**Farewell Hippie Heaven**

(Rites of Way on the Overland route 'Hippie Trail' between Europe, Asia and Australasia)

By

Jack Parkinson ©

1st edition 2001, 2nd edition 2013

**From the first edition flap notes:**

*My air ticket was in my pocket. I gave the whole country a solemn mental warning as I left: 'This is not a divorce,' I told it. 'Not quite yet. It's just a trial separation. I'll be back – probably. But I'm telling you right now things are going to be different around here!'*

So says Jack Parkinson, as he leaves to take the wildest, most exotic, evocative and exciting journey any person could ever contemplate. Join him on the 'hippie trail' as, living on a tight budget and following his nose across several continents, he meets Life with a very big 'L'. Unspeakably grotty, tragic, and dangerous, moving, breathtakingly beautiful, odd, funny and utterly weird...

Travel with him through Central Australia, up through the steamy jungles of Asia and the icy heights of the world's greatest mountain chain. Pop into a few of the world's great cities on the way. Travel the lesser known paths by truck, bus, car, pony-and-trap, ox-cart, paddle-steamer, motor-bike, tri-shaw and of course, hiking boot.

On this journey across the world, you'll encounter a flower child who makes Don Juan look shy. You'll be introduced to the toilet from hell, meet wanna-be drug barons and genuine gurus. Join the motley crew on the road to all things and take a wander through the cities, temples, markets, brothels, opium dens, night-clubs and famous sights of three continents.

You won't regret it. This *is* 'The Trail'- and it's not just a journey – it's a *trip*!

***The exotic...***

*...We set out on our Elephant hunt before first light with the village still quiet. A few women were squatting on the ground, starting cooking fires beside their huts. Here and there a hurricane lamp was burning. I could see a few wraiths of mist down near the river and the red glow of the men’s cigarettes as we walked up the trail. The calls of forest birds were only just beginning to resonate in the still morning air as we climbed to the top of the first forested ridge...*

***The hilarious...***

*...Elvis invited us to dinner at his extended family home. By chance he mentioned that his family would be eating chicken and I asked him if this was going to be a feast held to mark some special occasion.*

*‘No’ he said simply, ‘It was just a very old and very sick chicken - and it died this morning!’*

***The dangerous...***

*...he quite suddenly unslung his machine-gun from his shoulder, and with a fluid and evidently well-practiced motion, he twirled it deftly in both hands and whacked the solid butt of it hard into my stomach.*

*Actually it was very hard and very solid indeed.*

*I went down instantly on the snow and ice and made a more or less immediate resolution not to antagonize him any further...*

**About this book:**

When this book was first published in Australia as *'Farewell Hippie Heaven’* in 2001, it received an excellent reception. In true Andy Warhol style, my 15 minutes of author's fame were upon me...

In Adelaide, South Australia, the *Advertiser* ran an illustrated weekend magazine feature and printed a long extract. In Sydney and Melbourne, the book also featured in illustrated double-page spreads in mass-circulation papers. Pretty soon, I began to receive complimentary press-clippings - and the occasional (and no doubt inevitable) panning review from towns and cities across the nation.

As the buzz grew, I made a number of guest appearances on talk-back radio and was interviewed on commercial radio in most Australian major cities. I even made an appearance on daytime television. I was somewhat astonished at the fuss being made and I began to equate this with success...

Soon, the book filtered through the distribution systems and began to sell in major book stores across Australia, not long after it appeared at (some!) Wal-Mart stores in the US, and then in the UK at WH Smith. Amazon and other major online retailers joined the fray and some time later, my book was reviewed at [www.bookcrossing.com](http://www.bookcrossing.com/) At each of these steps a small flurry of sales ensued.

But in spite of all that attention, the book did not become a best seller, or even widely known. The fact is, it is very difficult for any author to obtain the kind of 'celebrity profile' that puts his/her work on prominent display at the front of the shop for more than a few days at best. And maybe the title put some people off. Who knows?

But what *is* sure is that the biggest danger facing *any* author is always obscurity. Despite all the initial attention, even I had trouble finding my book at local stores once the initial (and all too-short) hoo-hah died down...

But, this book was meant to be read. It's fun – and (at the risk of sounding overly self-congratulatory) - it’s funny! Those who *have* read it generally do recommend it.

After several years of selling slowly and predominantly by word-of-mouth recommendation, the first edition printing is now an officially 'hard-to-get' item at on-line retailers.

This second edition is for fun. I hope you read it, enjoy it and spread the word. This edition was specifically produced to be cheap and affordable. I long since gave up any hope of ever making serious money from it. Enjoy!

I hope *The Trail* helps to nurture the easy-going, tolerant, live-for-fun 'trail-person' that hides within us all - if it does; I will count that as success. Let the journey continue!

*Jack Parkinson.*

*The Barossa Valley, South Australia 2001*

*Suzhou, People's Republic of China, 2012*

**To my children, Morgan, Emily, Alissa and Leila...**

This book is a partial response to the next generation. If they should ever say:

*'See that old bloke with the white hair, staring out of the window? I wonder if he ever did anything interesting...'*

I'll be able to throw the book at them!

**Farewell Hippie Heaven**

**Jack Parkinson**



*A Tibetan village in the border region of Northern Nepal at around 3,500 meters. (Photo JP)*

**Author's note for the 2nd edition**

*This is a light-hearted celebration of travel and exploration and an account of a personal odyssey. It is a long story, but not the whole story. Some of the byways and detours have been skimmed, glossed over, or even bypassed altogether to leave a volume it is still possible to lift without assistance.*

*Even with those omissions, the narrative quite literally covers a lot of ground. It takes us from England to the 'Outback' of Australia and then meanders back to Europe by the overland route known to recent generations at least - as the 'Hippie Trail' - through Indonesia, South-East Asia, India and via a score of countries back to Europe.*

*It was a long trip. As the journey continued, the seasons came and went and hostilities broke out here and there as I meandered from east to west. Observant readers will notice from the historical references that this is not a very recent story. Although I was born just too late to be a real hippie, this tale definitely has something of the 60's in it – but the events related here occurred in the late 1970's or later.*

*One last point; while the essence of each anecdote in this book is true, some names, locations and inconsequential detail have been changed here and there to protect some identities and to maintain continuity. Everything else - from the gurus and the guns to the bedbugs and the bordellos - is real...*

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**Farewell Hippie Heaven**

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**Preface: A home on the trail**

Can a routine trip ever become a journey of exotic adventure? At the local crossroads a stone's throw away from home, my choices appear mundane: this way to the shopping center, that way to the sports ground. Yet, past the shopping center is a highway running across flat river-land and on through the mountains. Beyond the sports ground is a tangle of back roads – and eventually, the ocean road - snaking along the coastline to unexplored places. If I go past the shopping center I will also pass, ultimately, through cities and national parks, mangrove swamps, and mountain valleys filled with rain forest.

I know that the road outside my home is exotic. Each intersection offers new possibilities. The TRAIL starts from anywhere...

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I have held hold both British and Australian passports for a long time. But years after acquiring my second identity, I still occasionally experience a brief hesitation, even a temporary dislocation, when asked where I am from. I can own up to a birthplace in Manchester in the industrial north of England and a set of childhood memories of the adjacent resort towns of Brighton and Hove on the Sussex coast in the south, but all that was *then*. These days, I am a naturalized Australian and have been for years.

I wrote the first edition of this book mostly in the dry desert country around Alice Springs in Australia's Northern Territory. I edited it in the lush vineyard country of South Australia's Barossa Valley, and I am editing this second edition in the steamy, mountain-ringed and bustling metropolis of Fuzhou in the south-eastern tropical regions of the People's Republic of China.

And of course, there were the creative moments in the south of France and the 'Top End' of Australia too – and lots of other times and other places in between. I have known a good many of these places as 'home', so it is hardly surprising that I pause to consider when asked where my 'home town' actually is.

Although it means that defining 'home' is occasionally a conundrum, I am very glad that having Australian citizenship does not mean losing any rights previously held as a British passport holder. For now, the two coexist quite happily, as these arrangements should between civilized nations. And traveling the overland route across the world with two legal passports is a definite bonus; it provides a security blanket of sorts in the event one document is lost or stolen. Dual nationality also gives me the ability, just occasionally, to produce the identity that best fits the situation.

I have learned the hard way that nationality can determine the treatment you receive at a border crossing. Hapless overlanders are occasionally roundly abused for the perceived sins of their government and (much more rarely) feted if relations are especially friendly. Border officials are only human. Any kind of retaliatory action may be worse if your home team has just had a controversial sporting win over the country you are trying to enter. Fortunately these little acts of retribution usually amount to nothing more than an irritation or inconvenience. But that second passport is a comfort.

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As for my admitting to being a hippie, I do feel a certain reluctance to having potentially pejorative labels applied – those on the overland trail generally do. But the overland trail has a lure that cannot be denied and the overland trail *is* the hippie trail for many So, if the cap fits... Well, there's nothing at all wrong with a little bit of peace and love – and who gives a damn anyway..?

The truth is that being - or not being - a hippie is of minor importance. What *is* really important is that inside most sober business suits lurks at least the under-nourished germ of a potential trail person – a soul-searching, peace-loving, easy-living, devil-may-care, free spirit.

You may just need to feed it a little.

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**Introduction: The soul-searchers of Global Highway One...**

## The trail and its people, backpacker life, and the whereabouts and nature of heaven – with some hints on how to get there....

The ‘Hippie Trail,’ the ‘Overlanders Route’ - these are just two of its many names. But, you would have a hard time finding it on any map. It is not a strictly defined way and certainly not the best way to get to anywhere fast, but it is a *trip*. The wildest, most exotic, evocative and exciting journey any person could ever contemplate. Far from being simply a method of getting from one point to another, it is a whole planet, *the* whole planet, of new experience.

The 'hippie' trail is often mentioned in dismissive tones as merely a byway for a few dissolute youth. But label it any way you like: the trail is right up there at the head of the big league. A backpacker can take this overland route all the way around the world. It is Global Highway One, the road to everywhere.

For me, the trail was always an irresistible magnetic force. It is a phenomenon, a tangle of legend and reality, archetype and stereotype. For generations of the mobile and restless young from the 1960s onwards, it was the Yellow Brick Road. It still is for some. It is also the Journey to the East (with shades of Herman Hesse), it is the Grand Tour, and the Trip of a Lifetime. For a few, it is more a life-mission or spiritual quest than anything as mundane as a 'vacation.' For many it is escape - pure and simple.

Doing it - actually traveling the trail, is not the stuff of idle and unattainable daydreams. This is a path readily and almost instantly accessible for anyone with the will, some would say the vision, to take it. It can be ultimate freedom and dream fulfillment. Though some never notice the trail or even dream this road exists it is always there. And all anyone ever needs to join the motley crowd on this road to all things is a sleeping bag, a backpack, a change of clothes and the right attitude.

You can take to the trail on a shoestring budget and many do. Monetary considerations are generally secondary for trail people anyway, their focus is on the experience itself and their needs tend to be simple. Mostly, you can get by with a little help from your friends, or, the trail itself might provide…

Sooner or later, your journeying will almost certainly lead you to a place where a paltry fund of dollars, marks, or pounds will have unprecedented buying power. This usually unanticipated largesse is a happy by-product of the trail economy; a simple change of location can lead to a financial bonus in the form of a lower cost of living or a better exchange rate.

Financial considerations may be low priority, but there can be no ultimate escape from them. The possibility of reaping a financial dividend by simply moving on can be a major plus. A favorable exchange rate can boost a scanty travel fund from somewhere way below the poverty line to a local king's ransom. The trail-savvy quickly learn where to go to get the bargains.

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Anyone with a passport, the urge to travel and a reasonable level of fitness can bid farewell to the dull ordinariness of their old neighborhood and take to the trail. Whatever the traveler's personal fantasy might be, regardless of how outlandish the fancy, there is a very good chance of finding something to satisfy the wants, needs, desires or cravings of *any* individual on some byway of the overland route. The awesome potential for wish-fulfillment on the trail is the stuff of myth and legend.

To take just a random handful of possibilities from the myriad: perhaps *your* personal dream is to abandon the material and concentrate all energies on the inner-self. Somewhere on the trail is the soul-guide you seek. Somewhere, a place you can sit cross-legged at the feet of an eastern guru, converse with a genuine Hindu or Buddhist mystic, even join the entourage of a holy man of the most impeccably pious bona-fides.

On the trail - and possibly not that far away from right here - you can meditate on the nature and meaning of life and of the universe. There are no limits, other than those imposed by lack of imagination. Even soul searching could be done in grand style. Why meditate in drab suburbia when you can take yourself off to the sanctuary of a thousand-year old mountaintop monastery, or or linger for while beneath the very tree where the Buddha attained enlightenment?

But issues of spirituality and of karma are simply one aspect of the multi-faceted whole. Not everyone seeks revelation. Why not adopt someone else's credo to give life focus and give yourself wholly to some idealistic cause? Why not mix it with revolutionaries and experience the raw edge of the struggle for the better life?

Or try being a romantic exile in a distant paradise; assume the life-style and attitudes of a simple villager, or a hedonistic artist. Spend your days fishing the coral reefs off pristine shores or exploring the by-ways of exotic cities. And if you want push your endurance to the limit, climb the flanks, the peaks, if you dare, of some of the highest mountains in the world.

You can breathe the thin, crisp air of the Annapurna Sanctuary high in the Himalayan chain, trek through the deserts, rainforests and snowfields of some of the remotest back-blocks in the world. You may live dangerously if this is your ultimate thrill. You can abandon constraints and inhibitions. On the trail you are a free agent and no one will reproach you for laying your life on the line in some madly impulsive venture. Gambling with your future and being totally and outrageously selfish in the pursuit of a dream - that is something expected...

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The trail is very satisfyingly ambiguous for those with an anarchic streak. 'Right,’ ‘wrong,’ and ‘legal’ all became words with shifting definitions. In many places you can relish previously impossible or forbidden experiences quite openly. Should you wish, you can spend your days hallucinating in an opium den or getting blasted in a hash house.

Or, shunning synthetic highs, you can indulge a penchant for the aesthetic. Perhaps spend weeks or months marveling at the great artworks, architecture, and visual and scenic delights of the planet. You can canoe, cycle, camel-trek, bird-watch, hunt, hitchhike, or just meander. Or why not become an authority on some esoteric topic - master the sitar or didgeridoo? Possibly you might indulge yourself in a previously unimaginable and fantastically opulent smorgasbord of erotic and exotic sexual potential. Or, you could simply laze quietly and read a good book on a pretty beach.

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The trail is the place where all this happens and more. It is the road to mythic Xanadu and legendary Kathmandu and countless other places that only the trailblazers know. And every fabulous name beckons and resonates with the thrill and adventure of travel.

The trail isthe essence of fantasy fulfillment for western urbanites whisking them from the humdrum toil of satellite towns, dormitory suburbs and tedious commuting to within earshot of a muezzin call to prayer in the clear crystal dawn of a desert sky. The trail is the means to grasp a wispy insubstantial dream, a distant vision of snow-capped heights, pounding surf on a tropical beach, a shimmering heat-haze over a distant metropolis. The trail makes concrete reality of a minds-eye vision.

No special qualifications are required for acceptance on this route. The trail offers a complete change, even transfiguration, perhaps a new, better, more experienced, worldly and interesting you. Clerks, waiters, academics, engineers, students, cleaners, and hairdressers are all reborn, wide-eyed in fabled destinations, metamorphosed from the mundane to the exotic.

This is the road to Marrakesh and Mandalay, to Istanbul, Kabul and Bangkok, to the beaches of Sri Lanka and Bali. It takes you to Quito in the Andes and Everest in the Himalayas, to the Greek Islands, the Pyramids, and the Great Barrier Reef. It allows access to desolation and plenty - to places of lonely solitude or teeming multitudes, to deserts, jungles, mountains and endless plains.

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Sometimes, the overland trail is not even a road. It is simply an approximate route to negotiate by whatever means are available: A narrow-gage steam railway, clanking scenically past rice-paddies or rumbling volcanoes. A tram in a city shrouded in smog, a deck passage on a rusty old coastal steamer.

The trail may be a rickety wooden bus with rifle-carrying passengers, or an oxcart rumbling through a muddy no-man’s land between fortified border posts. It may be a trishaw or a battered taxi, a horse and buggy, or an ancient riverboat. The trail is a set of vivid personal memories; a garishly decorated bus with wooden seats and a religious shrine to safeguard driver and passengers (complete with stick of burning incense) built into the dashboard; a crippled and emaciated cow eating cardboard at a busy city road junction; a banquet served under palm trees on a golden beach by smiling locals…

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In parts of Europe as well as America and Australia, you can hitchhike on the trail, though personal safety can be an issue. Theft, disease and accident, and a whole gamut of tense and dangerous situations, are possible, and sometimes even likely encounters. Travelers must accept these unpleasant events as normal hazards

As an alternative to hitchhiking you might buy a cheap and battered old van with a friend or two, at a pinch, you could sleep on an old mattress placed in the back. Down at its most basic, the trail is often simply a rough and narrow pathway on some remote ridge line, a path only navigable by means of a stout pair of hiking boots.

For all its diversity of aspect, the hippie trail is first and foremost a true overlander's route, a convoluted and overlapping series of overland connections between Europe, Asia, Africa and Australia, with branches in both Americas. The trail doesn't stop at the edge of any continent. For those with the time, inclination and cash resources, crossing the expanse of the Atlantic and island-hopping the Pacific becomes a feasible proposition. With this accomplished, the only thing needed to complete the great circle is enough determination to force a passage through often difficult territory. The trail then effectively encircles the entire globe with a series of more or less well-defined pathways familiar to generations of backpackers.

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As for the trail people, who are they? Certainly not all of us are hippies, and we are definitely not all cast from the same mold. Some of us are wayfarers, yes, even beggars and deadbeats occasionally. You'll also find genuine pilgrims, hustlers, flower-children, questing intellectuals, runaways, several varieties of punk and plain and simple travelers. Trail people are free spirits. We may be seeking new thrills, strange sights, enlightenment, true love or cheap drugs. We are compulsive voyagers, high-school dropouts, and vaguely idealistic wanderers. Among us are hedonists, ascetics, freaks and acidheads, musicians, dissidents, mendicants, followers of Zen and Tao, and even, sometimes, just idle holidaymakers...

Trail denizens are as diverse as the places they visit. However a couple of generalizations can be ventured: overlanders are almost all quite young, and share a universal dislike for labels of any kind, and the label they reject above all others is that of 'tourist'.

Hippies and backpackers travel lightly by whatever cheap local transport is available. Many despise capitalism, but may sometimes trade nevertheless; picking up small items that are inexpensive in one place to sell them later for a small profit in another. When pockets are empty, casual and unskilled jobs are taken where this is possible. People on the trail live serendipitously, always with an eye to the lucky chance, the favorable coincidence, the fortuitous turn of events that will improve their lot.

On the trail, happiness is in the simple things: friendly people, an exquisite view, a cut-price rail ticket, a hot shower, a real toilet with the luxury of paper. It is not that we generally mind a little honest dirt and squalor; on the contrary, the simple lives and uncomplicated pleasures of the locals are often envied, though the risk in this is evident. Our ostentatious tolerance and readiness to accept: might actually look rather naive and patronising.

