Three Ways Travel Can Ignite Insight

5 MIN READ

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BY HEATHER HURLOCK

Changing your environment accelerates creative breakthroughs, according to a new study on Nobel Prize winners.

If you've ever returned from a trip feeling energized, inspired, or suddenly filled with new ideas, science may now explain why.

A 2025 study published in ***The International Economic Review*** found that Nobel Prize–winning scientists were more likely to begin their groundbreaking work shortly after moving to a new location or spending time in multiple locations. The researchers call this effect "recombinant innovation": the idea that exposure to novel ideas, environments, and people helps the brain combine familiar concepts in new ways.

"Going off into a completely different environment, a new context, might help creative people think in new ways," says study co-author **Bruce Weinberg** from Ohio State University, adding: "You're more likely to come up with that great new idea if you move around, meet new people, have new experiences, encounter new ways of thinking."

In other words, movement sparks insight.

The Neuroscience of New Places

Neuroscience has long shown that even **anticipating novelty** activates the dopaminergic reward system, the same circuits involved in **motivation**, learning, and memory. When you enter a new environment, your brain shifts from routine mode to

exploration mode, increasing activity in the **hippocampus** and **prefrontal cortex**, regions tied to spatial awareness, attention, and executive function.

That may be why so many of us return from travel with fresh perspectives or innovative solutions to stubborn problems. Even **short trips** have been shown to boost creative output, reduce stress, and improve cognitive flexibility.

What the Nobel Scientists Found

The Nobel study focused on "eventual Nobel laureates," or scientists who didn't start off as outliers, but who *became* exceptional. The authors found that the *earlier* these researchers relocated or experienced multiple work environments, the *sooner* they began the work that led to their breakthroughs.

Translation: The act of moving and encountering fresh ideas, systems, and challenges catalyzes innovation. And that doesn't just apply to scientific elites. Travel broadens your perspective, enhances pattern recognition, and supports *recombinatory creativity*: the ability to merge seemingly unrelated concepts into new, useful ones.

Three Ways to Rewire Your Brain When You Travel

You don't need to move across the world or become a digital nomad to unlock these brain-boosting benefits. Even microadventures and short-term changes in scenery like a weekend in a new city or taking your morning walk in an unfamiliar park can disrupt mental ruts and encourage new connections.

Here's how to make travel work for your brain:

1. **Seek diversity, not just distance.** Novelty comes from *difference*, not just geography. Choose destinations with distinct cultures, languages, or landscapes. In other words, don’t go to the same places to eat or shop in a new town.
2. **Engage deeply.** Don’t just pass through. Talk to locals, try unfamiliar foods, visit art spaces, walk without a map. Immersion accelerates neural flexibility.
3. **Reflect and recombine.** Keep a journal while you travel. Ask yourself: What am I seeing here that I’ve never seen before? What connections can I make to my life or work back home?

Why Novelty Ignites Insight

As we get older, we tend to prioritize comfort and predictability, often at the expense of novelty. But that predictability can dull our cognitive edges. Purposeful novelty, especially in the form of travel, language learning, or trying new experiences, can support cognitive longevity by keeping our brains active and adaptive.

So whether you’re planning a sabbatical, a bucket-list trip, or just choosing a different route on your evening walk, remember: Novelty isn’t a luxury. It’s a longevity tool.

Stay amazed. Stay curious. And keep moving.

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WRITTEN BY:



Heather Hurlock