

Delve deeper into your destination

By Marnie Hunter CNN

Friday, November 4, 2005; Posted: 12:15 p.m. EST (17:15 GMT)

(CNN) -- Getting a sense of a destination's true character takes a little time, especially if you're relying solely on the listings in your trusty guidebook.

Dig a little deeper, and you're likely to see how the locals live.

Reading material

Check out the local newspaper or independent weekly when you arrive or look for them online before you go. "You can find a lot of entertainment stuff in there, a lot of restaurant reviews that might not necessarily be part of the restaurants that are recommended by hostels or tourist agencies," said Laura Martin, editor in chief of the 2007 "Let's Go" guides. Many papers and independent weeklies publish an annual roundup of the city's most popular offerings -- including information on restaurants, bars, shops, galleries and parks.

Looking at bulletin boards in coffee shops or local stores often yields good insider information, said Jane Pirone, publisher of "Not for Tourists," a series of guides designed to make you feel like a local, or at least like a good friend is showing you around. "One big strategy for me is finding an independent bookstore because you really can find so much cool information about what's going on in the neighborhood and the town from that," Pirone said. By cross-referencing the local entertainment listings with a guidebook, you can find a performance that sounds intriguing in a club or bar that suits your tastes.

Take cues from the locals

Don't be afraid to ask for recommendations. Sometimes you don't even have to ask. A restaurant packed with locals is promising, said Julian Smith, author of "Moon Handbooks" guides on Ecuador, Virginia and the Four Corners (where Utah, Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico intersect). "It might be a really nice-looking restaurant, but if it's sitting empty on a Saturday night, that's probably not a good sign," Smith said. If you're not confident in the advice you receive, ask someone else. Sometimes asking around in an environment where you feel comfortable will produce the sort of recommendations you're seeking.

"If you're at a cool local record store or coffee shop or bookstore, then the person you ask will most likely give you a more authentic neighborhood restaurant as opposed to a chain that's void of any character about the city," Pirone said.

Getting around

Making your way from point A to point B with residents gives you more opportunities to gather information. Even if you're not the type to chat with someone on a bus, it's an interesting way to observe day-to-day life. "I like to try and take local transportation when I can, instead of a tour or a rental car," Smith said. "A lot of times you meet interesting people, and you might stick out, but people usually are interested in where you're from and where you're going."

Martin agreed that public transportation can be a fun experience and a good way to get to areas that aren't heavily visited by tourists, but she advises travelers to make sure the system is reliable before hopping aboard. Smith said he likes to hire a taxi and a driver when he's traveling abroad in a place where costs are low. "You get kind of a personal tour guide for the day because taxi drivers know everything, just about. They're one of the best sources of information," he said.

Rest for the weary

If you really want a window into local life, consider forgoing a hotel room or hostel for a rental house, apartment or a visit in someone's home. Web sites such as Vacation Rentals by Owner and Great Rentals offer a variety of rental properties across the globe. Smith recommends renting a room in someone's home for a more culturally rich experience. For the truly adventurous, budget-minded traveler, there are a number of hospitality sites -- CouchSurfing.com, Globalfreeloaders.com or Hospitalityclub.org -- that link travelers up with local hosts and accommodations at little or no cost. Smith said he has had good experiences with Servas International, a nonprofit group that links travelers with hosts in an effort to build cross-cultural understanding. Getting off the traditional lodging circuit is a good way to find local flavor, Martin agreed. "You're not necessarily with other travelers all the time," she said. "You're getting a better idea of what it actually is like to live in that culture as opposed to just staying there for a few days."