In emulating the lifestyles we saw, we often succeeded only in baffling the locals with our strange behavior. Frequently we learnt the hard way that the simple life we admired so much might be only hunger, pain and deprivation for those forced to actually live it. And what a sorry lesson that was: the realisation that the honest, down-to-earth people that hippies identified with and nurtured aspirations to be more like, may themselves aspire to be more like the hippies and back packers, whom *they* often regarded as rich beyond the dreams of avarice...

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Mostly, the people on the trail are philosophical about the setbacks encountered, accepting the inevitability of lengthy delays and uncomfortable beds that sometimes have bugs. We are stoic about unreliable transport and stomach upsets, boiling or chlorinating all drinking water for a time, or surviving on hot tea or bottled soft drinks. It is cool to live in mud huts for a season and even the worst slums can have their good points.

Those on the trail happily take the risk of being eaten alive by ferocious mosquitoes and the inconvenience of having no electricity or sewage. This is just a temporary state of affairs anyway; the discomforts are all authentic events, real back-to-nature experiences to be appreciated. Even when an episode becomes a trial to be endured with whatever resources can be mustered, it still has value. We believe strongly in obtaining our knowledge from first-hand encounter. We relish each new experience, good and bad. There is no substitute for being there and doing it.

People on the trail always have a flexible timetable and are mobile in the extreme. We'd travel a thousand kilometers, or even miles, on an insubstantial rumor, or go to extraordinary lengths to check out a particular beach or to attend a party. We'd cross an entire continent to spend a few hours admiring a beautiful view once heard described in glowing terms by another traveler who was probably completely stoned at the time anyway.

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Global travelers have no discernibly similar tastes in dress, although as trail novices we might sport jeans, or shorts and t-shirts – in fact whatever is a usual choice for casual wear at home. Then chameleon-like, we take on the local colour, sheepskin jackets in Afghanistan, saris and dhotis in India, sarongs and batik shirts in Indonesia, Tibetan embroidered fabrics and heavy copper and gemstone jewellery in Nepal. No article of clothing is too outlandish, no fabric too lurid and no style too passé, except perhaps the despised collar and tie uniform of the wage-slave. Where the climate is warm enough and the local authorities’ liberal enough, we go naked.

Hippies and backpackers love: beaches, good vibes, ancient ruins, the simple life, parties, traditional cultures, people with no hang-ups, hash and grass, down-trodden societies, and underdogs generally, local arts and handicrafts, making a real connection with someone, alternative lifestyles of all kinds, sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll, comfortable beds and favorable exchange rates.

Hippies and backpackers hate: crass commercialism, bum deals from officialdom, nine-to-five work culture, package tours, most symbols of authority and regulation, any person classed as 'heavy', being ripped off like a tourist, and any devaluation of the dollar or strengthening of the local currency.

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Trail people think of themselves as individualists, and prize the unique qualities that define the person well above the collective qualities defining the group. But the commonalities of a loosely affiliated tribal grouping are still there, and despite our individualist pretensions, we have a culture, tradition and a set of clannish affinities that are all our own. Trail people know each other and relate to each other in an idiom that is familiar to each one of us.

A traveler on the trail can join or leave it, and the whole loose social grouping, at any point. There are lifestyle choices to make as well. Be a social animal or a loner? The choice is yours. And time is most definitely *not* of the essence; anyone can linger as long as desired at any favoured crossroads. No two journeys need ever be the same: not even those starting and finishing at the same places.

If a traveler joins the trail from a starting point in the US, it's common practice to fly first to one of the major European trail crossroads: London, Amsterdam or Paris. From these starting points you can take the hippie trail from the European end to an Asian destination such as Goa or Kathmandu. Alternatively, the same traveler setting out from the United States can choose another well-trodden path on the same trail that leads to all the same major crossroads but travels the opposite way around the world.

This second route takes the traveler down from the US into Central America into South America and on through Columbia and Brazil. Here the Inca portion of the trail carries the nomad through to legendary Machu Picchu and the high towns on the Andean mountain plateaux: places where sturdy bowler-hatted women walk on cobbled streets above the clouds. The trail then snakes through jungle and mountain pass to grassy plains across Peru, Bolivia and Argentina before gradually petering out in lower South America. The traveler may then take a ship, or island-hop by yacht or plane across the Pacific to Australia.

Australia has its own major trail crossroads and destinations. The Barrier Reef, the Opera House, Surfers Paradise, Kakadu National Park, the Outback in general and Uluru (Ayers Rock) in particular, are the better known icons. A needy vagrant on the trail can also find work in Australia, perhaps fruit-picking or some form of manual labour, but an income nevertheless. From Australia, the trail leads onwards to Papua New Guinea, or via Bali to Java and Sumatra, and onwards to Singapore.

From Singapore the route snakes north through Malaysia to Thailand and Burma. War-zones permitting, it continues into the drugs and rock music sub-cultures that are a magnet to overlanders and a surprising underlay to the traditional lifestyles and mainstream cultures of battle-scarred Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

From all directions except north, the trail converges on the great hippie melting pot of Kathmandu in Nepal, a place where a large population of travelers is always found. Turning south from there, it disperses through a thousand thoroughfares into the vastness of India, only converging again at favoured haunts, Goa, Agra, New Delhi and Darjeeling. Much further south, the trail wanders through the Sri Lankan coastal resorts and on to the highland fastnesses of Kandy and Adam's Peak.

From the Indian sub-continent, the trail funnels through the Khyber Pass to Kabul in Afghanistan, then onwards through Iran to Istanbul in Turkey. Istanbul straddles the junction of Europe and Asia and here, where east meets west and almost anything goes - is another great confluence of cultures ancient and modern. Istanbul is a favoured haunt and meeting place of the trail-worn of many nations: those who are seeking to rest up, get stoned or go shopping before the next leg of the trip.

From Istanbul heading westwards, the trail splits yet again, the southerly arm meandering south to the kibbutzim and the biblical sites of Israel. Then, local politics permitting and sometimes via intermediate stopovers such as Cyprus, it continues into Egypt. From here the route spills and spreads into the ancient ruins and crowded souks of North Africa and especially into Morocco - and another hippie heaven and celebrated crossroads on the trail - Marrakesh. Daring individuals can strike southwards from here, picking a way through a score of famine and strife-torn nations to arrive eventually in South Africa for the sun, sand and surf.

Back in Istanbul, the northerly arm of the westbound trail passes from Turkey through the bottleneck of Greece and empties itself in stages into the heartlands of Europe. From there, diverging in a multitude of directions, the trail branches away into (former) Yugoslavia, Austria, Switzerland and Italy and winds through the high alpine country into France, Spain and Germany. There some travelers turn northwards into Scandinavia and destinations as high as the Arctic Circle; others cross the Channel to Britain. Many make for the liberal hippie utopia that is the only real European equivalent of Kathmandu – the city of Amsterdam. There in the vast plaza in front of the railway station, travelers from all corners of the world can be found at any time of the day or night chatting, smoking, dancing and singing.

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The trail has its forbidden places too. The no-go zones and temporarily shut off sections. These zones are not necessarily sacrosanct though. In some cases the very label 'forbidden' is simply a provocation and a dare to a determined backpacker or hippie whose creed it is to go anywhere and try anything.

It's also true that governments often don't care about hippies and backpackers entering their uneasy border areas, their strife-torn provinces and other danger zones, providing the hippies understand that they might get shot at. In Europe the traditionally Maoist enclave of Albania is generally out of bounds, as have been some of the former Soviet client states. In the Middle East, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and some of the gulf states are inaccessible or at least troublesome to enter. In Asia it is Tibet, Bhutan, Assam and Sikkim that are usually off-limits. Kashmir is militant and problematical at times but is famed for the beauty of its mountains and lakes landscapes and the cheapness of its houseboat living. Russia and China have in the past both been difficult, and sometimes impossible, to wander freely.

In South East Asia, travel is restricted by the local pockets of lawlessness. Burma is possible, but travelers must fly in and out and internal travel is severely restricted. There are hazards in the bandit countries of the drug lords of the Golden Triangle and the fiefdoms of militant groups that come and go in the region such as the Pathet Lao and Khmer Rouge. Yet wars and natural disasters notwithstanding, the trail always provides a way through, or around, for a determined hippie.

In fact, nothing much disrupts the the steady flow of traffic on the trail - except for really bad weather...

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**1. From snowy places to baking spaces...**

## England, Alice Springs, Uluru, an exploding petrol tank, Docker River, drink 'n' drive, the Gunbarrel Highway to Laverton, Indian Pacific to Perth

It was the coldest winter in England in twenty years, or thirty years, or two generations. The actual time span varied, depending on which authority you accepted. I would have accepted any exaggeration.

It was *cold*.

The cars parked roadside outside my poorly heated terrace were uniform gray hummocks under a blanket of dirty snow – and this was the south coast of England! Allegedly a little warmer than the frozen north, but still, getting to work meant freezing spadework in the late dawn to free the car. Then, there was an obligatory wait for the town council snowplough to clear a path before the street could go to work. Sometimes the snowplough threw up a bow-wave of semi-frozen sludge that threatened to re-bury my car. It nearly always necessitated more digging before it was possible to edge onto a treacherously slick surface for the slow commute to work. It was a horribly uncomfortable start to each working day.

During the second week of this big freeze my car heater gave up the fight, leaving the interior temperature hovering permanently in the sub-zero regions between an uncomfortable -1C and a deathly cold -10C. The vinyl seat coverings went brittle and cracked and splintered when sat on. One morning, I made the mistake of defrosting my windscreen with lukewarm water. It cracked. A few days later, wielding my shovel in the freezing semi-darkness with what pitiable dregs of energy and enthusiasm I could muster, I dug out my neighbor’s car by mistake, an error made much to his keenly expressed delight and much to my mortification.

My indelible recollection is of acute disappointment and dull resignation; of standing frozen, with a thin trickle of melting snow creeping down my spine, while attempting to come to grips with the necessity of regenerating all that energy again.

Driving to work on icy roads under leaden, snow-gray skies, England felt uncomfortable, small and constricted. It was depressing. I itched to get away, but had no desire to journey through a deep-frozen Europe. I caught myself harking back in memory to Alice Springs in Central Australia; one of the sunniest, warmest and friendliest places I ever visited - even though briefly. ‘The Alice,’ as the locals call it, has no snow, and no long winter nights. There is no darkness at 4pm, just warmth, sunshine, blue skies, and a majestically rugged landscape of wide-open spaces and incredibly clean air. I would be warm, and the overland journey I was contemplating would begin in the tropics instead of icy Europe.

Two weeks later, the snow in the streets had diminished to just a few unsightly, exhaust-blackened mounds. The weather forecasters were holding out seductive visions of spring. For me, it was too little and too late. I would not be around when the early flowers pushed their way through the frosty soil. England had chilled me to the bone and deprived me of sunlight for long enough. My air-ticket was in my pocket. I gave the whole country a solemn mental warning as I left: ‘This is not a divorce,’ I told it, ‘Not quite yet. It's just a trial separation. I’ll be back - probably. But I’m telling you right now - things *are* going to be different around here!’

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There is a curious optical illusion a visitor might notice when arriving in Central Australia by air. The scrubby vegetation, a prominent ground level feature that softens rock and sand with a tinge of green - ‘the bush’ - is foreshortened and diminished to insignificance when viewed from above. What you see from an elevation of several thousand feet is largely desert, plain and simple; this is especially true after a long dry spell. The sandy red oceans are interspersed with craggy outcrops of sandstone and quartz, and the gibber plains are a rock-strewn lunar landscape. The occasional patches of scrappy vegetation are mostly relegated to insignificance, like odd patches of moss on a rock-face shaded from the sun.

The whole panorama is so huge, endless and desiccated, that it comes as a surprise that settlements exist here at all. It looks untouched for the most part. And for the most part, it is. For those who equate ‘Texas’ with ‘big,' the Northern Territory is a shock; it is several times the size of the US State many regard as the benchmark for immensity anywhere.

Minuscule England would sit unnoticed in a corner in the Northern Territory. Endless deserted expanses stretch away beyond every horizon from any starting point you choose. Imagine a pastoral property with several airstrips depending on which part of it you want to visit: that is the Northern Territory. Even the trucks are big: land-leviathans, fully fifty yards long, with three massive articulated bogeys hitched behind a hugely powerful prime-mover. Rigs with sixty-four wheels are common, rigs with no less than ninety-four wheels are not unknown.

The Northern Territory is big.

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Just thirty seconds on the ground at Alice Springs airport was enough to banish any residual English chill from my bones. Another two minutes sufficed to raise a cheerful sweat. The terminal was scruffy and ramshackle, but surprisingly busy with a steady bustle of people leaving and arriving. ‘The Alice’ is a town that relies heavily on its air-links and counters its remoteness by bringing in the fundamental essentials of the good life on a daily basis. These primary requisites include mail, newspapers, fresh seafood, and Japanese tourists.

Low and squat on the tarmac by the terminal in Alice Springs was a giant, drab, Starlifter aircraft with US military markings. It was huge, bigger than a jumbo, tail-plane almost as high as the airport control tower and a flight crew sporting jaunty NASA caps. The nosecone swung aside to reveal a steel tunnel big enough to swallow a fully loaded truck. The Starlifter was delivering supplies direct from the US to the Joint Defense Space Research Facility at Pine Gap near Alice Springs, known locally as the ‘Space Base,’ and the focus of occasional angst by supporters of ‘Armageddon’ catastrophe theory.

Armageddon did not trouble me. In fact, the whole scene at the airport was an unexpectedly agreeable cosmopolitan hustle, I found myself pleased just to be a part of it and half a world away from English winter.

Sitting on the floor near the street exit of the terminal was a grizzled old Aboriginal man. His narrow back was propped against the wall, a pair of skinny wasted legs with bare and callused feet stuck straight out in front. He appeared oblivious to the crush around him. This old man was the very first full-blood Aboriginal I had ever seen at really close range. Not wanting to stare impolitely, I edged a little closer anyway to take a look. After a moment or two, his eye caught mine through the crowd and he beckoned me over with a languid wave of a wiry arm. As I approached, he gestured me in even closer, into the fetid zone of an indescribably potent body odor. It was like no other rankness ever experienced. I noticed at this range that his rancid and filthy clothing was plastered to a bony and very grubby body, and his rheumy eyes were barely focused. His message when he spoke it, was short, to the point, and delivered without perceptible emotion in a low monotone.

‘You’re a white prick,’ he announced with finality.

Momentarily taken aback and slightly soured by this frank assessment, I left without comment to collect luggage and find transport into town. Thirty minutes later, insults forgotten, I was at the door of an old friend’s place. I glanced around. A sprinkler made pretty rainbow patterns above the expansive lawns. The swimming pool made inviting slapping and gurgling noises and reflected the endless blue of the sky. I rattled the mosquito screens. The first sound I heard was ‘Why you old bastard!’ The second sound was the pop of a champagne cork. This is the life, I thought, thinking of English weather left behind, I might even go for a swim in a little while...

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Alice Springs is a last frontier. If nothing else, the town has a high profile in the select pantheon of romantic and mythological places, and a fame out of all proportion to its size and importance that brings thousands of backpackers every year.

‘The Alice’ has the glamor of extreme remoteness and of being a semi-mythical town even for Australians. It is ‘Woop-Woop,’ and ‘the Red center,' the ‘Back of Beyond,’ and the ‘Dead Heart.’ It is ‘Outback’ personified, its real nature as much a distant mystery to most Australians as it is to the visitors from Europe, Asia, or the Americas. The mythology of the place is that of a people engaged in a continuing fight to etch their rights to occupancy in an inimical desert landscape.

Most new arrivals are surprised by the picturesque location. They expect a ground level continuation of the flat monotony they have just flown over for hours, or driven through for days. What they get instead is the broad dramatic sweep of the rugged MacDonnell Ranges, ancient stubs of a once-towering chain of peaks that form a craggy mountain backdrop to the town. The ranges dominate the town landscape with rocky echoes that rise and fade into purple distance. Beneath the ranges and close by Mount Gillen, the small low-lying town of Alice Springs nestles on the sandy floodplain of the normally dry Todd River. It is a visually satisfying three-dimensional landscape, an impression of homeliness set against an exotic suggestion of arid desolation.

You can see the desert landscape from practically every street corner in Alice Springs. Refocus the eye from a foreground of shop fronts and traffic lights and spectacular undulating vistas of crags, rocky slopes, and distant peaks are revealed. Despite this, many see only a tiny community wilting in heat and isolation. As always, the real place is in the mind of the onlooker. The reality is a modern town sitting at the outer edge of all things civilised, safe and domesticated. Beyond is country at best uncertain, a place where the expected amenities of urban life can no longer be taken for granted.

Alice Springs is an Aboriginal dreamtime landscape. ‘Dreamtime’ in Aboriginal tradition, being the legendary pre-history when the world was created and clan attachments formed. The dreamtime landscape was flat around Alice Springs until the giant Yeperenye caterpillar raised the eastern MacDonnell Ranges and the dingo fought their epic battle to create the western ranges.

Traditional Aboriginal communities ring Alice Springs, with numerous sacred sites used for arcane ritual since time immemorial. And all this cheek-by-jowl with hotels, casino gaming, fast food, nightclubs and the trappings of city and suburbia. It is not surprising racial tension occasionally surfaces here into outright hostility. Even so, race bewilderment is far more common in these parts than race hatred.

The instilled social values and the life experiences of black and white citizens in the Northern Territory are so diametrically opposed, it is a wonder and a credit to the tolerance of both communities that the two intermesh successfully to the extent that they usually do. The ethos and agendas appear too dissimilar to accommodate a common goal. Local politicians posture and pontificate, but the latest buzzwords for friendship and mutuality encompass no serious planned agenda for Aboriginal progress.

A short shelf life is the traditional fate of the quick fix for the problems of the Aboriginal communities, in most cases deservedly. Governments of all flavors have a long and ingloriously steadfast history of appeasing the electorate rather than grappling with the issues when it comes to dealing with indigenous people.

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Just south of Alice Springs, an inexplicable incident underlined the gulf between Aboriginal and European tradition soon after my first arrival in the town.

Driving with friends northwards towards the town with the outside temperature hovering around a scorching 41C, we came across a slightly built young Aboriginal man collapsed at the roadside. Investigating, we found his left hand half-severed from the arm near the wrist, and more blood than I would have thought possible soaking into the red dust. The area was already covered in buzzing insects and there was no one around to help.

Later it was suggested the injury was the result of a heavy, blunt object, perhaps the sharp edge of a rock, being hammered or otherwise forced into the man's arm. The wound was certainly torn into the flesh rather than cut. It was ragged, bloody and in short, a mess.

Two of us made an attempt to bind the wound while one member of our group went to call an ambulance. Whatever the cause, the injury was recent. Nevertheless, the man was barely conscious when an ambulance crew arrived shortly afterwards and placed an oxygen mask over his face.

On regaining consciousness, the injured man began to lash out despite his injury, and with such force that his would-be helpers were forced to step back in self-preservation. The reluctant patient then dropped the oxygen mask and collapsed again within a minute. This procedure was repeated until the ambulance personnel were forced to physically restrain the man by strapping him tightly to a stretcher. Once immobile and well secured, they once more revived him with oxygen and loaded him, still struggling ineffectually, into the waiting ambulance

The next day, I checked with the hospital to see how he was faring, and was told he was dead. An acquaintance working for the health service told me the wound was probably a ‘sorry cut’- a self-inflicted injury indicating remorse for an action. It was also possibly a tribal punishment inflicted by others. In other words, some person or persons may have deliberately hammered a blunt object halfway through the man’s arm and then left him to die in the baking sun miles from help. Either way it was tribal business, Aboriginal business. And that was the end of it. It was a cultural phenomenon everyone was more than happy to leave alone.

