San Francisco Travel Guides
A Comparative Design Analysis

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Overview

Travelers look to a variety of sources for information about their intended destinations. Traditional sources include travel brochures, guide books, newspaper clippings, and word of mouth. While a certain pleasure comes from leafing through books and talking with friends and family about their travel experiences, digital sources offer highly compelling information depth, organizational flexibility, and personalization possibilities.

A digital media travel guide is potentially far more than a mere replacement for books and brochures. Properly designed, a digital guide should be an improved, supercategory of information resource not otherwise possible. The digital medium offers many affordances guides in traditional media cannot easily supply, including interactive visual and aural components, multiple and dynamically arranged information views, and discussion forums.

This paper provides a comparative design analysis of multiple travel information sources, beginning with an examination of travel-associated core human needs and key tasks. Both traditional (non-digital) and digital information sources are analyzed with respect to semantic versus physical segmentations, legacy representational conventions, and digital conventions. Each analysis determines how well it serves the identified core needs and tasks. Digital sources are further assessed to determine the extent to which they exploit the affordances of the digital medium.

Requirements and steps are outlined for transitioning the digital travel guide into a mature genre in its own right. A mock-up of a next-generation navigational element illustrates and supports specific conclusions and requirements for such a guide.

To narrow the scope of the analysis, the discussion focus is restricted to travel information for San Francisco, California. A popular tourist destination, San Francisco is a city rich in history and culture with many relevant traditional and digital travel information artifacts to examine.
Travel Information Sources

Chambers of commerce and tourism boards around the world provide brochures, maps, and simple travel guides to prospective visitors. Travel agents provide similar information sometimes accompanied by individualized recommendations based on experience booking travel to popular destinations. Often supplied free of charge, these resources are helpful starting points, but the information they contain is generally sparse and oriented towards a narrow range of accommodations and “touristy” sight-seeing options.

The primary alternative to destination-supplied materials is the commercial travel guide. Such guides have provided independent and well-researched travel information in book form for decades. The travel guide market is substantial, and tourists have many options in terms of style, content, and price. For a popular destination like San Francisco, California, for example, a search at Amazon.com shows 1,075 results for travel guides and travel-related books.

Some guides target the more conventional tourist interested in the usual list of museums and historic sites. Others lean towards a more off-the-beaten-track approach. But in spite of differences in writing style and emphasis, most popular guides are structured according to the physical layout of the destination. At the coarsest level, a country guide is often organized by region, state, or province. City information is similarly segmented by section or neighborhood. At the finest level of detail, guides may offer walking tours in which information is sequentially ordered by block, pointing out individual buildings and other physical objects of note, like statues or fountains.

Given that these are travel books, there are certain understood conventions and expectations. For example, the content is fixed; margins afford note-taking; pages can be dog-eared; passages can be highlighted; and searching for specific content means looking in the table of contents, the index, or visually scanning the text.

There are also well-known limitations. Because content is fixed, a section on eating options for a large city cannot possibly remain up-to-date, even in annually updated guides. More importantly, the information is pre-organized; its consumer is a passive recipient of the representational and categorization schema deemed appropriate by someone else. A consumer must either adapt to a guide’s organizational style or seek an alternate resource.

The digital medium offers significant possibilities for far richer access to travel information. More than just powerfully encyclopedic, the digital form also offers procedural, participatory, and spatial possibilities that give the information provider highly flexible information delivery
options. Moreover, a properly designed digital resource that takes advantage of these elements also gives the consumer the power to re-mold the user experience at will, according to individual needs and preferences.

Digital travel information resources are widely available in Web form. A Google search for “San Francisco guide”\(^1\) returns nearly 17,000 associated Web sites. Although the nature of the Web means only a fraction of these sites contain useful information, the number nonetheless gives an indication of the interest in Web-based sources. For those sites that are genuine sources of travel information, it remains to be seen how they make use of the affordances of the digital medium.

The Representational Elements section of this paper analyzes several examples of traditional (non-digital) and digital media guides to San Francisco. Two popular print guides, *Fodor’s San Francisco* and *Access San Francisco*, provide a basis for content comparison with digital guides. An analysis of digital forms provides a cross section of representative of Web-available content. Two of the selected Web samples, Fodor’s and Lonely Planet, have roots in print media; a third is produced by a tourism board, the San Francisco Convention and Visitor’s Bureau.

