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# How To Explore A City in Ten Easy Steps

by  Spectafy



# Table of Contents

1. Get a place to stay with local advantages
  - What “local advantages” mean
  - Why does this matter?
  - How to find these
2. Get the highlights online & from locals
  - Getting highlights from locals
  - Getting highlights online
3. Discover the hidden jewels
  - Where you can find these hidden jewels
4. Map out your hot-spots and plan your time
5. Getting the lay of the land so you know where to go
  - Tools to use
6. Be a tourist!
7. Run it, get deep into the culture
  - A few ways to dive into the culture
8. Check out the local events
  - Tools to use
9. Say “Yes!”
10. Remember it and share it with others!
  - Tools to take notes, and to share your experiences

Whether you're traveling through a new city, or just trying to discover more of your own – it can be hard to get outside of your comfort zone and to get moving. We all want to experience more, to see more, to do more, and to feel more – but sometimes its hard to get beyond that barrier of comfort, and venture into the unknown.

This is a simple guide for getting past that psychological barrier and to focus on the experiences you can make throughout every journey, no matter how different they are from your norm. This guide is to inspire you to venture out, to see more – and to soak up every experience you can, wherever you are.

This is not a typical travel guide, this is an experience guide – a guide to living more. It's not a guide to experiencing what you're used to, it's not a guide to keep you sheltered. Using these tools and these small tips you will interact more, learn more, and experience more everywhere you visit, or even where you live.

So let's jump right in, shall we?

*"A ship is always safe at the shore - but that is NOT what it is built for."  
– Albert Einstein*

## 1. Get a place to stay with local advantages

If you're visiting a new city you're going to need a home base. This will be your mission control center, but be aware – you're looking for the benefits this location will grant you more than you are looking for the living accommodations it boasts.

Simply speaking, you're not going to be spending much time here if you're doing things right. Because you won't be spending much time here the quality doesn't have to be absolutely top-notch, unless you're really just wanting to have a very high-class experience, and you have money to blow.

## What “local advantages” mean

- A concierge/host that has knowledge of all of the local hot-spots in the area.
- A concierge/host that has hook-ups with local event organizers that can give you discounts.
- A hotel or hostel that has a bustling community of people your age looking for similar experiences with a fun group of people.
- A hotel or hostel that has free breakfast or has a fast and easy breakfast location nearby.
- A hotel or hostel that has clubs, classes, or other interesting amenities attached or included.

Basically any location that has added benefits other than simply being a place to crash. You want this because it's going to supplement every other activity you try to perform while venturing in the new city.

## Why does this matter?

*A concierge or host that has knowledge of all the local hot spots can be invaluable when you first arrive and you're just looking to get settled in immediately.*

I remember when I first got to NYC for the first time, I was overwhelmed by the amount of activity, the locations, the options. I didn't know where to eat, what would be good, or even where to simply get a cup of joe while I recouped and gathered my thoughts about what to do next. The concierge at The Empire Hotel immediately told me that just around the corner from the hotel was not only one of the most highly rated restaurants in NYC, but also the first ever establishment to serve alcohol in Manhattan, P.J. Clarke's. I not only enjoyed an incredible gourmet chicken pot pie and coffee, I experienced a landmark simultaneously. A top-notch concierge is invaluable.

*A concierge or host that has knowledgeable information about local events and excursions in the area is also a great asset.*

In La Fortuna, Costa Rica there is a beautiful, secluded, natural resort called Lomas Del Volcan, at the foot of Volcan Arenal. Simply staying at the resort for its scenery would be enough, but the concierge experience takes it to an entirely different level. Every day visitors can sign up to go on a number of excursions around the Arenal National Park, which depart directly from the breakfast lounge next to the hotel concierge. A van will pull up, wait for you to finish your authentic Costa Rican breakfast, then taxi you off to whichever excursion you picked the day prior. Excursions may range from rafting the Rio Toro River, to hiking up the Cerro Chato volcano, and going swimming in the emerald lake formed in its crater. The point is, the benefits of a hotel go far beyond the hotel itself.

