HOW TRAVEL HAS CHANGED

As a rather experienced traveler -- 114 countries so far, along with all fifty states and most of Canada -- I have witnessed profound changes in the travel industry since my first airplane trip in 1966 at the age of fifteen. ($99, round-trip in coach, from ORD to PHX.)

The various businesses that comprise our worldwide travel network are recognized as the globe's #1 employer: airlines, cruise ships, passenger rail systems, hotels, motels, restaurants, bars, museums and visitor attractions, souvenir makers, taxis, tour buses, travel agencies and tour companies, publicity promoters and advertisers, group and individual tour guides, reservation agents, travel guidebooks, governmental departments, travel magazines, clothing and equipment providers, luggage manufacturers, travel photographers, and more.

It seems that there is a vital, universal need to explore new places, appreciate new cultures, and to over-all enjoy a variety of new experiences away from home. And, as more and more people are able to afford it, the demand for travel continues to grow. While there have been notable positive changes to the industry, the sheer expanding numbers of tourists have spawned significant negative consequences as well.

So: How exactly has travel changed? Let's look at the airlines first.

Many famous airlines no longer exist. Pan Am, TWA, Northwest Orient, Eastern, Braniff, Mexicana, Swiss Air, and several other once major carriers are now defunct.

People used to dress up more formally to fly. Suits for the men and dresses for the women. The in-flight meals were specially prepared and served -- with china plates, crystal glasses, silverware, and cloth napkins, even in economy/coach class. The stewardesses were attractive, young women in fancy uniforms. Many of the flights were uncrowded (unlike today, as we are treated much like cattle, and sardined into cramped, full-capacity seating), and flew crisply on schedule, with the typical first-class and economy cabins perhaps one-third empty. Complimentary newspapers, playing cards, and magazines were offered. Passengers were pampered. Seating and legroom was nicely comfortable too. Cabins and restrooms were very clean. Although smoking was allowed once aloft, in later years the cabins were divided into smoking and non-smoking sections. Unfortunately, the smoke tended to drift as it wanted, making that aspect of flight unhealthy for the non-smokers seated closer to the smoking section. Airplane tickets were obtained in person at the airport counters, or through a travel agent in advance. The tickets were paper documents (3.5" x 7'') with multiple carbon paper inserts.

There were no TSA security checkpoints with long lines, no service or comfort animals, no in-flight movies or music, no wi-fi or internet, no pre-printed barcoded tickets, no emailing. Business was always conducted in person or over the telephone. Airports had pay phones, and a typical local call cost a dime. Most transactions were done by paying cash or writing a check. Credit cards were just being introduced, however, beginning with Diner's Club and American Express, and were soon followed by Interbank/Master Charge (later renamed Master Card) and BankAmericard (later renamed Visa).

When travelling overseas, you took traveler's checks rather than large amounts of cash. These were usually purchased through American Express or Thomas Cook (the latter company which sadly went defunct in September, 2019 -- after 178 years in the travel business). You took these to an approved foreign bank and co-signed your previously signed traveler's check and showed your passport as proof of identification. Then you were given the necessary foreign currency, minus a small service charge. Each country had its own money, unlike the Euro today. If your traveler's checks were lost or stolen, they could simply be replaced with no problem. They had serial numbers on them, like real money.

Regarding travel guidebooks, those were limited to either Fodor's or Frommer's (or Baedeker's if one was already abroad). Travel agencies had loads of free brochures and maps as well, as did government tourist offices, who would mail you generous packets for free from overseas to your door.

There were no computerized language translation apps back then, so you either learned a language in advance, or carried a translation book with commonly used phrases. Most non-English speaking countries did not have many people able to speak English in those days, except for some hotel managers or bank tellers. I remember doing a lot of pantomiming when requesting a particular restaurant meal or an urgent bathroom!

Especially if going overseas, you used the services of a professional travel agent. For hotel lodgings, a 'Telex' was sent to the property, requesting availability for particular dates. This process often took up to three or four days, particularly for the busy summer season. Sometimes, an international telephone call had to be made, which was very expensive.

Keeping in touch with loved ones at home wasn't very easy. You sent detailed postcards or lightweight airmail letters from abroad, then had wait for weeks for a response. You picked up any mail from home at the General Delivery desk at American Express offices, so you routinely checked in at each major city you visited to see if you got any word. If you needed to call home in an emergency, it was extremely expensive. You went to the foreign city's main telephone exchange building, and reserved a particular day and time for the undersea Trans-Atlantic or Trans-Pacific communication cable lines. You then showed up at your appointed time and went into a sound-proof telephone booth. The operator would let you know when the connection was made and only then you could talk to your family or friend. The transmission was sometimes primitive and riddled with static! Of course, later, modern communication satellites made this process much easier and cheaper.

News -- in English -- was found in the International Herald Tribune newspaper, which was for sale in most major world capitals. Later, news from the U.S. could be found in the weekly international editions of both Time and Newsweek magazines. But there were times when traveling abroad that I had absolutely no idea what was going on back home for weeks at a time!

In the 1960s, young backpackers descended upon Europe and Asia. Some were students on their summer holiday, while others were vagabonds looking for cheap food, lodging, sex, or drugs. Hitchhiking was common. Some purchased a cost-effective "Eurail Pass," which allowed unlimited train travel throughout most of Europe. Many also used that method to conveniently sleep on trains overnight, thereby saving money on a hotel bed or hostal. A so-called "Hippie Trail" also led overland by thumb or bus across Asia from Turkey to either India or Nepal. A vague quest for spiritual enlightenment, or simply an adventure to score cheap hashish and other drugs, was the main motivation for many of these young people.

