

Nicos Hadjicostis

DESTINATION EARTH

A New Philosophy of Travel
by a World-Traveler

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Chapter II: *The eerie Guilin karsts enveloping the Li River. Guangxi, China.*

Chapter III: *An Indian drying his sarongs. Pushkar, India.*

Chapter IV: *The traveler-hermit. Jiuzhaigou National Park, Sichuan, China.*

Chapter V: *Turning bike tricks at sunset. Bora Bora, French Polynesia.*

Front Cover: *A photo composition of three Chinese landscapes:*

Huanglong calcite pools, Jiuzhaigou National Park, Guilin karsts.

To my father Costas,
who is the embodiment of
Freedom, Strength, and Love

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FOREWORD

By Jane Kayantas

In March of 2005, I was invited to a dinner party hosted by friends in New York City. Among the dinner guests was Nicos Hadjicostis, a Greek Cypriot who had arrived in New York two days earlier from Europe, and who planned to travel extensively around the United States. A friendship began that night and developed during his one-month stay in the city.

Nicos explored New York thoroughly, walking in historic neighborhoods, visiting museums, meeting people, and enjoying the wide range of eateries and cafes unique to the city. As a local, I offered an insider's view to authentic New York living and exposed him to different facets of the city. A few weeks after his arrival, he rented a car and headed north to New England, to begin his exploration of the rest of the country.

Traveling by rental cars, trains, buses, and airplanes, Nicos's five-month American journey awakened his inherent, and until then dormant, wanderlust. Seeing beautiful, diverse landscapes; meeting locals in different areas of the country; and experiencing the freedom of travel sparked the idea to extend his journey beyond the United States. He thought of the exotic cultures he had learned about as a boy—the Aztecs, the Mayas, the Incas—and wanted to see firsthand what remained of these mysterious civilizations. He wanted to see more of the world's natural beauty, to try different foods, to listen to different sounds and languages. A strong urge for new and immersive travel experiences started to grow and inspired him to plan the quite ambitious mission of traveling around the world.

Upon completing his U.S. journey, Nicos methodically outlined a first tentative itinerary of his around-the-world journey, which he had asked me to format and print for him, since he did not travel with a laptop. First, he developed a list of

the most interesting countries, based on their natural beauty, culture, and history. Then he created as harmonious a route as possible to connect the dots without backtracking and without missing important places along the way. Logically, after the United States, he continued to Central and South America. He then traveled westward to the South Pacific, Australasia, and Asia. The original itinerary that I handed to him in Cayuga Lake, New York, where we met at the end of his U.S. journey, was due to last a total of 98 weeks. The original plan was to finish his travels in India, specifically in Pondicherry, where he would study the work of his beloved philosopher, Sri Aurobindo, at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. By then, he would have lived out all of his wanderlust and, with no temptations or desires, he would have been able to focus on spiritual and philosophical matters that have always been central to his life.

As it turned out, traveling the world was not as easy or straightforward as he imagined. Despite all his methodical planning, his original itinerary was unrealistic given the enormity of our planet and the unique challenges of long-term travel. He chose to heed to the universe's rhythms, and slowly adapted his exploration accordingly. For this reason, his journey brought three significant changes.

First, the journey did not end in India. Nicos's strong will and curiosity propelled him to continue and complete the invisible line he was etching around the world. Therefore, after his travels in India, he continued north to Tibet, Western China and along the ancient Silk Roads of Central Asia and the Middle East, before visiting parts of Africa. He completed his journey by traveling around those areas of Europe he had not explored in detail earlier in his life. By doing this, he essentially circumnavigated the world in a single journey, moving westward from Europe until he returned to his native continent.

While it is becoming more common for travelers to undertake long-term, worldwide journeys, they usually do so with a selected activity. They sail, bike, walk, volunteer, work their way around the world, often taking breaks to return home. Usually the selected activity becomes the primary focus of their journeys, while the exploration of countries and cultures becomes secondary. By contrast, Nicos traveled with the intention of exploring the world in all its aspects, without backtracking or interrupting his line of travel. His aim, as you will read in the first chapter of this book, was to treat the whole world as a *single destination*, and to actually *see* it!

The second significant change was the time period dedicated to his exploration. The original itinerary's 98 weeks became 120 weeks, then 208 weeks and so on. The exploration of each country demanded time, and he could not move faster without compromising his travel method. Quickly, he became attuned to "the journey's voice," which became an important factor in shaping his travels. When he was in harmony with his surroundings and with his journey, everything flowed effortlessly—from little things, like a bus arriving the moment he appeared at the station, to big things like finding out an annual festival was taking place on the day



*The author's
6.5 year westward
route around
the world.*

he was passing through a remote village. When nothing happened as planned and obstacles kept appearing along Nicos's path, he said that "harmony was lost" and he kept looking for the reasons why this had happened, as well as for signs that it was coming back. He would make adjustments to his day's activities until harmony was regained and things flowed again.

