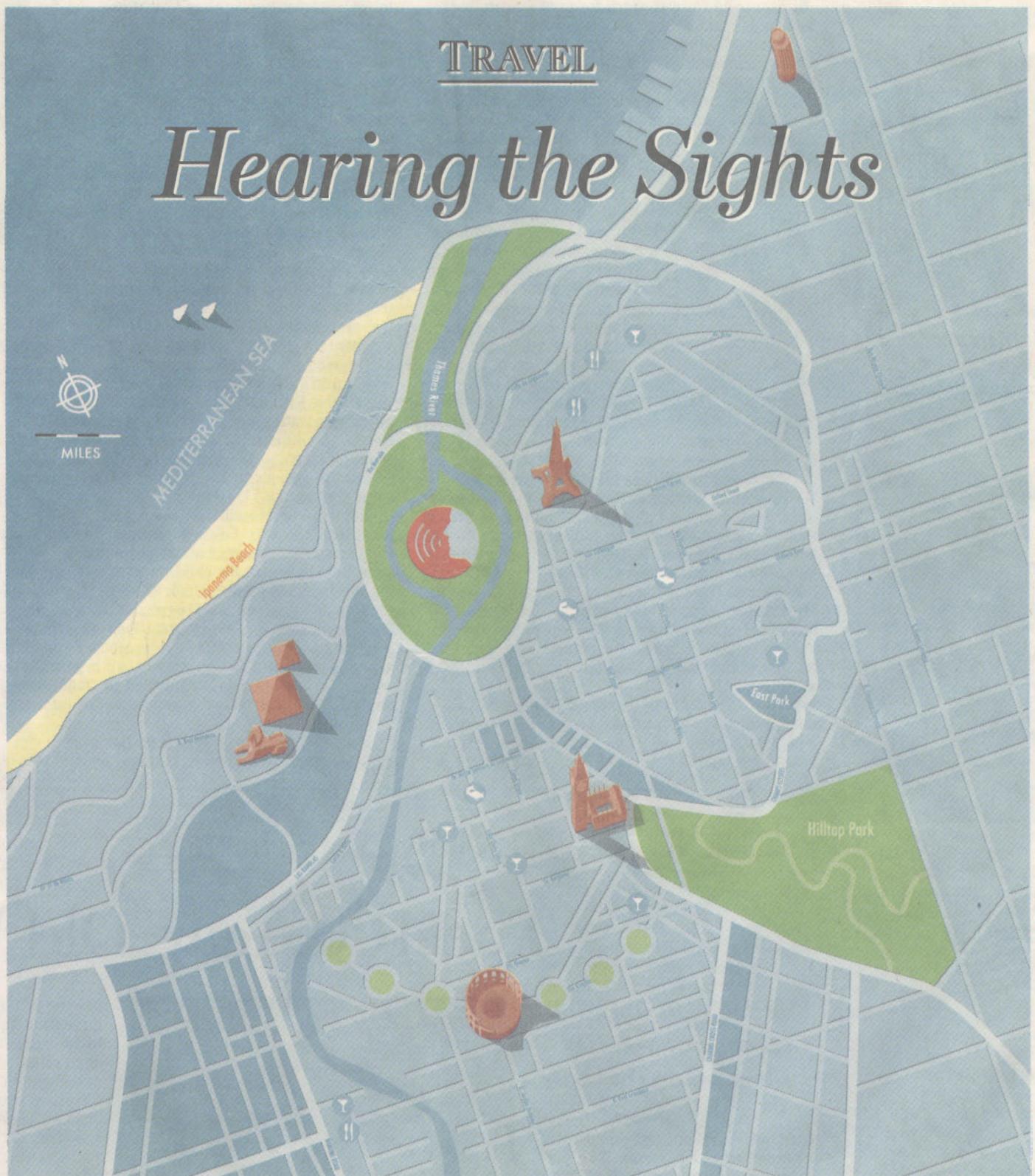


# WEEKEND JOURNAL.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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*Audio tours move from the museum to the wider world of tourism, promising offbeat looks at destinations from Vegas to Macau. Hannah Karp asks: Are they worth a listen?*

**B**ORED WITH TRAVEL GUIDES and planning a trip to Paris, Frank Perry recently stumbled across a tour he could load onto his iPod. It was anything but the same old Eiffel-Tower-and-Louvre routine: Narrated in a breathy French accent, the audio guide played tips on seducing local women, told him where to buy aphrodisiac tea and shared the security code to a private courtyard, where his headphones filled with sounds of a couple in a lover's spat.

