"On Visiting My Hundredth Country: The Traveled Life is One Worth Living"

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A few days after this column appears, I will visit my 100th country: Cambodia. I am writing this column aboard a ship on the South China Sea along with 200 of my radio listeners.

I consider this a major milestone. And I admit to being proud of it. It is not easy to visit a hundred countries (most of them at least twice); it takes far more commitment than it does money. But the reasons I consider this a major milestone go beyond that.

It is major because all this travel has been life-changing and life-enhancing. For many years, I have urged young people to take a year off after high school to work and to take time off while in college to travel abroad, ideally alone for at least some of the time.

Nearly everyone grows up insular. The problem is that vast numbers of people never leave the cloistered world of their childhood. This is as true for those who grow up in Manhattan as it is for those who grow up in Fargo. And as for college, there are few places as insular and cloistered as the university.

Insularity is bad because at the very least it prevents questioning oneself and thinking through important ideas and convictions. And at worst, it facilitates the groupthink that enables most great evils. Although one can hold onto insular and bad ideas even after interacting with others, it is much harder to do so, especially when one interacts on the others' terms, as must be done when traveling to other cultures (and especially when traveling alone).

It is therefore one of the most maturing things a person can do. It is also one of the most humbling. I will never forget the effect of hosting a weekly radio show in which I was the moderator among clergy of every religion. After five years, I announced this conclusion: "The moment you meet people of other faiths whom you consider to be at least as decent, as least as religious, and at least as intelligent as you think you are, you will never be the same."

This is not to suggest that the inevitable consequence of international travel is multicultural relativism — the belief that every culture is equal, that no culture is morally or culturally superior. On the contrary, my going abroad every year for 42 years has strengthened my appreciation of both Western culture and America's unique value system (what I call the American Trinity: liberty, in God we trust, e pluribus unum).

But there is one benefit to international travel that probably cannot be gained in any other way: Other nations and other peoples become real.

When I began traveling at the age of 20, I had one goal in mind: I never wanted to hear the name of a place in the news and not be able to relate to it. Let's be honest. Until you go to India or Honduras, they are abstractions. One can major in Indian history or Latin American studies, but

two days in one of those countries makes that country more real than four years of reading about it.

One of life's great moral challenges is to see the stranger as fully real. While travel does not guarantee that one will see all others that way — the father of modern Islamism, Sayyid Qutb, spent two years in America in the late 1940s and left seeing Americans as caricatures of decadence — it is very hard to do so without travel.

You also learn a lot about life. For example, I learned very early on, in the first of my four visits to India, that poverty was not the cause of crime I was taught it was at college. In fact, aside from abject, starvation-level poverty, it is not even the main cause of human unhappiness. In most of the poor places of the world, children seem considerably less jaded and laugh more easily than many American children.

I learned more about Islam in a week in Egypt than in two years at Columbia's Middle East Institute. When the pretty young Egyptian waitress at the Nile Hilton in 1974 told me to read the Koran because once I did I would become a Muslim, I realized that secularism was not, my professors notwithstanding, the wave of the Middle East's future, and I understood how Muslims view the Koran and the non-Muslim world. When I offered to buy a beer for the Egyptian taxi driver who took me from Cairo to the pyramids on a very hot day, he politely declined, explaining that as a Muslim he is not permitted to drink alcohol. I asked why he thought the ban was necessary. Because, he explained, if a man drinks and then goes home and sees his daughter lying in bed, bad things could ensue. That opened this 25-year-old's eyes.

When I was in the Soviet Union in 1968 and in 1981, dissidents agreed to speak with me by meeting at a certain tree in a certain park; because sitting and talking with a Westerner would attract KGB attention. I then understood totalitarianism better than any of my Soviet-studies classes could possibly communicate.

After visits to about a dozen African countries, I came to realize that the spread of Christianity holds the best hope for that sad continent. If anyone can name a better solution, this Jew would be interested in hearing it.

And I came to realize the overwhelming power of cultural values. How else do you explain "honor killings," the subverting of the most powerful instinct in the world — to protect one's child — except through an understanding of the power of culture? For that matter, how else do you explain the American love of ketchup with French fries?

We have one life to live on earth. There are few better ways to live that life than to travel around that planet and meet its people.

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