

Praise for *Why We Travel*

'If you like travel you must read this! A beautiful, insightful and thought-provoking book with the power to change how you see travel – and life. Ash is a thought-leader in the travel space and it's not hard to see why. Simply brilliant'

Pip Stewart

'*Why We Travel* is an eloquent journey, exploring the very essence of life and the motivations we have for travelling. Navigating and blending real world adventures with the landscapes of our mind. You'll find profound meaning and insights with every step of the journey, that isn't just about the destination. An excellent read'

Aldo Kane

'Ash is a great storyteller, whose book weaves together adventure, big ideas and inspirational tales from around the world. A must for any smart-thinking traveller'

Levison Wood

'*Why We Travel* is the right book at the right time, interrogating the biological and social reasons we wheel our suitcases out ... Bhardwaj is out to change mindsets, not just itineraries'

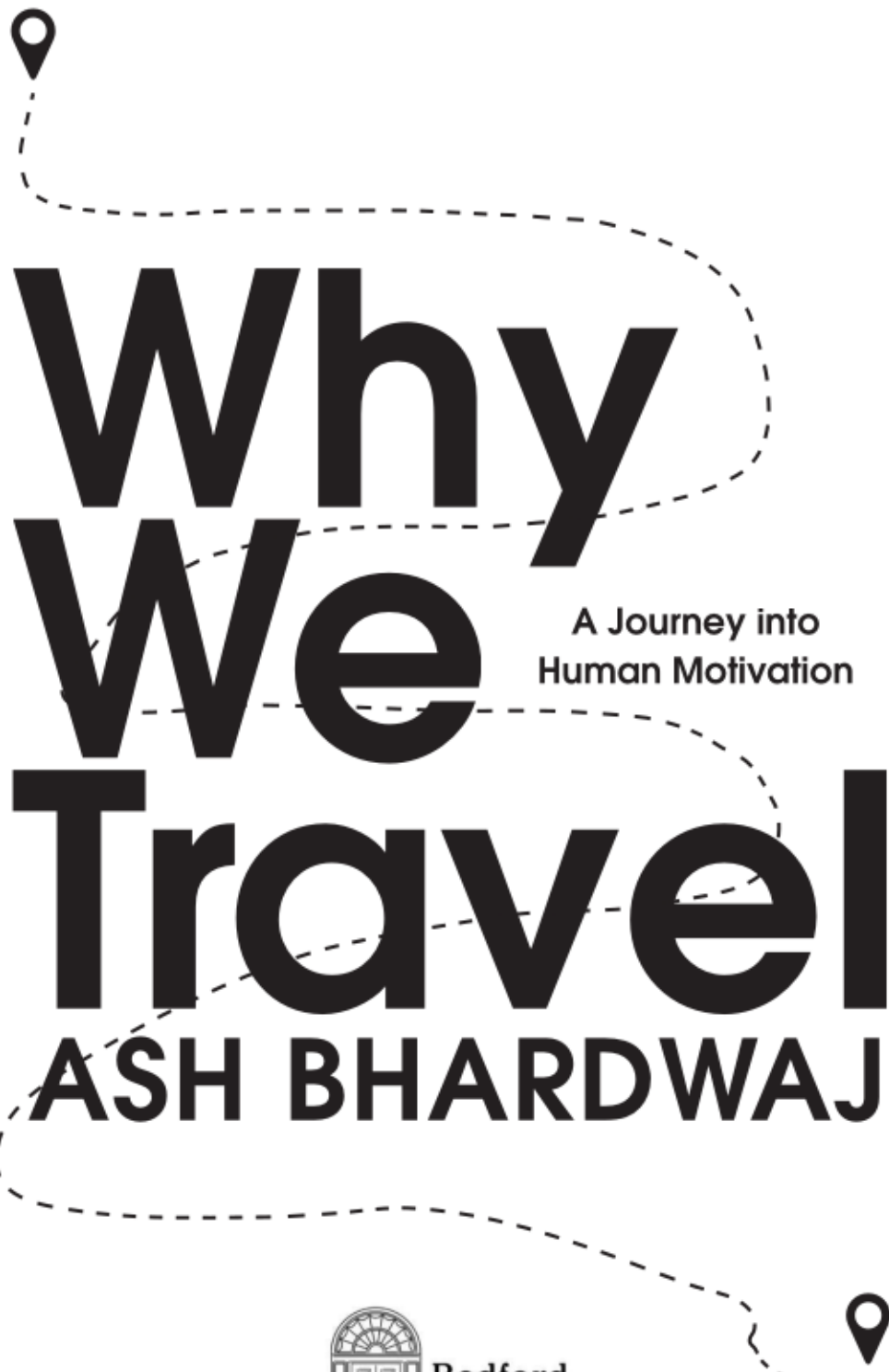
The Bookseller

'What a story!... We don't often hear about the long and rocky road that separates a journalist's dream from readers and listeners. *Why We Travel* will inspire and help others who would like to share their passion for discovery. It's personal, adventurous and shines with curiosity'

