

Travel, but make it analogue



Ditching the phone and making plans the old-fashioned way is gaining fans as travellers aim to avoid curated journeys and over-photographed hotspots, even as they hope to stumble upon the unusual

Anita Rao Kashi

On a pitch-dark, moonless southern hemisphere summer night, the boat docks silently against a small wooden pier. Beyond the pier, the land is a dark blob against which the hazy outline of a wooden staircase is barely visible. The staircase leads to a narrow muddy path and everyone follows in a single line. The silence is a thick blanket and the senses are super-focused as a motley bunch of us wind our way through the forest near Glory Cove of Stewart Island, off the southern coast of New Zealand.

Called the Wild Kiwi Adventure, it is a midnight walk. There are just a handful of infrared torches between us to spot kiwis. Other than that, there is no light. I am encouraged to leave behind all electronics and I grudgingly comply. As the group goes deeper and deeper into the forest, I barely make out thick jungle foliage on either side, the trees rising into the sky, standing like sentinels. I can feel the jungle occa-

sionally as leaves brush against my legs and arms. Heightened senses pick up random noises but without the means to locate them, there is a sense of foreboding coupled with excitement.

Two squawking kiwis suddenly cross our path and we watch them under the red light in fascination. About an hour's trek takes us to a beach and we flop on the sand, revelling in the rhythmic sound of the waves under a mass of twinkling stars. I taste mild saltiness in the air, a gentle breeze on my skin and the combined smell from ocean, sand and jungle. It feels remote, like the end of the world.

We make our way back to the boat after some time, ride quietly lost in our thoughts and bid warm goodbyes. I've been out for nearly 5 hours and am pleasantly surprised that I hadn't once reached for my phone after the first few minutes. I feel both virtuous and gratified for proof that I can live without it. It feels less like rejecting technology and more about loosening the ubiquitous grip it has.

Although still quite nascent, one of this year's trends is analogue travel. Described variously as "travelling without screens" and "travelling the old-fashioned way", analogue travel prioritises slow travel, intentionality and immersion in the surroundings (be it nature or culture), and lays emphasis on human interaction. It goes beyond digital detox to deliberate unplugging and relying on pre-digital tech such as printed maps and navigating via landmarks, using actual cameras rather than phones for documentation, writing or sketching experiences rather than performing for an audience. It is seen as a reaction to sensory overload and exhaustion from technology. There's even a catchy acronym: JOLO—the joy of logging off.

