

The Joy of Missing Out

Forget FOMO. One veteran traveller discovers exactly what he was looking for—and it wasn't on his list.

By Chaney Kwak Illustration by Daniel Hertzberg

THE 16TH-CENTURY castle town of Kanazawa was supposed to be a gem. As soon as my train from Tokyo glided into the station, I dashed to Kenroku-en, touted as one of Japan's three most beautiful gardens, to photograph the winding streams and immaculately manicured pine trees. Then off I went to the samurai quarter of Nagamachi, with its clay walls and mysterious courtyards. The 18th-century Omi-cho market brimmed with the latest colourful catch from the Sea of Japan, as well as diners queuing up for *kaisen don*, a bowl of rice brimming with fresh sashimi and fish eggs. But how could I waste time waiting in line when I had to run to a suburb to watch artisans hammer out decorative gold leaf, the city's claim to fame? There was so much to see.

I was miserable.

Travel used to be my panacea for boredom, sadness or whatever ailed me. Each trip left me inspired and physically invigorated. But lately I was finding myself anxious on the road (“Will I see everything I should?”) and regretful after trips (“What did I miss?”). I was having a traveller's version of this millennium's epidemic, FOMO: Fear of Missing Out.

“Well-travelled folks have it extra hard,” says luxury travel advisor Jessica Ourisman. “Their sense of FOMO is not just about checking off the usual list, but also about finding the next undiscovered thing.”

While I was in Japan, my itinerary buckled under the weight of famous attractions—as well as sights unlisted in my English guidebooks. And I'm ashamed to admit it, but I wanted to get the credit for posting the hidden gems on Instagram. In his 2013 paper in the journal *Computers in Human Behavior*, University of Oxford behavioural scientist Andrew Przybylski blames social media for the “pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent.” Stunning shots of, say, elephant trekking in Thailand on your friend's Instagram feed can jolt you with wanderlust, and the double-edged sword of social media means you, in turn, can be the envy of that friend when you post about a Golden Triangle cave he missed.

How could I have fallen so low? I remembered the time I found myself in a bar with final-year MBA students who were trying to impress one another. “You haven't experienced Machu Picchu unless you've walked

the whole Inca Trail,” said a perky woman, to which another responded, “Well, you really haven't hiked until you've done Kili.” Then another, for the win: “I'm planning to do Everest before graduation.”

Odysseus didn't *do* Thrinacia any more than Charles Darwin *did* the Galápagos. And I bet you never would have caught Jack Kerouac, martini in hand, starting a story with “When I did Mexico City . . .”

Completing a number of tasks, no matter how rarefied or Herculean, doesn't entitle us to stake a claim with such finality. Yet people do it all the time because there's a sense of urgency. The real race, though, isn't against other travellers; it's against the clock. We're lucky to live in an era when a jet can whisk us from a coffee farm in Kona to the splendour of Istanbul's Hagia Sophia. We can swim with manta rays in Bora Bora, then catch a show in London's West End later that weekend. But each of us has only so many days on this planet. Can we really blame ourselves for wanting to see, touch, taste and do as much as we can manage?

No wonder the proverbial “bucket list” caught on like wildfire, and travellers began compiling their own 1,000 places to see before they die. The trouble is, there's something about lists that can turn the most exciting adventure into a chore. That's where I went wrong in Japan. With my overeager plan, I ended up reducing a vibrant, endlessly discoverable place into a soulless to-do list.

Luckily, I found my salvation there as well. While I was scurrying from Kanazawa's modern art museum to the geisha district of Higashi Chaya, a sudden rainstorm forced me to take refuge. Without an umbrella, I huddled under a stone arch. The small shrine it marked wasn't on my map, and there was no signage to tell me the name. I watched the temple's red flags flutter as a small fountain murmured its story. Pine needles collected raindrops, each watery pearl a universe unto itself. I knew I would get no bragging rights or Facebook likes, but this moment of calm, unanticipated beauty reminded me why I'm compelled to keep hitting the road. The rain stopped, leaving the air full of sweet petrichor. I would miss my next appointment. I wasn't in a hurry. ■



Chaney Kwak is a travel writer whose work has appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times* and books by *National Geographic*.