

Navigating stories with VoiceMap's Iain Manley



By [Ruth Cooper](#)

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VoiceMap, an immersive audio tour app breathes character into cities through guided GPS location-aware audio tours by "journalists, novelists, tour guides and passionate locals". We chat to founder Iain Manley about city storytelling for #InnovationMonth.

■ *What inspired VoiceMap?*

After graduating from university, I travelled for quite a long time – almost a decade. I spent 18 months making my way from London to Shanghai overland, then I lived in China for three years. I spent two years in Southeast Asia and a year in India. I paid my way by working as a freelance journalist most of the time, and my best travel stories and travel experiences always had the same thing in common: a local showed me their city.

The perspectives of these generous people cut through all the abstractions of being an outsider. By looking at a place through their eyes, I felt like a participant. I had a point of reference and could share in the complex feelings they had about their homes, probably because we all have complex feelings about our homes.

When I came back to Cape Town, I got a job editing audio tours for open top buses, river cruises and car rental companies. This was done using a production line, with writers in a Cape Town office submitting their work to me, and me passing it over to voice artists. But you can't tell a city's story without ownership, and only one or two voices. In Cape Town, for example, it's impossible to speak about Bo-Kaap's Asian roots in the same way as you talk about the colonial Company Gardens or the Grand Parade, where Mandela addressed 200,000 ecstatic people after his release from prison. You need a strong subject, and the personal opinions, anecdotes and sense of ownership reflected in phrases like, 'I love', 'I remember', and 'I hope'.



VoiceMap was inspired by the combination of these two things – by my experiences while travelling and the difficulties I had editing these audio tours. I wanted to create a platform that anybody could use to tell location-aware stories in their own voice – to match the immediacy of GPS with the intimacy of a real person's stories and a real person's voice.

■ ***What is the split when it comes to local and international users?***

Just under 25% of our users are either South African or using VoiceMap in South Africa. More than 50% are in the US and the UK. Most of the rest are in major European and Asian destinations like Paris and Rome, Singapore and Hong Kong.

■ ***How successful is VoiceMap in other parts of the world?***

Our proudest achievement to date is a [free audio walk with Sir Ian McKellen around London's Theatreland](#). Sir Ian might be famous for playing Gandalf in Lord of the Rings, but he is also one of the world's most accomplished actors, with a 52 year-long career. I think it's safe to say that he knows London's theatres more intimately than just about anybody else.

But we're proud to have worked with every single one of our storytellers, and most of them have become friends. To date we've published 275 tours in 76 cities and 35 countries, on 6 continents.

▣ ***What have been some of the most popular tours?***

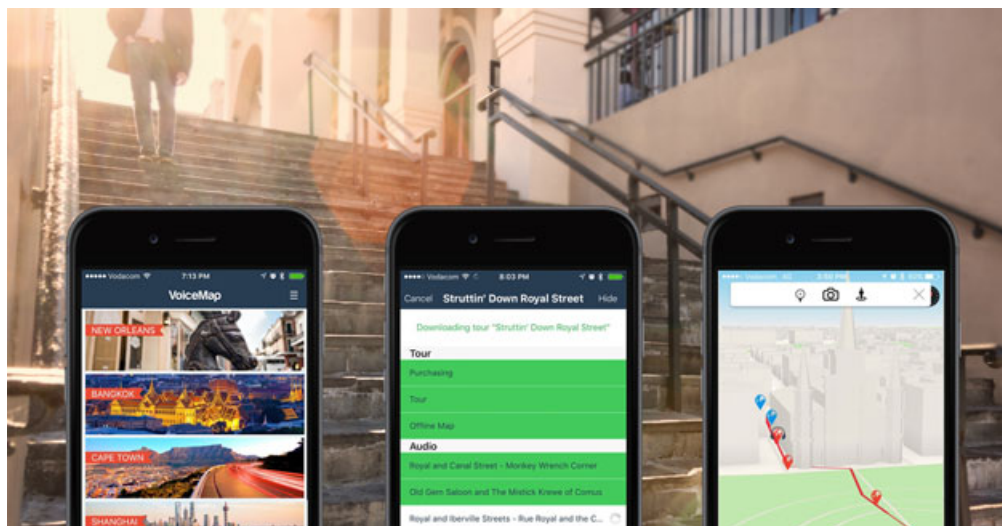
Theatreland with Ian McKellen is pretty popular, as you'd expect. [Our free tour of Table Mountain](#), in partnership with the Cableway, is also very popular. [Our walk around Bo-Kaap](#) is pitch perfect, and I think it has changed how many people see this "village in the city". It definitely should: Shereen Habib created it, and she has compressed an unbelievable amount of knowledge and warmth into this half-hour long walk. Another popular VoiceMap in Cape Town is the [Elfin Trail](#), a fictional audio walk that populates the forests of Constantia with elves, pixies, dwarves, and dragons. I'm sure Gandalf would approve.

