Cartographies of Time
by Maptia, Co-founder Team

Cartographies of Time: Part II

We believe that places are like people and that each has a unique personality. A defining and often delightful aspect of each place’s personality is the way in which time is understood, measured and perceived by the people who live there. Cross the globe and you will encounter many different rhythms of life - some slow, some frantic, some chaotic and changeable, some melodic and rich, and just a few where time goes by entirely untracked.

Many farmers use the subtle variations in seasonal weather patterns to measure the passing of time, while others’ religious beliefs can lead them to live their lives according to the waxing and waning of the moon, and some seafarers still track the time using the predictable arc of the sun, the stars and the moon. Each different culture and place has its own subtle melody and pace of life - time is experienced differently around the world.

When you listen to music, your heart-rate will often subconsciously adjust to the beat and tempo of the song. Likewise, if you spend long enough in a place that has a relaxed way of life, your own internal metronome will adjust to a much slower rhythm. This is one of travel’s less tangible yet more profound experiences - to come to understand and appreciate the way another culture uses time. Some are appreciative and take a meditative approach, while others are afraid that it is simply running away from them.

“Every culture has its own unique set of temporal fingerprints. To know a people is to know the time values they live by. -- Jeremy Rifkin, Time Wars

Temporal Perspectives Around the World

As we wrote in Cartographies of Time Part 1, industrialisation, and now globalisation, continues to promote the importance of strict clock-based routines. Think about it, how would we be able to interact on an international basis without a shared understanding and agreement on how we measure time? And yet all over the world there are fascinating, often enchanting stories from cultures that still measure time in more traditional ways, and in each and every place there are unique sayings or phrases that have come to represent different amounts of time in a much more human way than the mechanical ticking hand of a clock.

In England we might say, ‘Oh, I’ll just have forty winks.’ By this we would mean that we
were about to take a five or ten minute nap. While if you asked how long something was going to take in Madagascar, you might receive an answer such as ‘the time of a rice-cooking’ (about half an hour) or ‘the frying of a locust (a few minutes). In his book, ‘The Geography of Time’, Robert Levine quotes someone from Nigeria as having said, “the man died in less than the time in which maize is not yet completely roasted.” This is apparently less than fifteen minutes.

No matter we are from, each of us interprets the passing of time in relation to our experiences of the world around us. This brings a rich variety of colour and emotion into the language of time. Drawing on Levine’s book and on other travellers’ experiences, we have collected anecdotes and stories that illustrate some of the starkly different ways humans understand and experience time around the world.

Starting out in New York, there is perhaps nowhere that Benjamin Franklin’s famous phrase, ‘remember that time is money’, is more true - after all it is the city that never sleeps. In New York, doing nothing is a clear sign of being unproductive and indicates that you are wasting your time. For many New Yorkers a loss of structure and lack of time-keeping can lead to a feeling that they have lost their sense of purpose in life.

Compare this with Mexico where they have a saying ‘dar tiempo al tiempo’ or ‘give time to time’. Mexicans find the idea of ‘wasting time’ quite incomprehensible as if you are not doing one thing then by definition you must be doing something else - even if that is nothing more than relaxing with a friend. Levine notes that both the New Yorkers and Mexicans agree that ‘time is our most valuable commodity’, but that Mexicans say this is exactly the reason that it should not be impartially divided into inorganic monetary units.

Travelling eastwards, monks over in Burma have no need for alarm clocks or snooze buttons, they know it is time to get up when ‘there is light enough to see the veins in their hand’. Meanwhile, Kelantese peasants living on the Malay Peninsula have a unique coconut clock-timer that is traditionally used in sporting competitions. Levine writes, “This clock consists of a half coconut shell with a small hole in its center that sits in a pail of water. Intervals are measured by the time it takes the shell to fill with water and then sink - usually about three to five minutes. The Kelantese recognise that the clock is inexact, but they choose it over the wristwatches they own.

Over in Barundi, India, where the majority of the population are subsistence farmers, natural events entirely dictate the temporal structure of life, and time is tracked according to the passing of the seasons. As Levine relates, “[In Barundi] they set their appointment for the time when the cows are going to drink in the stream. Precision is difficult and mostly irrelevant because it is hard to know exactly at what time people will be leading the cows out in the first place.

One of the most delightful interpretations of time we have heard about is by natives of the Andamanese tribe, who live in the southeastern corner of the Bay of Benegal on the Andaman Islands. According to Levine, they have constructed a complex annual calendar built around the sequence of dominant smells of trees and flowers in their environment. So instead of living by a calendar the Andamanese tribe ‘simply smell the odours outside their door’.

Perhaps the most exotic temporal fingerprint of all is found in the Amazon Rainforest, amongst the Amondawa tribe. Remarkably, this tribe experienced their first contact with
the outside world less than thirty years ago in 1986. Professor Chris Sinha, who has spent time observing the Amondawa tribe, found that they have no specific word in their language for ‘time’ nor do they determine any discrete periods of time such as a month or a year. The tribe have only divisions for day and night, and rainy and dry seasons. More perplexing still, nobody in the community has an age. Instead, they change their names to reflect their stage of life and position within the community. It is almost incomprehensible for us clock folk to imagine living our lives this way.

Turning up the cadence once more to the bustling city of Tokyo, the fiercely strong culture of hard work dictates that time should never be wasted, that speed is a virtue, and to start events or meetings precisely on time is not merely the norm, it is expected. It is also not uncommon for Japanese employees to sell their holiday time back to the company, leaving them with only a few days off in an entire year. Unsurprisingly, Japan ranked top in a study on the pace of life in 37 countries. This study found that walking speed was closely linked to a country’s productivity and economic ranking. It is clear that our experience of time is not only emotional, but physical, and that many aspects of how we live our lives are determined by the predominant interpretation of time within the society we live in.

Finally, contrast the acute punctuality of the Japanese or the Swiss with the laidback Chileans living in Santiago. You might have been invited to a party at 6pm, only to find that none of the other guests show up until 7pm, 8pm or even 9pm and as we experienced first hand while living there last year, Chilean time can take some getting used to!

Working at Maptia we have experienced both extremes of the temporal spectrum. Last autumn, while we were part of the TechStars accelerator program in Seattle, we felt the intensity of the action packed schedules and ‘do more faster’ mindset. At times it was exhilarating, at others exhausting.

In stark comparison, this year we have found it refreshing to experience the much slower pace of life here in the little fishing village of Taghazout, Morocco, where our startup is now based. The locals here seem to have won a temporal lottery. In radical contrast to the frantic ‘time equals money’ culture found in many westernised cities, they give the distinct impression that they have all the time in the world. No one is ever seen running to catch a bus, or to make it to a meeting on time, and we are sometimes invited to share spontaneous mint tea with a friendly local family or stopped in the street for a meandering conversation about nothing of particular importance. Although we still work with intensity and have a tendency to burn the candle at both ends, being in a place where those around us are not constantly fighting the onslaught of time cannot help but recalibrate our internal metronomes to a more measured and sustainable pace.

Metaphors of Time

All around the world the metaphors we apply to time have come to define the texture and quality of our existence. Living a fast-paced, hyper-productive way of life cannot be said to be any better or worse than a more relaxed, melodic and thoughtful existence - it’s just different, and different cultures have evolved to value different things. It is, however, a fascinating exercise to observe the pace of your own internal metronome and to gain an awareness of the diverse relationships with time that exist in different places around the world. So the next time you change time zone or are readjusting your clocks to go back or forwards an hour - take a moment to imagine how different your life would be without them.
“Time is the truest form of wealth. And the beauty is, we are all born equally rich in time.
-- Rolf Potts