




TRAVELLING
THE
WORLD
AS
CITIZENS
OF
HEAVEN

STEPHEN LIGGINS



God's world is an amazing place. It boasts an incredible diversity of people, places, cultures, wildlife, and landscapes. And these days more and more people are heading off to travel or live overseas to experience it.

But as we walk through the airport on our way to becoming citizens of the world, is there anything that marks Christians out as different? What does it mean to travel the world as people whom the apostle Paul describes as 'citizens of heaven' (Phil 3:20)? How can we plan ahead to make our time overseas a positive rather than a negative for our spiritual life?

Author, pastor and experienced traveller, Stephen Liggins is your guide to thinking wisely and biblically about the what, why and how of overseas travel as a Christian.

Travelling the World as Citizens of Heaven is a must-read for just about any believer with a passport.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen Liggins serves as a pastor at a church in Sydney, is a visiting lecturer at Sydney Missionary and Bible College, and writes short articles on evangelism for a Christian website. He is married with two children, and enjoys sport, movies, reading, and reminiscing about his backpacking days.





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SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

Travelling the World as Citizens of Heaven
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Matthias Media

(St Matthias Press Ltd ACN 067 558 365)

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In various anecdotes within these pages, names and incidental details have often been changed to protect the privacy of certain individuals.

ISBN 978 1 925424 11 9

Cover design and typesetting by Lankshear Design.

To Mum, Dad, Eva and Veloo

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WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR AND WHY I WROTE IT

This book is for Christians who are thinking about travelling or living abroad, and for those who are already doing it. It may be for a few weeks' holiday, a backpacking adventure, a visit to family or friends, a gap year, a working holiday, a sabbatical, a study trip, a ministry trip, a work transfer, or any combination of the above. This book is also for Christian family, friends and church workers who are supporting or advising someone who's considering going overseas or is already abroad.

I am an evangelical minister who works for a church in the Blue Mountains just outside of Sydney in Australia. I'm also a guest lecturer at the Sydney Missionary and Bible College, I write short pieces on evangelism for a Christian website, and I've recently written an academic book on the book of Acts. So why would I write a book about Christians travelling and living overseas, instead of tackling a more 'significant' topic?

Well, while it is far from being the most important thing in my life, I do love travelling and spending time in foreign

lands. I moved from Sydney to London for five months when I was 20 years old in an effort to kickstart a career in cricket. While there I got involved with a large evangelical church, and God used that trip to bring about great spiritual growth in my life. In the years since that first trip I've left Australia a number of times—for short-term backpacking and other holidays, for work, and for ministry. For me, travelling and living overseas has been a great positive for my Christian life.

But for all the potential benefits and joys of going abroad, I am very aware of its perils for the Christian. In thinking about whether to go and in planning our travels, there is a real danger that we will think and act in accordance with the world's agenda instead of God's. There are important questions to address—for example, is the trip a wise use of money and time? How will this time away impact my relationships, church and ministry? Furthermore, being away from home, church and normal routine for an extended period can play havoc with one's Christian life. You may know people whose faith has been shipwrecked on foreign shores.

There is a range of views in the Christian community about the wisdom, merits and dangers of going to foreign lands for any length of time other than for full-time missionary service. Travel certainly does present many opportunities and pitfalls for the believer abroad. I believe that where damage occurs, much of it results from the fact that Christians have gone away unwisely or spiritually unprepared. We can spend so much time and energy planning itineraries and organizing details that we don't give any thought to our devotional life or to Christian fellowship. Conversely, wise, godly consideration and preparation can lead to a highly positive and productive experience.

Given the fact that more and more people these days are travelling and living overseas, and since to my knowledge no other book has been written on the topic of Christians and travel, it seemed good to put my fingers to the keyboard. This book aims to help Christians think wisely about whether to travel, how to travel, and particularly how to think and act when away from home. It seeks to do this in a biblically sound, ethically wise, and interesting way, drawing on my own thoughts and experiences as well as those of other travellers, Christian workers and parents. My hope is that if a believer does venture abroad, the experience will be a spiritual plus rather than a spiritual minus—a real help to their faith, not a hindrance.



INTRODUCTION



*Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast. (Ps 139:7-10)*

Take off!

