

29 Lessons From Travelling the World by Benny Lewis

Eight years.

That's 416 weeks, or almost 3,000 days.

This is the amount of time that I have not had a fixed home; moving to a new country, culture and language every few months and taking absolutely everything I own with me. It has been a significant percentage of my life, and it's still long from over.

I had actually done some travelling before - a couple of summers in the states, and an entire month already in Spain. But about this time back in 2003, on the week of my 21st birthday, I left Ireland for good. I had graduated university a few days before, and knew that I'd only be coming back "home" for visits (I've never once missed the family Christmas dinner). But it's not really my home any more. Since then, "wherever I lay my hat, that's my home".

After devoting my life to them, university and schools had taught me nothing of any real importance. I had gone through as many books as I could and thought I knew it all, but the fact of the matter is that I have become the person I was meant to be in the last 4/5 of a decade, while on the road. And I certainly still have a lot left to learn.

Since yesterday was my 29th birthday and this week is my 8 year "travelversary", I thought it fitting to share 29 of these revelations with you of things that I have learned on this journey. Many of them are about life in general, but these are actually my observations after meeting many people from all over the world:

1. Everyone everywhere basically wants the same thing

Vastly different as the world's cultures are, if you speak to Italian millionaires, homeless Brazilians, Dutch fishermen and Filipino computer programmers, in their own languages, you start to see that we are all incredibly alike where it matters.

Everyone just wants validation, love, security, enjoyment and hopes for a better future. The way they verbalise this and work towards it is where things branch off, but we all have the same basic desires. You can relate to everyone in the world if you look past the superficial things that separate you.

2. Deferring your happiness to the future is a terrible idea

Too many people presume that when they have that one thing they can work towards for years then "everything will be alright".

This is delusional.

When you get it, there'll be something else missing in your life. I fundamentally believe that long-term pure happiness from one particular situation or achievement is a pipe-dream, but we can learn to be content with what we have, live in the now, all while enjoying the progress and changes we are making.

If your whole life is working up towards one really big major goal that you hold on to for years, then you will have a major anticlimax after the dust settles. Work towards it, but stop deferring your happiness.

Get there slower and enjoy the ride. I like how it is portrayed in this video:

Enjoy the show, and don't wait for the finale. A song I really like (in Spanish) reminds me that the present really is all we have.

3. "Someday my ship will come in" is BS. You will NEVER win the lottery. Be practical. People seem to have a strange concept of how luck works and how the universe/some diety/karma/their lucky shoe or how "they deserve it" will mean that things will eventually fall into place for them. You are "due" to win the lottery or will get swept away by prince charming any day now. "You deserve it" (as if others don't).

This is a misunderstanding of how the world actually works. Perhaps I'm wrong and praying or hoping that it will all work out, or generally being a nice person is what really "does the trick", but why not actually get off your butt and do something tangible too while you're at it.

I personally don't believe in magic or fairies or astrology or sky wizards or large-scale invisible inexplicable forces at work on petty daily activities of humans. I'm sceptical about such things, and believe they are all impossible/ridiculous, and knowledge of this has enriched my life. As a practical person, I see the world as a very logical place with physical and social rules and understanding this has helped me live well in it.

The universe owes you nothing, you owe it to yourself to be the master of where your life ends up.

4. There's no such thing as destiny. This is excellent news!

Destiny is used as a cop-out and standard excuse by most people for why they don't do something with their lives. The thing is, it doesn't exist.

Your limitations are not set by who you know, where you were born, what genes you have, how much money you have, how old you are right now, what you did before or other things that you can claim are your stamp of failure for life.

If you are determined enough there are many opportunities in life that are totally achievable with minimal cash, regardless of who you are.

5. Seek out people with different beliefs and views of the world to yours and get to know their side of the story

As you can probably guess from #3, I have some beliefs about the world that don't jive with a lot of people's. However, a lot of people get their meaning in life from believing in things I don't. If everyone thought like me, the world would be a very boring place.

So when I meet someone with a very different belief system to mine, it's better to get along than to try to "convert" them. This is as true for how the world works as it is for language learning methods, fashion, movie tastes etc.

When someone is sure about something and has believed it for many many years, then you cannot convince them with a few cleverly picked words. Everyone is closed minded about something, including me. They have to discover it themselves over time or just continue believing what they do. Don't take responsibility for convincing the world you are right. It's important to acknowledge that maybe you are actually the wrong one.

The world is much more fun with people of varying interests and beliefs. Despite my scepticism, in my travels I have hung out with astrologists, palm readers, very religious folk, conservatives, and people who hate technology. And my life and experiences are enriched so much because of it.

Spending time exclusively with people who agree with you on everything would never challenge you and allow you to learn so much more.

