

How We Travel

An Explanation behind our Trip Reports

s/v Jacaranda <http://www.jacarandajourney.com>

We thought it might be helpful to give you a context for our Method in our Traveling Madness - and a few unsolicited tips. The discussion below pertains to our inland travel off of JACARANDA (while our philosophy remains the same, the method in our cruising mode of travel is of course different).

In this way, we hope our experiences will be of some help to you in planning your own trip. Take it for what it's worth.....

And we will say this again and again and again: we know how very lucky we are to have the physical ability, time and money to be able to travel the way we choose. We remain consciously grateful of this every day.

1. **Be Knowledgeable**. We are DIY (Do It Yourself) travelers, making our itinerary, reservations, and plans ourselves. One of the foundations of a successful trip is knowledge: ResearchResearchResearch and read all you can about the place in which you are going to travel - beforehand. The more you understand the country, the people, the culture and the interesting sites/sights that exist before you go, the richer and more meaningful your trip will be when it is brought to life by the real deal of your own first-hand experiences. This basis of understanding will also help you in making choices during the trip and embracing spontaneities that may arise. Ex. The timing of local festivals - which you may want to observe or avoid - and what to expect (which will affect your logistics).

2. **Good Planning Guides**: Our Travel Bibles are:

- (1) **Lonely Planet Guides**. lonelyplanet.com. We don't go anywhere without our Lonely Planets. We forgo the actual books nowadays in favor of downloading the most recent version on our iPad which we bring with us. It is also possible to just download one pertinent chapter of a LPG book - i.e. you don't need the entire Mexico book if you are only going to Oaxaca. Lonely Planet is our preference but there are many out there, from Moon to Rick Steves.
- (2) **Tripadvisor**. tripadvisor.com. We use this traveler-opinion website extensively both before and during a trip - to find (and check) hotels, restaurants, itinerary suggestions, activities and travel cautions. We often contribute reviews as well, and have posted questions on their Forums. There is an art to using Tripadvisor and a method of interpreting the reviews and ratings that we have developed - we do not take everything at face value but have learned to read between the lines. It's kind of like handicapping a horse race.

3. Flexible Budget: We consider ourselves budget travelers but we are not “bare-bones” travelers. We are fortunate enough to have the financial resources to give us the freedom of not having to travel on a shoe-string where we have to watch every penny. This gives us the opportunity to have a wider range of experiences and stay in a variety of places. We go reasonable, go cheap, but splurge for wonderful experiences/ meals every so often. This is reflected in our Trip Reports. So we may stay at a backpacker hostel with trekkers for several nights and have street food for dinner, yet sleep in a unique boutique hotel and eat fusion food prepared by a celebrated chef the next week. Ex: We stayed in three different Amazon Basin Lodges in Ecuador along the River Napo - each was more expensive than the last but gave us a different and more in-depth experience of the jungle.

This said, be aware that in some places you *can* get better discounts by going through a local travel agent rather than booking yourself. Surprisingly, we have sometimes gotten better hotel prices through [booking.com](https://www.booking.com) than by calling and speaking to the hotel staff directly.

And it never hurts to ask for discounts so give it a try! We have gotten them for special promotions, for extended hotel stays, for traveling in the low season, and for being “jubilatos” (don’t you just love the Mexican term for “retiree” which comes from “jubilant”?) or “tercer edad” (third-age) based on our age as seniors (which varies from country to country).

4. Our Motto: Be a Traveler, not a Tourist. Our aim is to “know “ a place, not just say we have been there. What does that mean - to “know” a place - and how do you do that? On what level do you ever *really* get to “know” a place? How do you get a glimpse of what it is to be an “insider” or a local? These are philosophical travel questions that remain open to much debate. It’s a very difficult but very rewarding goal.

Certainly “time spent” in a place is one defining factor. We feel that if you see too much, you don’t see much of anything. So the whirlwind commercial tours that offer 14 countries in 10 days amaze us. As superficial as this seems to us, with the time, money and limited opportunity constraints for many people, we guess there is something to be said for being able to say you’ve “seen” the landmarks of Europe, etc. However, we opt for limiting the extent of our travel to fewer places in favor of getting a more in-depth experience. Sometimes this is not so easy, especially when temptation beckons to just go “next door” to another country because we are already so close by.

But if it’s anything we hate, it is being led around in a big group with a robotic guide and canned spiel in a predetermined timeframe. Sometimes we have done it because we have had to in order to get access to a site, but we generally avoid this. We prefer to take our own time depending on our interest and be able to delve deeper if we want to (See #8 below: Exploration/Orientation)

Another defining factor is the way in which you meet the local people and the type and quality of interaction you have with them. Communication and making an effort to meet people is key. Some tourists will never speak to another local other than their waiters in a restaurant or the front desk person at hotel reception.....and in english only....content to stay within their little closed tourist group and ask questions only of the guide; they don't stray outside their narrow comfort zone. Linda actually saw an "Ugly American" tourist berate a salesperson in a small shop in Mexico because she could not speak english to him. Unbelievably embarrassed, Linda sternly reminded the tourist that this was their country, not his, and profusely apologized to the Mexican woman for such rudeness from a fellow countryman.

