

**HEY BOOMERS, DUST OFF YOUR BACKPACKS  
TRAVEL THE WORLD ON A LIMITED BUDGET**



HEY BOOMERS, DUST OFF YOUR BACKPACKS  
TRAVEL THE WORLD ON A LIMITED BUDGET

Or

AROUND THE WORLD ALONE  
ON SOCIAL SECURITY

By  
LINDA J. BROWN

*A Hey Boomers Media Book*

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*To intrepid travelers of every century,  
no matter what their age.*



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## WHEN FEAR FELL AWAY

We were descending the summit of Pyramid Peak near Aspen, Colorado, when I had my first—and final—face-to-face encounter with fear. I stared it down, and I haven't heard from it since.

It was August 1988, and I'd climbed this killer mountain three times before, never much thinking of its drastic reputation among mountaineers as the toughest and most dangerous of Colorado's "fourteeners," the mountaineer's term for any mountain over 14,000 feet. But the death of famed theoretical physicist Heinz Pagels, just the week before, was on my mind.

At fifty, I was only a year older than he had been on that gorgeous July day when he hugged the same rock face and edged his right foot blindly around the curve to find a solid place on the narrow ledge. Pyramid is what's called a "rotten" mountain, and it was his bad luck to find a rotten rock with that right foot. Thinking of him that day, I survived his ledge, but there was a scree-covered slope just ahead with my name on it

Someone else in my party had already crossed an angled slab of granite and was waiting to grab my hand, once I'd taken several long steps necessary to traverse the sideways-slanting rock crossed by the trail. Then, I stopped short. There was nothing for four thousand feet to catch a plummeting body. Plus, tiny pebbles of scree littered that slick rock, and they could easily send my boot soles skidding.

"I could die ten seconds from now," I heard a part of my mind whisper to myself, as fear found a wide open door into my heart. I felt his cold fingers along my spine and

noticed how that affected the backs of my knees and put a stricture in my throat. For one split second, I even considered challenging my own belief that what one takes up the mountain, one must also carry down, including my own inexpert body.

Then, I remembered the lesson of the labor room, twenty-five years before. My babies were born by natural childbirth and I went into labor fully trained to cooperate. Midpoint, and simply out of curiosity, I had experimented for one tiny moment to see what would happen if I stopped doing the breathing and relaxing exercises that I'd been taught. *Wham*—the pain hit hard. Now, I understood why those women down the hall were screaming and crying in such fear: They were unprepared, and so afraid that their bodies naturally clenched up and worked against them. There in that labor room bed I took charge of myself and resumed the exercises, and all went well.

And, on this mountain, I took charge of myself again. *Tak, tak, tak, tak, tak, tak*, said my mind, verbalizing the six steps required; using my hands to rehearse the placement of my feet. That launched my body across the open space and, in seconds, I was holding my friend's outstretched hand. Fear had lost its foothold and must have fallen into the abyss instead, because I haven't seen him since.

Over the next quarter-century, there were many opportunities for fear to return to my heart. I left my happy-go-lucky life in glorious Aspen to plan and lead group trips to the Soviet Union, taking Westerners to meet the people of that vast land when the Iron Curtain fell apart. Strange and dicey things happened all the time, but they gave me exhilaration and happiness instead of fear and worry. That sort of travel led to an appetite for more, and I began to roam

the less-traveled places of the world, alone. Recently, I proved that I could safely wander across the entire Northern Hemisphere by myself, with only a backpack, for a year. Soon, I'll set out to do the same throughout the Southern Hemisphere. Even as I age along, I do not encounter that old rascal, Fear. My beloved mountain, Pyramid Peak in Colorado, took him away from me forever.





## PREFACE

There's a certain kind of story that pops up in our minds when we're sitting around a campfire, or a dinner table, and someone says, "Let me tell you about the funniest bus trip I ever took . . ." Or the wildest camel ride, or the strangest meal, or whatever.

If you're a veteran traveler too, then all of your own stories in those same categories will come to mind, ready for the telling when the first speaker is finished. Human beings have always been this way. It's how we spent our evenings, back in the cave. And it's often how we spend them today, if we ever take the time to sit around a fire. So, come now and gather around my campfire while I tell my tales. I call out to a vast population, the Baby Boomers, the oldest of whom are, at the very least, eight years younger than me. A few boomers began to tiptoe into early retirement at age 62, in February of 2008, but the greater majority must wait a few more years until they can draw full Social Security benefits.

Boomers may not yet have comforting stories in their minds, as I do, with the strange vistas I've seen through the gauze of a government check, because they're still among the uninitiated. I'm like an elderly warrior, securely under the protection of the Tribal Fund, who has returned to tell of good times possible on the other side of the great age divide. Boomers cannot yet go to learn the truth for themselves, and they may quake at the thought of seventh-decade bones lugging belongings along unlit back roads to strange beds and uncertain sanitation. Historically, that Tribal Fund has spelled an end to the happy-go-lucky life and a beginning of a long and dreaded decline into dotage.

But, here am I, with genuine tales to the contrary. I've been Out There, and I'm going again. Let me tell you what it's like to be socially secure under the most insecure of circumstances. Let me tell you how I traveled all over, and eventually around the world alone, on Social Security.

My traveling style is quite wingdingaroooney, just like my self-taught snow-skiing. I like to go fast. Through all the years that I lived in Aspen, Colorado, try as I might to carve those nice, safe turns, I usually wound up heading straight down the mountain, gathering speed, and hoping I could make the next curve in the trail without a spectacular wipeout. Somehow, I never got hurt; did no damage to people or their property, and had a very exhilarating time, but I hung up my skis when I turned sixty-five because my younger friends were getting their blown-out-knees replaced. Nowadays, I'm still carrying on that tradition of throwing myself down the mountain and then seeing what happens, by heading out into the world with a minimum of preparation.

I have two disclaimers to make. First, I hardly expect many of you to roar out the door, like I do, and fling yourselves down the mountains of adventure travel without a safety net. But if I'm doing it the hard way, then perhaps I can defuse any temptation of yours to use age as an excuse. You can go kamikaze skiing with me vicariously and then make up your own style, having seen that the wide-open spaces are relatively forgiving and that the world is actually quite safe. This is not a how-to book. There are many excellent ones already available. This is a what-happened-to-me book, which might give you an inkling of things that could happen to you if you also become enthralled with extemporaneous travel.

The second disclaimer is that it would be foolish of me to say that everyone can do this on Social Security. I can, only because certain conditions apply: I'm single and healthy and lead a very simple lifestyle with no debts and few expenses. I do have a good thing going for me, in that my Social Security check is pretty large. I'm collecting as if I were a doctor, without ever having gone to medical school, thanks to the fact that I married a physician and became eligible for his Social Security when he passed away.

After six or seven decades on this planet, none of us will have exactly the same configuration of lifestyle. We geriatrics may all look alike to those in charge now, but we're still very, very individual, which means that my story surely won't fit your circumstances. But my attitude might possibly have an impact upon your own. And, that's what I'm really trying to convey: thoughts, discoveries, and conclusions about this high-wire act called Life.

Growing up in the Fifties in the small town of Winter Haven, Florida, I had the same aspirations as the other girls in my class: to fall in love, marry and raise a family. I married a medical student right after graduating from the University of Florida with a degree in Journalism and Broadcasting. Some decades later, after my children were raised, I grew restless with my settled life, left my husband, and eventually moved to Aspen, where I became involved with grassroots travel to the Soviet Union just as that country was beginning to open up.

Westerners were curious to meet Russian citizens and to see the country that had been closed to them for over seventy years. An informal movement called Citizen Diplomacy soon developed, to allow teachers and other

professionals to interact with their Soviet counterparts. Two of my friends participated in those early groups and returned to set up their own small travel companies to meet the need for bringing Americans to the USSR for homestays, conferences, and short business seminars. I spent the next four years helping to plan and lead group tours to Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, and Siberia. There was no model for this sort of work and we were completely independent of any government, other than the requirements of the complicated Russian visa application. We employed doctoral candidates in the computer sciences to set up the tours and to provide us with university students as local guides and translators.

I was actually within the Soviet Union, and the Republics that developed later, for a total of eighteen months during that four-year period. It was a very exciting time to be in the USSR, and all such travel necessarily had a very wingdingaroonie flavor. Later, I became qualified to lead conventional group tours by taking a course at the International Tour Manager Academy in Denver, but my real interest is in solitary rambling in strange countries, to see what I can see. Inevitably, I'll not see all the sights available in a given location and I'll have frustrations that the escorted traveler will never know; but it's always possible for me to develop a mystical sense of belonging to a place, simply because I'm free to loaf around in it.

When I set out in 2005 on my around-the-world journey, I was trying to be a lady and to do a little something to preserve a dignity befitting my advanced years, so backpacking hadn't yet occurred to me. But after daily agonies with an assortment of suitcases across the length and breadth of Central Europe, I succumbed to an enormous

pack, bought on the run in Prague, which did solve the problem. I never knew how many pounds I was carrying, but I'm eagerly looking forward to the day when an experienced mountain man informs me that an eighty-five liter pack was built for giants.









**SLEEPING WITH GUYS HALF MY AGE:  
HOSTELING AROUND THE WORLD  
ON SOCIAL SECURITY**



## EASTERN EUROPE

2005 - Age 67

Is an around-the-world journey the Holy Grail of travel?

For me, that was the case. It seemed so far to travel, so difficult, so expensive, and so foreign. Plus, I didn't want to whisk around in eighty days. I wanted a trip that I could savor, one that made me feel as if I were living in permanent travel mode.

One that took me a whole year.

It was just too tempting not to use my fat Social Security check to follow my dreams. This obligingly hit the bank once a month, requiring nothing more of me than to keep aging along. Having also inherited my ex-husband's fine, bright-yellow pickup truck, I had no need of my sweet little bright-yellow 1979 VW restored convertible, so I sold it for \$6000 and used that stash for airfare, Intrepid group trips, and incidentals. All in all, the money came out right on the nose. I never quite ran out, but I also had nothing left over—only the memories, and twelve handwritten journals from which these stories have been gleaned—with plenty of them remaining untold, as you might imagine.

I can't call myself a backpacker during this first section, covering most of Eastern Europe, as I was busy having luggage headaches of the first order. I became a backpacker when finally, in Prague, I'd had it up to *here* with rolling suitcases. Actually, if your definition of a backpacker is one who camps out, hikes everywhere and eats granola, then I'll never live up to that description. Hostels and hotels

were my form of shelter and I only chose this sort of luggage because I was sick and tired of every other kind of suitcase used during the first months of this trip. There's so much to be said for a pack that can be worn. Yes, it's very heavy, but it is practical and, in the long run, a great deal easier.

My departure preparation consisted of pesky details concerning my house, yard, air tickets, immunizations, and money, as well as the future anticipated needs of family and friends. I was very fortunate that my son Randy, was willing to handle my business affairs while I was out of the country. Aside from designing my route and buying the first half of my plane tickets, it was too early to detail plans for overland travel. I've always done that by the seat of my pants.

The trip was launched in mid-May 2005, with a visit to my daughter's family in Castledawson, Northern Ireland, where my grandchildren took me to their schools to give talks about this sort of traveling. I showed the classes my little tricks of the trade for savvy travel – the skirt that converted into either long pants or shorts, the hidden pouch in my rain jacket for emergency funds, the zippered pocket in my sock, and the first of many journals which I would fill with my stories—the same stories which I am including in this book.

From Ireland, I flew to Zagreb, Croatia, and took the train into Slovenia to begin a four-month ramble through Eastern Europe, before heading to the Middle East and Asia. Life is different and so I am different when I'm "on the road." It's good to have a pleasant place to slip into the traveling role which, unfortunately, only strangers see me in.

Superman had his phone booth; I had Ljubljana.

# SLOVENIA

## Ljubljana

**Tuesday, May 31:** Such a beautiful little jewel of a capital city. It reminds me of San Antonio's Riverwalk, with an Old Town spread along a charming river canal. Small boutiques filled with beautiful clothing, jewelry and art make shopping fun, even for a non-shopper like me. Then, there are the enticing cafes with their outdoor umbrella tables, which create a quandary as to which one to patronize next. Most amazing is that the waiters seem to actually want you to stay a whole afternoon.

Home to 60,000 students, Ljubljana has a vibrant, youthful, university atmosphere.

It's a good place to get my bearings and to shed the role of mother/grandmother/ local senior citizen and put on my traveling attitude again. I need to linger long over a good glass of wine, with my guidebooks spread out before me, to figure out just where I want to go within this large chunk of the world. Then, I'll take those ideas to the nearest internet cafe and do some practical exploring among the many choices of accommodations within my chosen villages and cities. Something will turn up, and that's where I'll go next.

Ljubljana is a very clean city, with good sidewalks and everything in good repair. This country is known as the richest portion of old Yugoslavia. The land isn't much good for agriculture, so Slovenia has become a center of industry, learning, finance, and mountain sports, which attract many local tourists in summer and winter alike.

One small fact gleaned from my city tour was about a historic bank there. Long after the present bank was

established, archeological records showed that the Treasury, or bank equivalent, in Roman times was located on that very spot. So, all through the ages, there was financial prosperity to the place.

Somewhere near that bank building are the subjects of a poignant folk tale about two lovers, kept apart in life, but now able to gaze upon one another, forever. He was the country's most famous poet, Dr. France Preseren, born in 1800, whose statue stands grandly in the central square. She was Julia, whom he had met just two weeks before her wedding. They fell madly in love, but she honored her betrothal vows and became the wife of a man she now could not love.

Julia was the love of Preseren's life, and many of his famous poems are about her. On the side of a building, directly in the statue's line of sight, is a bas-relief statue of her lovely young head and shoulders, leaning out of a carved window, set between two of the actual second floor windows. It seems so natural that she is forever looking into his eyes, and he is permanently gazing at her from across the piazza.

This beloved story tells something about the romantic and sentimental character of this sweet town. Honeymooners would not be disappointed with its atmosphere, considering that its name means "beloved," from the Russian word for love, Ljublju.

The Fluxus Hostel, at \$27 for a dorm bunk, is half the cost of the cheapest hotel. It is brand new, brightly decorated, and very clean and quiet, despite 100% occupancy.

What is it like to sleep in a coed bunk room, surrounded by thirty assorted men and women? It's just fine. Mutual consideration makes it work out. I wear a loose sundress to bed and get dressed in the morning under the

covers, quietly and modestly, as do many others. All are extremely respectful of each other's privacy and right to sleep late. No loud conversations; no turning on the lights or getting in each other's way; no violation of each other's possessions, often strewn about the base of every bunk. There are good lockers for valuables, but backpacks are usually kept handy and available, perhaps just shoved under the bed or to the side. I feel completely at home in this environment and have never had any bad experience with it. Generally, no one even snores.

All but me are attractive young adults; they're not kids, and they don't behave as such. Most are already out of university. The subject of one's travels is usually the first thing we all talk about: where you've just been, and where you're headed. It's at these times that I realize what a Road Warrior I really am, because my experience often ranks me as equal, and often senior, in unique mileage. This is surely why they don't see me as representing my age, but simply as a well-broken-in fellow traveler, with advice of my own to share about off-beat places.

Soon, it became necessary to figure out where to go next and I turned to the hostel and pension listings for Slovenia on my favorite backpacker's website, [BootsnAll.com](#). I based my selection on the availability of a bed. When I had located one and booked it, I checked to see where it was and that's how I wound up staying in a family home in a small Slovenian village.

## Dreznica

**Friday, June 3:** I have truly landed in paradise. Who knows when I'll ever come out?

What a wonderful mountain village it is, a small collection of two- and three-story white houses with red tile roofs, built in the Swiss style. All the balconies have flower boxes spilling over with trailing blossoms in bright red or pale purple. The houses are placed all higgledy-piggledy, with little dirt alleyways between them, and when you walk along the paths, you see well-used farming equipment, a horse-drawn plow, or a small tractor, pulled up beside the barn, and then you catch a whiff of the cows inside or hear them stirring about.

The barns are built cozily close to the house and path, as are tiny hen houses and patches of bright green vegetables. In that village, a whole farm could be contained within one building lot, right in town, and it looks as if there never has been any city planning. Instead, the layout reflects the original sprouting up of cabins, facing all sorts of directions, with footpaths winding among them. Oddly, there are no old houses; every single one of them seems to be brand new and modern. But, it is a very old village, or so I hear. The most striking feature about Dreznica is the lovely Catholic Church built high on a small hill so that it towers grandly above the village. It is literally the centerpiece of life here.

My hostess, Monica, meets me in her little red car soon after I climbed off the bus. Her five-year-old daughter, Luzita, is crying away in the back seat, and continues to do so all the way home, without making the least impression on her mother.



Monica's village is about three miles into the forested mountains above the small town of Kobarid, which contains a few restaurants, a war museum, and several shops. I can hitchhike there whenever I need to go; Monica says it is the accepted way, and there is always traffic to and fro. Before the switchback road to Dreznica was built by the army for one of the wars, the only way between the two towns was a rope ladder, slung over a perpendicular cliff. I don't imagine they did much heavy shopping in the bigger city.

Kobarid is famous with war buffs because in 1917 this territory was Italian and named Caporetto, the "white town" described in *A Farewell to Arms*. Hemingway, who was a medic in World War I, passed through here on his way to the front. That seems like a rather slender claim to fame, but they make a big thing of it there. The front must have, at some point, been right near Kobarid and Dreznica, as well, judging by the extreme loss of life by all of the armies involved.

Monica tells me of the million unburied bodies in the mountains above the village. She says that in World War II a large number of soldiers fighting in the extremely hostile mountain conditions were killed; many villagers also had died then.

Dreznica was squeezed between three different armies. There was the Italian Army, the Communist Army, and also a very Catholic army. After World War I, this part of Slovenia was declared a part of Italy, and its citizens were forced to speak only Italian. They hated to be under that flag. Many villagers were taken away during the night, and even today, their families don't know what became of them. Not only were partisan activities avenged, but old scores were settled once a former antagonist gained power. Many of the bodies in the woods some of them civilian date from that period.

Monica also speaks of the lovely village graveyard right beside the house. She admits that some guests take one look at it and refuse to stay there, going off to find other accommodations not so close. Originally, that site was at the very edge of the village, but now it is almost at the center. Someone can always be seen tending the plot of a loved one. Her husband's older brother was killed in a mountain fall four years before my visit. He still seems very close to them because his grave is just across the low wall beside the driveway. Everyone in this village is related to everyone else. Monica's mother, brother, and stepfather own the only restaurant here, and her brother runs the paragliding operation, which I hope to patronize. In spite of roads, cars, and other small settlements within walking distance Dreznica feels isolated. When I look up, all I can see are ragged mountains nearby, closing me in.

I learned, finally, that earthquakes are the reason that all the houses are new. The most recent quakes were in 1996 and 1998, and another had struck in 1978, so they come fairly regularly. The government helped a little with the rebuilding money, but taxes went up, so the local citizens will wind up paying, anyway.

The people of Dreznica are very much connected with the modern world and right on top of things, with nothing at all provincial or backwoods about any of them or their attractive homes. Yet, they're the genuine article in their living connection to history, having bridged that gap most successfully. Family life is conducted in the very same way that ours in the States is, as far as I could see. In fact, I made a shoe-buying trip with Monica's family to a nearby town. I wanted hiking shoes and a different and much lighter suitcase, the first of many attempts to solve my luggage woes.

## Bled

**Friday, June 10:** I fall ever more deeply in love with Slovenia. A walk through my hostel's neighborhood has me oohing and ahhing at every turn. First, I walked the streets leading up the mountainside, ostensibly looking for the road to the old church, high up there, but I didn't really care where I wound up. The hostel is on a slightly commercial main road circling the base of the mountain, but the streets leading upwards are all residential, and truly, each house and garden would do any upper-middle-class neighborhood in the States proud. The houses all look new and unique. There's that Swiss look again and all those blooming flowers in their boxes on windows and balconies. Everything is happily colorful.

Among my fellow hostel guests were six ladies from London. They have been friends for twenty years and every now and then will leave their husbands and children at home and hop on a plane for a long weekend in some new and interesting part of the world. We spent the day together exploring the little resort town which circles the lake. These English gals never neglect their tea time, and I was privileged to share it with them in a lakeside park gazebo. Each woman is responsible for bringing along one particular necessity, such as a piece of equipment or an ingredient. I watched in amazement as they combined their items and had us a boil-up in no time flat.

The famous Lake Bled is ringed by lovely green mountains. After tea, we rented a boat and rowed out to the small island in the center of the lake. Almost every square inch of this island is filled with a great big white church. A wedding was about to begin and we witnessed their very athletic bridal custom, which requires the groom to scoop up

the bride and carry her to the church door over several hundred steep steps. This groom looked like a Marine and managed very well, but pity any poor Jack Sprat to marry here.

### **From Bled, Slovenia to Heviz, Hungary**

A great storm front moved across Eastern Europe bringing rain and much lower temperatures. Among my travel literature was a booklet about the Hungarian Hot Springs Spas which I had become slightly familiar with on a previous trip to Budapest. After studying this menu of delightfully appealing Bath Cures, I chose the small town of Heviz, Hungary, close to the shores of Lake Ballaton, which seemed to offer a wide array of lovely hotels offering relatively inexpensive packages for a week of massage, hot springs soaks, food, rooms and medical supervision. Why not hunker down in such luxury while the storm blew over? I hopped a train for Hungary.

# HUNGARY

## Heviz

**Wednesday, June 16:** By the time I reached Heviz, the Shingles, which started before I left home, had returned, and I hoped that this Cure might make them disappear. Shingles are caused by a virus that hides deep in the nerve tissue of people who have had chickenpox as children. Silent throughout life, they sometimes come on with a vengeance in the senior years, and it was just my luck that this condition would strike me for the first time as I was planning this around-the-world trip.

Other people get Shingles on their backs but mine come out on my face, looking red, feeling very itchy, and swelling my eyes shut. Plus, all of my energy disappears for the week or more that my nerves are inflamed. Eventually, my health always returns to normal, helped along by steroids and antibiotics. I'd already had a flare-up of this condition in Slovenia, and was now on my second bout of the trip

Right at the moment, I needed to rest and do nothing but eat, sleep and soak in healing waters, so I decided to seek alternative cures, as my doctor at home had suggested I do if my symptoms returned.

The spa package in the Panorama Hotel is under six hundred dollars for the whole week and that includes the room, two meals per day and an initial physical examination. I also scheduled acupressure treatments by a Chinese doctor.

The hotel is certainly well-located, right in the heart of the bustling little spa town, on a shady promenade lined with attractive shops and restaurants. This avenue is always full of happy people in bathrobes, bathing suits, or colorful summer

clothing as they walk back and forth between the hot springs and the hotels.

### **A brief overview of a curative spa experience:**

The admitting doctor said that they had no suggested treatment for Shingles and looking in vain for signs of rheumatism, something that they do claim to help. I was prescribed a daily massage and long soaks in the small lake nearby, plus a seaweed wrap during the week.

The thermal waters of the tiny lake come from a deep crevasse in the earth and are believed to contain healing minerals. At 89.6 degrees, the little pond feels neither hot nor cold, but just pleasant. One needs a swim ring as the bottom is far below and treading water becomes quickly exhausting.

There has to be a large component of faith here, because these folks are very serious about the efficacy of mineral baths. Probably most of the clients do have the usual problems of aging and the aches and pains of rheumatism, but this is obviously not a place for sick people. Those with heart trouble, malignant tumors and infectious diseases are not permitted to use the lake. I was expecting really hot water because Tamas, my translator, said not to stay in it very long. In the afternoon, I went to my first full body massage. You can't be bashful, that's for sure. A pleasant young therapist showed me to his curtained massage room and spread the blue cloth I'd been given this morning onto his table. There's not even a pretense at modesty. You strip and lie face down on the table with no towels or drapes as one gets in the States. It was a very good twenty minute massage, on the back side only, from toes to neck.

The days take on a lazy pattern of floating on the lake, meals, massages, and rests in my room. I spend the day in a bathing suit with a luxurious white terry cloth robe, as do all the cure patients. And that's about it, day after day. Evenings, I dress and go to a restaurant. One day I got a gooshy green seaweed pack while lying on a table and was then wrapped in warm cloths to steep. After that, I stumbled into a way-too-hot bath to soak the stuff off and to uncover my purified pores.

**Tuesday, June 21:** Nothing interferes today. No clouds chill the earth, no wind comes up; there's no separation between me and the strangers who surround me, speaking their incomprehensible language. I feel no need to watch, and I do not feel watched in return. After nearly a week of immersion in my Hungarian spa cure, it occurs to me that I've lost all interest in carrying on any sort of internal, intellectual activity, such as studying people, or thinking about the next move I must make on my travels. I simply float on my inner tube in this warm little lake created by a hot spring, letting myself drift away into a lazy trance-like state.

The lake is healing me; if not of the Shingles, then of the condition of Uptight, which I would have sworn that I did not have. I just keep paddling around, dreamily returning to my detached self; feeling full of well-being; having nowhere to hurry off to. Where I am, in the middle of a tiny Hungarian lake, is exactly fine with me; floating obliviously with all the others, who also seem to be in the same semi-conscious state.

Late in the day, it occurs to me that it is the first day of summer. What a fine way to spend it. Very probably, it is the best Summer Equinox I've ever had. I wonder what in the world I will be, where in the world I will be, and who in the

world I will have become on the last day of summer, three months from this day.

In three months time, I'll still be in Eastern Europe, but how many more of its wonders will have affected me? What friends will pass through these days on the way to Fall? Now, when I can see ahead only to the next train destination, and that only after much deliberation, I have no idea of the specific shape that my life is going to take.

Only one thing is certain: Unless the uncertainty of life decides to intervene, I will be a year older when autumn rolls around. Sixty-eight is so ancient-sounding. But, if this Coming of Age phase continues to work its miracles, I'll be younger than ever.

Two teenage boys play ballads with a cello and a flute in the park as the swimmers amble home. I take a bench break to listen and to admire the bright green, backlit leaves all around me. Another shot of afterglow. I'm now singing: "Those lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer."

I went to an outdoor restaurant late that night where a musician named Claus is the performer. I had admired his fine interpretations of popular Western songs the last time I ate dinner there and had complimented him after that performance. So I was very pleased to see him again and we waved at each other as I took a seat. Later, Claus came to the table on his break. It wasn't a good night for him, because the mosquitoes were picking on him instead of the customers. The tops of his hands were swollen because he was defenseless against their bites while playing his instruments. Claus apologized, in advance, for any mistakes in his music tonight and also for the scent of citronella around him, explaining that both he and his small son always draw mosquitoes to themselves. His wife, he says, never gets bitten.



I had to laugh, because I had thought a great deal about bite prevention back home before leaving on this trip, especially as a way to avoid getting malaria later on, in India. I'd fallen for a catalogue advertisement selling a mosquito-repellent watch: All you had to do was push a button, and a tiny, high-pitched sound would drive away the pregnant females, which, the ad claimed, do most of the biting. Apparently, the watch convinced them that a male mosquito was around and, wanting nothing to do with males, they would flee. Of course, you had to leave the sound turned on all the time if you wanted any sort of protection.

Well, none of the mosquitoes, in Florida at least, seemed to be fazed by the noise, though it set my teeth on edge. Still, I brought it along with me, even though I couldn't bear to wear the clunky thing. Once, I put it on the nightstand to see if it would clear the room of the buzzing insects and still allow me to sleep through the annoying sound. It was dark when I gave up in frustration and wildly mashed all six control buttons until it finally shut up. I must have seriously confused its electronic brain, because I never could get it to work again.

Claus was welcome to it, and I promised to bring it along with me the next night. Claus turns out to be a true gadget freak, and it's the novelty which appeals to him, even more than the actual expectation of fooling any pregnant Hungarian mosquitoes. The whole subject became a running joke throughout the evening.

### **Musings on the bus ride to Budapest**

**Thursday, June 23:** Hungary is thoroughly modern, clean, and beautiful. It has charming towns reflecting that

Swiss Alpine architecture, with flower boxes in every window, and there are golden wheat fields and flat, rolling green land with small rises and hills in the distance.

It is not cheap, but it is very reasonable. My four-hour bus trip to Budapest costs fifteen dollars. I find that they have the same U.K. department store chains, Tesco and Lidl that my daughter patronizes in Northern Ireland, and within which Hungarian city women purchase the same products, even the same name brands, as we do in the States. Many of the world's goods—trucks, clothing, paint, cement, whatever—come from the same international suppliers. Somewhere, in some office, a sales representative is writing an order for a million nuts and bolts to go to Hungary, whether that representative is in Japan, England, or America. Whatever the world uses, or wants to carry in its stores, will wind up there, no matter where it is made.

Why did I put two huge extra tubes of toothpaste in my already heavy luggage? I could buy the same brand in Eastern Europe. Why did I bring that enormous bottle of Ibuprophen? Those items alone added an extra two pounds, and I'd have to lug them halfway around the world before I'd even need them. How did I forget that these very things, and often these very brands, are on many grocer's shelves, in every town in the world?

While I'm traveling between Heviz and Budapest, I'm basically doing a portion of what most tourists would call a "Tour of Europe." I'm aboard a very fine, air-conditioned motor coach heading for a major European city on the Danube: Budapest, one of the most popular package tour destinations of all travel agencies. The tours that I am qualified to lead, as a tour manager, all involve days of transport between cities on similar coaches, so this could

easily have been one of them, filled with Americans, instead of locals.

I'm now passing through the same countryside that they would see. Right here, it isn't very exciting, and it looks a great deal like home. Here is where a good Tour Manager would be lecturing, in a most enthralling way, about the history of the land, or what the travelers will find at their hotel in Budapest, or the exciting adventures just ahead. Anything to uphold the exotic perception of the country that the paying tourists have come to explore.

The whole touristy thing is merely packaging, anyway. Maybe forty or fifty years ago, in each country, certain landmarks, buildings, churches, cathedrals, museums, galleries, and such, were identified as must-see spots. Around those well-photographed squares, fountains, and promenades were built plenty of cafes and souvenir stalls, and a few blocks away, many parking slots were provided for massive tour buses. Then, the giants of the travel industry must have met to divvy up the visiting hours, in order to space apart millions of tourists who would obediently flock to see what the brochures told them must be consumed by the well-rounded traveler.

Meanwhile, the people in that country are living their normal lives, frequently in the same circumstances that the tourists enjoy at home. I am now passing huge malls, just like ours. I see all the same fast food outlets. Other than the language on the signs, this Hungarian city could be any city in the West. Europe is just not that different anymore—in fact, it's necessary to “Frenchify” Paris, or “romanticize” London, so that the tourists will feel that they have left home at all. What if St. Louis had no Arch; Paris, no Eiffel Tower; and

New York, no Statue of Liberty? How would they advertise themselves?

Ironically, only a few miles away from these famous scenes may be a suburb with a modern shopping mall, full of familiar products. If visitors fly in and out, then the illusion is easier to maintain, but if they motor coach between cities, they have to look long and carefully inside the boundaries of Oz to find that Hungarian flavor they want, in order to feel as if they have “done” Europe, and not Detroit.

Generally, I travel to towns where no Americans go, like Heviz. These places haven’t yet bothered to position themselves as “must see” destinations so that Westerners will come and drop money on them.

## **Budapest**

### **Kelati Train Station, Thursday, June 23, 4:30**

**p.m.:** I entered Budapest’s large international train station and headed straight to the information window before going to the ticket window to make my purchase. The last time I was here, I had failed to get my train information first and that was a serious oversight. Now, it seemed like forever before the line finally moved forward. As people who are kept waiting will, I indulged in some friendly grouching with a fellow ticket buyer.

A tall British man in front of me remarked that if anyone wanted to experience a throwback to the Soviet era, they would have to go no farther than this train station. I agreed, saying that nothing had changed in the three years since I had stood in this very spot buying a ticket to Romania.

“Nothing has changed in seventy or eighty years,” he said. “This was the Communist Party’s method of giving

everyone a job. They broke up any task into minute parts and assigned them to different people, who all take their time to do the work.”

I mentioned that even with computers on every desk, they still write out everything by hand, in triplicate. A memory of my years of Soviet travel during the early 1990’s flashed back: a day in Lvov, Ukraine, when I stood with my two translators at the train station window, needing to buy a ticket to Kiev. We were in a huge crowd pressing around the small wooden opening behind which sat a Ticket Dictator. No one formed a line; they all just pressed in close hoping to squeeze their way to the front. Then, when their turn came, they had to bend over in order to see through the low wooden window to speak to the woman in charge; in effect, causing them to bow before her. Arbitrarily, that window might slam shut at any time whenever she needed a break for a cigarette or lunch. This is why ticket purchasing was often done the day before by those in the know, because it sometimes took all day. Now, of course, Communism is no longer in charge, but inertia has kept things fairly static in the modernization department.

Here’s the way it operates in 2005 in Budapest’s international train station: People stand in obedient lines and you finally get your turn in front of a big glass window for your purchase, once you have acquired the data from the information window. The ticket lady then jumps up and disappears around the corner when you hand her the slip of paper telling her the train that you need. She’s looking things up on a big chart in the other room, even though a fine computer sits idle on her desk. When she returns after quite a long disappearance, she flips through pages in her book and, at last, writes some information on triple carbon sheets,

which she then tears apart and carefully sorts into piles with other similar sheets. At last, she delivers a price by writing the figures on a paper and shoving it toward you.

All this time, you have been praying, *“Please God, don’t let this cost more than I have on me, so that I’ll have to find an ATM and then go through all this again.”* But, it’s okay this time. You have the money. Then, she stares for long minutes at your passport and, finally, writes out your ticket . . . by hand, of course. She never mentions that you must also buy the all-important Reservation or you can’t even get on the train. Luckily, I do recall that fact, just in time, and she sells me one of those, but she will not reserve a sleeper space. I must deal with the conductor for that.

Outside of the train station, Budapest has modernized quite nicely. But, here is a stubborn little pocket of the old days for any history buff who would like to taste a bit of Soviet life as it used to be. I don’t know anyone else who would be nostalgic for that, though.

Can you figure out what SZENDVICS or SZENVISEX means? A nearby kiosk is advertising them for sale. Sandwiches, of course. A universal word, I suppose. This cavernous waiting room has an amber glow from wall lights and a tawny marble floor. Every few minutes the public address system erupts in loud musical tones, followed by a garble of train information.

I suddenly realized how very much I love being in the middle of all of this, traveling the way we used to back in the old Soviet Union. Of course I complain, as do all the natives, but still, I find it so very special in all of its old-fashioned feeling. Earlier, I was bemoaning the sameness of modern cities the world over and, looking around me now, I can appreciate the history here.

Like many old European stations, there is a very high brown glass roof overhead, with huge arches and elaborate buildings running along each side of four tracks. Locomotives pull their trains indoors, stopping directly behind large black signboards, which whirl and clack endlessly as yellow letters spell out changing information. Here is an example of an enduring manual solution in a digital age. The noise of it all is terribly exciting.





# BULGARIA

## Train from Budapest to Sofia, Bulgaria

**June 24, 12:15 a.m.:** I am aboard the fast-flying train to Sofia, after a very sincere math dilemma experienced with Demeter, the true hunk in charge of the train car. As the Conductor, Demeter assigned me to a bed, but paying for it created a major financial moment for both of us. I can't pay him in Hungarian forints, as it is a Bulgarian train and, naturally, I have no Bulgarian money. He asks if I have either dollars or Euros, and at first I say no, until I remember my five, one-hundred-dollar emergency bills, sewn into my little red rain jacket. I unstitch a seam, extract a toothpick wrapped with a single C-note, covered with cellophane and bound with sewing thread, and proudly present him with a fine, crisp, American bill. He has no dollars to give me for change, and we aren't even sure how many dollars I owe for the thirty-Euro bunk, as I have not needed to know the dollar to Euro equation for quite awhile.

The midnight hour is as good an excuse as any for our lazy brains, but we are standing in a fantastically beautiful train car, working the calculator and getting more and more puzzled, the way I always do in the presence of higher math. I suggest that he just hang onto my hundred until we cross the Bulgarian border, sometime the next afternoon. Then, we can get the money changed into leva at the Sofia station and settle up.

He must be amazed at how I trust him, but then he comes up with the winning formula. He does the math in his own currency, leva, and tells me the dollar value. We quickly

see the light, figure out the correct change, and he gives it to me in Euros.

So I am flush for my new country, and we are dear friends, having just been through so much together. I know he will take very good care of me all the way.

**Friday, June 24, 5:45 p.m.:** Well, that is the most concentrated attention my passport has ever had, and, I must say, it's been through a lot of borders. At the Bulgarian entry point, a uniformed gentleman somewhere near my age came to the compartment, studied my passport very carefully, got out pen and paper and wrote down my pertinent information, and then read it out loud to himself.

A few minutes earlier, I had heard my name and "America" in a conversation down the hall; I assumed it was Demeter talking to the officials. If I were a smuggler, or guilty of border-jumping, then that note with my information going into his pocket would have had me sweating bullets. But I am so squeaky-clean that I have nothing to worry about. I understand that I am, more than likely, simply a great novelty and curiosity. Maybe the official will research me and try to understand why a lone woman would want to come to Bulgaria.

I tell my seatmate, Gatiene, that I am so often caught in the bathroom when the Border Patrol comes through, as if I had something to hide, but it's really just my uncanny sense of timing at work.

Border crossings used to be very scary events, back in the war years and throughout the time of Communism. People couldn't even breathe properly in the presence of these very powerful officials. That was still true when I started traveling in the USSR, before the collapse of the Iron Curtain. You would sometimes hear crying and screaming in

the night, as a man or woman was caught smuggling forbidden purchases in from bordering countries. Not that they were being hurt, but that they or their contraband were being taken off the train. I was always so guilt-free that I didn't palpitate, though I certainly witnessed the drama.

Nowadays, there may be an occasional fugitive or forged passport, but the official's role has died down to the less exciting one of document-stamper. There is no longer that frisson of fear which used to fill the entire train car at every border. The good men in blue, interested only in doing their work well, wouldn't miss the old power-wielding days, but the occasional bully would.

Through the train window, I see an old man and an old woman herding a bunch of goats down a street. How far, far away I am now from Heviz and the spa life. Now we pass a field where people are conducting a bazaar out of the backs of their cars, parked in a circle with their wares spread out in their open trunks. Yep. So Soviet. Two days of constant travel, but much more time than that separates us. It feels as if I'm in an earlier century. Now, I am a Time Traveler.

I feel as if my real around-the-world trip is just beginning as I land in places not quite so much like home. I've been rolling through the entire length of old Yugoslavia and am now somewhere in Bulgaria. The sun is setting and I have no idea how far we are from Sofia.

Just being in a sleeper car, all to myself, is a treat. The upper bunk is folded against the ceiling, and I'm stretched out on the lower one, with my pillows propped against the window, eating fresh raspberries, rice cakes, camembert cheese, and kefir. I feel ever happier as the miles roll on and am completely prepared to love Bulgaria. Even the heat building up in the train has nostalgia attached to it.

There is much about this hot train that takes me back to 1990 and those thirty-three-hour trips between Moscow, Russia and Odessa, Ukraine, when our small traveling group would be prostrate in our bunks, only rousing ourselves for a sip of water.

Of course, I had the camaraderie of the others to make it more fun. At each stop, one of us would snag goodies: blackberries in a newspaper cone, hot boiled potatoes seasoned with dill in recycled glass jars, or teensy fried fish sold by babushkas who would meet each train with food. Not to imply that we are at all in the same conditions now. Warmish, yes, and a little headachy, yes, but nothing like those old glory days—although it's probably the closest I'll ever come to repeating it.

Approaching my new destination, I am again experiencing the known comfort of the train versus the unknown mystery of a new city, and the immediate necessity to find lodging in it before nightfall. The capital of Bulgaria, Sofia, is a city within which I will make my own way very quickly, but just now, it's like meeting a blind date: Will it like me? Will I like it?

## **Sofia**

**Saturday, June 25, 9:40 a.m.:** *Ahhhh.* Here is a lovely patio café with pleasant tables under the shade of many huge, white, umbrellas that form a sort of a ceiling. I've come for a cup of coffee and a bottle of mineral water. My hostel hostess served me a huge chocolate croissant which I munched while organizing my things, but I've had no coffee.

This is a great chance to write and get my journal caught up. Last night, I'd forgotten the likelihood that the train would be met by hostel representatives, but so it was. Only one hostel lady was still standing there, looking hopeful and expectant in spite of our delay.

She was Tsetsa, a woman in her late forties, accompanied by a nice young man, Luce. I gladly accepted their offer, negotiated for ten Euros per night, and happily let Luce wrestle with my bag, which had already fallen off its cart when Demeter lowered it from the train. Tsetsa spotted some other likely candidates and zipped off to snag them. She was successful, and two young Finnish backpackers joined us at the car

Our hosts pointed out places of interest as we made the short drive to the main part of town, pulling up in a parking place on the central street. Between department stores was a nondescript steel door, our hostel entrance, opening to three flights of steep stairs. Again, Luce did the heavy work, bless him. I remembered the much fancier, but just as steep, circular stairway in Ljubljana's hostel, and didn't want to repeat that shoulder-wrenching suitcase-hefting.

We entered double doors into a spare, bright, clean lobby, off of which various dorm rooms opened. Men and women were separated in four rooms, but I was alone in mine, so far. The lads shared a room with Joseph, an American, who had arrived the day before. Tsetsa had said that she had an American "boy," so I was surprised to shake hands with someone who appeared to be near my age. Short, compact, tan, and bald, Joseph seemed, at first, to be your quintessential Ugly American, as he was certainly not shy in expressing his prejudices and anti-Bush sentiments. In fact,

he was already holding forth to the new roommates, not ten minutes after they arrived.

Apparently, he was responsible for a little lost business for Tsetsa, as she had recruited him and a Korean girl at the bus station, and the girl checked out, after only one night, just to escape. It wasn't because of any improper advances on his part, but simply too much outspoken American-ness for one shy Asian lady.

When I asked about nearby restaurants, Joseph, who'd already eaten, offered to show me the way to a good Chinese place. I discovered a likeable side to him, beneath all the bluster. He was a professional wine maker and had traveled a lot, but he later revealed himself as a seething pit of insecurities who fiercely resented his vain, self-centered mother.

Joseph had a beer and I was glad that he was there to share my enormous platter of fried rice and mussels. He calmed down from his ranting persona and we became very comfortable with each other. He turned out to be just forty-nine years old, though he kept talking as if he was a senior citizen, "too old for this and that." I squelched such an attitude when I revealed that I was seventeen years older and my son was only a few years his junior. He'd be a fine companion, if he turned down the volume as he did at dinner. He was just one of our walking wounded, who certainly doesn't create a good impression to the world about the rest of us.

**4:05 p.m.:** I am having a wonderful day, as lost as can be in the city of Sofia. Getting lost in any city is the superior way to find out about it and to stumble upon so many unexpected delights. Plus, I have bagged all of the items on my to-buy list. One of those items was a CD Walkman, so I

can listen to Claus's music. Another need was a pair of bungee cords for my suitcase, which I finally found displayed on a cloth, laid out before an old man selling things at a street market.

Sofia is a lovely, graceful city with a glorious statue of a golden woman as its symbol. But, on its outer edges the clean attractive streets crumble, fairly quickly, into streets with broken sidewalks, though they're not the least bit threatening. You must watch your footing, but not necessarily your purse. I was wandering down the back roads, sounding out the Cyrillic signs as I went, which meant that I became lost every single time I went exploring. Eventually though, I always wound up back in familiar territory.

**9:10 p.m.:** I'm still so absolutely stunned by what has happened this afternoon that none of it has had time to sink in yet. As I try to comprehend it, all I can do is feel that this is the most normal and natural thing in the world. Well, if so, I wish something like this would happen every day.

I was writing at an outside café table, having finally decided to stop wandering and eat. It was one of those Middle Eastern burek places where the man carves your gyro sandwich meat off a huge, impaled pillar of lamb at a counter open to the sidewalk. It was a great sandwich, and when I saw a fine tall man, obviously a fellow backpacker, scanning the Cyrillic menu, I knew his thoughts exactly and chimed in to tell him what good food they serve here. He was glad to hear that, and disappeared inside to order. A moment later, he popped out to ask if he might join me at my table; then ducked in again to finish ordering.

"You had me at Hello" could have been our theme song this day, as we launched into animated conversation, and didn't come up for air until four hours later. By then, we had

finally vacated the hot sunny table to find a shady place, free of the long, eye-blinding flame of setting sun.

The first likely spot was a parking lot, with a fringe of trees and grassy edges, so we sat on the low curb, feet extended, leaning against a lamp post. All that mattered was our high-speed, fabulous conversation, at first about world travel and mutually-loved must-go-to places. He was just embarking on his Eastern European travels for the first time, so I listed some of my very favorite cities for him to see.

