

The Bayan Gate at Angkor Thom, Cambodia

A City Planner Travels Around the World

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My recently published book *Follow the Sun!, A City Planner's Journey Around the World*, documents my four month solo journey through Southeast Asia, China, Mongolia, Russia via the Trans-Siberian Railway, the Balkans, Israel, and Morocco. As a city planner my interests tend toward city form, character, modes of transportation, and local economics. People, though, are at the forefront because a city or region is its people, and, without close observation and personal contact, any understanding of the environment is only superficial. The book reflects this orientation when discussing the route, which consists of five segments.

Southeast Asia to Shanghai: My journey begins in the City-State of Singapore, which guards the entry to the South China Sea and connects the sea route between west and east. Home to many local cultures, reflecting Malay, Chinese, Indian, and British heritage, it is a blend of east and west, old and new. From Singapore, it is a short bus ride across a bridge into Malaysia where I visited its thriving capital of Kuala Lumpur and continued north up the Malay Peninsula to the Island of Penang, which, like Singapore, was earlier part of the British Straits Colony.



Boat Quay, Colonial Singapore backed by today's development realities

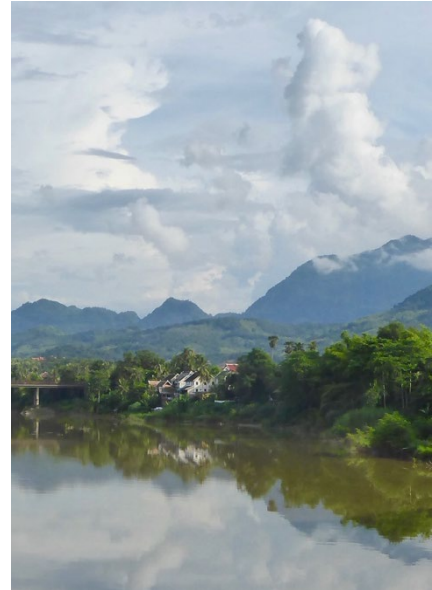
A short flight to Pnom Penh, capital of Cambodia, connected me to the Khmer culture and its ancient civilization at Angkor Wat. Pnom Penh is a mixture of Khmer culture combined with the remnants of French colonial rule. It is also a place to encounter the history of the 1970's genocide of the Khmer Rouge regime which slaughtered nearly a quarter of the nation's population of seven million. Impressed with the culture, yet sobered by the history, I continued north, up the mountainous, verdant Indo-Chinese

peninsula, to communist Laos, visiting Vientiane, its French tinged capital, and the laid back and breathtaking historic capital of Luang Prabang, the home of the last Laotian king,

From there, travel through beautiful mountains brought me to Vietnam, entering through Dien Bien Phu, the site of the demise of French Colonialism in the 1950's, and departing via Hanoi, a city of contrasts – thriving markets, elegant French boulevards, and burgeoning industry. I then

flew from Hanoi to Shanghai to start the second leg of travel.

Shanghai to Irkutsk by Rail: Upon arriving at Shanghai's international airport, I was swept into the city at 260 mph by a futuristic magnetic levitation (mag-lev) train and then greeted by massive levels of congestion, smog, and noise. Shanghai and Beijing assault one's senses and make a strong statement regarding China's economic prowess. Time well spent at Shanghai's "Center for Urban Planning", provided the context for seeing this complex city. Four hours of high speed rail travel then brought me to Beijing, and the vast scale of the Capital. Onward rail service took me through Mongolia, visiting its wild countryside and urbane capital of Ulan Bator, followed by the thrilling exposure to Siberia's Lake Baikal, the source of 20 percent of the world's fresh water, and then a city once known as the "Paris of Siberia" – Irkutsk.



Luang Prabang across the Mekong River. It could be Shangra La!



Model of Shanghai, Center for Urban Planning. A great tool for understanding this complex city.



Young buddhist monks in Luang Prabang



My train moves across the Mongolian Steppe



A traveler in Ghorkhi-Terelj National Park, Mongolia

The Trans-Siberian Railroad to Moscow: My month-long visit to Russia, via the Trans-Siberian Railway from Irkutsk to the current “Paris of Russia” – Moscow, let me experience major cities like Ekaterinburg and Kazan, and learn that Siberia, a place many westerners associate with frozen wasteland, is a bountiful region, laced with cities having a population of over a million people and much important history. It also brings one in contact with the *taiga* — that continuous forest of larch, pine and birch that covers the Siberian terrain, and is an all but continuous companion outside the train window. Finally, arrival in Moscow, the center of the Russian Universe and a story all its own!



