



The Treasures of Travel

In the age of the jumbo jet and the cheap fare, tourism has become one of the world's largest industries. Is there a right and a wrong way to travel? Snobs might say so, but it's really all in the mind...

□ Why do people travel abroad? It is not hard to find good reasons. Some must do it whether they like it or not, on business, to fulfil family commitments and the like. Others go for recreational purposes which supersede the actual trip: to view works of art, to sail or fish, to bask on a warm sunny beach — *any* warm sunny beach — as a respite from the northern winter. Still, the question remains: Why do people travel at considerable expense and often in considerable discomfort simply to go somewhere strange?

Not so many years ago, the answer would have been as obvious as the roar of a transatlantic jet plane taking off: they went to see things. Nowadays, however, television channels are crammed with documentaries showing the wonders of far-off places in uncanny detail, and wide-screen movies filmed on location present us with grander vistas than we could ever witness on the spot.

Another explanation that might have been offered back then was that they went to experience things they could never find at home: to sample the food, hear the music, talk to the people. But in any Canadian urban area these days, a wide array of foreign cuisine is only as far away as a delicatessen counter or an ethnic restaurant. You can listen to the music of whatever country you choose on tapes, disks, radio, and the occasional live performance if you happen to be near a concert hall. As for talking to the people, you can now see and hear on TV articulate citizens of various countries being interviewed in their home surroundings. No awkward language problem here; either they speak English or French, or their words are translated expertly.

No, there must be deeper reasons why the international areas of our airports are being jammed by ever-thickening throngs of vacationing passengers. Travelling for pleasure abroad is hardly rational, since there are moments when it is not a pleasure but more like a pain. The idea of it never has appealed to pure logic. As the great stay-at-home of Walden Pond, Henry David Thoreau, put it: "It is not worthwhile to go around the world to count the cats in Zanzibar."

Perhaps the best explanation for the urge to wander is that human beings are born with it. We are, after all, descended from prehistoric hunters and gatherers who would never have survived to propagate the breed if they had not kept ranging beyond the next hill. Among primitive people, the Australian aborigines are famous for "going walkabout," taking long excursions into the Outback in response to some mystical whim of nature. What is to say that modern city-dwellers who feel that they must periodically pack their bags and be off somewhere are not subject to the atavistic impulse to go walkabout as well?

Sigmund Freud theorized that the desire to travel is a throwback to childhood. Part of the satisfaction of going away lies in the fulfilment of "early wishes to escape the family and especially the father," he maintained. If recreational travel is not literally a means of escape from the father, it is definitely a means of escape from what he represents — one's usual duties and responsibilities.

When in a foreign country, you really do get away from it all — from work, from the boss, from the walls that normally surround you. There is little to remind you of your normal existence when

everything you see and hear and eat is unfamiliar. Travel is supposed to be relaxing, and it does cut you off from the usual sources of stress. You may find, however, that these are replaced by different stressors arising out of the very act of travelling. When your luggage has been misplaced, or you can't cash a traveller's cheque because the banks are closed for a festival, remember that a change is as good as a rest.

"To be a good traveller argues no ordinary philosopher," H.H. Tuckerman wrote. "A sweet landscape must sometimes atone for an indifferent supper, and an interesting ruin charm away the remembrance of a hard bed." Judge Thomas Haliburton greeted the vagaries of travel with typically philosophical words of comfort: "The bee, though it finds every rose has a thorn, comes back loaded with honey from his rambles, and why should not other tourists do the same?"

Getting into bizarre situations is half the fun of being abroad

Had he thought of it, Freud might have had something to say about the change of identity that comes over people when they are in another country. In places far from home, a person can feel what it's like to be somebody else. There are countries where, because of exchange rates, people of modest means from western countries find out what it's like to be wealthy. In conversation with other travellers and local folk, it is possible for these kings and queens for a day to inflate their stature back home.

More often, though, the identity change involves a process of deflation. With its snags, snarls and surprises, foreign travel can turn a competent adult into a helpless child, throwing him- or herself on the mercy of strangers, haunted by thoughts of being cheated, robbed or worse.

The calm, confident business or professional man from Canada may suddenly become a capering clown when faced with having to explain what he wants in sign language or phrase-book Flemish or Croatian. If he is to enjoy his trip, he had better have enough of a sense of humour to laugh at himself and the bizarre situations he gets into: his wife will if he doesn't. In retrospect, at least, the comic imbroglios of travel are half the fun.

