



GOING LOCAL

The self-justification for vertical travel

I WAS HALFWAY OVER THE ATLANTIC in November 2009 when I realized that my one-year plan—bracketing stays in a trifecta of North American mountain towns with three international journeys—made zero sense. I blame Steve, a fellow traveler whose meddlesome, questioning attitude tipped the scales.

We hadn't left the ground when he asked, "Where you from?"

My mouth was cottony from the Ambien I'd swallowed to anesthetize myself for this, my fifth intercontinental trip in seven months. Technically, we were in the city I'd grown up in—"Minneapolis," I said.

"Me too," Steve replied. "Where you headed?" I told him Ethiopia.

"Me too!" Steve said, his left eyebrow rising excitedly. I furrowed my brow. We were about to spend 23 hours on the same flights—too long to maintain a lie. "OK," I said, "I'm actually from Boulder."

If I'd left it at that, I likely would have had my headphones back on before takeoff. But I instead told Steve my plan—I'd rented my house in Boulder and would spend December in Montana, the rest of the winter in New Hampshire, and the time between testing out the San Juans.

For Steve, Ethiopia was his only trip in 14 months. He worked for an oil company, drove a Prius or biked to work, and had a garden. With every new tidbit he shared, I mentioned another place I'd recently visited. Soon Steve looked at me sideways—extra sideways, not just plane sideways. I salvaged my dignity the best way I knew how.

"I'm a climber," I said, as Steve grabbed an in-flight mag. "We do this."

IN THE PAST YEAR, I've paid rent in five places in four states, climbed in another 10 states, deep-water-soloed in Mallorca, established new routes in Namibia, and belayed my first 5.15, in Spain. I travel so much my friends ask me where I'm going next instead of saying hello.

Fortunately, I can justify this all by saying I'm a climber. Or, I've tried to. Since the 1960s, travel and exploration have been the soul of our sport. In these last 50 years, the world opened up politically, travel became cheaper and more accessible (thanks, in part, to commercial aviation), people had more disposable income, and climbers had the gear, the skills, and the singular will to go new places. Suddenly Alaska, Thailand, Patagonia, Australia, and Iceland were all possible. The sport exploded, because here's the thing about climbers: we don't stay home for long.

Perhaps we're vagabonds because we've become accustomed to the inhospitable life: any time you climb, you go where humans do not live—the top of a snowy Andean peak, the middle of a wall in Mali, or the fourth move on a backyard boulder problem. Add to that the lure of exploration and our compulsive desire to swap tales, and you create a perpetual travel-motion machine.

I've tried to fight it: for seven years in my 20s, I had a home in Estes Park, Colorado. But every time I picked up a mag, saw a slideshow, or ran into a friend with a forearm newly lacerated by some foreign pricker plant, I wanted to leave. We climbers need to prove ourselves against the unknown, a complex mix of ego and desire fed by our community and industry. (Take a look at this magazine—how many stories present some far-off destination of desire?) Meanwhile, the climbing world also boasts countercultural roots: minimalism, environmentalism, activism. ...So where does that leave travel?

Take my May 2009 trip to Namibia. Five people flew 9,488 miles each for a 95,000-mile round-trip total. We rented two 4WD trucks and drove 1,200 miles at 13 MPG—our carbon footprint from travel alone was 57.8 tons. Then we came home and processed images, film, and words on plastic boxes that consume 879 megawatts/hour. And that's not even counting energy used to produce our gear: a quadruple set of cams, nuts, pins, bolts, tents, harnesses, and 2,600 feet of rope. Add it up and climbing—especially expedition climbing—seems like the least environmental activity in the world (and I'm not even mentioning the bushes and trees we had to rip out of the cracks). Even at a conservative estimate, a grand total of 85 tons of CO₂ costs \$1,200 in Kenyan reforestation projects to offset, as well as extreme mental gymnastics to justify the emissions in the first place.

