

## The Cranky Tourist

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**P**ossibly I possess an underdeveloped soul, lack artistic sensibility and a sense of my shared heritage as a human being, or maybe I am missing an important gene. Whatever the cause, I simply cannot, for the life of me, bring myself to behave like a disciplined, focused, well-trained tourist. Put me in front of a “sight,” and my eyes glaze over, the yawns come in rapid succession (I’m yawning this very moment, as I write this) and an overwhelming urge to lie down on the nearest bench overcomes me. My complaining gradually takes on a distinctly whiny tone: “Please, please, don’t make me see the insides of yet another church. Let’s leave that wing of the museum until the next visit (ha!). Do we have to read *every* damn inscription on every exhibit? Who *cares* what happened to his ear? When do we eat?”

I am writing this from “historic” Williamsburg. This has to be the most irritating way possible to spend an otherwise pleasant weekend. Williamsburg is essentially one big “Ye Olde ...” kind of place. And no place on earth is more annoying than a *ye olde* anything. For my money (literally), this

is a rather pathetic attempt to take a small lump of history and fashion it into something profound, soul-stirring and significant.

Then again, maybe I just don’t “get” it.

At the information and ticketing booth, my wife (one of those lovely but annoying wives who **MUST** see and do absolutely everything there is to see and do everywhere she goes) got swept away in the eighteenth-century euphoria of the Martha Washington creature behind the window. When she emerged from the wreckage, she had bought us, golly, the *deluxe* passes—for *only* \$28 each, we were now entitled to come back to historic Williamsburg **FREE!!!!** for an entire year and see as many of the “attractions” again and again and again; in fact, as often as we could stand having this much fun.

Had I died and gone to heaven? Just think—for my \$28, I could have bought myself a nice little piece of electronic hardware. Instead, I was paying for the privilege of trudging around dusty streets surrounded by costumed gargoyles.

The highlight of the day, I was to later

realize, was the very first attraction. We were herded into a rather impressive looking theater by Thelma Jefferson (it might have been Dolly Madison — I can never tell them apart in the semi-dark) to see a movie about life in ye goode olde days. This proved to be a mildly engaging film with some powerful overacting. I even felt a momentary and mild tingling in my long-atrophied tourism muscles — perhaps this wasn't going to be all that tortuous a day, after all.

When will I ever learn? These films beat the real thing every time. In retrospect, I would have been perfectly content to sit there all day in splendid and air-conditioned darkness, while they ladled their culture and history on me in sequential bite-sized doses.

(I must not be alone in preferring this celluloid version to the “real” thing. At just about every tourist-afflicted place I have ever been to, all the patrons (after visiting the refreshment stand and the restroom) make a bee-line for the theater (if one has been provided). When informed that there is no theater, your average tourist, being a seasoned professional, groans softly but then proceeds with gusto to the actual sights.)

The darkened state of bliss didn't last long. Soon enough, I felt an insistent tugging at my sleeve. “Lead me to the attractions,” I sighed resignedly.

I was soon engulfed by a horde (or is it a pride? bevy? concorde?) of grim, heavy-set, determined, camcorder-brandishing, child-leashing, gum-chewing tourists in hats and XXXXXL plaid shorts. I quickly got out of their way as they lumbered from Mansion A to Curio Shoppe B—had I not, I'm sure they would have walked right over me like so many vacationing elephants.

Tourists must eat prodigiously to keep up their strength. Fortunately for them, the town is jammed with “All ye can eat” restaurants (quite the rage in the 1760s, I understand). The tourist dining principle applies here: quantity over quality every time; if you can't go back for thirds, why go on vacation?

After lunch, we head back into the fray. Soon, a gentleman in tights and a powdered wig was carrying on about something or the other, annoying me intensely. What price these costumed charlies? This is a hell of a way to make a living. Why wasn't I told of

this career track by the authorities when I was young enough to have done something about it? I'm sure they have a graduate program in this stuff over at nearby William and Mary College.

I hid it well (I think), but I was getting increasingly bitter about this whole experience. Give me a good book, any day. Heck, give me the back of a match-book. But don't ask me to traipse through yet another nondescript old building surrounded by talkative, miserable-looking tourist guides dressed in ridiculous retro-18<sup>th</sup> century garb ("This is where the Governor wrote his letters before going to bed.")

The crowning horror of this longest of all days was narrowly averted. We nearly tried to eat *ye olde English* "food!" Fortunately, we regained our senses in time to steer us towards *Ye Olde Hunan Garden* instead.

I eventually made it out of Williamsburg, glassy-eyed but otherwise in reasonably good shape. Aside from a tendency to start at small noises, I appear to have suffered no lasting ill-effects. My year-long pass lies safely buried deep in my desk drawer, never to see the light of day again.

Remind me some day, when I'm feeling stronger, to tell you about the seven thousand churches of Italy. But don't ever get me started on museums, especially those that have anything to do with modern "art." That really annoys me.

### **Disclaimer**

*The above was written on the back of several soiled napkins in a hot and stuffy car when the temperature outside was 93% and the humidity stood at 90%. Aside from being thirsty and sleepy, the author was feeling singularly disenchanted with pretty much everything. In real life, he is not nearly as cranky as this would indicate. In fact, he has been known to be downright pleasant on occasion, going so far as to pat little boys on the head and ask them their names and pretend to care. However, the same cannot be said for his dealings with tourists.*