



Epic European Journeys

The Essence of Travel: An Essay

In a survey conducted in 2019 by WeSwap amongst 18 – 35 olds (i.e. millennials), 37% of respondents said their choice of holiday destination was influenced by social media, with 31% stating that posting holiday snaps online was just as important as the holiday itself. Clearly, the way we travel has undergone a massive transformation. Capturing a moment on camera is certainly not new, but the way we share our travelling life with others has reached an extent that was hitherto unimaginable. The 21st century equivalent of a picture postcard (or the infamous slide shows to which people were subjected to not that long ago) might be an incredibly convenient way of letting others know about your exploits. But not everyone has come on board. Villanelle, the protagonist in the BBC's spy thriller 'Killing Eve' offered a dry comment on this social phenomenon. She was sitting outside a small café in Amsterdam overlooking a canal, wearing one of her customary garish outfits. A young tourist approached her and commented on how cute she looked and whether Villanelle would mind if the tourist could take a photo for her Instagram feed. 'Absolutely not. Get a life', was Villanelle's acid response. What Villanelle presumably meant was that gathering pictures at the expense of experiences might not be as fulfilling as it seems at first.

The notion of Instagram as a source of ridicule has become widespread. Consider for instance, the Asian couple standing amidst a 35,000-strong crowd of Borussia Dortmund's 'Yellow Wall' in the South stand of the famous *Westfalenstadion* (now sadly referred to as the Signal Iduna Park). The year was 2017 and with minutes to play in the semi-final of the German cup competition, and the score tied, Dortmund was awarded a penalty. Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang steps up, but footage shared on social media showed the couple turning their backs to the action. Instead, they raised a selfie stick so that their camera phone can snap their two smiling faces with Aubameyang scoring in the background. What is so poignant about this story, is the attempt to capture a moment, which only resulted in the couple in fact losing the moment. Posting their image proved to the social media world that they were amongst a fanatic crowds. But their behaviour of course falls well short of actually experiencing the place. They were there, but not really.

Cynics might point to the occasional Darwinian process of survival of the fittest (or the reverse: the demise of the not-so-fit). There is the story of two Indian travel bloggers on El Capitan in Yosemite National Park in California who moved about with their selfie stick cameras to capture the best light and position. Eventually, they fell 3000 feet to their deaths. The bloggers might have harboured the misguided and fatal belief (quite literally in this case), that their status and maybe even their degree of happiness are enhanced by acquiring the respect and admiration of others.

Whether you shake your head in disbelief at such stories is a moot point. Travellers have always collected mementos of their journeys, whether souvenirs, photos, or live-action films. That has not changed in the digital age, it is just that

everyone is doing it now and at colossal volumes. And yes, some travellers give in to their narcissistic streak, and the joy of travel all too often becomes a banal exercise in self-promotion. But so what? Just don't follow them if it offends you. But what did change dramatically is the sheer number of people chasing practically identical experiences.

Barbarians don't travel. They simply go to destinations or conduct raids

Olga Tokuraczkuk won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2018 and this is arguably the most famous quote from her novel 'Flights'. Anyone visiting European tourist hotspots might be reminded of Olga's observation: Hordes of sightseers moving from one photogenic location to the next, ticking off boxes on some 'top-things-to-see-and-do-in-XYZ' list, whilst capturing well-practised poses in front of some tourist highlight, before releasing the image onto social media, where very similar versions of those images can already be found. Sadly, this is where social media adds a further twist. The scourge of modern life is FOMA: the fear of missing out on a list of much-see and must-do experiences, aided by a tourist industry that is promoting 'instagramable' photo ops to which everyone seems to flock. And so the hordes march on, like crowds in a theme park going from one attraction to the next. Here is me in front of the Cathedral of Barcelona (#ilovegaudi), and here is me riding a tram through the old town of Lisbon (#tramsarecute). Ticking off this list might be great fun to some, but does it really get us any closer to a meaningful travel experience?

