

Talking Your Way Around The World

Sympatico Travel

Publication Date: April 2011

Language is a funny thing. Practice may make perfect, but it still doesn't mean you'll be able to find your way to the Kyoto Zoo.

As a teenager on a high school exchange to Japan, I had decided on my day in Kyoto that I wanted to visit the zoo. I worked on the phrase, "Where is the zoo?" for the better part of the morning and, feeling confident, finally hit the streets and made my way towards my destination.

When I knew I was getting near, I asked a stranger where the zoo was. "Doubutsuen wa doko desu ka?" It turns out I had remembered the phrase correctly and he understood me. The problem was that, in hearing my overly-rehearsed pronunciation, he assumed I spoke a little of the language, and so he answered me.

I hadn't been prepared for that.

The stranger blurted out dozens of words in rapid succession, explaining exactly where the zoo was. He used vocabulary I hadn't yet managed to learn, such as the words "left" and "right". At the end of his answer he pointed south. I thanked him, then followed his finger for a couple of blocks, posed my question again to a new stranger, waited through her answer, and once again followed the finger-point. I did this until I eventually found the zoo.

For native English speakers, it's easy to not learn much of another language when going away on a trip. A huge portion of the world speaks some English and many people speak it extremely well, so it's often easiest to communicate in our language. Though while nobody is expecting you to learn Danish for a weekend away in Copenhagen, what about longer trips? And trips to more exotic locales?

Learning to speak a few words of a foreign tongue is a good way to enhance your trip, as it allows you to go more places and try more things. It's also a good way to make friends and gain a few appreciative "oohs" and "aahs" from locals.

The best place to start is with the basics: "Hello", "Please", "Thank You" and "Bathroom" are some of the essentials. Once those are down pat, numbers are useful, as they not only allow you to understand prices, but let you convey how much of something you want; accidentally renting a room for 12 nights instead of two can lead to a headache and a heated debate when you're desperately late for your flight and trying to check out.

A great hint I learned was once being told by a fellow traveler to learn verbs before nouns. After trying this theory, I became a big fan of it. Vocabulary is easy to find – a small dictionary would

have all the words you need – but sentences can be hard to say or understand without knowing conjugation. If you met a nice Chilean and wanted to explain that you were a handsome librarian - “Yo soy un bibliotecario guapo” – the only word not in your dictionary would be “soy”, or, “I am”. For that, you would have to know the verb you needed was “ser”.

Also, acting out vocabulary is another surefire way to make friends.

Technology is helping with language like never before, too. For those traveling with smart phones, try out the Google Translate app to help you while on your journey. It translates over 50 different languages and even has Text to Speech functionality, so you can hear how to say the phrase in question. Languages include Chinese and Japanese, which very handily allows you to translate what you are trying to say into characters and show it to a local, taxi driver, etc. This is worth its weight in gold when traveling to Asia. It’s free to download and works offline, so no need to worry about exorbitant roaming charges.

For those feeling even more high-tech, try out the augmented reality of the World Lens app. Simply hold your smart phone camera up to a foreign street sign or menu and have it translated to English instantaneously on your screen. Absolutely amazing. (Only translates from Spanish at the moment, but more languages on the way)

For those of you still kicking it old school with paper, most guide books have a pretty good section in the back for simple phrases and a handy pocket dictionary will run you under ten bucks.

And if you’re traveling single? There’s no better method for learning a language than finding yourself a tall, dark-haired dictionary. For educational purposes, obviously.

My Recommendations

Learn a little before you go: Spend a couple of hours picking up a few of the essentials before your trip; it’ll improve your journey and the locals will appreciate the effort. The web has no shortage of free courses: try [Livemocha](#) or [BBC Languages](#) for some handy beginner lessons.

Take your new language on the road: [Lonely Planet Phrasebooks](#) do a great job of giving you the essentials and more, plus they like to throw in a few fun phrases and tongue-twisters that are entertaining to try.

