

travel essentials

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SPECIAL EDITION: EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH WADE DAVIS

An anthropological view of travel and tourism

The scientist and traveler upon whose adventurous spirit the character of Indiana Jones was loosely based, National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence Wade Davis views modern tourism through the specific lens of cultural anthropology. Throughout his career as an anthropologist and ethnobotanist, Davis has traveled to some of the most remote destinations on the planet and lived among tribal peoples whose lives are highly integrated with their indigenous ecosystems. Davis is familiar with the budget traveler and the high-end adventurer alike, not only through his travels, but also from a tour supplier perspective; he is a professional white-water rafting guide, owns a commercial fishing lodge in northern British Columbia, has worked as a mountain guide, and lectures on Lindblad cruise ships as well as for National Geographic private jet tours. Currently at work on a four-hour television series about culture around the world, Davis spoke to the editor of *Courier* from his home in Washington, D.C.

Photos by WADE DAVIS

COURIER: You study the diversity of people around the world, and yet you also spend a great deal of your time living and working in the United States. Given your global perspective, what is your view of North American culture?

DAVIS: All cultures are fiercely ethnocentric and loyal to their own interpretation of reality, including our own. But if you were a Martian anthropologist and you came to America, you'd discover some curious data. Here is a place where people revere marriage, but half the marriages end in divorce. They say they love their elders, but only six percent of American homes have elders beneath the same roof as their grandchildren. They say they love their kids, but embrace the slogan "24/7," implying the total dedication to the workplace at the expense of family, and then wonder why the average American youth at the age of 18 has spent two full years passively watching television. And if you add to that an economic system of "wealth generation" that by any definition compromises the fundamental biological support systems of the planet, you see that we're many wonderful things, but the paragon of humanity's potential we're not.

COURIER: How does this perspective relate to your role at the National Geographic and your current television series project?

DAVIS: Fundamentally I am an anthropologist and my mission at the National Geographic is to draw attention to the erosion of cultural diversity around the planet and to celebrate one of the key revelations of anthropology: the idea



that other peoples of the world are not failed attempts at modernity, but unique expressions of human imagination, and that collectively the myriad cultures of the world make up the human repertoire for dealing with the challenges that confront us in ensuing millennia.

The whole idea of the project is to take a very long view and recognize that while the human species has been around for a couple hundred thousand years, modern, industrial society as we know it is scarcely 300 years old. So that shallow history shouldn't suggest to any of us that we have all the answers for all the challenges that will confront us in the coming years. There's a kind of a conceit in the west that while we've been indulging in technological wizardry, these other peoples of the world have been



somehow intellectually idle — and nothing could be further from the truth. Biologists have finally proven to be true what philosophers have always dreamed to be true, which is that we're all cut from the same genetic cloth; every human population shares the same raw intellectual capacity and the same mental acuity, regardless of whether that genius is placed in technological innovation as it is in the west, or by contrast in the deserts of Australia among the aboriginal people unraveling the complex threads of memory inherent in a myth, or in the high mountains of Tibet in the pursuit of the 2,000-year-old science of the mind that is Buddhism. These are matters of choice and cultural orientation, and against the backdrop of any attempt to tell those stories of culture is the harsh realization that culture is being absorbed or eliminated or assimilated at a tremendous rate.

COURIER: Can you offer an example of how this assimilation is occurring?

DAVIS: I think the key figure that always takes the breath away is the fact that when most of us were born there

were 6,000 languages spoken on earth. Now a language isn't just a body of vocabulary or a set of grammatical rules, it's a flash of human spirit; it's a vehicle through which the soul of each particular culture comes into the world. Every language is like an old growth forest of the mind or a watershed of thought, an ecosystem of spiritual and social possibilities. Of those 6,000 languages, fully half aren't being taught to children in schools, which means that they are effectively already dead. Roughly every two weeks some elder dies somewhere and carries with them to the grave the last syllables of an ancient tongue. That is the hidden backdrop of our age.

COURIER: Is the goal of cultural anthropology to preserve such elements of culture intact?

DAVIS: The goal, of course, is not to freeze people in time or to create some zoological park or rain forest park of the mind; the goal isn't to keep people from having access to the genius of modernity. On the contrary, it's to ensure that all peoples on the earth have access to that genius and the products of that genius *without that engagement*



AD-Chicago the Musical



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having to imply the death of their ethnicity. The goal is to find a way to live in a truly multicultural world that’s pluralistic and in which all the different facets of the human imagination find a way to become manifest, because these facets are indeed the repertoire with which we’ll confront the ensuing millennia.

COURIER: Now that you have set the anthropological stage for our audience, what is the view of travel that emerges from your perspective on culture?

DAVIS: I’ve always felt that true travel only occurs when you have a one-way ticket, no itinerary, no plans as to what you are going to do, and no certainty of when you are going to come back. That, to me, is the open-ended nature of travel. And that’s the magic of travel. But that doesn’t exist anymore. I only managed to do that once when I was 19 or 20 and I set off for South America and ended up staying 15 months.

