

Reflections from Traveling Around the World

I recently got back from an epic trip around the world. It was by means of traveling east, first to Virginia and New York City, then to India (New Delhi, Agra, Jaipur and Dharmasala), then to Macau and Hong Kong, followed by Tonga and New Zealand, and finishing up in California and Oregon before heading back home to Minneapolis where the trip all began. The trip started in September of last year (2014) and ended a couple of weeks ago (July, 2015). Out of all of the international places, Tonga was the one that I spent the most time at (five months), followed by India and Macau where I spent a month and a half at each, followed by Hong Kong and Auckland, New Zealand where I spent a week at each.

People have occasionally asked me what I learned or gained from all of this. I am sorry to disappoint, but there are no big insights, no profound revelations, no shattering revelations, transformations, what-have-you, to pass on to you from all of this. I am still the same person today that I was when I started the trip. This is not to say that changes and insights did not occur during the trip, it's just that I have no grand story or package-of-insight to give you. Everything is all fits-and-starts, scattered and diffuse stuff.

Hands down, my favorite part of the trip was India. This is a place with a whole lot of everything: people, history, ideas, sights, sounds, smells, dangers, delicacies, kindnesses, cruelties, good and bad. We only saw a tiny smidgen of the country, with most of our time spent up in the Dharmasala area which is in the Himalaya mountain region. Of the whole India experience, my favorite part of that was my volunteering at a Vipassana Meditation course at the Himachal Vipassana Centre. This is because I felt actively engaged with something, a part of something, belonging to a group and a team with a clear mission and purpose. This provided an appropriate container for lots of weird and crazy shit to happen, and for me to be able to handle and weather it all with grace and fortitude. Such a situation could be replicated elsewhere, but since this experience occurred in India specifically, it provided me with a unique introduction to many of different aspects of Indian life, in addition to the usual profound benefits that Vipassana practice offers.

One tendency that I noticed in all of the overseas locations that we visited was for Westerners to mainly socialize with other Westerners, despite being in another foreign culture. This happened to me in India, Macau and Tonga, and I suppose that this is just the usual pattern of like associating with like. It did help me to learn more about other Western cultures outside of the U.S., but that was not my intention in going to these places in the first place. It was damned annoying, in a way, while at the same time also providing me comfort and solace as well. It did detract from me pursuing my purpose with this trip.

So what was my purpose for this trip anyway? It was basically to just get away, **far away**, from my regular life and routines that I had in the U.S. I quit my job and moved out of my

apartment before going and then I set off to go experience places and things different from what I was previously used to in the U.S. I had already done extensive traveling within the United States before all of this, so I figured that it was time for me to see what it is like in other countries as well. The purpose was simply that of personal exploration of other places and experiencing something different from my norm. That is it.

This trip generally accomplished this goal. For example, in Tonga, where I spent the most time at during all of this traveling, I worked as a volunteer at a school with children. I had previously not worked with children or in a school setting before. This was new to me. It brought up many memories for me of my own school experiences as a child, and I witnessed much of the same bullshit there as I did when I was child going through the whole thing the first time around. The difference was that this was in Tonga instead.

That was one revelation right there: I do not want to willingly contribute to something that I consider to be bullshit, and not be paid for it. I view employment as generally-speaking being a situation where one is paid money in order to spend one's limited time on earth and scarce personal energies towards contributing to something that is more or less anti-life. But, in the hostage situation that is capitalism, at least one is being paid for it and can therefore continue to live. So, I would be willing to work at a school again, the only difference is that next time I will go in with no blinders on, no illusions of grandeur (not that I had much of these to begin with), and would be paid for my efforts.

This brings me to another topic - that of international "voluntourism". I recently came across an article that summarizes my thoughts on this topic nicely, which can be found here. The succinct summary of it all, found within this article itself, is: "without knowledge of language, local culture, societal nuances, and the economical framework of the community, this type of "voluntourism" is sometimes wasteful at best, and possibly destructive to the community at worst."

My experience with "voluntourism" overseas is that it was mainly involved in setting up systems and patterns of doing things that the local people had no interest in and most likely were not going to continue after I left. In other words, it was a nice public gesture but ultimately a waste of time and effort. The one possible benefit was that the people I interacted with, especially the children, might possibly remember me in the future and hopefully it will be some kind of a positive, constructive memory, and not just a meaningless novelty.

As far as working with children goes, I am referring here mainly to my time in Tonga, although I did also volunteer briefly in a school in India as well. I found the most meaningful experiences out of all of that to be those that took place outside of the established curriculum, where I was interacting directly with the actual sincere interests of the students. For me, this took place mainly with the subjects of history, geography, science

and library science. I was not officially assigned to work with the kids on **any** of these subjects - I was technically assigned to work with them on their literacy skills and math. Neither me nor the kids were generally interested in those subjects when we were together, so as a result I believe that very little learning actually took place with those subjects.