Before the invention of the digital camera, travelers wishing to take their own photos with their own bulky reflex cameras usually brought along an estimate of how many rolls of camera film they thought they would use during their trip. The most prized film -- because of its superb color qualities and its 100-year durability once developed -- was Kodachrome 64, made by the Eastman Kodak Company out of Rochester, New York. This color slide film -- mounted in 2" x 2" cardboard squares -- fit neatly into Kodak's own Carousel Projector trays, allowing perfect enlarged showings of vacation scenes on a portable projection screen. I still have eighty such Carousel trays, safely holding more than 12,000 color slides, along with my still-working bulb projector. The only drawbacks of the older cameras and their necessary rolls was running out of film while abroad (and having to purchase more at a higher, imported expense), and having to wait many days after you returned home for your slides or photo prints to be developed. Sometimes, important pictures came back completely blank or totally black, due to over or under exposures of one's camera's light meter -- which, of course, was not known at the time you clicked the shutter while on vacation. This came as a cruel shock! Of course, with digital cameras, there is no film to worry about, and one can view and/or delete one's pictures while still on one's trip -- a marvelous and foolproof improvement!

One regret I have is that I was never able to afford to fly on the SST Concorde, the passenger plane that flew from the years 1976-2003 before going defunct. Twenty such planes were built, and could fly twice the speed of sound -- Mach 2 -- at 60,000 feet, almost twice the standard long-distance airliner altitude of 33,000 feet. British Airways and Air France exclusively offered the deluxe service. One could fly from New York to London in just two hours and fifty-three minutes, compared to typically eight hours today. But the round-trip ticket cost a hefty $7995! Similarly, one could fly non-stop from London to Singapore on the Concorde in only seven hours, compared to seventeen hours on a standard airliner. As a person who has taken several 15-17 hour flights around the world over the years, it would have been wonderful to shave off that much time en route!

Luggage has also changed. You, or a porter, carried your bags by their handles or straps. None were on wheels, as most are today. Smaller 'roller' bags with collapsible chrome handles -- nowadays jammed into overhead bins on airliners -- didn't exist. Overhead bins were once used only for storing passengers' coats and hats, complimentary plastic airline shoulder bags, or airline blankets and pillows. Prior to 9/11 and the introduction of strict TSA security procedures, I was able to bring my trusty Swiss Army knife with me into the airline cabin and actually use it in flight. No more!

Cruise ships have gotten bigger and bigger over the years -- triple or even quadruple the number of passengers and crew! While tourists bring much needed cash into vacation zones, such mega-ships can disgorge thousands of people over the space of a few hours and completely over-run historic sites and popular museums like voracious locusts, choking narrow streets and causing huge attraction entrance lines. Cities like Venice are experimenting with actually limiting the numbers of visitors each day during peak season.

Because of its rising middle class and their newly-acquired access to more disposable income, China has now entered the global tourist scene in a very significant way. In the 1980s, a burgeoning and wealthy Japan had many of its citizens able to afford international travel for the first time. This has now been totally eclipsed by the Chinese, who are eager to experience the outside world -- most of them for the first time too.

Since 1994, we have had the Channel Tunnel (a.k.a., the "Chunnel"), which connects England and France under the English Channel. Prior to this, the only way across the waters for tourists from the British Isles to the Continent was via regular ferry service, which could be dicey during rough, stormy seas. (There was also a hovercraft company called Hoverlloyd, from 1965-81, that went across the Channel by hovering a few feet above the water as it propelled itself forward. I did this transport once, but have yet to traverse the Chunnel.)

Rail travel in Europe and the U.K. is remarkably efficient, compared to the sorry state of passenger train service in America. Amtrak probably does the best it can under its long, precarious financial constraints, but it seems that our country is wedded to the private automobile, and that is unlikely to change. You would think that the richest country in the world would have the best and most modern passenger rail system in the world. But that award must go to the innovative Chinese, who have wisely invested in state-of-the-art, fast and reliable new rail systems all across their land -- the most populated country on earth.

Travel agencies have also changed dramatically with the popular use of the internet. Many people now quickly and easily book their travel needs directly from their Smart-Phones or computers with a few simple clicks. Travel web sites compete in offering the lowest fares. AirBnB has upended the motel and hotel business by allowing people to cheaply stay in comfortable private homes or apartments almost anywhere around the world. Similarly, ride-sharing companies such as Uber and Lyft have weakened the monopolistic grip of taxi cab companies by widely offering inexpensive rides at the push of a button. But travel agents are still important players in the travel industry, particularly for giving expert advice to their clients and in getting special, unadvertised deals not known to the general public.

Where is the travel industry headed in the years to come? Well, for one thing, space tourism is coming! Elon Musk's Space X company will soon be offering sub-orbital trips into zero-gravity space, as is Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic and Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin. These billionaire-entrepreneurs have ignited many an imagination. Time will tell if their visions will come true, and be self-sustaining. Truth be told -- if the price ultimately became more affordable -- I would like to give such a trip a try.

Yet when I think back to the Golden Age of Travel in the last part of the 19th Century and the first half of the 20th Century, I confess that I am an incurable romantic. Give me the mysterious Orient Express racing to Istanbul, or Pan Am's China Clipper heading into the sunset across the Pacific, or the luxurious Queen Elizabeth ocean liner steaming across the Atlantic, or the stately Graf Zeppelin gently floating across the sky. Give me a battered steamer trunk plastered with exotic stickers from classic grand hotels. Give me relaxing dinners at the world's finest, five-star restaurants. I want to be in a falucca drifting dreamily down the Nile. I wish to gaze at soft moonlight shimmering on the Taj Mahal, and to hear the distant roar of lions at midnight on an African safari. I need castles and cathedrals, ancient ruins and museums -- but I want them without the crowds.

In short, give me the Past...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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