COURIER: From reading about your travels in your book “One River,” it sounds to me like what you experienced while living among indigenous tribes in South America and studying their use of plants has a bit of the flavor of what today is known as ecotourism. What is your view of this type of travel?

DAVIS: I think that in principle, the idea of ecotourism, which is to have minimal impact — to go to celebrate natural wonders as opposed to commercial extravaganzas constructed for the industry — is a wonderful idea, and the idea of seeking knowledge through travel can only be beneficial for the world. What I find is that there is a correlation between sensitivity and difficulty of access; the harder you have to work to get to a place, the more interesting the interaction or sensitive the encounter. But I’ve always found that “ecotourism” as a term is kind of a conceit because it maintains the assumption that somehow if you travel with a backpack, polar fleece and a Nikon, as opposed to loud Bermuda shorts, a funny hat, sneakers and an old Kodak, you’re somehow a different

kind of tourist. I think that much of what ecotourism does is simply increase penetration of the hinterland, and I think ecotourism gets into serious problems in the realm of culture because it invariably then becomes a form of voyeurism. I’ve seen ecotourism operations that are set up in a competitive fashion with the goal of “contacting unknown peoples.” I think it’s extraordinarily problematic and exploitative in its essence. With that said, it’s also important to note that tourism, when practiced sensitively, can be an incredible source of empowerment for local people — and not just economically.

COURIER: What is a modern day example of this type of empowerment?

DAVIS: I think that one of the reasons there has been such a Renaissance of culture in the environment of a place like Cuzco, Peru — and a tremendously increased sense of awareness and pride in the patrimony of the country by all levels of society — is in part because Cuzco was the destination of an incredible wave of young seekers, adventurers and scholars who went there in the late



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'60s, '70s and early '80s. It was the heartland and the pulse of the ancient civilizations that drew people and the existence of the dynamic Andean culture. And I think that was a tool of empowerment for people when they realized that these foreigners who had a certain inherent status were truly interested in what they were, and because tourism was the main economy of Cuzco, this echoed throughout the entire economy and the local culture, and as a result a place like Cuzco is far more interesting place to go today than it was 30 years ago.

COURIER: How has the advent of affordable, accessible travel changed the nature of our encounters with other cultures over the past few decades?

DAVIS: There is no denying that the ease with which certain areas of the world are now reached by the global tourism industry makes it such that one gets a sense that people have not earned the right to be there. I'm not trying to be judgmental, because anthropologists are just engaged in another form of tourism in a way, but there is something about the process versus accumulation. Are you going to the pyramids to check it off a list, or are you going to the pyramids to experience the transformation process and the engagement that travel implies? This is why travel and tourism take on a very metaphysical level in a sense. The whole idea of travel is not just to go off with a one-way ticket with no fixed itinerary and no certain date of return, but more importantly you go off with the understanding that you'll come back as a different human being. As opposed to high-level commercial tourism in which the individual is, for example, parachuted into an area with the expectation that they will be able to keep their environment with them as opposed to adapting to another. Part of it is that it's very difficult to set up these encounters where 20 people parachute in from a boat on the edge of a river

in New Guinea as I've seen; it's probably less detrimental to the local people than industrial logging or mining and it does bring revenue, but it's just such an awkward scene for the most part.

One of the things I find particularly appalling is the discount backpacking tourist — from a place like North America or even Europe, where generosity is not a reflexive instinct in people — whose *raison d'être* is to find the cheapest way to get around the world. For instance, just think of the way I can turn up in any Indian village in the Amazon or the Andes and be welcomed with food even if I'm a total stranger. Or in the deserts of the Sahara, I have encountered a caravan where seven or eight men with a 150 miles to the nearest well are down to a couple of liters of water and the first thing they did upon encountering me was to kindle a twig fire and use that water to brew me tea. By so doing, they were honoring their obligation to share; the old adage in their culture is that if a person comes out of the desert to your tent, your slaughter the one goat that gives the milk that keeps your children alive rather than shame yourself by not being hospitable, because of course you never know when you'll be that person coming out of the desert. And often what you find is budget travelers who are not familiar with that kind of easy hospitality (there is no way in any American suburb you can go up to someone's door, simply knock, and be welcomed in for a meal — they'll call the police). So these budget travelers reflexively in effect take advantage of that hospitality, especially from poor people. So you'll get someone saying with great delight that they've gone all the way up the Amazon only spending a hundred bucks, and of course what they've done is they've bummed their way up the Amazon on the backs of poor people who probably couldn't really afford to feed them, but are honoring their obligation to be hospitable.

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COURIER: What can the tour operator do to prepare clients to have encounters with integrity and that honor the traditions and the ethnicity of other cultures?

