

A Wandering Mind

More than physically transporting us to a new place, travel takes the mind into uncharted territory.

At first glance, the cultural evidence that travel makes us more open, creative and curious seems irrefutable. From the Beat Generation's cross-country benders to Mark Twain's assertion that travel is "fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness," we assume without a second thought that seeing new places, people and cultures changes us for the better in ways that long outlast unflattering passport photos.

And yet for every adventure-hungry artist, there's a secluded genius who conjures a masterpiece using nothing more than their own limited experience and boundless imagination. Emily Brontë reinvented the Victorian novel and evoked vicious, vividly drawn relationships even though she lived most of her life in her picturesque family home. Likewise, Emily Dickinson—that other famously reclusive Emily—produced almost 1,800 poems over her lifetime despite leading such an isolated existence that she often spoke to visitors through her door and reportedly listened to her own father's funeral from the comfort of her bedroom. In the art world, postimpressionist painter Henri Rousseau is most famous for his jungle scenes—in spite of the fact that he never left France, let alone saw a jungle.

None of these creators strayed far from their garden paths, yet they all produced works as worthy of praise as their globe-wandering counterparts. So if we want to determine whether travel actually has any significant effect on creativity, we have to look beyond the typical narratives and personal anecdotes: And in recent years, that's exactly what psychologists and neuroscientists have been doing.

According to Paul Nussbaum, a psychologist and adjunct professor of neurological surgery at the University of Pittsburgh, it's not surprising that we feel more inspired when traveling. To start, travel *literally* changes our brains' structures. "Travel puts us into a novel and challenging situation we're not familiar with, so we're using our cortex," Nussbaum says. This activation causes our brain to sprout new dendrites, which are tiny branches on the brain cell that pull in information from the outside world. The more dendritic branches we grow, the more resilient our brains become.

While it's possible to grow dendrites in other ways, Nussbaum says that travel is ideal because it is—by definition—foreign. Rather

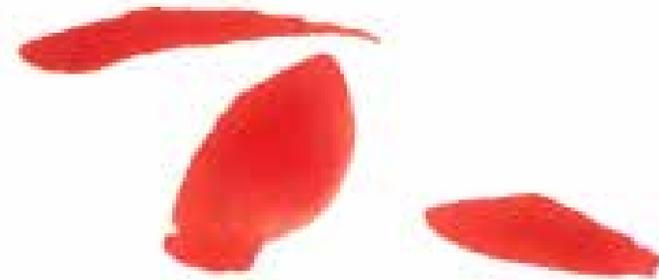
than having to seek out novelty, we're immersed in a variety of unfamiliar stimuli all at once. "You're interacting with people who may not speak your language and might have a different code of dress, form of money, food and a totally different environment—all those things can be very beneficial for the brain," he says. "In order to survive, in some way, you're having to problem-solve. And that's what creativity really is: taking things you get exposed to and forming new ideas, solutions, products or services."

There is a wealth of quantitative research to support this view. Adam Galinsky, a professor at Columbia Business School, looked through 11 years of collections from hundreds of high-end fashion houses to see if there was a correlation between the creative directors' international experience and how innovative their designs were. As judged by independent buyers and journalists, he found that creative directors who had lived and worked in other countries produced more steadily inventive fashion lines for their brands than directors who had not. Why? Because "foreign experiences increase both cognitive flexibility and the ability to integrate information," he says. In other words, our brains become more adaptable and are better able to synthesize multiple viewpoints at once if they've been exposed to other cultures.

But there was a catch: According to Galinsky, traveling abroad did not reap the same benefits as living abroad. Though living in a greater number of countries increased creativity, it only did so up to a point—once a creative director had lived in three countries, the effects turned negative.

Galinsky and his team hypothesized that this all came down to one thing: how engaged we are with our surroundings. Moving frequently tends to make people less invested in their host city and, likewise, "Someone who lives abroad and doesn't engage with the local culture will likely get less of a creative boost than someone who travels abroad and really interacts with the local environment," Galinsky says. "The length of time spent in a place matters, but only because it increases the probability of deeper engagement."

So what does that mean for the average American, who takes only 11 vacation days a year? The good news is that we don't always need to go to another country to deeply engage with a new culture. "We have a tendency to self-segregate into groups of sameness—



to surround ourselves with people who think like us and look like us," says Joe O'Shea, the director of undergraduate research and academic engagement at Florida State University. In the same way that confirmation bias makes us more likely to believe information that supports our preexisting values, socializing with people who see the world in the same way as we do makes us feel safe and reassured. While this keeps us comfortable, "having homogeneous experiences and social networks dampens our cognitive and moral growth," O'Shea says. Even just breaking our routines to visit a different part of our own city or engaging with different kinds of people can have creative benefits.

Another way to make the most of your travels is to reflect on them afterward. Alina Black, principal designer at global design firm IDEO, is responsible for planning experiences locally and abroad to inspire and inform the company's design and strategy. According to her, making time to allow our minds to wander free from distraction is just as important as conscious reflection. "We design our experiences as much for serendipity and whimsy as we do for pointed research and expected outcomes," she says. "We want to allow for a variety of experiences but also for downtime. People really need that in order to soak in the learning and make space for things we couldn't have planned for."

As a person whose job involves both extensive travel and engineering inspiration on a daily basis, Black may have a unique perspective on the relationship between travel and creativity, but that doesn't mean she's immune to its challenges. In fact, she makes a point to mention something that the data often doesn't—that for all its benefits, travel can sometimes be bothersome. "Trying new things is not always enjoyable," Black says. "I hate to say this, but it's true. Sometimes, you do something and realize that there's a reason you don't do it on a regular basis—though that doesn't mean it's not helpful in that creative way."

Going in a new direction means we'll sometimes get lost, meeting new people means we won't like some of them, and seeing things from a different perspective means we have to question our own beliefs. But whether we're crossing a continent or walking home from a friend's house, it's worth remembering that the road less traveled is often also the more creative one.

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