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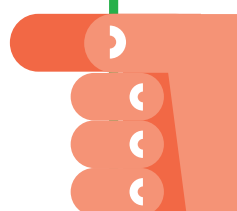
TAKE MY ADVICE

# "Collecting countries can be addictive"

IT'S NOT HOW MANY YOU'VE BEEN TO, BUT THE EXPERIENCES YOU HAVE THAT COUNT, SAYS OLIVER SMITH

I just turned 70. You wouldn't guess it from my youthful face and boyish demeanour. But, yes, I'm 70 and in my world, the bigger the number, the greater the respect. One of my friends is 104, and he speaks admiringly of people of 134 and 156. We're not talking about age: we're talking about the number of countries we've visited.

Counting the countries you've visited is a strange affliction. Travel writers are especially predisposed to it, misguidedly seeing it as a displayable trophy, much like a butterfly collection. Symptoms may include boasting to the public, making a handbrake turn on a Swiss motorway so you can detour to Liechtenstein (+1 new country) or traipsing across Rome to St Peter's, because ticking off the Vatican City has the same net result as a year-long expedition to, say, Papua New Guinea (+1 new country).



I'm much better now, but I've suffered acutely from country-collecting syndrome in the past. My own symptoms included asking a Thai shopkeeper if I could put my left foot in his storeroom (which happened to be in Myanmar, +1 new country) and soaking up the highlights of Ukraine – the onion domed-churches and winding rivers – without going beyond the postcard stand at Kiev airport (+1 new country).

My lowest point came 13 years ago, as a backpacker landing in Dresden with two mates in tow. Dresden is, of course, a >



fine German city of ornate royal palaces and baroque spires. To my mind, it was a place of endless opportunity, because it's on the doorstep of Poland and the Czech Republic (+2 new countries). At the time, Facebook had an app where you could colour in all the countries you've visited to get maximum respect from your Friends. All I needed to do was put my little toe in Poland to colour the entire nation blue as far as the Belarusian border.

From Dresden, I excitedly boarded a train to Görlitz, Germany, right next to Zgorzelec, Poland. It was perfect: I could tick off a whole nation before lunch. These were the last days of passport checks on the German-Polish border and the border guard was slumped in his booth playing Snake on his Nokia.

"How long do you plan to stay in Poland?" he asked.

"Ten minutes."

We three backpackers crossed a bridge into Poland in the style of a Cold

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War prisoner exchange, though with no material benefit to Germany (nor, come to think of it, Poland). It started to rain. Our welcoming party consisted of a dog and his fleas. The dog escorted us to a wet bench, where he put on a commemorative display of licking his bits. We wondered how best to schedule our remaining eight minutes before we were due to make a similar trip to the Czech Republic.

It's fair to say Zgorzelec was quietly attractive, but of modest interest. The tourist information website lists the erratic boulder in the park as a prime sightseeing spot – that is, until the tourist information shut down in 2011 – but I've found that even in the first hundred metres of a country, the part tourists quickly pass through, humble experiences can be rewarding. Our seven-minute itinerary took in wildlife – being



entertained by a cat chasing a pigeon around a playground. It involved local cuisine – visiting a supermarket and wondering if Polish KitKat Chunkies were chunkier than German ones, or was it a trick of the light? Nobody had any zloty on them, so the case went unsolved. And it meant connecting with local people. In our case, our old friend the Polish border guard, who we met on our return to Germany seven minutes later.

"Did you enjoy your trip to Poland?" he said without looking up from his phone. "Please come again. There is so much more to see here."

Since then I have done precisely as he said. I've discovered the remainder of Poland to be an endlessly beautiful country. I've seen the squares of Krakow under snow, and stood among bison in Białowieża Forest. I've nursed vodka hangovers and walked on the frozen lakes of Masuria. But, even now, I still have a soft spot for those first hundred metres of Polish soil: the cat in the playground, the erratic boulder, the KitKat Chunky bar we couldn't afford. It's experiences, not countries, that are truly worth collecting. Even in the most unlikely corners.

### TAKE OLIVER'S ADVICE...

#### DO

**Look for the best in  
the farthest frontiers  
of a country.**

#### DON'T

**Treat travel like it's a  
competitive sport –  
it's not.**