



Photo: Paul Hul/Hollandse Hoofde (1958)

# Keep on moving

What actually drives our desire to travel? Jane Szita searches for the answers

## If you were asked

what inspired you to take the trip you're taking now, the chances are you wouldn't cite your DNA. Yet modern science suggests that travel is in our genes. When our distant ancestors migrated out of Africa, around 60,000 years ago, it seems that they had more than their fair share of the so-called "adventure gene" DRD4 – more, anyway, than their cousins who opted to stay at home.

**Identified in the 1980s**, DRD4 is a genetic marker that controls the intake of dopamine by the brain's reward centre, and is associated with all kinds of risk-taking and novelty-seeking behaviour. Geneticists believe DRD4 has influenced multiple migrations, explorations and innovations in human history – as well as

launching a thousand whitewater rafting trips and *Survivor*-style TV shows in more recent times.

## But genetic explanations

haven't stopped a host of philosophers, social scientists, psychologists and travel industry marketers from trying to uncover the less scientific reasons why we travel (or think we do). For example, in his book, *Tourist Behaviour*, Philip L. Pearce, a psychologist and Professor of Tourism at the James Cook University in Australia, surveys over 1,000 travellers from Western countries to discover their "tourist motivations".

The results suggest that the main reason for travelling is the quest for novelty, followed by the desire to escape everyday reality. The third motivation, ►►



## How to travel

Jan Morris, travel writer

- Wherever you go, pretend to yourself that you have never been there before.
- Remember that any experience, of any sort, even going to the dentist or losing a passport, is grist to the proper traveller's mill.
- Keep in mind E. M. Forster's advice about the best way to see Alexandria – "To wander aimlessly about" – or Lord Salisbury's theory of an ideal foreign policy – "To float lazily downstream, occasionally putting out a diplomatic boat-hook to avoid collisions".
- Don't set out to see what other people see.
- Take a sketchbook, not a camera.
- Don't be ashamed to go on a bus tour.
- Travel alone.
- Keep a sense of humour.
- Learn how to listen.
- Bargain fairly.
- Learn some of the local language.
- Be aware of the social and political situation of the country you're visiting.



Photo: Paul Huf/NA/Hollandse Hoogte

►► the desire to strengthen a relationship with a travelling companion, seems at odds with the fourth, which is the desire to exercise autonomy. Experiencing nature is the fifth most important motivation for a journey, with self-development and stimulation sixth and seventh on the list.

exploring why we keep going places – and why our travelling experiences so often disappoint us (basically because we have to take ourselves, and all our mental baggage, along).

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"I think we travel because in the end, where we are deeply influenced by what sort of people we can be," says philosopher and writer Alain de Botton. "We are not the same people in all places. A certain kind of wallpaper or smell deeply influences our character." De Botton wrote a book, *The Art of Travel*,

paradise with none of the discomforts and compromises of home," says De Botton. He likens the illusory power of the experience to falling in love – potent, but ultimately no guarantee of happiness. To travel hopefully, as Robert Louis Stevenson once put it, really can be better than to arrive. Or as De Botton

LEFT: Summer holiday time on the beach (1953)  
RIGHT: A family station wagon and camping trailer hit the road (1960)  
BELOW: In front of the S.S. Queen of Bermuda (1949)

would suggest, to plan optimistically is often the best part of the trip.

"Happiness is not as easy in reality as in anticipation," he explains. "And much of the reason has to do with how complicated we are. We get grumpy and have conflicting wishes and are paranoid and anxious and tetchy. It's hard enough for us just to feel comfortable in a chair in the sun – the experience can be spoiled by too much heat or too much shade, the noise of the hotel bar, anxieties about work or an unexpected desire for greater excitement."

