

Going Nowhere: How to Travel in Modern Times

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The Sex Pistols knew what Freud knew, who knew what Oscar Wilde knew, who knew everything there is to know about traveling. In 1977 Johnny Rotten screams from a stage: He doesn't want a holiday in the sun amidst other people's misery, just take him to the other side of the Berlin Wall. In 1899 Freud said, lie down on this chaise and discover the worlds to be found behind closed lids. And in 1885 Oscar Wilde said, "Consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative." What they all knew is that traveling isn't necessarily going somewhere. It's simply a break from the rituals that make the familiar invisible.

In New York City, on 13th Street in the West Village, there is a tiny French sandwich shop and bakery run by an elderly Japanese man, who is rarely spotted without a khaki baseball-hat with a faded leather strap. Housed in an old printing press, occupying a little anomaly of a grey brick building about the size of two stacked shoeboxes, The Adore will not serve a scone with jam, but you will find yourself going back again and again, in spite of this militant attitude toward the right to preserves.

On any given morning, you can locate the shop by the inevitable line of customers trailing out the door:

some, who sacrificed a shower that morning, believing that a little culinary wonder to start the day can turn something like the fluorescent light of an office right off; others, structured hat owners who have never needed a watch; students from the nearby art school, who sort of sweetly overestimated the day's outfit; and those partial to tortoiseshell accessories, office supply stores, and table lamps. This queue is devoted to a small selection of homemade croissants, scones, and miniature brioche sandwiches so meticulously rendered, a considerable amount of generosity is required to offer up a bite, even to the best company.

For 10 years, this little café with six tables, perched like a small silence in the cacophony of eight million people with somewhere to go, was where I traveled the most. Though it was no more than a ten-minute walk from my apartment, I traveled, not by flying 14 hours into foreignness, but by taking a detour from the well-worn habits of the day. Distance was not what made The Adore a destination, but difference, which of course is the basis of all that we deem foreign. In contrast to the aesthetic scream of 14th street, this perch with its humility, and quietness, and tea, slows time.

These modern times seem to designate, complicate, and often regulate where and when we can find the time and space to travel. Vacation days are thinly stretched across the grids of laptop calendars, and work travels with us, packed in touch screens, tucked in our pockets. We access the world through

portals, and innocently forget to notice that we leave our chairs less and less to go somewhere. Physical and cultural geographies are increasingly mapped, so though we may be able to get around more easily, it can also mean that it might be more difficult to find the way to our own experiences when navigating new territories.

The exotic and the foreign are, of course, the myths that shift depending on the axis that one calls home. What does not shift, however, is the notion that traveling is simply created through difference; it happens with a rupture in the terms that define our norm. As a child, it was the foreign worlds of visiting a friend's house: they ate raw tofu, or had no bedtime, oriental rugs, or said grace before dinner. It was pressing your forehead against a car window in the backseat, and watching fields collect into suburbs, and cities. Now as we know more, as we've seen more, what was once "other" becomes familiar, and we find new territories to map.

But as Mr. Wilde knew so well, the most brilliant people we know, though living in our familiar cities and towns, sleeping in our apartments—sometimes even right next to us—they will always be ones who have traveled the most, because they're the ones who can open worlds by going nowhere. •