

TRANSFORMATIVE TRAVEL

Outer Adventures, Inner Journeys

by April Thompson

An open-hearted journey can take unexpected paths. More travelers today are searching for deep and lasting changes in their view of themselves and the world.

Declare Your Intentions

Attention and intention are the main ingredients for transformative travel for Phil Cousineau, acclaimed author of *The Art of Pilgrimage*. “Ask yourself what is motivating the journey: Are you going just to check something off your bucket list because you read about it or are you going because your grandma told you how magical her visit there was in the 1920s? Are you going because you’re at a crossroads in your life, marriage or work?” queries Cousineau.

Naming your intention helps open up the heart and psyche for transformation. Cousineau recommends sharing our choice beforehand with a friend or even a casual acquaintance. Writing it down can also unpack those yearnings and understand the pull to a place.

Part of the intention setting is clarifying what we hope to accomplish through making a journey, suggests Nathaniel Boyle, creator of *The Travelers* podcast and the travel platform Holocene that facilitates community among transformation-seeking travelers. It might be climbing a mountain with our spouse to strengthen a marriage, or taking a cooking class in Italy or a basket weaving workshop in Indonesia to rekindle a sense of fresh input and creative expression.

Stay Open

Cousineau suggests that travelers prepare to open their thinking by reading about the history, culture and geography of a place, and then continue to learn *en route* by talking to locals for insight rather than relying only on a guidebook. “Make yourself vulnerable. Ask questions and be humble. Talk to your waiter or cab driver about their lives and conditions in their country. Those that become most delighted and transformed by their experiences are the most curious,” observes Cousineau.

Anna Pollock, of London, England, founder of Conscious Travel and a sustainable travel expert, elaborates on potential results. “Travelers may see the world and their part in it differently or feel greater clarity, peace, freedom or hope. For some, it’s about insights into their personal purpose. Others may return with a deeper sense of connectedness or feeling of mastery that comes from trying something completely new.”

Jake Hauptert, of Seattle, owner of Evergreen Escapes International, co-founded the Transformational Travel Council to help people embark on such life-altering journeys, and translate “Aha!” moments on the road into meaningful changes back home. He has witnessed individuals undergo radical shifts from changing careers to becoming parents. One couple was so moved by their experiences on an African safari that they adopted their first child from Kenya.





If we truly want to know the secret of soulful traveling, we need to believe there is something sacred waiting to be discovered in virtually every journey.

~PHIL COUSINEAU

Move Beyond Comfort

"Travel can serve as a vehicle for expansive personal growth. Through it, we learn to explore the world and ourselves," Boyle observes.

"When you venture outside the controlled environment of prepackaged trips for tourists to face difficult decisions and confusing and chaotic situations that require problem solving, that's where real change can occur," says Hauptert.

"My 12,000-mile journey from Washington, D.C., to Antarctica was transformative in so many ways," says journalist Andrew Evans, author of *The Black Penguin* memoir. "I'm a geographer by training and spent four years studying maps, but I never understood the true size of the world until I traveled across it on a Greyhound bus. I now see the world as much smaller and much more accessible. The trip made me a stronger, more confident person, and less afraid of what other people think of me; it also made me want to keep traveling."

"Travel comes from the word *travail*, to labor, and trip from *tripalium*, Latin for a medieval torture rack. Metaphorically, travel can feel like torture at times, and some travelers feel unhappy,

unprepared, bored or disappointed," remarks Cousineau. "But the flip side is that travels can stretch us, just like a medieval rack."

If you have stretch goals, you can build them into an itinerary, advises Hauptert, whether it's getting up the courage to skydive or negotiating a purchase in a foreign street market.

Do Less, Experience More

To heighten experiential awareness while traveling, build fewer to-dos into an itinerary, the experts recommend. "Immerse yourself in a place. Leave time for unplanned explorations, rather than bouncing between destinations without space for spontaneity and restful reflection," says Hauptert. "Also build in time for meditation, yoga, simple relaxation or other intentionally restorative moments in-between the high-intensity peak experiences."

Hauptert suggests staging a ceremonial start to a journey, such as a special dinner or bike ride upon arrival. Similarly, Cousineau recommends starting a new journal on every journey, to ceremoniously start anew in one's thinking.

Engaging in ritual can also help awaken the traveler, says Cousineau. He suggests walking in silence as we approach a sacred site, or physically engaging with it, as pilgrims might do when they palm the feet of a Buddha statue or press their forehead to the Wailing Wall.

Sacred sites are fertile ground for transformative experiences, says Lori Erickson, an Episcopal deacon, travel writer and author of *Holy Rover: Journeys in Search of Mystery, Miracles, and God*, a memoir of her trips to a dozen of the world's holy sites. "So many people have prayed and opened their hearts in a holy place that you can feel the energy," she says.

Erickson suggests that travelers seek out hallowed ground from different traditions, which can help heal divides among people of divergent faiths. "The art and architecture of holy sites are beautiful manifestations of spiritual longing and human creativity. These places have the power to move you, regardless of your own spiritual background."

JOURNEY JUMP-OFFS

Here's a short list of resources to inspire transformative adventuring.

