

Sometimes You Get Lost

Travels with Rudy Maxa

By Eric Tegler

Over the course of 85 television shows spotlighting travel destinations around the world, Rudy Maxa has occasionally been, well ... not where he intended to be. But that's okay, he says.

"I don't mind getting lost. A friend said to me a long time ago, 'It's the trips where something goes wrong that you remember.' I find that happens all the time."

People consistently tell Maxa travel stories of taking a wrong turn or of getting to their destination, finding no hotel rooms, and staying with locals who took them in. When things go slightly (not seriously) awry, travelers learn from and often enjoy the experience. And if travel is exploration, then getting a little lost is just fine.

"It might be something unexpected," Maxa explains, "not part of the plan, which forced you to deal with the local people, live by your own wits, and improvise. I don't think there's anything wrong with that."

Maxa has been showing viewers, and describing for listeners, places they might like to visit via the public television series *Smart Travels* and more recently *Rudy Maxa's World*. A syndicated radio program of the same name is heard nationally on news/talk radio stations as well as on XM Radio. Maxa is also a contributing editor for Delta Airlines' *Sky* magazine and for *National Geographic* magazine. Prior to his career as a travel host, he spent 13 years with *The Washington Post*, with stints as a magazine columnist, editor, and scriptwriter along the way.

For those of us who love to travel (and Rolls-Royce and Bentley owners are some of the most enthusiastic wanderers), Maxa's programs are a great stepping-off point and perhaps inspiration for our own next forays. So it's not surprising that the question Maxa says he's most frequently asked is, "What's your favorite place in the world?"

"I always answer this way: It's what you discover later in life," he explains.

"My dad was in the Army and he did two tours in Europe, so I became very familiar with Europe and I like it. But I didn't get to Asia until I was 34. So I'm blown away by Asia. However, if we had lived in Asia for whatever reason while I was growing up and I didn't get to Paris until I was 34, that would be like, wow!"

The same idea applied right here at home, Maxa says, a feeling most of us can probably identify with.

"As a kid we moved around [the United States] but never west of the Mississippi, so I didn't see the western part of the United States until I was in college and went to a journalism conference in California. I thought, 'This is incredible!' San Francisco, the hills, the trolley cars, the bay, the climate. I was blown away. That would sound naïve to someone who had grown up in the West, but maybe they went bonkers over the high buildings in New York or the avenues in Washington, D.C."

Fortunately for his audiences, Maxa has been more or less "bonkers" about it all, taking them with him from Seattle to South Africa. That perspective is something worth tapping into, so we asked Rudy for his views on travel hotspots, preparation, and more.

TRENDS

The destinations that have long appealed to Americans, like New York or San Francisco, Italy or France, still draw millions each year, Maxa confirms, but in these places and elsewhere, travelers are more frequently seeking some kind of participation.

