

## Our shrinking world

When I lived in France, an elderly neighbour told me that in his youth used to make three journeys a year to the provincial capital about 12 km away, and for the rest of the time stayed in the small town where we lived.<sup>1</sup> Another neighbour, a vivacious and entrepreneurial lady, told me how she envied my incessant traveling (for I was more often away than not). Traveling was indeed part and parcel of my life. As an undergraduate and graduate student, spending a month with an Interrail pass was the modern equivalent of the Grand Tour, and since then my professional work has taken me to many diverse places. The abrupt and effective prohibition of international travel struck a profound and sudden blow at this activity. In effect we are now all constrained to be in the same position as that of my erstwhile elderly neighbour. Projects relying on experiments in foreign laboratories came to an sudden halt. This state of affairs has now lasted over a year.

The hiatus has allowed us to take stock. Now that there are some signs that international travel may again be permitted in the foreseeable future—without the onerous burdens of quarantine, self-isolation Covid tests or vaccines—I've tried to imagine what might be like. And, to my surprise, the answer to the question “if it was possible, would I want to go?” is not a forthright affirmative.

What about the travel itself? Serpell pronounced it a disbenefit [1]. At a time when considerable comfort was still to be found on British railways (cf. Fig. 1) this was widely perceived as an artifice to depreciate the value of passenger railways, which was apparently government policy at that time in the UK. In the end comfort (and convenience—above all due to closure of many lines) declined to such an extent that perhaps traveling by train did become a disbenefit [2]. In contrast, travel by air tended to be promoted but nevertheless has suffered a similar decline in comfort (cf. Fig. 2), perhaps an inevitable consequence of its exponential growth.<sup>2</sup>

What I emphatically do not miss is all the bother at airports: the ever-lengthening interval of time one has to allow to complete all prior formalities; the crowds; the undressing to go through security checks; the officious examination of one's cabin baggage; the inability to even take some coffee, brewed at home (since coffee on aircraft has become execrable); the scramble to

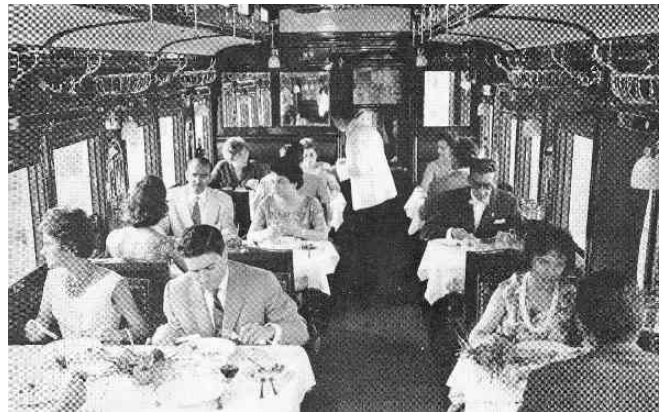


Figure 1. Restaurant car on the Benguela railway in the 1960s (CFB photograph). The gauge of the track was 3' 6".



Figure 2. Loading up dishes for a short European flight (from H. Golding (ed.), *The Wonder Book of Aircraft*. London: Ward, Locke & Co., 1927).

<sup>1</sup> He also told me how much the natural environment had deteriorated, evinced by the great diminution or complete disappearance of many species, formerly numerous, including corn crakes, grass snakes, fire salamanders, slow worms etc.—even though the area as a whole had remained rather rural and traditional, but nevertheless influenced by the baleful Common Agricultural Policy of the EU.