*A hotel or hostel that has a bustling community of people your age can help you engage with others experiencing the same interesting thing you are, and also help you find other things to do that you might not otherwise experience.*

I backpacked around Europe for a few months and I made some life-long connections with random people staying at the hostel at the same time that had similar styles, interests, etc. Even the people I didn't connect with super well expanded my horizons and opened my eyes with what they were doing in the city.

*A hotel that has fast and easy breakfast locations around it, or has its own breakfast bar or buffet is perfect because you don't have to worry about what to do for that first meal of your day, you can simply eat and get moving.*

*A hotel that has clubs, classes, or other interesting amenities can supplement the hotel itself just as the events and excursions did from the concierge.*

Some hotels, resorts, or hostels have an all encompassing "experience" built into them, whereby they offer classes or courses that you can take to become better at a skill, or just learn something completely new. For example [School of The World](#) in Costa Rica is a hotel that is basically mixed with a hostel, offering a connected community of visitors, supplemented with integrated classes teaching photography, surfing, and yoga. These locations are exceptionally special because you can learn an entirely new skill set while experiencing an entirely new location, and make new friends simultaneously.

Each of these benefit you far more than a simple hotel or resort normally would. They go far beyond what a simple pool, hot tub, or sauna could offer at a resort, hotel, or hostel.

## **How to find these**

If you want to find these kind of locations I really recommend doing your research before leaving, using [Lonely Planet](#) or [Frommer's](#) travel guides, as well as the vast amount of travel blogs you can find online. If you're going spur of the moment and you need something in a rush, I recommend using [HotelTonight](#) to find some of the absolute best resorts and hotels for the cheapest prices. I've stayed in a world-renowned 5 star resort in Miami, FL at 10% normal room-rate using HotelTonight. Due to under-booking each room goes on auction towards the end of the night, and you can simply bid on the best one. Another great one is [Hostelworld](#) to quickly find last minute cheap hostels to stay at for the night.

[AirBnB](#) is an awesome way to find helpful locals to stay with. (Other good options are [couchsurfing](#), [Housecarers](#), [Mindmyhouse](#), and [Homeexchange](#)) Either you're going to be staying with someone who is familiar with the area, or you're going to be renting

from someone who is familiar with the area. Either way you get a very personal concierge who probably has a similar style to you (if you picked your room based on your style). If you're staying with someone ask them what they like to do, and see if they have plans. It's a great way to make friends while exploring around, and far cheaper than a normal hotel would cost. Bonus points if you go out of your way to find the most interesting places to stay.

## 2. Get the highlights online & from locals

Now that you have your home base figured out, it's time to get planning on your big hot-spots to hit. It's time to collect all the data you can, get your notebook out, and get to writing. Write down locations like you're writing a bucket list, but that this list expires when you leave the city. You want to make sure everything counts, everything big that you've dreamed of seeing at the location is accounted for, but that you also leave space for the really interesting odds and ends that pop up by talking to people who are familiar with the landscape, and seeing interesting suggestions online.

### **Getting highlights from locals**

There are plenty of ways to get information on the best spots from locals, here are a few of my favorite ways to do that:

- Ask whoever you're staying with (or the concierge if you're at a hotel).
- Go to a coffee shop or pub and start some conversations with people who look interesting (or who are just friendly in general).
- Ask a cab driver, a police officer, a security guard, or anyone else who you think might have some extensive knowledge of the city.
- If you have friends in the area, ask them – and ask if they want to go!

Some of my most incredible experiences in a new city have come from acquaintances that I've met through other friends simply showing me around. In a city like NYC there is just so much to see, and so much to do that it's hard to filter through the noise to the quality. With friends who just know about these locations, it's easy. I wouldn't have discovered the High Line (an incredible spot to walk along in lower Manhattan) or The Park (a wonderful restaurant that is outfitted to look like a random park) without the chance meetup of a friend of a friend.