**Finding ourselves** in our dream location, but still occupying the tedious mental landscape of home, is the quintessential experience of De Botton's travel world. Naturally enough, these private limitations are exactly what most travellers look to transcend, through what psychologist Abraham Maslow called "peak experiences" – those unforgettable moments capable of making us forget our usual niggling preoccupations. Another psychologist, Mihály Csikszentmihályi, refers to such magical times as "flow", that elusive mental state when mind and body seem to be in harmony, and attention is absorbed in the here and now. Travel, of course, abounds in such opportunities.

**The most extreme** example of travelling transcendence has been recorded in space voyages. Several astronauts have described the so-called "Overview Effect", a blissful sense of universal connectedness in which the subject becomes profoundly and almost religiously aware of the synergy of all life in our universe. For terrestrial tourists, a similar if less intense sensation of ►►

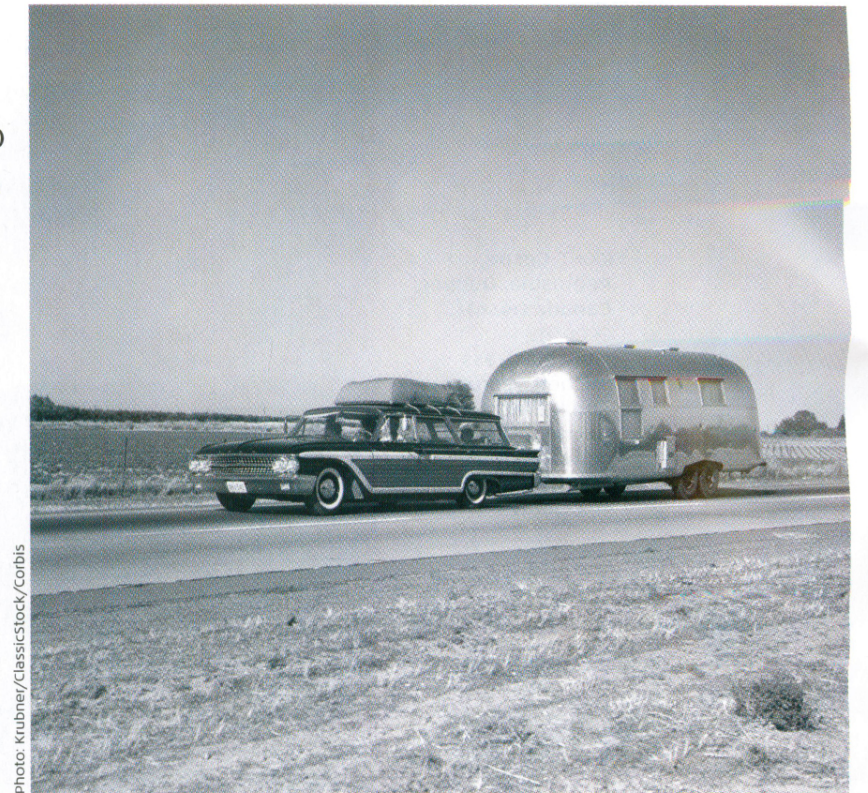


Photo: Krubner/ClassicStock/Corbis



Photo: Genevieve Naylor/Corbis



RIGHT: Gaspé Peninsula, Quebec, Canada (1946)  
OPPOSITE PAGE: French actress Michèle Morgan and Italian actor Gabriele Ferzetti admiring the Mediterranean sea (1961)



Photo: Genevieve Naylor/Corbis

### Don't forget...

**Michael Brein, travel psychologist**

- Become more conscious: often, travellers are cocooned in psychological cotton wool.
- Experiment a little - get out of your shell.
- Be open to other people.
- Be a local: get to know the area where you are staying.
- Sit at cafés. This is not a waste of time.

► oneness is pursued and often found in alien cultures, or in nature, in those "perfect moments" that raconteur Spalding Gray once claimed all travellers are seeking. As travel writer Jan Morris memorably put it: "Whole cities are mine, because I have loved them so." Travel can make a place a part of us, through a kind of ecstatic symbiosis.

