

HAVE LAPTOP, WILL TRAVEL

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Compiled from two of over 200 "Nonfiction" columns by the author.

We are on the Chavon, a deep, murky, Dominican river that empties into the Caribbean. It's an unimportant river on the island's less fashionable southern edge, its claim to fame being (or so our guide, Jesus, tells us) that it was the setting for *Apocalypse Now*. He's lying, of course.

We've seen no other human being traversing the water, and the only commerce along its banks will be the sale of coconut juice, conducted under a small lean-to by a tall black woman. The woman is wearing a piece of fabric with a hole for her head and two holes for her arms. In one arm she holds an infant, in the other a razor-sharp machete which she swings with surgical precision to circumcise green coconuts for the rare traveler who's thirsty enough to stop. She's beautiful, but looking at the squalor behind her in which she lives and the two small, grim men in straw hats who apparently live there with her, one cannot imagine that she will be beautiful for long.

Aside from this little coterie, the only life we've seen on the Rio Chavon has been animal—some black pigs, a cow or two, and a variety of egret that seems to cluster only on one large green tree, turning it almost white. There isn't much room for people; the land on the river's banks quickly turns vertical, and most of the Chavon—where we are, anyway—runs between high cliffs draped in thick foliage, and it is only on top of the cliffs, too high to see anything but buildings, where the people are, and they are in the resorts for the rich. For them, the Chavon is merely scenery.

Jesus is not rich. He's also not a good liar. He tells us he's never dealt with Miguel, the boat's owner, before, but he finds his way through the complicated jungle terrain and lo, Miguel is there waiting for him. He originally told us that 300

pesos—\$50 American—would cover everything; later he'll claim that he had to give all 300 to Miguel. This is another lie, a lie even more extraordinary than the one about *Apocalypse Now*. Jesus obviously has little respect for the intelligence of tourists, a disrespect that's surely paid off in the past. But this time it won't: we pretend to believe him, and pretend also to be lousy tippers, giving him a total of 330 pesos to cover everything.

Jesus, pronounced hay-SOOS, of course, is in the front of the boat, and in the back, coaxing life out of the old outboard motor, is Miguel. It is not much of a boat—with only five people in it, there is room for no more—Neither of them speak much English. My wife, who has an exquisite eye for detail, is making mental notes about everything; my daughter, Lizz, being fairly fluent in Spanish, is our translator.

There are the five of us and the river, and the river is dark. Occasionally Jesus's mood seems to grow dark, too; inexplicably, he swings from amiable to something else. It's nothing he says—just something foreboding in his eyes as he looks at us, and I'm hoping that it's nothing more than big-city paranoia at work in the Dominican jungle. But later Lizz will say that Jesus looked capable of killing.

I drop my hand over the edge and let it trail through the water like the side of an oar, then bring it against my forehead. The weather is hot and sticky, and I am worried about the rental car back on the river bank. Jesus told us how to get there, took us from the safety of our road map into the Dominican jungle, and that was when I realized that we didn't know where we were or how to get back—and that we didn't know Jesus from Adam.

Our car had twisted and bounced over ruts like an armadillo;

it whined through sinkholes; and we followed Jesus's directions—"A la derecha, a la izquierda"—through tortures few test cars could have endured. When we finally arrived at a clearing, there was a group of Dominican men sitting around smoking and laughing. They fell silent when we drove up, and it occurred to me that perhaps we looked too wealthy, because in the Dominican *wealthy* is defined as *tourist*, and in the Dominican there is no middle class, and these men were not rich, and....

"Wait here," Jesus said, and he ostensibly went to negotiate with Miguel, whom he pretended not to know—and when he came back he told us to lock the car and leave nothing in it; his eyes said that the men on the bank could not be trusted. Now I was on the river, and the sun had fallen quietly behind the cliffs, and I wondered how much four tires and a car radio were worth in the Dominican Republic—how much an entire car was worth, for that matter—and why Jesus kept glaring at me.

I decide to call this "What I Did on My Summer Vacation."

A good number of writers finance their travel, and get to write off their trips, by doing travel writing—which is to say that they write about the trip itself. Many, failing to get assignments to do that (and such assignments *are* difficult to come by until the writer has a certain amount of recognition), simply stop thinking in terms of combining traveling and writing.

To my way of thinking, that's a little shortsighted. A good writer can write about *anything*. So even if the most exotic locale you'll go to this year is your grandmother's house in Cleveland, there's something to write about. To ignore even the seemingly mundane visits to rel-

atives is to ignore a potential source of income. Because the real value of travel, of course, is not the destination; it's the escape from the everyday. If I spend a weekend at home, it will pass like four hours of real life. If I spend it where I've never been, it will seem like four days. Time expands to fit the experience, and when our brains are reacting to a variety of stimuli we experience time differently.

