traveltime: an R package to calculate travel time across a landscape from user-specified locations

2025-04-07

# Summary

Understanding and mapping the time to travel among locations is useful for many activities from urban planning (Zahavi 1974) to public health (Hulland et al. 2019; Weiss et al. 2020) and myriad others (Nelson et al. 2019). Here we present a software package — traveltime — written in and for the language R (R Core Team 2024). traveltime enables a user to create a raster map of the travel time over an area of interest from a user-specified set of locations (geographic coordinates). The result is a raster of the area of interest where the value in each cell is the lowest travel time in minutes to the nearest of the supplied locations. We envisage this software having diverse applications including: estimating sampling bias (Dennis and Thomas 2000), allocating defibrillators (Tierney et al. 2018), setting health districts (Padgham et al. 2019), or mapping access to vehicle chargers (Falchetta and Noussan 2021) and agricultural facilities (Zhao et al. 2023).

The work-flow requires two key steps:

* preparing a friction surface for the area of interest, and then
* calculating travel time over that surface for the points of interest.

traveltime provides a spatial interface using object classes from the terra package (Hijmans 2024). Travel time is calculated as movement over a resistance ‘friction surface’ (van Etten 2017). To provide easy access to the existing friction surfaces generated by Weiss et al. (2020), traveltime internally uses malariaAtlas (Pfeffer et al. 2018) to download surfaces for the area of interest; though users can also supply any other friction surface.

traveltime is available from [R-Universe](https://idem-lab.r-universe.dev/traveltime) and [GitHub](https://github.com/idem-lab/traveltime), and documented at <https://idem-lab.github.io/traveltime/>. Although this article is intended to be the key reference for the traveltime package, we suggest citations of the package are accompanied by citing the underlying methodological work as well (Weiss et al. 2018, 2020).

# Context

Global maps of travel time to cities (Weiss et al. 2018; Nelson et al. 2019) and health care (Hulland et al. 2019; Weiss et al. 2020) have generated much interest and use[[1]](#footnote-24), and the city data set of Nelson et al. (2019) is available to R users through the widely-used geodata package (Hijmans et al. 2024). Here we extend that work to enable travel time calculations from any arbitrary set of locations and friction surface.

A gaggle of R packages provide superficially similar though fundamentally different functionality via the [TravelTime.com](https://www.TravelTime.com) API (TravelTime 2024a, 2024b; von Bergmann 2024; Lo Russo 2024). Their ‘Isochron’ polygons — areas reachable within a given time from a given location — are most comparable to what traveltime::calculate\_travel\_time() calculates. However, each isochron is a single polygon calculated is for a single point location and specified maximum travel time, rather than a raster of temporal gradation across a landscape, jointly for an arbitrary number of points, as in traveltime. TravelTime.com cannot provide a single result surface for time to the nearest of a group of points, and continuous time scale without extensive repeated iteration for all combinations of time and points, plus additional calculation of the minimum value for each cell from all points. Furthermore, TravelTime.com requires access keys, a paid subscription beyond a short free period, and caps queries, which add considerable friction to the use of this resource.

With traveltime, we provide free and open source software to estimate travel time from any number of user-supplied locations, across a complete area of interest, and with convenient access to motorised transport or walking friction surfaces with global coverage.

# Example: walking from public transport in Singapore

Here we provide a very brief example to calculate and map the walking travel time from rail transport stations across Singapore. [Complete code for this example is available as a vignettte in package documentation](https://idem-lab.github.io/traveltime/articles/singapore.html).

## Prepare data and friction surface

We need two items of data:

* our area of interest — Singapore, and
* our points to calculate travel time from — Singapore’s Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) and Light Rail Transit (LRT) stations.

We download singapore\_shapefile, a polygon boundary of Singapore from the GADM (GADM 2022) database using the geodata package (Hijmans et al. 2024) as our area of interest. Our points are the traveltime::stations data, containing coordinates of all LRT and MRT station exits in Singapore (Land Transport Authority 2019). We then download a walking travel friction surface for Singapore:

friction\_singapore <- traveltime::get\_friction\_surface(  
 surface = "walk2020",  
 extent = singapore\_shapefile  
 )|>   
 terra::mask(singapore\_shapefile)

(Alternatively, we could use surface = "motor2020" for motorised travel. We’re also only interested in walking *on land* so we mask out areas outside of the land boundary in singapore\_shapefile)

We plot these data below. traveltime takes resistance values of friction (van Etten 2017), so higher values of friction indicate more time travelling across a given cell.

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| Figure 1: Friction surface raster of Singapore, showing Singapore boundary in grey, and station locations as grey points. |

## Calculate and plot the travel time

With all the data collected, the function calculate\_travel\_time() takes the friction surface friction\_singapore and the points of interest in stations, and returns a SpatRaster of walking time in minutes to each cell from the nearest station:

trave\_time\_singapore <- calculate\_travel\_time(  
 friction\_surface = friction\_singapore,  
 points = stations  
)  
  
trave\_time\_singapore

class : SpatRaster   
dimensions : 37, 57, 1 (nrow, ncol, nlyr)  
resolution : 0.008333333, 0.008333333 (x, y)  
extent : 103.6083, 104.0833, 1.166667, 1.475 (xmin, xmax, ymin, ymax)  
coord. ref. :   
source(s) : memory  
name : travel\_time   
min value : 0   
max value : Inf

We present the resulting calculated travel times in Figure where, as expected, the travel times are lowest near station exits (per Figure ) and progressively higher further away. Note that the results in trave\_time\_singapore include infinite values (Inf above). In Figure , the islands to the south and north-east are shown as filled cells, but unconnected with the mainland. The raster cells for these islands appear absent in Figure . Because they are not connected to any cells with a station, the calculated travel time is infinite, and so these cells do not appear in Figure .

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| Figure 2: Map of walking travel time in Singapore, in minutes from nearest MRT or LRT station. |

# Opportunities for future development

The traveltime package is immediately suitable to a range of application. Nonetheless, we see opportunities to build the package utility through:

* capability to better distribute a wider range friction surfaces, and
* additional methods to efficiently compute results over large spatial extents.

Firstly, traveltime currently facilitates access to walking and motorised friction surfaces for 2020, both at 30 arc-second resolution[[2]](#footnote-39). Although the user can presently supply their own friction surface, we expect most applications will use these existing surfaces given the extensive work needed in creating new ones (Weiss et al. 2018, 2020). As landscapes are dynamic, it may be useful to incorporate updated versions of these friction surfaces if and when they are available. Furthermore, although the resolution of these data is likely to be suitable for larger landscape foci, higher resolution data may be helpful for more locally focussed analyses. For instance, although the example here was chosen for it’s simplicity and low computational demands, a ~1 km2 cell size is a relatively large area to walk across, and thus actual waking times may vary significantly within each cell. We underline however that a user can provide their own higher resolution friction surface at present if desired.

# Acknowledgements

This work was supported, in whole or in part, by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation [INV-021972]. The conclusions and opinions expressed in this work are those of the authors alone and shall not be attributed to the Foundation. Under the grant conditions of the Foundation, a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License has already been assigned to the Author Accepted Manuscript version that might arise from this submission. Please note works submitted as a preprint have not undergone a peer review process.

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1. Collectively >1600 citations per Google Scholar at the 28th of January 2025. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
2. Approximately 0.008333 decimal degrees, or just below 1 km at the equator [↑](#footnote-ref-39)