

Two stoves

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I was in love with the camp stove we had in Venezuela. It was a jigsaw puzzle: you open a bag of parts, put the little stove-holding pegs in the base, and then slide in the heat reflector, and then screw in the crown, and then fasten it all to the gas canister. There was something fun about the process every time.

In the end, the stove itself just gave you a surface on which to put a pot and distributed the gas from the canister, which did all the real work. The canister is very clean and neat. There's really no way to get the gas out without a little stove on top, so once it was detached you could just throw it in the backpack with the food and clothes and not worry about it. We made tea in our hotel rooms all the time, and for the week that I was living in a tent, I never felt unsafe cooking inside it. One drawback is that the canister is basically a specialty part, and you can't take it on airplanes, so you've got to find one wherever you go. We found ours at a furnace store in Merida.

Through most of Latin America and all of Spain, houses don't have gas lines; instead, you buy big ol' cans (*una bombilla*) of compressed gas which somebody has to haul to your house and then drag up however many flights of stairs it takes to get to your apartment. *Muy Interesante* (a pop science mag for the Spanish-speaking set) asked its readers to nominate the top sci-tech innovation of the century, and the readership put the bombilla de gaz right up there with relativity and quantum mechanics.

So no problem getting the bombilla-ettes for the camp stove in Venezuela; they're clear on the concept down there. But there's something aesthetically displeasing about having to find this specialized part everywhere you go—and when you're done with the canister, there's nothing to do but throw it out.

So when I finally bought a stove for myself (that one was a loaner), I decided to go with the liquid-powered kind, which is an entirely different animal.

The functioning is sort of amazing. As noted, there's now a pump, since the liquid isn't prepressurized. The pressure from the hand pump pushes the gas along a narrow tube, which loops over where the flame is about to be and down to the bottom of the stove. It spritzes through a little nipple, and then you set fire to it. When you first start it you're burning liquid, which is inefficient and messy. I'm using kerosene, 'cause the hardware store didn't have specialty camper-gas, and when kerosene burns as liquid, it produces evil black smoke and covers the poor stove in soot. Meanwhile, the flame is warming up the

tube through which the kerosene runs; when the tube gets hot enough, the kerosene vaporizes and comes out as gas. The flame gets significantly hotter, and everything that was going up as soot is now being burned. You get a dazzling flame as the vapor shoots up and ignites. At this point, you can start making tea.

I'm torn as to which sort of stove I like better. The canister-based stoves move all the hard technology to the canister manufacturers, so you the user don't have to worry about the whole bootstrapping process of producing vapor from liquid fuel. The liquid-based stove is lower-tech in the sense that all of the workings are right there for you to see and avoid touching, but it doesn't offer the low-tech advantage of having fewer moving parts. Also, it doesn't come into pieces like the jigsaw stove did. But there's a much more significant difference between a can of gas and dealing with liquid.

Visceral consumption

To make coffee on my front porch, I need to bring out a kettle of water, a coffee press with some coffee, a mug with sugar at the bottom, and the bottle of kerosene for the stove. Four more-or-less pure commodities, all of which wars have been fought over.

There are some cases where the raw material is preferred—people pay extra for the veggies that haven't been frozen and turned into some sort of pulp—but then there's a whole 'nother class of commodities for which people pay extra so that they don't have to think about the pure commodity itself: animals and petroleum are the standouts.

If gas was sold in supermarkets like milk, we'd all be driving much less. When you burn gas on your house's kitchen stove, there's a meter downstairs that runs and gives you a little number; when you drive, there's a little gauge that goes from F to E. But imagine if you had to fill the tank every time—and not in the sense of going to a pump with a gauge measuring dollars spent, but in the sense of holding in your hand a two-liter bottle of liquid, which you pour into the car. At the end of the trip you can say, 'Oh, look, those two liters of liquid have burned away into fumes. Better get more.' My own impression was that Spaniards were much more likely to keep their hot water usage down than the typical U.S. home dweller.

Thusly, the new stove makes me more self-conscious about using petroleum. The compressed-gas canisters are binary—it's not like they shrivel up as gas is used; they just don't work one day, and then you throw them out the way you throw out a soda can. With a liquid-burning stove, every cup of tea destroys a little more of the petroleum product which I'd carried home. When I use the big ol' Maytag in my kitchen, I never think twice about the gas, sweat, and tears that went into it, even though it burns through much more gas in much less time.

The irony of low-footprint living is that it makes us even more aware of what little footprint we do leave.

Sailing beyond the sunset, making tea there

The other advantage of the liquid-based stove is of course that I can go anywhere and find something to run it on—it'll run on car gas if the need arises. Equipment which folds up and works anywhere is half about neat gadgetry, and half a romantic promise. 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world. Push off—and anywhere you go, your nifty gadget will be there for you, sitting well in order. I could go live in Ethiopia, and would have no problem making myself tea.

Which makes me feel hopelessly domestic and unadventurous. What exactly does it mean to go to distant and exotic lands with equipment that allows my life there to be as much like life on my front porch as possible? There's a point when a person carries so much baggage (in the form of procedures, outlook, habits) that they're not really travelling; sometimes I feel that I'm quickly approaching that state.