Nicholas Crane

'A beautiful book. *Why We Travel* will catch you unawares in the most unexpected ways. While it will certainly make you a more thoughtful and better traveller, there's a high chance it will make you a more thoughtful and better person, too'

Alex Bescoby



Why We Travel

A Journey into
Human Motivation

ASH BHARDWAJ



Bedford
Square
Publishers

First published in the UK in 2024 by
Bedford Square Publishers Ltd,
London, UK

bedfordsquarepublishers.co.uk
@bedsqpublishers

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN
978-1-915798-78-7 (Hardback)
978-1-915798-79-4 (Trade Paperback)
978-1-915798-80-0 (eBook)

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

For Mother B

Introduction

For all its material advantages, the sedentary life has left us edgy, unfulfilled. Even after 400 generations in villages and cities, we haven't forgotten. The open road still softly calls, like a nearly forgotten song of childhood.¹

Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*

Travel is the driving force of my life. It's my career, my hobby, my love and my nemesis. When I was a child, we rarely went on holidays abroad, but I explored the countryside near our home with the enthusiasm of a Labrador, and I loved it when Mum took us to visit her brothers in Devon and Holland. At the age of 17, I had my first proper overseas adventure. It was life-changing, and I have been preoccupied with travel ever since.

I have travelled in many different guises: as a backpacker and as a soldier, on expedition and on holiday, in groups and on my own, for work and for fun. I went for sport and for love,

as a journalist and as a pilgrim, a teacher and a student, and I learned as much about myself as I did about the world. Travel was my gateway to ideas and education.

As I built a career in travel journalism, I began thinking about the *purpose* of elective and leisure travel (as against migration for economic or security reasons). For many people, travel sits alongside homeownership and marriage as a significant life goal, and we Brits spend more on package holidays than we do on any other leisure activity.²

Given that we spend so much of our time either travelling or saving up to go travelling, it seems surprising that we rarely think about *why* we do it. Most travel marketing focuses on fun and relaxation, but when I reflect on my own travels I realise that this only captures a small proportion of my adventures.

This means that we miss out on much of what travel can do for us. We live in an era when travel is not just getting more expensive, but also causing catastrophic climate change, ruinous amounts of waste and irreversible habitat destruction. It is time for us to think more carefully about when we travel and why.

As I reflected on my own reasons for travelling, I became curious about why other people travelled. I started by asking my friends and colleagues, then I interviewed scientists, philosophers, DJs and athletes. I read everything from historical poetry to religious texts, and I became acquainted with niche scientific research. It was an incredible journey into the minds of others, and I brought some of their motivations into journeys of my own.

Why We Travel is the result of that mission. Each chapter is a mix of travelogue, conversation, advice, research and

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self-reflection. Most of the travels are my own. Some are epic adventures, others are closer to home, and some are journeys of internal exploration. Each is a window into a specific motivation for travel: Curiosity, Inspiration, Happiness, Mentorship, Serendipity, Hardship, Service, Empathy, Healing, Wonder, Eroticism and Hope.

I unpack these motivations through interviews, research and the science of their origins. I use them to explore other journeys, and topics ranging from genetics to psychedelics. I look at how travel intersects with the rest of our lives, and question its hold over us: Why do we travel? How do we do it 'better'? Can it help us to live more fulfilling lives?

I have come to realise that no one motivation is 'better' than any other. Instead, we travel with different motivations at different times, and they sometimes overlap. Some of them will be familiar to you, and others might seem absurd or outlandish. But I hope that they inspire you to think about travel differently.

I also hope that they give you an insight into where our motivations come from, and how they affect us in everyday life. Because these motivations are not just reasons to travel – they are reasons to live.

Ash Bhardwaj, November 2023, London.

Chapter 1

CURIOSITY: From Windsor to Waikato

Windsor was a good place to grow up, even if you weren't royalty.