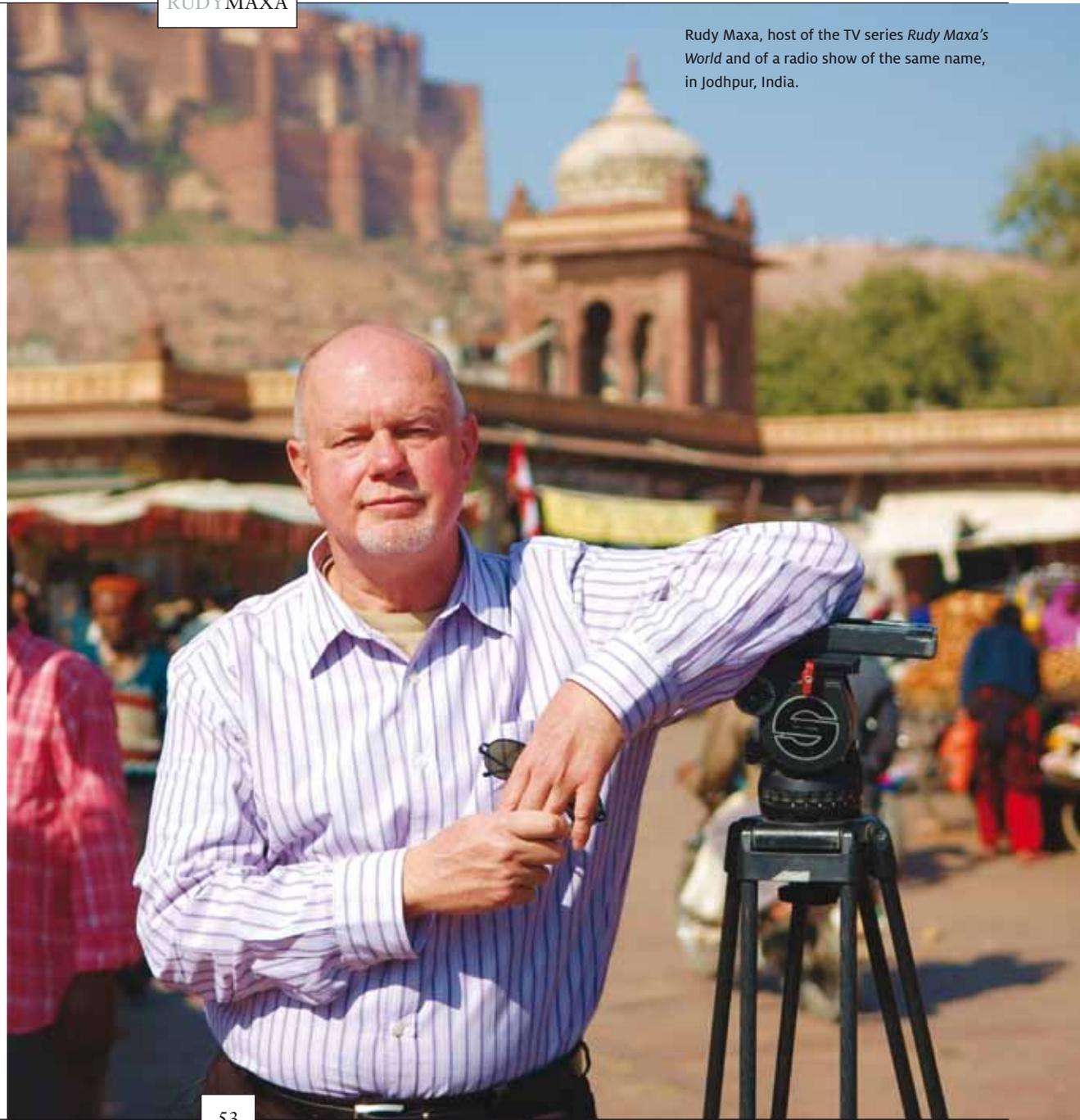
"I think experiential travel is still on an upward trend. People increasingly want to go somewhere and do or be part of something as opposed to just showing up as tourists – not that there's anything wrong with that.

“People may want to participate in an archaeological dig or bicycle through Vietnam or Provence. That may be attributable to the fact that baby boomers are becoming the big demographic now and those of us who are baby boomers all think we’re 10 or 15 years younger than we really are. And we’re behaving that way.”

As an example, Maxa cites a friend who has traveled through much of Europe specifically to see pipe organs. Such enthusiast travel is, of course, nothing new to Rolls-Royce and Bentley owners and others in the vintage car hobby. Today, however, it has spread across the travel population, manifest in individual odysseys and group vacations from themed cruises to adventure outings. Changing attitudes about aging and better average physical stamina among the most financially advantaged demographic of Americans is fueling experiential travel.

“I’m 62,” Maxa says, “and I know that my parents at 62 would never have considered going to the southern coast of Turkey and doing a *gullet* [a Turkish wooden motor sailboat] and bike trip, yet I would go in a heartbeat. I think this baby boomer phenomenon is accounting for more of this active and experiential travel.”

