

What I learned travelling

Beer is good anywhere, especially when it's cold

BY DON SAWYER, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN JULY 10, 2010



Elephants are a known hazard in Africa, but traveller Don Sawyer believes that insects are usually the greater enemy when you're on the road.

Photograph by: Getty Images, The Ottawa Citizen

For 25 years I have travelled professionally and for pleasure.

During those years I have managed to visit -- and often work in -- about 30 countries on four continents producing a collection of memories almost unbearably wonderful: Dancing the night away in The Gambia with a film crew, and most of the neighbourhood, to a kora and ballophone band at a friend's compound.

Standing at a makeshift urinal outside an open-air pub in northern Ghana under a beautiful black velvet African night with the moon so bright the trees cast sharp shadows on the ground.

Meeting with fiercely dedicated peasants creating a co-operative in Nicaragua.

Naturally, there have been lows as well: Trying to count the number of bugs on my sheet in the Catholic guesthouse in Navrongo, Ghana, (by quartering, counting the bugs, and multiplying by four I came up with about 1,200). Waking up one night in the Sahel covered in army ants who were

bivouacking on my adobe bed platform. Coming under fire from contras in the mountains of Jinotega province in Nicaragua.

But as all travellers know, it's the great times that are remembered, and even the not-so-great ones can be turned into really good stories.

I shudder to think of my novice self shipping off on my first trip to Africa. I think I did nearly everything wrong, from packing about 10 times more stuff than I needed to forgetting dental floss. But I found I loved Africa, as I have most regions I have visited, and from all of those journeys, slowly, painfully, I figured out some basics of sane travel. Here are a few tips I found along the way.

1. No matter how it appears, drivers are not trying to hit you (except in Berlin).
2. In developing countries, those folks harassing you for a dollar, school tuition for their kids or who want to sell you shell necklaces do not really like annoying you. They just want your money. (Except in Senegal and The Gambia, where pestering seems like half the fun).
3. Discomfort is not the same as danger.
4. Don't be too timid. If you make a mistake or break a taboo, locals will, more or less politely, tell you so.
5. In developing countries, remember how you look to the locals: naked with \$50 bills taped to your body.
6. Don't wear high-heeled shoes in Lisbon, where the cobbled streets and sidewalks will almost guarantee twisting your ankle. In fact, don't wear high heels anywhere.
7. Remember that the whole world shares the same moon.
8. There is pretty good beer everywhere in the world, but it is always better when refrigerated.
9. When in doubt, drink Coke.
10. Avoid locally brewed stuff, especially if it's foamy and served in a calabash.
11. Generosity is often inversely proportionate to people's wealth.
12. Your mom was right -- please and thank you (in the local language, of course) really will get you a long way nearly anywhere.

13. Most people are kind and don't dislike you.
14. When travelling, you are largely irrelevant to most people's lives.
15. Pack light. You don't really need seven pairs of pants, and anyway, getting your laundry done is cheap (except in Portugal, where it can run more than your hotel room).
16. Do not rent a car.
17. In Europe, stay in hotels at least 75 years old. In Africa and South America, don't.
18. Canadians enjoy a good (though not always deserved) reputation. Maple Leaf flags are readily available.
19. If you have to stay in one of those all-inclusive resorts, one day rip off your bracelet and hire a driver to show you the country you're actually in.
20. Don't jog in any Chinese city. In fact, avoid breathing as much as possible.
21. In a market in Africa or South America, never pay the first price. (Rule of thumb: take that price and quarter it. Start from there.)
22. Always take dental floss when travelling in Africa. (Goat is very stringy and floss is non-existent.)
23. Try the local food (unless it has eyeballs in it).
24. Don't eat fufu and goat soup in Ghana while wearing a white silk shirt.
25. Write this down and review it each morning: "The world in which you were born is just one model of reality. Other cultures are not failed attempts at being you; they are unique manifestations of the human spirit." (Wade Davis)
26. Always bring a flashlight. (But if the power goes out in your camp room in Africa and your Maglight bulb burns out, do not bother trying to change it in the dark. Just grope your way to the bathroom.)
27. Generally speaking, insects are not your friends.
28. It is not necessary to put duct tape across your mouth when showering in dubious water, but do keep it shut (not bad advice in many situations).

29. Never, never take Lariam.

30. Always bring a second pair of glasses along. Otherwise, after your only pair is swiped on the first day in Managua, you won't know what Nicaragua looks like until you get home and develop the pictures.

31. Avoid "big men" in Africa. They are generally quite small inside.

32. In Mexico, having the waitress at a restaurant take your six-month-old daughter into the kitchen for 15 minutes does not constitute kidnapping. It just takes that long for the whole staff to admire her blonde hair and coo at her.

33. The deadly green mamba really does live in trees in Africa, but they hardly ever drop onto the shoulders of unsuspecting pedestrians passing below and bite them on the neck, even at night.

34. The WATO bar in downtown Accra might be the most interesting place on earth to spend an afternoon drinking beer.

35. Remember that the very fact that you have the means and freedom to travel makes you privileged.

36. Don't skimp on socks. If you walk in hot climates, avoid cotton: good synthetic, wool or blends are a must. If you still get blisters, try putting anti-perspirant deodorant on the bottoms of your feet. Really.

38. Wayne's rule of packing: You can always fit in one more thing.

39. Remember the Eight-fold path of good travelling:

1. Be flexible.
2. Be nice.
3. Be patient.
4. Tolerate ambiguity.
5. Don't be afraid to ask.
6. Remember you're not at home.
7. Be interested in where you are.
8. Know the local words for bathroom and beer.

Well, there it is. Not a complete list, I know, but at least a start. Quoting Rick Steves, "Travel is intensified living -- maximum thrills per minute and one of the last great sources of legal adventure.

Travel is freedom. It's recreation, and we need it." Travel has the power to transform, broaden our understanding of how the world works (surprisingly well in most places, even though they do things appallingly differently), and make us better people. It can teach us patience, tolerance and make the term "global citizen" actually mean something.

That's why I travel, and over the years I have come to realize that all the discomfort, crises, illness, aggravation and jerks you meet along the way are a tiny price to pay for the sense of being engaged and truly alive that comes with the smells, noise and colour of the massive Kumasi market or deciding whether you really should eat that piece of grilled dog meat proudly offered you as a delicacy.

I know that my list of lessons learned will lengthen and change as I continue to explore this fascinating world we live in. But the most fundamental tenet -- understand that we are all just people sharing the same shockingly small planet -- will remain constant.

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