

Walk estalk

PULSE



"Sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens used his teenage mistress as the model for the goddess Nike at this Grand Army Plaza statue."



"The San Remo apartments were designed by Emery Roth, who rose from penniless immigrant to premiere architect."



"Balto the sled dog earned a statue in 1925, when he led a team through a blizzard to deliver serum to quell diphtheria in Alaska."

Take a guided tour of N.Y.C. with your iPod

By CHRIS ERIKSON

YOU can access a lot of information from a Palm Pilot. Addresses. Phone numbers. Schedules. The history of Central Park. That last one is the idea behind Racontours, a new company offering historical walking tours of the city that can be downloaded to mobile digital devices, including PDAs, iPods and Smartphones. For a fee of \$14.95, users can download one of six tours from the company's Web site (www.racontours.com), including Greenwich Village, Central Park, SoHo, South Street Seaport, Lower Manhattan and Washington Square. (A Times Square tour is in the works.) Head to the starting spot and press play, and a narrator guides you through a tour on the audio track while the screen offers an interactive map and accompanying images synced up to the text. (Users of iPods or other MP3 players get audio only). The tours, most of which last around two hours, can be stopped, started, rewind and forwarded at will, and users

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A downloaded tour of Central Park includes these tidbits:



Take a tour de

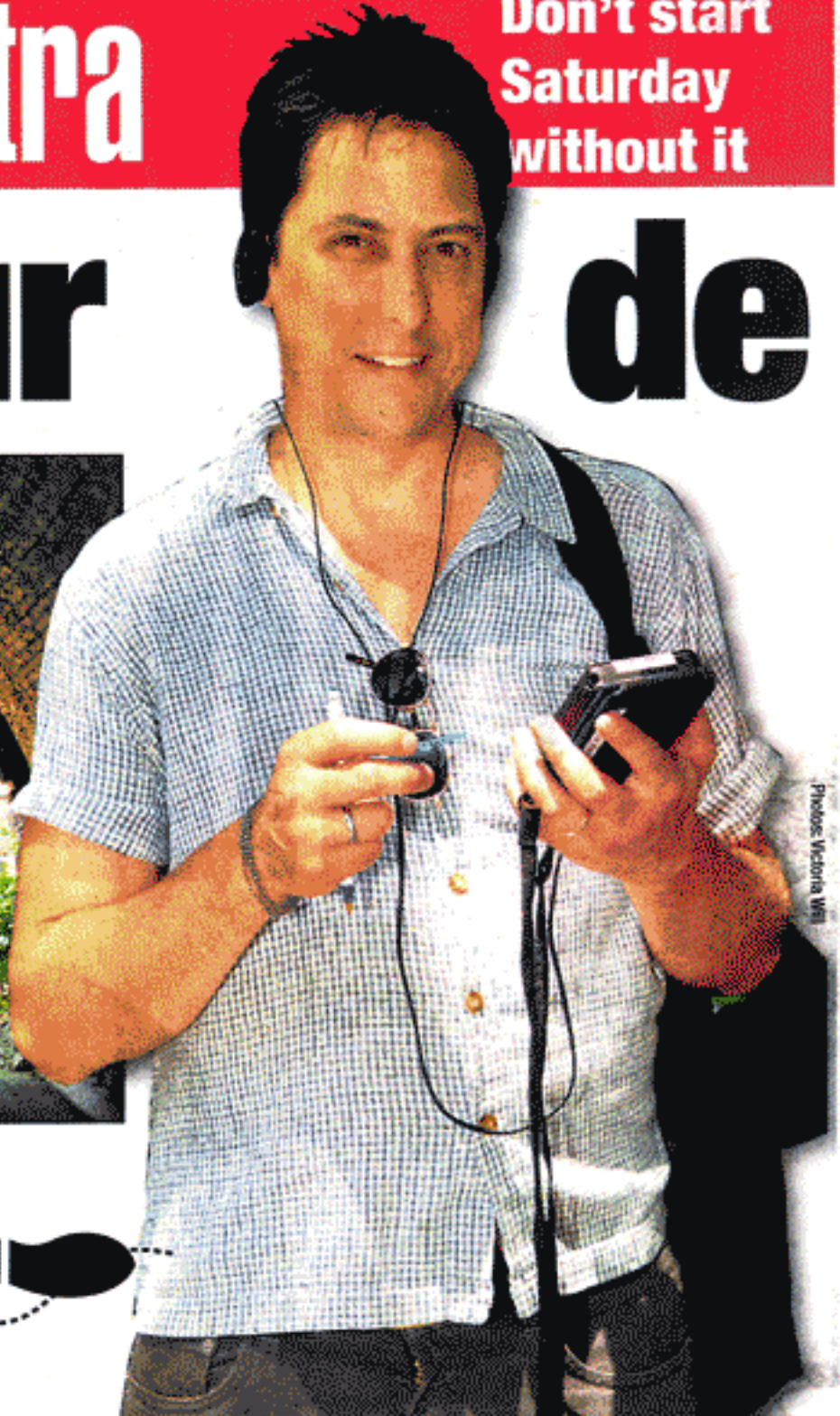


Photo: Victoria Wei



Reporter Chris Erikson tours Central Park with Racontours on his headphones.



We get in step with the download

By CHRIS ERIKSON

ARMED with a handheld PC, The Post gave Racontours a test drive. I opted for the Central Park tour, both because it came recommended and because on a 90-degree day the park held an appeal that couldn't be denied.

I used a Dell Pocket PC borrowed from the company with the tour already loaded up, allowing me to skip the first step. (They swear the downloading is simple.) I definitely recommend using a similar device instead of an iPod, which lacks the visual element.

I gave a quick listen to the instructions, which seemed simple enough. Starting the program at the appointed spot, you listen on headphones to the narration, which will direct you to the next spot on the tour when it's time to move along.



