What A Life Of Travel Does To You

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By Alex Brueckner on http://thoughtcatalog.com

A life of travel is a good thing to have. But once you start off on it, there’s no looking back. What traveling does do to you is work its way inside of you, changing you completely as it finds a seat deep within you. It’s a parasite with a greedily voracious appetite. That bastard is hungry. Once the travel bug bites, you’re afflicted for life. Once the wanderlust hits, your feet never stop being restless.

It creeps into the edges of your mind. You start clicking through Facebook albums from past trips to Peru or China or Ghana. You find yourself browsing WikiTravel or Intrepid Travel, concocting perfect two-month tours of Africa or South America. Idly, you check Orbitz to see how much a flight next month is to Cambodia. Just for the hell of it. Just in case. It never hurts to know, right?

The temptation is always there just to take off work, drop everything, and go. And once you have a trip on the books, it’s inevitable that you eyes creep toward a calendar during any spare moment and instinctually count down the days until you can flee. There’s a constant itch that gets under your skin, and the only way to scratch it involves a plane (or train or bus) ticket, a backpack, and plans that don’t go beyond “just get me out.”

Our heroes are people like Anthony Bourdain, who makes a living (and a life) out of trekking to the furthest corners of the map. We like stumbling through sentences in foreign languages like kindergarteners. We feel proud when we can get through three weeks in Eastern Europe on a single backpack or successfully navigate through the tricky back alleys of a new city. We get thrills during the moment that a plane takes off from the runway or a bullet train pulls out of the station. We get off on eating foods that contain things we’ve never tried before, let alone heard of. We love filling out those “where I’ve been” maps and seeing just how much of the world we’ve covered.

For those who make traveling a lifestyle, the fear of putting down permanent roots is always present. Top Gear’s Jeremy Clarkson has said, “Speed has never killed anyone. Suddenly becoming stationary, that’s what gets you.” He may have been talking about supercars, but I think the philosophy applies just as well to traveling, too. If you’re constantly moving, whether it’s on the back of a motorbike in Ho Chi Minh City, a vespa in Firenze, or a kayak down the rapids on the Rio Grande, suddenly hitting the brakes can be absolutely devastating. It’s a constant fear that I’ve hit my “peak” and that I’ll spend the rest of my life wanting to travel and being unable to. Instead of actually getting out to see the sun rise in Goa, I’ll have to settle for a picture I found on Google as my laptop background.

When I returned home to Pittsburgh from living in Germany, my mum remarked to me, “We’ll have to nail your feet down to keep you stateside, won’t we?” And it wasn’t a week later that I
told my parents I wanted to move to Japan after graduation to teach English. I’m lucky, and I know it. The job I have right now basically allows me to travel as much as I want; I may officially be an “Assistant Language Teacher,” but if I had it my way, “globetrotter” would be front and center on my résumé.

One of my favorite quotes about traveling is “I haven’t been everywhere, but it’s on my list.” It sums up perfectly just why I love globetrotting so much. Once you start, you can never truly finish. There’s always more to see, more to explore, more summits to climb, more seas to dive into, more cities to get lost in. Germany was the first foreign country I set foot in. I could travel there every summer for the rest of my life; I’d never see it all.

For the hardcore travelers, our sustenance lies in those perfectly surreal moments that you just stumble upon by mistake. They’re moments that, when you seen them in a movie or hear other people reminisce about them, seem utterly fake. Their very perfection takes away from their realness. If there were a Shutterstock for traveling experiences, it would catalogue those impossibly perfect moments.

But when it’s you experiencing them, you can’t help but grin to yourself and feel a certain gleeful shiver work its way through you. My favorite, but by no means solitary, example of such a moment happened in Paris last summer. I was walking through an arcade near the Louvre, turned a corner, and then was greeted by a busker playing the cello set against the backdrop of the setting sun reflecting through the Louvre pyramid’s glass. That right there is something straight out of a Woody Allen movie.

As scared as I am that I’ll lose the means to travel, I think I know in the back of my head that I’ll never let it truly happen. Wanderlust doesn’t just die from disuse or neglect. Get a camel, a hot air balloon, a pair of snowshoes, a hang glider, a sled pulled by dogs… if you want to get out, you’re getting out.