

REFLECTIONS

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MY TRIP TO THE FUTURE

I used to be a cutting-edge sort of guy, the sort who likes to fill his life with the newest and most interesting gadgets. I had a VCR when they were considered wildly futuristic. (They are so non-futuristic now that many of you probably don't know what VCRs were. Well, Google it.) Before that, I had a pocket tape recorder to serve as a notebook for story ideas as I moved about. I had one of the earliest Sony Walkmans. (Another forgotten gadget.) I went shopping for my first computer in 1978. (The salesman told me to wait a couple of years until the hard drive was available, and I did.) And so on and so forth. I wrote about this in much more detail in a 2012 column. But all that happened when I was in my thirties and forties, which was a long time ago. I'm in my eighties now and much less interested in reading instruction manuals. I have opted out of a lot of contemporary gizmos.

For example, I don't have a cell phone. I can think of just two other SF writers who don't have one, and one of them is older than I am, and the other one is no youngster. All the rest of the world, so far as I'm aware, has them and uses them constantly.

More about my cell-phone aversion in a moment. I want to talk about my lifelong avocation of world travel, first.

I've been an assiduous traveler most of my life. Travel was impossible during my boyhood, which coincided with World War II—wartime travel restrictions made it very difficult to get far from home except for some really good reason, and so my travels were restricted mainly to the subway ride from my Brooklyn home to the museums of Manhattan, forty minutes or so away, or to the home of my paternal grandmother in the even more distant Bronx. In the summer my family trekked all the way up to the seasonal resorts of the Catskill Mountains, which I recall as a three-hour drive from Brooklyn (and three hours when you're nine years old seems an eternity, so I thought of the Catskill trips as Serious Travel). But at the same time I was a regular reader of the *National Geographic*, to which a friend of my father's had bestowed a subscription on me in 1944, and in its vividly illustrated pages I read about places like Jaipur and Shanghai and Tahiti and Patagonia, and knew that some day, when the war was over and I was grown up and could make decisions for myself, I was going to get out there into the world of the *National Geographic* and see all those places with my own eyes. (As it happens, though I've done a fair bit of traveling in the past sixty-some years, I've never been to Jaipur, Shanghai, Tahiti, or Patagonia, and I don't seriously expect to get to them in the handful of years that lie ahead. Nevertheless, I've done a pretty good job of gobbling up the globe, one or two big trips a year, sometimes three, for decade after decade.)

My world travels began in 1950, as a teenager, with a voyage from my home in Brooklyn to far-off exotic Philadelphia. After that one, it was easy to extend the conquests. I went here, I went there, and by 1957 I had made my first European trip, to London and Paris. After that, four weeks in Italy. And then Jamaica! Puerto Rico! Surinam! Guyana! Grand Cayman! Dominica! The Netherlands! Belgium! Scandinavia! Kenya, Tanzania, and Zanzibar! Turkey! Israel! Australia! Morocco! Tunisia! And so it has gone ever since. My wife Karen and I usually take two overseas trips a year, Greece, Spain, Russia (St. Petersburg, anyway), Japan, Finland, Latvia, Estonia, the Galapagos, Switzerland, Catalonia, Croatia, Hungary, Germany both East and West, Egypt, the Czech Republic, Austria, almost every corner of France (Burgundy,

Bordeaux, and the Dordogne, Alsace, Provence, the Loire, etc.), and many repeat visits to London and Paris, and on and on and on, just about everywhere with the conspicuous exceptions of China and India, where the geographical extent and the size of the populations made even a seasoned traveler like me hesitate.

In the spring of 2015, I decided, after reading how Matisse had discovered the use of color under the dazzling light of the French Mediterranean coast in 1905, to visit the town of Collioure, where he had lived, close to the Spanish border, and drive up the coast to such adjacent places as Montpellier and Narbonne, a part of France I had never seen. This involved flying from San Francisco to London, then a short flight to Toulouse, and then, via rented car, over to Collioure.

We got to Toulouse after some complications not relevant here, spent the weekend wandering around it, and a couple of days later set out in our rented car for Collioure, Matisse's pretty fishing village on the Mediterranean coast, a two-hour drive away.

And now we come back to the cell-phone theme, and I get a chance to tell how I was Really Wrong about something, and how I apologized for it.

These are both fairly rare events in my life. I don't have any problem with apologizing when I'm wrong, but I am a pretty shrewd guy, and I have been around a long time, and that combination of shrewdness and experience has allowed me to avoid a lot of life's most serious mistakes. But I'm not infallible.

