

Hidden treasures

EXPLORING ONLINE MAPS HAS BECOME A FAVOURITE WAY FOR JESSICA FURSETH TO DISCOVER THE LITTLE-KNOWN AND UNEXPECTED IN HER CITY, AND BEYOND





The best recommendations always come from an excited local – the people so enthusiastic about a restaurant, viewpoint, or garden that they’ll draw you a map right there at the supermarket checkout. But did you know there are millions of these locals

waiting to share their advice with you, hidden in the map that’s always in your pocket?

You may think of Google Maps as an efficient but unexciting tool for getting from A to B. But I’ve found it to be a treasure trove for finding new and unexpected things to do in the city I’ve lived in for two decades. Providing not just directions but insight, history and opportunities for adventure, it’s become a favourite tool for a day out when I wake up in a mood for adventure and heading across a field to see a strange little tower I saw on Maps feels like just the ticket.

In the summer, when I’m eager to get outside on my lunch break, I’ll often take a little curiosity journey on Google Maps to chart new walks around my neighbourhood. Here’s how I do it. Once I’m in the general area, I start to poke around until I find something that sparks my interest. When you zoom in closer, you’ll see more icons popping up – look for purple which denotes cultural and historical sites. This is how I spotted the Dorich House Museum just three miles from my house. The commenters describe this former home of sculptor Dora Gordine as a “hidden gem” where the tour is worth booking in advance, and apparently even the toilets are worth a peek. Sold.

The comments under entries are full of useful tidbits like this, written by people who’ve taken the time to praise – or pan – attractions in their area. As they describe everything from overpriced cafes to hidden figures in the masonry, it has that feeling of gaining insider knowledge. Now I know that I’ll want to take the lesser-trodden path that veers to the left down this hill, because Mark from Sheffield once made a wrong turn and took the time to warn me in the comments.

You can turn it into a bulletin board that’s tailored to your interests. Type in “swim” and you’ll be sent to a bend on the river where someone has left a comment about a nice bank. I’ve looked up “abandoned” to find curious ruins – they make for a great walking destination – but more often I just do a simple search for “garden”, as there’s a good chance this will show me a new green spot. In the summer, when I’m up for a little amble, a great search is “blue plaque” – all the signs from English Heritage will pop up on the map.

Some of my favourite spots at home in London are the result of a poke around Google Maps. I’ll often go

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back to Nature’s Throne, a peaceful stone circle on the River Lea created by artist Paula Haughney. I know it’s popular – in the comments, locals are joking about the crowds and the gift shop, none of which exist. There’s lots of odd little entries like this, like a place tagged “My thinking bench” in the Docklands – it’s just a regular city bench, but people had added ratings! That cheeky listing was quickly removed by Google, but it was fun while it lasted.

There’s a delightful randomness to these finds, and I think this is why I love it. Official lists of attractions will send everyone to the same places where you’ll probably have a fine time, but it will be predictable, and it will probably also be crowded. These finds feel like a discovery, even if they’re not exactly hidden – but it’s often a place I probably wouldn’t have found otherwise. Like when I wanted to swim on the Jurassic Coast in the South of England, and a Maps peruse convinced me to forgo the beach and head for Dancing Ledge, a fantastic rock pool accessible at low tide for those willing to scramble down some rocks.

My best Maps moment ever came last year, when I went to the Peloponnese in Greece with my dad. We’d spent days seeing glorious ruins from thousand-year-old civilisations, but while drinking my morning coffee on our last day, Google Maps revealed a strange entry. Something called “Caves of the Twins Dolines”, an hour’s drive away on “Unnamed Road”, had blurry photos of two sinkholes, with some tiny chapels dug into the side. There was no mention of opening hours, but reviewers assured me that although the tunnel-like entry was narrow and uneven, it was doable. We headed out with fingers crossed, and it was the most remarkable thing we saw on our trip.

Using Google Maps in this way has revealed unknown parts of my own city to me, and brought me illuminating insights into local lore and history – at its best, it’s a lot like running into a quirky bloke in a pub garden. As we’re encountering more and more fakery online, Maps can feel like a throwback to a kinder iteration of the internet, when people shared information a lot more honestly and freely. In the comments, people just want you to have a nice time.

On my wish list for a future city walk is a curious entry called “Another Time XVI”, which I clicked on to realise it’s actually an Antony Gormley sculpture on the Thames foreshore. The commenters inform me that the path might be closed, but according to a local named Jenny, you can still see the statue from the windows of The Grapes, the nearby pub. As insider knowledge goes, that’s pure gold. 📍