

New York by the book, any book, is encyclopedic

By T. Susan Chang, Globe Correspondent | November 12, 2006

NEWYORK -- Visiting the Big Apple is not for the faint of heart; even if you stick to Manhattan, it's easy to get overwhelmed. If you're not prepared, one week in the city that never sleeps can leave you kvetching like a native: If it's not the weather, it's the crowds. Or it's the smells, or the high prices, or never being able to find a cab when you need one.

If you're like most visitors, you'll want a book to help you find your way around. And every well-known travel publisher (and many an obscure one) has a New York guidebook -- which makes choosing one almost as overwhelming as the city. What happens if your so-called guide steers you to the same places everybody else is going, and you end up spending your whole vacation waiting on line (that's New Yorkese for "in line") at the Statue of Liberty?

The current crop of guidebooks ranges from palm-size to doorstop heft, from the fanny packer's 10 best to the ultimate insider's guide, from the corny to the canny. Recognizing that no one book will satisfy the tastes of every wanderer, here's a brief guide to the guides:

Pocket guides

For those who want to travel light, there is a handful of smaller guides. Rough Guides has two: "New York City Directions" (\$10.99), a compact neighborhood-by-neighborhood guide with an overall map of Manhattan (showing neighborhoods, but no transit info) and a street map of downtown in the front flap. The listings (restaurants, shopping, etc.), though hardly comprehensive, are well mapped. The "Mini Rough Guide" (\$10.99), a squat volume no bigger than a sandwich, is organized first by neighborhood and then by listings, with no clear reasoning as to what elements go where; museums are in the neighborhoods section, for example, while galleries are in the listings. An array of decent maps are bunched at the back.

Those who want a classic tourist experience -- Statue of Liberty, Empire State Building, South Street Seaport -- will find it in the slim "best of" guides, which tend to be little more than advertisements for the city's most obvious sights. Fodor's has "New York City's 25 Best" (\$11.95), which will get you to the aforementioned sites along with everybody else. New York's universe of shops and restaurants are summed up in a terse 24 pages, and the fold-out map is a sure bet if you want to annoy subway riders at rush hour.

DK Publishing's "Top 10 New York" (\$12) is a bit better, even if its obsessive list-making sometimes verges on the farcical. Sure, you might want to hear about New York's top 10 skyscrapers and romantic settings -- but do you really need help figuring out the top 10 attractions of the Statue of Liberty? (The crown is one, the pedestal another.) Still, the walking tours of each neighborhood and color illustrations make this a good choice for the pedestrian tourist.

Lonely Planet's "Best of New York City" (\$14.99) dispenses with the more obvious draws in 20 swift pages, and has the best front-fold maps of the lot. The rest of the volume deals with a limited but can-nily chosen selection of shopping, eating, and cultural attractions that display true New York character -- including gritty old institutions like Eisenberg's Sandwich Shop and offbeat festivals like "Night of a Thousand Stevies."

Full-size guides

Even the best pocket guides will serve for only a whirlwind tour of Manhattan. Full-size guides tend to be of two types; which you prefer will depend on whether you navigate by landmark or by map. If the former, the full-color illustrated guides are the better choice -- filled with photos of the city at its most flattering, they're perfect for whiling away the time indoors on those rainy, humid, blistering hot , or windy, bone-chilling days the guides so rarely describe.

DK's "Eyewitness Travel New York" (\$25) gives capsule descriptions of the neighborhoods, with pictures that favor architecture over humans; the maps are picturesque, but hard to read and often centered over the book's gutter, making them even less legible. Restaurant and shop listings are impressionistic, and lack both hours and transit directions. Fodor's "See It New York City" (\$24.95) is more thoughtful, if less abundantly illustrated; it's heavier on cultural history and has better directions. The maps are also a bit easier to read, but the emphasis is on attractions and listings rather than neighborhoods.

For the more map-oriented explorer, the big narrative guides are a better bet. Fodor's "New York City 2007" (from the "Gold Guide" series, \$17.95) is a navigator's dream -- each neighborhood has a big, easy-to-read map, and the four "other" boroughs (especially Brooklyn) are unusually well represented. Fodor's abides by the classic travel-guide split -- first neighborhoods, then listings. This guide has the best listings -- hours, location, directions, phone, website , and a decent description -- which make it indispensable if you are after some serious conspicuous consumption. Fodor's also boasts of fascinating "closeups," which explain, for example, what the colored lights of the Empire State Building mean and where you can find a classic New York brunch.

The "Rough Guide to New York City" (\$17.99) is less informative but more compact, cramming the essentials into its tightly formatted pages. The neighborhood descriptions are particularly well written and discursive (for some reason the Metropolitan Museum of Art is also considered a "neighborhood"). The listings are not quite as comprehensive as Fodor's, but taken as a whole, the Rough Guide is a well-crafted bargain.

Specific needs

Frommer's offers a handful of midsize guides that cater to those with more specialized needs; all emphasize listings rather than neighborhoods. "Pauline Frommer's New York City" (\$15.99) is a budget-oriented guide with clear ratings for price and good maps and directions. Frommer's "New York City With Kids" (\$16.99) is invaluable for traveling families; New York's bustle can be overwhelming for young children, and it's good to know exactly where you can go for an age-appropriate pit stop. Finally, Frommer's "Irreverent Guide to Manhattan" (\$12.99) targets the twenty- to thirtysomething set with its brash prose and explorer-friendly attitude. Each listings section contains an overall description, maps, and a handy index.

Insider guides

Even a New Yorker can spend a lifetime without getting to know every corner of the sprawling city. A few guides are designed as survival handbooks for natives -- but they can be lifesavers for visitors as well. The hands-down best of these is the Not For Tourists "Guide to New York City 2006" (\$14.95), a wallet-sized guide packed with factual info in eye-breaking type. Detailed street maps of every city neighborhood are marked with icons for neighborhood transportation, essentials, and sundries. (Coffee and gyms are sundries; bagels are essential.) There are maps of stadiums, parks, museums, and transit hubs, and a section on 24-hour services (hospitals and locksmiths). Someone even had the brilliant idea to include an address locator, providing cross-street info for avenue addresses.

Not For Tourists doesn't bother with what you ought to see or why -- it assumes you know what you want and gives you a hand getting it. Bridge and ferry crossings, tow pounds, toll fares -- all delivered in a punchy, concise prose, with a smart black elastic strap to hold your place.

Charming if less practical is Pamela Keech's "Curious Shopper's Guide to New York City" (Random House, \$12.95), a gem of a book no bigger than a knish. Much of Manhattan's appeal can be found in its historic commercial neighborhoods. These are fading in the shadow of Starbucks, Old Navy, and the rest, but Keech is determined to save them in this ode to nine storied shopping districts with a dozen specialties. One by one, Keech introduces the kitchenware stores of the Bowery, the art-supply stores of the Printing District, the buttons, trims, and notions of the Millinery District -- small owner-operated shops filled with treasures you find nowhere else. Also included are places to eat in each neighborhood -- many of them, like Katz's Delicatessen, institutions in themselves.

Finally, there are the Pratique Guides (\$18.95), stylish leather-bound portfolios proportioned like a business envelope. Side-by-side pockets hold a folded map and a shopping guide with excruciating, block-by-block detail but no criticism. These guides require two hands and a table (as well as yearly updating), and are really for those who live in a particular neighborhood. However, a visitor wanting to stick close to his or her host's home turf might find a use for them.

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