

# Far away is nearby

**M**ust one travel far away to experience things that are different, unfamiliar, exotic or extraordinary?

## Gradients of change

We are no strangers to the humdrum of routine. Waking up to a sky we know. Reaching out to the bedside table, our muscles calibrated to unhook the phone from its charger without even looking. The same traffic jam on the ring road, or the same busload of people. The familiar ring of the telephone at the desk. The slightly-too-bitter coffee from the machine. And what if we want to have a break from all that? What if we want to experience something different, or even, dare I say, extraordinary? To counter the sometimes monotonous existence of working life, it is no surprise that we are inclined to take our holidays abroad - in far-away, exciting, exotic places. I, myself, remember arriving for the first time in Asia in January 2019, in Singapore. The punchiness of the humid air. The ubiquitous symphony of sizzling fish grilled in Hawker stalls complementing cacophonies in languages I couldn't understand. The groaning and creaking of the megacity stilled only by the meditative slosh of the sea along its shores. It was a festival for the senses, and truly an exotic and unfamiliar land. It was everything I could ever dream of as an antidote to the too-familiar. I was there to cycle across the continent, back to my hometown of Sheffield. As I slowly progressed along this trip, I noted many sometimes rapid changes. Suddenly, a new type of tree dominated the landscape. Suddenly, mosques became Buddhist temples. A mountain range rose seemingly out of nowhere. The food served in villages by the sea changed decisively from that just ten kilometres inland. I began to realise that while there is a global gradient of change across this world that acts over large distances, (for Sheffield and Singapore are so undeniably different!) there are also dramatic local changes too. Does this mean that the *exotic*, the *unfamiliar*, the *different*, and again - dare I say, *extraordinary*, can be found closer than one may think? I will try to illustrate with a couple of examples.

1) **Different:** In 2020, much of the world was 'locked-down'. I remember being with my partner, in Paris, in an apartment not too far away from the Bois de Boulogne - a great swathe of

open space in the otherwise suffocating city. We felt like we needed to *change* from the confines of the apartment and the 500 metre radius around it. So what did we do? We cycled an hour and a half, through the city, to its other side, to visit the Bois de Vincennes! We felt that by travelling (relatively) far, we would find the *change* that we needed. The next day we simply walked 15 minutes to the Bois de Boulogne, and asked ourselves why we had cycled so far yesterday - when the *change* we sought was, figuratively speaking, under our nose the whole time!

2) **Unfamiliar and Exotic:** I recently met a mountaineering instructor whose role was to educate French teenage students from 16 to 18 through a programme that culminated in them organising their own expedition. They were encouraged to aim for *exotic* places: Kazakhstan, Peru, Georgia. This country, Georgia, was where the latest group had planned to go. It was planned for February 2022, at which point Russia invaded mainland Ukraine, and the trip was cancelled. The backup plan was put into action: to go to the Bernese Oberland. The instructor sighed over his coffee, "It's a shame because the students didn't really get to experience any different culture". Surprised, I replied, "But isn't Switzerland a different country, and isn't the Bernese Oberland in Germanophone regions? Isn't that a different culture?"

"Yes but it is so similar!", lamented the instructor, taking another sip of coffee. I couldn't help but disagree. Not only is the language different, but the mountains have another character. The food, too, is different. One cannot compare a nussgipfel with a croissant, nor a Röstli with a Tartiflette! And then, it's tidier! And the people, they are so different! Why this was *so similar*, while Georgia - that, like France, is a historically Christian nation, with good wine and good bread - was not, I could only hypothesise... I felt that the instructor was under the illusion that to experience the *exotic* with his students, they had to go far away.

So far, these examples have touched on the *different*, the *unfamiliar* and the *exotic*, but what

about the *extraordinary*? This is perhaps what many people seek when travelling. It was the case for myself upon finishing my work contract in December 2024. After 5 intense years, I felt I needed a change from my routine. I needed to come up for air, and, knowing myself, I wanted to experience the extraordinary.

## In search of the extraordinary

I mulled over several options that fitted with travelling to experience the extraordinary. Japan by bicycle. Trekking over la Réunion, or even in Nepal. Hitch-hiking around South America. Adventurous, exotic, and with great potential to be extraordinary trips. However, I thought back to the Bois de Boulogne and the Bois de Vincennes. Do I really need to go all that way to be immersed in an unfamiliar place, to experience the extraordinary? I looked again on the map, focussing on Europe, and made up my mind quickly. I will not go to the ends of the World. I will not take a plane. I will go to the Alps, and cycle slowly through with my touring skis. Let's see what is close to home.

And so began the trip to find the *far away nearby*. It started on the night train to Vienna, itself an unfamiliar experience. I waved goodbye to my partner on the platform and settled into the sleeper cabin. I was being transported out of Brussels, and out of my comfort zone. The train rolled into Vienna in the late morning. The continental climate blessed us with a dazzling sun presiding over a dry chilly day at the start of February; a far cry from the wintry humidity of Brussels. After a single day marvelling at the riches of the city, I set off towards the Alps. Baden, Berndorf, Pernitz. The traffic thinned. The city townhouses gave way to more humble lodgings that eventually gave way to the first undulating hills. At the top of the first one, I looked back to the Danube plain. The thin layer of smog. The factories belching steam into the air. The procession of morning commuters slowly penetrating into the confines of Vienna's suburbs. On the other side of the hill, an oak forest and farmland. I knew this was the last I would see of the plain for a good couple of months. I was ready to plunge into the sea of oaks, the mountains beyond, into another world. Within a day, the belching steam from towers of industry was replaced by the gentle tendrils of smoke from fires heating up cottages nestled in the first valleys of the Alps. The chic people in the bustle of Vienna were replaced by the occasional wood-worker waving a greeting from their workshop, or an old dear in a felt hat wishing me well as I stopped to rest or refuel. This transition was extraordinary, and it was far from the only one! Within just three days, I arrived in the Gesäuse, where despite an exceptionally dry Winter thus far, there was snow enough for skiing. In Johnsbach, I was