\(^1\) Quotation marks included in search parameters. (Without quotes, the results are in the millions.)
Core Tasks and Human Needs

The first step in analyzing the suitability of any guide is to enumerate the core human travel needs and tasks irrespective of the delivery mechanism. Note that some overlap exists across these two areas (a traveler may study restaurant options before making the trip). In general, however, core human needs apply during the trip, and core tasks concern pre-travel activities.

Core Tasks: Planning Activities

- **Information Sifting** — Direct identification of pertinent information through easily grasped organizational conventions.
- **Note-taking / Bookmarking** — Identifying information for direct recall without having to remember a page number (or URL) or look in an index.
- **Key Interest Identification** — Quick identification of activities of interest. Supported by information on when activities can be done, where they happened, and how to get to them.
- **Itinerary Planning** — Concerns all aspects of planning the trip, from arrival and departure to everything in between. Related to interest identification and information sifting.
- **Packing / Outfitting** — What to pack, what weather to expect (by time of year).
- **Making Reservations** — Pre-planning specific activities; may include dining in a popular restaurant, attending a theatrical performance, or booking space on a tour or ferry.

Core Needs: Traveler Requirements

- **Eating** — A list of eating options and where to find them, preferably organized by location, cuisine, and price range.
- **Lodging** — Accommodation, including hotels, motels, and hostels, ordered according to location and price range, with contact information.
- **Cost & Payment Guidelines** — Local currency information (for foreign visitors), tipping guidelines, typical costs, and locally acceptable payment options.
- **Navigation / Orienteering** — For a city, navigation aids may include city maps with neighborhood highlights, transportation options, and background on local culture.
Representational Elements

The identification of core tasks and needs provides an important checklist of essential criteria against which to check any travel information source. This section uses these criteria to look at both traditional (non-digital) and digital sources for the city of San Francisco, California.

Where applicable, each information source is also examined to determine the degree to which cultural and social contexts shape what gets included, what is omitted, and what is made difficult or easy to do as a result. These effects result from the definition of the guide’s intended audience as well as biases imposed by the information provider.

Representational elements in digital resources are analyzed with respect to semantic vs. physical divisions, the use of legacy or fossilized representational conventions, and adherence to (or violation of) existing digital conventions. Examining the consistency of labeling systems and categorization can also reveal areas obscured (or made invisible) by organizational schema.

The analyses presented here also explore how well electronic guides improve on non-digital sources of information. Of particular interest is the extent to which the digital guides exploit the affordances of the medium in which they are deployed.

Traditional (non-digital) Sources

A wide variety of travel information books are available for San Francisco. This section provides an overview of two well-known guides: Fodor’s San Francisco and Access San Francisco. Table 1 shows a side-by-side comparison of the books’ organizational structure as given by their tables of contents.

City neighborhoods are the main focus of both guides, but each surrounds this information with a significantly different level of detail. Fodor’s approach serves less experienced travelers by opening with a 30-page introduction to San Francisco that includes a historical overview, a list of annual events, and general travel information. The Access guide’s introduction is a third this size. It assumes a more seasoned traveler (or perhaps a traveler looking to other sources for background and historical information) who just wants the basic facts on transportation options, city events, and important phone numbers.
Table 1: The organizational structure of the two San Francisco guide books examined in the traditional (non-digital) category. The focus of each guide is the city's neighborhoods, highlighted here in blue.

Fodor’s “Exploring San Francisco” section offers twenty neighborhood-centered tours of the city. Each section includes a map with points of interest marked by numbered circles. A variety of repetitive text “chunking” and figure elements are used within the guide to identify, organize, and categorize information (see Table 2). Numbers on maps correspond to nearby text entries and are
logically organized into walking tours of each neighborhood (see Figure 1). A star symbol next to an entry identifies a “recommended” establishment (e.g., a hotel or restaurant) or noteworthy tour stop. Sprinkled throughout are “Time Out” sections (notable places to eat or take a break) and “Off The Beaten Track” options for more adventurous travelers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Repeating Organizational Elements</th>
<th>Major Elements</th>
<th>Minor Elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• tours by section</td>
<td>• numbers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• maps</td>
<td>• star symbols</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• site descriptions</td>
<td>• color coding / shading</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2:** Major and minor repetitive elements used in the Fodor’s and Access guides to organize and identify information.

**Figure 1:** This scan of the Fodor’s map for the Northern Waterfront shows the various elements used to orient the reader. Circled numbers correspond to descriptive information text and the locations are also identified below the map.

