

START WHERE YOU ARE

In *The Greater Journey*, his chronicle of 19th-century American artists and intellectuals traveling to France, the historian David McCullough describes the overland trek most visitors took from Le Havre to Paris, with its strategic stop at Rouen to see the cathedral at the center of town. “The Americans had never beheld anything remotely comparable,” he writes. “It was their first encounter with a Gothic masterpiece, indeed with one of the glories of France, a structure built of limestone and far more monumental, not to say centuries older, than any they had ever seen.”

The gobsmacked Americans—including such luminaries as Stanford White, Charles McKim, Mary Cassatt, and Augustus Saint-Gaudens—were hungry for edification. They saw the great cities of Europe as open-air classrooms, and the influence of their studies is clear—from the echo of Henri Labrouste’s *Bibliothèque St-Genevieve* in the Boston Public Library to St. Bartholomew’s church in New York City, which White modeled after the abbey at St.-Gilles-du-Gard. Painters from the Hudson River School kept sketchbooks of the Roman Forum or the islands of the Adriatic, learning as they drew. (That tradition continues—as our sketches by architecture students and their instructors beginning on page 26 attest—even if a digital stylus and pad now sometimes replace graphite.)

Although they sojourned by steamer and stage-coach, the artists and architects on tour in the 1800s traveled for the same reasons we do today: to see the world with new eyes, to be shaken from our complacencies, to feel somehow more fully alive. Travel heightened the senses with a frisson of unease. Friendships flourished in unfamiliar surroundings; the unexpected rose up everywhere, allowing the visitors to see things literally in a new light. Writer and philosopher Pico Iyer equates this special openness with falling in love: “All good trips are, like love, about being carried out of yourself and deposited in the midst of terror and wonder.”

Today we have to work harder and go farther to get outside ourselves; there’s now a Starbucks at the historic Lingyin Temple in Hangzhou, China. Travel is fraught with guilt over the disruption of indigenous cultures and the jet engine’s carbon wingspan. But we still love to shake off our familiar cloaks and depart into the unknown. Even the mortifications of airports—the interminable lines, the security wandings, the purgatory between flights—can be part of the adventure. It’s certainly a step outside our comfort zone, albeit more the product of conscious planning than of chance. (See “Nonstop,” Ian Baldwin’s enlightening survey of airport design, on page 34.)

Those who travel know the delicious dislocations that await: camels loping among the traffic in the center of Cairo; a craftsman in Mumbai living in the crawl space above his market stall; the incomprehensible, musical chatter of foreign languages; the otherworldly feeling of standing before the Taj Mahal or the Eiffel Tower—places you’d otherwise consider clichés—eyes wet, heart pounding.

But what if we could bring that sense of wakeful wonder and freshness to our everyday surroundings? We tend not to recognize our own environments, just as the fish doesn’t know it’s swimming in water until it gets yanked out. But the sun will never glint off the corner of that building quite the same way again. Watching the crowds from a sidewalk table can be as absorbing in Boston as in Barcelona if you truly pay attention. The River Charles is as blue as the Danube.

Seeing things this way requires more of an inner journey than your typical trip to Paris. It begins with a single step. ■

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Photo: Bert Steiger