

Are we there yet?

Mark Eveleigh embarks on a spot of time travel and asks how technology will change the way we travel in the next decade. Just how will we see the world when we're equipped with '2020 vision'?

YOUR FLIGHT INTO ROME ARRIVES late and the friend you were meeting texts to say that she has to cancel lunch. This leaves you with an afternoon to fill, but by the time your baggage has arrived on the carousel, you've already booted up your PDA and browsed your bookmarks to find a multimedia tour that fits well with your interests. 'Spanish Steps' just wins over 'The Forum', and downloading it takes a couple of minutes. You'll be free by 6pm so, after a few more quick searches, you have a reservation at a recommended restaurant and a late deal on a theatre ticket.

Even ten years ago, this scenario would have been considered pure science fiction, but today, all of these possibilities are everyday realities. Tourcaster already offers more than a dozen downloadable tours for Rome (and many more from 30 other countries) that can be played on an MP3 player or suitable mobile phone,

while Tourist Tracks and Soundmap offer similar tours specifically in the UK.

'With the increase in internet-enabled mobile phones, in the near future, more people will be downloading many different types of guides and tours,' says Jo Bryan, Soundmap founder. 'GPS represents another huge opportunity. The ability to accurately anchor audio and video to the exact spot on which you're standing is going to have a huge impact, not only on tourism but also on education.' And these products need not only be accessible to the computer geeks among us: Soundmap also produces simple audio-players with their tours preloaded.

WALL UNIT

Berlin has recently introduced an impressive handheld multimedia device that goes a long way towards resurrecting the demolished Berlin Wall, although thankfully only in virtual reality. The WallGuide



Left: a tourist stands in the shadow of Berlin's Brandenburg Gate while the MauerGuide (WallGuide) gives her an insight into a darker period of the city's history; **Right:** an Indian man uses a satellite navigation device while riding a camel in Rajasthan

ADRIAN POPE/GETTY IMAGES; MARK EVELEIGH/THE WIDEANGLE

can be hired by the hour from kiosks located at various points along the wall. It's a system that many other cities will be copying in coming years, and puts even the most enthusiastic and knowledgeable of human guides to shame with its image displays, recorded interviews with living witnesses and general depth of information. You no longer have to fit in with scheduled tour departures or keep up with the speed of the group – you can leave when you want and fast-forward (or rewind) as needed. Best of all, the interactive touch-screen allows you to follow lines of investigation (perhaps 'escape attempts' or 'East German propaganda') that most interest you. The built-in GPS receiver allows you to follow the route of the entire wall, including unmarked sections that are now unknown even to most locals.

Google Earth has revolutionised the way we look at our world perhaps more than anything else online. Far from detracting from the thrill of exploration, increased access to all this information may actually make it easier for those driven by adventure to get farther off the beaten track. Many of those empty spaces on the world's maps – what Joseph Conrad once called 'a blank space of delightful mystery' – are now revealed in all their glory, beckoning to the adventurous with their uncharted rivers and unclimbed peaks.

The increase in available information is exponential. The MAPA Project, for example, has just begun an ambitious project to map the boundaries, roads and trails of every national park in Africa using GPS and to add it to the sum of knowledge on Google Earth. This information will ease the planning and travelling



Above: the MauerGuide's touch screen guides visitors along forgotten sections of the Berlin Wall. Devices such as this will become increasingly common for the tourists of the future

traumas of countless safari and overland travellers across what was once known as the Dark Continent because of the fathomless mysteries that lay at its heart.

TAILOR-MADE TOURISM

In the future, we'll be able to download information such as this to a single small, but hugely powerful, device. It will integrate everything we could possibly need – phone, credit card, music player, media player, high-speed internet access, hi-res camera, G3, GPS and so forth – into one unit. But these mind-boggling possibilities may mean that, by 2020, we'll be so spoilt for choice that the biggest problem will be sifting through all of the options available and making a decision. Luckily, smart technology is already available that will thin down the possibilities to a list of options that appeal to our individual

tastes or habits. For example, if you're a vegetarian, your PDA will long ago have learned not to bother recommending a great steakhouse.

Luis Castillo Vidal, an associate professor at the University of Granada in Spain and an expert in artificial intelligence, says this trend towards technological individualisation is key to offering the tourist a personalised experience. 'The added value for any people-oriented business today is the customisation of products – adapting to the needs of individual clients,' he says. 'The better adapted the product is to a person, the more valuable it will be for this person.'

All of our bookings will be made through tourism websites that will have adapted quickly to put an end to what Castillo Vidal calls 'canned visits' – online experiences that are the same for everybody. When we look

for a hotel, search engines will confer with the individual profile data on our computer or PDA to determine that, for example, a gym is more important to us than a pool, or that a range of good restaurants is more of a priority than proximity to the beach. Our devices will be intelligent enough to learn our characteristics by experience, and we'll be able to transfer these traits between devices in the same way that we import such things as address-book files today. Thus, through use, our devices will get to 'know' us more intimately and our searches will be ever more specific to our needs.

The future is already upon us and the way in which we travel is still changing at breakneck speed. Who knows: by 2020, we might even have found ways to get around those delayed flights and long waits at the baggage carousel. **G**

Guiding the way into a new era

Back in the dark ages of 1995, Rough Guides was the first major publisher to put guidebook content online. It followed this by launching downloadable versions six years later. These days, its website also features podcasts, podscrolls (guides that can be viewed on iPods), phrase book downloads and digital maps. More recently, it created Rough Guides Mobile, which allows you to

download information on European cities directly to your mobile phone.

Dorling Kindersley also offers an online 'make your own guidebook' application, through which you can publish your own customised guide, featuring only the locations and information you need. The company believes that customisation such as this will be the normal format for the guidebooks of the future.

Liz Statham of Penguin, the parent company of both Rough Guides and Dorling Kindersley, foresees huge changes. 'Eventually, guide devices will become smaller and there will be a wealth of geo-coded content and location-aware software that can be accessed on your mobile,' she says. 'A trip to the undeveloped world will involve pre-trip planning on the web,

but a guidebook will still be needed while you're on the road, perhaps using a mobile device every now and then.

'Or perhaps kids will be so sick of technology in their everyday lives, and so desperate to get off the beaten track, that they'll decide to leave their handhelds at home and travel on a wing and a prayer like their grandparents did!'