6. Living a good life is the best way possible to convince people

Enough words and enough arguing. Just live by example and soon you'll have people on your side when they see your results and how passionate you are. No need to "convince" them. Just show them that you are there, tell them how you got there, and they will start to realise that maybe you aren't that crazy after all.

7. Nobody has it all figured out

Almost everyone has problems and puts on a brave face - don't presume they have it easy. You see of each person what they let you see. You have no idea what they are going through or what they had to put up with to be in a situation that you can consider "easy". This is universal - millionaires, students, the cool kid, the party animal, the introvert and everyone in between has more to their story than the superficial restricted one you see. Never dismiss them as having it easy if you don't know the entire story.

8. There's no shame in saying "I don't know"

There is a stigmatism in some cultures to admit ignorance about a particular topic. Don't dance around the issue - just say I don't know. Honesty is way smarter.

9. More money will NEVER solve your problems

As long as you are not living in the street or going hungry, then you do not "need" more money. When you spend enough time with people who are actually living on next to nothing, but having a full life, then you will truly understand this. Everything that is wonderful about life doesn't cost a penny, and the rest is way cheaper than you think it is.

10. Possessions own you

Look at the real reason you want to buy more expensive crap and realise that it all comes down to validation from others in one way or another. You don't really need any of it unless it's directly related to essentials in how you work or survive.

The need to buy new crap dictates your life - it fixes you in one location with that house and furniture, and it governs how much money you need to earn. And it almost never actually enriches your life in any way. The less you own the better.

11. TV is the greatest black hole of time available to mankind

I wasted so much of my life before age 21 spending 3-4 hours a day watching TV. Following shows that I "had" to see, in order to "relax". I regret almost every second of it. The whole world was passing me by outside.

TV was an important part of the 20th century, bringing communication and news to the masses, but now it's wasteful. People get biased news through it, when much better alternatives are available, watch terrible TV shows through it that teach them nothing, and it sucks so many hours of their lives away that they seem to forget about when they delude themselves into thinking that they don't have time to pursue real passions in life.

TVs encourage people to be antisocial. The only TVs you should be watching are someone else's - go to your friend's house to share a series you like if you must, or go to the bar with your mates to watch sports. Your life will not be enriched by sitting at home watching a screen with zero interactivity to it.

12. The Internet is the greatest tool ever available to us, but daily use must be capped

Unlike TVs, the Internet is interactive and allows you to take part and become virtually social. It connects communities all over the world and without it, the last 8 years simply would have been much more difficult for me for many reasons.

Having said that, it has the same potential as TV to become a black hole of time. Use it to enrich your life, but put a cap on how much you use it so you can get out and live that life. Replacing one screen with another (even when you use it to chat to people) is just escaping the real world, which is much more beautiful.

13. Get outside and do something with other people

My favourite website in the world is Couchsurfing.org, precisely because I spend so little time on it. It has simplified my travel life tremendously by allowing me to host people to maintain my languages, and to search it for interesting people to meet up with.

The world that is worth experiencing is not in books or on TV or computer screens. It's with other human beings. Stop being shy and get out and meet them!

14. Speaking only English is incredibly limiting to non-tourist travellers

If you are visiting a country for a weekend, then you can check into your hotel and order food in an expensive restaurant and get a guided tour in English. You can even make local university educated friends, and successfully create a bubble to protect you from the local

language for as long as you like, and delude yourself into thinking that this is the way things are.

But you will never truly experience the local culture if you limit yourself to being able to interact on a deep level just the well educated part of it. English-speaking travellers miss out on so much - not speaking English has defined most of my travels and the amazing experiences I have had would have been impossible if I didn't try to learn the local languages.

ANYONE can learn a language. When I was 21 I thought I couldn't do it, but one day I put all the BS excuses to one side and just spoke it. Speaking a language from day one is the 'secret' to being able to learn it quicker and at any age.

15. Modern foreign culture does not have to satisfy your stereotypes

Every country in the world is modernising but this does not mean that they are westernising or Americanising. What makes them unique does not have to satisfy your "quaint" tourist-brochure view of them. Leave ignorant stereotypes aside and have an open mind about how modern life is like in that culture.

Not all Irish people drink, not all Brazilians samba and play football, and Germans, Dutch, Filipinos and everyone else will surprise you if you leave your presumptions about them at the airport.

Respect the differences, try to adapt to them yourself and realise that to them you might seem backwards in many ways.

16. Take your time

If there's one thing I've learned from living in countries that are more "easy going" it's that they are way wiser than the rest of us in their pace of life. People and countries that do everything quicker also do it worse. Take it easy and go slowly.

Enjoy every bite of food, walk at a slow pace and take in your surroundings, let the other person finish their side of the conversation while you listen attentively, and stop in the middle of your day, close your eyes or look at nature and become aware of your breathing.

17. You can't please everyone

"I don't know the secret to success, but the secret to failure is trying to please everyone"
- Bill Cosby.