Throughout my childhood, hundreds of thousands of tourists came to the town every year, thanks to our famous local resident, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. At 11 a.m. each day, the soldiers of the Household Division – dressed in their scarlet tunics and bearskin hats – would march behind a band from their barracks to Windsor Castle, for the Changing of the Guard ceremony. After drinking in this display of military pomp, the tourists would file into the castle, and enjoy the Queen's interior design.

Familiarity may not breed contempt, but it tends to breed disinterest, as I didn't even visit the castle until my early twenties. But our famous neighbour had her positives: the castle's Crown Estate provided easy access to nature. The tourist industry meant lots of jobs in hospitality. And teenage delinquency was limited to eating Woolworths pick'n'mix without paying.

I had gone to the local junior and middle schools, then won

a scholarship to do my GCSEs at a Quaker boarding school in Reading. I did well academically, but I only had a few friends, and I always felt dislocated, so I chose to return to the local state system for my A levels, and joined the Windsor Boys' School in 1999.

Not long after I started at Windsor Boys', my mum discovered that the school was planning a rugby tour to Australia, New Zealand and the Cook Islands. She told me that, if I got a place on the team, she would pay for my place on the tour.

Mum had travelled to New Zealand in the 1970s, and she loved it. She inspired me with stories of smoking volcanoes, empty beaches, trees unchanged since the time of the dinosaurs, and wildlife that had evolved in isolation from the rest of the world. It sounded magical, and my excitement was matched by my teenage desire for independence: I would be travelling with my peers and without my family, but within the safety net of an organised tour.

Mum had raised my sister Barty and me by herself. We lived on income support in social housing and, while we never struggled for food or clothing, we didn't go on fancy holidays or buy expensive junk for the house. But Mum felt that it was important for me to have experiences that broadened my horizons, so she took on a second job as a cleaner, just to cover the cost of my ticket.

All I had to do was to learn how to play rugby.

In my late teenage years, I was a slightly overweight geek, more focused on hip-hop and science fiction than on drop-goals and scrums. Most of my friends were metalheads and skaters who sat around in parks, getting stoned and drinking cider.

With a goal to achieve, things began to change. I spent evenings at rugby training instead of the local park, and

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watched rugby games on the telly, rather than *Star Trek*. I also had to get fit for the first time in my life, so I trained at the school gym every morning.

I could barely catch a ball at my first rugby session, but I kept turning up and doing what the coaches told me to. I played as a prop because it mostly involved just leaning on other people, and because no one else wanted to do it. I was given a place as a substitute and slowly got better and fitter, until I eventually made it into the starting line-up for the second team. I would be going on tour.

The day of departure was nerve-wracking. I was about to spend three weeks further from home than I had ever been before, with a group of near-strangers who had been mates with each other for a decade. A large part of me didn't want to go because I was nervous that I wouldn't have a 'place' within the group.

The two teams played six games each during the tour, and we stayed in the family homes of our opponents, rather than hotels. That meant we had to come out of our shells and speak to locals, instead of hiding at the back of a group. It also meant that we experienced things that most tourists would never see, so we got to know each country at a deeper level than most visitors.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in New Zealand, which I had basically thought of as a far-flung outpost of Britain in the southern hemisphere: they spoke English, ate lamb, had the Union Jack on their flag, and they even played rugby and cricket. Australia's indigenous Aboriginal people had been almost invisible during our visit there, and I assumed that the same would be true of New Zealand's indigenous Māori.

My preconceptions were shattered from the moment we arrived: Auckland airport signs appeared in Māori as well as English, and our coach driver, Bernie, told us legends about Polynesian gods stalking the land and ocean. When we arrived at Ōtūmoetai College, the students greeted us with a Māori haka that put goosebumps on my arms.

Once the formalities of that greeting were over, both groups milled around like boys and girls at a school disco, our local hosts on one side of the room, and us, the touring party, on the other. Curiosity got the better of me, and I was the first to cross the gap, to start asking the Kiwis about their cultural mix.

‘It’s just the way things are,’ said my host, ‘Māori and Pakeha (white New Zealanders) go to school together. We work together, we fall in love, we get married. There’s still challenges, of course, but it means that Kiwi culture is a mix of both cultures.’

The next couple of days were enthralling. We explored the Bay of Plenty with our hosts, and hiked up Mount Maunganui, an ancient lava dome that was once the site of a fortified Māori village. At Rotorua, we saw bubbling mud pits and superheated geysers, before swimming in hot pools heated by the same geothermal activity.

The rugby games were a close-fought affair. As the second team, we always played the warm-up match, and we managed to win an ugly encounter of muddy tackles and dropped passes in pouring rain. Our first team were in the lead throughout, but they were foiled by the referee’s scandalous decision to award a last-minute penalty to the hosts. The ball sailed through the posts and put an end to our winning streak.