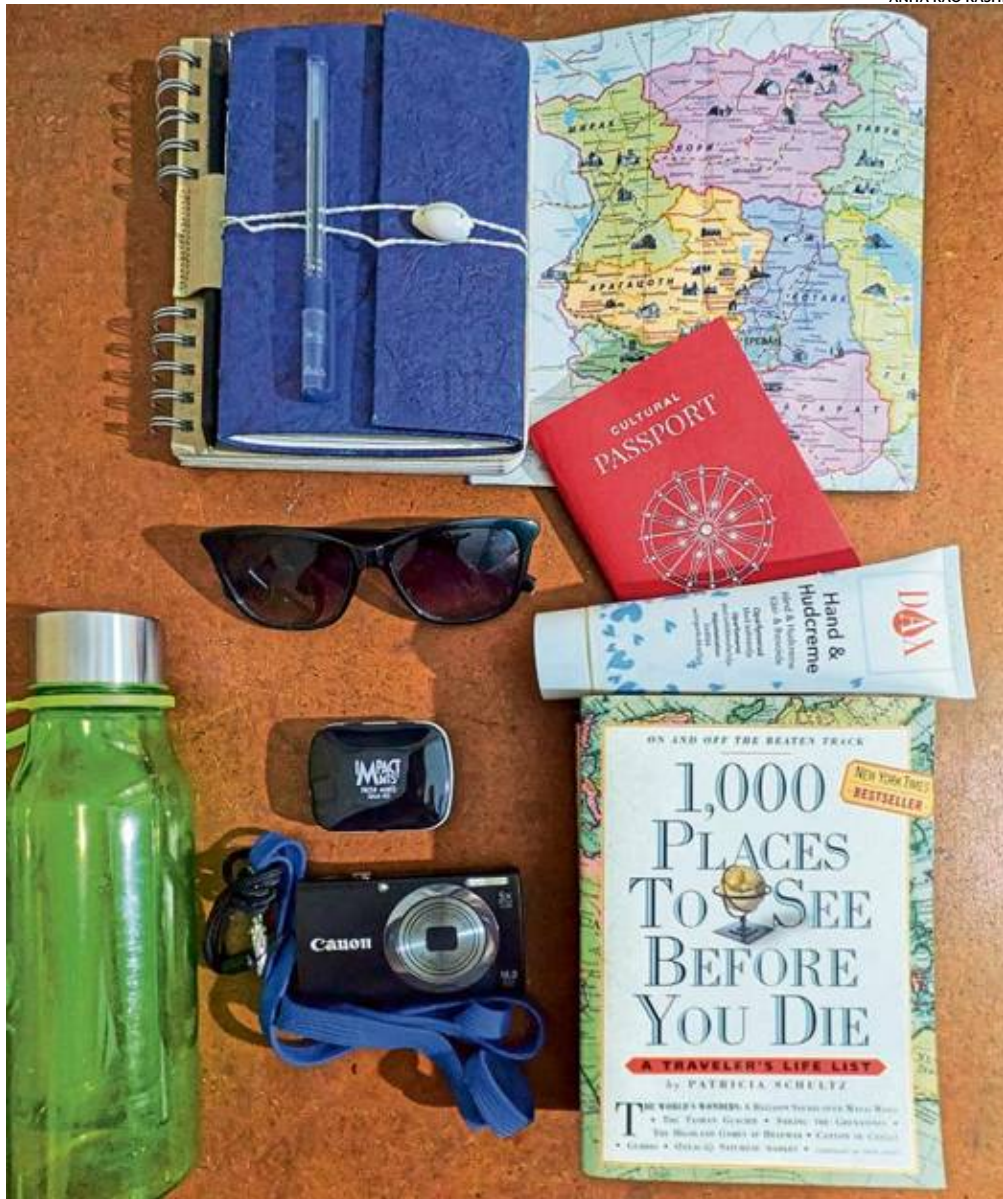
The biggest trigger for this is the way most apps



Analogue travel goes beyond digital detox, instead travellers rely on printed maps, actual cameras instead of phones, and write down or sketch their experiences

work, with algorithms serving versions of the same using personal browsing data. This means that it gets significantly harder to find offbeat places or out-of-the-box experiences. Ironically, the internet kills the very unpredictability that makes travel exciting by meticulously marking and predicting everything. Analogue travel, also called off-grid travel, is meant to put the excitement of discovery back in travel and make space for serendipity.

A few years ago, in a remote part of Nagaland—with zero network—when the car broke down miles away from the nearest village, my guide and I



(clockwise, from left) Navigating the streets with a physical map; the essentials of analogue travel; kiwis at a Berlin zoo; and a group of hikers.

trekked through tall oak and teak forests to our destination. On the way, we stopped to chat with farming families who offered us water and snacks, encountered wildlife, walked through masses of beautiful wildflowers, waded through gurgling brooks and wandered under bridges. It was so much fun that we even cheerfully declined the offer of a lift from a passing vehicle. I had a wonderful time in Nagaland during that trip, but our unexpected foray is the thing I remember the most.

"Travel in India is seeing a sea-change, especially in the way leisure is treated," says Rohit Hangal, co-founder of Bengaluru-based tourism marketing company Sphere Travelmedia and Exhibitions. "Earlier, when you travelled to an off-beat destination and you didn't find mobile signal, the place was considered 'primitive'. But today if you find yourself isolated and without a mobile signal, it is considered pure luxury." Hangal says that analogue travel is the extension of this and feels that soon travellers might have to "pay a premium, to isolate from technology."

