

# Le Bon Journal

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Traveller's tales paint the world in rosy colours. The more one travels, the more one can contrast and compare. Travelling opens the mind.

## **Cycling Van Gogh country**

My sister spent a summer in Leuven, Belgium some years ago and wrote to me about cycling in Van Gogh country. I have since yearned for a similar experience.

Today my Dutch friend took me around Naarden defense works (direct translation from Dutch). The ancient village inside seemed more like an interior designer's dream world. Every house had big windows you could look into. Every house was orderly and spotless. You would think that it was deliberately kept clean on a public holiday like today, to attract gullible tourists.

It's so comforting to see cycle paths everywhere we go. Cyclists don't get nearly the attention or respect they deserve in England. That's why it's frustrating to cycle in England.

But in Holland - it's another story. I can understand why Van Gogh was so inspired to paint his country. Everything is flat, perfect for lazy cyclists like myself. Because everything is flat, you can see the horizon and the windmills that dot it. The smell of natural fertilizer is stronger than your own body odour. But it soon becomes part of the landscape..

Six hours under the sun --- I finally cycled Van Gogh country!

## **Living among locals**

My first friend in college said that he preferred to be a tourist going to visit a place as an outsider. I preferred being inconspicuous and living among the locals. Perhaps that's why he was only my first date and not my last.

In Thailand, I lost my way in the countryside and had to hitchhike back to Bangkok on a motorcycle.

Because I was dressed like the locals, wearing a local sarong, the motorcyclist assumed that I was a mute country girl.

It was much harder to pass for a local in Italy. Thankfully for my black hair, no one was interested.

Living local means being one of the family. When I visited Hiroko and her family more than five years ago (almost six!) in southern California I did just that. My friends in Kenya were equally accommodating during my three-and-a-half week visit.

Only when I'm living as a local will I truly know what it's like to live there.

## **Houston mosquitoes**

Dining outside between the seasons means risk being bitten by the infamous Houston mosquitoes. My body was sweet and delicious to these little bugs who delighted in the taste of London damsels.

I've forgotten that "all that glitters is not gold." For years, I longed to return to Houston where I had been so happy for 14 months. I missed the freedom of driving a convertible. I missed the convenience and comfort of living in America. Houston has since then moved up in the ranks: the third largest city (from the 4th) and full of expensive cars.

Has it become a city of beautiful people? I read recently about the soaring popularity of plastic surgery. I also read that it ranks amongst the highest for overweight men. Yet ironically, almost all the women I see in the places I work out are superbly fit and free of body fat.

From October to April, you can be safe from hot, humid weather - and mosquitoes. Personally, I dislike air conditioning. Thus, the months from May to September could be torture.

Tonight was no exception. Despite the exquisite dinner, intellectually stimulating conversation, and dry spring weather, I was conscious of those little bugs that torment and

torture. Singapore, at last, has rid itself - why not Houston?

Tomorrow I would feel the bites spread. Ah - but tonight it's worth the itch.

## **Finding Aberdaron**

We started our road trip without a map. We thought we'd just follow any road along the coast. The roads were small and winding. It was difficult to tell where we were going, given the hills and the unfamiliar terrain.

We passed Abersoch, a busy but quaint coastal town just after Pwllheli. It was too noisy for us. So we drove on. After a couple of dead ends, the driver got irritated. I got car sick. The other two passengers got hungry.

Somehow, by sheer luck and will, we ended up in Aberdaron, a small place, perhaps too small to be called a town. But it was strategically located, between a big hill and a long beach and bay. A small river flowed through it. And we sat next to the river to have our Sunday lunch, against a majestic scenery.

Later we lay on the beach and wished that we had chosen this place in the beginning. We would have had an extra hour of sun in North Wales.

## **First day in Rhodes**

The more you travel, the easier travelling gets. Or rather, you take it for granted that every destination has cash machines, accepts credit cards, and speaks English.

I took twenty-five pounds in cash, my cash card (ATM), one credit card, sunglasses, and a small bag of colourful sleeveless outfits. One week of holiday in the sun meant lying on the beach, swimming, touring the island, and eating authentic local food.

The chartered flight was packed. The hotel was full of British tourists who did not speak BBC English. The hotel was located in the middle

of nowhere, but conveniently situated next to a new fast lane highway. It was a mere 20-minute walk to the beach and the 100% touristy town of Faliraki, custom-designed for the non-Greek speaking tourist. Faliraki was a haven for go-kart lovers, mini-golf players, pub-drinking clubbers who sleep in the day and party at night.