DAVIS: I think it's all about how one engages, and to what extent you're prepared to educate your client as opposed to being subservient to the marketplace. If I have a tourist who is not behaving in an appropriate way, I don't hesitate to call attention to it. It's really important to encourage the questions: Why are we doing this; what's the point? Why do you go to this place? What level of engagement do you want and what level of education are you prepared to embrace? I am a big believer in study and preparation. Give people some guidance on how to show up in this other culture.

Americans are famously culturally myopic and in part, to be fair, because it's a country that was forged from people who wanted to get away from another place. So you have an indulgence of cultural myopia. Many other cultures are also like that. It's the whole question of: Do you bring your own environment of psychic, social, political and religious culture with you, or do you understand and adapt to another one?



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COURIER: Isn't part of the "ugly American" issue related to the fact that people from the United States stereotypically refuse to learn the languages of the countries they visit?

DAVIS: Yes, but America hasn't traditionally needed to learn any other ones; it's a country that has its own internal domestic market, which is the foundation of its dynamic economy, so it's not a place that had to look to other places for economic stability. But all the same, there's a brashness to many Americans when they get overseas that offends many people.

COURIER: So what would you say is the defining element that dictates whether our global era of tourism produces coattail-riding voyeurs who impose their own culture on others, or creates respectful, adaptable travelers who are sensitive to the richness of others' ethnicity?

DAVIS: In a way we're all tourists, we're all voyeurs: We're all together in this increasingly interconnected world in which people travel with such ease — not only people from the west traveling to see the "other" of the third world, but also people from different indigenous societies traveling all over the place encountering the new in this increasingly mobile world that exists both in cyberspace via the Internet, and also in real space, as people find travel to be so cheap.

I've always thought that the traits that you want when you go into a foreign place are the same traits that may be welcome in your house at Thanksgiving: a certain kind of gentleness, discretion, humility, self deprecating humor, openness — these are traits that call for a kind of quiet engagement as opposed to that clichéd American propensity to litter the world with itself. It comes down to whether people have good manners or not. And manners are universal. ■





Wade Davis

Wade Davis is an Explorer-in-Residence at the National Geographic Society. He holds degrees in anthropology and biology and received his Ph.D. in ethnobotany, all from Harvard University. Mostly through the Harvard Botanical Museum, he spent over three years in the Amazon and Andes as a plant explorer, living among fifteen indigenous groups in eight Latin American nations while making some 6,000 botanical collections. His work later took him to Haiti to investigate folk preparations implicated in the creation of zombies, an assignment that led to his writing **Passage of Darkness** (1988) and **The Serpent and the Rainbow** (1986), an international best seller which appeared in ten languages and was later released by Universal as a motion picture. His other books include **Penan: Voice for the Borneo Rain Forest** (1990), **Nomads of the Dawn** (1995), **The Clouded Leopard** (1998), **Shadows in the Sun** (1998), **Rainforest** (1998), **Light at the Edge of the World** (2002) and **One River** (1996), which was nominated for the 1997 Governor General's Literary Award for Nonfiction. His most recent book is **The Lost Amazon**, published in 2004. He is the recipient of numerous awards including the 1999 Klinger Award (Society of Economic Botany), the 2002 Lowell Thomas Medal (The Explorer's Club) and the 2002 Lannan Foundation \$125,000 prize for literary non-fiction. His more recent work has taken him to Polynesia, East Africa, Borneo, Tibet, the high Arctic, the Orinoco delta of Venezuela, the deserts of Mali and Burkina Faso and the forests of Benin and Togo. Upcoming expeditions, planned and funded, will focus on Greenland, Peru, Mongolia, Bhutan and Nepal.

A native of British Columbia, Davis has worked as a guide, park ranger and forestry engineer, and conducted ethnographic fieldwork among several indigenous societies of northern Canada. He has published 130 scientific and popular articles on subjects ranging from Haitian vodoun and Amazonian myth and religion to the global biodiversity crisis, the traditional use of psychotropic drugs, and the ethnobotany of

South American Indians. He has written for **National Geographic**, **Newsweek**, **Premiere**, **Outside**, **Omni**, **Harpers**, **Fortune**, **Men's Journal**, **Condé Nast Traveler**, **Natural History**, **Utne Reader**, **National Geographic Traveler**, **The New York Times**, **Wall Street Journal**, **Washington Post** and **The Globe and Mail**. His photographs have been widely published, and his research has been the subject of more than 600 media reports, interviews and documentaries in Europe, North and South America

and the Far East. Davis was the host and co-writer of **Earthguide**, a thirteen part television series on the environment, which aired on the Discovery Channel. Other television credits include the award winning documentaries, **Spirit of the Mask**, **Cry of the Forgotten People** and **Forests Forever**. He is currently working in collaboration with 90th Parallel Productions, Alliance Atlantis and the National Geographic on a four part series, **Light at the Edge of the World**, which will air in 2006 on the National Geographic Channel.

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