
FLIGHTLESS

*Incredible Journeys
Without Leaving the Ground*

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INTRODUCTION

Tony Wheeler

‘Getting there is half the fun’, it’s been regularly suggested. And these days it can be not only half the fun, but altogether environmentally responsible and totally good for your conscience as well – which is probably not the prime reason most of these writers set out on their journeys; fun was undoubtedly far closer to the top of their agenda.

Flightless, I must confess, is not something to which I can lay claim. My frequent flyer statements would prove me a liar if I did. I also enjoy the view from 30,000ft (I am distinctly edgy if I don’t get a window seat) and I have said that my favourite place is the departure lounge, because it means I’m on my way somewhere – hopefully somewhere interesting. That doesn’t alter the fact that the very best trips are often the flightless ones, and over the years I’ve been lucky enough to rack up quite a few of them.

Way back in the ’70s, it was from England to Afghanistan by car and then on to Australia by every means of transport possible. Yeah, there

was one flight, but only one, from Calcutta to Bangkok – and only because there was no alternative. That ‘overland’ journey led to the creation of Lonely Planet Publications and our very first guidebook. A year later Maureen and I were off on a year-long motorcycle trip around Southeast Asia. Starting from Sydney, it took us down to the southern end of New Zealand and then all the way to the northern end of Thailand. Our motorcycle was stolen right at the end of the trip in Chiang Mai.

There have been many more ‘flightless’ travel experiences in the years since those first two excursions, including the little jaunt from Plymouth (in England) to Banjul (in the West African nation of Gambia), an account of which is my own contribution to this collection. My annual New Year’s resolution – to spend at least a week of the year to come on foot, travelling from somewhere to somewhere else – means that I’ve also managed to trek up to the Everest Base Camp, walk across England from coast to coast, climb Mt Kilimanjaro and even walk a circuit of Tibet’s holy Mt Kailash. A useful little ramble, that last one: Tibetans assure you that completing the *kora* wipes out all the sins of your lifetime – the current lifetime, at least.

So in this book there’s plenty I can identify with and, even more importantly, lots of inspiration for future flightless forays. The authors include some serious walkers, people who put my own little treks way into the shade, whether it’s making a complete circuit of the world (a stroll that’s still a work in progress), a casual little jaunt across Pakistan, some interesting walking in Oman, following the Silk Route or a trek from London to Istanbul. Other human-powered land and waterborne travel possibilities also get some attention – cycling, canoeing, pedal boating – and we’ve even got a story of an intrepid 13-year-long trip around the world entirely by self-powered means.

For those who are more interested in motors than muscles, there are accounts of epic train journeys. They don’t come more epic than the iconic Trans-Siberian Express, a trip that’s still sitting on my personal ‘must-do’ list. The train trip might not be as long, but taking the rails from Baghdad to Basra, in that brief window of opportunity after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, certainly qualifies as intrepid.

Flightless includes travel by old routes, with an account of a modern retracing of Mark Twain’s Middle East travels documented in *An Innocent Abroad*, and some classic travels with the author’s own wheels, including Jon ‘Into Thin Air’ Krakauer’s coast-to-coast blast

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across the USA on a Harley-Davidson. Perhaps a big Harley doesn't qualify as all that environmentally sensitive but, hey, is there a more appropriately American vehicle for crossing the lower 48? Coaxing an elderly Vespa around Italy also qualifies in the right-vehicle, right-place category, but I'm not so sure about setting out from London to Helsinki on a scooter. Sometimes a good slice of that getting-there fun is attained by doing it in something totally inappropriate, like a circuit of South America on a motorcycle more suitable for delivering pizzas. Or travelling from Bangkok to Brighton on a tuk-tuk. For most of us, the distance from one Bangkok traffic jam to the next is quite far enough to travel in one of those infernal Thai contraptions.

Of course, the urge to travel appropriately can be equally interesting, whether it's by ancient methods – saddling up the camel to head across the Sahara or hauling up the sail to tack a leaky dhow towards the magical island of Zanzibar – or by thumb around the Australian outback (yes, there had to be a hitchhiking story). Or let's simply endeavour to get there while sticking strictly to surface-level transport, whether that's from San Francisco to Bristol or Chengdu to Lhasa. I had a go at exactly that sort of trip from Singapore to Shanghai two years ago. When I eventually sailed up the river into Shanghai on a rickety old passenger vessel bearing the reassuring name *Jin Ping*, I'd travelled almost 7000 kilometres by bus, train, boat and a host of less comfortable (the back of a truck in Cambodia) and rather riskier (riding pillion on motorcycles in Cambodia, Vietnam and China) forms of transport.

The constant theme through all these tales is that less is more. Less speed equals more understanding, more fun, more satisfaction. The equation is easy to prove: if we're going slowly, we have more time to interact with our fellow travellers, and they're more likely to be those local characters we all hope to bump into. My own flightless travels have often been uncomfortable, they've sometimes been a little scary, they've regularly tested my endurance and my patience, but equally often they've left me thinking, 'Wow, what a trip.' That's exactly the conclusion of all our *Flightless* contributors.