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Putting travel apps to the test on a tour of Atlanta

By Becky Krystal, May 16, 2013



Planning my first-ever trip to Atlanta was making me dizzy, and not only because of the city's dazzling number of offerings. Hunched over a borrowed iPad, flicking among a too-large array of information-loaded travel apps, I soon realized that the kind of motion sickness that keeps me from ever going to an

Imax movie apparently applied to large electronic tablets as well.

It was a sign of things to come.

I'd set myself a challenge. I was going to navigate Atlanta using only travel apps. The idea was that they'd be dynamic, updated guides that would let me be spontaneous.

My arsenal included Goby, Triposo, the Layover (based on Anthony Bourdain's Travel Channel series of the same name), Afar, Oyster, TripAdvisor's Atlanta city guide, Gogobot, Viator, Stay.com, Chefs Feed and Find.Eat.Drink. All were free. Google Maps, a favorite app already installed on my phone, would be essential as well.

And that's how straight off the plane I ended up in line at Star Provisions, a hip market/bakery/sandwich shop a few miles north of downtown, on the recommendation of Bourdain and several chefs featured in Chefs Feed. I had no idea how — or what — to order until I started talking to the guy in front of me. He began to wax poetic about several of the menu items — the prosciutto and sweet butter on a baguette, the Reuben. Then there was the potato salad.

"I wake up in the middle of the night thinking about the potato salad," he confided. Ah, the human app. Sometimes you can't beat that. (For the record, I did get the potato salad. It was excellent.)

The gorgeous weather convinced me that I ought to be outside. But where? I settled on the Atlanta Botanical Garden, No. 4 on the list of things to do in the TripAdvisor city guide. It didn't disappoint. I traversed the entire garden, smelling herbs, admiring orchids and generally basking in the sunshine.

I considered zipping over to the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site, No. 2 in the TripAdvisor guide. But I wasn't able to quickly figure out the operating hours, a common failing of many of the apps I tried. So I called (imagine that!). By the time I got there, I had just under 90 minutes to explore.

Another information omission from the apps: You need a ticket to tour King's childhood home. A park ranger told me that all the free tickets had been spoken for, but that if I stuck around, I might be able to claim one belonging to a no-show. And I did.

After the tour, my phone battery almost dead, I checked in to the Glenn Hotel. I'd selected it based on the Oyster app, which closely mirrors what you can find on that hotel comparison Web site. A big part of what sold me: "The hotel's rooftop bar — which boasts stunning views of the city — is a highlight."

Before checking out that view, I spent an inordinate amount of time on my bed with my iPad trying to decide where to go for dinner. The number of options was debilitating. I doubted that this would happen with a guidebook.

At last I settled on Antico Pizza, endorsed by one chef on Chefs Feed as "simply the best pizza this side of the Mason-Dixon line." Decision made, I locked the iPad in my room safe, since my shoulder was already beginning to protest carrying it.

I passed enough time at the hotel bar to drink in the view, though not a cocktail, because I was going to be driving. When I arrived at Antico, I worried that the app recommendation was too spot-on. It seemed to be a popular place. I slid into a seat at a communal table as the clamor began to grate. Before my doubts could take over, my pizza arrived. All was good.

Back at the Glenn, my evening continued with more app-hopping. I felt like some sort of 21st-century parody, jumping between apps and gadgets. On Triposo, I browsed for things to do the next day and breakfast options from the places I had starred on the plane. It was just about enough finger-swiping to make me nostalgic for page-turning.

Still, I came across some intriguing prospects. One poster on Afar, which contained slightly offbeat attractions, suggested the Krog Street Tunnel. It connects the Cabbagetown and Inman Park neighborhoods and is full of ever-changing street art, a.k.a. graffiti. Goby's massive listings contained one gem that struck my fancy: the Inman Park Spring Festival and Tour of Homes. The item promised a home tour preview the following afternoon, but when I tried to click for more details, nothing happened. Without allowing myself to "cheat" by going online, I was at a loss. Should I risk heading to Inman Park without knowing the specifics? I slept on it.

When I woke up, I bolted for a CNN studio tour — nowhere to be found in the TripAdvisor top 100. Perhaps this was a warning that I should have heeded, but because it was only a block from my hotel and appealing to me as a journalist, I went anyway. The tour was most notable for an awkward tour-guide switch about halfway through and the absurd questions a few of my fellow tourgoers asked. (No, CNN International anchor Michael Holmes is not the same person as HGTV personality Mike Holmes of "Holmes on Homes.")

Breakfast was better. I grabbed a scone and chai at Hodgepodge Coffeehouse and Gallery, one of the leads I'd gotten from Triposo.

Then I set off for the Krog Street Tunnel, figuring that an outdoor excursion would be perfect in the lovely weather. Google Maps took me right there, though I settled for merely driving through. Verdict: cool, but not mind-blowing.

I had now crossed into Inman Park. Having gone this far, I put my faith in the Goby listing and tried to find the house tour. Driving up and down the area's main drag, I saw signs for the festival. Now what? With no more guidance from the app, I looked up the festival Web site on my phone. It directed me to a church a few streets away, so I walked there. Success. I bought a ticket.

Inman Park, Atlanta's first suburb, is full of envy-inducing historic and historic-looking homes, and I spent a couple of hours visiting almost a dozen of them. Would a guidebook have led me to the tour, the highlight of my trip? Probably not.

Then it was back to app paralysis. I sat on the edge of my rental car trunk, eating leftover Antico pizza and plotting my next move. The options overwhelmed me again. The zoo (pandas!) was a strong contender. So was the Atlanta Cyclorama, at TripAdvisor's No. 31 slot, three spots behind Zoo Atlanta. Then I recalled my friend's endorsement of the Cyclorama as "amazingggggg!," which hinted at enough cheesy fun to seal the deal.

Caught up in a group of schoolchildren, I let the wonders of the 360-degree painting of the Civil War Battle of Atlanta wash over me. I got to sit, enjoy the enthusiasm of our guide, a dead ringer for Chris Rock, and learn a bit of history. I'm sure that the attraction is in every guidebook. I didn't care.

Paralysis struck yet again as I debated whether and where to grab some takeout food before heading to the airport. Battling a wheezing phone battery and an iPad not connected to WiFi, I pulled up recommendations for a tart shop, a specialty grocery store and a sandwich bar. Closed for the day, closed for the day and sit-down only. Soon, I'd reached the dangerous window of Atlanta rush hour. My search had taken too long, and if I was going to make my flight, I had to skip dinner.

Indecision: If only there were an app for that.