A list of ten 2011 travel trends by a senior executive from tour operator Cox & Kings USA supports Maxa’s observation, adding in value and economic considerations that are driving travel. The trend list includes multideestination vacations that expose travelers to cultural variety with combined itineraries; group tours that leverage numbers to offer discounted travel; destinations that tap into current cultural trends like cutting-edge music or art; so-called “learning experiences” wherein the destination offers opportunities to learn everything from sushi-making to



Rudy Maxa, host of the TV series *Rudy Maxa's World* and of a radio show of the same name, in Jodhpur, India.

photography; “bucket-list” experiences; transportation mode vacations like rail trips through various countries; experiential family travel; and a resurgent interest in travel experts, from tour operators to media figures like Rudy Maxa.

PLACES

“For some reason, Americans like to go on holiday in Europe and not see other Americans. I’ve always gotten a kick out of that,” Maxa says.

If that’s one of your requirements, going to some of the less-traveled corners of Europe like Serbia or the Ukraine might appeal. Maxa points out there are other reasons to go as well.

“What we used to call the Eastern European Bloc is an area where people are finding the relative lack of economic progress over the last few decades has resulted, at least for the visitor, in a more authentic European experience.”

That authentic experience often comes at a better value for your dollar or euro, Maxa adds, with less stereotypical vacation opportunities available. For instance, most Americans are surprised to learn about the charming towns, countryside, and castles in the Czech Republic outside of Prague. Bulgaria’s Black Sea resorts provide a beach experience your friends will likely not have had.

For centuries, Europeans and Asians migrated back and forth across the Silk Road trade routes over which silk, spices, tea, and textiles flowed. Visiting the countries on the routes is becoming a new experiential trend, Maxa says.

“I did a show on Uzbekistan a couple years ago and I saw very few Americans, but those I did see I thought were sort of leading indicators. They’re fairly wealthy;

they’re curious about history and architecture.” In exotic cities like Samarkand and Khiva they’re finding it, ironically in an environment an American traveler might not think would foster tourism.

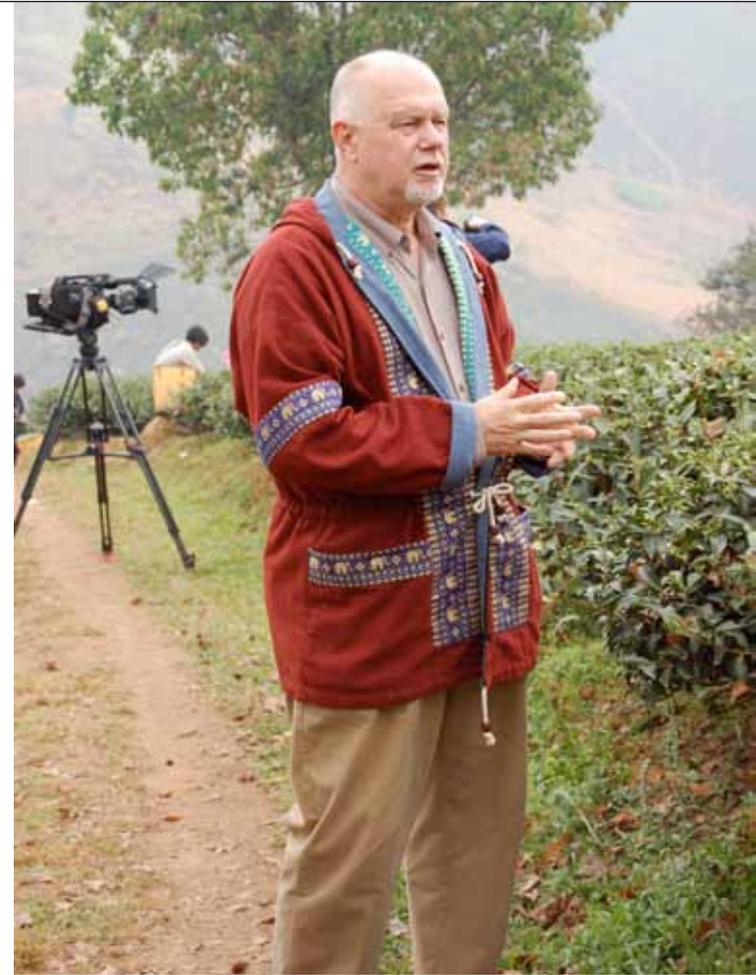
“Thanks partly to a fairly repressive government,” Maxa explains, “Uzbekistan is a safe country, has a fairly well developed tourism infrastructure, and the Russians really did an amazing job renovating the mosques of yesteryear. It’s almost like you’re in Disneyland they’re so great.”