"It wasn't anything I thought it would be," says the 33-year-old New York designer.

For travelers weary of soporific travel tomes, crowded buses and minders with megaphones, another option is arriving: the audio tour. In an expanding corner of the travel-guide business, startups and big publishers alike are offering audio guides that take in spots from New York and San Francisco to Singapore and Varanasi, India. These

**PLUS**

*Magical MP3 tours: Our take on more than a dozen new guides. **W14***

# Sightseeing by Ear

We listened to—and in the majority of cases, took—tours available on CD or MP3, by cellphone or even offered as part of a rental-car package. Here is a sampling of tours in cities around the world:

CITY / TOUR / COMPANY / WEBSITE	COST / PLATFORM	WHAT IT IS	HIGHLIGHT	LOW POINT	MUSIC?	DINING TIPS?	MAP REQUIRED?	COMMENTS
<b>Brussels</b> A Little Piece of Brussels Dimitri Larmuseau and Lynn Tanghe www.podguides.net	free/MP3 download	Introduction to the Belgian capital	Steers listeners from "overrated" shopping district	Midway through, narrator bursts into giggles		✓	✓	This tour, posted on the Web with other homemade guides, has no sound effects or tunes. But the makers did their homework: Listeners are guided to an art-deco bar "where pleasant drunks" meet and hear about a student prank most guidebooks omit: painting an unmentionable part of a lion sculpture near the Bourse in bright colors. "Have a look—maybe this week they're pink!" (The guide took less than an hour to make, Mr. Larmuseau said. Main expense: beer.)
<b>Chicago</b> Chicago; Audissey Guides www.audisseyguides.com	\$9.95/ MP3	Overview of the Windy City	Crash course in Chicago politics at City Hall	Tour hits crowded spots like Marshall Field's store	✓	✓		This walk, to be released later this spring, is narrated by a Jewish hip-hop spoken-word artist who at one point performs his own ode to the El train. The tour offers theories on why baseball's Cubs are cursed and why the Chicago Tribune building is important (it's where cousin Larry worked in the TV show "Perfect Strangers").
<b>Chicago</b> Millennium Park Antenna Audio www.millenniumpark.org	free/MP3	45-minute architectural guide to Chicago's Millennium Park	Interviews with architects including Frank Gehry	Inarticulate passersby give comment on the works. "It's like... all metal."	✓	✓	✓	Tour was created by audio-guide pioneer Antenna Audio, which got its start in the mid-1980s when a group of San Francisco experimental-theater actors created a guide to Alcatraz prison that recreated voices of inmates and jailers. Now the company administers some 20 million audio tours a year for museums world-wide. This tour explains the story behind 11 of the new Chicago park's buildings and public art works, like Anish Kapoor's Cloud Gate sculpture.
<b>Las Vegas</b> Las Vegas; Virgin Atlantic virginatlantic.loudish.com/ /destinations.html	free/MP3	Las Vegas 101	Fatburger or In-n-Out? Invited us to compare local burger favorites	Visitors must design their own itinerary	✓	✓	✓	This year, Virgin Atlantic released audio guides for seven of its destination cities from Shanghai to Johannesburg. They're not really walking tours: The 15-minute podcasts give overviews of hotels, attractions and recommended restaurants—with the Las Vegas guide offering the lowdown on neighborhoods off the Strip and tips on gambling. (Beware of free drinks.) Virgin says it hires an independent producer for the guides and doesn't take sponsorship money.
<b>Macau</b> Walk the Talk Macau Mobile Adventures Ltd. www.walkthetalk.hk	free (not including phone bill) / cellphone	Hour-long walk around Macau's historic center	At each sight, gives directions to nearest bathroom	Tour starts at a fountain that no longer exists		✓	✓	Dial a local cellphone number to start this walk through the former Portuguese colony, with lessons on pirate battles and Lisbon's quest to Christianize the Far East. Tourgoers can key in a number to learn more about, say, Chinese medicine—or pause any lesson to sample some of the recommended food at each stop (Portuguese croquettes). Prepare to start from the beginning of the lesson if your call is disconnected.
