

Travelling Light.

In our present troubled times world travel for pleasure is fraught with risks. Unforeseen events may disrupt our plans and travel may become downright unpleasant. The list of countries one is not allowed to, or should not visit because of danger to one's life grows longer and longer and even travel to "normal" countries can involve encounters with various forms of mass protest, demonstrations, strikes, closed airports, cancelled or delayed flights, all of which can thwart our plans. To these must be added threats to our personal security such as hi-jacking, hold-ups, assaults and theft. The advice to be constantly on one's guard can slightly reduce the chances of becoming a victim but cannot protect us fully. All such incidents are as a rule unexpected and unanticipated and we can do little to prevent them happening at all. Therefore it would be better to concentrate on those risks which can be foreseen and thus more easily avoided.

One of the commonest things which spoil the pleasure of travel is excess baggage. Of course, travelling light is not really possible if we intend to go camping and sleep in tents. It would mean doing without essential equipment which would weigh us down so I shall confine myself to thoughts about travelling from place to place staying in hotels or with friends.

There are two well-known ways of ridding oneself of excess baggage, one of which depending largely on the contents of one's wardrobe. If we notice that we have too many old clothes that we do not think suitable to wear but are still too good to be thrown away, then we have a choice. The first choice is to pack a suitable number of these old rags and set off. As we wear them one by one, then instead of cleaning them, we discreetly dispose of them in the nearest refuse bin. So, although at the start of our journey our suitcases are full, as each day passes our cases become lighter and lighter and when we return home, they are empty! This method has many advantages. Above all, it makes us look poor which immeasurably enhances our security because we are no longer of interest to criminals, fraudsters or various types of con men. Even if our baggage is stolen from hotels or at airports, a not infrequent occurrence, then we can consider it not a theft but a blessing. We can always buy a new suitcase and new clothes, ideally in a second-hand clothes shop to maintain standards. The obvious advantage is that we have cleared out our cluttered wardrobe at home. But this method is not recommended for journeys where we intend to visit friends and make a good impression on them.

The second choice is more appropriate when our wardrobe is not quite so full and we don't really know what to pack. Then we can set off with an empty suitcase and gradually buy clothes along our way as and when needed. In this way we begin without any baggage, so to speak, but return home with our bags full. This is especially to be recommended for those who like travelling to go shopping. Sometimes this method can be financially advantageous if we travel to those countries where prices are lower. However, the biggest advantage is the opportunity it provides for filling our wardrobe with brand new, fashionable clothes at times unobtainable in our own country such as various exotic garments which at home we wouldn't quite know what to do with. If we didn't want to be held to ridicule, then we would have to conceal such items in the depths of our wardrobe, out of reach to prying eyes unless we have an attic or a cellar.

Both these methods have their good points but there is one disadvantage. We always drag our cases to the airport where unfortunately they tend to go astray. They are rarely lost for ever because they frequently turn up again at other airports, sometimes far away. They are usually found after a few days and returned to their owners. It is bad enough if our journey is confined to only one place but if we move around from place to place or, even worse, from country to country, then we probably won't see our luggage again until we get home.

For the above reasons, although not the only ones, for many years I used to travel with hand luggage only, not weighing more than seven kilos, thereby giving me enormous freedom. I never wasted time waiting at the baggage reclaim carousel or missed connecting flights. Despite what people think, this way of travelling does not condemn you to rough or uncomfortable conditions. You can always do your laundry in a hotel so nobody can accuse you of being an unwashed tramp. In my case, my luggage was a small rucksack with wheels which I could pull along those endless airport

corridors. Recently I travelled like this through three South American countries, including the mountains of Peru. On returning home I found that I had packed items I hadn't even used.

Sometimes I wondered whether I could not travel even lighter. Then I discovered that I could. We found this out when we met somebody on a bus tour of Portugal that my wife and I undertook some ten years ago. We first saw him on leaving the airport at Lisbon heading towards our bus with our guide. This elderly gentleman with a neat, greyish beard was gently pulling the hand of a tall, much younger blond-haired man, looking rather apprehensive, whose other hand was dragging a huge suitcase behind him. I remember remarking to my wife that they seemed to have rather more than just a shared suitcase in common.

Every evening we gathered over dinner in the hotel restaurants of the different towns we visited, each time sitting in different places at table. On the first evening, the gentleman with the grizzled beard – his name was Robert – sat next to us, leaving his companion to his own devices. This habit of his continued to the end of the tour to our great satisfaction and pleasure. He was an extremely interesting person, so interesting in fact that he deserves to be introduced to my readers. I shall try to reproduce the stories he told us every evening during our two week tour in his own words as proof of their authenticity.