- The blog at *AyanaJourneys.com* explores Cambodia's sacred Buddhist sites.
- Evergreen Escapes at *Evergreen EscapesIntl.com* specializes in unforgettable locales tailored to the traveler's inner calling.
- "The Travelers" podcast via *Holocene.io/travelers* features stories and advice from 200-plus change-makers on topics ranging from creativity, fear and gratitude to travel-related careers.
- Muddy Shoe Adventures at *MuddyShoeAdventures.com* offers small-group trips that challenge participants with combinations of physical activities and cultural experiences.
- *OuterTravelsInnerJourneys.com* connects people through shared spiritual adventures like mind-body healing and immersion in nature.
- Phil Cousineau (*PhilCousineau.net*) hosts writer's retreats, literary tours and pilgrimages to historic sacred sites.
- Responsible Travel at *ResponsibleTravel.com* offers socially and environmentally conscious tours to all seven continents, including small-ship cruises to more authentic, lesser-known ports of call.
- Find uplifting stories at the Transformational Travel Council's website *Transformational.travel*, a travelers' forum and other tools for change-seekers.
- World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (*wooof.net*) links volunteers with organic farmers to help build a sustainable global community.

Lasting Travel Gifts

When you give while traveling, you often get back even more, says Cousineau. "A pilgrim never travels empty-handed. Bring gifts; even postcards from home can make a meaningful connection." He recently brought baseball equipment along on a group tour he led to give to kids in baseball-crazed Cuba. Giving appreciation is as important as tangible mementos, he notes. "Gratitude makes transformation possible; that's what modern people are longing for, to be touched."

Boyle suggests that finding ways to give back can unlock unique opportunities. Quinn Vanderberg and Jonathon Button, guests on Boyle's podcast, left stable lives and jobs in California for Nicaragua in 2012 with only their travel bags and a shared dream. Brainstorming a vision for a new life together, the 25-year-old pair had realized, "We wanted life to be filled with travel, culture and people, and to make an impact along the way," says Vanderburg. "We went knowing we wanted to create a social venture, but first wanted to see what was really needed by the community."

They went on to partner with local

educational nonprofits and artisans to launch Life Out of the Box, a line of clothing and accessories modeled after Toms' "Buy one, give one" business model. For every product sold, the entrepreneurs donate school supplies to a child in need. Since 2012, the project has expanded to also support kids in Guatemala, Kenya, Mexico and Morocco.

Drive Home Transformation

Starting with a moment of reflection before departing a place, take advantage of a trip's afterglow to recall insights learned, gel memories, share insights and move to make changes stick. Hauptert sees this as a good time to develop an action plan to "express gratitude for the journey and create a framework for your homecoming."

Then, take a day to reflect upon returning home before jumping back into work or other obligations, internalizing your experience and integrating your "traveler self" back into normalcy. It might involve a trip to the spa, an afternoon of journaling or organizing trip photos, suggests Hauptert.

"Resist the urge to check emails the minute the plane touches down or start planning the next trip. Take



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Adventure travelers named transformation and an expanded world view as top motives for their explorations.

~ADVENTURE TRAVEL
TRADE ASSOCIATION

time to remember the journey and see your home turf with fresh eyes," adds Cousineau.

The returned pilgrim has a responsibility to memorialize the journey, an ancient tradition of Judeo-Christian and Islamic faiths, advises Cousineau. The San Francisco writer traveled with a group on foot from Louisville, Kentucky, to Thomas Merton's Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, near Bardstown, Kentucky, to celebrate the legacy of Merton and Mahatma Gandhi. One of the women inked a footprint from each of 100-plus travelers, sewing them into a quilt to commemorate the pilgrimage.

Chronicling the journey can be as simple as a dinner party with friends to share what we have learned, says Cousineau, but suggests that travelers engage attendees to also contribute their own stories and reflections.

"We have a choice upon returning; do nothing and just let that experience fade or own it for ourselves," concurs Boyle. "It's incumbent to extract the meaning of our experiences and find a way to express them, whether through a photo series, article, painting or video. The traveler's 'third act' of creativity after preparation and execution is how we process change."

Connect with freelance writer April Thompson, in Washington, D.C., at AprilWrites.com.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

Eager for a transformative adventure without traveling afar? Here are some ideas for exploring cultures and connecting with others closer to home.

- ✓ Attend festivals celebrating varied cultures in your local community. Every spring in Washington, D.C., embassies showcase the cuisine, art and history of 70 countries. Frackville, Pennsylvania's 103-year-old Lithuanian Days is the oldest ethnic festival in the country.
- ✓ Host a traveling cyclist and hear tales from the trails via WarmShowers.org, a hospitality exchange for 90,000 touring cyclists and hosts.
- ✓ Take advantage of local, state and national parks, including 88 ocean and coastal parks within the National Park Service (nps.gov). Along with wilderness sites, the service also stewards important cultural heritage sites nationwide.
- ✓ Find a spiritual retreat center at RetreatFinder.com.
- ✓ Overnight on an organic farm. Visit FarmStayUS.com to sample what's in season in the region.
- ✓ Meet and host individual travelers via CouchSurfing.com, a network of 11 million globetrotters in 150,000 cities.