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Chapter 2

Pursuing Happiness on the Road Less Traveled



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Introduction

‘Traveling makes men wiser, but less happy’, wrote Thomas Jefferson (1787) in a letter to his cousin. One of the problems for travelers is the Mona-Lisa-effect. If you visit the Louvre in Paris, you may expect something of an epiphany when you will be confronted with Leonardo Da Vinci’s most famous painting. In reality the painting looks exactly the same as the picture of it on a biscuit tin. Disappointment sets in and is the consequence of huge expectations. This essay explores the question if traveling can be happier if we allow ourselves to be surprised more often. A lack of advance preparation may be of help.

The super-rich provide an illustration of our own behavior during holidays. For those who have had their fill of the world’s most luxurious cruises, there is now the 24 day tour past the world’s most exquisite highlights. The delights include Copacabana-beach in Rio de Janeiro, the Galapagos Islands and observing mountain gorillas in Rwanda. Fifty passengers travel to these destinations by private jet, sleeping in five star hotels, eating Michelin starred meals and free champagne. Additionally, guests can call on the various expedition services provided at any time from the ‘expedition-doctor’, guides and other attendants. According to the Guardian, this voyage costs € 128.000 a person when two people travel together. Those who want a single room have to pay a € 10.000 surcharge (Neate 2020).

This description of this highly efficient tour shows us our free time has become part of the experience economy. Whenever we have a day off, we no longer fold out our chairs at the side of the road to just sit down and enjoy some peace and quiet,

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instead, we want each and every moment of our lives to be special (Andersson 2007). For this reason, people often opt for a package holiday. We want our rental car to stand ready at our destination and we like it if our route has already been planned by someone who knows the area like the back of their hand. This way we see the popular tourist attractions and are assured of a decent bed and good breakfast at every hotel. Even the memories we want to create are planned in advance. Think of highlights such as whale safaris, sitting in a jacuzzi while gazing at the northern light or drinking the coconut milk straight from the shelf on a secluded beach.

Holidays should offer us the highest high's that are within reach of our financial situation. Generally speaking, we actually succeed at achieving this rather well. On average, we feel happier during holidays, and we experience an increase in vigor for a short period of time after a trip. Daily life quickly brings us back to normal levels, but we are not plagued by the regret Jefferson feared (Nawijn et al. 2010; Veenhoven 2020).

Psychiatrist Dirk de Wachter (2019) would say that the search for ultimate holiday happiness is for a large degree about 'Me, me, me!'. In times of climate change maybe we should take the maximum capacity of our nerves into account. Nerve cells grow numb responding to continuous powerful stimuli. A nerve that has adapted to strong stimulation, will give off weakened signals to the rest of the nervous system. This phenomenon also applies the other way around when there is a lack of stimuli: nerve cells become more sensitive. In such a case, small stimuli are enough to trigger a response (Kandel et al. 1991). This phenomenon is called hedonistic adaptation when the pleasure center of our brains are involved. The good stuff induces less pleasure with repeated exposure (Lyubomirsky 2010). Raymond Chandler put it like this: 'The first kiss is magic. The second is intimate. The third is routine.' The self-made billionaire on the hunt for the ultimate experience will, when he or she succeeds, experience the same rush of freedom and delight as he or she experienced as a child camping at a lake with parents. Yet this will be only if he or she is lucky. Maybe observing the mountain gorillas will be a letdown because the animals are sleeping when the rich tourist arrives to see them in their duly planned hour. Unfortunately, the tourists cannot stay and watch for a little longer, as they must move on to the next highlight. Not a minute must be wasted. Combine this feeling with jetlag and maybe one would arrive at the conclusion that the ultimate experience tour was something of a letdown.

The catch in the search for more exotic and luxurious pleasure is that our experiences are not only dependent on the stimuli, but also on our expectations. We are especially happy when an event exceeds our expectations (Frijda 1988). A clean shower with plenty of warm water feels like heaven while camping, but the same shared sanitary facilities would be unacceptable to us in a five star hotel.

The search for 'the' optimal experience is partly neutralized by the rising expectations that are accompanied by such efforts. If I would encounter a wolf while walking my dogs in the forests of the Veluwe near my house, where wolves have not roamed for decades, I would be exhilarated, or terrified if it decided to move in my direction, but when I see an entire pack of wolves in a zoo, I shrug the experience off as just another group of canines.