In the end, his around-the-world journey lasted a total of 339 weeks—that is six years and six months—from the 15th of March 2005, when he arrived in New York City, to the 10th of September 2011, when he finished it at the foothills of the Acropolis in Athens. Traveling around the world took much longer than Nicos had originally anticipated. On the map above, you can see his route, and at the end of the book, the list of the countries he visited.

The third significant change was the addition of a traveling partner—me! Although Nicos had set out to complete this journey on his own, he ended up sharing much of his global odyssey with me. Early on, while he traveled in the Americas and I lived in New York, our connection deepened as we kept in touch via phone and email. I joined him twice for a few weeks in Latin America and then again for a few months in Asia. When we met in Thailand in 2009, he invited me to join him for the rest of his journey. I boldly consented. We recognized a soul mate in one another, and I became his travel companion for the last two years and eight months of his journey, which took us through a big part of continental Asia, Africa, and Europe.

No longer a solo traveler, Nicos made minor adjustments to his journey to accommodate me. Our personalities were compatible since we viewed travel and exploration in the same way. Yet, there was a sense in which we were also alone in

our exploration. Our view of the world and our travel experiences were not always the same; it was interesting to often see the world through one another's eyes.

While I had previously traveled independently, my long-term journey with Nicos took the travel experience to another level. We camped out on an isolated island, Robinson Crusoe style, in Phang Nga Bay, Thailand; we slept in a floating bungalow and watched the one-leg rowers cast their fishing nets in Inle Lake, Burma; we danced at midnight with locals in a park in Chengdu, China; we praised Allah after surviving a big car accident on the narrow and windy High Atlas mountains in Morocco; we discovered the depth and breadth of French cheese (oh la la!) in rural France. These, and many more unique moments, have been etched permanently into my soul.

As such, I have intimate knowledge of how Nicos conceived, developed, and carried out his journey. Always guided by a flexible itinerary and route, he followed a meticulous method of travel that was built on a foundation of knowledge. Before arriving in a region, he read books and travel guides, researched websites and forums to determine where he would go and what he would skip. However, while he had an idea of what to see, he incessantly asked locals and other travelers about suggestions, never resting comfortably with his own research and studies.

His days were categorized: exploration, study, plan, rest, and errands (see Addendum II at the end of the book). A typical month may have included roughly 20 exploration days, six rest days during which he would also study, two days for planning ahead, and two or three days for running errands. Errands days became novelties as we scoured neighborhoods for a good laundry to wash our clothes, a pharmacy to buy more shampoo, a cobbler to mend our shoes. These errand days gave us a unique view into everyday life and ended up being just as fascinating as, if not more than, our exploration days.

Nicos's travels, as you will read in this book, were also governed by the Buddhist idea of the Middle Way. The reason for this was twofold. The first reason applied to accommodations. Nicos never traveled at the luxury level or at the backpacker level, preferring to travel in between. Neither extreme was feasible for his long-term travel: The luxury level would have been financially prohibitive as well as limiting with respect to the range of experiences he would have had, whereas backpacking would have been physically prohibitive. For Nicos, in his early forties, staying in extremely basic accommodations for extended periods of time simply wasn't an option; he didn't want to relive his army boot camp experience. A modicum of comfort, like a hot shower and a comfortable bed, made his journey consistently pleasurable.

The second and more important reason that he chose to follow the Middle Way, however, was that this mode of travel offered the best exposure to local cultures. Whether he was drinking tea with the Sultan's sister at the Palace in Ternate, sleeping on the floor next to pigs in the Solomons, or attending a classical

music concert in Rome, Nicos mingled with the locals and moved comfortably and effortlessly in all strata of society. He even developed his own universal sign language—a combination of Greek hand gestures, Chinese facial expressions, and monkey-like sounds—that enabled him to communicate with people of any nationality. When we later traveled together in Western China, I too began to adopt his sign language and was also able to communicate my needs through pronounced facial expressions and hand gestures.

Nicos traveled with the essentials required for four seasons, all organized in one large red suitcase and a medium-sized duffle bag. On his shoulder he carried a messenger bag and on his belt a cash pouch plus a camera. We must not, however, forget the mini-library, which was packed in a foldable supermarket-style tote bag on wheels and weighed about 10 kilos. Obviously, this was the pre-iPad era, when printed travel guides and a mini-atlas were indispensable. However, most of his books were a luxury (Nicos's unnecessary necessities), as he always needed a context in which to experience a place. In addition to books that were relevant to the history and arts of the region he was exploring, he carried philosophy and other books that he read for pleasure or general education.

