

SUMMARY THE ART OF TRAVEL

ALAIN DE BOTTON



Summary of “The Art of Travel” by Alain de Botton

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Discover the art of travel and learn how to appreciate and make the most of your next trip.

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Introduction

Instead of learning *where* to travel, why not learn *how* and *why*? Throughout *The Art of Travel*, de Botton teaches you about the pleasures of anticipation and why we, as humans, crave something exotic. With insight from fellow-travelers like Baudelaire, Wordsworth, Van Gogh, and Alexander Humboldt, de Botton details the right way to travel. Instead of cramming every tourist hot spot onto your itinerary, try something different. Take a page from Baudelaire and immerse yourself in a new culture, or be like Wordsworth and take a hike in nature, stopping frequently to take in the sights, smells, and sounds. Or even take a page from Van Gogh and sketch the landscapes and architecture, stopping to pay attention to the details and appreciate your surroundings. Traveling doesn't have to be filled with lines, crowds, and countless photos that take just one second to take. It's about appreciating something new, something beautiful, or something different. At the end of the day, De Botton asks us, "If we aren't stopping to take in our surroundings, then what's the point of traveling?"

The Realities of Travel

A dominant aspect of our lives is perhaps our search for happiness. Many try to find it in their jobs while others may seek happiness in their relationships. Others, however, believe they'll find it in their travels. This quest shows that we as humans understand what life is truly about. Of course, we understand the need to work and survive, but at the end of the day, happiness is our main goal. Therefore, when searching for a new destination, we are inundated with advice on *where* to travel to; however, we hear little of *why* and *how* we should go.

Many see pictures of beautiful tropical destinations, a simple brochure filled with curated images of palm trees, clear skies, and white beaches. We see this image and tell ourselves that if we were laying on the sand right now, our problems would be solved. We fail to think about the lengthy and expensive journey ahead, and we fail to realize that our problems don't magically disappear by simply leaving for a few days or weeks.

In an 1884 novel called *A Rebours* by Joris-Karl Huysman, Huysman recounts the story of Duke de Esseintes, an aristocratic misanthropic hero who despised the ugliness and stupidity of others. His hatred of society led to a life of solitude, spending his days in his home reading classic literature. One night, however, the Duke surprised himself with an intense desire to travel to London. This inspiration struck during a reading of Charles Dickens, which evoked visions of English life that the Duke became excited to experience. Immediately, he ordered his servants to pack his bags while he got himself ready to take the next train to Paris.

While in Paris, the Duke went inside an English bookshop on the Rue de Rivoli and bought a volume of Baedeker's Guide to London. He then made his way to an English tavern where he sat and watched the people of the city over a bowl of soup and a pint of beer. As the train approached, the Duke's dreams of London were about to turn into a reality. However, he began to think about the stresses of traveling -- he would have to run to the station,

fight for a porter, board the train, endure an unfamiliar bed, stand in queues, and feel cold as he moved around the sights of the city.

Realizing the trouble of traveling was too overwhelming and exhausting, the Duke paid the bill, left the tavern, and took the first train back to his villa where he stayed and never left again. This story of the Duke reveals the reality of how the anticipation of travel is far more exciting than the trip itself. De Botton experienced a similar scenario when he traveled to Barbados prepared to spend his days lying on the beach under a shady palm without a care in the world. Upon landing, however, he quickly realized that nothing was as he imagined. He waited in line at customs as immigration officials carefully scanned the pages of hundreds of passports, and he then found himself in a sea of tourists trying to hail taxi cabs and get to their hotels. Even worse, the heat and humidity was intense and uncomfortable. The next morning, he found that he was still as anxious as before, that his problems didn't magically go away simply because he was at a beautiful, tropical destination.

The Miracles of Trains and Planes

De Botton recalls the 19th-century French poet Charles Baudelaire, who from his childhood never quite fit into society. Baudelaire didn't get along with his family and was expelled from "a succession of boarding schools." He knew he was destined for a life of solitude and always wanted to travel as far away as he could. He would spend his time watching ships dock and depart, telling himself they were setting sail "for happiness."

He admired these large vessels and was amazed at their efficiency to travel between continents. Similarly, de Botton frequently goes to Heathrow airport when he feels sad, finding comfort in "the ceaseless landings and takeoff of aircraft." He imagines all the places these planes have just been and where they are headed. A plane takes off for New York while others sit at the Terminal destined for "Canada, Brazil, Pakistan, Korea." He watches as men perform "a choreographed dance" as workers unload baggage and passengers disembark.

While Baudelaire loved the miracles of ships, de Botton feels the same about airplanes. From the moment we take-off and leave the earth, we are filled with excitement and given the opportunity to change our perspective. As we travel higher into the sky, the buildings below us become smaller and smaller until they are no longer in our sight. Our perspective begins to change as we realize just how tiny we are in this big world. Finally, we break through the clouds to see a vast landscape below us.