Images pop up on the screen to accompany the narration, with a pinging noise to alert you when a new one appears. You can toggle back and forth between the images and zoom in or out of a map that follows your progress along the route.

My starting point was Grand Army Plaza, where the tour — narrated in workmanlike fashion by Racontours' production manager — started with a detailed rundown of the General Sherman statue. It was a slow start, and I can't say I've ever laid awake at night wondering what its sculptor looked like (though I now know), but things quickly got more interesting.

In short order, I learned that the Pulitzer Fountain across West 59th Street is modeled on Paris' Place de la Concorde (an onscreen image



makes the resemblance clear), and that the statue of the Roman goddess Pomona that tops the fountain was built (so it was believed) with its rear end facing south as an intentional slight to Cornelius Vanderbilt, who lived where Bergdorf Goodman now stands, and whom Joseph Pulitzer hated.

It was fun to see a photo of the barren plaza before the fountain was built, with the stunning Vanderbilt mansion in the background, and evocative to hear that the now-dwarfed Plaza hotel was the area's tallest building when it was built 100 years ago.

Even better was hearing about the building of the park, which, it seems, was not part of the scheme when city planners laid out the street grid in 1811. It was later added to ease the monotony of the endless crisscross of roadways. (Madison and Lexington avenues weren't part of the initial grid either — they were added later, which is why the avenues east of Fifth are closer together than the others.)

Here's what I learned about the park — all that natural beauty wasn't there for the taking. In fact, it took a phenomenal amount of work to create. (And 270,000 imported trees, if anyone's counting.) The best

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can bypass the usual tour order and skip around by clicking icons on the master map.

The first tours of their kind, they're the brainchild of Michael Guthrie, a 34-year-old NYU business school grad. A lifelong history buff who has spearheaded several high-tech startups, he's betting guided tours that can fit into a handbag will appeal to people who might not seek out a regular walking tour.