This book bag had a life of its own that influenced the journey. On three separate occasions—in the United States, Peru, and Morocco—the book bag disappeared, stolen in plain sight. The first theft, which happened just after he had finished his six-month U.S. journey, also included the theft of all of his American photographs. For this reason, there is only one photograph of the U.S. in the book! Looking back, it seems as if life had deliberately pushed the book bag out of the journey in order to force Nicos to stop reading and start living more fully in the present moment. Certainly, the books were tools and wells of information, but they were never a replacement for real-life exploration. In these situations, he recalled the concept of one of his favorite philosophers, Franklin Merrell-Wolff, who said that the universe's main function is to resist all of our efforts. Nicos's revision was, "When the universe resists, our job is to resist its resistance, and start all over again!" As such, the book bag was recreated after each theft.

Throughout the journey, Nicos kept two diaries. The first diary was a daily log in which he briefly noted the day's main activities—the sights seen and any of the day's interesting situations. The second was a diary of ideas, where he wrote his thoughts and impressions and which served as the foundation for this book.

In discussing Nicos's single line around the world, it is important to mention a personal tragedy that befell his family in January 2010. We were preparing a road trip through the wadis of Oman when we received a call from Cyprus informing us that Nicos's younger brother, Andy, had been murdered. He was 41 years old. We immediately traveled to Cyprus to be with family and mourn the loss of his beloved brother. Shortly after the funeral, Nicos helped to manage the family business and tried to come to terms with this tragic loss. Four months later,

we decided to complete the journey, as Nicos strongly felt that this was what Andy would have wanted us to do. In fact, Nicos saw the journey's continuous route from Oman to Cyprus to Egypt (Egypt was our next planned destination before Andy's passing) as a sign that we *must* continue the journey. Nicos and Andy had a magnetic, intellectual, loving, and spiritual bond that transcended their strong brotherly relationship. Nicos's loss was beyond words and the last 18 months of the journey were completed with a tainted lens. However, Andy's exemplary, joyful, and intense life kept us mindful of a simple truth: Our short time in this world must be lived as fully as possible.

A final note on the actual writing of this book: Nicos began to write it in 2012 and completed it in 2014. In the last stages of his work, I became his advisor and assisted him in streamlining the content and structure of the book. It was an intense creative period where he arduously worked to develop his ideas and to integrate several independent threads into one comprehensive written piece. This process was a catharsis as he revisited past ideas and experiences that were formative in his life. Sometimes I felt he was painfully giving birth to a child after a gestation period that lasted for over 15 years. In many ways, this book is a finale to a period in his life that had been governed by seeking and exploring—of both the world and himself.

PREFACE

This book is the product of my six-and-a-half-year journey around the world. A year after the end of my travels, I gathered all my journals and notes, and leafed through them to find what was valuable and worth sharing with others. Most of my journal entries consisted of essays that were self-contained and were composed on the spur of the moment or close after the experiences that inspired them. My greatest difficulty was retaining the freshness and spontaneity of the original writings, while at the same time binding them together into a new whole: a book with its own character and unity. I first organized the journal writings into themes and wrote new material from rough sketches I had kept. I then saw where these pieces of writing led me. I thus allowed the book to “form itself,” so to speak, rather than create an initial predetermined structure to which the content would conform. So, in a sense, just as the journey ended up having a life of its own, the book also emerged naturally out of material that was not originally meant to be part of a book. I do not know the extent to which I have succeeded in my endeavor to create a harmonious synthesis of ideas and writings spanning a period of many years. Only the reader can decide.

I have also chosen to include some photos that I took during my journey as well as travel incidents that were crucial in opening new spheres of understanding. These inserted travel incidents (capsules), which form the more “alive” part of the book, are meant to be read alongside the main text. They give flesh and bones to the various theoretical or practical discussions. I have also made a conscious effort so that all the specific examples I give in the main text are real and derived from my journey, be it the reference to a Hindu funeral ceremony, the Brazilian Carnival, or a heated argument in a hotel in Hanoi. The photos, capsules, and real-life examples, apart from binding the theoretical to the practical aspects of the book, also provide idiosyncratic glimpses into my real travel experiences.

In this book, I break the journey into parts, analyzing it, thinking aloud about different aspects of it, and exploring ideas as if they were separate, well-defined entities that could be isolated and examined on their own. Still, the journey itself can never be truly communicated to another. Travel belongs to the domain of living experience and is incommensurable¹ with the world of words. As something that is lived-through, it is also unique, personal, and incommunicable *qua experience*. Lands, peoples, incidents, feelings, and ideas may be described in words and sentences. Yet these descriptions bear the same relation to the real journey as a verbal description of a piece of music has to the performed music. The travel experience itself is not made of thoughts alone; it is real, multi-dimensional, and integral. It pertains to the real movement of Life, i.e., to praxis itself.

