

# On Habit

*Alain de Botton*

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## *Points of Access—Pre-Reading*

1. Why do you think people go away on vacation? Write down five reasons that you can think of. What are you able to do, and to see, on vacation that it is impossible to do at home?
  2. What can cause you to act differently from the way you normally act? Do you think that your physical environment causes you to act in certain ways? Can changing your physical environment cause changes in your behavior? Can you change your behavior without changing your physical environment, or is it often too difficult to do so?
  3. Look at some familiar object in your room. Try to write half a page describing it. Think of this description as trying to paint the object with words. Do you notice things about it that you had not before? What makes this experience different from the way you usually experience this object? Has your attitude towards the object changed after looking at it in so much detail?
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1.

I returned to London from Barbados to find that the city had stubbornly refused to change. I had seen azure skies and giant sea anemones, I had slept in a raffia bungalow and eaten a kingfish, I had swum beside baby turtles and read in the shade of coconut trees. But the home town was unimpressed. It was still raining. The park was still a pond, and the skies funereal. When we are in a good mood and it is sunny, it is tempting to impute a connection between what happens inside and outside of us, but the appearance of London on my return was a reminder of the indifference of the world to any of the events unfolding in the lives of its inhabitants. I felt despair to be home. I felt there could be few worse places on earth than the one I had been fated to spend my existence in.

2.

The sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room.

Pascal, *Pensées*, 136

3.

From 1799 to 1804, Alexander von Humboldt undertook a journey around South America, later entitling the account of what he had seen *Journey to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent*.

Nine years earlier, in the spring of 1790, a twenty-seven-year-old Frenchman, Xavier de Maistre, undertook a journey around his bedroom, later entitling the account of what he had seen *Journey around My Bedroom*. Gratified by his experiences, in 1798, De Maistre undertook a second journey. This time, he travelled by night and ventured out as far as the window-ledge, later entitling his account *Nocturnal Expedition around My Bedroom*.

Two approaches to travel: *Journey to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent*, *Journey around My Bedroom*. The first required ten mules, thirty pieces of luggage, four interpreters, a chronometer, a sextant, two telescopes, a Borda theodolite, a barometer, a compass, a hygrometer, letters of introduction from the King of Spain and a gun. The second, a pair of pink and blue cotton pyjamas.

Xavier de Maistre was born in 1763 in the picturesque town of Chambéry at the foot of the French Alps. He was of an intense, romantic nature, was fond of reading, especially Montaigne, Pascal and Rousseau, and of paintings, especially Dutch and French domestic scenes. At the age of twenty-three, De Maistre became fascinated by aeronautics. Etienne Montgolfier had, three years before, achieved international renown by constructing a balloon that flew for eight minutes above the royal palace at Versailles, bearing as passengers a sheep called Montauciel (Climb-to-the-sky), a duck and a rooster. De Maistre and a friend fashioned a pair of giant wings out of paper and wire and planned to fly to America. They did not succeed. Two years later De Maistre secured himself a place in a hot air balloon and spent a few moments floating above Chambéry before the machine crashed into a pine forest.

Then in 1790, while he was living in a modest room at the top of an apartment building in Turin, De Maistre pioneered a mode of travel that was to make his name: room-travel.

Introducing *Journey around My Bedroom*, Xavier's brother, the political theorist Joseph de Maistre, emphasized that it was not Xavier's intention to cast aspersions on the heroic

deeds of the great travellers of the past: 'Magellan, Drake, Anson and Cook'. Magellan had discovered a western route to the Spice Islands around the southern tip of South America, Drake had circumnavigated the globe, Anson had produced accurate sea charts of the Philippines, and Cook had confirmed the existence of a southern continent. 'They were no doubt remarkable men,' wrote Joseph; it was just that his brother had discovered a way of travelling that might be infinitely more practical for those neither as brave nor as wealthy as they.

