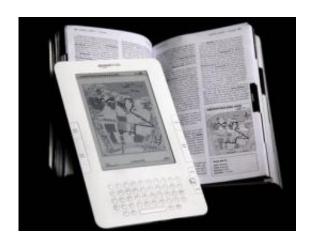# Review: Paper wins over e-books for travel guides

November 24 2010, By ANICK JESDANUN , AP Technology Writer

A Kindle version of the Lonely Planet guide to Germany and the 844-page, 13.6 oz. printed version are shown in this photograph, in New York, Wednesday, Nov. 24, 2010. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)

(AP) -- It sounded like a better, lighter way to pack for a trip to Germany: a Kindle with a Lonely Planet travel guide in lieu of an 844-page brick of a book.

Yet to my surprise, the 10-day visit to Munich, Dresden and Berlin turned into a lesson about the pitfalls of cramming an old medium - the book - into a new one - the electronic reading device.

It's a good thing that I had the foresight to bring a paper copy of Lonely Planet's "Germany," borrowed from the public library. My plan was to

bring it as a backup in case something went wrong with the Kindle, but leave it in the hotel room to lighten my backpack. Instead, I ditched the Kindle and carried the book around.

That made me sad, because the Kindle, and the e-reading revolution, promises so much.

The [e-reader](#) from Amazon.com Inc. is light and can store not only the travel guide, but all the bulky novels I've been meaning to catch up on. A built-in dictionary lets me look up strange words.

The Kindle lets me type notes, highlight passages, and find them easily again. I added tips on tipping and transit fares as well as a reminder to visit a concentration camp memorial outside Berlin. The Kindle also lets me add bookmarks, the digital equivalent of the folded corners, or doggie ears, that I've marred many paperbacks with in the past.

Preparing for the trip, there was no need to go to a book store or even a computer. I just bought the book through the Kindle's wireless connection. The Kindle version of the Lonely Planet guide was cheaper, too - $15.39, compared with the paper version at $18.47 on Amazon (the list price for both is $27.99).

Lonely Planet also let me buy individual chapters - for example, the one on Munich and surrounding Bavaria - for less than $5 (though it wasn't clear that I'd be getting the same content contained in the main book, rather than a distinct guide for the region).

But I quickly came to realize what I like most about paper books: I can touch the pages, and I can see more at once, whether it's a map, some text or a combination.

I missed all that reading on the Kindle, which was clumsy by

comparison. There were two main reasons for this: the screen technology and the way the book was converted for e-reading

Consider the Lonely Planet's 2.2-mile, 16-stop walking tour of Dresden, which takes me by the major churches, markets and other sights rebuilt following the Allied bombings of the city in the waning days of World War II. The narrative gave me bare-bones descriptions of each sight. To learn more, I had to flip to a different section in the book and sometimes consult the index to find the right page. To navigate the route, I had to flip to a map and follow a black line marking my route.

Holding the paper version, I simply kept my thumb on one page and a finger on another to flip back and forth between the narrative and the deeper descriptions. The map was either on the same page or just one page away.

With the Kindle, I had to hit "next page" and "prev page" repeatedly, and the pages took their sweet time to turn, because the "electronic ink" technology of the screen doesn't respond as fast as a computer screen. Out of frustration, I flicked a switch to turn the device off instead.

E-ink also means scrolling and zooming doesn't work well. The Lonely Planet's solution was to break maps into four, so that you could get a closer look at each quadrant on the full screen. The idea is good in principle, but clunky in practice. I found I had to flip back and forth too many times because the legends telling me what sight each number corresponds to ended up on the wrong quadrant. Had the guidebook been developed in digital form from scratch, points on the map could have taken me to the corresponding entry with one click.

In the paper version, the region I explored was printed on the top of each page, whether it was Berlin or Central Saxony. On the Kindle, I had no such guide. I came across a listing for Thomaskirche, a church where

composer Johann Sebastian Bach once worked. I thought it would be a good place to visit, until I realized I had already left the Dresden section of the book and moved on to Leipzig, which wasn't part of my journey.

Another example of poor conversion from paper to bits: There's an index at the end of the Kindle book that serves no purpose. The listings aren't clickable. I would have expected the digital index to function like a search - click on it for all the references to those keywords throughout the book.

And because the Kindle can't handle columns well, some text was presented as a graphic, making it unsearchable.

As a technology writer for more than a decade, I hardly consider myself a Luddite. I do believe e-books have their place in society - even as travel guides, when designed properly. The Kindle works well for linear novels, but stumbles badly when given another task. The experience might have been different on, say, an iPad, which has a responsive color screen.

Even then, I'd have to hope for a guidebook specifically designed for the screen, rather than a conversion from paper. Or I'd at least hope for an e-book that gets updated frequently, something more difficult with paper. As it was, the Kindle edition I bought in August was based on the 2007 version of the guidebook, not the 2010 edition that just came out four months earlier.

And perhaps if I ever get to take an around-the-world trip one day, I'd appreciate being able to bring multiple guidebooks for multiple destinations without having to carry all that weight, even with the Kindle's limitations.

One of the Lonely Planet executives I talked to after my trip pointed out

that printed books have a head start of several centuries.

That's true. I'm dealing with first-generation e-book technology at best.

So for my next trip to a single destination, I'll stick with the tried and true: I'll just carry the book.

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