

IS TRAVEL THE MIDWIFE OF THOUGHT?

Daniel Xerri

This reflective essay explores the notion that travel has the potential to be an edifying cultural activity for those who engage in it. Travel is also the basis for stories and other forms of writing; however, the distillation of the lived experience into the written form very much depends on one's engagement with place, culture, and the act of visiting elsewhere. Through a consideration of some literary and philosophical ideas on travel as well as an analysis of my first-hand experience of a package tour, the essay presents a reflection on the limitations of travel for those who resist its enriching potential. The essay has implications for those teachers who encourage students to write about their experiences in places other than home.

1. Introduction

As the Airbus A380 takes off from Cape Town and starts its 7,647-kilometre journey to Dubai, cutting across the continent, I am reminded of how in *The Art of Travel* Alain de Botton describes "journeys as the midwives of thought" (57). His statement is based on the assumption that travel is meant to broaden your mind and enrich your inner life. It is meant to be as much an educational experience as a form of leisure. However, with the invention of the jet engine and the commercialisation of travel, opportunities to visit destinations both near and far have become much more easily available to the masses. While the accessibility of a large variety of destinations has perhaps enriched our understanding of cultural diversity, it might have also resulted in the loss of our capacity to feel the awe evoked by travel. Catching a flight has become a mundane event and the globalisation of many cultural experiences that traditionally were not exported beyond a country's borders has meant that once we reach a destination the sense of novelty is no longer all that powerful. The loss of this sense of novelty impedes us from benefiting from the transformative experience travel could potentially be.

One of the main phenomena that have most probably eroded the awe-inspiring potential of travel is the package tour. This is usually organized by a tour operator and it involves a group of people following a carefully planned itinerary under the guidance of a tour leader. Millions of people from all over the world go on tour each year. Tours are not a new phenomenon and some of the issues you face on modern day tours have long existed. In *The Innocents Abroad*, Mark Twain caricatures his fellow travellers on a tour through Europe and the Holy Land in 1867. But he also concludes that “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts” (Twain 650). Once again, this idea seems to suggest that travel enriches your life and intellect. Twain seems to be implying that just by travelling to a foreign country one will be rid of these negative sentiments and made more tolerant. Whether this is true of all those who travel is very much doubtful, as my first experience of an organized tour to South Africa with a group of compatriots reveals. In this essay I reflect on the implications of this experience for me as someone struggling to write about it.

2. On Tour with the Maltese

Most of the tourists I spent three weeks with in South Africa fit the stereotype alluded to by Twain. On the tour, we saw many of the country’s highlights but I suspect we did not really experience what the country is all about. We covered hundreds of kilometres by coach, moving from one place to another in quick succession and spending little more than a night in each place. It was the very definition of a whistle-stop tour, a cursory expedition across what is often described as ‘the world in one country’. Contrary to Twain’s belief, throughout our whirlwind journey across South Africa I realized that my compatriots’ prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness were unlikely to be eradicated by this particular tour.

In the course of a day we visited a number of attractions and only spent a few hours in each one. We rarely got an opportunity to savour the unique experiences afforded by every place we stopped at. These were merely hinted at by the richness of sounds, sights and smells that assailed our senses but there was never enough time to take it all in. The coach we travelled on acted as a bubble, sealing us off from the places we visited and the people we saw. The only locals we met were our tour leader, the coach driver, the staff at various hotels and restaurants, and the souvenir vendors we haggled with in our efforts to purchase ‘authentic’ stuff to fill our homes with.

As we boarded our coach every morning to sedentarily skim through a rich tapestry of cultures, little did we understand how complex this land truly was. We killed time by discussing the familiar world back home, never getting an opportunity to delve into what we did not know by conversing with the people whose country we were visiting. Our cultural ignorance was amplified with every kilometre we added to our journey and we seemed blissfully unaware of this.