<b>New York City</b> Meatpacking District Soundwalk www.soundwalk.com	\$12 / CD or MP3	Hour-long tour of Manhattan's Meatpacking District	We were directed to visit an artist's studio apartment	Tour's pick for "hottest" nightclub, Cielo, arguably isn't anymore	✓	✓		One of 15 tours from New York's Soundwalk, this one offers details of a trendy meat-locker-turned-nightclub district even natives might not know. (Which door at the all-night eatery Florent doesn't open?) Though Soundwalk updates its tours yearly, it's hard to stay current in an area where new clubs constantly sprout up. Not appropriate for children: Tour includes sounds from a former S-and-M club.
<b>New Orleans</b> The French Quarter Audiosteps www.audiosteps.com	\$14 / MP3	Post-Katrina tour of the French Quarter	Watching beignets being fried through a back window at Café du Monde	No tunes—in the country's jazz capital		✓		Though the French Quarter suffered less damage than the rest of the city, Audiosteps recently updated its New Orleans tour to describe the hurricane's effects on the quarter. (The narrator warns that some attractions described may not yet have reopened.) Includes a sweet history of the praline. Audiosteps, founded in San Francisco last year, released a tour this week for the anniversary of the 1906 earthquake, and will launch a London tour next month.
<b>Rome</b> Old Rome; Ijourneys www.ijourneys.com	\$14.95/ CD or MP3	One-hour tour through Rome's historical center	Eating Tartuffo at the bar where the dessert was invented	Gazing upon the Pantheon... from McDonald's		✓	✓	Ijourney tours—also available for Venice, Paris and Pompeii—are heavy on history, and this one winds its way from the ancient Pantheon to the Bernini fountains in Piazza Navona. (For a more modern attraction, it points out a cafe where insiders go for cappuccino. Ugly tourist alert: Guide would have you enter a church with headphones.
<b>San Francisco</b> GoCar Gocarsf.com	\$44/first hour of car rental	A driving tour through the streets of San Francisco	Tourists can put their shopping bags in the trunk	Forget the Golden Gate: highways and bridges are off-limits				The most popular audio tour in San Francisco these days isn't a download, says the local convention and visitors bureau: It's a three-wheeled rental car—small enough to park in motorcycle spaces—with a GPS system that guides travelers by voice around the city and informs them about important sites passed along the way. Cars speak Italian, Spanish, German, French, or English. (Car rental gets cheaper after the first hour.)
<b>Seattle</b> Seattle; Audissey Guides www.audisseyguides.com	\$9.95/ MP3	Tour narrated by fishmongers, exotic dancers	Drum-fueled ode to Chief Seattle by a tribal leader	Local DJ's cheesy cowboy impression at a historical café	✓	✓		This guide to Seattle is one of five tours that Boston-based Audissey Guides will release later this spring. Packed with music and local voices, the tour visits the original Starbucks and Skid Row, and what was once Seattle's biggest brothel.
<b>Singapore</b> Desire Paths; Spell #7 www.spell7.net	about \$9 / loaned CD	Walk around Little India neighborhood	Having our fortune told by a parrot	Often asked us to stop and listen—under hot tropical sun	✓	✓		The organizers, a Singapore-based arts group, used to send tourists out one at a time at 10-minute intervals—but now that they have more loaner CD players, they can send groups together. (Call ahead to reserve.) Narrated by a man and a woman seemingly involved in a romance, the 45-minute tour visits street stalls, coffee shops and a WWII battlefield.