"I live in Florida. I come from a large and very wealthy family noted for its numerous progeny. Then for unknown reasons, the family stopped reproducing, I myself being typical. I have never had a family myself. I was the youngest member of the family and as each of my older siblings died without issue, I inherited their estates, one after the other, which enabled me to lead a comfortable and affluent lifestyle without needing to work. Of course, I studied at the best universities, philosophy, history, art and music, but purely for pleasure. My great interests have always been travel, art and music to which I have dedicated my life. I can say that I have visited every country in the world apart from a couple which simply don't interest me. The greatest pleasure for me is to go to music festivals, not just the famous ones but also to the lesser known ones of folk music in the most remote and inaccessible corners of Asia and South America.

I have always travelled on my own but now I find myself here in Portugal, a country I know well, purely out of excess altruism. I am here for the sake of my companion with whom I share a hotel bedroom. For me this is a sacrifice which costs me sleepless nights because he snores all night long. This young, timid person is a postman where I live. He has never been abroad although he has often dreamed about it. Now he has decided to realise that dream and knowing that I constantly travel, he turned to me for advice. I advised him that in view of his lack of experience of the ins and outs of travel, he should choose a package tour and I suggested this one to Portugal. We went to a travel agency and found that the cost exceeded her budget but if he shared a room with somebody, then the cost would be significantly less. He begged me to come with him. What could I do? So I agreed." "Well", I interrupted, "one advantage for you travelling together is that you only have to take one suitcase."

"Not at all! That suitcase is his alone containing a thousand useless things. I have always travelled for many years without any luggage at all."

"No luggage at all?"

"None. It is the only way to travel with freedom, pleasure and comfort. Besides, luggage is not necessary at all if you stay at hotels. As you see, my hair is very short, not because I particularly like it so but because I don't need to take a brush and comb. The same with my beard; it means I can travel without shaving tackle. Instead of packing a toothbrush and toothpaste, I clean my teeth with dental floss which dentists recommend anyway. Hotels always have soap and towels. My clothes are also well chosen; I have a T-shirt and an ordinary shirt. When it's hot, I wear just the T-shirt. When it's cool, I wear just the shirt and in winter I wear both. A good shirt must have two pockets with flaps and buttons securely sewn on. In the right one I keep my passport which I immediately deposit in the hotel safe or give to the tour guide. I enclose with it the hotel's visiting card with the address and telephone number before emptying my pockets. In the left pocket I keep two credit cards and two major currencies. The choice of currency I use each day depends on which has the better

exchange rate. Having credit cards makes life much easier, especially if one of them is swallowed by an ATM, which sometimes happens. I use an ATM only once every two or three days, not only to avoid carrying large sums of cash but also because the value of money, especially in Third World countries, keeps falling almost every day. I keep my money in my left trouser pocket and when I am in a crowd, I keep my left hand there. Coins go into my right pocket. I also have a tiny, almost invisible pocket in the front of my trousers where I keep a tightly folded 100 dollar bill. If I am mugged, assuming they will not leave me trouserless, at least I can pay for a taxi to my hotel. But so far this has not happened.

Trousers must be comfortable, not too tight, and cool, with large pockets and made of good, crease-free material. The same goes for my shirt, but it's getting more and more difficult to find what I need in the shops. Lately, therefore, I have been going to the Far East where I can choose the material myself and have it made up by a local tailor in half a day. Shoes are crucial. I buy soft leather moccasins with soft leather soles on to which my local shoe repairer sticks thin layers of porous rubber with varying degrees of hardness and elasticity. Shoes must be laced because only such shoes can adjust to the size of my feet which swell a little during a day's walking, especially in warm climates."

"And what socks do you consider the best?"

"I try not to wear socks at all. You may remember that Albert Einstein first had the idea of not wearing socks, although he is better known to the world at large for his other, equally great ideas."

"And what do you do when it rains?"

"I buy an umbrella which I dispose of when the rain stops."

"Doesn't travel with such few clothes raise difficulties keeping them clean?"

"On the contrary. Not having a case in which clean and dirty linen are mixed together makes it easy to keep them clean. I just use the overnight laundry service in all good hotels. If the hotel has no laundry service, I wash them myself in the evening and dry them with a hair-dryer which nowadays is standard equipment in all the better hotels. In the morning everything is clean and dry."

Of course our evening conversations were not just about baggage but I have to keep to my topic in this piece.

Although some years have now passed since I met Robert, the man who travelled light, I have never tried to follow his example. Instead I have concentrated on slowly reducing the weight of my hand luggage. However, I am now actually preparing to travel without baggage as I am planning a trip to Poland this year.

Maybe Robert will find some followers among my readers in Cape Town?