

edition of *Guitar Hero*. Our pace quickens. We're hot on the trail. Two hours of zigzagging through the forest yields one distant chest-beating grunt and a few silverback hairs on a tree, but no actual gorillas. No matter. Fay's passion for jungle exploration is proving to be infectious. I realize I've been fully indoctrinated when I notice I'm happily knee deep into a swamp crossing before remembering that we've seen several dwarf crocodiles in waters just like this.

Each day's hike has begun with the same warning from Fay: "Forest elephants can be very aggressive, so if we meet up with one, stay behind me." No problem there. Then he adds, "If I say run, take off as fast as you can, and go until you find a big tree to hide behind." Problem. At six-foot-five, I'm too tall to run fast in the jungle, where branches often hang over the trail less than five feet off the ground. Maybe that's why some of the best guides in Gabon are Pygmies. Fortunately, my ability to simultaneously duck and run is never tested.

We are, however, treated to a magical encounter with elephants that affirms Gabon's reputation as one of Africa's last Edens. Near the end of our trip, Fay takes us to Ivindo, another national park, where we hike into a watery forest clearing, or *bai*. Fay found this unique wildlife gathering place during his megatransect. His may have been the first visit by humans in hundreds, if not thousands, of years. He was able to walk right up to the famously skittish Sitatunga antelope. On our visit, it is again raining, but a large group of elephants is putting on a show, with a couple of the younger ones doing a Gene Kelly number splashing and practically dancing in the rain while playing in the river. For almost three hours we sit transfixed, the elephants ignoring us.

Not to nitpick, but all that's keeping this from being the perfect afternoon is that we haven't been charged by an elephant. My disappointment proves that I've fallen completely under Fay's spell.

That's the beauty of traveling with someone who doesn't believe in detours. You see the world in a new way. Sure, you might get foot worms, but you might also see an elephant dancing in the rain. Just watch out that when you get back home you don't pitch a tent and start sleeping in the backyard.

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What's the single most crucial thing to take on a trip? A very small shortwave radio, to alert you to world events, the possible horrors of the place you're in, and to give you something to listen to in the hours of the night, when you're alone in the dark.

In your writing, you tend to focus on individuals that you meet. Why? I can't describe places in great sweeping generalizations. I need to speak person-to-person. I describe India and other places as having "the accessible poor." This is not the case in many other places. America, among others, has inaccessible poverty. I often ask Indians and Thais and Burmese and others: What's your name? Where do you live? How many children? How much money do you make? And so forth. Try asking those same questions in Appalachia; Jackson, Mississippi; East St. Louis; or areas of Los Angeles or Brooklyn.

Are there younger writers out there that you admire for their ability to evoke a sense of place? I am not a good judge of younger writers. On my last trip in India I read *Lady Chatterley's Lover*—don't laugh. It has a tremendous sense of place, the coal fields of the English Midlands side by side with the English pastoral.

What's your next frontier? I have a hankering to go to Greenland. I've been to Brazil but haven't written about it. I found it daunting—so big, so diverse, such a mess. I thought: I must learn Portuguese to get to the bottom of this.

Bees, it turns out, are an environmental barometer. You're a beekeeper. What are your bees telling you these days about the health of the planet? That even Hawaii—once the home of the healthiest bees—is not immune. That no bee is safe from tracheal mite, varroa mite, and the collapse of a hive.

If you could retreat from the life you live now, what would you do—and where? I have spent my whole life searching for the best place to live. I spend the summer on Cape Cod, where I spent my happiest childhood days. I spend the winter in happy Hawaii, bathed in marine sunlight. I make forays to the coast of Maine. These are sun-kissed days. Why retreat?

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dering where he was taking me. He pulled out a little stool stuck in-between two diners slurping away with their heads in their bowls. I shoved in, trying not to poke anyone in the eye with my chopsticks.

Space in Hong Kong is not an abstract concept or a cultural construct—it is simply a limited resource. (After four years living here part-time, I now grab any empty seat and slurp away.) And just like high gas prices change our transportation habits, China's congestion has forced me to rethink my idea of what is "too close."

I've also learned to appreciate that a lack of space and privacy, which makes me anxious, can have the opposite effect on others. I recently took a short trip to a remote part of China's Guangdong province with my Hong Kong friend A-lan and her sister. When it came time to find a hotel, my friends asked the desk clerk for one room.

Figuring they wanted to save money, I went along, although, truthfully, I'd have rather stayed alone. But as we all got ready to squeeze into two single beds amid giggles, bantering, and late-night tales about A-lan's six brothers and sisters, I began to understand that sleeping three to a small room wasn't just about saving money—it was about feeling connected. The worst thing, from my friends' point of view, was not that I might feel crowded, but that I might feel left out. Lonely.

Like the taste for fish paste or the ability to write fluently in Chinese, the joy of closeness is something that's probably best acquired in early childhood. Traveling has helped me appreciate the way other cultures handle personal space. But I still lose my way sometimes, shifting gears between one zone where nobody would dream of intruding and the other, in which squeezing three people into two twin beds is not only considered practical but comforting.

Anyway, the battle between the lady on the bus and me ended like this. After a bumpy hour of jabbing elbows and shifting bodies, she grudgingly gave me back three inches of breathing room, and I let her use my pack as a backrest. I wasn't completely happy with the arrangement, and I don't think she was either. But for travelers, personal space is all about these little negotiations. Ten hours down the road, Luang Prabang—and all the space I wanted—was waiting.

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