As soon as the two games were over, any frictions from the

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pitch disappeared, and we were all invited to one of the players' houses. They were preparing a hangi – an underground oven, in which volcanic rocks are heated on a bonfire in a pit. Once the flames had died down, food wrapped in leaves was placed in metal baskets above the rocks. Then everything was covered with wet cloths, buried in soil and left to cook in the heat.

A few hours later, the pit was dug up and the food unwrapped. The lamb was the tenderest that I'd ever eaten, and it came with seafood that one of our hosts had caught in the bay. We stayed until dawn, drinking beer, chatting to our opponents and getting to know our teammates. It was a ritual that we went through after every game that we played, in every town that we visited; making new friends and learning about their lives.

By the time we got back to Windsor, I was an integral member of a close-knit fraternity. We had forged bonds of allegiance through shared physical hardship and built memories that would stay with us for ever. For most of my teammates, the tour had been an extended holiday, with fun activities and novel things to buy. But, for me, it was life-changing.

There was something intoxicating about arriving in a place that felt subtly different to home, from the font on car number-plates to the way people greeted each other. By spending time in unfamiliar environments with a new social group, I uncovered skills and interests that I never knew I had.

'Ash was a great ambassador,' my coach said to my mum when we returned. 'He was always the first person to speak to the other team because he wanted to know everything about the places we visited.'

That single trip to the Pacific was a revelation. I found a

world beyond skate parks and *Star Trek*, and I realised that asking questions – both meaningful and minor – made travel infinitely more rewarding. It taught me the power of curiosity in travel, which lit a fire inside me that has been burning ever since.

Humans live in every environment on Earth, ranging from the desert to the Arctic, but we are not born with the bodies or instincts to survive in most of them.

Simple animals, like flies, are born with innate behavioural responses. Complex animals, like lions, learn essential behaviours from their parents. These animals have had to adapt gradually to their environments through thousands of generations of natural selection. But we humans are different: we adapt to our environments through a mix of skills, knowledge and collaborative strategies that no single individual could ever figure out in their lifetime.³

Just think about the skills and knowledge of a remote tribe in the Amazon: the construction of shelter and making of clothes; knowing what plants to eat, and how to prepare them; animal-tracking to find prey; crafting bows and arrows, blow-pipes and darts; collecting frogs' poison to hunt; preparing and butchering prey; and building fires to cook dinner.

This complex social knowledge is 'culture' and we learn it from other members of our societies. As humans develop new knowledge, it is passed on and improved in a kind of evolution that takes us beyond mere biology. This 'cultural evolution' means that we adapt much faster than other animals to new and changing conditions, which has enabled humans to reach every corner of the Earth (and even into space) in just 70,000 years.

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Why am I telling you this in a book about travel? Because cultural evolution requires learning. Learning depends on curiosity. And curiosity makes us want to travel.

‘Curiosity is defined as “an intrinsic motivation to learn”’, says Dr Emily Emmott, an evolutionary anthropologist whose research focuses on adolescence. ‘It’s more than just copying – it’s experimenting, to figure out how things work for ourselves. You see this in kids who repeat what adults say, but in a weird or funny way. No other species experiments like this.

‘During adolescence, something changes in how we process information. We actually become more curious because we need to learn cultural and social knowledge for adulthood. That’s why teenagers are curious about things that are permitted for adults but not children, like smoking. They are working out how to “adult”.’

Curiosity differs from risk-taking. We take risks because there might be a benefit at the end of a dangerous activity. But with curiosity, there is no inherent danger, and we often seek out information that has no obvious purpose or reward. We just want to know what’s out there, which affects our general behaviour, not just our response to specific incidents.

‘Studies show that our “range” grows every year,’ Emily says, ‘As children get older, they start playing further from their house. As teenagers, they start to visit friends who live further away, and they want to see new places or experience novel things. They seek autonomy, as part of the preparation for adulthood, and curiosity is the driver.’

This spatial component of curiosity was vital for early humans who needed to migrate for space and resources. For that to happen, someone in their tribe had to wonder what was over the horizon – and be willing to take a look. Human

societies that contained such 'curious' individuals became more likely to survive, so the trait was more likely to be passed on. But why are some people more curious than others?

In 1999, a variation of the gene DRD4 was linked by researchers to adventure, curiosity and restlessness. By 2012, we knew that it was found in 20 per cent of modern humans, but it occurred more frequently in populations that had experienced a lot of migration. The variation (DRD4-7R) became known as the 'wanderlust gene' when the science writer David Dobbs suggested that it was linked to a specific passion for travel.