The Taiga, near Irkutsk, Siberia



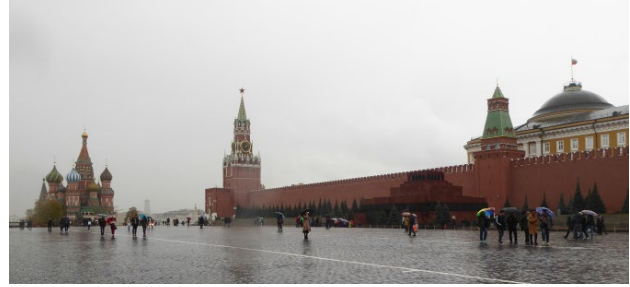
Lake Baikal --20% of the world's fresh water in one lake!



Sophisticated shopper in Irkutsk



Ekaterinburg, a city of two million in the Urals.



Red Square, Moscow

Traversing the Balkans: A short flight from Moscow to Bucharest, Romania set me squarely within the Balkan Peninsula. Turkish for “mountains”, the Balkans reflect its name, and contains a mix of predominantly Slavic peoples, currently divided into about 12 nations. While separated from Asia by the Black and Aegean Seas, the Balkan cultures have been influenced by Asia, especially by what is now Turkey and by adjoining European countries such as Italy, Hungary, and Russia. Swept over and colonized by Greece, Rome, and the Ottoman Turks, it’s a land of varied cultures and lovely small cities and towns, offering the traveler a variety of experiences. There I visited Bucharest and Sofia, the comfortably scaled capitals of Romania and Bulgaria, a number of smaller towns, and lastly, Thessaloniki in Northern Greece, which hosts little mentioned examples of quality urban design.



Brazov, Romania, near the Transylvanian Alps

The last leg of my journey took me from **Israel to Morocco**. After reconnecting with the major Israeli cities of Haifa, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, and a short rest in Rome, a flight to Casablanca and a rail trip brought me to Fez and its amazing Medina. Following several days driving

through the Atlas Mountains to Marrakech, I returned home via Paris. This last leg was primarily a view of two Mediterranean cultures; Israel, modern, but rooted in its past, and Morocco, emerging into modernity, but reflecting its historical culture. Each offered the traveler different cultural experiences, terrain, and urban characteristics that are worth the journey.



Bauhaus architecture constitutes much of older Tel Aviv, Israel



Ait Benhaddou kasbah in the Saharan Atlas Mountain region, Morocco

I travelled modestly, staying at small hotels primarily occupied by regional travelers, ate with the locals in their restaurants, used trains and buses, and sought out conversation wherever I could find it. Contrary to the news, which tends to focus on the crisis du jour, the world that I saw is a wonderful and exciting place. One can travel safe and in contact with local society if you're a bit street smart, and willing to accept the local pace, food, and the values of the culture in which you are a guest.

To sum up, I've again confirmed that travel is about the journey, not just the destinations; to have opportunities to meet, mingle and talk with locals and travelers from other than your own country; and I continue to believe that the world is a fascinating and (often) welcoming place, full of mostly pleasant surprises, even for the most wizened traveler. But, to *travel* one must get out

of one's home-culture bubble; to be with the locals and use the same forms of transportation as they do, to stay in modest hotels and hostels where one mixes with people. And from such experience I hope that you, like I, learn that most people have the same concerns, aspirations, and values; namely to be respected, be safe, and to live as comfortably as possible.



After her overloaded motorbike almost fell on me, we repacked it and left with a smile and hug! SaPa, Vietnam

Follow the Sun! presents these observations and more about the character of the places visited and their people, the adventure and challenges of solo travel, and the wonder that is our world. Should you be interested in obtaining a copy, you can find it on Amazon or by clicking one of the following links which will bring you to a choice of ebook or regular and deluxe color paperback formats.

(I've held back on the links in this section as you might believe this too much of a sales promotion. If so, I'll modify this paragraph accordingly)



The camel driver prepares to lead me out of the Sahara and back to the 21st Century!



I followed the sun across parts of 15 countries during four months of travel