

Out and About: Journeys Completed or Contemplated

A Traveler's Guide to the Land of Depression

"... in moments of clarity, you may realize that you have spent far too long in this place you do not want to be and you do not know the way out."

Travel changes us; a journey to this particular place is guaranteed to have you feeling like you're someone else.

by Pam Mandel

Freelance travel writer and photographer

Permanent January. A gray blanket fort. Fog. 19th century Russian literature.

If these things have limited appeal for you, you are not alone. Yet in spite of the dull edges, lack of color, and very little else to recommend it as a destination, nearly 16 million Americans make an annual journey to the Land of Depression, some taking up residence for months, even years at a time.

The country is as multifaceted as it is dully tedious, offering everything from a week or two of feeling glum, a season of light-deprived blues, or a complete metaphorical drowning in a black lake of murky water that is just above body temperature, making it hard to realize that your lungs are slowly filling with despair.

It's popular wisdom that the best travel changes you, and a journey to this territory is guaranteed to have you feeling like you're someone else in no time. The worst new you awaits! For long-lasting, effective transformation, you can't beat depression as a destination. This guide will help you know what to expect from your journey.

Disclaimer: For a monochromatic country, depression offers a staggering array of nuance. This guide was accurate as of May 2018, but please be aware that while things seem to take for-flippin'-ever in depression, they also change frequently and without notice. We strongly recommend you do your own research in addition to reading this guide.

ARRIVAL

The route to Depressionville is varied. In fact, most travelers don't know they've arrived until they're informed by a medical professional or, in some cases, an insightful friend. "You need to see a doctor," your friend may tell you. Upon completing the required entry form, the PHQ-9 (a questionnaire health practitioners use to diagnose depression), you will be informed if you're in-country.

You might find you've been in-country for quite some time already, without being fully aware of your presence therein. Consider the PHQ-9 a sort of "You Are Here" designation, one you will need to fill out nearly every time you encounter an authority figure of any kind. "Yes," they will say, "I know you filled this out yesterday. Today is a different day."

The porous nature of the borders is such that one moment you may be in-country; the next, out. This lack of clarity about where you are,

Traveler's Guide: *Continued on page 43*

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Shortly after my birthday this year, my doctor diagnosed me with severe recurrent depression. After a few months of treatment I'm feeling much better and back on the road to a happier self.

In addition to seeking medical treatment, part of what eased my burden was speaking candidly about my condition — treating it like the flu or an injury enabled me to feel less guilt and shame about what is a medical disease. Speaking openly about my issues, I found that my social circle was eager to help, much like they'd stop by with soup were I down with a bad cold. Their support continues to be a gift. I strongly encourage anyone who's suffering for more than a week or two with sadness, despair or general lethargy to seek medical help. Depression is a treatable medical condition, and you do not have to suffer.

FACTS ABOUT DEPRESSION IN OLDER ADULTS:

- Depression affects more than 6.5 million of the 35 million Americans aged 65 or older.
- Late-life depression increases risk for medical illness and cognitive decline.
- Unrecognized and untreated depression can have fatal consequences.
- Depression is the single most significant risk factor for suicide in the elderly population.
- Older adults are at increased risk for depression. About 80% of older adults have at least one chronic health condition, and 50% have two or more. Depression is more common in people who also have other illnesses (such as heart disease or cancer) or whose function becomes limited.
- Older adults are often misdiagnosed and undertreated. Depression is not a natural reaction to illness or the life changes that may occur as we age. Older adults often do not seek help because they don't understand that they could feel better with appropriate treatment.
- Estimates of major depression are much higher for older adults who require home healthcare or hospitalization.

This conviction is so encompassing that line-circumvention has replaced crossword puzzles and Sudoku as my newfound brain exercise for maintaining mental vibrancy. So obsessed am I with the plotting and planning that I'm considering writing a self-help book titled *When Long Lines Happen to Good People*.

As a teaser of sorts, some of the book's topics (all based on personal experiences, of course) will include tips like these:

Once you choose a checkout line, commit to it. Avoid monitoring the progress of neighboring lines. Keep those eyes focused straight ahead. Line-angst tends to compound when we perceive shoppers in adjacent lines advancing at a quicker pace.