The mosques are now repurposed as administrative buildings, schools, etc. That kind of quirkiness is attractive to a cross section of travelers and something that can be found south of the border as well.

“We just don’t look south as Americans, I guess. Uruguay, for example, is just unexplored,” Maxa says. “I suggest going to Buenos Aires to people and they look at me like, ‘Can you do that?’”

They can, along with checking out economically prosperous and 2016 Olympics-focused Brazil or less traveled but more recently stabilized Colombia. Panama and Costa Rica offer excellent, dollar-friendly Central American beaches and tropics. In Asia, Vietnam has become particularly popular with experiential and more casual travelers in the last five years. In the far southern hemisphere, Maxa points to New Zealand as a highly worthwhile destination despite the fact that more Americans go to Australia.

“Australia, with its strip malls, seems like America 10 years ago. New Zealand still seems to have a tranquility and a grace that makes it stand out in the world. Going over the mountains where *The Lord of the Rings* was filmed was probably the most impressive balloon ride I’ve had, although going over the chateaus of the Loire Valley ain’t bad either.”



Maxa on location at a tea plantation in the Golden Triangle area of Thailand.

China is naturally on the savvy traveler’s mind these days as its economic prosperity and global influence have grown. While the country has recently been successfully traversed by vintage Rolls-Royces

or Bentleys in the Peking to Paris run, Maxa says it's not quite "ready for prime time" as far as independent travel is concerned.

"That's still a tough concept in China because English is not widely spoken, even in cities with 6 million people. The hotels are pretty funky. That's changing. Hilton, Marriott – everybody's scrambling to build hotels there. It's changing but it's still Shanghai, the Great Wall, Yangtze River cruises, and Beijing. Those are still basically the travel places in China."

Whether the destination is China or elsewhere, making any trip successful is a matter of preparation, and particularly for those in pursuit of travels off the beaten path, Maxa stresses a little forward thinking.

PREPARATION

One can always go online and get a feel for a travel destination and some of its challenges. But interestingly enough, one of the biggest travel challenges is portable: It's your own health. Making sure you're up to the trip is common sense, as is ensuring that you and your companions are sufficiently protected from local health hazards and, as importantly, that you have a way out when there's a health-related incident.

"I would certainly look for a local travel clinic that knows the territory you're traveling to," Maxa recommends. "Most larger [American] cities have several of these. I would also suggest medical evacuation insurance.

"So many people think their Platinum American Express Card provides medical evacuation, but if you read the small print, it's medical evacuation to the nearest facility, which could be a taxi ride across Rome. There are some Rome hospitals you don't want to be operated on in.

"When I was shooting in Uzbekistan, I was tossed off a camel towards the end of the shoot and broke my right shoulder. This was in Khiva. The doctors said they wanted to operate immediately because there were bone chips that were going to cut my carotid artery. But because I had something called Medjet Assist [a medical evacuation insurance provider] and because I knew they'd fly a Learjet in, or a dogsled or a ship – anything to get you to your hospital of choice anywhere in the world – my producer was able to call them immediately and put me in touch with a University of Pittsburgh specialist who said, 'Whatever you do, don't let them operate. There are no bone chips!' I didn't know that broken shoulders heal themselves."



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Maxa can tell similar stories of friends, including one who paid thousands of dollars for a first-class airline ticket out of relatively nearby Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, when his kidney stones began acting up.

“Among my friends, I really stress getting medical evacuation insurance,” he says.

Take the proper precautions and you’ll not only be prepared if something goes amiss, you’ll be more relaxed when things go well. Letting go allows you to take in what you’re seeing, an approach to travel that Maxa tries to convey in his television programs. However, he does so with camera and crew in tow.

THE BIG SHOW

Travel to a different enough environment and you face the possibility of being a curiosity to the locals. Take a TV crew and you’d think you’d be the center of attention. Not necessarily, Rudy confides.