According to my friend at the hospital, the man resisted all treatment until sedated. In effect, he bled himself to death. No one was really interested in investigating precise circumstances, and no one was really surprised. It was just one of those things.

It seemed inexplicable that such a futile death should occur and not cause a ripple, but there it was. If a degree of harmony between two diverse cultural groups is desirable, then a part of the mutual respect and trust is the acceptance of the inevitability of some dark and quite baffling events. Certainly the man's later behavior had been suicidal, but who would seriously attempt suicide by cutting off a hand with a jagged rock?

If a third party were involved would this be murder? Or perhaps manslaughter or assault with a deadly weapon? Or, was it a justified punishment under tribal law? An abyss awaits the investigator who approaches this sensitive area. Both Aboriginal and European cultures are capable of creating situations for which the other has no real coping strategy. To avoid potential conflict, the case is simply closed as quickly as possible. The patient refused treatment of his self-inflicted wounds; and he died.

End of story.

My friend at the hospital was able to put this point both more colloquially and more succinctly: ‘Shit happens.'

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‘The trouble with the bloody government here,’ said Andy a few days later at the wheel of his Ford F250 utility, ‘Is that they don’t give a rats-arse for us poor bastards who travel these roads.’

It was true, the road was awful, and showed every sign of being ignored by government for a very long time. We were driving well south and several hundred kilometers to the west of Alice Springs on a stony dirt track with an endless series of washboard corrugations. The suspension of the big Ford was taking wicked punishment, jarring and jolting from ridge to ridge and sometimes fishtailing in the slithery gravel sections. Driving too slowly led to terrible jolting and bumping; going too fast led to uncontrollable slides and a vibration like bad dentistry.

The ideal was to maintain enough speed to enable the suspension to absorb the worst of the bumps while retaining effective control in the loose gravel sections. It was hard work.

We were heading towards the Western Australian border and the wastes of the three great deserts that merge there. Ahead was at least several hundred more kilometers of punishing dirt track.

The previous night we camped at the base of Ayers Rock, that great icon of Australia, known as ‘Uluru’ to the locals. With camp set up, two of the more energetic in our party climbed a thousand feet up the rock before the evening light faded, carrying bottles of drinking water and comfortable swags all the way to the summit. From this breezy sleep-out they were able to watch the spectacle of dawn creeping over the flat desert landscape the next morning to illuminate the distant high rounded domes of the Olgas, known as Katatjuta to the locals

Recently, the pressure of visitor numbers has resulted in a proliferation of rules and regulations at Uluru. National Parks and Wildlife rangers now marshal visitors to a few designated areas and prevent activities such as camping on the rock itself, or even in the national park surrounding it. Even climbing Uluru is now discouraged. But our group did no harm. Responsible bush travelers despite their rough and ready appearance, they took nothing away and left no trace behind.

In front of our bouncing utility, two kilometers ahead and invisible behind the thick cloud of dust raised in passing, was the lead vehicle in our convoy, a big diesel-powered Dodge ten-tonner. At the tail end of the group and invisible behind our own kilometer-thick curtain of dust, was the third vehicle, a Toyota utility. Andy was my driver, later we would swap seats and I would be his chauffeur for a while.

To aid his strenuous efforts on rough roads, Andy selected another cold beer for himself from the portable fridge wedged handily between us. This done, he felt able to warm to the theme he had been elaborating before his endless thirst interrupted his thought process. Andy gestured airily with his beer-can at the endless vista of spinifex plains and distant craggy hills by way of illustration of the point he was trying to make.

‘Wander out there,’ he said, taking a long slug of cold beer, ‘With as much water as you could carry and the chances are you would still be dead inside a day - unless you happened to know a thing or two about surviving in the bush. And without water - forget it! You would probably only last an hour or two.’

He was right; it was a zero tolerance landscape that would brook no casual or unprepared intruders. Dehydration could strike and kill perhaps before you knew it. There were stories and anecdotes in plenty to back up Andy’s remarks; including the true tale of the Japanese tourist who died while apparently soaking her aching feet in a pool of rainwater left from a recent downpour. Death came so quickly, she had no time to realize that she could save her life by drinking the dirty water she bathed in. She was separated from her sightseeing tour group for less than two hours and it killed her. Perhaps she could not overcome her qualms about hygiene until it was too late.

My personal experience included some casual outdoor work during my first Australian summer. I took the trouble to monitor my liquid intake on a day the temperature peaked at 44C. It was actually higher even than that in the enclosed courtyard where I was working. I drank twenty-two pints of iced water between 8am and 5pm with just one visit to the toilet. The rest I presumably sweated out during the day.

I really should have asked for a pay rise on that job.

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Andy’s warnings were a sign of his healthy respect for the environment. In these parts the desert was oceanic; sparse communities like tiny islands in the vast expanse. Getting out of a vehicle to stretch cramped legs in the middle of this emptiness was to feel a landscape searing and scorching - rejecting the intrusion immediately. The intense heat of the sandy soil burnt upwards through the soles of shoes, while simultaneously, the sun beat down to scorch scalp and any exposed skin. Often there was no audible sound whatsoever in this burning wasteland, except my breathing and the ticking of the hot engine as it cooled.

I noted at the last stop that the bodywork of our truck was again too hot to touch and that this time there *was* a sound. It was an ominous bass rumbling and bubbling from the forty-four gallon drum of fuel strapped onto the tray behind the cab. It was the noise of petrol boiling, a sound like an ancient hot-water system building up a dangerous head of steam. At first it worried me, I had visions of an apocalyptic explosion. But you get used to just about anything. Andy placed the palm of his hand on the hot fuel drum and removed it quickly.

‘I hope we don’t need fuel this afternoon,’ he said, ‘Its going to be around bloody midnight before that drum cools enough to pump.’

I nodded agreement. We made *that* mistake earlier in the trip, tapping into the drum as gently as possible, unscrewing the bung a fraction of a revolution at a time to relieve the pressure gradually. The painstaking care was in vain. With one quarter-turn there was nothing, the very next fractional movement brought a fountain of hot fuel geysering high into the air. The result was a thorough soaking in highly flammable liquid for us, the truck, and all our possessions. Cleaning up delayed us for hours and even now the petrol stink was on everything.

After the big clean up at the roadside, Andy tore off his petrol-sodden clothing without a word; hurling his shirt and shorts down disgustedly before stalking off, naked and foul-tempered in the heat haze. It was a moment or so before I realized his strange behavior had a reason: he was in search of a place where he could enjoy a cigarette without accidentally incinerating himself.

We were on our way to Kalgoorlie, the old gold mining town in Western Australia. I was along for the ride and to lend what assistance I could, the rest of the convoy because their work took them there. On these remote roads, a convoy is safer than a single vehicle in the event of breakdown or other mishap. But the traveler with the sense to prepare for the worst can do the trip alone. It is standard practice to have someone to raise the alarm if you do not show up after a reasonable time has elapsed.

The heat was an overbearing monster and there was a feeling that it may at any minute decide to beat us senseless. Sweat seeped continually from every pore and evaporated instantly, leaving us itchy, dusty, perpetually thirsty, and just as hot as before. The cassettes of music I had brought along to liven up the journey were now mostly deformed and useless lumps of melted plastic. They were inadvertently left exposed to the sun at one of our regular stops.

‘Is it usually like this?’ I asked Andy, who was steering with a piece of cloth wrapped around his hand to prevent burning himself on the steering wheel.

‘Shit no!’ He said, ‘Last trip it was *cold,* I ran out of matches trying to light a fire the second night - I was traveling alone and I nearly shivered to death before I remembered the cigarette lighter in the dash board.’ He grimaced at the memory, and sounded sincere, but I just could not picture it at that moment.

It had taken us four days to get this short distance; the rear axle on the F250 was the early casualty. With no chance of getting a spare, we set up roadside camp and removed the broken part. The axle was then trucked back in the lead Dodge to the well-equipped ranger’s workshops at Ayers Rock. In this sweltering repair facility and using parts from the local dump, Andy proved himself an outstanding bush mechanic and cobbled together a workable axle with a borrowed welder. We took this ugly contraption, covered in welded reinforcing strips, back to the stricken vehicle and fitted it. To my absolute amazement it worked. But we lost two days. Two punctures, a carburetor full of fine dust and a cracked windscreen also took their toll.

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In the late afternoon of the fourth day we arrived at the tiny Aboriginal community of Docker River. Here we hoped to refuel our small convoy and conserve supplies. But we were advised that fuel was vaporizing in the lines due to the heat and no petrol would be pumped until late evening. With little to do but wait, we visited the fortified store, then sat in the shade. The very apparent severity of the security measures at the store was a consequence of the fact that burgling it was a local tradition. When we finally did get fuel, we drove a few kilometers down the road to avoid burglars who might prefer us to their beloved store and camped until dawn.

There was little chance of sleeping much past daybreak, insects pestered us and we sweated uncomfortably. We spent an hour or so repacking the loads of the vehicles to take some of the weight off the repaired axle and then we were on our way.

But just before we set off this morning, I satisfied a long-held personal ambition and confirmed the truth of a much-heard legend. I fried an egg on the hot steel of the Toyota’s bodywork. This was quite difficult to do - not through any lack of available heat as it turned out, but the panels had rounded curves and the first egg slithered immediately into the dirt. I had to park the vehicle precisely on the road camber and flip the hood-catch to create a suitably flat surface. Once this was done, a legend was easily confirmed. It *was* hot enough to fry eggs on the bodywork of your vehicle in central Australia - even in the early morning sun before the real heat of the day. The egg sizzled nicely with the assistance of a little margarine and took only a little longer than usual to cook. On the downside however, it did leave an indelible stain in the paintwork. And of course, it was not my car...

Andy disdained this innovative solar powered breakfast. With true bushman simplicity he simply punched a large hole in a family-size tin of spaghetti using the nearest sharp implement. He then drank, or rather sucked, the contents from the can in three massive gulps. As supplement, he cracked two raw eggs into half a cup of milk and drank those down as well in one single, solid protein hit. Thirty seconds after commencing his meal, he was breakfasted and ready to travel.

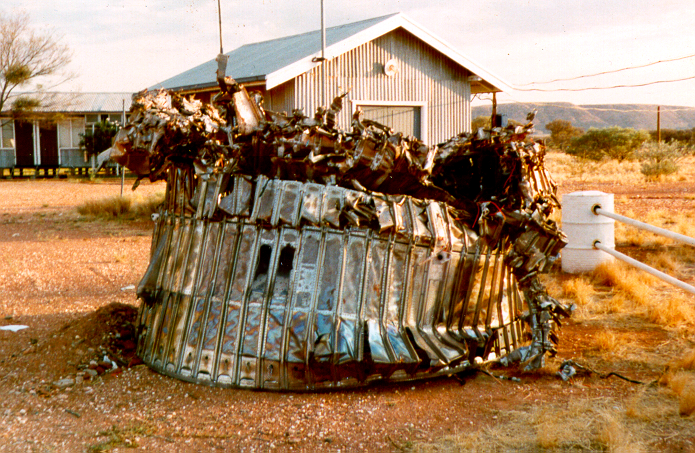
We rolled through the desert landscape all day, seeing no other vehicles. At one point we stopped at the remote cave where the legendary gold prospector Lasseter spent his final days. The reef of gold he is rumored to have discovered has never been found since. Now a huge wasp-colony prevented entry and the sandy creek in front was bone dry. Later, as we rounded a knoll, I saw two enormous lizards. Whether they were fighting or indulging in some reptile foreplay in the sand dunes was hard to say, but they reared up like boxers, scrabbling at each other with stubby forelegs scratching and long tongues flickering. They were both over a meter and a half in length.

‘Perentie’ Andy grunted without much enthusiasm and helped himself to another beer. Andy had developed drink driving to a fine art. He had several special places he could quickly wedge a half-full beer can in the unlikely event that he suddenly needed both hands to drive. I wondered what Andy did when he drove around city streets. I could not imagine him driving without a drink in his hand, but it was also difficult to imagine the police tolerating a driver whose foible it was to drink alcohol steadily all day. I guessed I would find out when we got to the next town. During the early stages of the trip I tried to gage how much the continuous intake of alcohol affected Andy's driving skills, but since I never really saw him totally sober, the benchmark was hard to fix.

In the early evening we arrived at Giles Weather Station (population 6). Giles is no beauty spot. It is a tiny meteorological outpost that lies at the head of a ruler-straight section of graded desert track that revels in the name ‘The Gunbarrel Highway.' It is as remote a posting for the meteorologists who work there as you can get. One man there told me that he had completed a tour of duty in Antarctica and spoke of the striking similarities between the two postings despite the obvious contrasts in the environments.

Just behind the weather station, in a dusty vehicle and plant storage area, I saw the remains of a small rocket. Not in the space-shuttle class, but certainly sufficient to catch the eye. I thought it was a pile of crumpled aluminum junk at first glance, but even Giles had played a part in the history of space flight and weapons delivery systems. During the 1960's, the area was nominated (presumably because of its lack of population) as the target-landing site for the test firing of the British ‘Blue Streak’ rocket program. The scrunched, but still recognizably rocket-shaped aluminum nose cone of one those test-firings still sits in the desert among the four wheel drive vehicles at Giles...

In the air-conditioned bar and mess room at Giles that night, I contemplated the the journey made so far. It was a long distance in both psychological and geographical terms from ice-bound Europe to the Australian Western desert, and for me the journey already felt as though it extended from distant past to distant future.



*Space junk: part of the nose cone of a British 'Blue Streak' rocket at Giles Weather Station in the Western Australian desert. The rocket was test fired in the Australian outback during the 1960's.*

The big Dodge finally gave up the ghost in Laverton close by the Western Australian border, retiring in a cloud of steam and a rush of oil with a cracked engine block. In one of those amazing twists of fortune, a low-loader truck was delivering pre-fabricated housing to the the tiny community at just precisely the right time for us and agreed to carry the ten-tonner back to civilization in Kalgoorlie immediately. All we had to do was get it on the back of the truck – without heavy lifting gear.

Laverton is possibly one of the ugliest places anyone could hope to visit, its feeling of remote lawlessness accentuated by the housing compounds with high fences topped with barbed wire and patrolled by guard dogs. The locals all live in these secured compounds – and even the hospital resembles a concentration camp. But despite the forbidding nature of the place, they proved more than happy to assist us where they could.

With a group of locals to help, we accomplished the task of burying the rear end of the low loader in the dirt and creating a ramp up which we could manhandle the fully-loaded big truck. It took half a day of exhausting spadework in sweltering heat and lots of willing manpower to accomplish this task. I knew how the ancient Egyptians must have felt when they built the pyramids. We were blistered and tired as we rolled into Kalgoorlie to spend our final few hours together recuperating over cold beers at a local hotel.

Feeling the need for a mode of transport a little less physically demanding for the final leg of the trip to the coast, after farewells I journeyed onwards from Kalgoorlie to Perth in the air-conditioned comfort of one of the world's great trains – The Indian-Pacific. Arriving just after dawn, I planned the day ahead with relish. First there was the clean white sand of Cottesloe beach and the prospect of a dip in the Indian Ocean, then lunch in the city and some relaxation before final preparation for the onward journey. I had a long bus trip north and then a plane to catch before my next wayside stop of any length. Not that far away now was an overlander's paradise – Bali.

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# 2. Cock fighters and other innuendoes…

## Bali, Kuta Beach, in the grip of an irresistible force, bed and breakfast in a losmen, to Legian by motorbike,the Balinese highlands by bemo taxi, Ubud, Besakih

Harrison was perched on a cane bar stool at the La Barong bar when I first saw him, looking fairly morose for a recent arrival at one of the most fabled of a select group of earthly paradises. That is a description of Bali that finds plenty of support from the travel-weary on the trail. The La Barong is just a short walk from Kuta Beach and its namesake hotel, one of the older and better-known haunts of the young visitors and the serious travelers who pass through Bali.

Some of the backpacker visitors who arrive may admit to being hippies and others may not, but Kuta itself is a celebrated crossroads on the overlander's trail. A relaxed haven for the long-distance traveler, it just happens to be conveniently located in a tropical island Shangri-La. The living is cheap and easy, the people friendly and the climate all gentle warmth and sea breezes. Bali is a place of myth and legend on the hippie trail, a name that conjures visions of plenty. It is akin to Penang, Kathmandu, Marrakech, Goa and Istanbul as a must-see and must stay-over destination.

Bali, and Kuta in particular, is also a refuge where trail-weary travelers can marshal resources, obtain information and make plans. Kuta always has a large population-in-residence of itinerants from every corner of the globe. It is the first outward-bound stop and introduction to south-east Asia for those heading from Australia to Europe, and the last blissful taste of Asia for those veterans who have made the trip the other way.

Until sometime in the 1970s, it was actually possible under a loophole in Australian law for an unemployed Australian to live in Bali and pay little or nothing for this privilege. All of the considerable amenities of the island, including the opportunities for surfing, swimming and a more or less continuous exotic party lifestyle, could be enjoyed on a continual basis by a street-wise few. Better yet, the whole package was financed with unemployment allowances from the Australian government.

Until this loophole in the social security system was hastily plugged by politicians fielding angry protests from scandalized constituents; unemployment benefit payments could be legally sent to recipients in Bali by friends or relatives back home. While this ‘dole’ money may have amounted to frugal sustenance in Australia, it was a different story in Indonesia. Converted to rupiahs at a rate of around 1200 to 1500 for every single dollar changed, it was possible to live like feudal aristocracy. Two or three people together could rent a house, employ servants and enjoy every conceivable local luxury. Even now it is likely the Australian government could save cash *and* solve its youth unemployment problem at a stroke by paying them all a minute pittance to party on in Bali...

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Harrison was not receiving ‘dole’ payments to support him in Bali. He was perched on his stool at the La Barong, and tasting the excellent Bintang beer, one of the more positive legacies of the Dutch colonial occupation. We sampled the brew together and he explained that ‘Harrison’ was his first name and not as I had first supposed, his surname. Harrison was complaining because he had as yet failed to score any local dope, this despite the tales he had heard in Australia about the high quality, low price, and absolute abundance of the local weed.

‘This place should be just awash in it!’ he said mournfully.

He was quietly forlorn at Kuta failing to live up to its huge reputation. Although it was only around 9pm, the only other customers in the small bar were two friends of the proprietor, who were drinking coke and playing chess. It was a very quiet night in Kuta Beach.

Over another couple of bottles of the local beer, Harrison told me he was from Melbourne, and had flown from Darwin to Denpasar a couple of days previously. I soon discovered that, although I did not recall seeing him on the plane, he had been on the same flight as myself, an old Merparti Airways DC10,

Harrison paused and offered to buy the friendly and attentive barkeeper a beer. It was a part of Harrison’s makeup that he bought drinks for everyone and he was surprised and slightly offended when the barman, who said his name Nyomen (pronounced Yeoman) showed signs of hesitation at his offer. Eventually Nyomen said that he was grateful, but that he would much rather have the money instead of the drink, if that was okay. He explained to an astounded Harrison that each beer he sold to us cost more than his entire wages for a whole evening of work. He simply could not imagine wasting so much money on what was after all, just a drink. It was an early indication and by no means the last, of the yawning chasm between the standards and mores of Asia and those of Australia with its European profligacy, traditions, and mindset.

