

## In an Age of Slow Food, Slow Travel

PHOTO AND EDITORIAL BY TERENCE BAKER



**F**licking through a book on travel factoids—how many cows  $x$  country has; how densely populated  $y$  city is; how distant  $z$  island is from any other, that kind of thing—a coincidence came before my eyes. It was this: The last three places I traveled to—Belize, Wales, New Jersey—all measure 8,000-something square miles; more thrillingly, the next place I was off to—tickets secured—was Israel, measuring in at—joy of joys—8,522.

Am I drawn to places this size without being aware? Any Israeli guide worth his Dead Sea salt explains that one beautiful thing about Israel is the effortlessness of getting from Golan Heights' ski slopes to the majesty of Jerusalem and the beaches of Eilat all in the course of a day. Is it this ability to get a fair idea of *all* of a country in one trip that appeals? A destination such as India is overwhelming. It's a minimum of 20 trips—wonderful if you have the time. I've never been. I have been to São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Salvador, but do I understand anything of huge Brazil? Perhaps when traveling we learn more about ourselves, and our traveling companions, and maybe that's the larger point; enjoying a great vacation is a perfectly adequate conclusion, too.

In an age of slow food, maybe the same


is true of travel? Sitting on a beach or gliding on a cruise ship are even slower, I hear you state, but coincidences such as mine help also slow travel by providing a thread between destinations.

Belize is a multitude of "countries"—the Mayan temples of Xunantunich and Lamanai, the subtropical rainforests along the Macal River, the Caribbean beaches and palmed islands near Punta Gorda and the Mennonite and Mayan communities of Shipyard and San Pedro Colombia. On a school bus (its first life was in Glendale, Ariz.) that stopped every half-mile, it took only three hours to cross the country.

Wales has a more circuitous road network, with mists and herds of road-jamming sheep that wonderfully interrupt schedules. Still, it's possible to travel in a day or two from the Welsh-speaking areas ("Cerddwyr ymlaen" means "Slow down"; luckily, road signs also come in English) of Anglesey and Snowdonia to the glorious coastal walks of the Gower Peninsula and on to the wilds of the Brecon Beacons not far from the cities of Swansea and Cardiff.

Americans regard drives of 300 miles as short excursions, but there's much to be said for taking it slowly, understanding one piece of the United States jigsaw, rather than a sizeable chunk. I drove to several old diners in Northern New Jersey, visiting Summit, Hasbrouck Heights, Blairstown and Paterson, towns rarely gracing tourism brochures. I sauntered, never leaving this small state, from the Great Falls in Paterson to the farms and country stores of Sussex County. Cape May's Victorian houses and Wildwood's Art Deco hotels seem, but are not, a thousand miles away.

From the wonders of the Old City of Jerusalem, it's an hour to the Mediterranean city of Tel Aviv, where the beautiful people party with zeal. Next door is the ancient city of Jaffa, and two hours away is the Negev Desert, where I found Naot Farm's homemade goat cheese in the village of Ramat Hanegev. It's another hour to the Dead Sea and the epic mountaintop fortress of Massada. A short drive is the West Bank, where near to Jericho I gazed down at the Great Orthodox Monastery of St. George Choziba (see photo) in a very narrow valley called Wadi Qelt, its buildings wedged amid jagged limestone. Traditionally, this valley is considered to be the "valley of the shadow of death" of Psalm 23. I went from the old to the bold, from the sand to the grand, from the ancient to the patient, all in a handful of days and, more satisfyingly, without rushing.

So, where next, assuming it has to tip the scales at 8,000-something square miles? According to the U.S. Department of State, I'm left with Djibouti (I've been to El Salvador), which lies against the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden between Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia. Has any reader been there? 

*Terence Baker is travel editor of this magazine.*