Avoid making big life decisions while waiting in line. Frustrations from waiting tend to mildew clear-headed thought. Unlike a hot shower or a walk in the forest, the most popular incubators for creative breakthroughs, you never hear anyone attribute a eureka-moment to waiting in line at the Winn-Dixie. I could be wrong, but I bet if thoroughly researched, historians would discover most of mankind's worst decisions — Hitler deciding to invade Poland, Paul Anka deciding to

write "You're Having My Baby" — all occurred while waiting in grocery store checkout lines.

Maintain focus when using the self-checkout. Follow the checkout machine's visual and audible prompts without questioning. A wandering mind — my eternal downfall — slows the process with mistakes. Instead of paying attention, my mind distracts with a salvo of feckless questions: How come the machine's female voice sounds oddly similar to the voice on GPS devices? Is it the same person? Are they sisters? Why do machines usually have female voices? How would I feel if it were a male voice with a thick Boston accent? How come after most scans it says, "Move your item to the bag," but occasionally recognizes the name of a scanned item and in the giddy manner of a Jeopardy contestant who after 11 minutes of being shut out finally knows an answer and shouts "Move your BANANAS! to the bag"? I then waste even more time waiting for an attendant to amend my errors.

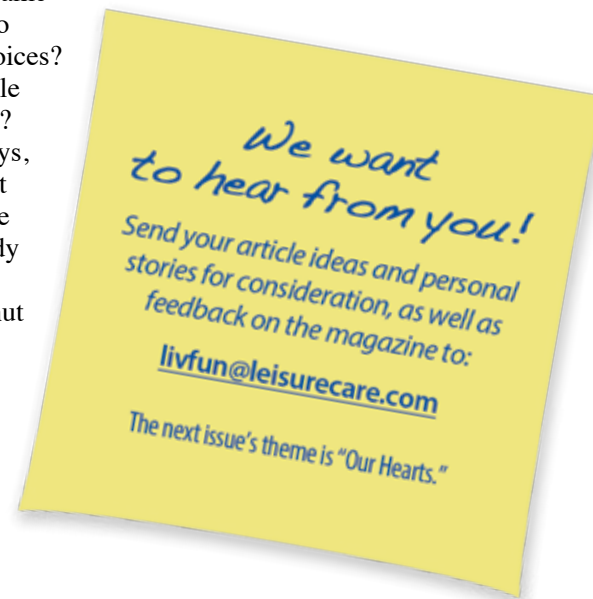
This is just a small sampling ... but if and when this book hits the Amazon best-seller list, I plan to use all proceeds

toward lobbying grocery stores into making the checkout experience more accommodating for older shoppers. We'll start by changing "20 Items or Less" express lanes to "20 Years or Less."

Hopefully, it will speed the checkout process.

Hopefully, it will give us more time to do, see and flourish.

Hopefully, it will make the Stones' "Time Is On My Side" enjoyable again. ♦



exactly, is a defining feature of the landscape. Expect to be continually re-orienting; you may find yourself crying in the car for no apparent reason as you drive home from a perfectly pleasant and even-keeled outing.

BUDGET

Thanks to the blatant capitalism of healthcare in the U.S., the quality of your trip often depends on your health insurance. You may or may not have coverage for mental health services, and even if you do have coverage, your out-of-pocket expenses can be quite high. Unexpected expenses are likely to arise and can include late fees on bills that you have not paid because you forgot, opportunity cost due to missed days at work, and an uptick in pizza delivery, even while the pizza goes uneaten because you're not hungry — I mean, you thought you were, but really, you're just not; maybe it will be good for breakfast.

Those with excellent benefits and a retired lifestyle may find depression a more affordable — but by no means easier — destination. The self-employed, part-time workers, and any number of poorly insured or financially insecure individuals should prepare to have the expense of depression be an additional burden — because everything is already awful, why not have it cost a lot of money too?

FOOD AND DRINK

Bad-for-you but fun-to-eat foods dominate the depression dining scene. Ice cream by the pint, Doritos, stress-baked cinnamon rolls, mac and cheese, burgers and fries ... The diet of a summer picnic seems to play a prevalent role. The bad news is that the kinds of foods you'd normally enjoy as a treat at that summer picnic end up sucked entirely free of fun as you find yourself staring at the Cheetos dust at the bottom of the bag and wondering if you should eat a salad now to offset your bad choices; but making a salad is just so exhausting. I barely even remember eating those Cheetos, so why is my gut a gaping maw of sadness when it's full of Cheetos?

Alcoholic drinks are a bad idea in that they tend to have depressive qualities, but maybe a bourbon on the rocks would take the edge off? Did my doctor say that I could or could not have a glass of wine with my meds; I'm just going back to bed anyway. Yes, it's only one in the afternoon; what's your point?

