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STAY AND CHANGE

Some cities will always remain wrapped boxes, containers of riddles
never to be solved,
nor even to be seen by vacationing visitors, or, for that matter, the
most inquisitive, persistent travelers.
Music for Chameleons, Truman Capote,

Let me start with a confession: I don't like to travel. It has taken me some fifteen years of traveling to realize this. Maybe it sounds a bit decadent, since traveling is still a luxury. Who doesn't want to travel?

For someone who doesn't like to travel, I have visited quite a number of countries in the last couple of years: Greece, Italy, Ukraine, Iceland, Portugal, France, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Thailand, India and now the United States. So apparently there must be something about traveling that I like. What is it?

First of all, I like the feeling of getting used to a place, the specific state of mind of getting to know it, of learning about people, habits and customs. To make a place my own, to familiarize myself with these new surroundings, to conquer them, as it were.

Traveling is always a pilgrimage.

I like something as simple as getting to know my way, to map my surroundings. Meanwhile, everything new strikes me as interesting. What's normal or self-evident for the inhabitants of the country I visit seem remarkable or strange to me. Traveling stimulates perception, upgrades it, if you will. This state of mind is very difficult to achieve when you're at home, whether you're an artist or not. But when you're traveling you don't have to do anything. It's a gift.

This new hyper-perception, so to speak, also internalizes itself. Traveling leads to self-observation. I look at myself in a new way, as if I'm a stranger. Who am I? What am I? What am I doing here? The answers vary.

What I like about traveling as well are the new views, the new images. And I like the position of the observer, the eavesdropper, the peeping Tom. I don't take part in all the lives I see. Yet I am there. I see all these people. They might see me. But even if they do, they do not really see me. They see a foreigner. Or a tourist. I feel like an actor, already on stage, just before the play is about to begin. I admit, it's a superficial pleasure.

It's the ideal situation for a poet.

I also like speaking another language. I can be someone else. I feel different. My universe has shifted. Just a fraction, but that's enough for a universe.

Travel in itself is not amusing or comfortable. I don't feel particularly safe. I'm not relaxed or entertained. I'm putting myself at stake. I'm taking a risk. I can feel depressed or ecstatic in a way I couldn't feel at home.

I don't really mind non-spaces like airports, train stations, highways, gas stations. Maybe it's because to a large extent I experience the whole world as a non-place.

Although I don't dislike airports, I hate flying, an abstract and tedious way of traveling, confining yourself to a floating bubble, buckled to a small seat. Those in the audience who know me a little might have already heard that the journey to Iowa City with my son was a little odyssey. My son was suffering from an increase in bowel movements. Just before take-off – we were already on the runway – I had to change his diapers in a toilet designed for midgets. I had to play with him for twelve straight hours. When we were flying over Greenland we experienced turbulence. Of course I needed to change him again – this time without the facilities of the midget toilet. I can assure you: when a plane is shaking in the air, a poopy diaper emanates a serious threat. I was waiting for the air marshal to identify himself.

In general I think that the moment I start to move, I become watchful, vigilant. I don't let down my guard. What if I miss a connection? Or the right exit? What if I lose my luggage? I have to be careful not to get mugged.

It must be obvious by now: I'm not a born traveler.

When I travel I'm not a nice person. I don't mind talking to people, but I'm not very open with them. I communicate only when it serves a clear purpose. If someone needs help or anything, don't come to me. I'm coming from A. And I'm heading for B.

When I travel I'm shallow and suspicious.

There are of course many ways to travel.

Des Esseintes, the main character of Huysmans' nineteenth century novel *Against the Grain* (a sort of 'Decadence for Dummies'), preferred to travel in his mind. Native Americans, the indigenous people of Australia and the Roma gypsies in Europe were (are) nomads. What we do is something in between I suppose.

Traveling as a way of life, a *modus vivendi*, who would want that? People only do that when they are forced to. Or when it is part of a tradition. These days traveling is an alternative way of life, secondary to the 'normal', working way. It is an integrated part of life, but nevertheless secondary. During the year you work. At an office. At home. Wherever. It doesn't matter if your work means traveling. You have a place, a nest to return to.

A lair, depending on your cleaning habits.

Sometimes you take the weekend off to relax. During the holidays you visit family. In the summer you go on vacation. Things can't get out of hand (too much), because when you come back you should feel good. Recharged, like a battery.

People travel to come back.

A round-trip is cheaper than a single trip.

Airlines discourage immigration.

In the summer people become tourists.

Tourism is – of course – an excess of traveling.

A short diversion: there is an expression in Dutch, 'cultuur snuiven'. Literally translated: to sniff culture. That's what the tourist wants. Like a drug. A short moment of bliss. The tourist really doesn't care where he is. He just wants to relax and be entertained. An old travel program called *Yorin Travel* used to be broadcast in the Netherlands. At its core it was a xenophobic travel program. The hostess was a pretty blonde who never forgot to take her bikini with her, even if she was going to the mountains. But she was always near the sea. In this program the sea became a swimming pool. Culture became folklore. Economy was reduced to a nice little flea market for rich Dutch people looking for a bargain.

The way I perceive the tourist is that he experiences nothing. He enjoys himself. He recharges himself. The same applies to the traveler, unless he takes the time to stay somewhere.

The purpose of traveling as I see it is to change into a *better* man or woman. This change is a way of learning, I guess. I don't have time to elaborate on this matter, but in my view this change is always a good thing.

You don't learn from traveling: you learn from staying.

Traveling as a hazardous affair is only valuable when you reach your destination and when you take the time to explore it. It will change you and if you stay long enough you will change it.

Being on the road is survival, nothing more. I'm convinced any nomad will agree with me.

You have to be lucky or very persistent, or both, before a place opens itself up to you. Only then will your pilgrimage have meaning. In any case you need to speak the language of the country you visit. If you don't, don't even bother trying. People and culture will remain a mystery, even if the people speak English very well, even if you share some other language.

My prerogative: stay. Or you might as well, like Des Esseintes, go home before you have even left.