It turned out that he's a Norwegian travel book author, with three books already published. He lives with his longtime girlfriend and their seven-year-old daughter, in Europe, and both are authors, making their living entirely from writing. They met while each was independently sailing around the world and his first books were about seagoing around the world travel. But they were written in Norwegian, so I can never read them. His name is Erik.

I told him about "The Insatiable Sea," the screenplay that I wrote about my father's attempt to sail around the world. Then I mentioned the book which I hoped to write about my own journey around the world. He said that he would certainly be interested in reading it, and he knew that the public would be, too, because he represented them.

I said something about how both of us obviously travel under divine protection. One time, his vessel hit a reef, broke up, and sank far from land, but he and the crew members were rescued off Argentina. My comment led to his question: "Are you spiritual?" And that led to some personal revelations about my inner development and my ability to hear guidance spoken from Invisible Realms; and that led to his whole Norwegian practical thinking of: "there is no God anyway,



and it's only us and our imaginations;" and that led to me trying to share a wee bit of my experience.

Some children had been playing across the lot and they started watching us two adults, sitting on the low curb, waving our hands about, touching each other's shoulders on good points made, and throwing in an occasional hug, or hearty laugh, as we connected on so many levels.

The kids really got a sight when Erik raised both hands to the sky and shouted *"God, talk to me. If You would say just one word to me, I'd travel around the world for You."*

I put in an aside, also sent upward to God: *"Yeah, but he's already traveling around the world."* Erik was indicating his jaw, hands still upraised: *"Just hit me right here, God. Tap me on the jaw. I'll give you five seconds."*

I said, *"That's not much time, and anyway you're making too much noise to even notice it, if He did speak to you, or tap you."*

It was all very sincere and natural and funny. He was not mocking or making fun. He would have sincerely loved to have a revelatory moment. But it was all wonderful. At last, we—or, rather, he—ran out of voice. It was time to split, and let this beautiful afternoon take its honored place among the great moments of our lives.

He was every bit as deeply grooved by it as I was, and I know this, because, soon after we sat upon the curb, he had a slight panic attack, suddenly thinking that he'd lost the little slip of paper that I'd written my name, address, and e-mail on. He went through all his short's pockets and finally, with great relief, found it tucked in the book he was carrying. I was still there, and could easily have written another, but it was a most complimentary privilege to see his raw and spontaneous

reaction to the mere idea that he might not have a way to stay in touch.

As we were walking away from each other, I too, hurriedly scrambled through the papers in my waist pouch. Where was his address? Ah yes, there it was, in the money compartment, tucked where I knew I would find it again. We promised to let each other know if our respective books ever become a reality, but unless his is printed in English, I'll probably miss out on the joy of following his travels.

In parting, I told him my theory of Intergalactic Friends, and assured him we fit that description, as our lives had intersected, ever so briefly, on the back roads of Sofia, Bulgaria. That would explain why we reacted so powerfully to each other. The theory is that we have known each other before, in other lives, perhaps even in other galaxies. I like to imagine that, during some long-ago goodbye, we might have wondered whether we would recognize each other, if and when our paths ever crossed again in a new life.

Now, every time some stranger and I hit the ground talking, I know that we are Intergalactic Friends and that we have just passed some cosmic test. Invariably, we cannot remain together, and we have only a short time to upload and download the stories of our current lifetimes. This is why we talk so fast and so constantly. Erik didn't argue about that other-worldly idea, having just experienced it for himself. Oh Erik. I already miss you.

**Monday, June 27, 9:15 a.m.:** I'm waiting to catch the bus to Varna, Bulgaria, on the Black Sea. Oh, what a story—I couldn't wait to write it down. The whole truth, and nothing but the truth is, that good stories only seem to happen when things are going wrong. It was so funny, and now that it's all taken care of, I can sit at my nice table in

Sofia's fancy international bus station, having coffee and a croissant, and write about it at leisure. When a day gets off to this sort of a start, it's been my experience that funny things keep revealing themselves, just like little hiccups, for a while afterwards. The trick is to savor and appreciate all of them before they evaporate and normalize.

I went to bed early last night, though an aching right foot kept me wakeful. Still, I managed not to disturb my sleeping roommates when the alarm went off and I showered, dressed, and pulled my suitcase out of the hostel room. Without fanfare, I gentled my bungee-wrapped cart down seventy steep stairs, trying neither to break a wheel nor make too much clatter.

Outside, the day was lovely and traffic was light. So far, I hadn't made any taxi decisions though I had considered having Rumi, the hostel employee, call one for me, so that the driver could sherpa my heavy pack down the stairs. However, I'm genetically predisposed not to take taxis. Three cabs trolled for my business, at the sight of a fine lady dragging such a man-sized burden. One of them even did a U-turn to put himself conveniently beside me.

But it was such a beautiful day, and I had a six-hour bus ride ahead, so I chose to hoof it. The sidewalks were almost even, and the curbs weren't bad. I felt full of vim and vigor, in spite of a stiff and sore ankle. I ignored the circling yellow vultures and kept hiking. The hostel brochure said that it was only a ten-minute walk, and we had passed the beautiful glass bus station on the way from the train that first night. How hard could it be, for heaven's sakes? This is a nice, compact city, with everything close.

Had I so quickly forgotten that I'd become lost one hundred percent of the time, every day that I had set out to

wander in Sofia? On those days, I had nothing to lose: no schedule, no drag pack, and no consequences. Never one to claim a good sense of direction, I was still so sure that the station was a simple left turn at the major intersection, that asking directions never entered the equation.

My chosen path was along a double-wide, eight-lane boulevard, divided by a center island containing a narrow running river. Cleverly, I crossed the traffic at the first intersection, and, block after block, trudged along a sidewalk, which soon became more and more broken into jutting slabs, creating deep puddles, absolutely impossible for an easy human passage.

Barking dogs were another problem. Some were behind fences, others were not. One big brown cur heard the ruckus of his neighbors and came out to help, but he backed away, eyes huge, at the sight of me and my rumbling equipment. Ludicrously, that tough mutt was next seen desperately trying to force his body under some yard's fence railing to put a little safety on his side. Failing that, he came out barking again and whisked past me, trying to fake a rear attack but beating a permanent hasty retreat.

All the while, I'm popping along, humming "Guantanamo," from Claus's great CD, which I'd heard for the first time last night. Still optimistic that I would soon spot the shiny side of the glass building at any moment, I kept going forward. But, to be on the safe side, I thought that, just maybe, I should check with the locals who were rushing past me to get to work. I tried to ask my question in what I could remember of Russian.

Three people in a row pulled that universal facial expression, which accompanies the thought: *Lady, I don't know what the heck you're saying.* I feel it too, sometimes,

sliding across my own normal expression. What is this? I'm speaking their own language. Well no, Bulgarians speak Bulgarian, but they understand Russian, thanks to the conquering tendencies of the Soviets. It's actually highly possible that even Russians wouldn't understand my Russian: "*Ah-oof-toe-boose Een-ter-nas-ee-o-nal Stah-see-own.*" I'm even pointing in the direction that I'm headed to show that I know where it is but I just need them to confirm that for me, maybe tell me how much farther I have to go.

I still didn't doubt my course, but was just wondering how many bends in the road ahead it is, since it's 8:30 a.m., and I should have been there by now. Plus, I'm getting pretty hot and tired. I received only a blank look and a shrug from all of them. Imagine, not knowing your own town. There's a police car. For sure, they'll know. But, they didn't. They looked at me uncomprehendingly as I pronounced my Russian words and pointed straight ahead. They consulted over the word, autobus. "*I'm going to Varna.*" said I. Ahhh, intelligence dawns. Then, they started pointing back in the direction that I had just so laboriously come from. Way, way, way, back, according to their pushing motions. "*Taxi*" was all that I could get out of them.

Twenty minutes till bus time. Nothing to it, but to do it! I crossed over and stood on the center island facing the inside lane of traffic, now seriously scanning for bright yellow vehicles. Rush hour. I see taxis, but they're all full of passengers. I'm far, far, from the trolling ground now. I'd better cross over to the sidewalk. Oh, there's a cab, pulling over to the curb, just after I waved at him. This is good. I'm sure I'll still make the bus now.

But as I approached him, he waved me away. I noticed that he was patiently waiting while a buxom beauty had a

long goodbye kiss from her fellow, and then popped into my cab. The sign on the shabby building proclaimed that I was standing right in front of a strip joint. This driver probably picks her up at the same time every day, I thought, as I stood on the curb, desperately trying to wave down another cab. I remembered Gaitiene's advice, on the train, to use only taxis with 92121 on the hood, to avoid the unregulated rip-offs. Great. Now, I had to not only scan for heads on the passenger side, but numbers on the hood, as well, not to mention picking out a genuine taxi from the unbelievable number of private cars painted bright yellow. I trolled unsuccessfully for any big empty fish. Those which had been sharks an hour ago were now very well fed with airport passengers. The Taxi Gods were teaching me a lesson—again.

Guess I'd better start walking. How could it be in this direction? I didn't pass it earlier. This was the puzzle that had occurred to me, even as the police were emphatically pointing. Should I try, one more time, to ask directions? Here were three young women approaching. I think I'll change my tactics. "*Do you speak English?*" Two looked blank, the third said what I was longing to hear, "*Yes, I do.*" I quickly described my dilemma, and all three became involved in its solution. They agreed that a taxi would be very hard to catch in this heavy morning traffic, and invited me to walk with them until they could show me the turn that I should have taken. It wasn't likely that I could make my bus to Varna, which was now ten minutes from departure, but there would be another.

They were telling me how I could catch a city bus to the international bus station, when we all spotted an empty taxi pulled up at a gas station pump right behind us. At that moment, the four of us transformed into a pride of lionesses,

suddenly alert, when a gazelle wanders nearby to drink at a stream. *“Go, go—there he is!”*

I pounced, catching the cabbie half in and half out of the driver’s seat. Miraculously, he not only understood my garbled Russian, but he agreed to take my fare as soon as he filled his tank. I was buckling my seatbelt when my three fellow lionesses appeared. *“Where is he?”* they asked me. *“We want to make sure he knows where to go.”* They trooped into the cashier’s office, gave careful instructions, and then waved goodbye as they continued on to work. Settling happily into my seat, I noticed the numbers on the hood: 92121.

At last, off we went into the heavy traffic, pulling up at the station at exactly departure time. There was even the fraction of a possibility that I might still catch my bus, if I flagged the driver as he pulled out of the stall. I knew that I could buy my ticket from him, so I hurried through the marble concourse to the bus area. Every one of the twenty buses looked exactly alike, except for a white card in the front window stating their destination. I had a mere second to scope the Cyrillic signs, and then I focused on the one with “BAPHA” printed on its sign. *“Yesssss . . . Varna.”* But, the bus was packed to the gills; I would have to wait for the next one at eleven.

So I bought my \$18 ticket at leisure, and went through contortions to find a phone to call the Varna hostel about my new pickup time.

*“Where’s the phone?”* I asked.

*“Orange phone.”*

*“Yes, but where?”*

*“Green sign around.”*

Finally, an Aussie answered the phone at the hostel. *“No problem. We’ll be there at five. Look for a blue tee shirt with Gregory’s Backpacker Hostel on it.”*

Inside the new and beautiful ladies room, we were stuffed like clams, waiting for one of the five cubicle doors to open. All stayed shut a long, long, time. Then, I heard a woman’s voice ring out and recognized the pattern of speech, if not the words, of someone talking on the phone. I scanned the ears of those waiting their turn with me, but no one had a cell phone in action. Incredibly, this conversation was coming from inside one of the booths, and it must have been a business call, judging from the speech pattern. A momentary trance passed over me, as I visualized each stall with a desk pulled up to the toilet and busy female functionaries, hard at their morning’s work. No wonder the doors weren’t opening. How would she finesse it when time came to flush? *“Excuse me sir, let me put you on hold for a moment.”*

## Varna

**Tuesday, June 28, 6:15 p.m.:** I’m in the village taverna, planning to eat dinner. I love this. A booming set of speakers is loudly reverberating with some fabulously rhythmic music. I can’t understand the words, but I sure could dance to it. Walking here from the hostel I saw only men hanging around the entrance, and heard this booming music. Maybe it’s a dive, but the hostel recommended it for Valentina’s good cooking. I’m the only one inside.

I feel right at home around here. This is the best hostel, and the best experience. Three of us went into Varna on this morning’s shuttle, as the hostel is about twenty minutes outside of the main resort town, in a delightful little village.



Two older British men are fellow hostel guests for very different reasons from the rest of us. They are strangers to each other, but both have a great appetite for acquiring property. They want to get in on the Bulgarian real estate boom and make big money, and that sets them apart from the true travelers. They're so fixed on the search for profit that they aren't even looking at the sights, only the For Sale signs, and they have separate realtor appointments all day long.

**A Black Sea Beach:** Ahhh, what a life. This is what world travel is all about. If those who think that I'm very brave to do what I do could only see me now, they'd know the truth. I'm stretched out on a chaise lounge, on a sandy Black Sea beach, getting tan. My 25-year-old hostel mates, Adam and Ben, are with me. We're family now and totally at ease with one another. Ben writes a technology column for the London Times entitled "*Diary of a Dot.Com Millionaire aged 21.5.*" The age is now out of date and his millions evaporated when the dot.com bubble burst, but he still writes the column from spots all over the world.

We happen to be in ancient Thrace. Varna used to be named Odessos, and dates deep into the centuries before Christ. Much gold and many personal objects have been excavated in burial sites here and are now on display in Varna's fine museum. Things are all so modern and contemporary these days, but this particular location has made it a very important Black Sea trading spot, always prosperous as a crossroads. Yet I'm sure that those ancient people felt just as modern as we do today. Personally, I feel that this is the conviction of every generation.

I haven't described this fancy resort town of Varna adequately yet. The city sprawls and looks larger than its 400,000 population, because it swells so greatly during the

two summer months of July and August, which is just beginning to happen now. But, talk about modern: You couldn't do any better than the grand promenade to the ocean right here in this world-class beach resort. I'm certain that it's awash with Mafia money, as there are so many casinos and five-star hotels here. Everything for the rich tourist can be had in this very upscale place, and clothing stores sell all the big brand names. Things are priced for the gambler's girlfriends and way beyond my budget, but this also means that there are many wonderful fine restaurants and great sidewalk cafes competing with each other all along the boardwalk and central promenade, and their prices are very good. So, the ordinary person can enjoy Varna, too. There seem to be quite a few reasonable lodging places, as well, and I'd recommend this to any Westerner for a great beach vacation. Nothing shabby about Bulgaria.

This beach is top-optional, and I see lots of beautiful young women tanning their breasts. Their bikini bottom is a mere thong. The girl in front of me looks just like a model on a postcard except that she hasn't had monstrous breast implants. No one is ogling her; not even the virile men, of whom there certainly is no shortage. They don't approach her, nor do they sneak peeks as they walk by or lie around. It's so okay to be topless, that it raises no eyebrows. But, I think another secret is this: that an uncovered, tanned woman's chest begins to look as normal as a man's and stops being an object of curiosity. It's only when one's white breast is alluringly peeking over its bra, or when its shape is suggesting itself through a filmy blouse that it becomes of any sexual interest. The women, who matter-of-factly lounge about in such disregard of their own bodies, are giving the

cue to their audience to put no meaning to it, either. And so it plays out.

Both of our British house hunters have landed properties and are starting to tackle the massive paperwork. Every foreigner who buys Bulgarian property must set up a locally registered company, which will actually own the house, so they now have to invent a name for their business and do the legal work.

I met an English couple at our barbeque last night who are building two villas for resale, becoming developers here in Varna's boom time. My hostess says there's a large Mafia presence here, as I'd suspected, controlling casinos, hotels, liquor licenses and any foreigners who dare to encroach. Another couple had recently gone into the Jet Ski business, only to have all of their machines stolen. This hostel is out of town and is small potatoes, so it's not likely to be bothered. As I observed the real estate frenzy that seemed to have these two men in its grasp, I couldn't help but wonder what might happen, way on down the road, after many such speculators had bought and improved property here. Since it's actually owned by their name-only company, which exists only under Bulgarian law, what might stop the government from nationalizing these valuable places and turning around and selling them to others? It seems to me like a pretty transparent way to get foreigners to fix up the place.

I think they have to go through all this legal work and expense *every year* to keep their little company current. Both of these men plan to move here, but one of them wonders what he'll do for employment. I told him to figure out how to navigate these multiple legal hurdles and to market that knowledge to fellow Brits, but I don't think he will. It seems

like just too much work for a person like him, who probably simply wants to turn a quick profit.

## **The Journey Back to Budapest**

**Saturday, July 9:** While in Bulgaria, I also enjoyed brief stays in Veliko Tarnovo and Plovdiv. Now, I needed to return to Hungary to complete a treatment I had begun at the spa, and so, I was retracing my steps to return to Budapest aboard the same train I'd traveled south on two weeks before.

**12:10 p.m.:** All of us in this train are languishing quietly in our bunks. It's hot when we go slowly, better when we speed along. There's a pet fly in here but even he is scarce when the train flies, as we're doing now.

My two roommates and I are non-invasive friends. They've become pretty close, themselves, since discovering that they graduated from the same school. We're stacked in a three-tier bunk, all on the same side of the compartment. The youngest one is near the ceiling, and may not even have the space to sit up in bed. She doesn't seem to mind.

Amazingly, I have another friend aboard, who recognized me and gave warm greetings at the beginning of the journey. It turns out that I met Ryan, a classical musician, in the Veliko Tarnovo hostel where we chatted briefly. Now, he's on his way to a Bartok Music Festival in Hungary. One of the unexpected beauties of hostel life is this instant inclusion within a large community of fellow travelers, whom you're likely to encounter again someday, out on the trail.

My food supply languishes uneaten, so far, because my knife is buried in the luggage and I can't tear open the cellophane around my nut bread. I can still eat my brie and dates and drink my orange juice, though. One of Ryan's

friends pressed a large tomato and cucumber into my hands, so I can just bite into those, if desperate. A great deal of world travel is made up of these quiet moments, when your forward motion is out of your hands and you simply need to endure the hours that it takes to work through your present situation. This is true even on the most luxurious first class flights, or the most basic overland travel. The body must wait patiently for its chance to stretch, feed, pee, or sleep, and perhaps it's never quite ideal, but it's also not so bad, either. Those of us here, who have the luxury of a sleeper car, are the ones to be envied, but we paid eighty dollars extra for the privilege.

Ryan, whose compartment is a few doors down from mine, paid the same money as I did, but, he's assigned to the small third bunk at the very top of the stack, which is only about three-quarters as long as a normal bed. He's a big, strapping 25-year-old Australian and he says that the older couple in the other two bunks don't like it one bit that he's there, so he stands in the hall a lot because of the vibes in his cabin. A nice man who works for the railway presses homebrewed beer and sausage on him. I'm sure he's woozy by now. It's a very long ladder up to that rooftop lounge of his.



# SERBIA

## Stranded In Serbia

**Sunday, July 10, 7:40 a.m.:** We're still in Belgrade, only halfway through the journey, which should have ended in Budapest almost three hours ago. We have no engine for our little string of cars and have been sitting in this train yard since eight o'clock last night. No one knows why.

Yesterday, in the late afternoon, I had a long chat with Antonia, in the bunk above me, while we gazed out of our open window, admiring the beautiful mountain countryside. She and my other roommate are high school German teachers on the way to Frankfurt for a training course in the language. For several hours we watched the lovely soft sun and people working in the fields beside the track. Sunset was dramatic as we rolled underneath a great storm cloud; and soon, rain pelted us and lightning flashed high above. We slammed the windows shut and went to sleep. I believe we actually arrived in Belgrade on schedule, but we didn't leave at 10:00 p.m., as we were supposed to. Our locomotive left without us for parts unknown and the Budapest-bound one still hasn't shown up.

When morning came, we discovered that we were still seven hours away from Budapest, where we should have been at dawn. This delay isn't serious for me; as I'm a day early for the Spa check-in, but most people on board have schedules to meet. My Germany-bound friends will miss connections to a crucial conference that they simply cannot afford to miss.

A man down the hall is hired to be a waiter on a Uniworld river cruise ship on the Danube, and he's very much afraid of missing its departure. He was supposed to be there ten days ago for training, but had other problems, so if he's

late now, he's not sure how they will react. He's a professional ship's waiter but has never worked river ships or for this company and is wringing his hands in worry and consulting me because of my travel background. I try to give him all the comforting words I can think of but I don't know anything about river ships. He doesn't seem to notice that failing and just needs motherly assurance that all will be well.

Probably behind every door is a similar story but, all the same, there's laughter in the hall, as the hours wear on and we remain stranded. From my window, I can watch the Belgrade buses go by and life in the city proceeding along, with all citizens oblivious to our plight. I wonder how many train cars are in our abandoned string. It's much worse for those passengers who've had to sit up all this time.

Finally, I learned the story: At the Bulgarian/Serbian border, our train cars were shifted to a diesel engine, which was simply too slow to get us to Belgrade to meet the Vienna train we were supposed to join. Though we were only forty minutes late, that train couldn't wait, forcing us into this ten-hour delay.

By now, I have no idea of how to estimate our Budapest arrival, but it could take another seven hours until 3 p.m. I located my knife and served a breakfast party to some of my train mates, including Ryan, in his room way down the hall. I had cheeses, some pretty terrible German pumpkin bread, olive and chicken spread, and that tomato and cucumber.

The cruise ship employee thinks he might be all right; as the ship is due to arrive at the Budapest dock for the previous cruise to disembark between ten a.m. and two p.m. today. Then, there's a five-hour cleanup time before embarkation this evening, so he should make it. Maybe this



train trip will take twenty-seven hours, instead of seventeen. Isn't it magical, how strangers all become friends when things go awry?

I'm reading an interesting and thought-provoking book these days: *Lost In The Cosmos*, by Percy Walker. His hypothesis is that each one of us, each human Self, is very good at analyzing and quantifying everything except itself. When it comes to self-perception, however, we have no real tools except what we see reflected back to us from others, or from mirrors, or photos, or movies taken of us. We always seek transcendence of the ordinary, and we can sometimes gain it, when swept up in our own pursuits—our art, our science, or recreation, or those activities which make us feel vital and valuable, and more or less unconscious of our everyday surroundings. But, when we “come to” in the mundane truth of everyday life, we suffer from “reentry” and that can be a terrible challenge.

That rings true when I examine my own life. Also it's surely what a recently retired friend of mine has been suffering from for the past four years: “*Where is the life that I used to know?*” The same thing happens to an author who finally completes a novel. When something sustaining is over, and can't provide the self-definition that it once did, then the Self is at a loss as to how to view itself. Travel is one reentry solution because one must always focus on solving new problems. Nothing becomes ordinary. Maybe that's why I do it.

The author mentions another quality that I must admit as my own: the tendency of some of us Selves for swallowing towns and locations whole, like an amoeba surrounding something, thoroughly digesting it, and then moving on to a fresh meal of Someplace Else. We keep looking for new places

but, after while, those don't suffice any more either, because we have finished with them. That is so me.

Though one thing that he mentions as a way to have a strong identity with Self is to have a close identity with God. So, that's me too.

After Bulgaria, I returned to Heviz, Hungary, for my second Spa Cure at the five-star Hotel Carbona. Its fasting program provided a pleasant but unremarkable interlude with a great deal of time spent alone. Fancy hotels are not conducive to making close friendships and the language barrier was more of a problem here than in other countries so there is not a great deal to report about this period.

When one thinks of world travel, especially, the labor-intensive sort like this, you never imagine that there could be days when time lies heavy on your hands. But it does. Afternoons when you've done everything you can think of within your location; when you've more than satisfied your curiosity about the place. When the books left to read are all dull, and there's no prospect of finding others in your language. .

What do you do? Well, you can still pray and meditate. You can still write in your journal, and you can still sleep. You can soak and scrub your rubber sandals, and you can shower and change into fresh clothing. You can listen to your new CDs; you can dance to them, and even sing away in the privacy of your large room. And, you can be happy and content with your own company while you watch the day move steadily by.

# SLOVAKIA

## Kezmarok

**Monday, August 1:** After riding the train all day, I'm now in Kezmarok, a sophisticated little town on the edge of the High Tatra mountains. (They are also referred to as the High Tatra Mountains.) It's a lovely place, catering to hikers and skiers who come for every sort of mountain sport. There's also a bona fide castle to explore.

So far, Slovakia and Hungary are not inexpensive, since I consider any housing over thirty dollars to be expensive, spoiled as I am by hostelling. My hotel room costs almost forty dollars. However, it's high season, so I'm mighty lucky to be able to waltz into town at 3:00 p.m. and find anything at all available. I met a couple on the train today, Danusa and Roman, who have also traveled quite a bit. We agreed that a large part of the world is homogenizing, and life everywhere is being lived in much the same way, even with the same products, no matter what the culture. I said that we should all hurry to experience China while Communism still holds materialism at bay, or that difference will be gone and its towns and cities will all look like ours.

Here I am in a very beautiful little restaurant having such a wonderful conversation with Lenka, my waitress. She's so curious about me and my journal-writing, which is how the conversation opened. Her grandmother is younger than I am, but she hardly ever leaves her house, except to visit children or grandchildren. I said that this is true of many older people in America, as well as the more traditional countries. Some wouldn't venture out, particularly alone

At dinner tonight in a pizza place, chosen at random, I ran into Lenka again. She was sitting with some men in animated conversation and then came to my table, insisting that I join them. The good-looking fellow, whom I thought might be her boyfriend, turned out to be her father, Beny. Soon, Lenka's mother joined us. The other man is Jan, a family friend.

Lenka, her brother, and her parents emigrated to New York City fifteen years ago, when the Iron Curtain fell, but they spend every summer back here, where the grandparents live. Tomorrow, they want to take me to the mountains. Their level of hospitality just bowls me over and it feels wonderful and strange to be so quickly absorbed into the hearts of the people who live here. They are such a good-looking family.

It isn't so simple to find meals around here, as all of the outdoor patio cafes only serve coffee, soft drinks, or ice cream parlor treats. There are more ice cream opportunities, than anything else. Many sit-down restaurants serve heavy, meat-laden food, and ordering is a risk, since I can't read their menus

So, always on the lookout for edibles, I spotted a monstrous sign that tweaked my curiosity. Beside a serving window, was a painting of an "Ameriky Hot Dog," with the words spelled out in English, of all things. I do like hot dogs once in awhile, and it sounded simple, if decadent, because the painting showed a pile of stuff on top of it. I ordered it with French fries. The woman asked "Dva?" (two?) and I thought I had made it clear that I only wanted one order; but she soon pushed two dogs and two fries across the counter, with a bill for both. I protested, and she argued back and wouldn't hear otherwise. For proof, she presented the charge

tape, which, of course, she herself had created. There it was—proof that I had ordered two. There was no arguing with this Hot Dog Nazi, and no refusing the food, either. I tried to give the extra away to those in line behind me, but nobody wanted it. They probably didn't know what I was talking about.

I paid the two dollars and took my massive serving over to the picnic tables under the shelter. The French fries were okay, but the Slovakian ketchup, which she'd slopped over everything, at extra charge, is too sweet for my tastes. The hot dogs were pretty awful, with sweetish, tough, buns and indifferent meat. Now I could see what the painting was depicting as the stuff on top. It was a mass of shredded cabbage, mixed with shredded cheese, drizzled with ketchup. Way down underneath, was the hot dog and slices of tomato and green pepper. How they thought we Americans eat something like that, I do not know, but curiosity was the reason behind this order in the first place. I ate the salad off the top and had a few bites of the dog, a few French fries, but threw the rest away.

The Kezmarok castle dates from the Fifteenth Century and contains a good museum about the history of the area, spotlighting a great many admirable developments, guilds, crafts, and medical advances which happened right here. Dr. Vojtech Adalbert Alexander was a local physician who brought the first x-ray machine to Slovakia in 1897. He lived and worked in Kezmarok before going to Budapest to become the first professor of Radiology at the University of Hungary. In this museum were examples of his early x-rays: a snake, shells, his own hand, and the fetus of his own son. All of his children were born mentally-retarded, because he used them in his experiments before and after birth, not knowing the

harmful properties of this new science. He himself died of cancer at the age of fifty-nine.

There's also a poignant story connected with the dungeon which lies at the very base of the rounded castle tower. This actual event is worthy of a romance novel. The story is about a woman who is called the first tourist to the High Tatras. One of the men in the line of the family which owned this castle was a gambler who had lost his fortune. He traveled abroad and succeeded in marrying a wealthy woman, twenty years his senior, just to get hold of her money.

Of course, he couldn't stand her, and he was looking for any excuse to get rid of her. She was very interested in visiting the mountains, and when he wouldn't take her, she went along with some of the townspeople. Upon her return, three days later, that trip became his excuse to throw her in the dungeon where she languished for six years. It was her cell that I thought must have once been a round water cistern, though it had two small windows. Through one window, she received her food, which was simply bread. Through the other, she could see the mountains, the cause of her misfortune.

Eventually, a captain rescued her and took her away, and that captain later came into possession of the castle, because the terrible husband had squandered her fortune and the property was forfeited to pay off the debt. What a story.

After leaving the castle, I contacted Beny, as arranged, and was invited to the same restaurant, which I think is his headquarters. He explained that they want to take me to Zdar, a mountain village where there's to be an annual folk festival this weekend. They have friends with whom I can stay, and then I can go by bus to Krakow on Monday.

When I mentioned to Beny that I enjoyed the exhibits at the castle, he had a story to add. He grew up just down the street from the adult children of the famous Radiologist. They were physically and mentally deformed, and at the time, were in their sixties. Beny and his playmates used to tease them. No one in town knew the story of why they were as they were, but, later, when the museum was set up, the story came out. Now, he feels badly because he knows that they were martyrs to Medical Science, and it was because of their father's innocent medical experiments with the unknown and invisible magic of radiation, that they had to suffer their whole lives through.

**Friday, August 4:** I'm leaving Kezmarok and a long day's journey into night it will be, too. It's very cold, with quite a wind chill. I didn't go to the mountains with Lenka and Beny because of the sudden change in the weather and something about forest fires in the High Tatras. I'm taking the little electric train to Plavec and will arrive there at 5:34 p.m. Then, I must wait at that small train station until 1:25 a.m., tomorrow morning, for the train to Krakow, Poland, which will get me there at 5:30 a.m. the following morning. I have a reservation at a hostel, so at least I can taxi there, shower and go to bed.





# POLAND

## Krakow

### **Train Station, Saturday, August 5, 12:15 a.m.:**

Here I am in Krakow, sitting through the night in the well-lit, well-populated underground railroad station, waiting until dawn when the money exchange window opens, so I can get some local cash for a taxi. I don't see an ATM in here, which would solve my problem.

A serendipitous event brought me to Krakow earlier than expected. My train to Poland was not due to arrive at the tiny Plavec, Slovakia, station for many hours, so I decided to walk into the nearby town and look around. When the lady behind the ticket window couldn't understand my inquiries about luggage storage, a tall man offered to translate. As soon as he learned that I was traveling to Krakow, he said, *"We are too, and there's a seven o'clock train tonight. You don't have to wait around here until one in the morning. Come along with us."* Jeremy and Monica were returning to their home in Gdansk after ten days in the Tatras, so I happily fell in with them.

Their train was coming from somewhere south and would depart from a Polish station across the border. We hopped onto a small electric train to travel just one more stop to the end of the Slovakian railroad line and then we began to walk down the road for about one kilometer. I dragged my large suitcase, and they had backpacks, but, after a while, Jeremy took on my suitcase, and I carried one of his extra sacks and his cantaloupe, which dangled heavily in a plastic grocery bag. At a small sign, they reported that we were

crossing the border and we took each other's pictures to mark the occasion.

Then, after a bit more walking, we came to the entry point, which looked like a turnpike station. Everyone except us was driving across, but we fell in line behind the last car. Soon, Jeremy noticed a large construction truck pulling in, two cars back, and went to speak to the driver, securing us a lift to the train station after we all had passed through the checkpoint.

It was a jolly affair when we got to the customs windows. The official took a long time studying my passport, flipping all the pages, partly looking for room for her stamp, but partly just seeing where I'd been. Then she stamped it and passed it over to the other official who had been laughing with my friends. He asked where our car was, and I pointed to my big, black suitcase. So, as we left the window, he cautioned me not to speed.

Soon, our truck finished the border processing and pulled over to receive us. Luckily, it had a big empty back end into which Jeremy plopped our suitcases and the three of us climbed into the wide front seat. The driver was glad to help us out with a lift and thank goodness for him, because the train station was five miles from the border. What a hike that would have been, on top of the mere half-mile that we had already walked.

Once we got to the station, it was still an hour until our train departure, so Jeremy cut the cantaloupe and we had a little celebration snack while getting to know each other. Monica is a school counselor and Jeremy is a physiotherapist, with a specialty in Sports Training Psychology. We had a long conversation about that relatively new field, which is only about ten years old.

As he explained it, the psychology is applied to push athletes into new degrees of stretching the limits in competition and exceeding their previous performance. His good friend, Arthur, one of the early pioneers in this field, is now an American citizen, and teaching at a university in Florida, though Jeremy couldn't remember which city. He and Arthur will be cooperating to bring groups from America and Poland together to study this new approach, now being used by trainers of top athletes.

After awhile it grew dark, and we dozed. Then it was midnight, and we were in Krakow, where we said our fond goodbyes. They'll travel for the next twenty-four hours, until late afternoon tomorrow. None of this would have happened if I had stuck to my original schedule and taken the later train from Kezmarok, or if I hadn't asked the station agent about luggage storage, or if I'd traveled on a different day. I would still be waiting in that minuscule Plavec train station and would have missed this adventure and its good story.

**4:40 a.m.:** Three-and-a-half hours later and this metal station bench has become really uncomfortable. My paperback book is pedantic and boring but is all that I have left to read. Though many of us down here in the underground corridors of this station are obviously travelers, complete with luggage, perhaps an equal number are homeless men taking shelter from the cold of the night, getting some sleep on these wretched benches. Except for a few more obvious ones, most are dressed like the travelers but seem to be able to sleep under these conditions and we can't.

On the subject of the homeless: I'm as penniless as they. Though I have the means and money of other lands, at this moment, I have nothing that spends here. Until the

exchange opens, I can't make a phone call, take a taxi, or buy any food. So, here I sit. This night was going to be a wait-filled one no matter what, and I would rather be here than in that empty country station.

**Saturday, August 5, 9:50 a.m.:** I've checked into the hostel room and even though I'd signed up for a mixed dorm room, they gave me a single with a shared bathroom for only \$10 per day. Now for a bath and a nap. During the school year, this is a Jagallonian University dorm and only serves as a hostel in the summer time. It's lovely and very well-run.

The weather is gorgeous, with bright sunshine and a clear blue sky. Kezmarok was dry and hot, but it turned cold and wet. Now they tell me that Krakow was cold and wet until yesterday, but now it has turned bright and clear. Thank goodness.

At the train station, I finally found an ATM, and drew out 800 Polish zlotych, without knowing the exchange rate. It's so necessary to know this very important fact, even in order to understand how much you're drawing down your debit account. On my way out to find a taxi, I inquired about the exchange rate and was told that \$3.50 equals one zloty. Omigosh, if that's true, then I had just withdrawn \$2800 from my account and that was not good at all. I spent a moment of panic in the cab, thinking that my bank must have lent me the \$800 above my current balance, and how could I repay that costly loan? But, then I talked some logic into myself and was sure that he meant one dollar equals 350 zlotych, which meant I had only withdrawn \$28 and was completely safe.

I've just had a lovely time wandering through Krakow's Old Town. It is vibrant, exciting and beautiful, with a huge activity-filled square featuring amazing architecture, flower

stalls, break-dancing youth and actors in costume, mimes, good international restaurants, and so many sights to explore.

I'm absolutely in shock and can't really believe what appears to be the case about the exchange rate of the dollar to the local currency. By now, I'm very accustomed to sliding easily into a new value system whenever I cross a border. I simply need to know how many local toalars, koronas, forints, or zlotych, my one dollar will buy, and then I can do the math on what things are costing.

But, this challenge has absolutely thrown me, and I don't dare buy anything except my meals until I believe what actually seems to be the case. At the moment, things don't compute (again) because everything seems to be so very cheap, costing only pennies and that doesn't feel right. For instance, one dollar buys 320 zlotych. The guy at the station was using an old figure, obviously. Over and over, I have checked at the exchange boards, and that's what it says.

In Hungary, one dollar bought two hundred forints, but things were priced in the thousands, so the cost made sense in terms of what a thing would cost in U.S. prices. Usually, costs over here are a bit less, but not dramatically so. But in Poland, posted prices are forty-nine zlotych for a shirt, ninety-four for real amber jewelry and six-hundred-sixty zlotych for the titanium glasses frames I've been looking for. Using my present weird guidelines, that would make the frames a little over two dollars, the amber, about thirty cents, and the shirt about fifteen cents. It looks like a nice apartment rents for 3500 zlots. per month, or around \$100, and my big Chinese lunch today cost eighteen zlots. What's that? Five cents? That's what's so bizarre. One test I might make is to bring one of my \$100 bills to the bank and see how

much they give me in exchange. Other hostel guests aren't from America, so they don't use, or relate to, the dollar, so I can't consult with them.

**Sunday, August 7:** At breakfast, I solved the mystery of the money. The exchange boards in Poland are using one hundred dollars as a base, not one dollar, as has been the case in all the other countries I've been in. So, the single dollar is worth 3.20 zlotych. Now, things fall into place realistically. I should have figured that out, but I've never seen the exchange rate posted on a base of one hundred. Now I'm on solid ground again. I was quite correct not to believe what my senses were telling me when I looked at all those exchange boards.

A girl named Cat cleared this up, saying that she had found the explanation, somewhere, in very small print. Cat's a student of International Relations, a junior, studying at American University in Washington, after having spent one year in Spain and a summer in London. She came to Poland for a few days before flying home, back to a "normal life," and is wondering how she can ever fit back into the society of our immature college youth, with their high dramatics over trivia, after having spent a year abroad.

Ohmigosh, Poland. Krakow. My new great loves. I feel like I did when I was discovering Croatia. It's just wonderful. Krakow throbs with life, and beauty, and humor. Today, a Sunday, when so many towns are quiet and buttoned up, this place rocks like Disney World with the crowds of people who are out and about. The huge square has many intimate settings within it, and so much going on: mimes, pigeon-feeding, lines of carriages pulled by matched horses, flower sellers, outdoor restaurants, and many, many stores selling high quality goods. A summer in Poland, a summer in

Krakow, would never be boring and would also be very affordable. I can't stop taking pictures—one big sign of how charmed I am with this place.

**Tuesday, August 9:** I spent the morning at Wawel Castle, a massive complex right in the city, which completely covers a small hill. This is the hereditary palace of the kings of Poland, and they are buried here, though they are not underground. They are in a special room within the royal cathedral where many sarcophagi are displayed. Each one has a life-size carving depicting the king or queen lying within.

I walked comfortably among them, looking upon each face and reading the dates of their reign carved into their raised stone coffin. They all lay at table height and were very easy to stand beside. It was a bit like wandering through the storage box of a giant's chess set. Here were the pieces flat on their backs now, but no less royal or grand.

Nearby were the elaborate living quarters which they had occupied, one after the other, and directly overhead was the cathedral which had been built for their private worship. In death, they had not gone away to a place underground but were still holding court for those tourists who wandered into their little room. It was quite nice to have that experience and to meet those who had ruled here so many centuries ago.

### **Auschwitz/Birkenau**

**Wednesday, August 10:** I saw the fleeting shadow of others who had, some years ago, passed through this region and left indelible traces when they died. I took a day-long bus tour to Auschwitz/ Birkenau. It was not quite so nice to experience and I'm not very sure at all that I can sum things up in any satisfactory manner.

In fact, when it came time to put this into book form, I went to the Web to recapture what I had both seen and not seen. I found the site *remember.org/ auschwitz* which I invite you to visit for a virtual tour. This is the next best thing to being actually feet-on-the-ground at Auschwitz. In fact, it's better, because too much collides in your brain to absorb it all in person. For me, it was a matter of both having too little time and being among too many people.

Time has worked against those of us who expect to feel emotion on these ash-strewn grounds. And yet, this is ground zero of a subject that is so heavily laden with horror, disgust and rejection that naturally, we expect to feel it here, of all places. I thought so, anyway, and yet the reality was that I needed to actively recall images from every movie and every book which has immortalized those atrocities. For me, recorded words are the landscape which reveal that dreadful darkness; and not so much the actual place where some of it was perpetrated.

The day was bright and sunny. The grass was green, the sky was blue. Should these things matter? No. But, they do. A cold grey bitter windy day would have fit the need for proper mood so much better. Birkenau is a large fenced expanse of grass and trees with fallen-in cement gas chamber ruins; that famous towered gateway building penetrated by a single railroad track; high sentry posts and those awful wooden barracks scattered all about. Much of it is gone to grass.

We started there at Birkenau and we stood at the very same unloading ramps beside those railroad tracks where the sorting took place. People sent to the right were taken directly to that ruined place behind us which the Nazis had destroyed as they evacuated the camp. It once was a shower room where



cyanide pellets released gas instead of water above the heads of two thousand people at a time. The crematorium was right there as well. Our guide pointed out other caved-in rubble piles of white bricks and fallen roof slabs in the distance, and also former gas chambers.

My best memory of that day was of the inextinguishable Jewish life force defiantly praying in the forbidden regions of those crematory shambles. Jewish youth, wrapped in blue and white Israeli flags, sat upon the precariously-balanced concrete slabs of the destroyed crematorium, singing or praying in unison and reading from the Hebrew scriptures. Through their serious intensity I could read the clenched fist they were raising to the now-vanquished Nazi foe.

We were many groups of tourists, led by guides who had a lot to tell in a very short time. After poking about in the handful of still-standing former horse stables that served as Birkenau prisoner barracks, we boarded buses to travel the few miles between camps. Then we rushed through the Auschwitz barracks, swiftly viewing intriguing displays in large cases. We had to hurry past things that deserved our time and contemplation such as piles of shoes, prosthetic devices, hair, eyeglasses, clothing and photographs, so as not to lose sight of our guide in the crowd. The narrow halls were jammed with other tourists, all on their singular, lonely pilgrimage; but every one of us was faced with the stark reality of being left behind by our tour bus, which would not wait for slackers. I did miss mine and had to take public transportation for the hour ride back to Krakow.

## Polish Salt Mines

**Thursday, August 11:** On another tour, the salt mines outside of Krakow presented a different and much more beautiful history lesson. We walked for two hours, hundreds of feet underground in a mine that had been operated since the 1400s. Now, the mine is played out and it's only used as a tourist attraction.

Over the centuries, miners carved gigantic caverns removing the salt, but many of them must have been sculptors, as well, because some of these caverns are populated by fine rock salt statues and bas-relief carvings. Their natural color is charcoal gray, with a high sheen and brilliance. One huge room had three magnificent carved salt crystalline chandeliers hanging from its soaring ceiling, and its floor was highly polished by the passing of thousands of feet over hundreds of years. This room was called The Cathedral because of wall carvings depicting the Life of Christ.

I made some friends during that underground tour. I had noticed one couple the minute they walked up to our hotel gathering place. They were so remarkably good-looking that it set me to wondering who in the world they were. She might have been in her mid-thirties, tan, blue-eyed, long-haired and very shapely. But she was totally upstaged by her husband. I was sure that he must be an aging movie star or live theater actor, now in his mid-fifties.

Everything about him was attractive: luxuriant white hair, great square face and piercing eyes, muscular body. But he had a crooked tooth and a working-class London accent, so acting didn't seem likely. By the time we debarked from

the tour bus, the three of us were chatting away. She's Polish and this was for them a shopping trip to Poland to find a vacation home in the High Tatra Mountains on the Polish/Slovakian border.

Also, there was another family on the tour, an Irish couple and their teen-aged son. She used a wheelchair but could walk for short periods and the many series of steps down to the bowels of the earth required the men to carry her chair while she walked down. I took her arm and carried her heavy purse and we all got to talking about their home in Ireland.

The husband turned out to be claustrophobic and he became terribly worried about the miner's lift which was to carry us, in small groups, to the surface. Wife and son went in an earlier group and he and I were left with the guide who said that there were no other options for leaving the very deep chamber. When our time came, about nine of us were mashed into the wire cage which began its shaky, noisy, swift ride upward. He crossed himself, turned very red and his lips moved in prayer, but he managed well.

### **Aboard The Train to Warsaw**

My brand-new suitcase, bought for \$80 in Zilina, Slovakia, is kaput. The pulling handle broke off this morning as I was leaving the hostel. Probably, bumping down the steps caused it to bend. When I foolishly tried to straighten the handle, it snapped. So now, I must drag the case by the short, leather handle on top, and my heels keep bumping the sides. I don't know what the solution is. Lighten the load? But I keep buying things as the weather changes. I did give some summer clothes to the secondhand shop near the hostel.