One wonders then if there is *any* way a traveler may in fact share his experiences with others. I think there is only one possible way in which this may meaningfully be done: by showing your enthusiasm and excitement for your travel experiences, you inspire others to follow in your footsteps so that they too may have their own parallel experiences. When a person who followed your path experiences something similar to you, at that exact moment you are truly sharing your journey. Paradoxically, this sharing happens *at different moments in time*, and creates a silent bond between two travelers as they have sipped from the common, inexhaustible fountain of travel.

In this sense, this book is neither about the act of traveling nor about the real experiences of travel—although it occasionally struggles to convey both! It is rather the product of an inner impulse, a natural need that appeared after the end of the journey, to *encourage and inspire others* to undertake a similar long-term journey around the world, or at least around a continent or a group of countries. Therefore, I will have truly managed to share my journey only to the degree that I succeed to inspire others to emulate a part of my journey, or to create their own individual journey from scratch. Reading this book alone will not suffice. If you read it but do not move from your couch, I will have failed in my effort.

With this aim in mind, I strove to create a *philosophical framework* in which long-term travel may be meditated upon, planned, and executed by current or aspiring travelers. In as far as this book pertains to the (admittedly nonexistent) branch of the “Philosophy of Travel,” it does not contain a well worked-out set of ideas and it has no formal structure, since it was not conceived as a “philosophy” from the beginning. It is similar, I would say, to the mode of exposition used by Seneca the Stoic, as expressed through his letters (which I very much admire). The philosophy, if it may bear the name, is to be found in the totality of the work and

¹ Incommensurable: lacking a common quality on which to make a comparison, such as it is impossible to compare weight (kilograms) to volume (liters); or belonging to another category of reality altogether, such as it is impossible to compare a painting to a musical piece.

in the interdependence and interconnectedness of the ideas, rather than in any rational construction. As such, it aspires to pertain to the ancient tradition of a non-formalized set of ideas that are held together by their having been conceived through reflection on one's life experiences, rather than being the product of independent, abstract philosophical thought unrelated to Life itself. My wish is that the ideas and exposition will also be *felt*, not simply understood. Although most of the philosophical ideas are included in Chapter III, "A New Philosophy of Travel," the whole book may be considered as one long series of meditations or reflections on long-term world travel and life.

For those readers who are ready to undertake a long-term journey, but may still be wondering *how* it is done practically or how life on the move looks and feels, I have included two addenda at the end of the book. The first is an example of how many of the ideas presented in the book may be used to create a tentative itinerary of travel, and the second gives a personal glimpse into the daily life of a world-traveler. I hope these addenda will also help demystify long-term travel.

Finally, if I were to honestly pass judgment upon my own endeavor, I would say that it is nearer to that of a missionary's than that of a travel writer's, or to that of an advertiser's rather than that of a travel philosopher's! Yet, as any good missionary or advertiser must be a little bit of both a traveler and a philosopher, I hope that some of the travel and some of the philosophy (of both my journey and my life) may have trickled through the lines.

Nicos Hadjicostis

Nafplio, Greece, May 2016

PROOIMION

Nobody thinks of buying the Parthenon and taking it home. Or the Pyramids, Macchu Picchu, and the Great Wall of China.

All the great monuments, all the grand structures of the world, belong to everyone. We can admire and enjoy them for as long and as much as we like, as if they were our own.

Yet, when things get smaller, we suddenly acquire the need to possess them, to “own” them. We want to own a piece of land or a house; a painting at an art exhibition; a figurine, a porcelain vase, and a hundred other little objects. We feel that if we attach the word “mine” to an object, its hue changes and something in its structure or quality is altered forever. Yet the name or idea we attach to an object alters nothing. It remains the same thing it was before the designation of the possessive pronoun.

The idea of ownership of material things is, paradoxically, always connected to size. We can only “own” things that are approximate in size to our human body and its immediate environment. The idea of ownership is just an illusion stemming from small size. We do not think of it this way, because we grow up conditioned to own everything that we can possibly own.

But do we actually own everything we think we own? Do we own, for example, our own body—the basic measure of all things human? Did we create it? Do we know how our liver or brain functions, or understand the laws that govern the way our mind works? It seems that a more appropriate description of our relationship with our body is that we simply “borrow” it for the duration of our life on Earth. Just as we borrow the air we breathe, the warm rays of the sun, or the immense expanses of land and sea that belong to nations or to none.

If we don't own our body, then we may go as far as saying that we own nothing. We actually borrow everything. The things we own proper, the ones to which the word "mine" has been attached—because we have inherited or bought them—will be left behind the moment we die. They too are simply borrowed for the duration of our life. Is not the house we rent as much "ours" as it is that of our neighbor's who spent all of his savings to buy it? Don't we own our hotel room for the nights we enjoy it as much as we own our bedroom at home when we sleep in it?

