

The Story Behind by Rob Swanson

My wife can be a bit obsessive when it comes to planning a vacation. Triple A is called and maps are ordered. Each segment is carefully examined for distance, efficiency and what there is to see. And then it happened.

“This doesn’t make sense.” The TripTik says to drive from the Grand Canyon to Seattle in a dogleg pattern. Head straight for the coast of California and go straight up. But if the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, doesn’t it make sense to angle up through Nevada? Not according to the map; that’s three hours longer.

“Must be the mountains.”

Except it’s not. It’s the map. The Mercator map, that is. The one we see hanging on walls at school. The one made in the 1500’s before satellites and GPS. The one before planes or cars. The familiar one.

It’s also the wrong one. That comfortable old map makes Greenland look the same size as China or Africa, when in fact China is four times larger, and Africa is *fourteen* times larger. It also makes North America look gigantic, which might explain some of its comfort factor.

Projecting a global topography onto a flat piece of paper is pretty much doomed to failure on some level, so the question is what to retain? Shape or size? Our common map retains shape and distorts size, but it’s good for navigation – except when you start measuring the “stretch zones” like the one found in Nevada.

The Peters Map thinks that size matters and it’s enough to give us Americans an inferiority complex. The Peters Map wilts and elongates familiar continents. North America looks like an afterthought, while Europe and Africa take dominance. Truth is, there is almost twice the land mass below the equator than above it, but our familiar map flips those proportions.

It makes me wonder which other beliefs we hold that are untested because they’re comfortable. Men don’t cry. Self-reliance is a virtue. I’m OK, You’re OK. I’ll only believe it if I see it.

What do you think?

Mercator Map



Peters Map

