

Bruce Kirkby on what it takes to truly escape

BRUCE KIRKBY

Published Friday, Oct. 01, 2010 11:29AM EDT

Last updated Friday, Feb. 08, 2013 10:44AM EST

Whether headed to humid jungles and Asian guest houses, the southern seas for a sparkling cruise or simply to the cottage for the weekend, travel begins with the dream of freedom.

Freedom from the familiar and mundane. Freedom from the incessant bombardment of information. Freedom from the burden of societal yardsticks and possessions. Freedom from our own assumptions and sureness. Freedom, at times, from comfort itself.

Explorer Sir Richard Francis Burton, in words a century old, captures the buoyant optimism of setting forth:

"Of the gladdest moments in human life, methinks, is the departure on a distant journey into unknown lands. Shaking off, with one mighty effort, the fetters of Habit, the leaden weight of Routine, the cloak of many Cares, and the slavery of Home."

Under way at last, having broken free from life, we are aloft. Now what?

If lucky, some time later, we abruptly realize that both literally and figuratively, we have landed a world away from where we started. Perhaps the awareness descends while standing in the back of a pickup, bouncing down a gravel track in Africa, hair and dust lashing our cheeks. Or upon collapsing in giggles, chasing hermit crabs with our children at dawn on a wave-washed beach. Or amid sleep-deprived whisperings with a stranger on a darkened bus.

Whatever the case, without our noticing, the clutches of home have receded. We have Escaped.

Such soul-opening moments are ephemeral and unpredictable, often alighting on us like a butterfly when we are otherwise engrossed. Notably, they are rarely the moments we buy from glossy brochures or marketing campaigns.

For Escape can't be bought, ordered, planned or delivered. Rather, a complex and personal process must unfold, which sadly means that the more pressing and insistent our "need" to "get away from it all," the harder this becomes to achieve. In this manner, Escape is like coolness - care too much, strive too hard, and it slips from our grasp.

Also fatal to Escape are the twin vices of our modern world: time (too little of it) and connection (too much of it).

The tendency nowadays is to cram as much as possible into our journeys. (Even if we cram pool-lying, sun-tanning and mojito-sipping - it's still cramming.) And the shorter the escape, the more perfect it must be. Flights leave Friday after work, home Sunday in time to do laundry. Strict schedules eliminate all uncertainty. The fun must come at such a frenetic pace that we return exhausted ... and in need of another vacation.

Far worse is the chronic need to stay connected (and distracted). From the jungles of Laos to the beaches of Mexico and the villages of the Himalaya, wireless networks and Internet cafés are everywhere. Social media demand we document every minute of our adventures. (Pics! Or it didn't happen.) So we post updates, photograph meals, text friends from summits, check in with the boss, and, in the process, rob ourselves of the very freedom we seek.

Even on wilderness journeys, satellite phones are now commonplace. This summer, while on Axel Heiberg Island (in Canada's High Arctic), an English friend disappeared into his tent, called his Swiss wife at their French home and, after a long chat, re-emerged to report that Spain had won the World Cup that morning.

The mere presence of a connection to the outside, even if never enacted, alters a journey seismically. Weaning ourselves from such addictive technology is one of the greatest challenges facing travellers today.

Millennia ago, on the battlefields of Rome, fleeing soldiers discovered that the key to avoiding slaughter was to unclasp and cast aside their heavy capes. They literally ex (Latin: out of) caped. This etymology (eerily evocative of Burton's declaration, with which I began) is a reminder that the gifts of travel come only after we have evaded our enemies, only after we have unclasped the beliefs and certainties that bind us, tossed aside the habits and routines that moor us. In other words, only once "ex caped" can we truly Escape.

Then, the road is free to remind us of who we are, and who we aren't. Stumbling down unfamiliar pathways, in foreign lands and in our hearts, we revel in anonymity, experiment with alternative personas, unearth parts that have drifted under, and along the way, catch glimpses of a younger - perhaps truer - self.

Travel, at its best, confirms the elemental value of time, of human connection, and strangely, of home. And the whole unlikely beauty of the thing upends much of what we take for granted, testing our balance and leaving us fiercely alive.

Bruce Kirkby is the author of Sand Dance: By Camel Across Arabia's Great Southern Desert and The Dolphin's Tooth: A Decade in Search of Adventure, both bestsellers.