"A lot of people don't like being on a guided tour and being part of a group, or riding on a bus," Guthrie says.

That goes especially for New Yorkers, he adds, who tend to dread looking like outsiders. "No New Yorker is going to get on a Gray Line bus tour and sit there with people from Nebraska."

Guthrie says his tours, with their historical maps and photos, "combine the immediacy of being there with the information you can get from a book."

He likens them to taking a walk with a local who has a lot of stories and might know a good place for a drink to boot.

"It's like when you're traveling and you meet someone, and they've got all these great stories because they've lived in a place forever," he says. "But that's hard to get access to. So the idea was to offer a kind of insider's guide."

Guthrie founded the company two years ago, and spent months researching, writing and producing the tours, culling information from licensed city tour guides, among other sources.

The resulting tours mix historical info and points of architectural interest with sites like John Gotti's Ravenite Social Club and the Village club where Dylan played his first gig. They're peppered with modern and historical anecdotes, from rat fights at the old Seaport and Prohibition-era drinking at the Village bar Chumley's to the flap over Mia Farrow's infamous rent-controlled apartment.

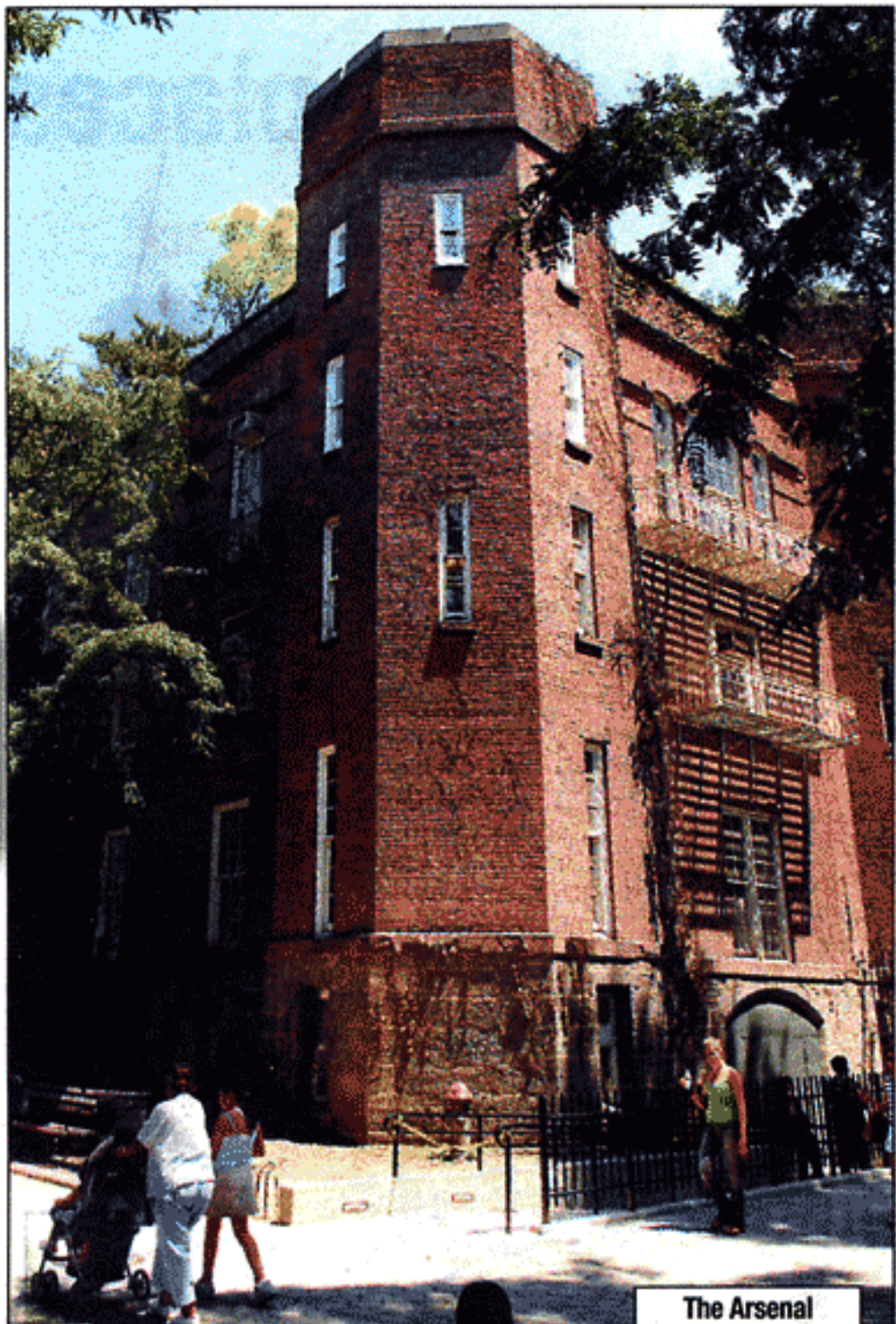
"We try to mix it up," said Guthrie. "We tell you about Peter Stuyvesant and Alexander Hamilton, but we're definitely also going to tell you about Liza Minnelli growing up at The Plaza hotel."