Being amongst the clouds changes us. What were once giant obstructions of the sun and producers of rain are now beautiful equals. Even bad airplane food tastes better when dining among the clouds. In the grand scheme of life, we experience a rare view that historical poets like Baudelaire could only dream of seeing. It's a remarkable thing to be able to *fly over a cloud*. In a poem titled *The Outsider*, Baudelaire writes "I love the clouds...the clouds that pass by...over there...those lovely clouds!" It's amazing how among the clouds, our earthly problems just seem to disappear.

Similarly, American painter Edward Hopper viewed trains in a magical light. Seeing a dreaminess in trains, Hopper believed sitting on a train and watching the landscape pass by allowed people to think more freely and access memories they didn't know existed. De Botton agrees that watching the landscape flow past distracts our minds and opens us up to uninhibited reflections. During a train journey of his own, de Botton found himself thinking about his father's death and an essay he had been writing. Calling this "train-dreaming," de Botton argues that when we allow ourselves to just sit and train-dream, we can connect our thoughts to past experiences that we may have otherwise forgotten during our busy lives.

The Freedom of Exoticism

De Botton once flew to Amsterdam, a relatively short flight for most Europeans. Despite the short trip, however, de Botton became infatuated by the seemingly mundane things such as the signs at the airport. He recalls the Dutch vowel combinations giving him genuine pleasure and reminded him that he was, in fact, somewhere exotic.

The allure of traveling somewhere exotic has long been an impetus for travelers everywhere. We have the desire to travel somewhere different and immerse ourselves in something new and exciting. In the early 1800s, the word exotic became synonymous with the Middle East, an area commonly referred to as “the Orient.” Writers like Victor Hugo became fascinated by the Middle East’s exotic customs and architecture, so much so that architecture in European cities began to reflect what they saw in the Orient.

For instance, French novelist Gustave Flaubert hated his “sterile, banal, and laborious” life in the city of Rouen and began to dream and write about life in the Middle East. He imagined the Orient as an escape from the sensible, boring life in France. After the death of his father, Flaubert traveled to Egypt at the age of 24 and became thrilled to find himself in a world with “Negroes, Negresses, camels, turbans, and guttural cries.” He loved the chaos of Egyptian life, the yells of animals, the bold colors, and the locals’ manner of speech. Chaos was the true way to live, calmness and order simply stifled human creativity and was no way to live.

Throughout his travels in Egypt, Flaubert studied its language, culture, and history. In fact, his dark features and Egyptian dress led him to pass as a native, people even calling him “Abu Chanab,” or “Father of the Mustache.” Like anything, however, the excitement wore off. After months of traveling around Egypt, Flaubert slipped back into depression. He realized that changing your location doesn’t simply cure you of your unhappy predisposition, instead, you just become unhappy abroad. This doesn’t

mean his trip failed him, however. In the end, he didn't want to leave Egypt and spoke about his life-changing trip until the end of his days.

Through his experience, Flaubert argues that nationality should reflect what we are attracted to, not simply our place of birth. Flaubert thought he was "as much Chinese as I am French," and had a respect and loyalty that ran deep for the Arabs. He succeeded in breaking down barriers of foreign and familiar, he found a place that reflected his personality through the power of travel. According to de Botton, you too can find freedom through immersing yourself in different, exotic worlds.

Why Traveling is “Boring”

On a trip to Madrid, de Botton woke one morning with intense lethargy. He began to peruse a few travel magazines and guidebooks to inspire himself to walk around and explore the beautiful city. Outside his door was a new world he had yet to discover, but instead, all he felt was exhaustion and a lack of enthusiasm. He resigned himself to his hotel room to sleep; however, the constant interruption of housekeeping led him outside to look around the city. This lethargy and exhaustion is a common experience among modern-day travelers. When it comes to travelers of the past, however, there wasn't time to be tired.

In 1799, German scholar Alexander von Humboldt sailed from Spain to South America. When he set out to South America, Europeans didn't know much about the continent and Humboldt's job was to inform them. During the voyage itself, Humboldt recorded everything from the temperature of the sea and the ship's location to the unclassified species of the sea that he caught from a net. Once the ship anchored, the recording continued. He drew maps of the continent and its rivers, recorded temperature and atmospheric pressure, made discoveries about the Earth's magnetic fields, and studied the indigenous peoples and their way of life.

Humboldt was exploring territory that had never been explored before. Today, there's no land left to explore! Thanks to early explorers like Humboldt, everything about the places we are traveling are already known. Simply put, early travelers like Humboldt didn't have time for boredom like today's travelers. When de Botton finally left his hotel room to explore Madrid, he found himself anxiously wondering, “What am I supposed to do here? What am I supposed to think?” Explorers like Humboldt were never plagued with these questions; his job was to make new factual discoveries which are now seemingly impossible.