The story involves Karen's iPhone. As I said at the beginning, I don't have one. I have what amounts to an irrational dislike for smartphones. I rarely leave the house during the day, and since there are computers and telephones all over the house, I don't have any need to clutch a smartphone in my paw as I move through my daily routines, and, in the evening, when Karen and I usually go out to dinner, we have depended (on those rare occasions when we needed a phone) on the dumb little phone-only flip-top cell phone that she has carried in recent years. One time when I was driving alone, coming back from the dentist, my car broke down and I needed to call Karen to come rescue me, but I knew that everybody in the street would have a phone in his pocket, and it was no problem to stop someone and have him call her. And at worldcons I will ask friends to put through calls for me when I'm trying to reach someone in the confusions of the con. But a smartphone of my own? Never! Irrationally or not, I have taken an intense dislike to the whole nose-in-the-screen culture I see about me, the couples sitting at the restaurant table ignoring each other while poking at their devices, the dreamy teenager wandering across the street against the red light as I come driving up, etc., etc.

For this trip Karen insisted that we had to buy a smartphone. She was afraid that we would get lost driving around on the French coast, that the burden of figuring out our route would fall on her, and that we needed not just a GPS but the full assistance of Google's travel facilities to guide us.

I scoffed. I pointed out that our whole trip involved about two hundred miles, that French road signs are rationally distributed and clearly intelligible, that I had a good road map, that I have been wandering around Europe since 1960 by car without ever getting seriously lost, even in places like Greece that don't use the Roman alphabet, and that I am, goddammit, not quite senile yet. We would not get lost, I said. And if by some mischance we did, I would take it upon myself to figure out how to deal with the problem.

Well, no dice. She wanted a smartphone anyway—she and I were practically the only people in the world without one, she pointed out, and that felt peculiar—and so she went out and bought one. I am not the sort of husband who issues dictatorial decrees, and she is not the sort of wife who would let me get away with that, anyway. So she had an iPhone 6 in her purse when we embarked for Europe.

And when we drove down from Toulouse to Collioure we got ourselves hopelessly lost

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and needed the smartphone to bail us out.

Most of the drive was an easy one—a smooth, straight French freeway, better, indeed, than our California equivalents. We picked up the car at the Toulouse railway station, and I drove us out of town, and after about ninety minutes on the road, we stopped and I turned the wheel over to her for the final leg into Collioure. And then the fun began. Our nice straight roadway devolved into a series of roundabouts conducting us to ever more secondary secondary roads, and, though I had brought along a printout of Michelin highway instructions for this leg of the journey, suddenly the signs on the highway did not match the instructions on the printout, and Karen, not knowing what to do next, made a right turn off the road into a quiet residential neighborhood so we could figure out a route that would take us the remaining ten or fifteen miles into Collioure. Big mistake. The residential neighborhood, at noon, was *very* quiet. There was not a human being in sight. And each of its streets terminated in a dead end. We drove around in circles, trying to find some way out that would lead us back to the road we had been on, since that at least went somewhere and these streets went nowhere, one cul-de-sac after another. Trapped! And then Karen pulled out the smartphone that I had so vehemently objected to buying and began poking at things on its screen.

Suddenly a voice out of the phone said, American accent, “Turn left on Rue Olivier.” I looked up, and, by damn, there was a street crossing ours just ahead, and a street sign plainly said, “Rue Olivier.” I was flabbergasted. How did the telephone even know where we were, let alone what the street at the corner was named? “Turn left again into Place Charles de Gaulle.” “Turn right on Rue de la Republique.” And so on and so on, step by step, until it had led us out of that series of cul-de-sacs and back to the highway where we had become lost in the first place. “Take the next roundabout to the D8 and go four kilometers,” the telephone instructed. We did so. Meanwhile I unfolded my old-fashioned road map, saw where we were, plotted a route that would take us from there to Collioure (a matter of seven or eight kilometers), and, behold, so it happened. Between the phone and my map we found our way with ease and joyfully parked the car at our hillside hotel.

For just about all of you, cellphones are simply an artifact of daily use, taken for granted as something that is always with you. For me, they are futuristic devices, pocket-sized computers straight out of some 1942 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*. Having one of the shiny little things right there in the car with us, telling us to turn left and then turn right in this unknown little French subdivision, was, for me, like a visit to the glittering future that once was portrayed in the primordial SF magazines of Hugo Gernsback and John W. Campbell.

And it had been most useful indeed in this emergency. So I apologized most handsomely and extensively to Karen for having scorned the smartphone, because I knew that without it we would still be banging around helplessly in that neighborhood of dead-end streets, wondering how to get to Collioure.

I still don't have one, of course. But there will not be a peep out of me when we get lost driving around Tuscany on next spring's trip and Karen Googles us back to the highway with hers.