My fellow tourists represented a cross-section of my country's population and its quirks and foibles. The flamboyant tour operator was a TV personality has-been who enjoyed making us aware of how profitable our thirst for travel was for him by dressing only in the priciest brands. His past TV fame made many in the group treat him as if he were a celebrity and this had the effect of expanding his chest and widening his smile. Early on in the tour, a tiny farmer's wife cosied up to the tour operator and convinced him of the value of using the coach's microphone to recite a brief extract from a missal every single day for the rest of the journey. Religion was shoved down our throats under the assumption that we were all practising Catholics who appreciated every opportunity for a catechism lesson. Every time the farmer's wife meekly walked up the aisle to hand the missal to the tour operator she was the opposite of the aggressive haggler I saw her become whenever we stopped to buy souvenirs.

The first people who got off the coach were always the same obnoxious couple who were intent on being first wherever we went and at whatever we did. They pushed and shoved and felt entitled to unfailingly be at the head of the line. The husband enjoyed bragging about the size of his villa, the price of his sports car, and the success of his many businesses. He described himself as the king of his town and was surprised I had never heard of his nickname. Their closest friends on this tour were a couple made up of a scrawny dietician and his bossy wife, whose blood-red hair was visible for kilometres across the veld. The dietician frequently boasted about how his son was a millionaire who had moved to London to escape the shackles of the Maltese way of life. Ironically, he bought one flashy BMW after another, which is what most chavs do on the island. These two couples very soon got into a spate of arguments with an elderly couple consisting of a tile layer and his grumpy wife. The latter felt slighted whenever someone cut in front of them to be closer to the tour leader and thus thwarted their efforts to comprehend his explanations in impeccable English. They often complained that as Maltese people it was unfair for English to be used so

often on a tour organized by a Maltese company, perhaps forgetting that they originated from a bilingual nation with the supposed ability to switch between the two languages effortlessly.

The most well-off people on the tour were probably another elderly couple who owned a jewellery shop in Valletta. The wife had an uncanny resemblance to the President of the Republic and she enjoyed dozing off during all the exciting moments of the trip. At Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park, we were lucky enough to see two rhinos mating just in front of our jeep. Everyone was fervently filming the action and snapping photos but Her Excellency slept right through it despite all our giddiness. The jewellers made friends with a couple whose main pastime seemed to be that of whining about every single thing. From the very beginning of the journey, they carried their luggage on board the coach rather than stowing it beneath the vehicle. Apparently, they mistrusted the locals so much that they opted to hog another two seats for their suitcases despite the incredulous looks everyone else gave them.

Some other couples on this tour consisted of a bodybuilder with an effeminate voice and his subdued wife, and a honeymoon couple whose idea of a romantic holiday was that of spending three weeks on a coach in the company of a group of compatriots. The youngest couple were only aged 19 and it was obvious to everyone that their parents were funding their trip, especially since they seemed unaware of how much this extravagance cost. It was their first time abroad and they had no clue the world was much bigger than the tiny island they lived on. While the guy worked in his father's panel beating firm, the girl managed the till in her parents' grocery store. They ate nothing but junk food and complained that any other food tasted bland. All the way from Malta to the colder climate of Johannesburg, the girl wore a skimpy pair of shorts revealing most of her buttocks. I caught most of the men in our group stealing glances whenever they thought their wives were not looking.

There were only two people in our group who were travelling on their own. A stubby businessman with Brylcreemed hair was under the impression that his sense of humour was shared by everyone. From the start of our journey, he made lame jokes and acted as a buffoon while we watched in embarrassment. He thought we found him cute and entertaining but his homophobic and racist jokes were revolting. At some of the towns and cities we visited, he disappeared for a few hours in order to get a massage or for a brief encounter with a lady friend he somehow happened to know. He once

attempted to flirt with the other lone traveller on the tour, a septuagenarian who got extremely offended that any man would think she was available given the wedding ring on her finger. She made a huge fuss about the pass he made at her and sought to convince us that she did not lead him on. From that day on, they were constantly making snide remarks about each other and asking us to take sides.

Like any other package holiday, my tour to South Africa in the company of my countrymen was made up of what the tour operator conceived the country to be. It is true that we visited a number of magnificent natural attractions and witnessed amazing things, especially at the national parks and game reserves. However, the tour consisted mostly of five-star hotel experiences, massive buffets supplied every morning and evening, visits to sham attractions that were meant to satisfy tourists' appetite for 'native' places, eating pizza in malls and gated neighbourhoods in case the local cuisine and people would harm us, and long journeys sleeping on board the coach while passing through incredible scenery. By the end of the tour, I was still in agreement with Twain's suggestion that many people need to travel in order to cleanse themselves of prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness, but I was not convinced that the kind of journey I had undertaken with my compatriots had proven fatal to their continuing manifestation of such sentiments.

