

Digital Devices, Print Guides Both Useful on Trip

Fritz Faerber, Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — On a recent trip to Spain and Andorra, I loaded a Lonely Planet Discover Spain guide on my iPad, put Lonely Planet city guides for Barcelona and Madrid on my iPhone, and for good measure, carried around a Rick Steves Spain guide — the paper kind. I also installed maps on my iPad from a company called Dubbele that specializes in mobile maps.

After two weeks on buses, trains, planes as well as skis and on foot, the verdict is in. Digital devices are making headway but the printed guidebook isn't a relic yet.

Using a smartphone on a trip has advantages. GPS can figure out where you are or find a spot to eat or shop. Nifty images of attractions along with contact information and hours of operation are at your fingertips. But nothing beats a good travel guidebook for reading up on a destination. Tuck a postcard in the page with all the restaurant listings you'd like to try, scribble extra info on the margins, or push your seat to a reclining position and read during your flight.

On the other hand, twice during the trip I took with friends, information delivered digitally saved the day. First, on New Year's Eve, the trendy tapas bar in Barcelona where we'd made reservations for five had only marked down space for two of us. The restaurant expected three of us would simply leave, but loyalty won out and we all took a hike through Las Ramblas and the Gothic Quarter. It was 9 p.m. on Dec. 31, not an easy time to find a decent restaurant with space open. As my friends griped, I consulted the Lonely Planet guide on the iPhone, which pinpointed several nearby restaurants. Following the handy map, we managed to weasel our way into a great spot for a fabulous evening.

Then, when two from our group decided to take an extra day in Barcelona, I worried they'd never find our lodge in Andorra, located on a tiny unlit windy mountain road. Using Google Maps would have required an Internet connection and resulted in international roaming data charges. But using the large Dubbele map I'd installed from iTunes on the iPad, our friends were able to find us.

Reading the Lonely Planet guide on the tablet was also easy on the eyes. The text is clear and big enough to read. Maps and photos are not tiny thumbnails lacking detail, nor are they so zoomed-in that the scale is lost. It's possible to bookmark and there are plenty of hyperlinks throughout the guide.

But digital devices have their drawbacks. A \$500 tablet may not be the best item to toss in the back seat of a car, read at the pub or consult in a drizzle. Books dry out. Electronics are easily ruined and damaged, and can also be targets of theft.

And unlike a book, smartphones and readers need juice. I found myself obsessively searching for outlets everywhere I went — rooting under tables in cafes, pulling

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couches away from walls in hotels and sprawling on the floor in a bus station to gain a coveted electrical current. Apparently, air travelers in Madrid don't use electricity. I spent 20 minutes hunting around the international terminal to find an outlet. Of the small handful I found, all were either not functional or occupied. (Abroad you need adapters too, since currents and plugs are different.)

In addition, data isn't cheap. It isn't even reasonable. It's downright spendy. Be aware of data charges if you travel internationally. And, just because you've purchased an international data plan, don't assume your costs are contained. Some places don't abide by these plans — including Andorra, where I paid a princely sum for using my iPhone.

Overall, I could have gotten by with just one source of travel information instead of three. But after comparing the three in real time, I think the best way to go is to take a book and a phone. The iPad is a good delivery system for e-mail and other content — including travel guidebooks — but it isn't a primary communication device. It can be a good option, however, for travelers who read a lot and prefer e-books to carrying around "War and Peace" or the collected works of Dean Koontz.

A final thought: Paper guidebooks don't have bugs and don't crash. It is extremely frustrating repeatedly trying to access an app and have the smartphone just freeze or repeatedly download a Google Map. I have yet to open a book and see nothing but blank pages.

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