Getting Lost While Traveling: Truly Get to Know a City

As a native New Yorker, I walk, take buses and subways to get around the city. Similarly, when I'm overseas, I rely on public transportation to get me efficiently and inexpensively to destinations I want to visit. And these days, with apps like Google Maps, it's easier than ever to find your way around. But what about deliberately getting lost while traveling? For many people, the idea of getting lost is a frightening concept, synonymous with confusion and danger. What if getting lost were more about discovery than disorientation? What if it were a deliberate choice, a path to exploration and connection with a new city?

Getting Lost While Traveling Means Truly Getting to Know a City

Getting lost as a way to truly get to know a city is a trick I learned when I was young. A group of Swedish students I met at a youth hostel (which is a terrific way to meet travelers from around the globe) led me on a "mystery tour."

A First Time for Everything

"There's a tram. Let's catch it," said one of my new Swedish friends.

"Where's it headed?" I asked.

"No idea."

"But don't you want to know?" I was puzzled. Why would anyone board a tram randomly?

"That's part of the fun." Her blue eyes shone with delight. "It will be an adventure." She explained that, when traveling, they made it a practice to visit the outer reaches of a city, never knowing what they might discover. It allowed them to see how ordinary people lived. If something attracted their attention, they got off and walked around.

Be Open to New Experiences

Since then, no matter where I travel, I ride a bus or tram not knowing where it's headed. If I see something interesting, a restaurant, shop, park, public art, or just about anything, I hop off and explore. If there is an inviting café, I sit down and people watch and have often gotten into conversations with locals. I don't hesitate to ask them what's special about the neighborhood. Those conversations have led me to flea markets, street art, intriguing immigrant communities, gardens and more.

When you adhere too strictly to maps and tour guides, you risk missing the authentic experiences that make a place unique. Sometimes, it’s in the lesser-known neighborhoods that you can find the real heartbeat of a city.

Try Using Public Transportation While Traveling

By taking public transport and deliberately allowing yourself to get lost, you open up opportunities to see sights that aren't in the guidebooks, to meet locals, and to experience a city as its inhabitants do.

Begin your adventure by choosing a bus, subway, tram, or trolley that can lead you through unknown parts of a city.

Buy a Day Pass: Many cities offer unlimited daily travel on their public transportation networks, allowing you to explore without worrying about costs.

Ride a bus to the end. You might discover a charming neighborhood or beautiful park that you never would have seen otherwise.

Don't be afraid to get off at a stop that intrigues you. Wander around, pop into a local café, explore shops, and see where the day takes you.

While you’re exploring, try to immerse yourself in the local culture. Eat a meal at a family-owned restaurant, sip coffee where the locals do, shop far away from well-known department stores. From antique shops to small galleries, hidden gems are often found in the most unexpected places.

Safety Considerations

While getting lost while traveling can be a joyous experience, it’s essential to consider your safety. Be conscious of your surroundings, and if something doesn’t feel right, head back to a familiar area. Have a fully charged phone with you, but don't over-rely on it. Stepping away from the screen lets you see more of the world. If you ever feel uncomfortable, don't hesitate to ask for help or get a taxi back to more comfortable surroundings.

For me, using public transport to deliberately get lost and discover a city is more than an exercise in exploration; it's a celebration of spontaneity, curiosity, and openness to the unexpected.

It reminds us that sometimes, the best way to truly get to know a place is to leave the well-publicized and embrace the unknown. Doing that often leads to the most memorable experiences and you’ll have great stories to tell.

Getting Lost While Traveling and Getting to Know the City

So next time you find yourself in a new city, consider leaving the map and guidebook behind. Use public transportation: board a bus or subway train, and let the city reveal itself to you. You may just find that getting lost is the best way to find the city. Happy exploring!

For More:

Want to read more? Of course you do! Buy Karen Gershowitz's newest book, Wanderlust: Extraordinary People, Quirky Places, and Curious Cuisine on Amazon.

-All photos by and courtesy of Karen Gershowitz.