

Tourism Hits the 21st Century

By: Carmel Delshad

The iPod has a new gig: tour guide.

For tech-savvy mp3 owners who love to travel, Boston-based Audissey Guides provides audio tours for download. All you need is a sense of adventure, so put down your credit card because these tours are free.

Founder and Creative Director Rob Pyles started the company in 2005 and launched the first audio tour, set in Boston.

“The timing was perfect because iPods were just starting to get popular in 2006. So we started with Boston because we are from Boston,” Pyles said.

Users download the audio tours from iTunes or the Audissey Web site. From there tourists upload the tour onto their mp3 players and print out a map directing them to the various tour destinations. Tours are available for Boston, Miami Beach, Houston, Seattle, New Orleans, Chicago, Halifax, Nova Scotia and Hampton, Virginia.

Pyles’ love for traveling was the catalyst for his career venture with the Audissey Guides.

“I wanted to show the cities on an intimate level and give a unique view as to why they are special,” he said.

Pyles now has an armada of young tech specialists to help keep this internet-based company going, including Glenn Forsythe, a “soundscape architect” and Berklee College of Music graduate.

“Working with Glenn is great,” said Pyles. “We take history and reinvent it in an awesome way.”

Forsythe’s job is to bring out the flavor of each city through the music he composes.

“There is the literal end, with ambient recordings,” said Forsythe. “Then the music, I try to see the impression it gives me as a composer. For instance, in Houston, I gave the music a Southern, lush bayou feel.”

Pyles said his tours take you to places you cannot get to by bus or trolley. The tour, narrated by Pyles, takes followers to the notable areas of Boston and features guest narration by local Bostonians.

The sounds of footsteps and Pyles’ voice take you to Devonshire Street. Pyles narrates in a signature Bostonian accent:

Listen to a tale of James Michael Curley, the wildest politician in a city of wild politics...He was the most gifted speaker of his time, but sometimes he let his fists do the talking. Back in 1926 a newspaper editor wrote a scathing editorial about Curley. A couple of days later, up ahead on the left, by the sign for the National Park Visitor’s Center, the editor and Curley just happened to cross paths. Now stop here, check it out. Here, at about this spot, two of the highest profile men in Boston squared off. The editor went sprawling to the gutter. That’s right, on a crowded street, in the middle of the day, the mayor of Boston punched the editor in the face and knocked his ass out.

Dick Lehr, a Boston journalist and co-author of *The Underboss: The Rise and Fall of a Mafia Family*, takes tourists on a walk through the city's infamous North End, known to locals as a former mafia hot spot.

"The North End is peaceful now," says Lehr as he narrates. "Visitors identify the neighborhood with Paul Revere and the Old North Church. The streets of the North End were long a protective cover for a more sinister kind of rebel: the Boston mafia. You're headed to 98 Prince Street, where one of the most daring chapters in Boston crime history took place back in 1981."

With a young team of tech specialists, which Pyles notes was a stroke of fate and not a purposeful action, the tours cater to the young and young-at-heart. The tours last for roughly an hour.

Tourists and college students alike can appreciate the hands-on approach of the tours.

Tu-Phuong Tran, a student at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, said she would definitely go on the Boston Audissey tour while away from college for a weekend.

"It's a pretty creative approach to modern travel. Given the popular usage of iPods and mp3 players, I think this product is a great idea especially for those who backpack or prefer to travel alone. I would definitely go with friends," Tran said.

Student Sean Karlen said the free tours are great for college students.

"If you like to travel that's expensive enough. So this idea of a free tour that you can control is pretty awesome," said Karlen.

His friend and classmate John Marc Wilson agreed.

"Anything that's free will be bound to attract students. And I think that's what the tourism industry really needs. People can't afford to go anywhere on vacation now, so these free tours are great," said Wilson.

Pyles said the tours were not free previously, but with the recent boom in business, he decided to make the tours as cost efficient as possible.

"Now, we have cities contacting us and hiring us, so that's how we are able to give the tours for free," said Pyles.

Tran sees one major downside with this portable tour guide.

"I worry whether the iPod tours would present distractions, via surround sound, that could put a user in danger," said Tran. "Having traveled by myself in foreign countries, I think it's important to be aware of your surroundings for safety reasons. But it is all about personal responsibility in the end."

While these dangers exist anywhere, Pyles' team stresses that their destinations are just as safe as any other tour.

What is next for these tours that claim to "create hip, entertaining audio and video walking tours that launch travelers off the beaten path – and into the soul of a city?" Pyles said he plans to stick to the same formula for success.

"We are just having fun the way it is; all of us enjoy our jobs. But we are lining up new cities for the future and expanding overseas," said Pyles. "We will look for cities that have a bittersweet story, like Belfast or Sarajevo, a place that you might not think of when you hear the word tourism."

The Audissey Guides team is also tinkering with GPS technology to create customized GPS-based tours for clients, cell phone tours and online virtual tours.

Bittersweet or not, these interactive tours are just a sign of the times, where technology meets recreation.