In a similar way, the Access guide covers the city in fourteen neighborhood-specific chapters. The number of areas covered is about the same as in the Fodor’s guide, but the Access guide
groups a number of closely related city sections into the same chapter. Each chapter includes a section map with numeric references to the text (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2:** This scan of two pages from the Access guide shows how numbers in the map correspond to numbers in the text.

The main objective of the Access guide orienteering: to provide at-a-glance information about where one is standing and what is nearby. Textual color coding quickly identifies the kinds of places described in the text: red is used for restaurants and clubs, hotels are described in blue, outdoor elements appear in green, and so on. Colored paragraphs are numbered and associated with corresponding numbers on the maps in each sections.
Digital Sources

As mentioned in the introductory Travel Information Sources section, the number of matches returned by a Google search for “San Francisco guide” is staggering. A tourist just starting to learn about San Francisco via the Web might be overwhelmed by the number of choices. Fortunately, most well-known travel guide publishers also offer Web-based travel information. Based on their good reputation in print guides, Web sites offered by two of these publishers—Lonely Planet and Fodor’s—are used as starting points for examining the ways in which the digital medium is employed. The Web site operated by the San Francisco Convention and Visitor’s Bureau provides a third example. Table 3 provides a side-by-side comparison of the top-level menu structure for each resource, with the main link to neighborhood information in blue.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top-level Navigational Structure for Web-based Guides</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SF CVB</td>
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<tr>
<td>Home</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meet Riley</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explore the City</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alamo Square</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Castro District</td>
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<td>Chinatown</td>
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<td>Civic Center</td>
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<td>Fillmore Street</td>
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<td>Fisherman’s Wharf</td>
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<td>Haight-Ashbury</td>
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<td>Hayes Valley</td>
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<td>Japantown</td>
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<td>Marina District</td>
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<td>Mission District</td>
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<td>Nob Hill</td>
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<td>Union Square</td>
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<tr>
<td>Union Street</td>
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<tr>
<td>Western Addition</td>
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<tr>
<td>What’s New</td>
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<tr>
<td>Today In San Francisco</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plan Your Trip</td>
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<tr>
<td>Info Kit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Book a Room</td>
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<tr>
<td>Calendar of Events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow Pages</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Top level menus for selected Web-based San Francisco travel information sources. Links to neighborhood information is shown in blue. Green text indicates neighborhood information accessible from secondary menu elements.
Web Sample: San Francisco Convention & Visitor’s Bureau

URL:  http://www.sfvisitor.org

The San Francisco Convention and Visitor’s Bureau site is largely the equivalent of the glossy in-room city guides provided to hotels by tourism boards and visitor bureaus. Like those books, this site paints an unfailingly rosy picture of the city while emphasizing a very narrow range of shopping choices, hotels, restaurants, “shows,” and package deals.

Figure 3:  The main San Francisco page of the SF Convention and Visitor’s Bureau looks more like a series of advertisements than a travel guide. The Tabs along the top are the main navigational elements. Sidebar menus provide additional links.

Neighborhood information is accessible from the Home tab’s Explore the City selection

Sidebar menus for the Home page
Tabs at the top of the page form the main navigational element (listed in Table 3). Each tab corresponds to a page, and each page has its own sub-menu which leads to other pages. The Home tab, for example, links to four other pages:

- Meet Riley
- Explore the City
- What’s New
- Today in San Francisco

These “sub-tabs” should contain logical groups that correspond to the super category, but the entries under most tabs are somewhat odd. At least the “Explore the City” selection on the Home page leads to the city and neighborhood information that most visitors would want to see. Clicking on this link drops the visitor into a page under the main “Plan Your Visit” section, whose sub-tabs include:

- Book Your Air
- Need a Car?
- Contact Visitor Center
- Contests and Sweepstakes
- Sign up for a free e-mail newsletter

The connection between the “Plan Your Trip” tab and the Home page’s “Explore the City” sub-tab is not apparent until one notices that “Explore the City” appears in the “Plan Your Trip” page’s sidebar menu (see Figure 4). Moving the location of the link from the sub-tab in the Home menu to the sidebar for the trip planning page is inconsistent and makes the information difficult to find.

