

JOHN
FLINN

The cultural art of getting from here to there

THE GREEK shopkeeper let out a weary sigh of resignation that I tried not to take personally. Then he puffed out his cheeks, raised his hand and performed a slow, sweeping, backhanded gesture that covered about 180 degrees on the compass.

Someone watching might be excused for thinking I had posed some sort of unanswerable philosophical question or asked him to point out the territory conquered by Alexander the Great. But it was nothing of the sort — I'd merely asked him how to get to the bus station.

Wandering away, no better informed, I began to consider the act of giving directions. Looked at in the proper light — which is to say, when you're not lost and late for a bus — it can be a fascinating little window into other cultures.

For example, if you were to ask a speaker of the Wintu language how to get to the local post office, you'd have trouble understanding the reply unless you knew where the nearest river was. Wintu, spoken by a few Native Americans living near Redding, does not contain the traditional words for right or left. Wintu speakers refer to one's "river side" or "mountain side," because the landscape is important to them and speakers do not consider themselves the center of existence.

Even when you speak the same language, cultural differences can throw you a curve. Once, on a street corner in Krabi, Thailand, I asked an English-speaking Thai man if this was where the bus to Ao Leuk stopped.

"Yes," he said.
"Right here?" I said, pointing straight down, just to make sure.

"Yes."
Moments later a bus pulled up across the street, took on a few passengers and drove away.

"Uh... that wasn't the bus to Ao Leuk, was it?" I asked.

"Yes."
Lesson: In some parts of the world, particularly Asia, it's considered the height of rudeness to say no. Every question is answered in the affirmative, even if it means giving out incorrect information.

Once you get used to this, it's fairly easy to work around it. Just pose open-ended questions. Instead of asking, "Does the bus to Ao Leuk stop here?" I should have asked, "Where does the bus to Ao Leuk stop?" I'm pretty sure my informant would have pointed across the street to the actual bus stop.

I've heard reports — although I've never experienced this personally — that some flinty old New Englanders have a uniquely diabolical method of giving directions to outsiders.

"Drive on down to where the hardware store used to be," they'll say, scratching their chins, "turn right and then make a left about half a mile before you get to the Old Connors place. Can't miss it."

Whether they think they're actually imparting useful information or are amusing themselves by sending out-of-town tourists on long, time-consuming forays into the countryside is unclear.

In Great Britain, as Bill Bryson has pointed out in "Notes from a Small Island," a simple request for directions can get you more information than you could ever possibly assimilate.

"If you mention in the pub that you intend to drive from, say, Surry to Cornwall, a distance most Americans would happily go to get a taco, your companions will puff their cheeks, look knowingly at each other, and blow out air as if to say, 'Well, now, *that's* a bit of a tall order,' and then they'll launch into a lively and protracted discussion of whether it's better to take the

A30 to Stockbridge and then the A303 to Ilchester, or the A361 to Glastonbury via Shepton Mallet," Bryson wrote.

"Give two or more men in a pub the names of any two places in Britain and they can happily fill hours. Wherever it is you want to go, the consensus is generally that it's just about possible as long as you scrupulously avoid Okehampton, the North Circular in London and the Severn Bridge westbound between the hours of 3 p.m. on Friday and 10 a.m. on Monday, except bank holidays when you shouldn't go anywhere at all.

"Me, I don't even walk to the corner shop on bank holidays," some little guy on the margins will chirp up proudly, as if by staying at home in Capham he has for years cannily avoided a notorious bottleneck at Scotch Corner."

When asking for directions in unfamiliar country, your best approach, of course, is to seek a second opinion. But even this can backfire.

Colin Fletcher once wrote of walking through the Coast Range of central California and coming across a rancher — "a pleasant-

[See FLINN, T-8]

◆ FLINN from T-2

Directions depend on culture

faced man wearing a ten-gallon hat and a red shirt and driving a green pickup truck." They spent some time discussing how far it was down to the ocean, and the best routes to get there.

An hour later, far down the hill, Fletcher came upon a cattle chute where a bald-headed man in blue overalls was inoculating a herd of

heifers. Seeking to verify the information he'd gotten earlier, he said, "Say, can you tell me how far it is down to the sea?"

The man stopped and looked at Fletcher closely. Then, without saying a word, he turned and walked away. Puzzled, Fletcher wandered off.

"Suddenly, beyond a small outbuilding, I almost walked into the green pickup," he wrote. "And on its seat sat a familiar-looking ten-gallon hat."