



Illustration by Jon Han



BOOKS

DON'T GIVE UP ON TOURISM. JUST DO IT BETTER.

Paige McClanahan's book, *The New Tourist*, argues for recognizing how potent travel's social force is.

By Chelsea Leu

JUNE 30, 2024, 8 AM ET

SHARE & GIFT  SAVE 

In 1956, the poet Elizabeth Bishop worried about the imprudence and absurdity of going abroad. “Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?” she writes in her

poem “Questions of Travel.” “Is it right to be watching strangers in a play / in this strangest of theatres? / What childishness is it that while there’s a breath of life / in our bodies, we are determined to rush / to see the sun the other way around?”

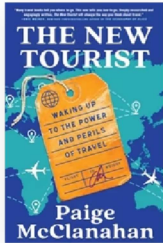
Decades later, the phrasing of these questions, and the fretful frame of mind behind them, seems to perfectly sum up a new attitude toward international travel: one of moral unease. Every summer, a litany of headlines appears about tourists behaving badly: people carving their names into the Colosseum or posing naked at sacred sites in Bali, for example. Even the ordinary business of tourism leaves much to be desired: The crowds at the Louvre make seeing the *Mona Lisa* such a brief and unsatisfying experience; foot traffic, noise, and trash slowly degrade sites famous for their natural beauty or historical significance. In the Canary Islands, the Greek island of Paros, and Oaxaca, Mexico, residents of popular destinations have protested against throngs of visitors. For many travelers, it can seem somehow *wrong*, now, to plunge blithely into another country’s culture and landscapes, subjecting locals to one’s presence for the sake of leisure, while the long-haul flights that make these trips possible emit massive amounts of greenhouse gases. Bishop’s queries are our own: Would we be doing the world a favor if we didn’t sally forth so confidently to other countries and just stayed home?

ADVERTISING

*The Atlantic*[My Account](#)[Give a Gift](#)

Amid this quagmire, the journalist Paige McClanahan’s book, *The New Tourist*, is a levelheaded defense of tourism that proposes a genuinely helpful framework for

thinking about our own voyages. We tourists—a label that includes everyone who travels abroad for work or fun—think about the practice’s pleasures all wrong, she says, and discount its potential. Many of us are used to thinking of ourselves as simple hedonists when we go on vacation, or perhaps as economic participants of the tourism industry. But we’ve largely forgotten “about the power we hold as contributors—however unwitting—to a vast and potent social force,” McClanahan writes.



The New Tourist: Waking Up to the Power and Perils of Travel

By Paige McClanahan

[Buy Book](#)

The New Tourist is dedicated to fleshing out this bird’s-eye view of tourism as a formidable phenomenon, one that we participate in every time we leave our home country—and one that we ignore at our peril. Traveling the world was once reserved for the very rich; now, thanks to a series of recent developments—including the deregulation of the airline industry in 1978 and the launch of Travelocity and Expedia in the ’90s—planning a trip to Iceland or even Antarctica is easier than ever. The

world saw more than 1 billion international tourist arrivals last year, and tourism contributed nearly 10 percent to global GDP. This monumental traffic now shapes the world for both good and ill, as McClanahan demonstrates. Tourism revitalized the city of Liverpool and employs nearly a quarter of the workforce of the Indian state of Kerala; it's also turning places such as Barcelona's city center and Amsterdam's red-light district into miserable, kitschy tourist traps and pricing out local residents.

Read: A future without long-haul vacations

Tourism also has the capacity to shape how travelers imagine other countries. McClanahan dedicates an entire chapter to soft power—a government's political ability to influence other states—because, as she points out, our travels change where we're likely to spend our money and “which places we're inclined to regard with empathy.” Tourism has elevated Iceland, for instance, from a country that North Americans knew little about to a recognized player on the world stage. And Saudi Arabia plans to pour hundreds of billions of dollars into its tourism industry with a goal of attracting a planned 150 million visitors a year by 2030. For a nation, especially one striving to change its international reputation, the benefits of tourism aren't merely financial. “The minute you put your feet on the ground,” an expert on “nation branding” tells McClanahan, “your perception starts changing for the better—in ninety percent of cases.”

In fact, McClanahan took a trip to Saudi Arabia as research for this book. “I was scared to go,” she writes, given what she'd read about the country's treatment of both women and journalists, “more scared than I've been ahead of any trip in recent

RECOMMENDED READING



An Artificial Intelligence Developed Its Own Non-Human Language



ADRIENNE LAFRANCE



What Ecstasy Does to Octopuses



ED YONG



Dear Therapist: My Fiancé Believes Spanking Is Good Parenting



LORI GOTTLIEB

memory.” But she was captivated by her conversations with Fatimah, a tour guide who drives the two of them around in her silver pickup truck. Over the course of the day, they discuss the rights of Saudi women and the assassination of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi. “Her answers are thoughtful; many surprise me, and I find myself disagreeing with several outright,” McClanahan writes. When McClanahan returned home and published an interview with Fatimah for *The New York Times*, however, outraged readers excoriated her. “Just curious—how much did MBS pay you to tourism-wash his country?” one wrote to her in an email, referencing Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. “Or was the payment done strictly in bonesaws?”