To generate interest Guthrie is doing some online advertising; so far sales have been modest, but are growing, he said. He hopes to extend the business to other cities in the U.S. and Europe.

He's full of ideas for extending the interactive-tour concept — a rock 'n' roll tour of London, a gastronomic tour of Paris and using celebrity narrators. "The possibilities are endless," Guthrie says. "Right now the idea is a lot bigger than the company."

Voice

Victoria Will

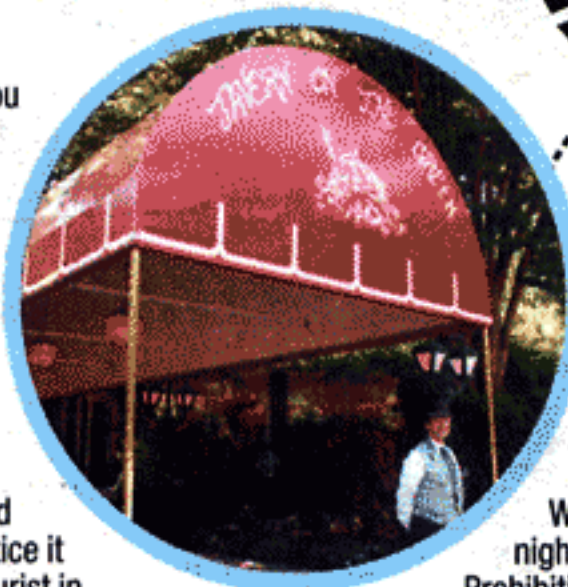


The Arsenal (above), built in 1848 for troops in New York, is highlighted during the tour.

image in the tour juxtaposes a view of the southeastern corner of the park with what was there beforehand — a festering swamp abutting a squatters' camp called Pigtown, for the swine that roamed there.

Speaking of beauty, have you noticed recently how gorgeous that park is? I've walked through plenty of times without looking up much, but the tour was a good occasion to notice it again, like a tourist in my own city.

The walk was supposed to last about two hours, but it was closer to three by the time I wound up at the endpoint, Tavern on the Green. I'd heard about Gus, the depressed polar bear at the Central Park Zoo; about Tammany Hall and how Boss Tweed sucked money and jobs from the park's construction; about the lavish casino where Mayor Jimmy



Walker drank the night away during Prohibition; about where

John Lennon was shot, and where Jerry Seinfeld's terrace can be spotted.

There were some dull spots in there, but all told, it wasn't a bad way to spend a couple of hours. I enjoyed thinking about when Fifth Avenue was a dirt road and pigs roamed in the park. So I'd definitely consider doing another — especially during work hours.