The Mona-Lisa-Effect

I came up with the term Mona-Lisa-effect to describe disappointing highlights, after 16-year-old I went to Paris with my sister for the first time. My father had offered us a ride, because he had to work in the City of Lights for one day. We created a race against time: Could we make it to the Eiffel tower, the Arc du Triomphe, Montmartre, the Notre Dame, the Sacré-Coeur and the Louvre in a single day? Inside of the Louvre, we rushed to see the world's most famous painting: the Mona Lisa. It was hard to see behind the hordes of visitors. It was not that large and it looked exactly the same as the picture of it on my Mom's biscuit tin. Disappointed, I left the Louvre. Looking back at this moment forty years later, I think that I could not really see the beauty of her smile straight from the Renaissance era, because I was expecting something of an epiphany.

An open, curious mindset without too many expectations could enrich moments of happiness. During travels, the unexpected moments are usually my favorites. Slowly, an idea formed in my mind. Maybe I could derive more pleasure from my holidays if I focused less on what I wanted to experience, while changing my mentality to be more open to enjoying the unexpected.

So, when I was planning my latest holiday, I faced a problem. I wanted to travel by bike to Santiago di Compostela, but I already knew too many people who had immensely enjoyed doing so, and I had read several travel journals and seen various films and documentaries on the destination (Albers 2007). I found myself full of anticipatory fun, but how would I actually enjoy the travel, when I had been looking forward to it for the past fifteen years?

The solution presented itself when I decided that it would be a great idea to get myself a handy app or navigational aid for the journey. I would only have to download the route, and the machine would lead me past peaceful villages and secluded pathways. I faced the problem of having to pick the best navigation aid out of a huge variety of options. In the end, I succumbed to choice overload (Schwartz 2004). Impulsively, I decided to go to the other extreme. I would travel without a map, like people in the Dark ages. If one wanted to reach Santiago from the Netherlands, all one would have to do is follow the coast. You would take quite the detour in Bretagne, but fortunately that is a part of France I would not mind to see a bit more of. With the help of google maps I found that it would take me five weeks to reach my destination, if I could keep up a pace of a hundred kilometers a day.

For this journey, I decided not to search for ultimate pleasure, but for an abundance of the mundane. I would try to not strive for that which I wanted most, but to desire that which I would have (Larsen and McKibban 2008): a long holiday, a lovely partner to travel with me, a lot of beautiful views of the sea, and the thrill of a hint of uncertainty. Did this help me to achieve a bit of extra happiness?

Missing Our Target

As expected, travelling without a map had its disadvantages. Close to home, it turned out that Dordrecht was a much larger city than expected, and my own sense of direction kept leading us back into it. The world is filled with roads and paths and some seem to start in the right direction, but eventually curve back to a different destination. In Dordrecht, I found this frustrating, but not having a map or app turned out to be a concealed advantage. When you follow your own sense of direction in unknown territory, you usually do not even notice all the extra kilometers you make. Ignorance is bliss.

A large disadvantage of this way of travelling was that we never reached our destination. We did not get lost entirely. You ask locals for help and you just follow their directions. The experience that so many people were willing to help me, was heartwarming. Sadly, when our time was up, we had just reached the Spanish border. We chalked not reaching our destination down to the fault of the extremely hot summer weather.

Looking back, one of the things that stands out is that frustrations were tied to the highlights of the journey. The night when we could not find a camp site we rolled out our sleeping bags in a field with a nice view of a beach. The next morning, we discovered that the surfers were already up, en masse at around seven a.m. for the best waves. Another night without a place to sleep, we were invited to spend the night in the garden of strangers who had a pool in their backyard.

I was most stressed out when we couldn't find how to cross the *Pont de Normandie*, a bridge that would take us 200 meters above the Seine. The bridge contains a highway, but also a small path for bicycles and bikes right next to it, where cars and lorries were allowed to travel 'only' 90 kilometers an hour. We kept searching for the entrance to this path, but could only find a way onto the highway for cars only, or we could pass below the bridge to the wrong direction. Cheating by using *google maps* sent us back to the ramp that was allowed for cars only. Eventually we looked so desperate that a small Renault stopped to ask us what was wrong. The woman inside showed us the way to a small path that wasn't indicated anywhere in the surrounding area. She drove in front of us at a pace we could keep up with for at least 8 kilometers. Thankful, but also frightened because of the height and the fast-moving vehicles way to close for comfort at our side, we finally crossed the bridge. In the end, we did not pay a high price for embracing the unexpected.

The Miracle of Being on the Right Track

Travelling without a map or planned route also had the expected advantages of the unexpected. Somewhere in the middle of nowhere in France we saw a small sign that said 'coffee' at the driveway of someone's home. We parked our bikes against a barn

and rang the bell as we saw a parasol in the garden. Inside, there was not only a fully decorated pub, but also some kind of strange museum which was filled to the brim with old billboards, spray bottles, teapots and other stuff one could expect to find at a flea market. The stuff covered every square inch. The owner did not really feel like chatting, but she did tell us that we were the first customers of the day. Some days there would be no visitors at all, and other days as many as six. The coffee was delicious and I felt like I had stumbled upon a hidden treasure. When we left, I saw plaques hanging outside on the wall, indicating in which popular travel guides this place was mentioned. The place was no longer our unique find, and thunderstruck I considered if it was worth going out of our way for the visit. The place was as wacky as denoted in the travel guides, but I realized that I would have seen it as so much rubbish if I had read about it beforehand. The extraordinary pub had lost the extra appeal.

