

Get off the beaten track

When millions of tourists follow the same well-worn path, a city can suffer. Bernhard Warner tries out an innovative alternative

Those of you who've been jostled and prodded on the Rialto Bridge or shoe-horned onto a *vaporetto* full of camera-snapping day-trippers will attest that Venice would be a truly magical place if it weren't for all the damn tourists. Some 14 million flood the lagoon city each year, turning parts of it – certainly, the stretch between the Rialto Bridge and Piazza San Marco – into a barely manageable pedestrian pile-up. Meanwhile, adjacent stretches of the city will be congestion-free, perfect for a stroll back in time to a world that inspired the likes of Pound, Mann and Henry James.

Venice exemplifies the damage mass tourism can inflict on a city. In this age of budget airlines and weekend holiday packages, more people are visiting foreign lands than ever before. Armed with crisp new guide books, they head to the same top three *must-see* destinations, where they jostle fellow digicam-toting tourists and read aloud a description of what they are seeing, before moving on to the next spot. A micro-economy of over-priced cafes now line these routes, selling uninspired dishes of pasta, trinkets and ice-cream. Thanks to globalisation, many of the stores are recognisable from back home, but the currency is different, and so, we pop in and take a look. It's brought a shopping mall-like atmosphere to some of the most wondrous places on earth. Welcome to the tourism industry of the 21st century.

Last summer, I ventured to Venice at the height of tourist season to check on a project with a lofty aim. A group of researchers from the University of Architecture in Venice and from MIT were trying to nudge tourists off the well-trodden paths with some whizzy technology and a shoestring budget. It was late August and both the Biennale Art Festival and Venice Film Festival were in full swing. And, like clockwork, Piazza San Marco was filled with tourists sipping on £5 cappuccinos.

In the nearby Costello neighbourhood, the researchers had organised a multimedia walking tour. A two-hour tour – replete with flash animation, maps and video clips – narrated by five local Venetians was downloaded onto PDAs. Walking around the narrow, crooked streets of this unquestionably Venetian neighbourhood, where actual Venetians lived, guided by the recorded insights of these unlikely tour guides, was truly eye-opening. Much of the detail would never make it into a guidebook. We learned about house squatters and the No Global Movement's recent activities. We learned about the ancient craft of glass blowing and the fishing industry and, of course, this being Venice, how easy it is to fall in love with a young *veneziana*. And there she was, still working in the same bakery after all these years.

For a month, the researchers took notes on 200 tourists who found their way to Costello and agreed to take the tour. As for the content and flash layout, it was highly rated by users – receiving a grade of four out of five. More impressively, one in eight participants reported interacting with, or seeing, people mentioned in the tour, one of the organisers, Michael Epstein, told me.

According to Epstein, the idea behind the project was to use new mobile technologies to get people to explore more of their world. Most of us carry a PDA, MP3 player and/or 3G mobile phone handset, even while on holiday. Why not use the devices to guide you into new terrain? Not only would tourists be bringing their pounds, euros and dollars to well-deserving fringe areas, but they would also be enriching themselves. Epstein recently launched a company called Untravel Media in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to bring the idea to more cities. The first, after Venice, will be a behind-the-scenes tour of Harvard

University this spring, and Epstein is working in post-Katrina New Orleans to get the next wave of tourists to venture beyond The French Quarter.

To be sure, the explosion of downloadable city guides and podcast excursions is becoming big business. Most museums offers a downloadable audio tour or rent out PDAs near the coat-check, but Epstein is thinking bigger. He sees the opportunity for mobile technology and enlightened narrative, neatly downloaded onto a PDA or beamed to a 3G phone, to capture the imagination of intrepid travellers and nudge us into barely-trodden quarters. The idea is to remove the Disney-like element of the package tour, turning tourists into adventurers with a purpose.

As for Venice, whizzy new technologies will not thin out the queues overnight. Give it a few years, says Epstein. "To really change the tourist footprint, you need a two- to three-year cycle in a city like Venice. But our hope is, if the city plays along and if enough hotels carry this product, we could see a dramatic change in the flow of tourists in that period," he says confidently.

Stay tuned.

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