Now, said suitcase is in the overhead rack, thanks to some businessmen in my compartment, and I'm hoping it doesn't crash down on us all, if the train suddenly stops. What is my luggage solution? Buying a new case a month? This one lasted two weeks. I'm not sure I could carry such a load on my back if I bought a huge backpack.

## Warsaw

**Saturday, August 13:** Even though it's the weekend, there are not the throngs of people that there were in Krakow. Some Warsaw streets are completely empty and silent. In the Old Town, I saw a few tourists, but there's not as much for them to do: take pictures, ride horse-drawn carriages, or watch the many, many, clowns blow up balloons. These clowns all speak in silly, high-pitched, voices and aren't very original. Not funny, and certainly not classy, like the mimes of Krakow.

So far, I'm not picking up on any sort of vibration here in Warsaw. Mostly, it feels modern, commercial, and without a past, so the Krakow vibe doesn't carry over. It's a gray, chilly, day and people scurry about in coats and scarves. Warsaw, which was pulverized by severe bombing, has risen from the ashes of World War Two. Restoration work proceeds today, but the soul seems to be gone. It feels dead, and people walk carefully, as if in a museum.

## Gdansk

**Monday, August 15:** I'm unexpectedly falling in love with Gdansk. It just so happens that today is the first day of a

week-long celebration of the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Solidarity. In August, 1980, the toppling of Communism and dictatorship began right here, in this little city on the Baltic Sea (which the Germans call Danzig) with a shipyard worker's strike. This Movement eventually brought down the Iron Curtain.

Also, a sign tells me that this is where World War Two was triggered, when a visiting German ship, paying a courtesy call in this port, opened fire on the fort. So, I've stumbled upon some amazing history and a very significant anniversary party and I may just stick around for awhile. I had thought, originally, to simply take a peek at the place. What could there be in such a remote city, after all? Unless you think of it as the Gateway to Poland, the entry port from the Baltic Sea on the northern border.

In spite of all of these warm feelings and meaningful discoveries, my visit to Gdansk got off to an inauspicious beginning. The train arrived at 4 p.m., and before I could catch my breath, after dragging my load down the train steps, here's an involuntary adoption taking place. Happily, those have been rare on this trip.

A short, elderly man came right up to me, speaking a torrent of Polish. He picked up the heavy end of my suitcase while I descended the long steps from the platform; helpful but not entirely welcome. I heard the word, Hotel and Taxi, so I showed him my notes on The Baltic Hostel and its address. It was unfamiliar to him and he began commanding passersby to stop and advise us. I didn't want this, and expected to easily see the place, "across from the train station," as the Internet blurb had promised.

He involved various people in a long, arm-waving discussion, during which they got out maps. Then he commanded me up some stairs and over to a taxi for

information. He was beginning to handle my arm and stand possessively in front of my suitcase and I didn't like his bossiness.

Finally, I just walked away from him, refusing any further suggestions, and left him grumbling about my colossal ingratitude. As a lone woman traveler, I have discovered that it is wise to back out of situations like this when a strange man interposes himself into my field of operation. It can't end well and the longer I allow it to continue, the harder it will become to extract myself from his unwanted attention.

As for the man, I'm sure that he had no harmful intentions. He just seemed to be a personality type that I run into occasionally and don't wish to entertain for long.

Inside the station's Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant, I asked the employees about the address and they directed me to cross the tracks and go left. Optimistically I began to drag, drag, drag, the heavy load up steps and down long streets in the unfamiliar heat.

Finally, seeing no hostel, I entered the police station and threw myself upon their mercy. Even they had no idea of where this address could be, and it took many minutes, and much consultation, before we all saw that I should have turned right, instead of left, in coming up from the station. Where was this Baltic Hostel? More walking and dragging the suitcase along sidewalks already covered.

Well, it emerged that the "newly restored" hostel was part of a large tenement building, beside the tracks . . . actually, way across many tracks, and on top of a hill, but technically visible from the station—if you knew exactly where to look.

The seedy tenement entryway opened onto three high stair levels with a hostel sign pointing to the third floor. An old man grabbed the bottom of the bag and helped me up, pointing out the correct doorway. Inside of the hostel, the hallway was freshly painted and everything looked clean, so I checked in, settled my luggage in the tiniest bunk room I've ever seen and came out to explore the city.

Gdansk is a charming little seaport town, though the waterfront is filled with the famous shipbuilding factories whose strikers brought Communism to its knees. Many blocks of the downtown are set aside for pedestrians and there is much to see and do in this lovely center filled with stores and sidewalk cafes. Of course, the Solidarity Anniversary had the place crackling with activity and excitement and probably many more visitors than usual.

Returning from my fascinated discovery of the beautiful little town, I took a shower in one of the two unisex shower stalls. There was only a flimsy outer curtain for privacy in the tiny dressing area, with a constantly wet floor in front of the shower doors.

Guys and gals were doing their best to observe everyone's modesty as we were all complete strangers forced to behave as husbands and wives, brushing our teeth side by side. I could handle that. I've been in hostels with one shower for thirty people; although there, we took turns locking ourselves into the dedicated room.

Okay, I still wasn't being required to share a showerhead and I was pleased to find that the bed and pillow were comfortable, the sheets fresh and new, and the duvet, warm. Plus, I was really, really tired, far too exhausted to fuss about much of anything. The night started out pretty well in the cramped six-bunk dorm and sleep came quickly. It wasn't

even too bad when the manager turned on the bright ceiling light to show some late arrivals to their beds.

Things fell apart around 3 a.m., when I woke realizing that we were becoming oxygen-challenged. This long narrow room had only one large window right at the head of my bed and a door at the opposite end. It might have been all right if the window hadn't been painted shut. There were now at least eight people sleeping in the room, as one couple was sharing a bunk only three feet across from mine and another couple was in the other lower bed. Everyone was beginning to breathe very audibly and the guy in my face, across the too-narrow divide, was starting to snore.

I found good air in the hall; had a drink of water and returned to the hot stuffy bedroom, leaving our room door open. With the introduction of oxygen, the snoring and labored breathing stopped, but it wasn't long before someone else got up and closed our door upon returning. We were soon back to our earlier level of deprivation.

Once more, I hobbled into the hall for air, water, and the bathroom. This time, I noticed that our front door, the only thing that separated us from the rest of the tenement, was flung wide open. A girl was asleep on the couch in the common room. Who knows? Maybe she was supposed to be on duty as our night watchperson but obviously, anyone could have sashayed right in. I closed and locked the door, went back to bed, and must have passed out because, suddenly, the sun was beating upon me through our east window, making the very un-fragrant room quite intolerable. Hustling up my paraphernalia, I slipped out of the bedroom as silently as I could.

The shower door broke while I was using it, so I had to squeak through a two-foot space to get out. Luckily, I could



fit, but just barely. The free hostel breakfast consisted of a large bowlful of hard-boiled eggs, bread, and jam but I remembered seeing a great many eggs on that table when I checked in yesterday. Surely, those very same ones were still there for the new day, and probably would be until they were completely consumed by trusting backpackers. That would be exactly in keeping with this brand-new hostel, hoping to attract its share of the world's backpackers, but, already easily qualifying as the world's worst, in my book.

So, I escaped to find a fabulous breakfast someplace else, which led me to pay twelve dollars to hobnob at the Holiday Inn, though I wasn't desperate enough to shell out \$200 for one of their rooms.

Where, oh where, would I sleep tomorrow night in Gdansk? Certainly not at the Baltic Hostel. It was already clear that the town was full to the gills for the Solidarity Anniversary, but things came together in the Tourist Information Office when they told me that there was one pension room available in the Old Town for thirty dollars per night. I took it gratefully and Monica (not my earlier border-crossing companion) came over very quickly and showed me to her flat, close by. I loved it and the deal was done. I am now occupying her eight-year-old daughter's room. The girl spends the summer with her grandparents. Two Parisian ladies are here tonight also, renting the sofa bed in the sunny kitchen/dining room. It's a bright, happy flat.

Monica is a lovely, talented professional photographer who makes extra money renting parts of her flat to tourists during the summer. It works all the way around. We talked about Solidarity and the miracle that Communism could be sent into collapse, all because the unified Poles simply went

on strike and everything in the country came to a stop, bringing down the whole Communist house of cards.

However, that heroic generation suffered greatly, and is still suffering today, because they lost their jobs, pensions, and their future. Modern companies don't want them, as they're too old and have no English or computer skills. The martyrs have been pushed aside, unappreciated. It's Monica's parents' generation who are among those affected. Economically, they might have been better off today if they hadn't rebelled, but the world would have suffered.

Yesterday, I bought a big, heavy book, written by a young woman named Kinga Freespirit, who lives here in Gdansk but has traveled around the world, hitchhiking. First, I came across her little red car, which had big yellow letters painted all over it: [www.ledbydestiny.com](http://www.ledbydestiny.com). I looked up her web site when I got to the Internet cafe, and thought I'd leave a note on the car to the effect that we should meet.

But before I had a chance to do that, I bumped into her sitting at a small table in the town square, selling books about her five-year journey, backpacking to all countries with her boyfriend, Chopin. The book is chock full of her own excellent photography. There were too many people trying to talk to her for us to have any long conversation, but I could tell that she is, indeed, a fellow free spirit and far more of a world traveler than I could ever hope to be.

Two years later, I learned on the above web site that Kinga died in Africa of cerebral malaria, but she was out on another long journey, so she died with her boots on. You can meet this fantastic woman, who packed more grassroots travel into her short life than most humans can even dream about, on [www.kingafreespirit.pl](http://www.kingafreespirit.pl) or [www.ledbydestiny.com](http://www.ledbydestiny.com).

## On The Train to Wroclaw

**Friday, August 19, 3:35 p.m.:** This dagnabit suitcase. Two men helped me get it on board, but one Good Samaritan nearly got stuck on the train, as he was already in the process of getting off when he climbed back into the aisle to help me. It was awful. There was no way around me because this bulky new cart, just bought in Gdansk, is as wide as the aisle.

There's a baseboard heater unit midway along each train car and a single bolt protruding from my wheel lodged in the grate. Cart and suitcase had to be wrestled along sideways, and for the first ten yards or so, was scooping up the red carpet runner, stopping traffic for others trying to squeeze past me.

I was thinking I'd probably have to stand for the next six hours on the end platform, but found that place full of other luggage junkies like me.

Then I noticed a glass-fronted compartment with only one blue-shirted man, wearing a tie, working out of his open black satchel on the floor. He was, obviously, the conductor. Or, so I concluded, along with all the rest of us hallway unfortunates. The door was closed and he sat in lonely official splendor. I wondered how a train employee could absorb six whole seats while ladies stood.

Ten minutes went by and I peeked through the glass wall that separated us. Why didn't he go collect tickets or something, or see that everybody had a good seat? Omigosh, now he's reading a book. Is he off-duty? Then, I had the horrible thought that at the next station, more people would press aboard and five of them would brazenly fill those five empty seats that could have been mine, had I but asked.

So, courageously, I opened the door, “*Are those seats available or are you the conductor?*” Even without English he understood my question and looking surprised, waved at the vacancies, generously. No, he wasn’t the conductor but he gestured vaguely in the direction of the other car, in case I wanted the man.

I heaved in most gratefully. As it happened, he got off at the next stop and I became chief occupant of this little room. Future arrivals would be my guests and couldn’t complain about the fact that my monster occupied all of my legroom and most of the floor space of the seat across from me.

Soon after the pseudo-conductor left, a nice middle-aged man came aboard, had a sweet goodbye with his wife, then stretched out and napped on those opposite seats. For the next several hours, I didn’t attempt conversation, thinking that he might not speak English anyway and having no need of striking up an acquaintance. Hours later, I inquired as to whether he was also traveling to Wroclaw, and he was, so I commented that this would be an easy way for me to know when to get off.

Not claiming to speak English, he actually knew a lot from having picked it up through movies, TV, and co-workers. He had lived in France for fourteen years and speaks French so fluently that he stumbles over his native Polish now. He’s an engineer in the French Foreign Legion, in charge of building bridges, mines, and tunnels.

We talked for quite a while about how the world is changing. He doesn’t see the planet becoming more peaceful because of the emerging terrorism which can spring up anywhere and which isn’t the more predictable type of war between governments and nations. So far, the Legion doesn’t

get called in against these terrorist cells. He'll be in Kosovo next month, and said that it's not safe for travelers at this time, but Sarajevo and Albania are safe enough now. Right then is when I decided to include both of those locations in my itinerary.

**In The Wroclaw Train Station:** Now is the time to spend down my remaining Polish money, as the next stop will be in the Czech Republic. The last coins went to a pack of gum and a can of Red Bull energy drink which I might need tomorrow after no sleep tonight. Now, I have a ten zlotych note, worth around \$3.00, and about 25 cents worth of coins left over. Paper money may, or may not, exchange, but coins are worthless. However, I planned it pretty well to come out this close.

There's a young woman approaching each of us on the platform with a story that sounds sincere to me. She says she's stranded here because all her money was stolen and she must get home for work tomorrow. She speaks English and is nicely dressed so I gave her the last of my Polish money, which she says is now half of what she needs. She had twenty-five zlotych, already. None of the others, whom she approached with the same story, gave her a tumble. I don't know if they spotted a beggar where I didn't pick up on it or whether they just don't help each other.

Her direct approach worked on me, though. I'd be a sucker if they all told me their life story, as the Gypsy mother once did in Sibiu, Romania, which coincidentally, sounded a lot like this woman's story, except for the babies. Or was I willing because the money was a limited amount and not worth much to me now that I was leaving? I don't know, but I suspect so, in addition to a genuine interest in solving her problem.



# CZECH REPUBLIC

## Prague

**The “Red Bull of Prague,” Saturday, August 20:** Prague has everybody snowed. All you hear at home is how beautiful this city is. When people converse about Europe, Prague seems to be mentioned first among European capitals. In the past, I’ve only been able to say that I’d once been in its train station in the middle of the night, passing through, between Frankfurt, Germany, and Lvov, Ukraine. I wouldn’t have recognized it as this station, but that was thirteen years ago, and I had been “adopted” by a Ukrainian couple, who were flurrying around to purchase seat reservations for all three of us. So, I never saw the city, but always claimed to have landed briefly on its fabled soil.

This city is like a beautiful movie star, whom everyone loves on the screen. Yes, but what is she like in person? What’s she really like? We’re finding out now and so far she has been found wanting.

Let’s capture this interesting story as it unfolds. The last you heard, I was expecting the train any minute, having just given my last pennies to a young woman with a winning hard luck story. So a fine shining train rolls up and I, having checked the wagon and compartment number on my ticket only minutes before, run down the way to haul myself aboard car #344.

However, I soon notice that it’s not a sleeper car but a second-class coach. Whoops. Wrong turn here. People kept pouring aboard between me and the exit and my luggage was now hooked up on something in the corner. Ordinarily, with another type of suitcase, I’d simply walk through the cars

until I found my correct wagon, which a quick check of my ticket reveals is #341. My compartment number is #44. I'm a little dyslexic at one-o'clock in the morning.

Four or five people come at me; squeezing their bags through the small space mine has left. If I don't get off fast and run three cars up, the train will begin to roll. The teenager and his family who had helped me aboard are still in the vicinity, so they help me down again when I finally make it to the steps.

"*Five minutes,*" the mother shouts, as I start to run three cars up. By now, no one is around to help me hoist my stuff back up the straight train stair ladder and I get a taste of what the world is like without Good Samaritans. Thinking I'm an Amazon, I climb the metal mesh steps and haul upwards on my vast assembly of wheeled rack, jumbo bag, and delicately lashed-on shopping bag.

What happens next? Imagine this: I'm standing on the train, leaning out over the straight metal steps, when my cart's wheels hang up on the bottom of the lower step. Everything, including me, dangles precariously over the open space between the train and the concrete platform. I'm already visualizing the dreaded moment when the train will, inevitably, begin to move and I will slowly pitch forward, losing my grip on the tubular handle of the rack, as I watch everything being ground between the moving train and the unyielding cement, myself included.

I finally drop my senior citizen cool, my apologetic strong-woman insistence that "*I can handle this, but it's awfully nice of you to help. Bless you sir, and long life to your descendents,*" that sort of stuff, and yell, "*Help!*" while scanning the now-empty platform for saviors.



There is one thin lady, and, oh, is this a man approaching in my peripheral vision? Yes: elderly, grizzled, and using a cane.

“*Help!*” I call again, and help appears behind me in the form of a large black-shirted guy and a suave red-jacketed conductor. They pull me in from outer space but let me figure out how to get the contraption through the door and wrestle it sideways down the aisle. Luckily, I had retrieved my ticket from the floor of wagon #344 and now have it clenched between my teeth, having almost dropped it trackside, along with the luggage.

I have shown the conductor my compartment number and he moves toward mid-car, while I’m dealing with the fact that those half-inch bolts protruding from each wheel are now catching in the slits of the wallboard heater. What else is new? I finally join him just after he has awakened my unfortunate roommate, knocking insistently for her to unlock the door. As she does so, my bag prevents the door from opening.

It’s like an episode from *Fawlty Towers* as we try to maneuver around each other to get the door open and to push my possessions in sideways; but this silver-haired gentleman never loses his cool. In courtly fashion, he asks whether I prefer coffee or tea when he wakes me for arrival in Prague.

Oh, my—this really is uptown. I haven’t had a hot beverage served to me on a train since the early days of my travel in the Soviet Union. Back in 1990, one of the most important duties of the train matron, after providing you with your still-damp sheets, was to bring a hot serving of delicious chai, in a glass held with a silver filigree cup. Those days disappeared after a year or two, with the economic downturn at the country’s opening, but perhaps it has resurfaced in the

Czech train customs. Perhaps it had never died in this country. I accepted his gracious offer and selected coffee to help me make it through the long morning.

My bunk was the center one, above the middle-aged woman, whose hair didn't look a bit out of place, though she'd been so rudely awakened by my clumsy arrival. I noticed that she had even changed into a nightgown to sleep in this very fancy accommodation. I clambered up the ladder to my bunk in my clothing and tucked into the clean sheets and soft duvet.

I must have been asleep when the passport check came, as I was groggy while digging out my documents. Then, I waited for the inevitable entry border check, but it never came, because the next knock at the door, at six a.m., was Handsome with my coffee on a silver tray. I sat up; he slid it onto the bed and then said, *"Twenty zlotych."* I handed the tray back, explaining that I had neither Polish nor Czech money, since I was just crossing the border. He abruptly waved the coffee back and, with a nasty expression on his face, shut the door. The stuff was too strong and hot for me to drink, anyway, and I put it on the window table while its caffeine-filled aroma gave us our energy boost.

When my roommate, by now beautifully dressed, took herself down the hall, I swung my rumpled self off the bunk and went into the aisle to wait my turn. Here comes the not-so-suave, frowning Redcoat. *"Three zlotych, then."* I took out my change purse and turned it upside down, *"I don't have any money. I thought it was part of the ticket. I have just crossed a border and I spent all the old money before I got on this train. I didn't drink the coffee anyway. You can have it back."* He scowled, saying that he had already "written it down." Now, he would have to pay for it himself. As we both

moved toward the end of the car, I fished out the unopened package of gum. *“Here, I paid twenty zlotych for this.”* He snatched it sourly and went into his room. Actually, I later realized, I’d only paid two zlotych, not twenty. My mistake.

Back in my room, waiting for the station, I had time to think. Twenty zlotych equals more than six dollars. What a racket. This man had his coffee scam going, and he didn’t like to be foiled.

That’s when I named him the Red Bull of Prague, because I decided to leave him my new can of the energy drink, value 5.5 zlotych, and I even planned a scolding speech to go with it. Alas, he was hiding in his room when I and my roommate were trying to get off the train, but he would find the drink waiting silently on my table.

Of course, I had my usual catastrophe proceeding down the hall and became totally stalled when the open door reduced the space by a few inches. At this point, my basketball-sized extra parcel snapped out of its elastic bindings and bounced to the feet of the woman, who had seen quite enough of me by this time. What could she do but pick the thing up and carry it for me as I grunted my load sideways and onto the steps, summoning superhuman strength to muscle the entire mess off by myself?

She held my package by its green bungee cord as if it were a dead mouse, until I could take it from her and then she swept out of my life forever. I was collapsing in a fit of laughter while re-stringing the trolley, preparing to face the unknown in a new station.

**11:05 a.m.:** Outside of the train station, I snagged a taxi and we were off, passing a most unusual statue exhibition at the center of Prague’s modern commercial section near the Parliament building. The first huge statue is a stack of

skeletonized, wrecked cars, rusty, gutted and delicately balanced, in a nose-to-nose triangle, towering high into the air. Supposedly, these formations are wry comments on civilization.

When the taxi driver saw that I laughed at that one, he proudly drove me past one of Superman in flying pose, smashing head first into the pavement, his blood and brains leaking all over the cement. The third statue is two or three enormous rectangular blocks of pure cement, with some brown patches embedded in the sides. I hate to think, almost afraid to look. A subsequent walk reveals that these were boots and shoes: The futility of man, I believe.

I've heard so much about Prague. This is the seventh European capital I've visited within the past few months, and I expect that it might be the most Westernized. So far, the charm escapes me.

## Prague

**Sunday, August 21:** Yesterday, I didn't even try sightseeing, but just rested and napped in the hostel. The Arcopay Hostel is a good one with very comfortable beds, new mattresses and linen, and some very compatible mates staying here. We were all great friends, right away, and I've just spent the day in town with Cindy and Eleanor, who are in their twenties.

After a luggage consultation with all my dorm mates, they have told me to get myself a backpack, right away, and Andy let me try on his Fairy Down pack. It felt very good. Of course, it was empty at the time.

I've decided that I do like Prague, and that there is something to rave about, as its Old Town is quite different,

and rich with interesting architecture. So, it has been redeemed for me, somewhat. That doesn't erase the fact that the outlying city, where I'm staying, is quite grubby and grimy.

Prague is overwhelming in the same way that a king's palace is overwhelming. The Old Town, or Stare Maesta, is about the only place that tourists see. They get bussed from their cruise ship or their upscale hotel and roam for a day through very extensive and architecturally-impressive streets of ancient splendor loaded with shops selling Bohemian crystal and lavish souvenirs. The fancy part of Prague is really fancy in an Old European way and it truly is a wonderful experience. This is the Europe that we all expect to see when we travel so far from home, not the familiar brand-name shops that now can be found all over the planet. So most tourists see only the precious boutiques of Prague and go home raving about the utter beauty of the place without knowing what lies around the edges.

I stay a short trolley ride away in a neighborhood that is definitely working-class and is very run down. Here, there are no shops other than things like plumbing or electrical supplies; there are no neighborhood groceries, clothing stores, or family-oriented commodities. I wonder what the people who live here do for their needs. The social divide is huge and no one looks happy.

Going back and forth between the two very different areas, I contemplate the dynamics that must have caused this great difference. First, there was the aristocracy and they left their golden mark in that beautiful center. All others were the servants, relegated to the edges where nothing has been spent in their behalf. It was quite a striking transition. Ironically, no one lives in that Center now. It seems to be just set up for

tourists, so locals now commute into it as modern-day servants: waiters and shop clerks and such.

But lo and behold, there was a sporting goods boutique in the Golden Center of Prague and so my needs were met, here in this city of many contrasts. I tried on the biggest backpack on the wall, with the help of a young salesgirl, who knew even less than I did about these things. What cloth pack doesn't feel fine if it has nothing in it? Shelling out less than \$100, I loaded my purse and packages into it and decided to wear it home.

I had laughed to my hostel mates while we ate together at the best vegetarian restaurant ever, that it would be so easy to get lost here in the circular center because the streets in the Old Town are like little false eyelashes. They are curved and not very long and have many different names. Plus, there are so many fascinating shops to distract the wanderer that when you emerged from one, you might not remember which direction you had come from. It's a fairy tale warren in there.

This happened to me after I bought the backpack and it took many hours to emerge from the labyrinth and find my trolley stop. If I were a shopaholic and had plenty of money, I could have filled that empty pack right up before I came out of the fantasy into the real world again. Luckily, the above did not apply.

My friends have all gone their separate ways, though we vow to stay in touch. How lovely it is to fall into close relationships so easily with whoever happens to be bunking with you. Because of all the things we have in common, the bonding takes place quickly, and there honestly is no apparent difference between us due to age. They seem to think of me as one of them, though I might speak of my grandchildren and they're not even married yet. Again and

again, this ageless factor occurs. They don't even seem curious about how old I am, just take it matter-of-factly that I'm out here on the road as they are; though I am out for longer, and am going farther.

Our mutual travels are the big topic, as if I were in my late twenties or early thirties, as they are. The way that my being a senior citizen applies, is when they say that they wished that their life would allow a year off and I tell them to wait until they retire. That feels like a long time ahead to them and, of course, it is.

I decided to do some drastic housecleaning before I went any further with my now-overloaded new backpack because I thought I'd sink to my knees with every step down those three flights of hostel stairs to the ground floor, carrying the loaded thing on my back.

After some expert strap adjustment from my helpful hostel mates, I said goodbye to these new and dear friends, and tottered off under my still-heavy load toward the train station. I have met some great people in the Arcopay Hostel, who have launched me in this new direction. Suddenly, I have become a backpacker in my seventh decade.

So, here am I, back on a train, suddenly interested in observing other backpackers. How big are their loads? How are they fastened together? How is the human being, underneath it all, faring? Are they bent forward and grimacing or do they stand tall, straight, and proud?

I still haven't heard from my travel agent, and it's been two weeks since I emailed her. I wonder why? Not only must I change the date of my flight to Egypt to fit the departure time for the Intrepid group tour I've just signed up for, but I also must make arrangements to buy the remainder of my return tickets from Bangkok on. That has to be finalized before I get

to Cairo, Egypt, because I know the name of the hotel where I'll be headquartering, so they can send those air tickets to me. I don't want to cut it too close.



# SLOVENIA

## Piran, Istrian Peninsula

**Thursday, September 1:** Right now, I'm in a gorgeous outdoor restaurant, about to have a four-course meal, plus a glass of white wine, to celebrate my arrival on the wonderful Dalmatian coastline. All of this luxury will cost only ten dollars. Before me is a huge harbor with calm, clean, pure, blue water. People are diving off of boulders right here next to the sidewalk or from cement piers and steps. The opposite shore is a few miles away.

There's actually a smaller harbor within the big one and colorful boats are tied up everywhere along the edges and buoyed in the center. This is still Slovenia, though we're only a few miles from the Croatian border, and it's a most wonderful part of the world. It's so good to be back in this whole Adriatic Sea area, one of my very favorite places.

From this table, I can see pastel buildings of green, pink, rose, beige and yellow, facing the rocks of the harbor edge. There goes a windsurfer, trying to catch any little bit of air. Other boats drift in the windless water. It's a hot, sleepy, afternoon here. For the first time in months, there's no large famous city for me to explore on foot.

After such a big lunch and that gorgeous glass of wine, I'm ready for a good siesta. Now, will I be able to slow down from my purpose-driven approach to this traveling life? Always, having no place except a hostel bunk to rest, I've stayed on the move for three months. Can I now kick back and join the throngs of sunbathers?

I think I do see a sandy beach, much more inviting than these boulders that people are using near me. Here in this little seacoast resort are all the ingredients of The Good Life, right within my field of vision: Lovely linen-covered tables, delicious food, wine, a slow pace, sunshine, sailing, sea and sunbathing, yachting, fast speedboats, jet skis, windsurfing, parasailing, and fishing, many people's dream for themselves and their leisure. I wonder if the people who live in Piran, and other coastal communities, envy the sophisticates from the cities, because they may think that so little transpires here except for the flow of the tourists, who may envy those who get to stay.

After an exploration of the tiny alleyways around the lighthouse point, I eventually return to the main side of the little medieval town. People's front doors open right onto clean-swept, narrow marble meandering alleys, curly little paths between stone buildings which must offer much shelter from the cold winter winds.

Cities in the interior of the countries just don't compare, though the countryside I came through on my way here was absolutely beautiful with mountain scenery. This is the reward for hard and long travel. I've certainly enjoyed the whole mixed bag and feel as if I've seen a large chunk of this European continent; but now, just a few miles from my beginning point, I find such a paradise.

**4:10 p.m.:** Again, I have wandered through a warren of anonymous little alleyways to the other side of the peninsula and am now perched upon a wall from which, if I fell, there would be sudden and certain death. Below me is a rocky beach, with nude sunbathers; one of them has gingerly entered the cold water and is now swimming; another sunbathes, languorously. This must be a completely nude

beach. The other side is merely topless. Problem is, they are “sunbathing” in the shade.

But, oh, the view: yachts and sailboats on aquamarine ocean, white gulls, buff bathers. Paradise. At times like these, I miss having someone with me to share the wonder and adventure of it all, someone to poke around with, through all these sweet little winding alleyways that break out onto beautifully mysterious views. I know that I would stay longer than I now tend to, when I’m traveling alone.

Shops are closed here in the heat of the day, and they re-open in the late afternoon, and then stay open until ten at night. I need to find an Internet café, especially because time is running out on future airline ticket ordering, and I still haven’t heard from my travel agent. So, I have some work to do, but today, I’m going swimming.

Here’s a comment on today’s world: My window faces a similar window in the home across this narrow alleyway. Each night now, that room light has shown brightly into my room and I can look across and see the shoulder and half of the head of a handsome young man sitting immobile for hours and hours.

Obviously, he’s in front of a computer screen. All evening long until late, he’s there concentrating on his invisible cyber world. Whether he’s in a chat room, or a virtual universe, he is “somewhere else” and not in Piran, Slovenia, as far as his consciousness goes. He could be carrying on a romance with a girl in Great Britain, or South Africa, or America as he sits, shirtless, beside his window across the alley from me. Basically, he’s out of commission to anything in this locality and I’m sure it’s his nightly habit because he’s done exactly the same thing every night of my stay.

How many millions of other places in the world is this scene repeated? We humans so easily become “zoned;” one step removed from our immediate surroundings. First, it must have been books, and later, TV that masked our reality; now computers invite us to step inside of their world. Soon, after virtual technology is perfected, will we sit at our kitchen tables with head gear on, playing and communicating in a realm that no one, observing us, can see or hear? Except, that we will look like madmen, moving our bodies wildly around in the empty room.

# CROATIA

## Rovinj

**Sunday, September 4:** Rovinj is really beautiful, upholding the Croatian reputation with me. It's also bigger than it looks and not cheap. I had a roommate last night, a Korean music student who studies in England. He caught the same bus with me in Piran, though we didn't meet at the time. We spoke briefly at the station here, but he was trying to continue on to Split and Hvar Island. There was no bus leaving tonight, so when he showed up later at the accommodations office looking for a room, I offered to share my double room since I'd just snapped up the last availability in town. Luckily, it had two beds so we each paid thirteen Euros for last night

The room turned out to be one bedroom in elderly Anna's two-bedroom flat, right in the center of the Old Town. We had use of her kitchen so the two of us shopped for groceries and I cooked a vegetarian dinner with what we managed to find in the tiny grocery nearby: boiled potatoes, frozen spinach, sautéed zucchini and sliced cucumber. It did the trick.

Sharing the room was just like being in a hostel dorm. My big bed was one of those with a deep cavity in the mattress but it was tolerable. It was late at night, in this innocent arrangement that I dreamed up a clever title for my book: *Sleeping With Guys Half My Age*, though this fellow was even younger than that.

I rode a rented bike to a perfect little tourist poster type of beach on a woodsy peninsula, though it would have been an easy walk. This beach is made up of small pebbles

instead of big boulders, and I found a spot in the sun, luckily, because the water is quite chilly. Tree shade has claimed most of the sunbathing area by this hour, and the breeze is cooling.

Life is good and everyone would envy my Mediterranean Paradise. But, I'll leave early in the morning, on the 8:45 a.m. bus, for Rijeka. I've now decided to get on down to Athens early, without spending a lot of time in my well-loved Croatia. It simply means that I have a reason to return someday.

My impasse is my air tickets. Try as I might, I cannot contact Egypt Air to change my dates, and I still haven't heard from anyone at my travel agency. What is the problem? Soon, my return ticket purchase covering the second half of the world will become a concern and my only ace in the hole is Bangkok's reputation for being a cheap air ticket hub.

But I can't imagine that I'd be left dangling in mid-trip. If they went out of business, I would think that they would inform me. So, because of this mystery, I must hurry on down the coast, not playing tourist, but traveler. If I get to Greece early and get this stuff solved, I can include Turkey in the equation, so it may be a good thing.

## Rijeka

**Tuesday, September 6:** I'm waiting until ferry-boarding time in the patio of the Hotel Intercontinental, having a Coke and thoroughly digesting the overseas edition of the *New York Times*. In an hour, I can make my way toward the ship, which will take me to Split. It's just lovely weather to sit outdoors in the shade of an umbrella. I have sent an emergency e-mail to my travel company, through their general web site, telling them of my troubles in

connecting with Monica. Maybe I'll hear soon. So, here am I, in a little-known European city, with nothing to do but chill out, looking forward to the soft, mild, adventure of an overnight coast-hugging sea voyage.

My time in this part of the world is winding down, with only three-and-a-half weeks to go. I will have visited fifteen countries, some of them more than once, all of them so far populated completely by white Europeans. So there has been a great similarity of sights, cities, streets, and citizens. Even of buses, trolleys, trams, trains, metros; and certainly of shops. Clothing styles are so homogeneous now, worldwide, and music is mostly American everywhere, as are movies, DVDs and CDs. Brand names follow me throughout these Baltic States.

Language changes don't impact me greatly, because I'm as at sea with one tongue as with the other. Safety has been consistent throughout these countries, and I've never felt threatened, nor my possessions envied and desired, by anyone at all. Europe feels like my home, and I move easily within it. People don't really react in the least to the sight of a senior citizen bearing a heavy backpack. They treat it as normally as I do. So, if there are to be exotic locales on this trip, they'll probably be further east.

As a matter of fact, I did meet an exotic trio of Aussies at the Hotel Neboder, where I stayed last night. The father and son had caught my attention in the bus terminal earlier, and when I saw them again in my hotel lobby, I blurted out: *"Didn't I just see you at the bus station? Either that, or someone else was wearing similar shirts."*

It turned out that there are only five shirts like that in the world, and they own them all. Of course, it was the two of them at the station, meeting up with Hilary, the wife and

mom of the combo. They are John, Daniel, and Hilary Gould, of Australia. The father and teenage son are biking between London and Istanbul; and Hilary is following by train or bus, and booking their hotels along the planned route.

The men ride one hundred kilometers per day, and are now halfway through the journey, filming and running a web site, [www.cycleodyssey.com.au](http://www.cycleodyssey.com.au) . Daniel just graduated from high school and is taking time off before college. John runs a telephone company, and has been planning this trip for two years. He had five special biking shirts made up, bright green and yellow cycling tunics, with a map of their journey drawn across the chest.

By the end of this week, I will have been traveling for four months, and I'm still going strong. I mentioned to the Goulds the phenomenon of not feeling tired until the journey's end, no matter what the length of the trip, and that's true now. As long as there is more ground to cover, I'm up to it. But when it's time to wind down, my body knows it and I begin to feel appropriately tired. I still have about eight months to go; twice as long as this segment, which seems short. They agreed that one doesn't begin to feel really tired until the end of a trip, no matter what the length.

## **The Bus to Sarajevo**

**Thursday, September 8:** Today will be filled with bus riding so that I can make it to Sarajevo by tonight. So, I have lots of time to write in my journal, though it's always hard to make out my handwriting when the roads are rough.

Last night I arrived at the Jadrolina ferry dock in the early evening and spoke briefly to a woman who was attempting to board early and had been turned back to wait



another ten minutes. She clearly was not inviting conversation and answered curtly, so I left her and stood in line.

At the proper time, I presented my ticket to the reception desk on board and received the key to my room. The ship was lovely and the crowd was light. Soon, there was a knock on the door and my roommate appeared, the same woman I'd spoken to on the gangway. Now, of course, she had to be friendly.

This Croatian lady had probably been an attractive woman in her youth but only bitterness and prejudice now show up in those disapproving eyes and turned-down mouth. As we chatted in the cabin, I learned that she's against Slovenians, Bosnians, and especially, Serbs: all of those people who were, for so long, artificially slung together with Croats under Communism. Now, she counts every presumed injustice as a personal affront. Not surprisingly, with all of these angry feelings, she's a bag of physical complaints.

We ate dinner together in the dining room and I noticed the imperious way that she treated the waiter, with a frown and sharp words, just to do the functional business of ordering. When it came my turn, I did it with friendliness, smiles, and laughter. The next thing I noticed was a total change in her approach to him. She began smiling as she spoke, discussing her purchase of a bottle of red wine, and then became totally different from her original attitude of a boss to a servant, which must be her usual approach to almost everything. Throughout the meal, they enjoyed the switch, and by the end, were positively bantering. This morning, at breakfast, she greeted the same waiter with warmth. It was, obviously, a big deal for her, as if she had

never before experienced the positive returns of being nice to strangers.

# BOSNIA

## Sarajevo

**Thursday, September 8:** I don't know what to expect in Sarajevo and I don't have a place booked, as I wasn't sure of my arrival date. But there are several nice-sounding hostels that I found on the computer so it shouldn't be a problem. Maybe some of the town will still be in ruins.

I'm entering a Muslim country for the first time, so am wearing a shoulder-covering shirt and long pants to be proper. It's warm, sunny, weather—hot, actually. The bus is passing through beautiful mountain country in Bosnia-Herzegovina, somewhere between Mostar and Sarajevo. A river runs all along, connecting the cities. Ten years after the awful Bosnian War, there are still many shelled and bombed-out structures, but also quite a few new modern houses and buildings as well. One still gets a very strong impression of the war and of the hatred against Serbs. My seatmate is a Bosnian man in his forties, who was a soccer player and now owns an antique store in Sarajevo. He has been very friendly and helpful, telling me a little about what we are passing through. Plus, like everyone else, he wonders why I travel the world alone, especially to spots like these old war zones.

**7:00 p.m.:** I'm now in Sarajevo and have literally been up, down, around and around this town today. As the bus neared the city, my seatmate was telling me about the famous Holiday Inn where all the journalists stayed and took refuge during the Bosnian War, which began thirteen years ago, on April 6, 1992. It ended ten years ago, in 1995.

So, this is the most famous Holiday Inn in the world, where Christiane Amanpour made her name by being brave enough to cover the war when a more famous male correspondent refused. I admire her for it and for her work since then.

Suddenly, I had the inspiration to stay in that hotel for my birthday weekend, so I tottered the three blocks to the big yellow Holiday Inn and made my way to the fancy reception desk. It was my great fortune that the two men there were good and open people who did everything in their power to help me. Some folks in such a swishy setting get full of themselves, and out-snoot the Rockefellers.

I really did try to be foolish enough to spend a total of \$376 for three nights, but it proved to be impossible to make Internet reservations there, even from the computers in their own business center. I joined the Priority Club but could never get connected to make my reservation in this hotel. This particular Holiday Inn can't take walk-ins and doesn't take money in person. All is done online now. I don't know why my attempt wouldn't go through, but it's just as well, because I'm at my poorest, though I do have the money. My Social Security refill is still a few days away.

The man at the desk called the Hotel Relax in the Turkish Bazaar area, and they had a room for \$56 per night, but he didn't understand that the only reason I was going to spend so much was because of the history of this hotel during the war.

Otherwise, I needed to save by staying only in budget accommodations, until my bank account refills; so by the time I boarded the tram I'd lost the fantasy and decided to go to a hostel instead of the ritzy hotel. That's how I signed up

for a bunk in an eight-bed dorm room for only \$12.40 per night.

At the moment, I'm all alone in there. It's a weird one, all right, because the entry is down an alleyway, and through a cracked kind of gate, but it's pretty clean. Just strange smelling. What a contrast.

I have come to the Old Quarter for some food, and have found this Turkish Bazaar area just amazing. I've eaten soup, salad, and stuffed vegetables in a fabulous Arabic restaurant. There was just too much well-seasoned meat to eat very much of it. It was dark when I emerged, and I had no idea how to find my strange little living quarters, because I'd wandered so much around the bazaar before choosing a place to eat. A jeweler was about to close his shop and I asked him for directions; then a woman overheard and jumped in to head me right.

Everyone I have met here has been so very friendly and helpful. I feel absolutely safe out and about at night, though I'm not planning to be out after dark, usually. Maybe I'll spend my birthday in this frumpy little room, instead of the fancy Holiday Inn. Well, I'll owe myself one.

At last, I've heard from the travel company on my air ticket needs, by going to their "Contact us" button on their web site and writing an explanation of who I was, where I was, and what I needed. Monica is no longer with the company, but they didn't know how I'd gotten missed, as her e-mail was supposedly sent on to customer service. Anyway, they changed my Egypt Air ticket easily, so that is done. Whew. I was assigned to an agent by someone who sounds like a boss, and they will expedite the purchase of my return tickets, because, indeed, the time is growing short.

I suggested that they could overnight mail them to my hotel in Cairo, since I know where I'll be staying for the rendezvous with my Intrepid group. At last, I'm back in someone's bailiwick, and that feels much better. I should hear from them again tomorrow.

**Friday, September 9, 9:50 a.m.:** I'm now checked into the Hotel Relax, which is where the Holiday Inn reservations manager sent me in the first place. I should have spent the money, as the "hostel" I was in became the worst of the trip, so far, beating even the Baltic Hostel in Gdansk. It wasn't too terribly bad when I was alone in the long, narrow room with four bunk beds, but after I fell asleep, the light was suddenly switched on and four young British guys were ushered in. That was okay. We talked a little bit, and they went out for food and beers and I never heard them return to go to bed.

But, at 1:15 a.m., two other fellows were brought in to fill the last two bunks and I felt the covers being yanked off of me by the matron who was checking them in. Earlier, I'd helped myself to another duvet, as the only way that I could stand to sleep on this dippy mattress was to put one blanket under me and one blanket over me. It wouldn't have been so bad if she'd spoken to me, or warned me, but she just started pulling it off.

The narrow little room had no oxygen by morning, and I had a headache. I opened the window, and then made several trips to carry my possessions into the hall, take a shower, and then dress. I packed, walked three blocks to the office, and checked out; getting my money back for the next two nights. Then, I came directly down the street to this fine-looking hotel and am in good surroundings for tonight. I

think I'll bus to Dubrovnik tomorrow. Object lesson learned here: beware of twelve-dollar hostels.

**11:45 a.m.:** After a long exploration through the Turkish Bazaar streets, I found a great restaurant and have just had a delicious meal of vegetables, a mixed salad and a bottle of water, plus some very tasty soft pita bread. I'm now reinforced for more wandering.

The shell of Hotel Europa is visible from my seat at this outdoor table. Many bombed relics still abound, though there is some building and restoring going on. The pavement, throughout the city, is filled with pock marks and most walls display great sprays of bullet holes or massive blackened wounds inflicted by mortars and rockets. It's almost possible to stand looking at this shot-written history and figure out what the fight was like; as if it's still going on in some ghostly parallel, frozen in its own blackened script.

Croatia has pretty much erased the ruins of the same war, especially in the tourist areas of the coastline, but the Bosnians haven't been able to do this over the past decade. It's a much poorer country. NATO is still present, to keep the peace, though their numbers are fewer now. It's presence is vital, according to Ahmad, whom I met on the bus. I've seen these soldiers in their green camouflage fatigues, sleeves rolled up, eating in cafes and, window-shopping along the bazaar streets, frequently in male-female soldier couples. My guess is that this avoids any implications of patrols and keeps the presence visible but non-threatening. Or, maybe they are simply off-duty.

**5:20 p.m.:** This has been a hardworking day for me, but a vital one. After my very fine lunch, I walked to the bus station for tickets to travel to Dubrovnik tomorrow and this gave me a good look at the city along the riverfront and a

chance to note the jillions of bullet holes and bomb craters in the sides of buildings and along all the sidewalks. This was a long, hot, dusty walk and I learned just how polluted air made by fast-moving traffic is. My throat became sore, my nostrils swollen, as I breathed the inescapable fumes. The vehicles are old and creaky but they all drive at top speed. Everyone parks on the sidewalk, so one must walk around them into the street.

I've returned to the same great restaurant as this morning and the lady remembered me. She pointed to a case of vegetable-only dishes, saying: "*Vege-TAH-blay Mix-ED?*" I said, "*Oh yes!*" and she commanded, "*Sit down!*" in a tone that showed that she would take good care of me. I spread my arms wide and laughingly said, "*Feed me.*" She loved it and translated that to the guy working with her.