As de Botton read through various guidebooks, he became maddened by the details that seemed irrelevant to his life. Instead, he finds himself

becoming curious about Spain's lack of vegetables, Spanish people's long names, Spanish men's small feet, and the prevalence of modern architecture. When visiting the Royal Basilica of San Francisco el Grande, de Botton found the facts in his guidebook to be superficial and uninteresting. Therefore, he began asking himself questions that he would want to be answered. Why did people first begin building churches? Why are many churches different in design? Why is this particular church so popular and successful?

De Botton believes simply following a path prescribed for you from a guidebook will lead to unfulfilled travel. You must follow your own subjective interests to get the most out of the cities and countries that you are visiting. By asking questions and developing a curiosity surrounding what you are exploring, you will not only learn more about the place you're in but you will also learn more about yourself.

Spots of Time

Born in 1770, the British Romantic poet William Wordsworth spent his childhood in the Lake District running wild among the mountains. His connection to nature continued into adulthood as he walked every day along the lake or hiked in the mountains. Each time, he wrote short poems about the significance of nature and criticized the dangers of city life. With pollution, people, and poverty, urban life was bad for the soul. Living in a city led to a population of people obsessed with social status and consumerism.

Nature, on the other hand, was good for the mind and body. Flowers had an air of humility and meekness while trees represented patience and dignity. Wordsworth paid attention to the way nature moved and saw the intricacies of the environment around him. He believed noticing the beauty of nature could heal your mind, he once wrote a poem about daffodils and stated, "For oft when on my couch I lie / In vacant or in pensive mood. / They flash upon that inward eye... / And then my heart with pleasure fills, / And dances with the Daffodils."

According to Wordsworth, this concept of remembering nature is called storing up "spots of time." He made this revelation when walking among the Italian Alps and stating, "scarcely a day of my life will pass in which I shall not derive some happiness from these images." In other words, remembering particular scenes from nature could allow people to relieve stress and every day worries.

Inspired by Wordsworth's appreciation for nature, de Botton visited England's Lake District himself. Despite the rain, the author immersed himself in nature, noticing the trees, the birds, and even a sheep that he encountered. As they stared at one another, de Botton wondered what was going through the sheep's mind. Sitting under the oaks, a favorite pastime of Wordsworth, de Botton felt calm as he allowed his mind to forget about the anxieties of daily life. Later, upon returning to London, de Botton

experienced his own “spot of time.” While sitting in a traffic jam, he suddenly returned to the trees of Lake District and stopped worrying about his upcoming meeting.

It would benefit you to use the same technique in your own life. When traveling in nature, take in your surroundings and the view. Upon returning to everyday life, you can recall these moments when you begin to feel stressed and anxious. Hopefully, these memories and images will have a calming effect similar to what Wordsworth and de Botton experienced.

The Sublime

On a trip to the Sinai Desert, de Botton read a passage from the philosopher Pascal that inspired him to wonder about the smallness of humans. In this huge world, humans occupy such a small space, which is both awe-inspiring and scary. As he explored Sinai, de Botton encountered deep canyons, valleys, and granite mountains that seemed infinite along the horizon. He began to think upon how the endless Sinai easily swallows up the human observer as he felt minuscule in comparison.

This feeling, known as the sublime, is the meaningful feeling of insignificance that de Botton experienced. This concept, however, is far from modern. In 1712, an ancient Greek treatise on the sublime was translated into English, inspiring writers to take up an interest in recognizing the power of our world and the landscapes that surround us. When visiting places, such as Sinai, it's impossible to ignore thoughts of deities and Gods. It's normal to think about something greater than ourselves, something that had a hand in creating such monumental, beautiful landscapes. In fact, many early philosophers and theorists saw the sublime as proof of God's existence, even writing about such experiences in the Bible.

The book of Job, for example, recounts the story of a man named Job. An incredibly wealthy man, Job suddenly experiences a loss of livestock as his sheep are either stolen or slain. Soon afterward, a raging storm kills his son. Job's friends suggest that his sin caused such misfortune; however, Job defends his innocence and knows he has not sinned. Job turns to God to question what he did to deserve such a loss. God replies, "Do not be surprised that things have not gone your way. The universe is greater than you and you cannot fathom its logic." In other words, humans play such a small role in the grand scheme of the universe. Humans can never understand the logic, but must simply continue to trust in God's plan for the universe.

Whether you believe in God or not, understanding that humans can't control everything can lead to a sense of peace and happiness. Understand that we as people are small, we must relinquish control where we do not have it, and focus on our future rather than dwell on our pasts.