Take your new language on the road (for the tech savvy): Have a smart phone? The [Google Translate](#) and [World Lens](#) apps utilize cool new technology to translate for you on the go.

From liftoff to kickoff: A guide to sports travel

Sympatico Travel

Publication Date: January 2012

As of the time of writing this, the Vancouver Canucks have just booked their ticket to the Stanley Cup finals and hockey fans from around the country are getting excited. The possibility of a Canadian team winning the Cup has definitely created a buzz north of the border. However, it's not just in Canada that you can hear the excitement and it's not just the Canucks booking their tickets – anyone watching Vancouver's road games in San Jose will have noted the numerous chants of "Luuuu!" from the stands, encouraging goalie Roberto Luongo on. While a number of these Canucks fans in attendance live in the U.S., a large number had made their way down from the great white north in order to cheer their team on.

Road trips to watch sports can be big business – think of the money places invest to host Olympics, World Cups, and Superbowls. They can also be a heck of a lot of fun and a great excuse for a vacation. And with the cost of NHL games in Canada combined with the scarcity of tickets, some people have found it not only easier but more cost-effective to fly to a game in a non-hockey market in the U.S. and watch their favourite team play there, instead.

There are numerous companies to be found both online and in the newspaper that will book a complete sports package for you - tickets, transport and lodging. This is a fantastic option and all you need to do is relax and prepare to cheer your heart – and lungs - out!

For those feeling a bit more industrious, here are some tips for the DIY sports traveller:

1. Tickets

Tickets are almost always available through Ticketmaster, or a specific team's, league's or event's website. But what if the game is sold out or you can't find the tickets that you want?

Ticket re-selling has become increasingly legalized and there are now major websites available for what was considered scalping only a couple of years ago. While you still might end up paying inflated scalpers' prices for the games, you may actually find tickets for less than face value at undersold events. Friends and I went to a Kings game in Los Angeles with re-sold tickets that we bought for only \$10 each (less than the price of a stadium beer!).

Two top options for re-sold tickets are:

[Stubhub](#)

[Ticketmaster's ticketexchange](#)

These tickets can be picked up in person from the seller or, on occasion, printed up online.

For large-scale events, such as the World Cup or Olympics, it may be required to enter a ticket lottery significantly in advance of the event itself, and even then it's no guarantee you'll get the tickets you want. Keep your eyes out for when tickets go on sale or use the re-seller services if you missed the deadline.

2. Accommodations

Besides hotels, apartments can be a fun and affordable way for a group of friends to travel anywhere. It can also be an easier way of finding accommodations when going to large-scale events like the Superbowl or World Cup, both of which often have all hotel rooms booked up months in advance.

As well, buying tickets to a tournament using the lottery system mentioned above means that you may not find out if you have tickets until after all the hotel rooms are already sold out. Finding an apartment is a great way to get around problems like these. Plus, it's a better location for you to paint your faces in anticipation of the big game!

A couple of the best sites to find good place to stay while on your trip are:

[Craigslist](#) - click "cl worldwide" on the right side of the page to select your destination, then choose "vacation rentals" under the "housing" section

[VRBO](#) (Vacation Rentals by Owner)

3. The Big Game

Last, but definitely not least, you need an sports event to go to! Hopefully your team has made it deep into the playoffs and your sly cousin Lenny found you tickets, or maybe you've wrangled a trip to the World Cup. This makes choosing a destination pretty easy.

But another option is simply finding a location to go travelling and using sports as the excuse. A couple of years ago, when I was living in England, two friends who were coming to visit mentioned they had seen that Canada was playing Estonia in a friendly soccer match around the same time. While none of us cared at all about a non-competitive game between two teams that aren't exactly considered global soccer powers, it gave us an excuse to go to Estonia, somewhere none of us had ever been. We even opted to get there by overnight ferry from Stockholm, which allowed us to see two great new places on the same trip. Plus, being a tiny (yet visible) minority group of fans at a large sporting event is a surefire way to make new friends in a foreign country.

