

An Innocent Abroad: Life-Changing Trips from 35 Great Writers

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There is an assumption that accomplished writers possess a more finely honed sense of observation than the rest of us. Or, at the very least, a heightened proclivity for the quirky. This anthology, which features the likes of Tim Cahill, Dave Eggers, Pico Iyer, and Ann Patchett, does little to dispel that notion.

For Patchett, it was the allure of tattoos after observing a Parisian waitress with a decorative scroll of flowers on her arm. Patchett's traveling companion thought she'd opt for a fish on her shoulder blade, and for reasons unclear, Patchett considered a tiny cow on her bicep. But then, in Northern Ireland, they saw young men with tattoos celebrating guns and violence, which suggested that youthful passions do not connote wisdom and explains why a cow does not graze on Patchett's arm.

A young Richard Ford had an enlightening moment when hashish merchants in a truck cut off his car, blocking his way on a mountain road in Morocco. As Ford prepared to defend himself and his young wife with only an empty Coke bottle for a weapon, the men emerged smiling to sell their product. Ford declined but since then has kept a vow to never travel to someplace he doesn't have good business to be.

Tony Wheeler is reminded of the "curiously erotic flavor" of cabbage soup when he recalls a trip to Yugoslavia. Mary Karr learned to be wary of the 250 varieties of snakes in Guatemala and to alleviate her fear of spiders by discovering that to stroke a tarantula's belly is to find that it feels not unlike a bunny's.

THOMAS BEVIER (Winter 2015)

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