

Ride Your Own Ride

26 August 2008

The tourist walked up to the restaurant, stopped, glanced at the exterior, looked over the menu on display and smiled, apparently finding something he liked. He started to enter but then stopped.

He pulled his travel guidebook out and leafed through the well worn, dog eared pages until he came to the city's restaurant listings. He traced his finger down the reviews again and again. When he didn't find the restaurant before him listed in his book he turned and walked away.

Meanwhile, we sat inside and enjoyed one of the best meals we'd had in weeks.

The tourist had fallen into the trap of becoming dependant on his guide book. He was unwilling to take a chance on any experience, even a meal, without the explicit endorsement and recommendation of the authors.

In reality, the tourist was not on his own trip. He was recreating a version of the guidebook's trip. He was just like all the other travelers we see moving around the big tourist areas in clumps and packs, never deviating from the prescribed route, the advised stops, and the recommended activities.

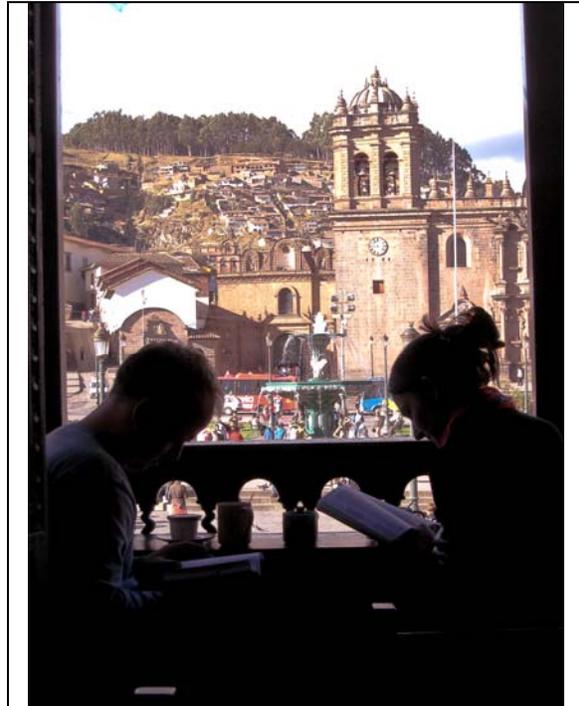
And that is a real shame, because our best travel experiences, by far, are the ones we stumble into ourselves.

Whether it was wandering around the Byzantine back alleys of the cities in the Middle East or the small fishing villages of Japan, the best discoveries, the most authentic experiences and the best new friends have always come due to our own discoveries, not by following the lowest common denominator recommendations of a guidebook.

A guidebook is written to appeal to the broadest possible audience while presenting the lowest possible risk profile. That guarantees if you follow a guidebook you will experience the same white toast, vanilla journey as the other 500 shuffling zombies thumbing their guidebooks around you.

In addition, guidebooks are generally targeted at a specific market segment. For instance, Lonely Planet guidebooks are the bible for early twenties (and those who still wish they were) backpackers. That's great if you want to know which hostel is less than \$1 USD cheaper than the next, but not very relevant if you are looking for a different type of travel experience, such as a really nice, once-in-a-while, dinner in a decent or upscale restaurant. Much less where you can experience something of the local culture without sharing it with 100 other backpackers.

When you base your trip on a guide book you are not living *your* experience - you are living *theirs*. You are not on your unique journey, you are walking down a well-worn path established and defined by people you have never met and likely never will.



This couple spent their entire 1.5 hours in this restaurant ignoring the colonial cathedral and plaza while studying their guidebooks.

Ride Your Own Ride

At a minimum, it is less rewarding to live someone else's journey. In some situations it can be dangerous.

When I learned how to ride off-road motorcycles at the ripe old age of 37 I had the good fortune to fall in with a group of guys who were all above average to excellent to regional champion to national champion to world champion class riders. The upside to that experience was that for the few brief seconds I could keep them in sight I could pick up a few pointers. A few of them also took mercy on me and coached me in specific techniques for specific challenges.

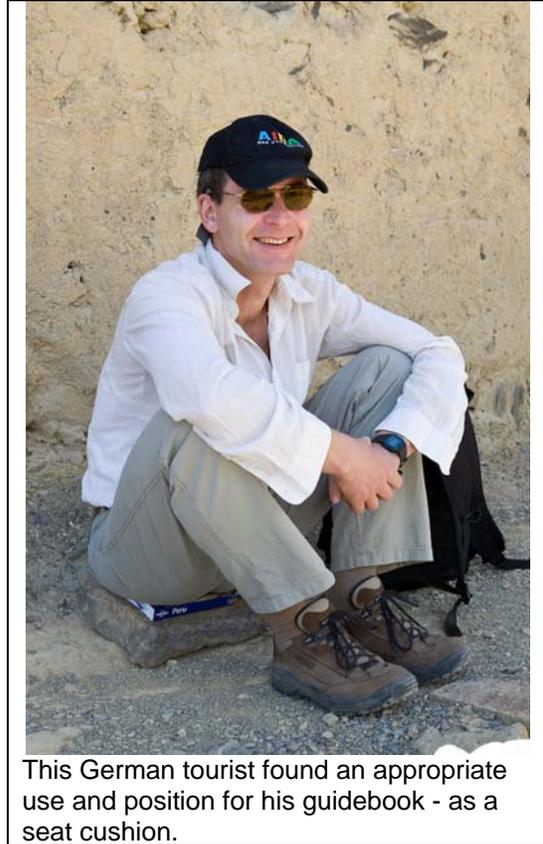
I spent a few years riding very hard trying to keep up with them, all the while crashing on a regular basis when riding over my head attempting to stay within the same area code as their rapidly disappearing dust clouds. That chapter of my life is most accurately described as long periods where my velocity exceeded my abilities alternating with the consequences thereof. My yield was a good collection of broken bike bits, bruises, scars, etc.

I finally came to the conclusion that no matter how hard I tried, I was never going to compensate for the fact that these guys, almost to a man, grew up with a dirt bike between their legs and the endless, infinite expanses of the 60s and 70s American west to ride it in. It finally sunk in that if I wanted to really enjoy the experience and take in the incredible scenes of nature around me, I needed to stop riding their ride and start riding my own.

At that moment my enjoyment of the sport increased by several orders of magnitude. I stopped trying to take someone else's journey and started to experience my own.

The same goes for travel. Don't get trapped into taking someone else's journey, especially a guidebook's.

Ride your own ride.



This German tourist found an appropriate use and position for his guidebook - as a seat cushion.

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All photos by Douglas Hackney



Photo by Jorge Valdes

Douglas and Stephanie Hackney are on a two to three year global overland expedition.

You can learn more about their travels at: <http://www.hackneys.com/travel>