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Surface travel and tourism gaps: the missing links in global integration

This paper develops the premise that there are three categories of places based on an individual's experience: those not yet visited, those visited by any means, and a critical subset of the latter – those visited in a contiguous surface routing. The central conclusion is that global integration – and tourism expansion within it – needs closure of the surface travel gaps, amazingly few in number (i.e the Darien Gap, Abu Simbel-Nairobi, and Siberia-Fairbanks), that preclude easy, inexpensive travel from any “here” to anywhere.

Keywords: global surface travel gaps, contiguous surface travel

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Although we clearly live in an age of mass tourism, in which few places on earth's surface have not been visited, written about, and/or visually recorded by someone, global travel and tourism destinations are dominated by a relatively few winners.

Western Europe, the United States/Canada, and Australasia dominate the developed destinations.

Mexico, the Caribbean, East and Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe lead the developing destinations.

Central and South America, Russia and the CIS, North, East and South Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia badly trail despite their enormous potential.

West and Central Africa are essentially off the present map.

Air transport links all of the above routinely, but surface travel – the only option prior to the jet plane – has largely been eclipsed. Sea linkages have all but disappeared, save for the relatively few, widely separated cruise markets and the even more limited scheduled intercontinental services. Rail linkages beyond Eurasia never developed on a continental scale; the few rail services still operating elsewhere are but vestiges of the past, with few international connections. Even road transport linkages, which should by now be highly developed and an after thought, are frequently handicapped by physical and political gaps.

One would initially suspect that there are hundreds, if not thousands, of “missing links.” Of course there are if one assumes the level of high-standard connectivity of the eastern U.S. or Western Europe. But if one looks only for a basic all-weather surface connection – a road, a railroad, or a water service – there are only two physical gaps on the planet: the miniscule Darien Gap between Panama and Colombia, and the much more challenging connection between eastern Siberia and Alaska. Sadly, there are many more that are purely political; roads, railroads, or ferries exist, but the peaceful pursuit of tourist travel has not been realized.

In a lifelong challenge, the author, using only routine surface methods (scheduled railroad, scheduled ship, scheduled bus, and private automobile) has traveled to 116 countries on all seven continents in a contiguous routing (see <http://www.cheklist.com>). 271 countries and territories – every country on earth or the one next to it - have been reached when air is included, but surface interconnectivity of these additional places has been difficult at best, impossible at worst, and remains a presumably self-evident global goal.

North to South America? Driving from the Arctic Ocean to just short of the Colombian frontier, and from just beyond that frontier to Ushuaia in Tierra del Fuego is relatively routine. The Darien Gap could be easily connected were it not for concerns over a tidal wave of illegal drugs using the routing.

Europe to Asia? Driving from Calcutta to Edinburgh was easy prior to the disintegration of Afghanistan and the Middle East, but that routing is largely out of the question today. However, the end of the Soviet Union has made the more northerly routing along the Trans-Siberian Railway a highly viable surface alternative, especially when the Chinese and Vietnamese systems extend the route by hundreds of miles. Assam and Burma complicate what could be an option via Thailand and the Malay Peninsula to Singapore, and easily beyond to Java/Sumatra.

Europe to Africa? Basic links are already in place between Tel Aviv and Cairo, and across the Strait of Gibraltar. But sadly, Cecil Rhodes' near-legendary vision has yet to be realized, despite there being no insurmountable technical barriers. Tel Aviv-Cairo and on south to Abu Simbel is routine, and Nairobi-Cape Town is only slightly more challenging, but the decades-old political gap of the Sudan remains the planet's longest-standing.

Asia to North America? Some day, via a short Siberian-Alaskan ferry, but with no connected roads east of Magadan or west of Fairbanks, that gap will likely be among the last to be closed.

The following summarizes the author's analysis of the global situation in terms of routine, relatively low cost surface travel. It is hoped that readers will correct any errors and/or indicate any evidence of progress affecting the links that are presently deficient in either physical or political terms.

