

The Treats of Travel

I've mentioned before I'm not the greatest one for flying, but I get on planes anyway because I love to travel. I don't know if it's the kind of books I enjoyed as a child, or movies I watched, or having grandparents who went to lots of places and brought back interesting items and photos, or hearing stories from people who lived or studied abroad. But I've had a yearning for the wider world since I was pretty young, and have always known that staying in one place all the time and never going out to see what else is there doesn't work for me.

I enjoy living where I live, but I can't look at the same thing all the time. It's important for me to see something different every so often. I have this thing about expansive landscapes and far off horizons. I like to wander in places where other languages are spoken, and spend time silently listening to those cadences and rhythms. I observe the way other folks do the quality of life thing - people watching is always interesting, especially in other countries. Here in the US there are so many different places to visit as well. I'm drawn to the West, probably because I've spent my whole life in the East. There is something about the desert Southwest and about the Rocky Mountains or the Grand Tetons - maybe it's that expansive far off horizon thing again, but it definitely thrills me, as do shore horizons and cities on water. Tasting other foods, seeing other sights, hearing other sounds - there's such a sensory element to traveling that is just as important as the photos taken or the people encountered.

My own travels elsewhere began in 1985 when I went for the first time to England to stay with a college friend. I'd been on planes before, but this was going to be a long flight, at night, arriving the next day in a foreign country, I had to have a passport for the first time, the whole thing was different and so exciting! I pored over guidebooks and asked others for recommendations, checked out information about what to see and do in London, which was where I was going to stay. Since my friend was in graduate school and had classes during the daytime, I was on my own with my guidebook and my ability to navigate a strange city, learn a different transportation system, and trust my instincts about asking strangers for information when needed. And I still do those things when I plan to travel. The planning is just as much a part of the excitement as the trip itself. Once I've decided on the destination, my first travel purchase is a Frommers or Rick Steves guidebook, which I'll read from cover to cover, marking sights to see, places to stay, restaurants to try. I'm on the Food Network and Travel Channel websites surfing for details and information - it's great to have that added set of resources nowadays! I'm clipping articles from newspaper travel sections, asking friends for recommendations - it's all part of the fun, as is the actual surfing for travel bargains and airline points and all the rest of it.

While it's great to have people along on the journey, I'll gladly travel alone as well. When I'm ready to go, if nobody else is available, then I'll go on my own. I enjoy meeting new people, and have always believed in that "kindness of strangers" thing anyway, and so have had some great experiences meeting and talking to strangers when traveling. There was the Pakistani man who sat across from me on the train from Hampton Court to Victoria Station in London who complimented me on my nice white teeth. There was the couple who sat next to me in a Paris restaurant and talked to me in French about American politics and American television shows, and the American couple who sat on the other side and participated in the conversation, with me

translating back and forth - that was a stimulating meal! There was the guy with the heavy Cockney accent in the London tube station who actually took the time to walk me to where I was trying to go. I could barely understand his English - and we're supposed to speak the same language! When I thanked him and tried to give him a tip for escorting me, he refused, said something else I couldn't understand and walked away. On a day trip to the Grand Canyon, a couple who saw I was by myself asked if I would sit with them at a the meal break included in the trip. How nice it was of them to reach out to the solo traveler and offer companionship. Sometimes strangers I've met on group trips have become friends when we chose to stay in touch once the trip was over. It doesn't always happen that way, but when it does, it enhances the vacation experience that much more. Then there are future opportunities to meet the friends again, and that's special too. I've been to visit vacation friends where they live, they have been to visit me, and sometimes vacation friends and I have traveled together again.

Along with the many photos of my travels, there are the "memory snapshots" I've gathered over the years. When I took my parents to Paris for their first trip to my favorite city in the world, as we walked through a neighborhood together, we turned a corner and there in front of us was the Eiffel Tower. The look on their faces from seeing that up close for the first time was unforgettable. One night on a camping bicycle trip through the California Wine Country, I got up to walk to the bathroom at the Bodega Bay campground, accompanied by the mournful sound of the foghorn in the bay. I looked up and the stars were so close overhead it seemed as if I could have reached up and touched them. Seeing the Western Wall in Jerusalem for the first time was so emotional. Another woman on the same group trip who was also there for the first time linked arms with me and we stood together in silent awe. We hadn't really gotten to know each other that well, but somehow it seemed natural for us to stand there together at that moment.

Travel changes me for the better every single time. There are good memories and some not so good, happy adventures and unpleasant mishaps have occurred along the way. Whether abroad or here at home, the opportunity for a change of scene and change of routine are renewing and rewarding. Knowing that the world is a much bigger place than where we live is a worthwhile concept. Realizing that there is always something learned from being somewhere else can be refreshing and helpful. It's good to take a break from our regular lives - sometimes it's a welcome and needed change. It can be intimidating to step outside of our comfort zones and experience something unknown. But for me it's that unknown that challenges me to reach inside myself for the strength to manage whatever situation comes my way. It also helps me realize that if I can navigate the wider world while traveling, then I can use that same skill set to stay balanced here at home as well.

If you're already a traveling person like me, then I wish you good health and good fortune in your travels as I hope for them in mine. And if you have yet to begin, I wish you the courage to get out there and begin your journeys. It's worth the risk.