

The Top 5 Things to Do Wherever You Go

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Travel guides, Trip Advisor, and many another will tell you that, when in Paris, don't miss the Eiffel Tower, or the Washington Monument in Washington, the Tokyo Skytree. Such an approach to tourism has a tremendous benefit: returned home, chatting with your friends, you are not likely to say, "I never went to the Eiffel Tower!"

*Of course there are other approaches to tourism, to include some that do an equally good job of making world travel not seem too overwhelming. You needn't try to do everything, see everything. Just a few "top" things. And as regards everyone, the list below is hardly for everyone; among other things, it is biased toward European travel and it is lost to the pleasure that many, many people find in being part of large crowds (at entertainment events, in Times Square, when well-advertised new products go on sale). By contrast, the tops listed below can claim this additional advantage: they can keep you from colliding with bus-and-sidewalk loads of selfie-snatching, Chanel-snatching, line-hungry tourists. Instead, you might enjoy an interesting, relaxed, and not-expensive vacation, and one that will add a certain *je ne sais quoi* to your "I never went to the Eiffel Tower!"*

1 Find your café (or tea salon, bar). This may take a few days and a good deal of walking. It is possible you won't find quite the right place, if at all, then not until your very last day. Imagine the sweet regret you may feel—that thought coming to you—if only I had found this place sooner!

It may seem particularly important that a café make good coffee, or that a similar place serve good tea, beer, wine, whiskey—the beverage of your choice. And indeed this is “important” (assuming that, with your Top 5 list, you have not left off traveling in a world of importances). This sole, good-beverage requirement may discourage you from visiting titanic swaths of the United States, Russia, and many other parts of the world. However, good beverages remain a lesser priority than something in the atmosphere. For me, this is both a literal and figurative requirement. I don't like sidewalk cafés with lots of smokers or lots of passing motor vehicles, and I am looking for a place where I will enjoy spending and be able to spend two or three hours a day relaxed and in the company of strangers, preferably not too close and not from the country from which I am taking a vacation.

Because of the centrality of a good café to a good vacation, further details will be discussed anon. But let us first consider some of the other items on our list.

2 Embrace the suitable means of transportation. Tourist destinations may divided into four groups: those best toured on a bicycle (e.g. Paris); those best toured on foot (Madrid, the Alps); those requiring little more than a few steps (e.g. to get from hotel terrace to pool, beach, ski slope); and those that can hardly be seen at all without the use of a car. Given the plethora of other types of destinations, and the costs and annoyances of car travel, car-demanding destinations are best avoided. As regards the first three groups, above all you will want to realize what kind of place you are in, and should you be in a bicycling location, you will want to find an easy way to rent a bicycle.

A bit of mental reorientation may also be useful. It may seem, for example, that your bicycle is useful for getting you to the Eiffel Tower, or that you should hurry to the pool before breakfast to throw some towels on the “best” seats so that no one but you can enjoy them. But, in fact, the “top” thing you are doing is the bicycling or strolling (or hurrying, if you wish). Your five-star destination or chair-commandeering is merely an excuse.

3 Visit a post office. You may tell yourself that while you are doing this you are learning something essential about the country and culture you are visiting, about its efficiency or the helpfulness of the people, or about the attitudes of employees and customers regarding government service. But in our electronic age, it can also be a simple pleasure—a vacation in and of itself—to wait in post-office line, and when you are feeling there is nowhere else you need to be, there is no package you absolutely have to get in the mail before Christmas. And then, arrived at the head of the line, you will have an opportunity to actually speak to an actual human being, be she polite or impolite, and be you, qua foreigner, able or not to understand what she, or he, is saying. You may have an opportunity to choose different designs of stamps and, at some later moment, to lick and stick them onto an envelope or postcard. These are increasingly rarified pleasures.

I should note in this regard that the United States Postal Service is much maligned and seems to compare badly with postal services (and their package designs) in much of Europe. But such a poor reputation is hardly deserved for the many, many smaller US post offices to which a train or a bicycle might bring you. And even in New York, and for all it may seem no longer a good walking city and not yet a good bicycling city, there are good post offices to be found. One of my favorites is the old “Madison Square” post office on East 23rd Street. Inevitably, hardly will I have written this then it will be closed for renovations or in favor of a smaller, more modern space. But for years this post office has not only been refreshingly dimly lit, cavernous and un-remodeled, its customer-service staff has been both helpful and good-humored, witty at times. Waiting in line here one is spiritually, if not physically, miles away from the hurrying, carefully monitored and

monitoring employees of the private, often aggressively anti-union postal companies. This alone, this distance, *vaut le voyage* (can make your visit worthwhile, and particularly if “getting away from it all” is a priority).

4 Choose your museum carefully but confidently. There is a simple way to do this—either save your museum going for when you are in the provinces or a university town (Rouen or Northampton, Massachusetts for example), or buy a guide book, see which museums are rated “must see,” and cross those off your list. Too crowded.