We always speak to the "person on the street", not just service providers who deal with tourists on some level every day. We like to hear the stories of the cleaning women in hotels. Whenever we take a taxi, we always exchange names with the driver and ask him where he was born and about his family. It is quite easy to personalize even casual contacts with people. (See #5 below: Deal with the Language Barrier)

5. Don't Ignore the Language Barrier - Deal With It

There is certainly no substitute for speaking a foreign language - which is sometimes impossible for many, if not most, of us.

At the very least: (1) do learn some key words or phrases in their language such as hello, please, thank you, beautiful and goodbye; (2) listen for, be able to recognize, and be able to answer the most common questions you will be asked: Where are you from? and How do you like (my city) or (my country)? Memorize your answers. Or volunteer the information if you are not asked.

We love to create memories of "light-up" moments. Nothing delights us more than when we watch a person's face light up with a broad surprised smile because we've addressed them in their own language - it catches them off guard. This simple gesture says I acknowledge you - your life and existence. Spanish is one thing but relatively obscure languages are another. We will always remember the reaction of the elderly women sitting in the Otavalo market selling textiles or our canoe paddlers at the Amazon Lodge in Yasuni when we greeted them in Quechua (each in their own dialect!). Or the Raramuri we said hello to in Copper Canyon, Mexico. Or the Mayan people on a bus in Chiapas. Maybe it's because so few people try, or care to try, that this simple act means so much to them. Their appreciation is visibly evident and we are often treated differently because, as outsiders, we've made an effort to connect with them on their terms.

Humor is a major icebreaker; it is especially hard to do without a certain level of language proficiency. But if you can insert humor or jokes into conversation, watch the ice melt, the smiles appear, and the warmth of the locals emerge in a way you have never seen before. We have seen disdain disappear over a laugh and you might even

end the conversation with a mutual hug. Linda loves to make fun of her spanish and when, after a few initial words she gets the inevitable remark “Oh, you speak spanish!”, she responds “Yes, I do speak a lot but I don’t understand a thing I say”.

6. Be flexible and embrace spontaneity: We don’t really like being locked into an exact schedule or definite plans, so instead leave with a vague travel outline. We often book a hotel in a new destination for the first night or two and then wing it from there. Another traveler expressed our sentiments: “Fellow travelers are always eager to share secrets about spectacular, little-known towns or sites they have visited and not being locked into reservations allows me to take advantage of these tips, but it also means I am often looking for last minute bookings, which can be frustrating as well as expensive.”

We will always regret the day in Iceland when we were invited to join a group of vacationing Icelandic choir singers for a day trip on a remote fjord we were all staying at and we declined because we thought we couldn’t afford the extra day at that location. It was such a special opportunity to be an “insider” and we missed it.

7. Attitude: Be Open

Listen to stories and advice from others who have been there but don’t rely on it - let it augment your own research and interests; a place will be different for different people and one person’s truth is not another’s. Ex: We met a lovely American couple in Vilcabamba, Ecuador who had just come from Peru and who had intensely disliked the country; they were pickpocketed and had almost fallen victim to a theft scam when they tried to help someone who had “fallen”- it colored their whole view of the country, understandably so. Another example: Linda loves orchids and was thrilled when our guide, seeing her enthusiasm, offered to take her to a local’s private orchid garden that is not open to the public; we were traveling with others who had no interest in this.

8. Exploration and Orientation: Walk walk walk. Our favorite way to get to know a place is what we call “poking around”. Be respectfully curious. Peek into open doors and windows (discreetly), look into alleys, narrow passageways and courtyards, smile and talk to the locals; engage them and ask questions, express interest in what you see, look up, look down - notice the details; listen for music or local sounds, smell the air for flowers and bakeries, use all your senses.

Conventional city tours (especially bus tours) are ok - they show you the top sites but don’t really give you a real taste of the place. We like going on walking (or biking) tours with knowledgeable guides who show you diversity and another perspective - a “detour” rather than a tour. Self-guided tours can also be rewarding with the right material.

9. Get Off the Beaten Path: We revel in places and experiences that are off the beaten path and not your standard travel experiences, especially if it means getting to know people more intimately or seeing or doing wonderful things that not many people get to experience. This often means making an extra effort, overlooking inconveniences or enduring a bit of discomfort in some way but the rewards can be great.

10. Travel globally, think locally: Take a cue from people who live there. We like to go to local places where the locals go. We eschew chains and international corporate entities: you won't find us staying at a Hilton or Marriott; fast food joints are out (ok - we admit to occasionally eating a Subway sandwich because of craving or the price). We often ask a local where they like to eat and what they would recommend.

11. Take precautions but do not let fear rule

Don't be paranoid but do be careful. In any place you go, even in your home country, there are locations where you would not feel safe to wander, especially alone or at night. The same applies when traveling abroad. Do educate yourself about warnings through guidebooks, travel forums, or from listening to locals and fellow travelers and then use your own judgement and common sense. BTW, we do not usually concern ourselves with U.S. State Department warnings - a lesson we learned from being in Mexico for 7 years where American perceptions were molded by media sensationalism, misinformation, and exaggeration. We never felt unsafe in the places we visited in Mexico but did remain wary of the border and a few selected cities. Do not wear jewelry - that's asking for trouble. Know the typical tricks that pickpockets use and leave your valuables in a hotel lock box if possible.