In some strange sense, the things we supposedly own are "less owned" by us than is the nearby lake. For we have to serve them in order to own them. We need to repair our vehicle or our home, take care of our lawn, water the flowers in our garden in order to enjoy them. Yet, the ownerless lake that belongs to nobody, paradoxically, belongs to all. It will take care of itself for as long as we live and will allow us to enjoy it without servicing it.

The idea of ownership, beginning as it does from the illusion of size, and proceeding to the artificial and mistaken division of things into "mine" and "not mine," ends up being one of the great shackles of mankind. But all of us can break these shackles and begin to see the world and everything it contains from a completely new perspective. Travel is one of the great destroyers of the conventional idea of ownership. We may even go as far as saying that another definition of travel is repossessing the world. Each one of us owns the planet.

I own the world! I own the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, all the great rivers and forests of the world; the sky, the rain, the stars, the Grand Canyon, Perito Moreno Glacier, the Great Barrier Reef. I affirm my ownership of the immense expanses of the Tibetan plateau the moment I set my eyes upon it; I own the carpet of a billion pink daisies of the Siberian prairie while they envelop me as I travel on the Trans-Siberian Railway. I own the shade of every tree I pass under, the song of every bird the moment it sings for me, the colors of every sunset, the smell of the sea, the dancing ducks in the lake.

But my fortune, spreading as it does across the four corners of the world, does not end here. I also own all the great inventions of science and all the great achievements of all cultures and nations. Wright's flying machine takes me from Madrid to New York, Maxwell's electricity equations govern the artificial light of the bulb on my desk; Plato's dialogues, Seneca's letters, and Buddha's dislike of any form of ownership permeate my thought.

I own every city, every living tradition, every great historical monument. I can lie on the grass of a slope in Macchu Picchu and feel like an Inca priest;

I can walk in the Forbidden City in Beijing as every Chinese Emperor did; I am Cheops humbled by the Great Pyramid, but also enjoying it as he never did; I am an Ancient Greek at the foot of the Acropolis admiring the eternal cliff; I am a Pope enjoying Michelangelo's masterpiece in the Sistine Chapel, just as so many other Popes have done.

I know there are a few spaces scattered around the world with surrounding fences and a humorous inconspicuous sign saying "Private Property." I leave all these confining pieces of land to all those who choose to be imprisoned within them.

I am the owner of the whole world. That's more than enough.



CHAPTER I

DESTINATION EARTH

Travel is the departure from one's little pond.

It is the bold renouncement of the petty comforts that hold us prisoner.

It is a movement away from the known towards the unknown and unimaginable.

Travel is expansion, widening, opening-up. It is the conquering of one's fears, insecurities, prejudices. It is the hovering above one's life, past and present, and seeing it in the larger context of the world. It is the fierce struggle against our already formed concepts of the "other"; the vanquishing of our dearly held beliefs, of what is familiar, intimate, cherished.

It is the seed of our childhood imagination breaking open and facing the sun after a long sleep. It is our soul becoming free and unbound once again—alive, powerful, open to surprise.

The Ultimate University

Travel is the Ultimate University. It offers the most condensed, wide-ranging, and deepest “courses” in all fields of life. It is the only university that brings together theory and practice, and harmonizes knowledge with life. It is the spark that alights our curiosity, leading us to discover and delve into new fields of knowledge, from astronomy and archaeology to geology and biology. It is the portal to new societies, places, sensations, and events we never knew existed; it is also the golden highway to the deepest recesses of our own being.

The Chinese proverb, “It is better to travel 10,000 miles than read 10,000 books,” is more pertinent than ever. For the experiences gained by travel are pulsating and permeated by the breath of human experience and interaction. Book knowledge helps us obtain a basic understanding of subjects and categorize them; it moves in one dimension. Travel is multidimensional: It connects the various branches of human knowledge that are held isolated in unconnected mental compartments; it gives flesh and bones to the world’s nations; it introduces us to new sounds and smells and an infinite variety of circumstances. Travel is not only the Ultimate University, but also the only one that is *alive*! By incorporating in its innumerable courses the accumulated knowledge and experience of mankind, it surpasses even the notion of university itself. Travel is education par excellence, and thus stands above any other institution or method of learning.

Each one of us should know that the gates of this Ultimate University are permanently open to everyone. Anyone is eligible to enter without applications, exams, or fees. The only thing preventing a person from reaping the benefits is the decision to not enroll. The Chinese sage Lao Tzu said, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” One need only take the first step.

Destination Earth

This is the first time in the history of humanity that millions of people have the ability and means to travel around the world. What was once the privilege of historians like Herodotus, emperors like Hadrian, royal emissaries like Zhang Qian, intrepid explorers like James Cook, or simply the aristocratic few is now within the reach of the middle class.

