

DON PARRISH AT 70: BY C. KEVIN SHORT WHAT FUELS HISTORY'S MOST TRAVELED MAN

WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE TO SEE MORE OF THE WORLD THAN ANY PERSON IN HUMAN HISTORY?

“Having seen so much of our planet, I probably have a feeling similar to astronauts who have seen the Earth from space: There is a certain wonder that is very hard to communicate.”

While Donald Parrish may not be able to fully communicate the sheer magnitude and grandeur of his record-breaking travels, any fragment that he does speak about is deeply fascinating. In his 70 years, Don has managed to travel to every country in the world. He has visited 839 of the 875 sites listed on the Most Traveled People's list, putting him in first place on this preeminent travel ranking.

But as truly astounding as Don's travel records and statistics are, his personal philosophies, humility, and outlook are even more impressive. When you speak with Don, it's not the rankings or the mileage that animate him the most. Rather, Don's most valued stories and experiences are those when he connected with others, bridged cultural divides, and saw glimpses of shared humanity.

For example, when Don was on a train in the Siberia region of Russia (where he's seen all of the country's 83 political subdivisions) in 2009, he met a man roughly his own age who had never before met an American. They held a simple yet powerful conversation via a Russian translator, but Don says it was the “wordless exchange” that had the most profound affect on him.

“It's not the words that were expressed; It's the emotional bonding that you occasionally get when you travel... I travel for that.”

In fact, Don won't speak about his prolific travel records unless he's directly asked. While other extreme travelers or wealthy tourists will insulate themselves with a large entourage, Don travels with humility and an emphasis on exchange. He's a veritable information sponge that finds something to learn everywhere and from everyone. He recognizes his privilege and is able to appreciate all the people he meets, be it in New York or Namibia.

“I am amazed how many smart people there are in the world,” said Don. “The only difference many times are the circumstances we were born in.”

Don took his first trip outside the U.S. during college in 1965 when he spent a summer working as an unskilled laborer in a Hanau, Germany metal factory. He spoke nothing but German and debated politics with his Communist penpal during this highly formative experience.

“I grew up. I learned what it took to live successfully as a foreigner.”

His long career working in International Switching development for AT&T Bell Labs facilitated an immense amount of international business travel. But it wasn't until about 2006 that Don realized he had a shot at ascending the rankings of the most traveled people and began a concentrated travel push. He now travels for roughly six months per year and has spent about 10 years of his adult life outside of America. His 13 passports are a saga.

“The shift that happens is when you say to yourself: Why not just visit everything? Forget this ‘good and bad’ [places] or ‘recommended and not-recommended’ -- let's just go off and see

