

draft of Sept 18, 2009.

A Strategy for Travel, by Edward Ordman. About 2340 words.

My wife and I like to travel. In fact, we like to travel to very strange places. How many women in their 80's are tempted to go into the slums of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, on foot, to look over an interesting literacy program? Or are tempted by Indian villages in the Andes of South America?

A friend once said something that helps to explain our attitude: "You can get some pretty nice pictures of the Eiffel Tower. You may even see some of the people standing near the Eiffel Tower. But looking at the picture, you can't talk to those people." In fact, visiting the Eiffel Tower doesn't appeal to us very much. We are much more interested in talking to the people, in learning about their lives. The standard package tour doesn't do that very well.

We have been lucky, in being college professors. The tradition of a sabbatical encourages travel and there are research grants and fellowship programs such as the Fulbright Fellowships to support some kinds of travel. I've taught in Australia, my wife and I have both taught in Denmark and in the Faeroe Islands (between Iceland and Norway), and I've had summer or semester-long research visits to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and the University of Paris. We've known students who have spent semesters in quite a variety of countries. Such visits do not necessarily lead to close relationships with the local people, but they provide enough time to build contacts and friendships if the effort is made.

We've seen a few package tours that make an effort. Some of them go so far as to arrange with a local family for the tour group to visit their home, look at things, and ask questions. It sometimes works, but too often the room is crowded, the answers are too well rehearsed, the hosts are too well practiced at making foreigners happy. I've actually enjoyed that experience more when the tables are turned - when the foreigners are coming through our house in the United States to ask questions. One way of doing that is through The National Council for International Visitors, <http://www.nciv.org/>, a national network which includes at least 91

community-based organizations that help host foreign visitors sponsored by the US Department of State. We are on their list in Memphis, Tennessee, and have had four journalists from the Middle East in our home for dinner. The Iraqi journalist asked how much our home cost and how it compared with my salary. This particular experience was before the first Persian Gulf War of 1990-91, but as recently as 2007 there was a small Iranian counterculture band that came through Memphis on this program, and we were able to hear them play and visit with them in the home of another member of our local group.

Some of the service clubs, such as Rotary International, <http://www.rotary.org>, are very active in organizing international exchanges. We've known them to sponsor some unexpectedly interesting programs - e.g. an American Jewish college professor being financed to spend a semester teaching at Bir Zeit University, a Palestinian university near Ramallah in the occupied West Bank.

But for the typical individual or family without special contacts or qualifications, a much more convenient way to meet individual foreigners is through an organization called Servas, <http://www.usservas.org/>. Servas, an international organization that began in Denmark, is a pro-peace organization that works primarily by encouraging short-term home visits. It publishes for each country a list of people who are willing to provide dinner, breakfast, and someplace to sleep, usually for two nights, in exchange for interesting conversation. Both hosts and travelers go through an application and interview process, so we've almost always enjoyed the people we have met during our many years in this program. We are on the list as hosts, both in New Hampshire where we have a summer home and in Memphis, Tennessee, where we live during school years. And we have been travelers, staying with Servas hosts in most of the countries of Western Europe. Most people participate just as hosts or just as travelers, you don't have to do one to do the other.

We've become quite friendly with some of the people we have met through Servas, visiting more than once. The "two night" system has remarkable effects: the first evening gives time to talk about where the visitor comes from, and what they might like to know or see in the place

being visited. The second night often leads to the exchange of confidences - what is your life really like, what are your hopes, your fears, your problems? Often there is a level of sharing that rarely happens with people you are likely to meet again. To just mention a few of our more exotic travel experiences: we stayed in the attic of a family in Brussels, climbing a vertical ladder to get to the sleeping accommodations, and then went with the family to their children's soccer league annual picnic where we met and spoke with many people employed in the headquarters offices of the European Community. We stayed with a homosexual male couple, both university students, in Amsterdam, hearing of their adventures in university and the difficulties one had in being accepted by his parents. We've slept in sleeping bags on the floor of a student room at the university in Heidelberg, Germany. Our guests have included a computer programmer from East Germany, just when the Berlin Wall had come down. We asked him to stay in Memphis a few extra days, to talk to a Computer Science class I was teaching. Another visitor was a member of a state legislature from West Germany, for whose visit we were able to invite our own state legislator over to have a conversation about how legislative work differs in the two countries. A young couple from Denmark interested in religious music attended a local Black church in Memphis with us, and sang a hymn in Danish as part of the church service.

Even when we were going on longer trips to a place, such as our semesters in Denmark and Paris, we have found contact with local Servas hosts invaluable. Setting up housekeeping in Denmark, we needed to stay at a Servas host's home for a few days just to learn how things in our own newly-rented apartment worked. Since that sounds strange, I'll give an example. Your home may well have at least three or four different kinds of electrical outlets: two equal prongs, two prongs with one slightly larger than the other, three prongs, and perhaps a few larger outlets for a stove or clothes drier. Homes in Denmark have three kinds, too, and we had to learn which was which, what you used them for, and whether there were adapters to put one shape of plug into a different shape of outlet.

Traveling with Servas, of course, requires a lot of individual initiative. You plan your own travel, and make contacts with hosts on your own. Particularly in capital cities or major

airport cities, the hosts may have too many visitors and you may have to make many inquiries to find a host, or go to a nearby smaller town by train or bus. If you want a trip in which someone else does much of the planning, there are a number of alternatives beside commercial tours.

