

In Defence of Travel

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My wheels are coming off. The wheels of my suitcase, that is. It won't be the first time either. Recently at Cape Town International Airport, Uber driver Alexis helped me with my luggage. He was struggling. "Ja your suitcase, it's two-wheel drive now," he said. I concurred.

See, I'm reluctant to replace it. A piece of luggage represents more than the sum total of its parts. Traces of places linger on it; memories. The air of cities, clanging dashes over cobblestones, faraway fingerprints and distant sunsets.

We were in Amsterdam, a travel companion and I. Walking along a crowded street, we argued. A busker's voice hung over the night chill.

"I hate this song," said travel companion.

"Oh?" I said. We walked on in silence.

"This, though." I pointed at lights darting off a canal. "Isn't it, like, beautiful?"

He shrugged. "It's all the same. Just atoms, rearranged."

That night I thought hard, trying to come up with a defence for travel. If it's true that, ultimately, Earth consists simply of atoms, configuring and reconfiguring since 13.6 billion years ago, why are some of us compelled to observe this spectacle? In short, why do we get off the couch and cram ourselves into cars or planes to walk on other sides of the globe? Travel companion argued he'd be perfectly content viewing the world on YouTube.

Ten years ago, while I was snacking on olives and pide in front of the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, a girl approached me. Behind her the mosque's twin turrets were lit. She smiled shyly, lowering herself onto the grass by my side. She had dark eyes and neat eyebrows, her face wrapped in a scarf. We did not speak each other's languages, but gestures sufficed. We exchanged snacks. She was Turkish, but a lone visitor to Istanbul too. Together we paged through our guidebooks and watched the moon rise. She gifted me a keyring from Gallipoli, a small metal fort. I gave her a wooden bangle off my wrist. I still have that keyring, plus photographs of us hugging goodbye.

Later at my pension's roof deck overlooking Sultanahmet, we gathered. A handful of young people from around the world: South Africa, Brazil, Tokyo, England, Bulgaria and Slovenia. Flung together by chance, we sat drinking raki, comparing notes. The Bulgarian had a dog-eared copy of Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*; he was studying in America. Half an ink dragon curled across the Slovenian's shoulder. He shrugged. His tattoo artist got jailed on drug charges before the tattoo could be finished.

The next day my flight to Pamukkale touched down just past dusk. Pamukkale in central Turkey is renowned for its white mineral pools on a low mountain. But the airport is 70 kilometres outside the town, with patchy transport connections. This is how I ended up hurtling through the night in a small yellow 'taksi' with strangers: a woman in a sequined blouse, and a man with ring-encrusted knuckles. They took pity on me, stranded outside the airport. From their scant English I gathered she was a singer on her way to a gig and he was her manager. They were smoking short, strong cigarettes as we sped and twisted through the dark, putting out the cigarette butts on the taxi's floor. During that drive I shot more than one prayer up into the ether. It worked; a few hours later I collapsed, exhausted, on my guest home's bed.

Next was Fethiye on the southwestern coast, followed by a four-day yacht trip – past Kaş and Kekova with its pirate cave – to the resort town of Olympus. It was utterly scenic but choked with backpackers and I left after one night, trudging along the beach to nearby Cirali. A seaside restaurant amidst orchards offered refuge. In its backyard, I stayed in a neat wooden hut with an outside basin. Across a scraggly hedge, a stout man lived on an old sofa under an orange tree – alfresco. There were free-roaming chickens, and breakfasts of olives and feta and thickly sliced tomato at tables practically on the beach.

Up the coast, my final night was spent wandering around Kaleiçi, the historic heart of Antalya. Zigzagging the tangle of alleys, I picked up company: a blonde Russian. We had dinner at the old Roman harbour, then strolled some more. Soon enough, I got nervous at the urgency in his voice inviting me back to his hotel for vodka. Feeling lost, fortunately I recognised my own pension ahead, eagerly bidding the man adieu.

My own accommodation was a sprawling Ottoman house, high ceilings on groaning timber. The owner, a giant of a man, was in the downstairs lounge, cuddling a kitten on his lap. We started talking, setting up my airport transfer for the next day and sipping raki, as is the Turkish way. Two more guests straggled over, reclining in chairs. One was a software programmer from the United Arab Emirates. We got to chatting, as I'd recently been on a press junket to Dubai. The other spoke a foreign language. Pointing at me, he smiled to the owner.

"What is he saying," I asked.

"He is joking," the pension owner said. "He asks how many camels to buy you."

"Tell him more camels than he can afford," I replied.

That night I placed my bed in front of my room's heavy door, sleeping with a Swiss army knife clutched in one fist. But morning came and I made my flight back to Istanbul.

Just off Church Square in Cape Town, a leisurely lunch buzz is unraveling at Fyn. On a mezzanine overlooking the restaurant, founding chef Peter Templehoff is bent over a table. He's recently back from Zambia. Before that he visited Japan – for the fourth time – tasting his way through Kyoto, Tokyo and rural Odawara, savouring views of Mount Fuji. Fyn serves hybrid South African-Japanese food. For Peter, travel is about hunting and gathering; hunting and gathering flavour.

"So I took my head chef and we make contact with suppliers," he says. "A rice grower, a soya producer, and so on. It was about inspiration. This is really important in my industry. For a chef, traveling is about fact-finding. We have to explore cultures, we have to explore different foods. I go out to borrow knowledge, to borrow ideas and flavours."

Model and actor Ezra Mabengeza, star of South Africa's 2019 Oscar contender *Sew the Winter to My Skin*, is from Port Elizabeth. His career has taken him to New York, Miami, Milan... all around the globe. He speaks an array of languages: German, French, Afrikaans, Dutch, English, isiXhosa and Sepedi. "I'm also curious about learning Chinese, you know, because I grew up loving Kung Fu movies," he tells me during an interview earlier this year. "I'm curious about Italian too. I lived in Milan for a while. The Italians were just really intense, and I'm an intense person so I was vibing there."

Turkey had been my first solo trip, a significant one. A break-up had left me hungry to swing from the cosmic chandelier – a Jack Kerouac moment of sorts. These days travel for me is less about escape; more about arriving, becoming immersed. Carving new thoughts. Our planet is mostly documented and measured, but frankly there's always a new absurdity or charm.

Then there is perspective: it's humbling to feel tiny, just a speck in the history of the world. To learn that certain struggles we have in South Africa are not unique, while others are. It's about discovering common humanity that transcends language. And most importantly, finding kindness in unexpected places.

Travel as we know it will soon change. Watch this space. Fuel-guzzling air travel is not sustainable. Until then, I will be fixing the wheels on my suitcase, spending spare cash to explore.

For some, Earth is more than the sum of its atoms.

Be that as it may, in the end first prize always remains returning home.