I never expected to travel—well, not overseas anyway. Growing up, family holidays were local affairs: five-in-a-station-wagon Aussie odysseys involving tents, air mattresses and a portable stove. Overseas destinations seemed unattainably exotic. At school I did unnecessarily detailed projects on foreign lands such as ‘Europe’ and ‘Scandinavia’, but these were distant and magical worlds I was never likely to inhabit. International travel seemed about as likely for me as the kind of travel that featured in another hopelessly extravagant assignment I submitted to

my fifth-grade teacher, entitled ‘Astronauts’.

But life has a way of throwing up its surprises, and the unexpected can happen. For here I was one early evening in April, aged 20, sitting in a plane on the tarmac at Sydney preparing to take off for London. London! I was ecstatic.

My entry to the world of travelling and living overseas was accidental. I had hopes of becoming a professional cricketer, and, as a Christian, I thought the world could do with a few more prominent believers in that sport. So I’d taken time off from university to play cricket with a club side in London for five months, hoping to improve my game.

The club would provide my accommodation but I needed money for my airfare and living expenses, so I’d spent my weekdays for the previous few months working as a helper in a children’s holiday play centre, and as a linen distributive engineer and bed-composition technician (let the reader understand) in a local retirement complex. In the evenings I planned what I needed to take and how I might go about living away from home. Partway through this process it dawned on me that I would also have the opportunity to look around parts of the UK and maybe even Europe.

Minutes earlier I had farewelled family and friends at the airport. It was a poignant moment—until then my longest stretch away from home had been two weeks in Melbourne (where I’d been homesick), and here I was moving hemispheres for five months! But a lot of people were supporting me and praying for me, including my parents and the church fellowship group I attended. The senior minister at my church had given me the details of two good churches in London, and my friends were excited about what I was doing. A few came out to the airport to see me off, and one even

slipped me an encouraging note and a couple of evangelistic tracts.

A thousand thoughts were swirling in my head as, after what seemed like interminable taxiing, the plane finally started down the runway, gathering speed until it finally broke contact with the earth's surface and we were airborne.

I still love planes—the novelty is yet to wear off. Almost every flight is taking me somewhere exciting or interesting, or to do something worthwhile. The weeks of frenzied preparations finally give way to a floating world in which all you can do is sit, talk, read, pray, think, watch movies, listen to music or sleep, as pleasant flight attendants bring you one meal after another. It is an oasis of rest.

That April evening, I found myself sitting with Amelia and Scott. Amelia was a member of the New Zealand women's underwater hockey team. (Yes, I know. I thought I knew sport, but this was a new one for me, too.) Scott was a lawyer from Melbourne. We chatted easily and intermittently throughout the flight. I thought of giving them the two tracts but, perhaps lacking a little courage, didn't.

Cruising through the night, the flight set down temporarily in Perth, where I met a Christian called Andrew. A friend had tipped me off that Andrew would be on the plane, describing him as "5 foot 10 with blond hair". My enthusiasm levels were running high enough that this was sufficient information for me to track him down on a plane full of hundreds of passengers. He was the first of many believers I would meet on my travels.

Hours later, the sun rose over Sri Lanka and we started to descend into Madras (now Chennai) for refuelling. As our altitude dropped, a very different world from the one in

which I'd spent my life came into view. I saw alien factories, strange housing estates... and slums. We landed and taxied to a halt. Somewhat sleep-deprived but needing to stretch my legs, I stumbled off the plane and into the humid air on the tarmac. When I reached the air-conditioned comfort of the airport terminal, I noticed soldiers carrying machine guns.

After walking aimlessly for a while I wandered, half comatose, into the men's bathroom. Before I realized what had hit me, I was surrounded by a mob of men thrusting soap and towels into my face. I was utterly disoriented. Just managing to kick a bit of grey matter into gear, I realized that they were trying to earn money, and that my wallet was back on the plane so I had nothing to give them. Panicking, I pushed my way back out into the terminal with a feeling of guilt.

I returned with relief to the familiar Western interior of the plane and thought back over what had happened. Outside, the slums—a sea of poverty—ran right up to the airport. A boy stood on a rubbish heap staring at our plane. Sadly, it seemed to me that his was a world from which there was very little chance of escape—if you were born in a slum, there you would live and there you would die.

