

# Augmented reality apps have some work to do

August 23 2011, By Roger Yu

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Imagine if you could wander the streets of a new city and get monuments and shops to reveal detailed information about themselves in a speech balloon. Like in a cartoon.

That's the idea behind an emerging - but clumsily named - [mobile technology](#) called [augmented reality](#), or AR. It combines a camera, GPS and compass in a smartphone, so that the phone can "recognize" an object or spot that a user is pointing to by computing [location data](#) and displaying it on the screen.

A traveler points the phone's camera at a particular spot and small icons appear on the screen, representing various points of interest: restaurants, museums, hotels, transit stations. Tapping on the icon renders more information: address, phone number, historical background or [Wikipedia](#) description.

Given travelers' propensity to get lost and the limitations of 2-D maps, it's not surprising that travel companies - from guidebook publishers to online booking sites and ski resorts - are eager to try it.

[Yelp](#), [TripAdvisor](#) and Lonely Planet are just a few travel companies that have introduced augmented reality on their apps. There are also AR browsers, such as Wikitude, Layar and Junaio, that offer data from third-party providers.

Augmented reality is a nifty and fun time-waster, but I don't think it's

ready for prime time in its current form.

Having the camera screen tell you what's in front of you might be useful for someone who's completely navigation-challenged. But if I'm looking for a sushi restaurant near me, I'm more likely to turn to [Google](#) or Yelp to display the results on the map software, than to rotate my phone around me on a street corner.

Its user experience also leaves a lot to be desired. Too often, the icons are twitchy and stacked on top of others, making them difficult to separate and read.

For some apps, it's also difficult to adjust the distance range, resulting in restaurants and other points of interest that are anywhere from several feet away to 30 miles out.

AR apps could be more helpful if they could point to a building or a structure and tell travelers what they are looking at or what shops or tenants are inside.

But the current lineup of AR apps isn't quite ready for such features. They just point you in a direction and tell you how far to go without really guiding. You still need a map.

I can appreciate what the designers are trying to achieve with augmented reality and why it has gotten so much attention. It's a very Star Trek-y tool. But for now, it's more style than substance and has a long way to go before it can augment anyone's reality.

## **mTrip**

Overview: A city travel guide app with an AR feature. Has hundreds of museums, monuments, restaurants, bars, hotels with descriptions,

reviews and photos. Available for 28 destinations, including four U.S. cities.

**Pros:** Has other features beyond AR, such as offline navigation and the ability to create personalized itineraries. Guide information on sites is thorough. No Internet connection required.

**Cons:** AR feature works well in showing points of interest but has limited range of about only a half-mile. Cluttered, with too many features crammed in. Functions, including AR, are limited once you leave the city limits.

**Takeaway:** Suitable for those seeking to combine tour guide app with augmented-reality feature.

## **TripAdvisor**

**Overview:** The popular travel app, best known for its more than 45 million reviews, has added an AR feature called Live View. Use the app to filter and find hotels, restaurants and points of interest, and the AR tab places search results on the screen.

**Pros:** AR icons reveal review ratings of restaurants and hotels. Phone, map and street view are only one a click away.

**Cons:** Number of search results that show up on AR screen is limited. For example, there are 455 restaurants within a mile of my office, but only three icons appeared.

**Takeaway:** AR is a bonus for an already popular app for travelers. Not really a game-changer.

## Wikitude

Overview: An AR app that uses third-party content (such as Starbucks, YouTube, Gowalla, Foursquare) to locate restaurants, shops and other points of interest nearby.

Pros: Since it relies on others, its information and data are more comprehensive than other travel guide apps. Has photos and videos of places nearby. Has search tab for narrowing choices ("pizza" or "hotel").

Cons: Disorganized interface. No way to filter search by distance. Clunky user experience, as some icons appear one minute and disappear the next. Icons are often stacked on top of each other, making them difficult to read.

Takeaway: More useful for its content than its AR feature.

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