'Bearers of this mutation,' Dobbs said, 'are more likely to take risks; explore new places, ideas, foods, relationships, drugs, or sexual opportunities... they generally embrace movement, change and adventure.'⁴

So are those without DRD4-7R destined for life as a homebody?

Not exactly. In his BBC Radio 4 series, *Bad Blood*, the geneticist Adam Rutherford explained that, while some genes are essential to a trait, no single gene is deterministic, even for simple characteristics like eye colour. Behaviour is even more complex. It's a product of hundreds of our genes, as well as our upbringing, experiences, interactions and environment.

Think of it like the ingredients in a recipe: you can't make chicken tikka masala without chicken; but simply having chicken doesn't guarantee a tikka masala. You need all the right herbs and spices, cooked in the right way, in the right order, or you could end up with chicken soup. We all have the genes that allow us to be curious (DRD4-7R is just a 'boosted' version that makes curiosity more likely). We just have to 'cook' the genes that we have in the right way, through specific experiences and interactions.

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‘In some hunter-gatherer populations,’ Emily says, ‘children as young as three can choose to spend time with their aunts and uncles, and walk between family camps whenever they like. This freedom gives them the chance to stimulate their curiosity, and they become more curious as a result. But in less permissive societies, where children are more bounded by rules, they end up becoming less curious.’

The ‘chef’ for this recipe is the brain’s limbic system, which is involved in emotional processing and rewards. It’s what gives you that ‘kick’ from doing something you enjoy, thanks to a neurotransmitter called dopamine. Put simply, certain tasks or behaviours trigger the release of dopamine. That makes you feel good, which encourages you to repeat the task or behaviour.

This is why we like eating fatty and sugary foods. Our behavioural systems developed while we were still nomadic hunter-gatherers, who needed energy from fruits, nuts and animal fat. Our body evolved to release dopamine when we ate those foods, which made us feel good, encouraging us to repeat the behaviour of finding and eating those foods. We might not be hunter-gatherers anymore, but that behavioural feedback-system is still with us.

Curiosity is linked to the dopamine system in a similar way. When we discover something, and our curiosity is satisfied, we get a dopamine kick. Our unconscious brain learns that curiosity leads to feeling good, and it encourages us to repeat the activity that stimulates it.⁵

Dopamine systems must be triggered for a behaviour to be linked with that kick: people need to eat an ice cream to know that they like it, but, once they do, they go looking for it again. Perhaps the rugby tour to New Zealand rewarded my curiosity

circuits in the same way. They learned that travel would give them a kick, and that's why I've been chasing it ever since.

Humankind's first form of travel was curiosity-driven migration, and most of it happened on foot: up through Africa, across the Sinai Peninsula, along the coast of Arabia, into Europe, down to India, and across the Ice-Age land-bridge between Russia and Alaska.

But the most remarkable migration happened by sea. And, because it occurred within the last few millennia, its story is recorded by its descendants, in oral history and legends.

Twenty years after the rugby tour, I returned to New Zealand's Bay of Plenty. It is home to Jack Thatcher, a Māori celestial navigator, who has spent his life researching traditional Polynesian sailing methods. He took me to Tauranga Marina, where his boat, the *Ngahiraka mai Tawhiti*, was undergoing repairs. The two hulls each had a carved red figure on their prow, and were connected by a deck that carried two masts.

'This is a waka hourua,' Jack said. 'A voyaging canoe, like the one Kupe used.'

Kupe was a legendary Polynesian explorer. While there are variations of his story in Māori oral traditions, they all agree that he came from the semi-mythical land of Hawaiki, and discovered the land that became New Zealand. Kupe and his wife named it Aotearoa, which means 'Land of the Long White Cloud.'

'New Zealand is remote,' Jack said. 'We're 1,200 miles east of Australia, and 600 miles south of Fiji and Tonga. It takes days of sailing to get here from anywhere else, but our ancestors discovered it around 1,000 years ago, and they did it without compasses, sextants, clocks or maps. Having found

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Aotearoa, they then travelled back and forth – over and over again – to settle it. But that was just the end of a long voyage of curiosity and innovation.’

Around 3000 BCE, some humans in modern-day Taiwan began exploring rivers and deltas with dug-out canoes. To cross larger stretches of water, and to reach nearby islands, they began experimenting with outriggers to make their canoes more stable. At each island they reached, they could see another one on the horizon, and to cross these longer distances they developed skills of steering and sailing.