Reach out to people, try to meet people, ask people what they're doing – and often times people would love to accompany you on your adventure.

## Getting highlights online

Of course there are a multitude of ways to get the local highlight information online, some are:

- [Yelp](#)
- [Urbanspoon](#)
- [TripAdvisor](#)
- [LonelyPlanet](#)
- [Frommer's](#)

These are pretty straight-forward, simply search for the places with the best reviews in the given category and go there. TripAdvisor helps make sure you have the best experience, and not waste your time at a sub-par establishment. Lonely Planet seems to have some of the most interesting “off-the-beaten-path” information that I’ve come to love when traveling, I recommend using it mainly for your online info.

Also, and sorely missing in most guides like this one, Twitter and Facebook have been an incredible source of information for me, and chance encounters that I wouldn’t have ever expected. It’s wild what putting out some info into the ether of the internet will bring back. When in NYC I simply tweeted that I was looking for something to do in NYC and asked for suggestions. The reaction was incredible. I had industry peers wanting to buy me a beer in SOHO. I had friends recommending restaurants I would have never discovered using Yelp or other services, restaurants that blew my mind. I met up with people I would have never otherwise met, and they showed me around the city in a way I would have never experienced on my own.

I recommend 20% research, 80% movement, but when it comes to getting your highlights, make sure you round all the bases. Do it online, offline, and make sure you connect with as many people as you can.

## 3. Discover the hidden jewels

Every city or location has hidden jewels that it boasts, typically not very well known, and typically way better than most of the more well-known attractions. When you’re making your hot-spot list, make sure you include these.

Most people know about Stone Mountain in Central Georgia, but most wouldn’t know about the [“Indian Seats” in North Georgia](#). See, Stone Mountain is incredible because of the amount of sheer rock that is bulging out of the earth, and because the extent of history that is held behind it. The facts are pretty common knowledge though, and if you ask me that’s not really much to “discover.” However, if you venture an hour or so north of Stone Mountain you will reach Sawnee Mountain in Cumming, Georgia – where

you can hike up a newly formed trail (which was only recently built) and sit on the side of a cliff in seats literally carved into the rock by Native Americans hundreds of years ago. These seats sit as thrones overlooking a vast area of North Georgian farmlands, and you can easily see the start of the Appalachian Trail in the distance.

This is just a single example of the beautiful, mysterious, and hidden jewels that you can find if you dig hard enough, and adventure past the typical tourist spots.

### **Where you can find these hidden jewels**

- [LonelyPlanet](#) as mentioned before is one of my favorite spots to find these kinds of spots.
- [Fieldtripper](#) is an interesting app that you can use in supplement to exploring, to find information about landmarks placed in plain sight.
- [Frommer's](#) is one of the most noted travel guides with a ton of in-depth city guides to read from.
- [WanderWheel](#) will take you on an interesting scavenger hunt quest through multiple points of interest around your location, some better known than others.

## **4. Map out your hot-spots and plan your time**

Now that you know where your hidden jewels are, you know your big points of interest that you want to explore, and you have a general sense of your timeline of exploration, you need to prioritize these on a map.

I recommend using the “batching” method for this part of your planning. Map out each location on Google Maps, or on the LonelyPlanet’s app (or even on a physical city map) – then create a list of locations, grouping each of your highlights in to a location, then decide which locations to tackle each day. This is the most efficient way to get through a long list of locations in a little amount of time.

For an example if I were to have the Empire State Building, Ellis Island, The 9/11 Memorial, and The Statue of Liberty on my list of highlights while in NYC – I would batch The 9/11 Memorial, Ellis Island, and The Statue of Liberty together – as each of those are at the very bottom of Manhattan. I would save the Empire State Building and batch it with the Grand Central Station, The Rink at Rockefeller Center, and Times Square, as they are all near each other and could easily be visited in rapid succession.