It appears like it's a trend whose time has come: web searches for "analogue travel" skyrocketed over 5,000% over the last year according to Google Trends. A big driver of the trend is incidentally the



payphones, and being truly disconnected from the world. "I couldn't relate to it at all, until this trip. Now I've realised the virtues of travelling like that," she says.

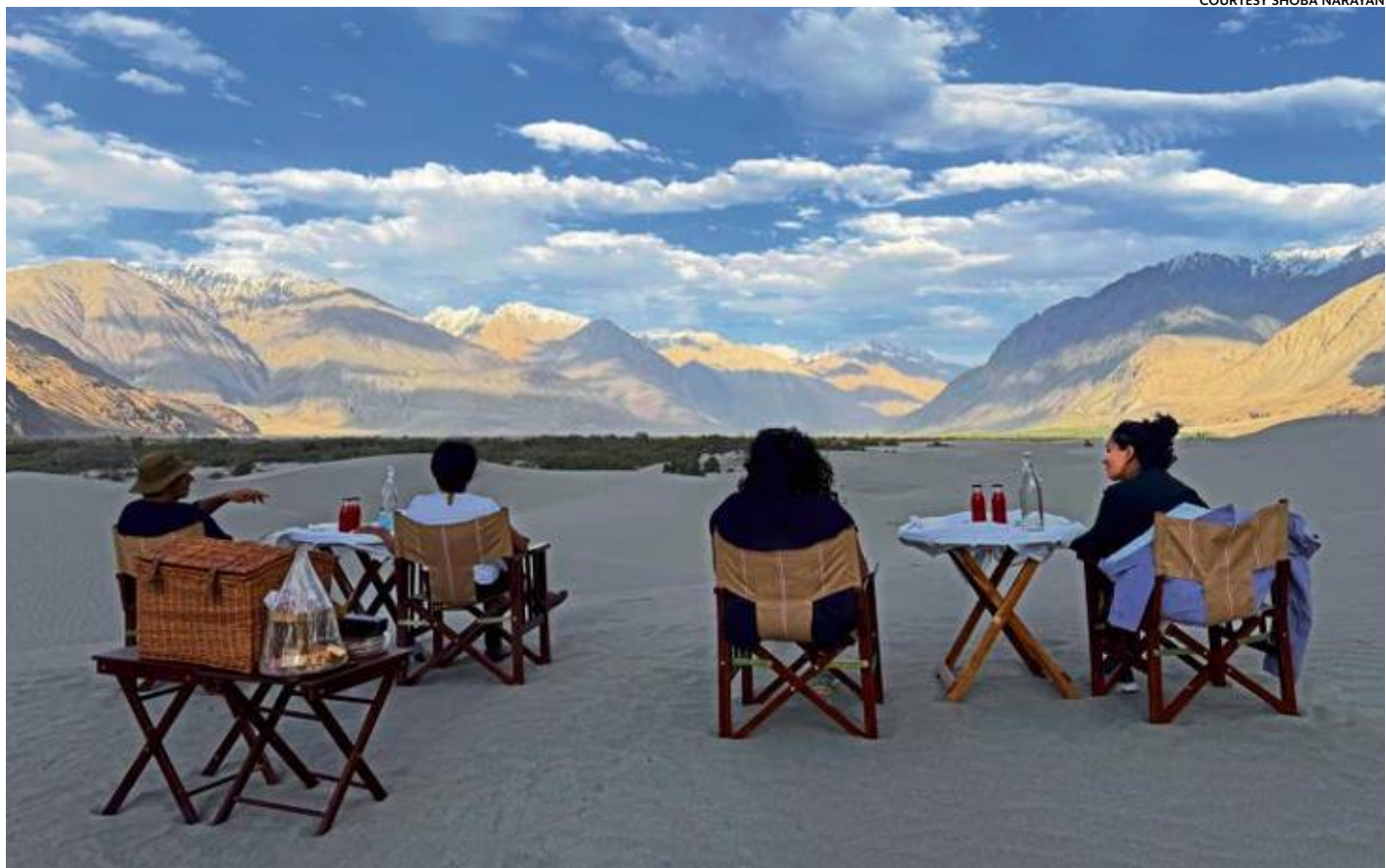
Chennai-based psychologist and therapist Subrudha L., who specialises in interpersonal relationships and stress management among other things, sees a direct connection between the rise in phone anxiety/social media burnout and a desire to travel unplugged. "When someone feels overwhelmed by constant notifications, social media, or the pressure to always be available, the desire to unplug can become a desire to regain some control over their attention. And sometimes, what people are really craving is not simply a break from their phones; they are craving a break from the feeling that they are always supposed to be doing something with it," she says.