Pick your desired location, then look online for any sporting events coming up around the time you'd intended on being there. Always wanted to see New Zealand? Check out when the All Blacks

play next to see a world-class rugby match at the same time. Dreaming of catching some rays in Antigua? Why not do it with a cup of tea while watching the Windies play an exhibition cricket match? And if you really want to head off the beaten path, why not visit North Korea at the time of their [Arirang Mass Games](#)? (yes, there really are tours that will take you there!)

The Importance of Being Flexible

Sympatico Travel

Publication Date: December 2010

New Years Eve can suck an egg. The best nights on the town are rarely ever on New Year's – the ones that always stand out are the ones that begin with an accidental bottle of wine on a random November Tuesday afternoon. While the November Wednesday morning at the office might not be quite as enjoyable, it's that unexpectedness, that lack of a planned night out, that always make those evenings so memorable.

It's the same with travel. When going on a trip, being flexible is one the best ways to ensure you enjoy your travels. I am not talking here of the ability to physically contort yourself so that you can jam your way onto a Bolivian chicken bus along with approximately 82 locals (although that definitely can be handy). But the willingness to change your plans and do something completely spontaneous can help lead to those really special, one-of-a-kind travel experiences.

Many years ago, after having spent a few days in Rio, I had planned to take the bus up north along the coast. However, I met some other travelers in my hostel who were talking about a little island to the south that I'd never heard of, called Ilha Grande. Though it meant that I'd have to skip another city on my itinerary, I invited myself along with these travelers instead. I ended up staying on the island for over a week and changing my journey north entirely. A real slice of Brazilian heaven, Ilha Grande is still amongst my top two or three places I've ever visited, but one I'd never have seen had it not been for a lucky change in plans.

Having that flexibility isn't always easy. Trips are always too short and everyone has their own must-sees or must-dos. Here are some tips on building a bit of wiggle room into your next getaway.

Take a longer trip. Easier said than done, I know. But most rigid schedules come from the fact we simply don't have enough time to do what we'd like. Manoeuvring your holidays over a long weekend so you have twelve days off instead of one week allows for greater opportunity to relax and see something that wasn't on your list. Because while everyone going to Croatia should see Dubrovnik, you may find you like the pace of the islands up the coast more. A longer trip lets you spend more time where you are really enjoying yourself.

Stay in a Hostel. There's no better way to find out about unknown, amazing destinations than to talk to other travelers, and there's no better place to talk to other travelers than in a hostel. Hostels are filled with travelers coming in from every direction, so there's guaranteed to be a tip about a unheard-of place that's great – or a place you were interested in that it turns out isn't so

great. As well, staying in a hostel ups the chances are you'll meet someone interesting and join them wherever they're going, simply because you'll enjoy their company.

Go To Europe. Locations with lots of nearby highlights and good transport access are ideal for being flexible, and Europe is the best for this. The lack of official borders makes this easy, too. Venice a little too smelly for you? Get on a bus and be in beautiful Ljubljana, Slovenia by lunchtime. Planning to go from Vienna to Munich tomorrow but the forecast calls for rain? Take the train and be in Prague in a couple of hours instead.

Go Into A, Leave Out Of B. This is the most recent step I've added to my vacation planning, and it's probably my favourite. Flying in and out of the same city ensures you have to stay around or come back to somewhere you've already been. Why not fly out of a different city instead? This not only ensures you'll see two different places you find interesting, but the need to get between the cities opens up a lot of options for how you travel. Visiting Eastern Europe last year, I flew into Kiev and out of Bucharest, giving myself two weeks to get between cities. This plan, combined with some good luck, allowed me to hitch a ride into Moldova and then bus into Transylvania, both incredible places I'd likely have missed had I flown out of Kiev, as well.