The Kuta streets were dark and quiet, lit only by the occasional oil-lamp as we wandered down to the beach for a stroll before turning in. We had not gone far when there was a sudden commotion behind us, and Nyomen approached carrying my wallet upraised in one hand. I had left it sitting on the bar-top with more than $3,000.00 in cash and travelers checks inside. It was enough money to get me all the way to Europe, or converted to more than four million rupiah, enough to buy the barman a house and still leave lots of change... I thanked my lucky stars this carelessness happened in a place where the locals were mainly decent, honest people. In reward, I gave Nyomen some money and told him gratefully that I would see him tomorrow.

A little farther down the street towards the beach, two giggly young prostitutes came rushing out of the dark shadows under the trees near the Kuta Beach Hotel. These were not the hard-bitten business-before-pleasure types encountered in the mainstream tourist clip joints of Southeast Asia. They were just a couple of good-time girls set on socializing with young foreign males and perhaps making some money from what they were going to do for fun anyway. I soon realized they had no real notion of what they were really doing, and even less idea of what would be a proper way to go about doing it. Possibly they were depending on their enthusiasm to make up for their inexpert approach!

Their eagerness may have been an indication of lack of trade, because they were *very* keen to secure our custom. They quickly demonstrated a remarkable, perhaps unique form of no-nonsense foreplay – a seductive technique that certainly had the benefit of surprise, even though it proved in practice to be self-defeating.

The girl's technique was, first, to smile enticingly at their target. This was a suitably disarming start as no man could possibly feel threatened by two petite and pretty young females who smile broadly as they advance. The second phase of the master plan came into operation as soon as they were, quite literally, within reach.

The objective at this point was simple: to shove a hand quickly down inside the prospect's pants and seize his genitals in a vice-like grip. Once they had the situation firmly ‘in hand,’ and before the hapless 'client' had even a vague inkling of what was happening to him, the girls would then run for home with the ‘catch’ firmly and safely in tow. I couldn't help but think of a probably apocryphal slogan I once heard attributed to an American president; ‘Once you have them by the balls - their hearts and minds will follow…’

They were fast as well as daring, two smiling, slender streaks of greased lightning. The first girl seized Harrison in a steely grip without any preliminary at all beyond the allure of her dazzling smile. The second girl backed up her huge smile to me with a heavily accented and husky ‘Hello darling!’ and snaked a hand down behind my waistband a second or so later. Luckily for me, her forearm jammed tightly against the belt of my jeans as she grabbed and pulled, and this obstacle absorbed the first shock of her planned run for home base. I was able to grasp her arm and then her wrist and extricate myself reasonably rapidly from a painful grip. The relief! The initial assault had threatened to rupture me.

Poor old Harrison had no such luck - he was in the grip of an irresistible coercive force. He was wearing shorts with an elasticized waistband, a garment that stretched far too easily to absorb the damaging impact of a sudden and determined run for cover. To protect himself from potentially catastrophic injury, Harrison broke almost immediately into an involuntary and somewhat panicky trot. He was engaged in a desperate attempt to keep pace with his captured scrotum: an item being swiftly hustled down the street towards the beach by his nimble assailant. By the time I disentangled myself from the second girl, he was rapidly disappearing down the darkened street after the first.

I could hear him yelling hoarsely: ‘Stop! Oh shit! Help! Oh, my balls! Oh, Jesus! My dick! Stop! God! Help! She’s tearing my dick off!’

I picked up the camera he dropped in his unintentional flight and followed him to the beach where he managed to disentangle himself from the grip of the over-eager girl. I guessed she now realized that her technique had fallen somewhere well short of the desired aphrodisiac effect. On discovering that Harrison was in genuine distress she released him and now seemed a little puzzled as to what had gone so wrong with her master plan.

Harrison fell dramatically to his knees on the beach, breathing heavily as he cradled his groin in cupped hands.

‘You are new at this are you?’ He managed to say as he gasped and groaned.

The girl was bemused by this display, perhaps surprised that this sorry wimp of a foreigner did not appreciate a spot of hearty Balinese foreplay before the main event of the night. In answer to a question I could not hear, Harrison began a strangled monologue, with words forced out between theatrical moans. He was telling his slightly downcast and penitent attacker, that not only did he absolutely *not* want jigajig right at this minute, he actually might never ever, ever, want it again.

As he warmed to his theme, Harrison explained he had suffered a potentially devastating injury. Perhaps his attacker was in receipt of faulty information, but her action was not one any male would consider pleasurable, and certainly *not* that sometimes referred to colloquially as ‘having your plonker pulled.’ Furthermore he scolded, she would never make a living in her chosen field if she persisted in her mistaken belief that a dick was simply a convenient form of male tow-bar. Sometime, he might decide he wanted children...

But it seemed no long-term damage was sustained, Harrison ceased complaining and brightened up considerably when the girl apologized and offered to sell him some grass instead. Before long he was smoking contentedly and telling his tale. Aside from the clumsiness of their approach to potential trade, the two girls were good company and as I found out, Harrison was incapable of being angry for long at any female and eminently capable of appreciating the best qualities of all of them.

Harrison was fun. He was on his way to London where he was planning to stay a while. His destination, almost inevitably, was a house shared by a group of Australian friends in Earls Court, that great melting pot of travelers in temporary residence in England. His immediate plan was to travel to Bangkok and from there get a cheap flight to Hong Kong before moving on to Tokyo. There, he said confidently, he would make himself a quick fortune by teaching English to wealthy Japanese students. Then he would complete his journey on the Trans-Siberian express across Asia to Moscow and on to Paris. My own plan as I sketched it to him, was to make the journey to London via India, Nepal, Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey. We made a pact there and then to meet up and compare notes at the London end.

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‘Losmen’, is the Balinese name for the local bed and breakfast or small hostel. Without further ado, that same night I moved into Harrison’s losmen with the promise of 'fantastic' room service. Room service at my lodgings was non-existent and the room grimy and unwelcoming. But everything Harrison said about his lodgings was true; the rooms were large, bright, clean, comfortable and airy.

Room service consisted of a daily breakfast tray of sweet black tea and bananas served by a young, slim and breathtakingly gorgeous Balinese girl who happened to be the daughter of our host. What made the room service 'fantastic' was her habit when serving our breakfast of quite unselfconsciously wearing only a colorful batik skirt tied around the hips. She appeared the next morning exactly as Harrison promised she would - smiling shyly and totally oblivious to the effect her near-naked body was likely to have on young western male travelers. ‘You don’t get service like *that* where I come from at under two bucks a week’ observed Harrison happily as he demolished his breakfast banana and took in the view. And as an afterthought, ‘How about lets hire a couple of motorbikes and go see a Balinese cock fight!’

Hiring a motorbike involved obtaining a local permit, but this was no real obstacle. To qualify for a Balinese driving license you just get on the bike, ride a few yards down the street to demonstrate your prowess and then ride it back again. If you fall off the first time, you fail. But this is no big deal; you simply try it again. Everybody passes - eventually.

Harrison’s main expressed concern was for the possible long-term damage done to his reproductive equipment during his forced and traumatic flight of the night before. He expressed the fear that riding a motorcycle might exacerbate the injuries he still claimed to be suffering and dwelt on this topic at some length, enjoying the opportunity for some creative word play including references to his, ‘recently rudely wrenched wedding tackle.’ and his, ‘mauled and mangled member.’ He was worried about the rough and spectacularly pot-holed Balinese roads, but in the event he forgot about it for long enough to stop complaining after a while.

Newly empowered by our bikes, Harrison and I drove a few kilometers down the coast to Legian beach. Here, we were reliably informed a cock fight was to commence in the early afternoon. Our guide was a young Balinese with an insatiable thirst for western culture; ‘The name is Wayand,’ he said memorably at our first meeting, ‘but you can call me Elvis...’

Elvis wanted to live in Australia and craved ownership of all the trappings of western consumerism. Primarily, he wanted a jeep, a stereo and lots of t-shirts with writing on them. The precise text on his shirts was unimportant, but he made it clear that some sort of slogan had to be there or the fashion statement had failed. I gave Elvis a shirt of my own featuring a map of the Northern Territory of Australia with little printed labels showing all the towns on the Stuart Highway. He was ecstatic. He wanted to buy my jeans to complete his outfit, but I drew the line at traveling all the way to Europe with a wardrobe that alternated only between shorts and a sarong.

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Because the Balinese need the dollars brought by visitors to their island and show great skill in extracting them, I half-expected the cock fight to be a tame and touristy thing – an exhibition concocted for gullible visitors. In the event it was anything but. Cock fighting has been illegal in Indonesia for many years, but the ritual of the fight is deeply implanted in local tradition and matches continue regardless.

Fighting cocks are everywhere around the villages, usually being pampered and preened by doting owners. Fighting cocks are prised possessions; they are fed special diets and fussed over endlessly. A good fighting cock will have a huge amount of care and attention lavished on it for its short life.

Harrison and I were the only foreigners present at this particular cock fight, and it was clear that this was *not* a spectacle arranged for the benefit of foreign visitors. Some of the questioning glances we received from the locals were not especially welcoming. For a few moments it looked as though we might be ejected as unwanted intruders even before the fights started. But fortune smiled on us when our friend Elvis spotted a male relative of his, a man who was prepared to invite us along as his personal guests. We did our best to be totally inconspicuous and melt unnoticed into the background.

The atmosphere around the fighting arena was electric. There was an unexpectedly violent undercurrent of tension in the proceedings and it was clear that serious business was underway. Large bundles of currency were brandished, thumbed, and endlessly counted and recounted. Bets were being laid, opponents' chances discussed and alliances formed. I expected a somewhat mundane and low-key spectacle, a quaint local sporting event with an element of wanton cruelty. In reality, the cock fight was far more than just a way of passing the time and irritating animal rights activists.

Tensions and long held rivalries between opposing village factions were of major significance. Every match was a grudge match and the same groups of people were almost always on the same side. The barely contained hostility between some of the spectator groups was palpable, with a heat strongly reminiscent of the tribal factionalism of English soccer. The actual fighting space was a small circle of dusty earth surrounded by a low wooden fence and shaded by a thatched roof. The visible bloodshed in this arena was only a part expression of the violent potential that permeated the atmosphere. You need not be a spectator at the cock fight for long to realize that it was a form of social warfare. Wealth and prestige were being accumulated and lost before our eyes.

The fighting cocks were prepared for their brief battles by their owners, or experienced special handlers. The techniques varied - some were simply held tightly until their turn came and then placed in the ring to face their opponent. Other owners composed their birds for battle by stroking and even singing to them as they waited their turn for a brief moment of death or glory. I noticed that a bird lacking the fighting spirit was prodded and poked or had its feathers fluffed in an effort to raise its aggressive instincts. Just before each fight started, a handler attached a pair of viciously sharp and curved steel spur extensions to the bird’s legs with thin leather bindings.

The fights were often too fast paced to watch, let alone make any sense of. The roar of the excited crowd rose to a swift crescendo that died away as the match proper began. Then came the confrontation. More often than not, it was just a few seconds rapid flurry of feathers and then one combatant strutting victoriously around the arena. The loser a weakly fluttering, or collapsed and still bird lying in a spreading patch of red.

Defeated birds were retrieved, with a great deal of caution and respect for the razor-sharp spurs, by an official, or handler of some kind. No matter how inert the body, it was at all times assumed they had one last punishing kick left in them. Once seized securely, their legs were immediately and unceremoniously severed from their bodies with a very large sharp knife. This procedure served the purpose of instantly separating the dangerous spurs from the body of the losing bird, which was then forfeit to the owner of the winning bird. With their leg cut off, the birds were tossed onto an ever-growing mound of dead and dying roosters in a corner. Some of those birds, viciously stabbed and double amputated, were still twitching and flapping feebly late in the afternoon.

It was compelling and repulsive by turns, hot, dusty and brutal. For the local participants it was a cathartic release of built-up tensions and hostilities. After a while Harrison entered into the spirit of things and laid a couple of small bets much to the delight of the locals whose clan he had inadvertently adopted. For my part, I hung back and found myself wishing that at least they would knock the birds on the head before they cut off their legs and tossed them in the corner. At one point a rooster flapped out of the arena during a fight with spurs still attached and the crowd scattered with practiced speed. Everyone was fully aware of the potential for major damage in those razor sharp little knives. By the end of the day I felt slightly sick and jittery with nervous exhaustion. I was developing a tension headache from watching the cock-fighting action; culture shock had set in.

Later, I came across an account of the Balinese cock fight written by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who studied the social context of this ritual in the late nineteen-fifties. Everything he said struck an immediately recognizable chord and reinforced my own first impressions. Geertz points out that the psychological identification of men with their cocks is a double-entendre that works as precisely in Balinese as it does in English. On the alliances dictating the patterns of betting, he confirms these are more accurately a reflection of the local political and social realities rather than the odds on any particular bird. A man *never* bets against a cock owned by one of his kin, even though he may believe it will lose. He can strategically absent himself, but if present at the fighting arena, he will be honor-bound to bet for the family bird.

The Balinese regard this sport as, ‘playing with fire without getting burned.’

At the end of the afternoon, I felt wrung out and glad to just sit quietly on the beach for a few minutes and watch the sunset. Later, as we returned to our bikes for the trip back to Kuta, Elvis invited us to dinner at his extended family home. By chance he mentioned that his family would be eating chicken and I asked him if this was going to be a feast held to mark some special occasion.

‘No’ he said simply, ‘It was just a very old and very sick chicken, and it died this morning!’ Neither Harrison nor I could face it. We let Elvis down as gently as possible and suggested an appointment to go with him later to an arrack drinking party instead.

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In the event, our chance to try the local narcotic brew came the very next day and Elvis abandoned his family dinner party without qualms to accompany us on the outing. This version of arrack called something sounding more like ‘toorak' is a traditional beverage made by fermenting such ingredients as the hearts of a particular type of palm tree. Firm details on the methods used are hazy because brewers keep the details of their recipes to themselves, but the drink certainly does have narcotic properties. Since it is essentially a home brew, the quality, taste, color and texture, not to mention the potency, can vary wildly from batch to batch.

Drinking toorak was like cock fighting we discovered, a ‘men only’ pursuit, at least on this particular occasion. When we first arrived at the designated spot around sunset, the drinks had not yet arrived and little groups of men stood by waiting patiently and chatting amicably. The whole ambiance was anticipatory and mildly festive. Harrison and I had decided that we would use the tasting as our springboard for the evening entertainment and we would take Elvis along if he felt like it. The plan we had tentatively sketched was to have a couple of drinks each and then cruise around to see what was on offer by way of nightlife. We did not expect this to be very much as most locals seemed to sleep early and rise with the sun.

The sunset was almost gone and the company getting slightly restive when two burly men finally appeared carrying the essential supplies between them. The beverage was transported in a large plastic dustbin. The actual drinking vessels were a little more traditional - tubes of thick, hollow bamboo, one end tightly sealed with a wooden plug. The cost was ridiculously low, I calculated I could have bought the entire dustbin full - more than I could lift, let alone drink - for less than a dollar Australian. My huge drink cost less than one rupiah, and there were nearly 1500 rupiah to the dollar.

There were two varieties of the drink on offer; Elvis described them as ‘sweet’ and ‘sour’ though neither designation was particularly accurate. Both were thick and smelly, yellowish concoctions. I had to try hard before the tasting commenced to rid myself of a disturbing mental image that threatened to ruin pleasurable anticipation. What was being ladled into my bamboo tube was not entirely dissimilar to the contents of an overloaded nappy on a baby with a very sick stomach...

‘Heres cheers!’ I said bravely to Harrison and downed an experimental mouthful or two. It was not bad, slightly bitter and even a little oily at first taste, but surprisingly refreshing and with an astringent aftertaste. It had the texture of freshly squeezed orange juice with lots of the pulp left in. ‘I think I’ll try the sweet one next.’ I remarked to Harrison and Elvis, and drank the first one down without further ado. However, a strange thing happened towards the end of drink number two. The babble of conversation, until that point constant, faltered, slowed to a trickle and finally ceased altogether. The silence was punctuated only by the occasional grunt, as people held out their bamboo tubes for another ladle of the brew. Far from becoming animated, the party was slowing down, as the drinks took effect we were all shifting to a lower gear.

I no sooner noticed this strange phenomenon than I became suddenly aware of an overwhelming urge to sit down. Muscles seemed to be slackening off all over my body and I slithered jelly-like down the wooden post I had been leaning on to slump limply in the dirt. To my surprise, Harrison was already down there, as were most of the other men. Harrison had apparently turned to jelly as well. Every muscle in his body seemed to have taken time out to loll. With difficulty I asked him how he felt. My tongue felt as though it had bandages on it.

‘Relaxed to the max,’ he managed to mumble thickly, after which there was nothing more from him for at least an hour.

The drink-induced stupor pole axed us both until mid-evening, then we gradually began to feel that there was some hope of eventually regaining the use of our muscles. It was like recovering from an anesthetic, which I suppose is pretty much what it was. There were no pretty visions, no strange hallucinations, or even much of any kind of tipsy feeling that I could remember. We were simply overwhelmingly tired and then out for the count. After around ninety minutes, I felt I had regained sufficient use of my limbs to barely stand up. Elvis was already on his feet having had only one drink to start with. Harrison also rose shakily to his feet when he saw us making the effort.

The feeling of lethargy and numbness was almost overwhelming and all thoughts of doing the town and trying the nightlife were abandoned by unspoken but entirely mutual consent. Until such time as sufficient energy returned, I did not even want dinner. Harrison fully agreed with this sentiment when I finally managed to voice it. Moving like two very old, fragile and doddery men, we left Elvis to make his own way home, and proceeding with exaggerated care, made our way back to the losmen to sleep it off.

On the way back, the same two girls who had tried out their novel seductive techniques on us before waylaid us again. This time they were a little subtler in their approach and seemed to quickly appreciate that we were more than usually tired. Since they were obviously suffering a dearth of clients, I gave them some money and asked them if they would go and buy us peanuts to eat and coke to drink and join us in this basic supper.

‘Peanuts for protein, coke for a caffeine energy boost,’ I croaked to Harrison. But being numbed and anesthetized had not dulled his cynicism.

‘They’ll only run off with the money,’ he warned. But they did not. They returned after a short absence with everything requested, so at least we had that limited sustenance. Harrison got down to brass tacks when the girls returned to meet us at the losmen; his curiosity was overcoming his lethargy.

‘How much do you charge?’ He asked the taller of the two girls. She replied hopefully that her fee was a thousand rupiah ‘all night,’ but quickly dropped this to six hundred rupiah when he made no response. She really should have waited; the truth was that Harrison was thunderstruck by how inexpensive it all was. He took me aside, gleeful despite the toorak.