welcomed to the Ödsteinblick gasthof. I dined with 4 schitourenführers, eating food I had never tasted before: "Einmachsuppe mit Bröselknödel". The next day, I met several ski touring groups on the mountain, and despite my limited German, managed to chat, climb the unfamiliar valley, up an unfamiliar gulley, to an unfamiliar face, and arrive at the top to a view that can only be described as, you may have guessed it, extraordinary!

After having cycled and ski toured, in a reasonably short amount of time, through the Steiermark, some Salzburger alps, Karnten, Öst and Süd Tirol, I arrived in Switzerland. Here, in an improbable encounter at the foot of the Oberalp pass, that I had just skied down, I met a group of 2 Swiss and 6 Nepali people. They invited me back to their chalet, near Sedrun, to stay for the night. There, the Nepali delegation put themselves into full action. Nepali music, dancing, chai, and finally a full 'momo workshop'. These exotic and extraordinary experiences that I could have dreamt of living in Nepal, I had here in a remote village in the Graubünden!

As a final example, while searching for a place to plant my tent one evening in Süd Tirol, I chanced upon a dairy farmer whom I asked to pitch up on his land. Instead of sending me packing, or suggesting a place to stay outside on what was set to be a sub-zero night, he warmly, almost instinctively, welcomed me into his house, telling me I could sleep in a spare room. In the meantime he had 'arbeit' to do in the 'stalle'. His young helper, a boy of only 12 years old, excitedly showed me all around the farm. How much hay per cow per day. How much milk from each cow. The size of the newborn calves. Everything on the farm was demystified. As a 'city-boy', I could not have been plunged into a more alien, *exotic* world. After the 'arbeit' in the 'stalle', the farmer shared his supper with me. A humble bowl of vegetable soup, with a copious glass of fresh milk. I tried to glean meanings from his hardened Tirolean dialect. Two phrases I recall with absolute clarity. "Nicht einfach", aber "ein schönes leben"...

## Look at the fine resolution

Throughout these experiences, I forged a deeper conviction that I was truly living *different, unfamiliar, exotic* and *extraordinary* experiences of equal, or even stronger intensity than I perhaps would have had further afield. I realized, once in France, a country that is more familiar to me than the others along the Alpine arc that I went through, that the proximity of these *unfamiliar* experiences anchored them amongst what was otherwise *familiar*. Now when I look at the map, I see Johnsbach, the Ödsteinblick, the schitourenführers and the Knüdelnsuppe. It is just next to Vienna! I

see the chalet where the Nepali delegation taught us how to make momos. Not too far from Zürich! I see the dairy farm in Süd Tirol and I smell the stalle and hear the rhythmic pumping of milk. It is but a stones-throw from Bolzano. These *unfamiliar* experiences are interspersed amongst these well-known European cities where everything feels more *familiar*. What became clear over the course of the trip were the immense gradients of change on a finely resolved scale. One does not access this resolution in dashing from city to city. It is only appreciated at a sufficiently leisurely pace, such as that of a bicycle or a ski tour up a valley. Move too fast, and these fine gradients, local fluctuations, are brushed over, and only the global changes - the ones that separate Sheffield from Singapore become apparent.

## Nearby

In a time where we may feel more than ever the need to come up for air, to break free from the

squeeze of modern life, it is perhaps frustratingly also the case that we must be evermore attentive of the strain that travel puts on the environment. 16.2% of all global greenhouse gas emissions are a direct result of transportation[1], so taking the plane to escape to the other side of the world is not an enterprise taken entirely guilt free. However, as some of the above examples show, maybe the experiences that one may seek in Bali, Australia, South America or Nepal, one can also have, at least on an abstract level, by exploring the world nearby in finer resolution; to appreciate the details and the beautifully undulating topology of the change around us. I am convinced that one can access the *different*, *unfamiliar*, *exotic* and, yes, even the *extraordinary* in this way. For it is there to be discovered and the map becomes all the richer for it. And lo! there is no climate guilt in cycling, walking, skiing or travelling by human-power! And who knows, you might still be able to eat a few momos along the road...

## About the author

Jake Johnson grew up in Sheffield, UK. He disliked the outdoors until his teachers convinced him, at the age of 19, to sell his moped and buy a decent bicycle. He is now passionate about sharing his love of the outdoors. He [cycled from Singapore to Sheffield](#) in 2019, and [cycled and skied across the Alps](#) in Winter 2025. His trips were worked around around his job as a physicist in the field of nuclear medicine that he held for several years in Belgium, where he earned his PhD in 2024.

## References

- [1] Hannah Ritchie (2020) - "Sector by sector: where do global greenhouse gas emissions come from?" Published online at OurWorldinData.org. Retrieved from: 'https://ourworldindata.org/ghg-emissions-by-sector' [Online Resource]

