

Not a Tourist

In the age of Google and YouTube, there's no such thing as terra incognita. But it's still possible to travel to unknown places— with a little imagination.

BY THOMAS SWICK

ROW 24, SEATS A, B, AND C.

The young woman by the window turns to the man in the middle and smiles. He smooths her hair and tells her she is going to love his city. Not even off the ground, and they have already created a private lair in the still-upright theater of coach.

The man in the aisle seat immediately experiences feelings of exclusion, envy, and inadequacy. Travel, most people believe, is best when shared—an attitude that makes the solitary traveler one of life's losers.

Just in time, the man reminds himself that he is not a loser. He is a travel writer. He will not be engaged in the superficial pursuits of tourists but in the difficult task of trying to make sense of an alien culture. He looks over somewhat pityingly at the couple, who are now discussing an evening trip to the casino.

Once the plane is airborne, he glances across the aisle at the woman sitting with an open laptop. He overhears her tell her neighbor that she is a public health expert going to fight malaria. She would present an affront to a businessman's sense of importance. The travel writer leans back with a grimace, caught in the eternal no-man's land between pleasure and purpose.

The travel writer, when thought of at all, is regarded

as a charmed figure, never stymied in front of a customs officer or a computer screen. The travel writer, when he reflects, sees himself as aimless, clueless, but nevertheless underappreciated.

He picks a destination, or is assigned one, and often it's a place he's never been. Before departure he reads travel books, histories, relevant novels—even learns a few words of the language—but he remains hopelessly behind the humbling crowds of specialists, anthropologists, diplomats, fieldworkers, exchange students, business travelers, expatriates, flight crews, and repeat vacationers who have preceded him.

So he scrunches into seat 24C, furiously skimming the guidebook he didn't quite get to during his pre-trip preparations. A long flight is an opportunity to cram, a seat-belted all-nighter. There will be a test in the morning.

After the landing, the lovebirds and the do-gooder and all the other passengers disappear in a rush to restart their lives, and the strangeness of the travel writer's surroundings distracts him from the fact that he doesn't have one. At least not here, not yet.

Why didn't he bring his wife, or a friend? Some writers don't want their assignment looking like a lark. Those who embellish their accounts understandably prefer not to have witnesses. Also, going with a like-minded companion makes you susceptible to feelings of

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A travel writer's solitary work can look a lot like play—though it is anything but carefree.

cultural superiority. But the real reason to travel alone is to be free from distractions, to be uninterruptedly absorbed in the place.

Those first few hours are always the most vivid, as everything stands out in its immense originality: buildings, people, cars, mannequins. In a few days these props will pass in a near-familiar blur, but now—right now—the world crackles with high-definition details. And in fact there is no test; the day you arrive is more like an orientation film. Tomorrow you begin your work.

I am talking here of narrative travel writers, not the compilers of information for guidebooks. They tend to hit the ground running, pressed as they are for time and money. It is tiring, thankless work, though—if Thomas Kohnstamm's *Do Travel Writers Go to Hell?* (2008) is to be believed—you can skimp on the research and become a kind of note-taking rock star. Sex, drugs, and flora 'n' fauna.

The traveler in pursuit of atmosphere and essence has a more elusive task. If all writers are by nature

outsiders—standing on the periphery, taking in the action—the travel writer is an outsider times two. He repeatedly ignores the oldest saw of the trade: Write what you know. He is an observer who frequently doesn't know what he's observing. A few years ago in Bangkok, I walked out of my hotel every morning past men and women hunched over bowls whose contents remained a mystery to me. And I asked myself: How can I know what these people are thinking when I don't even know what they're eating?

Audacity didn't strike me as a job requirement when I chose this career. I was fresh out of college with a desire to be a writer and a conviction that, after a lifetime of school, I had nothing to write about. So I went to France to learn French, and two years later I moved to Poland to marry a woman I had met on my way home from France. Teaching English in Warsaw, I acquired another language and enough experiences (this was the early 1980s, the days of Solidarity and martial law) to write my first book. Living in a foreign country not only

gives you a deep understanding of another culture, it introduces you to new ways of being and seeing that are of inestimable value on later journeys.

