

Review: Foursquare a fun complement to city jaunts

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Foursquare is displayed on an Apple iPhone 3GS, Wednesday, March 23, 2011 in New York. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan)

(AP) -- At first, I didn't see the point of Foursquare, the mobile service that turns sharing your location with friends into a game of sorts. More than a year later, I still don't, but I'm hooked - much to the chagrin of my fiancé, who prefers to spend his time on more noble pursuits such as "Angry Birds" and Facebook.

For those unfamiliar with Foursquare, the service works like this: When

you're out at a bar, park or eatery, you find that place on Foursquare's free smartphone application and tap a button that says "check in."

Once you do, people you've designated as Foursquare friends will know your whereabouts, if you so choose. People who check into a place most often become its "mayor." Venues sometimes offer discounts or other incentives for checking in, such as a free drink at a bar for the mayor or \$1 off a slice for your first time at a pizza joint.

I've been dutifully logging my jaunts around the city. I've found that although Foursquare isn't a replacement for other apps I use to find stuff, such as Yelp or [Google](#) Maps, it's a fun and serendipitous complement.

My first-ever check-in was to the headquarters of The Associated Press in New York on Feb. 2, 2010. A few hours later I checked in to the bus stop near my apartment, then to One Stop Market, the corner store of which I later, briefly, became mayor.

Since then I've developed a Foursquare habit I can't seem to kick. Not that I want to.

It feels unobtrusive and irreverent, a welcome connection between my online and offline life. It's also quirky: During New York's snowstorms this winter, I was among hundreds to check in to "Snowpocalypse 2011" and, later "Icemaggedon 2011."

It's also fun to use the app to see where my friends are. Because we don't talk or email every day, it's comforting to see their check-ins and imagine them having fun at a bar in Dublin or stuffing their face at McDonald's in San Francisco. This feels less intrusive than Facebook's constant barrage of updates, links and requests from my 200-something "friends." On Foursquare I have just 14.

The service recently updated its software to make it easier to find nearby deals, and to make competing with friends for points (which you get for check-ins) a more prominent part of the Foursquare experience. It should be noted, though, that there's no reward for racking up points other than the ego boost. The [app](#) is also a little easier to use now that it automatically brings up previous places you have checked in to once you start typing.

But by far the most promising new feature is the replacement of the "tips" button with "explore." Previously, tapping "tips" would pull up users' suggestions for nearby venues on what to order, what to avoid or what days a bar hosts punk rock karaoke or trivia night.

"Explore" is much more elaborate, letting users search for venues by category such as food, nightlife and shops. You can also search for specific terms - try "spicy food" or "date night."

I was a bit overwhelmed by the abundance of eating, drinking and entertainment options in this city that never sleeps - but that apparently eats, drinks and entertains itself non-stop. But this is hardly a complaint.

I spent last Saturday in a popular North Brooklyn neighborhood doing errands with my fiancé. Our first stop was the Brooklyn Kitchen, a kitchen supply store that also offers classes such as pickling and home brewing. As useful as these classes are, I was surprised to discover that Foursquare gave me four points for checking in at my "first college classroom." A bit of a stretch, perhaps, but I'll take what I can get.

Next up was lunch. To find out what's around me, I tapped "explore," then "food." The first suggestion - a brewery that doesn't serve food - was way off. But the next recommendation, Saltie, was spot on. It's a small sandwich shop I've been meaning to try.

According to Foursquare, a friend of mine had been there 13 times, and another friend, three times. It also said that "people who go to Prime Meats and 6 other places go here."

I wasn't sure what to make of this. Prime Meats is a German-influenced restaurant in my neighborhood known for fresh, local fare and artisan cocktails. Because I've been there a few times and like it, I figured I'd trust the Prime Meats crowd for my lunch suggestion in a different neighborhood and different type of restaurant.

I was right to do so. Saltie's food was tasty, and we left with full bellies and only a small dent in our wallets. But I was left wondering what the "6 other places" referred to. Foursquare does not seem to have a way to see that, which is a shame.

Out of curiosity, I did a search for Mexican food nearby. Among the suggestions was Taco Chulo, a place I had never been to. Foursquare recommended it based on what it calls "related places." But I'm not sure how a taco joint is related to Marlow & Sons, a rustic, sit-down restaurant serving oysters and things like rabbit terrine and brick chicken. Distant cousins, maybe?

Still, it was fun to see the suggestions. Foursquare says it bases them on a mix of many things, including what's popular overall, where else you've been that's similar and how often, the best tips, and so on.

When I have a place in mind already, I still prefer to read Yelp reviews and check out menus on Menupages before deciding whether to go. Foursquare, however, provides more serendipity. Although it has no reviews or ratings, its quick tips from friends and strangers can be useful.

With the overhaul, Foursquare is also giving users more statistics about

what they and their friends do. My favorite is the "most explored categories." I like to eat and drink, so it makes sense that my top category is "food and drink shops," followed by bars and something called "other great outdoors," which includes the Niles Canyon Railway in California.

Foursquare's new points system is an improvement over the earlier one. Instead of resetting points every Sunday night, the points are now counted over the previous seven days, which seems to encourage staying competitive throughout the week.

The new Foursquare also gives points for a whole slew of little things. I got extra credit for checking in to a venue where a friend of mine is mayor, for example, with [Foursquare](#) politely informing me that I'm "creeping on their turf!"

One thing that hasn't changed but wish that it had is Foursquare's insistence on separating my friends by city. I have friends in the San Francisco Bay Area, New York, Philadelphia and Boston, and we travel a bit. It would be nice to see everyone in one big happy heap.

Nonetheless, after 1,275 check-ins, a couple special deals and about a dozen hard-won (and some, lost) mayorships later, I'll keep coming back for more.

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