

WHY TRAVEL GUIDEBOOKS HAVE REFUSED TO DIE



If you're over the age of 30, then it was probably your guiding light on your first-ever trip abroad. If you're under 30, then you might wonder what all the fuss is about.

The classic travel guidebook, popularised by Lonely Planet and Rick Steve, used to be the first thing in many backpacker's rucksacks, but sales dropped by 40% between 2005 and 2012, leading observers to suggest that they were a thing of the past.

Yet fast forward to 2021 and some printed guides continue to prosper. They continue to be many people's go-to source of travel knowledge. How have they survived? Here's a look at the reasons behind their stubborn refusal to die.

The digital age

In a digital world, we've become used to having everything available at the click of a button, with more choices than ever before. If we want sneakers, then a price comparison site will find you the best value pair, if you want to try your luck then a lottery webpage will gather hundreds for you to choose from - travel books were slow to pick up on this at first, but now many large publications have interactive websites where you can click on the destination of your choice and read a guide about it.

That's not to mention the appeal of apps and e-books. With virtually every travel specialist offering them these days, they're cheaper and more portable than paper copies - perfect for travelers. A quick tap on a smartphone draws up all the information you need.

'Surely this will lead to fewer printed books?' you may ask. Well, not quite. Short online guides act as a type of advert for printed editions - if someone likes the writing style of the internet version, then they might buy a paper copy to read on the train or the beach. They might also be tempted to buy them for someone's birthday: travel guides still make great gifts, after all.

Printed copies are also a great memento of a trip you went on, a way of saying 'I've been there' when you have visitors come round and inspect your bookshelves.

Ease-of-use

Ever used a digital travel guide and got frustrated with its out-of-sync maps and charts? It's a common problem: flicking through these documents online can be tricky, particularly on a mobile device.

Physical copies continue to offer a more pleasant browsing experience. The layout is clearer, its pictures are easier to look at - plus many people prefer the simple pleasure of reading print instead of staring at a screen, similar to normal books. Printed guides often come with a fold-out map, too, which is easy to spread out across a table and pore over your next move.

That's not to say it will always be like this. Technology is advancing quickly, so it will only be a matter of time before e-guides become much more interactive, with zoomable maps and higher resolution, for example.

For now, though, many customers prefer the feel of a book in their hands, and to read print instead of pixels.

The trend towards specialist books

Printed guidebooks have survived thanks to another factor - the niche market. Travellers who have a deep interest in a certain location often find that there's a lot of noise online: that is, oceans of TripAdvisor reviews and Google ratings, catering to a general audience.

These reviews are also often manipulated by clever marketing strategies by a shop or restaurant - the one with the highest rating isn't always the best.

While this might be useful for someone wanting to find somewhere in a hurry, it doesn't necessarily satisfy someone with a specialist knowledge of Parisian dining who wants to find the finest eatery, for example.

Such a saturated online industry has led to a demand for more specialist 'travel literature', and these often take the form of a printed book. Travelers may want a literary tour of Shakespeare's Britain or a guide to fine dining in San Sebastian - things your typical online eBook won't provide.

Also, people planning a 'once-in-a-lifetime' trip need more than the typical internet article and are willing to invest in something with more authority, something tangible that the author has spent a lot of time researching and curating.

So, while online guides are useful tools for the masses, there'll always be a section of the market that needs something a little more niche, which is where specialist printed books come into their own.

A digital future?

While printed guidebooks have put up a spirited fight until now, can they keep it up?

Improving technology appears to be their biggest threat. Once e-guides offer a comprehensive service, involving interactive maps and videos, they may start the printed guide's descent into oblivion. The arrival of 5G will take this further with AI guides offering possibilities such as virtual tours of destinations that make you feel as if you're there in person, or they could even start to organize the trip for you once you've decided to go. Even specialist literature may find a challenger in a hyper-digital age, with it being possible to access any type of niche information within a few seconds.

A digital future like this might prove to be a step too far for our paper guides, and we may see the era of e-guide truly begin.

Date: 2021-03-30

Article link: <https://www.tourism-review.com/printed-travel-guides-remain-popular-news11958>