Yet nonstop observation—even of things you understand—is not enough for the travel writer. After a few days a feeling of futility, not to mention loneliness, sets in. Business travelers have their meetings, aid workers their clinics, tourists their museums. Foreign correspondents are in search of news. Travel writers have no

with the new. Shunning the tour groups, we traipse through neighborhoods and sit in bars and inadvertently make ourselves even more out of place. We are engaged in work that looks a lot like play—even to us. But it lacks play's essential carefree quality. A story has to result. And it weighs on us, this knowledge, along with the idea of our impertinent existence.

But we press on, watching people with purpose go through their day, remembering friends back home

who said they've always dreamed of visiting the place where we now schlep. And without any prompting, we think of Bruce Chatwin—not his 1977 masterpiece *In Patagonia*, but his posthumous 1989 collection *What Am I Doing Here*.

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itineraries or obligations (mummies bore us, nobody's expecting us), and we have no leads, since frequently we don't know what our story is. In the absence of a special event, or a specific assignment, we have to find our story, and often it is whatever happens to us.

So we wander, mosey, poke around. This is another reason we go alone: We don't have to explain to anyone what it is we think we're doing. A lot of travel writing is creative hanging out. And, inevitably, it looks pretty pointless. But we're hoping for an incident or a character or even a calamity that can become our subject. The worst trips, it is famously said, make the best stories, a philosophy that fuels the trend in adventure travel. Risk—its heated buildup and colorful consequences—is an irresistible subject. The problem with much of the writing that results is that it's heavy on personal rather than worldly insight, portraying not the place but the author's mettle. A beautiful exception is Joe Kane's *Running the Amazon* (1989), which shifts between gripping accounts of kayaking the length of the world's largest river and evocative depictions of the lands passed through.

Unlike the adventurers, who have a quest, the rest of us struggle with definition. We are not tourists, though we share their transport, their hotels, their intoxication

It is one of the most perfect titles in the history of travel writing, but it could only have graced the cover of a modern travel book. The first travel writers entertained no such uncertainty about their mission. They followed in the footsteps of the explorers, or were explorers themselves. Their objective was clear: to describe to the folks back home an unknown world.

In the 19th century, travel writing became more personal. Alexander Kinglake, in *Eothen* (1844), described not only how the Middle East looked, but also how it felt. To enliven *The Bible in Spain* (1843), George Borrow hung out with Gypsies, theirs being one of the handful of languages he spoke. These writers were joined by others, including novelists—Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, Mark Twain—who brought the imaginative and intuitive skills of their trade.

The 20th century gave us “specialists”: Freya Stark in the Arab world, Norman Douglas in Italy, Gerald Brennan in Spain, Patrick Leigh Fermor and Lawrence Durrell in Greece. Durrell, best known for the rich sensuality of the novels that make up *The Alexandria Quartet* (1957–60), grew up on Corfu and lived on a number of other islands. As a novelist who also wrote travel books, he continued in the tradition of D. H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, and Graham Greene. Evelyn Waugh is remembered as a novelist, but he also wrote *Labels* (1930) and *Remote People* (1931), and claimed

that he preferred “all but the very worst travel books to all but the very best novels.”

Travel writing was one of World War II’s casualties, and really didn’t engage the general population again until the mid-1970s, when Paul Theroux published *The Great Railway Bazaar*. Joy-riding on trains through Europe and Asia, the young American novelist boldly ignored the sights and harrumphed about the people. And he made the travel book fashionable again (until it was swept aside by the memoir).

Curiously, the genre’s renaissance coincided with the appearance of its obituary. In 1980, the cultural critic Paul Fussell published *Abroad*, a superb study of British travel and travel writing between the wars that concludes

with the pronouncement that the postwar age of tourism killed real travel and, by extension, the writing that was its offspring. It didn’t finish off either, any more than televised baseball brought an end to a day at the ballpark. There is still the authentic experience, but, like being a spectator at a game, travel is now altered by its well-recorded popularity.

