

## The best guided city walks

### Sophisticated strolling from Paris to San Francisco — no tourbook needed



Chee-Onn Leong Boston / iStockphoto.com

For first time visitors to Boston, the 'Heart of the Freedom Trail' is a good introduction as is 'Boston By Little Feet,' designed for six to 12-year-olds and their older companions.

By Emilie Harting

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Exploring a major tourist city? Take a walking tour. Yes, I know about all the iPod tours. And I've stuck my fingers in the pages of a guidebook, while simultaneously following a map and asking questions at street corners. However, after taking many guided walks in London, Rome, Paris, Dublin, and New York, I'm convinced they provide a much richer experience.

Guides know the enchanting alleys and shortcuts. They are long-time residents of the cities and excellent, often native, English speakers. They are constantly researching, and they give an overview of the city so that walkers can more easily return to places they see along the way.

The tours themselves also provide entertainment. When rain came down heavily on a route through Dickens' London, our gray-haired guide, fully costumed in a long dress and bonnet, shepherded us into an overhang, hopped up on a shelf, and acted out scenes from Dickens until the storm passed. Another guide had us standing high on tiptoes in front of T.S. Eliot's widow's house on Gloucester Square so we could peek in and see Eliot's library. On a tour of Rome's Forum and Coliseum, our guide had us pause at a spot where we enjoyed a panoramic view of the ancient city's temples, palaces, courtyards, and government houses. He then pointed to a door on the lower level: "That led to the slaves' underground walkway."

On the French Revolution Walk in Paris we wound down a narrow street of small shops and tea rooms and stopped in front of Le Procope, the highly rated café where Voltaire, Robespierre, Marat, Ben Franklin and others often met to discuss liberty and the rights of man (though probably not with each other) just before the French Revolution. I sighed as we passed the building where Marat, the editor of *L'Ami du Peuple*, printed the people's newspaper during the Revolution. We were even more excited when we went to the site where Dr. Guillotine—yes the very inventor of the grisly machine—had his shop. To add to that, we learned that the house where Marat was stabbed to death in the bathtub by Royalist intruder Charlotte Corday once stood on a nearby street.

Tommy Graham, director and founder of Historical Insights in Dublin, says his guides "are constantly striving to offer some 'insights' into Irish society through the medium of history." In Dublin's historic district south of the Liffey River, we strolled through Trinity College, where Jonathan Swift, W.B. Yeats, Oscar Wilde, and many other notables studied, then to nearby St. Stephens Green, where a chamber quartet was performing on the lawn, and on to the winding street of pubs in Temple Bar. Many famous literary pubs, among them Davy Byrne's, are in and around Duke Street. In that area lines from James Joyce's novel "Ulysses" are carved in small plaques on the sidewalk. When we arrived at the Georgian Merrion Square, with its rows of identical houses, each with four stories of dark red brick, black shutters, and gas lights, our guide pointed out the colorful statue of Oscar Wilde lounging on a rock on one corner. She also said that during the famine of the mid-1800s the elegant private park in the center would have been filled with tents and cauldrons of food.

While walking working class neighborhoods north of the Liffey River, our guide, a young James Joyce scholar, made sites from the author's stories and novels come alive. I was thrilled to find the houses where his famous story "The Boarding House," and his novel "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" were set.

On New York City tours we came to bustling Canal Street, and learned that it once had actually been a waterway separating downtown and uptown Manhattan. At Trinity Church's cemetery, we saw the grave of statesman Alexander Hamilton, who lost his life in a duel with Aaron Burr, and passed by historic Fraunces Tavern, where George Washington said farewell to his troops after the Revolutionary War, and The White Horse, which had been a gathering spot for writers and reformers. After we crossed over the Brooklyn Bridge to the Promenade in Brooklyn Heights, we had a sweeping view of New York Harbor from Staten Island up to the Statue of Liberty and on to Manhattan while ferries and tugboats zigzagged back and forth.



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London Walks offers over 200 tours ranging from 'Tower of London,' 'Royal London and Westminster Abbey,' 'Shakespeare's London,' 'Beatles in My Life,' and the ever popular 'Jack the Ripper.' Almost all tour leaders are Blue Badge City Guides, and many are former actors and actresses who are apt to put on a show.

depth.”

Another advantage is the helpful information travelers share with one another. David Tucker, owner of London Walks, says it goes beyond simple recommendations for plays, museums or restaurants to “make sure to get there a half hour earlier to avoid two hours in a queue.” Guides often recommend reasonably priced restaurants in the area, and others are apt to chime in with anecdotes about good eating places. At the end of a walk through Trastevere, once Rome’s ancient Jewish ghetto and now one of its trendiest neighborhoods, four of us took our guide’s suggestion and went to a little café near the Ponte Sisto Bridge and shared discoveries in Rome and other places.

Getting to the designated starting points is part of the fun. Walks usually start outside specific subway entrances, but sometimes at well-known museums, churches, or squares. Tourist maps are abundant in big cities, and many hotel clerks and concierges are eager to pencil in directions.

Oriel Caine, a founder of Paris Walks, points out that “Guided walks are much different than the superficial visiting a traveler gets with iPods and guidebooks. You get warmth, humor, stories told with spontaneity, and you are in touch with a local person who can answer questions.”

“With a guide, you use all your senses,” says Seth Kamil, owner of Big Onion Walking Tours in New York. “Guidebooks go out of date even before they are published. We are constantly changing the walks, constantly finding historical material that works, and incorporating the past and present in this thriving, living city. Also, you can’t get lost. If a site has closed, the guides can talk about what that means to the neighborhood. The celebrities on iPod tours are excellent readers, but they may not know the area in



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Award-winning Big Onion Walking Tours has New York City offerings every day of the week during the summer months, and five days a week during the rest of the year. The 'Multi-Ethnic Eating Tour,' which mixes the history of the Lower East side with foods from at least eight different areas of the world, is the most popular. Harlem, Brooklyn and Brooklyn Heights, and Greenwich Village tie for second.