Subrudha says the interesting thing is that the generation that grew up with the most technology may also be the generation that becomes most intentional about making space for life beyond it. "They are constantly exposed to new ideas about health, wellness, productivity, and how to live better. The same digital world that has made us more connected is also helping us discover the things we might need to disconnect from. Analogue travel feels like another expression of that same desire to be more intentional about how we live." She adds that as a therapist, she finds the "shift hopeful, especially when you see people encouraging their friends, their peers, and even their children to have dedicated screen-free time."

For those fascinated by the idea but doubtful whether it will work, Subrudha has a cheat sheet. Rather than going cold turkey, she says, "I would encourage people to think about analogue travel as a gradual practice rather than an all-or-nothing challenge. You don't necessarily have to go on a week-long trip without a phone to experience the benefits. You could start by navigating somewhere unfamiliar without using Google Maps, spending an hour in a café without reaching for your phone, or taking a walk without documenting it."

Clearly, the trend is taking off. "Quite apart from being in nature and everything we saw, rather than being immersed in our screens, we had such great conversations," says Purvi. "So much so that we're planning a similar trip to either Uttarakhand or Ladakh this year."

Anita Rao Kashi is an independent journalist based in Bengaluru.



(above) The sand dunes of Hunder with a view of the Karakoram mountains; and a traditional bakery in Leh.

What it's like to put the phone down

A family of four decided to give up their smartphones during a trip and found themselves transformed by the decision

Shoba Narayan

I didn't plan on telling my adult daughters about my childhood problems. But I did, in the middle of a fight with them in Ladakh. Maybe it was the thin air or the altitude sickness, but most likely it was because we didn't have our smartphones with us.

We were in Wari-La on our way from Leh to Nubra Valley in Ladakh, and had stopped for a picnic at 17,427 ft on top of the Ladakh range. Yaks grazed in the distance, a pristine glacial stream flowed between the rocks on the side of the road. Just beyond, in a green meadow, was a wooden picnic table with a white tablecloth that matched the patches of snow on the ground. Nearby, the crew from Stonehedge hotel in Nubra Valley boiled water for *thukpa* made with wild mushrooms and noodles. While we waited for the soup, they brought us basil-mozzarella sandwiches, made with sourdough bread from Leh's Hafla bakery. Eating a restaurant-style lunch in this untouched place felt both surreal and luxurious.

Meal over, we would normally reach for our cellphones. Except there were no phones to be had. Before our nine-day trip, both my daughters, aged 29 and 24, and I had decided to leave our smartphones behind in Bengaluru. My husband carried his but limited his use to taking photos.

It was Day 3 when we reached Wari-La, and to their own shock, the girls realised that they didn't miss their phones at all. This was no small declaration. For them, as for us, the phone is an extension of the self: map, calendar, camera, wallet, communicator, therapist. Yet, here we were, blissfully cut off. But it had been quite a journey to this point.

On Day 1, as we stood at Moljoks Heritage House in Saspol, just outside Leh, I felt phantom vibrations and often reached into my pocket for the phone. Moljoks House is located on the banks of the Indus, and every morning, we would read, have *khamir*, that delicious Ladakhi bread, walk to the river, and try not to scratch that compulsive itch to reach for the phone.

On Day 2, as we stood beside the green, fast-flowing waters, my younger daughter Malini asked, "Where does the Indus originate from?" We glanced at one another, used to instant answers via Google. Now we had no choice but to ask the staff at Moljoks. Along with the answer, we got riverine stories based on folk tales in Ladakh.