One thing that stood out for me with all of these travels was how I stood out as a white person. In India crowds of people would stare at me as I went by, since I was a white guy in a sea of non-white people. I was stared at, pointed at, and publicly remarked upon as a white person in Tonga as well and frequently would hear the word "Palangi" uttered in my presence, which means "white person". My assumption is that for many people, white skin = lots of money, so people were probably looking at me as a walking moneybag from a faraway land. This experience, combined with what I said earlier about "voluntourism" leads me to think that simply giving money to trustworthy local charities is probably more effective in actually helping people than going to distant countries to volunteer there.

In all of these countries I definitely felt like I was largely running on a designated tourism track, part of some vast international Tourism-Industrial Complex. I do not necessarily see this as being a bad thing in and of itself, it is a series of jobs like any other job that people perform, an industry within capitalism like any other. Tonga was definitely the least developed country in every respect that I visited, and it's tourism industry was the least developed of them all as well. Tonga does have a number of genuinely beautiful "tropical island paradise" locations, and I think that if one wanted to go to some far off location to get away from the maddening crowds and to just read, write and meditate in peace, then Tonga would be the place to go for that (assuming you brought everything that you need for that with you).

A commonality that struck me through all of the different countries that I went to was the global rise of China as an international super-power. First off, we spent a lot of time in Dharmasala, India, which is the center of the "Tibetan Government in Exile", with a massive population of Tibetans who moved there to escape the Chinese conquest of Tibet that took place in the 1950's. Then in Macau we were there to witness the massive celebrations for the 15th anniversary of the official handover of Macau to the People's Republic of China from Portugal. And in Tonga the society there is experiencing a large influx of Chinese moving there and setting up successful businesses while the Tongan government is going increasingly into debt to the Chinese government with little hope of ever being able to pay it off. We also went to Hong Kong, which was handed over to the Chinese government from the British in 1997, and New Zealand which has received a massive influx of Chinese immigrants, the largest Asian ethnic group in New Zealand. These are all different ways and means of growing Chinese influence and dominance over the world.

Despite the rising Chinese influence, though, my being an American citizen was like a gold

standard everywhere I went. It was a sure thing for people to know about the U.S., to generally appreciate the U.S., and to express a desire to me to want to visit or re-visit the U.S. if they could. I often met people from other countries who knew more about some aspects of U.S. culture than I did. The desire for U.S. cultural products was prevalent everywhere I went, and I had no worry about being kept up-to-date on the newest movies coming out of Hollywood.

I had an eye out for anarchist groups everywhere I went, and was basically unsuccessful everywhere I went, with the one notable exception of Hong Kong. In Hong Kong I visited two different anarchist cultural spaces, a bookstore and a collectively owned cafe. This was nice except for the fact that everything was in Chinese so I had very little understanding of the particulars of what was going on there. In Auckland, New Zealand I had the address for an anarchist social center, and when I went there I found an abandoned empty space that was up for sale or lease. India, Macau and Tonga were complete blank slates as far as anarchist activities goes. I do believe that the potential exists in these different countries, if one were to go there with an anarchist missionary zeal and was able to speak the local languages. I, however, went to these places with neither of those.

As far as international traveling itself goes, this is something that I am interested in pursuing again in the future. I would want a more clearly defined intention and purpose before setting out, however, and the vague do-gooding "voluntourism" methodology is not something that I would want to pursue further. I would also want some different destinations as well, to see some places that are new to me. But the desire for more travel and to see more different things is still there.

Also, the fact that I did these travels together with my wife, Liz, is a significant factor in this whole trip. It adds a whole new dimension of richness to be able to experience things together in partnership with someone with whom you are close with, and for this I am very grateful to have been able to do this traveling together with her.

One thing that I do realize upon returning to the U.S. is how odd this experience makes me in comparison to so many others who have not had comparable experiences themselves. This general phenomena is nothing new for me, but it is something that I find to be somewhat sad. It is not at all unique to the U.S. either, since I met many people in India and Tonga for whom the idea of doing big international travel trip was completely out of the question for them. A lot of this has to do with financial concerns, I realize this, but nonetheless I do find it to be sad. It has been said that historically one of the biggest motivators for international travel for people has been war and displacement. My desire is for a world completely different, where this was not the case, and where people could view world travel as being a realistic and desirable option for them, among other things. Ultimately, though, I do think that we need a whole new world in order for most people to be able to go out and see the world. I'm down for that.