<sup>2</sup> The number of rail passenger journeys reached its nadir around 1985. In the 1990s and 2000s it climbed steeply, by 2017 reaching a plateau 75% greater than the level 1950–1960 (data from statista.com).

disembark; more delays going through passport control etc. etc. I used to be able to arrive at Basel airport just 10 minutes before the scheduled departure of my flight; and could be in my downtown apartment just 15 minutes after touching down. I no longer live there but on visits find that these times have lengthened to about 1 hour each way. The deterioration of the quality of the overall experience has been so gradual as to be almost imperceptible. The direct comparison with, say, 40 years ago—since when many of the basic features of aircraft

have remained practically unchanged—is enormous. Alas, one cannot evade the bother by traveling by train—Eurostar services between London and Paris insist that their passengers arrive at least half an hour (perhaps now even longer) before the scheduled departure time of their train and in many other ways (e.g., the arrangement of seats in the carriages) the experience is not dissimilar to that of traveling by air. Besides all that, one is likely to have to pass through architecturally mediocre buildings before embarking on the actual journey (cf. Figs 3 and 4).<sup>3</sup>



Figure 3. Norwich City station from an old postcard. It was closed to passengers in 1959 after having suffered irreparable damage due to bombing in 1942.



Figure 4. Wingfield station in Derbyshire, designed by Francis Thompson and drawn by Samuel Russell in 1840 when the line was opened. It was closed in 1967; the line however is still open and the building still stands, albeit in very poor condition.

<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the generally utilitarian approach to modern railway architecture (with exceptions, such as the copper signal boxes in Basel designed by Herzog & de Meuron), modern airports are often strikingly conceived by star architects.

Pressurized aircraft flying at high altitudes have a sealed cabin, and nowadays even trains no longer have windows that can be opened. In our era of Covid this inability to arrange copious fresh air ventilation poses a health risk.<sup>4</sup> Air conditioning systems are typically equipped with high-efficiency particulate-arresting (HEPA) filters.<sup>5</sup> These are good at arresting bacteria but many viruses are small enough to pass through. Besides, even the best-maintained filter systems will not protect a passenger from an infected person in the next seat. Long-haul flights, implying exposure of many hours, pose a particular risk.<sup>6</sup> And once one arrives at one's destination, more stringent controls lead to crowds and further risk of infection (Fig. 5).<sup>7</sup>



Figure 5. The arrivals hall at London Heathrow airport on 22 January 2021. Social distancing is impracticable under such circumstances.

“It is better to travel than to arrive”,<sup>8</sup> but given the above, can that still be true? What awaits us when we do finally arrive? Even after the arrivals hall, “crowding destroys the values the people crowding come to seek” [4]. Despite the undeterred fervour of travel columnists,

reflexion makes one realize that vast swathes of the world are now hugely unattractive or even dangerous, even for a fit and healthy person.

### Political dangers

“I for one will not be visiting China. I have no wish to join my friend Michael Kovrig as a hostage” wrote Charles Parton of RUSI, after Ofcom revoked the licence of CGTN, the overseas arm of China Central Television, on the grounds that licence holders are not permitted to be controlled by political bodies (in this case the Chinese Communist Party) [6]. Alas, Hong Kong may also now be off-limits since the passing of the National Security Law on 30 June 2020.<sup>9</sup> Similar or worse dangers exist in any country in which the authorities, more or less directly, have engaged in extrajudicial murder, including Malta (Daphne Galizia in 2017), Russia (Anna Politovskaya in 2006) and Saudi Arabia (Jamal Kashoggi in 2018) among others.<sup>10</sup> Basically, wherever one cannot have confidence that the rule of law will be upheld, impartially and accessibly for all, it would be prudent to hesitate before visiting. The same applies to countries in which the danger comes rather from the general laxness of standards of law and order—modern South Africa and Zimbabwe come to mind. Somalia is a more extreme case, and a full-scale civil war is raging in Yemen.

Then there is a clutch of countries whose political development in recent times has been so distasteful one hesitates to contemplate a visit. Chile and Venezuela would fall into this category, even though the perpetration of atrocities mainly concerned their own citizens. Perhaps even Argentina and Brazil should be included—the latter not least because of the tremendous despoilation of its formerly pristine rainforest. One might ask how long should “recent” last. General Pinochet’s *Caravana de la Muerte* flew in 1973. Should the country still be considered off-limits because of that?

<sup>4</sup> In aircraft, passengers may be exposed to neurotoxins inevitably introduced to the bleed air typically used to pressurize and heat cabins [3].