Israel and beyond: Negotiating the Middle East

Sympatico Travel

Publication Date: June 2011

In a move that sent both of our mothers into a maternal tizzy, my wife and I made the recent decision to go to Israel and the Middle East this summer. While admittedly tensions in the region have been running a bit hot recently, our choice to go now was based on the following factors:

- We've both always wanted to go;
- Due to scheduling conflicts, this will be our only real vacation in the next year;
- We're incredibly stubborn; and
- It seems that tensions are always high in the Middle East no matter when you go, so why not go now?

More reasonably, a close friend from Tel Aviv has let me know that he has never encountered any conflicts or major issues in Israel, despite living there his whole life. Combined with our overwhelming stubbornness, that was endorsement enough to get us to book our tickets.

Pre-planning all the details for a trip is something I usually blanch at, however I realized for this trip it would need to be different. While much of that planning is necessary due to trying to see a wealth of sights in a very limited time, an additional issue comes from the fact that visiting multiple countries in the Middle East can be logistically challenging.

Getting the necessary visas is always an important consideration when traveling abroad. While Canadians are fortunate enough to get visas automatically for an extremely large number of countries, the Middle East has different political considerations.

Jordan and Egypt have good diplomatic relations with Israel and so hopping between these countries and Israel to see the sights is not a problem. For other Arab countries, however, it can be extremely difficult.

For example, Canadians can have little problem getting into Lebanon when heading there directly. We get a visa at the airport when landing in Lebanon and it is a simple, standard procedure. However, nobody with an Israeli stamp in their passport may enter Lebanon, whether by air or by land. If your passport has an Israeli stamp, you will be turned away at the border, regardless of which country you are entering from. It also doesn't matter if the visit to Israel had occurred three years previously - if you have an Israeli stamp in your passport, other Arab countries such as Syria, Lebanon and Iran (amongst others) become no-go zones.

In fact, the policy goes further and states that a passport with any trace of a visit to Israel will be turned away. This can include checks of baggage tags on your luggage or border control stamps from Jordan or Cairo, should you have entered these countries from Israel.

With thanks to our friends at igoogledisrael.com:

Arab countries that accept visitors with Israeli stamped passports:

- United Arab Emirates
- Egypt
- Jordan
- Oman
- Morocco

Arab countries that DO NOT accept visitors with Israeli stamped passports:

- Syria
- Lebanon
- Libya
- Kuwait
- Iran
- Iraq
- Pakistan
- Saudi Arabia
- Sudan
- Yemen

So, despite the challenges (or perhaps because of them), you still want to witness the historical sights of Jerusalem and then dance the night away in Beirut's world-class nightclubs? Or wander the art galleries of Tehran? There are a few ways this is possible:

1. Just ask nicely

It has become common practice to simply ask Israeli border officials to place their stamp on a separate piece of paper. Simply tell them that you are planning on visiting Arab countries after your visit and, while this is not guaranteed, they will likely just stamp a piece of paper not in your

passport than you can conveniently "lose" after leaving Israel. (Remember not to have this in your bag when you head to the Arab country!)

2. Go the other way

While the aforementioned Arab countries will not let you in with an Israeli passport, that often is not the same in reverse. In the majority of cases, if you enter Israel after an Arab country and are there just for tourism, you will be let in. Border guards will need to be convinced that you are only there for tourism, but once that happens, you will be allowed to enter the country. In other words, dance the night away in Beirut first, then head to Israel to recover on the beaches of Tel Aviv.

3. Get two passports

This is possible if you are a dual citizen and happen to have your hands on both passports. Fly into Israel on one passport and then from Israel to a third country, such as Cyprus or Jordan, on the same passport. From that country, use the second passport and fly to the Arab country of your choice. Be wary of having any border stamps or luggage tags from Israel, however.

All of these options require the headache of having to go through an intermediary country. But when faced with the incredible history, beautiful scenery and spectacular food that all countries in the Middle East have on offer, having to spend a couple of days in Cyprus sounds like a pretty good headache to have!