Primary: Global impediment to connectivity

Secondary: Regional impediment to connectivity

North America

Alaska

Nothing west of the North Slope-Fairbanks-Denali-Anchorage axis

The paved Alcan to the Lower 48 via Canada is now a pleasure

Canada

From Inuvik via the Dempster, to Red Bay, Labrador, a pleasure

United States

On or off the Interstates, a pleasure

Mexico

Largely pleasurable throughout, but lacking effective promotion;
tourism is air-dependent and disconnected

Central America

The Inter-American Highway fails to deliver on its potential,
largely due to facilitation problems that impede flow

THE DARIEN GAP

No road beyond Yaviza, Panama, but that's a lot further than before!

A trail-water-trail route would be easy, given peace and security

Sea connections to South America have been abandoned as unprofitable

South America

South from Cartagena to Ushuaia along the western coastline has long been routine,
although currently Colombia is out

East across the Amazon Basin remains elusive

South from Belem to Ushuaia along the eastern coastline has long been routine

Europe (from western Ireland to eastern Bulgaria)

Whether by land, sea, or rail, generally a traveler's delight

Asia

Russia

Largely pleasurable by rail, highly impractical by road
In fact, the only current transcontinental routing
Northeast of Vladivostok, nothing

MIDDLE EAST

Sadly, one of the planet's major political gaps
Generally superb highways closed to outsiders make the region inaccessible
by surface, especially Saudi Arabia

CAUCASUS

Maybe someday, especially if oil pipelines bring progress and stability

CENTRAL ASIA

Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan are presently out

PAKISTAN

Ditto, putting the dramatic Khyber Pass out of reach; The alluring
Karakoram Highway to China is also a victim of the political morass

India

Potentially so easy and so incredible, but so isolated
Potential link via Assam clouded by security concerns

BURMA

Another political global gap, although parts are easily accessible from Thailand

Thailand/Malaysia/Singapore

Pure pleasure throughout

China

As in Russia, routine – even pleasurable - by rail; virtually impossible by road

Vietnam

Routine once there; China crossing challenging

Laos/Cambodia

Isolated by surface, despite existing local connections

South Korea

Easily reached from China or Japan by sea

North Korea

Hopefully someday; currently blocked, but easily bypassed

Japan

Pure pleasure throughout

Australasia

Australia

Pure pleasure throughout, but only one perimeter routing and only one practical routing up the middle limit options; **nothing west of Alice Springs as yet**

New Zealand

Pure pleasure throughout

AFRICA (the primary global challenge)

Algeria

Major security concern crossing North Africa or the Sahara

Tunisia

Isolated between Algeria and Libya

Libya

Major security concern crossing North Africa or the Sahara

SUDAN

As noted, the planet's longest-standing political gap

Ethiopia

Local exceptions, but overall a challenging barrier

Djibouti

A marginal railway is grim, but feasible

Uganda/Kenya/Tanzania

Hopefully changing for the better, with renewed accessibility border to border

Tanzania/Zambia

Routine via the Chinese-built TanZam Railway

Zambia/Zimbabwe

Routine via bus and rail services

South Africa

The continent's dream destination

ANGOLA-CONGO BASIN-WEST AFRICA, north to Mauritania and Western Sahara

The continent's worst nightmare - one of the planet's two least surface-accessible regions (the other being eastern Russia)

Antarctica

Relatively routine via cruise ship, with ex-Soviet icebreakers greatly reducing prior exorbitant cost

South Pacific

Likely to remain air-dependent, as sea distances are excessive

Caribbean

Routine via cruise ship, although highly selective and variable

Conclusion

Global integration will only truly be achieved when surface transport is globally routine. Intercontinental physical connectivity is largely in place, precluded only by the Darien Gap and an eastern Siberian connection. While there have been significant disappointments, primarily the deterioration of Highway A1 to India, road links generally exist. Political barriers are the primary problems, the major ones being those in the Sudan, throughout West Africa, and both east and west of India in the Middle East and Burma. But overall, a significant part of the world is (still?) easily connected on the surface. Most importantly, surface travel enables the visitor to experience the land and people close up, averting the aerial disconnect that inevitably results unless the surface link has been previously traveled.