<sup>5</sup> HEPA was originally a trademark of HEPA Corp. (Anaheim, California). It is now a generic term defined by standards (e.g., EN 1822, MIL-STD-282, ISO 29463). HEPA filters are typically made from paper (i.e., a random mesh) trapping most particles bigger than 300 nm.

<sup>6</sup> It is now generally recognized that mass air travel plays an important rôle in spreading infectious diseases [4].

<sup>7</sup> Passenger facilities have often been offered in several classes, which mainly differ from each other in terms of the space allocated to each passenger, with the fare in proportion. This implies that the operating company has no financial motivation to increase passenger numbers.

<sup>8</sup> The original appears to be “To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive”, from Robert Louis Stevenson, *El Dorado*. In: *Virginibus Puerisque and Other Papers* (1881).

<sup>9</sup> Article 38 provides: “This Law shall apply to offences under this law committed against the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region from outside the Region by a person who is not a permanent resident of the Region.”

<sup>10</sup> And even Italy, if one goes back a few decades (the case of Giulio Andreotti regarding the murder of Mino Pecorelli in 1979). It is noteworthy that all these victims were journalists.

### Environmental despoilation

The corollary of the crowding deplored by Dasmann is development of the built environment. This has sufficed to seemingly irreversibly destroy the charm of many places formerly worth visiting. Again, the changes have been gradual; one may only notice them if one revisits after an interval of 20 years or so. Criticism has been remarkably muted, perhaps because of the tremendous economic interests driving such development. Besides, if the local inhabitants were happy to trade their formerly attractive environment for the development of mass tourism, do outsiders have any right to oppose it? To be sure, in the long run the locals will end up out-of-pocket—it really is a case of killing the goose that laid the golden eggs, unless one de-educates the tourists to such an extent that they no longer care. Evidently such killing is deeply rooted within humanity, otherwise it would never have been worth writing a fable about it. Or is it an example of the Irish applewoman’s principle that you can afford to sell each apple at a loss if you only sell enough [7]? Ultimately, perhaps, a low population density offers some protection—and here we note that the least densely populated countries in Europe, such as Finland and Estonia, have but a tenth of the densities of the more crowded countries such as the Netherlands and the UK.

Environmental despoilation can take many forms, and is sometimes on a vast scale. The case of Brazil and its rainforest has already been mentioned. The Aral Sea is another example, and the pollution of the formerly pristine waters of Lake Baikal. But many smaller scale examples suffice to put one off visiting. The River Jordan has been almost entirely diverted into irrigation projects and the Dead Sea is on track to suffer the same fate as the Aral Sea. Even in the 1980s one could not walk on a beach in Cyprus without picking up oil on the soles of one’s feet. The plastic rubbish bulldozed daily away from the beaches of Bali has become iconic. Truly, one can give these places a miss.

The underlying causes of this despoilation are not always easy to perceive, but mostly they are driven by straightforward economic motivations. The Amazon rainforests must be cleared to provide agricultural land, often cash crops cultivated on an industrial scale. Lake Turkana (formerly called Lake Rudolf), mostly in Kenya, is gravely threatened by the damming of its feeder river in Ethiopia in order to irrigate cash crops (mainly sugar). The unique wildlife of the Galapagos Islands is threatened by industrial-scale fishing [8]. These economic motivations are short-term. In the case of the Aral Sea, it was soberly calculated that the value of the cotton whose cultivation would be enabled by

diverting the waters of the Amu Darya (formerly called the Oxus) and Syr Darya (formerly called the Jaxartes) exceeded the value of the fisheries that would be destroyed. The decision was nevertheless contentious because some ecologists foresaw the catastrophic desertification that would ensue. Very often, however, those who suffer in the long term are not the short-term beneficiaries. In the case of the destruction of the Amazon rainforests, the whole world will probably suffer. The long-term costs usually greatly exceed the short-term benefits, hence pursuing such projects is really an abrogation of human solidarity. In some cases, such as beach pollution, the cause is widely dispersed, perhaps worldwide, and very little can be done to prevent it locally.