3. Conclusion

Twain believes that "One must travel, to learn" (545). However, on my tour to South Africa with my Maltese compatriots I at times felt as if travel did not always have an edifying effect on people. We tend to cling on to the myth that travel is an educational and transformative experience for all those who engage in it, but perhaps what travel truly reveals is how little people know. According to Geoff Dyer, "That's one of the things about travelling, one of the things you learn: many people in the world, even educated ones, don't know much, and it doesn't actually matter at all" (15). Perhaps the most important lesson that travel teaches us is related to the Socratic notion that in our quest for wisdom we should remain conscious of how much we do not know.

Despite the fact that my fellow tourists were all seasoned globetrotters, they still seemed to be plagued by the same cultural ignorance found in those who never travel. In our conversations, they would often compare our tour to their visits to Brazil, Australia, Chile, Cambodia, Japan and a wide range

of other countries. But when speaking about their travels, they would do so without revealing whether they had attained any insights into the cultural fabric of the countries they had sojourned in or whether there had ever been an opportunity for reflection. Even the tour operator seemed oblivious as to the implicit tutelage that travel is meant to provide. Despite his numerous trips all over the world, his remarks about travel were restricted to the best places for bargain shopping and exquisite meals in high-end restaurants. His first tip for us was meant to satisfy our fixation with connectivity. As soon as we landed in Johannesburg there was a scramble for data cards as most of the group did not want to feel deserted from the island they considered to be life's centre of gravity.

Twain's idea that travel is instructive is somewhat more convoluted when applied to writers, especially those engaging in creative writing. Some writers believe that writing is enhanced by all the experiences one lives through whereas others are convinced that good writing does not depend on one's immersion in experiences. In my case, the tour ended up providing me with more of a perspective on my compatriots rather than an understanding of South Africa. It was an opportunity to observe at first-hand the impoverished experiences of a bunch of Maltese tourists who would then go on to boast to all their relatives that they had been to South Africa, perhaps never realising that their version of this country was a pre-packaged commodity safely presented to meet their suburban expectations. The country and its culture had been mediated via the tour operator's conception of what should be seen and experienced. It was one more country in their accumulation of souvenir destinations to talk about with those who did not travel as much as they did. South Africa was a country seen from within the safe space of an air-conditioned coach and from beneath a thick layer of Deet.

In many ways, travel is meant to be an act of introspection; we are meant to glean as much about ourselves as about our destination. In the impermeable space created by a tour, I learnt a lot about how the Maltese behave when on holiday and even though I did not partake in all their follies there were some things that resonated with my own behaviour when abroad. After my first experience of a tour, I feared the possibility of growing used to this pampered and detached kind of travel, where I read nothing about the destination, did nothing on my own initiative, and learnt very little about the cultural diversity, history, and ecology outside the coach and the luxury hotels we spent most of our time in. From the point of view of a writer, I became aware of how dangerous such an attitude and practices would be

if I were to be presumptuous enough to write about such a destination. In fact, in this piece I have restricted myself to writing about one aspect of my experience in South Africa given that this was the one I learnt most about through observation and reflection.

My reflection on this tour has consolidated my resolve to seek ways of shunning those practices and attitudes that unwittingly sabotage one's awe at discovering new places and cultures. It is probably true that "Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things can not be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime" (Twain 650). However, travel can only midwife thought if reflection on experience is actively sought. Just because one travels, it does not mean that one's inner life is inevitably enriched. When this notion is translated to writing, it perhaps implies that just because one experiences something, it does not mean that one can thoughtfully write about it.

References

- de Botton, Alain. (2002) *The Art of Travel*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Dyer, Geoff. (2003) *Yoga for People Who Can't be Bothered to Do it*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Twain, Mark. (1869) *The Innocents Abroad, or the New Pilgrims' Progress*. Hartford, CT: American Publishing Company.