I'M NOT A CLIMBER WHO LIVES ON THE ROAD. It's more like I have a home and road-trip in spurts. If I were really a road warrior, I'd be like my friend Kate Rutherford. In Namibia this past spring, after eight days of 100°-plus F heat sans shower, I offered her a washcloth and soap.

"I gave that up—seemed like too much work," she said.

Kate has also given up the sink in the Sprinter van she shares with her boyfriend, Mikey, saying it's easier to wash their dishes in a bin outside. Listening to her "living with less" strategies, I felt an uncomfortable combination of envy and pity. If Kate's choices made her the ultimate lightweight travel-alpinist, my soap and washcloth made me the person sieging Everest with 50 Sherpas and 99 of my closest friends.

Back in Boulder, I thought about Kate when I slotted my electric mixer into my van's fridge, so I could whip egg whites on the road. Just then, a non-climber neighbor, Mark, peeked in. I self-consciously saw what Mark must have seen: the mixer, French press, ropes and screws, 30 hangers (for clothes), four pairs of ice boots, three pairs of skis, a poodle bed, a small Matterhorn of down, climbing packs, bolt kit. ...

"Wow, look at all that stuff," he said. "It's so cool."

I finished packing, drove to Montana, and got on the plane (via Minneapolis) to Africa.

I FINISHED MY FIRST IN-FLIGHT MOVIE still above the States. The roar of the plane's engines filled my head; 200 video screens flickered above. Of all my trans-Atlantic trips this year, this was the first not for climbing. Ambien-induced loose math floated in my head. About 3,500 miles each way, 21.3 total tons of carbon = 21 trees in Kenya; rent paid in North Conway, Jackson Hole, Bozeman, and Boulder; trips to Salt Lake, Red Rock, Joshua Tree, Ouray, Moab, Lake Nipigon, Banff, Ventura; 14,545 miles of driving in a 20 MPG van. ...

Lately, I've wondered what would happen if I just stayed put. There's a man in NYC—Colin Beavan, aka No Impact Man—who, with his wife, kid, and dog, spent a year using only local items and goods, so his net waste output was zero. *Could I also do this?* I wondered.

It turns out that a year of dosing yourself with in-flight Ambien makes you *stop* sleeping on planes. I continued to toss and turn in a somewhat lucid state, envisioning a stay-at-home life in Boulder. I could take ceramic and hip-hop classes on Monday nights, join the volleyball league, wash and dry my cams, have a garden, and bring only fresh vegetables on homemade bread with yogurt cheese to the crags (within biking distance). Climbing would localize to a 15-mile radius, and I would inevitably have to 1) face all the climbs that I avoid, 2) keep becoming a better climber to try something new, and 3) learn how to get inspired via perspective instead of adventure. This plan didn't sound too bad, not to mention the benefit to the planet. With the world's resources ever dwindling, it might become mandatory, anyway.

Take Namibia:
our carbon footprint from travel
alone was 57.8 tons. What
would happen if I just stayed home?

BY THE TIME WE LANDED in Addis Ababa, I was ready to go home and start plowing a field. But because I'd come all this way—not to climb, as per a trip in 2007, but instead to write a book on coffee—I decided to delay my new, homebody plan. Besides, the journey home would burn the same amount of carbon no matter when I took it. As we waited to de-plane, Steve suddenly leaned over.

"Hey," he said. "What about Salt Lake City?"

"Salt Lake?"

He pointed to the in-flight mag. "Looks like they have rocks there—that's what you're looking for, right?"

Steve's aisle started moving first, and I never saw him again. ☞



Senior Contributing Editor Majka Burhardt counts the chances high that she'll emerge from her Ethiopian stay as a coffee farmer... or coffee-farming climber.



SCARPA
NO PLACE TOO FARR

UPSIDE DOWN,
RIGHT SIDE UP,
SAME DIFFERENCE.

THE FEROCIE CLIMBING SHOE