‘Do you realize,’ he said, awed by this, ‘Lovely girls are two for a dollar here?’ I told him I was sure that this was a market anomaly unlikely to prevail for very long. In the morning I noticed that Harrison had slept with both the girls in his room. In response to my raised eyebrows over tea and bananas, and the suggestion that he may have been a trifle hoggish in his conduct, he maintained sheepishly and a little defensively that absolutely nothing had happened. As he put it:

‘I was too tired and smashed to argue and too tired and smashed to say either yes or no. OK, so I blew a dollar. But I reckon they both still owe me!’ He was clearly feeling close to normal today, because he followed this with the thoughtful admission, ‘And I think I quite fancy the taller one.’

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The following day I left Harrison to his own devices in Kuta and got a lift in a bemo taxi to the mountain village of Ubud. Harrison said he planned to take a trip out to the fringing reef at Sanur beach with Elvis, but I strongly suspected that his real reason for not coming along was to give himself the opportunity of a little dalliance. I had no doubt this would involve the fulfillment of his new found passion for the taller of the two ‘working girls.’

The driver took a meandering, indirect route to the mountain country, dropping and picking up passengers from the crowded bemo as he went and diverting where necessary to allow them off. The continual sidetracks suited me; they were an opportunity to see a little more of the island. Although we started to climb into higher country almost immediately, we still dipped back downhill on occasions, and all the way back down to the coastline again at one point. This was apparently by special request to drop off a man who struggled mightily with a heavy wicker basket that occupied the places of two passengers. To save him the inconvenience of carrying his burden any distance, our driver took us right down to the beach and stopped at a series of curious wooden beach shacks at a point just above the high water mark.

The shacks were very small and ramshackle, really just roughly thatched roofs over plaited palm leaf walls. I was curious and asked the driver who lived in those places? He laughed at my ignorance but humored me anyway, switching off the engine to give me a guided tour. None of the other passengers seemed to mind having their journey delayed while the driver filled in this gap in my education. When I looked inside the small huts, I saw that each of them contained one or more large sea turtles and some of these animals were truly huge in size. The huts had deep scoops in their sandy floors; and each sheltered depression was filled with seawater to keep the turtles cool.

‘Very good eating!’ said the driver. I understood. It was a turtle farm or more correctly a sort of holding facility where doomed turtles languished until required for the cooking pot.

The mountainous hinterland of Bali is what give the island its spectacular diversity and appeal. Here are the picturesque lush terraces of the rice paddies and cool mountain retreats. Steamy jungle filled valleys hide cool, clean rivers fed by mountain torrents. There are mountain top villages to wander through; places where ancient temples and modern artists' workshops jostle together agreeably in the narrow streets.

It was a good opportunity to spend a happy couple of days fossicking through the little settlements and seeing the sights. The morning of the third day found me climbing to the crisp, cool heights of Besakih, the big temple that sits on the side of a smoking volcano. Later the same day, I hitched a ride in another bemo to visit the famous, but putridly malodorous temple built inside the bat-cave on the winding road down from the highlands.

Inside the bat-cave, on a series of carved stone altars buried under thick layers of rotting bat excrement, offerings and prayers to the deities are made in the fetid air of a huge cavern. Inside this spacious enclosure, the uneven expanse of the rock ceiling is upholstered in bats, the atmosphere thickened and tainted by the rank aroma of a horde of the leathery-winged creatures perhaps tens thousand strong. The pious and the curious stream into this shrine continually, and are careful to enter the cave under the protective cover of large umbrellas. The umbrellas are necessary precautions to shield worshippers and tourists alike from the incessant rain of bat excrement that pours down in a steady drizzle from the ceiling above.

Getting away from the bat cave proved more difficult than getting in. As the only foreign visitor in this particular group, and therefore the prime target for local hustlers, I felt like an Oscar-winner trying to evade the paparazzi on awards night. I finally got away from the frantic vendors who haunt the entrance to the bat-cave only by shouldering through the crowd and clambering back onto the bemo. Only then could I hurl back all the trashy necklaces, cheap carvings and other souvenirs forced on me on the way back to the vehicle. I had so many necklaces dropped over my head on the short walk back to the bemo that I was able to rain them down on the would-be salespeople who were now surrounding the vehicle and demanding extortionate levels of payment for their unwanted offerings. Suddenly, I felt I knew something of the pain of stardom.

Following this brush with the lifestyles of the rich and famous, the bemo continued its winding and curving progress back down to a picturesque little cove with a small sandy beach. The driver told me the place was called Tanah Lot, but the attraction in this Arthurian-sounding resort had nothing to do with the Knights of the Round Table. The local curiosity is the variety of venomous and colourful sea snakes, all of which the driver assured us cheerfully, were deadly poisonous. We found the snakes in a cave normally submerged, revealed for our entry and inspection today only by an extra low tide. To me, the sea-snakes coiled on their rocky ledges looked like abandoned party decorations. The driver poked them with a stick in an attempt to create a little dramatic tension for the occasion, but they wound themselves into even tighter garish coils and ignored him.

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On the fourth day of this meandering progress through the scenic delights of the island, I gave up the role of the wide-eyed tourist to head back to Kuta in the early evening. I found that Harrison, not really surprisingly, was head over heels in love.

Since this news was not totally unexpected, I already had the beginnings of a plan. By now I had worked out that Harrison was a hopeless sucker for any kind of proposal put to him by a female; he simply could not say ‘no.' I took him to the La Barong to discuss the potential ramifications of his new relationship over a cold beer. He reacted somewhat defensively to my non-committal response to his happy news.

‘Hey lighten up!’ he protested, ‘This girl is *really* sweet! Can’t you *see* how beautiful she is? She wants to marry me! I’m in love!’

‘Oh well, that's wonderful news. Its not just *terrific* - its the best news I've had all week!’ I told him with all the false heartiness and sarcasm I could muster.

‘Congratulations are in order!’ I continued, ‘Maybe we can draft a letter right now to give your parents and the rest of your family the good news. In fact - hey listen! We can send it tomorrow! I’m sure they are going to want to hear all about you...’

‘Lets see...’ I told him briskly, ‘We could phrase it something like this:

‘Dear Mother, I've met a wonderful Balinese girl who says that she loves me deeply and wants to have my babies. I’m in heaven because I love her as well, although I have only known her for five days. She is absolutely wonderful!’

‘She is very pretty too *and* smart, although she has not had much in the way of an education. Its a shame that she is dirt poor and that she *is* actually working as a prostitute right now, but I know that you and Dad are both just going to love her anyway.’

‘You will both laugh when I tell you exactly how we met. It was a scream; she nearly did me a permanent injury with her bare hands. But she means well and she really is a *very* bright girl. Would you believe it, she can say, “Do you wanna fuck?” and make herself understood in six languages...’

Harrison groaned at this point and put his head in his hands, but I continued remorselessly:

‘Even though I have only known her for less than a week, I know I’m doing the right thing with this girl. Actually, I still haven’t managed to get her into bed without paying her, but after all, a girl still has to eat. I just know this is the real thing for me, I’ve found my soul mate. Just as soon as we both get through a course of really strong antibiotics, to get rid of any lingering nasty little rashes from her previous customers, we are going to make it all legal...’

‘By the way mother, about her religion, she is an animist of some kind, a Buddhist with a bit of Hindu or something... I don’t let it bother me. I hope this doesn’t affect your relations with *your* church group. I really don’t think we should let all that and the fact she speaks hardly any English at all, get in the way of our being one big happy family...’

‘No, no, be serious for a minute!’ Harrison interrupted with a note of desperation creeping into his voice, ‘Tell me *really*. How do you think they’ll *really* take it?’ He insisted: ‘If it’s phrased just right?’

‘Dear son.’ I told him firmly, ‘This is your father writing, since your mother has taken to her bed and is feeling unwell ever since she got your last letter.’

‘Now I don’t know what you think your game is son, but if you don’t stop this nonsense and get back home right now, I don’t think I would like to be responsible for what happens next. Its plain to me that you are still not fit to look after yourself alone.’

‘Although I never thought I’d see the day I labeled my own grown son a complete dickhead, just now I can’t think of a better way of putting it. And as for that girl of yours - you may think this is all a great joke - but I am telling you son, you have upset your mother and we are not laughing...’

Harrison groaned again.

‘I didn’t think you even knew my family.’ Was all he said as he ordered another two beers.

He railed against the injustice of it all for the rest of the evening, but at least I knew by then he was not going to do anything more stupid than he already had. For four more days he dithered and groaned and suffered the pangs of a doomed but epic love. After a while I could tell he was beginning to enjoy the drama and the guilt and I thought that perhaps he was casting around for some suitably climactic grand and final gesture.

In the meantime, his cash-strapped beloved amassed a small fortune by charging him hourly rates so that he could gaze soulfully into her eyes and explain himself in minutely apologetic detail. Harrison paid gladly, his conscience eased by the steady trickle of hard currency and the rest of him similarly eased by frequent farewell pilgrimages to her room. Then he cut short the agonized farewells, jumped onto a plane bound via Jakarta for Singapore at my recommendation, and was suddenly gone.

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That same evening his grieving beloved seemed to have already come to terms with her loss. She made it clear it would be no problem to transfer her affections to me if that was what I wanted. She confessed that she had always thought I might actually be the man for her. Now that she was at a loose end, she could pop back a little later in the evening to talk about this if I would like her to...

But I had other plans.

I wanted to see a bit more of Indonesia before arriving in Singapore for a considered, but no doubt, beery post-mortem of Harrison’s love life. I had decided to travel through Java first and then to travel to Singapore from Jakarta. Harrison had given me an address in Singapore; ‘Shang Onn Hotel,’ it said with a note reading, ‘Simple, but good, clean, cheap, double beds, free tea, near Raffles. See you there or leave message.’ It sounded all right to me.

# 3. Stunt driving to Java...

## By ferry to Java, the backblocks of Java, Jogjakarta, volcano hunting, meeting Suze on the train to Jakarta

The ferry ride between Bali and Java looked set to be the first really terrifying part of the trip. The little bus I was on drove out gingerly towards the ferry by means of a long and very slender wooden jetty. This was a construction so narrow that, from our viewpoint in the bus, we completely and literally filled it from side to side. To step off the bus would have been to step down straight into the water. Once a vehicle had driven onto the jetty, there was no chance to go back and no escape. We were committed for better or for worse to boarding our waiting vessel.

All the passengers for Java were trapped aboard their vehicles and nervously waiting to load onto the small wooden ferry. The reason for the general nervousness was clear: the boat up ahead was bouncing up and down with alarming energy. The vista as far as the horizon was a thick and sloppy green swell under a glowering and stormy late afternoon sky. Offshore, a stiff breeze formed sizable white-caps and promised a very lumpy crossing. I did not like the look of it at all and to cap it all off, I was very hungry. I was famished to be more accurate, with an empty stomach that growled and rumbled in noisy protest at my prolonged neglect. I had not eaten all day and had just been cheated of a meal by a little Balinese con-man, a street vendor who was probably not more than ten years old.

The diminutive swindler struck as we were waiting ashore in the small queue to drive onto the jetty. As we stood with engine idling, the youngster approached the bus at my window and offered to sell me hard-boiled eggs from a large basket of produce. I quickly agreed to buy two eggs, and passed him money through the window. The little trickster then made a great show of finding change and being apologetic about having the wrong denominations of coins and notes in his pocket. He seemed to be busy trying to help me and he appeared to be trying his best. But when the bus drove onto the jetty two minutes later, not only did I still have no change, I had no eggs either. My last close view of him was a derisive wave as I was driven away helplessly.

Once he saw me driven on to the jetty and helpless to retaliate, he smilingly held up my money in one mocking hand and my eggs in the other. To make matters worse, a roar of appreciation from the other kids at the head of the jetty greeted this little deception. It was obviously an entertainment they were familiar with. I guessed it was a long-running joke, a well-practiced routine to fleece the foreign visitors. Realizing I had fallen for his trick hook, line, and sinker, I made a rude sign at the laughing group, but this only made them all howl with laughter even more. I gave up in disgust. A little later in the day I did manage to purchase another two hard-boiled eggs from a vendor on the boat, only to find that my run of bad luck was continuing. When peeled, they were ancient, greenish in colour, and as inedible as golf balls. I decided to stay hungry.

Boarding the ferry to Java was a hazard to say the least. Vehicles loaded via a steel bridge from the boat to the dock. The problem was that the ferry was plunging up and down in a state of continual violent motion. It seemed a very unstable platform indeed, bucking and tugging at its flimsy attachment to the land like a skittish untamed beast determined to tear itself free or perish.

Access to this unsteady vessel presented a challenge of continually variable difficulty for drivers of boarding vehicles. When the ferry was up at the top of one of the greenish peaks, the steel access ramp became a steep, but quite negotiable hill. When the ramp descended to a point level with the wharf, access was perfect, but only for the briefest of instants.

The real problems arose as the ferry deck dropped below dock level. Then it forced the ramp downwards until the shoreward tip actually lifted off the dock to around shoulder height. All access then became impossible until the heavy steel contraption came crashing down on thick timbers perhaps twenty seconds later. At this point the ramp became briefly usable again as the whole cycle started once more.

There was a technique in vogue to negotiate this considerable peril. Accepted practice was for each vehicle to approach with its engines revving, then to accelerate onto the ferry via the moving bridge as it rose ponderously on the upward part of its cycle. The trick was to make the first move the instant the bridge became level and accessible. Speed was of the essence in completing the maneuver successfully. This meant that nearly all vehicles were arriving on the plunging ferry deck under acceleration and generally going much too fast for their own good. From my high vantage near the front of the bus I could see vehicles skidding sideways across the wet boat deck as the brakes were applied hard following the fast and hair-raising crossing.

Immediately in front of the bus was a Volkswagen Beetle, its hapless driver having a terrible time steeling himself to drive on board the ferry. He was still hesitating after a full ten minutes of assessing ways and means of getting aboard in one piece. This hesitation was despite the vocal support of the onlookers gesturing and shouting encouragement to him from the decks, and the tooting horns from the waiting queue of vehicles. I did not blame him at all for hanging back. Much of the time the bridge was rearing up like a giant, blunt-edged guillotine. Every couple of minutes saw it rising high above the roof-level of the Volkswagen before slamming down again hard. Each time it came down like this, it was with a force that made the whole structure of the dock shudder. From the vantage point of the driver inside the low vehicle, it must have been like driving into the jaws of a car-crusher. And it could easily have had that just that effect.

After watching several cycles of the rise and fall, the Beetle driver finally decided to make his move. It was just bad luck that even though he managed to time his attempt to board quite correctly, it was still a disaster. As the bridge reached level on its upward journey, he started as planned, but not nearly quickly enough. Then he suddenly and quite catastrophically lost his nerve as the bridge became a thirty-degree slope before his eyes. Belatedly, he decided he could not make it and tried frantically to reverse off for another go.

This was a *very* big mistake. As the luckless driver reversed, he was caught. With his front wheels on the bridge and his back wheels on the wharf. He had little chance to avoid disaster as the ferry began its downward plunge into the trough.

Back on the docks, we were treated to a remarkable sight. A Volkswagen lifted, and suspended above the ground, held almost vertically upright by the end of a heavy steel bridge wedged under the front wheels. There it hung briefly, but only as a prelude to being unceremoniously dropped, pile-driver style, on its rear end on the wharf. In an unlikely upright position, it tottered for a second or two, then toppled forwards onto the now level bridge just in the nick of time to have the whole grim cycle repeat again. I could see the driver’s anguished grimace in his strangely angled seat as the car lifted, looking like an astronaut awaiting lift-off. Although he was not strapped in, he was lying on his back with his knees in the air and hanging on desperately in an uncanny emulation of the last anxious minutes before ascent and orbit.

I decided I really did not want our bus to emulate that Beetle.

It was a considerably damaged Volkswagen that finally got aboard the ferry after two more attempts. The driver must have been a candidate for long term therapy and immediate strong sedation by then. I was sure he would have abandoned the attempt to get aboard altogether if there had been any way off the wharf other than via the ferry itself. In reality, the only alternative was a final despairing plunge into the green depths below. The only exit shoreward was hopelessly blocked by the snarl of waiting vehicles behind. Eventually, he made it across.

Suddenly it was our turn.

It was apparent however, that *our* driver was a pro. His studied and nonchalant demeanor said that he was not a man likely to be fazed by a simple Hollywood stunt like this. Boarding was all in a day’s work for him and not to be confused with a *real* problem. *This* was simply driving a bus load of helpless and terrified passengers at considerable speed over a plunging and bucking steel bridge onto the unstable slippery deck of a tiny wooden boat. Easy! His body language was all confidence and machismo, but I noticed he had been chain-smoking his aromatic clove-scented cigarettes ever since we first arrived on the dock.

The bus driver revved his engine until it howled in protest as he concentrated on gaging the movement of the heaving bridge. He was clearly expecting formula-one style performance from the under-powered diesel. Watching from behind in helpless fascination, I could see the tension ripple across his wiry shoulders as the bridge crashed up and down. After a few minutes of watching and calculating, he picked his moment to scream the engine and slip the clutch with an artist's precision.

Suddenly we lumbered forward and were already riding the heaving bridge, then almost immediately sliding sideways on wet timber. A bus in an uncontrolled skid on a rolling boat? No way, I thought to myself as I gripped the seat in front with white knuckles. With no film director in sight to record the feat, we slithered sideways in a satisfyingly ‘b-grade’ film-epic way, across a boat deck that could not possibly be big enough to hold us.

In the event, it was just big enough, but, by the time the other vehicles came aboard, there was absolutely no hope of getting out of the bus before eventual disembarkation on the far shore. The vehicles were packed in too tightly to open the doors. We all sat there, hot and uncomfortable, breathing exhaust fumes and feeling slightly seasick. But we were able to buy snacks and warmish cold drinks brought to us by agile teenage vendors. These people scrambled over the roofs of the adjoining vehicles like mountain goats and pushed sustenance through the windows to the trapped occupants. We were all just praying that it would be all over soon and that we would not sink in a sudden squall. Getting to a lifeboat - if indeed there were any - would have been out of the question.

To my own amazement, after about half an hour of this, I fell asleep.

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It was dark when I awoke. We were already disembarked without incident from the ferry and trundling down a narrow Javanese road lined with the thick trunks of big mature-growth rain forest trees on both its verges. Each huge old tree had a reflective white ring painted around it at a height of about a meter off the ground. In the absence of any kind of artificial lighting, the rings were intended to help the traffic along, but to my tired eyes, all that was achieved was a hypnotically disconcerting flicker of light and dark. Every few minutes the rhythmic light and dark flashing ceased momentarily as we passed through either a small town or a village in a forest clearing. The regularity and proximity of these population centers were a reminder that Indonesia is a very densely populated country, and Java is its most populous region. Around 200 million people live in Indonesia, and although these people are spread over more than three thousand islands in the archipelago, most of them are tiny. Java is packed with humanity.

Most of the houses we passed seemed not to have electricity in these distant back blocks and the flicker of oil lamps was everywhere. Much to my relief, around mid-evening we halted for a rest stop, a small and ancient-looking hostel looking like something from a movie set for a Robin Hood extravaganza. Guttering oil lamps lit a small and cobbled courtyard, entered through a large stone arch. Decorative carved wooden shutters over tiny windows of rough, distorting glass lent a medieval feel.

Inside this traveler’s rest, the theme park flavor was effortlessly maintained. Floors were rough timbers, polished only by the feet of those passing through. I was suffering terminal hunger pangs and found dinner being served from a series of giant cauldrons on a platform at one end of a large baronial looking hall. Meals were taken at long wooden trestle tables set down the length of the room. There were even a couple of chickens fossicking around for scraps under the trestles, a sight that heightened the notion of having suddenly arrived in Ye Merrie Olde Englande circa 1300 AD.