It took them 2,000 years to reach Samoa, Fiji and Tonga. But to go any further, they would have to cross wilder ocean.

‘They guessed more islands were over the horizon,’ Jack said, ‘because they saw birds flying from that direction. But ocean-sailing was a big jump in skill and technology: they had to carry enough food to survive several weeks of exploration, on ships that could survive storms and sail against the prevailing wind.’

They built stronger, double-hulled, ocean-going canoes (like Jack’s waka hourua), with shelters for safety and provisions. They developed new sailing techniques, navigated by the stars, and learned to find land through weather patterns, swells, sea animals, bird migrations, and even flotsam and jetsam in the water. New knowledge was learned, and their culture evolved, until they became the Polynesian wayfinders.⁶

Once they had cracked these skills and technology, the Polynesians quickly found the Cook Islands, Marquesas and French Polynesia. At the peak of their abilities, they used ocean

⁶ This part of the story was memorably depicted in Disney’s film *Moana* (2016).

currents to head north and south to Hawaii, Rapanui Easter Island, and eventually to Aotearoa, New Zealand. The historical existence of kūmara sweet potato in Polynesia (when it originates in the Americas) suggests that they may even have reached South America before Europeans did.

This is a perfect example of the cumulative cultural knowledge that Emily had told me about: each generation learned the skills, technology and strategies of their predecessors; then curiosity drove them to experiment, innovate, and cross thousands of miles of open ocean. Along the way, they evolved cultures that were perfectly adapted to their environments.⁷

‘Today these techniques seem like magic,’ said Jack, ‘but they evolved over millennia, and took decades to master.

‘Once our people settled in New Zealand, there were fewer voyages back to the islands, and our distinctive Māori culture developed. Our people still fished the oceans, and used inland rivers to get around, but the voyaging skills were lost, particularly after Europeans arrived.’

The legacy survives if you know where to look. In the Māori legend ‘*Kupe and the Giant Wheke*’, Kupe is forced to chase a giant octopus (Te Wheke-a-Muturangi) from his homeland. As he pursues the wheke, it leads him to Aotearoa. He follows it down the east coast, through the Cook Strait and into Queen Charlotte Sound, where he kills it. Afterwards, Kupe heads up the west coast and returns home to Hawaiki.

‘It sounds like a fairy tale,’ said Jack, ‘but it contains navigational knowledge. In the story, the wheke starts in Hawaiki – which is probably modern-day French Polynesia and the Cook Islands – and its tentacles are a metaphor for the ocean currents in that area, which our ancestors used to reach Hawaii, Rapanui and Aotearoa. The path of the battle with the

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wheke, and the stories around it, are a map of Aotearoa's sea conditions, safe harbours and places to settle.

'So it's a sort of guidebook, and the listener can learn everything they need to know about voyaging to Aotearoa from that legend. That's how our people pass down knowledge – through culture and stories.'

In 2012, Jack put these ideas to the test when he captained *Ngahiraka mai Tawhiti* and another waka, *Te Aurere*, on an 18,500-kilometre journey from Auckland to Rapanui Easter Island, over to French Polynesia and the Cook Islands, then back to New Zealand. He did the whole thing without modern instruments, and relied on the wayfinding and navigational techniques of his ancestors, and the knowledge of currents and places from Māori myths and legends.⁸

So it looks like curiosity is the architect of the travel bug. It evolved to help humans figure things out and adapt to new environments, and it pushed us to migrate. There is a genetic component to curiosity, but it needs stimulation to flourish.

What does this mean for us, as modern-day travellers? Can we use our understanding of curiosity to make travel more fulfilling?

The psychologist Professor George Loewenstein has shown that humans have 'a natural inclination to close information gaps'.⁹ And the closer we get to solving a riddle, the more we want to do so. It's a craving, similar to the craving for drugs, sex, and sugary foods. And just like those other cravings, it requires a trigger. Something to spark that curiosity, and the desire to find an answer.

In *The Psychology of Curiosity*, Loewenstein suggests four ways to induce curiosity in humans:

1. The posing of a question, or presentation of a puzzle.
2. Exposure to a sequence of events with an anticipated, but unknown, resolution.
3. The violation of expectations that triggers a search for an explanation.
4. Knowledge of possession of information by someone else.¹⁰

When I discovered these four principles, I realised that they all exist in travel. When linked, they describe the template for a compelling travel experience:

1. The potential traveller poses the question: 'What is place x like?'
2. The journey rips them from the mundane routine of daily life. It is pregnant with possibility and unpredictable outcomes.
3. Everything that they encounter will be subtly different to the way it is back home, from ingredients in their dinner, to the colour of the sky. The traveller will want to know why.
4. The traveller seeks information from a source, such as a guidebook, a fellow traveller or a newspaper article. They want information that will help them see the 'real' face of their destination, and to acquire that knowledge for themselves.

