Ytravel[i], A travel blog

In between: A literary reflection on the experience of travel

Lara Campbell - Sunday, August 23, 2015

The most important reason for going from one place to another is to see what's in between.

Norton Juster (1964), The Phantom Tollbooth

Bangalore, India

I take a seat just in time. The bus jerks forward and I have to stick a hand up against the warm, greasy bar in front to stop myself shooting forward. She is squashed against me. As the bus careens through roundabouts, I can feel soft, maternal flesh beneath her chiffon sari. She prattles Hindi into her mobile phone, gazing out the window. A long, animated conversation—perhaps philosophy, or gossip.

Indian music wobbles over the speakers like the heat waving off the cars outside. The off-green colour inside the bus compliments the fake flowers decorating the front windscreen. The bust of an Indian female stenciled onto the wall above the window stares at me, notifying the segregated seated plan. Women to the front, men to the back. It's a short trip. The bus stalls to a halt and I stumble off as others stumble on. The air is dusty and dry and smells like a mixture of curry spices, exhaust and sewerage.

Trans-Siberian Railway, Mongolia

Human noise has quieted. Passengers have been lulled into a hypnotic trance, the soothing rhythm created between train and tracks. The extensive desert miles of repeated journeys through Russia, Mongolia and China have not wearied the continual clatter created upon the tracks. Like film on a reel, the Gobi rolls past the window. The fluorescent blue of a cloudless day sits starkly above the dull desert dirt below. An unending fence bounces and bobs along the bottom of the window's view. Contained and protected from the wilderness of extremities beyond, I am rocked to sleep.

Paris, France

The air is thick in the tunnel. Heat, bodies, crêpes and rubber. It's early evening on New Year's Eve and already the underground at Alma-Marceau is packed with people waiting to board packed trains. We're going to the Champs De Elyse to see the lights and the sights and the people on the popular street. The train arrives in a bluster of warm air.

The chatter onboard is ecstatic. Families, couples and friends cluster around themselves, excitedly anticipating what the night will bring. Scarves and down jackets do little to disguise party dresses and feet in stockings and heels.

"Indian music wobbles over the speakers like the heat waving off the cars outside."



Wahroonga Adventist School students: Jayde Boehm, Amelia Buechner, Emily Miller, Claudia Granger, Charisse Prineas & Sophie Johnson. Photography: WAS images

"Bonne année (Happy New Year)." A young African man greets me from behind. He sits alongside his two African companions, dark pupils in bright eyes fixed and moving along us. Their over-friendliness is a symptom of an early start to the evening's drinking, evidenced by a brown paper bag hugging the figure of a wine bottle swinging in a relaxed pair of hands.

The train rocks and sways, bringing the riders into a group dance. Everyone sways together, moving as one.

Rome, Italy

Like a herd of cattle, the local passengers unashamedly cram against each other, hungry for a spot on the crowded bus. A common claustrophobic bus has replaced the sights of civilisation and grandeur. My legs are weary from traversing cobbled streets between Colosseum and cathedrals. Foolishly, I am the last one on, defying the demands of the driver to wait for the next one.

"Allora!"

I've backed in—I'm wearing a backpack and use it as my battering ram to move into the masses. The doors judder to a shut in front of my nose. The bus lurches into the traffic; a collective groan arises from its passengers. Suddenly conscious of the sticky fingers of gypsies, I sense the vulnerability of my backpack within many arms' reach. I swivel around to discover I am squashed between the front windscreen and a nun. All is well.

"I sense the vulnerability of my backpack … I swivel around to discover I am squashed between the front windscreen and a nun. All is well."

The journey in retrospect

Lawson Hull - Sunday, August 30, 2015

Up and stumbling, I wake from weightless slumber to a knock on my door. It is 4.27 am and my companions are avidly campaigning for a scooter ride to the mountains to see the sunrise. I could sleep all day in my peaceful palace-cave, made dark by heavy curtains blocking the sun and a high-rise view. For fear of missing something unforgettable, I accept.

The streets are dark yet busy; market stallholders are setting up for the day. The early air is cool and pleasant. It is hard to imagine in just a few hours, the streets will be smouldering in the raw heat of Thailand. Only the bravest of foreigners will be seen contently folded in a Starbucks lounge, double-shot mocha in hand and a laptop in sight.

Racing down the highway involves a great deal of squinting—I have no goggles and the wind is thick and dry, but I can see the blue mountain silhouettes where we are headed.

The ascent is dreamy.

After fuelling up for the equivalent of four Australian dollars and setting our bearings straight, we leave the bewildering maze of Chiang Mai.

I feel, if I close my eyes, I could be sailing any winding mountain range on earth—the Alps or the Rockies. The rainforest air is cleansing despite intermittent air pockets fumed by dirty diesel trucks rumbling up the way.

Not yet to the peak, we make it to a lookout where the city spreads thousands of buildings below. We wait, only to be disenchanted—a tall ridge divides our view of the sunrise. Bothered, we take some blurry throwaway photographs and continue upwards.

Still early—the top is a peaceful and placid tourist niche. The locals are readying their handmade goods for the hopeful day of business ahead. Orange-robed Buddhist monks slowly wander by.

After strolling awhile we discover a famous sanctuary nearby. We pay a dollar to look inside the sacred and eerie courtyard of the Wat Phra That Doi Suthep. Layered gold are the shrines of this holy place. The statues and murals are breathtaking.

After staggering up some stairs, we approach a sea of golden-glazed tiles covering a platform that opens to an expanse much greater than my digital-driven eyes can gather. A belated sunrise awaits us here. It is a magnificent panorama from the highlands to the outer suburbs; the elegant towers of the city and beyond, where the mountains cross back and forth, forever into the distance.

I glance back upon the golden domes. To me, they resemble the shiny heads of robed deities. For 600 years this place has stayed the same, regardless of the ever-expanding conglomerate at the feet of its resting place.

No, I do not ponder life or its often unanswerable questions.

We leave, not making a sound.

[i] Ytravel, a travel blog, is written by Avondale College of Higher Education students who want to share their love of the world with anyone who will read about it.



Photography: Lawson Hull