

TRAVEL REALITIES

By Roger Beaumont

Literature and travel are the most effective ways of expanding our horizons. Not only are they two of life's great joys, they're also legal. Of all the things that travel abroad offers, perhaps the most salutary is the sense of being a foreigner - not a favoured holiday consumer, but a temporary refugee in a strange place.

Nothing alters your perception of who you are and where you belong as fundamentally, radically and permanently as being somewhere else.

I'm endlessly astonished by the power and unfading brilliance of the memories of people and places I've met: the Moroccan herdsman offering a gourd of warm cow's blood and then asking if I'd read any Jeffrey Archer. Or the pretty teenager in the guesthouse in Kabul who wanted me to help her with her English homework and solemnly intoned the correct tenses in "My cat hasn't eaten my other sock, the bear has."

Through travel we escape the deadening effects of habit. Our eyes are never more open than during our first days in a new place. The mind is like a radar newly attuned to pick up certain objects floating through consciousness. And, in a delicious twist of irony, people often travel only to discover that what they really need is already at home, but are unable to recognise this truth until they travelled. That's the deal.

Naturally, there are casualties. Like those individuals who appear to spend their entire lives in the wrong lane, neither reaching their destination, nor capable of finding their way back. For some there is no destination. Others are simply blown off course along the way. An unfortunate few return but can't settle. Their travel experiences were simply too intense and realise their old reality is now too mundane and predictable.

Travel has not only changed them, it has left them in limbo - between the new and the familiar.

A normal reaction is to talk it out - to or at anyone in range - about how they either crossed the Gobi desert single-handedly, mastered full contact origami in Kyoto or wrestled with French poodles - and won.

Someone wrote that the first lesson a

pilgrim learns is that most of the baggage we carry is useless. For most travellers, the bag of new experiences we return home with are viewed in perspective and then filed under "experience".

But then there are those moments of sheer awe that leave travellers truly gob-smacked. Forever.

During Napoleon's disastrous 1798 campaign in Egypt, an entire regiment snapped to attention when they first glimpsed the Temple of Karnak at Luxor, just after sunrise, without any orders to do so. It was a spontaneous moment of group respect.

Or the member of a British expedition to Antarctica who wrote: "You look at the horizon and it just gets richer and richer until there's this big cobalt blue dome above you. The snow looks like its scattered with diamonds, and it can look like there's glitter in the air because of the ice crystals. It's a very, very dangerous and hostile environment, but the beauty is just incredible."

For those who have to commute across oceans and continents in order to work, the reality of travel is rather different. I remember being on a flight and suddenly realising that here were 400 people, 30,000 metres up, flying across the French Alps in glorious sunshine and not one person was looking out of the window. They were either looking down at their laptops, or up at the movie, or directly at the back of a seat.

But for those who can't afford to jet off to the exotic they might take comfort in the eccentric French 18th-century writer, Xavier de Maistre, author of an idiosyncratic travel book entitled "Journey Around My Bedroom".

In its day, it was a bestseller. It sold at least 18 copies, which is going some for a book that had to be scribbled out by a frozen hand on dead goat, using part of a dead goose dipped in soot and blood. His

point was to suggest that the pleasure we derive from our travels depends more on a certain way of looking than on any particular destination.

If we applied this way of looking to our own neighbourhoods, then our bedroom might be no less interesting than the jungles of South America or the passes of the Himalayas.

De Maistre quoted with approval Pascal's dictum: "All of man's unhappiness stems from not being able to remain quietly in his room."

Perhaps it is not by reading more books, but by deepening our understanding of a few well-chosen ones that we develop our intelligence and our sensitivity. And yet this patient focus on a few titles is made ever harder by the abundance of new books, and by the attempts of publishers to frustrate our wish to deepen our loyalties to a few works.

Two writers worth reading are Alain de Botton and Tahir Shah. They are both young and approach the genre of travel in fresh and different ways.

But first a telling similarity, which in a roundabout way is also a salute to deranged De Maistre in his bedroom. When they arrive at their respective places they never visit the tourist sites. For them, the true heartbeat of a country is not to be found in monuments.

To discover and understand what's really going on means not simply looking at things, but noticing them. Not feeling, but sensing. Not hearing but listening, so that behind the roar of traffic the backing

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