## 5. Getting the lay of the land so you know where to go

After you've mapped out your locations and batched them accordingly, it's time to get a good lay of the land so you can get your bearings straight as you move about the city.

There are plenty of tools to use to make this easier, but a good way to easily get acquainted and not feel too overwhelmed is to understand how the road system is laid out, and find a high-up vantage point to see from. For example if you're in Seattle, take a map and head to the top of the Space Needle. Use your map and acquaint yourself with how the city is laid out and where each of the locations are, this is one of the fastest ways to truly understand how the city works and how it should be navigated.

Understanding the road system and how locals reference locations is vital too. In NYC there is a numbered grid system that the entire city is laid out on – it's very straight forward – whereas in Costa Rica everything is measured from a central point or landmark within a city, which can get difficult. Knowing these intricacies can really help when finding your way around an unfamiliar city.

It's very simple and straight-forward finding your way back to where you're staying if you know how the road system is laid out. It can be exceptionally stressful if you get to this point and aren't familiar with the road systems or major landmarks to direct from. Getting a high vantage point over the city and understanding where certain landmarks are in reference to others can help give a visual anchor for this.

### Tools to use

- Apple maps has had some trouble in the past with map data, yet for most highly developed areas the maps information is pretty accurate.
- Google Maps and Streetview can help massively in directing you through cities, with a ton of data, and by giving you the option to zoom in and see locations from a street basis, so when you get to a location you aren't taken aback by what you see. You can be sure you're in the right place.
- LonelyPlanet maps and app are by far the most efficient for me in my experience in less-developed countries. Using Google Maps in Costa Rica almost literally killed me by taking me over a mountain off-road at night without any prior knowledge that the road turned to an off-roading adventure half way through. Once I downloaded the Lonely Planet map I was easily able to see the infrastructure differences between the road, in a visual representation.
- Foursquare, due to its easy to set up local listings has better venue data in underdeveloped areas than Google actually does, leading to Foursquares maps actually sometimes being better developed in underdeveloped areas than Google's maps.

## 6. Be a tourist!

Do the touristy things! Some people will find that they have lived in a city for a long time but have never done the popular tourist things... do it all! If you live in a location, or are just visiting, it's a huge waste if you don't knock out the major tourist attractions. If you're limited on time just do the big ones, and get to the nitty gritty cultural side of the city. Try to do all of them though, you won't regret it. It's something to reference, it gives you more knowledge about your location, or lets you immediately have conversation with someone who wants to visit, or is wondering about your visit.

"How was the Empire State Building?" has been asked to me countless times. Had I not gone because it was such a "touristy thing to do" I would have never been able to say that I could literally feel the building sway in the wind, or that it was the second most quiet place in Manhattan, apart from the 9/11 Memorial (which I also wouldn't have been able to know).

These tourist locations are touristy for a reason, typically because they're interesting or significant. Collect these experiences, everyone has their own version of the same locations. Create yours.

## 7. Run it, get deep into the culture

Go on an adventuresome run or walk and always turn uphill! It'll take you all over the place. Adventure on foot, or even rent some transport like a bike, a scooter, or in underdeveloped countries, a dirtbike!

It's really incredible how deep you will be immersed into the culture of an area if you explore it yourself, even if you're scared that you don't know the way around – or don't know the terrain. This is all part of the experience. For example: I was in Berlin once and I went out wandering at night with a few older guys from Spain, we literally stumbled on a massive party with a local rapper (all in german) kegs and hundreds of people.. all under a highway overpass in the dark at 3 in the morning. you don't see that in guide books - get out and explore!

Try to entrench yourself into the culture in as many ways as possible.