If you're visiting Los Angeles, [a stroll along the Sunset Strip](#) with filmmaker Aric Allen should be at the top of your list. He digs up the origins of the 60s counterculture, which burst out right there, and discovers gamblers and gangsters at its roots. And the most popular VoiceMap at the moment is in [Chicago](#). It's by the legendary activist and educator Bill Ayers, who is exactly the sort of person you'd want to take a walk with in this most American of cities. Bill has spent a lifetime grappling with the problems and possibilities of the American dream, and he ends the walk outside the home of his friend, Barack Obama.

▣ ***What makes for a good audio travel story?***

Two things: immediacy and intimacy. GPS is accurate to within five metres, and this can feel like magic when it's used well.

But to really feel like the person whispering stories into your ear is right there, walking beside you, they need to let you in a little, by talking about their own connections to a place.



❏ **Anyone can create a story for VoiceMap, right? Can you explain this process?**

Yes, this is true, and we plan to make creating your own VoiceMap easier and easier to do.

It's a straightforward process:

- You draw a line on a map, representing the route listeners will follow
- Then you place the locations you want to speak about on this line
- We use the line and locations to automatically give you an outline that matches speaking time to walking (or cycling or driving) time, giving you a structure for the tour's script
- Once you've written the script, you submit it to our editors, who help you get all the details right – things like directions and sentences that are easy to read aloud.
- Then you record the tour using whatever equipment you have – most of our storytellers use smartphones – and upload the audio
- After that, you're ready to publish

❏ **I first heard about VoiceMap when researching [Bryan Little's Endemic Project](#). I believe that project dictated some of the direction VoiceMap took initially. How did that work influence the development of VoiceMap?**

The Endemic Project was hugely popular, because it was so visible. But it was an outlier: we'd love to do something like this again in the future, especially with our improved tools, but there aren't many people like Brian, who will invest so much time in creating an extraordinary experience without stopping to worry about how they'll get paid.

▣ ***Can you tell us about the VoiceMap Fictional Audio Adventure event that recently took place?***

[The Little Robot's Chronicle](#) is a story with its own mythology, and this unfolds across Cape Town's city centre, as if it was the board of a game. After you start the VoiceMap on Greenmarket Square, you have to dash around protecting the little robot in your pocket from the insidious Consortium, with the help of friends you meet along the way.

Audio walks like this aren't how I imagined VoiceMap being used when I got started, but we have fictional walks in cities around the world now, and they're a lot of fun.

▣ ***What other local apps or initiatives do you find truly innovative?***

Truly innovative? That's asking a lot. I'm not even sure if VoiceMap is truly innovative. [22Seven](#)'s user experience is world class. [TravelStart](#) have done an impressive job of using South Africa's relatively small market as a launching off point for much larger ambitions. [OurHood](#) is trying to do something really bold by creating a social network for neighbours. If it gets things right, it could be globally significant, and I think it's a great example of what more startups here should do: think outside of South Africa.

▣ ***Out of all your travels, which places and what experiences have been the most memorable?***

I spent some time in Syria in 2007, and I still think the people there are the friendliest I've ever met. Somebody I met in Aleppo actually travelled with me to Damascus and spent a week there, meeting up with me for strong cups of tea and helping me to explore. I've tried to get in touch with him over email since the Civil War started, but I haven't received a reply.

That's obviously quite dark, but it's strongly felt. I have too many happy memories to list, and I visit India, China, and Laos every night, in my dreams.

▣ ***Describe yourself in three emojis.***

Can I use six?

In Slack that's :station::coffee::computer::walking::beer::memo:



iain 3:53 AM



What's next in the development of VoiceMap?

We're working to make creating tours easier, and eventually you'll be able to do most of this in the app, by just walking and talking. We're also working to make it easier to find the right tour for you by highlighting the

themes of every VoiceMap. I'm excited about this because I think that when you're planning a trip to London, for example, you don't want to go back and forth between hundred of tours: you want something that reflects your interests.

We're also launching Welcome to the Neighbourhood tours. These will be shorter than our other tours, and will show around people who are new to a place, pointing out useful things like grocery stores, ATMs, local coffee shops, etc. But they'll tell a few stories too. The Welcome to the Neighbourhood tours are aimed at Airbnb hosts, hostel owners, guest houses, and other people who offer holiday rentals. At the moment, they mostly provide a flip file with a battered map and flyers. I think VoiceMap can improve their guests' experience considerably.

voicemap.me

ABOUT RUTH COOPER

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