Despite all this old European ambiance, I was the only person present who was not Indonesian. What’s more, although fifty or sixty people were eating or chatting in the room, it was soon evident that no one was about to admit to speaking a word of English. However, after a short wait, a most welcome plate of rice with some sort of savory vegetables appeared and I was able to get a bottle of beer, even though not chilled. After an excellent game of charades with the waiter, I even finally made myself understood enough to obtain a spare bottle of beer to drink later on the bus. I also made a resolution to carry a phrase book in future. I was enjoying myself. Even so, now that I had a spare beer in my bag, I was a bit worried about where the next toilet stop might be.

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Jogjakarta was cheerful bustle. Paul, a Canadian met at the bus station next morning, dragged me off immediately to a hotel he had heard strongly recommended by another traveler. In the absence of any firm plans of my own, I was quite happy to drift along and follow his lead. On arrival at the hotel by trishaw, we were shown into a largish, medium clean room, with three single beds. Here we were told we would have to share, and that toilets and ablution facilities were down the hallway. Paul went to try the ablutions and came back twenty minutes later enthused about the beautiful old stone bathtub he had found.

Curious, I got him to show me. In a large and otherwise bare room was a huge raised stone tank of water, perhaps three meters across. It was quite shallow and perfectly clear, except for the remnant scummy bubbles of Paul’s soap, plus shampoo and conditioner.

‘You had a bath, in that?’ I asked.

‘Sure, it was great!’ He said.

It was the fresh-water drinking supply for the entire hotel.

He had even been wondering why there was no plug to let the dirty water out.

Fortunately, no one in the hotel found out they were actually drinking and cooking with Paul’s used bath water for the next few days and his breach of etiquette went unnoticed. This probably saved us the indignity of being hounded from the building. However I made a point of eating out and getting my own drinks elsewhere. I thought Paul was all right as a person, but I drew the line at drinking his bath water…

By way of a change of pace from crowded streets and city hustlers, we went on a volcano hunt after a couple of days kicking our heels in Jogjakarta. The Indonesian archipelago is a geologically unstable area where the drift of continents causes huge disturbances beneath the crust of the earth. Consequently, there are numerous volcanoes throughout the whole island of Java, and always a couple of dozen ‘active’ at any one time.

With high hopes of an apocalyptic scene of tall peaks spewing ash and lava, we hired a couple of motor bikes and headed for the hills. On the first afternoon we were disappointed, seeing only a few distant smoking hilltops. Then we managed to enlist the help of a local who brought us to a ridge top lookout. From this vantage point a thick stream of red and pink lava could be seen flowing down a shallow slope across a narrow valley in front of us. Although we where still two or three kilometers distant, it still felt uncomfortably close. The lava flow had the look of an unstoppable force. I had the feeling it would be quite hard to relax in any community living in the shadow of an active volcano.

Once the casual traveler has dutifully admired a few batik designs, and seen a few silver factories, viewing the manufacture of jewelry and clothing quickly palls as a spectator sport. Jogjakarta was fine, but not what I wanted to see right then. I did not want to fill my bags with baubles and go home. I wanted to take a train and head through the heartland of Java to the capital. And on the way, I wanted to take stock and make sense of some of the notes I had made so far.

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In the event, I did not do much sorting of notes and impressions on the train. My companions on the journey saw to that. They included a young Javanese woman of extraordinary talents, who said her ‘English’ name was Suze. I discovered later she had taken the train specifically to spend time chatting with the foreigners she knew would be aboard. Suze was brushing up on her English. Actually, her language skills needed no brushing up at all. In addition to speaking half a dozen of the local dialects, Suze was charming and personable and spoke almost perfectly accented English. She explained that she had received part of her education at a boarding school for girls in England. It was quickly evident that Suze came from an extraordinarily privileged background.

Her linguistic skills also extended to speaking excellent French. She mentioned casually that her European education had included some schooling in Paris. These early educational experiences had ended, naturally enough, with a year or so at finishing school in Switzerland. As if these academic accomplishments were not enough, she had a slender and delicate figure, exotically high Javanese cheekbones and the posture of a catwalk model. Suze also intimated that she was an aristocrat, a princess of sorts, although she was a little cagey about admitting this. She clearly was accustomed to a degree of teasing about her up-market family connections. I could not quite reconcile her cosmopolitan and patrician background with the picture of Javanese society I had been expecting. Nevertheless, here she was, most genuine, and obviously a member of the wealthy elite. She told me that she flew from her home in Jakarta to Bali most weekends when she was free. She liked the gregarious atmosphere there and the freedom of mingling with travelers from all over the world. She was the first Indonesian I had ever met who had been snow skiing.

Suze had been in Jogjakarta on family business and was now taking the train home. She was the most helpful of fellow travelers. She had the habit of getting her own way and did not hesitate to pull rank on railway officials and importuning vendors. Suze, it was clear, expected and received due deference from all lower echelons encountered en route, and with Suze, drinks and meals cost much less. The hapless salespeople took one glance at the steely glitter in her eyes and my own pathetic bargaining technique became quite redundant. On arrival in Jakarta she arranged my taxi and hotel accommodation with minimum fuss and financial outlay on my part. ‘But where are you staying?’ I called as she was driven away in her cab.

‘At the Sultan’s Palace!’ She said, ‘I’ll call you!’

Sure you will, I thought to myself as I settled in my hotel room, I am always being chased by exotic, cosmopolitan, millionaire beauties like you. I knew when I was severely outclassed. I needed at least a five-star hotel room and a chauffeured limo to compete. Pleasant and friendly though she was, a few hours talking to Suze made me feel like a combination penniless bum and rural hick, which compared to her, I probably was. I settled down to sort the scribbled notes of weeks of traveling, and put her quickly out of my mind. I wanted to make sure I had recorded events accurately before being overwhelmed with later impressions.

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# 4. A large penis guard can boost one’s social standing...

*Nightlife in Jakarta, Bandung, and onwards by light truck, trail biking and hiking in the Western Highlands, the oracle predicts, tropical ulcers*

Looking up from my notes after a day of sorting, I thought it was time to explore the Indonesian capital just beyond my hotel door. I began with a random foray into my immediate neighborhood. This part of Jakarta was a peculiarly Asian mix of palm-thatched shacks and skyscrapers. Street vendors with muscle-powered carts picked their way through traffic gridlock, and poverty and affluence were in radical opposition on every street corner. After my first brief and tentative exploration of the traffic snarl that seemed to be a main feature of the locale, there was a telephone message for me. Who, I wondered, might call me in Jakarta, or even know where I was?

It seemed that a certain aristocratic Javanese lady was planning on taking me to dinner tonight.

I dug out my ‘going out’ shirt and dress trousers for the occasion and managed to borrow an iron. What followed was only a partially successful attempt to remove the worst of the wrinkles in my clothing. These creases were as much a part of my attire as buttons and zips, accrued over weeks spent crushed and crumpled in a plastic bag at the bottom of a backpack.

I need not have bothered really. In most of the places we visited during the evening, clean jeans and a T-shirt seemed quite acceptable. Although I did notice that the jeans were designer label and heavy gold-chains and expensive wristwatches were *de rigeur* as accessories. I hoped, without any great confidence, that my own dress would pass for European chic, but I was very aware of the limitations of a backpack wardrobe.

The evening was a wonderful introduction to the city. There is absolutely no substitute for a friendly and knowledgeable local in a new town. Geographically, I was a little disoriented on this initial outing. We whirled from place to place so quickly I was never quite sure where we had landed. But there was a real feel of big-city nightlife. First stop was a bar in a high-rise international hotel with floodlit fountains at the front. A building obviously worth several tens of millions of dollars, but my companion dismissed it as ‘something to do with uncle.’ I was definitely moving in lofty social circles. We moved on to a lovely restaurant with a traditional gamelan orchestra. Gamelan is the once-heard never-forgotten tinkling percussive music of Indonesian stage and story-telling ritual. Later, there was jazz and a night-clubby bar with tots of Johnny Walker and a dizzy overview of the city lights. Suze knew all about the good life and was an excellent guide to her own city.

The following day I took up her offer of an escorted trip around town. We took a little three-wheeler cab and started with a tour of some antiques and crafts markets, with me easily filling the role of crass westerner:

‘But what is that thing, no *that* thing there, the strange looking curvy thing with the leather straps. The thing that looks like a deer’s horn?’

‘That is a traditional Javanese penis-guard, as worn by the tribal peoples,’

‘Oh, I see. But its over half a meter long!’

‘Yes, that’s about right,’

It’s not about right for me I thought. I was beginning to feel quite inadequate again.

I pondered briefly the idea of buying myself a generous length of penis-guard to boost my flagging self-esteem. But there *was* the consideration that this might seem just a trifle ostentatious among my home circle of friends and acquaintances.

In the afternoon, we took tea with some people from Bandung: among them several academics who turned the conversation to western versus traditional medicine. I heard that in the remoter western forests of Java, there still live people who even now have little or no direct contact with civilization. I was surprised at this because I had thought that the island of Java at least was all pretty much under the sway of the central administration in Jakarta. Not entirely true, my informant maintained, there were many traditional communities whose day to day lives were affected little by events in Jakarta. These small villages were all nominally subject to central rule, but in practice, their remoteness and mountain inaccessibility isolated them.

Some of these traditional communities were the homes of traditional healers, health magicians with amazing powers of healing I was told. It would be a journey of several days on foot through thick rain forest to access one of these areas. Part of that distance might be covered by motorbike, but weather would be a factor, river crossings were sometimes impassable after rain and some tracks were subject to landslides.

I could see the trip taking shape before my eyes.

‘But these people, are they really magicians?’ I asked.

‘Yes, they are really magicians, they live close to a village called Kenakes, and they *do* have fabulous powers!’

This was an extraordinary statement coming from an educated city-dweller.

I decided to go and have a look for myself.

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The name of my guide, as close as I could pronounce it, was Eiwa. He was about twenty years old, and he wanted very much to hold my hand. Anyone who has traveled very much in Asia will have noticed in many places the unabashed way that grown men walk hand in hand. This is a culturally quite acceptable, even an expected thing to do. After two days of travel and amiable chat, Eiwa had decided that our relationship had reached the hand-holding stage. And nothing was going to stop him: except possibly my reticence arising from my own cultural prejudices.

I told myself I was harboring a silly bias in being so reluctant; Wasn't I the one with the absurd cultural hang-ups? I told myself sternly that Eiwa was a good fellow and there was absolutely no reason to offend him and his cultural traditions. I was effectively rejecting his friendship by refusing to hold his hand. It was his tradition and this was his country.

But when it came down to it, I could not do it - not really. Eiwa’s hand would slip slyly into mine and I would make an effort to respond appropriately, but the devils of my own cultural inhibitions were always lurking. Within a minute or so, I felt compelled to drop his hand on some pretext or other. A minute or two later again, his hand would be back in mine and the cycle would recommence. Eiwa was as incapable of walking by my side without holding hands, as I was of actually holding hands. It was sometimes an uncomfortable impasse.

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Before I set out on this trip I had to face unexpected opposition my plans had created among my newfound circle of friends and acquaintances in Jakarta.

It was too dangerous they objected, I would get sick, I might be attacked, it was primitive, it was uncomfortable, and people had disappeared for ever in those remote areas in fairly recent times. They were urbanites through and through, shuddering at the thought of the primitive conditions and hardships of the countryside only a short distance from their luxuriously appointed apartments in the city.

To me, it seemed like a reasonable journey and I was not even traveling very far from the large regional capital of Bandung. Surely it could not be that remote and dangerous. But yes! I was assured it was. I was touched when Suze, the epitome of sophistication, told me she would consult her personal fortune-teller for me. She added that she would also have her religious mentor bless this ill-conceived trip if I was determined to proceed.

It all seemed a lot of fuss about nothing.

The following day Suze informed me that precautions had been taken. She was able to assure me that I ‘probably would not actually die’ on this reckless trip. However she solemnly advised that I needed the prayers of a virgin to help me on my way. She also said her oracle predicted I would probably become quite sick while on the road. She told this whole unlikely story so earnestly that I had to bite my tongue and curb an almost overwhelming urge to mock these superstitions. This was clearly important to her and it would have been rude in the extreme to poke fun at genuinely held beliefs, especially considering her strenuous efforts on my behalf. Suze may have been very European in her sophistication and social presentation, but her trust in her oracle was pure Javanese.

In this strange situation, I tried to proceed with as much tact as possible. I inquired cautiously as to exactly how I was to arrange to receive the prayers of a virgin? She told me this was already in hand. I was thankfully relieved of the task of organizing a Javanese virgin hunt. Also organized was my guide, I would meet him in Bandung, where he was a student at the university. Even a friendly place to stay had been considered and arranged. Onward transport in the rough hill country had been dealt with efficiently, and good solid Japanese trail bikes had been arranged for the first part of the jungle trip. Almost every detail down to the daily rate I should pay my guide was covered in their plan.

I was staggered by the degree of thought and effort that had gone into all these preparations on my behalf. All this care and attention came from a group of people I had only known casually for a few days. Left to my own devices, I would simply have hopped onto the first bus or train heading in the right general direction, and played the rest by ear. I did my best to express my appreciation as I left on my foray into the wilder regions of the countryside, but I was sure that all of this attention was quite unnecessary.

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The trip was routine, if a little uncomfortable until Bandung was reached. The bus was cramped with miserably hard seating. The roads were sometimes very rough. From Bandung, where I met Eiwa as planned, we traveled westwards in a small truck through increasingly mountainous jungle country. The track was mainly dirt after an introductory section of good bitumen, although with paved sections near the settlements. It was a hot and steamy trip. As we continued to climb into hill country, the bridges thrown across the ravines along the route became more and more basic in construction. After a while they were mostly formed by the simple expedient of placing a pair of huge thick logs to span the hazard. Other smaller logs laid across and between these main bearers formed a bumpy and very irregular surface that could nevertheless withstand a considerable weight.

Sometimes, thick and rough-hewn planks were fastened onto the bridging logs at approximately the right wheel width for a light truck and smaller branches placed between these roughly parallel logs. Sometimes, the whole temporary-looking contraption was covered with earth in an attempt to make it approximately smooth and level. The intent was good, but the earth washed away in anything but a light downpour, and it was raining today.

At one crossing, a truck had dropped both front wheels through a hole in a bridge created when a log shifted. Now the small rig was stuck, tilted forwards and front wheels dangling over a drop of perhaps twenty meters to a rushing river below. It looked precarious, but there was no real danger of it falling; the hole that was big enough to swallow both front wheels would never allow the whole vehicle to pass through.

With the assistance of a towrope and the passengers of both trucks working in unison, the truck was manhandled out of its predicament. This done, the heavy log was heaved back into place and wedged with smaller tree branches before we continued slowly. There were many washouts along the winding mountainous sections of the road and our truck was sometimes heeled over like a yacht under sail. The ‘road’ was often little more than a steep slope of loose scree.

At one point on this mountain section, we came around a sharp corner a little faster than was wise and literally fell into a hole over a meter deep. It was an unexpected hazard created by a very recent landslide. Here we instantly killed a goat unlucky enough to be standing in the crater at the time. Little fuss was made of this small accident; the carcass was simply thrown to one side while the truck negotiated a laborious way back onto the road proper. All passengers got out once again in the rain to push from behind. With a little help from its passengers, the lightweight truck was a quite capable all-terrain vehicle despite not having four-wheel drive.

Still, with all the stops and interruptions, our average speed was something well under thirty kilometers an hour. It was early the next afternoon when we reached the literal end of the road. From here onwards the tracks were for walking or trail biking. We would travel on foot to reach the bike collection point.

Eiwa and I set out walking on a pleasant broad pathway through a forested valley, passing through a series of attractive small villages. I had been warned that it was necessary in these parts not only to report my presence to police stations en route, but also to call upon the headman of each village to pay my respects. I was very glad to have Eiwa along to help me with these formalities. Few people spoke any English in these rural regions and even fewer were accustomed to dealing with foreigners. Without Eiwa's knowledge and translation skills, I would almost inevitably make some gaffe that could prejudice the trip. The local officials appeared all-powerful on their home turf and the protocols had to be respected.

The police stations were all different; in some our presence was given only cursory acknowledgment before a disinterested officer sent us on our way. Sometimes it was clear they wondered why we bothered to call at all. At others they made a great show of formal interview, and of carefully scrutiny of my passport. laborious details were copied onto report forms and notes taken on a multitude of responses to questions painstakingly translated by Eiwa. Not infrequently we had to wait a considerable period while this was accomplished.

The encounters with the village headmen all followed the same general pattern: firstly a ritual greeting, on the porch of his house. We were admitted, or sometimes led to a shady seat outdoors. I gave away packets of cigarettes on the advice of Eiwa and we all drank a glass of water together. A child, or sometimes a veiled and self-effacing woman who never spoke, brought the water. Following this predictable beginning, the same grave questions were repeated. Where had I come from? Why was I here? Did I intend to stay? Would I be returning this way later? Sometimes the headmen were genuinely interested in my replies and wanted to chat, sometimes they were indifferent and simply wanted to get it over with and the quicker the better.

Although we had only a few kilometers to walk to our overnight stop, it was dark well before we reached it. Hurricane lamps were burning in the windows of the small houses and flimsy huts as we passed. There was little or no electricity in most of these tiny villages and the night crowded in on them quickly. I was reluctant to abandon each pool of light and sociable group that marked some pleasant evening festivity or relaxation.

We were to stay in the home village of Eiwa’s uncle, but just before we arrived, a sudden torrential downpour left us totally sodden, despite our vain attempts to use giant palm leaves as umbrellas. But we were within reach of our destination, a pleasant wooden house with plaited palm-leaf walls, a wide and shady veranda, and a thatched roof. The house was set in a grove of towering rain forest trees beneath a high, wooded ridge. We squelched up to the door damply and miserably and were made welcome and at home immediately by Eiwa’s family.

The uncle and aunt were a retired schoolteacher and his wife. Also present were several other members of the extended family whose precise kinship I never quite understood. A good proportion of their staple diet was the banana, or perhaps they were simply eating their way through a seasonal glut. For whatever reason, it was ubiquitous; Eiwa’s family served both sweet and savory varieties, the savory being used as a vegetable with almost every meal produced. A dish of rice with savory crisp dried banana was brought to us almost immediately. We ate by candlelight while Eiwa’s uncle supervised the setting out of our wet gear to dry and asked the usual questions about the journey in his meticulously formal school teacher’s English. Even my passports and travelers checks were slightly soggy. The photo was coming loose from my British passport and I made a mental note to glue it back in more firmly and keep these valuables in plastic bags when traveling through the rain forest in future. I didn't realize the unfortunate consequence this mishap with my passport would have later.

Eiwa’s uncle simply could not comprehend the enormity of a trip from Australia to Europe. He wanted to know what it would cost, where I was from, what I did for a living and how I had managed to accumulate the huge amount of money he imagined would be required to successfully complete a journey such as this. Most of all he wondered: why was I coming *here*? I did my best to answer his questions candidly, feeling all the while like an awkward rich kid and spoilt member of an undeserving elite.