The page sidebars also have poorly arranged content and varying names. On the home page, the sidebar menus are titled “Specialized Info” and “Shortcuts” whereas the “Plan Your Trip” page has “In this Section” and “Specialized Info” sidebars (see Figure 4 for side-by-side comparison). In addition, the “Specialized Info” sidebar appears on every page of the site (with the order of the items sometimes rearranged). The sidebar includes:

- Convention and Event Planners
- Bureau Members
- Hot Dates for Meeting Planners
- Research
- Travel Media
- Travel Trade

The whole site is already dedicated to “specialized” San Francisco information, so how much more specialized these links be? This is an example of poor labeling, the equivalent of the “About Us” link found on so many other sites.
Figure 4: The Home page sidebar menus (in blue) vs. the sidebar menus for the top-level “Plan Your Trip” page (in pink). Menu content varies greatly by page do little to meaningfully organize or identify information.

On the positive side, a virtual city tour on the city information page begins to scratch the surface of the Web’s affordances. The tour is little more than a series of annotated photographs, but it does occasionally include links to detailed maps. An even harder to find interactive map looks promising but soon reveals a confusing and artificially limited range of options and “points of interest.”

Of the sites reviewed, this is the worst example of a digital travel information artifact. While some aspects of the Convention and Visitor’s Bureau site look promising at first glance, its poor organization, narrow commerce-oriented focus, and cumbersome implementation make for tedious, confusing, and inconsistent navigation. Much of the information related to core tasks and needs is present but is too spread out to be useful. In the end, the site’s design delivers a very poor user experience and requires too much work on the part of the visitor.

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2 http://www.sfvisitor.org/visitorinfo/html/Alamo.html
3 http://www.sfvisitor.org/maps/default.asp

Maria A. Cordell
Web Sample: Lonely Planet

URL: http://www.lonelyplanet.com/destinations/north_america/san_francisco/

Lonely Planet’s entry into Web-based information guides is as well organized and informed as their popular print guides. Intended to support book sales, the Web site is not meant to be a comprehensive information resource. In spite of that, the site offers a reasonable introduction and orientation for travelers to San Francisco, starting on the first page.

Figure 5: Lonely Planet’s initial San Francisco page gets right to the point by displaying background and orientation information up on the first page.
Multiple controls offer a range of viewing options for the information. A “next” button at the bottom of each page lets the user read the next chunk of information, and a “printable version” icon near the top of the page lets the visitor see all the content at once in scrollable Web page. Right-side navigational options provide maps, a slideshow, and links to relevant print guide purchasing information.

The bulk of the content is in the “Attractions” and “Off the Beaten Track” sections. “Attractions” lists San Francisco’s neighborhoods, with brief descriptions of each area, a bit of history, and some pointers on what to see and do. The “Off the Beaten Track” section focuses on side trips to nearby communities and points of interest, including Berkeley, Marin County, and the wine country.

A thumbnail map on the site’s right-hand sidebar of the site looks like a promising reference, but clicking on it displays only a slightly larger version of the same map (see Figure 6). The larger map is inactive (no rollovers or clicking functions are supported). What’s worse the larger map appears by itself on a blank page, without the site’s navigational structure to guide the user. The visitor has to know to click the browser’s back button to return to the previous page.

One option on the site provides what a printed guide cannot: access to Lonely Planet’s moderated Thorn Tree travel forum (see Figure 7). This virtual meeting place is offered free of charge and invites travelers and locals alike to trade information, offer tips, and exchange links to other resources.
Overall, Lonely Planet’s main site does little to exploit the affordances of the digital medium. A photo tour is short (about six images) and isn’t linked to maps or any other site content. And although the pages provided are well designed and organized, they provide information largely replicated from Lonely Planet’s print guide to San Francisco. In spite of this, Lonely Planet is the best Web travel information resource implementation considered in this analysis. And by making relevant links available from the left-hand menu that accompanies all main pages, the site does a very good job of organizing core task and needs information.
Web Sample: Fodor’s San Francisco

URL: http://www.fodors.com/miniguides/mgresults.cfm?destination=san_francisco@137

Figure 8: The main Fodor’s Web page for San Francisco information provides a general overview with links to lists of attractions, restaurants, and walking guides of select city neighborhoods. There are many pop-up ads, too (not shown).

Fodor’s on-line guide to San Francisco is less complete than its print counterpart and yet it provides a starting point of reasonable depth for someone new to the city. City-specific menu selections appear in the left sidebar (see Table 3 for details) and expand to reveal alphabetized
and customizable lists of hotels, restaurants, and activities. The list of restaurants, for example, can be narrowed according price range, cuisine, and location within the city.

