


How Many `Countries' Have You Visited?

September 24, 2000 | By Alfred Borcover.

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For anyone who travels a lot, there's an inevitable question that friends and acquaintances ask: How many countries have you visited?

The flip answer might be: Probably not as many as Madeleine Albright or Bill Clinton.

My own pat answer is about 70, maybe a few more. For example, if you were in Czechoslovakia in 1990, before the country split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia, can you now add one more country to the tally? The same goes for Yugoslavia. I've been in Belgrade, Sarajevo and Zagreb. So do I add Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to Yugoslavia?

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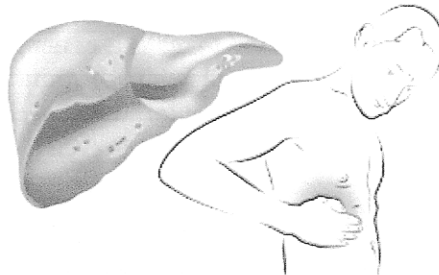
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According to the latest United Nations count, there are 188 countries in the world. But then, if you really want to be boastful, you can go by the Travelers' Century Club, which lists 313.

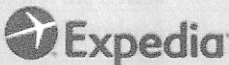
The TCC, established in Los Angeles in 1954, bills itself as a social organization whose members must have visited 100 or more "countries" in the world. What boosts the TCC country count is the fact that it includes Alaska, Hawaii, the San Blas Islands of Panama and the Galapagos Islands of Ecuador, among many other places, as separate entities. Among the approved "countries" in the Pacific Ocean that will send you scurrying to an atlas are Lord Howe Island, Norfolk

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"Although some are not actually countries in their own right, they have been included because they are removed from parent countries, either geographically, politically or ethnologically," the TCC explains in its literature.

And to make it easier yet for travelers to qualify for membership, the time allotted to a visit can be minuscule. "It was decided that even the shortest visits would suffice--even if only a port of call or a plane fuel stop," TCC says.

Based on the TCC list, the number of countries I've visited jumped from about 70 to 97.

The TCC claims about 1,600 members worldwide, said Klaus Billep, its chairman. Of the 1,600, there are "about eight or nine that we know of who visited all 313 countries," said Billep, who runs Universal Travel System, a tour company in Santa Monica, Calif., that sends travelers to mainly offbeat destinations--the Arabian Peninsula, Central Asia, West Africa and Micronesia.

Billep said TCC asks applicants and members to substantiate their visits to countries with passport stamps, itineraries and copies of airline tickets, but acknowledges that not every country stamps passports.

Does that mean that applicants or members might cheat? "If people cheat, they are cheating themselves," Billep said. "We work on an honor system. We don't police it."

TCC was founded by Burt Hemphill and Russ Davidson, pioneers of world tours after World War II.

Travelers interested in joining can write to the TCC at P.O. Box 7050, Santa Monica, CA 90406, or phone 310-939-7419. Or they can find the TCC's country list on its Web site at www.travelerscenturyclub.org. The club's initiation fee is \$100, and annual dues are \$25.

If you qualify, be kind. Don't bore friends and acquaintances needlessly with your intrepid travel exploits in each of the 100 or more countries you've visited.

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