



Why We Travel ?

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In the bungling and bellicosity that constitute the back and forth of history, worsened by natural disasters and unprovoked cruelty, humble citizens pay the highest price. To be a traveler in such circumstances can be inconvenient at best, fatal at worst. But if the traveler manages to breeze past such unpleasantness on tiny feet, he or she is able to return home to report: "I was there. I saw it all." The traveler's boast, sometimes couched as a complaint, is that of having been an eyewitness, and invariably this experience — shocking though it may seem at the time — is an enrichment, even a blessing, one of the life-altering trophies of the road.

"Don't go there," the know-it-all, stay-at-home finger wagger says of many a distant place. I have heard it my whole traveling life, and in almost every case it was bad advice. In my experience these maligned countries are often the most fulfilling. I am not saying they are fun. For undiluted jollification you bake in the sun at Waikiki with a mai tai in your fist, or eat lotuses on the Côte d'Azur. As for the recognition of hard travel as rewarding, the feeling is mainly retrospective, since it is only in looking back that we see how we have been enriched. At the time, of course, the experience of being a bystander to sudden political or social change can be alarming.

Throughout history the traveler has been forced to recognize the fact that leaving home means a loss of innocence, encountering uncertainty: the wider world has typically been regarded as haunted, a place of darkness: "There Be Dragons." Or as Othello reported, "Cannibals that each other eat, /The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads/Do grow beneath their shoulders."

But it is the well-known world that seems particularly dire at this moment. Egypt has been upended, and I smile at the phrase "peaceful mob" as an oxymoron; all mobs contain an element of spitefulness and personal score-settling. Tunisia before the mass demonstrations and the coup was a sunny shoreline popular with European vacationers, and the chief annoyance to the traveler was the overzealous rug dealer.

The recent disaster-in-installments in Japan of earthquake, tsunami, damaged nuclear reactors and near-meltdown is a particular shock; Japan has long been regarded as one of the safest countries in the world. And now it seems a perilous place of inundated cities and contaminated air and undrinkable water. The earthquake itself was enough to inspire a sense of deep insecurity. And the idea that Christchurch, New Zealand, could be flattened and feel dangerous — this polite, orderly, beautiful, under populated, provincial, hymn-singing place — is yet another surprise.

Many people think of global travel as though presented on a menu, one of those dense, slightly sticky volumes that resemble the Book of Kells. But it is a changing menu, as certain places are “discovered” and others deleted. Libya is now a war zone, but only the other day the Libyan tourist board was encouraging visitors with promises of Roman ruins and cusucs bil-hoot (the Berber version of couscous with fish). Baghdad may have been the Paris of the ninth century, as Richard Burton described it, but James C. Simmons points out in “Passionate Pilgrims: English Travelers to the World of the Desert Arabs” that it has disappointed most travelers since then as, in their words, “a city of wicked dust,” “odorous, unattractive, and hot,” with an “atmosphere of squalor and poverty” — and these descriptions are from travelers in the 1930s, long before the invasion, war and suicide bombers.

Afghanistan in the 1960s and '70s for all its hassles (gunslingers, scolding mullahs, ancient buses, bowel-shattering cuisine) was astonishingly rich in tradition, ancient pieties and dramatic landscape, shimmering with the still-intact Buddha sculptures in Bamiyan, and penetrated with the sense of the medieval. There were robes, ragged turbans, daggers and even a certain dusty romance — dark eyes peeking from a Shmoo-like burqa. Kiss that goodbye. I well remember the jolting bus ride from the border city of Meshhad in Iran, the walk across the stony frontier to Islamic Qaleh, and finally the small-scale magnificence of the ancient city of Herat. It will be a long time before any farang with a backpack takes that bus ride again. And in Pakistan, the stupendous Greco-Buddhist ruins of Gandharan monasteries in and around Taxila, not far from Peshawar — only a dozen years ago a must-see spot — are now unvisited except by jihadis whose only mission is to deface them.

