

Comment

The road worrier

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This summer I've noticed the continuation of a trend that's been developing for the past ten years or so. Increasing numbers of my colleagues are opting to take their vacations at home, or in summer properties they've purchased or rented close to home. Since this behavior predates those events of the past two years that made many people reluctant to venture abroad, I think it's motivated by something other than fear. It comes, I believe, from a deep sense of weariness, not wariness. Scientists travel a lot on business, and for many of us that has led to the feeling that the last thing we want to do is travel for pleasure. In fact, many of us believe that the very concept of travel for pleasure has become an oxymoron, like military intelligence.

Sometime in the last 20 years travel ceased to become an adventure and became a drag. Personally, I look forward to most of my business trips with the same enthusiasm that Sir Walter Raleigh expressed in contemplating his imminent beheading. There are many reasons for this attitude: snooty hotel staff - a problem not unique to, but endemic in, many European countries ("Sacre bleu! A green American Express Card! Pierre, show Doctor Petsko to ze room we reserve for peasants."); waiters in overpriced restaurants who treat every request as though one were *Oliver Twist* asking for a second plate of gruel; hotel rooms with windows that cannot be opened - presumably because the aforementioned snooty staff is afraid that the guests, in a fit of travel-induced melancholia, might hurl themselves to their deaths, even when the room is on the first floor; taxi drivers who not only do not speak one's language but do not speak the language of the country they're in, or any other recognizable human tongue, and whose knowledge of the area is confined to the location of a few five star hotels and strip joints; hotel coffee shops in which a cup of coffee costs more than the gross national product of the country in which the beans were grown; world-famous attractions that are open year-round except on the only day one tries to see them; and crowds, crowds at the beaches, crowds at the airports and train stations, crowds on the highways and in museums and shops, crowds everywhere.

Yet I honestly believe that we could put up with all this were it not for that *bête noire* of travelers everywhere, the airlines. Air travel, which was once glamorous, now has all the charm of riding in a cattle car, except that at least the cattle are on their way to a mercifully quick end, whereas the airlines seem to delight in extending one's torment as long as possible.

I'm not sure exactly when it happened, but sometime in the past couple of decades nearly every major airline around the world seems to have been taken over by direct descendants of the Marquis de Sade. Take the small matter - the very small matter - of airline seats. Although study after study indicates that, on the whole, people in much of the world are getting taller and heavier, the airlines seem to believe exactly the opposite. Most seats now would offer generous amounts of legroom only to a Munchkin, and they have become so narrow that one is constantly performing The Armrest Elbow Dance with one's seatmates, in a desperate attempt to lay claim to a precious extra inch of width. Should the person in the seat in front of you decide - as the person in the seat in front of me always does - to spend the entire 12-hour flight to Tokyo with his seat-back down as far as possible, you will lose what little room in front of you there was, and if your tray table was down when this happened you will never be able to raise it again, quite probably for the rest of your life.

Carry-on baggage is another endless source of delight. One's fellow passengers seem to believe that the overhead bins are not only capable of holding rollaboard suitcases - inventions of the devil if ever there were any - large enough to contain a baby grand piano, but that they have the right to schlep all their worldly possessions on your flight - and some of them possess quite a lot. These are invariably the same people who, when everyone is nervously waiting to disembark, wait until the last possible moment to gather up their tons of luggage, thus holding up all the passengers behind them. One will no doubt encounter these Nostradamuses again at queues for tollbooths and grocery store checkout counters, where they will realize with a shock at the last possible

moment that they will actually have to pay something and so finally, after all their car has come to complete stop or their groceries have all been bagged, they will begin their lengthy search for a means to do so.

And let us not forget - or rather, let us try to forget as soon as possible - the matter of airline food, another oxymoron that ranks right up there with compassionate conservatism or reasonable attorney's fees. Many airlines, as a cost-cutting measure, are actually discontinuing serving meals on flights - one of the few bright spots in the area of public health news in recent years. But this does make one wonder how far this trend of off-loading tasks that used to be done by airline personnel, such as checking oneself in, onto passengers will go ("Oh, Doctor Petsko, it's your turn to fly the plane now".).

So why, in this age of teleconferencing and e-mail, do we put up with all this? One reason is the Schimmel effect. Biologist Paul Schimmel has famously remarked that the amount of respect accorded to a scientist increases sharply with the distance from his or her home institution and goes through zero at the origin. It is certainly nice to be treated like minor royalty for a day or two somewhere, even if one has to be treated like dirt to get there. And having tried teleconferencing on several occasions, let me say that, for me anyway, it just doesn't work. I miss the dynamic of direct interaction, the freedom of not being tied to a camera location, and the chance to experience new faces and places. Our lives are already too bounded by computer screens to need more of them. And of course, for young scientists, travel is essential as a means of getting one's work and oneself known in the community at large.

Genomics, as it does for so many other things, is magnifying this necessity. The interdisciplinary nature of genome-driven biology requires that we become familiar with an ever-expanding array of techniques, disciplines, and colleagues. We all must collaborate more, build bigger networks of friends with expertise in a wider range of areas, attend more meetings on more different subjects, and present our work to an ever larger number of audiences.

We can hide from this demand for a time - say part of the summer - but our need to know and be known is relentless. So regardless of how tedious and dehumanizing it is, come September the skies above us will once again be filled with scientists, all undergoing the twenty-first century equivalent of *The Death By A Thousand Cuts*.

Robert Louis Stevenson said, "To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive." Robert Louis Stevenson was never stranded at O'Hare or Heathrow airports. These days, it's better to arrive.