

A Good Trip

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SECRET

Thoughts on travel not to be found in your Baedeker.

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"Tony had a bad trip last time."

"That can happen. He must have been in the wrong mood when he started out. Or—maybe—he didn't use the right means of transport."

"I don't like it," David said, "I'd like to do it if I thought I'd have a good trip but how can I be sure?"

"You can't," I told him. "But before you take any trip, listen to me."

Two Kinds of Trip

There are basically two kinds of trip which come under the general category of orientation for a Washington-based analyst. You can have an official passport and visit the embassies. If you are well-prepared you can spend your days talking and listening to embassy personnel, eat in the embassy restaurant, spend your nights in the hotel where arriving embassy personnel usually stay. You will never be far from hot and cold running water, orange juice, and coffee. When you come back you will be knowledgeable about those who write the reports you read and you yourself will find it easy to write an informative and long trip report.

The rationale for a second kind of orientation trip lies in the thought that the embassy has wisdom in its ways and has already communicated on paper its views, facts, and expectations. Since this is so—and if you are close enough to the working level to read reports—the orientation trip can be used to seek the background, to meet in the countryside people who are not already familiar with Americans, and to travel even in the capital outside the rut worn by a thousand Americans before you.

Evelyn Waugh wrote in *When the Going Was Good* that he proposed to do his traveling in strange places during his years of flexibility, leaving the most common tourist attractions to the end of his life, which he visualized spending in decrepitude. This pride in flexibility is important to any good trip of the second type.

Another helpful concept is one given to me by Grace Hanks. She said, "I always tell my children that when your plans don't quite work out, when the bus is stalled or a tire is flat, then you should be alert and interested. Perhaps an adventure is beginning." Other people like the word serendipity.

A Plan Gone Wrong

In fact when I was in Vienna one cold November, my plans to book a day's tour to the Hungarian border fell through, and I was disappointed because I had never seen an Iron Curtain frontier. I wondered if I would be able to do it on my own by riding a regular bus to Morbisch on the Neusiedler See. The hotel clerk's directions for taking a streetcar to the bus station, which lay on the other side of Vienna, were kind, courteous, and incomprehensible, but that problem was overcome by taking a taxi. At the bus station I hastily rehearsed German phrases in my mind. At the window, the clerk understood me, gave me a ticket, and took my money. As I was moving away toward the bus itself, an Austrian voice asked, "Why are you going to Morbisch? Are you visiting someone there?"

I thought at first that those countries close to the Iron Curtain certainly were keeping a close watch on comings and goings, but my questioner, who had the evocative name of Frau Marx, explained that she lived in Morbisch, knew everyone there and was just taking a friendly interest. Frau Marx and her daughter traveled with me on the bus. During the

hour wait at the way station of Eisenstadt, Frau Marx sent her daughter with me to make sure I saw the Esterhazy castle. They obviously enjoyed thinking of anyone being as rich as the Esterhazys had been. Eventually, in Morbisch, I was invited to visit the Marx house where the half-modern, home-built kitchen had an enormous picture window looking out over the Neusiedler See to the Hungarian barbed wire. Company came to call. We talked about the harvest, the local dialect, the evangelical church and the public school where Frau Marx's mother had had to study Hungarian, Frau Marx to study Russian and the daughter now to study English. The mother, who could read Hungarian aloud but could not understand what she read, seemed to have done about as well as any of them with the language requirement. As we sat looking out over the lake we all had new red wine and bread spread with lard and sprinkled with red pepper. The disruption of my plan to take a tourist excursion to the Hungarian border had turned into that most interesting kind of encounter, one, that is, with the people of one's assigned country who are at the same time so unfamiliar with Americans as to think that something like lard and cayenne on bread is a plausible offer.

The Airgram is Secret

Even if you are persuaded that you can best spend your time with places and people remote from US Government installations, you will probably be asked to "check in" at the embassies and consulates en route. This will be decided before you leave the States and an airgram will be sent to the overseas posts to notify them.

With normal luck, you will know the airgram number. With good pre-trip briefing you will remember that the message is classified SECRET while most communications about travellers' itineraries are of lower classifications. If you go to as many as five posts, however, the chances are good that at least one post will have secured the secret airgram so thoroughly that it can no longer be found.

This is not necessarily bad. When a friend of mine, then in a junior grade, went to a city in Spain long ago, he had that experience. The consul general was extraordinarily kind to him. An interesting trip to a nearby military base was arranged with the base commander for personal

escort. The most elaborate dinner my friend ever had—and he is not accustomed to the simple life—was arranged by the consul general's wife with my friend as guest of honor and the guest list a roster of notables.

It has never been clear what visitor the consul general thought he had.

You Have One Wish

In those cases when your airgram is readily found, there are still problems for you to solve. You are by now in the hands of State Department's Administrative Officer. When he has identified you he will probably insist on taking you to "your own people." If you have never heard the name of the chief of station or the chief of base, you will scandalize the State Department officer, giving him a picture of intra-Agency chaos. You should know the names of the State Department people, too, whose reports you have particularly liked. Finally, you should prepare for the moment when someone in the embassy or the station asks, "Is there something we can do to help you?" This is the magic moment when you are given one wish as if you were the hero or heroine of a fairy story. Choose carefully. If you say, "Well, I certainly wish I had a box of Kleenex," you will be given kind and fully adequate instructions for acquiring such a box. Then you are on your own. You could have said, "I wish I could tour the famous steel plant," "I wish I could talk to the key local Socialist," "I wish I could see a plantation," "I wish I knew how to take a collective taxi to a mountain village," or even "I wish to see the 400-year-old bush which the natives say will die to signal the slaughter of the oligarchy." In a place where travel is as difficult as Africa, you may want to try, "If anyone in the embassy is taking a trip anywhere in the country, I would like very much to go along."