So-called “safaris”, especially in Africa, were popular before the pandemic, to observe the animals haunting the plains, forests and rivers. But, as the artist C.F. Tunnicliffe, who has painted many of them, has noted, “Soon, unless man becomes suddenly more intelligent, we shall have to face the fact that where he lives and works, animal life will continue to suffer, and where he is in complete control the animals must disappear completely.” The composer Robert Sherlaw Johnson wondered whether Olivier Messiaen had written his “Réveil des oiseaux”, “Oiseaux exotiques” and “Catalogue d’oiseaux” (already in the 1950s) presaging a time when birds would no longer populate Earth.

### Destruction of historic monuments

Humanity has a complex relationship with remains from the past. Despite the often awe-inspiring feelings they evoke, and the fact that they are part of our “cultural DNA”, hence no less important than our human ancestors, they are evidently not felt to be universally sacrosanct. War is of course a common cause of destruction. Sometimes entire cities, such as Rustavi, or Théroanne, were erased without trace. In other cases destruction deliberately targeted an ancient monument without apparent strategic purpose [9]. The Gulf War (1990–1) and Iraq War (2003) were catastrophic for a region traditionally known as the cradle of civilization and particularly rich in ancient monuments [10]. The aftermath of those conflicts led to further destruction, such as Palmyra in Syria (Fig. 6). Nimrud (Iraq), of much greater antiquity, suffered a similar fate. Perhaps we should not be surprised—von Mises has remarked that Islam “inspired the sons of the desert to lay waste ancient civilizations” [11]. It is perhaps just as well that many artefacts were removed for safekeeping in the 19th century—most boldly perhaps the Ishtar Gate from Babylon, now in the

Pergamon Museum in Berlin.<sup>11</sup> Such a solution was not available for the old city centre of Bucharest, destroyed to make way for a vast and hideous ensemble of socialist palaces by its late megalomaniac ruler, Nicolae Ceausescu.



Figure 6. The Temple of the Sun (Temple of Bel) in Palmyra, about 1700 years old, photographed in the 1930s. It was destroyed by ISIS in 2015.

The ambiguity of mankind's relationship with these monuments is further evinced by the debates whether to rebuild their ruins. Proposals to allow Rheims Cathedral to remain in its damaged state as a war memorial were soon discarded in favour of rebuilding; ultimately the same happened to the Frauenkirche in Dresden, which had been destroyed along with almost the entire city by bombing in 1945. The old Coventry Cathedral, on the other hand, similarly destroyed by bombing, was indeed left as a ruin and a striking modern building, which is well worth visiting, erected nearby to replace it.

Sometimes destruction is wrought purely for economic reasons. An egregious recent example was the mining in May 2020 by Rio Tinto of the Juukan Gorge rock shelters in the iron-rich western Pilbara region, dating back more than 40,000 years and considered to be of the highest archaeological significance in Australia.

Given that the main reason for visiting these places is to be inspired by the grandeur of the past, the destruction of their antiquities also destroys the motivation for going there. There is little interest in seeing ruins of ruins. Reconstructed ruins might also fail to evoke inspiration. Sometimes the antiquities may formally still exist, but as Vaz et al. have remarked *a propos* the urban sprawl of Cairo engulfing the pyramids of Giza, "Clearly, if no actions are taken, the unique architectural legacy of the pyramids of Khufu, Khafre and Menkaure might be lost" [13]—some might consider that it already has been.

### Staying in one's country

Given all of the above, even if one were allowed to travel abroad (which, according to the latest announcements, is unlikely to happen before July 2021 at the earliest), it does not seem that there are many foreign places still worth visiting. On the other hand, domestic travel is likely to be possible well before that. Nevertheless, all is not well inland. For example, in the UK, Stonehenge, even older than Nimrud, is under threat of irreparable harm from a road tunnel, despite the Planning Inspectorate having recommended against its construction.<sup>12</sup> There are simply too many motor-cars (Fig. 7). Odd things are happening in museums. The venerable Natural History Museum in London (which probably has no desire to be perceived as venerable) plans to display imaginary creatures that have been devised for films.<sup>13</sup>

In France, where many traditions are on the wane,<sup>14</sup> paintings in the Grottes de Lascaux, about 35,000 years old, can no longer be visited, but only replicas can be viewed (the cave paintings were deteriorating because of visitor exhalations). Italy's infrastructure is said to be crumbling [18].<sup>15</sup> Until lockdowns struck, Venice had become dominated by enormous cruise ships completely incommensurate with the city's architecture.