In an age of mass tourism (and YouTube), the travel writer’s job has changed. It is not enough anymore simply to describe a landscape—we must root out its meanings. British writer Jonathan Raban, playing the immigrant in *Hunting Mister Heartbreak*, goes shopping in 1980s Manhattan and is struck by the tone of bombastic abundance. “Macy’s was scared stiff of our boredom,” he writes, nailing the frenetic nature of not only an American department store but American capitalism. Writers such as Raban, Colin Thubron, Jan Morris, and Pico Iyer possess, in addition to the requisite eye for detail, an agile and well-stocked mind for synthesis, and their findings are riveting (and often surprising), even to people intimately familiar with their subjects. The physical hardships these writers endure in the course of their journeys often pale in comparison to



Months after the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Scottish journalist Rory Stewart walked across the country accompanied by a retired fighting dog to write *The Places in Between*.

those of their predecessors—though Thubron continues to travel rough—but the scaled-down suffering is offset by the greater creative challenge.

A somewhat related development has been the emergence of the political travel book. Writers such as Robert Kaplan, who has written about the Balkans and other incendiary places, and Rory Stewart, who walked across Afghanistan in *The Places in Between* (2004), resemble to some extent the doughty adventurers of the past as they go off to lands of conflict and return with a mix of history, description, reportage, and analysis.

Sitting at the opposite end of the spectrum—like the pretty cheerleader voted most popular in the class—is the escapist travel book. Peter Mayle sipping pastis in the south of France in *A Year in Provence* (1990) and Frances Mayes rhapsodizing about her Italian garden in *Under the Tuscan Sun* (1996) prove Fussell half right, as they are the age of tourism’s frothy answer to Gerald Brenan’s amateur anthropology in *South From Granada* (1957) and Norman Douglas’s raffish erudition in *Siren Land* (1911). People read Mayle and Mayes not to learn about the world but to dream of their own idyllic retirements. More recently, the most popular travel narrative has

been *Eat, Pray, Love* (2006), by Elizabeth Gilbert, the Freya Stark of the Oprah generation in that she circles the globe in search of self-realization.

These books have done a great deal to romanticize the profession. (Tell people you are paid to travel and write about it, and you will be greeted with exclamations of envy.) They help explain why Raban flatly disassociates himself from the tribe—so emphatically that he now writes novels—and why Theroux once claimed that he does his travel writing with his “left hand.” “Travel

Coimbra, I went to the university English department and accosted the first person I saw. This turned out to be Bibi, a woman from Rotterdam who was spending a semester teaching Dutch. At a nearby café she told me about her friend in Lisbon, a poet named Casimiro whom I should call when I returned there.

Casimiro invited me to dinner, after which we went to a bar for fado music. On my solitary strolls I had passed numerous restaurants advertising “folk-

lorique evenings”; this wasn’t one of them. It was a smoky dive, full of what looked like stevedores sitting at long tables before a gaunt guitarist perched on a stool. Occasionally a lone brute would stand up and belt out a song of outstanding melancholy.

Casimiro translated. “It smells of Lisbon,” he said after one almost upbeat number. “It smells of flowers and the sea.”

That night I learned how to travel as a travel writer: You approximate, as best you can, in the short time allotted you, the life of a local.

And this is achieved through personal encounters. It is something the adventure writers often miss. Everyone can climb Kilimanjaro, or at least attempt to. They will all, for sure, have their individual responses to the experience, but they all go up the same mountain. Whereas the person you meet in your travels is yours alone (provided you avoid the cliché of writing about your guide or your taxi driver or your hotel receptionist).

In addition to uniqueness, residents give you a sense of the present (as opposed to museums and monuments, which are all about the past). It’s extremely difficult, and usually presumptuous, to write about a place without meeting and talking to the people who live there. This was Steinbeck’s mistake in *Travels With Charley*, the book about his 1960 road trip around the United States with his pet poodle. Even a dog can hold you back.

People also provide, occasionally, an emotional dimension. In *Reading Chekhov: A Critical Journey* (2002), Janet Malcolm goes to Russia and comes to

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writer” may be the one title everyone wants except the people who have it.

We suffer a recurring crisis of confidence. We wonder not just what we’re doing here (wherever “here” is) but how we can ever discover its essence. How can we possibly describe all these faces, all these doorways and shop windows? The scale of every place overwhelms: hundreds of streets we can never walk down, thousands of people—many of them, surely, perfect embodiments of their city’s spirit—we will never meet. A dozen just passed, lost forever. Who, after all, are we to pronounce on this place, and who, outside of our families, cares to hear our pronouncements? Why bother describing in words what can be seen in a video?

