

My new attitude to travel is to skip the iconic – and I thank my father for that

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A canoe at dusk in the backwaters of Kerala, India. Photograph: Olivier Follmi /Rapho /Network

My father, who lives in India, loathes travel. He will tell you this himself. When he hears about other people's road trips, he shakes his head, wishing they had more common sense. The greatest pleasure, for him, is to be at home, reading the news and eating rice and coconut chammanthi

. Ideally, the coconut should be from his own village [in southern Kerala](#).

Alas, all his children live abroad. My siblings live in the United Arab Emirates and I'm in [New York](#). Every few months, my brother will send my parents a non-refundable round-trip ticket and my father's reluctance to travel will battle with his parsimony. Eventually, he will climb on the flight, bundled up thoroughly against air-conditioning, which he hates almost as much as travel. Once he arrives at my brother's house in Sharjah, he ventures out as little as possible. He knows what he likes: reading news. Why bother doing anything else?

Outside of these Sharjah exiles, my father has made two epic trips. As soon as my parents could afford it, they went on the [Haji pilgrimage to Mecca](#). The other journey was [a visit to New York](#). When my daughter was a few months old my parents and sister arrived to take over my household, cook four multi-course south Indian meals every day, and sing endless lullabies. "You must be exhausted," I said when they arrived at the apartment after 20 hours of flying. "Of course not," my father said and fell asleep on the couch.

I knew that between my adventure-averse father and my infant, we would be home a lot. But I also wanted to show off my city. I surprised my parents with a helicopter tour over Manhattan. My mother got off the chopper with windswept hair and shining eyes. "Just wonderful. Everyone should do this," she declared. My father shook his head and said, "eminently avoidable."



Shahnaz Habib's father visiting her in New York. Photograph: Rollo Romig

While my parents were in New York, I started freelancing as a writer for the United Nations. I had to attend various General Assembly committee meetings, listen to the delegates and write coherent summaries. I was working full-time after a long time out and catching up on world news after months of scouring parenting blogs. So I would wake up early in the morning to study the day's topics. My jet-lagged father would be wide awake. He would make us coffee. While the rest of the household slept, I would ask: "Tell me everything about the Western Sahara problem." And without batting an eyelid, he would give me the whole story – many decades of reading international news, mainstream and alternative versions, condensed into his elegant and precise English. "What is happening in Gibraltar?" "What is all the drama about the Falkland Islands?" He had nuanced answers. Every single time.

During those early-morning conversations, I started realising that there are many ways to travel. For years, my father had been travelling exactly how he wanted. He had been scanning the world, its politics and geographies. In this, he is very much a product of [Kerala](#), a place where barber shops and bus stations ring out with intense conversations about international politics. But he is also unique in that no one I know has his hunger for getting to the root of an issue, for forming informed opinions not for the sake of impressing friends and employers, but for the sake of informed opinion.

I also noticed how my father took in New York. He wriggled out of expeditions to the Statue of Liberty, Times Square, and the Empire State Building. "It's not the Grand Canyon," he would joke whenever I suggested sightseeing. According to him, [the Grand Canyon](#) was the only thing worth seeing in America.

But he loved grocery shopping. Everyday he would go to the Caribbean stores on [Flatbush Avenue, near my home in Brooklyn](#). My father didn't so much buy vegetables as investigate them. He was intrigued by the bananas, which are not indigenous to the US. He looked up Caribbean banana plantations and the history of the trade between the islands and the US.



Shahnaz Habib's father at home in India. Photograph: Rollo Romig

It was autumn which meant that, week after week, our [Community Supported Agriculture \(CSA\)](#) fruit share consisted almost solely of apples, an expensive fruit in Kerala. I was tired of apples every Saturday, which mystified my father. How can you be bored of good fruit? He ate all our apples and then started reading about different apple varieties.

It occurred to me that my father has a wonderful sense of what the French call *terroir*. In Kerala, he will stop the car at roadside stands when he sees good [kappa \(cassava\)](#). He can tell by sight the kind of soil they grew in. He will eat that kappa for breakfast, lunch and dinner. When my mother's mango tree blooms in April, my father eats mangos for dinner. This is how I get my vitamin C, he says when we laugh at him.

In my family, we think of my father as someone with limited tastes in food because he refuses to eat sliced bread, biscuits, candy, noodles, frozen mishmash, anything from a can. He took one bite of a cake I made from a boxed mix and said guardedly: "It's very good. Please don't make it again." While we prided ourselves on being adventurous in trying out various processed crap, my father has always stuck to kappa and mangos and coconut [chammanthi](#). Watching him enjoy the apples, I realised that what he lacked was not curiosity; it was the ability to pretend that bad food tastes good.

A lot of travel can be about pretending. I should know – for years, I have been pretending to enjoy monuments in various countries. I have spent perfectly sunny mornings in museums that I did not care for and I have sat in cute trolley cars and I have thrown coins into wishing wells. I have tried hard to enjoy walking tours. There are good arguments for doing new things, but having made them all to myself, I am now beginning to see the case for doing only the things you are curious about. As I grow older, I hope to become more like my father, who caused much amusement by firmly declining a ride by the White House when we went to [Washington DC](#) to visit my in-laws. "It's the White House," my mother-in-law said to me. "Anyone would want to go."

Anyone except my father. Over the years of saying no to other people's adventures, he has retained his triangularity in a world of round pegs with well-rounded to-do lists. He loved what he loved – the bridges of New York, the Halal street food vendors, the [ferry to Staten Island](#) – not because they were iconic but because they pierced his indifference. One of his favourite New York days was spent at Zuccotti Park, visiting Occupy Wall Street.

Lately, I have been testing out my father's attitude to travel. When we arrive in a new place, I skip the iconic. When I hear of fun walking tours, I murmur, "eminently avoidable". Instead, I visit bookstores and shop for groceries and daydream in urban parks – activities that I can enjoy without leaving Brooklyn. I have a fetish for small urban places of worship and now I sidestep the major monuments in favour of these. The truth, frightening and liberating, is that nothing in the world is a must-do.

It's been years since that month my father grudgingly spent in New York City. Whenever I suggest another visit, he shudders. But I want to take him apple-picking upstate. If he comes again, we will definitely go to the Grand Canyon, I assure him. "Even the Grand Canyon is not the Grand Canyon," he told me recently, laughing heartily at his own joke. While I waited for his laughter across the oceans to subside, I remembered my favourite [CP Cavafy](#) poem. A poem, called The Place, that struck terror into me when I was younger but is beginning to make sense now.

You shall not find new places; other seas

you shall not find. This place shall follow you.

And you shall walk the same familiar streets,

and you shall age in the same neighbourhood,

and whiten in these same houses.

The winter months are too cold, the summer months are too hot, fall is when my parents go to the UAE. "Come to New York in spring," I tell my father. "The weather is perfect. Flowers everywhere." But April is when the mango tree in my mother's garden blooms and sends ripe fruit pelting down on my parents' perennially bruised car. If he comes in April, how will my father stock up on vitamin C? "No," he has a better idea. "You come."

