



Traveling Light

Here's what you really need
to leave behind the next time
you pack for a trip

BY ERIC WEINER • ILLUSTRATION BY DAVIDE BONAZZI

My driver navigated the hairy switchbacks with practiced ease. Before long, we reached our destination, an old building perched atop a hillside, and I found myself sipping butter tea and discussing the nature of happiness with a man named Karma. I was in Bhutan, a Himalayan nation sandwiched between India and China, investigating global bliss. Karma Ura seemed ridiculously happy, so I asked him, in so many words, what his secret was. “Well,” he said, taking his time to reply. “I have achieved happiness because I don’t have unrealistic expectations.”

Karma’s answer dumbfounded me. Here was a man born in a remote Himalayan village who went on to earn a PhD from Cambridge University and help shape Bhutan’s innovative policy of Gross National Happiness telling me that he had no great expectations. Was he pulling my American leg?

No, he wasn’t. Karma knew that a happy life is one free of expectations. I did not know this, not then, but after many years and many hard-earned lessons, I have come to know it and embrace it. Expectations are the great enemy of happiness.

Nowhere is this truer than when it comes to travel. We diligently plan our trips, down to the size and color of our packing cubes and each minute of our perfectly choreographed itinerary, oblivious to a mind-set sure to poison our journey. We might travel lightly, obsessively shedding gratuitous ounces like a Tour de France cyclist, but it is all for naught if we fail to jettison the greatest weight of all: expectations.

To expect something, anything, of a place is to make demands of it, ones that can’t always be met. Disappointment is sure to follow, a setback we’re quick to blame on the place or the stars or something we ate—anywhere, really, except where the fault truly lies: our outsized expectations.

The pandemic has changed everything—and nothing. It might seem like life is more uncertain, that less is under our control. This is an illusion. The world has always been a fickle place, and our expectations of it are bound to disillusion. The pandemic has merely laid this truth bare. We enjoy life the most when we expect the least from it.

Looking back at decades of travel, I realize the times I was expecting the least, I received the most. The ridiculously long layover in Dubai that led to a surprisingly candid, and illuminating, conversation with an Iraqi businessman. The languid days spent in “boring” Cleveland that yielded a quiet contentment that

had long eluded me. A trip to the tiny nation of Liechtenstein, of which I knew virtually nothing, that spawned deep reflections about nationhood and identity. What all these journeys had in common was that I wanted nothing from them. I made no demands of them. Whatever joy I experienced came not as an entitlement but as a gift.

This is why I’m careful not to over-prepare for a trip. Sure, I’ll read historical accounts of a destination, but I avoid most contemporary ones. I may painstakingly choose my hotel and carefully curate my itinerary, but I don’t want the voices of others to drown out my own. Too much information, like excessive expectations, clouds the mind and blinkers the eye. To clarify: I’m not suggesting you fly completely blind. Some pre-trip planning and research are necessary, but there is a point beyond which additional planning yields less enjoyment, not more.

Travelers with fewer expectations still experience places, of course, still engage with people, but with one crucial difference: They don’t demand these experiences conform to their expectations. They maintain an attitude of radical acceptance, open to whatever comes their way, good or bad, and as a result have more authentic encounters with the great big world out there.

Mahatma Gandhi summed up this outlook in a single word: “desirelessness.” It is not an invitation to indolence. People with no expectations do a lot. They invest one hundred percent effort into every activity, but have precisely zero percent invested in the outcome. Another important distinction: Having no expectations is not the same as having low expectations. Low expectations are merely high expectations in disguise, a mind game we play in an attempt to shield ourselves from disappointment. (Spoiler alert: It doesn’t work.)

So, the next time you’re packing for a trip, leave your expectations at home. Not only does expectations-free travel soften the sting when our journeys go off the rails, as they inevitably do, it frees us up for the possibility of unexpected delight, or what the writer Robert Grudin calls “the sudden beauty of seeing.” Isn’t that why we travel in the first place?

ERIC WEINER is an author, philosophical traveler, and “recovering malcontent.” His books include *The Geography of Bliss*, *The Geography of Genius*, and, his most recent title, *The Socrates Express: In Search of Life Lessons From Dead Philosophers*.