**Saturday, September 10, 7:10 a.m.:** Whew. I may be a year older today, sixty-eight, but I'm still doing Boot Camp. It was quite a march to the "Boose station." Leaving the hotel at 6:20 a.m., I walked the three blocks to the tram, glad that the traffic was lighter, as I felt quite vulnerable with my heavy load. I kept thinking up slogans, like: "*Well, if cars can use the sidewalk then I can use the road.*" or "*Doesn't the Quran say to be kind to animals, old ladies, and other beasts of burden?*"

I climbed aboard the nearly empty tram, feeling very well prepared, having bought my bus ticket in advance. As the trolley rolled past the familiar Holiday Inn, I became fascinated with a twenty-story building that is now just a shell with gaping rocket holes in it. I realized that it must be deliberately left that way as part of the memorial about the War.



I considered hopping off of the tram there at the Holiday Inn but then thought that it would be better to be deposited closer to the station because of my big pack. However, this particular vehicle continued on beyond the spot where I knew the station to be. I tried asking advice, but no one knew English, so I jumped off, not wanting to be carried away, farther from the station. I had boarded the wrong tram. So, that meant a march of a mile or two, but I got there by seven, in plenty of time.



# CROATIA

## Dubrovnik

**Saturday, September 10, 6:10 p.m.:** Oh, It's so good to be back in this most gorgeous city in the whole wide world. When I arrived at my favorite lovely guesthouse there were two young Frenchwomen inquiring ahead of me. My former hostess remembered me from three years ago, but had no space for any of us and sent us to her friend, Katya's, only half a block away. All three of us took Katya's rooms and they are very wonderful.

For \$36, I have a huge airy double room opening onto an enormous sun porch, facing the sea, and looking down upon Hotel Bellvue's beach, which we are free to use. I've reserved this room for three nights, until Tuesday morning, when I'll bus on down to Montenegro.

**Sunday morning, September 11:** It's a beautiful day, and this pension is perfect. The two French girls stayed last night, and now a young couple, a French woman and a German man, are checking into their room, when the girls leave for the island of Korcula. We all had breakfast together on the terrace just now and it was so great to be among new momentary friends.

I popped over to the little grocery store across the street, marveling in the appreciation of the simple things of life, like grocery shopping. Just the idea of cooking my own food is appealing, after so long.

Sitting on this terrace to write is a treat. I hear the sound of a cricket in one direction and rolling breakers on the beach from the other. Church bells are pealing, announcing Sunday services. This is perfectly heaven. I've just looked

down upon the swimmers and it's so inviting that I must go swimming soon.

It's so good to be back here. Nothing that I've seen yet, tops this one place on earth. I think that what I missed yesterday, in town, were all the blue umbrellas and the café tables set up with people eating at them. Some restaurants were open, but not as many, and no umbrellas, probably because the summer season is over. Also, there were packs of tour groups milling around, in their batches behind tour leaders with raised signs or American flag umbrellas. Three or four large cruise ships are in port and my countrymen don't exude the same glamour as the Italians do. Maybe nobody else does. The Italian Riviera is right across the water from here, so this is an easy holiday destination for them.

**Leaving Dubrovnik, Tuesday, September 13:**

Again at the bus station to wait an hour for my bus to Kotor, Montenegro. I've just seen my first true Ugly American of the trip. He is furious, absolutely spitting, cursing, and apoplectic, just because the bus to Split leaves two hours after he thought it did. I had been on the city bus with him, and thus was right behind him at the ticket window when he spat out a few strong expletives into the poor woman's face. She was visibly recovering when it was my turn. Thank goodness, I was traveling in the opposite direction or I'd have appeared to be traveling with him, being a fellow countryman. Soon, he took to marching up and down along the platform, spewing his four-letter words, and now he is using the street to vent his ire, walking with so much anger, back and forth, in front of the station.

Pitiful. Frightening. He's totally self-absorbed. Nothing matters but himself and his needs and wants. What a pain such coiled springs are. Of course, he should have

informed himself better. It's not as if the bus company changed anything on him. I would hate Americans too, if that's the sort I mostly saw, turning the air blue with their curses.



# MONTENEGRO

## Podgorica

**Wednesday, September 14:** I stopped in for a look at Kotor, stayed overnight in Budva, spent a few hours in Sveti Stefan and now, I'm in Podgorica for the night. A tall taxi driver approached me as I got off the bus and offered to drive me to the airport or wherever I needed to go. I just said that I was traveling on by bus across the border to Albania; sort of waving him away as if I planned to step aboard my waiting overnight bus to the next country, which I absolutely hoped to do. But he stayed with me and suddenly became my counselor when I learned at the ticket window that no buses, or trains, ran across the border. Not ever. The old structure hadn't changed enough to provide a connection. The only way to get there was by taxi.

This used to be Yugoslavia although now this portion is Montenegro and Serbia. As my cab driver, Goran, explained without the benefit of English, Yugoslavia and Albania have had no relations for many years. So, taxis take you to the border and you catch a bus from there.

Now Plan B went into action. The man with whom I had initially avoided eye contact became my new best friend as I asked him about hotels in town. Obviously, no such thing was near the bus station, and Lonely Planet advises against hotels here as they are expensive. Goran and his fellow taxi driver friend, who does speak English, confirmed this.

I decided that it really would be wiser to stay here tonight, in this capital city, rather than arrive in Albania after dark with no place to stay. They suggested that I take a private rental for \$40 rather than a hotel for \$133. I agreed

and we then proceeded to negotiate a price for the whole deal: \$40 for taxi services to the rental and to the border tomorrow and \$40 for the room. Off we went, with Goran talking on his cell phone to reserve my room and trying to drive one-handed, while skillfully avoiding several potential collisions.

Goran drove me to the outskirts of town and I thought to ask about the availability of a restaurant in the vicinity of my quarters. No, there was nothing near, so I suggested stopping at a market to let me buy a few groceries. We also agreed that he would pick me up at eight o'clock for the trip to the border. All this was done through mime, as we had no common language.

Soon we came to a very small, poorly-stocked, teeny-weeny store at the side of the road, which had several men standing around outside, and one within. I chose a green apple, two yogurts, one can of sardines in oil, a liter of milk, and two bottles of water. Looking for some bread or crackers to eat with the sardines, I, gleefully picked up a half round of some sort of slightly-oily cornbread. This pleased the man behind the counter, as it is traditional to eat this bread with the yogurt which I'd chosen. Indeed, they are good together and the yogurt would have been too tart for my tastes without this dipping bread. Canned sardines, I had learned during my Soviet travel days, make a superior meal: tasty, filling, healthy, and long-lasting. One person can make two full meals from one can. All of this cost only a few dollars. Then, I noticed my green apple, forgotten on the counter when he figured the bill. I said, never mind, but he insisted that I take it as a gift. I have enough for dinner, breakfast, and a bus snack too. And a new and growing respect for these dear Montenegrin people.



I fully expected to find myself in some family's spare bedroom, though Goran was trying to tell me otherwise by stacking his cigarette lighter on top of his cell phone, to explain that it was a "camera" on top of the "familia:" an apartment over the family's home. He was driving in the rain, by now, narrowly missing some excellent collision damage opportunities. I kept reminding myself that I had a very extensive travel insurance policy that would click right into place, should we fail to miss one of the possible manglings. At one point, he pulled over beside a cement block manufacturing factory and called someone on the phone to translate for him. That was when we were settling upon the grocery plan. He handed me the phone and let this gentleman tell me what he was saying. Very effective idea. I was also fascinated with seeing the wet dark gray cement blocks, just newly-produced.

We pulled up to a very nice-looking home with lots of building activity going on. An older woman and two children stood at the entrance. Ahhh, my family, thought I, preparing for an intercultural experience with no common language. But no, a portly man, with a business-like money bag in hand, escorted us all up several flights of nice modern stairs. Goran handled my pack while I carried my purse and the groceries.

It's like a small hotel with a shared bathroom, all very clean and inviting. My room has three twin beds, a table with a television, and a remote-controlled air-conditioner, though I only needed it to clear out Goran's cigarette smoke leftovers. I have French doors opening to a private balcony, a lovely view of the neighborhood and surrounding mountains, and many interesting cloud formations, après rain.

One hundred percent beautiful is what I thought just now, as I got up to go onto the balcony again for a last look at

the lovely sunset-pink sky laced with gray clouds. Lightening bolts dance above the mountains on the horizon. Across the street, the neighbor's acre contains a fruit orchard and a vegetable garden. He has just opened the chicken coop and a dozen hens raced out together to the same destination across the yard.

Children are happily calling and shouting to each other in games between supper and a school night bedtime, and a couple walks together pushing a baby stroller. The attractive, modern houses around us are now tinged bright yellow with the long rays of the setting sun. It's wonderfully quiet and safe out here. This is Montenegro, but it could be an American neighborhood. Just as I'm doing now, people from many vastly different countries all over the world, would surely recognize this scene as reminiscent of their own homeland.

# ALBANIA

## Shkoder

**Thursday, September 15, 9:45 a.m.:** Wow. Here's my Big Adventure of the Journey, so far. I'm on the bus in Shkoder, Albania. Getting here was worthy of all the stories about Northern Albania.

This morning, I woke up in the Montenegrin family pension, to the smell of strong cigarette smoke filling my room and then I heard a mysterious choking noise. The lady of the house was ironing sheets, smoking and coughing, in the nook outside of my door. Goran arrived at 7:30, and hustled me off. I was all ready, just eating my apple.

**2:40 p.m.:** Ohhhhh boy. Albania is a new entity, entirely. Big challenge. It's way different from the rest of Eastern Europe. Probably, much like the Soviet countries would have been for us without our team of youth translators along to buffer us from the basic realities. And why not? This has been a Communist country until just recently. It is so Third World that a lone Westerner is really completely lost, mostly because the familiar infrastructure just doesn't exist here.

Goran let me out of the taxi within sight of the border control buildings but I had to walk the final half block. He seemed afraid. There is simply no relationship between the two countries. So, I walked across my second border. First, my passport had to be stamped by the Montenegrin authorities, and then I had to walk over to the Albanian Entry Station and pay their ten Euro fee.

The uniformed Albanian official asked me where I was going and how I planned to get there. I blithely said that I

would catch the bus to Tirana, the capital, and he blithely informed me that there was no bus running from the border. The first bus could be caught thirty miles away in Shkoder. Whoops. A little bit of an information glitch between the two countries.

Lonely Planet was no help, as they simply advised no traveling at all in Northern Albania which is where I was now. Banditos. I was here because the French Foreign Legion man on the train told me the banditos had stopped being dangerous or something like that. Hmmmm. Anyway, the official waved over the next car passing through and told him to take me to town and put me on the bus.

I completely believe, to this day, that this luck-of-the-draw car was full of said banditos. Three very skuzzy men, unshaven, with long greasy hair, driving an ancient, very, very beat-up caramel-colored Mercedes, pulled over and agreed to take me for “ten dollars.” While we were trying to set a price, a nice-looking, well-dressed man came up to translate. I said that I had no dollars, only Euros. Same difference, they said. Not to me, but I had no choice, so I paid ten Euros, or thirteen dollars for the ride.

The professor sort said, “*Wouldn’t you rather ride with me?*” and waved towards his fancy Mercedes, with his family inside. My backpack was already in the first man’s trunk so I didn’t want to make waves and get it out. But, soon, I regretted missing that opportunity when we were in front of the Albanian Customs office and my driver waved me into the car and motioned me to sit quietly. It didn’t help that his back seat was not securely fastened down and slid about when I sat down on it.

It also didn’t help that he became very nervous and completely unfriendly. It seemed to me that he was not

intending for me to enter the office to get my passport processed and I kept saying that I needed to do that in person. Then, to relieve some of the tension, I told him my name and asked him his...in pantomime, of course. He was acting very strangely by that time, standing in my open door, as if to block my escape. By now, I had reached my bandito conclusion.

So I slipped past him and went to speak to the professor in the car behind us, saying that I would rather ride with him, after all. He spoke to my driver and, alas, it was too late, as the first man was already going to have to pay a percentage of my fee to the border station officer.

Okay. I sat back down on the detached, sliding-around back seat, comforting myself with the idea that the border police on both sides of the line knew that an American was riding with them and, anyway, what dastardly deed could they do at ten o'clock in the morning, for goodness sakes? Steal what I had on me, is what, if they were banditos.

They sure looked tough. One had greasy long hair and very few teeth. He was probably in his forties. The other two men were a bit older but looked slightly like fathers or business men. A little bit, anyway. I was so very glad that I hadn't tried this border crossing business last night, as I'd originally planned. I do remember thinking, while apparently captured in this unstable back seat, that this was as good a day to die as any. It was sunny and warm and even a little bit lovely. I would simply go with the flow.

Now, we moved forward to another building and I was motioned to go inside to present my passport. That's where I had to pay another ten Euros for an entry visa. I pulled the note out of a seriously diminishing supply of money. The young official also said that it was a one-day transit visa and

that I should be traveling on through to Macedonia by tonight. That was also fine with me. He shook my hand in warm goodbye, and this was as close as I came to living the joke that Albania sees so few tourists that the usually formal crossing guards say “Thank you for coming to Albania.”

**5:20 p.m.:** Now I’m sitting in the splendor of the Tirana International Hotel lobby. I’m not staying here, but am taking the 9 p.m. overnight bus to Macedonia. They are happy to let me use the lobby as long as I need to. Bless them. Okay, now back to the story of how I got here, and of my fifteen hours in Albania. After saying goodbye to the last official, I returned to the car with my three thugs, who had rearranged themselves so that I could sit in front. Two men now held down the shifting rear seat.

I was “not allowed” to fasten my seatbelt, as was also the case in Goran’s taxi earlier. It’s obviously a terrible insult to their driving ability, and possibly to their very manhood, and every time I pulled on the strap or even looked as if I was thinking about it, a finger would be shaken: “*Ah, ah.*” Even so, at mid-point in the journey, my driver pulled his seatbelt across his shoulder, but didn’t fasten it. The old fool-the-cops-routine, though I never saw anyone to enforce such things. At that moment, I, too, tried to comply, but up comes that finger. “*Ah, ah.*” Okay. What the heck? I’m in Albania now. Do as they do. I sure didn’t intend to antagonize these guys.

But, ohmigosh, what dangerous driving, on what awful roads. At one spot, two old car tires had been propped up in a pothole to warn drivers away and prevent them from falling in and getting hung up. Luckily, it was at the very edge of the slender road, which was also used by donkey carts, tractors, semi-trucks, three-wheeled auto trucks, bicycles, and massive

herds of sheep. We did breakneck things, as I admired the many shrines of flower-bedecked crosses and memorials to all those loved ones who had lost their lives doing just what we were doing now, though perhaps they had had a drop or two, to tip the scales. One of their cars was still upside down and rusted out in someone's yard. Each side of this questionable freeway serves as a landfill and many trucks have left construction debris as well as sheer household garbage. A lone woman was doing her bit at recycling, trying to find something useful to put in her plastic bag.

Somewhere along the way, we stopped to fill up with gas and, a little farther along, we pulled into a fenced yard surrounding an auto repair business. "*Uh, oh.*" I thought, "*Do we already have car trouble, or is this where I get done in? Why are we stopping?*" Then, two harmless-looking teenage boys came out and opened the hood of our car. The strapping youth began to haul on a white fabric bag, half-filled with something sand-like. It might have been dirt, but I don't think so. Then, a larger, similar, bag was yanked, with some difficulty, from the other side. Both had been wedged on either side of the engine block. "*Oh, okay. They aren't banditos any more. Only smugglers. I feel better.*"

La tee da. I didn't say a word. Nosireee. We all just ignored that transaction and the hood was slammed shut, and we were on our way again, with the three fatherly-looking men at the repair shop waving us on and letting their boys do the hauling. Hey, it could well have been beach sand, for all I knew, but, if not, this would explain the tight features, the nervousness at the border, and the refusal to exchange names. Perhaps my presence even helped the operation to go more smoothly, distracting as it was to their real purpose. Plus, it's most likely that all of those officials were in on the

pie, if there was money being made, just as the referring officer was going to get a piece of my fare. I'm not one to upset the delicate fabric of a country's economic structure. Well am I familiar with the desperate subsistence smuggling done for mere survival in a Communist, or a post-Communist, country.

Anyway, we slammed along, while I admired the landfill and the lovingly-decorated roadside shrines to the deceased. These were actually made at a grave marker company, so common they must be. Flat, marble slabs bear permanent inscriptions and photographs. No expense spared. There were even three of them attached to the rails of a high overpass.

I offered everybody some wafer and chocolate cookies but only one man accepted. They weren't very delicious, so I only had two, myself. In the back of my mind was the self-serving thought that even the hardest heart wouldn't be mean and nasty to a cookie-offering grandmother. It was also mighty gratifying to notice an embroidered cross hanging from a cord on the dashboard.

As it happened, the driver was true to his promise to take me to the "boose" in Shkoder and we pulled up to the street-side stop just as the Tirana bus was loading. I was the last passenger left in the Mercedes as the two cronies had hopped out along the way. So much for my Albanian bandit story.

Well, let me tell you, even without banditos, Albania is still a little bit scary. The countryside is like its people. Some houses are large and modern, painted saffron, red and other bright, cheerful tones. Others are old and dumpy, even slummy. The people have good-looking features, but life is so



hard and the air so polluted, that they soon wear down and start looking very leathery and used-up, fairly early in life.

It's the same with one's impression of the land. A bird's eye view of this country would reveal mountains surrounded by rocky fields. Nature here looks pretty, but it's the civilization that sits upon the earth which looks like a crazy-quilt mix of medieval life and extremely modern touches of Western commerce. Some incredibly large and colorful gas stations, fancier than any I have ever seen in the States, sit next to fields where someone is loading a donkey cart with hay, using a wooden pitchfork. Nearby, a strong woman is scything a field. I might have had less culture shock if I'd already been to Egypt, or particularly India, at this point, but Albania has the distinction of being the country to introduce me to the regular use of beasts of burden on the public highways.

Boarding the bus, I was involuntarily adopted by a teenager working as an assistant to the driver, selling tickets and storing baggage. This was a kind and welcome adoption because a stranger, coming suddenly into this local culture, needs an advisor and protector, or so I felt at the time. By now, I was well into a good case of culture shock as I discovered just how different things were here. Geni is a sophomore in high school and quizzed me, in good English, while escorting me to a seat, saying he would join me soon. *"Don't let anybody else sit here,"* he commanded with a winning smile. Our driver was the first black man that I have seen anywhere in this region. Tall, about fifty, and so very nice, he had a ready smile and true authority about him. It turns out that Geni's father owns the bus company. They have six buses. Two, including this one, belong to Geni; two belong to his brother in Italy; and two belong to his father.

A smart, good-looking, take-charge fellow, Geni also knows Italian and often visits his brother in Italy. He quizzed me on my plans and my purse; and then commented that my existing Euro money supply wasn't enough to get me to Macedonia. There are no bus stations in Tirana so I would have to use a private tourist bureau. No ATMs, he said. Wrong. They are everywhere along the main street, as I later learned. He also told me that it was impossible to charge the ticket on a credit card, as that system doesn't exist here. Didn't I have any American money or more Euros on me? I allowed as how I did have \$100 for emergency use. Oh, that's plenty. I hadn't wanted to get stuck with lots of leftover Albanian currency, as I knew, perfectly well, that it would not be convertible or useable in Macedonia, or anywhere else.

## **Tirana**

**September 15, 1:00 p.m.:** We were stuck in traffic, entering Tirana. I think the jam involved oxen. And Geni was asking me if I think it's a pretty town. He obviously does, and is very proud of his capital city. Looking at the graffiti-covered, galvanized shacks in front of us at the moment, I said that I loved the view of the mountains from here. That was pretty diplomatic, I thought, and didn't add that I was not talking about the mountains of garbage which I could see out of the bus windows.

A little further in, I realized that Tirana has a nice central main street, and a few others radiating away from it. These streets do have some fine modern buildings. Geni took me to one of those which had a tourist office on the ground floor. Like a little old lady, I let him do the negotiating and ticket buying for me, as if I hadn't been managing my own

affairs in foreign countries for the past four months. After traveling alone in Egypt and India, later on, I wouldn't have been so shell-shocked as I was in Albania, but I now relaxed into the care of this capable young man, even to the point of turning over that big American bill and letting him buy the tickets and handle the change, which was of course given in Albanian currency.

He talked the lady behind the counter into storing my luggage while he showed me the city. at least, that one street of it. Then I invited him to lunch, in return for his kind services and he summoned a taxi to take us to the most expensive place in town. It was very nice and the food was good and I had all this money to use up during my next few hours in the country so he had a very good steak dinner and then received a nice tip on top of that. Any leftover Albanian bills were going to be totally worthless the next morning. He soon had to leave to ride his bus back to Shkoder and I remained at the table awhile, enjoying a cup of coffee.

Then I walked back over the route that I'd seen the taxi taking, until I came to a large and fancy international hotel on the main avenue. Geni had imagined me as a much more breakable Western traveling lady than I really am, accustomed to hoofing the length and the breadth of all the wild cities of the world.

Ironically, I later came across an ATM in Tirana, which supplied money in Euros, so I could have gotten exactly what I needed and saved my American money. This boy was a fast-talking charmer, but his company and assistance were worth the money spent. On his behalf, I'm sure that he was unaware of such a fine European addition as that ATM to this roughshod capital town, put here, in a sheltered corner, mainly for the use of foreign businessmen. Someday, such a

talented man, as Geni genuinely is, will wind up being Prime Minister of Albania, when it comes into its own.

**8:10 p.m.:** Now I'm sitting with the guys on the patio of a very macho café, overlooking the muddy yard at the end of the one fancy boulevard in Tirana, waiting for time to board the bus. If I plan it right, maybe I can snag the backseat, so that I can stretch out and sleep all night.

**8:30 p.m.:** I'm now sitting on a curb, under a lamppost, with an Albanian young woman. We only guess at what the other is saying, but it's pretty close. Her name is Jemidia, and she's a medical student who lives in Tirtova, but she studies here and goes home on weekends. We floundered on whether it was every weekend, or just once in a while.

**8:45 p.m.:** Now I'm aboard the modern coach bus, and I do have the back seat. Tonight, for the first time, I have used the small dog leash to strap my purse and bum bag together and around my waist. It will probably only inconvenience me, but I plan to sleep, so it's a good precaution. I didn't think that the air conditioner in here might be so cold or I would have dug out my sweatshirt, as I did my pillow. The backpack is covered with its nylon protector and is already under the bus, so it might be too late.

**8:57 p.m.:** Nope. Got it. I had tied that self-protective shroud on so good and tight that I couldn't get it undone in the dark, but the driver himself took over and carefully unknotted the thing. He and his assistant, who speaks a little English, understood that I was cold in the AC and sympathized. I'm practically the only one way back here and it's much warmer up in front, but I need this long seat for a bed. I have the plum place, all right. That's what's called being "overnight-bus-savvy." Now, I want a blanket. When we roll, I snooze.

## MACEDONIA

### Skopje

**Friday, September 16, 3:50 p.m.:** I have set up office in the outdoor café of an Irish pub to have a very late lunch/early supper and catch up on journaling all of the anecdotal reports of the past few days. It's always true that, when things go hard for me, they are going very well for this story. There would be nothing to write if every day was like a Holiday Inn stay with no surprises. I have a lot to write now, because these days are not that sort at all.

My table is on the riverfront and I'm watching the passing crowd. This is an interesting city, full of nice people, some of whom speak English. Their alphabet is Cyrillic, though they aren't speaking Russian. As I recall, when it was still part of Yugoslavia, under Tito, he was enthusiastically Stalinist and so all their signs are in Russian. I can sound them out, though I don't know the meaning, unless it's an adopted word, such as restaurant, photocopy, automatic, or stop.

A comment on Bare Shoulders, and the like: I'm sitting here, blatantly and daringly, wearing a sleeveless shirt. For four months now, I've followed all the advice to tourists to dress conservatively; but particularly, as you get into Muslim territories, to cover your shoulders and upper arms. Bosnia was the first Muslim country I had ever been in, and so was Albania, and my arms were fully covered, as they were this morning when I set out, wearing an overblouse.

But the sun is hot, and I walked so far, all the while observing many other women being uncaring about the Islamic shock threshold, so that I too, have now stripped

down to normal. It feels good though I intend to go back to being respectable on the way home to my hotel. Conscious as I am of this whole custom, I've noticed that there seems to be no prohibition against tight bosom-defining clothing, or against deeply dipping necklines. It's the bare shoulders which must be scandalous. A cap sleeve makes all the difference.

Except, so far, there's been no obvious control over the babes on the billboards. They are as revealed as in the rest of the world. It will be interesting to see if there's any effect on sexuality in advertising, as I travel in countries where the majority are Muslim.

Now, to catch up to the present situation: Luckily, I had reserved my \$40 hotel room here yesterday, using the Internet at the Tirana International Hotel, but I arrived way too early in the morning for the staff of this cute little lodge, run in very homey fashion by a Macedonian family. However, when the taxi deposited me, the friendly owner came to the door in his bathrobe and checked me in. This is a narrow, four-story, high-rise apartment with three or four rooms to a floor. I have a single room and my own bathroom, so I took a hot shower and went right to bed. Two hours later, the maid showed me to the breakfast room, where I helped myself to a good breakfast and then took off to explore the town, armed with a city map presented by my host.

I must say, I have now returned to a more familiar brand of civilization here in Macedonia and surely, that's due in large part to economics. I found some architectural monstrosities in the center of this really quite attractive city, and then remembered Lonely Planet's description of them. There's a lovely riverfront, full of shops and restaurants, and evidence of many tourists, but these very odd buildings stand

out, like many sore fingers. Actually, all architects should make a point of coming here to gawk and this city really should be a part of their education.

Forty-two years ago, in 1963, an earthquake destroyed most of the buildings here and aid poured in from all over the world—too much money, apparently. One can see the bureaucratic hand at work, making excuses to use that money, rather than turn it down. So, they built enormous things, of a swoopy-swirly architectural nature. The post office and the telecommunications buildings are so awful that you want to stare with mouth hanging down. The color and texture of corrugated cardboard, they both have large portholes, half-circle windows and curved edges, plus round turrets. The look is what we in the 1950's used to call "futuristic", with dipsy-doodle lines at the top. Gigantically contrived, these two buildings are wrapped tightly around the sides of an ordinary, Soviet-ugly apartment building that looks nothing at all like them. Probably, the apartment was not damaged by the earthquake and thus couldn't be pulled down.

It's pitiful to see hundreds of small air-conditioners braced to the sides and the pillars of these monstrous buildings, accumulating like fungus or small mushrooms, over the past forty years. Some of them drip condensation, in now-blackened waterfalls, down the cement sides. Either proper air-conditioning wasn't installed, originally, or the small interior rooms foiled that design. Or perhaps, by now, anything original has all broken down. Today, every eager beaver building here has these little window units sprouting all over its sides, ruining the ostentatious lines conceived by whatever junior-grade architect it was who designed them.

These monstrosities are scattered all about, like giant's playthings, throughout the city and these days they crumble or lie empty and underused. Apparently, no one thought about the massive cost of maintaining and repairing these freaks over the decades.

The train/bus station is the best example. It's so enormous that many trains can park, and pass, right on top of it. As long as a city block, it's like something built by the pharaohs, though it has no identifiable style. Imagine a colossal, dirty brown Shredded Wheat biscuit laid across a two-lane highway, with a tunnel scooped out for cars to go through and train tracks running right on top, as if it were a giant overpass. The right-hand side contains the terminals for bus and train travelers; but the left, and larger end is an abandoned, boarded-up, warehouse, probably intended to store freight but surely, way overblown for the needs of this city.

I thought of the Pharaoh connection as I walked through the grimy, dank, half-block-long, traffic tunnel. Surely, it was designed by someone who didn't drive and had never taken a train; who also thought it was a great idea to arrange for them to embark and debark in a traffic lane, never even thinking to provide a pullover parking area. The main terminal entrance is right in the middle of the dark tunnel, in the belly of the biscuit. There's a small parking place beyond the tunnel, beside the little bus terminal for the necessary commercial buses, which is surely the parking space that everyone uses. What happened to Form Follows Function? Bureaucrats with free money have obviously never heard of it.

I will be interesting tomorrow, to see where my taxi deposits me when I go to catch my train to Greece. After my foray into the station, it's extremely obvious to me that no one



here takes the train. That part of the station is like a dark tomb, and the listless, sulky workers in the offices don't want you to bother them. It's the weirdest, emptiest, dirtiest, place ever imaginable, with none of the purpose and bustle of a real train station. I should know, having sampled enough of them.

What trains might show up from time to time on the upstairs surface of this giant Weetabix have to be reached by climbing three high and unforgiving sets of steps. A broken escalator taunts people like me, who arrive bearing heavy loads. Not having my pack with me today, I went up there to see what sort of train must shamble into this afterthought of a terminal, and, yes, the rolling stock fits the motif, very well. I don't think the trains go to very many places, but they do cross the border to Greece, which none of the buses do, and that's where I'm headed next.

So far, I'm busting the myth that economically poor countries are playgrounds where middle-class Americans can live like wealthy people or even vacation nicely, or buy goods cheaply. Bottom of the ladder spots, like Albania, are places where no one would want to live or spend any time. Even in those countries' capitals, such as Sarajevo or Tirana, fine hotels are not cheap. They're just as expensive as anywhere else, because they cater only to business travelers, not to locals. This is also true of their restaurants or boutique stores. They have no relationship to the local economy and charge in Euros or dollars. Sometimes meals are cheap, but I have more often than not paid about what I would have paid at home. No bargain. I've actually looked for good buys on clothes, shoes, luggage, and now I'm spotting for a functioning camera, but I haven't saved any money on my purchases and all cameras here look very expensive.



# TURKEY

## **Aboard the train at the Turkish Border**

**Monday, September 19, 4:30 a.m.:** After an overnight in Thessaloniki, Greece, I hopped on a train for Istanbul. That last stop was just the Greek exit process. Now, we're stopped at the Turkish entry border and some of us from the U.S. and Europe had to leave the train and go into the station to pay the \$20 visa fee. They still have our passports and are entering them into the computer. We leave a digital trail because our passport number always goes in, so they can universally tell where you are and where you've been: time, date, everything. I guess people that need apprehending are tagged and when they cross a border they can be nabbed.

I'm clear, so it's always smooth. No tags on me. I sure looked funny trooping into the office in the wee hours of the night but, at least, I was dressed...overdressed actually, with long pants, a skirt and a sweatshirt plus shoes and socks. I was cold earlier, so got up and changed from my sundress/nightgown. Thank goodness. I wouldn't have wanted to parade in like that and the soldiers don't give you time to do anything except grab up your documents.

**8:55 a.m.:** I'm up and ready for the day as best I can be. My pack is closed and I'm decently dressed with even an attempt at a makeup job. The day is misty but sunshiny, and we've been rolling through farm lands with towns in the distance. What I see so far, heading through Turkey towards Istanbul, I like. As always, in approaching a new city where I have no reservations, there's the semi-dread of how things will go once we pull in. Not at all that anything bad will

happen, just a wonder about how it will shake down. This time I have a pamphlet about the hostel that I want, but since I couldn't find an Internet connection yesterday, there's nothing reserved for me. I'll bet they'll have space on a Monday. Single rooms at the Sinbad cost \$21, which sounds good, as I'll need some sleep today and would love to have my own room.

## Istanbul

**September 19, 12:40 p.m.:** I *like* Istanbul. It's user-friendly. So was the train station....smallish, and right in town. I easily caught a taxi to the Sinbad Hostel near the Blue Mosque and I could check right into a private room.

What a great city. I'm now seated at a sidewalk café table in Old Istanbul, where I now live, watching covered women walking with their children. Their covering is a large, flowered scarf with a long-sleeved coat dress. I've seen one young wife in a black burqa with only her eyes showing. Schoolgirls wear uniforms with vests and long black stockings but no scarves yet. Tradesmen walk along slowly, sing-singing out about their wares. One had a basket of dishes slung over his shoulder; another carried a shoe shine/repair rack. Life is like it always has been. I've just eaten the best lentil soup and am now waiting for my vegetarian dish with mushrooms.

**5:10 p.m.:** I've wandered to a park overlooking the Blue Mosque and St. Sophia after a long nap at the hostel. It's a soft late afternoon and tourists and locals mill about. So far, I've fended off about four conversationalists, all men selling something. "*Hello. Where are you from?*" Then, they start guessing. "*Oregon? Wisconsin?*" They want to sell carpets, or

leather jackets, or a meal at their restaurant or to give me a tour. They speak good English and are oh so eager to be helpful. This is very good practice for India.

By the way, a tout is someone who approaches you on the street trying to sell you something. Taxi drivers are notorious touts, both for their own services and for shops and hotels which pay a commission for all tourists referred. In my experience, they are not the least bit dangerous, but they can be aggressively pesky. All it takes to shake them is a firm negative answer and they will back off.

My bench is in a lovely old park which is well-populated with both men and women. An old geezer came and sat beside me, fairly close, as I'd taken the middle spot on a short bench. I immediately closed this journal and got up in a silent huff, sending a glare to him, almost, and I walked to another bench. He followed me but veered off when he noticed a policeman on the next bench over. I had seen him too; that's why I chose this one. It's probably best to snub these street touts altogether but I haven't yet mastered that technique. I told one that he was interrupting my meditation, which was very true, and then he wanted to start a philosophical conversation as to whether it was possible to meditate on the street. "*Oh yes. When there's no one talking to you,*" said I, speeding up.

But I have stumped their "*Carpets for your floors or your walls*" approach with the fact that I have no need for one. "*I'm a world traveler,*" I say. That didn't stop one of them for long. He came back with "*How about a leather jacket, then?*" I just walked away, because to reply that I was heading towards hot climates would have taken things a level farther along, conversationally. Very soon, they have all this information about you. It's not necessary to be impolite but it

isn't necessary to be ruled by politeness either, which is what they're counting on...at least, from us garrulous Americans. To be nothing at all to brazen strangers is the best way. Perhaps, to beat them at their own game of the unexpected. We shall see. I certainly won't be out after dark here.

**7:15 p.m.:** Well, there's hope for the future. The very noisiest soccer child in the street below is a girl. I finally looked out of my hostel window to see this bossy mouthy boy and learned that it's an eight-year-old girl. She tells the others what to do and she shouts and coaches like a pro.

The Turkish people are an assertive sort. Maybe the women rule the roost within the home and then agree to be silent and walk behind the husband in public. Now, the evening call to prayer resounds from two close-by but non-cooperating mosques, meaning that they step on each other's lines. But, it still sounds good. I'm high on the hostel rooftop at their restaurant with a lovely view of the city lights. My food is being ordered from the same place I had lunch in, a half-block away. They bicycle it over. The sea is about two blocks away and darkly visible. Whoops. My food has arrived and I have exactly the same meal as I had for lunch, vegetarian plate. Good, but hot with peppers.

**September 20, 10:30 a.m.** The Sinbad rooftop restaurant above the hostel is supposed to open at 8 a.m. for breakfast, but is still locked tight at ten. The guy sleeps up there, so my host thinks he just hasn't gotten up yet. He tried to wake him by yelling up from the street, to no avail. So I'm at the tea garden nearby, sipping mint tea and trying for food. The waiter has to go across the street to the kitchen, and twice, he has come back. "*No omelet.*" Then, "*No fruit salad.*" Now, we're trying for yogurt salad. What's this? A big bowl of yogurt, with tiny slivers of cucumber and a plate of soft

French bread. At least, the slivers aren't hot pepper, which has been reaming my stomach since last night's supper. This restaurant is clearly a shish-kebob sort of place and I'll go the meat route tonight.

Last night I slept very well and the few times I did wake, I noticed the absolute silence of Istanbul. My bed is right beside a window overlooking a side street, and it was fairly noisy early in the evening. Traffic and children, calls to prayer, and calls to buy. But, after 9 p.m., silence fell and remained in place until 9 a.m., only broken by two morning calls to prayer from the nearby mosques.

Two families live in the house across the narrow street but no noise came from them. At 2 a.m., when I got up briefly, I peeked out and saw that their entry door was wide open and a man was sitting on the steps smoking. I thought he was an all-night guard but he was gone later on, so now I think he was a husband, out for a smoke. This considerate silence is a beautiful and remarkable phenomenon for a huge capital city. It may well have to do with the extremely reduced amount of alcohol available in this Muslim country.

**1:15 p.m.:** I'm watching the population through the window of a nice cafeteria-style restaurant where I've just eaten a delicious vegetarian meal. I'm no vegetarian, myself, but have learned that meat here is over-spiced for my tastes. I see interesting, wonderful faces. Turks are a very nice, attractive people who like the formalities of a smile and a greeting before slamming into the business of selling me some water or a ticket. That is, they like it from me, and so do I. In all this dealing with folks that travel brings out, I have seen how people soften up if you're just simply nice to them and, for instance, preface your remarks with "*Excuse me*" when asking directions

Simple, pure, human etiquette really works, but as I've also observed, is not always practiced by us Westerners. All too often, we press our rush to do whatever is on our agenda onto them without even noticing the human interaction. I just had a good laugh with the vendor of my cold bottled water about his lost millionaire status. His shop is a hole in the wall but his water is colder than any others. 500,000 lira was the cost according to the sign. That's now stated as half a lira in their new money. But, a while ago in pre-Euro days, the lira was stated as a million. He spoke better English than many of the professionals and we joked about no longer dealing in millions. It's probably a very old joke around here but it didn't matter. We both enjoyed the moment.

Turkey is so great. I'll have to come back and do the whole country on another trip. This afternoon, returning to the Old Town by bus, I sat next to a woman from Alexandria, Egypt, who struck up a conversation by advising me about my money pouch around my waist. She told me not to wear it twisted to the side while I sat on a bus but to pull it to the front. We began to talk and then she invited me to join her for lunch at her favorite restaurant near the tourist information office.

**1:45 p.m.:** I'm down in the underground water cistern, which dates to Emperor Justinian. Water is brought here by aqueduct from the Belgrade Forest, nineteen kilometers away. At present, the depth of the water is only a few inches. It's silent and dark down in this enormous column-filled cavern except for the subdued lighting along the wooden walks that allow you to explore most of this eerily beautiful place. I'm the only customer in a nice little underground café, drinking too-strong coffee and eating a Mars Bar, of all things.



I must be doing something right as far as the touts are concerned. I do ignore them, but I don't. If they approach me, or show me their wares, or speak out, I acknowledge that without making direct eye contact and without breaking my stride. I agree that the cloth is beautiful and then I smile and shake my head, or answer as I pass. There's no need to frown or look forbidding. These men get that all day long from most people, and yes, we Westerners would think, "*Then, why don't they stop?*" But, it's their livelihood and even though they distress the tour operators, and do prey upon unwitting tourists by costing them money, they do sell some souvenirs which some people want to buy, such as postcards and gold-embroidered men's pillbox hats. The dear Iraqi doctor who sat with me on the city tour bus bought two hats to remember his visit to the Blue Mosque. I've done a lot of sightseeing in the must-see palaces and museums of Istanbul by now.

So these touts are not bad men and they are quick to pick up on your signal, though they may persist a little longer. They won't follow very far, as they have a very distinct territory, so there's no reason for alarm if one comes to walk for a few steps beside you. And they do respond to someone who is real with them. As I ate breakfast earlier, I compared faces and expressions directed towards the dapper man whose job it was to convince passersby to eat there. Many faces were hard and somewhat insulted but one woman gave a beautiful smile as she refused and I saw him relax, even though she and her family walked on by. Tourists need to remember that they aren't the only people in the world who have agendas.

I will next travel to the Southern coast of Turkey, so have bought a three-day package tour of the middle portion of the country as transportation to the Olympos Turkmen Tree

House Hostel. While I waited at Adventure Tours for my bus to Cappadocia, I saw the truth behind the practice of the store and restaurant owners standing on the sidewalk, speaking out to people. “*Hello, Lady. Are you hungry?*” or “*Do you want to buy a carpet?*” “*Take a tour?*” or the funniest, “*Buy a carpet and ice cream?*” They all must do it, to hope for a chance, and I saw the very distinguished owner of both this tour company and the restaurant doing it as well. Now, here is a handsome, business-suited, dignified man of great stature in his family and in society. So, this is simply the nature of Turkish commerce and if I worked there, I would do it too, as the employees of Adventure Tours did a little bit. They were all tired and would come back in and sink behind their desks, or continue their conversations, when there were no people strolling in front. Well, it was almost the same in Aspen except that the merchants hoped that their sale racks out on the sidewalk would do that job.

## Cappadocia

**September 23:** I’m with my small tour group in Cappadocia, having a leisurely swing in the shade at an outdoor patio café after drinking apple tea, a very Turkish custom. I’ve had it frequently here and it often accompanies business deals, such as my arranging to take this tour. This is a lovely day, sunny but cool. Everything is perfect for this perfect spot, with its mystical, conical geological shapes. My hotel is luxurious and called a Cave Hotel, consisting of underground rooms. It’s fancy and has a great Jacuzzi bathtub and true Turkish towels, enormous and scratchy.

**3:50 p.m.** *Yawn.* After a lovely demonstration of ancient wine-making techniques and then, a wine-tasting in a

local family-owned shop, I'm interested in a long nap, being already sleepy from the overnight bus ride. We've seen lots of very unusual sandstone and eroded ash formations and have been into many of the caves that riddle these stone hills. These were carved out by humans during the second century and this was the first place that missionary Christians came two hundred years after the death of Christ. They lived here and taught Christianity by telling stories, using as illustrations the paintings on the walls and ceilings of their little churches which they added to the carved caves in the rock wall.

We went to a place called the underground city where we were allowed to follow deep shafts down to over two hundred feet underground. The tunnels and round rooms were originally carved by the Hittites, then the Romans, the Byzantines, and finally, the early Christians. They all lived in there, by turn, going deeper and deeper over the centuries. The entire countryside is ancient like this. Everywhere, rooms are carved into canyon walls. Walking along a riverbed in a deep canyon, I could have felt as if I were hiking in Colorado, except that the stone canyon walls had many square windows and doors of carved rock dwellings.

Lunch was delicious river trout, served outdoors beside a running stream after our two-mile walk. Turks are gracious and wonderful hosts, very sweet and hospitable. I feel very safe here. Some of those on our tour were Turkish people from many parts of the country. One man was a Turkish Air pilot. Everyone spoke English.

## **Busing to Olympos**

**Sunday, September 25, 3:20 a.m.:** Everything about Turkish road travel is first class. I am so impressed with the Mercedes-Benz public overland buses and, most especially, the extremely clean and very beautiful bus stations. We had a half-hour meal stop during the wee hours of the night and I was simply knocked out by the gleaming glory all around me. There were lovely blue-tiled fountains and huge flower arrangements, soft music and plenty of employees to serve up steaming buffets of delicious food. It was like nothing I have found anywhere else in the world and I shuddered to think of any Turk's culture shock if ever they had to travel across the United States by Greyhound bus. I was embarrassed for my own country. Turkey has us beat by a country mile. Or, should I say, by a national mile, in the "Who has the best cross-country transportation?" department.

## **Olympos**

**Sunday, September 25, 10:15 a.m.:** It's breakfast time at Turkmen Treehouse Pension, and there's a delicious buffet set up under a great shelter. This is a large operation, ([www.olymposturkmentreehouses.com](http://www.olymposturkmentreehouses.com)) and there are many youthful travelers here, though also some families with children.

What a wonderful place. My little cabin, all to myself, is not in a tree but is raised a few feet off the ground, very clean, rustic on the outside, paneled inside with blond pine which is varnished to a shine. The bathroom is a short hike away. Cost per night is only thirteen dollars for a single cabin plus two all-you-can-eat meals. So, this is highly

recommended and worth all the effort to get down here. The weather is paradise perfect. They even have a travel office on the premises and are going to help me figure out my travel plans on getting to Athens so that I can catch my scheduled flight to Cairo. We're on the southwestern coast of Turkey, near Antalya, and I would think that I can find ferries through the Greek islands to Athens.

**6:10 p.m.:** The path to the beach is most interesting. This was once an ancient city named Olympos during the second century and this very land has been occupied by Romans, Byzantines, and early Christians. Ruins are everywhere between this pension and the sea. Olympos was sacked by pirates and has been unoccupied for many centuries, but much archeology remains. Empty graves of the necropolis are fallen-in and trees grow in shells of once fine ancient homes, right here on the path to the beach, and everything is completely accessible. One can wander about through these ruins on paths that must have, at one time, been narrow streets. We're on an old river bed which used to be deep enough for ships when the town was flourishing. High mountain peaks rise above this long dry channel, making everything feel surrounded by beauty and nature.