I had taken a number of casual jobs in Australia to fund my traveling, I told him truthfully. I had been born in England, but now I lived and worked in Australia. He wanted to know how much money 'casual' jobs paid in Australia. I gleaned from our conversation that the very least weekly pay I ever earned at some unskilled job was still more than Eiwa’s uncle could earn in a month. This was despite his professional status as a teacher and his years of experience. I found this obscurely embarrassing.

He told me sadly that in his entire thirty-year plus career; he had managed to save just $1500. I was compelled to admit under his questioning that I had relatively easily saved twice this amount in under a year, mostly by doing unimportant and unskilled work. I was looking forward to changing the subject, and was relieved that we all went to bed early to avoid unnecessary waste of candles and oil lamps. The house had no electricity.

I awoke in the morning feeling distinctly seedy, and with a prediction ringing in my memory, *‘You will be quite sick, but will probably not actually die.’* Outside the plaited palm-leaf shutters, a troupe of monkeys made their noisy way through the treetops. I could plainly hear the sound of the river nearby, though I had not noticed it the night before. My stomach felt liquid and unsteady this morning and I also had a headache. A couple of mosquito bites on my legs seemed to have become infected in the humid jungly atmosphere. The bites were swollen a fiery red with yellowish centers indicating an infection and the potential for more trouble.

Eiwa took me down to the river for morning ablutions. This stream was both water supply and sewer for this small village community. Given the absence of conventional toilets or even septic systems, the accepted toilet practice was to squat discreetly in the shallows, raising one’s sarong while sinking into the water and maintaining a modest degree of decorum at all times. This trick was considerably more difficult for someone wearing shorts or trousers and this was something I had not considered when getting dressed. I cursed myself for lack of forethought. The only way to maintain the required degree of decency was to wade in a little deeper and effectively, to undress underwater.

This was a difficult feat to perform in a fast moving stream, and I ran the risk of losing my footing and being swept away. It was an undignified prospect, which lent itself well to an imaginary tabloid headline. Various possible examples came inconsequentially to mind as I waded in: ‘BARE-ASS FOREIGNER SWEPT AWAY WHILE ATTEMPTING FIRST UNDERWATER CRAP,’ ‘BADLY DRESSED TOURIST PAYS ULTIMATE PRICE FOR TOILET FOLLY.' Dangerous and ridiculous situations often inspire a lurid potential headline in me. I managed well enough in the event, but as we walked back to shore, my queasy stomach rebelled. I vomited quite suddenly and unexpectedly into the riverside bushes. I felt weak and told Eiwa I did not feel like continuing our journey today. As an afterthought I asked him if he could get me a cheap sarong as soon as possible, I had the feeling I might need several more trips to the river before the day was out.

Back at the house, Eiwa’s family was all concern for my welfare, but I was confident I would be fine after a day or so of rest. I took my trip notes, and my *Guide to South-East Asia* out to the veranda, and prepared to spend the day lazing.

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Eiwa brought me back from feverish dozing to the Javanese present a few hours later with a flask of hot black tea and some crispy dried flakes of banana as an afternoon snack. It was a sultry day with a strong hint of rain in the air. In the deep shadows under the canopy of the tall rain-forest trees there was barely a breath of air. Somewhere above my head on the veranda a noisy gecko was calling at regular intervals from his hideout in the thatch of the roof.

‘What do you call that animal?’ I asked Eiwa, idly as I put away my notebook.

‘Tolchok,’ he responded, and mimicked the noise, ‘Tok, tok, tok, TOK, TOK, - TOLCHOK!’ It was a remarkable imitation of the local gecko.

‘Are you feeling better now?’ he asked.

‘Yes, I am thank you’

‘That is very good,’ he said, ‘Let's go and get the bikes!’

We got our bikes and left the following morning, I had recovered from my stomach upset, but the small festering wounds on my legs were not healing in this damp and hot climate. I was probably a little run down I decided; perhaps I needed to improve my diet when we reached the city again. It was painful to sit on the bike at first because one of the inflamed and septic wounds was at the very top of my thigh and chafed against the seat. But once settled, the trip was still a delight.

We proceeded slowly, picking our way from valley to valley down narrow jungle tracks. Sometimes we scrambled up a steep hill, building up speed to tackle the slope at the bottom and hitting the incline with engine gunning. Often we crossed a fast-flowing shallow stream. In water knee-deep or less, we simply forded in low gear and put our trust in lots of throttle to force the bikes through. Bigger waterways were a balancing act, riding the bikes across rough bridges made of logs or massive timbers shaped with ax and chain saw.

Around midday we lunched in a small clearing with a few scattered huts. Here, while eating dessert bananas, I saw the largest insect I have ever seen. It was a giant millipede, with a brown metallic gleam and quite evil-looking. It was as long as my forearm and perhaps as thick as my wrist. I called Eiwa to tell me about it, but it disappeared by the time he strolled over. Following lunch, we were only able to take the bikes as far as the next village. Then there was a ridge to be climbed in a series of high rocky steps and it was too rough for bikes. Eiwa said we had a choice. We could camp the night here, and have an easy back and forth trip to our destination tomorrow, or we could do a forced hike to our destination this afternoon and save a day.

Disappointingly, we could only visit the healer village during the daylight hours, we were not permitted to stay overnight. This was the firm message from the last headman spoken to and meant that our long journey would end with only a cursory look around the destination. I thought hard about what to do in this situation. The infection in my legs was getting worse. I needed antibiotics, but I would probably only get them in a major population center. This meant several more days retracing our steps. I decided it would be wiser to go in immediately and save time. My reasoning was, if the infection spread, I may not be well enough tomorrow and it would be an extra day before I could get any medical help.

We hiked to the ridge and set a good pace down the other side. The villages we passed now were truly remote, many of the people almost naked. In some cases they seemed quite shocked to see us. The women and children encountered on this route all fled at first sight of us. We could sometimes glimpse them hiding behind trees in the fringing jungle. The men held their ground as we approached; they also held a hand close to the large curved dagger they all carried at their waists. The accepted greeting was a smile accompanied by a slight bow, hands clasped in front like a pious churchgoer. This is the ‘namaste’ salutation, seen in many Asian countries. I grinned and greeted like a maniac, and was glad that I still had nearly two hundred cigarettes to give away as proof of my good intentions.

After walking for an hour or two, we saw a man carrying his daughter piggyback to see the healers in the village up ahead. The little girl was about eight years old and had an enormous tumor of some kind on her spine. The huge lump was just at the base of her neck and almost as big as her head. I had never seen anything like it in my life: it looked terrible.

‘Can the healers cure a condition like this?’ I asked the man through Eiwa.

‘Oh yes!’ he smiled, his faith absolute. He had carried his daughter on his back for three days to reach this point. I handed over cigarettes and we continued on our way. When we finally did enter the small village it was anti-climactic, a cluster of basic wooden huts by a fast moving river in a deep ravine. We were ignored at first, then two older men approached, courteous, but not very forthcoming. Yes, they were healers they admitted, but they could not, or would not, discuss their work.

Here was a glass of water: had I come far?

But how did they heal? I persisted. We squatted in the shade with the two men, chickens scraped and clucked around us but there was no sign of either women or children.

Oh, it was just something they did, where was I going next? Would I like another glass of water?

After two hours of this polite stonewalling, I knew we would have to leave, or be caught on the walking trail in the dark. We left. We had seen nothing remotely magical or even out of the ordinary, nor had anything been revealed about the abilities of these healers. We had simply reached the end of our tether and had to return. The man with the crippled daughter was talking with one of the old men as we left. He obviously believed. I would have dearly loved to see how she fared.

Eiwa and I made quick time back to the bikes and camped at sunset in the village where we had left them. In the morning I awoke stiff and sore and feeling pretty terrible. I examined my legs carefully, my mosquito bites were no longer mosquito bites, they were sores oozing infected matter, bruised and bluish around the edges and excruciatingly painful. They were now ready for promotion to tropical ulcers. All I had by way of medication was a hopelessly inadequate tube of antiseptic cream and a packet of paracetamol. The prediction on my health on this trip seemed more serious now than it had in Jakarta. *‘I would be quite sick, but would probably not actually die...’*

I climbed back on the bike with some difficulty, this time I was not able to settle down and enjoy the trip. We simply concentrated on making the best possible time back to the village where Eiwa’s uncle was waiting on his veranda. A quick check with him confirmed my fears. No doctor was available right now though one did visit occasionally. I decided to get back to Jakarta immediately and by the most direct route possible.

My return trip was organized efficiently by Eiwa, but I felt guilty for running out on him in so perfunctory a way. I had planned and hoped for a more leisurely stay and return trip. In addition to the agreed fee, I gave him all my remaining cigarettes plus a T-shirt he really wanted. I knew that Eiwa also wanted paperback books to help him with his English, so I dug deep in my pack and left him my unread copy of Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. I also promised to send him a copy of *Playboy* if I could, this was a magazine he had heard of but never actually seen.

The trip back over the rough roads was a painful nightmare, when I ran out of painkillers there was nothing for it but to hold on. The ulcers oozed through my jeans, staining the denim and making the fabric stick painfully to my legs. It was not until we had almost reached Jakarta the following day that a thought suddenly struck me. I had been in a village of traditional healers, why was it that it never even crossed my mind to ask them to help me? I was feeling feverish and pondering this question as we arrived in the city. I considered myself open-minded, now I decided that my basic skepticism must run a little deeper than I thought.

Back in Jakarta, I had two series of painful injections of antibiotics into the muscles of both thighs. The bruising alone kept me stiff and sore for a week. I also took a course of capsules that finally checked the infection, although the ulcerated scarring on my legs was to be permanent. Healing was the number one priority and I made a point of eating well and taking care of myself. I pottered around the city for a few hours daily when I started to feel better, but I saw my Javanese friends only on a few brief occasions during this recuperation. Our one trip to the nightspots was not a success. I felt still too weak to really enjoy the proceedings.

When I did finally begin to feel better and started planning the next stage of the trip, Suze was unavailable to say ‘Good-bye and I told you so.’ I called, but she was away again on her travels and not expected back for at least another week. I was disappointed, but left a farewell message and decided it was time to see if Harrison had found himself a new girl in Singapore.

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*Eiwa and his extended family at their home in Java. Eiwa far right - yours truly far left and at the back...(Photo JP)*

# 5. I can’t tell the girls from the boys anymore..!

## Singapore, Bugis Street,long-distance taxi to Malaysia, Malacca, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Georgetown, the Lo Kok Hotel, the international express from Butterworth

Harrison said he had a new girlfriend, but was unforthcoming about the new relationship. Clearly, the course of his latest true love was running somewhat less than smoothly.

Somehow, I was not surprised. My plane from Jakarta arrived early evening Singapore time and I caught a cab directly from the airport to our arranged meeting place at the Shang Onn Hotel. Harrison was not only checked in, I actually bumped into him in reception. I showed him a couple of the ulcerated scars acquired in Java and explained with suitable modestly how heroic I had been with regard to the intense pain experienced.

Not unexpectedly, he was singularly unimpressed by these exploits. He was on his way to Bugis Street to eat at one of the outdoor restaurants dotting the pavements there. He wanted to know if I was coming or not, as it was imperative that he had a beer immediately. His intention was have a couple of drinks and consider the evening’s agenda while watching the nightly parade of bizarre street entertainment that made Bugis Street famous the world over.

‘Its better than a cabaret,’ he assured me, ‘You are going to love it!’

After I checked in at the hotel and dropped off my pack, we walked through a tangle of streets swarming with street vendors and redolent with the spicy aromas of a huge variety of food. One thing surprised me immediately, no less than three dealers sidled close during those first few minutes and inquired if we would like to buy some heroin or other drugs. I was amazed.

It is a hanging offense to traffic heroin in Singapore and local authorities sentence offenders to death regularly. The judiciary can also order severe whippings for lesser offenses. Despite this, dealers were out in force. ‘Do they like living dangerously here or what?’ I asked Harrison. He only grinned.

‘You ain’t seen nothin’ yet’ he promised cheerfully.

Bugis Street was a bit overwhelming at first sight. The atmosphere was a buzz of music and street theater mingled with the smell of cooking and the hiss of hot oil in the wok. Swarms of people obviously thought this street was *the* place to be. There were trail veterans - backpackers and hippies galore - and several contingents of more conventional foreign tourists. There was much eating, drinking and chatting at outdoor tables and a continual passing procession of prostitutes and transvestites hoping to attract custom. They did this mostly by parading up and down the crowded street dressed in all their considerable and exotic finery. There were hordes of hustlers and market stalls selling everything from fake designer clothing to pirated music albums. I sat down and quickly accumulated a small band of courtiers who wanted to proposition me on a dozen different topics.

Experimentally, I tried just saying ‘yes’ for a while. Very soon I was drinking a beer while getting a shoeshine from a boy squatting under the table, and simultaneously playing noughts and crosses for money with another young entrepreneur. I discovered that this child was a genius at hustling money. He would force the pace of the game faster and faster until his opponent lost concentration for a second and made a mistake, then he would collect his winnings and start again.

While all this was happening I was also having my fortune told with the aid of a complicated birth chart. The chart was a work of art, sprouting multiple branches before my eyes and the wisdom I was hearing was indisputable (you have traveled very far - you have a long way to go...). A pimp appeared and placed a photo album in front of me while meantime, our dinner was underway and sizzling in a wok a few meters away. Every few minutes another vendor-hustler would approach with a pitch for another novel product.

While all this was happening to me, Harrison was not being ignored. He was drinking beer, playing checkers for money, contemplating the wisdom of having a street haircut and fending off another pimp. I thumbed through the photo album before our food arrived. The first thing that struck me was how organised and methodical this pimp’s enterprise was. The photos and descriptions in the album were all under clear plastic so that grubby fingerprints would not mark them. In many cases the photo-captions were in six or more languages. The inscriptions had all been typed in English, Chinese, and Japanese and neatly pasted in. All the information in the folder was in two dialects of Chinese, plus English, French, German, Bahasa Malay, and occasionally, Japanese.

Many of the pictures were of very pretty young Asian and Eurasian girls, Chinese mainly, but with a sprinkling of Malaysians and Indians among them. Most shots were portrait style: the girl posed naked to the waist and either smiling, or looking suitably enigmatic. But as if by way of emphasizing a point, every page also had a sprinkling of landscape oriented hard-core shots. In these shots the girls' eyes were often glazed or closed and the spread-eagle close ups were much more crudely anatomical in content. Allure had not been top of the agenda for these shots. The pimp tapped these photos eagerly and stated the obvious,

‘All real girls!’ he said.

Harrison leaned over for a look,

‘Bet you anything those pretty ones with the frilly pants on are all blokes,’ he commented. ‘All those legs-in-the air shots are taken with a different camera - look, the quality of the color is not so good. These are just cheap snapshots, maybe Polaroid’s or some kind of instant camera, the others are posed pics taken on a decent 35 millimeter camera.’

The pimp denied this assessment angrily, but I thought Harrison was probably right. Singapore is notorious for its good-looking transvestites, a breed always attempting to be more feminine than the real girls they were competing with. The street in front of us was full of them and sexual ambiguity was a way of life in this street. The pimp’s meat-on-a-slab close ups only succeeded in making the point that *those* particular shots were of genuine girls.

No doubt an unprepared customer could get a nasty shock when he turned his attention from the delicate features and enhanced breasts of his escort, only to find that the contents of her lacy knickers were decidedly masculine. Presumably, by that time it would be too late, the money having already changed hands. ‘*Please choose carefully* - *the management regrets being unable to offer refunds…’*

Our pimp could see that we were wasting his time and was annoyed we had made disparaging remarks and questioned the feminine bona fides of his ‘genuine girls’. He stalked off in search of better prospects with his album under his arm. After he took his huffy leave, I learnt why Harrison was so unforthcoming concerning his latest relationship. It should not have come as a complete surprise that the reason Harrison had a ‘girlfriend’ problem yet again was precisely this uncertainty on gender brought about by the rampant local transvestitism.

‘Its giving me nightmares,’ he admitted in an aggrieved tone, ‘I meet this girl, and she is nice, I mean she is *bloody* nice!’

He leaned forward to emphasize his point: ‘In fact she is not less than one hundred and ten percent pure honey. We have a couple of drinks, she has a great body, a great sense of humor, she chats, she can dance and I know she is just waiting for me to make a move. Then I think to myself, suppose “she” is really a “he”? And I freeze... I can’t tell the girls from the boys any more!’

‘Have you tried asking her?’ I said.

Harrison was less than pleased with my suggestion.

‘Oh sure, brilliant, I can just picture it now,’ he said caustically.

‘We’ll get to the romantic hands-on bit, have a drink, kiss maybe; although even that is a problem with the big question just hanging there. Then I look her in the eye and say: ‘Darling, before we go any further, I hope you don’t mind me asking you a personal question. Um, its a bit difficult for me, but I just really have to know if you are hiding something from me. Something I *really* should know about... Something like... Well you know the sort of things a girl likes to hide from a boy... A large hairy scrotum and a huge dong for instance...?’

I had to admit it; the question was not that easy to ask. On the other hand, I also found it was not that easy to take either the question or the problem very seriously. Life was too short.

‘Don’t worry about it then,’ I told him breezily, ‘Why sweat it now? If the worst comes to the worst, just tell her that you could not possibly go out with any girl who has a dick bigger than yours. Then run from the room screaming and seek professional help. They can do marvelous things in group therapy these days. My guess is, you will be off the valium and back facing the world with a smile on your face and a song in your heart in no time.’

‘Oh ha bloody ha,’ said Harrison. He was obviously not to be comforted.

There is really not a great deal of interest in Singapore aside from the spectacle and character of Bugis Street unless you are a person who enjoys acres of shopping precincts. I am most definitely not. The city, which seemed to be just one huge department store, palled for me after only a few short days. It was just K-Mart and Woolworth on an epic scale - and I was bored. Bugis Street, which at least had the saving grace of some character of its own, was already living on borrowed time. It had already been condemned as just too sleazy by the squeaky-clean Singapore government and would eventually be bulldozed. Ironically, once it was gone, the tourists would quickly miss it - and the government be forced to reinvent it in a sanitized form to at least give visitors an alternative to shopping.

For now at least, Bugis Street was *the* place. On the advice of other trail people met around Singapore, I bought a few cheap wristwatches to use as gifts or trading items later in the trip. Harrison was still moodily pursuing his dangerous liaison and procrastinating on asking his big question, so I arranged to see him in Penang should he feel like it, in a couple of weeks time. My own two meetings with his beloved were inconclusive in determining gender. I told Harrison the diplomatic truth: she was attractive, intelligent, and totally feminine in her looks. He was not to be fobbed off by this sort of hedging.

‘But are you certain she is not a transvestite?’ he asked me.

‘Yes’ I told him, exasperated at being perpetually tangled in the details of his love life, ‘I’m sure.’

‘How sure?’ he persisted.

‘Completely and totally sure,’ I told him. ‘In fact, I am so sure; I would bet your girlfriend’s balls on it.’

Then I packed my bag and took a long-distance taxi across the Singapore border to Malacca in Malaysia.

Even as I was getting into my taxi the hustlers were still whispering into my ear: ‘Heroin!’ they said, ‘Good smack..! Hash..! LSD..! Grass..! Coke..! Speed..! Real girls..! Boys..! Whisky..! Cheap cassettes..! Best prices..!’

