

## Digital options lighten load for tourists

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By Jeffrey Goldfarb

Travelers are starting to leave behind heavy, dog-eared guidebooks and instead are cramming their much lighter mobile devices with all the necessary tips they'll need to discover new parts of the world.

Airlines, tour operators, entrepreneurs and even old-fashioned travel book publishers have been unleashing a wave of information accessible with MP3 players and mobile phones that is easier to tote while on vacation and is delivering increasingly personal recommendations.

A visitor to Venice, Italy, can escape the crushing throngs in overpriced St. Mark's Square, for example, with an audio and video off-the-beaten-path walking tour guided by locals and delivered over location-aware multimedia phones and PDAs.

The History Unwired project uses Bluetooth sensors and global positioning hotspots in the popular Venetian quarter of Castello to transmit anecdotes and personal recommendations from a local baker and fisherman.

"Because it knows where you are, it can encourage you to see things and meet people you wouldn't normally see or meet," said Michael Epstein, a researcher at MIT who helped develop the project and is creating a similar system for New Orleans.

"This kind of guide can lead to a lot of social impact," Epstein said. "It can lead to more fulfilling travel and more ongoing relationships with the cities that you travel to."

Tourists baffled by New York's sensory overload can carve out a little piece for themselves using specialized audio tours from Soundwalk.com. A Bronx graffiti walk or a tour of Manhattan's Chinatown are blended with music, sound effects and interviews.

New downloadable tours also have been recently launched by Soundwalk for Paris and Varanasi, India.

Another company, Talkingstreet.com, enlisted celebrities such as Aerosmith's Steven Tyler and Alien star Sigourney Weaver to lend their voices to their hometown tours of Boston and New York respectively.

Visitors to Washington, DC, can use their cell phone to call a local number supplied by Talkingstreet and listen to an audio segment about the place where they are standing, delivered straight from talk show host Larry King.

Such efforts prompted British tour operator Thomson to predict the death of the guidebook when it unveiled its own podcasts to accompany travelers to Corsica, Cuba or the Cote D'Azur. But the theory didn't fly with everyone.

"The information on their podcasts is bland brochure-speak, devoid of the detail you would get in a guidebook - like having an advert whispered in your ear," wrote the travel editor of Britain's *Times* newspaper.

Richard Branson's Virgin Atlantic airline has had more than 200,000 of its podcasts downloaded in less than a year from its online site and from Apple's iTunes store for destinations ranging from Shanghai to Las Vegas.

"We believe that providing travelers with relevant destination content will help them plan their trip, and giving it to them in a portable format will enable them to make the most of their time away," said Breda Bubear, Virgin Atlantic's head of advertising.

One of the leading voices in travel guides, Lonely Planet, rejects the notion that its books will ever go out of style. It is supplying free podcast downloads to supplement the printed materials and enhance the kinship its readers often feel with the authors.

"The podcasts are particularly well-suited for opening up unique experiences and destinations they may not have seen before," said Tom Hall, travel information manager for Lonely Planet, citing an anecdote told by its Ethiopia guide writer about riding in a truck with a local pregnant woman.

"The podcasts help people to look beyond the book when they travel," Hall said.

Lonely Planet is issuing a new podcast every week that is about 10 or 15 minutes long, but it expects to develop even more interactive services in the months to come.

"We feel that we're at the tip of the iceberg," Hall said. "We've gotten up to speed pretty quickly to let travelers tap into a rich source of information, but we're also very aware there a huge number of things that we haven't started thinking about that you can do with this technology."

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