We were soon back in the air, chasing the sun around the world. We flew over the deserts and oases of the Middle East, the hills, towns and fields of Turkey, and then the patchwork farmland, alps and cities of Europe. During the flight I had been reading *God's Smuggler*—the biography of Brother Andrew, who helped smuggle Bibles into communist Europe in the 1950s and 1960s. Now here I was looking down on those very countries where he'd worked. I wondered how the gospel was going down there now.

With my forehead pressed against the cold pane of glass,

I looked down and marvelled that in each of the tiny houses below were people who were important to God. It seemed incredible that he was interested in each of their lives, and that he heard all of their prayers.

The plane flew on and the hours ticked by. My anticipation increased as we approached England—as did the cloud. Eventually, we dropped through the mist and I got my first glimpse of London. Even from the air it looked un-Australian and very English—with duller light, trees of a deeper green, narrower streets, and rows of terraces. This was the land I'd read about and seen in movies and on television. It was the land of Dickens, the royals, the Beatles, and cricket. And I was here!

Avoiding turbulence

This was the start of five months that God used to change my life for the better. Although my cricket improved only marginally, my relationship with God grew enormously. I prayed and meditated on Scripture. I joined a large evangelical church and met many Christians both there and elsewhere. I had good opportunities to talk about my faith with nonbelievers. I also learned a lot about God, the world he created, and the fallen nature of this world. Those five months proved to be one of the most stimulating and influential periods of my life. Opportunities I've had since then to travel and work overseas have had a positive impact on my Christian life as well. And I've met many others for whom this has also been the case.

But it is not like that for everyone. I know of one Australian university student, for example, who decided to study in

Japan for six months. He was a new Christian, and before he left his Christian friends tried to connect him with a missionary working in Japan. But while he was away, his newfound Christian faith increasingly took a back seat. He didn't go to a church, his prayer and Bible reading became increasingly erratic, and his focus moved further and further away from God. He did many things he now wishes he hadn't, and hurt people in the process. Sadly, stories like this are quite common. Fortunately, this particular young man is back on track with God, but there are many others who have strayed away and stayed away.

So I am very aware of the dangers of travel for the Christian. Our decision to go overseas may be poorly made—there are good reasons to travel abroad but there are often good reasons to stay put. In our planning, we might listen to the world more than to God. We may give little thought to how we will grow in our faith while we're away from home. And while living in foreign lands, our lifestyle may bear little resemblance to that of a follower of Jesus. Being away from home, church and our usual accountability structures can tempt us to behave completely differently from the way in which we normally would.

A friend who's involved with a ministry to university students once told me that about half of the Christian students he knows who have travelled or lived overseas for a period of time have gone backwards in their faith during their time away. Of the other half, some have grown; but many have gone neither backwards nor forwards. It is a shame that they have not all grown a lot!

Part of the problem seems to be that few people talk about the very real tests and temptations that travel presents. It's

easy to come to the subject of travel with an unquestionably worldly perspective, because most people in Western society speak only in glowing terms about it. As a result, Christians often travel without godly consideration and preparation. We need to be wise, however, and examine the challenging questions surrounding travel through a biblical lens.

The aims of this book, then, are to help Christians decide whether or not they should travel or live abroad (see especially chapter 7), and to help those who do decide to travel—for whatever reason and for however long—to prepare themselves spiritually so they can make the most of the opportunities and be aware of the potential struggles that lie ahead.

The itinerary

As we embark on our journey through this book, where are we going? What is our itinerary? Well, the account of my first trip to London raised many of the ideas we're going to think about. In chapter 1 we will consider what it means to travel with God. He is our Lord overseas just as much as he is when we are at home... thank goodness! No matter where we are in our travels, no matter what situation we find ourselves in, God is there.

In chapter 2 we will reflect on travelling God's world. As travel blogs, books and documentaries attest, our planet is an amazing place. Why? Because God made it and everything in it. Creation reflects God's glory. Viewing what we see and encounter in the light of this truth can transform our time away.

Then in the following two chapters we'll think about the

connections we might make with the people we meet on our travels. When we meet Christians (chapter 3), we can encourage them in their faith and, in turn, be encouraged by them. When we meet non-Christians (chapter 4), we can point them towards Christ. Every encounter is an opportunity that we can take—or lose. These chapters also discuss the positive and negative impact that other people can have on us.

