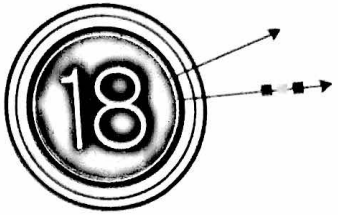
shrubbery, devastated gardens, and possible roadway collisions, explore the problem from the other side. What are the deer worried about?

13. Fresh spring buds and greenery can be so wonderfully revitalizing, but remember that death and decay are also an important part of nature's cycle. The forest floor is one enormous compost pile, recycling nutrients into the soil for next year's growth. We humans, however, often remove every sign of dead leaf or cut grass from our lawns, only to then buy gigantic bags of chemical fertilizer to spread in spring and fall. Don't rant, or judge, but thoughtfully consider how we arrived at this ironic moment in man's relationship to the land around him.

14. Long-abandoned farmland is fascinating to explore.

15. If you can afford to travel to the South Pole, by all means do so (and take me with you), but remember that you can also learn about nature and find a subject for your writing by simply planting one seed in a tiny pot by the window on the desk where you sit and scribbling each morning.



WRITING THE TRAVEL ESSAY

"Travel and change of place impart new vigor to the mind."

—Seneca

One of the finest and most-satisfying adventures of my life so far was the time I canoed through whitewater rapids down the lower canyons of the Rio Grande River, just east of Big Bend National Park in southern Texas. You read about this trip in an earlier chapter, when we took a closer look at the essay "Ah, Wilderness! Humans, Hawks, and Environmental Correctness on the Muddy Rio Grande."

Each day of that trip brought new sights and new adventures—as might be expected of such a grand landscape and precarious mode of travel—and it was in my attempt to put this river journey into words that I discovered what every other travel writer has probably discovered as well:

- Travel writing is easy, because travel has a natural story arc. We enter the canyon, we are surrounded by high canyon walls for days and days, facing fresh obstacles with each passing mile, and eventually we come out the other side. Think how many novels, short stories, and memoirs mimic that very

structure. Have you heard of Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*, for instance? Even if you are not on an "adventure" trip, you still have a natural beginning in your arrival, a natural middle with your stay, and a natural ending around your departure. Time and again, the journey structure seems to work.

- Travel writing is very, very hard. As writers, we usually come to understand our topics and our feelings toward them over the course of years, not days. We understand the culture we live in by growing up within that culture. We understand family love and family woes by being members of a family for decades. We write about our spiritual journeys after years of searching and seeking. By definition, however, a travel writer is often just passing through. The result is that a travel writer runs the risk of noticing only the slick, shallow surface of things, not the truth that lies beneath.

While I remain grateful for that aspect of travel that makes the writing easy, I still have not found the precise antidote for what makes it so difficult, except to be aware of the dangers of shallow observation and to try very diligently to avoid them.

A Reminder to Avoid Quaint Sentimentality

Though I understand where the notion comes from, I must admit my frustration with travel essays that reveal little more than "I went to this exotic location and boy was it ever different!"

Well, of course it was different!

Foreign lands are different, the food is unusual (to you), and the unfamiliar customs are sometimes charming. Though there remains something exhilarating about discovering these delightful differences firsthand, there is nothing new in the discovery.

So, just as you should avoid being the ignorant visitor, the one who insists that foreign lands should be "just like home," with all of the familiar comforts and menu items, avoid as well the tendency to over-romanticize. The indigenous woman selling handcrafted souvenirs in the village square is charming and evocative maybe, but she is also a person, with children and grandchildren, perhaps a stack of debt and worries back home, and maybe even some arthritis in her knees. Don't make the mistake of assuming her life is simple, easier, or less stressful than your own.

When travelling, try to see what is really there, not what past travel articles—many of them riddled with clichés—tell you will be there.

Three Quick Tips

- Read as much as you can about your destination before you arrive, and don't just read the guidebooks. Read up on the region's history and economy, explore the cooking and agriculture, and try to understand religious observances. This way, if you see something unfamiliar or peculiar, you'll have a better chance of understanding the reasoning behind the custom.

- Newspaper travel sections often reduce travel writing to a list of hotels and tourist-friendly restaurants. These articles can be useful, certainly, to first-time travelers, but as an

essayist, remember that you are digging for deeper treasure, looking for meaning in an experience, not just bargains.

- There is a difference between a travel writer and a tourist. A tourist is on vacation; a travel writer is on a pursuit.

Your Travel Essay

Try some of the following prompts to get your travel essay wheels turning:

1. You needn't go overseas. If you live in the city, go to the country and attend an antique farm equipment auction or learn to make goat cheese. If you live in the country, spend a long weekend in Chicago or New York City.

2. But if you do the latter, don't try to "cover" the whole city in three days. All you will have then is a list of destinations. Instead, pick an obscure neighborhood, eight square blocks, and really get to know the area up close.

3. Add people to your story. If you speak the language of the area you are visiting, that's a great advantage, but if you do not, find someone local who speaks English. Buy them coffee or lunch and ask them questions. Most people are flattered and eager to talk about the place where they live.

4. Travel writer Pico Iyer, author of *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home,* advises skipping the normal attractions. He seeks out the "... new, absolutely contemporary, and constantly shifting wonders of the modern world." For example, in his often-anthologized essays, Iyer chronicles airport culture instead of cathedrals and explores the world's largest Kentucky Fried Chicken, found just off Tiananmen Square, near the Mao Tse-tung mausoleum. In other words, don't try to capture what you can see on every tourist postcard. If it is on the postcards, it is already a cliché.

5. Not all travel is uplifting and life-affirming. Were you pick-pocketed? Write about it. Do you suspect the cabdrivers of inflating their prices? Well, write about that and how it makes you feel.

6. Fly to Paris, Berlin, Mexico City, or Minneapolis. After a good lunch and a revitalizing nap, take out a map of the area—maybe large enough to cover a 50-mile-radius. Now close your eyes and point. Find a way to get to wherever your finger landed, write about how you got there and the surprises along the way.

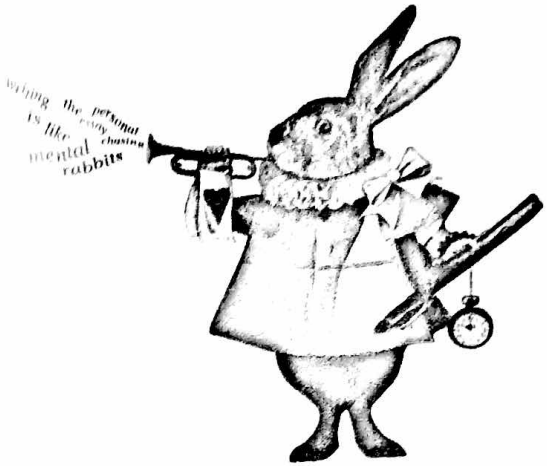
7. When you find yourself in a location where the cuisine seems very exotic, seek out cooking classes. Or offer the cook in your hotel a small tip to at least let you observe.

8. In lieu of the grand, "written-about-two-thousand-times-each-year" medieval cathedral, seek out the small place of worship that no one visits except the people who actually live and pray there.

9. Bring yourself into the travel, and the travel essay. If you are a sixty-year-old, recently widowed

woman who spent her life farming and raising dairy cows, your response to the French countryside should reflect that, and thus be very different from a response written by a twenty-five-year-old elementary school teacher.

10. Be enthusiastic and curious. It will make your travel more interesting and will always show through in the writing.



PART TWO
REACHING READERS