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TRAVEL SHORTS

Enjoying the charms of street food

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When the prospect of going to Australia recently came up, one of my first thoughts was about meat pies.

I discovered them on my first visit in 1999. They're related to English pies, like steak and kidney, but they come from the non-dysfunctional side of the family. For one thing, they don't contain kidneys. Also, the meat is lean and tasty (I met a vegetarian in Sydney who raved about Australian beef) and the rich salty gravy marvelously moistens the warm doughy crust. Meat pies sit high on my all-star roster of international street foods.

Everybody's writing these days about ways to keep the costs of travel down: renting bicycles, staying in hostels, working as mimes. But nobody mentions eating street food. A story on France will claim that you can save on lunch by having a picnic. A picnic! You need time, money, utensils for a picnic! Buy a tzatziki-dripping gyro from a guy in a window and you're golden -- with enough change to go and have a crepe for dessert.

I got my first taste of foreign street food in Paris. I had arrived at the Gare du Nord and set off on foot down a sun-dappled boulevard. (Saving money and imbibing ambience.) After about 10 minutes I came to a stand selling hot dogs. I was a college student and an unadventurous eater. The man took a hunk of baguette and impaled it on a rounded spike. He lathered the inside of the bread with Dijon mustard. Then he inserted the steaming sausage. I took a bite and suddenly all the reports of French culture, sophistication, superiority made sense. For they had taken a cottony childhood staple and turned it into a crusty, tongue-tingling, eye-opening masterpiece.

It filled me with excitement (if they can do this with a humble wiener, what other gustatory pleasures await?) but also disheartenment, as I wondered if I could ever eat an American hot dog again.

On subsequent visits to the City of Light Fare, I graduated to more exotic takeaways. The narrow streets of the Latin Quarter blazed with Greek restaurants where uncooked kebabs slept in vast, colorful rows. (Even immigrants acquired the locals' sense of aesthetics.) It wasn't done to walk down the street holding a saber, but you could get a gyro, the shards of spiced lamb always stuffed, like a geographic indicator, into French bread.



This is the other thing about street food: It's not only cheap and delicious, it's almost always illuminating about the place. Even when it's an import.

One of my favorite street foods is bratwurst, which in Germany is presented with both greasy ends sticking out of a small roll that serves primarily as an edible napkin. Again, disgracing its American counterpart, which is often buried in a fluffy, oversized mitt.

But there comes a time when you tire of sausage, even in Berlin. A few years ago, on my third or fourth day there, I found a Middle Eastern place and ordered a shawarma. Shawarma is one of those rare foods that is as enjoyable to eat as it is to say. I had my first one in Jerusalem in 1992, and for all its history and religious significance, it will always be for me the city of shawarma.

Anyway, in Berlin I took my stuffed pita and saw that, topping the shaved meat, the sliced tomato, the dollop of tahini, sat a bed of shredded red cabbage. It was like a gentle reminder: You may have been thinking Ben Yehuda Street, pal, but now you're in Germany.

Sunny lands tend to have better street food than overcast ones, though the latter improve when they attract people from the former. The last time I was in London I walked around munching on papadum.

A small part of the pollution in Mexico City comes from grill smoke that floats a nearly irresistible aroma of corn tortillas, though even the locals graze with caution, going only to the vendors they know and trust.

But no place can rival Southeast Asia when it comes to street food, in large part because so much of its life, not just eating, takes place on the street. Here the portable meal becomes a sit-down feast. In Vietnam, you pull up a tiny plastic stool on the sidewalk and slurp your pho -- beef noodle soup confettied with herbs. You can travel through Malaysia sampling excellent Malaysian, Chinese, Peranakan (Chinese-Malaysian) and Indian cuisine without ever going indoors. Singapore is famously furnished with a staggering variety of health department-inspected food stalls.

But even in less-antiseptic cities, indigestion is often less a concern than the feeling of melancholy I got from my French hot dog. In Turin a few years ago, on the day before my departure, I searched for the perfect place to have my last lunch. It was a window facing onto an alley. Rectangular trays of pizza were visible through the glass. I pointed to the perfectly red one and received a generous divot of ambrosial crust and heavenly sauce. I ate it slowly, wondering how long it would be before I had such a fine pizza again (in other words, how long it would be until my next trip to Italy). Then I walked a few steps, like a condemned man, and bought a gelato.

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