

WHAT A PRIVILEGE

For many people around the world, travel of any kind is nearly impossible

by Willie Weir

I sat in a government office in a small town in Mexico applying for a travel visa to Guatemala. Seated next to me was a strikingly beautiful woman named Monica who was there for the same reason. I was a sometimes-employed actor traveling by bicycle with less than a thousand dollars to my name. She was a professional psychiatrist with a thriving practice traveling by bus and rental car. She was dressed in silk. I was dressed in cotton and lycra. I hadn't shaved in months. She had just had her hair styled.

I walked out in five minutes with a five-year, multiple-entry visa for Guatemala. She walked out two hours later not only without a visa for Guatemala but with an order that she had five days to leave Mexico.

It didn't make sense, except for the fact that I was an American citizen and she was from Argentina.

As an American, it is so easy to take travel for granted. You save some money, spin the globe, buy an airline ticket, and off you go. It's no big deal. Maybe that's why less than twenty-five percent of Americans own passports.

Or maybe it is because we are so self-focused that the average American has no curiosity about what lies beyond himself. When I was a senior in high school I don't remember any of my classmates talking about where they were going to travel after they graduated. They were all talking about what kind of car they were going to buy.

I met Victor Hugo (yes, that was his real name) in the town square of Antigua, Guatemala. We quickly took a liking to each other and agreed to meet every afternoon in the park. We spent thirty minutes speaking in English and thirty minutes speaking in Spanish.

Victor had gone to university in the United States on a



scholarship, so in English we talked of world politics, literature, religion, and philosophy. I had come close to failing foreign language in high school, so in Spanish we talked about the weather and sports.

Soon after we met, I asked Victor how he got his name.

"My mother loved the author. Lucky for me, she didn't favor Rudyard Kipling," he said. Victor was the principal of his local school, was married, and had three kids. Our conversations always seemed to come back around to travel. His smile would widen and he'd get a faraway look in his eyes.

"Oh, how I wish I could see the world," he would say.

"Why don't you?" I asked.

"I can't. It's impossible."

"Nothing's impossible," I answered glibly.

For the next thirty minutes, I got a lesson in non-American reality. Victor had been the principal of his

school for eight years. He was at the top of his earning potential. But he earned quetzales, not dollars. At the current exchange rate, his life savings couldn't afford him a solo plane ticket to Los Angeles, let alone a globe-trotting journey.

I remember looking at Victor as he walked down the cobblestone street after one of our meetings and thinking, "I am having the adventure that he deserves."

When we got together for the last time before I cycled south towards El Salvador, Victor looked me in the eye and said, "Travel well, my friend, for you must travel for both of us."

With every bicycle journey, the value of travel increases. I become a citizen of a larger portion of this world. I listen to the news or music or read literature with an increasing depth of understanding and appreciation. And each journey brings another example of how fortunate I am.

In Cuba, I befriended a woman in her early twenties. Like many Cubans, Carlita was struggling to make enough money. She and her husband were raising a couple of pigs. They called them Psychosis One and Psychosis Two. At the time we traveled in Cuba, cows could not be bought or sold without permission of the government. In a way, you leased your cattle from the government. Fidel's "rent-a-cow" program, I called it. Slaughtering a cow without the proper paperwork could get you thrown in jail.

Pigs were a different story. They could be freely bought and sold, so everyone we met was raising a pig or two. Even people who lived in apartments were raising pigs if there was enough room on the porch or balcony. After they sold Psychosis Two, Carlita figured they would have enough money to buy a tape recorder. And, with that tape recorder, she could further her study of languages.

This young woman already spoke Spanish, English, and French fluently and was working on German. She was majoring in tourism at the local college and loved everything about travel. One of her classes was about sports and games for tourists. They learned how to play such tourist favorites as volleyball, tennis, and horseshoes.

Her instructor decided that they should all learn to water ski, but the school had very little money in the budget. They had no boat and no lake nearby. So one morning they went to the local

swimming pool. They took turns putting on the skis in the deep end while their classmates stood on the other end with a rope. On the professor's command, five or six students holding onto the rope would run like hell and the person on the other end would get a two-and-a-half-second ski run before plowing into the edge of the pool. The lesson and the skis did not last long.

Here was a young woman who was devoting her life to travel and tourism, yet the chances of her being allowed to visit the countries whose languages she studied and mastered were slim to none. She and her husband would have to make and save enough money (at the time, they were making the equivalent of thirteen American dollars a month), obtain hard-to-get visas and then harder-to-get exit permits.

We talked for hours about our countries, our lives, our hopes, and our dreams.

At one point, fighting back tears, she said, "I don't envy you your house, your car, your computer, your money, none of it. I envy your freedom to travel."

Four dreamers, four would-be adventurers, yet only one is allowed to freely travel the world.

By a cosmic roll of the dice, I was born in a wealthy nation with a stable economy and government. I am free to pedal most of this globe with few restrictions on my wanderings.

Travel isn't a right, it's a privilege — one that a majority of the world will never experience.

When I meet the Monicas and Victor and Carlitas of this world, I am reminded of my embarrassment of riches — and also of my promise never to take this wondrous privilege for granted. 🇺🇸

Willie Weir has spent much of his adult life bicycle touring and engaging people of many lands and cultures in the process. He is currently bicycle touring Southeast Asia with his wife Kat.



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