



TRAVEL ADVICE FROM TEJU COLE, WHO HAS VISITED 39 COUNTRIES IN 6 YEARS

By Rohan Nadkarni, July 16, 2017



*Teju Cole is cutting into and eating what he describes as a “half-assed” muffin when his mind quickly jumps to music. Do you like jazz? Answering negatively would feel embarrassing. Cole ditches the muffin, shuts off his noisy AC unit, and carefully places a vinyl into a record player until his homey Brooklyn office is filled with the sound of the Vijay Iyer Trio’s performance of “Hood.” Much of the trio’s album was inspired by Cole’s second novel, *Open City*.*

*The book marked something of a turning point in Cole’s life. Since writing the novel in 2011, he’s visited 39 countries, often as a guest for a literary panel or lecture. The extensive travel is just one of many factors that contribute to Cole’s thought-provoking essays and books. Cole’s fourth (and latest) publication is *Blind Spot*, a documentary-esque collection of photos that also serves as a glimpse into Cole’s adventures around the world. In between reluctant bites of a dry muffin, Cole spoke to GQ about photography, his travel essentials, and how to ethically explore the globe.*

How do you find out what’s interesting about a place?

I’ll answer that question but while you were asking that I thought of a completely different question that you can ask me as well, which is, what are the mechanics of how I travel? How do I make traveling comfortable for myself? Let’s say five things I always bring with me when I travel.

That’s a very GQ question.

A very GQ question! What is interesting about a place? Like in the past one month, I’ve been in, New Zealand, Italy, Palm Springs and Germany a little bit before that. Germany I’d been to like 10 times. So it becomes what else is there? When you’re in Germany, you’re thinking about how rich it is, how well organized. This time around I found myself thinking of the dark history of Germany a lot. So I’ve always been against this like, someone says Germany and you say “Nazis.” That’s stupid. “Oh, Germany is bad, France is good.” You don’t understand how history works. But I was thinking a lot about how places absorb horrors that have happened in them. I’m going to show you a picture—I’ve been working on a project called

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Black Paper, which is a kind of, a very visceral photographic response to the age of Trump. Exploring shadows and dark feelings. So while I'm doing that, I'm looking for opportunities to take surprising pictures. While out at a club one night in Germany, I saw a guy. They were trying to revive him. He had overdosed. And somebody shone a light, a cell phone on him. I was just sort of hanging back, and I took a picture kind of quietly. And when you look at the photo, it looks like theater.

So what's interesting about a place? It's about having your antennae up, and being ready. I have my notebook with me. I have my camera with me. Only after arriving from a place do I realize, "Ah, this was interesting." Very often it's after I come back. The camera becomes a way of seeing what's going on.

I guess the short answer to your question is, just to be alert. Be open to the possibilities. That's what makes a place interesting.

If someone wants to experience travel through photography, or have an experience similar to yours, what's the key?

You know, you don't have to be a photographer. You don't have to be a writer. My advice to the traveler is, yes, it's easy to go and stay in a hotel and then step out of the hotel and go to the vibrant marketplace, go look at the natives. You're in France and you want to find someone with a beret or a rude waiter. You go the Louvre. You go to Vietnam and take pictures of Buddhist monks. But for me, ethical travel is about going there and actually having some kind of imagination about what life is like for people who live there.

What traveling in France, Nigeria or Vietnam all have in common is, normalcy is actually fairly continuous across the world. People our age have kids. They want their kids to do well in school and stop staring at their phone so much. It's the same in Kenya or Brazil. But if your only notion of Brazil is samba, sun, and soccer, and girls in bikinis, then you're actually missing out on what the Brazilian experience is. It's a modern, emerging economy, where people are trying to make a life. It can be as simple as a conversation with your cab driver. What does he think of ongoing politics? How much does he make? At some point he'll tell you why his country is completely fucked up. He'll also tell you why his country is the greatest. So try to travel with a sympathy with what life is like for others.

Okay, let's get back to your question. If someone wants to travel like Teju Cole, what should they bring with them?

In practical terms, I travel so much, I just need to be comfortable. I like to take a beanie, in case my head gets cold. I like to have a pair of shoes that can work if I'm doing an event. So you need nice kicks. But also shoes I can take long walks in. And easy to take off for security, so there's no wasted moves. I'm wearing these right now, slip-ons from Armani jeans. I also like to dress well on a flight, simply because, you know, it's traveling while black, right? If you have a jacket on, a pocket square, like people actually treat you nicer. It's funny.

I don't use noise canceling headphones, what's important to me is audio quality. I travel with a Senheiser Momentum 2. And it's the best audio quality of my life, so it's very precious to me.

And an iPhone 6, because the 7 does not have an audio jack, and I live by my music. I used to take a lot of pictures with the 6, but now I travel with a Fujifilm X70 digital camera. Very compact. It's a workhorse, and half the size of my Fujifilm X-Pro 1. This is with me all the time—bars, clubs, or meetings.

What are some of your favorite places in the world?

New Zealand and Switzerland for nature. I grew up in a hot, flat, crowded, coastal city, and it turns out I love mountains. And Brazil, for culture. I love Sao Paulo. It was amazing to be there. Sao Paulo I've been twice. Switzerland many times. New Zealand twice, and I'd like to go back. Repeated visits because things have really struck me there. Sao Paulo's visual art, music, the language, people, food. If I had to pick three places I'd like to see again, Sao Paulo, Basil, Switzerland and Auckland.

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Ultimately, how does someone travel ethically?

Well, the ethics of travel is more in your head. Have respect for the culture. Understand that that culture is not static. Like, Mexico City is not people in ethnic dress. Mexico City is also young rockers, and cafés, and contemporary artists, and software designers.

And do good work. Hope you get invited so that somebody else is paying for it. Try to get an upgrade. Show up fresh. Traveling is not great for the environment, so the least you can do is be present to the people there, make connections, do good work. So that way when you get on that flight back, and they say, "Would you like some Champagne, sir?," you know you kind of earned it.