EDITORIAL

Broadening Gay Travel

My Chattanooga high school’s English department took pride in its southern roots, and “literature of the South” was a staple offering at every grade level. Probably no one graduated without reading Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” a macabre tale of a Georgia family’s vacation gone horribly awry. Given its gory denouement, I find it remarkable that I remember the story for one line, uttered by the grandmother, urging her family to reconsider their Florida destination and instead, for her own selfish reasons, head to East Tennessee. The children, she noted, had never been there, so it would thus be laudably “broadening.” As a gay boy longing to get out of the region, I found—even then—the idea of East Tennessee being “broadening” painfully laughable.

But of course, travel anywhere almost always is broadening. And for those living in today’s United States, travel abroad can offer a sobering new perspective on our bellicose Homeland.

Cross the border into Canada, for example, and you will be struck how the media freely uses the word “torture” to describe the U.S. conduct in the so-called war on terror. Broadcasters and columnists in the U.S., kowtowing to the government which steadfastly denies it that routinely tortures, often euphemize the military’s and CIA’s beatings, drownings, and electrical proddings as “harsh interrogation.” But their Canadian counterparts have no trouble using more honest language. Indeed, the story of Maher Arar, a Canadian citizen of Syrian background, who was kidnapped and imprisoned by the CIA for almost a year, has received prominent and lasting attention in Canada, with the U.S. conduct unambiguously and accurately termed “torture.”

And this year, Canadian officials’ decided to place the U.S.-run concentration camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, on a “watch list” for torture, in part following claims made by a Canadian detained in the camp, Omar Khadr, captured in Afghanistan when he was 15 years old; he alleges he has been repeatedly tortured during his five years of imprisonment without trial.

While domestic headlines of “bombing” in Iraq will universally reference a car bomb in Baghdad, or an IED targeting military personnel, an overseas story about bombing in Iraq is more likely to focus on the stepped-up U.S. air campaign, wherein, according to the Asia Times (Atimes.com), over 100,000 pounds of American bombs were dropped on Iraq’s Arab Jabour region in one 10-day period last January.

And anyone traveling to countries where the Al Jazeera Arabic-language television network is available may see horrific images of what those tons and tons of U.S. bombs actually do to the people they fall on, images sanitized—if shown at all—in U.S. media.

Gay people are especially avid travelers, in part because they have, by their embrace of homosexuality, shown themselves to be open to new ways of looking at the world. Having learned to traverse more of life’s sexual geography (indeed, frequently mapping out whole new lands that are terra incognita to most straighties), queer folk have been able to look back at orthodox heterosexuality and conventional sexual mores and found them decidedly wanting. Capricious and often cruelly-enforced rules about the appropriate gender or age or race or number or marital status of ones sexual partners are rightly seen as inhumane and destructive, arbitrary edicts to be challenged, not followed. The fresh perspective won by sexual “travelers” is liberating; it is indeed hard to keep ’em down on the farm after they’ve seen gay Paris!

Similarly, literal suitcase-and-shoe-leather travel has the potential to liberate one from stultifying provincial mindsets, broadening both sexual and political horizons. A new vantage point can lend an enlightening view of both oneself and one’s country, making gay travel a great prescription for both individual and societal well-being.