
WHY WE TRAVEL – AND MAYBE WHY WE SHOULDN'T

By Bani Amor

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Next time a consumer has the impulse to travel they should think twice about their reasons why, says Bani Amor, a travel writer specialising in the decolonisation of travel culture.



Alila Anji, China

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— Bani Amor, travel writer

Wanderlust, itchy feet, the travel bug – consumers attribute these phrases to their impulse to travel, naming something they want while recognising that they don't totally know why. Yet, at a time when both information and travel are arguably more accessible than ever before, it seems lazy for travellers to rely on urges – or maybe Instagram inspiration – alone and not investigate the roots and impacts of travel.

Taking a close look at some of the main reasons for traveller's intentions and impulses, I believe that consumers shouldn't just be asking *where*, but *why*. The following breaks down my thoughts and recommendations for both companies and consumers wishing to travel or operate overseas.

Cultural learning

Many travellers consider immersing themselves in another's culture as the best way to learn about it, often using the word 'exploration' to describe their travels – a callback to the period of European conquest. But as that era is (generally) over, and there is not much left to learn about the world that can't be Googled, immersive travel should be the last option for someone looking to learn about a specific culture that isn't theirs. It's common for tourists or expats to spend some time abroad and still know very little about the places they've visited, so what really lies behind this impulse to explore? An extreme but common result of travellers fixating on one destination in particular is exemplified by the rampant **Orientalism** that saturates travel culture. This Western perspective of Asia, rooted in colonialist attitudes, flattens and fetishises the region and its people. We have to ask ourselves if the reason we're curious about a particular place isn't grounded in stereotypical messaging.

Discovering oneself

Instead of travelling under the guise of learning more about the *other*, spiritual tourists are happy to profess that they embark on journeys to get in touch with themselves, carving out an entire **market of wellness retreats**, sacred site tourism, and guru or shaman rental that's becoming more popular by the day. One needn't dig that deep to realise what makes self-actualising abroad potentially problematic, but for companies planning to offer it, or consumers considering it, I implore them to ask what it is about a foreign culture that they believe they're entitled to, and that they can't get, or provide, without travelling.

'Choosing to work in a country with poverty actually decreases the likelihood of establishing meaningful connections with locals.'

Helping others

The impulse to travel to help the disadvantaged is so common that it's gained its own name – the White Savior Complex. The misguided idea that white people know what's best to save low-income people of colour from themselves, this mainly manifests itself in travel culture through resume-padding efforts like NGO work and voluntourism. The problem with this type of temporary feel-good travel is that it relies on maintaining oppressive relationships to achieve financial gain for US and European-based agencies, in the case of NGOs, or exploitative nationals, instead of actually mending the issues at hand. Therefore, for consumers or companies that really want to help others, why not start with those in your own communities or simply donate money to transparent organisations instead of paying to travel and take pictures with little kids in Africa.

Work

Whether it's teaching English abroad, opening a hotel, or just going on business trips, many travellers are getting paid to visit particular areas by a company or organisation, often itself from a high-income country. Tourists and companies operating in this way often opt for destinations precisely because the majority of local people live in poverty and thus, while the travellers' cost of living are low, their quality of living is by default improved. Commonly referred to as a 'travel hack,' this is nothing more than taking advantage of a system that's already rigged in travellers' favour. In fact, it decreases their likelihood of establishing meaningful connections with locals outside of business transactions, it keeps economic flow within a privileged expat enclave, and ultimately it relies upon inequality to maintain their comfort.

Bani Amor is a travel writer whose work has appeared in *CNN Travel*, *Teen Vogue*, *Bitch Magazine*, and in the anthology *Outside the XY: Queer Black and Brown Masculinity*.