

Travel as a Spiritual Experience

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The first time I stepped into St. Peter's Cathedral in the Vatican, I remember feeling overwhelmed by its beauty. The domed ceiling was so immense, so beautiful, so adorned with murals from master artists and tons of marble, gold and other precious materials, that for a few precious moments I found myself dumbstruck. I lost all words and all thought, and in that empty space there rose an immense sense of stillness, peace and awe. I wasn't very religious or spiritual at the time, but I seriously pondered (if only for five minutes) the prospects of becoming a Catholic priest!



St. Peter's Cathedral from the outside

No, I didn't join the priesthood, but the place did leave a lasting impression on my mind. So much so that when I write about it now, even though I've forgotten much about what the ceiling actually looked like, I still remember that feeling.

The spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle describes this feeling as a connection to consciousness. There are moments when we witness beauty so great that it overwhelms the mind's faculty to describe it. It is in these moments, these moments of 'no thought,' that we reconnect with Being or God or the Collective Consciousness or one of the many other labels that religions ascribe to the feeling of oneness.

Tolle recommends travel as a spiritual practice because we have many opportunities to encounter great beauty. Great beauty silences the chatter of the mind, and in that space of silence one can get in touch with stillness and peace. One thing he cautions against, however, is spending too much time studying and learning about the history of a place before you actually go there. If you do so, the mind is prepared for what it will see and your knowledge of a place will trigger an endless stream of thoughts: "Aha," you might think, "this was designed by Michelangelo," or, "this must be the edifice that was destroyed in the year 1678 and later repaired in the mid-1700s." Such thoughts interfere with experiencing the place and the moment as it is.

I noticed the effect that forehand knowledge had when I visited the Sistine Chapel. Although it was my first time in Rome, I had already seen many pictures and read many articles about Michelangelo, the chapel and its restoration. There was no disputing the fact that the chapel was beautiful, but instead of that feeling of stillness and awe, I felt as though I needed to pick apart and dissect everything that I saw in order to appreciate it. I didn't just receive the place as it was. Because I already knew a lot about the place on an intellectual level, I couldn't get in touch with it on a deeper level.



Castel St. Angelo, right next to St. Peter's Cathedral

This is not to say that you shouldn't read up on a place after you visit it, however. Even Tolle himself enjoys reading up on the places he has travelled after visiting them. Knowing a place's history does add a certain level of depth to your experience. It can't compare, however, to feeling the beauty of a place, to walking past the threshold of the dome and: *wow...silence*.

It is said that a spiritual master can see (and I mean 'see' in the sense of the 'feeling' mentioned above) the beauty in the most mundane of things, in the most mundane places. For the rest of us, however, we need to visit places like St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome or the Grand Canyon to pull us out of our incessant stream of thoughts and feel the awe and the stillness that comes when we witness great beauty. Travel is important because even if you live in a beautiful place, you become desensitised to the beauty, so much so that you forget that it is even there. Sometimes you need a complete change of scene to jolt you out of your reverie and truly 'see' beauty at its deepest level.