'Millions of people who, before me, had never dared to travel, others who had not been able to travel and still more who had not even thought of travelling will now be able to follow my example,' explained Xavier as he prepared for his journey. 'The most indolent beings won't have any more reason to hesitate before setting off to find pleasures that will cost them neither money nor effort.' He particularly recommended room-travel to the poor and to those afraid of storms, robberies and high cliffs.

#### 4.

Unfortunately, De Maistre's own pioneering journey, rather like his flying machine, did not fly very far.

The story begins well. De Maistre locks his door and changes into his pink and blue pyjamas. Without the need for luggage, he travels to the sofa, the largest piece of furniture in the room. His journey having shaken him from his usual lethargy, he looks at it through fresh eyes and rediscovers some of its qualities. He admires the elegance of its feet and remembers the pleasant hours he has spent cradled in its cushions, dreaming of love and advancement in his career. From his sofa, De Maistre spies his bed. Once again, from a traveller's vantage point, he learns to appreciate this complex piece of furniture. He feels grateful for the nights he has spent in it and takes pride that his sheets almost match his pyjamas. 'I advise every man who can to get himself pink and white bedlinen,' he writes, for these are colours to induce calm and pleasant reveries in the fragile sleeper.

But thereafter De Maistre may be accused of losing sight of the overall purpose of his endeavour. He becomes mired in long and wearing digressions about his dog, Rosinne, his sweetheart, Jenny, and his faithful servant, Joannetti. Travellers in search of a specific report on room-travel risk closing *Journey around My Bedroom* feeling a little betrayed.

And yet De Maistre's work springs from a profound and suggestive insight that the pleasure we derive from journeys is perhaps dependent more on the mindset with which we travel than on the destination we travel to. If only we could apply a travelling

mindset to our own locales, we might find these places becoming no less interesting than the high mountain passes and butterfly-filled jungles of Humboldt's South America.

What, then, is a travelling mindset? Receptivity might be said to be its chief characteristic. We approach new places with humility. We carry with us no rigid ideas about what is interesting. We irritate locals because we stand on traffic islands and in narrow streets and admire what they take to be strange small details. We risk getting run over because we are intrigued by the roof of a government building or an inscription on a wall. We find a supermarket or hairdresser's unusually fascinating. We dwell at length on the layout of a menu or the clothes of the presenters on the evening news. We are alive to the layers of history beneath the present and take notes and photographs.

Home, on the other hand, finds us more settled in our expectations. We feel assured that we have discovered everything interesting about a neighbourhood, primarily by virtue of having lived there a long time. It seems inconceivable that there could be anything new to find in a place which we have been living in for a decade or more. We have become habituated and therefore blind.

De Maistre tried to shake us from our passivity. In his second volume of room-travel, *Nocturnal Expedition around My Bedroom*, he went to his window and looked up at the night sky. Its beauty made him frustrated that such ordinary scenes were not more generally appreciated: 'How few people are right now taking delight in this sublime spectacle which the sky lays on uselessly for dozing humanity! What would it cost those who are out for a walk or crowding out of the theatre, to look up for a moment and admire the brilliant constellations which gleam above their heads?' The reason they weren't looking was that they had never done so before. They had fallen into the habit of considering their universe to be boring—and it had duly fallen into line with their expectations.

5.

I attempted to travel around my bedroom, but it was so small, with barely enough space for a bed, that I concluded that the De Maistrean message might prove more rewarding if it was applied to the neighbourhood as a whole.

So on a clear March day, at around three in the afternoon, several weeks after my return home from Barbados, I set out on a De Maistrean journey around Hammersmith.

It felt peculiar to be outside in the middle of the day with no particular goal in mind. A woman and two small blond children were walking along the main road, which was lined with a variety of shops and restaurants. A double-decker bus had stopped to pick up passengers opposite a small park. A giant billboard was advertising gravy. I walked

along this particular road almost every day to reach my Underground station and was unused to considering it as anything other than a means to my end. Information that assisted me in my goal attracted my attention, what did not was judged irrelevant. I was therefore sensitive to the number of people on the pavement, for they might interrupt my path, whereas their faces and expressions were invisible to me, as invisible as the shapes of the buildings or the activity in the shops.