Approached in the right spirit, overseas travel is humbling. We are bound to stand in awe of some of the marvels of art, architecture and nature we are exposed to; they show us how limited and insignificant is our place in the grand scheme of the world. A brush with long-established cultures may make our values look petty and superficial.

Now, ordinary people may make their own grand tours

Of course, some are impervious to the lessons of travel. A change of scene does not necessarily bring about a change in mentality. The worst travellers are those who refuse to adapt to their surroundings, insisting on applying the standards of their own countries to others. Much to the irritation and embarrassment of their companions, people of this type have been roaming the known world since the time of Socrates. When told that an acquaintance had not been improved by his excursions abroad, the old philosopher said: "I very much believe it, for he took himself along with him."

The modern phenomenon of the package tour tends to perpetuate such thick-headedness by isolating people from the enlightening realities of foreign societies. The chief drawback of touring in groups is that it throws people in among their compatriots. "Those who visit foreign nations, but associate only with their own countrymen, change their climate, but not their customs. They see new meridians, but the same men; and with heads as empty as their bodies, return home with travelled bodies, but untravelled minds," Charles Caleb Colton wrote.

But package tours are what you make of them — those who look around them will see, those who prefer to be blinkered will stay blinkered. Tours have been unfairly maligned by purists to whom the only real travel experience involves something like going up the Amazon in a dug-out canoe. They sneer at the standardized comforts and westernized food in tour hotels, seeming to long for a return to the days of the 19th century grand tour, when only the wealthy could afford to sample the cultural riches of continental Europe. They appear to resent the fact that inexpensive air fares now make it possible for ordinary men and women to make only slightly less grand tours almost anywhere.

Purists insist that the only reason for travel should be travel itself, taking their cue from a famous quotation from Robert Louis Stevenson: "For my part, I travel not to go anywhere, but to go." Oddly enough, though, they would probably disapprove of the most popular modern manifestation of going for the sake of going, the sea cruise. Though there are brief stops on the way, cruises are the ultimate in not going anywhere except back where you started. Is cruising really travel? Some say not, but what else is it, then?

In any case, group tours are not nearly as soulless as their detractors would have us believe. For one thing, most of the hotels on tour circuits are not all that anonymous and antiseptic; there is a touch of local colour in having no water in your room or seeing a small reptile scurry up the wall. The good tours — and admittedly there are bad ones — offer their customers a fair sampling of the local sights, cuisine and entertainment. It is no bad thing when your time is limited to have your itinerary organized for you. Real live guides can tell you more about what you are looking at than guidebooks, and it is a comfort in moments of confusion to be able to call on their help.

The ideal trip would be as William Hazlitt pictured it, offering "liberty, perfect liberty, to think, feel, do just as one pleases." But for the most part modern conditions preclude the footloose wanderings that make up travel at its best. Perhaps the nearest approach to the old-fashioned ramble is to range around in a rented car, but even that is restricted by having to take superhighways, having nowhere to stop but in official parks, and having to cope with the terrors of traffic and the difficulties of parking in crowded foreign cities. The open road in many countries is not so open any more.

"One of the most pleasant things in the world is to go on a journey; but I like to go by myself," Hazlitt wrote, raising the oft-debated question of whether one should travel singly or in company. After Rudyard Kipling wrote the famous line, "Who travels fastest travels alone," Ella Wheeler Wilcox riposted in verse: "Who travels alone, without lover or friend/But hurries from nothing to nought in the end." The argument for going with someone lies in the old saying that a joy shared is a joy doubled.

Still, there are times when couples will opt for separate vacations because their interests do not coincide, or simply because they feel that they could do with some time apart.

It does individuals no harm to experience a touch of homesickness and loneliness in foreign climes; it only makes them appreciate what they have left behind them. Which brings up the point that travel, like the rest of life, does not yield unalloyed happiness. There are bound to be moments of tension, disgust and exasperation. Even when one is delighted with a place, there is a sadness attached to leaving it, knowing one is unlikely ever to see it again.