One of the most promising features is the selection of walking tours for several of the most interesting parts of the city.\textsuperscript{4} Unfortunately, this feature is also the most disappointing. The tours do nothing to capitalize on the affordances of the Web; each tour is set up as standalone text, without connection to maps or photographs, or even sketches. Not even the relative location of the tour within the context of the city is provided. At the very least, each tour should include a zoomed out view of San Francisco with an arrow or other indicator to show the location of the tours. Another possibility would be to provide a single map on which all tours are clearly identified, as they are in their print guides (see Figure 1). This already proven approach works because it provides context and inherently indicates the proximity of one tour to another.

A featured and similarly promising “San Francisco’s Best in Three Days” section fails to tap into any of the Web’s capabilities for a rich user experience.\textsuperscript{5}

Fodor’s offers a user registration and login option for access to restricted areas of their site. For the most part this seems to lead to a moderated forum similar to the one offered free of charge on the Lonely Planet site. Visitors may also choose to receive “news” from Fodors.com and “special offers” from select Fodors.com partners.

If the main purpose of Fodors.com is to promote the sale of printed Fodor’s guides, its relatively poor site design and information content is doing little to support this. Fodor’s printed guides are thorough, well-researched, emphasize detailed walking tours closely linked to maps with numbered points of interest. The site does provide cover most of the identified core tasks and needs, but the content is shallow and is poor use of the digital medium.

\textsuperscript{4} http://www.fodors.com/miniguide/mgresults.cfm?destination=san_francisco&cur_section=fea&feature=30004
\textsuperscript{5} http://www.fodors.com/miniguide/mgresults.cfm?destination=san_francisco&cur_section=fea&feature=30002
Recasting the Model

The previous section’s review of Web-based sources for San Francisco travel information reveals a variety of flaws and shortcomings for three major sites. This may seem like small sample size, but the sites examined are representative of this category as a whole; the drawbacks listed are in fact common to most Web-based travel information sources available to date. Many Web sources, even those published by companies with long histories as providers of quality travel information, are little more than online brochures in which even the simplest affordances of the digital medium are missing. This is especially evident in the lack of even the most rudimentary connection between images (photographs, maps, etc.) and textual content. The fundamental problem is that on-line guides remain mere adaptations of non-digital material whose format and organization does not directly translate to the digital form.

Towards the Ideal Guide

The first step towards the ideal digital guide is to avoid thinking of it as a replacement for books or brochures. The digital guide exists in an altogether different category that simultaneously overlaps with previous formats and supersedes them through capabilities unique to the digital realm.

Proven traditional elements and naturalized conventions can be retained as much as possible, of course, but they must be carefully incorporated so as to avoid the unnecessary creation of fossilized conventions. A standalone static map that offers no user-selectable connection to supporting text—as was the case for Lonely Planet’s map—is such a fossilized convention. It’s the equivalent of printing a map on one page and the associated text on another. In the digital realm there should be little or no “page flipping” required to go from map to description; the two should be closely related, and one should naturally lead to the other.

Traditional elements that transfer to the digital realm include editorial content, personal narratives, and many organizational structures. Previously identified core human needs and tasks also are also medium-transcendent—the fundamental need is travel information, and information needs remain the same regardless of the selected medium.
Capabilities Overview

The principal strength of the digital travel guide is its malleability. Content can easily be adapted to individual location, user type, and delivery format. The power behind this organizational and representational flexibility stems from the medium’s relational database underpinnings. Properly architected, the relational database model allows data to remain reasonably free of presumptive assumptions about interrelations or even how it should be displayed. Book-style display conventions can be used if desired but form just one of many views into the information. In fact, a travel guide design should enable views into the information by any number of flexible and consumer-customizable means. This provides greater and more specific control of the information displayed; it enables the information consumer as selector of content consumed.

The defining elements of the ideal guide, then, include at a minimum:

- **Active maps with rollover information displays**
  - overview of city by neighborhood, with zoom in/out capability
  - informational for both first-time and repeat visitors
  - turn-by-turn travel routers, with dynamically definable start/stop point

- **Trip/itinerary planning and orientation tools covering**
  - transportation
  - communication
  - food and lodging

- **Information overviews with zoom for elements including**
  - attractions, neighborhoods
  - lodging
  - restaurants & shopping
  - nightlife & arts

- **Information portability—from Web site to PDA and future devices**

A properly designed content architecture provides an additional benefit: information sharing across media types. The same content that appears in print can inform the Web site, but the representation of the content varies (automatically) according to its final destination, whether a

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6 In the style of SmartMoney.com's stock market map.
computer screen, a PDA, or well-worn guide on the shelf. Each form should complement the others; a PDA-based guide complements the information available on-line, and vice-versa. And since the PDA is portable and can be location-aware—via GPS and wireless Internet access, for example—it can offer travel information updated in real time.