It had not always been thus. When I had first moved to the area, my attention had been less jealously focused. I had at that time not settled so firmly on the goal of reaching the Underground quickly.

On entering a new space, our sensitivity is directed towards a number of elements, which we gradually reduce in line with the function we find for the space. Of the 4,000 things there might be to see and reflect on in a street, we end up actively aware of only a few: the number of humans in our path, the amount of traffic and the likelihood of rain. A bus, which we might at first have viewed aesthetically or mechanically or as a springboard to thoughts about communities within cities, becomes simply a box to move us as rapidly as possible across an area which might as well not exist, so unconnected is it to our primary goal, outside of which all is darkness, all is invisible.

I had imposed a grid of interests on the street, which left no space for blond children and gravy adverts and paving stones and the colours of shop fronts and the expressions of businesspeople and pensioners. The power of my primary goal had drained me of the will to reflect on the layout of the park or on the unusual mixture of Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian architecture along a single block. My walks along the street had been excised of any attentiveness to beauty, of any associative thoughts, any sense of wonder or gratitude, any philosophical digressions sparked by visual elements. And in its place, there was simply an insistent call to reach the Underground posthaste.

However, following De Maistre, I tried to reverse the process of habituation, to disassociate my surroundings from the uses I had found for them until then. I forced myself to obey a peculiar kind of mental command: to look around me as though I had never been in this place before. And slowly, my travels began to bear fruit.

Under the command to consider everything as of potential interest, objects released latent layers of value. A row of shops which I had known as one large, undifferentiated reddish block acquired an architectural identity. There were Georgian pillars around one flower shop, and late Victorian Gothic-style gargoyles on top of the butcher's. A restaurant became filled with diners rather than shapes. In a glass-fronted office block, I noticed some people gesticulating in a boardroom on the first floor. Someone was drawing a pie chart on an overhead projector. At the same time, just across the road from the office,

a man was pouring out new slabs of concrete for the pavement and carefully shaping their corners. I got on a bus and, rather than slipping at once into private concerns, tried to connect imaginatively with other passengers. I could hear a conversation in the row ahead of me. Someone in an office somewhere, a person quite high up in the hierarchy apparently, didn't understand. They complained of how inefficient others were, but never reflected on what they might have been doing to increase that inefficiency. I thought of the multiplicity of lives going on at the same time at different levels in a city. I thought of the similarities of complaints—always selfishness, always blindness—and the old psychological truth that what we complain of in others, others will complain of in us.

The neighbourhood did not just acquire people and defined buildings, it also began to collect ideas. I reflected on the new wealth that was spreading into the areas. I tried to think why I liked railway arches so much, and why the motorway that cut across the skyline.

It seemed an advantage to be travelling alone. Our responses to the world are crucially moulded by whom we are with, we temper our curiosity to fit in with the expectations of others. They may have a particular vision of who we are and hence subtly prevent certain sides of us from emerging: 'I hadn't thought of you as someone who was interested in flyovers,' they might intimidatingly suggest. Being closely observed by a companion can inhibit us from observing others, we become taken up with adjusting ourselves to the companion's questions and remarks, we have to make ourselves seem more normal than is good for our curiosity. But I had no such concerns, alone in Hammersmith in mid-afternoon. I had the freedom to act a little weirdly. I sketched the window of a hardware shop and word-painted the flyover.

## 6.

De Maistre was not only a room-traveller. He was also a great traveller in the classic sense. He journeyed to Italy and Russia, he spent a winter with the royalist armies in the Alps and fought a Russian campaign in the Caucasus.