THINGS TO DO

Relentless introspection is a popular pastime in depression. Many locals engage in an activity called rumination, where they worry about a problem over and over and over again, preferably one they cannot solve, until they've occupied so much of their brain with this Rubik's Cube of concerns that they cannot perform the most rudimentary of tasks, not to mention be successful and creative in their daily responsibilities. It's always a bad time to ruminate, always, so there's no need to worry about schedules. And anyone can do it; no special skill is needed.

Restless sleeping is an easy way to fill 12–18 hours of your day. It can easily be integrated with pretending to read while being completely unfocused, staring at on-screen entertainment, or listlessly scrolling through social media.

Extreme sports are available to the supremely motivated. It's widely recommended that you make the effort to participate in these activities while you're in-country, but be aware, the exertion can seem insurmountable. If you can muster the energy, you can participate in such heart-racing activities as walking the dog while still wearing your pajamas, doing a load of laundry and leaving it in the dryer for three days, or for the truly ambitious, taking a shower and going to buy groceries that will go bad in your fridge because who has the energy to cook?

SOCIAL LIFE

Hahahahahahahahahah. Ha. Whew. I'm done. No, wait. Hahahahahahaha. Ha. Heh. Hoo boy. Just ... no.

THE TRIP OF A LIFETIME

Lucky travelers will find they merely transit the landscape, skimming across the surface as though it were an afternoon drive through Liechtenstein, that tiny European nation you can walk across in a day, if you're ambitious. They will treat it as a little more than a stopover, and indeed, this is a wise choice — as if you have any choice in the matter.

The coffee at the end of the B gate in the depression airport isn't bad if you end up grounded for more than a few hours. And, honestly, an airport grilled cheese and a good mope every now and then isn't going to ruin you. Have a good wallow; you deserve it.

But in moments of clarity, you may realize that you have spent far too long in this place you do not want to be and you do not know the way out. You will require the help of an experienced guide to find your departure gate. The lights on the emergency exits are fitted with bulbs that have been dead for years; the doors themselves may be completely overgrown, and the staggering weight of lethargy meeting apathy meeting what feels like an epic case of jet lag can leave any traveler feeling like the way out is, oh, I guess I just live in my bed now. That seems fine, right? It's fine. I need another nap anyway.

Were we talking about something? I'm sorry. I'm going to go lie down. Is it OK if I say I'm going to call you later and then forget all about it and cry while watching *Parks and Rec* instead? Cool. ♦

Read more:

"Depression Is Not a Normal Part of Growing Older." Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved March 1, 2018, from www.cdc.gov.

"Depression in Older Adults: More Facts." Mental Health America. Retrieved March 1, 2018, from www.mentalhealthamerica.net.

BRAIN GAMES ANSWERS / From Page 20

Answers to Crossword Puzzle

S	T	P		A	W	L		G	A	S		B	A	D		
T	R	I	O		V	I	I		N	N	W		A	T	E	
B	O	O	K	S		I	L	L		P	T	A		T	H	E
R	O	P	E	S		A	L	A	S		R	A	T	E	D	
A	L	I		I	O	N		C	H	I	L	D	R	E	N	
S	C	O	F	F		U	S	U	R	Y		C	D	S		
						M	Y	T	H	S		N	E	R	D	
C	U	B	A			A	D	S			E	U	C	L	I	D
O	F	T	H	E		S	A	I	T	H		B	R	A	I	N
D	O	U	A	L	A		S	H	E			A	C	I	D	
						L	I	D	S		I	N	P	U	T	
F	R	I		N	A	T	E	S		I	N	E	R	T		
J	O	N	A	T	H	A	N		A	G	E		E	R	A	
B	O	U	N	D		G	R	A	B		A	S	T	I	R	
E	R	N		E	W	E		A	C	E		S	W	I	F	T
A	D	D		P	A	S		G	E	L		E	A	R	L	
U	S	S		T	N	T		E	R	E			B	E	E	

Answers to Sudoku

1	8	7	3	9	2	6	5	4
4	5	9	6	7	8	2	3	1
6	2	3	5	4	1	9	8	7
2	3	5	9	1	6	7	4	8
8	1	4	7	2	5	3	9	6
9	7	6	8	3	4	1	2	5
5	6	2	1	8	9	4	7	3
3	9	1	4	5	7	8	6	2
7	4	8	2	6	3	5	1	9