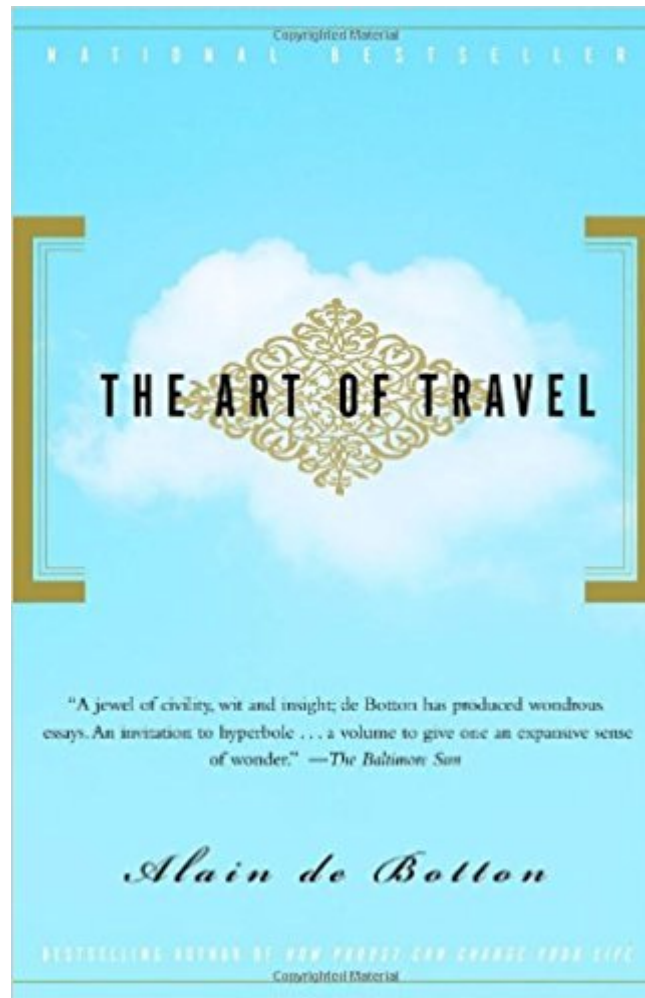


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The Art Of Travel



Synopsis

Any Baedeker will tell us where we ought to travel, but only Alain de Botton will tell us how and why. With the same intelligence and insouciant charm he brought to *How Proust Can Save Your Life*, de Botton considers the pleasures of anticipation; the allure of the exotic, and the value of noticing everything from a seascape in Barbados to the takeoffs at Heathrow. Even as de Botton takes the reader along on his own peregrinations, he also cites such distinguished fellow-travelers as Baudelaire, Wordsworth, Van Gogh, the biologist Alexander von Humboldt, and the 18th-century eccentric Xavier de Maistre, who catalogued the wonders of his bedroom. *The Art of Travel* is a wise and utterly original book. Don't leave home without it.

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Customer Reviews

In the past, when I still regularly attended graduation parties, such parties were always teeming with graduates-to-be harbouring fanciful travel plans. Everybody seemed intent on getting away a.s.a.p., as long as possible, and to a very far away and preferably out of the way place. They wanted to become travellers, a breed not to be confused with commonplace tourists. I've never been able to detect any intrinsic motivations driving this graduate travelling habit, e.g. a deep-seated and longstanding interest in a particular country or culture. It was simply a matter of opportunity, this jumping at the a chance to be thoroughly irresponsible for a while, before entering on the responsibilities of a steady job. And of course, everybody was going and it would be very un-cool to stay at home. After these people returned from their well-organised adventures, it invariably struck me how little they had changed, and how little they had to tell about the places they had been; apart