## A few ways to dive into the culture

- Get around how the locals do – whether a truck, a moped, or a bike – explore on your own the way the locals get around. There are few things that can give you more understanding of the psychology of a location than driving or commuting in that location. The way people operate, the “understood” rules of the road, they’re always different, and they will always teach you something. If you’re in Amsterdam rent a bicycle, if you’re in the Amalfi Coast of Italy rent a scooter, if you’re in San Francisco don’t be afraid to take a [Lyft](#).
- Eat native food – either in NYC, Italy, Ireland, or Australia – try to eat what the locals eat. This will give you an incredible sensory experience that is simply hard to put words on. Some cultures like a thick amount of sauces, some like very simple delicate dishes. Some cultures like fish, some cultures like poultry. It’s very interesting to experience the different tastes of individual cultures, literally. If you’re in Scotland, try the haggis – it’s actually really good. If you’re in Moscow get “herring under a fur coat” (it isn’t any good, but at least you will have a story to tell – no offence to the fur coat lovers out there!)
- Adopt the mindset and the speed of the culture around you. If you’re visiting a city that primarily speaks a different language, try to learn that language using [Duolingo](#), and try to speak it to locals. They will respect the fact that you’re trying to speak their language, and they will be more happy to interact with you. At least learn the simple stuff, like “please”, “thank you”, or “do you speak english?” If you’re visiting a city that doesn’t speak another language, at least try to adopt their mindset for speed, and social settings. Move fast in NYC, move slow on the beaches of Florida, tear up the snow in Colorado – try to adopt the mindset of the location.

There are so many ways to immerse yourself into a location and a culture, take every chance you get to bring yourself closer to the spirit of the place you’re visiting.

## 8. Check out the local events

There are always events going on, everywhere. Try to find some interesting local events and check them out. Usually these events will bring out a ton of locals that are looking for some fun things to do, this is a great opportunity to meet people that are very knowledgeable about the area, and could give you invaluable information about hidden jewels in the city. Plus, events are just fun.

A fun event can take a fun trip to the next level. Imagine going to San Francisco for the week, only to find out that your favorite band is going to be playing in San Francisco the day after you get there. That takes a trip’s scale from 9 to 11.

## Tools to use

- Groupon for very “experience based” events tailored to your interests.
- Eventbrite for general events.
- SongKick for the audio lovers looking to hear incredible live music.

## 9. Say “Yes!”

For the period of your trip try to say “yes” as much as you can. Think Jim Carrey, but with more Red Bull. If you’re ever teetering on the edge of “no” and “yes” throughout the trip, and “yes” wouldn’t result in probable death, pick yes. Try to experience as much as you can throughout your adventure.

If you meet people and they want you to accompany them with their plans, do it. If you aren’t sure if you should meet up with a colleague that you’ve connected with online but haven’t ever met in person, and they’re in the area, do it. You never know what kind of doors can be unlocked when you aren’t afraid to simply open them. Venture out, try new things, say yes to invitations, do more.

Always saying “yes” for a period is also a great way to further explore the city you live in. It forces you to step outside your comfort zone and explore other areas and activities in your hometown!

## 10. Remember it and share it with others!

Once you’ve had your adventure, make sure you remember it, and share it with others. We learn so much more through our experiences adventuring than we do in our normal routinized day-to-day lives. We learn valuable lessons, lessons that should be shared with the world.

## Tools to take notes, and to share your experiences

- Evernote for note taking, clipping images that you want to keep for your notes and so much more. Evernote is even a great app to use just when researching your trip before you even leave, taking notes of locations to visit, hotels to consider, excursions you’re interested in, etc.

- [Medium](#) or [Squarespace](#) for writing about your experiences and sharing them with the world. Medium is free and easy to use, with multiple communities around travel and adventure. Squarespace isn't free, but easy to set up to have your very own blog and domain that you can get writing on and share to all of your friends, family, and start building a following around your adventures from people across the world. [Tumblr](#) is also easy to set up and completely free to run, it's great if you're into photography!

At the end of the day we can't take our "tangibles" with us, though we will always hold on to the things we've learned, the experiences we've had, and the people we've met along the way.

Be bold, be adventurous, get out there, and *get moving*.

*See more, do more.*