

Turning Business Travel into an Adventure

Go off the beaten path on your next trip, and enjoy the experience.

It was one of the most amazing sunrises I have ever seen: a mosaic of orange, crimson and dark yellow spread wide, tinting the indigo water below while silhouetting several of Lake Superior's famed Apostle Islands. I had slept quite well the night before, thanks to a quiet hotel and a great dinner preceded by a 60-minute run along the tree-lined bluffs that doubled as a shoreline.

As I stepped outside the door to my room that morning and took in the amazing scene, I thought to myself, "Isn't business travel awesome?"

In truth, traveling for business can be a drag. Everyone has at least one air-travel nightmare story, and some of us have dozens. Nights spent in terminals, missed commitments, barely making the standby list and then being stuffed in the window seat of the back row, next to someone who fits perfectly into his seat plus half of ours, with the door to the well-used bathroom only feet away.

Snowstorms, icy roads and the inconsiderate person in the next hotel room who apparently doesn't realize that, while he sleeps best with infomercials blasting in the background, perhaps the rest of us do not.

Frequent flyer miles. Cookie-cutter hotel chains with rooms that look the same in New Jersey as they do in New Mexico, each with a matching restaurant chain next door that guarantees to serve my chicken wings or burger exactly the same way no matter in which state in the union we are.

Is this what life is supposed to be?

Several years ago, someone who didn't travel much suggested that I was lucky to be able to visit so many great places while traveling on business.

These finds create such a unique, albeit unconventional, way to spend a business trip, that I have made it a habit of seeking them out.

I thought about this comment, and it occurred to me that, while I had seen a lot of the world, for the most part, my travel was through a string of airports, restaurants and hotels that all looked and felt the same.

I used to travel regularly with one of our salespeople,

Bill. While most of our team would take in dinner at a restaurant whose name begins with that of a red fruit, a hot pepper or a bison, Bill refused to eat in chain restaurants. Instead, he seemed to know every single back-alley, hole-in-the-wall pub, grill and supper club in his four-state territory. The servers were often familiar with him, too, and he knew the best items on every menu.

Dining with Bill wasn't always culinary nirvana. For example, the mole sauce at an off-the-beaten-path Mexican restaurant in Indiana left my stomach knotted for the next day

and a half. Perhaps the gas station not far from I-65 really did serve the "best fried chicken gizzards you've ever had." I will never know.

Regardless, traveling with him always made life more adventurous, and, with very few exceptions, more enjoyable. His habits got me thinking about what other aspects of my business life had become a traveling version of the movie "Groundhog Day:" life repeating itself day in and day out with little variation. With Bill as my inspiration, and owing credit to the person I mentioned earlier who was a bit envious of my travel, I adopted a new approach. Not every time, mind you, but often now, I turn business travel into an adventure.

When traveling by car, as I often do, I used to rush back home as fast as I could to cross a workout off my list and get on with the evening. Now, I put a mountain bike in the back of my truck. What difference does it make if I arrive home by 6 and ride a trainer in my basement for 90 minutes, or if I stop off three hours from home and take in some single track? Plenty, if I want to live a life that consists of more than just sitting on a stationary bike.

I love it when I can double-up on travel time, taking a break on a business trip and taking in a point of interest I have always wanted to see, or driving to a vacation destination and visiting a few business contacts along the way. Instead of racking up a free night for every 10 in a look-alike hotel chain, I often visit a website like Hotwire and take a chance on a like-priced three- or four-star hotel. I have stayed in some amazing places that I never would have tried or could have afforded otherwise.

Another great approach is to find a one-of-a-kind hotel, validate its quality by checking the reviews on a travel site, and enjoy the unique ambiance. I scored not long ago on a sweet hipster-style hotel owned by Justin Vernon, the musician behind the band Bon Iver. No more expensive than a chain hotel, but way cooler. These finds create such a unique, albeit unconventional, way to spend a business trip, that I have made it a habit of seeking them out.

Which is how I found myself in a small town 20 minutes out of my way, far enough off the main thoroughfare that the automatons with their airline statuses named for precious metals and rare gemstones were nowhere to be found. Just me, on a crisp fall morning, at a locale I have never before visited, in a no-name one-off hotel overlooking Lake Superior, taking in a sunrise among the most incredible I have ever seen.

Isn't business travel awesome? ■■■



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