Miraculously, these doubts vanish when observation gives way to participation.

My first trip “on assignment” was to Spain and Portugal. It was October 1989, two months after I had taken a job as travel editor of the *Sun-Sentinel* in Fort Lauderdale. (I had never thought of living in Florida, but I had long dreamed of traveling for a living.) For two weeks I walked the streets—Madrid, Barcelona, Seville, Lisbon—ate in the restaurants, took in the sights. I was always alone and painfully aware that something was missing. Desperate in

the realization that travel is an inherently “low-key emotional experience.” This runs counter to the popular perception of the activity, which elicits—not just in advertisements but, sadly, in many travel articles—words such as “adventure,” “excitement,” “romance.” But, Malcolm argues, most tourists aren’t doing anything exciting or romantic; they are passive observers—visiting cathedrals, looking at paintings—and are less engaged than they are on a typical Monday at home.

Even when I’m in search of a story, many of my trips are uneventful. But it does sometimes happen that I find good people, learn new things, participate in the life of a place. And there are times—like unexpected gifts—when the people become friends, the information becomes insight, the participation becomes engagement; I develop an emotional attachment to the place. And then I think: It’s not the worst trips that make the best stories, it’s the best trips.

Row 37, seats J, K, and L. The teenager slumped against the window is snoring loudly, and the man in the middle weighs 300 pounds. Nevertheless, the woman in the aisle seat leans back and smiles. She is a travel writer, and for the first time in a long while she has nothing to do. The place she obsessed about for months has disappeared beneath the clouds. All the anxiety she felt on the flight over is now replaced by exhausted elation (especially if her notebook is full). She luxuriates in the lull between legwork and composition.

The feeling of contentment doesn’t last long. At her computer the old doubt returns, though this time it’s not stirred by the confusion of the new. The chaos of travel has given way to the order of home. She is, as one never is on the road, in control. Her late-night stumble into a slum is rendered calmly, with carefully weighed words.

Yet even when those words are flowing, uncertainty creeps in. What am I doing here? becomes, in its domestic form, Why am I writing this?

It sometimes seems that as more people go out into the world, there is less interest in reading about the world. How else to explain the decline of the travel book in the age of globalization? True, there has been a concurrent rise in travel blogs, but these seem to be, for the

most part, cyberspace’s version of the vacation slides people used to inflict on friends.

For some time now, the travel writer has been viewed as a kind of subspecies. Few modern travel books, with the exception of Chatwin’s, have been heralded as literature. Travel writing courses are rarely included in creative writing programs (an omission that may work to the genre’s advantage). Magazines and newspaper sections devoted to travel are mostly unreadable, having moved over the years from gushing boosterism to drab consumerism.

And yet, good travel writing continues to be written and published. Each autumn *The Best American Travel Writing* appears like a national health report confirming the surprising robustness of the genre. A few of the stories in this annual anthology are found hidden between resort ads in the travel glossies, but most are plucked from the less sumptuous pages of general-interest magazines and literary quarterlies.

The best writers in the field bring to it an indefatigable curiosity, a fierce intelligence that enables them to interpret, and a generous heart that allows them to connect. Without resorting to invention, they make ample use of their imaginations. They do what many of their compatriots find impossible: They speak another language (or two). They have a solid grounding in history, culture, religion, politics, economics, architecture, food, plants. You would think this wide range of knowledge would earn travel writers respect (if not a loyal following), but in an era of specialization it tends to do the opposite, painting them as irrelevant generalists.

The travel book itself has a similar grab-bag quality. It incorporates the characters and plot line of a novel, the descriptive power of poetry, the substance of a history lesson, the discursiveness of an essay, and the—often inadvertent—self-revelation of a memoir. It revels in the particular while occasionally illuminating the universal. It colors and shapes and fills in gaps. Because it results from displacement, it is frequently funny. It takes readers for a spin (and shows them, usually, how lucky they are). It humanizes the alien. More often than not, it celebrates the unsung. It uncovers truths that are stranger than fiction. It gives eyewitness proof of life’s infinite possibilities.

This is why you write it. ■