This is what happens. I realised, when you lose the arrow-like focus your smartphone demands. It is like looking for a word's meaning in a dictionary instead of online, or when you read the newspaper instead of thumbing through your online feed. You stumble into adjacent worlds, take detours, and acquire collateral knowledge that often has nothing to do with what you sought.

After lunch at Wari-La, we headed to Stonehedge in the heart of Nubra Valley, where we had two full days of hikes and monastery visits planned. Hunder Dok, a tiny village of 95 people, was the destination of our hike. It was a hard trek through rocky trails and across mountains. Along the way, Malini and I began fighting and arguing. As usual, it was about something trivial but it spiralled.

Halfway through the fight and the trek, I realised the value of being always attached to a smartphone. When things get ugly, you can retreat into it. Without it, there is nothing, just a diffused anxiety you have to sit with when hostilities erupt. Thankfully, there was the beauty of the landscape: untouched meadows, no plastic, no people, no horns, just silence and the mountains all around us.

We were exhausted by the time we got to the village. A homestay gave us a simple Ladakhi lunch and a welcome swig of *chang*, the locally brewed liquor. We hiked back to Stonehedge, and our guide, also an Anchi or traditional Tibetan healer in the hotel, told us about the medicinal value of wildflowers. We sat in a stunning wildflower meadow and had Ladakhi butter tea.

Picnics are at the heart of the Ladakhi

family experience, said Stanzin Tsephel, the owner of Stonehedge, when we met him during a traditional Ladakhi dinner that night. Tsephel, who locals call Ka Tsephel, or Big Brother Tsephel, said his family would herd yaks to higher pastures, and there was always a picnic. "We would carry dried meat, noodles, and forage for herbs and mushrooms wherever we were. Then the elders would make a fire, heat up water and we would mix it all together into a *thukpa*. For us kids, it was heaven."

The next day, still not talking to each other, Malini and I headed out to the desert dunes nearby for an outdoor picnic. The sun was setting as we sat facing the Karakoram. Right after a sundowner, I blurted out that growing up in a conservative middle-class family in Chennai in the 1980s was not easy for a rebellious teenage girl. There were the comments, the insistence that you follow arcane rules, and sarcasm and finger-pointing when you didn't. "Maybe that's why I am so conservative about some things," I mumbled to my daughters. "It has given me these triggers I cannot seem to overcome." Their eyes widened and they began asking questions. My husband watched, uncomfortable with the whole conversation. But with no phone at hand, he had nowhere to hide. An hour later, we all sat together, holding hands, anger forgotten.

Psychologists say you need to give the body and mind time to process emotions, that distracting yourself with a device is harmful long-term because it pushes painful emotions into a painful shoulder or back. In Ladakh, we were all able to—indeed, forced to—sit with discomfort, like Buddhist monks told us to.

Wangchok Namgail, the general manager of Stonehedge, came to pick us up. He told us about the rituals around *chang* in Ladakhi culture, the special vessels to pour it, the custom to keep pouring it during weddings till the cup is turned over. "In Ladakh, we say that the taste of *chang* depends on the hands of the woman who makes it," he said. *Chang* interests me because women brew it, much like in the North-East where women are at the heart of brewing liquor. In Ladakh, *chang* is had in tiny cups with a bit of butter on the side, like salt in a margarita.

That night, I went to my daughters' room with a bottle of *chang*. Wespoke for 4 hours, finally saying everything we've needed to say for years. We argued about expectations, about parents refusing to realise that their daughters are adults, and about daughters who both adored and were constrained by their mothers. We cried, apologised and finally slept.

We like to think we use our phones reflexively, but often we reach for it as a tension. A smartphone is integral to daily life and smoothes out the wrinkles of our routine, but it has also become a screen behind which we hide when we don't want to face harsh truths—or look at the world around us. In Ladakh, we had no way out. For nine days, we had slipped away from the clutches of a device that runs (and perhaps ruins) our life, and as hard as it was to give it up, being without it led to conversations that transformed our relationships.