<sup>11</sup> Artefacts removed by a "scientific excavation" do not always have a happy end. Neugebauer provides an excoriating criticism of the fate of Mesopotamian tablets [12]: "While the field work has been perfected to very high standard during the last half century, the second part, the publication, has been neglected to such a degree that many excavations of Mesopotamian sites resulted only in a scientifically executed destruction of what was still left undestroyed after a few thousand years. The reasons for this fact are trivial. The time required for the publication of results is a multiple of the requirements for the fieldwork. The available money is usually spent when a fraction of the original planned excavation has been completed ... The Mesopotamian soil has preserved tablets for thousands of years. This will not be the case in our climate ... I have seen "tablets" which consist of dust only, carefully kept in showcases ... Many thousands of tablets have been acquired at high cost by big and small collections only to be destroyed without ever being read or recorded in any way."

<sup>12</sup> *A303 Amesbury to Berwick Down. Examining Authority's Report of Findings and Conclusions and Recommendation to the Secretary of State for Transport*. Planning Inspectorate (2 January 2020).

<sup>13</sup> In this it merely continues an earlier-established trend. Forty years ago, grave reservations were expressed regarding the then new departure whereby the Museum was no longer merely to provide displays of its authentic materials, but to attempt to communicate ideas and concepts to the public, according to currently fashionable theories [13–16]. It will doubtless not escape those who read Griggs' article [17] that he presents a rather partial view of, for example, Halstead's assessment in order to bolster his own conclusions, which follow the trend.

<sup>14</sup> Such as farmhouse cheeses, usurped by their "substantially equivalent" industrially made versions.

<sup>15</sup> A bridge (built 1967) in Genoa (the Polcevera viaduct) collapsed on 14 August 2018, killing 39. On 8 April 2020 a bridge (built 1909) in Albiano Magra collapsed (due to lockdown only 2 lorries were on it at the time and there were no fatalities).

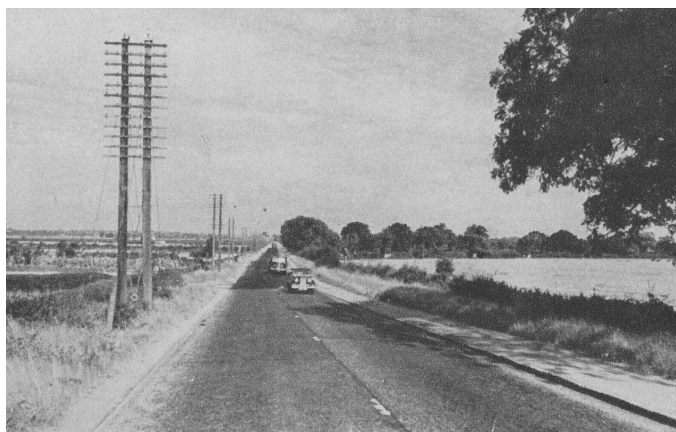


Figure 7. (Left) the Great North Road (A1) near Newark, England around 1950. (Right) its replacement, the M1 motorway, in January 2020. Even during lockdown it is little different from this view.

In many countries, it is becoming the custom to eliminate public statues and other records of past history, such as the memorials of Ostapenko and Steinmetz at, respectively, the south-west and south-east city limits of Budapest. These removals only make the places where they once stood less interesting and inspiring. If Albert Schweitzer had never seen Bartholdi's sculpture of an African in Colmar he would perhaps never have decided to practise medicine in Lambaréné.

