

# GETTING LOST WITHOUT GETTING LOST

You've just arrived in a strange city and feel like exploring. You get the hotel name and address in the local language and cautiously venture beyond the safety of the security guards.

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What next? The visitors' brochures are out of date and only feature the attractions tourism department officials think will amuse. Few bureaucrats have been outside their own province, certainly not overseas alone and bent under a backpack.

Consequently they have little understanding of what drives foreigners to stray beyond the neon for a tiny taste of local life.

Now imagine you have a smart phone app prepared not by the chamber of commerce but members of a heritage organization. They want to steer your steps away from shopping malls and into narrow lanes where history has hidden in locations so secret even locals are unaware of their significance to the outside world.

Maybe you'll find a shop where the goods haven't been made in China and where the seller just wants a fair price, not your total wallet. Perhaps you'll encounter quirky architecture and enter houses built centuries ago.

Wouldn't that be worth US\$2 [Rp 25,000] if the money was used to help conserve some of the buildings?

That's the thinking of Dutch urban economist Ester van Steekelenburg who develops what she calls "innovative learning tools". One of these is an app iDiscover, she

and her colleagues at their Hong Kong based consultancy Urban Discovery have put on the market.

The company's slogan is "keeping heritage alive for a vibrant and viable urban future".

In the 1990s, she spent a year in Xiamen, formerly Amoy, the ancient Chinese port opposite Taiwan. As usual, developers were following their herd instincts — wrecking history and building bland. It made her wonder if there was a middle way.

"There's often conflict between conservation and development, yet preserving heritage can make economic sense," said van Steekelenburg, who has a doctorate in urban economics, in an e-mail exchange from Hong Kong.

It's strange that Indonesians and other Asians go to Europe to see heritage buildings but ignore those in their own cities.

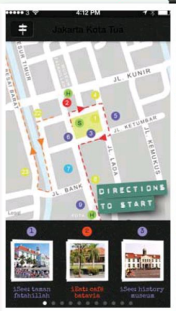
"The response from people who've done the app walks is great. They typically say that they've visited places they would otherwise not have found or would not have dared to go inside.

"Another comment is that users feel they have a better understanding of the neighborhood. Customers are mainly individual travellers who find us through our website and by simply browsing the app score for their travel destination.

"The apps, which include maps photos and videos, have been designed to help visitors get lost without getting lost."

So far walks have been completed for Denpasar, Jakarta, Surabaya and Yogyakarta in association with NUFFIC (the Netherlands Organization for International Cooperation in Higher Education), an independent non-profit with an office in Jakarta.

Van Steekelenburg said NUFFIC covered costs for training, curating



Kota-kota Puskaka di Indonesia

(A guide to exploring heritage in Indonesian's Cities), said Android apps were essential.

Van Steekelenburg agreed: "We're only one year old and especially in terms of local marketing and keeping walks up-to-date I think we can still improve.

"The bottleneck here is that we mainly rely on the local heritage organisations who are the co-curators of the walks.

"Very few Indonesians have iPhones, so for them it's a bit difficult to see the value added at this point. We hope that with the release of the android version [in February] and increased revenues from downloads coming their way it will be a nice promotional tool, an exciting addition to their current activities to bring more awareness to local heritage."

Leushuis said that creating an app is one thing, "but making it accessible and out there is another."

"Somehow people have to know that there is an app available when they are staying for example in Malang and might be tempted to explore the city.

"I think there should be clear barcode-scanning points at certain

locations favored by expats and maybe also on the sign boards that Dwi Cahyono has put up around town."

Cahyono is a Malang entrepreneur who runs a private museum and has been urging local government to preserve the city's heritage. He used his own money to erect signs around the city describing historical sites, hoping local government would fund English translations. That has yet to happen.

"I'm one hundred per cent behind this idea if it's using android apps," he said. "At the beginning this will attract foreigners — maybe it will take two years for Indonesians to catch up.

"Care has to be taken — what works in Hong Kong may need to be adapted to function here. There's still a need for education; too few government tourism departments understand that heritage means money."

The iDiscover apps are available through iTunes

— PHOTOS COURTESY ESTER VAN STEEKELENBURG

