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TRAVEL

Happy Talk

Around the world in search of a cuppa joy.

Reviewed by Daniel Gilbert
Sunday, January 20, 2008; Page BW02

THE GEOGRAPHY OF BLISS

One Grump's Search for the Happiest Places in the World

By [Eric Weiner](#)

Twelve. 329 pp. \$25.99

In the last two decades, psychologists and economists have learned a lot about happiness, including who's happy and who isn't. The Dutch are, the Romanians aren't, and Americans are somewhere in between. Eric Weiner -- a peripatetic journalist and self-proclaimed grump -- wanted to know why. So with science as his compass, he spent a year visiting the world's most and least happy places, and the result is a charming, funny and illuminating travelogue called *The Geography of Bliss*.

From the [Persian Gulf](#) to the [Arctic Circle](#), Weiner discovers that happiness blooms where we least expect it. Who knew that the long, dark Icelandic winter gives rise to a magical, communal culture that has done away with envy and sobriety? Or that the Thais so prize "fun" that their government has created a Gross Domestic Happiness Index to ensure they get enough of it? Or that Moldovans are miserable because they "derive more pleasure from their neighbor's failure than their own success"? Or that the wealthy citizens of [Qatar](#) lead pampered, joyless lives in a "gilded sandbox" while the poor citizens of [Bhutan](#) are cheerfully obsessed with archery tournaments, penis statues and feeding marijuana to their fat (and presumably happy) pigs?

But Weiner does more than report on the lifestyles of the delighted and despondent. He participates -- meditating in [Bangalore](#), visiting strip clubs in [Bangkok](#) and drinking himself into a stupor in [Reykjavik](#). These cultural forays are entertaining, but the real focus of his story is on the people he meets in cafés and on buses, the people who rent him rooms and give him directions, the people whose conversations, confessions and silences reveal the deep truths about their lands and lives.

Weiner asks an Icelander whether he believes in elves, and the man replies, "I don't know if I believe in them, but other people do and my life is richer for it," leading Weiner to conclude that Icelanders "occupy the space that exists between *not* believing and not not believing. It is valuable real estate." He meets a widower in Slough -- a small town outside [London](#) with little to recommend it -- who explains that he's thought about moving away but that in the end "you come home because this is where you live." Weiner realizes that when our relationships end, "the place is all that remains, and to leave would feel like a betrayal. . . . He doesn't love Slough, but he loved his wife, loved her here, in this much-maligned Berkshire town, so here he stays." Memory, like bliss, seems to have its own address.

Weiner has studied the scientific literature on happiness, too, and weaves it into his narrative, which he leavens with a steady stream of clever quips. We learn that "Bhutan has made



Children in the remote highlands of Bhutan (Dennis Brack/the Washington Post)

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tremendous strides in the kind of metrics that people who use words like metrics get excited about" and that "hairpin turns, precipitous drop-offs (no guardrails), and a driver who firmly believes in reincarnation make for a nerve-racking experience."


Weiner, a correspondent for [National Public Radio](#), is an American who unapologetically indulges his ethnic stereotypes ("Watching Brits shed their inhibitions is like watching elephants mate. You know it happens, it must, but it's noisy, awkward as hell and you can't help but wonder: Is this something I really need to see?"), but if you want to wag a politically correct finger in his direction, you'll have to stop laughing first.

Weiner's book is so good that its occasional flaws stand out in sharp relief. He is smart and funny but doesn't always trust his readers to know that, which leads him to step on his punch lines and belabor his conclusions. Sometimes, he settles for clichés ("Happiness is a choice") and platitudes ("Some things are beyond measuring") instead of reaching for richer and subtler insights. And while he expertly brings us into the lives of every stranger on a train, he plays his own cards close to the chest. He tells us a lot about his obsession with satchels, for instance, but only in passing does he mention that he's a father. After traveling so long and so far together, we should know him better than that.

One of the ineluctable laws of travel is that most companions are beguiling at the beginning and annoying by the end. Weiner's company wears surprisingly well. It takes a chapter or two to decide you like him, and another to realize that you like him a lot, but by the time the trip is over, you find yourself hoping that you'll hit the road together again someday. *The Geography of Bliss* is a journey too good to be rare. *

Daniel Gilbert is a professor of psychology at Harvard University and the author of "Stumbling on Happiness."

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