McClanahan likens these commenters to acquaintances who tell her they refuse to visit the U.S. because they’re disgusted by some aspect of our country—American stances on abortion, or immigration, or race. Traveling to Saudi Arabia didn’t change her awareness of the country’s repression of speech and criminalization of homosexuality. But it did give her “a glimpse of the breadth and depth of my ignorance of the place,” and a recognition that the country has to be viewed with nuance; in addition to its regressive policies, she writes, the trip made her acknowledge the complexity of a land that millions of people call home.

Read: The fantasy of heritage tourism

McClanahan's anecdote gestures at what we might gain from tourism—which, she argues, has now become “humanity’s most important means of conversation across cultures.” What physically traveling to another country grants you is a sense of how *ordinary* things are in most parts of the world. Unless you’re limiting yourself to the most touristy spots, going someplace else plunges you briefly into a daily fabric of existence where you must navigate convenience stores and train schedules and local currency, surrounded by other people just trying to live their lives—a kind of visceral, cheek-by-jowl reminder of our common humanity, distinct from the policies of a group’s current ruling body. Traveling, McClanahan suggests, helps people more keenly discern the difference between a state’s positions and the culture of its people by seeing it with their own eyes. This firsthand exposure is a much better reflection of the truth than flattened, extreme images provided by the internet and the news. That’s a good thing, because by sheer numbers, this kind of cross-cultural contact happens on a much larger scale than any other.

Seeing the wide world more clearly seems beneficial for everyone involved. But measuring these grand ideas about travel against its actual effects can be difficult. How *exactly* does visiting new places change you? Can a short trip, especially one catered to a foreign visitor, really give a person a realistic view of life in another country? McClanahan doesn’t specify what she and Fatimah disagreed or agreed on, or what aspects of Saudi Arabia she was ignorant of and subsequently learned on her trip. In the *Times* article, Fatimah’s answers about what it’s like to be a Saudi woman who

drives, wearing no head scarf or abaya, are uniformly breezy—“Some people might stare because it’s still kind of a new thing to see, but they respect my choice,” she says—and a reader might wonder if, as an ambassador for a more liberal Saudi Arabia, she’s motivated to respond that way. One could argue that by not pressing further, McClanahan actually avoids Saudi Arabia’s complexity. And this surface-level experience extends to all kinds of trips: When I travel, I’ve found that the notion that I’m doing something good—not just for me, but for the *world*—can seem impossibly lofty, even self-aggrandizing, amid my stress, exhaustion, and vague shame. How valuable is enlightenment about my own ignorance compared with the concrete harm of emissions and supporting states with unjust laws?

And yet this tension is the crux of the soft-power argument: How people feel about other places matters, because these opinions shape reality. Dismissing these intangible sentiments raises the risk of falling into the old trap of seeing travel through an individual lens rather than a social one. What might happen if millions of humans have their perspectives of other nations subtly changed? Perhaps, McClanahan suggests, we’d gain the ability to exist alongside different worldviews with equanimity, without alarm or intolerance—a necessary skill for democracy and peace, and an outcome worth the downsides of mass tourism.

Read: The last place on Earth any tourist should go

But to encourage this global-citizen frame of mind, governments, businesses, and tourists alike have to change the way the travel industry works. If we are to consider tourism a collective phenomenon, then most of the burden to improve it shouldn't fall on individuals. "Tourism is an area in which too many governments only get the memo that they should pay attention after too much damage has been done," McClanahan writes. (Her book is full of examples, like the poignant image of visitors trampling natural grass and moss around a popular canyon in Iceland so badly that the landscape may take 50 to 100 years to recover.) Instead, she argues, lawmakers should enact regulations that help manage the influx, and she lists concrete steps they can take: setting capacity limits, building infrastructure to accommodate traffic, banning short-term rentals that drive up prices across the world, and making sure that most of the money and other benefits flow to local residents.

But the social lens also suggests that there are better and worse ways to be a tourist. Traveling will always be personal, but we can shift our behavior to acknowledge our role in a broader system, and also improve our chances of having a meaningful experience. McClanahan sketches out a spectrum with two contrasting types at the ends, which she politely (and optimistically) dubs the "old" and "new" tourist. The old tourist is essentially the boorish figure from the headlines—solipsistic, oriented toward the self, someone who superimposes their fantasies onto a place and then is outraged when their expectations aren't met. What sets apart the new tourist is a focus

on the place they're visiting. Don't make it about you, in short: Make it about where you *are*.

Traveling well, then, involves basic acts of physical courtesy: Don't litter, don't cross barriers intended to protect wildlife, don't take fragments of beaches or ruins, and generally don't be a nuisance. But it also involves some amount of research and critical thinking about the destination itself. I've taken to using my international trips as crash courses in the history of a particular country, which mostly means reading books and spending large amounts of time at museums and historical sites. But this is just what I happen to enjoy. One could just as profitably try picking up the language, having conversations with residents about their lives (if they seem interested in talking to you, of course), venturing to less well-known destinations, or reading the country's newspapers and learning what issues people care about. The point is to invest something of oneself, to try to engage with a different place—an effort that strikes me as a more honest accounting of the undeniable costs of going abroad. Even Bishop concludes, in “Questions of Travel,” that the endeavor is ultimately worthwhile. “Surely,” she writes, “it would have been a pity / not to have seen the trees along this road, / really exaggerated in their beauty, / not to have seen them gesturing / like noble pantomimists, robed in pink.”

When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

Chelsea Leu is a freelance writer in the Bay Area.