The travel counselor here recommended that I fly back to Istanbul and catch a plane to Athens in order to meet my scheduled flight to Cairo. The sea route through the islands isn't going to work, as most ships have stopped running in the off-season and any that still do would take too long to get me there. Besides, how could I just whisk through those beautiful places without stopping to linger? Luckily, I snagged a plane ticket for the last seat in economy class, but it still cost \$352. So, this spontaneous look at Turkey is costing a bundle, versus my other choice, an exploration of Greece,

just working my way overland from Thessaloniki to Athens. With the tour of Cappadocia, and now this flight, Turkey has cost \$700 extra. But, I'm so glad that I came here. It's been worth every penny and I know that, someday, I would love to return to see more of this very interesting country. As I leave the European continent behind I can look back over a grand total of sixteen different countries on this leg of the journey; twenty-one, if you count multiple entries of the same country. I've extended my stay here at this refreshing hostel, so with five days in one location, I can stop rushing about.

Last night was funny. At 4 a.m., I woke to the sound of two drunken boys making their way to their cabin across the dirt path behind mine. One was singing at the top of his voice, a story that he had surely loved as a very little boy. "*The little baby duck went quack, quack, quack.*" He had lots of sound effects to go with the quacking, and I could almost imagine the illustrations and the adventures of that little baby duck, but surely the whole village of us sleepers didn't want a bedtime story.

They weren't going straight to bed but were tottering about behind my cabin; perhaps trying to tell which identical shack in the next row belonged to them. I looked out of my window and spoke to the quieter one. "*What's going on?*" He said that his friend was up in the tree and, sure enough, leaves were raining down and quacking was coming from higher up.

I put on shoes and a sweatshirt over my long sundress nightgown and came outside to see what I could do about getting them to go to bed. The quiet one was very polite and cooperative during our window conversations but the silly monkey in the tree was now making schoolboy jokes about

penises. His branch was practically over my roof but it was a slender branch and any fall was going to hurt him.

Locking my door behind me, I called up to him in a friendly, motherly fashion telling him that he had woken the whole population and that it was now time to go to bed. He said something about roosters and I replied that he had a bird complex; first a duck, and now, a rooster. He asked where I was from, saying that he would come down if I told him. So, I said "*Florida.*" and guessed that he was either an Aussie or a Kiwi. Then, I delivered my ultimatum, "*Okay, now I'm going to walk to the bathroom and you need to be down from there and in your bed before I return.*" And, off I went to the loo.

Then, I thought it might be wise to find an employee, in case he was stubborn, so I walked to the central gathering place which looked deserted. A nice bonfire was still burning and stars filled the sky, so I sat down to enjoy that, since sleep was not too likely, under the circumstances. I heard a cough from one of the cushioned platforms. Then, a figure was walking towards me from the office. He didn't speak English and was holding a beer bottle but did say he was an employee.

After I got the problem across, he waved the bottle in explanation. "*Yes, but we can't sleep. Come with me and help me quiet him down.*" He followed me back along the stone path between our shanties. Voila. All was quiet in my lane. The tree was empty and we heard only a muted query from the boys' shack, indicating that they knew that I had returned with The Law.

I whispered goodnight to them and turned to my helper. "*You did it,*" I said, and extended my hand to shake his. He gallantly kissed my fingers and disappeared back to the office. Problem solved. I went to bed, marveling that not any peep was coming out of the boys' little house. As if they

were lying stiffly, hoping that Mama wouldn't fuss. Of course, maybe they had passed out by that time. Just now, after breakfast, I was walking behind two Asian girls when these guys crossed our path. They recognized each other as drinking buddies and murmured greetings. As we walked on, I asked the teens if that was the quack-quack guy. Yep. He was a good-looking, clean-cut, nice young man. No, that was the quiet one. I see the tree-climber now, from this window. Cute, with curly dark hair, college age. They're checking out, so maybe tonight we won't be disturbed.

Walking back from the beach, a long and familiar hike by now, I marveled at being In Turkey, and about how natural and homey it feels to be here. Will I feel that way about India too? India sounds so strange and exotic to me. But, so did Turkey, before I tried it on. Then I thought about how I tend to feel at home wherever I am, with the exception of that fleeting period of time when I'm approaching a new place, whether I have a reservation or not, but more so if I don't. I always feel slightly off-center about it and even if the train or bus ride has been exhausting and I'm ready for it to end, there's that slight regret when pulling into a strange town, because I'm going to have to disembark from the familiar to the unfamiliar.



**PART II:**  
**EGYPT, INDIA, AND THAILAND**  
**2005**



# EGYPT

## Cairo

**Sunday, October 2:** The afternoon flight to Cairo was very smooth. The baggage arrived promptly, and I decided that there was plenty of time to take local transportation to the Hotel Victoria to meet my Intrepid Travel group, which would be convening at six for our get-acquainted meeting. The directions that I had received with the tour materials sounded very straightforward, so instead of hailing a taxi, I simply climbed aboard the local bus #5 heading to the British Museum, as instructed.

Fortunately, the kind stranger who gave me directions to the proper bus stop took the time to jot down the shape of the number that I was to look for on the side of the bus. I thought that we used Arabic numerals and here I was in an Arabic country, but the sign designating the bus was very unfamiliar. That was a very thoughtful extra gesture on his part.

After I entered the bus and became surrounded by the late afternoon rush hour crowd, I had a disturbing thought: How would I know when we had arrived at my stop? Luckily, the man next to me spoke English and said that we would travel about an hour before coming to the British Museum. He was to get off earlier, but would ask the other passengers to let me know when to get off.

It was dark by the time several remaining passengers turned in my direction and let me know that my stop was to be next. Without a common language, however, there was no way that they could give me any advice about where my hotel

was, from that stop. I squinted at the printed directions and hoped that I could now find the correct street.

Well, I soon began to mutter to myself that whoever had decided that it was feasible to find this hotel on one's own, according to these directions, was a silly nincompoop. I walked, and walked, and walked around the large, well-lighted area between the museum and a huge traffic roundabout, until I was absolutely weaving from fatigue carrying the heavy backpack.

Egyptian traffic supplies a culture shock of its own, as it toots and weaves thickly and relentlessly. I actually crossed the traffic circle several times, back and forth. The flow of traffic never stops its honking and jockeying for position, like an Indy race course, so the trick is to find a tiny lull and to simply step out into the four-lane fray. If you move confidently across the four lanes, keeping a steady pace, you will not, theoretically, get hit; but if you wait on the sidewalk for the whole business to stop and rest, you will grow a beard and die of old age.

At last, I gave up on finding this address by myself, and entered a fast food place, an American Hardees, knowing that they would speak English. The manager was so very, very kind and told me that I was still a long way from the Victoria Hotel and that he would recommend my taking a taxi. He even came out to the street, procured one for me, told the driver my address, and let me know what the cost would be. It was way, way, too far to walk, even with no luggage.

Sitting comfortably in the cab and sincerely wishing that I had done this in the first place, I remembered my high-priced ride in the Athens taxi for my one-night stay on the trip to Egypt, and the subsequent vow to depend upon local transportation the next morning when I took the metro to the

airport, so easily and inexpensively. That's why I was so happy that I had Cairo bus directions. Aside from the physical labor involved, it was a pretty good immersion into ground-level Egypt.

I sure was glad to get to the lovely Victoria Hotel and check in, so that I could meet my group when they gathered in the lobby for our orientation meeting. It was such a relief to have people waiting to absorb me into their fold and to just lead me around for the next two weeks. After so long traveling on my own, this was the perfect time and the perfect country for me to choose to take part in an organized group tour package.

We are ten women and three men. Most are British or Australian couples in their twenties and thirties, plus two somewhat older English women, who've been friends for years. It's a great and compatible group. The Aussies include our guide, Kristie, who was suddenly asked to lead this trip when our scheduled guide became ill. This darling blonde dynamo rose to the occasion, though she had just returned from a two-week trip during which she had sprained her ankle.

By now, I had run out of options on acquiring my visa for the three months that I planned to be in India. Since I was unable, for one reason or another, to visit the Indian Consulate in Istanbul or Athens, it was imperative that I apply for it in Cairo. However, because the next day was to be a vital first day of the tour, with visits to the Giza Pyramids and a tour of the British Museum, I decided to put off my Indian visa application process until my return to Cairo in two weeks. After all, I didn't have to leave on my flight to Mumbai for three days after that.

I might mention that it was not a possibility to apply for this visa back in May before I left home; since six months is the period of validity, and it would have expired by this time. I hadn't at all forgotten about this necessity during my approach to this part of the world, but was hampered by various realities. As it turned out, the process is not a simple one and could not have been fulfilled in any city except Cairo.

**Monday, October 3:** The Giza Pyramids are very beautiful and being there is just like becoming part of a National Geographic world. It is simply amazing to be in heavy Cairo traffic one minute, and then to be standing among camels on desert sands gazing at the lovely light tan shapes of those familiar pyramids the very next. We were able to walk freely beside the enormous stone bases and, if we wished to climb a bit and pay a small entry fee, we were allowed to enter the Great Pyramid of Khufu (circa 2600 BC) through a short doorway.

We had to bend over quite markedly to fit into the cramped passageway and then hunch our way single-file down a long lighted slanting shaft, then up another into the large empty burial chamber. The air was stale but breathable. Outside again, we paid homage to The Sphinx and saw a temple where the dead kings were mummified by priests.

Inside the British Museum, our guide took us through many centuries of Egyptology. There were the original objects we have seen since childhood in the pages of our encyclopedias, such as thirteen royal mummies, as well as the fabled night-black room containing King Tut's treasures.

Back at the hotel, we had only time to shower and pack before heading to the train station for our overnight train to Aswan.

## Luxor

**On the train, Luxor, Egypt, Tuesday, October 4:** It's been light for over an hour and we passengers are gradually stirring in our seats. I've had a cup of tea and a mango and croissant, bought on the way to the train station last night. It's another three hours until we reach Aswan, but now we are stopped at the Luxor station.

A train window provides a very fine peek at an unsuspecting world. There's a young woman in a long black dress and veil, who keeps her eyes diverted most of the time, but occasionally peeks up and takes a penetrating look around. White-uniformed soldiers with rifles stand next to men in long desert robes who come to their fields on donkeys at first light. By now, not quite seven in the morning, it's already getting too hot to work in the sun.

This is the first day of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, when Moslems fast between earliest dawn and sundown. They do not eat, drink, or smoke during the day for a full thirty days, but they do continue their work.

## Aswan

**Tuesday, October 4, 8:00 p.m.** – What a wonderful day we have had on the Nile and in a Nubian village. After lunch, we put bathing suits on under our clothing for a motorboat ride across the Nile to a Nubian beach for a swim in the fabled river. My three hotel suitemates and I jumped off the sides of the boat together, laughing about crocodiles.

After paddling in the shallows with the passengers of several other covered launches, we boarded our boat to hear a

talk by Mr. Hamdi, a highly educated elder of the Nubian people. He spoke of his ancient tribe's culture, which can be traced back as far as 3100 BC, mentioning that he has served as guest lecturer in quite a few Western universities. As soon as he learned my country, Mr. Hamdi began to recite the names of famous authors, actors and classical singers from the U.S. In a moment, he did the same thing with Italy when he met Cecelia and learned of her origins.

Next, we mounted camels for a slow walk across the desert to view the long-abandoned monastery of St. Simeon. A camel is an awkward ride and I felt like a flexible reed at the base of my mount's long neck; but I loved this sunset caravan, which ended at the doorway of a Nubian family's home, where we were welcomed by Mr. Hamdi and the owner of the house.

Even though, because of Ramadan, this family had been fasting since 5:30 a.m. they were busily cooking a many-course meal for us which would soon be set upon long woven mats laid out upon the floor. We were in a center courtyard, part of which was paved and roofed and the ground of which was filled with soft sand, open to the starry night sky. During supper preparations, Mr. Hamdi continued his lesson about the ageless history of the Nubian people.

He told us that they were the original civilization and have always believed in One God and many Prophets of that One God. Nubians welcome daughters more than sons, though he didn't explain why. They are a peace-loving, friendly people and a distinguishing characteristic is that their skin is almost blue-black.

Soon, great pots of soup, salad, stews, flatbread, and platters of fish, chicken and vegetables were spread before us



and we ate our fill while the family retired to the kitchen to break their fast. After the meal, drummers came in and Mr. Hamdi drew us out into the open patio to join the family in a dancing circle.

All happily stepped to the drumbeat as burning torches flickered on the wall. I felt hands grab mine and a very old lady, the matriarch of this family, brought me with her into the center of the circle. The drums increased their intensity; the other dancers quickened their step and we two began a stomping dance, laughing together with sheer joy of movement. Faster and faster we turned. Approvingly, my partner nodded and then made the loud “Yi, yi, yi yi” sound with her tongue that I have only heard before in movies. I tried to imitate.

Soon, a younger woman took my hands and we became the show as everyone else backed off to watch. I danced with all of the women like this, without rest, as they spelled each other. It was a long dance, but I was still eager for more when the drummers stopped and slipped away. That night of dancing broke the ice, and we laughed and talked with our new friends, puffing and panting from such exertion after a meal large enough to sideline any python.

Three-year-old Fatimah wanted to go home with us and wailed when Kristie rounded us up to leave. If I’d been a little kid, I would have wailed too. We were having too much fun to let it end.

But one last memory was in store for me. The moon was full as our boat captain, J.J., our tour leader, Kristie, and I walked together through the darkened Nubian village. I could feel soft sand underfoot on the pathway between the square clay houses as JJ called out greetings to shadowy figures sitting on their stoops in the cool of the evening. For

so many lovely hours, we had been a welcomed part of their world, their ancient society.

## **Abu Simbel**

**Wednesday, October 5,:** The day began at three in the morning when we boarded small armed vans for the two-and-a-half hour journey to Abu Simbel to see the Temple of Ramses and his wife Nefertit. These massive and magnificent structures were moved in order to save them from being covered by the waters of Lake Nasser, created by a dam built in the 1960s. We had several hours to wander about before we had to begin the long ride back to Aswan. Though the movement and restoration of these structures was an enormous undertaking, they will now be as vital a part of the future as they were of the past.

## **A Nile River Felucca**

**Thursday, October 6, 10:35 a.m.:** Yay! The group is aboard our Nile felucca, home for the next two days and nights. We are thirteen souls, plus two captains, Ikamkani and Ayoub, and that's the perfect number for the large square, rose-print-covered mattress which fills the entire high deck of this sailboat. We recline along the sides of the vessel and there's a clear space between our extended feet, now filled with day packs and books. Just overhead is a great flowered awning and above that, a wind-filled triangular sail. Underneath our deck is a large storage space for our luggage. Reggae music is playing on the portable tape player. We are drinking hibiscus tea. Oh, this is the life.

One of our captains is cooking lunch in a small area in front of our raised platform. He has been peeling and chopping vegetables, and now those are bubbling away on a two-burner propane stove. Another felucca sails close and its captain tosses a plastic bag containing a cereal, which Ayoub explains will help his stomach during fasting. Meanwhile, our vegetarian meal is beginning to smell fantastic.

**Sunset on the Nile, 5:30 p.m.:** No sunset in the world can possibly be this glorious. It's not just the sky—it's everything. Waves, frogs, birds, streaks of sunlight on clouds. The river is almost totally silent, but splashes of sound and light will, briefly and unexpectedly, paint themselves on this colorful canvas of sky and water. Our captains are softly saying their prayers on the prow of our beached felucca. The beautiful evening call to prayer streams like a wisp of smoke from a mosque somewhere across the river.

The sky is shell pink as our team handles the tasks of setting up for the night on the sandy shore. We search for firewood and dried palm fronds for the bonfire, which will be lighted later, well after dark. Palm logs are scouted for and pulled up close to the fire pit dug in the sand. Then, we dig a deeper hole, way off to the side, and set up the potty chair, screening it with a contraption made of striped awning cloth and poles.

When all is shipshape on shore, our captains call us back to the felucca for dinner. Our sloping board of a gangplank tips a little to the right, but we have a pole alongside to correct the balance situation. Everybody takes off their sandals and throws them into a shoe bin on the boat's prow. Then, we assume our now-accustomed places along the center tablecloth.

Bird's tongue macaroni, with vegetable stew and bread, is served in bowls upon an oilcloth running down the center of our sailboat living quarters before which we sit in yoga-like positions. Ours is a good and comfortable family now after five days of heavy-duty tourist work and this wonderful camping-out experience.

After dinner it was bonfire time. Ikamkani and Ayoub sang tribal songs to their Nubian drums, then led us in singing *The Lion Sleeps Tonight* and *Clementine*. When the crew turned in, we tried to keep the sing-a-long going but none of us could carry a tune or remember the lyrics, though we were attempting popular songs. When the fire died down, we too crawled into our sleeping bags on the deck and unfurled the mosquito nets from their attachments on the cloth canopy. Sleep became Nile deep.

At four in the morning, I woke because it was time to visit the loo down on the beach. Scrambling over the sleeping form beside me, I discovered that it was one of our captains, sleeping now above board to keep us safe.

In its many forms, and through every changing minute, the Nile, its banks, and the sky above, are all of a piece: complementary, harmonious, blending. Constellations and stars have no competition from any other light source and they shine with bright intensity. I was so glad that I had come out to witness this silent magic.

Soon, the most beautiful muezzin call to prayer began to float towards heaven from the mosques across the river. For a very long time, several voices sang in unearthly unison and I felt a new kind of trance sweep over me. The singers' hearts had a purity which pulled strands of mystic thread from my own heart, as well as from my head. I felt like a spindle, with silk emerging from my crown, from my heart,

and even sometimes, my third eye. This silken cord pulled heavenwards after first flowing through the singers across the river and into me.

I could physically feel the passage of whatever was produced within my chakras, and I could also sense the individuality of the muezzins, as well as hear the changing timbre among them. Each caused a different sensation within me, like the skill of rare, rare musicians completely at home with their instrument—in this case, the voice . . . in prayer.

And almost at the end, there came bird sounds and a wild period of slapping waves from the wake of a large passing ship, as if the entire river were singing its praises to God along with the muezzins and my soaring heart.

The following day was spent lazily sailing up and down the Nile with the simple object of living a river life. In two days, we had only traveled the distance covered by a half-hour's car journey. Time was spent playing cards, reading, writing, swimming and lying, sitting or reclining, talking happily among ourselves in the canopied space, and only standing straight up in the fore and aft sections of the vessel.

A visit to a camel auction yard in Darau gave us a chance to bid upon the beasts not sold in a pre-dawn auction. Any one of us could have signed on to the Sudan Camel Drive if we had wanted to. But, we didn't. These poor leftover camels, with their almost non-existent humps, were soon to meet the same fate as the donkey whose severed ear we noticed lying on the ground near the butcher shop. One way to judge a second-rate camel is to see whether their water-storage-tank, the hump, is still somewhat elevated after the long caravan across the desert to this place. If they have become seriously dehydrated, then they are no longer a good prospect as a working animal.

The Nile is lyrically happy and softly melodic all day long and crystal quiet at night. Five times a day, the prayer call comes from mosques. The mystic Song of the Nile is made up of thrumming paddle wheels on queenly ships; shouts of friends from boat to shore, or from ship to ship; an occasional small outboard motor; a camel venting an opinion; or a donkey making his complaint to the neighborhood.

That night, we were the fifth felucca to tie up along the same grassy shore. This time the outdoor toilet was set up over a freshly-dug hole on a cow-pie-mined field about fifty yards from shore. Our latrine doesn't exactly add to the bovine contributions, because in the morning we burn the plastic bag containing paper and bury everything else in the covered-up hole.

The grass was wet, so a campfire wasn't in the cards, but we had a very good evening onboard, playing guessing games, laughing and chattering away for hours. Finally, the morning people crawled into our warm sleeping bags and kibitzed from there. Apparently, our party looked like so much fun that a couple of drunken fellows from the tour group in the felucca nearby decided to join us. They were soundly turned away by our captain.

Theirs was a hard-partying bunch and we'd been running into them at different venues throughout the week. Now, I think that when they heard our peals of happy, sustained laughter, they simply wanted a little bit of whatever Kickapoo Joy Juice we were drinking.

Club Med in Luxor; the Valley of The Kings by donkey back; King Tut's tomb; alabaster and papyrus shopping; a silver filigree ring with my name in hieroglyphics; the Karnak Temple complex; the "Vomit Comet," the fast ferry across the Red Sea to Sharm el Sheikh; a hot drive across the Sinai

peninsula, and two days at Sawa beach camp on the Bay of Aquaba where we could look across the water to Saudi Arabia, filled our calendar during the second week of the Intrepid Egyptian tour.

## **Mt. Sinai**

**St. Catherine's, Sinai Peninsula, Thursday, October 13:** St. Catherine's is both a small town and an ancient monastery, built on the very spot at the foot of Mt. Sinai where Moses is said to have begun his climb up the mountain where he encountered the burning bush. We checked into a pleasant hotel and then went to spend a few hours at a very ancient Greek Orthodox Monastery. It is still active, housing about twenty monks, who allowed us to have a look at a tree in an enclosure which was reportedly grown from a cutting of the original burning bush. It looks like a willow tree.

Then we rested at the hotel until mid-afternoon, when we returned to the foot of Mt. Sinai with the object of climbing to the top in time for sunset. Other groups would begin their attempt at midnight, planning to summit in time for sunrise. The only reason that it was at all possible during the daylight hours is that the mountain's shadow covers the trail so that one doesn't cook in the searing sunlight.

At the base, our guides told us that we had two choices: we could hire a camel and its attendant or we could walk up the seven thousand steps, which is a shortcut in a straight line up the mountain. Our group split about fifty-fifty.

Crazily, I chose neither of those methods, as I had it in my head to walk up every foot of the way, as Moses must have

done. At the moment of decision, I had no idea that the ascent didn't even begin for a mile or two after the monastery, and that the camel paths which I must follow had lots and lots of switchbacks that added greatly to the distance.

Soon, I began to take shortcuts between the switchback curves, and that put me into some odd mountain-climbing situations, because the shelf edge of the path became more pronounced the higher I went. I was essentially climbing straight up and crawling out on every other loop. It was not always graceful, particularly if there was a short stone wall at the hairpin turn.

*"What was I thinking?"* became my refrain, but I counted my blessings and tried to put myself in Moses' sandals. He had neither camel nor stairs.

Finally, I reached the area where the camel riders also became climbers for the final several hundred feet, and I walked along the stone path to the top with many beautiful souls who had come from all over the world to make their pilgrimage to this holy mountain where the Ten Commandments were revealed.

We stood in silence as the sun went down, illuminating the mountainous moonscape of the Sinai Peninsula with long red streaks. Then we carefully picked our way down in the dark, also thinking of Moses, who had no cleared path to follow and who bore a stone tablet in each arm. I was so glad that I'd had my time alone during that six-hour ascent to ponder such things in such a place, and I was thrilled to have actually made it.



## Cairo

**Saturday, October 15:** We visited a part of the city that few people even know exists. It's called Garbage City, and it is the Mokattam neighborhood of Cairo, populated by hereditary garbage collectors. For countless generations, a certain level of society has collected and sorted the daily refuse of this megalopolis. There is no established governmental or civic department to handle this problem, so every morning, men and boys diverge to every portion of Cairo, pulling carts to collect the daily trash.

Then they bring it back to this section where they live to sort it in their homes, in their tiny yards, and in the streets. Oddly though, there is some kind of neatness here, some sort of order and dignity. Recovered foodstuffs are fed to their animals; the donkeys, chickens, pigs, dogs, and, also most likely, their families. Paper, plastic, and every manner of discarded object is carefully cleaned, recycled and sold.

Garbage City is a quiet, hard-working, serious quarter where even the children are set to the relentless task of separating the seven hundred tons of daily debris that their fathers bring home in their carts. They live in it; they sleep beside it; they never escape from it, but the whole area has a dignified feel to it, as if even the tiniest child knows that this is a family profession. These children will grow to shoulder the burdens of their parents just as soon as they are strong enough, born into the honorable station of a trash collector.

I met some of their mothers, who were gentle, cheerful women involved in an experiment to create a new sort of work using the large amounts of paper and cardboard brought into the sector on their husbands' carts. In an open

air patio building, cauldrons were carefully watched and stirred as some women cooked down tons of selected paper trash. Others spread the mush in a thin layer onto drying racks, at times pressing herbs or small flowers into the wet material in artistic ways. The result is a beautiful, heavy specialty paper which is then fashioned into stationery, picture frames, gift cards and bags as well as Christmas decorations. These are sealed in clear plastic wrapping and sold in their gift shop. I brought home a number of these beautiful items and some are beside me now as I write. They are amazingly artistic creations.

The Association For The Protection Of The Environment, or A.P.E., was established in 1984 for the betterment of the Cairo Garbage Collecting Villages. Our Intrepid Tour Company is a proud supporter of this wonderful effort and all Intrepid groups visiting Cairo are brought here for a privileged glimpse of a life that few people are aware of.

In addition to the papermaking unit there is a rag recycling model in which women create beautiful woven rugs and patchwork quilts from materials made out of the collected garbage. Another effort is an animal waste composting plant which provides high quality compost for desert agriculture. Funds generated provide earnings for the families, literary classes, daycare and nursery facilities, health care and personal and environmental hygiene.

You can learn more about this on the web site <http://www.ape.org.eg>.

If by any chance you have a gift shop or are seeking one-of-a-kind specialty items for your own use or as presents, then you may buy some of these beautiful things through that site and

take part in a great humanitarian work in Cairo and other cities of Egypt.

**Monday, October 17:** My return trip air tickets were waiting for me at the Victoria Hotel when our group trip checked back in after our circle tour of this country. So, I can forget about the little detail of how in the world I will get home from the other side of the planet.

But there's been quite a change of plans. I can't get my Indian visa until next Sunday because it takes a week to do the paperwork. I didn't know that and had naively figured that one could simply submit passport and paperwork on one day and pick up the visa the next, as is often possible for visas of other countries. Ideally, I would have applied for the Indian visa upon arrival in Cairo, but I'd have missed going with my new group to the pyramids at Giza and the Egyptian Museum and that would have been such a shame. But, it's okay because I'm getting around Cairo very proficiently by this time and the delay will give me more time to explore on my own, as well as to rest a bit after the wonderful but very fast-paced Intrepid tour.

I have now weathered walking across a jillion lanes of fast-moving traffic, and I have the technique down pat. You stick out a hand, you glare, you wait, you dodge, you watch out for the turning lane on your new corner, and finally, you hop safely to the sidewalk. Piece of cake. Nerves of steel. But, it's the system here

**7:50 p.m.:** It's still Ramadan and there is a small mosque directly across the narrow alley from my hotel bedroom window. Five times a day my room fills with chanted prayers coming from a loudspeaker. I do love to hear the muezzin's call and I still remember the way it felt to hear those prayers mingling with each other across the Nile. But it

feels as if the loudspeaker is attached to my window, nay, my very bedpost, pointing inwards toward my head. We are in very close quarters, to say the least. So I wake up very early every day.

In the evening, there's always a frisson of quiet spiritual excitement in the neighborhood of the hotel as the final prayer announces the completion of the day's fast which all have been observing since the first light streaked the sky that morning. No adult Muslim has had a thing to eat or drink for about fourteen hours. Nor have they smoked. This is a beautiful month to be here because the intensity of quiet, private devotion is so palpable.

I love walking in the nearby streets just as the sun is going down because so many people are quietly sitting at long makeshift tables anticipating supper, now sizzling on large outdoor grills set up on the sidewalk. My impression is that this social eating together is a special feature of the month-long fast and provides a communal sense of togetherness in what is essentially a very private religious act.

**Thursday, October 20:** The Ramses Hilton Hotel dining room made a great lunch stop in a day filled with walking sightseeing, but I had a strange conversation with a local woman. She stopped at my table to tell me that I was an American and then hung around, asking intrusive questions about my visit and my life. What did I like about Egypt? She hated it. She's Egyptian, but Christian. When I mentioned that it was very interesting to be in a different culture, she jumped into the Islamic issue, saying that they were bad people, in a bad religion.

On the subject of Islam, she said, "*You read too much. Read too much and write too much,*" to imply that I believed what I'd read, and that I had my head in the sand. Egad. All

this was because she'd seen me writing in my journal. She was just getting worked up, when she asked if she could sit and join me. Luckily, my belongings filled the other chair, or she surely would have pulled it out and sat down without invitation. I simply told her, no, she couldn't join me and she went away in a huff.

I can really understand why famous people develop a tough veneer, pretty quickly, in public. They must be approached by any stranger who recognizes them. Open season. Here, they do it because you're a Westerner and you have to ignore them to avoid suddenly becoming their New Best Friend.

**Sunday, October 23:** My Indian visa is finally in hand and I've been on the Internet, trying to find a Mumbai hotel to book. Everything listed is so expensive. I keep coming up with the Sea Green, a two-star hotel on Marine Drive, but can't get through to them to make a reservation. So, I shall wait until I get to the Mumbai airport and consult with someone in the hotel booking office there. Hopefully, India will live up to its reputation of being an inexpensive country. I've been running over budget for several months now and there are still nine days to wait until the social security check will be in the bank.

In the meantime, this extra week in Cairo has provided a chance to simply rest and unwind after the non-stop Intrepid tour to all corners of this fascinating country. I've been away from home for five months now without a break in my traveling and from all that I have heard about India, the travel may be challenging, so it's good to be refreshed.



# INDIA

## Mumbai, (Bombay)

**Mumbai Airport, Wednesday, October 26** - It's 85 degrees outside and very, very smoggy, from what I could see flying over. Also, the highways seem almost empty, except close to town. A hint of the poverty though, was the rag-tag shacks that were squeezed in between the high buildings. From the air, they look like flat matchboxes, strewn crazily together, jammed in, as if their gray roofs were the black striking part. They fill all the space that would normally be open.

Here's a way to see almost exactly what I saw from the plane window: Go to Google Earth and have a look at Mumbai, on the upper Western coastline of the Indian Continent, or any other big Indian city. All of that higgledy-piggledy grayness, filling in-between everything else, represents the tops of the tarpaper hutments, where millions of people are living on the ground in tiny tents and lean-to's constructed of whatever material they can find.

**1:05 p.m.** After clearing customs, I checked with the airport's lodging referral desk and was shown a simple list of hotel names and prices. There was no map to show locations and even less information than I'd found earlier over the Internet which still had me reeling from sticker shock. There were plenty of hotels, all right, but their prices were mostly between \$300 and \$500 per night. Even the lower-end hotels cost over \$100.

This turns out to be the beginning of the major holiday season of Diwali, the Festival of Lights, and that drives costs up, in addition to the fact that this city is high-priced. And

no, I hadn't figured this out before I left home, since most of my advance planning had consisted of studying maps instead of the hefty *Lonely Planet* that I had packed to take along. I'm the first to admit that my freestyle travel has a downside, here and there. But you can't run away from everything. There will always be a holiday somewhere. Most people like them, but I would rather escape the crowds.

Well, one has three choices of arrival cities when trying to decide where to land in this country: Mumbai, Chennai, or Delhi. Chennai (Madras), on the southeastern side of the continent, was experiencing monsoons and full-blown typhoon weather at the time. It was lucky I hadn't selected that city six months ago when buying my tickets. Delhi is in the center of the country, so it was logical to land on the western coastline in Mumbai, closest to Egypt. It was becoming clear that if I wanted to include India in my travels at all, I'd have to work within the situation, high prices, holiday season, and all.

The Sea Green Hotel was mentioned in *Lonely Planet* but even it seemed to be mighty expensive at \$55 per night. So, feeling temporarily slim in the pocketbook, I chose a place called the Garden View at \$25 per night. The man behind the airport hotel desk looked hesitant and said that this was a guesthouse, and not a true hotel. Well, that sounded quite cozy to me at the moment so I booked it and he arranged my transportation.

The road from the airport is a dusty river of people and motor traffic, all flowing along together. I was in a small clean white van, but everywhere were men leading beasts of burden pulling towering loads of freight; trucks, cars, and tuk-tuks (beetle-like, three-wheel conveyances with soft convertible



tops). They all jockeyed for space on a jam-packed highway. It was a real hubbub of humanity.

Seeing pictures of India in a *National Geographic* is one thing; being squarely in the middle of it is another. Suddenly, the noise, confusion, and the haze of white-hot polluted air struck me most oppressively. Culture shock was setting in. I hadn't even thought about jet-lag but I'd been up all night traveling across several time zones, and now five months into the trip, I found myself in a strange new setting.

This reaction is not an intellectual one and, therefore, can't be assuaged by scholarly preparation. It's an emotional one which comes suddenly in a visceral way when you find yourself so far from your familiar way of life. I can't remember ever having experienced this before, at least, not to this degree. Mostly, my feelings had to do with dismay about the air quality during that first hour in the taxi. I was also very, very tired and needed a hot bath and a comfortable bed to refill my completely drained-down energy tanks.

But that was not to be.

**1:05 p.m.:** The Garden View Guesthouse is, quite possibly, someone's home and my part of it might just be the garage. Its lobby is really just a central, concrete-paved, open space that my van could have driven right on into. My windowless room is immediately off the lobby. If I opened my door, I'd be looking at the front desk, which is really just a wooden counter. The proprietor is very nice, and speaks good English and I'm perfectly safe here. He was surprised at my age, saying that, in India when you're sixty, you're too old to travel anywhere, even around India.

My bed is, literally, a board: two twin boards, pushed together to make a double board. The wooden platform looks like a bed. It is bed-shaped, and has two flat, old, pillows and

an old-looking blanket, but no sheets, just bright orange print covers for the two-inch cotton matting “mattress.”

**5:10 p.m.:** I’ve just been for a walk through the neighborhood. This guest house is not in the same degree of squalor that surrounds it, but it seems to share the premises, back to back, possibly the same family business, with Fern’s Chicken Shop, selling live chickens. I’ve been watching the news about avian flu these past few months, but the proprietor assures me that no cases have been discovered in this part of India.

A meandering dirt road just on the other side of our gates, has open sewer ditches and much trash, as well as tiny little shops perched along its edge, small, three-sided boxes, selling many types of goods and services: a barber shop, a print shop, camera supplies, a hair salon, a grocery store. There are a number of gated high-rise apartments that are a part of a housing society, a very large temple building, a School of Nursing and some other fine buildings, so parts of this neighborhood are modern.

Then, there are the rag and cardboard shanties, set up like tents, in every free space and beside stagnant sewer ditches. Some people don’t even have that much makeshift shelter but live behind woven-together branches. These people are apparently employed in digging up old sewer lines and breaking the hardened solids within. Even juveniles were down in this mess, hands and feet working with a will to scoop out the muck. Walking past some tent-like shelters, I thought of remote village life, right here in a major city with three-wheeled taxis whizzing and tooting past.

Nobody approached me in any way. No children, clustering around, no calls from hawkers, which was almost automatic in Turkey and Egypt. No begging. They saw me,

but left me alone. One or two smiles and waves and that's it. No doubt, it's because foreign tourists never come here and they're not prepared for it. I think this guest house usually serves local native visitors to the city.

Looking back on things from the vantage point of home as I write about this trip, I feel sure that several factors were at work here. First, I think that I was much more exhausted than I realized. Even though I'd had a week's rest in Cairo, the booming electronically-amplified sound of the muezzin's call to prayer five times a day, day and night, broadcast from the mosque immediately across a narrow alley from my window, had made it very difficult to get an unbroken sleep. So, impressions were hitting me in a ragged way.

Secondly, guidebooks do tend to include many warnings to the traveler about various factors that one should be aware of in any particular country so that precautions can be taken. India has a well-earned reputation for beggars, pick-pockets and touts, those ultra-cheeky street venders, whom I had already begun to encounter in Turkey and Egypt. Those touts paled in comparison to the ones I would find on this new continent.

So, having lugged my heavy *Lonely Planet* volume on India all the way from home, and having read it constantly for six weeks prior to arrival, I was thoroughly conditioned to be wary as a single traveler.

Actually, none of that had materialized in this first guesthouse. I was just disappointed at the primitive nature of the accommodations, for the money they cost, compared with the other countries I'd been in. For instance, the shower was simply an open pipe sticking upward in the bathroom which allowed cold water to spurt over my head if I stood close

enough to the pipe to catch any of it in the first place. Runoff went down a drain in the center of the room. Water from the basin ran over my feet when I cleaned my teeth. And then there was the bed made of boards. Dinner was a sandwich and some peanuts delivered by bicycle.

I decided to try my luck at the Sea Green Hotel the next day.

**Friday, October 28 6:15 a.m.** The Sea Green Hotel did have a room and I have spent my first night here. Maybe I'm beginning to feel better about all this. The weather is nice outside now. I just stepped onto my balcony which overlooks the Arabian Sea. There are many people out for their early morning brisk walk along the shore promenade right across Marine Drive. Some of them look like Westerners from here. I can see lights across the water and around the avenue of the shoreline.

Yesterday, after checking in, I noticed that the high rise Indian Air building was just a few blocks away, so I walked down to investigate the possibility of advancing my departure flight if I decided to try to escape early from this country. Of course I can, and that knowledge made my culture shock diminish appreciably. That's often all we need when things feel overwhelming.

**9:50 a.m.:** I'm in the fine and fancy coffee shop of the swanky Ambassador Hotel, around the corner from mine, waiting to order breakfast. This looks like a good place for other meals too. How clear it is, concerning the role of luxury hotels in the world, particularly for easing one into a new, and challenging, culture and location. However, that very same cloistering ability can keep you from ever feeling, or experiencing, another country. Tucked away from the problems and the pollution in high-class American-style digs,

it's never necessary to "do the work" that I must now do to get myself on the right track so that I can begin to enjoy it. I've decided to head on down south tomorrow to Pune.

The two things that I find most hard to relate to here are the heavy air pollution and the frantic traffic. If I can tuck into good and reasonable accommodations in Pune and have a few successes in daily-needs problem-solving, I will, doubtless, see the many blessings of this country.

At the end of the day, it's all about "ourselves," isn't it? How life is knocking us about at any given moment determines just how expansive or charitable we may happen to feel about other people or places. Our own bottom line must be taken care of and then we can deal with the world at large.

Of course, the definition of each individual's bottom line can vary wildly. Anyone who would argue that point simply has a lower tolerance threshold than most other people. Even self-sacrificing missionaries have some point below which they will squirm unhappily, though it is entirely possible to learn new behavior for the sake of others. Maybe, if I stay here long enough, I too can transcend traffic, noise, and pollution, and begin to enjoy myself.

**7:50 p.m.:** Here's a bottom-line need being filled. I've found a highly superior pizza restaurant and am happily consuming a great pasta and salad. Plus, this business collects money from their patrons to help the street people and I was so glad to contribute.

There was a mother with two small children across the sidewalk outside of the window. She sat while her toddler babies did the begging. All of these wee ones are very skilled and aggressive beggars. They don't "attack" anyone, but they follow and touch you and make an eating sign. You want so

much to help, but it's wrong to encourage and perpetuate this. It's wonderful to learn that there is citywide help going on for them, from life skills and education to medical care. Those kids never know the life of a child. They live on a section of a sidewalk and they shill for their mother, who probably did that herself. Often, as well, there's some man who makes them turn in most of their take to him. I have heard that India's begging is fairly well-organized, especially in the large cities.

(I've just had a confirmation of this suspicion, through an AP Impact article posted on the Internet April 20, 2008. Rukmini Callimachi is reporting about child beggars in Dakar, Senegal, but it's most likely that similar conditions exist in the begging underworld everywhere. He speaks of 7,600 highly organized children and youth beggars in the African city of Dakar alone who reap their keepers two million dollars per year but live in squalor and are severely beaten if they don't meet a daily quota.

According to a study released by the International Labor Organization, the United Children's Fund, and the World Bank, in February, 2008, there are over a million begging children, worldwide, who collect fifteen billion dollars annually for those who keep them in servitude.)

Tonight, I noticed such a change in the whole atmosphere. There was a fresh breeze blowing in off the water. People were stringing Diwali lights and decorating. Everyone sounded happy and even the traffic seemed to have a more cheerful tone. Was it the holiday spirit affecting me or an improvement in the air quality because of the disappearance of that oppressive white haze?

I spent the afternoon walking about in this part of the city in order to locate the Central Victoria Train station and

then buying my train ticket to Pune. After going through the familiar routine of following my map and actually winding up at the train station, then the convoluted business of purchasing the tickets and, at last, navigating through hordes of people in the station and on the sidewalks, I finally got my groove back. Now, I'm fine for this country. I knew it would happen.

### **Leaving Mumbai to go to Pune**

**Saturday, October 29, 6:45 a.m.:** I'm already aboard my air-conditioned chair car, well ahead of time. It's a very sparkling clean train car and a porter just came through to put a free newspaper on every seat. My ticket to ride in such cool clean luxury for three and a half hours only cost \$4.19. However, it's mighty cold in this car. I didn't think chilling would be my problem over here.

**10:35 a.m.:** Should be there soon. Men constantly walk the aisles, selling food: tea, coffee, and tomato soup. The car isn't crowded and I'm well impressed with Indian trains, though maybe next time, I'll go second class to get away from the AC.

Now, for some musings from the window: this countryside is pretty, with mountains, now and then. We passed through some really beautiful high ranges, and into a place called Monkey Hill. Sure enough, there was a monkey, right on the tracks. I also enjoy watching the people from this anonymous train window and have concluded that I really admire the sari as a dress style. They come in so many colors, and are always graceful.

Newly-washed clothes are flopped to dry anywhere, even along the tracks. People seem peaceful and

hardworking. Most are very thin, but, my gosh, they can move big weights. Freight for the train was hauled in long wooden drays with two middle wheels and wheelbarrow handles, being hefted by one man and pushed from behind by one or two more. You see this in the streets too, right among the traffic.

## Pune

**Saturday, October 29, 1:30 p.m.:** Here I am in Pune, and I feel just fine. It's small, compared to Mumbai, and really shabby if you take the first impression of the streets, but it's a very good place to be.

As the train ground to a halt, four red-shirted porters all wanted to carry my backpack, but what could they do when I was wearing it? The tracks let out onto platforms attached to a long elevated overpass leading to the two sections of town, split by the railroad. I walked quite a way in the wrong direction, but knew that my chosen National Hotel was right across the street from the station and the fact that it wasn't, was my tip-off to my "Wrong Way Corrigan" choice. So, I effortlessly made my way back through the taxi touts, all clamoring at once for business. You don't look at them, just cheerfully say, "*No thanks*" and keep walking.

Sure enough, after a half block of teeming sidewalk and small shops, there was an arch with the National Hotel name. I entered the fenced grounds and things suddenly got quieter, like a hush within a cloister. The hotel is a large, two-story, veranda-rimmed building, surrounded by trees and freshly-raked earth. Its lobby was a big, airy, roofed opening between two solid sides of the double building. A front desk is just an informal counter, and a few tables and chairs form a



dining room, further in. My room costs a little less than \$10 per night. It has no windows, but very high ceilings, two twin beds, a TV, and a bathroom.

After a rest, I went exploring around town, and found a good restaurant in the old section. The waiter helped me choose unspicy food, and my soup, fried rice with mushrooms, plus a flaky circle of bread, was enough for supper too.

Pune has an exciting messy vitality. Everything happens in the road, and all over the sidewalk. Traffic here is as chaotic, smelly and as noisy as it was in Cairo or Mumbai, but it's on a much less intimidating scale. Commerce is done so thickly outside of the shops that it's actually happening in and around the vehicles. Toot-toot, Beep-beep! The people are nice, and they seem genuinely gentle.

**7:25 p.m.:** I'm now snug in my room, watching TV. It was interesting, walking home just after dark. Everyone is preparing for Diwali now. The merchants are decorating their sidewalks and gutters with brightly-colored powder. Someone will be squatting in front of each little business stall, drizzling handfuls of colored sand designing simple themes, like flowers, borders, and "Happy Diwali." It's very natural and exuberant, and they pay no attention at all to the imperfections. So, there's all this artistic gaiety everywhere.

I spotted a plastic folding mirror displayed on a cloth on the sidewalk, so I bought it from the dear old vendor who was so surprised to have a volunteer customer. But, I've needed something like that. Yep, I'm starting to feel at home. Plus, now studying more closely the Lonely Planet map of Pune, it seems as if I haven't even discovered half of what is here. There's an ashram in town. I must find it.

**Tuesday, November 1:** After a long and interesting exploration of Pune today, I followed my map to the Happy Home Hostel and knew that I must be close to the ashram because of a cluster of white-robed young men standing in the courtyard.

This little hostel is a brand new building on risers, with a large open space underneath, occupied by a sparkling clean lobby graced with a picture of an Indian guru. A room is available so I took it for \$12 per night. This hostel is on a pleasant street lined with nice apartment buildings and cute shops. The German Bakery on the corner is, according to the guidebook, quite renowned for its delicious health food. Things just get better all the time!