And since most writers write about things they've experienced in one way or another, even a few hours in a strange place may come in handy as the basis for an article at some point. You may not write about where you've been as soon as you get back, but if you're a writer, you write about almost everything, eventually, in some manner or other.

On a more practical level, and one on which you can perhaps more easily take advantage, say you're writing an article about great book collections—original manuscripts, signed first editions, galley with author notations, etc. You probably selected the subject not only because you're interested in it, but also because it's convenient: maybe there's a great collector right in your hometown, and it's a simple matter for you to get an interview and soak up some of the atmosphere. Well, that'll work, and it's most often the way it happens, considering the rate of pay for most magazine or newspaper articles—you can't afford to select a subject that will make things hard for you. But if you're thinking about getting away for a few days—maybe you'd like to visit Boston or Philly or D.C., for instance—well, there are famous book collections in all of those cities. *Voilà!* The trip—or part of it, anyway, depending on how your time is spent and how scrupulously you keep your records—is a tax write-off. (Point of interest: Be honest. The IRS will not let you write off a 'round-the-world cruise because you're thinking of writing a book about it. You'd better have a contract. And you can't write a

\$200 article and write off a \$2,000 trip and call it a business expense. If that's how you do business, you're bankrupt before you start.)

Granted, all of the above might seem to be an unusual way of looking at travel writing, for what normally comes first to mind when one thinks of travel writing is the kind of writing that tells readers about a particular spot on the globe and how best to enjoy it. Such articles normally contain a lot of data: packages, value of the dollar, best restaurants, best hotels, hidden treasures, crime, things not to eat. Of course, travel articles have to be more than facts, and so we usually get—depending upon the ability of the writer to turn even an ordinary travel experience into something more—a story.

It used to be that when I went on vacation, I would customarily ignore the fact that I was a writer. If something happened while I was there that I felt would make a good article, I'd write it—but it was rarely part of my plan. I never went anywhere with the idea of looking for an experience to write about. Nor would I take notes for such an eventuality.

Then I went to Bermuda. There, on the beach, I came up with an idea for a book that would, by nature of what the plot encompassed, have to take place at least partially on those islands. The Bermudan waters gave birth to my novel, *The Physalia Incident* (physalia is a Portuguese man-of-war jellyfish, which are occasionally found along the coastline there), and eventually I found myself going back for a second time to do more research; if half my book were to take place in Bermuda, I had to know more about it. The book is fiction, but virtually every detail in it is based on fact. It was published by Viking-Penguin in both hard- and soft-cover.

Having had the Bermuda experience, I can no longer go anywhere without reminding myself not only to be wide open for ideas, but to be

vigilant in their pursuit. It's been two for the road ever since: mixing business and pleasure, and mixing nonfiction and fiction.

To have your travel experience pay for your trip, you don't necessarily have to do what is normally called travel writing. You don't have to write about the accommodations and the flights and the fares and the friendliness of the natives. You can write about an experience, plain and simple. It may have no more to do with travel than that it took place where you were. It may not make anyone want to have the same experience you had. And yet it may sell as a travel column, because as surely as people who don't read a lot of books may enjoy reading *The New York Review of Books*, many people who rarely travel enjoy reading the travel sections of magazines and newspapers..

There is, really, a pendulum which describes the extremes of travel articles. On one end there is the tour experience, where the writer provides you with enough information and atmosphere and activities to enable you to decide if you want to blow your two weeks doing exactly the same thing. On the other end the individual experience is far more important than its ability to be duplicated, and chances are you won't want to do it nearly as much as you'll want to read about it. And like any pendulum, there's plenty in between both extremes.

When I was an editor at *Philadelphia Magazine*, I remember buying an article from a freelance writer about panning for gold in Honduras. This was about the writer's legitimate attempt to strike it rich, not a Join-12-People-Just-Like-Yourself-for-Our-Honduran-Gold-Rush-and-Biking Tour! Now, Honduras has nothing to do with Philadelphia, but the writing was the thing, and it was good, so I bought it. I believe I ran it as a travel article—even though it would have been impossible for anyone to

have the same experience as the writer.

Now that I know all this, I can tell you some of the things you might want to keep in mind when you go on a trip, whether it's to Peoria or to Poland. Some of these won't always be possible, but here goes:

Be able to communicate. Note that I didn't say "learn the language." But it is essential that you have a command of at least one language that is spoken where you're going. In many places on this planet, English will be enough. But English was not enough where we were in the Dominican Republic—we heard a lot more German, in fact—and part of what made us select the site was that my daughter had previously spent a summer in the island republic and was just about fluent in Spanish. But had we had the same experience, say, in Russia, life—and the information we brought home—would have been much more difficult.