There are museum professionals who can tell you about great collections that certain provincial museums have, but I would not worry too much about this. The ideal museum may have only one or two interesting/wonderful/beautiful works, and what makes it ideal is precisely this fact. The paucity will incline you to spend a good deal of time with these works.

I recall visiting the not-small art museum of a small yet prominent European city. There was room after room of what might be called embarrassingly uninteresting paintings. But there were half a dozen quite interesting works, including, in far corner, an extraordinary Picasso and an extraordinary, modern crucifixion painting by Antonio Saura. Of course it would only be by going to this particular, otherwise not particularly noteworthy museum that you would get to see these two great works; but my basic point is, rather, that the world now has a vast supply of museums (of art and of other things) that contain one or two great works, and, at many of these museums, the very limited competition, both from other works or from other tourists or local art aficionados, can give a visitor plenty of time and space to appreciate these works. At first you may hurry or move steadily through the galleries, as we have been trained to do, but, bored, you may find yourself giving up on this, returning to that one far corner and, if you’re lucky, finding a bench or an unoccupied security-guard’s seat.

A few more words regarding your café. Many people may save their “café” hours for the end of an afternoon or of an evening, but my preference is for beginning each day so seated. Compulsive, I make myself quite busy, reading or writing or perhaps sketching a neighbor. But I take such activities to serve, like many of the endeavors of fortunate, sufficiently nourished and secure humans, a deeper purpose: they keep at arms’ length intimations of mortality and the demands such intimations can create. There I am, finally arrived in Rome, *La città eterna, Caput Mundi*. Art-historian friends have told me about this or that fresco in this or that church that I absolutely have to see. Indefatigable world travelers have told me about this or that restaurant in this or that out of the way place. And, therefore, I am lingering over my coffee, challenging my limited Italian with the opening paragraphs of *Il Grande Gatsby*, and this perhaps before walking to a favorite spot in a favorite park, rarely crowded on weekday mornings. (Safe and sound in my New York Italian café, I find more than one

website proposing the 10 or 8 or 12 churches in Rome, besides St. Peter's, that are the best, most beautiful, that "you have to visit." No surprises there.)

5 Talk with strangers. Those traveling alone, or who can find a way to spend a day by themselves, enjoy a great advantage; for them (or us) such conversations are inevitable. It's not possible to go by yourself to Northampton, say, and not end up in at least a little conversation with the owner of a coffee place or a docent at the Smith College Museum of Art. Of course it helps to know the local language, and, be one in Chihuahua, Shanghai or Amsterdam, it's a poor excuse to say, "But everyone these days speaks English," or even, "It's too bad we Americans don't learn foreign languages the way people in other countries do." But these two facts remain: you can have better conversations in Mexico, say, if you speak Spanish, *and* even if you don't you can still have good conversations.

Regarding the value of these conversations, I will only say this. One day I was due to return to New York from Switzerland, but my flight was cancelled, and it was a nice summer Sunday, not too hot. I was not in a good town for cafés, but in a little square a restaurant had some tables outside, and it turned out to be quite a good restaurant. Two Parisians a little older than me were drifting from table to table—she wanted sun, he shade—but finally they settled right next to me. What didn't we talk about—terrorism, of course, and Paris, of course, and our jobs, our children, challenges of retirement, the food, Stefan Zweig. After an hour or so they had a plane to catch, and I wandered over to the contemporary art museum and saw almost nothing of interest besides two pages of a dictionary in which all the definitions had been blacked out, only the words to be defined remained legible. One of the other museum visitors, a middle-aged woman with a devilish streak, opened a door which was clearly labelled, in French, I suppose, Do not open or alarm will sound. The alarm sounded, and a young guard went running full tilt through rooms of lifeless American Minimalist works. I thought that perhaps *this*—alarm with running guard—was the real show, or should have been.

The airline company had arranged to stow me overnight in a sprawling, half-empty hotel and casino near the airport, and, when I went down to dinner, there were few customers in the restaurant. This gave me the opportunity to chat with the waitress. Muslim, born in Algeria, raised in France, she was quite bitter about the racism she had experienced and about the color of her skin, which she took to be too dark and to have handicapped her in France, and this as compared to a sister of hers who was fair-skinned and blue eyed and had married a black African. The waitress was also a beautiful middle-aged woman and a gourmet. We talked, too, about the cooking of fresh-water fish and about various chocolates, which latter discussion led to her bringing me from the kitchen a small bag of what she took to be the very best Swiss chocolate.

I should have asked her for her phone number, but instead—too stupid and too tired after such an enjoyable day—I gave her my business card and thus will likely never get such another chance to talk with her. And I never went to the Eiffel Tower.

P.S.

Since I have never had a halfway decent meal in Chihuahua, I cannot recommend it as a tourist destination, and some might say, too, that it lacks for sights. Worth a day or two, no more. But, on other hand, the air—at 4,500 feet above sea level and relatively unpolluted—is quietly extraordinary, and it would be hard to find a better way to spend a day than just sitting on the square in front of the cathedral, watching the people and sky, getting your shoes shined, Mexican music playing here and there in the background.

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