



- Rock Earle

Wanna Go? Guides; good - and others

As I stand at a *carrefours* of my life, watching my youth receding but eagerly awaiting my approaching maturity, a natural summing up of my experiences around the world is happening. And here's a realization that will startle nobody: it occurs to me now that there are two kinds of travel: independent - by far the most attractive and prevalent style for me up to now - and otherwise.

Independent travel is seductive for its freedom and, well, independence. But it's lotsa trial-and-error, uncertainty, tedious details, and just plain work, so as I age the attraction fizzles and "haul my lazy carcass around, talk to me, feed me, and show me to my bed" starts sounding better and better. Which is the non-independent side of travel: tours. I haven't done this very much, but now that I'm old and tired from the road, I am allowing, with a certain measure of disdain and self-loathing, this low-impact mode of travel to set in.

And if you're being taken care of from dawn to dusk, somebody has to do the caring: tour guides. Not that you have to be part of a group to have a tour guides. We often hire a guide for a day when we are traveling alone, and some of our best experiences have come that way. Anyway, after a while, you realize that sometimes you've been well-guided and benefited, and other times you've not. So when I think of the good guides, I naturally wonder what made them that way.

There all kinds - guides who stay with your group for the duration, independent guides who are called by hotel concierges or cruise directors for a day or an afternoon, day-bus guides, or truly independent types who may be found on government tourism organization lists. Looking back, I can't say for sure that the type of guide has any bearing on his/her "goodness." You might think that one guide per couple would be always better than one guide for a bus. But there's no correlation - our Viking River Cruises guide Steven had responsibility for 30 of us for two weeks, and was our best ever. Likewise if the guide is also the driver: Gerardo in Mexico City was a fabulous at both.



Gerardo, in Xochimilco

Actually, most of the time now when we are traveling alone we just ask the hotel to arrange for a driver, and they usually turn out to be great guides. The subject may defy science, but, here are some of the things I think about when pondering good guides and not.

Time spent together may have something to do with it; duration, though, makes a good guide better and a bad guide worse. Certainly, getting to know Steven over two weeks in China added to the experience and even engendered a real fondness. But familiarity is a two-way street; After a few weeks in Greenland on an icebreaker with Jane the English bulldog we were wishing we weren't.



All-time fave Steven
on the Yangtze



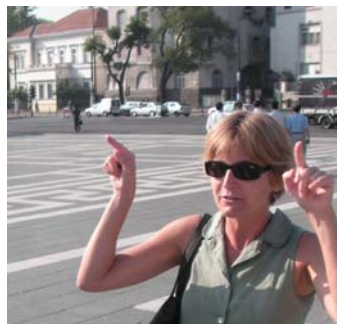
Our Sachiko in the
Tokyo subway

Knowledge - being totally familiar with places, as was Sachiko in Tokyo is crucial because time is always limited. Unlike Park in Pusan who took a group off a bus to a little market instead of lunch, then to a train station with long walks and stairs but without porters and a very short time window, for a long train ride without food. And **Command** is related to knowledge. Mr. Liu, our lovable ex-People's Army officer driver in Beijing, not only had intimate knowledge of every destination, but also the resolve to park anywhere *he* wanted to. Knowledge and

Command lead inevitably to **Flexibility** - willingness to do what we think we want to, but the firmness, resolve and authority to guide us to other options if our ideas would not be fruitful. Well-reasoned suggestions, based on his understanding of our interests and existing knowledge levels, are critical.

Language If everything else is perfect, but you can't understand your guide, what's the point? Most of the guides we've had, all over the world, have been barely understandable, like they graduated from tour-guide English class but never really lived in English, so to speak. This applies to all of the Koreans, really, and some of the Chinese. Struggling to listen takes extra energy; after a while in South America, I would just give up, surely missing meaningful things. No doubt their English is better than my Mandarin or Hungarian, but I'm not getting paid to render facts understandably.

Humor Every tour group leader tries to tell the same old jokes. Steven was a riot, but *pobre* Carlos in the Chilean Lake district hung one joke over the 2 days we were with him, waiting until the bitter end to tell the punch line, in broken English, that we knew he'd delivered 242 times...this year. Grace in Beijing struggled with English jokes, too, but in the end made us laugh all the time.



Eva in Budapest

Cost You'd think cost would be a determiner, but no - that just depends on where you are in the world: Sachiko in Tokyo was about \$400US for a half-day, with no vehicle or driver; Gerardo in Mexico City was about \$50 for an entire day, including his car, chauffeur services, and gas. Most private guides are somewhere in between. Of course, the cost of group guides is hidden in the cost of the trip, so who knows?

Willingness to share - like Steven with his wonderfully personal stories about his family and his people...indelible and unforgettable tales that left tears in our eyes. Ingrid in Vienna had all the qualifications and did an OK job, but two days later, Eva in Budapest won our hearts with stories of her minister father's persecution by the communists during the Cold War. And I don't know where this comes in, but assenting and fitting right in when asked to sit and dine with us, rather than shrinking away adds tremendously to our experience. I will never forget the luscious *carnitas* with Gerardo in Xochimilco, or the narrated fresh fish lunch with Julio in Vina del Mar.

So how do you get good guides? I have no idea! I do know that I'd rather be lucky than smart. But luck is a frame of mind, and maybe being lucky in Guides entails being every bit as flexible, personable, willing to share, knowledgeable (prepared), courteous, and well-humored ourselves as we want *them* to be. Wanna go?

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