

# How to Travel

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## Contents

1. How to Choose a Destination .....	7
2. What Is 'Exotic'? .....	12
3. The Suspicion of Happiness .....	14
4. Anxiety .....	16
5. Small Pleasures .....	18
6. Water Towers .....	25
7. The Importance of the Sun .....	27
8. Travel as a Cure for Shyness .....	30
9. The Pleasure of the Airport .....	36
10. The Pleasure of the Flight .....	39
11. Pretty Cities .....	41
12. The Pleasure of Otherness .....	44
13. The Longing to Talk to Strangers .....	46
14. The Vulnerability of Perfection to Emotional Troubles .....	48
15. The Importance of Family Holidays .....	51
16. The Pleasure of the Romantic Minibreak .....	53
17. The Little Restaurant .....	55
18. In Defence of Crowds .....	58
19. The Pleasure of Room Service .....	63
20. The Pleasures of Nature .....	64
21. Drawing Rather than Taking Photographs .....	66
22. Holiday Fling .....	78
23. Travelling for Perspective .....	80
24. Travel and Pilgrimages .....	85
25. How to Spend a Few Days in Paris .....	89
26. How to Come Home .....	102
27. The Advantages of Staying at Home .....	104
28. Cherishing Memories .....	107
29. The Shortest Trip: Going for a Walk .....	109
30. The Shortest Travel Quiz .....	116



## 7.

### The Importance of the Sun

We're supposed to be serious people with important things on our minds. But we can admit it without guilt: seeking sun is one of the central, and most important, motives behind going travelling.

We have, after all, been cold for so long. For months, we have been fending off wind, rain and despair. Through the impossibly long winter and freezing spring, we have been swaddling ourselves in layers. We hardly ever see our own legs – beyond a reluctant glance at their pallor in the bath. We have eaten for comfort. And it shows, a bit. But deep within us, we know we are essentially made for sunny mornings, hot lazy afternoons and warm nights that echo to the sound of cicadas.

On the beach, there are recliners under big straw sunshades. The water is warm. The heat envelops us and warms us to the core. Every day, the sky is perfectly blue and unclouded. From the hotel balcony, we can look out onto a succession of arid and scrubby hills; we love the sight of the baked and cracked earth because it speaks of weeks upon weeks of hot, dry weather.

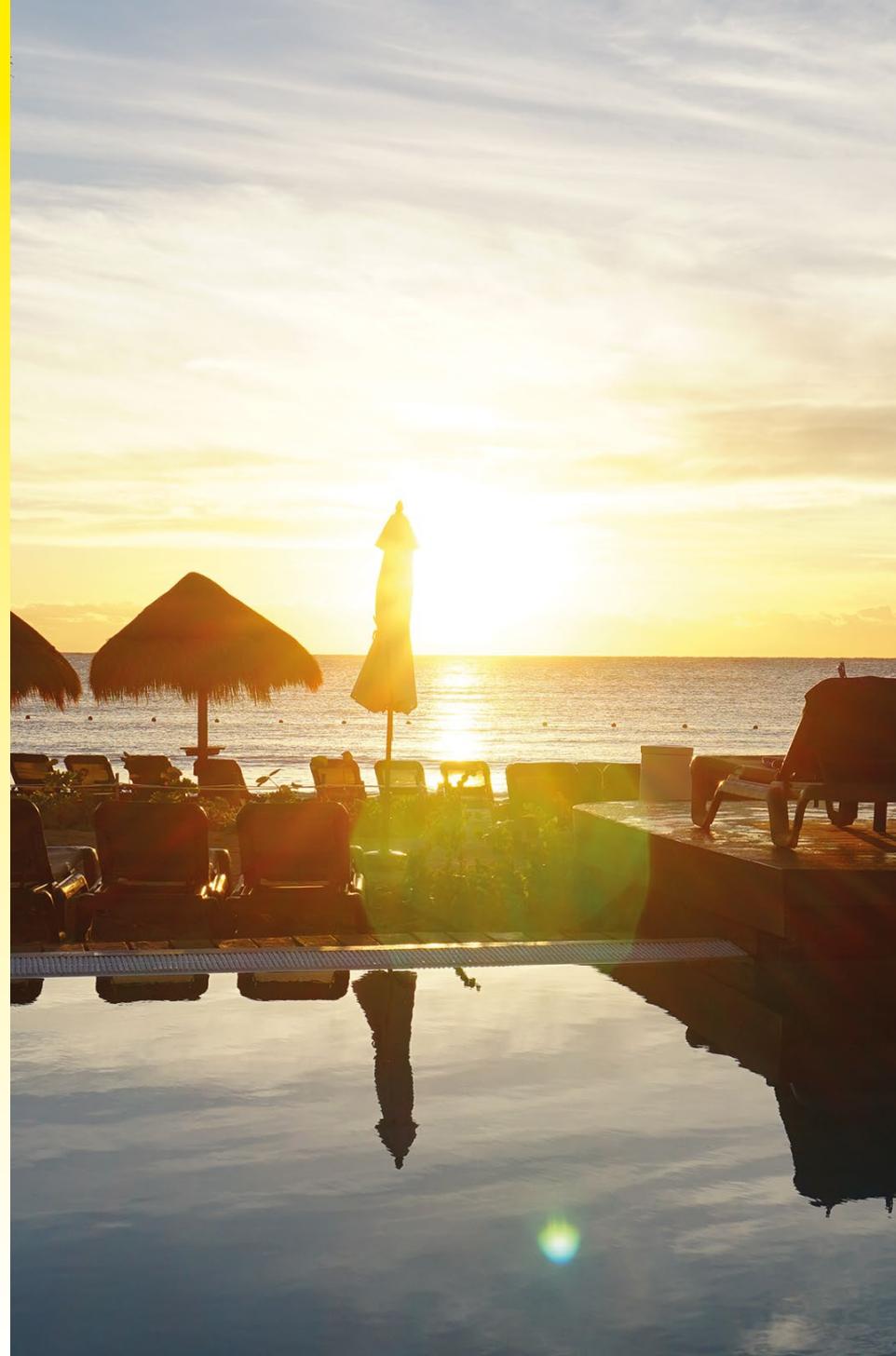
It can suddenly seem inhuman that our species has so cleverly managed to sustain itself in places that are windswept, wet and dreary for almost the whole year. We have made good lives for ourselves up there – in Wiesbaden, Trondheim, Hyvinkää and Calgary. But at such a cost.