“It’s different than what I expected. For example, one of the most difficult countries to shoot in is France. I swear, everybody there is in the witness protection program and nobody wants to be on camera. We were shooting on a street and some restaurateur comes running out and says, ‘No, no! You can’t shoot here.’ He didn’t even have an outdoor café. We said, ‘What do you mean?’ I wanted to show how you could go to the Métro and buy a weeklong pass and save money. We had permits to shoot from the Métro and the city of Paris, all things we have to have. Then we walked down to a ticket booth and the woman in the booth won’t sell me a ticket with the camera there. In Italy, everyone’s always making the ‘V’ sign behind your head and acting for the camera. Go to a crowded place like India and they just sweep right by you. They’re just too busy to worry about what you’re doing.”

And yet, there’s sometimes a happy medium between indifference and outright mugging for the camera, Maxa says.

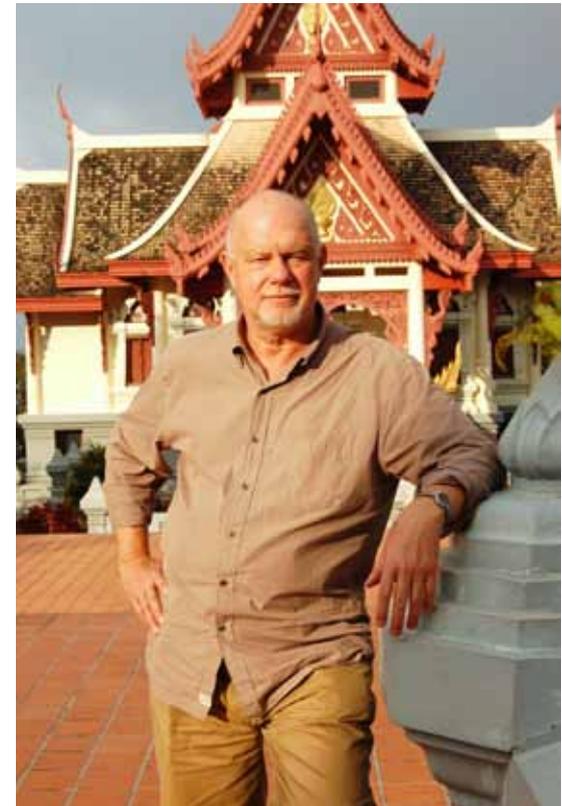
“In China, they think it’s all a big show. I was doing a stand-up on some street in Shanghai, and you’ve always got to do three or four takes. Your producer is never happy with just one. We were in the middle of a pedestrian mall in a shopping area of Shanghai. By the time I finished my stand-up, which took all of 10 minutes, there must have been 300 people watching. They were very respectful, they were on the other side of the camera, not clogging the shot with people. They just wanted to watch. They heard me doing the same lines over and over again so they knew what I was doing, and when I finally finished they broke out into spontaneous applause.”

Away from the camera, the simple fact of “being there” gives the traveler an impression of the world he or she just can’t get remotely. Maxa points to the sharp distinction between the developed world, which he refers to as the “United Colors of Benetton,” and the developing world. In the former, there’s a McDonald’s everywhere and the rhythm of life is generally similar. In the latter, people have an agenda.

“Whether they have to sweep the hard-packed mud in front of their house every day or go to do road construction, they’re on a mission. They live pretty seriously.”

“I did a show in Korea, which I’d not been to beforehand. South Korea was just destroyed after the Korean War. In 60 years it’s become an economic miracle, amazingly fast. You pick up that energy and that national will to be a world player. When you’re there, you feel it.”

Maxa observes that in the United States, we don’t wear such national pride on our sleeves and that



Maxa, who didn’t travel to Asia until his 30s, says he is “blown away by Asia.” He’s pictured here in Chiang Rai, Thailand.

foreign visitors don’t typically experience it. “I think we take it all for granted,” he says.

Perhaps that’s the greatest lesson that travel teaches us – not to take things for granted, especially when we get lost.