"The Art of Travel", by Alain de Botton

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This is a very engaging book about the mental and aesthetic aspects of travel, of particular interest to those unhappy few of us who are not really as enthusiastic about the subject as everyone else seems to be.

Alain de Botton, author of the quite memorable *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, is not particularly trying to encourage the reader to travel more or even differently, but rather to approach travel and new experience in a more thoughtful way, to better prepare for and benefit from the stimulation provided by the seeing of new sights.

At the start of the opening chapter-essay on *Anticipation*, de Botton thinks about the lure of faraway places in the middle of a wet, cold London winter, and advances the proposition that the study of the art of travel - of the *why* and the *how* as opposed to the *where* - might contribute to an understanding of what the Greek philosophers beautifully termed *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing. He cites the Duc des Esseintes, the central personage in a novel by J-K Huysssman, who was so pleased with the preparations he had made for his forthcoming trip to London in the English watering-holes and shops in Paris that he abandoned his trip at the train station and returned home, feeling that he had already gleaned all the benefits he could expect and would thus avoid the fatigue and hassle inevitably associated with a long voyage. He filled his chateau-home with objects from and pictures of all the far-flung places he wanted to visit, and never left home again, convinced that the imagination could provide a more-than-adequate substitute for the vulgar reality of actual experience.

A number of stark, truer-than-life paintings of people on the move by Edward Hopper illustrate a chapter about the poetry to be found in travelling-places such as airports, bus stations and hotel rooms. Texts by Charles Baudelaire (who abandoned in des Esseintes-style his first and only trip to the Orient in mid-passage, never to return) on the urge to travel and the lure of places such as harbours and train stations, a major theme of his œuvre, are also widely quoted and commented upon in this chapter, by the end of which we are beginning to get the point about how much we tend to miss not only when we think about going places, but also in the actual process of getting there.

A chapter entitled *On the Exotic* is centred on the life and letters of Gustave Flaubert, who from early youth onwards had dreamed of escaping from the provincial and bourgeois boredom of his native Rouen by going to fabled Egypt, which he did as soon as possible in a determined and intense way, learning Arabic and integrating himself profoundly into the local culture. This urge to be elsewhere, where one's heart really is, is led him to consider personal identity as being independent of what one was born as - a Frenchman from Normandy, for example. As Flaubert put it in one of his later letters: "As for the idea of a native country, that is to say of a certain bit of ground traced out on a map and separated from others by a red or blue line: no. My native country is for me the country that I love, that is, the one that makes me dream, that makes me feel well. I am as much Chinese as French." This reminds our author of Socrates, who when he was asked where he came from said "not from Athens, but from the world".

An essay *On Curiosity* meditates on the example of the 19th Century explorer Alexander von Humbolt, whose account of the scientific, geographical, botanical, linguistic and anthropological discoveries he had made during an expedition to South America occupied 30 volumes - a measure of the extent of his achievements. But how can one develop such curiosity about new sights in a world where everything has already been analysed and the guidebooks are overlaid with facts? A pitfall
to be avoided is seeing things at the wrong time, before we have had a chance to build up the necessary receptivity, to build up the curiosity needed to feel personally involved with the sites and objects to be to seen in new places. This leads to Nietzsches considerations about the difference between collecting facts like an explorer or academic (negative) and using already well-known facts for the sake of what he termed "life-enhancement" (positive). He suggested that by reflecting on the remnants of past greatness we can be inspired about man in general, and that by learning how our societies and sensibilities have been formed by the past we may acquire a new sense of continuity and belonging. Well worth thinking about before buying that ticket and guidebook !.

William Wordsworth, an inveterate walker from boyhood onwards, who chalked up over 180,000 walking miles in his lifetime according to his friend Thomas de Quincy, developed an aesthetic of Nature as a source of respite from the stress of the urban environment which was hugely influential in the history of Western thought. Lines such as "Look, five blue eggs are gleaning there!/Few visions have I seen more fair,/Nor many prospects of delight/More pleasing than that simple sight" were widely mocked at the time for their lack of sophistication, most notably by Byron, but Wordsworths Nature-centred aesthetic had triumphed for good only a few years later. His philosophy of the importance to mankind of being sensitive to the beauties of nature provides the backdrop to a thought-provoking and even moving chapter-essay On the Country and the City, illustrated by extracts from the poets lyrics and by photos of the Lake District where he spent most of his life. Of particular interest is the passage on Wordsworths conception of "spots of time" : small, critical moments in Nature which can transform an entire life ("There are in our existence spots of time/That with distinct pre-eminence retain/A renovating virtue .../That penetrates, enables us to mount, /When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.")., which explains the unusually specific way he subtitled many of his poems - most famously Tintern Abbey, subtitled On revisiting the banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798 - so as to underline the importance of the spots of time concerned, as worthy of as precise remembrance as birthdays or wedding dates.

There are interesting, easy-to-read essays on The Sublime (with input notably from Pascal, Burke, and The Book of Job) and on Eye-Opening Art (where the author finds new interest in olive trees and other Provencal sights by emulating Van Goghs way of seeing aspects of cypress trees that had escaped the notice of his predecessors). But the highlight of the book just has to be the chapter On Possessing Beauty, based on the writings and works of John Ruskin, the great 19th-Century art critic and essayist. Not just a theoretician, Ruskin was a firm believer in the benefits of taking pen and paper to hand to draw whatever one finds worthy of interest, independently of whether or not one has any actual talent for drawing - the act of trying to capture an image via hand and eye and brain being for him the key to understanding. He was also a proponent of the benefits of what he called word-painting, again independently of ones actual talent with words, and de Bottons account of his own efforts in this direction, sitting in his car in the London business district intently staring at an office tower to be able to word-paint it, rather makes one want to try it oneself. I had always wondered about Marcel Prousts lifelong enthusiasm for Ruskin and the very considerable amount of time and effort he put into translating and promoting his works - I wonder no more, thank you Alain de B.

De Botton finishes in style in the final essay On Habit with another novel concept, invented by Xavier de Maistre at the end of the 18th Century : room-travel ! In his first book, Journey Around My Bedroom, de Maistre lovingly contemplated and systematically visited the furniture, clothes and objects in his bedroom, and in a later work, Nocturnal Expedition Around my Bedroom, went as far as
to venture out to the window-ledge. He explained that his new concept was designed to help those millions of people who had never dared to travel, and that even the most indolent wouldn't have any reason to hesitate before setting out to find pleasures that will cost them neither money nor effort. He particularly recommended room-travel to the poor, and to those afraid of storms, robberies and high cliffs.

This is a nicely-put-together book, considering the reasonable price, lavishly illustrated with the paintings and sights referred to, and it is just packed with quotable citations and poetry extracts. Although I don't think that it has quite managed to change my slothful attitude to travel (to change ?), I do not think that the time spent reading this book has been wasted, and I do not think that you will either.

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