

Lost and Found

by Nancy Friedman

If you are reluctant to ask the way, you will be lost.

—Malay proverb

The happiest I've ever been while traveling was during a business trip to Las Vegas a couple of years ago. I was staying at one of the newest and biggest hotels on the Strip, a pleasure palace of such colossal proportions that the architects had massed the exterior windows in groups of eight to trick passersby into thinking there were fewer of them. Otherwise, the thousands of little square apertures would have made the building look like a prison.

Inside, the hotel was laid out according to Rule #1 of Las Vegas commercial space planning: Abandon hope, all ye who enter here. Once you ventured into the vast, glittering casino, all bets were off, directionwise: no walls, no doors, no signs provided the slightest hint of orientation.

I'm no gambler, but I was thrilled. For once, everyone I saw was just as lost as I was.

I am, to use the modish term, directionally challenged. I've been lost in all the expected places—Jerusalem's Old City, the New York subway system, the Ikea store—and in some really embarrassing ones, like San Francisco neighborhoods I've visited dozens of times. I do fairly well in large cities like Los Angeles with prominent landmarks and strict street grids; I'm hopeless in the countryside or in small towns with winding lanes. I'm pretty safe in Oakland, where I've lived for 15 years: San Francisco Bay is to the west (and I do know west—it's where the sun sets), the hills are to the east, and the Oakland Tribune building and twin-towered Federal Building are downtown. I fare much worse when I cross the bay to Marin County, whose many villages sprawl around the bay and up a mountain. During the day, when it's possible to read street signs (if you can find them—that's part of the Marin "charm"), I can sometimes find my destination; add fog, rain, or darkness to the equation and I'm doomed. On one stormy night in Marin County, I got lost walking from my hostess's front door to my car, which was parked about 200 feet up the road.

Imagine my delight when I discovered a new book for folks like me, *I'll Never Get Lost Again: The Complete Guide to Improving Your Sense of Direction*, by Linda Grekin. (A sure sign of kismet: the book was published by RDR Books, whose offices are *exactly one block* from my house.) In fact, the book reassured me I'm not all *that* disabled: unlike some members of the Lost Tribe, I can read a map. And I don't panic on freeways; on the contrary, I'm soothed by their clear, frequent signs and marked exits.

But after taking the book's self-test, I had to admit I was at least partially disabled. The key question for me was: "Do you need to have the map facing the way you are going to picture the route and follow the map?" Well, duh—doesn't everyone? Apparently not, says Ms. Grekin, who (when she isn't getting lost herself) is a school librarian in Michigan. In the course of her research, she discovered an interesting correlation: directionally challenged people score very poorly on those school tests that ask you to mentally rotate a figure. You know: here's a blobby circle, and here are four more blobby circles. Which two are really the same blobby circle, only turned around?

Me, I take one look at those pictures and my stomach starts churning. Please, please, please give me a mathematics word problem instead.

Is there hope? Ms. Grekin, who seems like a cheerful woman despite her, um, challenge, offers some helpful advice. Keep a tape recorder in the car and record all the turns you've made. Wear a watch with a compass. Practice your route the day before. Don't give up. And don't panic.

But I've found that sometimes the best way to find your way is to surrender to lostness. I learned that lesson unwillingly during one of my scariest getting-lost experiences.

I was traveling in New Mexico, and met an artist who promised to show me a cave filled with strange sculptures in a remote wilderness area. Except he didn't take me there: he simply accompanied me to a trailhead, waved his hand vaguely, and gave me some incomprehensible directions having to do with rock formations. I should have listened to my common sense and walked straight back to my rental car, which was still in my field of vision. Instead, filled with the careless optimism that travel can sometimes engender, I set off in the direction of the waving hand. Forty-five minutes later, I had discovered no cave, and was standing on a windy hillside cursing myself for having left my water bottle in the car. (Which, I suddenly realized, I'd forgotten to lock.) When I tried to retrace my footsteps, I found that the soft sandstone had swallowed them. Panic formed a hard ball in my gut and began crawling up my throat. How long would it take the sheriffs' deputies to find my bleached bones, I wondered.

Yet just at the moment I gave up, I saw what I'd been missing. Not the cave—I never did find it—but the blue sweep of the sky, the golden mountains carved by shadows, the echoing silence. I no longer felt like a stranger on the landscape; I felt oddly at home. My head cleared, my stomach quieted, and I began a slow descent that miraculously brought me back to my starting point.

Nancy Friedman can be found at www.wordworking.com. *I'll Never Get Lost Again* is available in bookstores and on the publisher's Web site, www.rdrbooks.com.