

# **Off The Beaten Path**

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## Off The Beaten Path

Hitting the snooze at 4 AM. Waiting in long security lines. Sitting in the middle seat of a cramped flight where everyone smells a little off. Why do people put up with all of this?

Traveling doesn't advance the human race or give anyone an academic edge. It costs money for something intangible, yet Americans take over 720 million trips every year. The answer, in my opinion: perspective. After 23 short days of strangers becoming friends, karaoke and wine, and over 100 miles of walking, it's impossible to see the world the same way.

It's the first snow in years. A spectacle unlike any other for the region that stopped the group dead in our tracks. For hours, cold white powder sheathed every tree and shut down the town. This was day one of our trip. The first morning illustrating anything can happen. Amidst the first nights of sharing dinner and wine, karaoke and trivia nights, and many more, one thing did become clear. The visions of myself and my peers didn't line up as expected. Like that morning, everyone formed into groups, and I seemed like an outlier. Often bouncing from one group to the next, the realization began to settle that I can force myself into their mold, or I can be myself.

None of the cities from Venice to Florence tried to be like the next, and I realized I didn't have to either. The quiet charm of a Venetian canal felt entirely different from the overwhelming beauty of Florence's cathedral. Neither was wrong, just different. And in Florence, a lesson began to take shape: if I wanted something from this trip, I would have to go get it myself. Even if that meant going alone.

Any travelers' worst nightmare came true for me. Tired. Dirty. Wearing the same clothes for four days straight after delays and rebooks – and an unplanned tour of the many airports Italy has to offer – the airline lost my luggage. Having faith that it would get back to me in the first week, I held out until day nine: Florence. I told myself my priority was simple: find new clothes. But the group wanted steak and pubs. I went along with it. Great food, good company. But I knew I had traded something I actually wanted for something easier. I couldn't do that again. Day 12: Siena. For the first time, I went alone.

I stepped into a small café. The smell of coffee and a quiet hum filled the room. An old man nodded. “Posso avere un cappuccino per favore?” I asked. He smiled – and answered in English. So much for blending in.

From there, I wandered. Shop owners gave unsolicited fashion advice: brighter pants, a leather jacket, a scarf. Before long, I had three new outfits and nowhere in particular to go. So, I chose a road less traveled. Burnt orange buildings lined both sides of a quiet street. No cars. No people. Just a quiet serenity. At the end was a stone gate. I stepped through and everything opened up.

To the left, the Italian countryside stretched endlessly, hills rolling like waves. Trees dotted the landscape, and scattered houses sat like brushstrokes on a masterpiece. To the right, Siena sat below, perfectly arranged in warm tones and careful detail. I stood there, realizing I had chosen this moment. Just off the beaten path, there was something most people will never see. That was the shift. In Siena, I stopped traveling with the group and started traveling for myself.

I still spent time with them – dinners, laughs, shared moments – but seeing the world alone, at my own pace, was something entirely different. Somewhere along the way, I realized travel isn't just about places. It's about people ... and sometimes, getting lost.

It was Verona, love was in the air (but not for me), and I decided to go off on my own again. I walked through the Arena, stood where Romeo once spoke to Juliet, and followed the familiar tourist paths that felt almost too perfect. At the bridge, people crowded for the same postcard photo of the bright blue river below. I did the touristy thing, took mine, and crossed the bridge.

On the other side, Verona changed. The streets were dirtier. Shops sold Hispanic and Greek food. The air felt heavier. This version of the city wasn't meant to impress tourists. It wasn't meant for me at all.

Inside a grocery store, I saw an elderly woman struggling with her bags. I offered to help. At first hesitant, she eventually agreed. We walked together for ten minutes, talking in broken English about education and life. Before leaving, she told me about a bar across the river where young people liked to go.

When I got there, I ordered a beer and asked the bartender what he thought of America. An hour passed. I didn't leave feeling validated. I left uneasy. Hearing an outside perspective made me realize that my voice, my vote, and my decisions carry more weight than I thought. Regardless of nationality, people are people. A kind gesture crosses any language barrier.

Sometimes travel isn't just for yourself. It's learning how to exist in a world much bigger than your own. Anthony Bourdain said it best: "The journey changes you; it should change

you... you should take something with you.” Sometimes God sends you 3,000 miles away not to be impressed by a city but to be inspired by the people in it.

So what is the value of perspective? It’s seeing the same world from a different angle. Standing under the same sky but understanding your place in it differently. This world offers more than beautiful views. It offers the chance to grow, to reflect, and to step outside your own life. So don’t hit snooze. Book the flight. Step off the beaten path. Let the world humble you and teach you a new lesson just as it did for me.