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WHAT MY DENTIST TOLD ME

Embracing the global staycation phenomenon and more

Steve Gillick

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30 OCT 2017: "We went on a wine tour of France. We don't drink wine but the scenery was amazing. All those classic vistas of small French towns, winding waterways, vineyards, chateaus...it was quite spectacular".



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My dentist is a pretty cool guy. I've known him for over 20 years and most of our discussions, in between polishing my molars, have been about travel. He and his wife enjoy cruises on both large ocean and small river ships. He's been to China, Alaska, South America, Israel, the Caribbean and various other destinations. While not into challenging physical adventure, his holidays are fun, relaxing and full of stories and memories about the people he's met and the sights he's seen.

So when he told me recently that he cancelled his trip to Southeast Asia and was now heading back to the Caribbean, I was a bit concerned and not because of the Caribbean per se. I've enjoyed the labour of love of writing about specific Caribbean Islands: the people, festivals, traditions, culture food and attractions, on numerous occasions. And we know that after Hurricanes Irma and Maria, a return to high levels of tourism will play a vital role in the full recovery of the countries affected. My concern was more on the general perception of travel around the world.

My dentist implied that there were too many issues of concern in Southeast Asia, highlighted by North Korea's verbal belligerence and missile tests, as well as the tragic Rohingya refugee situation emanating out of Myanmar and now in Bangladesh. (For the record, another friend also cancelled a waterways cruise in Southeast Asia for similar reasons). Europe was ruled out due to possible repercussions from the Catalonia independence movement, plus the ongoing possibility of terrorist attacks any place, anytime. So the decision was to either postpone all travel plans (which was quickly dismissed on the basis that once you get 'the travel habit', you can't just go cold turkey and stop) or to take an extended "staycation".

It's interesting how the idea of a 'staycation' originally referred to holidaying in the town, province or state in which you lived. Then the boundaries began to expand to include the country, then the continent and then the entire hemisphere. Leave it to travellers to find a way to fulfill their need to explore, relax, and seek out new experiences, while still maintaining their sense of safety and security!

But all travellers are not created equally and some love the idea of a staycation but actually define it in terms of a comfort level with the planet itself. These 'global staycationers' know no limits in terms of travel experiences. At the recent World of Taste: Tourism and Gastronomy Festival in Toronto, the public was enticed and enchanted with destination-based tour operators featuring countries and opportunities that, well, Toronto doesn't normally see at travel shows.

And if the goal was to open the imagination, plant

suggestive seeds for future travels, and be captivated by the enthusiasm of the destination reps, then the show seemed to be a great success.

I managed to touch base with many of the countries represented out of a general field that included such intriguing places as Tajikistan, Botswana, Sudan, Slovenia, Ethiopia, Pakistan, Madagascar, Romania, Rwanda, Myanmar, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Mongolia, Lebanon, Eritrea, Georgia, Moldova, Cote D'Ivoire and Cameroon, along with more mainstream destinations such as Indonesia, Cambodia, Morocco, Singapore, China, Thailand, Chile, Bolivia, Croatia, Fiji, India, Ecuador and more.

While Uzbekistan has been on my wish list for several years, I never really thought about neighbouring Tajikistan. For inveterate country collectors, the seven "Stans" (meaning country, nation, place or homeland) are one of the prized accomplishments: Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The posters at the Tajikistan booth featured families living in yurts, using horses as the main mode of transportation, donkey and yak trekking, climbing mountains, cultural interaction, photographic opportunities galore and trips across the border to northern Afghanistan where I was assured "it's safe".

The photos at the Mongolia booth bore some similarity to Tajikistan. I visited Mongolia in 2000 and still hold it to be one of my top adventures. The posters and brochures on display emphasized activities I hadn't done before including journeys into the Gobi Desert and the annual Golden Eagle Festival in the Altai Mountains. For those birding clients who say they've seen and done it all, this is

a creative suggestion you can make!

Another surprise were the scenes depicted at the Sudan booth. What appeared to be pictures of Egyptian pyramids (before the tourist buses arrive) were in fact scenes of the area known as Nubia. Francesca, who along with her husband owns Italian Tourism Company (with offices in Milan and Khartoum) suggested that Sudan was for those who wanted an absolutely unique experience: stunning scenery, cultural interaction, camel tours, battlefield visits, luxury desert camping and boutique hotels, all in a crowd-free environment. It's you and the desert; you and the pyramids.

I chatted with Thuso at the Botswana display about the features that distinguished his country from the more popular safari venues. He spoke about the Okavango Delta, Moremi Game Reserve, Chobe National Park, salt pans the size of Portugal that attract both birds and herds of animals, 90,000 year old cave paintings, traditional craft displays, and interaction with the Tswana people.

At Madagascar's booth I learned about Red Tsiingy Park with its incredible red laterite stone formations, Lemur trekking, birding, whale watching, scuba diving, Baobab Alley, and Malagasy cultural experiences. Have you eaten some good Romazava lately?

And switching directions, I learned about Moldova, a former Soviet Republic wedged between Romania and Ukraine. When I was in Croatia earlier this year, travellers spoke about their trips to Albania, Serbia and Bulgaria but no one mentioned Moldova. Perhaps they should have. The country has a growing reputation as 'the last visited country in Eastern Europe' featuring

monasteries, wine tours, rural tourism in ‘peasant homes’, festivals, museums, parks, forests and panoramic landscapes, and is often touted for its’ “off the beaten track charm”.

I have a habit of only collecting brochures at travel shows from destinations that I would seriously add to my travel wish list, but I left the Tourism and Gastronomy Festival with a bag full of material and am currently figuring out how to include some of these destinations on future travels.

Like many others, the entire planet is my ‘staycation’ zone where the rewards are the very act of travel, along with meeting and chatting with locals, tasting new foods and drinks, and visiting sights that are not always ‘standard’ tourist fare. But it’s only one way of ‘connecting’ with the world. My dentist listens to my stories, sometimes shudders, and continues to enjoy his own brand of ‘escape’.

We all have our own comfort zones and one of the skills of a trained travel professional is the ability to ease this information out of a client and then respond with a reassuring travel strategy. This in itself is an adventurous and rewarding experience.





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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