Of course, a print version of a guide always lags behind the digital travel information database. The database can be updated as frequently as content editors deem necessary, with the displayable information automatically updated. The print guide catches up eventually when the next edition is published, still serves a very important purpose, and generally provides nicer bedtime reading than a wireless-enabled laptop or a PDA.

An Implementation Example

Digital guides offer great flexibility for city information display. This can take the form of virtual and photo tours, audio snippets, and maps. All of these elements can and should be included, but the map may in fact be the most appropriate starting point, especially for first time visitors. Unfortunately, most existing travel sites have minimal map support and surprisingly little connection between their maps and neighborhood or sightseeing information (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: The map offered by most existing digital information sources closely resembles a traditional print map of San Francisco and offers no active connection to the text. This one is from Fodors.com.
A mapping approach similar to that used to view data via the Smithsonian Institution’s HistoryWired site is a good model for the digital guide and can provide basic orientation to the city (see Figure 10). Omitting streets for this view simplifies the map and more clearly identifies the neighborhoods. Horizontal and vertical information sidebars (not shown here) can change and information boxes can be displayed as the user rolls over the map.

Clicking on a neighborhood would be the first step towards more granular information display. The example in Figure 10 shows how a mouse-over for The Richmond, for example, provides basic neighborhood information.

Figure 10: The basis for the ideal guide’s HistoryWired-style overview of San Francisco’s neighborhoods features a rollover-enabled map as one of multiple ways to access city and neighborhood information.  

Ideally, as in the HistoryWired example, controls associated with the map can restrict or highlight areas of interest. In the case of the city map, parks are already marked in green. Similar indicators (or filters) can highlight other segmentations, like business districts, residential areas, or sports facilities. Ideally these functions would work at most zoom levels, although finer grain details like hotels, restaurants, and points of interest might make sense only at the more zoomed-in views.

Clicking on a neighborhood section or its information pop-up (see Figure 11) can lead to more specific information and provides a series of user-directed views into an area. This may include basic orientation, a historical background, demographics, things to see and do, off the beaten track tips, and any number of other options limited only by the breadth and depth of the database itself.

To put the information in context, all zoom levels should refer back to the “big picture.” In the example below, even while zoomed in to information about The Richmond, an icon provides a reminder of the relative location of this neighborhood element within the context of the whole of San Francisco.

![The Richmond](image)

**Figure 11:** The icon provides a graphical cue such that helps keep the reader from getting lost in a sea of information. Links lead to separate pages with detailed information.

The power and flexibility of the digital guide offers yet another advantage. While the initial or default neighborhood information list might include those elements listed in Figure 11, this is by no means the only way to organize the information. A user may reorder or the topics or select an entirely different list according to individual preferences and needs. This is possible because all database information is available and its display can be organized or filtered as desired.

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8 ibid.
The map-centric view proposed above is one approach to accessing travel destination information in the digital realm. The ideal digital guide design should encompass the encyclopedic content of the traditional travel guide and offer views into the information in ways not otherwise possible.

**Conclusion**

More than a decade after the development of the World Wide Web, few Web-based travel resources do a good job of presenting core travel needs and tasks, and surprisingly few exploit the Web’s affordances for rich content. Moreover, when relevant identified core tasks and needs information is present, finding it requires a lot of effort on the part of the site visitor.

Before the Web, travelers frequently looked to multiple resources to learn about a particular destination. Word-of-mouth, travel guides, newspaper articles, and even Michener books might have provided background and orientation to destinations of interest. The situation is similar with respect to the digital guides now available. Most travelers need to consult multiple sites in order to build a well-rounded picture of a destination. The reason, for the most part, is that this Web site category is still relatively new. The organizations and companies that produce them—even though many are significant publishers of quality print guides—have so far done little to capitalize on the affordances of the Web. If the sites they now offer were set up as “teaser sites,” for the purpose of selling access to more comprehensive on-line information (by monthly or yearly subscription, for example), then the level of information now provided is a reasonable starting point. But as the only available digital content, the current sites are seldom more than badly (and incompletely) digitized books.

Web travel guide publishers are just barely scratching the surface of possibilities for information organization, recall, and customization. The ideal guide is not a fantastic idea; it’s possible now, with current technology. The main hurdle appears to be getting content providers to see the value of developing a rich Web-guide that logically complements their other products.