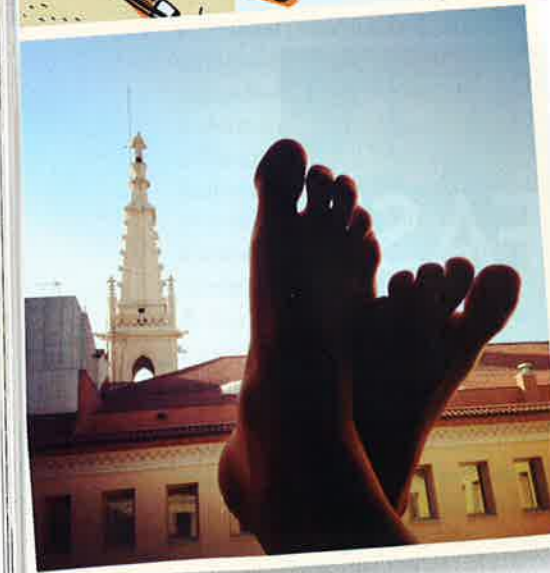


WIRED TO TRAVEL



If one in four of us has the so-called “explorer gene”, Sharon Stephenson (left) is certainly among those DNA-driven globetrotters. She ponders what compels her to travel.



I took my first international flight when I was a toddler. When we disembarked at Singapore and the heat walloped me in the face like a giant hot towel, my mother says I asked, far too loudly, “Who turned the bloody heating on? And could they please turn it off?”

Thankfully for the travelling public, my precociousness and I didn't get on a plane for another decade, when I was lured across the Tasman by a taffeta monstrosity masquerading as a bridesmaid dress.

But these tiny scraps of adventure were enough for me to fall on the concept of travelling like an old friend. The issue was how to parlay it into real life: becoming an air hostess was out – I wasn't tall enough or handy enough with a coffee pot – and as for being in charge of the pointy end of the plane, the nuns at my school would never have entertained the idea of women pilots.

I became obsessed with James

Bond movies and played with the idea of becoming the female equivalent. I wasn't sure exactly what they did or how you became one, but I liked the look of it. There would, I reasoned, be lots of air-time, probably in private jets, with weeks that started in New York and ended in Moscow, sandwiched by cocktails under ridiculously blue Jamaican skies. Sadly, that too was never offered as a career option.

I slogged through university and post-grad study, desperate to find other parts of the globe in which to linger. So far, there have been two OEs – the first for five years, the second for 18 months – in which every dollar not exchanged for rent or food was stolen by plane, train and ferry tickets. There were camel rides in Cairo, octopus tentacles swallowed live in Seoul and hangovers on three different continents. Later, by some miraculous twist of fate, I fell into travel writing and some of the most



sublime moments of my life.

Guardian columnist Lucy Mangan once described foreign travel as “the healing salve that makes the daily grind bearable”. Humans are, by nature, a migratory species, even if these days our migrations last only a few weeks and are powered by jet fuel and a swipe of the credit card. But while most people are content to find a lovely part of the world to escape to for a fortnight or so, others' itchy feet are motivated by more than just boredom. Some of us, it appears, are genetically wired to seek more extreme experiences.

According to research, one in four people has the so-called “explorer gene”, a DRD4-7R dopamine-receptor variant (sometimes referred to as the less-clunky 7R) that's been linked to curiosity and restlessness. Studies show that people in possession of the 7R receptor are more likely to take risks and explore new places, ideas, foods, relationships, drugs and sexual opportunities, as well as generally being more passionate about embracing change and adventure.

Many 7Rs apparently gravitate to high-stress, high-risk careers – such as pilots, entrepreneurs or soldiers – that meet their need for a bigger bang, while those who find themselves with safer jobs often choose the kind of extreme sports that make others shake their heads. “A 7R thinks outside the box, then kicks a hole in it and strides forward into the unknown,” says British travel writer Tim Moore.

It's what propelled our forefathers to leave Africa and go, *Star Trek*-like, where no man had gone before. And while I'm hardly in the same league as these brave explorers, I'd like to think my dopamine receptors are similar to theirs.

For me, travel is about throwing myself off the cliff and hoping I grow wings on the way down. It's the possibility of the unknown, the chance to leave my beliefs at home and see things in a different way. It's that delicious cocktail of nervousness and excitement I get from arriving in a foreign country where I don't know a soul and they don't speak my language. It's the

uncertainty of not knowing how the little things work – how much do I tip the waiter, which bit of the Metro machine do I stick the ticket into, where can I find a decent coffee?

A friend of mine can't imagine why anyone would want to sleep anywhere but their own bed. Her only overseas trip, a holiday to Thailand, was cut short by homesickness. She thinks I'm mad. Just because we're the first generation who can outrun the sun and switch seasons in a single day, it doesn't necessarily mean we should, she says.

Sometimes, I have to agree – when the airport madness, lost luggage and indignity of being herded in ever greater numbers onto planes that appear to be getting smaller threatens to unravel my sanity. Or when my luck runs out and I'm chased by a drug-dealing maniac through a Moscow subway; or repeatedly lose the contents of my stomach, and my mind, in India. It's those days I wonder why I'm compelled to wander the globe.

Few, of course, kid themselves that they're discovering virgin lumps of geography. There are, after all, very few parts of the world that haven't been picked over by travellers. Maybe that's why über-7Rs, such as entrepreneur Richard Branson, are now expanding into space travel. For the rest of us, it's more a case of places, and things, remaining undiscovered until we've found them for ourselves.

James Cameron, director of *Avatar* and *Titanic*, owner of a large chunk of the Wairarapa and almost certainly a 7R, has spent much time and money travelling to the deepest point in the ocean, the Mariana Trench, in the Western Pacific Ocean. Having made the solo descent by submarine to a spot he called “absolutely the most remote, isolated place on the planet”, Cameron was asked why he undertook such a risky, expensive expedition.

“I had to go, because otherwise how would I have known what's out there?” he replied.

I couldn't agree more... +

SHARON STEPHENSON IS A NORTH & SOUTH CONTRIBUTING WRITER.

GETTY