For the modern traveler there are recent and sharp reversals — the overthrow of longstanding governments, earthquakes, a volcano, the release of radioactivity into a blue sky and cows' milk — all in the span of a few months. What then is the traveler to do except huddle and observe?

Tourists have always taken vacations in tyrannies — Tunisia and Egypt are pretty good examples. The absurd dictatorship gives such an illusion of stability that the place is often a holiday destination. Myanmar — yet another place recently traumatized by a deadly earthquake — is a classic example of a police state that is also a seemingly well-regulated country for sightseers, providing they don't look too closely. (The Burmese guides are much too terrified to confide their fears to their clients.) Kenya's 24 years under the kleptocracy of President Daniel arap Moi, which ended in 2002, never discouraged safari-goers, and in fact might have encouraged them to believe they were safe with so many conspicuous cops around. It is only relatively recently that tourists and hunters have begun to stay away from Zimbabwe. At a time when President Mugabe was starving and jailing his opponents in the '90s, visitors to the country were applying for licenses to shoot elephants and having a swell time in the upscale game lodges.

By contrast, the free-market-inspired, somewhat democratic, unregulated country can make for a bumpy trip, and a preponderance of rapacious locals. The Soviet Union, with nannying guides, controlled and protected its tourists; the new Russia torments visitors with every scam available to rampant capitalism. But unless you are in delicate health and desire a serious rest, none of this is a reason to stay home.

“YOU’D be a fool to take that ferry,” people — both Scottish and English — said to me in the spring of 1982 when I set off at Stranraer in Scotland for Larne in Northern Ireland. I was making my clockwise journey around the British coast for the trip I later recounted in “The Kingdom by the Sea.” At the time and for more than 10 years later, a particularly vicious sort of sectarian terror was general all over Ulster.

How do I know this? I was there, keeping my head down, eating fish and chips, drinking beer and observing the effects of this confederacy of murderous dunces, the splinter groups, grudge bearers and criminal hell-raisers of the purest ignorance. “I’m a Muslim!” a man cries out in a Belfast street in a dark joke that was going around at the time. And his attackers demand to know, “Are you a Catholic Muslim or a Protestant Muslim?”

The narcissism of minor differences was never more starkly illustrated than after that rainy night when I boarded the ferry from Scotland and made the short voyage into the 17th century, setting off to look at the rest of Northern Ireland. What I found — what I have usually found after hearing all those warnings — was that it was much more complicated and factional than it had been described to me. And that there were unexpected pleasures. For one thing, the Irish of all sorts were grateful to have a listener. This is a trait of the aggrieved, and to be in the presence of talkers is a gift to a writer. Yes, there were checkpoints, roadblocks, bomb scares, metal detectors, pat downs. There was the occasional outrage. Ambushes by and against British soldiers were fairly common, as were other features of uprisings from Israel to Sri Lanka — the kicked-down door, the humiliated civilian, the stone-throwing children. But the prevailing quality of war is not noise or gunfire. It is suspense, something like boredom; nothing happens for long periods and then everything happens at once in indescribable confusion.

What I saw in Ulster on that trip was unforgettable. It was first of all the recognition of the utter uselessness of the conflict and its self-destructive element. But it was also the way in which, in the worst situations, life goes on. Market day was observed even though a bomb was now and then detonated in a market square. Rituals were observed, like the one in Enniskillen in 1987 during which 11 people were killed when the I.R.A. detonated a bomb at a Remembrance Day ceremony — murdered as they were mourning their dead. Still, life continued: a cake sale, a bike race, farmers mowing their fields, the sound of a choir from a church, “Have a cup of tea?,” birds singing on the country roads where I waited for a bus, the blackening rain coming down and the exasperated good humor of humane people who were sick of it all.

It was all a revelation that has become a rich and enlightening memory. It had not been the first time I was warned against a place. “Don’t — whatever you do — go to the Congo,” I was told when I was a teacher in Uganda in the mid- and late 1960s. But Congo was immense, and the parts I visited — Kivu in the east and Katanga in the south — were full of life in the way of beleaguered places. In the mid-1970s I was setting off from my West Berlin hotel toward the train into East Berlin, when the writer Jerzy Kosinski begged me not to go beyond the Brandenburg Gate. I might be arrested, tortured, held in solitary confinement.