Loewenstein's research also suggests that humans crave the answer to 'questions of no importance,' which might be part of the appeal of travel. When we are away from home, we are surrounded by a million unimportant questions – *Why do they*

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use that font on road signs? Why do they greet each other like that? – so travel inherently appeals to our deep-rooted instinct of curiosity.

The ultimate expression of this quest for explanation is the desire to discover the ‘real’ version of a place. But there is no perfect answer because there is no such thing as the ‘real India’ or ‘real London’; there are an infinite number of versions, based on timing and individual experience. So we keep looking for it, endlessly answering unimportant questions, and asking new ones out of curiosity, prompted by the craving and satiation of our dopamine system.

But how do we become curious in the first place? We can’t do much about the DRD4-7R mutation – you either have it or you don’t.¹¹ The good news is that, either way, it is not deterministic: you can be curious without having the DRD4-7R mutation; or you could have it, but be totally lacking in curiosity. It’s your experiences that matter; curiosity needs some stimulation to get going, but then it becomes self-perpetuating.¹²

My own curiosity was stoked by childhood visits to my aunty and uncle’s house in Maidenhead, where the scent of Indian cooking and the sound of spoken Punjabi transported me from suburban England to the subcontinent. It wasn’t entirely my own culture – I was raised by my mum in an English household – but I loved it, and it made me curious about the link between culture and place.

¹² DRD4-7R probably makes some difference at the extremes of adventure and exploration, in the same way that genes related to muscles make a difference if we are sprinting at the Olympics. But most exploration is the equivalent of a casual half-marathon. In which case, training and practice matter much more than genetics.

This was deepened by Michael Palin's travel documentaries, which showed me places beyond my imagination. His charm brought out the best in the people that he met, and he revealed what disparate cultures had in common, not just how they differed.

These stories and experiences lit the embers of my curiosity, and the rugby tour added fuel to the fire. But if I had not taken that opportunity, given to me by my mum, my dopamine system might not have linked personal travel with curiosity, and the travel bug would never have bitten me. The first step on the path to curiosity lies in seizing opportunities.

*

Chay Blyth was a sergeant in the British Army's Parachute Regiment. One day in 1966, his boss, Captain John Ridgway, asked Chay to find him a volunteer to row the Atlantic as part of a world record attempt. Chay volunteered himself.

When Chay and Ridgway arrived in America, they were scheduled to do a promotional event in Boston Harbor, to build interest in their record attempt. But Ridgway had fallen ill with food poisoning, so Blyth was on his own. The assembled journalists asked him to row a lap of the harbour, so that they could take some photos.

'Sorry,' said Chay, 'I don't know how to row.'

'You don't know how to row?!' said the journalists, 'But you're about to cross the Atlantic!'

'Exactly,' he replied, 'I'll have plenty of time to practise.'

They crossed the Atlantic in 92 days, encountering two hurricanes, several storms, cargo ships, sharks and whales. After surviving that feat, Chay sailed around the world single-handed, then founded the British Steel Challenge so that novice sailors could experience something similar. He became

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one of the greatest sailors in history, and was eventually knighted for his services to sailing. I was lucky enough to meet him at an event in London.

'When I committed to rowing the Atlantic,' Chay said, 'I didn't know it was going to change my life. I just knew that Captain Ridgway's offer opened the door to possibility.'

'I knew very little about either the ocean or rowing when I signed up to do it. I had no idea what that life looked like, but I *did* know what life would look like if I *didn't* seize the opportunity – another few years in the garrison in the Far East, and maybe a promotion. I knew what *that* looked like because I'd already been doing it for eight years!'

'How does someone know what opportunity to say "yes" to?' I asked.

'These "opportunistic moments" present themselves everywhere,' Chay said, 'from spotting a job offer, to bumping into someone you fancy. There is a second or two to act, before the opportunity disappears for ever.'

'You should apply for that job. Or say hello to your crush, even if you don't know the next step after that. You can usually figure out how to do it along the way – like I did with rowing. Even if you fail, you will never regret trying.'

'But here's the thing: you never know which one might change your life. You might quit the job after two weeks, or it might become your calling in life. The date might go terribly, or they might be the person you marry.'