I had about 40 pence worth of local currency - 200 drachmas left over from my last trip to Greece ten years ago. This was enough for a bottle of mineral water. After quenching my thirst, I set out to find a cash machine. To my disappointment, not only were they a rare breed, the only one that seemed open did not take my card. Stuck!

### ***Walking in Bath***

You appreciate different things at different stages in your life. Although I've been to Bath (pronounced B-ah-th) twice, I've never felt the urge to take anymore there for a visit. All I remembered was the Roman baths.

But how my wrong I've been!

After a quiet night at a Bed and Breakfast in the outskirts of Bath (a town called Bathford), we drove a short distance to the Waitrose carpark in central Bath. The carpark had a limit of maximum of 4 hours for STG 4.00. Coincidentally, we had only had 4 hours to spare.

We walked to the Tourist Information Office and asked what we could do in four hours. The lady suggested that we take the free guided walking tour which would commence shortly, outside The Pump Room. The tour guide rounded us up and introduced himself and his colleagues - "we are highly trained volunteers - so please, no fees or tips." This would never happen in mainland China, I thought to myself.

We were split into two large groups of 30 each. Our guide asked us to use our imagination - many of the big oak trees that we saw before us did not exist back in the days of promenade. Bath was a place known for its natural healing properties of

its water. There was so much history and culture, so much more than the Roman baths where it got its name.

We walked to the Royal Crescent, a beautiful arched row of terraced houses/flats facing a big green field and the River Avon. Designed by John Wood the younger, it was considered at the time to be a big mistake. However, nowadays, even the smallest flat would fetch a million pounds!

Bath was one of the first commuting cities to London, and as a result, housing prices have soared in the last ten years. My neighbour had once thought of buying a place here. Another good friend has been trying to buy property for the past year now.

The two-hour tour went quickly. I learned a lot of new things, among them "why are all iron gates painted black in England?"

### ***Cocktails at Paris Bourse***

Bourses and bolsas. Stock exchanges. The Paris Bourse opened its grand gates and doors to the power industry. As the champagne flowed, the music rocked, and the hors' d'oeuvres rolled, the delegates mingled in the halls.

"A hem." The music stopped. Someone got on the microphone to welcome us and introduce the important speaker of the evening. We quieted down.

The French, it is rumoured, love their language. I can see why. Even in English, French is a music of its own. In Montreal, I learned that speaking English with a French accent was much better than not speaking French at all.

In the beginning, I understood the speaker's heavily accented English. As his four-page (back-to-back, single-spaced) speech dragged on, I got lost in the champagne.

I looked up and around. Sculptures and art decorated the ceilings and walls. It was a magnificent display of historical ideas. The high ceilings, the grandeur, the beauty, the timelessness, ..... oh! what are we

doing here - listening to a boring speech?

### ***July 4<sup>th</sup> by myself***

There was a long queue at the airport. Most people were getting into taxi's by themselves. I wondered how I could get everyone to share cabs together. The queue would go faster, it would be cheaper per person, and it might be interesting.

When my turn came, I asked the cab director if I could share with others to downtown Manhattan. An older couple came forward from the back of the queue. Their luggage was three times the size of mine. They had just arrived from Denver and were on their way to Europe via the Queen Elizabeth (luxury cruise). What a nice life to travel in luxury all year round, I thought.

Fourth of July today: people are supposed to celebrate. Who do I celebrate this day with? Everyone I knew in New York had gone away, leaving a deserted city behind. I didn't want to celebrate with strangers in this humid heat. Out of curiosity, I went to the South Sea Port. It was too crowded for me to hang out.

So I went back to the hotel and played the piano until someone asked me to stop. I heard the fireworks. I saw the celebration on TV. It wasn't a day I would celebrate with anyone.



Anne Ku, editor, walks everyday, cycles almost everyday, and flies every month. These are selected travel stories from analyticalQ.com

### ***Feedback from a reader:***

*You have written about your travel in China in a quite humorous manner. It always makes me laugh to read them. I have also read the comments in your latest guestbook. They give me a chance to read various writing styles and new expressions, words. It seems your web has been read almost universally, except maybe those in Africa, Latin America.*

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