

Guides help real travellers rush in where 'tourists' fear to tread Books give more than landmark list 'Club' members get slice of city life

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In the world of travel, it is often said there are two kinds of people: tourists and travellers. Most of us are the former but wish we were the latter.

Wherever tourists roam there is a well-beaten path of landmarks, sanitized cultural experiences and inflated prices. Populating this path are the thousands who carry the usual array of guidebooks: Fodor's, Frommer's, Let's Go... Even Lonely Planet, which encourages adventure and discovery, has its own trail of followers who devotedly adhere to its picks and avoid its pans.

This is not meant as a slight to tourists — for I was once one myself. And I, too, wished I could be more adventurous, more serendipitous in my wandering.

Then NFT found me.

NFT, short for Not For Tourists, is the anti-guidebook. It empowers visitors — and locals — to make all their own decisions.

If you've heard about NFT, chances are a local tipped you off. Consider that your first test to see whether you're worthy of joining this semi-exclusive club. (That's no joke. NFT "members" can even get a free badge in the mail affirming their status as non-tourists.)

I learned about it this year on a trip to New York, where an alternative shop owner in SoHo, who had recently moved to the city, called it a "must" buy.

When I later pulled it off the shelf at the famous Strand bookstore (a location that rates highly in all the usual guidebooks), a young woman standing nearby, also newly local, asserted that the book "saved her life" when she moved to Manhattan.

What's the big deal?

The black-jacketed, full-colour New York edition is about half the size of most guidebooks (399 pages that fit easily in a coat pocket).

The first half is organized into maps; the rest is a detailed appendix.

I located the Strand on Map 6 (Washington Square/NoHo/SoHo).

In the text on the opposite page, I learned that within easy walking distance there were 20 "landmarks," 18 gyms, 12 liquor stores, 10 supermarkets, seven video stores, five bagel shops and 36 cafés — six of them Starbucks.

I turned the page to discover dozens more listings for restaurants, night spots, cinemas and shopping destinations.

I could then cross-reference the map with a massive appendix of perhaps the most concise, yet somehow informative, restaurant, bar and hotel reviews of all time. ("Mexcellent;" "Holy sh*t this is good Thai!" "Louche Argentines and brilliant French toast.")

If that's not enough, there are plenty more maps and listings dedicated to such necessities as transit, hospitals, kid-friendly destinations, places of worship and pools.

And in case non-tourists want to know their enemy, there are but nine brisk pages devoted to cultural landmarks from Times Square to the Empire State Building.

It's not quite Lonely Planet, and it's not quite the Yellow Pages, but NFT may be their bastard child.

"It's a way of looking at cities," says NFT co-founder Rob Tallia, 39, in a phone interview. "We feel cities are really a collection of small neighbourhoods, and it (NFT) is a breakdown of each of these neighbourhoods, showing how they all interact with each other."

The concept has caught on. Since publishing the first New York edition in 2000, guides have been released for seven other U.S. cities, with number eight (Seattle) due next year.

Each guide is updated annually, and all maps and text can be downloaded free from the website, <http://www.notfortourists.com>, where you can also order copies of the guidebooks (\$10 to \$22 U.S.).

Tallia expects the books to be distributed in Canadian stores beginning next year; after that, he says, the company is looking into publishing NFTs for Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal.

As for the books' slightly cheeky title, Tallia explains, "We're not really making a joke. Most of the listings are stuff that people who live in the city need to know about: gas stations, parking lots, banks, hardware stores, liquor stores, things like that."

The guidebook, he says, is aimed at locals, "and people who want to use the city like the locals (do). If you're only going to be in town for a few days and you're going to stay in Times Square and go to a Broadway show, then the book's not for you."

And if that's the case, it's doubtful any local tipped you off to NFT anyway so you'll probably never know what you're missing.

Ariel Teplitsky is the Star's Saturday A&E editor.