Modern-day inexpensive air travel, the immense network of highways, roads, and railways that connect every corner of our planet, plus the ever-present accommodation options, make traveling between countries and continents not only possible, but easy and affordable. Thousands of travel books and blogs instantly accessible on the Internet make travel planning a breeze. A year of travel, exploring one or even two continents, is now within the financial means of average working men and women who deliberately set aside the necessary funds.

What once took months or even years of preparation now takes only a few weeks. One need not preplan the whole journey or even most of it. After taking the first small steps, one can plan on the move. Any extended long-term journey may then easily turn into an around-the-world journey. With each new travel-bite, the traveler within each one of us may awaken from a long slumber and become transformed into an Ibn Battuta.²

Every corner of the Earth has been explored, charted, and studied, yet the majority of humanity has not made use of this. [Don Quixote] Many of us do not believe that it is truly possible to see the whole world in the same way as we travel and see, say, Italy or Spain. However, if we pretend for a moment that there are no borders separating one country from another, if we actually realize that these borders are nothing but imaginary lines drawn on maps and in historians' heads, we may easily come to view our planet as one country, one destination—as the moon or Mars were when we first set out to explore them. It may help if we pretend that we are a visitor from some other solar system, a space-traveler on the way to some other destination, who simply decided to stop on Earth for a few years to see this planet before moving on. By adopting the point of view of such a traveler, we break the mental blocks that prevent us from viewing our planet as a unitary entity. Our planet then ceases to be an aggregate of countries, and immediately becomes a *single destination* with a great variety of landscapes and natural beauty, numberless human cultures, a myriad of animals and plants, and an inexhaustible wealth of happenings. We may then call out with all of our might: “*I’m traveling to Earth!*”

In the past few decades, many young people in their early twenties have begun undertaking long-term journeys by backpacking across Europe or Latin America or other regions. Yet, travel need not be the domain of only the young. Neither must a journey last only a few weeks. Anyone can save enough money and plan a longer journey lasting six months, a year, or more.³ One may choose to travel along Marco Polo's route, or explore the Roman World of Hadrian's era; another may simply undertake to travel around Latin America or Africa. Someone else may be even more bold and ambitious and try to emulate Magellan by traveling around the world.

2 The Moroccan Ibn Battuta (1304–1369) is considered one of the greatest travelers in history. He traveled for 30 years throughout the Islamic world that extended from Morocco to Indonesia, visiting almost all Islamic countries, plus many non-Islamic ones. After returning in 1354 from his travels, and at the instigation of the ruler of Morocco, Ibn Battuta dictated an account of his journeys to Ibn Yuzzay, a scholar whom he had previously met in Granada. The title of his book is translated as *A Gift to Those Who Contemplate the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Traveling*; however, it is often simply referred to as the *Rihla*, which is the Arabic word for “journey.”

3 Addressing the financials of travel is beyond the scope of this book. However, Rolf Potts (1970-) deals with the subject in the beginning of his book *Vagabonding*. He emphasizes the fact that long-term travel “has nothing to do with demographics—age, ideology, income—and everything to do with personal outlook. Long-term travel isn't about being a college student; it's about being a student of daily life ... Long-term travel doesn't require a massive ‘bundle of cash’; it requires only that we walk through the world in a more deliberate way.”

Don Quixote

Volcan Pacaya, Guatemala

THERE IS NOTHING MORE to be discovered. Everything has been found. There are no unknown lands to be explored. Every land and sea has been charted. There is no Everest to be conquered, no Antarctica to be traversed by sleigh and reindeer on the way to the South Pole. There are no hidden Mayan worlds in the rainforest to be revealed, no hieroglyphs to be deciphered. Everything has been mapped by satellites. Everything has been photographed. Everything has been studied and printed in books. There are no great challenges to be met, heroic feats to be achieved, journeys to unknown lands to be traveled. All has been done.

The 20-year-old backpacker who strives to reach the top of the volcano, the middle-aged thrill-seeker who takes the sailboat to the open sea, the old couple who ride horses through the wild mountains, the Greek guy with the red suitcase traveling around the world are, in the end, different versions of but one single character: *Don Quixote!*

Midway to the top of the volcano there stand horse-taxis to assist the weak or faint-of-heart to reach the crater. The life jackets on the sailboat are there so nobody drowns, and the GSM-guided navigation system ensures the captain will not get lost in the ocean. Horseback riding is just a gimmick giving tourists a feel of the past. And, of course, the world-traveler, on board planes, trains, and automobiles, is a caricature of Jules Verne's noble Englishman Phileas Fogg, who traveled around the world in 80 days.

