

## How travel limits our minds

- o [Julian Baggini](#), [The Guardian](#), Sunday 30 September 2012

Slumping into the cramped confines of my seat, recovering my composure after a frantic, protracted check-in that made me mislay my wallet, almost miss my flight, and become €100 poorer, the result of my experiment in travel seemed obvious: boats and trains beat the pains of planes any day. But the real problem with air travel is not the carbon footprint, the hassle of security checks, the tedium of the boarding gate, the soulless sprawl of the hire car lot, or [Ryanair's](#) excessive excess charges and unavoidable fees for allegedly optional extras. The deeper issue is that how we travel reflects and shapes the way we think, and we have become a society of airheads.

I started thinking about this because of a recurring desire to recreate an annual childhood journey by ferry and overnight train to visit our family in northern Italy. Was it just nostalgia pulling me, or is something of real value lost at 30,000ft? I decided to go to Italy the old way and return the new, to see how the experiences really compared.

The passenger terminal at Dover docks did not provide the most promising start, having all the charm of a 1970s coach station. But once on deck, with the [white cliffs](#) fading into the distance, I had a real sense of a proper trip starting, something that the palm-sweat-inducing jolt of take-off doesn't provide. The sedate passage of the ship, the gradual emergence of the French coast, and the disembarkation in the open air, with a real town in clear sight, provided a sense of the continuities between places. In contrast, planes simply transport you from one anonymous, homogenous edgeland to another, between airports virtually identical in their black and yellow signage and multinational franchises. It's the difference between travel – a movement between places in which the journey is part of the experience – and transit, the utilitarian linking of here and there, in which the destination becomes all that matters and the transfer simply something to put up with. (...)

Consumer culture has made us too accustomed to getting only what we want, no more and no less. Experiences are atomised into their component parts, the extraneous excised in an attempt to maximise the impact of the parts we prefer, with no thought to how their context changes them. But if you only ever get what you know you already want, serendipity is denied and the richness of experience is reduced to the button-pushing delivery of crude hits of fun, excitement, novelty or reassurance, often consumed in the private bubble of home or headphone.

In this respect, train travel on commuter routes has, alas, gone the same way as flying, as I am reminded on the two-hour TGV ride from Calais to Paris. But on longer distances, there is a palpably different attitude among travellers. Accompanying us in our four-berth couchette from Paris to Milan, for example, were Amanda and Ian from New Zealand. They were taking this trip because Amanda has a wonderful and vivid memory of stepping out of an overnight train into a Venetian dawn 20-odd years ago. Say what you like about flying, but [North Terminal at Gatwick](#) just doesn't have the same effect.

In some ways train travel demands more of us. But even at 5.50am, after a night of interrupted sleep in a narrow bunk, the great terminus of [Milano Centrale](#) has infinitely more charm than any baggage reclaim area. It is a contemporary malaise to avoid things that require effort but are rewarding in favour of gains in convenience that come at the price of blandness and loss of variety.

It might be objected that "slow travel" is just an indulgence of the time and cash-rich. But you actually gain holiday time when travelling is an integral part of the experience, because you lose none to mere transit. As for expense, the gap was not so wide, and was almost nothing after the excess baggage fee. And yet despite all I've written, I admit I have another trip coming up and, guess what, I'm flying. I'm just another airhead, led by apparent ease and convenience away from what is more profoundly rewarding.

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