State your opinion and stick to your guns. If you are confident enough and share your idea with enough people, you will tick off someone no matter what you talk about. That's their problem, not yours.

18. Trying to be cool or following trends is for mindless sheep

Peer pressure is for people who are afraid of their individuality. Stand up for yourself, and go against the flow if that's what you feel is best. What's cool now will be frozen over in a few years.

19. Make mistakes - and LOTS of them!

Mistakes are how we learn. Failures are the stepping stones to success.

20. Wear sunscreen

Seriously. Protect your skin. Follow that and all other advice in this video:

21. Stop thinking so much and act

People think their way out of doing everything that's worth doing in life. The reason I feel I'm getting so much done in the last years is precisely because of how much time I give to over-analysing whether I should do something important or not: None.

22. Dance and sing whenever possible

Dancing and singing are great releases and forms of expression. It's hard not to feel good after a session of either!

23. Making new friends is easy and so is appreciating your current ones

My entire eight years travel has been alone. I arrive in a new nation without a single friend waiting for me in many cases. I have no connections, but I make them anyway. I

find a party online and go straight to it and say hi to everyone. Soon, if I try enthusiastically enough, I'll find people I can socialise with on a regular basis.

If you are friendly, genuine and charming, making friends with people from every culture and background is possible.

When people who are surrounded by family, networks, work and school colleagues, other friends, clubs and communities they are a part of... tell me that it's hard to meet new people I feel like slapping them in the face to wake them up to the opportunities around them, which I haven't had consistently for almost a decade. Look around you!

24. You don't know what you've got 'till its gone

Don't take anything for granted. I couldn't afford to pay for accommodation one night and had to sleep outside on a rock because of it. Ever since then I appreciate having a bed, couch or hammock, no matter how small or where it may be, because I know what it's like to not have one. One night was enough to burn it into me - I sigh a breath of relief every time I go to bed now.

I went partially deaf due to an ear infection for two weeks and appreciate my hearing and all the beautiful sounds around me all the more because I got it back. I also gained an appreciation for signed communication that I'd take advantage of several years later.

I've never lost anyone close to me, but I hug my family members and tell them I love them every chance I get, and clear any bad air with friends and don't hold back on sharing my emotions with them. Life is too short - if I lost anything important to me then I want to make sure that I never wasted the time I did have with it or with him or her.

25. Swallow your pride and apologise

Never hold a grudge and never try to win every argument. Sometimes it's best to let your pride slide for the sake of clearing the air with someone. Be the first to say you're sorry. Never wait for the other person to make the first move.

26. Doing anything specifically to impress people is stupid

People will never give you the validation you seek if you try to be a dancing monkey for them. Saying how many languages you speak, how rich you are, who you know, where you studied or what you do for a living, or trying to show-off in any other way to get someone to like you, or working for these things just for the bragging rights will leave you really disappointed.

People are impressed by those who aren't trying to impress them and are comfortable in themselves and social and interesting. Sometimes to be "interesting" all you have to do is be a good listener.

27. People are not alone in being alone

One of the most frequent questions I get asked as a long-term solo traveller is if I feel lonely. The short answer is no. The long answer would require an entire post in itself.

But the fact of the matter is that loneliness is much more common around the world than I previously thought it was. I was actually much more lonely in my university (fixed) life than I am now. And I meet many people who have vast networks of social groups who feel desperately lonely because they feel nobody gets them.

Then others who simply changed their lifestyle in some way (not necessarily by travel, but perhaps marriage or starting a demanding job) and have lost contact with all their childhood friends because of it, also feel lonely.

I've talked to many people who are convinced they are the only ones who feel this way. Each time I hear a similar story I can hear the Police in my head "seems I'm not alone in being alone..." Believe it or not I find this very comforting when I am genuinely separated by thousands of kilometres from anyone who even knows what my name is. Even though nobody is in exactly the same situation, the amount of people in the world I've met tells me that I'm very likely not the only one in such a situation, even at that very second.

No matter how lonely you might feel, there is always someone who can relate to you. Perhaps you can't talk to them right now, but they are out there.

28. Love isn't "all" you need, but if you don't have it in some form, your life will be very

empty

We don't need love to survive, but without it there will be a huge hole inside you. Make sure that every day you have someone (family, friends, lover) to remind you that you are special. If you postpone this part of your life until later, after you get or do that thing you want to do, you will continue in that lonely path indefinitely.

29. The most important lessons in life can never be expressed in black and white, but must be experienced

I thought I knew it all back in university - and that everything of importance can be found in books. But the truth is that the most important things in life are very hard to put in black and white, including what I've said in this post.

When most of the world's information is at our fingertips, a mouseclick away, it makes it feel like we don't need to experience any more. Movies, books, or "living vicariously through someone else" means we can apparently get the general gist of anything.

This is false. Experience is the greatest teacher of all. Stop reading about or watching the world passively and start living it.