So what is the essence of travel? There is nothing wrong with visiting spectacular sights, even if you have to share this experience with thousands of others. That comes with the territory. Crowds tend to flock to places that are deemed unmissable. But FOMA and the conspicuous list of tourist attractions promoted by travel influencers undermine other definitions of the essence of travel. How about interaction with locals? How about immersing yourself in a different culture? How about learning new skills? How about broadening cultural, social, and political horizons? And above all, how about stepping out of your routine life for once, and relish the intoxicating process of acquiring a new identity as a traveller; someone who journeys from place to place, soaking up social interactions and cultural exchanges along the way without following a social media-defined narrative? FOMA and coasting along tourist spots whilst constantly bumping into people of similar backgrounds might find it difficult to fit into such an understanding of travelling.

So, in short: If you're the type who tends to flock towards the big tourist agenda, who enjoys Europe's top attractions of which you have read so much about and always wanted to see, then by all means go out and grab that experience with all that you have. People have precisely done that for centuries, so you are in very good company. Numerous experienced travellers with their posts and blogs will offer personal, candid, in-depth, and even useful advice.

But this is not what EPIC intends to promote. I have already argued that following crowds from one tourist hotspot to the next might not be our preferred thing. Our suggestions also encompass lesser-known destinations that might not be frequented by as many travellers. It should make the process of immersing yourself in a local culture just that little bit easier, simply because the local culture is still there and not suffocated by turbo tourism. Beyond the 'where to travel to', I would also like to offer a different viewpoint as to 'how to travel'. Jetting around the world to land in some destination, only to return home from the same spot a fortnight later is also not top of our list. I am a great advocate of the journey itself (and not just the arrival) as the main attraction of travelling. As such, I have put together some rather mammoth road, rail or

boat trips that could keep you occupied for many months on end (should you wish to go the full distance). As to city tourism, there is very little additional information and knowledge that we could bring to the table. There are literally thousands of travel bloggers, guidebooks and travel companies that are specialising in this area. We will not add to this plethora. But we do have a special soft spot for hikes. It is a cheap and very accessible way of travel, it brings occasionally much needed funds to areas whose economic viability might not be as straightforward, and of course it is good for your mental and physical wellbeing.

Our name is EPIC. If you browse through a dictionary, the term refers to a long (and arduous) task or activity. Some of the journeys suggested are indeed long. I have described three ways on how to circumnavigate Europe: by train, by ferry and by night train. I am currently in the planning stages of driving along the perimeters of our continent (all 30,000 km of it), but Covid has placed this journey on hold for a while. Nothing (apart from your funds, as well as social or work obligations, I guess) can stop you from pursuing all these long journeys around Europe, whether by car, train, or boat. You can even embark on a race around Europe (and tell us all about it; we will happily come up with a leader board). This surely would meet most people's understanding of EPIC. But synonyms of EPIC also include heroic, grand, monumental, ambitious, or extraordinary. That takes us away from a definition purely focused on a time frame. Hence, you might want to take it slowly, spend more time in one place, and if you complete only a fraction of the circle, who cares? The experiences that you might encounter along the way could still be EPIC (as in heroic or monumental).

Beyond the circumnavigations, there are sections on EPIC hikes, all of which are long (and sometimes not so long) distance treks, which once again should offer you the chance to immerse yourself in a local setting, whilst also soaking up some wonderful views (and yes, please do share these on social media). There is also a section on EPIC drives on locations that would pass any Hollywood screen test. I prefer to do those in a car, simply because I tend to lug around a great deal of camping equipment, but these trips are also perfectly suitable for motorbikes or bicycles.

I will not offer a minutiae guide on accommodation, restaurants, or precise bus or rail timetables since the internet and several apps can do that so much better, so I am merely mentioning these travel support vehicles in the individual guides. The usual suspects including [booking.com](https://www.booking.com), [thetrainline.com](https://www.thetrainline.com), [rome2rio.com](https://www.rome2rio.com), [viamichelin.co.uk](https://www.viamichelin.co.uk), or [alltrails.com](https://www.alltrails.com) will help you greatly in planning your own special journey. Hopefully, the guides might inspire you to get on the road (or train, or boat, or bike) and to soak up what Europe has to offer. And be sure to engage in JOMA: the joy of missing out!

Andreas Staab