

## Getting to know the Big Apple with little books

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If the sidewalks of New York seem heavily populated with thoughtful, literary types consulting their Moleskines, don't be fooled. Some of the newest, and most useful, travel guides these days borrow heavily from those discreet black notebooks beloved of artists from van Gogh to Hemingway to Bruce Chatwin -- witness the understated black covers, the one-handed-flip-through size, the elastic placeholder.

"BlackBook Guide to New York 2007," edited by Ethan Wolff (BlackBook Media Corp.; \$9.95; 288 pages). The latest entry in a field trodden this past year by "The Little Black Book of New York" by Ben Gibberd (Peter Pauper Press; \$10.95; 200 pages) and the "Not for Tourists Guide to New York City" published by Jane Pirone (Not for Tourists Inc.; \$14.95; 368 pages) comes from the publisher of BlackBook, the slick magazine that is just well written enough to get away with calling its brand of celebrity journalism "progressive culture."

For all their physical similarities, each of three tiny tomes stakes out its own territory. The "BlackBook Guide," focusing strictly on hotels, restaurants and nightlife, retains the magazine's wit but applies it staunchly to the task: concise, cliché-free reviews of well-chosen places to sleep, eat, drink and dance. Reviews are listed by neighborhood, and all are located on a cluster of two-color maps in the center of the book, but for the most part the design is clean and accessible -- the most restrained of the three. Listings are selective rather than encyclopedic but cover the range from up-and-comers to celebrity hangouts (natch) to oldies but goodies to worthwhile splurges. There are options enough to occupy a lifetime.

"Not for Tourists," on the other hand, is a map-driven user's manual for the city that will get you to a supermarket, a local cafe or the nearest bank, library or drugstore when you venture outside your

comfort zone. These aren't reviews but comprehensive, block-by-block listings that even grizzled New York veterans declare indispensable. Each neighborhood has at least three and often four maps to plot essentials (landmarks, gas stations, post offices), sundries (coffeehouses, gyms, hardware stores), entertainment and transportation. The graphics are sharp, clear and so packed with information that merely possessing the book makes the Big Apple less intimidating. Miniaturization has its price, however: If you're older than 30, don't leave your reading glasses behind.

"The Little Black Book" occupies a middle ground. Each district begins with a modest fold-out map keyed to sights, restaurants, shops and hotels. The narrative includes transit stops, a neighborhood snapshot and details -- including snippets of evocative description -- on each mapped spot. The colorful, retro design is the flashiest of the three guides. The hard cover with spiral binding has its advantages but also makes the book bulkier and requires two hands to manipulate.

As long as "little" is the operative word of the day, the Little Bookroom covers its bases with two types of New York shopping guides. Travelers with a casual interest in shopping might enjoy "The Curious Shopper's Guide to New York City" by Pamela Keech (\$12.95; 352 pages). By culling each neighborhood's best offerings and leaving out the rest, it makes room for some enlightening background along with the meaty details, glossy photos and buying tips that shoppers live by. Pages are only 4 inches square, but they are heavy and there are lots of them, so it is curiously bulky for a petite book.

It's not as awkward to handle, though, as the same publisher's "Pratique Guides," one on SoHo and Nolita and another on the Meatpacking District and West Village (58 and 126 pages, respectively; \$18.95 each). They are packaged to go, with a vinyl snap-closure wallet holding a Zagat-style booklet of listings in one flap and, in the other, a color-coded fold-out map keyed to boutiques, cafes, salons and galleries. But you need a table or a bed to extricate and spread out the accordion-fold map and also be able to look up the details in the booklet. Getting to the information takes nearly as much planning as getting to the shops themselves; these are guides only a shopaholic could love.

For my money, Moon is still the one to beat in the fold-out map guide category. "Moon Metro New York City" (Avalon Travel Publishing; 122 pages), which released its third edition last summer, fits nicely in the palm but is taller than the little black books, so the maps (single fold, and laminated) are roomier and easier to read. Maps are grouped at the front of the book so you can quickly flip to a

neighborhood and see its points of interest at a glance. For more detail, map labels include page references to mini-reviews. The format also allows room for bits of description and background, and for several self-guided tours (best of New York City, fashionable New York and cinematic New York).

The major mainstream publishers have also kept busy. The past year has brought "Frommer's New York City Day by Day," by Hilary Davidson (Wiley; \$12.99; 184 pages), Frommer's own tightly organized, highly graphical series; the annual update of the lushly illustrated "Eyewitness Travel Guides New York" (DK Publishing; \$25; 448 pages); and Zagat's "2007 New York City Shopping" survey, edited by Catherine Bigwood, Randi Gollin and Troy Segal (Zagat, \$14.95, 430 pages), which unveils the series' redesign -- brighter cover, new icons and inside color, beefed-up introduction and maps.

Appropriately, perhaps, the past year also saw the 12th edition of "New York City Access," by Richard Saul Wurman (Collins; \$19.95; 384 pages). This series was one of the first to break out of the scholarly mold and introduce a neighborhood-oriented, highly graphical, quick-hit guidebook suited to life on the street. The upstart little black books are merely its progeny.

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