Cover is a Problem

Another problem which you have to solve is living up to your cover. Whether unofficial or official, cover requires individual preparation which

you must do on your own initiative. If you are a rich tourist living on inherited money, how have you been spending your time prior to this trip? How does it happen that you don't know who the runner-up was at Wimbledon? The necessity of developing your story for unofficial cover status is easy to see.

With official cover, detailed preparation is also necessary. Suppose, for instance, that when you were given one wish, you said, "I wish for a day-long tour of oil installations in the Lake of Maracaibo." For many years, and possibly still today, this wish would have put you in the hands of an Hungarian émigré who had taken hundreds of American officials around the lake and had visited Washington. It is only normal for him to seek to establish the fact of mutual acquaintances. What work exactly do you do in Washington? In what building is your office? With and for whom do you work? What ever happened finally to Jack So-and-So? What is the pay scale? How many Assistant Secretaries are there? Has there been a reorganization lately? Unless you can cope with questions like these, your avoidance of trouble will owe more to luck than to skill.

Once you have developed your cover story, you should stay with it. Some years ago a friend of mine was in La Paz, whiling away an evening talking to an American anthropologist. She was on an orientation trip, equipped with the cover story that she was a possibly rich, but certainly idle tourist. He was in town for some study of the local Indians. The conversation ranged over various subjects—social stratification in the Bolivian jungle, the role of the Mormon religion in the United States, the need for central heating in all hotels that are 12,000 feet above sea level—as I say, a wide variety of subjects. After a pause, such as will come in the best of conversations, she heard the anthropologist say, "You work for CIA, don't you?"

Her heart sank, her hands and feet grew cold, but she managed to laugh and even to reply: "You mean those people who wander about Washington causing dead spots at cocktail parties by their bland statements that they work for the US Government? Well, no, I don't, but if they earn their living by roaming the world like this, I'd certainly like to."

Then came the anthropologist's next question, a question which gave her certainty that he knew that her tale of being an idle tourist was false. He asked, "Are you serious?"

"I'm always serious," she answered, "serious about what?"

"Oh," he said, "serious about wanting to work for CIA. I have some connections. I could get you an interview there."

She breathed a quiet sigh of relief. The anthropologist's preoccupation with the CIA had arisen from his own background and not from anything she had said of hers.

The point of this story is the old rule—even if you are challenged, stick to your cover story.

Cheap Transportation is Better

The choice of transportation is a chance to be off the tourist path. If you travel by plane, you are in the rut. The people you see and talk to are, generally speaking, those who have met a good many Americans already. If you rent a car, you may not meet anyone but the car rental people. Of course, if, for instance, you ram another car in Amsterdam, you may well be able to establish that not everyone in the Netherlands speaks English. In this instance, you would also have contact with insurance adjustors.

If, on the other hand, you seek the cheaper forms of transportation, you will almost inevitably have better luck. For a beginning move, taking a streetcar is great. It always comes back eventually to your boarding point. A streetcar conductor in a warm and friendly place like Lugano may be upset at what he feels is a waste of your money but you cannot get lost. Either on a streetcar or a bus if you ask someone how long it takes to get to the destination, you will almost always be noted as a stranger and will be involved in a conversation before you know it. Trains are almost as good, with second class better than first.

Language

Of course language is important. The more you know of the language the further afield you can go. But a rudimentary knowledge of grammar and

pronunciation will carry you a long way. You should under any circumstances know the local words for please, thank you, left, right, straight ahead, and where. Even without the language you may establish a pleasant contact. A friend of mine offered a cigarette to an old man who came to share a plaza bench in Cliza, in the heart of Bolivia's central valley. The old man spoke only Quechua but in return he gave my friend a tour of the town with an eight-year-old grandson as Quechua-Spanish interpreter.

Discouraging Advice May Be Inaccurate

Sometimes your colleagues and acquaintances may undermine your self-confidence a little with their predictions and advice. When I booked passage on a steamer from Belem to Iquitos, for example, I heard a great variety of suggestions and recommendations. The trip had not been easy to arrange. Cook's Tours first denied it was possible to travel the 2,500 miles to the Amazon headwaters by boat. After some argument, Cook's agent wrote to Booth & Co., the most likely shipping line, to ask. The reply came that Booth indeed sailed from Belem to Iquitos every two months and had space for six passengers.

I was triumphant but my colleagues and acquaintances had questions: "Who will the other five be? Only headhunters and missionaries seek the headwaters of the Amazon where the man-eating piranhas abound. Will you enjoy your companions?" I shrugged off these questions as trivial harassment, but every once in a while I wondered.

Departure day came at last and, as planes did in the long ago days of 1954, my plane flew from New York to San Juan to Fort de France to Port of Spain to Georgetown to Paramaribo to Cayenne and, 26 hours after leaving New York, finally to Belem. It was four o'clock in the morning and "the only hotel" professed never to have heard of me, but at least I had arrived at the starting point for my boat trip.

When day had fully come I went to the Booth Line Office. The agent was cordial there, gave me the exact time and place for sailing and asked if there were anything he could do to help me.

"Well," I said, "there's nothing important but could you tell me who the

other passengers are?"

"Other passengers," the agent repeated, "Other passengers? Madam, you are the first passenger we have booked to Iquitos in 25 years. There are no other passengers."

It was an all right trip, though, and I was glad I had not worried about my compatibility with head-hunters. At the destination in Peru after 14 days, the ship's crew exchanged our cargo of dynamite for one of rare poison with efficiency and dispatch. Even the piranha stayed far from me during the Belem-Iquitos stretch and posed no threat until later on when I was visiting in Western Goias.

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