Buy a map. It's essential; a map gives you a real geographic perspective—as opposed to an imaginary one. You've probably seen that poster of New York as perceived through the eyes of a New Yorker, where Manhattan is half the world. Similarly, had I gone to the Dominican Republic and not bought a map, I would have pictured a much smaller island with Santo Domingo slightly below center. As it turns out, Santo Domingo is just a short distance from the southern coastline.

Buy newspapers. It's where you find out the real poop—at least, assuming you're in a country with a free press. When I was in the Dominican, they were short of electrical power. You knew this if you stayed there, because you would lose your air conditioning on a regular basis. The newspaper will tell you why. In the papers I learned, for instance, that Santo Domingo had a tough time coping with purse-snatchers and pickpockets, muggers

and mice; whereas at our resort, not only did they tell you there was no crime, they also told us there were no rodents.

Take along a computer. You know this. But there are cautions. In some places, a laptop makes you a target. You also have to be careful about dirt, sand and moisture. But this is the primary instrument in terms of making your living on the road.

Take an adapter. All this battery-dependent stuff can make you forget that most appliances can be used with wall outlets as well, and adapters save a lot of wear on batteries. But, depending upon where you're going, you may also need to **take a converter.** If you're going to a country that doesn't work on the same electrical system as the US, this will keep your tape recorder, etc., from turning into a puddle of melted plastic or going up in smoke.

Pack a camera. Don't trust your memory. Take photographs so that if you ever want to write about the experience, you won't have to remember anything. Cameras don't lie. Shoot everything.

Take plenty of film or, if you're digital, plenty of memory. Don't skimp. You can always use it later.

And buy before you leave home. I buy perishables (like batteries) in the U.S.A.—not because I'm a "Buy American" fanatic, but because I think it's best to buy your everyday sources..

Take a tape recorder. It's an indispensable part of the journalist's tool box, but when I travel I use it in a way that's a little unusual. I was attending one of those touchy-feely weekend seminars where a bunch of strangers would get together, spill their guts, promise to be lifelong friends and never contact one another again. I taped a lot of the thing—all the parts that were appropriate to tape—and then I came home to write about it.

During the weekend, background music had been played throughout, the same song repeated

over and over—to the point where it inadvertently, maddeningly, became the theme of the weekend. I found that I could just close my eyes and listen, and the atmosphere of my office changed. I was able to replicate many of the feelings and emotions of the weekend. And since the writer's job is to be not only the eyes but also the ears of the reader, the tape recorder becomes a valuable tool in that respect. You're in a bar, and the place is to be a key locale in the piece you're writing—why not be able to describe the sounds? Until you've tried this, you have no idea how powerful it can be—and not just to you as the writer. Use it well and your reader will be right there with you.

Sure, you can take notes. But notes get cold, no matter who takes them.

Additionally:

List everything you should be taking along, and check each item off as you load it into your suitcase.

List everything you'll want to learn while you're there—especially if you can't afford to go back.

Check your passport or proof of citizenship or whatever it is you need to get into the countries where you'll be going.

Keep a diary and a record of your expenses. Every dollar or peso or pound you spend, because you may eventually be able to deduct it.

Watch your phone bills. Americans take cheap phone calls for granted, but I learned a hard lesson in Prague: Less than 90 minutes of phone calls during a week in the Czech Republic cost me over \$700 because I called from my hotel room through an operator. Don't. Use an external pay phone and dial direct, use a calling card. Or, best of all, communicate by e-mail. Almost any alternative will save money big-time.

Watch your fellow tourists. They will add spice and humor and pathos to what you write. Right now it's only a smattering of memories, but someday I will use the conservative from Connecticut who spent

an entire bus tour talking about the price of gasoline, and I will remember the lonely woman from Ohio who traveled halfway around the world to spend a week abroad that turned out to be just as lonely, and I write about the guy we called Spielberg, who filmed his every move.

Remember that you're a tourist, too. If the place you're visiting depends largely on tourism for its income, that defines you. Whether you think you look like a tourist or not, people who want your

business can spot you at fifty paces. So if a native promises to take you to special places where nobody will take advantage of you—as if anyone could possibly have any other reason for wanting to help a couple of silly-looking suckers in loud shirts—your antennae should go up.

Which brings us to the big question: what finally happened on the Rio Chavon? Nada. After all, I'm here. Jesus turned out to be relatively benign, promising to send us Christmas cards. But if I'd men-

tioned that first, the story wouldn't have been nearly as exciting. I let you read it as I lived it.

Things that happen in faraway places with strange-sounding names always feel like adventures, and so it's natural that when we write about them they sound like adventures. That's the beauty of Someplace Else. If you're from Pago Pago and you're visiting a supermarket in Amarillo, you'll go home with a story, too.