Geography, they say, changes history. For our family, Ladakh's magnificent landscapes will be forever etched with memories of what it means to be a family, with all the beauty and messiness that goes along with such intimate relationships. One thing is certain: we want to return to Ladakh, either together or by ourselves. But whether with or without our phones, we're still undecided.

Shoba Narayan is an independent writer based in Bengaluru and a long-time contributor to Mint.



A group of Buddhist women at Lamayuru Gompa, Ladakh.

ISTOCKPHOTO

When notifications aren't just interruptions

Sometimes notifications are an early-warning system. Ignoring them can lead to mayhem, as this writer found

Shephali Bhatt

At 6am on Friday, my last morning in Japan, I woke up in my hotel room with the smug face of someone who had Planned. I had cleared my hotel bill the previous night so I could check out quickly. I knew which train would take me to Tokyo station, from where I would board the Narita Express to the airport. I had bought a ticket two days earlier. I even had time for breakfast before heading to the station.

By 8am, I was standing at the Narita Express platform at Tokyo station, about 30 minutes before I was to board my airport-bound train. There was nowhere to sit, so I opened my email with the noble intention of reducing the unread count.

That's when I saw an email that had arrived 3 hours earlier: "Notice of Suspension of Reserved Train." For queries, I could speak to station staff or send them an email, to which they would respond within 24 hours. My flight was to take off in 4 hours.

This is where I should tell you how I had ended up not seeing the email until I was already at the station. I wanted a holiday without work, but not a holiday without the internet. The extreme version of a digital detox—switching off your phone, disappearing from the internet and returning to civilisation after a week—wasn't possible. I needed the internet for basic holiday infrastructure: to book cabs, check train routes, find restaurants, look up opening hours, use maps, and communicate with hosts.

But there are no separate work and personal apps anymore. So I switched off pop-up notifications for every app, leaving only Airbnb notifications on because most of my experiences were booked there.

On an activity-packed holiday, this seemed like a much more sensible ver-

sion of a digital detox. I could use the internet when I needed it, but it couldn't demand my attention whenever I wanted. I thought I had cracked the system for future holidays. What I hadn't accounted for was information I wouldn't know I needed until it was too late.

Back at Tokyo station, I went from one information counter to another, channeling the inner Musaddi Lal of *Office Office*. At one of four travel information counters, a station employee used his phone's translation app to explain that it had rained the previous night and many trains had been suspended. I could take the Skyliner from Nippori station instead.

I started—rather uselessly—thinking of how much of this I could have prevented if I had simply left my notifications on. I could have looked up alternatives to get to the hotel with a plan. Instead, I was now headed to Nippori station like a headless chicken.

But I didn't lose heart. I had reached early, so I still had time. Or so I thought.

I queued for 20 minutes at Nippori station. When I finally reached the counter, the operator told me the fast train service



A Tobu line station in Tochigi; and (right) an izakaya in Tokyo.

to the airport wasn't operating either. There was, however, a slower train that would take about an hour and 20 minutes. "Would that be okay?" she asked. As if I had another option, I thought to myself.

It was 9.15am. I had planned to reach the airport 3 hours before my flight. Now I would reach one-and-a-half hours prior.

I would have to plead my way through the queues... I presented my forex card to buy the ticket. The operator looked at me and said the two words that finally brought everything crashing down: "Cash only."

I could see the card options displayed at the counter. I had specifically checked the payment options before joining the



queue. Nothing suggested that this transaction required cash. I had exhausted all my foreign currency because I was leaving the country—another thing I thought I had been efficient about.

"The ATM is to your left," said the operator, unfazed. I looked left. There were serpentine queues. I looked behind me. Another queue had formed. At this rate, I would reach the airport just before boarding started.

I had spent more than an hour at Tokyo station two days earlier buying the Narita Express ticket precisely to avoid this kind of last-minute hassle. But "Murphy was Murphying", as a certain demographic cohort would say.