### **The Osho Ashram**

**Tuesday, November 1, 4:45 p.m.:** Well, this will be interesting. I've signed up for the Osho Ashram, which is only two blocks from here. Two Swedish women, Alkie and Nan, were walking in their long maroon robes beside me in the street and we struck up a conversation. Soon, they invited me to tag along with them to the Meditation Center. They plan to stay several months over the Swedish winter and they live down the street in rooms that cost about \$4 per day. There's another room available in that house if I'm interested.

Soon, we turned into a road leading between handsome, dark gray and black slate walls. Light green box shrubs lined the sides of each sidewalk while beautiful trees and great green plants hinted at lush gardens behind the barrier. Suddenly, the dirt and noise of Pune - of all India, faded completely away.

My new friends showed me to the welcome center, a most inviting place of gleaming black marble floors and glass walls, opening completely onto gorgeous gardens, meditation pools, and flat falls of cascading water. Most modern. Most peaceful. Most beautiful. I was welcomed by a tall Indian man, who referred me to a German woman behind the main desk and suggested that I sign in now and begin in the morning with the three-hour welcome tour and a full day of Ashram activities

That cost was \$28.80, which includes the mandatory HIV test. Mine was negative. It was explained that the Osho Center is an AIDS-free zone and all participants must have a negative HIV-1 and HIV-2 test result every three months for the duration of their participation. In 1984, Osho had proclaimed that it was time that the sexual habits and carelessness of the modern age ended, as AIDS had the power to kill two-thirds of the world's population.

People of all nationalities are participants here. A Spanish woman took my registration details and she says that her four months there have felt like four weeks. Suddenly, life in Pune is very do-able and there's even the possibility of making friends, which would be very lovely; particularly, friends who share an interest in a spiritual life not of the mainstream sort. I'm really curious to hear what these beliefs are.

*Boom! Boom! Boom!* Happy Diwali! The Festival of Light . . . and Sound! This evening I was in the Internet café and decided to take myself out to the German Bakery for some celebratory lemonade. People throughout the neighborhood have all dressed up in their most fancy clothing and little children are excited and enthralled with the light and the constant sound of fireworks. It's like Fourth of July

yard parties. However, these are not mere firecracker strings but huge explosives with a big percussion.

**Wednesday, November 2:** Today was full, as was last night. I did my introductory session at the Osho Meditation Center and now have two outfits. For daytime, a long flattering maroon dress and a long white form-fitting jersey dress for the evening meeting. Both are very attractive and yet inexpensive at \$8 each. This morning, I joined a group of new enrollees for our three-hour introductory tour which gave us a taste of all the free meditation classes for which we could just show up at any time during the day. We learned of other very expensive courses taught by fantastic guest speakers, but those were completely optional and had limited attendance.

I met my Swedish friends at lunch. They had mentioned an available room at their place so I followed them to a family home and rented, for \$6 per night, a large bright yellow upstairs bedroom with a big picture window overlooking a nice green field. We three will share a bathroom

Then, back at Happy Home, I showered and changed into white for my first evening meeting in the beautiful, pyramid-shaped meditation hall. There's an hour of spontaneous single dancing to live music, as well as silence and meditation, and then a video talk by Osho, who is no longer alive.

All is geared towards teaching the human to "go within" as the path to enlightenment. "The Way," meaning the form and shape of organized religions, is not the way. The Self is. So, the whole emphasis is upon that crucial step of focusing on the vast inner landscape, perhaps really the greater self of God, which is the only place where true

spirituality can be found, according to Osho's teachings. The many exercises, from breathing and dynamic movement, to Kundalini awakening, are all designed to break down the formalities which impede the human and prevent him or her from taking that crucial step into the inner self.

It's working here and people are basking in the inner glow and their eyes are shining. I feel very much at home. In the later evening, I found my roommates and had some dinner at a lovely cafeteria right beside the illuminated pyramid. We ate outside at candlelit tables, enjoying the glint of starlight on reflection pools. Oh, so genteel and civilized and so, so, so delicious. Life here is very affordable and costs should be easy to manage. I've signed up for the next five days and we shall see how long I decide to stay.

**3:00 p.m.:** How lovely it is, lounging beside this huge and shapely pool, enjoying the luxury of this resort. Even the pool is different from the usual. This one is sort of three large kidney shapes put together and the material is black slate. The water laps up, over the sloping edges and a waterfall pours down, making a very shallow constant flow into the pool. Lush jungle-like forest surrounds every side.

As is true everywhere in this spiritual resort, people are quiet. Many conversations are going on, but no one disturbs others. I've seen one boy with his parents, but no other children, so it's not a family vacation spot. But what a great and relaxing place this is. There's plenty to do among the open Ashram activities and classes and my own quiet meditation, but there's also plenty of ordinary things to fill the whole day, between the pool, the Internet, and the meals. I think I'll investigate Zen tennis some time, too. I'm just plain ol' enjoying myself.

Everywhere I look, there are beautiful people. Today, I met Carmen, from Mexico who has just come down with a terrible cold. We spent several hours walking through the gardens. [www.osho.com](http://www.osho.com) is the web site, and I sent that reference to family and friends, so they could see this beauty for themselves, though the photos are too small to do it justice.

An alteration of time happens here, as well. Living within such a beautiful paradise, time and responsibilities are left behind at the gate. No energy needs to be spent on the crazy things of the world, and yet that's not closed away from us. We have a whole dedicated Internet building with about twenty computers, telephones, movies, books. No TV that I can spot, though sets may exist in the lodgings. Who has time for it? We're all so busy being laid back.

**8:45 p.m.:** I'm enjoying the evening meetings more and more...everything about them. But, tonight I had a sudden coughing fit and bolted from the auditorium with violent, wrenching coughs. So, I came home alone earlier than usual.

One thing occurred to me while walking home. I'm experiencing middle-class India in this neighborhood. The family from whom we rent was so kind to invite the three of us down to their living room for some Diwali sweets. It was lovely to have a more personal touch because our rooms are upstairs and accessed by a separate entrance, so we see very little of them.

It's taken five days to realize that middle-class fact because of the exotic nature of the street and small shops and the people who live here. They are always so vigorously out of doors. A great deal of life is conducted in front of the apartment building, house, shop or corner stall, in the yards

or in the street and, aside from just two or three beggars, the rest of the folks are entrepreneurs or else are friends and family of those hard-working ones.

Nobody stays inside in the early evenings, especially not those who might still have a chance to sell something. But also, they're socializing. Kids are riding their bikes; men are drinking coffee; rickshaw drivers are standing beside their vehicles, ready for a rider. It may be more so on this street because so many Osho guests live here and that means foreign customers will be walking past until after midnight, but the same was true on the poorer side of town where I first stayed. No one wants to miss out on anything and the roadway is the happening place. These people aren't sitting around watching TV after dinner, though they surely have television sets.

I remember commenting about the same quality on my visit to Tortuguerra Town, on the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica. Village life, everywhere, must be conducted mainly out of doors. And yet, the people of this neighborhood have risen far above the villager status of the hutment dwellers who haven't much choice about being out of doors.

Also, some of the road farther in, on the part where I live, isn't paved and there's an unfinished building or two, so we automatically downgrade that a notch, mentally. But, these are nice homes, built tall and divided into units so the family can rent out part. It's not all large apartment buildings, though there are those, too. I can now hear what sounds like a high school band at half-time, somewhere beyond my room's window, sounding just like my own hometown school band. Band practice is the same the world over, I guess. They even play the same tunes, and beat on the same sort of marching

drums. Well, how do I know with my tin ear? But it sounds like it.

**12:00 noon:** I had breakfast today with Noah, whom I'd met on Thursday after dance meditation. We had spoken easily about deep things then and we picked up the thread now. He showed me his broken foot which he'd injured by dancing too exuberantly last night. Now, he must have surgery to repair it but is returning to Israel tonight, so will wait until he sees his own doctor at home. I'm sorry to see him go. We became friends so quickly. He spoke of his loneliness and deep wish to find a woman to be in love with. He's a dynamic handsome man, perhaps in his fifties, who lives alone and wants someone to share happiness with. He will find her, surely.

**Monday, November 7:** During the night, my mind was moving into "taking care of business" mode, trying to list the things I must do to organize my departure. Mail many things home; learn means of transportation; find out about another Intrepid Tour; go to Goa, or Delhi, next? So, I must stop just drifting from one meditation bench to another, from one meal to another, and focus on necessities a bit more. I seem to be catching a cold now, and am hoping a nice hot beach will bake it out before it can take hold.

This two weeks here, has been so good on many levels and has set the ashram theme for India. Will I find other spots as welcoming, where I can join in for awhile to taste their brand of tea? I can see why some people come to this country and don't exit for years, if it's possible to wander from spiritual community to spiritual community.



## **Aboard The Overnight Bus to Goa**

**Sunday, November 13, 5:35 p.m.:** I'm heading south to Goa, which is a long narrow strip on the Western coast of India. It's still India, but has had a Portuguese influence, and is famous for its beaches.

I've never seen anything like this overnight bus. Some of us have little bedrooms with foam mattresses and gray, padded walls. Very comfortable. I have a double bed, into which fits my backpack, purse, and carry-all. Now, using my pack as a backrest, I'm reclining with legs forward, and am very happily installed. The outside of this bus is painted a cotton candy pink and it seems to be quite old and rattley. This is very, very funky and lots of fun. I look forward to a good rolling sleep tonight.

Now, we're stopped about ten blocks from our starting point and there's tapping and banging in either the engine or the luggage compartment. Most of us aboard seem to be European. One pretty young thing was burdened with so much heavy luggage, two hard-sided cases and a huge pouch carry-all, that she had to be helped by several men, just to get across the street. That reminds me of myself, not that long ago.

My golly. There's an elephant's face, staring through the window at me. He's just another piece of traffic being driven down this busy street. Poor baby.

## **Panjim, Goa**

**Monday, November 14, 8:35 a.m.:** Here am I, at the Panjim Inn, sitting up in my fancy four-poster bed whose

mattress and pillows are just as hard as the boards in Mumbai. It's a nice \$30 room, appointed with period furniture and the overwhelming smell of mothballs. There were four mothballs in the bathroom sink and shower drains. Why do they do that? Bugs? Cobras?

I've seen it before, in public restrooms. They let the water flow over two mothballs each, as it runs down the drain. There are more of them scattered about in the cupboard that holds blankets and a large mosquito net for this canopy bed but I can't fish around to find them. I've caught such a bad cold now and this has my sinuses going all over again. I think I'll see if I can find a room in another hotel.

The overnight bus was a hoot. I had the last double sleeping compartment at the back, and since I'd only paid for a single, I got a roommate. Well, he was a nice young man, a Kashmiri, who had lived in Pune for six years and was now moving to Goa. Another Indian and an American from Lake Tahoe, California, shared the other two bunks along the back and we all talked for awhile.

The American has been bicycling around India since February, and has a blog on the web site: [www.cosmos.crazyguyonabike](http://www.cosmos.crazyguyonabike), so I'll read up on his adventures in his running journal. We all lay upon covered three-inch foam mattresses and after we got rolling, I could see why this position was necessary. The road was terrible, full of potholes, bumps, and gravel, and we flew along at top speed, careening wildly. No one could have taken that in a seated position. I didn't think to wonder how the driver stood it. The bus seemed to have no shocks and we were behind the rear axle, so everyone flew a few inches into the air on the big

road events. Without a cushion to land on, we wouldn't have laughed half as much.

I was so glad to have my lightweight sleeping bag and my own little pillow, and I wrapped up snugly and managed a little sleep. My bunkmate had only a light sheet and it did get cold during the night. I must have slept for some of the hours, as it was a surprise when the first Goan stop came. Fifteen minutes later, we were at the second stop in Panjim, where I was plucked up by a motor rickshaw driver and brought here for fifty cents. Though it was very early, there was a clean-cut young man washing the patio who shouldered my bag and woke the night clerk to check me in.

I've now tried to sleep a bit, but the mothballs, the snoring of someone next door, and the day coming to life right outside my ground floor window just wouldn't let me. Now, my shower water is surely heated up, and I shall get ready to venture forth and discover Goa.

**4:20 p.m.:** For three hours, I've roamed Panjim, and have seen a great deal of it. If I had started here, instead of Mumbai, I would have had a better impression of the country, as it's much cleaner, with hardly any of the beggary and street living as there are in the two Maharashtra cities. Well, of course! This is a small town and that was a teeming city.

Though Goa is a part of India, it was long ago, settled by the Portuguese and still retains that strong and colorful influence. Not that many buildings aren't crumbling, or black with mildew, as this is a hot, wet, climate but the streets are well-swept and the sidewalks are for walking upon. Things aren't so intimidating here. Even the traffic behaves almost normally. Night sounds are quiet, compared to other cities. They still toot when they drive, but it's only one toot, instead of always and constantly, two.

My nose and throat are getting that raw feeling, so I'm going to take care of myself and not push the travel envelope. That cold that I caught two weeks ago sure took me on.

**Thursday, November 17, 12:30 p.m.:** I've just returned from Vintage Hospital, where I had a chest X-ray, which revealed a "long-term infection" maybe caused by the high level of pollution that I've been breathing during the whole trip. Not just India and Egypt—I remember suffering in Eastern Europe, as well. Six months of gunk. The nice woman doctor asked if I was a smoker, when she saw my X-ray. Nope! She prescribed several medicines, and if I'm not cleared up in five days, I should return. Total cost, \$15, for examination and medicines. I won't need to bother my massive travel insurance to cover this. So I need to rethink my plans, and probably go to nearby Calangute Beach until I'm healthy again.

### **Calangute Beach, Goa**

**Saturday, November 19:** Today, I've moved to Calangute Beach just a taxi ride from the more inland town of Panjim. It's very quiet out here and I can see the ocean through the palm trees in the garden. My room is almost on the beach. Here comes a band playing *Amazing Grace* and there goes a parasail gliding over the treetops with two people dangling down.

I have discovered a perfect restaurant here, the Redondo. The reason that I think their food is so grand is that it's designed to appeal to the many continental tourists who fly in from Europe. Already, I'm having a rather hard time choosing dishes on the Indian menus that I can manage to eat. Everything that they love about food in this country is

way too spicy for me. That's been true all my life and I knew that coming in, but I figured that I'd survive. So I have, but it's such a pleasure to discover food that I can truly enjoy. I am sure that the hot food lovers of the world go through all these same yearnings for their own type of "good food" when they come to America or England. My children, on the other hand, love things spicy, so they would be happy with either.

Anyway, I am really enjoying the Redondo. Its people-watching opportunities are excellent, as well, so I'm now eating every meal here. We sit inside but much can be seen from the wide-open wrap-around terrace. The eavesdropping this one time was so interesting. I have no idea if my interpretation was anywhere near the mark, but it was fun to imagine being in a James Bond movie. What do you make of it?

...Behind me, at the last table, is a woman who looks like a real moll, as in gun moll . . . as in Mafia. She must be a madam, running her business from her perch, here on the restaurant terrace. She's Russian, as she speaks that language at a high speed, rat-a-tat-tat, into her cell phone. She's a terrible scold and has tongue-lashed, in English, a few of the young men who have come to her table during the course of my lunch, harping about their taking so long, talking to someone so long. Then, she asks their name. She looks so young, slim and naïve, to be this very strict harridan that she obviously is. She wears a mini-skirt and a lime green halter top and has frizzed short blond hair and false eyelashes.

Here, a man has just walked past, shuffling a large amount of high-digit rupee bills, probably leaving them at her table. I'm not facing her way, so all I can do is surmise, but if this is her lair, I'll sit the other way next time so that I can watch. She could be selling drugs, too. This is probably a good

place for both activities. Now, another man is seated at her table and they speak English. It's all about money, money-grams and how to spend money. And lots of mentions about Thomas Cook, the exchange office down the street. She's a high-pitched squeaker. Mean as they come. She's like a sharp stiletto knife, maybe twenty-five, maybe younger. A young woman's body...

What a good movie scene that would have made. She was very pretty and looked like a movie star, but there were no cameras. So I guess it was real life being played out in this tiny beach town on the Indian Arabian Sea coast.

Of course, maybe she was simply a tour guide...

I met the couple who runs my new hotel, the Garden Court. So nice. He's a doctor, retired from general practice, and I told him that my husband was a doctor too. He apologized for the lack of city planning just outside of their gates. I could imagine how appalled they must have been at what has happened to their little Goan beach town since the tourists discovered it. With package tours from Britain such big business now there was no controlling the hodge-podge of shops and vendors that mushroomed, leaving no place for pedestrians.

The merchant mentality, from Athens on, has been, "*If you trip on it, you've bought it.*" and they make every effort to make you fall right on top of it. Plus, lots of little vendors spread a cloth and display their wares in-between the more permanent merchants' three-sided stores. Once in awhile, you might catch a glimpse of the houses which originally faced the road, but mostly, these open sheds have completely obscured them, forcing the homeowners to enter their property through a path, or, from the side. Of course, it's

probably a matter of laughing (or crying) all the way to the bank, because this is very prime real estate now.

In this bustling little beach town, I'm getting plenty of sleep and plenty of good food. India is, essentially, a hard country to be in, and it's good to find a place that works so well. But, I've had pretty good luck. Calangute Beach is a place where there are fewer beggars and the main hassles come from friendly taxi drivers, always trying to rustle up a fare. They all call me Mama and are, by now, used to me telling them that I'm already where I want to go.

**Friday, November 25, Leaving Calangute Day:**

All checked out, and eating breakfast before leaving. Who are these beggar women with babies? There's one within observation distance, now that I'm at an inside table and can gawk, watching anonymously. She's waiting for tourists to walk by. Her child is four-to-six months old, and is as limp and compliant as a rag doll. It just lies in the crook of her arm, very passively. I think these wee ones have no function except as props. They must never develop a sense of self through any acknowledgement of their reality as a separate human being. By the time they can walk, they know all about begging. I wonder if anyone has ever written about the stories of these beggars: *The People Nobody Looks At*.

I just had an impulse. One of the beggars I've seen before, around the restaurant, is different. He has useless legs and scuffs along on the ground. Later, I saw him with a stubby wooden crutch, which he uses to hold one leg up in the air and to his side, so that he could hop along with the crooked other leg. It looked as if the wooden crutch top must hit him right in the most painful part of his groin but he always has a bright cheerful smile. There was a similarly crippled boy in Pune, who owned a three-wheeled bike

operated with a hand crank. He got around very well, made himself useful, and no doubt, earned some money, by passing out flyers for local businesses. I wonder if I might leave some money with my host, the retired doctor, to buy one of those vehicles for this boy. Of course, maybe the doctor wouldn't want to take part, and that would be that.

**12:35 p.m.:** I'm on the Magio bus, hot and sweaty. It's very crowded. The bike for the boy idea isn't going to go anywhere. I talked to the daughter of my host family and she said that giving anything to any of them is discouraged because it causes the flow to become greater. All of the beggars have come in from other places and they have become a real problem since the tourists started coming in the sixties. They usually don't want gifts of things, only money, and the boy's infirmity helps him to beg. Plus, he might not get to keep such a thing if he had a boss over him, which he most likely does.

### **Palolem Beach, Goa**

**Paradise, Friday, November 25:** Paradise has cows and dogs in it. I counted twenty-one cows, of varying sizes, lounging about on the beach in front of the Palolem Beach Resort, where I'm now a guest. I took some photos, especially of a loving cow couple. Also, picturesquely in front of this central part of the beach are seven fishing outriggers, with their crews lounging about. A lone dog has settled, hopefully, at my feet. Both cows and dogs welcome a good scratch on the head.

Wow. The beach is littered with cow pies now. I wonder if they shovel them up in the night, because there would be more if they didn't.



Getting here took about four hours and it was hot on the bus, but otherwise fine. I sat on the very back seat with eight others, all mashed together, too far from the front to worry about the fast driving on the winding road. Not many tourists ride those local buses.

When we arrived I saw the charm of this place immediately. A street leading down to the beach, about a block long, had the usual souvenir stalls but was very attractive with many booths that I vowed to return to. The people running the shops were not at all pushy. Of course, I was burdened with my pack and no one made the silly mistake of assuming that I would do any shopping then. However, the taxi and lodging touts knew that this was their cue to install me in the place of their choosing. I knew to steer clear, as that only raises the price of second-class accommodations. So, armed with knowledge, if not a reservation, I headed towards the one I had picked out from the pages of the guidebook, The Palolem Beach Resort.

Let me tell you, it's lovely...very clean, with a groomed lawn and attractive landscaping. I was impressed. I had my choice between motel-like cottages for \$16 per night, with air-conditioner and TV; or a tent, for \$10 per night. Both of them had their own bathrooms. Other tents came without a bathroom for \$8 and occupants used a shower room nearby. I took the mid-range tent with a raised cement floor, twin beds, a big floor fan, army-tight sheets on the beds, cold-water shower, though we can order a bucket of hot water if we want it, for bathing.

My choice of a tent was not made to save money, though it did do that. The air here is so fresh that I didn't want to shut myself away from it. Plus, how often does a tent

like that come my way? Never! It's the kind of a tent that one might expect to see at an archeological dig deep within the Amazon jungle or on safari in Africa. How could I pass up that opportunity?

I have just met a couple of ex-patriates. An Aussie/American and his British wife bought a house near Bangalore three years ago and live permanently in India now. They are members of an ashram there, and he was healed of cancer, and had been coming for twenty years before they moved. He used to work in construction, but fell and was injured on the job, for which he received an insurance payout, due to continue for another ten years. It's not large enough to support them at home, but they only use half of it now to live on, and can save the rest. Right now, the monsoons are dropping heavy rains at their place, so they came here to dry out.

My next-door tent neighbors are another interesting couple. He's from Calcutta originally, but they live in Germany most of the year, coming to India for the winter. When they learned that I planned to be in Calcutta, they insisted that I call them when I arrive in that city so they could pick me up at the airport or train station and take me to my hotel. That was so kind, but I later made such a mess of my timing in getting out of Delhi, that I couldn't take them up on that offer.

**6:30 p.m.:** Ohhhhh, yeah. I'm drinking a Kings Beer at the dining table now, and about to have King Prawns, Rice, vegetables, and eggplant pakoda, all for about \$10. This is the life. This menu promises many treats and the waiters are so great and helpful, just like at the Redonda in Calangute.

The sea is fifty yards away, lapping calmly. I love it here. I don't notice any mosquitoes, either. This is an intimate-feeling beach, not vast, but curving around a small bay. The water is shallow, way out; though maybe that's just the way the tides are this afternoon. Life here would be cheap for a long-term visit. I must remember this. What a good place to write a book!

**Saturday, November 26, 10:40 a.m.:** What a great place this is. Of course, a purist, who had washed ashore here, fifty years ago, would snort. I can just imagine how idyllic it looked then. Now, every square inch of land, underneath the coconut palms, is filled with commerce. Beach hut hotel rooms on stilts, cafes, small shops selling handicrafts, even an Internet office. It's become a beach for the "wealthy" tourists, where the natives are only seen in service positions. There's a gorgeous fingernail of curved, clean sand beach, with perfect, graceful, South Sea Island palm trees, at some exact distance from the water's edge. I'm now sitting in an open-air restaurant perched atop enormous boulders, at the extreme southern end of the beach. I can see the whole curvature.

This is the Good Life. The Goan Good Life. It's still far from checkout day and it all feels as if it could go on forever. This beach is in a completely different category from every other beach that I have ever been to. If they had little housekeeping cottages, with a fridge and a hotplate, and a small balcony, overlooking all this . . . well now, how perfect for a long stay! This little shoreline is intimate, and well-proportioned, with a little green mountainous island, which I'm told I can walk to at low tide.

**9:45 p.m.** Hmmmm . . . I should appreciate this strange arrangement as a chance to compare cultures, but that's hard to do when I'm trying to sleep. Some native workmen, who are digging up some pipes in this complex, have been housed in an open-sided shed, across the little clay drive from my tent. Blue tarps have been strung around the sides and they're camping out. Last night, they were there without the tarp. There are three or four of them, a very talkative group. Very social, among themselves, but noisy neighbors. They talked late last night, and were at it again, as they prepared breakfast. Well, I wanted the tent, didn't I? That's what camping out is!

**Thursday, December 1, Noon:** In the water, appreciating the dependable rhythmic roll of the softly breaking waves, I wondered about the behavior of the fluid-filled cavities of my own body and realized that there were the same rhythmic tides and waves inside of my own organs. Naturally, this wave action is the pace of a pulse, evidence that an organism is alive. Whenever waves passing through liquid, stop, then that Being has died. It's not my movement through space, my walking and shifting about, that causes waves in my water-containing cavities, it's peristalsis. And, it's also, the regular, well-paced, beating of my heart, as well as the pull of the moon on that 98% of myself, which is water. All the tiny pools of it act like marshes and ponds. The flowing streams of it, act like rivers. Somewhat bigger bodies are my lakes and oceans

Underneath all of the solid surfaces of me lies an aquifer system, the large, large percentage of myself that distinguishes a water planet; a healthy human being, who

must always keep a bottle of fresh water at hand, for the sake of the life and the living systems that I support.

Hmmm. Is my science a little off the beam according to a biologist? Well, whatever . . . it sounds good when I am standing chest deep in the ocean and contemplating these things on a gorgeous afternoon, feeling like a planet at one with the universe.

I love it when such thoughts come and a lot of credit goes to Linda Grant, author of a book called *Still Here*, which I have just finished. In the book she flies around the origins and natures of things in just such a way. I'm sorry to see that book end. It must now circulate as well. There's a lively trade here in used books. All of us can be seen digesting them, in cafes and under beach umbrellas, creating our own waves of consciousness to beat more steadily within that mystery the Brain. Then our just-consumed paper meal gets recycled on the many book vendors' tables. Well-worn, well-loved, and as tasty as always.

My days have fallen into a predictable pattern. I do the same things at about the same time. It's funny to watch the animal life, out here on the beach. They too, show up at about the same time every day. Because they are revered here in India, cattle have utter freedom to meander wherever they wish, in town, on the beach or on the major highways. They are treated as if they're just another human. So, these animals are curious observers, or steadfast ignorers, just like the rest of us. They don't take up any more space than they have to, and are calm and mild. I've never seen any relate to the water, but they really value a good lie down in the soft sand.

I just watched a young bull wander along until his path was blocked by beached boats and a baseball game played by

a few boys. He stopped. The ball was hit to the right of his feet. His head turned to follow the roll. He then gave up the idea of forward motion, turned around, stepping very slowly; turned some more, and finally, folded both legs and lay down for a long sunbath.

## Mysore

**Monday, December 5:** I'm having a lovely breakfast at the Green Hotel in Mysore, which naturally had space as this isn't high season; it's monsoon season down here in the southern end of India. Sleep was good and deep, but I think I'll just hang around the hotel today and rest up after the long bus trip from Goa. Though not cold, there's a blustery chill and the air feels wet. This is strange even for the locals, as they have received twice as much rain as usual. Right now, the cyclone affecting Chennai is in its seventh day...quite a phenomenon for a cyclone. This year is very different from most, the chatting dining room host just told me.

Today, I'll read more of a book bought in Goa, "*Horrid Journeys*," by Martha Gellhorn, about her trips which went terribly wrong and, therefore, have resulted in stories that people are willing to listen to. She immediately ran away from this whole subcontinent after landing in Karachi, Pakistan. Taking one look at the cows and the miserable children beggars, she just got on a plane and flew away, skipping this country altogether.

How well I understand that desire because I too have felt the same way in this country from time to time. On the

bus, yesterday, I was doing it again. “*How can I get out of here?*” One depressing thing is that all areas of the country look about the same as far as the dirt and filth; the utter shabbiness; the state of the poor; the deadly traffic. Yesterday, I saw, from my bus window, a brilliant red pool of blood, beside a helmet and an overturned motorcycle. The body, or the injured person, had been moved. He had collided with a bus, which was now stopped, with all the passengers outside and staring. Of course, that happens daily in the U.S., as well. I just haven’t seen it.

And now I understand through experience, that extensive long-distance traveling within an enormous country like India, really doesn’t change the nature of what’s just outside the window and just across the gated wall. It doesn’t let up in different regions. These conditions are impossible to run away from over here because they are consistent in all corners of the country, even in Goa, except for the tourist beachfront. Just a mile inland, the India Syndrome, this reliable characteristic, was very evident.

In the meantime, this environmentally-sensitive Green Hotel where I have landed is very nice. I chose it because the *Lonely Planet* said that they employ only those from the lower castes to work here. Also, the hotel runs, as much as possible, on solar energy. My room is large and long, with a tiny porch in front, overlooking a garden. The main hotel building is a former princess’s palace, a grand old mansion kept much the way it was in the princess’s day, in the times of the rajahs. They have an internet computer for our use and a lending library upstairs, with rocking chairs or cushioned window boxes, to curl up in and read. So, I’ll manage quite well in Mysore with this place to come home to.

**Tuesday, December 6, 9:30 p.m.:** The huge maharaja's palace was quite interesting, though it reminded me of other formal palaces of all cultures. I have now seen the homes of royalty in many places of Eastern Europe, Russia, Romania, Turkey, Egypt, and now India. There's a great similarity among them, whatever the country. Can that be a royal "keeping up with the Joneses mentality," I wonder? The scale of the rooms and the heights of the ceilings dwarf the size of a human. Gold and ornate carving, inside and out, and beautiful rare wood floors make a feast for the eyes throughout the endless rooms. Every room is hugely grand.

However, each castle or palace looks as if it would be extremely uncomfortable to actually live in. Chairs or beds are not really proportioned for the human body and thrones are famously uncomfortable. I have sat in some where that was allowed! In fact, I believe that there's a strategic reason why they are constructed so that the royal feet do not quite reach the floor. This keeps the king awake during long audiences.

Parts of this palace were pretty. Lots of it was just big and meant only for show or ceremony. Most interesting to me were the big portraits showing the royal men and women. Even here, in the Green Hotel, there are photographs of the various princesses who once lived here. Perhaps royal families lived in comfortable homes like this and only held court in their palaces. or maybe these folks were simply close relatives to the royal couple.

When I run out of ideas about what to see next, I can be sure that my taxi driver will have plenty of good ideas. On every ride, each driver tries to sell me on a day-long tour. He turns around to face the back seat while he's driving,



hounding me with all the things he can supply, until I finally reach my destination, lucky that he didn't hit a bullock when he wasn't watching. They all say that they're a married man with children to support; or how expensive it is to drive the taxi. Again, I'm telling people that I'm from Ireland and they do leave me alone more. In the palace, even the guards came up, and if I admitted that I was from America, they suggested that I give them some American dollars, "*for my kids.*"

**Wednesday, December 7:** I've had a successful morning getting my life arranged. There are times when my vast experience in the field of world travel rises to the top to help me out. Of course, where was it when I got myself way down here in, not quite the toe, but in the ball of the foot, of the sock of India? Well, I had wanted to go south, but not to the monsoon coastline, and here I am. I knew that it wasn't an easy travel route. None of it is easy to get to. Goa wasn't either. Now, I've decided to go to Udaipur for a week, before Delhi. I did think about the Sri Aurobindo ashram in Pondicherry but it's awash with cyclones, so I think I'd better not.

This morning, I consulted with the very young man at the hotel travel desk, about Udaipur, but he could only suggest going either to Mumbai, or way up to Delhi, both at high prices. He did not know how to transport anyone to a city of their choice. He got the boss on the phone and they had only package prices to other certain designated cities, which were complicated and costly.

So, I went back to the room, hit the guidebook for an hour, and came up with a beautiful new plan that they hadn't thought of. Theirs involved several days of travel; mine is done in a day and a night. I can taxi or train to the Bangalore

airport, fly to Ahmadabad, and take an overnight train to Udaipur. The next morning, I'll taxi to my already reserved hotel in Udaipur. The total travel cost will be \$350 they say, but no plan would be cheap. There's a sort of a "*you can't get there from here*" philosophy, like I ran into trying to get to Athens from the southern coast of Turkey.

Just now, If I hadn't had the experience in figuring tickets out, and arranging so many travels, I would have taken what these "*experts*" cooked up for me. You pay more, and run around more, when they deliver it. Later, I became aware of the very high markup that I had paid for the privilege of asking them to arrange things for me. I should just have taken the bus to Bangalore and followed my own instincts from there as I usually do, but it was the handy proximity of a travel desk at the hotel that lured me into hiring them to do it for me.

**2:50 p.m.:** Exploring downtown Mysore, I've just witnessed a heartbreaking sight, and there was absolutely nothing I could do about it. Standing in the grass, right at the side of a busy traffic circle, was a tied-up horse. He was a beauty: young, strong and chestnut brown. But, he stood only on three legs. His left foreleg was snapped in two, with a heavy "bandage" fashioned awkwardly of wire and sticks, doing him absolutely no good and causing extra weight on that fragile, dangling, lifted-up leg. Flies fed upon the black goop that someone had smeared on the swollen surface of the break, hoping it would help.

No human being was anywhere near him. Why was he there? What was the purpose or expectation? Must he stand like that until he simply keels over from infection and exhaustion? Everyone driving by must have felt just as

helpless as I did. We could all do the math. That lovely creature could never walk again, let alone work, run, or carry anyone on his back. All future “horsiness” could only be a sham. No matter that he still had three good legs and an unadulterated body. That one-part tragedy doomed him utterly. This is a fatal flaw, though it alone, won’t cause instant death. In a horse, it can’t be lived with. No crutches, no wheelchair, and no surgery, can enable him to make his continued way upon the planet. But what were they waiting for?

Oh, the suffering in those eyes. If I’d had a gun hidden in my purse, I would have, unhesitatingly, put it to his head. I wanted to run around and rattle doors and find someone to fire that mercy shot. But, I walked away, failing even to take a picture of this symbolic epitome of India.

India, coming into the twenty-first century, looking strong and golden from afar, full of seeming economic promise. But, there’s that dangling leg of poverty that may well be impossible to heal. At least, I don’t see anyone even paying close attention to it, aside from dabbing on a little bit of hopeful black goop, from time to time. Meanwhile, even the natives drive right on by, helpless in the face of such a hopeless challenge. I don’t need a photograph to remind me of that scene, now seared upon my mind, and I can’t extricate it from the bigger picture of an allegory of a nation. Is there any cure for such a handicap?

**Friday, December 9:** Well, I messed up on my plans to run over to Kerala, on the coast, for the weekend. There are only evening overnight buses, so I should have left last night. Now, there’s no time to spend there, as I’m locked into my travel schedule to go north next week. So, I shall spend my

time relaxing at the hotel, instead of running about the countryside.

After a long reading session today, I suddenly wished that I could re-arrange my whole India plan, in order to travel all the way down to the tip of the sub-continent, to a small town on the Cape. The time to have decided all of this was back in Palolem, last week, not after I've booked and paid for my travel arrangements to Udaipur. From that beach, I should have continued by train, down the coast to Mangalore, and then to the end of the country and not come inland, at all. This is what comes of not buying the big map of India from the street seller and really studying it.

So, for five minutes, I was wondering how to re-do it. A little Lonely Planet reading told me that there was the longest train ride in the country, going from that little Cape Comorin, clear up to Delhi, and on to Kashmir, every Friday. It's a seventy-two-hour trip to the end. So, I could have easily gone north from there. Well, I just didn't hit the books and maps hard enough when I should have. I guess it's better to leave India with more to be done, than to be scurrying out, like I wanted to do in Mumbai.

The book that spurred this regret was *Third Class Ticket*, by Heather Wood, published by the Penguin Travel Library, telling the true story of forty-five village elders from Bengal who went on a round-India train journey, thanks to a legacy by a wealthy native woman. I'm reading pages describing the sea and sand dunes of that cape. I so much more enjoyed the coastline than I do the interior, which I'll now be in until just at the end. Ah, me.

However, if I'd merely stayed near the beach all along, would India really be distinctive to me, or just a wilder

version of Clearwater Beach, Florida? That would be a case of trying to duplicate my home environment wherever I went. Why leave your own surroundings, in that case? Anyway, it feels as if my Shingles are returning, and my face is not only swollen and itchy, but my body feels very tired and wiped out. So, it's probably much better not to be doing hard traveling right now.

I met some interesting people this morning, from Santa Fe, New Mexico. Melinda and Bernard are Buddhist Americans and they sponsor a monk and a young lawyer in Bangladesh, as well as a young girl in a town further south of here. The monk and the girl are here with them during this visit. Melinda is a professional tarot card reader and Bernard is an art appraiser.

There are many other American or European guests here at all times, because Mysore is a very famous Yoga center where people come to train and become certified to teach in their home countries.

**Tuesday, December 13, Noon,** I'm in a fancy taxi, ready to take off from the Green Hotel, having had the farewell ceremony where the head housekeeper put a red dot on my forehead and I was presented with a very small coconut, a banana, a betel nut, and betel nut leaves.

This morning, I watched the women of the housekeeping staff patiently arranging tiny purple and white flowers, the size and shape of a single ixora flower, to lie in the bottom of a copper bowl. Then, they inserted a funnel and carefully filled the bowl with water, lifting the little, star-shaped, blooms to float on the top. In this way, they made lovely patterns with the two colors.

## Ahmadabad

### **At the Ahmadabad train station, 9:02 p.m.:**

Now, with two hours to wait, I'm sitting on a bench with others at track twelve. The Spice Jet flight was uneventful, and I was hailing a little open tuk-tuk outside of the Ahmadabad airport by 8:30 p.m. I'm in Gujarat State, fairly near the Pakistan border, and I see a little more Army evidence.

I thought the price of the little tuk-tuk taxi ride, between the airport and the railroad station, was high at \$3.75, but didn't know at the time how far it was. What a fast and wild ride!

Oh my. I was thinking up things to say in the book, like *"Don't travel to India, unless you aspire to become a race car driver, and are willing to take lessons in two-way traffic, after dark, with unlighted bicycles, mopeds, bullock carts, big black cows, and gobs of pedestrians, some of them babies and toddlers."* *"Nuremburg Ring and India—the two are synonymous."*

It was cold, though I was wrapped in my new light wool shawl. Thank goodness for that. It's actually mild outside, but our speed was excessive. I was grinning widely and enjoying it as we whistled along, through a blur of oncoming traffic, which darts about in either lane, simply as expedience allows. Unbelievably, I caught sight of a big, black cow walking slowly and doggedly towards us, in what would officially be called the center of the road. Traffic, including us, simply veered suddenly, to avoid hitting god, or at least, his bovine representative

Not at that nail-biting moment, but somewhere during the exhilaration of it all, I actually heard myself let out a big “*Yeeeeee-Hawwww.*” Hey, if you can’t fight ‘em, join ‘em. And, secretly, this speaks to the real me.

The wide dark bustling train station parking lot reminded me of my years of Soviet train travel. Inside, people were milling purposefully, or spread-eagled out, sleeping on the floor.

**11:15 p.m.:** Now, I’m aboard the train and have a 72-year-old roommate, Durgha, a woman who could have stepped right out of this book I’m reading about the Bengali villagers who traveled around India. She has a beautiful face. A couple with whom I sat on the bench waiting for the train have been very helpful in getting me and my bags aboard and settled. It turns out that I’m in a third-class car, though I paid that travel agency for first-class accommodations. As I go, it’s becoming clear that I paid maximum rates for minimum goods. Solomon and his wife sat in my compartment, at first, though their tickets are for car #1. They came to this car #28, with me because the train was empty. Now that it’s filling up they’ve gone to their car. He’s very expansive and helpful and asked lots of questions. His wife, Ruth, only speaks Hindi.

## Udaipur

**Wednesday, December 14, 11:20 a.m.:** Now, this is more like it. I’m in Udaipur and I wish I’d come sooner. What a precious town. At least, what I’ve seen of it, which isn’t much, having been whisked to the Hotel Anjani, [www.anjanihotel.com](http://www.anjanihotel.com), from the train station at 8:30 a.m. I’ve had a bath and a nap, and am now waiting for breakfast in

their rooftop restaurant, after snapping panoramic views of the whole city from this high vantage point.

The Anjani is located in Old Town, the most scenic, historic, and desirable part of Udaipur. One of the three famous lakes of the area, Lake Pinchola, is just a block away and it shows beautifully from this romantic rooftop dining room. In fact, I can see it clearly from my room window.

Imagine my pleasure when I entered my fourth floor room and took in the attractive, truly Indian decorations and two large, cushioned, window seats before beautiful multi-colored squares of glass. The room has a big, comfortable double bed, a TV, several chairs, and a filmy curtain separating the bed area from the generous window seating arrangement. There's even a gigantic bathtub for long hot soaks.

Today, I shall roam about by myself, but I've hired my morning taxi driver, Mr. Singh, to give me a four-hour tour tomorrow for about \$12. Coming out of the train station into the morning chill, I decided against an open rickshaw and accepted a big bearded, red-turbaned, man's offer of a taxi. He looks like a professor and when I said a simple thank you for lifting my heavy backpack to fill the car's trunk, he reacted by offering me his car keys. *"For that thank you, I give you my car."*

Well, I lobbed the good-natured sentiment right back, saying that he couldn't pay me to drive in this country. As soon as we were underway, he proffered his album, full of letters of praise for his guiding skills. I realized during that taxi ride that this town is different and that it would be smart to see the major sights early on. Udaipur is that Rajasthan city so famous for its lacy white architecture, seen in so many



photographic shots of India. It truly is worthy of its fame. Everywhere are white arches set against the starkly blue sky or the azure waters of three close-set lakes. Everything about this hotel and the neighborhood is extremely interesting and I can see a great distance from my floor's balcony or from the high terrace above the restaurant.

All of the flat, low-walled roofs on every building are valuable living spaces for the families. They serve as sundecks, laundry drying areas, children's play spaces, roof gardens, patios, and in general, simply additional open rooms to the house. They even assist the monkey population to travel freely about the city. I enjoyed watching a monkey family, a mother and her brood, with one still clinging to her breast. They run along the rims and jump from roof to roof. My Hindu hosts have a lovely little shrine beside the swimming pool and they set out offerings which the monkeys help the gods to eat. Everyone co-exists. Just don't try to pet them.

I met a young Dutchman and his girlfriend, who are doing the same thing as I am, roaming with no time limits, as long as health and money hold out. Instead of around the world, they're doing a huge loop and have been through Russia, Mongolia, and China, and are now heading west again.

In the lobby, I had a long talk with the owner, the father in this family enterprise. This hotel is used by Intrepid Travel for some of their tours. That's a very good recommendation. By the end of our chat, it felt like I was a member of their family and he promised to invite me to a family meal, to introduce me to the local/regional cooking.

Everyone here is very sociable and pleasant and, several times, I wound up getting deeply involved in conversation with people on the street. I'm tripping myself up, telling folks that I'm from Ireland because a bunch of young art students and their teachers are heading off to Dublin, next week to exhibit their work. So, far from being an unknown place, they really light up at that and want, even more, to show me their art which is, naturally, for sale. That's how I got "involuntarily adopted" by a fine young man who informed me that "today" there was a free demonstration by the youth who would be traveling. Two twelve-year-old village boys were producing some very exact and wonderful classical art works such as have been made here in this city for centuries. Later, I caught on that wherever you say that you are from, their artists will "just happen" to be leaving soon for an exhibition in some city in your country. It's a marketing plan designed to break down your resistance. When I was Irish, they were about to leave for Dublin. When I was American, then Santa Fe was their destination.

Udaipur is a small town, at least this Old Town part is, actually protected by walls and partly-surrounded by water. My wandering course, inevitably, led me back to my street and I was recognized by several men sitting in front of a small camera shop two blocks from my hotel. They greeted me and offered a small stool, which I happily accepted, and we fell right to talking. Yogi is an artist and also works at my hotel. He and Pappu, who owns the camera shop, and Lars, of the food stall next door, are all long-time friends and have a very sincere interest in the passersby which shows no evidence at all, of a desire to sell us anything. Of course, they are there to do business, but at these moments when they strike up a genuine conversation, they are, really and truly just interested

in the person. Not like the hawkers in Istanbul, who say: “*Hey Lady. Where are you from?*” Well, actually, that question is coming out of the mouths of the many art merchants right here on the streets of Udaipur, but not from these guys.

They told me that I had a bright smile and happily acknowledged people, even while saying no to them. Then, they told me about the usual stony-faced tourist. *Why are they like that?* I said that it might be from fear, not of any immediate danger, but they probably felt that they couldn’t encourage anyone who would then insist upon a purchase. Also, maybe they behave that way at home, as well.

That led us into my newly arrived-at theory of personal space and the great difference between the size of the personal-space bubble around the Westerner and that around anyone from a more densely-crowded country. Soon the American or European is overwhelmed and shuts down because everyone is “coming at them,” when it really is, only people behaving as they normally do with each other. That made sense to them.

Soon I was invited to enter Pappu’s open-sided shop and they offered me a cup of hot tea from the street seller across from us. I’d never partaken of that street vendor tea, sticking religiously to bottled water, but I decided to throw caution to the wind for the sake of friendship. Sure enough, it was milky, sweet, and good, and never gave me a problem later. We traded travel stories, one after the other. Yogi had traveled to Istanbul and all around to the same spots that I went to in Turkey, with an art exhibition, so I guess some of them really do go on the road. Then, they posed for pictures and I finally headed back to the hotel.