maybe from random scraps on local customs that I could as easily and more completely have found in any travel guide book. Nevertheless most of these people, even years later, would be prone to lapse into dreamy states of blissful reminiscence at the slightest cue, expressing a deep longing to go back there, preferably to stay. It got me wondering why it is that the same things we find boring or commonplace at home are suddenly deeply interesting simply because they occur 5,000 miles away. I remember one such party where I met an acquaintance who just got her degree in philosophy. I asked her if she was planning on her more or less mandatory world trip as well. But she just gave me a weary smile, tapped the side of her head and said: 'Travelling is something you do in here'. In a nutshell that's the question and the essence of the answer in Alain de Botton's thoughtful book on travel. Why do we bother? What do we expect, and why are we so often disappointed? And then again, why do our memories of the trip rarely reflect the disappointments? And what is the clue to not being disappointed? How do you go about really experiencing the place where you are and making it part of yourself? On all such questions De Botton has interesting and often entertaining observations to make. He shows us that the exotic is not defined by long-haul flights and palm trees, but can be found literally on your doorstep if you just know how to look. He explains why a travelling Englishman can be depressed on far away and exotic Barbados and euphoric in nearby, but in many ways equally exotic Amsterdam, or even around the corner in Hammersmith where he lives. As a Dutchman I was fascinated by his detailed analysis of a sign in the arrivals hall of Amsterdam Airport, explaining its exotic nature from a British viewpoint, and the reasons you would never ever find a sign like that in the UK, just across the Channel. De Botton is a master at finding such surprising angles to elucidate his subjects. Moreover he has considerable erudition to add, resulting in an engrossing mixture of philosophical insight, personal experience, and references to artists, writers, explorers and scientists of the past. Mostly these historical figures, Flaubert in Egypt, say, or Humboldt in South America or Van Gogh in the Provence, are exemplary 'artists of travel', people who knew how to make the most of their expeditions. By taking their mindset, involving energy, patience and an eye for detail, as a template, De Botton generates some useful suggestions for the modern day traveller who no longer wants to bore himself by 'scoring' obligatory highlights in the guidebook star-rating order, or who refuses to be a slave to his camera any longer. He may even give you some clues as to how to deal with that greatest travelling problem of them all, the fact that wherever you go, you always have to take yourself along. In all, an elegant, intelligent, thought-provoking, amusing and useful little book, that nobody who takes travelling seriously should miss. Don't take it with you though - it won't last you much longer than an afternoon on the beach...

In his chapter called "On Eye-opening Art", Alain de Botton describes his lukewarm initial reaction to the much-extolled Provence, France. Then, in a sleepless first night there, he happened to read chapters in a book about Vincent Van Gogh that focussed on Van Gogh's Arles period. Van Gogh's art opened de Botton's eyes to the beauty of the landscape, because he started to see it as that great artist had. I mention this detail in particular because what Van Gogh did for de Botton, de Botton does for the reader. "The Art of Travel" introduces the reader to an attitude toward and practice of travel that allows him or her to enjoy it more fully. de Botton's suggestions and observations are surprising, of the "Huh, I never thought about that" variety. de Botton is well read, and he draws upon his knowledge of artists, philosophers, naturalists and poets, combined with first-person narrative, to illuminate his points. If you take the author's suggestions to heart, wherever you go -- across the globe or in your own neighborhood -- you will immerse yourself in your wanderings to a greater and more satisfying degree. Having said that, I should add that this book is not just a means to an end. The journey itself is enjoyable. de Botton's writing is as engaging as his philosophy is attractive.

Alain De Botton's latest publication, ~The Art of Travel~ is a philosophical investigation, simply written, on the reasons and motivations for why we travel. The book's main thesis is that our lives are dominated by a search for that illusive and fleeting emotion or state known as happiness. Travel, he proposes, is a major activity, amongst many, where we seek-out this state of mind. Travel can possibly show us what life is about outside our routine-filled day-to-day existence. The book examines our motives for travelling, our anticipations, and expectations using the writings of various artists, poets and explorers, providing different and highly creative perspectives on the subject. Personally, I found the most rewarding and instructive chapter to be, 'On eye-opening Art', using the views and paintings of Vincent van Gogh. Just as instructive, however, is the chapter, 'On Possessing Beauty', drawing on the works of the 19th century critic and writer, John Ruskin. The message from both these individuals are quite similar. One of the tasks of art, specifically painting, is to provide us, the viewer, with new perspectives in which to view the world. Vincent van Gogh's exceedingly original style and use of colour, for example, transformed, for some of us, the way we see a sunflower, a wheat field and a Cypress tree. When viewing these works of art, or any work of art, we are inspired to travel to these places where the artist created, and experience the subject of the works first-hand. John Ruskin believed that one of our primary needs in life is beauty and its possession. He suggested that the only meaningful way to possess beauty was through

understanding it: '...making ourselves conscious of the factors (psychological and visual) that are responsible for it,' (P.220) The way to attain this understanding, he suggests, is to draw and write (word paint) those things and places we come across in our travels that strike us as beautiful. A person sitting down in front of an expansive landscape, and sketching its many features, will discover aspects about the scene that would be invisible to the casual observer. When travelling, take the time to draw and write about those places and things one sees, and the experience will be much richer as a result.~The Art of Travel~ is a helpful philosophical guide to the budding and seasoned traveller. Where other books on the subject instruct us on where to go and what to see, Alain De Botton tells us how to approach our journeys and some useful tools on achieving a much more meaningful and rewarding experience.

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