



THE SUNDAY TIMES

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THE SUNDAY TIMES of London, England • November 30, 1997 Travel Section WEB SITE OF THE WEEK by Mark Hodson

I confess I am struggling to make this week's website sound interesting. It consists of a directory of ferry timetables and it is not, by conventional standards, a riveting read. But anybody who has experienced the frustration of trying to get information about ferry times will know that this site is potentially life-enhancing.

The site is the work of Dan Youra, an online and print publisher based in Washington State, who divides his directory into two sections, America and the rest of the world. The site has links with dozens of timetables published by both private companies and public authorities, many accompanied by fare charts, route maps, road directions to ports and photographs of the boats. In some cases it is possible to make bookings by e-mail.

Inevitably, some areas are better served than others. The coverage of Britain, Ireland, Germany, Scandinavia, America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Hong Kong is hard to fault.

In obscure corners of the world, such as Vietnam, any information is valuable (I once tried in vain to take the ferry from Saigon to My Tho; apparently, it leaves from the wharf on Ton Duc Thang Street every afternoon and takes three hours. Had I

known, I could have avoided an unpleasant bus journey).

The section on China is particularly good, even listing the rules and regulations on board. Here are some of the items you are allowed to take on a Chinese ferry: "Fifty small boxes of safety matches, 1kg of lamp oil, 1kg of insect killer-powder, five oilcloth umbrellas, a hunter's gun and a small number of bullets."

There are areas that could be improved. Details of routes around Scotland are patchy. Youra cobbles together a few pieces of information about Caledonian MacBrayne, the main ferry operator in Scotland, apparently unaware that it has its own excellent website, at www.calmac.co.uk

Greece, too, is not one of Youra's strong areas. Visitors are directed to the home page of Minoan Lines, which is only one of more than 10 shipping lines that ply the Aegean and Ionian seas. You would be far better off going to www.gtpnet.com which is compiled by the government-run Greek Travel Pages in Athens.

This site, which went online earlier this month, is something of a revelation. If you type in your points of departure and arrival, it will list every ferry that plies that route, when they run, which companies run them, what type of boats they use. From January, the site will be

updated each Sunday and will include prices.

You need some experience of Greek ferries to appreciate quite how impressive this is. Although GTP has been publishing timetables since 1975, it only managed to produce an edition for the general public earlier this year. Callers to the Greek tourist office in London frequently receive unreliable or incomplete information (when I phoned to ask for their Internet address I was even given the site of a commercial rival).

The only difficulty with gtpnet.com is that you must type in the "correct" spelling of Greek place names, so, for instance, it accepts Chania, but does not recognise the other common spellings of

Hania or Xanla. To solve this problem, you need to call up the list of ports, which also shows the phone numbers of port authorities and the phone and fax numbers of local shipping-line agents. Impressive stuff — although, of course, all the information in the world won't make the ferries run on time.

Mark Hodson