

# River Valley High School

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**GENERAL PAPER**

**Paper 2**  
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- 1 Why do we travel? It's not the flying I mind – I will always be awed by the physics that gets a fat metal bird into the upper troposphere. The rest of the journey, however, can feel like a tedious lesson in the ills of modernity, from the pre-dawn X-ray screening to the sad airport malls peddling crappy souvenirs. And yet here we are, herded in ever greater numbers onto planes that stay the same size. Sometimes we travel because we have to. Because in this digital age there is still something important about the analogue handshake. Or eating Mum's turkey at Christmas. We travel because the annoyances of the airport are outweighed by the visceral thrill of being someplace new. Because work is stressful and we need a vacation. Because home is boring. Because the flights were on sale. Because New York is New York. But here's my question: is this collective urge to travel – to put some distance between ourselves and everything we know – still a worthwhile compulsion? Because if travel is just about fun, then I think the new security measures at airports have killed it. 5
- 2 The good news is that pleasure is not the only consolation of travel. In fact, several new science papers suggest that getting away is an essential habit of effective thinking. It is not about a holiday, or relaxation, or sipping daiquiris on an unspoilt tropical beach: it is about the tedious act itself, putting some miles between home and wherever you happen to spend the night. The reason such travels are mentally useful is that with just a quirk of cognition, the mind is suddenly made aware of all those errant ideas we had otherwise suppressed and we start thinking about obscure possibilities. The notion that corn can fuel cars never would have occurred to us if we had stayed back on the farm. As a result, we keep escaping from the place where we regularly spend most of our time. 15 20
- 3 Moreover, there is something intellectually liberating about distance. The problem is that most of our problems are local – people in Indiana are worried about Indiana, not the eastern Mediterranean or California. This leaves two options: find a clever way to trick ourselves into believing that our nearby dilemma is actually distant, or go someplace far away and then think about our troubles back home. Given the limits of self-deception – we can't even tickle ourselves properly – travel seems like the more practical possibility. Of course it is not enough simply to get on a plane: if we want to experience the creative benefits of travel, then we have to rethink its *raison d'être*. 25 30
- 4 Most people escape to Paris so they do not have to think about those troubles they left behind. However, our mind is most likely to solve our stubbornest problems while we are sitting in a swank Left Bank cafe. So instead of contemplating that buttery croissant, we should be mulling over those domestic riddles we just cannot solve. The truth is that our thoughts are shackled by the familiar. The brain is a neural tangle of near-infinite possibility, which means that it spends a lot of time and energy choosing what not to notice. As a result, creativity is traded away for efficiency; we think in literal prose, not symbolist poetry. A bit of distance, however, helps loosen the chains of cognition, making it easier to see something new in the old; the mundane is grasped from a slightly more abstract perspective. 35 40
- 5 But distance isn't the only psychological perk of travel. According to the researchers, the experience of another culture endows us with a valuable open-mindedness, making it easier to realise that a single thing can have multiple meanings. Consider the act of leaving food on the plate: in China this is often seen as a compliment, a signal that the host has provided enough to eat. But in America the same act is a subtle insult, an indication that the food wasn't good enough to finish. Such cultural contrasts mean that seasoned travellers are alive to ambiguity, more willing to realise that there are different (and equally valid) ways of interpreting the world. This in turn allows them to expand the 45

circumference of their "cognitive inputs", as they refuse to settle for their first answers and initial guesses.


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- 6 So let's not pretend that travel is always fun. We don't spend 10 hours lost in the Louvre because we like it, and the view from the top of Machu Picchu probably doesn't make up for the hassle of lost luggage. We travel because we need to, because distance and difference are the secret tonic of creativity. When we get home, home is still the same. But something in our mind has been changed, and that changes everything.

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*Li-Ern Goh writes.....*

- 1 Travel, especially travelling involving long-haul flights across the circumference of the globe, is becoming increasingly out of fashion. With rising global temperatures and environmental pundits brandishing carbon footprint calculators and warnings of the imminent end of the world as we know it, there is a certain guilt in boarding a transatlantic flight from New York to Frankfurt just for a business meeting. Companies are concerned 5



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