The best part of our trip was that the ‘no-worry, we’ll see what we run into’ attitude to travelling that led me to the realization of how many beautiful places the world has to offer. If you do not know where to go, you’ll automatically pay more attention to your surroundings. An unexpected source of joy were the many signs we encountered that pointed to Santiago di Compostela, these comforted us that we were still on the right track, and that we somehow, in our own way, were part of something bigger.

I definitely think we experienced our journey with a bit more of a fresh outlook, but the biggest advantage was that we did not have a fixed schedule. We just woke up without an alarm, ate whenever we started to feel hungry and kept going until it was too hot to do so. We continued on our bike in the evening and searched for a place to stay the night when dusk started to fall. We could simply autonomously follow our own impulses, and we pretended we could afford the expenditure of time (Mogilner and Norton 2016).

The Sacré-Coeur-Effect

The search for the unexpected was worth it in our book. Lack of planning can counter the Mona-Lisa-effect, but, to be fair, I have also experienced highlights at moments when the Mona-Lisa-effect could have kicked in. After crossing the bridge across the Seine that I mentioned earlier, we sat down at a café terrace at the harbor of Honfleur. Having traveled in France quite often, I had been here at least ten times before, however, every time I go back here I am surprised at the sheer beauty and cozy business of this place. I know exactly what to expect, yet I enjoyed it all the same. Maybe, I should dub this the Sacré-Coeur-effect, after the same first visit to Paris with my sister. This because I can remember the joy I felt when I saw the white cream-cake of a church just as well as the disappointment I experienced in the Louvre.

The Sacré-Coeur-effect springs forth from the fact that happiness is not completely relative to or dependent on expectations. Most people who have fulfilled

their basic needs of relatedness, competence and autonomy feel happy. The pursuit of the greatest happiness of the greatest number is not a dead-end. Those who have their needs met, generally feel happy (Veenhoven 2010). If your mindset can help you to enjoy the ordinary, why would you not also experience delight in the harbor of Honfleur.

The Road Less Traveled

Looking back at our cycling journey, I think of it as a successful attempt to escape the competitive aspects of the experience economy. We tried simply to enjoy the mundane, in things like coffee, cycling, sun and our changing surroundings. While travelling, we simplified life to where we would go at the next intersection, where we would find food and where we would stay the night. Was travelling without a map a handy trick that helped to intensify this experience?

I wonder whether my journey was more fulfilling than the tour around the highlights of the world of the super-rich. It is tempting to cite Robert Frost (1874–1963) here, to pat myself on the shoulder: *Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference.* These words perfectly capture the essence of the glorious feeling of having done something unique, different and better than what other people have done or will do.

Close reading of Frost's poem indicates that delight in the road less traveled is just a trick of our memory. The walker at the crossroads had two roads before that looked the same, and that the traveler only imagined his route to be unique afterwards, because the path had been less worn by travelers (Orr 2015). Probably both myself after my basic biking tour and someone who has flown in a private jet around the world will cite Frost to prove that our own journey was the most happy. The happiness that one garners from travelling is not just dependent on the way one travels, it is especially dependent on the way that one makes the journey remarkable for one's self. One can experience new travels, on well-known paths (Jansen 2012).

People searching for the simple joys of travelling and people who search for the highest highs the world has to offer, will both end up having the idea that their journey was more special than that of the other group. The Mona-Lisa-effect will add to the law of diminishing returns of extra spending on happiness for the tour around the highlights of the world, but the Sacré-Coeur-effect and having needs met, will suffice to make the journey pleasurable, especially if the journey is sufficiently stimulating to body and mind, and not just focused on passive consumption (Sheldon and Lyubomirsky 2019). In the end, research shows that people can afford to be materialistic when it comes to happiness when they have a lot of money (Sirgy et al. 2019).

It is comforting to know however, that happiness in travels is also achievable for modest budgets. It can be achieved for those who worry about climate change, by simply getting on a bike, and going on a poorly prepared journey with an open mindset. Those who want to follow the advice of Jefferson to pursue their own

happiness, do not have to stay at home, especially if we travel to train our ability to savor both ordinary and special occasions (Bryant and Veroff 2007). We need not fear that the wisdom we may acquire on the road of our choosing will make us sad (Bergsma and Ardel 2012).

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