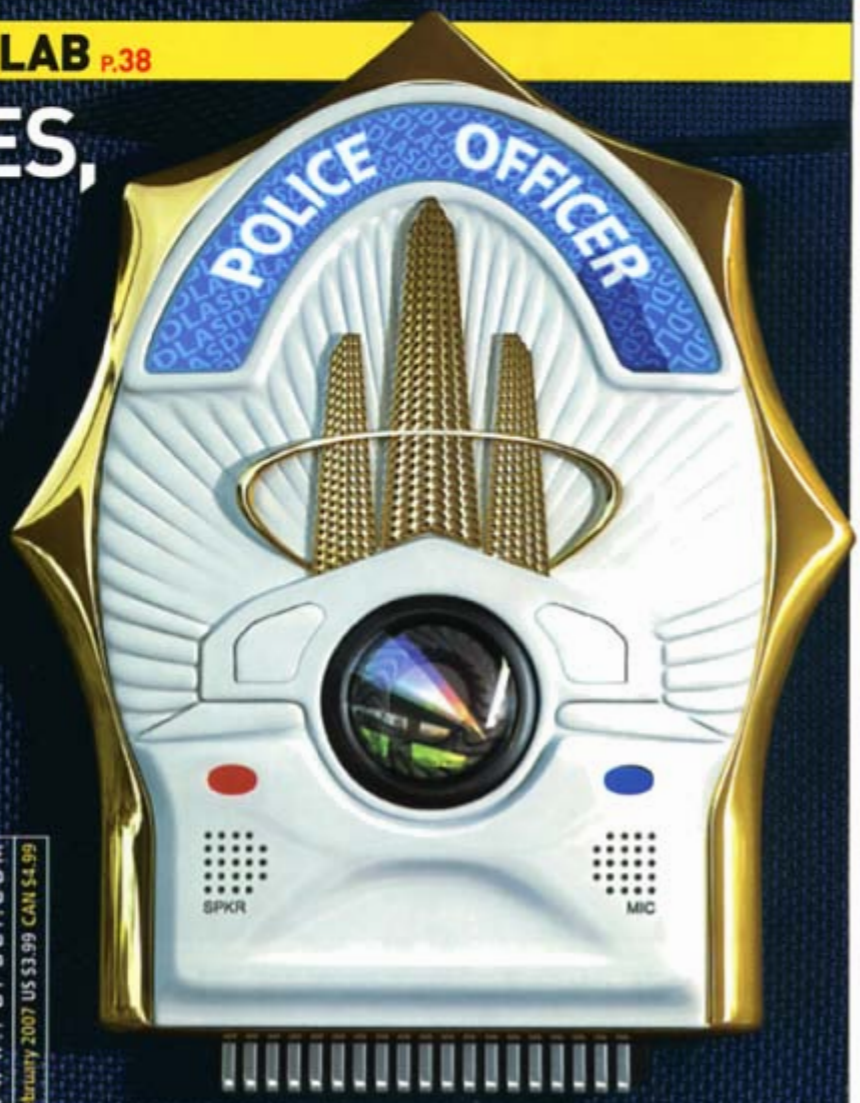
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PROTECT YOUR CAR

A MILLION LITTLE ID TAGS

Unmistakable identification keeps car thieves away from your ride

THE THREAT: More than one million vehicles are stolen in the U.S. every year, with a total value of over \$7.6 billion. And once thieves remove license plates and vehicle identification numbers, there's no way of knowing who the vehicles once belonged to.

THE SOLUTION: DataDot Technology—a startup company in Australia, which has the highest rate of vehicle theft in the developed world—has devised a way to cover valuable items in identifiers as small and invis-

ibly scattered as hairspray droplets on a bouffant. Transparent DataDots are laser-etched with an identification number unique to you and glued to every internal surface of your car, boat or laptop. The sheer number of sand-grain-size dots on treated possessions—up to 5,000—makes it all but impossible for thieves to take them off and sell the harvested parts. In contrast, existing theft-deterrent systems such as a LoJack can be hidden in only one of about 20 places, and so can be removed much more easily.

Cops determine who stolen property belongs to by using a 50x magnifier to read the dots. If a person reporting a theft mentions that the item was Data-Dotted, police departments can access a company-run international database to find out if the car has turned up elsewhere. "The system really works in favor of the police," says Scott McKeever, program-development director for DataDot's American division. "They only need to locate one dot to determine an item's owner, whereas thieves would have to remove

thousands of them in order to resell a stolen item."

Although DataDots are still largely undiscovered in the U.S., McKeever predicts that as awareness grows, they will become highly effective deterrents. In a three-year study, Australia's National Motor Vehicle Theft Reduction Council found that cars with DataDots were 80 percent less likely to be stolen and never recovered than cars of the same make without DataDots. "Once the word spread among thieves," McKeever says, "it was clear they wanted to stay away."

THE ETA: DataDot is just starting to test the consumer waters here. As part of a pilot program at auto dealerships in a dozen states, the company will apply around 1,000 dots to your new vehicle for \$300—and offer you a \$5,000 refund on top of regular insurance benefits if your car is stolen. The royal DataDot treatment should go nationwide this year, but in the meantime, you can obtain a DIY kit online. These kits cost about \$25 and contain 500 dots that can be applied at home with a swab. Schools including San Francisco State University have started encouraging students to use them on laptops and iPods.—ELIZABETH SVOBODA

DETERRENT DOTS

Parts covered in thousands of ID tags have a way of dissuading potential thieves.