But such rewards inevitably come at the price of many challenges, making travel the most paradoxical of experiences. "We travel, initially, to lose ourselves; and we travel, next, to find ourselves," says Pico Iyer. Or as his fellow travel writer, Jeff Greenwald puts it: "Travel is a luminous practise of its own, a doorway into worlds both alien and achingly familiar." In travelling, he says, we leave our comfort zones, making new insights and fresh thoughts possible. As George Santayana wrote in *The Philosophy of Travel*, "We need sometimes to escape into open solitudes, into aimlessness, into the moral holiday of running some pure hazard, in order to sharpen the edge of life, to taste hardship,

and to be compelled to work desperately for a moment at no matter what."

But travel has a less exalted function. The sector currently represents over 10% of global GDP, and forecasts indicate that the industry may double in size over the next couple of decades. As a pillar of the "experience economy", first described in 1998 by James Gilmore in the *Harvard Business Review*, travel is one of the intangibles that we now prefer to use instead of material objects like sports cars and jewellery to signal our status. Travel has to be memorable and special: beach-hopping by kayak in Brazil, hiking in the wilderness of Greenland, working on a conservation project in the Peruvian rainforest. A recent poll by a UK travel insurance company indicated that holidaymakers were even prepared to lie about their trips in order to impress other people, and 12% admitted to envying the travel escapades of friends.

According to travel psychologist Michael Brein, tourists are often motivated by issues of self-esteem. "The majority of people tend to live very



Photo: Paul Cupplemo/Api/Sygma/Corbis

mundane lives," he says. "Anything they can do to enhance their own image of themselves in the eyes of others elevates their sense of self-worth. We all want to feel better about ourselves." Travel can boost our image and our ego. Anyone who has spent time in the company of 'travel snobs', with their obsessive interest in the relative luxuries of hotels and restaurants, and lack of curiosity about the world outside them, knows that travel can be a mainly material pursuit.

But still there's nothing like travel, even in a shrinking, globalised world, to

imagination, and what the traveller brings back is – and has to be – an ineffable compound of himself and the place, what's really there and what's only in him."

"When people travel well, when they make a leap of faith into the world – they find themselves indelibly changed. We are better people than we were before, with a larger, more satisfying world view. It feels good to evolve that way," says Jeff Greenwald. He believes the best journeys have an unconscious motivation, which the journey then

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transform our interior landscape. If, like Alain de Botton, we can't quite escape ourselves when journeying, at least we can transform our inner reality by enlarging our experience of life. "Travel," says Pico Iyer, "is a voyage into that famously subjective zone, the

reveals. "People travel for a million different reasons," he says, "but the motivation always comes from some place mysterious: an unanswered question hiding within themselves." Ultimately, perhaps, we travel to find out why it is we are travelling. ◀

### Unfamiliar sights

**Alain de Botton, philosopher and writer**

"I've always had a problem with holidays as most people conceive them. I get nervous on beaches and bored in museums. My real interest lies in the infrastructure of modern society. I'm a fan of motorway service stations. I adore airports and train stations late at night. I like finding out about unusual bits of technology and recently followed a line of electricity pylons that carries two thirds of London's electricity from Dungeness nuclear power station to an unknown substation in Dalston. I have plans to do a comparable journey tracing the single fat data cable that, unknown to most of us, carries the Internet from Europe to America via Iceland.

"Unfortunately, this sort of holiday making doesn't get much support. So, after years of joking about this, some friends and I have finally taken the fateful step of starting a holiday company, one dedicated to taking travellers around some neglected but fascinating aspects of the modern world. We now have a full programme lined up. For example, the master photographer Martin Parr is going to teach us how to look at the world through his eyes and will be leading a group around the oft-derided aspects of the British seaside. And the travel writer Edward Platt is taking a group up the M1, pointing out the history of bridge and service station architecture along the way." See [www.theschooloflife.com](http://www.theschooloflife.com) or call: + 44 207 7833 1010.