

The Luxury of Doing Nothing

Why are we so obsessed with making the most of every moment — and everyone — while we're on holiday?

There is a phrase that seems to come up on almost every trip, usually uttered by someone who has just stepped off an overly air-conditioned bus, a folded map in their pocket and a mental list of things still to tick off: “We have to make the most of it — we’ve only got two days left.” It sounds harmless enough, but it hides a dangerous idea: that rest is a task, and that a poorly managed holiday is a wasted one.

It is hard to say exactly when this began. Perhaps with itineraries promising “the best of Lisbon in 48 hours”; perhaps with the quiet pressure of social media, where every trip seems to require photographic proof of tourist productivity. The result is often the same: people returning from holiday more tired than when they left, with swollen

feet and a collection of photographs they can barely remember taking.

There is, however, another way to travel — an older, simpler one — which consists of doing absolutely nothing. Sitting still. Letting your coffee slowly go cold. Watching the light change over a rooftop, a cliff or a courtyard, with nowhere else you need to be. This kind of travel may not produce spectacular photographs or stories to tell when you return to work, but it gives you something far rarer: the feeling of having truly stopped.

I know someone who once spent an entire morning wandering aimlessly around Príncipe Real, with no plan beyond watching Lisbon slowly wake up. Nothing particularly remarkable happened during those hours. There was no itinerary, no lunch reservation, not even any desire to leave the neighbourhood. Just the autumn light falling across the rooftops, the distant sound of the city beginning its day, and the quiet certainty that, in that moment, the whole of Lisbon was right there. Nothing more was needed.

Perhaps this is something we should tell people before they travel: a morning spent lingering on a balcony can be worth more than five monuments seen in a rush. A monument visited hurriedly can enter and leave the memory almost without a trace — another mental tick, another photograph much like the thousands taken from exactly the same angle by thousands of other people. A slow morning, on the other hand, stays with you. The particular sound of that place, the exact temperature of the air at that hour, the feeling that time is not being spent, but lived.

This is not an argument against seeing things. It is an argument against the idea that seeing things is the only legitimate way to make the most of a journey. Some people need to cross a city from one end to the other to feel satisfied, and they are absolutely right to do so. But there are also those who return from a holiday having seen almost nothing that would merit a mention in a guidebook, and still feel that it was one of the best trips of their lives. Because, for once, they allowed themselves to simply be instead of rushing from one thing to the next.

The difference between travelling to see everything and travelling simply to be cannot be measured in kilometres or admission tickets. It comes down to a simple question we rarely ask ourselves: how do I actually want to feel when I am there? If the answer is rested, quiet, with time to think, then perhaps the best holiday activity is precisely no activity at all.

Next time you plan a trip, it might be worth leaving one day completely empty. No museum booked, no restaurant reservation, no itinerary to follow. Just a balcony, a comfortable chair and the deliberate decision to do absolutely nothing.

Chances are, it will be the day you remember most.

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