Wherever I look around me, I see Don Quixotes trying desperately to live in an epoch that is no more, striving to heroically battle giants that turn out to be windmills, to conquer castles that turn out to be country inns. All of us attempt to transpose ourselves to the archetypal world of heroes, conquerors, and explorers. But all the adventures and thrills of our day, for which we often buy a ticket, are nothing more than laughable substitutes of the images we firmly hold in our primal psyche.

The 20-year-old girl who struggles with all her physical power, almost crawling in front of me, to reach the steep summit of Volcan Pacaya, comes near to viscerally experiencing the myths that nourished her childhood imagination. The modern sailor, fighting against the mighty winds and currents of the sea, comes near to experiencing the forces that the first explorers had to conquer. Both the hiker and the seafarer simulate an era long lost. But above all, there stands the world-traveler, me, the ultimate Don Quixote, who strives to do everything anew by rediscovering, reexploring, re-charting, and re-understanding the whole world itself!

We all yearn for a role in one of the heroic scripts of the tales with which we grew up, or a role in one of the great events of history. We all crave an authentic experience of exploration, discovery, or superhuman achievement. We would like to be Marco Polo traversing the length of Asia to reach an unspoiled China, or David Livingstone exploring the heart of Africa, or James Cook charting the endless expanses of the Pacific. But it is not to be. We are little weaklings condemned to Disneyland-like adventures in well-ordered and looked-after national parks in Guatemala or Costa Rica. We are tragic, or rather humorous caricatures—even more so than Don Quixote himself—striving to pertain to a world we feel is ours, but from which we discover we were left out. We all strive, but we all fall short, forever approaching the heroic world of our imagination, which exists in the depths of our craving, but never appears as a true reality in the real world.

I wanted to be Odysseus. It is this beloved ancient Greek myth of my childhood that nourished and sustained my United States journey. But in the end, Odysseus sat down to rest and enjoy a peaceful old age. He did not start all over again as I did by continuing to explore Latin America and beyond. Here, among the peoples of Latin America, in this beautiful and often tragic part of the New World, where, wherever I go, I discover that the past was always grander, more heroic than the present, a new myth begins to be born. When, in those moments of clear self-reflection and self-honesty, I sit down and examine my journey with fresh eyes, I can only see a funny, little, middle-aged Greek, riding his horse and struggling with imaginary castles and giants that in the end turn out to be nothing but mere windmills. Yes, now I see it clearly: I'm no other than Don Quixote.

The Earth turns out to be the most exciting of all possible destinations. As the global middle class expands, the cost of travel declines, and obstacles such as obtaining visas disappear, world travel will be pursued by a growing number of people. All this, together with the prevailing contemporary zeitgeist that encourages multicultural understanding, will lead to a tipping point, after which world travel will become one of the most revolutionary social phenomena that will define the twenty-first century. This century may become, for the first time in human history, the century of *Destination Earth*.

Extraterrestrials on Earth

The Earth as a whole—this is the aim of the world-traveler. He⁴ sets out to explore, not bits and pieces, but all of it. He has no real destination—all places he happens to be in are part of the destination. His aim is none other than to capture the soul of the Earth.

What a pity that the Earth, in spite of modern transport, still remains unknown to most. *We are all extraterrestrials on Earth!* Soon after we set out to explore the world, we realize that we have been living on an unknown planet all along. Paradoxically, the moment one becomes a world-traveler, he simultaneously becomes an extraterrestrial exploring an alien planet.

Every real journey begins with the wonder of the unknown. For the world-traveler, this curiosity is boundless. Every single day he is humbled by the nascent realization of his ignorance. On the one hand, he is shocked to discover that most of his previous assumptions about the world were wrong. On the other hand, he is elated to discover that he need not leave the planet to explore strange new worlds and other solar systems. Here on Earth, on this unknown planet, he is a real space traveler, an explorer of many small galaxies of infinite variation and marvel.

⁴ Gender neutrality, which has become quite popular in the last decade, is avoided throughout this book. When it comes to abstract ideas, switching gender can be very confusing.



*White Island,
New Zealand.*

We all live around our little pond. Most of us “experience” the world through novels, movies, or documentaries, learning disconnected pieces about other countries and cultures. Peeking through a 40-inch screen is how most people learn about our planet, but the information they gain is trivial and flat. In the end, they remain oblivious to the world’s essence, wealth, and innumerable surprises. This superficial knowledge sustains the illusion that we do know something about our home planet. But it is just that—an illusion.

It is not just the tangible multidimensional experiences that destroy this illusion and set apart actual travel from its various simulations. Once on his journey, the whole mental makeup of the traveler is soon deconstructed and rebuilt. When visiting a place, he realizes that what he had learned about it before was either dead knowledge or had nothing to do with reality itself. Most of his ideas about the countries and peoples of the world, ideas formed in school or through books and film, turn out to have been distorted.

