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WWWANDERLUST

Based on a visit from a friend and conversations between:
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I know it's time to travel when my senses start to go slightly out of focus. A creeping chill moves in undetected, settling somewhere under my skin to gently numb my imagination. Running cold and on empty I become increasingly restless and start to dream of unfamiliar, distant places. I've always been magnetically drawn to the excitement of the airport, the potential of the vast menu of destinations on shiny TV screens, the process of being routed via upholstered metal tubes to emerge on the other side of the world, the bizarre sense of being Nowhere, a willing captive of the no man's land between departures and arrivals. The heady mixture of controlled chaos, cheap packaged food, novelty graphics and a sense of timelessness triggers my memory into happy recollection, working wonders on my soul before I've even left home soil. But where do I want to go?

Mental passport in hand, I face a bewildering choice of destinations; having already been to Shanghai, Los Angeles, Sydney and Mumbai this year, Dubai seems to be the most logical option. But there is little time, and even fewer funds. What's more, I can go there on the Internet without the trouble of leaving home – while I will not be able to investigate the latest in

gleaming new arrivals halls, at least I can avoid the hassle of the security queues. A quick check on Google informs me that Dubai is undergoing the world's largest residential construction program: 80% of the city population are expats, and it also has 30,000 hotel beds – chances are there will always be an available room, so for now the real Dubai can wait.

With the Internet as my airline and guidebook, I can visit all the other major cities on my wish list in a single evening. With a single click, I can buy the customary souvenirs of places I've never been to in the endless aisles of online shopping. Sure, it's not real thing, but it's the next best thing.

Somewhere between Hanoi and Taipei I enjoy pixilated web-cam conversations with old friends in South America. Arriving in an unfamiliar room and the disjointed conversations to take place therein evoke the feeling of being in a foreign country – “Hello? Hello? [...] No, you go first [...]”

Soon a real-life, kerosene-guzzling travel plan is hatched and 48 hours later, Mark arrives from Rio on his first visit to London. Not willing to allow jet lag to take its deadly grip on the weekend, we head out into central London.

“An intoxication comes over the man who walks long and aimlessly through the streets. With each step, the walk takes on greater momentum; ever weaker grow the temptations of shops, of bistros, of smiling women, ever more irresistible the magnetism of the next streetcorner, of a distant mass of foliage of a street name.” —Walter Benjamin

It's an evening of favourite bars, but by 2:30am my impulse is to get home by the fastest means possible. Mark decides walking is the best option. I haven't done this for years, and a sluggish trudge across town seems like a dreary prospect, but gradually London begins to look increasingly intriguing, even foreign – certainly not the city I thought I knew.

En route past familiar attractions and the nameless and interchangeable places that provide the essential pulse of the streetscape, I simultaneously become the tour guide and tourist. Iconic landmarks, crowded cafés, early morning markets, secret gardens and squares, some of which must disappear like vampires in broad daylight, all take on a different intensity. Alongside the curious stillness of the structures around us is the street-life, secondary by day but more visible by night. We exchange glances with the early morning crowd gathering for a bus (some stony, some preoccupied), cheery clubbers spilling onto pavements, couples fighting, barefoot girls, drunks, hookers, pimps, the army of urban cleaners and night shift tube workers in day-glow orange, police arrests, and urban foxes on the prowl. Drifting home, my camera full of jpeg souvenirs, I realise that we are both looking at London with the sweetest uncertainty.

Travel is the best fuel, but the destination is not always the point. The Internet and budget

airlines increase our expectation of instant gratification, but our slow and indeterminate journey revealed the uniqueness that often gets lost in the rush. Unlike most tourists, we were looking at nothing in particular, and exploring the in-between. Leave Google and guidebooks behind and you perceive a different city. Being Nowhere becomes curiously exhilarating; the seemingly ordinary begins to look unique again.

Could an almost inevitable end of the era of cheap flights lead to a return to a more 19th century view of our city? Will we begin to reject the instant novelty of a weekend in a foreign city in favour of the search for excitement in our own?

Turning into my street 6 hours later, with fresh newspapers and the now familiar skyline beginning to emerge from behind the ever-brightening sky, I might have felt as though I had just crawled off the red-eye from New York. Instead, Mike and I, as post-easy-travel flâneurs or ‘gentlemen strollers of city streets,’ a condition first identified by Charles Baudelaire, have been reintroduced to the novelty of London in all its exotic and ordinary finery. The next time I feel the need to travel, I will remember that there is much to be learned from an overnight flight – hand luggage only – here at home.♦♦