Art and Travel

When traveling to Provence in the south of France, de Botton admits that Provence is not particularly appealing to him. To prove to himself that there must be something inspiring about the place, he pulls off the road to look at his surroundings a bit closer. He aims to seek for Provence's beauty, but he can't seem to find anything redeeming. When he arrives at friends' house, however, he tells them that Provence is "simply paradise."

Vincent van Gogh came to Provence in 1888 at the age of 34 and immediately began painting the landscape and the town of Arles. He aimed to show others the south of France, wanting to open others' eyes to a part of a world they had never seen before. During de Botton's stay, he read a book on van Gogh one night to help him sleep. The next morning, de Botton noticed two cypress trees in the garden and became reminded of van Gogh's sketches of cypresses, capturing their unusual proportions and dances in the wind. Suddenly, de Botton began to feel an appreciation for the trees and landscape of Provence.

Works of art are important and can inspire us to travel somewhere new. When people see paintings, photographs, or even movies that feature stunning landscapes of unfamiliar destinations, people become inspired to visit them. For instance, until the late 18th century, British people rarely appreciated their own countryside. Instead, they took trips abroad to Italy because of the many poems and paintings about Rome and Naples. It wasn't until British poet, James Thomson, wrote a poem called "The Seasons," which celebrated the English countryside. His poems inspired poets like Stephen Duck and John Clare and even painters like Thomas Gainsborough and Richard Wilson who began painting the beautiful scenery.

Soon, tourists began flooding the areas of the Lake District and the Scottish Highlands to experience the wonder and beauty of them. At the end of the day, art influences what people observe, which is why art and travel can be

mutually enriching. Through art, people can try new perspectives and even travel to new places to produce more art. Traveling can help painters depict a place in a way that no one has ever seen before, allowing viewers to see them from a new perspective.

Writing and Drawing Your Travels

If you've traveled in recent years, you might notice the habits of travelers at popular tourist spots. Hundreds, maybe even thousands, of people moving along snapping a picture to tick it off the list and quickly heading to the next destination. What are these people really learning about the place, if anything? If traveling is simply taking a picture and moving along, then what's the point?

Born in 1819, Londoner John Ruskin focused his attention on how to truly capture the beauty of a particular place. He paid large attention to detail and discovered that drawing and writing about beautiful places is the best way to understand it. Believing that drawing was more important, he encouraged everyone to learn it regardless of occupation, social class, or artistic talent. The point wasn't to create better artists, but happier people. The act of drawing forces you to notice rather than merely look. Frustrated by the tourists who try to see everything, he believed drawing placed value on detail, allowing you to truly appreciate the place you are visiting.

De Botton took the advice of Ruskin and decided to try drawing the window of his bedroom in the Lake District. His drawing was not exactly perfect, the window panes weren't exactly square and the paint wasn't necessarily white. However, during his drawing of the scenery, de Botton learned the structure of tree branches proving that drawing forces you to pay attention to the details. Additionally, Ruskin emphasizes the importance of "word painting," also known as writing. Writing can have a similar effect in that it helps us absorb our surroundings and appreciate where we are.

However, simply describing your surroundings isn't enough. Lazily writing out descriptions of pretty landscapes or the weather won't force you to appreciate what's around you. Instead, begin asking yourself questions about how and why things are beautiful. "Why is one lake prettier than another?" "What does this object or place remind me of?" "What makes this place stand out against others?" Additionally, Ruskin wrote descriptions

attempting to “bottle” the skies through his words and writing extensive descriptions of sunsets and morning skies. He personified his surroundings, seeing clouds as “if they were animated by an inner will, or compelled by an unseen power.” The trees in the Alps became “quiet multitudes that stand comfortless and proud amidst the rocks.” Giving his surroundings a human quality forced him to appreciate their detail and think of them as more than mere objects.

So the next time you travel, instead of taking a simple photograph, try bringing a sketchbook or journal along. Sit down on a bench and begin taking in your surroundings. Sketch the people eating at the cafe, or ask yourself questions about them, what do you think their story is? Are they locals or tourists? Perhaps draw the landscape or write a poem describing your feelings at that moment. Writing or drawing during your travels will help you appreciate the art of traveling and allow you to take in your surroundings. If that’s not the point of traveling, then what is?

Final Summary

Traveling can certainly be stressful and exhausting, but the next time you travel, remind yourself of the art of travel. Remember that flights can shift your perspective, allowing you to recognize that your problems are small in comparison to the universe. Similarly, the sublime reminds us that life is not in our control and that we must not question the power of nature and the universe. We must learn to appreciate nature, we can do this by looking at art and traveling in nature to bring us peace and calmness. We can submerge ourselves deeper by writing or drawing our surroundings when we travel. Simply paying attention to the details, the flowers, the trees, the clouds, the architecture, the people, will teach you to enjoy the moment and appreciate where you are. So the next time you travel, remember the art of traveling, stop to smell the roses, and really see the place you're in.



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