How you travel, where you travel, who (if anyone) you travel with — all these considerations are less important than the attitude you bring to the venture. If you go somewhere just to be able to say you have been there, you might as well stay in the comfort of your home and read about it in a travel book. But you should also read up on places in advance to get the most out of a journey. "As the Spanish proverb says, 'He who would bring home the wealth of the Indies must carry the wealth of the Indies with him' — so it is with travelling; a man must carry knowledge with him, if he would bring home knowledge," Dr. Samuel Johnson wrote.

The educational value of travel has always been stressed. If William Cowper is to be believed, it is wasted on no one. "How much a dunce that has been sent to roam/Excels the dunce that stays at home," his memorable couplet runs.

*Comparisons are irresistible,
but they can be carried too far*

But "a man should know something of his own country, too, before he goes abroad," as Laurence Sterne wrote in *Tristram Shandy*. Despite generations of school essays exhorting, "See Canada First," Canadians remain notorious for going elsewhere and never seeing the different regions of their own land. In a nation as vast and varied as this, there is a great deal to savour and to be learned about how others live. Within their own borders, Canadians are in a special position to test the truth of the saying that travel is broadening.

An extensive knowledge of one's native country provides a solid basis of comparison with other places, comparisons being irresistible in the course of travelling. Dr. Johnson obviously approved of them: "If the traveller visits better countries, he may learn to improve his own; and if fortune carry him to worse, he may learn to enjoy his own."

To draw full value from a trip — a value measured not in food and drink and accommodation, but in intellectual and spiritual reinforcement — the traveller must be receptive to fresh experience. It doesn't do to arrive with preconceptions or to draw irrelevant parallels. Every place you go should be considered a clean slate.

Fortunately, travelling itself tends to open the mind, providing it is a mind that is willing to be opened. It is a remedy for prejudice, because prejudice usually grows out of misconceptions and stereotypes that are corrected when one actually meets people on their home ground. Abroad, we come to recognize the essential oneness of humanity. At the same time as we see how different people are, we paradoxically see how alike they are.

The places we have visited stay always in our minds

An open mind seeks the truth about things, as opposed to the myths and conjectures. To Dr. Johnson, one of the purposes of travelling was to help lead the traveller to the truth, agreeable or otherwise. "The use of travelling," he said, "is to regulate the imagination by reality, and, instead of thinking how things may be, see them as they are."

As a dedicated debunker, Johnson noted that travel tastes sweeter after the event, when the upsets and fatigue, the litter and racket have faded from consciousness. "All the pleasure that is received," he wrote, "ends in the opportunity of splendid falsehood, in the power of gaining notice which the eye was weary of beholding, and a history of happy moments, of which, in reality, the happiest was the last."

Fair enough: in travel as in war, people are inclined to remember only the good times. The happiest moment is indeed the last for anyone returning to a good home. The frequent traveller proba-

bly appreciates home more than those who are seldom away from it. The same with one's country: nothing makes it more attractive than to be absent from it for a while.

"Never any weary traveller complained that he came too soon to his journey's end," Thomas Fuller observed. What we do in the name of enjoyment can be awfully wearing. Yet it is all so well worthwhile; it must be, otherwise people these days would not set out again and again on trips to all parts of the globe, making tourism one of the world's largest industries.

They carry bags of purchases back with them, but what they have really been doing is stocking their intellects. Travel has the addictive effect on the mind of making it want more. It stimulates a thirst for knowledge of faraway places in general. Travelling is likely to make you into an avid consumer of books about countries you have never been to. Seeing a little of the world makes you want to know more about the whole thing.

Never again will a person who has been to a place hear about it without a thrill of recognition and a rather proprietary feeling towards it. The excitement of travel, it is said, heightens the sensibilities, and the effect seems to be permanent. Years after you have been somewhere, the hero of a movie you are watching will go down a certain street in a certain city: and not only he, but you, will be there.

The places we have been become magic touchstones in our minds; rub them with a reference, and they return to illuminate our memories. The spirit of the former traveller shines through in a letter to William Coleridge from Charles Lamb. "Still I turn back to those great places where I have wandered about, participating in their greatness," he wrote.

But perhaps there are no such things as former travellers, no matter how old they get. They never stop travelling in their spirits, for like Lamb, they can always "turn back" and fall in love again with the places they have been. And if they are true travellers, they have one quality age can never take away — a fascination with humanity. True travellers may age physically, but they will always be young in their hearts and minds.