

The Lonely Planet Guide to the 4th Dimension

A Time Traveller's Guide to Surviving the Past

This discussion meeting is a bit different from the usual. Normally we start with someone presenting an argument, which everyone disagrees with. Violently. Or giving an overview of a topic, which everyone picks holes in. Enthusiastically. My problem is that I don't know enough to present an argument, but I do have lots of questions. Sophia, on the other hand, is a historian and so takes a professional interest in this sort of thing, so I'm hoping she can enlighten us. Then you can all disagree with **her**. Violently and with enthusiasm, by preference.

Anyway, let me explain my problem. You may remember that last term I led a [discussion meeting on the topic of Time Travel](#). I explained how time worked, how you could build a time machine, and how to avoid sleeping with any of your grandparents. As a physicist, I could do this in the knowledge that I was right, and all the contrary arguments anyone tried were obviously wrong.

But now I want to use my time machine and travel into the past. For reasons too sophisticated for non-physicists to understand (ho hum), **The Laws of Time** (that's capitalised!) stipulate that I can't bring anything with me (remember the beginning of *Terminator*?). Also, I'm about to be apprehended by the Time Police so I have to leave tomorrow. There's no time to bone up on techniques for the manufacture of gunpowder or useful facts like the sudden boom in tulip stocks in... whenever it was. Unfortunately I'm far too theoretical a physicist to have much special practical knowledge. I could probably knock you up the plans for a mean particle accelerator, but that wouldn't be much use if the only electricity available is what you get when you rub a piece of amber (unless **you** can remember exactly when the lightning bolt struck the clock tower).

So, will I prosper in the past? Are there any top tips that I should take with me (apart from checking the surnames of any potential sexual partners)? Should I send one of you guys in my place? Sophia would certainly do better on the historical knowledge, but maybe a scientist or engineer would have more valuable skills. If I get a choice in the matter, what would be the best period to choose? (But maybe my time machine is knocked to a random setting when I have that last-minute struggle with the Time Cops before pressing the **GO** button in a desperate escape bid.)

Books

In order to make the discussion a bit more concrete, I thought it might be a good idea to consider a particular period of history, as used in the the book I've brought along. (I also brought a couple more that we can consider later if there's time.)

The Anubis Gates

The Anubis Gates by Tim Powers is the story of Brendan Doyle, a literary scholar, who is part of a party who travels back to Victorian London to hear a lecture by Coleridge. Doyle gets stranded. Despite his intimate knowledge of the period, he ends up as a beggar, on the run from both his colleagues and some local sorcerers who want to know what he knows about the future.

This is a great fantasy novel, that mixes in elements of horror, mystery, historical romance, and time-travel paradox. In a wonderfully convoluted plot, Doyle meets Old Kingdom Egyptian sorcerers, Victorian romantic poets, a werewolf, age-old secret societies, grotesques inhabiting the London sewers,... and of course himself.

Read page 170, final paragraph to penultimate paragraph on next page.

Read page 225, final paragraph for two paragraphs.

Things to consider?

1. Could I fit into the society (any society) without some background? It would be easier to pass as an out-of-towner than today, but one could receive awkward questions, or expectation of a letter of introduction.
2. Would I have an advantage simply by having grown up with a good diet and few childhood diseases. Would a modern person be significantly taller, fitter, stronger, quicker, and more intelligent than someone from a previous age? Of course it's always nice to think that, in a past age, even us wimps could be considered hunks, but would the difference really be that noticeable? Would that be a good thing, or would I be considered a freak (more than normal, I mean)?
3. Would a basic knowledge of modern science, medicine, and technology be useful? Germ theory, how to make a battery. Would I stand any chance of acquiring a patron if I expounded on atomic theory or Special Relativity?
4. Would a basic fore-knowledge of history help? What would help for Victorian times?

The problem is always my lack of knowledge of specifics. If I knew when Disraeli came to power, and the names of some of his ministers, maybe I could ingratiate myself with one who would later become prominent. This is where Sophia would do much better.

Maybe I could give some hints to James Watt, while he was developing his steam engine - but most of the problems

developing a new technology aren't so much with the theory, but developing the materials and components (eg. boring the piston cylinder). An engineer might do better here.

Similarly, if I knew the details of races or stock market fluctuations, I'd do quite well. But who does?

5. There are plenty of practical skills that a contemp would have that I don't. I've never had to shoe a horse or light a fire without matches (that should be OK in Victorian London - just find a match girl to exploit). Of course I could rely on the extensive knowledge of such things I've obtained from films and TV. (I'm fucked, aren't I?)
6. What about cultural knowledge? In earlier times, would I be burned at the stake because I can't remember what the 10th Commandment is? (Remember *The Crucible*?) What should I watch for in Victorian times?
7. If I can bring something small back with me, what would be best? Gold, some cool tech, or a detailed history of Victorian times?
8. If I get a choice, are there better times I could choose? Going back just a few years, I could probably do quite well buying Google stock or whatever, as long as I remember when the Internet Bubble burst.
9. The further back I go, the more difficult language becomes, even if I stick to England. How easy would it be to pick up the language? How much did the contemps know about foreign languages? Could I pass myself off as an Romanian, pretending that my modern English was Romanian? Would I be locked up as a spy or hailed as an ambassador? Obviously Latin would be useful in Roman and post-Roman Europe, but would any modern languages help in deciphering what people say?
10. If someone tells me of an important event ("your ancestor lost all his money at cards on 12th January 1720"), I'd better remember when England changed over to the Gregorian calendar - or when people stopped counting the new year on March 25th.

Note added after the meeting: we had a good discussion on all these points and more. I didn't take notes, but might as well record here a few random points that I did write down:

- a. The quotes I gave were from bits of the book set during Regency, not Victorian, times.
- b. The biggest determinant of success would be gender. It would be much more difficult for a woman to achieve success in Victorian England.
- c. What about those of us that need glasses? They were available, but some of us might not do so well until we acquired them.
- d. There was no stock market in this period until after the 1860s.

Some other nice examples:-

Doomsday Book

In the *Doomsday Book* by Connie Willis, a normal historical field trip from 2054 to the Middle Ages goes horribly wrong. Kivrin is an Oxford student who goes back to 1320 to study Oxfordshire life and language.

Read page 385, "No", Kivrin whispered, looking at the priest' ... 'under the skin.'

While the future Oxford seemed rather unconvincing, this book is very convincing in its evocation of the Middle Ages. Unlike those around her, Kivrin knows what's going on. She can't stop the plague, but is able to bring some comfort to the desperate people around her.

Pastwatch

My last book is *Pastwatch: the Redemption of Christopher Columbus* by Orson Scott Card.

Diko, Kemal, and Hanahpu are historians in the "time of undoing" - our future, when the environment is so devastated that humanity is clinging to survival. They decide that Columbus's discovery of America was the critical moment of history that led to their downfall - but also that an even worse outcome would result if he hadn't sailed. They travel to meet him as he arrives in America and set history on a third course.

Read page 336, "But I tell you that here, in this place, there are millions of souls ... you will never be pleasing to God"
This book is as informative about the real history of 15th Century Europe and meso-America as it is with speculation about how it might have been different.

<http://users.ox.ac.uk/~ousfg/misc/4th-dimension.html> created 17th January 2007 by

[Tim Adye](mailto:T.J.Adye@rl.ac.uk), <T.J.Adye@rl.ac.uk>

