

The Art of Getting Lost

EDITORIAL AND PHOTO
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Curbside and irate, someone screamed that their car's GPS was not working. Seemingly, this was a perfectly sound explanation for a canceled appointment, and now that the excuse was phoned in, all was right with the world. Apparently.

What's happened to pulling into a gas station and asking directions? We're losing another hunter-gatherer skill, I thought.

For many, GPS is the best invention since fresh, bagged salad. I—who usually travel via trains, buses and ferries—used it once, and it was a godsend. With night enveloping, a mistake was rectified, and I resumed beetling to Princess Anne, Md.

I pondered what I would've unearthed the next morning if I'd stayed lost. Answer: Eastern Delaware's Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge and the "charmingly" named Slaughter Beach and Broadkill Sound.

I've still not been to them.

Thoroughly getting lost made humans discover things. Some have no time for such foolishness, but if you do, stepping off what in Latin American is—also less than charmingly—known as the "gringo trail" provides the rewards that keep us in perpetual wanderlust.

Some travelers step so far off they never come back. In 1925, Colonel Percival Fawcett disappeared somewhere in Brazil's Mato Grosso, but if he'd had GPS technology, it would have denied

us *Brazilian Adventure*, the wonderful account of the search for Fawcett written by the brother of Ian Fleming, creator of James Bond. This isn't comforting for Fawcett's relatives, I should add. If David Livingstone hadn't got thoroughly disoriented jungle-wandering beside Lake Tanganyika, there'd be no juicy accounts of Henry Stanley uttering the immortal words, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume." No, we would've had an electronic voice stating "bear left in 300 feet and take Tanzania Rte. B381 for 842 miles to Ujiji," or something tedious like that. I doubt Sebastian Snow, the first to boat along the Amazon's entire length, would've not wanted to walk the height of South America on a failed expedition to reach the top of Alaska, carrying a briefcase containing only one change of clothing, if he'd been forced to also carry a machine that continuously interrupted any attempt to wander off a chosen path and any chance of serendipitous discovery. Would the perpetually lost Christopher Columbus' American discoveries be so mythic if his handheld GPS proclaimed that what he always thought was Japan wasn't?

I've got lost often (although not for as long as Livingstone's six years of utterly clueless perambulating) and thoroughly enjoyed myself. In Lampa on the Peruvian Altiplano, I boarded the wrong bus and went to Ticini (I know this as someone wrote it down), but had

an excellent time cooking chicken with bowler-hatted Quechua speakers, sitting on a treeless hillside above a thin stream. I've never to this day located the place on a map. In the Turkish village of Harran (see photo), first mentioned in 2,300 BC but today mostly dust, I instead of heading south launched across a tarmacless desert ending at the Syrian border. However, I thus discovered that Cs in Turkish are pronounced as Js (important if the only nearby town is Ceylanpinar) and in the middle of nowhere (pouring over a map, no single other person to ask) a lizard called a Lebanese ground agama. In Ireland I got utterly discombobulated reaching Strabane, Northern Ireland, and spent an agreeable hour in a stone circle in Raphoe, previously unknown to me, surrounded by sheep all pointing their heads in the same direction.

AAA suggests that one good way not to get lost is to plan more than sufficient time for any trip (this avoids the need to speed, too), but that's also true if you want to get lost, a perfect route in which to avoid the tyranny of guidebooks and GPS-fed "tourism information."

AAA's wonderful TripTiks have their vital role, but on occasion, I recommend you all go get lost!

So, have you ever got lost and discovered something incredible? E-mail us at carandtravel@aaaany.com.

Terence Baker is this magazine's managing editor.