In an autobiographical note written in 1801 in South America, Alexander von Humboldt had written of his motives for travelling: 'I was spurred on by an uncertain longing to be transported from a boring daily life to a marvellous world.' It was this dichotomy, 'boring daily life' pitted against 'marvellous world', that De Maistre had tried to redraw with greater subtlety. He would not have told Humboldt that South America was dull, he would merely have urged him to consider that his native Berlin might have something to offer too.

Eight decades later, Nietzsche, who had read and admired De Maistre (and spent much time in his room), picked up on the thought:

When we observe how some people know how to manage their experiences—their insignificant, everyday experiences—so that they become an arable soil that bears fruit three times a year, while others—and how many there are!—are driven through surging waves of destiny, the most multifarious currents of the times and the nations, and yet always remain on top, bobbing like a cork, then we are in the end tempted to divide mankind into a minority (a minimality) of those who know how to make much of little, and a majority of those who know how to make little of much.

We meet people who have crossed deserts, floated on icecaps and cut their way through jungles—and yet in whose souls we would search in vain for evidence of what they have witnessed. Dressed in pink and blue pyjamas, satisfied within the confines of his own bedroom, Xavier de Maistre was gently nudging us to try, before taking off for distant hemispheres, to notice what we have already seen.

### *Points of Engagement—Reading Comprehension*

1. On page 63 de Botton claims that he had imposed a “grid of interests” on the suburb, Hammersmith, where he lives. Explain, in your own words, what it means to impose a grid of interests on something. Is it possible that such a view of the world could be positive, or is it only ever negative way, as de Botton sees it?
2. In the first paragraph of his essay, de Botton expresses a feeling of discontent, of malaise (if you don’t know what this word means, look it up). By the end of the essay, he says something quite different: he seems to be cured of his restlessness, and viewing his world in quite a different way. How do you think he cured himself? Give two quotations from the essay, and explain what you think they show.
3. Give two reasons from de Botton as to why traveling around your bedroom, or around your town, is a good idea. Why is it better than embarking on a von Humboldt-style journey? Why is it not the same? Provide evidence from the text.

### *Points of Departure—Assignment Questions*

1. While de Botton discusses our reactions to physical spaces, the same thinking can be applied to our interactions with people and with ideas. Think about what may

help people, or cause people, to change their perspectives or the way they interact with the world. Is being confronted with new places, objects, or people the only way we can cause a change in our attitudes, or are there other ways? Answer this question using de Botton and one other essay by Jane Goodall, Malcom Gladwell, Zadie Smith, or Jeanette Winterson.

2. Like Alain de Botton and Xavier de Maistre in "On Habit," the little girl Olivia in Adam Gopnik's "Bumping into Mr. Ravioli" pays a lot of attention to, and is deeply affected by, aspects of her environment. Is it ever possible to notice too much? To be too sensitive and reactive to the world around us? What are the consequences if we are? Can stimulation from your environment influence your behavior and your character in negative or distressing ways, or is it all, ultimately, to the good? Propose your own answers to these questions in conversation with the essays by de Botton and one of the following authors: Adam Gopnik, Arlie Russell Hochschild, Gregory Orr, Jeanette Winterson, or Kenji Yoshino.
  3. How does Alain de Botton's idea of what can be achieved by someone who adopts a "travelling mindset" apply either to Gregory Orr's memoir or Zadie Smith's ideas about the unique nature of those from what she calls "Dream City"? Does de Botton's essay complicate, contradict or complement the ideas in the other text? In what ways?
  4. Alison Gopnik claims that "human beings don't live in the real world" (163). With his interests in observation and perception, Alain de Botton's essay provides vivid examples of how this statement is true. Think about other authors in this reader whose experiences move between the "real" world of here and now, and a future or past world that doesn't exist in the present. In these essays, what is the relationship between imagining these other "possible worlds," and creating new, or re-creating, real worlds in which they live? Is there a difference, in the end? If so, what is it? Use the ideas and terms in Alison Gopnik and Alain de Botton to shed light on the life experiences described by Gregory Orr or Zadie Smith.
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