“What did they do to you?” he asked when he saw me reappear that evening. I told him I had had a bad meal, taken a walk, seen a museum and generally gotten an unedited glimpse of the grim and threadbare life of East Germany.

Not all warnings are frivolous or self-serving. In 1973, I was warned not to go to Khmer Rouge-controlled Cambodia, and that was advice I heeded. It seemed to me foolhardy to go to a country in a state of anarchy. I wouldn’t go to present-day Somalia or Afghanistan either. Nor is Pakistan very tempting.

I traveled to Vietnam that same year, just after the majority of American troops withdrew and about 18 months before the fall of Saigon. The country — though a government was intact — was adrift in a fatalistic limbo of whispers and guerrilla attacks. It was less a war zone than a slowly imploding region on the verge of surrender. My clearest memory was of the shattered Citadel and the muddy streets and the stinking foreshore of the Pearl River in Hue, up the coast, the terminus of the railway line. Now and then tracer fire, terror-struck people, a collapsed economy, rundown hotels and low spirits.

Thirty-three years later I returned to Vietnam on my “Ghost Train to the Eastern Star” journey, which was a revisiting of my “Great Railway Bazaar.” I went back to the royal city of Hue, and saw that there can be life, even happiness, after war and, almost unimaginably, there can be forgiveness. Had I not seen the hellhole of Hue in wartime I would never have understood its achievement in a time of peace. Seven million tons of bombs had not destroyed Vietnam; they had if anything unified it. And Hanoi, which had suffered severe aerial bombardment over the many years of the war, looked to me wondrous in its postwar prosperity, with boulevards and villas, ponds and pagodas — as glorious as it had been when it had been the capital of Indochina. It is certainly one of the most successful, and loveliest, architectural restorations of any city in the world.

Just a few years ago Sri Lanka emerged from a civil war, but even as the Tamil north was embattled and fighting a rear-guard action, there were tourists sunning themselves on the southern coast and touring the Buddhist stupas in Kandy. Now the war is over, and Sri Lanka can claim to be peaceful, except for the crowing of its government over the vanquishing of the Tamils. Tourists have returned in even greater numbers for the serenity and the small population. (Amazingly enough, almost the same number of people live in the Indian city of greater Mumbai than occupy the whole of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka.)

At one point Sri Lanka was on the Could Be Your Last Trip list of the traveler Robert Young Pelton. He has made a career of clucking about hazards, descriptions of which fill his books, notably "The World's Most Dangerous Places." On the one occasion when we met in the late 1990s — on a TV show taped in New Jersey — he came across as a genial if torpid Canadian, except when he was talking about the horrors of Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Colombia. I had made pleasurable trips to all three, I said. And I was compelled to point out to him that we were on the outskirts of Newark, at the time advertised by its own newspaper, The Star-Ledger, as New Jersey's homicide capital.

The earth is often perceived as a foolproof Google map — not very large, easily accessible and knowable by any finger-drumming geek with a computer. In some respects this is true. Distance is no longer a problem. You can nip over to Hong Kong or spend a weekend in Dubai, or Rio. But as some countries open up, others shut down. And some countries have yet to earn their place on the traveler's map, such as Turkmenistan and Sudan. But I've been to both not long ago — one of very few sightseers. And along with oppression and human rights violations, I found hospitality, marvels and a sense of discovery.

In my own "Tao of Travel," the fact that a place is out of fashion, forgotten or not yet on the map doesn't make it less interesting, just more itself, and any visit perhaps more of a challenge. But travel maps have always been provisional and penciled in, continually updated. The map of the possible world being redrawn right now — parts of it in tragic and unsettling ways — might soon mean new opportunities for the traveler who dares to try it. Travel, especially of the old laborious kind, has never seemed to me of greater importance, more essential, more enlightening.

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