

An open letter to travelers:

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I may only be a relatively young 30 years old, but I'd like to impart a little of my budding wisdom to travelers young and old alike. I've set foot on six continents and have been to more countries than I have years, yet I still see incipient explorers and seasoned world-wanderers make the same mistakes time and time again.

Part of the problem is that we live in a gotta-have-it-now, pre-packaged, fast food world. Now I know that this may not be the sort of profound insight you were looking for, but it's part of a larger point.

In a world where you can get a college degree from home, Maine lobster flown overnight to your doorstep, or listen to just about any song ever recorded instantly via iTunes, it's only natural that we would expect the same comfortable living room experience from our travels. After all, who wants to spend weeks on end traveling to parts unknown for the privilege of trying to decipher strange signs and strange people. To quote Jim Morrison, "People are strange, when you're a stranger." Wouldn't it be much easier if someone else did all of that pesky leg work for you. Let's face it, you are an important person and you only have seven days to turn that picture of Machu Picchu on your computer's desktop into a real-life bragging opportunity.

If this sounds like you, don't fret, you're just a victim of modern life. We've made it too easy to "explore" the distant corners of the world. In 24 hours you can be transported Star Trek style to just about anywhere on this pale blue dot. Type any exotic locale into Google and you'll find no shortage of eager opportunist happy to shrink-wrap and whisk you away on some bland, vanilla, hermetically sealed "trip of a lifetime." Now you can see any part of the world through the vaseline-smeared filter of double-ply airplane plexiglass, air-conditioned luxury busses, and courteous english-speaking guides in matching uniforms.

And the old are not the only ones being taken advantage of. The young, hip, bohemian college types fall into the same trap as everyone else, it's just been branded a little differently. Some advertising genius decided to coin the phrase....are you ready....drum roll please....ADVENTURE TRAVEL!!! Now the young too can enjoy the same segregated circus as their geriatric counter parts. Get ready to take part in an exciting three day Bungee jump/white water rafting adventure in New Zealand, a 10 day real-outback 4WD adventure in Australia, a Hong Kong-Shanghai-Beijing 7 day tri-city adventure...you get my point.

When it comes to throwing stones at my fellow travelers, I am not without sin. I write this article from the humble embrace of experience. I too have been lured into the seedy underbelly of glossy brochure travel. Knowing this, you may be asking yourself why I loathe this form of travel so vehemently. Well friends, this is why I have an ax to grind. What these travel companies allow you to do is to dip your toe into the travel pool before jumping in. Unfortunately, most people find that the water is a little colder than they anticipated, so they end spending the rest of their lives in a lounge chair next to the very pool they came to swim in. Anyone who has taken the proverbial leap into the deep end knows that the first ten seconds are rife with discomfort. Give it a few minutes (after my boy bits have shriveled almost unrecognizably) and something amazing happens...you have a great time. Before long you are playing Marco Polo, splashing your friends, and trying to hold your breath all the way from one end of the pool to the other. Occasionally you pop up like a surfacing submarine just long enough to glance over at the sunburnt corpses in the lounge chairs by the pool; you can't help but feel a little sorry for them. You want to tell them to jump in, but you already know the answer.

So what is this glorious pool I'm talking about? If you haven't figured it out I am referring to tetherless travel. I am talking about shedding the warm blanket of familiarity for the freedom of uncertainty. The unfortunate fact of the matter is that most of these places you've dreamt about visiting are not nearly as spectacular as you'd hoped they be. Sure, the Eiffel Tower is tall, the Great Wall of China is nice, and Table Mountain is flat, but taken as a whole they are not particularly memorable. Anyone whose been to a major monument knows that they are congested with polluted tour buses and gaggles of tourist whom are segregated by nationality and herded around like sheep by someone dressed all in white and carrying a number on a pole. You have 30 minutes to get off the bus, see the sight, take a picture with your shiny (insured) Nikon, buy a postcard or plastic figurine of said sight, then return to your rolling filing cabinet so you can

be rushed to two more sights before being dropped off at your all inclusive hotel. Here's my advice - ditch the tour bus, don't take any map more detailed than a country wide view, learn how to say 'hello', 'please' and 'thank you' in the native language, then get lost.

The best times I've ever had traveling were in the midst of disorientation and uncertainty:

-Lost in a midnight fog somewhere between Luxembourg and Belgium just to stumble across a hotel at 2:00 am that makes the Bates Motel seem like Disneyland.

-Enjoying lunch in the middle of Nowhere, Vietnam, trying to figure out what kind of meat was in my rice by using the internationally recognized animal noises (moo moo, cluck cluck, oink oink) just to have the bewildered food stand attendant eventually smile then say, ruff ruff.

-Wandering through the maze of seedy black-markets in Pattaya, Thailand. Markets selling monkeys, snakes, and just about every type of high end clothing you can imagine (most of them are the genuine article too because so many of your pretty \$200 shirts and \$5000 suits are made in countries like Thailand. Is it any surprise that some of them end up in these markets?).

Sure, I visit a lot of 'must sees' when I travel, but only if convenient. When I explain to wide-eyed friends that I didn't make it to Rome or the Leaning Tower at Pisa during my two weeks in Italy all I can do is smirk and say, 'hmmm, you know, I guess I just got side tracked.'

At the end of the day what I'm getting at is that I would have never been privy to these sorted traveling experiences had I opted for standard cookie cutter tour. While hindsight may polish these memories a bit, the fact remains that there is no better way to explore the earth.

Let the professional photographers take pretty pictures of Easter Island and Stonehenge while you go off and get lost. Trust me, you won't regret it.