'The only solution is to seize all those opportunistic moments while you still can, in case one of them is the winner. You can't win the lottery unless you buy a ticket!'

My opportunistic moment was my mum's bargain. I had no idea how I would get into the rugby team, but I said yes and

then worked out how to do it. The journey was as important as the destination because I got fit, made new friends and discovered new skills along the way. But it became the opportunity that changed my life.

For travel, once you have seized that opportunistic moment and begun a potential adventure, you can apply Loewenstein's principles to invoke curiosity and ask, 'what's this place like?'.

To refine it, you could ask, 'what's different about here from home?'. Most of these are 'questions of no importance', such as the alert-sound of pedestrian crossings, or the number of adverts on television. But each piece of information will stimulate your dopamine system, rewarding your curiosity and building a habit.

Hobbies are a great shortcut because they open up communities and insights. As a teenager back in Windsor, I wanted to learn how to ride a horse. I couldn't afford lessons, so I volunteered to muck out the cavalry stables in Windsor Great Park. In return, they taught me how to ride. When I travelled to Australia, in 2006, I chose to take this further and got a job at a stud farm that bred racehorses.

The stud farm was in Queensland's Darling Downs, two hours east of the city of Brisbane. This was rural Australia, with spectacular sunsets and dramatic storms that steamed across the rolling countryside. I was taught to ride 'Western' style, learned Aboriginal tracking techniques, went to country fairs at the weekends, rode horses to country pubs, and saw sheep-shearers catch venomous snakes in woolsheds.

Just before I left Australia, I caught up with a friend who had been travelling up and down the east coast.

'I'm a bit envious,' he said. 'I've partied with loads of

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different people, but the inside of one nightclub is pretty similar to any other. You've shown me that there's a whole different culture here – not just Britain with better weather and dangerous animals.'

From Australia, I moved to Wānaka, New Zealand, and joined a local rugby club. Wānaka is a ski town – full of seasonal staff – but my rugby teammates were locals. They were mostly farmers or builders who had grown up in the area, and they brought me into their lives by taking me hiking or hunting, and inviting me round for dinner. Every Saturday the team drove to isolated rugby clubs, in stunning locations that don't get mentioned in guidebooks. After the game we would hang out in the hosts' clubhouse, where my teammates would swap stories about bricklaying techniques and chasing escaped sheep. There could have been no better way to get to know the region and its people.

Once you've got used to asking 'questions of no importance,' you might be curious about 'questions of *some* importance.' How did the climate and landscape affect the cultures that evolved here? Why are the animals like this? What is the main music of this region, and what were its influences? How did historical empires shape the language and religion? These questions motivate scientists, historians, geographers and anthropologists to travel the world, but I have also found that these sorts of questions underpin my best travel writing.

My questions often emerge from unexpected places – novels, films, or articles in non-travel magazines. They give me a sense of purpose when I go somewhere – a mission to satiate my curiosity – and they help me to frame my journey as I start building an itinerary. Let me give you an example.

A little while ago, I watched a production of the play *The*

Merry Wives of Windsor by William Shakespeare, at a theatre in central London. Back when I was a teenager, there was a pub of that name in Windsor, which never used to ask for ID, so my friends and I used to spend a lot of time there. It's closed now (I don't know if that was due to the lack of ID checks) but it triggered a question of *some* importance: what places in London could I visit that are linked to Shakespeare?

The next step was to find all the different places in London that are mentioned in his plays (fortunately, academics have done all the legwork on this) and then research places in London that were connected with his life. Then I created a walking route to visit them.

It took me to parts of London that I had never been to before – such as Southwark Cathedral, which Shakespeare would have known as St Saviour's – and I got a sense of Shakespeare's London legacy. My curiosity was triggered, and it sent me on a satisfying and enjoyable journey.

Curiosity is the key to travel. It gets us out the door and ensures that we make the most of a place. It needs stimulation to get going but, once the curiosity engine is firing, it wants new questions to answer.

And that's where inspiration comes in.

About the Author



Photo credit Charlotte Broster

Ash Bhardwaj is an award-winning journalist, broadcaster and keynote speaker, whose work explores the intersection of travel, current affairs and human behaviour. He has reported from around the world for outlets including the *BBC*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Sunday Times* and *Condé Nast Traveller*.

Before travel writing, Ash was a ski instructor, science teacher and wannabe cowboy. He is an officer in the British Army Reserve, and a lecturer in travel journalism at City, University of London. *Why We Travel* is his debut book.

Keep up to date with all of Ash's travels online

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