



Mobile Tours Make Sightseeing Easier

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By Nick Barber, IDG News Service

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Rather than just let tourists wander aimlessly on a sightseeing excursion, hoping to stumble upon the next landmark, one city has a better idea. Spearheaded by the Cambridge, Massachusetts, Office for Tourism, the city's new Web site features downloadable audio tours.

"Almost the minute we finished with the Web site, we were approached by Michael Epstein and his group at Untravel Media to do a mobile walking tour that would be downloadable," said Robyn Bell, executive director of the Cambridge Office for Tourism. Untravel Media, in Boston, produced the tour, which can be downloaded to a Window's Mobile 5.0 enabled phone, video iPod or other MP3 devices.

The tourism office offers only "Beyond the Yard" as an 80-minute or 60-minute tour, but is planning to expand and offer more tours. The yard refers to Harvard Yard, the tour's starting point.

The tour's creation was a collaboration between Untravel and the tourism office. "We did a lot of the calls and told them who we want interviewed and they found a lot of things on their own that were hidden treasures throughout the city," Bell said.

The tours will be available on the site through June 1 for free. After that there will be a "minor charge" to download it, according to Bell.

Untravel demonstrated the tour on iRiver MP3 players because the route map is displayed on the screen and remains interactive. Tourists can click to different sites along the route, skip certain ones or go in reverse. The interactive maps are also supported by Windows Mobile phones, the iPhone and the iPod Touch, but not traditional iPods and some other MP3 players. When you put on the headphones and start the tour, you'll be guided along by local artists and poets.

For now tours are only available on personal players, but the tourism office is working with local stores to offer device rentals.

While the tour is new to Cambridge, it's nothing new for Untravel. Founded by two Massachusetts Institute of Technology graduates, the company already offers several tours. One, for example, is of Salem, the site of the Witchcraft Trials in 1692.

"We have a platform on the Web that allows people to take their travel assets -- pictures, video, audio -- and basically draw a route on a map ... drop that media in and turn it into a walkable tour," said Ira Hochman, chief technology officer and co-founder of Untravel. The software also combines Yahoo Maps and a media editing timeline to produce geo-tagged multimedia.

Untravel is currently developing a tour for the New England Aquarium and would also like to create tours for destination weddings.

Untravel is also in the process of beta testing proprietary software that will allow for the creation of these audio tours. It will be available commercially later in 2008.

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