

Magical mystery tour: Ipods guide a new-age Salem excursion

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SALEM - Attention history buffs, techies and camera-toting tourists: Salem's got a hip new tour guide. Small enough to fit in your pocket, yet versatile enough to offer a little about modern Wicca, maritime history and witch trials trivia, the iPod audio tour is sure to appeal to the independent traveler.

Already boasting five Boston area tours, the company Untravel Media launched in 2006 by MIT alumni Michael Epstein and Ira Hochman asks artists and film-makers to record walking tours of their own cities. iPod owners and those with platforms such as the iPhone Clix and Windows Mobile devices such as the Palm Treo 700w can download the tours from a website for free.

iPod owners and those with platforms such as the iPhone and Windows Mobile-friendly devices like the Palm Treo 700w can download the tours for free from the Web site, www.untravelmedia.com. The tour is free, at least while it's being launched, but it will likely become a paid service later.

Don your ear buds, click a button and you're guided through town by an eloquent narrator, who you're guaranteed never to lose in the crowd.

The Salem audio tour, "Seeking Sanctuary in Salem," made its grand debut Oct. 31, thanks to Salem filmmaker Mike Boudo, who wrote and mapped out the 30-minute meander through town. He snagged the job by responding to a competition on www.craigslist.com requesting tour proposals.

Boudo, 37, who works as a producer at Channel 7 in Boston and is known locally for his a punk rock documentary he produced, said he answered the ad because he liked the startup company's mission. As a finalist, Boudo was given a \$1,000 stipend and told to go ahead with recording an audio tour, but when faced with Salem's many sites and stories he panicked. How could he condense the city into a 30-minute package? And how could he avoid telling the same stories as other tour guides?

"I decided I wanted to focus on something I'm interested in," he said. "A lot of witches are in Salem and I'm interested in why they come here." Besides, he added, "Laurie Cabot doesn't have a tour."

Boudo decided to paint the city through a Wiccan perspective, following the worshippers of the nature-based religion who feel a connection to the 1692 puritans accused of witchcraft. Two months later, after combining music from local bands with footage shot in town and edited on his own equipment, "Seeking Sanctuary in Salem" was born.

Set to ambient music, and complete with interviews with two of Salem's well-known Wiccan leaders as well as a local educator and historian, the tour mixes the traditional textbook history with contemporary views on Salem's new-age religious appeal.

Locals who want to learn more about their town may enjoy following the tour, which begins at the Visitor's Center and hits sites including the witch-trial era John Ward and Narbonne houses before ending at Pickering Wharf, in what the narrator refers to as Witch Ground Zero.

This is no stodgy museum-style tour. The narrator is local actor and Griffen Theatre owner Erik Rodenhiser, whose sardonic sense humor combines with the sounds of the “characters” walking through the streets, making listeners feel as though they’re accompanied by a friendly group of adventurers.

Seeing the city through Wiccan eyes is definitely fresh and interesting. At the Salem Common, Gypsy Ravish, a Wiccan high priestess, tells tour-goers, “You can feel the spirits of the trees. They’ve been here hundreds of years, since this was a field of grazing cattle.”

Down at the waterfront, her husband Richard, a high priest, points to the lighthouse, saying that the spot used to be one of his favorite places to “project his spells out over the water.”

The Witch Museum director of education, Alison D’Amario, talks about what it must have been like living in the 17th century, conjuring up some of the hardships and fear settlers felt when facing long New England winters.

And historian Timothy Maguire, owner of the Histrionic Academy, a group that gives historical tours in town, adds his take on the Puritans, calling them, “the Taliban without guns.”

The result is a decidedly modern take on a city with a relatively ancient American history.

It may come as no surprise that the tour ends at Nu Aeon, the Ravishes’ Wiccan shop on Pickering Wharf. Is this the equivalent of an audio tour commercial? Boudo says no. By bringing tourists past the Witch Museum as well as Nu Aeon, he is giving them the chance to “connect in their everyday lives” with the people who just finished narrating their tour.

At the end of the tour, as the last notes of Gypsy’s haunting song “Burn Fire Burn Bright” fade away, Boudo hopes visitors will “come away not just with lots of historical facts but also with magic.”

Try out the Salem iPod tour by visiting www.untravelmedia.com.

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