Many college alumni groups organize tours, often with a faculty member along to explain what you are seeing. Some of these, such as theater tours to London or tours to see ancient sites in Greece or Egypt, may involve as little contact with locals as a commercial tour. But some are real gems: one of our favorites was a trip to Bhutan with a group from Principia College, visiting monasteries clinging to the sides of the Himalayas. One of the leaders, a long-time advisor to foreign students at the college, had a real gift for enabling wonderful visits with the locals. You do not necessarily have to be a graduate of the college offering the tour to join such trips: enquire at local colleges or colleges where some family member had a connection. My wife went to Egypt on a tour with Brown University, where her father graduated many years ago. One of the few women traveling alone on the trip, she shared a room with the guiding Egyptology professor.

Another group organizing trips, open primarily for those over 55, is Elderhostel, <http://www.elderhostel.org/>. These trips frequently have a study component, and selected ones do involve contact with locals. One trip we took shortly before the Soviet Union dissolved was a trip to the Ukraine where we spent a week at each of three teacher's colleges, in Kherson, Odessa, and Kiev. In the mornings, faculty members of the local colleges lectured on local history and problems. In the afternoons, we went sightseeing. In the evenings, we had social events with the students who were studying to be schoolteachers, so they could practice their English. One evening students invited each of us home to dinner with their families. On the way to and from the Ukraine, our group had a few days sightseeing in Moscow and St. Petersburg (then called Leningrad.)

The organization Global Volunteers, <http://www.globalvolunteers.org/>, specifically organizes trips in which you volunteer to help a local charity overseas. We have taught English for two weeks in a children's summer camp in rural Eastern Poland, and taught English at a

university in Xian, China. These trips have the advantage that they are tax deductible as charitable contributions, on the condition that the large majority of your time is in fact spent doing charitable work. That did not stop us from visiting Warsaw and Krakow and the concentration camp sites at Auschwitz and Treblinka on the weekends in Poland, or the important museums in Xian during our time off there.

While on the “volunteer” theme, don’t overlook church mission trips, or travel organized by such groups as Habitat for Humanity, <http://www.habitat.org/>. One can help build homes locally, in the area damaged by Hurricane Katrina, or in places far around the world, working side by side with locals and the people who will live in the houses. There are several charities that organize “peace-promoting” trips, to visit and try to understand areas with problems. We have traveled with Interfaith Peace Builders, <http://ifpb.org/>, to visit a Palestinian refugee camp and meet with both Israeli and Palestinian peace activists. The Fellowship of Reconciliation, <http://www.forusa.org/> has organized groups to travel to Iran and other problem areas, see for example <http://www.forusa.org/programs/iran/>.

Many of our interesting trips, in fact, have come with charitable groups that, like the Fellowship of Reconciliation and Habitat, are not primarily involved with travel. My wife does a remarkable job of watching the newsletters and web sites of interesting charities. Not infrequently, a staff member of the New York or Washington office of a charity needs to visit a local affiliate overseas. If a dozen donors or potential donors go along, the staff member can have their way paid as “tour guide” so that the trip costs don’t come out of general donations, keeping the charity’s reported overhead expenses down. We have traveled with FINCA, the Foundation for International Community Assistance, <http://www.villagebanking.org>, when their representative wanted to attend the annual meeting of their affiliate in Ecuador, and with Freedom from Hunger, <http://www.freedomfromhunger.org/>, to Peru and Bolivia. Much of the time on these trips was spent visiting Indian villages in the Andes, where these groups engage in microlending to groups of village women. But on the way we visited Inca ruins at Cuzco and

Machu Picchu, and villages on the floating islands in Lake Titicaca, among other sites.

Charitable trips of this sort are often cheaper than standard tours, since one is spending much of the time at places not normally visited by tourists. You are traveling with a guide who knows the local problems, has good local contacts, and wants to keep you happy in the hope of future donations to the charity.

I cannot resist mentioning three more of our trips with charitable groups. The American Indian College Fund, <http://www.collegefund.org/>, regularly organizes tours of small colleges on Indian reservations in the United States. We have taken their tour of reservations in northern Montana, seeing a lot of “Lewis and Clark” country and the buffalo herd on the Blackfoot reservation, going whitewater rafting on the Flathead reservation, but also talking with college faculty and visiting parts of Indian reservations that a non-Indian rarely has a chance to see.

We traveled with staff members of American Jewish World Service, <http://ajws.org/>, to visit charities in Southeast Asia with unusual funding problems. In addition to taking us to the slums of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, this trip took us to the northern border of Thailand to talk with people smuggling medical supplies to the rebellious Burmese hill tribes. Of course, we also took the opportunity to visit Angkor Wat in Cambodia, and temples in Bangkok, Thailand.

One of our most surprising trips was organized by an organization in our home town, Memphis. The painting curator of the Brooks Museum, a local art museum, wanted to visit an art exhibit in Havana, Cuba. Obviously, Museum funds could not be used for that. But a group of museum supporters could go and pay her way as tour guide, and at that time we could do it legally, as certain educational trips were still allowed by the United States government to visit Cuba and a tour led by a museum curator qualified.

So, if you want to travel, don't assume that commercial tours are the only way to go. If you want to meet the people of the places you go, and want to learn how people live rather than mainly looking at mountains and buildings, seriously explore the possibilities presented by some of the charitable groups mentioned here. Or ask your own favorite charities if they organize trips or have volunteer opportunities with their overseas affiliates. Happy travels!