

New York

NOT SO FAST

An older (let's say "ex-youth") traveller makes a case for being a little less connected when we travel. William Gertz takes us back to a simpler, less plugged-in era of travel.



Author William L. Gertz

In the summer of 1973, Bobby, Steve, Dave and I hit the road. We flew on Icelandic Airlines (youth fare \$269 round trip) from New York to Amsterdam. We stayed at the NBBS owned Hans Brinker Hostel for a few days to get our bearings. We had no itinerary for our trip – just a two month student rail pass, a copy of "Europe on \$10 a day", a backpack full of T-shirts & jeans, an ISIC card, a leather-bound journal, a bunch of language phrase books, and some traveller's cheques.

We wandered around Europe for three months sleeping in Amsterdam's Vondelpark, on ferries and in student hostels, taking long train rides and jumping off when we saw an interesting town, meeting people, having amazing late night conversations about America (this was the time of Watergate and Vietnam), and stopping at American Express to pick up a letter or two.

I learned so much more during this trip than I did in my four years (well, five) of college. But more importantly, I found myself. I grew up that summer. I decided that I wanted to make travel a career (although I never called it that). I also learned to be alone, to be independent, to be away from creature comforts, family, TV and familiar foods and locations.

FORTY YEARS CHANGES THINGS

Flash forward almost forty years. Life is different now and we all embrace new technology. The Internet is great for bringing the world together; we see videos on YouTube, make international friends on Facebook, and speak to our friends around the world on Skype. But are we missing something? What have we given up in the name of instant communication and instant gratification? Is the sense of adventure gone?

More young people than ever before are travelling on organised, "packaged" programmes from student tours to au pair and work programs to semester study abroad opportunities (up 400% in a few decades). I question the motivation of studying abroad, volunteering abroad and working abroad if it is just done to "add to your CV". As an employer, I like hiring people that have travelled, but I am much more interested in how they think rather than what they have seen or done. Lately, every resume looks the same as international experiences become routine and seemingly interchangeable.

In Europe, you certainly don't need phrase books as (almost) everyone speaks English in major travel destinations. Also, flights are often cheaper than rail

but most people agree that flying is a miserable way to travel. Removing your shoes and going through security is not a quality cultural experience. It's a tiring, crowded few hours that we want over with as soon as possible.

HAVE YOUTH TRAVELLERS TODAY LOST THE MEANING OF TRAVEL?

Travel has, in some ways, become another status symbol for young people. When one of our students says "I'm going to do Paris", I shiver. When students are abroad hanging out at McDonalds or Starbucks, I have to smile and think of the joy I received figuring out how to put three guilders in one of those food vending machines near Dam Square in Amsterdam. And if the food was bad, at least it was something new. It was an experience and one I couldn't find at home. Students now check off cities like notches on a belt – Paris, Amsterdam, Barcelona, etc. They put a pin on a map and see who can go to the most places in less time. What's the rush?

WANT TO EXPERIENCE REAL DISCOVERY? UNPLUG FOR A WHILE

One of the newest trends is to "rate" everything online – from hotels on Trip Advisor to study abroad programmes on Abroad 101. Why would anyone care how a stranger rates an experience? Wouldn't

we be better served pioneering these adventures on our own without someone else's bias? Our experiences should be fresh and organic – the way travelling was meant to be. I also have serious reservations about the value of Skype, texting, Facebook posts and all the things that take you away from your travels and bring you back to the world you have left. We need to temporarily cut ourselves off from our "regular life" and open our minds to the world of opportunity – disconnecting from family and friends for a brief period. The idea of travel is to meet new people with varying viewpoints rather than keeping in constant contact with those we know well.

You also need to think for yourself and make decisions on your own. Discovery is a big part of travel; forget the songs on your iPod – there's a lot of great music out there that you've never even heard before. Forget the recommendations from friends on what to see. Become an "accidental" traveller and find out for yourself what makes this world such an amazing place. Survive without downloading movies, videos or YouTube clips of fighting cats – in short, unplug.

Of course, there is a bright side to new technology. A cell phone is a must in an

emergency. An ATM saves you money and is a lot more convenient than cashing traveller's cheques. It's quicker to book flights and hotels online and you can prepare yourself for your journey much easier than ever before due to the proliferation of web sites containing videos on history and culture. We can even learn to speak new languages online on Rosetta Stone – never needing to tote a phrase book.

SOUND ADVICE

But for me, if I was twenty, I'd be riding the train from Lisbon to Nice with some wine and cheese in a compartment with people (and not just young people) from around the world, sharing some good food and talking about life for endless hours. I don't think I would miss a daily Facebook horoscope posting, a CNN alert, Pandora's consistently bad songs, or an email about a party on campus that I'm missing. But I guess each generation must chart its own course. I'm just glad to have grown up during a time when travel was an adventure, not an itinerary.

William L. Gertz is the President and CEO of the American Institute For Foreign Study (AIFS) (www.aifs.com)