Sunshine isn't merely 'nice'. It has a profound role in our lives. It is an agent of moral qualities: generosity, courage, the appreciation of the present moment and a confidence in our surroundings. We can

feel our character changing in the sun: becoming something we like a lot more. When the world seems bountiful and easy (as it does in the heat), material accumulation looks less impressive or necessary. When we can have so much pleasure from sitting in a T-shirt and shorts and feasting on a feta and tomato salad, competing wildly for promotion loses its point. When it is so hot, there is no point even trying to read – or think too much.

The sun can correct our usual vices. The ways of the north are liable to be overly dominant and entrenched in our lives. We need to lie on the beach not because we are light-minded or indolent, but because we can be so dangerously dutiful, serious, hard-working, disconnected from our body, over-cerebral and cautious.

It is a deeply noble search for wisdom and balance (which are the ideal goals of art, civilisation and travel) that has led us here – to an enchanting world of sun cream, dark glasses, recliners and vividly coloured cocktails by the pool.



## 8.

### Travel as a Cure for Shyness

On the first day in Japan, it was truly difficult. You went into the corner shop just off the main Motomachi shopping street to buy a prepaid mobile card. You pointed at your phone, said 'Hello, it's me', and mimed the actions of someone making a call. But it was useless. Mr Nishimura couldn't understand you at all. You were hot and flustered (it was 30°C and pretty humid) and felt very young again and an unusually big idiot.

It evoked the time at school when you were supposed to make a speech and your mind went blank, and the painful evenings at college when everybody else seemed to be heading off somewhere and you weren't sure if you could ask to join in.

Over the years, in your life back home, you have learned how to avoid situations of awkwardness. You have become an expert at working around your diffidence and your fear of being the unwelcome focus of attention. But, of course, there's been a price to pay for your expertise at defensiveness. Whenever something feels alien or in any way threatening, your instinct has been to retreat, and you've missed out on a lot.

But now, in Japan, fitting in is no longer an option. You are the stupid foreigner. Of course you can't know what you are supposed to do. Everyone stares at you wherever you go.

It sounds bad but, surprisingly, such extremity starts to offer you a certain sort of liberation. Maybe fitting in is overrated. Maybe not looking like a fool is simply not an option in any rich and interesting life, wherever it may unfold.

So you steel your nerves. You go back to the shop. You buy some wasabi-flavoured crisps and give the guy at the till a big smile. He grins back. You're learning. You opt to rent an apartment near the elegant Sankeien Gardens from a really nice guy called Kazutaka. A few days after, you drop in on the shop again and buy a packet of Chokobi mini star-shaped chocolate biscuits (they look fun). You make a joke about the rain. You say 'ame desu' – which you'd practised after breakfast and hopefully means something like 'it's raining' – and gesture drolly at your wet hair. Mr Nishimura beams at you.

Through travel, you're freeing yourself from your inhibitions. You're growing up – and into yourself. Our journeys can teach us a vital skill: that of not minding so much if we occasionally look a fool. They may be the best conduits for developing into the more confident, less self-conscious people we crave to be.



**‘ALL OF MAN’S  
UNHAPPINESS  
COMES FROM HIS  
INABILITY TO  
STAY ALONE IN  
HIS ROOM.’**

*Blaise Pascal*