### Staying at home

Why does one need to get away? Is it because one's immediate environment has become alienating? The photographer Ara Güler<sup>16</sup> felt that "the poetic, romantic, aesthetic aspect of Istanbul is lost ... The great culture I knew is gone". Even before the gigantic explosion that destroyed much of Beirut on 4 August 2020, Yvonne Lady Cochrane (née Sursock)<sup>17</sup> had remarked "Beirut has become an enormous slum. You go from one hideous place to another"—mostly because of unrestrained development, as in Istanbul. In England there has been a sudden abundance of reports on beautiful building [19]. If one's immediate environment is beautiful and inspiring, the need to get away is greatly diminished. But the venality-driven accumulation of monstrosities seems to have gone so far as to be now irremediable via any ordinary measures. It is unfortunate to the highest degree that venality finds its strongest anchor in the construction industry, which has the power to inflict a great deal of harm on our common environment, but less on its perpetrators directly.

<sup>16</sup> 1928–2018.

<sup>17</sup> 1921–2020. She died of injuries sustained in the explosion.

<sup>18</sup> In the Preface (1900) to his *Scrambles Amongst the Alps (In the Years 1860–69)*, Edward Whymper remarks that "These Scrambles amongst the Alps were holiday excursions ...". In his description of the first ascent of the Matterhorn in 1865, he writes, "Others may tread its summit-snows, but none will ever know the feelings of those who first gazed upon its marvellous panorama ..."

Paracelsus traveled widely in order to learn about alternative methods of medical treatment [20]. Much of that breadth of knowledge can now be acquired without traveling very much, thanks to the Internet (which has also accelerated homogenization of the world, gradually making it pointless to go anywhere because everywhere, especially cities, is becoming almost the same). Will that suffice to satisfy our deep urges to experience new environments? At present we have anyway little choice. When the barriers are finally dismantled, we might not be attracted to go anywhere, for the reasons outlined above. Tourism had become such an integral part of modern economies (estimated to typically contribute of the order of 10% of GDP, excluding the actual traveling) that there is a big vested interest in reviving it. Fundamentally, though, tourism is unsustainable. We now have an unprecedented opportunity to reconsider its place in our lives. Most places we might have considered visiting have become uninteresting, unattractive, artificial or dangerous. Formerly one could feel to be something of an explorer if one were the only foreigner amongst natives. Even the great explorers like Speke and Thesiger really did no more than that. But it was probably the only way that they could reach some understanding of the cultures in which they found themselves. Very few penetrated, for the first time, into wholly uninhabited regions like Antarctica. But all these opportunities have practically vanished—it is inevitable on a finite planet with a growing population.<sup>18</sup> If we—society as a whole—would put the same effort into enhancing our local environment as we

now put into traveling, a transformation could be wrought. Slowly, places would become so attractive in themselves that the feeling of the need to get away would diminish, and ultimately the places would become genuinely different again—and worth traveling to visit!<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>“Getting away” is just one facet of taking a holiday. A recent advertisement urging people to visit the island of Jersey suggested that they would “leave refreshed, revitalised and rebalanced”. This suggests a kind of rest-cure, “for people who’ve broken down under stress of too much worry and strenuous living”.<sup>20</sup> But perhaps more inevitably, we suffer from habituation [21], and need an “unrest-cure” to dehabituate ourselves. The latter may well preponderate in people’s motivation for taking holidays, as evinced by the apparently strong interest in “epic adventures” and the like, and it corresponds to the definition of a holiday as “a complete and absolute change”.<sup>21</sup> In reality, however, that may well be unattainable—as the anthropologist and culturologist Leslie A. White attempted to explain with his materialist–utilitarian concept of cultural evolution underpinned by technology [22]. Hence, “to be really effective, the unrest-cure ought to be tried in the home”.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> As stated by J.P. Huddle’s friend in H.H. Munro (Saki), *The Unrest-Cure*. In: *The Chronicles of Clovis* (first published in 1912).

<sup>21</sup> As stated by Mr Scogan in A. Huxley, *Crome Yellow* (first published in 1921).