The world is an amazing place—a masterpiece. But it's a ruined masterpiece, so in chapter 5 we address the reality of travelling in a fallen world. When we travel we'll see things that disappoint us, that shock us, and that may even devastate us. We need to prepare ourselves, as much as we can, to understand and respond to the tragedies we encounter. The best way to do this is by seeking to understand what the Bible teaches about living in a fallen world.

In chapter 6 we'll think about *how* to travel. There are all sorts of decisions to be made relating to the manner of travelling and living overseas. For example, should we travel or live alone or with another person? Should we go on a group tour or make our own plans? Does the Bible have anything to say about how we establish a travel budget? Should we aim to cover as much territory as possible or spend more time in a few different places? What steps should we take regarding safety?

In chapter 7 I raise the sometimes vexing question of whether or not we *should* travel. Travel is not a right or a necessity. We do not need to travel or live in another country, even if the expectation of our family or social set is that we will. As Christians, we want to take our cues from the Scriptures and not from the world about us. It's important to consider our reasons for travel, the stewardship issues

involved, and the impact it will have on our relationships. It may seem odd to end the book with this preliminary question of whether or not to travel, but one of the reasons for doing so is that the discussions in chapters 1-6 about the pros and cons of travel may help us to grapple with this question. There are good reasons to go abroad. There are good reasons to stay home. Despite its placement, however, for some this may be the first chapter they will want to read.

And finally in the conclusion we will tie together some of the thoughts from earlier chapters and cast a vision for putting Christ first, both in our home country and (should we leave its borders) overseas.

Your fellow traveller

When you meet another traveller and you've told each other where you've been and where you're going, you often share a bit about your lives. So, since we'll be travelling together through this book, let me tell you a bit about myself. Thanks to God, I am a Christian. When I was about ten years old I asked Jesus to forgive me, and said that I wanted to follow him. Over time my faith has deepened and developed, and my life has had its up and downs, but I have never regretted becoming a Christian.

These days I am married with two children. I serve God as a minister in a church just outside of Sydney. I've also worked as a lawyer and in the Christian media, and engaged in graduate and postgraduate study. As a young man I had aspirations of becoming a professional cricketer, and I came close but did not quite pull it off. And throughout all of this, and for various reasons, I've travelled.

I'm often amazed at how going and living overseas has featured in my life even though I never really planned it that way. But having had the opportunity, I do love travelling. I love the preparation—researching the trip, purchasing essential items, and anticipating what lies ahead. I love the airports—melting pots of culture with departure boards full of promise and possibility. I love the travel itself, with the chance it gives me to sit and talk or simply fall asleep. I love arriving in a new place—working out the lie of the land, discovering cultural nuances, dealing with the unexpected, and exploring natural wonders as well as products of human ingenuity. I love meeting people—fellow travellers and locals, people who share my beliefs and those who don't. Afterwards I love reflecting back on a trip—the photos, the new friends, and the opportunity to pray for and respond to needs that have come across my path. Most of all, I love the fact that God is there with me through all of this—that he teaches me things, and that in his mercy he uses me.

As I have said, my first trip involved living in London for five months to further a career in professional cricket. While there I took the opportunity to poke around the UK, and also made a few short forays to the Continent and Scandinavia.

Three years later, when a career in cricket had not transpired and I'd finished university but hadn't yet started work, I had the opportunity to embark upon the sort of extended overseas trip that future full-time employment would not allow. But I found myself thinking and praying long and hard about it. As a Christian, was this a wise use of my money? Was it a wise use of my time? What about relationships at home? What about the coming cricket season? In the end, although I could have gone for much

longer, I decided to head off for nine weeks with my backpack and an around-the-world ticket. I travelled to southern Africa and Europe and visited friends in the UK before dropping in on my eldest brother, who was then living in Texas, on my way home.

Since entering full-time employment, by using my annual leave strategically, travelling on a budget, adjusting my spending in other areas (e.g. buying cheaper cars) and tacking short holidays onto overseas work or ministry trips, I have now visited around 40 countries. I've spent time in Australia, Europe, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the Pacific and North America. As I've grown older I've tended to travel with friends (and since 2005 with my wife), and have even gone on the occasional short organized tour.