He comes to realize that his schoolteachers never taught him that the Aztecs had their own Venice, Tenochtitlán; that Hernán Cortés had its artificial canals filled with soil and rocks; that this grand metropolis was one of the 10 largest cities on the planet, having the population of Paris at the time. [Tlaloc] They didn’t teach him that the Mayas had cities that were populated with tens of thousands and were full of paved roads and colorful buildings; that they had books and astronomical observatories, medicine and science; that this civilization flourished in the dense rainforest amidst deadly snakes and majestic birds! Most importantly, they did not explain that the Mayas, Aztecs, Zapotecs, Incas, and many other indigenous peoples of the Americas, although conquered by the Spaniards, did not disappear with their



*The Olgas stone
formations,
Central Australia.*

civilizations: they are still present among us and their cultures live on. They did not tell him that the Mayas make up 60 percent of Guatemala's population. Nor did they tell him that 45 percent of Peru's population is fully descended from the Incas, and that another 40 percent consists of mestizos, in this case part-Inca. They did not tell him these things because these civilizations were relegated to the footnotes of high school textbooks, or the margins of history syllabuses.

In the end, all nations stick to their own kind. They learn only about the microcosm of their neighborhood. Only when one begins to study other cultures and see the world through the eyes of other people does one come to realize that the "great European civilization" of the last few centuries is just a part of a much greater reality.

Most Europeans, for example, are educated in schools with systems of thought and maps in which Europe is placed in the center and everything else revolves around it. This Eurocentric history is prejudiced, skewed, and narrow. It suffers, like the histories of other nations and regions, from the universal tendency to examine the rest of the world from one's own center.

But this is just the beginning of the distortion. The Europeans have furthermore adopted the Greeks and Romans as their own. Therefore, they present the passage of time as a clear, linear narrative, beginning with the ancient Greeks and Romans and somehow connecting through to the fifteenth century Renaissance, followed by the Reformation, Enlightenment, and the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions. Yet, objectively, fifteenth century Florence or the Tudor Dynasty of England or Peter the Great's St. Petersburg have very little in common with the ancient Greeks or Romans. All this is an artificial construct elevating Europe onto

Tlaloc

Mexico City, Mexico

TLALOC – THE GOD OF RAIN. I stand at the ruins of his temple on the top of the pyramid holding my umbrella. Of course, the “pyramid” is nothing of the sort—it is simply a bunch of stones connected by wooden planks at street level, since the whole structure is buried underneath.

Torrential rain in Mexico City today. I’m the only visitor in the Templo Mayor, the Great Temple in the heart of the Aztec capital, which was deliberately turned by the despicable Cortés into the center of an artificial state—modern Mexico. On my right is the grand Plaza de la Constitución with its Palacio Nacional, and behind me, the imposing Catedral Metropolitana. And beneath all these, buried under the ugly concrete and asphalt, the grandest, the most magnificent and dazzling city ever to have appeared on this continent: the Venice of the New World, the Wonder of the Aztecs, the legendary island-city Tenochtitlán.

Just in front of me, isolated among the ruins, a small, painted stone statue of a male figure stares at me with penetrating eyes. He appears to be holding a bucket. Is it possible that he is none other than Tlaloc himself, who decided to flood this colorless, dirty metropolis that covers his majestic city? Is he trying to wash away the filth so that his whole temple below may be uncovered—and below it, the whole grand pyramid standing in the center of Tenochtitlán?

A museum guard wearing a raincoat hurriedly walks past, looking at me inquisitively as if to ask, “*What are you doing here, señor? Don’t you see it’s raining buckets?*” It is obvious he doesn’t know: Today the Temple belongs to *me*. And Tlaloc speaks to none but me—through his buckets of rain.

Of the magnificent Tenochtitlán—with all its temples, pyramids, palaces, chinampas, canals, bridges, and plazas—the only thing that has survived is this featureless heap of stones measuring no more than 30 by 30 meters. Yet today, this little space—and its soul—*is mine*. For it rains, and I alone stand in front of Tlaloc and pay him tribute. Pay tribute to Him, his rain, his temple, the Great Pyramid, Tenochtitlán, and the mighty empire of the Aztecs—that *is no more*.

the center stage of human history, around which the rest of the world seems to revolve.

It is true, and to Europe’s great credit, that the Age of Discovery culminated in the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century, which paved the way for the Information Revolution of the twentieth century. European civilization, with its many inventions, discoveries, and systems of organizing society over the past five centuries, has become a model for other cultures. What we today call globalization revolves around a nucleus of ideas, modes of behavior, material goods, and systems that the Europeans (with their satellite civilizations, such as the United States) have created. A shopping mall in Dubai, a McDonald’s in French Polynesia, a university syllabus in Brazil, a nuclear facility in Japan, and a Michelin-starred restaurant in New York all have their origins in Europe. The clothes we wear—the suit and tie for