**Thursday, December 15:** I'm eating porridge at the hotel's open rooftop restaurant on this glorious day. This is a beautiful, peaceful place with lacy buildings everywhere in view, the blue Lake Pinchola surrounding a white island castle, and mountains ringing all around us.

Vijay, the son of the owner, runs this restaurant and he serves up history as well as food. He is soon to be married and the whole family is preparing for the great occasion. Vijay told the story of the area, speaking of the hordes of invaders who have stolen the wealth and taken over the land throughout the centuries: the Moguls, the Portuguese, the French, and finally, the British. He told me that the Moguls stole a caravan of 1100 camels laden with gold, diamonds and jewels in a heist that still breaks records... as well as present-day Indian hearts, judging by the eyes of this young man.

This puts a different spin on today's poverty, since it's been around sixty years since the British left after a long occupancy, having shipped out the precious resources of spices, silks and raw materials for England's use and enrichment, not India's. Vijay told of times when the Maharajah was no better than an Indian clerk filling a government position and was totally dependent upon the occupiers.

A news article yesterday compared the Indian poor of today as being the equivalent of the nineteenth-century poor of England. It quoted a written description of London city life at that time, and it fits city life here for many of the poor living in such horribly wretched conditions. One hopes that the status of the Indian poor will someday soon improve as it has for the Europeans.

I had an excellent and long city tour, led by Mr. Singh, and saw some beautiful gardens, old temples, and burial places of former kings, plus many museums. These were certainly things I wouldn't have seen on my own. We even saw a shrine dedicated to a heroic horse that, though mortally wounded in battle, still carried his master to safety before he fell and died. My guide took me to some lovely panoramic vistas to capture some of the magical combinations created by sky, bougainvillea gardens, delicate white arches and sparkling water. His tour certainly was worth the price of admission.

As we passed about a dozen cows lying about on a bridge, he commented that every living thing bears one attribute of God but that within the cow, all of God's attributes can be found.

Then, for the local scene, we walked through an open market where produce sellers sat cross-legged on a raised cement platform, right up there behind their beautiful vegetables. I'm not quite sure how it all started, but two happy-go-lucky ladies invited me to climb up and pose for my camera with their big squashes and green cabbages. I guess I'd been photographing them.

I accepted the extended hand and gleefully scrambled up to cooperate with their silliness, picking up a big, grinning, slice of orange squash, and positioning it in front of my lips. I handed my camera to one of the teenage boys who had clustered around for the action. The guys vied for the chance to be photographer, while we girls put our heads together, giggled, and selected groceries for our poses.

Poor Mr. Singh. He's a stately man, with bristly white beard and bright red turban. I think that at that moment, he

didn't really want to know me. He conducts himself with such dignity. This was just unseemly. But, like such men do, he didn't fuss, and simply kept on walking through the marketplace. I soon realized that my ride was disappearing, so I sobered up, resigned from my new job, collected my camera, and waved goodbye to my new friends.

Maybe Mr. Singh was simply rushing to take me shopping in a more productive and profitable way. He took me to two little shops, in spite of having said when he sold me the tour that he didn't do such things. The first was a tailor shop and I didn't see anything to interest me, as it was too fine and fancy. The next shop was more down to earth and we looked at cashmere pashmina scarves. I wound up buying two

Tonight's dinner with my hotel host family was wonderful too. The food was delicious and my hostess kept refilling my dal bowl until I was overstuffed. Their oldest son's darling children, Naman, three and a half, and Jeenu, a year and a half, reminded me of my own grandchildren.

They just crawled all over me, Jeenu anyway, and Naman brought out many toys and talked and talked, in a mixture of Hindi and English. The family said that these kids had never reacted to strangers that way before as they usually hang back, shyly. I was just being a grandmother again. I took my camera out and got away with a few pictures, but then, Jeenu saw her calling and became the photographer. Naman felt left out, so I must get him alone for a photo shoot. In fact, he was howling loudly when I left, and I only found out why a few days later.

**Friday, December 16, 9:40 a.m.:** It was a Hare Krishna night. No matter that it was in the wee hours when this town sleeps, their impromptu concert began at midnight with a solo singer and a drum and continued until three

o'clock in the morning. At dawn, a mixed chorus began and that was when I recognized the Hare Krishna words in their mesmerizing repetition. It goes on and on and on and is quite soothing. But, somehow, I don't think they're Indian natives, just enthusiastic visiting foreign converts. They had to be several blocks away.

This was a full day and I didn't leave the area around the hotel. Half a block away is a wonderful museum, and that filled several hours. After my lunch in the museum's glorious small restaurant overlooking Lake Pinchola and its lacy white castle, I was snagged on the street by a young man whom I'd put off the first day but promised to "just look" in his shop later.

Well, now I had to look. Indeed, there were glorious things and I wound up buying a green silk pants and tunic set of paper-thin silk, embellished with gold design, which I have since worn very effectively for speaking engagements. I bargained and wound up bargaining the shopkeeper out of his "*lucky rupee*." He had gone down to "*one thousand and one rupees*" and I said "*How about a thousand?*" and he took it; but now, Yogi tells me that they only deal in odd numbers for luck. Later, I returned to his shop and handed him the extra odd rupee with my apologies. He was so touched.

Tonight, I returned to the museum for a spectacular folk dancing show and when I was walking back to the hotel, another young man collected on my promise to visit his shop. I weakly protested, but he got me to venture just a little bit further down the street to take a look. He too, had a very attractive shop, full of gorgeous silk and cashmere items, all made by his, and five other families in Kashmir, that war-and earthquake-ravaged portion of India to the north. What great

craftsmen they are. Exquisite things. His pashmina prices were even better than the other vendors, but I fell for some long silk scarves and bought four to give away as gifts.

These guys really know what they're doing just to get us inside their stores. But, they also know exactly how valuable and well-priced their merchandise is. No one here has sprawled their wares all over the roadway. And, these shops are no three-sided affairs. They would do Aspen proud.

I've either gotten myself into a corner or a good place, with what I did in the Internet office today. Some young men were collecting money on behalf of a hospital that performs free operations on disabled children and they were collecting donations from foreigners at 500 and 1000 rupees each. They had an album with photos and a printed receipt book.

I asked if it was in Udaipur. "Yes." "*May I visit it?*" All of this sort of blurted out of me without forethought. Hazily, it connected with: 1. Are they legitimate? 2. My son, Randy wished for me to donate money in his name, if I found some good causes. So, I have arranged to go see it on Monday. I gave a thousand rupees as there was an urgent need to do an operation today. It seemed to them, to be a bit unusual for a tourist to request a visit, but they didn't hesitate. In fact, they wanted to take me right then, but I was already ticketed to attend the folk dance performance.

This is how I can put my money where my mouth is when I see the children on the streets, especially the disabled ones. I'm so glad that there are organizations like that. We need to help. I couldn't shoot that badly-wounded horse, and I can't fix all the children, but I can do something to assist those who are taking the action. So, the 10,000 rupees procured yesterday from the ATM, are disappearing rapidly,



but I've learned that lost opportunities don't usually present themselves twice, and this town is truly full of lovely opportunities. I don't want to stint if it feels right to give or to buy.

## **Kali Puja**

**Sunday, December 18:** Today is more than half over and I'm having a very light lunch, as I really did a number on my stomach by eating an entire coconut yesterday. In less than an hour, I'll go to Yogi's house for a get-together on spiritual subjects. I met him at Pappu's camera shop a few days ago and we talked yesterday after he got off work here at the hotel. We have much in common on the spiritual level and he said that his real work was helping people spiritually. Sort of as a psychic healer, I think. So, he invited me over for his regular Sunday night gathering.

**8:20 p.m.:** I've returned from the Puja at Yogi's house and it was a wonderful worship evening to Kali, the fierce Goddess aspect of Parvati, the wife of Shiva. Kali brings justice through her destruction of evil.

Pappu gave me a ride on the back of his motor scooter through the winding streets of Old Town to Yogi's house. Boy, was that fun. I met Yogi's wife and his five-year-old son. Up we went, on a vertical outdoor ladder, to the third stone balcony above his living levels, to an upper room dedicated as a temple to Kali. I watched long, careful preparations, setting everything up for the coming ceremony, handled by Yogi and his teenaged nephew. Garlands of flowers, lighted incense, taped chanting music, many brass and silver bowls with food offerings, single flowers, small candles, fire powders, and peacock feathers, were carefully arranged by the two men

before a small statue of Kali. We six guests sat on large folded blankets on the floor.

At last, after sunset, all was ready and they created a musical cacophony of bells, drums, and recorded music, to welcome the Goddess into our midst. This went on for about five minutes and then the ceremony began, with many active movements on the part of Yogi, who serves as priest. A small coconut was cracked and the flesh of it offered to the silver statue of the Goddess on the altar, as well as dry corn kernels and other ceremonial things.

After quite a while, each of us in turn moved to the front and Yogi asked us if we had a question. Then he would ask the question of the Goddess, listen carefully, and repeat the answer to us. It was all spoken in Hindi, so I didn't know what was being said. Then, my turn came, and taken by surprise, I had no burning question but, managed to come up with: *"What will become of us all? What's ahead for mankind?"* That was a different sort of an inquiry, because most questions concern business or family problems. But, I got a long answer in several sections. Pappu served as translator because Yogi uses an ancient Hindi language to speak to, and receive from, the Goddess; then he changes that to modern Hindi for the others and it was just too much for him to switch to English, as well.

Anyway, my long answer told of escalating crises, because of humanity's division. It is to be a time of continuing calamities for some years to come. I was given, as each of us were, a small amount of corn kernels and told not to throw them away but to keep them near. They're in a swatch of that day's Indian newspaper in the back zipper section of my waist pack. He also tied a cord necklace around my neck. Then, it

was over and we moved to the balcony to have tea and then Pappu took me back to the hotel on his motorbike. What an evening. What a privilege.

### **Narayan Seva Sansthan Polio Hospital**

**Monday, December 19:** Today I will visit the hospital that performs surgery on disabled children. No one came to pick me up at ten, as arranged, so I went back to the hotel, and was glad I was there because Yogi came to see me. We talked about last night. He wanted to know what I was thinking and feeling at the time, as he said he could feel power coming out from me during the Puja. So, we had a good conversation about things of the spirit.

Then, I came back across the street to this Internet office, where we had originally set up my hospital visit and they called an older man living nearby, who used to work at this children's hospital. He came right away, bringing two mailout types of publications with many photos, and he and the personnel here, made phone calls to the hospital with the result that they're sending a car, to arrive soon.

So, I've persisted all day on this idea, for some strange reason. I have 5000 rupees to present (\$110), but more than that, I'm keen to know about them. They show pictures of children and young men and women, whose legs are severely shriveled or very crooked from polio before their operations. Most are unable to stand erect or have to maneuver on all fours. Their "after" photos show them standing and looking normal. Maybe they have braces under the clothing but they look quite natural. I don't know whether I can be of any service beyond today, but it's possible that I can speak of it, when I get back home. I was completely surprised to learn

that polio has been a big problem in India until fairly recently.

**6:00 p.m.:** The Narayan Seva Sansthan Trust Hospital proved to be a very fine institution. Established for twenty years, with a long history of 49,000 free successful polio rehabilitation operations to date and counting, they were very kind to receive this total stranger, who was bugging them to come for a look-see. I didn't think about it at the time, but it might have cost them considerably to send the large black car and driver to ferry me far across town.

We pulled up in front of the very nice-looking, four-story Lodha Polio Hospital Rehabilitation and Research Centre, which had a number of people quietly waiting in the yard and reception area. These were families and prospective patients, hoping to receive free surgery for their disabilities.

I was ushered into the office and graciously received by the hospital's founder, Kailash "Manav," himself, as well as several members of his staff. Frankly, all of us were fairly puzzled as to the reason that I was there.

I explained myself, as best I could, and offered this second donation of 5000 rupees; feeling, by now, as if that was quite inadequate for all the attention I was receiving. Polio has only recently been wrestled to the ground in India and there are still many casualties. The lucky ones find their way to this wonderful hospital, which takes them in, no matter what part of the country they're from, and makes them whole again, at no cost to their family whatsoever.

I could see that this organization was enormous and highly worthy, and way beyond the need for my checking up on its legitimacy. Plus, I honestly couldn't make any promises about the future. Maybe this was a one-time shot and I'd evaporate into the mists of time for them. I wasn't seeking

any big projects to go home and sponsor after my trip and I'm wary of encouraging other people's expectations.

But they were warm and smiling and gave generously of their time, showing me around, and allowing photos and providing me with lots of literature. They are as good as I had hoped, and more. I met several of the little post-op patients in their casts. These children were lying in beds placed in the lobby, for lack of adequate ward space, but that was fine and everything was cool and natural about it. Their mothers, and perhaps other family members, were with them, holding their hands and tending to their needs, happy for me to take some pictures. I remember the shining, calm, eyes of the mended kids.

As I left, I was introduced to a handsome young man named Ishwar, in charge of the reception desk. He looks perfectly able-bodied and is one of their success stories, of which they now have many thousands.

They handed me back into the big black sedan for my return trip to the hotel, with sincere well-wishes and thanks for my visit, as if I were a foreign celebrity paying them a state call, instead of just some know-nothing tourist, who had blundered across them by accident. Just like the atmosphere created by Yogi, Pappu, and Lars, these very dignified saviors of the Indian poor, were genuinely happy to meet me and to show me this tiny portion of the work that they do. Never did they glom onto me as a source of new funding or, in any way take advantage of my interest.

Then, back in my room, through a series of random acts, I noticed a little yellow light on my television set. In trying to turn it off, I managed to switch the T.V. on and might even have stayed with Brendan Frazier and his mummy show, but I began to idly flick channels and lo and

behold, there is the man whom I had just met at the hospital, leading a telethon fundraiser for his children's operations. As I watched, I realized that this institution was in the big league, internationally. Their website is [www.narayanseva.org](http://www.narayanseva.org). Go there. Please. Now. I could go on and on, extolling this hospital and hoping that you, too, would realize the good that they do, but I'm going to let them speak for themselves.

Please, just go to their web site and check them out, as I did, and then send them a donation through that site, small or large, it doesn't matter. When I later sent a donation from America, I learned that Guide Star, a charitable trust clearing house here, lists their representative in this country as Narayan Sewa Sansthan, Inc., 936 Hampton Rd. Arcadia, California, 91006. This permits you to take a tax deduction for your contributions. Seva and Sewa seem to be interchangeable in this title.

By the way, any money figures in their presentation are presented in rupees, not dollars. You need to know this, or everything looks very expensive. When I was there, the exchange rate was 44 rupees to the dollar, but that fluctuates a bit. Also, please put them in your prayers.

Extend your help in some way, won't you? For the sake of that dear injured horse, standing forlorn in the traffic circle of Mysore...for the sake of that suffering analogy of India... Perhaps these good people can mend the dangling foot and bring about the miraculous cure this country needs. Who knows the ultimate power of innocent happenstance?

**Wednesday, December 21** - It's time to head to New Delhi. My packages are mailed and e-mails are sent; I've spent quality time with Yogi and Pappu, as well as with Dar, in the Kashmir shop. After packing and getting into travel

mode by filling my trusty backpack-style leather purse, I felt the need to apologize to my Hindu friends for brandishing leather so boldly now after using my small flimsy nylon backpack all week. One of them said, “*Well, get rid of it. Buy a cloth one,*” and Yogi and I went out in search of a suitable one on his motorbike. But the shops only had fragile, fancy ones. Yogi even offered to bring me one of his when he could get home at 4 p.m., but in the long run, I realized how much I loved this well-traveled leather one and told him that I’d switch back to my cloth purse again and hide the cow-thing in my big backpack. It was a squeeze but I managed, and so it will be, through the Hindu lands.

Now I prepare to leave this most unusual city where I have found such depth of spirit and so many friends. I have not been a complete tourist and many sites are uninvestigated. But I don’t mind at all. I’ve taken the pulse of the place and found it good.

## **New Delhi**

**Thursday, December 22** - Here I am in the capital of India. The overnight bus ride was okay, though chilly. It was a wrench to say goodbye to my dear friends, Yogi and Pappu. We never really got to say a proper goodbye though I was with them until the tuk-tuk came to take me to the bus. The last few hours were a run-around, trying to get photos printed of the hotel family dinner and the children. Poor Pappu had to hurry to the photographic lab several times and Yogi thought he’d have to careen to the bus takeoff point to return my camera’s memory chip, James Bond style. Instead, Pappu got it to me just in time as I was walking to the taxi.

Now, how's Delhi? Better, by far, than I expected. Not as cold but also not as beautiful as Udaipur; not as noisy and teeming as Mumbai, Pune, or Cairo. My hotel is nice and it's near a major shopping street, full of Christmas crowds tonight. I have found a Raffles eatery, a UK fast food place with a varied menu, and have had a big plate of nice bland spaghetti. Now, all I need is an internet cafe.

**Saturday, December 24, Christmas Eve, 11:15 a.m.** - Today is cold and windy with a white fog shrouding everything, even this close to noon. I'm at the Lotus Temple, as the Baha'i House of Worship is known here. I hope this fog lifts before I leave because the beautiful, lotus-shaped architecture is so stunning in the sunshine under a clear blue sky. Many people now flow, in a long, single-file line, silent, shoeless, and respectful; first inside the Temple and then around the exterior. It's very, very quiet

I was just in time for the morning service of chanting, singing, prayers, and passages from the Baha'i writings. The words became even more mystical due to acoustical bounce and reverberation from the lovely inner walls, glass windows, and curving spaces. The chants sound simply wonderful with that natural reverb. Everything was truly other-worldly because of it.

This Temple has become a major tourist destination for Delhi, featured prominently on many brochures and web sites, as it is on my own hotel's web. Buses bringing schoolchildren and tourists are always lined up in front of the gate. I have long wanted to come here to see this beautiful Baha'i House of Worship for India.

**2:20 p.m.** - I've just toured the Red Fort, another must-see attraction in this capital city. Now, I must figure out a way to get to Agra and the Taj Mahal. Here I am in a



McDonald's, of all places, in Old Delhi just when I had despaired of finding any food.

The largest part of my time today was spent walking through this huge area of Old Delhi right in the middle of the hurdy-gurdy of native Indian life. Not a soul approached me to call out "*Hello.*" or "*Where are you from?*" No one waved his hand in the direction of his wares; no one begged and very few wallahs offered rides. I was so far out of my own element and so far into theirs, that they ignored me. I took jillions of photos on the streets of Old Delhi and found it so alive with life itself. Here's where the heart and soul of this city resides.

In Old Delhi the people are living their own muscular life of petty merchandise and wrestling with enormous bullock loads of burlap-wrapped grain or whatever. They are busy. There's no room for gawkers. Roads are hopelessly jammed with conveyances, so movement is difficult. But it's alive and thus, is my most memorable part of this capital city.

The weather is keeping me here in New Delhi because extreme fog shuts down the airports and the train station making outgoing transportation very uncertain. It only happens two weeks out of the year right at the Christmas and New Years holiday period. So, I must wait until this present weather system clears up.

## **Agra & the Taj Mahal**

**Monday, December 26, 5:45 a.m.** - The tour is interesting already. A young man on foot picked me up at the hotel and we walked in the dark to the street corner to wait for the big tour bus. There was a group of men standing and sitting around a fire built on the pavement near the curb and

we joined them for about fifteen minutes in order to stay warm. They cordially offered me tea and a box to sit upon, asking polite questions about my age, my country, my profession. Soon the bus arrived and it's now been a long procedure picking up passengers from all over the city. I'm the only foreigner. These are Indian families on holiday it seems.

I watch Delhi wake up. Men pee against any wall and into any ditch, calling it enough to turn their back to the main traffic. They don't worry about side views. Also, there are many three-sided tile urinals along the streets that they can stop into, which are no different, as all is open to view.

Shopkeepers go to a whole lot of work every morning and night with their huge sidewalk displays and equipment strewn about. All is locked away at night when only rubbish and litter covers the streets. People sweep constantly but only move the trash piles to the gutter or from side to side to get it onto someone else's turf.

More passengers have boarded and there was much shouting at each other to get them settled in. They have made a four-person family occupy three seats so that I could have one. The poor father sits on a tiny portion. I've been cautioned to stick with the guide and not get steered off by any touts. The tout situation sounds fierce in Agra. They must be like vultures descending on foreign tourists. Now there is more wrangling over seating. There are restless babies aboard.

Here's a sign I just read on a building: *"The Lord is found through unceasing devotion. When you want only the Giver and not His Gifts, then He will come to you."* Sri Yogananda Paramahansa. I really like that.

**9:50 a.m.:** We're stopped for a breakfast break which has illustrated to me what a serious problem I might have in finding the right bus and staying with the tour when we're at the Taj Mahal. All buses look alike, plain white with blue names. Mine says Falcon but even these few, parked together, gave me problems as to which one was mine. Looks like accomplishing my ride home will be the chief order of the day.

I couldn't find my tour bus at Auschwitz and had to get my own self home but Agra is three hours away; though I know there's a train back to Delhi just in case. These drivers have cautioned me to stay close to them; so hopefully, they won't forget me as they almost did at this stop.

**4:45 p.m.:** Well, I've seen it all. The Taj Mahal and the Agra Fort and am now sitting in a travel office waiting to go to the train station at 5:30. How did I get into a travel agency? I was plucked off the tour bus by one of the tour organizers who told me, very reasonably, that it would be a shame for me to have to wait until this contingent of native tourists was ready to return to Delhi around eleven o'clock tonight. How about if they got me a train ticket on the evening train and in the meantime, taxied me all around to see the sights? No extra charge.

Well, sure. That would solve my insecurities about finding the correct bus, all right. So I followed him off the bus and into this agency to wait for my very own taxi driver. The young travel agent made cordial talk and became absolutely flattering over the fact that he couldn't believe that I was sixty-eight years old. No way, Jose! And, traveling alone around the world? No siree! This was a first for him. He was very friendly as he pumped me for facts about my life.

Finally, the driver came and took me to the gate of the fort that surrounds the Taj Mahal, agreeing to meet me in one hour at the same spot. I thought that that was a very skimpy amount of time but we did have to go to the Agra Fort and get back in time for the train so I trusted his judgment.

When I encountered the extremely long lines at the gate, I fell for the selling point of a guide for hire, Ali, who said that with him showing me through, I wouldn't have to stand in line. Sold! He promised to get me all around in a mere hour and he was a pleasure and very informative, so it was a good move. Ali explained that they've added so many security procedures, pat downs, and thorough searches of your parcels because this is such a likely spot for terrorism and that has slowed things down at the gate.

Now, what did I think of the most famous sight in the world, the Taj Mahal? It is absolutely beautiful and sits serenely within a large red brick fortress-like wall in the midst of green gardens. Outside of the walls lies ever-bustling India; inside is a peaceful state of quiet contemplation even though many people are walking around the grounds. They are so dwarfed by the massive scale that only colorful flashes of their silken saris and an occasional red or white turban vie for your attention.

There's a certain white marble bench where everyone must have their picture taken. You have seen it in celebrity visitor photos that sometimes appear in print. Now, I, too, have posed like Princess Diana in front of a lovely reflecting pool with the Taj Mahal filling the background. The sky was so blue that day. We walked through gardens towards the great structure and climbed the graceful stairs, all the while speaking of the history that brought this into being. As we

admired the delicate flowers created by inset precious and semi-precious stones and beautiful golden Arabic writing on black marble slabs, Ali told me the fascinating story of Mumtaz Mahal.

The beloved wife of Shah Jahan, Mumtaz Mahal, was Persian and had been married to him for eighteen years, ruling when he was away, which was often, as he would usually be out fighting wars. She bore fourteen children but only seven of them survived and she died in childbirth with the last one.

Shah Jahan was so heartbroken that he changed totally and became obsessed with building this monument. He had planned a replica for himself, in black marble across the river, but his youngest son killed his older brothers, imprisoned Shah Jahan and took over the throne. The young assassin prince must have been about twenty-three at the time because he was a year old when his mother died. I'm sure that all the children had been neglected by the grief-stricken father and this young king must have hated him and become ruthless. Shah Jahan never got his identical black shrine and is buried beside his wife in her tomb in an asymmetrical arrangement within in this model of symmetry. It looks fine though because the two sarcophagi are enclosed behind white marble filigree. Only he would have fretted about such a small detail.

After I bought a souvenir to send to my dear neighbor, my driver found me and we saw the Agra Fort where Shah Jahan spent the last years of his life as a prisoner looking longingly through his cell window at his wife's shrine. Then, I was taken back to the tour agency to await the time to go to the train station.

Now, here's where I discovered why I had received all of this elaborate one-on-one treatment. The original man was no longer there but another man, his cousin, was behind the desk. He carried on light chit-chat for just a moment then asked me something about my visa, saying that many tourists actually use their Indian visa to make big money for themselves. I walked right into that one, more for the sake of idle chatter than from any avarice of my own.

At my seeming interest, he shifted into the subject he'd been leading up to all along. He told me that he was an internationally famous jewelry designer and exporter, now living in England. He had exhibitions all over the world and a show was coming up in the United States in five months, right about the same time that I'd be returning home. How did he know when I planned to return to the States? Because of his buddy's intense, but casual, interrogation, of course. He went on to bewail the fact that he has never been able to carry in as much jewelry as he has actually needed for these shows. Visa limitations, you know. Valuable, very expensive stuff, it was, and he could sell it for lots of money over there, if only he could get it all into the country. That's where we lucky travelers came in.

Our customs allowance for duty-free gifts lets us bring in jewelry purchases very easily. Then he would meet up with us, in our own hometown, no less, and buy the precious cargo back at a great profit to ourselves. Naturally, to prove to customs that this was a legitimate purchase, we would, of course, have to buy it from him for a much reduced price in order to have a receipt and a credit card slip to make it all on the up and up. But, we'd get all that money back, and oh so much more, once he took it off our hands in our own country.

He said that many travelers manage to pay for their entire trip just by doing this little bit of business with him. Wasn't I lucky that we had just happened to meet?

By this time, his eyes were shining and he was actually rubbing his hands together in anticipation of what he was sure that I would do next. What American woman could resist a chance to buy jewelry? Especially, from such a famous designer as he had claimed to be? He tempted me further by adding that if I decided to keep this packet that he was sending with me, at such a paltry price, that I could contact him at any time and he would sacrifice its use in his exhibit. I did have that right in this arrangement.

After all that big elaborate pitch, I simply sat there and said "No." He could scarcely believe it and went through the whole routine once more. "No," I said. *"I'm going into Bangkok next and I don't want to be caught with any strange parcels in my backpack. Besides, I don't like jewelry."*

Well, this was just too much for him. He was being stymied and didn't have an argument to my sincere and impeccable logic. After sputtering and fuming a bit he is now totally ignoring me so I'm writing in my journal about it, right in front of him. Oh yes. I remember the last part of the conversation. He said *"Have you heard of this before?"* and his very question reminded me of the warning in Lonely Planet. I said yes, but I thought that it was in Jaiselmer that this scam was being perpetrated. When I got back to my hotel room I looked up that warning in the guidebook and guess what? It was for this very city of Agra, not Jaiselmer. Here is the quote:

### AGRA-PHOBIA

*“With its many, and varied scams and persistent touts, and rickshaw wallahs, Agra can leave many travelers on the verge of hysteria. The many pitfalls can be negotiated, but you will need to be on your toes. Be wary of anyone who offers to make things easier for you. A cheap, or free, ride will inevitably lead you straight to a craft shop. If you accept assistance with train booking, don’t be surprised if the service you want turns out to be full in all classes, necessitating an expensive private bus or taxi ride. Any traveler turning up at a hotel with a rickshaw wallah in tow is likely to pay a 100% markup on the rate for their room.*

*If you accept any of the detours to gem and souvenir shops offered by rickshaw drivers, you will inevitably pay elevated prices to cover the driver’s commission. Some shops may take advantage of the fact that you will be unable to find them again and will pull a variety of stunts, from substituting marble souvenirs for soapstone, to the grandmaster of all Agra scams, the “gem import scam.”*

*In this neat bit of credit card fraud, travelers are invited to help a shop avoid import duty by carrying gems back to their home country (for a small expenditure by credit card) where a company representative will reimburse them for their costs, plus a tidy profit. Without exception, the gems are worthless, the representative never materializes, and travelers are lumped with a credit card bill of around US\$1000. Keep your credit cards firmly sheathed.”*

His question, “Have you read about this?” gave him away and if he hadn’t asked that, I probably wouldn’t have remembered reading the above. So, I refused for my own reasons, without having absorbed this early warning. I had



been plucked off the original bus because I was a foreign tourist and an easy mark, they thought. Hey, luckily it didn't work on me and I got to use their personal services all afternoon, to ferry me around and to get me home to Delhi much earlier than planned. I came out the winner here.

My friendly taxi driver sat in the back of the room hearing this presentation, which he knew was coming. I got the impression that he was glad I hadn't gotten suckered in and he continued to be very helpful in getting me to the train on time and in advising me about where to eat supper. I tipped him very well. Then, I went to the bright clean restaurant at the station and ordered Chinese food thinking that wouldn't be too hot for my tastes. But this is India. I was wrong.

**Observations from the train window:** There is much desolation of poverty on the way to India's most beautiful jewel. Towns between Delhi and Agra are even more rural than I'd seen traveling through other parts of the country. In fact, they look like tribal villages. That answered my question of how the city poor can exist upon the ground. They can, because they always have. In the country, they live in mud and cane huts which are round with a conical roof, plastered with mud on the sides. They cook around fires in front of these little domiciles. It seems very African. So, the blue tarp tents or cardboard and burlap shelters strung along the city roadways aren't that much different from their village homes.

There's a big demand for recycled cow dung, or perhaps bullock or camel dung, which I often see drying in large patted circles, stuck upon a wall. The finished product is sold as cooking fire fuel. These patties are a uniform size with

a handprint logo in the center, stacked like pancakes after they come crisp from the baking wall. Women spend their lives squatting and working with this dung, cooking over it, eating and sleeping near to it, all on the ground. Pretty awful, that treasures and tourist sites of countries, such as Turkey, Egypt, and India, were built by lavish monarchs, hundreds, or thousands, of years ago and today the low and middle classes still struggle so mightily for every scrap they put in their mouths.

**New Delhi, Monday, December 26, 7:00 p.m.:**

Back in my hotel room, supping on a heavenly solution to the food problem, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. I hopped off the motor rickshaw at Ajmal Khan Road to head for Raffles to pick up some bakery items for supper. Wow. I found a jar of Skippy peanut butter and some strawberry preserves plus a loaf of fresh brown bread. Yum.

In the bakery, a lovely young Indian woman approached me with a question about Saltine crackers. She's nursing her newborn and her doctor had provided a list of high protein foods to improve her milk but she had no idea what some of the items were. It was, apparently, the list for a popular American weight-loss diet. Did she say South Beach? High protein? I would call crackers a carb, but I described Saltines and thought maybe the American Dollar Store nearby might carry them. She had never noticed the store so I showed her the way and we went inside together to poke around. No Saltines but the manager thought he could order them. She was very grateful for the information and I enjoyed playing Mama again.

Now, why is a doctor over here prescribing an American cracker? Surely, India must have its equivalent? I

felt a grandmotherly rush of indignation on behalf of that lovely young mother and her baby. She was sent running around all over downtown on a futile scavenger hunt while her husband was babysitting and needed to get to his job. If she hadn't found an American to, at least, tell her what the darned things were, she would have wasted even more time.

**6:00 p.m.:** Computer frustrations today. Same ones I've had all week. I can't figure out why this capital city of a large country doesn't have internet companies all over the place. I was sure that I'd find one in the modern heartbeat of Connaught Place itself, with its three concentric rings of shops

At last heading homeward, I caught a glimpse of the word, Internet, among other things on a sign. It was above a primitive three-sided store, literally an open box, sitting separate over in a grassy area. The fourth side is a galvanized roll-down front. Very tiny, it was crowded with employees, a Xerox machine and one computer. I said, "*Where's the Internet area?*" and they pointed to their only computer. Well, I couldn't access AOL and all my questions came up blank on the search engine. Also, the boy employee sat behind me reading over my shoulder, as I read news items about Avian Bird flu. I was just as glad I couldn't get my e-mails up or he would have kibitzed them too.

Almost a week went by while fog and cold weather had the city in its grip, playing havoc with air and train schedules. I gave in to it and did a lot of resting which was actually a very good idea.

**Saturday, December 31, New Year's Eve:** I'm packed and ready to check out, but have an extension on the room, as I don't have to leave for a few hours. Just checked

the internet on my hotel's business computer and I've had no response to my Calcutta housing query. I shall head to the Fairlawn Hotel there, trusting that they will have me.

**6:15 p.m.** - If that don't beat all. I'm still here in New Delhi, after a very crazy few hours. I missed the train, though I was at the track in plenty of time. Apparently, two trains left for Calcutta, just a few minutes apart, and I got on the wrong one and then discovered that mine had left the station only a few minutes before. A train came in on both tracks, one on either side of the cement platform where I was sitting facing the incorrect track. My train arrived first and I certainly could have gotten on but I had it in my head that the other track was mine. I think I mentioned before, that all destination postings are written in Hindi and you must search for clues, such as departure time and train number, to determine where, in all that hustle and bustle, to go to catch the right train.

I thought that I'd done everything correctly and sat in great confidence while the train at my back chuffed away. I "coulda, woulda, shoulda," asked one of the people on the bench beside me to take a look at my ticket and confirm my conclusions but I was over-confident.

When I boarded the wrong train, I found someone else occupying "my" bunk number and that's when the truth came out. This train was completely full or they would have taken me but nothing could be done. So, I hauled my heavy load back down to the International Ticket Office and bought a ticket for another train to Calcutta, leaving at 7:30 tomorrow morning.

Since my new train leaves from a different station in the older part of Delhi, I went to great pains to get over there

to find a hotel, following someone's directions to the metro, instead of climbing aboard yet another tuk-tuk. It was a long, long, long, stagger across the catwalk over the tracks and into a paradise of cleanliness that is the brand-new underground metro. Just like magic, everyone seems to be instantly transformed to fine ladies and gentlemen when they enter this shiny new tube.

After a fast ride, it was back out again into the utter shambles of Indian life at a train terminal even more basic than the New Delhi one. Sure. I could have popped into a rickshaw and gone back across town to the Rahul Palace Hotel again, but I hated to undo all the work of checking out. Plus, it seemed smart to find a place near the station since I must be there so early in the morning. Well soon, I had many "helpers" swarming around. "*Where you want to go, Madam?*" Usually, I brush them off but this time I went with it. The helper to whom I had nodded, led me across the street and I followed as fast as my aching, heavily-burdened, feet would allow.

It was one of those tiny informal, three-sided tourist offices with a desk outside on the sidewalk but still able to book hotels. The sort where price is elevated because of the commission the hotels have to pay. But, what the heck, by now I was exhausted with my forty-pound pack and billions of stairways. Everyone was nice. It was just going to cost me a wee bit more.

Okay. They conferred a lot and two of them hustled me off to a waiting tuk-tuk where all three of us, plus my big pack, mashed into the narrow backseat. We stopped at one hotel, not far from the station, and one of the men went in to check. I would have gone too but my three pieces of luggage

were all wedged in and I wasn't about to leave them. This hotel was declared too dirty and well it might have been, judging by the surroundings.

Then, the men said we had to go to New Delhi to find a hotel. I had just come from there and my train leaves from Old Delhi so I protested, but gave in finally, knowing that Old Delhi is really old. What was I thinking? Plus, I was pretty much at their mercy by now, as I was completely stuck in my seat.

When we all crowded in, our seating arrangement was so tight that I had nowhere to put my right leg, as that's where my backpack was, so I casually crossed my legs so that my lower right leg and foot was cocked over my left knee and extended even over the knees of one of the men. There was, literally, nowhere else to put it. I had on long loose, Eddie Bauer pants, socks, and dirty tennis shoes. The problem was that I couldn't tell if this young man was copping a feel or if he just couldn't find room for his hands.

It was a wild, wild ride, all right, through heavy oncoming, as well as going-in-our-direction, traffic, most of which consisted of over-laden bicycle rickshaws carrying unbelievable amounts of freight and many beasts of burden drawing heavy carts. These were huge shipments piled in ridiculous towers, all of which required an enormous amount of physical labor. Skinny, underfed, men bear up under such gargantuan loads. But, they work with a will and actually manage to do the impossible.

We were in this cheerful, boiling, tooting cauldron for a long time, making slow progress and finally we came out of it back at the New Delhi train station which I had just left an hour before. I brightened when I realized that if I got a hotel

nearby, I could go by metro to the other station and not have to repeat this tedious overland route.

Soon, the boys got me to a hotel that required a walk through an alleyway where some barking dogs came out to frighten us. I clapped my hands at them and this infuriated them extremely, causing a frenzy of barking and fake lunging. One of the guys said that you couldn't do that with these dogs. They would get meaner. I guess Delhi curs are as independent as the cows, in this country. Anyway, the hotel is okay; sparse, but clean enough. The toilet doesn't flush. There's no hot water. It's very noisy because of hammering and talking in the hallways. The room is cold, with uncarpeted floors and a hard bed. But I can't be picky tonight. It's New Year's Eve.

I tipped the two men, and the rickshaw driver but the first man frowned and gave his tip to the younger one. Soon, he showed up at the door of my second floor room talking about a drink and pointing to himself. He couldn't speak English, luckily, but it sounded like he wanted me to buy him a drink. Probably, my enticing foot had given him big ideas for new and exciting ways to spend his New Year's Eve.

I just played dumb, saying that I had my bottled water and the edibles I had purchased for the train, so thank you very much, but I would just stay in and snack right here. Wasn't he kind to worry about whether I had enough to drink? He finally left, still frowning. I figured he could get his tip back from the other one and buy his own drink. He probably thought he was worth a whole bottle. I knew that the hotel would also be paying them some of my rate, as their commission, so I wasn't taking unfair advantage. After seeing what that foolish hotel tout had in mind, I wondered if he had disqualified the first hotel he checked on because they didn't

have big double beds, like this one. The best laid plans of mice and men still don't get you laid.

So, here I am, in New Delhi on New Year's Eve and not on some moving train, going through dark countryside. "*Happy New Year!*" I toast with my bottled water held high.

Some family is noisily talking out in the hall. That's nice; it's a family hotel, at least. I hear babies and children, and lots of hubble-bubble. Maybe they'll all go to bed early for the children's sake. I have a wakeup call for 5 a.m. and have just noticed that my watch is stopped. Luckily, there's an alarm in my pack with the correct time. It would be nice to have a backup. I sure wouldn't want to miss another train.

Ugh. I feel so grimy already in my traveling clothes and the train ride will take twenty-four hours, so I'll be aboard all day and all night, arriving at 7:30 a.m. in Calcutta without any hotel reservations. It's just a mighty good thing that I'm reading Martha Gellhorn's book about her horror trips. That helps to put all this into perspective.

It's 9:30 p.m., by my dug-out alarm clock, and people are banging about. Everything is hard surfaces, so noise is not absorbed. The Big Family is either gone or comatose by now. I wonder if there will be New Year's fireworks, or drunks, coming in later? Hope not.



## 2006

### **Old Delhi, Sunday, January 1, New Year's Day:**

The coffee is great here in the nice restaurant of the Old Delhi train station. None of the Indian dishes looked at all interesting to my bland tongue, so I'll have to rely upon my own supply of tuna fish and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. I slept some, last night. Mostly after 3 a.m., when the hotel settled down. Once in awhile, a dog would wildly bark into the open lobby and the sound would amplify on the marble floor. Five o'clock came too soon, but there was, at last, plenty of hot water so I had a good wash and dressed in many layers.

Checkout was ludicrous, as they tried to blame the broken toilet on me and then said that the room cost 1150 rupees, plus tax, bringing it to 1200 rupees (\$27). I growled and complained but needed to change my 500 rupee note to pay the rickshaw, so I was stuck, as they wouldn't change it without deducting their extra money. I had decided to go by rickshaw instead of walking so far to the metro with that backpack.

There was none of the heavy night traffic in the cold pre-dawn and we rattled and bumped over the terrible road. People were preparing for the day, setting out their items for sale on cloths spread on the rubble-strewn roadside. They must have to carry heavy bundles of merchandise, back and forth, daily; then spread them out and sit there, on the ground from dark to dark, from cold to cold. Those who sleep

on the sidewalk prefer to be in a well-lighted section for safety, so they never even have the luxury of darkness and deep sleep.

These are not the people who get my goat. It's the ones in charge, who pretend to improve conditions, and only improve their own; who claim that India is so fantastic and romantic and ignore the filth and horror. I'd best get out to the track now, forty-five minutes early. I *must* make this train!

### **Aboard The Train to Calcutta**

**7:05 a.m.** - Ahhhh. I'm settled in my little home for the next twenty-four hours. My roommate, in the bunk across the aisle, is an Arab man. The train was already here when I got to the track and people were busily stuffing their belongings under and over the bunks. Though it will first be daytime, I hope to get long sleeps, lying on this lower couchette.

A curtain separates our four-bunk compartment, two upper and two lower couches, from the aisle. Single couches, also curtained, line the other side of the aisle. They have more privacy but less space. My backpack is in a safe place, way under my bunk and way over by the window, so I don't know if I'll need the new chain and padlock which I just bought from a trackside peddler.

Knowing that there have been train robberies by "dacoits," on this run, I thought a lock might come in handy. Though from accounts about recent holdups in the paper, those desperados would not let a small chain stop them. However, I believe that they're more into snatching jewelry from necks, and wallets from purses and pockets, all at

gunpoint, and would, no doubt, spurn my big, rough-looking pack.

We'll be moving through the desperately poor State of Bihar during the night, so one of these Great Train Robberies is not entirely out of the question. Wouldn't that make something to write about, now? However, the sneaky kind of pilfering is more likely and is common aboard overnight trains in many countries, though it's never happened to me.

But I haven't missed a train before, either. My valuables are spread about, just in case. The zip pocket in my left sock contains my debit card, driver's license, \$100 bill, and 2000 rupees. Passport occupies a back pants pocket, sealed with a Velcro flap; the air tickets are in the rear zip compartment of my ticky-tacky-looking rain jacket. Purse and fanny pack have nothing vital in them. So, I'm all set.

A three-member family from Bangladesh now shares my compartment. The other man is gone. They are: an old grandfather, a younger man who speaks English, and his sister. I've just offered to take the upper bunk so that these three can use the lower seats, plus the opposite upper. Then, I'll be out of their way and can stretch out and sleep or read. It's a bit darker up there, with no window, but that will make it much easier to sleep.

We even have food service on this train and I've just put in an order for an omelet. Now, we're pulling out of the station and I have nothing to worry about for the next twenty-four hours, unless the dacoits pull a stickup, which is not that likely.

Lots of cargo moves by train, wrapped tight in sewn-up burlap. I've been watching undernourished men move mountains of it on heavy wooden, single-axle, hand carts. Red-shirted porters carry high stacks of luggage balanced on

their heads for arriving passengers. All day and into the night, these men toil for just a few rupees. Sunday, or New Year's Day, for that matter, is no day of rest for them.

There's a lot of fog this morning. Zero visibility. Planes won't be flying until this clears away. Now, many people are defecating along the tracks, in their early morning routine. They're hidden from the road, but not the train. They don't care. Well, they live outdoors. Whatcha gonna do? Many women here work very industriously making cow dung patties, judging by neat rows of big brown pancakes sticking to the sides of the buildings, and piled in finished stacks, right here beside the train tracks.

**2:20 p.m.:** Very comfy. I'm snuggled in the upper bunk and have dozed. My family has settled in and I've learned that this brother and sister are taking their grandfather to have open-heart surgery. The brother snores and her voice is quite loud. Maybe the old man is deaf. But, they're good travel mates. She unveils herself when the curtain is closed, but if a trainman comes for tickets or inquiries, she plops part of her sari on her head.

When the food vendor came calling down the aisle, I declined lunch, suspecting it was probably spicy. However, I might try supper. I guess it's part of the ticket price, as they don't collect money. My sandwich-making stuff is in my pack, hopelessly stowed under the old man's bunk and their stuff is also piled on top of it. I'd sure like to snag the Tea Man and the Chip Man, though.

**5:30 p.m.:** I'm as full as a tick, having supped on offerings being hawked in the aisles: Chai (tea) for thirty-five cents; chips, Chow Mein, and a pound cake with currants, all for around \$2. My trapped food supplies will keep for another

time. It's a comfortable train, air-conditioned, but not too cold.