I've met hundreds of people, witnessed many awe-inspiring sights, and seen some of the best and worst of life on this planet. In my travels I've experienced happiness and sadness, and at times I've been lonely. But in every place and situation I take encouragement from the truth summarized in what I now consider to be my travel verses:

Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn,

if I settle on the far side of the sea,

even there your hand will guide me,

your right hand will hold me fast. (Ps 139:7-10)

The ultimate trip

You don't have to travel very far before you start to hear the following sorts of conversations. Let's say you've arrived in South-East Asia—Thailand, perhaps. You've been on the beach for hours and then, feeling well rested, you head to a cafe to check your emails. You strike up a conversation with a guy at a neighbouring table and tell him about your day. "Yes," he replies, "Thailand is good, but it's too full of package tourists these days. If you want something less commercial, try Vietnam."

You take his advice and go to Vietnam. Once there, you decide it would be good to learn something about the local culture, so you catch a taxi and spend the day exploring some ancient temples. While cooking your two-minute noodles in the communal kitchen at the hostel that evening you fall into conversation with another traveller, who is cutting up bamboo shoots. You ask her about her day and then tell her a bit about what you've seen. "Well, yes," she admits, "there's lots to see in Vietnam, but..." and here she shrugs her shoulders, "don't you think the ice-cream stalls and souvenir shops detract from the experience? For something a bit more genuine, you should check out Laos".

A week later, you find yourself trekking in the hills in the north of Laos, staying in village huts and buying your food in markets from the local Hmong people. One day you spot another backpacker resting under a tree. Seeing a kindred spirit you decide to stop and swap travel stories. You offer him some of your snake wine and start to tell him about where you've been. He looks around with a jaded expression. "Ah, yah, Laos is okay," he concedes, "but it has become too

touristic. For real authenticity, one must see Myanmar.”

Many travellers are looking for that ultimate experience—the most out-of-the-way location, the most genuine religious encounter, the most adrenalin-pumping activity, the most self-actualizing relationship. Others simply head off in pursuit of pleasure, or to escape, or because they can’t think of anything else to do.

Contrary to what some people think, however, travel is not the ultimate trip in life. Knowing God is. Idolizing travel will ultimately lead to disappointment and disaster. As Augustine wrote of God almost 2000 years ago: “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you”.¹

Our ultimate need is to have our sins forgiven and to be reconciled to God. Jesus, at unimaginable personal cost, died on the cross and rose from the dead to offer us forgiveness of sins, a restored relationship with God, eternal life, and numerous other benefits (and responsibilities). We receive this gift and embark on the ultimate trip by asking Jesus to forgive us and by promising to follow him.²

As followers of Jesus, we need to put God and his concerns first in our lives. Jesus teaches us to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matt 6:33). This is the same priority we find in the first of the Ten Commandments: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod 20:3).

As Christians we know these truths, but as we live in this world and perhaps move within the travel community,

1 Augustine, *Confessions*, book 1, chapter 1, trans. H Chadwick, OUP, Oxford, 2009, p. 3.

2 For a fuller gospel explanation see the appendix, ‘Two Ways to Live’.

it is possible for contrary attitudes to creep in. Almost imperceptibly, we can move from enjoying travel as part of our Christian life, to viewing travel and Christianity as parts of our life, until finally we find ourselves fitting Christianity in around our travels.

For followers of Jesus, *Christianity is our life*. Travel may or may not be part of that, but if it is then it needs to be firmly under the lordship of Jesus. As we read and apply God's word, God guides us in how we should order our priorities. The Holy Spirit, who lives within and is the constant companion of every believer, empowers us in this. The Spirit helps us to overcome sin (Rom 8:13) and to display good Christian character (Gal 5:22-23). Our primary aim as believers is to love God and love others. We want to become more like Jesus and to do what we can to help people become Christians and grow as Christians. These priorities, combined with our own personal circumstances, will inform not only how we travel but also our decisions about whether to travel at all.

We don't *need* to travel or live overseas. While I love travelling abroad, I would have done perfectly well without it. Travelling is not the ultimate trip. The ultimate trip is following Jesus, and we are privileged to have Jesus as our travel guide.