

With travel app, no one knows you're a tourist

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This Thursday, Oct. 1, 1998 file photo shows people as they walk around New York's Grand Central Terminal after a restoration and rededication ceremony. Fodor's Travel New York City City Guide App lists Grand Central as a top site in Midtown Manhattan. (AP Photo/Ed Bailey, FILE)

(AP) -- Tourist in my own city? Ack. I learned within days of moving to New York City earlier this year that a) Times Square must be avoided at all costs and b) you don't want to look like a tourist. The telltale signs are - appearing lost, reading a guidebook, and walking ... slowly.

So it was with secret pleasure that I could bounce around the city recently- with knowledge of my surroundings - but still maintain the illusion that I knew what I was doing.

Indeed, the best part about the Fodor's New York City 2011 iPod travel [app](#) is that it's a secret. Fodor's trademark orange cover, a not-so-subtle hint to strangers that you are, indeed, a tourist, is delightfully absent when you pull up the same guide on your smart phone. Why yes, I can stand on the subway and look up highlights for my visit to Grand Central. For all anyone else knows, I might as well be playing Scrabble.

For me, that was the best part about having the application, compared to carting around the guidebook on recent jaunts throughout the city. The content between the two was basically the same. While the application does have some tech extras that the book can't offer - such as using GPS to tell you what restaurants and sites are nearby - little else is different, beyond price and heft. At \$20, the book costs more than the \$6 application on [iTunes](#). And at 550 pages, plus maps, it's a lot harder to carry around than your iPod. (And in a city like New York, where shopping and walking are frequent pastimes, you want your bags to be as light and empty as possible.)

But even with the lower price and extra space in my bag, I'm not quite sold on the application. It's a great option for tech-savvy travelers who don't want to weigh themselves down, but it seemed most useful to me when I knew where I was going and had a general sense of what I wanted to do - be it shop, eat, or visit sites such as Bryant Park.

If I were entirely new to my destination, however, I'd think twice before committing solely to an app. Guidebooks are a joy to flip through; you get so many travel ideas, of places big and small, along with a sense of neighborhoods. When I have a trip ahead of me, I spend hours leafing through guidebooks, jotting down ideas, and examining my options.

The application, for me, wasn't as browser-friendly as the book. It was very useful when I knew what I wanted to do, but less so if I was just skimming the pages for ideas. There were many fewer photos, and fewer breakout sections that pull out little tidbits of information. The application is more to the point, to get you what you need in a hurry without any clutter. (If you want extra information, the app does provide links to take you to web pages.) It also makes it easy for you to bookmark sites for future reference. And if you're using a version on the iPhone, you're just a click away from dialing that restaurant to snag a reservation.

I used the app on an iPod Touch, which meant no phone calls or web access for the "what's nearby" feature unless I was in a Wi-Fi area. Luckily, the application has offline maps so I could still find out, generally, where I was, if I didn't have Internet access. If I found my location, I could click through to see what else was nearby.

The new apps, the first of their kind for Fodor's, are not meant to replace the guidebooks, spokeswoman Meg Rushton said. The company so far has apps for four destinations - London, Paris and San Francisco in addition to New York.

"We know travelers like to have options and the ability to access info on varying platforms," she said. "And we know that different platforms carry with them different strengths, which we feel we've capitalized on."

It was fun to use the app when I climbed out of the subway and into Grand Central. I appreciated being able to type in my destination and just click through to the page as I walked. If I were using the guidebook, I would have had to rush to the side, to get out of the way of the crowd, then take out my book and find it in the index. (Going to the side is key in any crowded New York area - just like pulling over on the highway.)

Both app and book list Grand Central as a top site in Midtown, and both advised me to look up at the ceiling of the main concourse to see the constellations made from twinkling fiber-optic lights. Both also recommended experiencing the thrill of rush hour.

Retreat, then, to the staircases and climb to the balconies to take in the whirl of people rushing, dodging and weaving their way home. I climbed high enough that it was safe to take out that orange-labeled guidebook again. Or maybe it was time for another Scrabble move.

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