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TRAVELLING THE WORLD FOR COMIC RELIEF

Manga, Bugs, Waldo, Godzilla and You

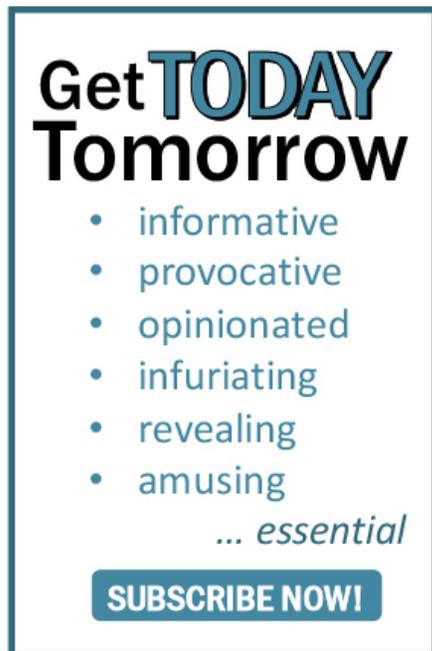
Steve Gillick

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17 MAY 2013: On my first trip to New York City, sometime in the early 1980's I walked into an art gallery that featured a display of Disney cartoons

in the front window. There was a great piece that featured Bugs Bunny lounging by the side of a road and munching a carrot, while on the road Elmer Fudd chased Daffy Duck and Wile E. Coyote chased the Roadrunner.



When I bought the art work the salesperson suggested that Chuck Jones, the Disney artist would send me an autograph as part of a special promotion. She asked what I wanted Jones to write and thinking fast I suggested “Cartoons, laughter and fantasy are the components of a reality suited to the Bugs in all of us”.

This started off a fascination with cartoon art work and I started to consider the tie-in between cartoons and travel.

This included Sherman and Mr. Peabody from the Rocky and Bullwinkle show travelling in the ‘Wayback’ machine; Tin Tin’s adventures in Morocco, Tibet, Egypt or the Moon; the Animaniacs singing about “The Nations of the

World (you can find this on You Tube); Where's Waldo in Portugal (Onde Est❖ Wally) or Finland (Miss❖ Vallu Iuuraa), and of course Superman saving people in all countries and on many other planets.

For me, cartoons are fascinating but for some they are a compulsion and I saw a small example of this on May 11th in Toronto at the Toronto Comic Arts Festival. My specific interest was a talk at The Japan Foundation by the famous Manga creator, Taiyo Matsumoto. The room was packed with people of all ages admiring the art displays, some doing their own drawings while listening to the speaker, and many uploading copies of Matsumoto's work on their ipads and iphones so they could follow the references made in the talk.

The term "manga" (pronounced 'mun-gah') literally means "whimsical drawings" but refers specifically to Japanese comics and cartooning. (Astro Boy was one of the first manga characters that went international).

In Japan you will find people of all ages reading manga books that include short stories, serials, and full scale novels. In fact it's quite common to find people on the subway reading their latest manga storybook collection. In bookstores it can be difficult to walk down the aisles in the manga section, especially after school lets out, due to the number of people reading the books. And you will be pleased to know that manga can be purchased in translated versions including English.

But the love of manga is not confined to Japan, and it, along with other comic art forms, have become a travel niche market and certainly the stimulus for ideas on how to attract an artistic –and often

younger - demographic to the world of travel and discovery. Japan is a natural destination. One company in the UK, Japan Journeys, is offering the "Japan Manga Tour" that includes a visit to the Ghibli Museum in Mitaka, Tokyo that features anim◆ (animation style drawings, including Manga), a private tour of an anim◆ studio; visits to Akihabara and Nakano Broadway (the home of electronics and a mega-manga-mall full of specialty stores), a visit to the Tokyo Tower, described as "Godzilla's favourite haunt" and a visit to Harajuku, the youth shopping area of Tokyo where young people in their teens and early twenties dress up in wild and whacky costumes and hang out, just for the fun of it, especially on weekends. Of course an optional visit to Tokyo Disneyland can be arranged. This is a great example not only of a niche tour but also a tour created to capture the imagination of a youthful market.

Japanese manga fans can be found around the world. The website Rocketnews24 quoted 'Jessica' from Canada as saying that "Japanese manga have great stories. On the other hand, American comics can be very dark and depressing. Japanese manga use male and female characters who are normal, everyday people and so it's easy to relate to them".

In Japan, 'cartoons' can be visited in many places. There are the Hello Kitty shops in and around Tokyo. There is the legend of Momotaro, the diminutive boy born from a peach pit who grew up to slay the ogres. Visitors can tour the cave on the island of Megi-Jima just outside of the town of Takamatsu in Shikoku. In Naha, the capital of Okinawa, you can find statues of manga and Hollywood cartoon characters up and down the main street as you shop.

For those with more of an historic leaning there are the drawings in a cave known as El Castillo on Spain's Cantabrian Sea coast. An outline of hands and images of horses and bison are recognized as the oldest cave paintings in the world. They may have been purely decorative and fun (although we are unsure of the extent of a Neanderthal's sense of humour), or it could have related to hunting and food supplies. The point is that pictures were used to create a dynamic interaction between seeing something static - a painting on a wall - and thinking or dreaming about the real object ♦ the horses and bison. The Lascaux Caves near Montignac in the South of France are also well known for cave art. For all intents and purposes, this was the beginning of cartooning ♦ telling a story through characters.

In the same spirit, centuries later, we have the idea of frescoes (paintings done in fresh plaster) - and seen today in such diverse locations as the Goreme Cave Churches in Turkey and the frescoes in churches in Italy (e.g. in Assisi). Frescoes have been described as the comic books of the past - depicting through imagery the teachings in the Bible and the 'rules' of society. While the population was mostly illiterate they could still see and appreciate the evils of hell or the rewards of heaven, without having to read the Bible

So today's cartoon and comic book aficionados can travel to see the history of the art or just the modern interpretation of that art.

And comic books are big business in the publishing world. Wikipedia notes that in Japan, manga publishing alone generates in excess of \$6 billion annually. Total comic book sales in North America

are estimated at \$700-\$730 million (www.comichron.com). One statistic even includes the claim that 25% of comic book and comic strip readers in the US and Canada are 65 years of age and older.

The popularity of this art form seems to be borne out by the number of comic book conventions around the world including multiple cities in India, Japan, Malaysia, France, Italy, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States and Brazil.

While comics, cartooning, manga and frescoes may be examples of niche market interests, they are also great examples of creative out-of-the-box ways of thinking when conceiving ideas for family travel or youth-specific travel - or even for Seniors travel. If your town or city hosts a convention or if you are close to one that does, then maybe there is a market out there for dual-purpose travel: see the world and do some cartoon networking while you're at it. Ever think of setting up a travel booth at a comic convention where you can promote tours that include cartoon/comic themes? Something to think about: Selling travel and providing some comic relief along the way.

The art work of Taiyo Matsumoto is on display at The Japan Foundation until June 7th, 2013. For those who are attending Steve Gillick's Global Explorers Network meeting on June 5th, you will be able to see the art at that time.

Details at www.talkingtravel.ca/global-explorers-network.html



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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