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Historical Tours Get New High-Tech Guide

By Heather Whipps
Special to LiveScience
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Without a good sign next to it, an ancient ruin is little more than a pile of rocks.

Anyone who has visited even the major archaeological sites in Europe has experienced the common frustration. Monuments there often lack good historical explanations or offer information that is out of date.

Now, a new technology born in Italy—one of the countries that could use a lot of help in this area—could quell a bit of this aggravation by offering tourists the chance to download to their mobile phones information and graphics about the sites they visit.

How it works

Agamemnon, named for a Mycenaen king who led the Greeks during the Trojan War, was developed by Milan-based firm TXT e-solutions. More than providing just a standard tour for each location, the technology can adapt to the user's individual interests, researchers say.

Visitors start by dialing in to a special number over existing telephone networks.

"At the beginning, a simple online questionnaire asks for specific interests," explained Matteo Villa, project leader with TXT e-solutions. "The system can cross-check visitor's preferences with content available with time available and provide an initial schedule."

The schedule isn't fixed, however, Villa said. A number of features make Agamemnon even more adaptable than the traditional audio guides available at most sites.

"During the [tour], visitors can ask the system to visit monuments not included in the list. Agamemnon will 'observe' such requests and it will be able to update visitor's profiles," Villa told *LiveScience*. The system can even recognize pictures taken with a cell phones onboard camera, "and provide relevant information on the monument identified."

An added benefit of the project is that pictures taken by visitors can be collected by site

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managers and used to enhance security. Despite their cultural importance, few outdoor sites have fixed security cameras in place, according to Villa.

Bye-bye tour guides?

Agamemnon has just recently finished an initial testing phase at locations in Italy and Greece. It worked well with most newer model phones, Villa said. Even if Agamemnon is introduced as a permanent feature at some archaeological sites, however, tourism officials are certain that human tour guides won't go the way of the dodo.

"We always stress the importance of information provided by personal guides over audio/video technology," said Riccardo Strano, director of the Italian Government Tourist Board in North America.

The technology is designed more to complement a site's staff, Villa agreed.

"Agamemnon is not supposed to replace tour guides, but rather to complete them," he said. "In fact the information it provides, like 3D reconstructions and videos, could not be supplied by any human guides. On the other hand human guides could drive visitors in the correct use of Agamemnon, and combine it with their traditional tour."

Saving money

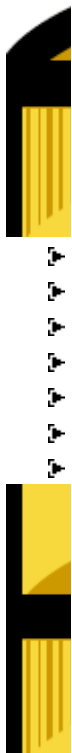
Another thing parties involved in the Agamemnon project agree on is its potential to cut costs.

Museums and outdoor sites could profit financially by sharing revenue earned by customer use, say Agamemnon's designers. They estimate it will cost from two to four euro to access the service, slightly less than the average cost of renting the classic audio guides currently available at sites like the Forum in Rome. But Agamemnon also eliminates the upkeep costs of those audio guides, Villa said, something that is especially beneficial for minor sites with smaller budgets.

Though Strano denied ever hearing complaints from tourists about the lack of information available at Italy's most popular attractions, he still felt Agamemnon could be a good addition to their repertoire of services.

"We welcome any technological novelty that can increase and facilitate the enjoyment of tourists who need historical or cultural background information related to tourist sites," Strano said.

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