



AUTHOR Q & A

with LAURA BYRNE PAQUET, author of *Wanderlust: A Social History of Travel*

GLE: Why the urge to write a book about the history of travel?

LBP: It was a huge undertaking, to be honest! But I've been writing about both travel and social history for years, and the time seemed ripe to combine those two interests. I think there's a tendency these days to assume that many of our current interests and activities are fairly new things. But, as I found out while researching my previous book on the history of shopping (*The Urge to Splurge*, ECW Press), a lot of our pet peeves, habits, and worries have very old roots. And I came to the same conclusion while researching *Wanderlust*. People have been complaining about uncomfortable hotel beds since at least the Middle Ages, for example.

GLE: How did you decide where to begin?

LBP: It wasn't really an organized process. I just started gathering books and information on the aspects of travel that interested me. I've always been fascinated by grand hotels, so that was one of my early research topics. One book led to another, and off I went.

GLE: Where did you gather the research for this book? And what did you learn along the way — what was new to you?

LBP: I spent a lot of time in libraries. The Carleton University library, in particular, was a godsend. Because I also do a lot of travel writing, I had a ton of stuff in my files about the historical aspect of travel: news releases about hotel anniversaries and that sort of thing. Plus, I was able to draw on things I'd learned on the road while writing travel stories. For instance, I once wrote an article about the old spa town of Sharon Springs, New York, and I was able to weave some of that information into the chapter about resorts.

As for what I learned along the way — well, I learned a LOT! For instance, I knew nothing about Juan Trippe, the man who founded Pan Am Airways. He was the Bill Gates of his day — he was on the cover of Time magazine and so on — but I'd never heard of him. He was quite the maverick, and I became totally fascinated — and a bit appalled — by the way he bullied various governments into letting him have his way.

And so many intriguing little tidbits showed up, almost as footnotes in other books. For instance, passengers on ships in New Testament times used to make a point of wearing gold jewellery or coins so that, if the ship went down, anyone finding their body would use the gold as payment for a decent funeral. That was the theory, anyway.

Then there was the whole story behind the number of U.S. highways. It was a hugely emotional issue in its time. Who knew? Before highways were numbered, they had evocative names like the Old Spanish Trail, and people were really attached to them. The debate went on for ages.

And did you know that stewardesses on one airline used to wear multi-layered uniforms? They'd take off one piece at a time on the transatlantic flights, so that by the time they got to London they'd be wearing hot pants. You know, sometimes the "good old days" weren't so good! (Actually, I could have written a whole book about flight attendants alone. In the 1920s, they had to carry wrenches with them to bolt the seats back down to the floor of the airplane when they rattled loose in flight.)

GLE: What's your personal relationship with travel?

LBP: I've always loved to travel. In fact, one of my very earliest memories is of sitting in my father's cousin's kitchen in Northern Ireland, aged 4, eating oatmeal! My parents love to travel and, luckily, took my sisters and me with them. It obviously rubbed off on us all. My oldest sister and her husband spent almost a year in Australia; my other sister did an exchange trip to Japan and is married to a travel agent! All of them travel as much as they can. In fact, our entire family — my parents, the three daughters and all of our assorted husbands and kids — went to Ireland together for 16 days in 2001. As for me, I've always jumped at any travel opportunity that came along. In high school, I joined a class trip to England and France. In university, I took a class in international reporting mainly because it included a trip to New York City! After university, I spent a month travelling across Canada with my roommate. And after a year as a working stiff, I quit and spent three weeks working on a volunteer vacation in Germany. I got another staff job but soon realized that there were freelancers out there who specialized in travel stories. Eureka! I wrote my first travel piece in 1991 (submitted it the day before my wedding), and the die was cast. I quit my job the next year and went freelance. I've always written much more than travel (I think Jan Morris, Bill Bryson, and a few other hugely talented souls are the only people who make a decent living through travel writing alone), but I've continued to do as much travel writing as I can manage ever since. I've served as president of the Travel Media Association of Canada, and I've written a guidebook to Ottawa, as well as travel stories for a wide range of magazines and newspapers.

GLE: If you could go back in time, what's the one era in which you wish you could experience travel?

LBP: Between the wars, when Hemingway and Fitzgerald were living on pennies in Paris and all those lovely, plummy-voiced Brits like Alec Waugh were lounging about on transatlantic cruise liners. Travel was modern enough to be comfortable but old-fashioned enough to be relaxing. At least, I like to think so. And people weren't yet in that "been there, done that" jaded mode.

GLE: Your book has a wonderfully broad range — appealing to a wide audience.

LBP: I hope it puts their travels in context. They'll see that there has always been at least a tiny core of crazy people who don't have the sense to stay home and will go through all sorts of tribulations (sleeping on the open deck of a Roman grain ship, putting up with customs officials repossessing one's toothpaste) just to see the world. Also, I think people will find it interesting how, in the space of a few hundred years, leisure travel has gone from something only the fabulously wealthy could afford to the sort of thing most westerners think of as their birthright.