Four robed mullahs occupy the next compartment, sitting up, cross-legged, on the lower bunks with so much luggage in the space between, covered with a cloth, that it makes a platform all the way across like the floor of a mosque. They have made a brightly-lighted neat space and one of them reads softly from the Quran.

I worried about offending them with my dangling, sandal-clad, almost-bare feet as I navigated my way off of the top bunk. Its ladder is at the end of the bunk, in the aisle, and whenever I had to climb up or down during the night, I was aware of my Salome-like effect possibly interrupting their prayers in their tiny mosque.

**Monday, January 2, 8:45 a.m.:** My twenty-five hour train ride was very comfortable. I felt right at home with all of my neighbors. The Mullahs prayed very quietly, sitting up with their lights on, all night long. In the morning as we pulled into the Calcutta station, one of them chatted with me in good English and gave me some sort of candy as we prepared to debark. He was intrigued to find an American lady, of a certain age, traveling alone under such circumstances.

We chatted as I went to the lower bunk to pull out my chained backpack from underneath the now-vacant grandfather's bed. My hand brushed against a pink plastic cup. "*Whose is this?*" It had a cap snapped over the top and something liquid inside. "*Oh dear . . .*" My suspicions were confirmed as I gingerly pried off the top and found a full set of teeth, forgotten in the family's scramble to make it down the crowded aisle before it became too difficult to navigate.

My eyes met those of the Muslim priest. “Go, go.” he said. “*Maybe you can find them. I’ll watch your luggage.*” Popping the cap back on tight, I shouldered my way down the aisle, managed the ladder one-handed, and raced through the jammed platform, hoping both to see my erstwhile roommates and to be able to remember how to get back to the correct train car to reclaim my backpack. There they were. Thank goodness the grandfather shuffles so slowly. I tapped him on the shoulder and held out his little pink cup. Surprise, gratitude, joy, spread over his face as he gratefully took his teeth from my hands. Wishing him well on his heart surgery and waving goodbye to them all, I turned and hurried back to my train carriage.

## Calcutta

**Monday, January 2, 9:30 a.m.:** I have come to the Fairlawn Hotel, on Sudder Street, which I wish I had booked way back in November. When I simply showed up early this morning, the desk clerk originally told me that they were full, but Grande Dame Violet Smith took a liking to me and, lo and behold, they found a room for the night. Breakfast was still being served and I was ushered into the beautiful dining room which manages to be both formal and cozy at the very same time.

*“The Fairlawn Hotel, on Sudder Street, in Calcutta.”* (that’s the way it is spoken of by those in the know, I later learned. They say all three phrases in one gulp.) turns out to be a most charming, famous and amazing place. It has been in business for over 200 years and is still kept spanking clean and full of Englishness. The owner, Mrs. Smith, is eighty-five years old and is strong, stylish, and totally in charge. Her

husband, the Major, died just two years ago and together they had owned and operated this hotel throughout their long and happy marriage. It was already a successful guesthouse when her mother bought it before Violet was born. Today, Mrs. Smith runs the Fairlawn with her daughter.

Pictures of admirers, guests, and famous people, as well as many framed newspaper stories about this highly-admired hotel adorn all of the walls, especially along the great stairway. Movie stars and Hollywood producers stayed here when they filmed *Oh, Calcutta* many years ago.

There's so much to look at, to examine, in this fabulous museum of a hotel which is most homey, welcoming, and full of lovely greenery and notes of whimsy, such as the strings of artificial fruit which hang among the leaves and vines of the entrance bower. It is so wonderful. All this is mine, plus three great meals, for only \$50 per day. Oh man, I'm in heaven.

**7:08 p.m.** Waiting in my room for the 7:40 dinner gong. I have been assigned a spacious bedroom and bath just off the dining room, behind lovely green and white draperies. I had Afternoon Tea with new friends, Nancy and Cyrus, on the palm-filled terrace and we lingered for hours. In fact, I barely had time to prepare for dinner.

After dark, the front exterior of the Fairlawn becomes a riot of orange, red, yellow, green, and blue lights. Strings of large bulbs in bright tropical colors decorate countless bushes, trees, potted palms, and the covered entrance to the lobby. Sitting there over tea, I was so surprised when these many lights suddenly transformed our surroundings into a wonderland just at dusk that I clapped my hands in sheer delight.

Though it isn't large, that front patio holds eight to ten umbrella tables and every one of them fills up at tea time with

happily chatting guests. Waiters carry silver trays laden with the whole British nine yards of mid-afternoon tradition. Tiny red roses adorn delicate bone china tea pots and matching cups and saucers; crisp linen napkins compliment the table cloths. Small cakes, muffins and marmalade pots accompany unlimited hot tea refills and soon, we're so stuffed that it's difficult to contemplate a large dinner in just a few hours. No guest can remain a stranger for very long with the cordial mingling that takes place over this afternoon English tea. Amazingly, this is also included in the room cost. I've gone from famine to feast, just by changing cities.

It is said that the British Army travels on its stomach, and that tradition is well upheld in this gracious hotel. Upon the summons of a large brass gong, we present ourselves and receive our seating assignment from the head waiter, who waves us to a chair at one of the family-style tables.

I have now met two Indian/Anglo couples, who live in England and Hong Kong, but come here, annually, to visit family. Nancy and Cyrus, English teachers, will move to New Zealand at the end of the school year, as they say they've had it with trying to teach indifferent students, who have no desire to learn anything, let alone, a hard subject like English. After breakfast, this couple invited me to go downtown with them for coffee at Flurry's, as if we hadn't had enough at Violet's bountiful table. But, who cares? I got my first real look at Calcutta.

It's really good. Calcutta is a true city, with good streets and sidewalks and nice shops and restaurants. It feels quite different from Delhi. I had expected twice as many people to be living on the street here, thanks to Calcutta's most famous nun. This place is smoggy with pollution and



everything that's close to a major street has a brown coating of dust, but that can be said of many big cities.

**Tuesday, January 3** This morning at breakfast, I was assigned to share a table with John, from Edinburgh, Scotland, who is also traveling around the world and has been in some of the same places I have. He flies to Bangkok on Saturday and plans to visit Chiang Mai, as I will later. Big and bald, wearing a white poet's shirt, he was most refreshing to talk to.

I have now been informed that I may extend my stay in the Fairlawn for several more days, so I jumped at the chance. This morning, I wandered a bit, exploring Calcutta's cityscape and shopping for such necessities as shampoo and toothpaste. The city feels surprisingly Western. One "growing" need was met when I found a nice hair salon run by Chinese ladies who gave me a very fine haircut. This was so welcome, as my head was becoming a bulky mushroom, and good short haircuts are hard to come by. I also spent time in a nearby internet cafe.

I made sure to return to the hotel in time for lunch, and then, naturally, stayed on for continuous socializing and more eating, over afternoon tea. This time I met Gabriela and Pedro, of Mexico, who are volunteers at the Mother Theresa Mission here. This hotel is often the choice for those who come specifically to serve at that mission. What a contrast, but they need a soothing place to retreat to, after their difficult assignments with the dying poor.

I said my goodbyes to Nancy and Cyrus, and hellos to Alan and Darren of London, who conduct their work by laptop computer as they travel to various countries of the world. So many people seem to be able to do that, nowadays, by working just a few hours daily in their room or beside a

hotel pool, or while sunning on the beach. Darren runs the definitive website on London Theatre, though I must confess that I never asked him for the web address, so I don't know which it is. He can stay in touch with every daily inside development through the internet. His website sells tickets, gives directions and provides the latest stage gossip and current information about all the London shows happening on the other side of the globe.

Darren laughed as he told me the story of how he snagged such a massively important website on London Theatre simply by buying the right domain name in the very earliest days of the web. Now others, who were originally much more directly involved with the theatre world, have tried to buy it from him but he's made such a success of it that he won't consider selling.

A comment about the food served at the Fairlawn: It is plentiful but it certainly wouldn't appeal to a gourmet. Presentation is everything. First of all, the dining room is set with white linens, fine silverware, and lovely china. Gloved Indian waiters are the whole show in their resplendent white outfits, red cummerbunds and gold-flecked turbans. One of the five waiters brings each course to you on a silver tray, changing your china for every single type of food presented: soup, salad, main dish and dessert, plus coffee and tea. You may have water during the meal but definitely no hot drinks until dessert. It's a rule.

Each one of these visions from an Arabian Nights Tale sweeps grandly out of the kitchen holding a great tureen filled with the main dish. He pauses at every guest's side so that we may serve ourselves. Everyone is watching so I think we're each a bit conservative while ladling the food onto the plate.

We also know that the tureen will be offered to us many times until the thing is empty.

It's like living among the British upper crust in the last century. John, my friend from Edinburgh, later explained that in the great manor houses of England, the actual food brought to the table for the guest's consumption is, more or less, an afterthought compared with the presentation itself.

I dearly hope that Vi Smith never reads the following, but as every veteran guest of the Fairlawn will attest, the food becomes one of the eccentric, endearing qualities, lingering long and affectionately in memory forever, concerning this quaint and totally individual hotel: this little piece of authentic England, holding its own, long after the Raj Days ended for India.

There's usually a soup, which seems to be simply flour stirred into warm water to form a white stock with no seasoning, but often with something floating in it. A few thinly sliced mushrooms and it's called Mushroom Soup. Four or five corn kernels instead create Corn Soup. But, always, the hot water with white flour which doesn't seem to have even been brought to a boil. So, that's the soup course.

Next, is a silver tray bearing a tureen of cooked cauliflower in a brown sauce along with some puffy circles of very thin pastry to pour your cauliflower stew upon. This afternoon, we also had cooked cauliflower, in a creamy cheese sauce, plus a salad of shredded lettuce with just a hint of radish, beets, tomatoes, and scallions. Dessert was a sliced guava. Tonight's dessert was a small donut, followed by coffee or tea.

We receive a grand dinner theatre of sorts with three big daily meals, plus afternoon tea, plus our room, for fifty dollars a day for a single. Couples get an even better bargain,

as their room cost, including all they can eat, is only \$60 per day. No one starves, believe me. The opposite is the case, as we all tend to hang around, talking our heads off and waiting for the next opportunity to become, again, stuffed like a python.

For me to be, finally, in a haven of bland food is like having died and gone to heaven. This is not Indian cooking, to say the least, and all of these comments are offered in a spirit of loving gratitude and affectionate humor. I can't complain, because it's not spicy and we were all talking so much, that we hardly noticed the fact that we were eating more cauliflower than we've ever eaten in our lives.

**Wednesday, January 4:** I slept late this morning and had to hustle to dress before the breakfast serving closed at ten. It's a wonder I didn't just sleep in, having already become so well-fed; but the meal camaraderie is a powerful lure, so I struggled up.

I sat with Daren, Alan, and others, and waved when John, the Scotsman, came in. Our table was filled and he was placed at another one; so when I finished eating, I went to his table for a second cup of coffee and a continuation of yesterday's chat. We wound up spending the whole day together.

First, we walked over to the Maiden, a great grassy strip of parkland that runs beside the main thoroughfare near the Hooghly River. After greeting the statue of Gandhi, we decided to take in the cricket match just about to begin in the huge nearby stadium. This was my very first experience with cricket and John explained the rules. Frankly, I didn't find it terribly exciting, but the fans, of course, thought so because a famous player was somewhere out there on the field. In my

opinion, the cricketers simply stood around a whole lot, with only short, baffling bursts of running in between.

There is a slight similarity to baseball but not much that I could see. John told me that many Europeans wonder why Americans prefer baseball to cricket because baseball is fashioned after the old English game of Rounder's, which is only played by ten-year-old girls in Britain. How can grown men enjoy that?

We then strolled along the famous Hooghly River, an arm of the Holy Ganges, and crossed it on the ferry. John hailed a really old, really skinny, human rickshaw man to cycle us to the Botanical Gardens and bargained with him for the fare. I was amazed that he could even make the bicycle rickshaw move with the two of us behind him and I wanted to throw in a big tip but was afraid that John would believe that I was undercutting his negotiation.

This famous Calcutta Botanical Garden is really a wonderful arboretum with many paths to wander along and a centerpiece of a 250-year-old Banyan tree which has spread out massively and created a forest made up of it alone. We took pictures of each other tree-hugging and then went throughout the gardens in search of food.

Unfortunately, the little arboretum restaurant had run out of all their menu items by that hour of the afternoon. So finally, very hungry, we hopped onto a local bus and rode back into town. As John explained the significance of the well-known river we were crossing, I turned sideways to look out of the window. At just that moment, a man sitting in the seat behind me sneezed and I could literally feel his cold germs hitting my face. Little did I know then, that for me, this would be the sneeze heard into Thailand.

Blue and Beyond, near the huge indoor bazaar, is a wonderful rooftop restaurant which John had discovered in his earlier wanderings. After two beers and a fish dinner as a late lunch there and now, a few hours later, a Fairlawn dinner, I'm completely stuffed. I certainly enjoyed the day with such a nice companion as John is. He stays at a hotel down the street but breakfasts here.

**Thursday, January 5:** I slept through breakfast, doggone it, and the dining room was empty when I finally showed my face. I'm quite sure that I'm getting another cold no doubt due to that intercepted sneeze.

Naively thinking that I could recover somewhat if I could only fix up my hair, whose roots were beginning to show, I decided to go to the same Chinese salon to get them to apply my hard-won blonde hair coloring. I can't do it myself because the hotel's hot water supply doesn't last long enough to get a good rinse. Though I didn't feel one-hundred percent well, I needed the civilizing influence that blonde can bestow. I say hard-won because it has proved to be almost impossible to find any light blonde hair coloring on this side of the world where the citizens are routinely very black-haired.

The hairdressers were quite happy to try to give me a dye job though they clearly weren't familiar with my do-it-yourself product. While I was at it, I got a pedicure, as well. That pampering felt good but the hair turned out a funny, dark straw color and not really blond at all. I think the lady left the stuff on too long because she started timing after a long and delightful scalp massage when the chemical clock was already ticking. I was in the zone and not thinking about the timing either. Now, I look really weird with a darkish,

greenish hat of hair sticking up awkwardly on my head. Not too good for the old morale, what with this now-nasty cold.

And, wouldn't you know, while I was wandering about town looking for an ATM, who should I run into, but John, with one foot in the air, getting his shoes polished. We went for coffee at Flurry's and then went our separate ways again. I had tried to be upbeat with my running nose and scarecrow hair, but I just couldn't pull it off. I don't know if he thought that I had missed breakfast on purpose in order not to spend another day with him. Perhaps we would have done more sightseeing but I'm feeling so sick now, I don't think I would have been much company.

**Friday, January 6:** The only reason I got up when I did was to make it in time for breakfast. You'd think I was starving around here and wouldn't get another food opportunity in just a few hours. Now, I'm back in my room. So far, the cold/cough is being held off by decongestants but I feel very tired and unenergetic. The idea of sightseeing is just plain unappealing, as is the prospect of venturing out into the "Great Human Stew" beyond these walls. Some guests are volunteering at the Mother Theresa Mission and I'm very interested to hear their stories.

I really should do that too, while I'm in this city, for goodness sakes. But, I'd like to feel strong, healthy and committed to the task before doing it. Plus, I'd rather go together with some of the others. Right now, one sneeze in a dying beggar's face and I've really given him his final bath. Or, one of his sneezes in my face would compound this cold, caught in that very fashion on an old crowded bus, which a solid citizen managed to pass on to me.

In order to continue my travel plans, I must get over this worsening cold. All I feel like doing right now is to crawl

into my bed for sleep. However, I can't, because they'll want to make up the room soon. I need both my health, and my hair, to be solved before next week, when I will do the Intrepid Mountain Tribe Trek, in Thailand.

Just a week from today, I'll be living in the hill country, near Chiang Mai, walking between high mountain tribal villages and I really need my strength back.

**11:55 a.m.:** I have just refused the millionth cheeky beggar who approached the taxi and stuck her tin cup through the back window, making childish noises to elicit my response and banging her cup on my upper arm. She had waited passively on the side while an old man first tried his luck with me. Then, she went into her act as he shuffled off. All the while, the taxi driver is watching my reaction in the rearview mirror.

Back to the subject of volunteering at the Hospital For The Dying Destitute: After waving away the beggars at the taxi window and always spurning young and old, cripples, sick, or whatever, I realized that it would be hypocritical of me to go to this place and murmur comforting words while washing bodies in their final days, if I wouldn't pass on a little money to them during their living days.

A long-term world traveler has to decide for themselves, early on, a personal policy about how they are to treat the beggars they encounter. If the question isn't settled, then your heart will negotiate with your head each and every time a pitiful request is made. A woman, by herself on the road, needs to keep her eyes straight ahead because there are far too many problems all too eager to catch hold of her sleeve and engulf her. It seems hard-hearted, I know, but your own safety depends upon how you approach this question. There



are ways that you can make a difference in the overwhelming face of poverty but giving to beggars is not one of them.

As a lone traveler, I've had to make my beggar policy and lie in it over the long haul, and that tells me not to play along. I can't cure this social blight, much as I would like to see it end, so I must move through it without letting it stop my forward motion.

More power to Mother Theresa and her Sisters but even they cannot address the living poverty and must simply be content to make death a little sweeter. The beggars of Calcutta aren't eligible for admission to Mother Theresa's Sisters of Charity missions unless they're at death's door, so no wonder a few of the guests here tell me that the dying beggars sometimes curse, in Hindi, at the Westerner who is tending to their personal needs now, as if to say:

*“Where were you when I really needed you, when I was a child, or a parent, or just an old man, spending my years on that dusty sidewalk? Dying takes so little time and brings an end to the pain. Now, you hold your nose and pretend to love me but I have seen you look the other way, just yesterday, before they brought me here. Go make your grandstand gestures to someone else and let me die without your help, as I have lived without it.”*



## THAILAND

### Bangkok

**Tuesday January 10:** Oh me, oh my, Thailand is simply wonderful. The city is clean, with real paved streets and true sidewalks. I'm still feeling pretty sick but I'll go to Mission Hospital run by the Seventh Day Adventists to see a doctor about this wretched cough and cold so I can do the Intrepid Mountain Tribe trip. I'm staying in the really lovely New World Lodge Hotel where the group will be gathering tomorrow. There will be nine of us, according to the list posted downstairs: five men and four women.

It's delightful to have simple food again. How much I appreciate clear consommé, a fruit salad, and a piece of chicken, prepared without sauces and spices.

**Wednesday, January 11:** I'm pumped full of cold medicine and that staves off the symptoms. My roommate, Louisa, a twenty-something Australian, also has a bad cold and sounds worse than me when she talks so that takes care of my concern that I'd pass something on to her. Everyone is Australian, except for one Canadian and me. They are all in their twenties and most are couples. Our leader, Lucky, is Thai.

We had a full day exploring Bangkok, beginning with a rapid ride in a river ferry to Chinatown. Long, fast swallowtail boats carry passengers up and down the central river from docks in different parts of town. It's beautiful, efficient and fun. In the bazaar, Lucky frequently stopped our group at the stalls of many street vendors, buying strange food for us to taste, such as jack fruit and crisp rice cups with a liquid center. I even tried a fried larva but passed on the other bugs.

The larva was only papery on the outside and nothing on the inside.

In the Golden Buddha Temple, we heard the story of the enormous five-ton statue made of pure gold. Once, a man had a dream three times in a row, in which a Golden Buddha told him to bring something out of the river. He dove into the indicated place and discovered a huge cement Buddha statue but no temple was interested in housing it as there were already many such images.

Of course, there are also many temples and he finally located one which grudgingly agreed to take the statue for only one year and at the end of the term, became adamant that it be removed. The tiny temple we visited accepted it and set it up though it dominated the small inner space. Later, a monk noticed a glint coming from a hole in the cement. When the crust was broken off, they discovered a solid gold 18-carat Buddha underneath. It had obviously been concealed during a time of invasion. Today, this little temple collects admission and many donations because of this now-famous statue.

Our exploration of Bangkok continued to the modern part of town, traveling on the metro and the sky train, which are both so modern as to be futuristic. I saw a very attractive, brand new condominium building where one bedroom apartments cost \$25,000. If anyone wanted clean city life with every imaginable need filled, this is it.

**9 p.m.** We are aboard the overnight train to Chiang Mai to the north of Bangkok, where we will begin our trek into the mountains. It was exciting to hoist our packs and walk the few blocks to the train station after dinner tonight, following Mama Lucky single file like baby ducklings, moving at a fine clip along the dark streets. I pretended that we were

commandos heading out on a vital mission; particularly because I had to step so lively to keep up with the group.

Now, we are stowed securely on board a very attractive Pullman-type train, just like the one I used to ride in the 1950s, with upper and lower bunks now being made up into beds by the porter. The group is getting ready to turn in, all talking and laughing together; some are playing cards. We all get along very well.

## **Chiang Mai**

**Thursday, January 12:** We are lodged in the beautiful Prince Hotel and have spent the day visiting four famous Chiang Mai temples. One of them was a fairly long taxi drive out of town and up into the nearby forested hills. Three hundred wide steps, flanked on either side by long green dragons, led to a golden temple complex covering the entire top of a hill. We wandered for hours on our own in the splendor of magnificent Siamese temple architecture among worshippers burning incense and offering lotus blossoms at the many altars.

## **Ethnic Hill Tribes**

**Friday, January 13, 8:00 a.m.:** Wearing a small backpack bought in a street bazaar and filled only with my sleeping bag and a few warm clothes, I climbed aboard the red pickup truck for the drive into the high mountains to visit the ethnic groups known as the Hill Tribes. The rest of our possessions are stored in the Prince Hotel until we return in three days.

A stop at the tribal museum educated us on the history of the people we were about to visit. The residents of the different small mountain villages are refugees of either Chinese or Burmese background, who crossed borders a century ago to escape persecution. Now, their descendents live undisturbed in these northern mountains of Thailand and no one is allowed to enter their territory except by permission of the Thai government and under strictly-controlled conditions with certified guides. The native villagers are considered to be precious national resources whose way of life is carefully preserved.

### **LiSu Village**

After four hours of narrow, steep, winding road and a midway lunch stop, our truck deposited us at a trailhead where we began our two-hour climb to the LiSu village. Our local guide, Sammy, led us at a rapid pace. This climb was hard work on a forested trail with many tight switchbacks. It was exactly like hiking the Ute Trail straight up the side of Ajax Mountain in Aspen, Colorado, which I used to do whenever I wanted a real workout; except that I'd never worn a heavy day pack like I had on now. My light cloth shoes were barely adequate but didn't pose too much of a problem.

I kept up with the others the entire way and we finished in one hour and twenty minutes instead of the two to two-and-a-half hours that the average group takes. Sammy congratulated us on our fitness. However, about three-quarters of the way up the mountain, I had injured my right knee by jumping off of a fallen log which was blocking the trail. Instead of easing my way across, I'd climbed up and jumped down, not realizing that the unaccustomed weight on

my back would cause my knees to buckle to the ground. I wound up in a kneeling position on the trail. Uh-oh. Bad move in these circumstances. Immediately after it happened, I thought I was fine and kept climbing at the same rapid pace; but later my entire leg began to swell and to throb painfully.

At last, we climbed out of the forest to a graded dirt road and Sammy explained the pagan spirit symbols on a shrine at the entrance to the LiSu village. These were there to keep out evil spirits and we were asked not to touch anything that we might see posted on a fence or around a home, as this would destroy their intended effect. The LiSu are animists and are opium growers who probably still do a good bit of that, though they are ostensibly phasing that crop out and changing to other agricultural products.

Sammy pointed to a grove of fruit trees which had become their new government-approved industry. But we learned that it would be very dangerous for any unescorted individuals to go into this whole area as they would be suspected to be spies and might not return alive. At least, that was the unspoken implication I received from our guides' comments: that the opium trade was still flourishing much higher on the mountains where the poppies grow in the cold air. The villagers allow tour groups to come in because the leaders know the safe areas to go and this travel industry is actually a great economic boon to the local people. They are paid to host our groups and they also do a thriving business in handicraft sales because we are all a captive audience for their marketing strategies.

We were shown around the village and even invited by one old woman to enter her little house made of woven bamboo walls and a leaf roof. There was a central hearth, a dirt floor and raised bed platforms on two sides of the one

room. The owner smiled at us, revealing her black-stained teeth and lips from a lifetime of betel nut chewing. This addiction prevents all tooth decay and gum disease but is not very attractive. We saw a few dogs and shy children on this first walk through the village but the adults must have been somewhere else.

Our guest house was set apart from the village houses and was a bamboo longhouse with raised bamboo-slat sleeping platforms along either side over a dirt floor. Thin mattresses, stone-hard pillows, and two heavy blankets each defined our sleeping places. Mosquito nets hung from low rafters above each person's bedding.

Our two hill country guides, Sammy and Yung, not only carried our heavy food supplies in on their backs but they cooked, served, and cleaned up, as well. A huge meal, more than the dozen of us could ever eat, even after all that exertion, was spread for us on the long covered picnic table. We ate and ate by candlelight. A volleyball court, the little cook shack, and a cement-floored latrine made up the other buildings of our guest complex beside the main village.

As soon as dinner was finished, Sammy received a message from the village leader offering to come and dance for us. They don't do this very often, we were told, as there are so many groups visiting that it would be too disruptive to their lives to dance every night but for one dollar from each of us, they were willing. That may have been simply the psychology of scarcity but it worked.

Soon, about thirty women and children and a few men, all in traditional dress, were building a big bonfire beside our dining shed. A musician played simple rhythmic tunes on a flute and a long-necked sort of a guitar and everyone began a shuffling circular dance around the fire,



grabbing our hands to draw us in. Five steps forward, then a back step, a cross step and forward again. I almost forgot about my injured knee in the happy fun of dancing.

So many cultures do a variation of this same circular dance and I have joined many such circles. In the Ukraine, we added a kick step and in Egypt's Nubian village, we would suddenly sing out a high-pitched "Yi-yi-yi-yi." Greeks, Israelis, Africans, American Indians, all do this dance. There are only so many original steps that one can do while going around a bonfire and the earth's old societies have explored them all.

By the time our dancing ended, the moon was full, illuminating our way to the toilet hut behind our sleeping longhouse. I put on all of my extra clothes and crawled into my lightweight sleeping bag under heavy army blankets but the rest of the group played a raucous game of cards out at the dinner table. My now acute cold symptoms vied for attention with my now-throbbing swollen knee.

Cold and colder grew the night in this thin mountain air. Wind blew through the wide spaces between the bamboo slats of the walls and sleeping platform. Parts of me were constantly freezing cold in spite of the covers I had clutched about me. It was a very, very long night with temperatures that I felt sure were in the forties, though that could have been my highly-exaggerated thinking. We were at a high elevation, after all.

**Saturday, January 14:** Roosters started crowing at two in the morning but dawn was a long time coming. Then, as the rising sun finally warmed the air, I gratefully fell asleep. But only a few minutes later, women and children arrived to spread out their handicrafts on blankets spread around last night's dancing area. When my name was called

to join the others for breakfast, I painfully struggled up from a now-deep sleep, fought my way out of the tangle of covers and rolled off the shelf to limp out of the longhouse into the bright sun and calls of “*Shop-shopping*” from the canny merchants.

We all sleepily begged off until after breakfast so they shivered over their wares while we feasted on Sammy’s good cooking. Then, there was to be no escaping the inevitable. Unfortunately, we hadn’t been warned of the need to bring extra money beyond that which we’d need for our few expenses and tipping our mountain guides. In fact, we had left all of our valuables: watches, cameras, cell phones and money supply back in Chiang Mai in the Prince Hotel’s storage room so as not to exaggerate the gulf between standards of living. None of us had very many spare Thai Baht along and we certainly weren’t about to use up Sammy and Yung’s tips after the royal treatment they were giving us.

The villagers were focusing their attentions on me as the senior member of the group. At last, I couldn’t beg off from shop-shopping any longer and I walked over to their fourteen well-filled blankets. Not wanting to hurt any feelings, I foolishly treated the display like an arts and crafts show, walking around complementing each lady on the beauty of certain pieces. This is not a very good bargaining psychology, in case this ever happens to you. It was obvious that these were not precious individually handcrafted items either because many blankets displayed the same trinkets that we had seen in city bazaars and on street corners.

Soon, it became obvious that idle window-shopping was not enough for these ladies. They wanted to see the color of my money—now. I was dragging my feet for many reasons, number one being the fact that I simply hate to haggle. This is

a long-standing reality for me and I am a recognizable full-price sucker as a result. Secondly, I was not very much awake after my ordeal of the night.

So, I would hover over a trinket spread, select an item and ask the price. “*One hundred baht,*” the LiSu lady would say. Everything on the ground cost the same, \$2.50. It might not have been the stated price for my tricky team mates who had made themselves scarce while I was attracting all the attention, but that became my starting and ending point. My solution was more desperate than it was savvy. I simply bought their stuff, one from each blanket, until I ran out of local currency and that was that. Halfway around the circle I showed them my empty purse. Cleverly, I had saved aside the necessary tip and trip expense money in a hidden pouch in my day pack.

All of this resulted in some pretty disappointed ladies who thought that I had signed a contract by admiring something on their blanket. I bought some things I didn’t need but at least I wound up with some gifts that I might not have acquired in any other way. Sadly, the next two villages had some much finer jewelry but I was out of souvenir money.

By this time I was limping on my injured leg and in quite a bit of pain despite the pills that Lucky had administered. She suggested that I forego the four-hour trek to the Karen Village planned for that day and volunteered to hire motorbikes and drivers for the two of us. As group leader, she felt responsible to accompany me. Thank goodness I had saved back enough money to cover the \$6 per person extra cost. The longer hike was also to be much harder than the first one and I think Lucky was glad to get a chance to sit it out, as well. I sure was.

While the young ones carried their packs over the rocky forest trail, we sped along some incredible motocross jungle paths; up and down, across streams and along precipices; through areas not designed for wheeled vehicles. Our drivers were very skilled and negotiated the terrain expertly. As passengers holding onto our drivers' waists, our part was to watch the trail ahead and anticipate the body movement which would best suit the bike and then to relax and have a good time. Wheeeeeee! It was a rip-roaring good time and I was sorry when we came to the river and had to leave the boys and the bikes behind.

Nearing the river rendezvous point, we picked our way along a driftwood-strewn shore until we were opposite the elephant camp. They sent a big beast and driver over for us as soon as Lucky hailed them. What a job it was to clamber aboard this big working animal with a wooden bench on his back. We stood on a sandy ledge and the elephant's forehead was brought up against the riverbank so that we could step right onto his big skull and then walk up the neck to the fenced bench secured on his back.

I got on pretty easily but Lucky doesn't like elephants and she was too nervous; so they sent a raft over for her and my beautiful beast was led across the river to a high wooden platform where I performed the same operation in reverse. It really is the only way to get on and off, but later when we took a much longer ride to the other village, each member of the group uttered the same dismay that I had about walking on his neck bone and skull. Did we think we were wearing high heeled shoes?

Riding an elephant is a back-breaking proposition, especially if he is negotiating a riverbank in either direction, climbing in or climbing out, which ours did several times.

There is so much swaying that the metal bar at the back of the two-person bench threatens to snap your spine right in two. Just as when one rides a camel or a motorcycle, you must anticipate the need and throw your weight in the correct direction. Otherwise, you make the job a lot harder for the animal.

## **Karen Village**

Everybody had to adapt to everyone else's personal foibles: my bum knee, Lucky's fear of elephants, and our senior elephant's fear of the pigs which run free in the Karen Village. The elephant drivers let us off in front of the entry gate and we had to walk a little distance to reach the largest settlement among all of the hill tribes.

This is more like a tiny wooden town laid out along clay footpaths. No woven bamboo here, but sturdy two-story dark brown wooden homes. The Karen people are predominantly Christian but we still saw a few spirit markers here and there.

Because the day happened to be International Children's Day, a very important and thoroughly observed holiday all over Thailand, we had purchased gifts of sports equipment, pens, pencils and story books to give to each village. Here, we formally presented these things to the local school teacher and the tribal chief.

While supper was cooking, I wandered down by the river and stood in the middle of a swaying suspension bridge watching six happy naked little boys playing on the sandy beach below. They were shrieking with the best, most bubbling, laughter that I have ever heard coming out of a child's mouth. Everywhere, in both villages, we heard this

joyful laughter of the children, who are obviously well-loved and are growing up in a most happy way.

**Sunday, January 15:** Sleep on the wooden flooring of our Karen Village guest quarters was a bit warmer at a somewhat lower altitude, so I felt much better in the morning when we boarded bamboo rafts for the four-hour trip downriver to meet our pickup truck. Lucky instructed me to sit upon the tied-together logs so that I wouldn't re-injure my leg if we should hit a submerged rock. That meant that my rear end and sometimes my entire lower half, was in the cold water as we traversed the rapids. Everyone else stood up, bracing themselves on bamboo tripods to keep their balance on the bucking raft. I really wish I had taken the risk and stayed dry myself as we managed to avoid all boulders.

## **Ko Payam Island**

**Tuesday, January 24:** After several days more in Bangkok, I decided to continue on to the southern part of Thailand by bus. From Ranong, it was an easy motor launch ride to the island of Ko Payam, where I could relax before traveling further on south to the beaches of Phuket. I reserved a cute little cottage at the Silver Sands resort, which had been built since the devastating tsunami fourteen months earlier. That famous rogue wave had only been chest high on this island.

I couldn't see any obvious traces of destruction until the day that I took a lone barefoot walk along the sparsely-populated beach. Just for fun, I began playing a little game with myself pretending to be shipwrecked and getting my bearings for the first time. Poking about, I imagined that I was looking for a telltale path into the vegetation which

would indicate some sort of human occupancy, as well as scoping for any kind of useful object for my own survival. Too many episodes of “Lost,” perhaps; but also a clue as to how this solo traveler keeps herself entertained.

I saw a sandal about my size and then prodded around in the driftwood for any old shoe to fit the other foot. Still in character, I reckoned that footwear would come in handy if I were to be marooned here for very long. I saw another shoe; but it was a man’s and covered with barnacles. Here was a pink baby girl’s shoe and then a polka-dotted zori. Why so many shoes? And none of them matched? Boy’s shoes, toddler’s sandals, little girls’, men’s, women’s, shoes, shoes, shoes. Now that my eyes were suddenly trained, I spotted many rubber soles and uppers tangled in every piece of vegetation all along the beach, looking old and dried out; looking as if they had been in the water for a very long time before finally being washed ashore during some storm or other, throughout the year.

This was no few flip-flops fallen overboard. This was the work of the tsunami and these were traces of the people it affected. My play-acting was forgotten as I imagined each shoe’s owner. They could have survived, I reasoned, and simply lost their mere, floatable, possessions.

But then an earlier memory haunted me. In Auschwitz, I had recently gazed upon a great pile of shoes which had long survived their owners. Here too, was such.

During this same week, I heard some strange survival tales from a few of the Swedish visitors who told me that many of their countrymen have always come to Thailand during their bitterly cold winters. Sweden had also been deeply affected by this great tragedy and almost everyone

either knew someone who had been caught by that tsunami or they had been directly involved themselves.

A Swedish family on the bus told me of four scuba-diving friends who were in Phuket as a group, led by a diving champion. They were up early that morning and already way out in the water when the wave hit. Each one was slammed all the way across the island and wound up, still alive, many miles from the beach. All survived, having somehow avoided the obstacles that they might have bashed into: buildings, sharp pieces of corrugated roofing, tree trunks, automobiles, and such. Perhaps they were not as prone to panic when they were underwater, as non-divers must have been.

The couple in the cabin next to mine had an interesting story to tell, as well. They had scheduled a very early morning sightseeing expedition and went to collect their friends for this tour. The other wife didn't want to go and tried to talk them out of it but finally agreed to take the excursion. When they returned, hours later, my friends' hotel room had been swamped and their possessions were destroyed. The other couple had a room on an upper floor so their things were untouched, but all of them were very shaken up about the close call they had experienced. That other woman won't return to Phuket at all now.

## **Phuket**

**Monday, January 30:** The island of Phuket has many horseshoe beaches and the one on which I stayed, Kamala Beach, wasn't at the very epicenter of the wave damage area. However, other guests warned me not to try to discuss the tsunami with the lovely Thai family who owned the Coco Huts Resort. It was just too sad a subject for them



to blithely discuss with their many Western guests over the year since it had occurred. Nearby, on the path to the beach, were still a few destroyed buildings and a whole rack of police motorcycles, knocked sideways by the water and rusting in place but rebuilding has erased almost all traces. A handsome black marble memorial has been erected on the beach path to the main Kamala Beach Center.

My week in Phuket was one of gentle relaxation, enjoying the lovely sand and sea and letting the world go by. All too soon, my visa expired and I turned my attention toward the United States.

By mid-February, 2006, it was time to begin the long trek home. After eleven days in Hawaii, just barely ahead of the Spring Break crowd, I flew to the U.S. West Coast where I spent the entire month of March outrunning heavy rains and unseasonal cold. The April heat in Florida was very welcome as I finally completed my circling of the globe and returned, at last, to Clearwater, five weeks ahead of schedule and glad of it.

It was a great adventure to be out there, but home looked even better than ever. It has taken quite a while to bring together all of the journal notes and memories and put them into book form so that I might share the reality which I realize that I have, through this odyssey, become supremely qualified to demonstrate. That truth is that Old Age needn't be a deterrent to daily risk-taking in the great unknown.

My happiness comes from knowing that I can do this, and I plan to get out there again as soon as I have proved to myself that it's possible for me to write, publish and promote a book.

Life, at any age, is about pushing envelopes.

**April 26, 2006** – This journal entry was written three weeks after returning home:

“My retrospective overview of the mushpile of memory tells me that nothing hugely outstanding in the way of big adventure happened to me during my RTW journey. Why should I even write it up at all? I didn’t get kidnapped or killed at the Albanian border as I thought I might be. The tsunami hit my beaches in Thailand a year before I arrived. No one hurt me or even threatened to. In other words, I can claim no headlines.

I have the kind of good news to tell that doesn’t sell newspapers. My conclusion is that the world is a very safe place and its people are very nice indeed. So, if I tell myself that nothing happened to write about, then I’m acting like all big city editors who require only murder and mayhem for their pages. I shall just keep on typing up my notes in the hopes that somebody out there will be interested to know that life is not always so bad, even when one does risky things alone.”

## **A LOVE LETTER TO THE BOOMERS**

And so, my dear friends, these are a few of the stories about what happened to me out there on one of the world's many trails. Just like life, it had its ups and downs and its various frustrations, but, all in all, it was a great piece of work, if for no other reason than the fact that I survived without any serious problems. All the stories about the people and places I experienced have now been woven into the tapestry of this book and are easily accessible. In my own memory, at least, most unrecorded details, no matter how fetching they might once have seemed, eventually slide into the forgotten past. Storytelling is a way to prevent that.

What will you do with your newly dusted-off backpack? It waits for you to fill it with creativity and with whatever tools you design in order to carry yourself forward into a new life of retirement. There's no need for you to use it exactly the way that I did mine. But let it represent for you, at least, that freedom of the open road; the open mind; the open possibility. Refuse to let your old excuses hold you back. Find ways to explore all those unknowns for which you've never had the time, heretofore.

Believe me, when you start lining up all of the unexplored mysteries that you wish to tackle, your time will fill up fast and become very lively and productive, just in the business of getting yourself ready to launch. Retirement doesn't have to be slow and dull and full of lonesome canyons. It's only that, if you fail to venture out at all or if you fill your pack with so many supposed necessities and thus, bog yourself down with too much of your past life. Then, you'll never make it out the door.

Have faith in yourself and constantly invent new ways to prove this to your greatest skeptic: you. Next, you may have to tackle some other skeptics: your friends, your family, especially your kids, when they hear what you have in mind. Persevere. They'll come around. Usually, behind all arguments to the contrary lies the unspoken fact that they could never conceive of doing such a thing themselves.

Ennui and doubt are usually the Big Bad Wolves of the early stages of your decision to hoist a backpack, real or symbolic, for the first time in forty years, or ever.

Just pack up that old kit bag and start dancing to a new drummer. Take baby steps at first, or just circle the campfire in a native shuffle, improvising as you go along. At last, you'll find out what your new tapestry is going to look like? You'll be amazed.

## WHEN FEAR FALLS AWAY FOR YOU

Picture a day when you have, at last, climbed the mountain of your new Resolution. It's been a very long, hard climb and you've already edged your way around some pretty nasty ledges, which threatened to jettison your dreams and kill your hopes forever. But those dangers are behind you now.

Your pack feels heavy. Not impossible, but heavy. You are tired in a wonderful way. A climber . . . that's what you are now and you stand at the top of the world.

But, what is this ahead, blocking your plan of triumphant return? It's what you feared, all along: that mountains were made of broken paths interrupted places, innocent-looking sand and pebbles where such things shouldn't be. Suddenly, the chasm yawns, the void pulls at you and you begin to imagine your future in its cold arms. How can you possibly get yourself safely off this massif where only the brave dare go? Already, the backs of your knees feel cold as your resolve freezes in your blood. Legs with frozen joints don't work at these altitudes. What's it to be - surrender to oblivion, or the path just six steps ahead? It's your call.

Then, you remember. It was another time when you felt fear. When you learned just how much pain pure fear is capable of rendering. You saw through its masquerade and learned that nothing is quite as dangerous as fear itself.

So here you are again on the mountain slope, with clammy hands and frozen knees. Next in that progressive grip will be your heart and then, you may as well throw your own self down that four-thousand-foot drop because fear is just about to do it for you.

Oh no, he won't. He's been unmasked and can't trick you again. Suddenly, the sun is out, your knees feel fine, you forget the worthless ruminations on impending doom, and you set about planning the solution.

Step, step, step, step, step, step. That's all it takes and you are on your way again.

And boy, do you feel good. It wasn't you that fell this day. Fear is gone and he won't be back.

## **A Brief Summary of Trip Costs**

Around The World Airfare	\$3,000
Group Trips, Spa, Purchases	\$3,000
Average Monthly Expenses (\$2,000)	<u>\$24,000</u>
Approximate Total Cost	\$30,000

Hostel charges ranged from \$10 - \$30 per night. Hotels from \$30 and up.

## **Recommendations**

### **The Practical Nomad: How To Travel Around The World, By Edward Hasbrouck**

[www.practicalnomad.com](http://www.practicalnomad.com). This book will tell you everything and then some about preparing for any kind of independent travel.

**The Macabi skirt:** an indispensable piece of clothing for going on the road. Mine thrived and still looks like new. Lightweight, cool, quick-drying, it converts to pants or shorts in a jiffy. Mention my name, or this book, and get 10% off. [www.macabiskirt.com](http://www.macabiskirt.com).

**Boots'nAll.com** is a wonderful website devoted to around the world travel and all of its many facets. Here you will find sources for air tickets, small group travel, hostels, hotels, transportation and a meeting place for fellow travelers of all degrees and nationalities. I also have a separate blog running here too, listed under Lindajbrown, but named Hey Boomers. [w.bootsnall.com](http://w.bootsnall.com).

**Intrepid Travel** – is the company that ran the two trips that I took which are mentioned in this book. They offer various levels of challenge from basic to comfort for groups of around twelve people, as well as planning independent trips for individuals. [www.intrepidtravel.com](http://www.intrepidtravel.com).

You can easily meet all of your most cherished adventure travel dreams by using the above resources.

Though some people eschew the use of guidebooks, preferring to make their discoveries as they go, I would never leave home without an updated Lonely Planet book pertinent to my destination. There are many good guidebooks on the market and you might sample some to see which you are most comfortable with.

I'm keeping my eye on the new Kindle electronic book and hoping that such travel guidebooks will be available for downloading to them. That would solve the serious weight problem which they now present.

My advice is to take care of the absolute necessities but don't sweat the small stuff. Just get yourself out there and have fun.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Linda J. Brown graduated from the University of Florida with a degree in Journalism, but most of her professional qualifications are in the field of travel, having planned and led Citizen Diplomacy group trips to the Soviet Union in the early 1990's, just as that country was opening. Certified as an International Tour Manager by the International Guide Academy in Denver, Colorado, she prefers to travel alone to the more off-beat regions of the world. For many years a resident of Aspen, Colorado, Linda Brown now lives with her son in Clearwater, Florida.

Though she is a veteran of many exploratory solo excursions, the trip described in this book was her first around-the-world venture. In 2009, she plans to circle the Southern Hemisphere in the opposite direction, going from East to West. She will be seventy-one years old when she again hoists her backpack for more serious world traveling.

The blog site, *www.heyboomers.com*, chronicles her ongoing adventures, as well as offering a bookstore selling this title and other related works. Scenes described in this travel story are also posted in the photo gallery on that site.

You are encouraged to visit and to describe your own Boomer travel adventures, or hopes and dreams along that line. As youthful retirees cross the line into fulltime retirement, hopefully, *www.heyboomers.com* will become a center for exchanging comments, tips, discoveries, and new ideas on the subject of later-in-life travel.



