Federico Curiél has hit a dead end in front of a canal, caught between undies hanging from overhead clotheslines and a fisherman casting his net into the pungent water. "I took a wrong turn somewhere," the 22-year-old Italian architecture student says as he lights up a Camel and squints at the PDA in his hands. "Back in Venice, I know what roads to take, what roads to avoid."

It's not surprising that Curiél doesn't realize that he is, in fact, still in Venice. Unlike St. Mark's Square, which is overrun by tourists sipping $10 cappuccinos, the nearby Castello neighborhood, which has been inhabited since the eighth century, sees few visitors. But Curiél isn't exactly lost. He's on a new multimedia tour narrated in video clips on his PDA. It was orchestrated by researchers at the University of Architecture in Venice and MIT's SENSEable Cities Lab, who are hoping to breathe life into the city's fringe destinations and unveil the less familiar sides of Venice's rich (and sometimes seedy) history.

Nearly 14 million visitors troop through Venice each year, turning parts of the 1,500-year-old former island republic into a clichéd tourist destination. Locals grumble that day-trippers have transformed the Rialto Bridge and St. Mark's into an Italian Disneyland. But outlying neighborhoods like Castello see few tourists. The nearly two-hour tour, dubbed History Unwired, features five recordings by local residents - ranging from a glassblower to a ska musician - along with flash animations, maps, and movie clips, all uploaded onto a PDA.

Three Bluetooth sensors peppered along the route trigger a virtual tour of a Venetian home and two art installations, one projected on a building, another on hanging laundry.
Seven AGPS hot spots (enhanced GPS designed to overcome Venice's many dead zones) are positioned along the major thoroughfare to launch video presentations of building interiors and samples of local conversation. "Our goal is to make Castello one of the attractions of Venice," says the project's creative director, Michael Epstein of MIT, who has a home nearby.

Curiél is among the first to experience the free tour, unveiled at the Venice Film Festival in September. Eventually, the plan is to beam the 50-Mbyte program to smartphones, using Europe's data-intensive UMTS mobile phone network. Motorola, which donated handsets, and 3, a European mobile network, are cosponsors. History Unwired's developers believe the tour could serve as a model for other destinations - Italian Slow Food villages or even a Harley-Davidson factory - letting travelers tap into the perspectives of insiders.

For now, Curiél, a Venice resident for the past two years, is getting a taste of parts of the town he's never experienced. Following the instructions of an art critic, a local resident featured in the self-guided tour, Curiél happens upon the point where the No Global movement recently painted a mural protesting the Biennale, Venice's prestigious art festival, which is held in Castello. Next up on the video, a fisherman points out the \textit{case occupante}, or house squatters, who he says are vital to a city whose indigenous population is in precipitous decline. A Venetian boatbuilder explains how he got started in his craft. And the glassblower demonstrates his mischievous side, blowing glass condoms and enormous glass breasts in his studio.

Everyday details receive a fresh gloss. Curiél learns from the ska musician that hanging laundry in Venice is a violation of city ordinance - a law that is widely ignored. In the old men's card-playing club, a statue of the Madonna shares wall space with a picture of a topless sunbathing beauty. The musician directs Curiél to stop at a corner bakery where he often serenades the proprietor, once the most striking
woman in the neighborhood. "Introduce yourself," he nudges.

Curiél has been through Castello before, on the way to the soccer stadium, but he never stopped to look around. "There's interesting architecture in this area. I never saw it before," he says with mild astonishment. He stubs out his cigarette and retraces his route, past the old-timers, fishermen, and undies, extending his tour to nearly three hours - his PDA conks out before the final narration begins. "I'm disappointed in this battery," he says. "But I'll be back. For sure."

- Bernhard Warner