That was the only difference the threat of the death penalty seemed to make; the dealers did not shout, they whispered hoarsely. I was not listening. The only thing I really wanted was to get out of the city for a while.

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Malacca was initially disorienting. The taxi driver dropped me off after sunset near a hotel he had recommended, but once I was on the pavement, I did not like its run-down and unwelcoming look at all. I decided to walk instead towards what I thought must be the center of town, but it was soon clear I must have taken the wrong road. Far from approaching any busy central business district, I was heading instead into a sparse and dingy old outer suburb. It began to rain steadily and there were no cabs. I was quite lost when a cheerful Chinese man in a white singlet vest beckoned from a doorway and asked me if I would like some good food and good cheap and clean lodgings for the night. The offer sounded just right to me.

I followed him into an unprepossessing looking building, but it was neat and dry inside and there was an appetizing aroma of spicy fish cooking somewhere nearby. The tiny dining room featured an eye-catchingly lurid variety of colored and patterned plastic tablecloths. All those primary colors and different bold patterns clashed horribly with red paper lanterns and garish cheap prints on the walls, but the food was very good. After a plateful of delicious fish and rice and a couple of drinks, I was shown to a room on the first floor of the hotel.

I discovered that all the rooms in this hotel had one peculiar feature in common: the dividing walls separating them did not reach the ceiling. I could peer quite easily into both my neighbors' rooms by standing on tiptoe. Each of them gave me a friendly wave as I did so. As if that was not odd enough, the walls also did not reach the floor. They were simply thin plywood partitions extending from around knee to about head height. As a consequence of this outlandish architecture, there was a cool breeze; but every cough and grunt of the other patrons, even from several rooms away, was clearly audible. I was also very aware that it would be an easy matter for a thief to sneak over or under a partition to steal valuables.

It was evident this was not a hotel normally frequented by foreigners. Except for myself, the clientèle was exclusively male and exclusively Chinese. The rooms and bed linen were clean and hot tea was provided in a small vacuum flask. It was quite comfortable. Being slightly paranoid about such things, I decided to sleep with my money and passports, otherwise I felt the place was reasonably secure. I settled down to read and drink some tea. It was about a half-hour later that I heard whispered female voices in the corridor. Within a few more minutes I detected a distinct air of excitement and anticipation abroad on this floor of the hotel.

At first I was not sure of the cause of the growing commotion at the far end of the corridor, but soon it was clear. Two or more of the local ‘working girls’ were systematically working their way along the corridor and propositioning every man in the hotel, and it seemed that business was booming.

After a few more minutes, I decided that there must actually be four girls in all, working as an organized team. Two girls on each side of the central corridor worked their way methodically through every one of the rooms. The operation began at the far end of the building and proceeded swiftly as the girls scuttled from room to room under the partitions. Long before they reached my room, the place was in an uproar - impatient men were standing on chairs to peer over the partitions and catch a glimpse of the action, and much ribald commentary was being exchanged between rooms. While one girl of each pair was busy with a customer (and each encounter took only a few minutes) the other would scurry through under the partition to take the next man in line. If a customer took too long, the other girl could double her take by taking two customers in a row.

There was little finesse in it. Speed was of the essence in this moneymaking venture, and the overall effect was of a noisy ‘Mexican wave’ of hurried sex, which came rippling swiftly down the corridor towards me. Before long, the springs in the next room were squeaking away and a few seconds later a skinny young Chinese girl slipped under my partition. She was already naked; the action so swift and furious she was not even bothering to dress between bouts. She was carrying a crumpled cotton dress and a purse in one hand. She hesitated for a fraction of a second when she saw that I was a foreigner. She had not been expecting that.

‘I fuck Americans good,’ she said, having sized me up.

‘I bet you do,’ I said, and then somewhat lamely for want of a suitably witty reply, ‘But I’m not American.’

She was quite attractive, but any slight disposition I may have had to say ‘Ok what the hell...’ was immediately dismissed by the circumstances. To my certain knowledge she had just had unprotected sex with at least four men, the last one not more than a minute ago.

The bedsprings ceased two rooms away, and a second or two later the other girl in the team slipped under the partition. She was also a young, slim Chinese girl. Naked and carrying her dress and a purse to hold the takings for the night, she could have been sister to the first girl. She glanced briefly our way, and seeing that her friend apparently had the situation in hand, crossed my room in a few steps and ducked nimbly under the partition into the next room. The squeaking of bedsprings started again almost immediately. My neighbor must have been ready and waiting with cash in hand.

The girl facing me realized she was losing time, and time was money.

‘You want? Yes? No?’ she said firmly.

‘No,’ I said.

‘Ok' she shrugged and was gone, bypassing the excitement in the next room to take the next eager customer in line. In a little more than half an hour it was all over. Ten minutes after that the only noises to be heard were rhythmic snoring. The girls had methodically administered their sleeping tonic to everyone but me...

I wondered if this was something they did regularly, or if it was some extraordinary and never to be repeated circumstance. I tried to ask a couple of the men the next morning, but no one seemed to have enough English to answer my questions. The apparent novelty of my presence in the hotel told me I was some way off the normal beat for visitors in this city. I checked out and went to look for a quieter hotel.

Perhaps it was my mood or perhaps the weather. It was raining all the time and Malacca was dark, gloomy and curiously impregnable. Wherever I went, I tended to wish I were somewhere else. Rain streamed down drabness: down old buildings, down cars, and down me. On another day, everything might have looked fresh and appealing. Today it was slightly damp and depressing and the whole town slightly repellent. Malacca was also the start of real ‘sleaze hotel’ country, from here onwards for the next several weeks of traveling, almost all the cheap hotels I stayed in performed a dual function as brothels.

The traveler’s advantage when faced with the dull and undesirable is mobility. If your mood does not fit the place, you can abandon the place. I abandoned Malacca for a leisurely trip northward to Penang via Kuala Lumpur and felt better for it immediately. It was a delight to be simply running away. I took a bus up the coast and relaxed, just let the country unwind and stream by the window. The bus was full of backpackers from the US and Europe and arrival in Kuala Lumpur was the signal for them to scatter in all directions. Most said they would not be staying, they were passing through to more interesting destinations like Penang and Phuket…

The big-city feel of Kuala Lumpur surprised me, I had expected something altogether sleepier and small town in ambience, but the only part I had ever seen before was the airport. I had not intended to spend much time in the city myself. This was just a stopover. In the event, I changed money in a cavernous chrome and marble hall and felt scruffy and out of place in all that tidiness and order. This gave me the motivation I needed to shave, shower, and generally spruce up and look respectable.

Having gone to all that effort I thought it was only right and proper to do the sights and nightlife, but in two days of pottering around, all I saw was more city. I chatted to cafe owners, taxi drivers and a few fellow travelers. I made the mistake of sprinkling a white powder on a meal thinking it was salt, only to find that it was actually monosodium glutamate. But nothing exciting really happened. It is the people encountered who represent the essence of a place: and I was not meeting anyone very interesting. I was just a little disappointed that Kuala Lumpur was something of a dud for me after my promising arrival in the city and a lacklustre Malacca. I was sure Penang would be better, and it was.

I arrived in a thunderstorm to be hustled into a covered trishaw by a skinny chauffeur with a plastic raincoat and bare feet. As he pedaled us down the drenched and crowded streets, he offered to be my personal reserved cab driver for the duration of my stay. I considered this and responded with a maybe - if he could first find me a good hotel and if I could afford his fees. His reply to that was to ask what kind of girls and drugs I liked.

Being curious, I turned his question around and asked him what was available? He was immensely cheered by this question. He could sense when a fair amount of money might be about to leave my wallet and come his way.

‘I give you brown girls, black girls, yellow girls, white girls,’ he said expansively. When I made no response he added, ‘I give you big girls, little girls and black girl with white girl all together!’ Apparently all fantasies were catered for in Georgetown, Penang.

I felt impelled to respond before he took the next logical step and started offering me boys.

‘What’s your name?’ I asked him.

‘George!’ he replied.

George of Georgetown, it seemed unlikely, but why not? George was efficient and useful and quickly got into the habit of popping in to see me every morning to check if his services would be required that day.

The hotel he brought me to was the Lo Kok, something of a grimy dump at first sight, but a friendly one. Nearly all of the ground floor was a combined bar and dining room; the rest of the Lo Kok was a straggling three-story rabbit warren. A gaggle of cheerful house prostitutes solicited hotel patrons in the ground floor bar, and it was a place frequented by an interesting cross-section of locals and foreigners alike.

Among the drinkers and diners were a smattering of merchant seamen, some trail-weary backpackers and even some military people from the nearby airbase. Much of the conversation was in English, which was a plus for me; and every new person entering the bar sparked a chorus of ribald assessment from the girls on duty. Surprisingly, at least three of the girls working the Lo Kok were pregnant, though this did not seem to slow them down much at all. One dusky Indian girl who must have been only a few weeks at most from giving birth asked me to come with her to her room there and then.

‘What about this?’ I pointed to her bulging belly. She laughed.

‘Lots of money in here,’ she said brightly, ‘You come to my room, I show you very good time. We can shower together! I have lots of soap! I wash you good, I love you!’

A slim Chinese girl in a black leather mini-skirt and a skin-tight pink top also approached a few minutes of my arrival and jammed her thigh against mine in a determined way. It was only a matter of a few minutes before she was also admitting that she loved me. Furthermore, she would like to marry me! It was not very difficult to become a sought after commodity at the Lo Kok.

Without ever trying hard or even trying consciously, I became the most popular man in the hotel in very short order. This began inadvertently the next morning when I rose early and came down to the bar in search of breakfast. The only other people in the room at that early hour were four bargirls who lived on the premises. They joined me at my table, out of idle curiosity more than any other reason. Once introduced, they questioned me at length on where I had been, where I was going, and what sort of girls I liked. Perhaps not unsurprisingly given their line of work, they were very interested in the precise amounts of money I would pay the girls in Australia and England to sleep with me.

Their curiosity did not end there. Other hot topics included: What did I pay for my wristwatch? Which of them did I think was the most attractive? Had I ever met a famous film star? Did I own or had I ever owned a car, and of what type and colour? And finally, but perhaps most importantly, how much did I earn?

They were breakfasting on small plates of fried rice, I was eating an omelet. Their questions were intrusive, but asked in such a relaxed, friendly and genuinely interested way that it was not really possible to take offence. They had a way of telling their own most intimate of personal stories without flinching and their unreserved chatter was often very funny. They struck me as honest people doing a difficult job while keeping a sense of humour.

I discovered that they were all working to support either children or aged parents. I ordered juice and coffee for all who wanted it, and then impulsively paid for everything, their meals included. Their frugal portions of rice cost hardly anything, but this small gesture on my part proved to be a good investment, enough to ensure VIP status at the Lo Kok for the duration.

They found my spontaneous generosity remarkable and it was genuinely appreciated. The first unexpected benefits of this philanthropy on my part came almost immediately. Within hours I was given a better room and moved from a third-floor attic down to a more comfortable, though noisier, ground level room near the bar. One of the girls had put in a good word for me.

Every one of the Lo Kok working girls proposed marriage by the end of my first forty-eight hours in the hotel. The strange thing was; although the proposals were jokingly made and accompanied by lots of lewd suggestions and laughter, there was a serious undercurrent of possibility in every suggestion, a sense in which they all meant it. I was a rich and generous foreigner who might just have the power to sweep them away to something better.

It was immaterial that I was dressed in old stained jeans, and had few possessions other than those I carried. I was marked as rich beyond their dreams of avarice. It was a perceived status I never felt truly comfortable with, but in the economic reality of many Asian countries, it is something that any western traveler must grow accustomed to fairly quickly.

There were nine girls working in the bar at the Lo Kok, though rarely more than four or five present at any one time. They were approximately evenly divided between the three predominant and racially distinct groups that make up most of the Malaysian population, being about one-third Indian, one-third Chinese, and one-third ethnic Malay. This seemed to be a deliberate policy on the part of the hotel management: who sought enough diversity to suit all their customers’ tastes. The girls’ ages ranged from about eighteen to twenty-nine.

On my third day in Penang, I ran into one of the Chinese girls from the Lo Kok in the street, her name was Kitty and she seemed upset. She asked if I could possibly let her have ten Malaysian ringgit; she did not say what it was for, but it seemed very important to her. It was about four dollars. I gave the money to her on the spot. She must have spread the word on this because my legend was now confirmed. As far as those girls were concerned, I could do no wrong at the Lo Kok. Kitty made it clear when she returned my loan a couple of days later that the door to her room was generally open when she was not engaged with a paying customer.

At the end of the first week in Penang I had the beginnings of a steady routine and was very comfortable. Harrison had not appeared, but this was not surprising given that I had arrived several days earlier than originally expected due to my skipping so quickly through Malacca and Kuala Lumpur. It was day eight or nine that I was having a quiet nightcap in the bar with Mohammed, a mustachioed and sometimes lugubrious regular patron who worked as a flight mechanic at the nearby airfield. He turned to me questioningly over his final drink of the night. As he hesitated I wondered what was coming next.

‘I just don’t understand it,’ he said, ‘I don’t understand it at all,’

‘What don’t you understand Mohammed?’ I prompted him.

‘How you make all these girls love you so much!’ he said mournfully.

It was true; Harrison would be proud of me. After just a week, I was an accepted fixture, the girls fussed over me and discussed their problems with family and clients alike. They would saunter over for a chat or a breather between clients and sometimes used me as an excuse to get away from a drunk or a man they did not like. They felt comfortable discussing the most private details of their work and their lives, and even my drinks at the bar were now significantly cheaper than on my first day.

I did not tell Mohammed my simple secret. Instead, I told him I was making the most of my privileged status, because I had never been adopted as mascot by any group of women before. Furthermore, I thought it would probably never happen again. Poor Mohammed did not believe me. He thought I had the magic touch.

As it transpired, he was not the only one, Harrison turned up at the Lo Kok halfway through week two after receiving the message I left for him at the poste restante. He was astonished when he saw the friendly terms I was on with the girls in the hotel. After playing the enigmatic hero for a while, I finally took pity and agreed to reveal the secrets of my success. ‘Don’t be a customer.’ I told him, ‘They see lots of men, but they have no men friends. All I do is buy lunch occasionally, lend a couple of dollars if needed and try to be a good listener.’ Knowing Harrison, I was sure he would be in love with half of them in three days anyway. In the event it did not take him that long. By day two he was getting the same sort of treatment I was used to and more; Harrison was a natural at this sort of thing.

I inquired as to the outcome of the gender-identity crisis he was having with his girlfriend in Singapore.

‘From now on,’ he said, ‘Forget the niceties, when I get involved with a woman, I’m going to brush up against her and check her for balls before I start to make any promises.’

From this I gathered that Singapore had not fulfilled his best expectations, but he seemed none the worse for it. I told him his screening technique might not be especially endearing to potential partners back home, although he might get away with it at the Lo Kok.

The third night of Harrison’s stay at the hotel, we hired George, my original Penang trishaw driver to take us out to ‘do the town.' At the last moment we were joined by a Californian named Mike. He wandered bored into the Lo Kok looking for the ‘local action’ just as we were preparing to leave. Our aim; or as Harrison put it ‘our mission,’ was to visit as many of the local nightspots as possible in one evening, but have no more than one drink and a cursory look at the facilities in each place. This was to be a reconnaissance sortie. Our plan was to later grade each of the nightspots on the basis of its attractions and return to the more interesting places on another occasion.

In practice, this plan worked well for the first four or five stops on our trek around the city. After this, the nightspots, the refilled glasses and the repetitive offers from pimps and madams began to blend into each other. Several times we all chanted familiar lines in unison - ‘You want short time - take this girl! We have room with fan!’ and, ‘Very nice! Very cheap! Very clean!’ Long before midnight we had lost all sense of where we had been and where we were going.

We each collected dozens of bargirls' cards in an attempt to keep track of our travels during the course of this mammoth pub-crawl, but it was no good - we had lost the plot. In the spirit of democracy, George, our driver and guide, who was unused to alcohol, was badgered unwisely by Harrison into drinking himself into a stupor fairly early in the proceedings. He was of limited value in helping us track our progress after that.

Harrison was a true egalitarian who could not stand to see anyone working while others enjoyed themselves. He would nearly always buy a barman a drink if they exchanged even just a few casual words, but his instincts in this case left us bereft of our fund of local knowledge. Following the sudden collapse of George, we put him in the back of the trishaw and took turns to drive him and ourselves from place to place. With one of our group pedaling recklessly through the narrow streets, we navigated by means of some less than explicit slurred directions from the back seat.

The evening turned into a carouse through a succession of ramshackle and seedy bars, many little more than waiting rooms for the small bedroom cubicles where the main business of the establishment was conducted. Harrison fell in love with every woman he met. During the course of the evening he turned charmingly maudlin and was sometimes barely visible in a cluster of girls he was simultaneously groping and captivating with his voluble appreciation.

Harrison sincerely desired them all. He just loved them; naively and helplessly, stupidly and hopelessly - and they knew it. He made himself appointments for a succession of later erotic assignations so extensive in scope that no one man could ever remember them, let alone have the stamina to keep them - or as Mike pointed out pragmatically - the deep pockets to pay for them. These antics made Mike draw comparisons between Harrison and the other great lovers of history.

‘You keep all those appointments,’ he told Harrison, ‘and you will be a living legend, a national treasure, and an icon for Malaysian working girls. Alongside you, Errol Flynn will look small, Casanova like a hermit, Don Juan an amateur and Warren Beatty celibate.’ As an afterthought he added, ‘And I will want your autographed photo and you also may need the address of a good clap-doctor…’

Harrison however, was not a man to be deterred by frivolous comments and pointed sarcasm, he was having a good time. Around 1am he was propelling our trishaw down a narrow street in light rain feeling supremely energetic and in high spirits. His evening was complete, he had just arranged to have sex with a lifetime supply of Malaysian females and he was contemplating the job ahead with relish.

Then he took a corner too fast, dropped a wheel into a pothole and flipped the trishaw over, tipping us all onto the damp street. No one was hurt, but Harrison showed a distinct reluctance to get back on his feet once relaxed full length on a strip of wet and dirty concrete. When he did get up he said he needed to vomit and promptly did so, complaining throughout that it must have been something he ate.

Mike and I doubted the truth of this, knowing that Harrison had taken all his calories that evening in liquid form. We decided to call it a night, but it was another hour before we found our way back to the Lo Kok and awoke George to pedal unsteadily homewards by himself. Three of the Lo Kok girls were still around and quite concerned when they saw the state Harrison was in. ‘Harrison darling, let me help you!’ said Kitty solicitously as she helped him to his room. I had the feeling I had lost my number one ranking in their fickle affections as Kitty put Harrison to bed.

Over the next several days we swore off alcohol, wandered the town, lazed around the beach at Batu Ferringhi, and tried to dissuade Harrison from marrying one of the Lo Kok girls. The only thing that really assisted in this endeavor was his dithering; he wanted to marry all of them and was incapable of narrowing the field. After a couple of weeks of restful pottering about the city and the island, I finally persuaded Harrison it was time to abandon his marriage plans and head for Bangkok. We treated all the girls to farewell lunch before we caught the international express from Butterworth on the mainland. Mike crossed to the mainland on the ferry with us and then bade us a cheerful good-bye: ‘Farewell, hippie scum!’ before he took the opposite road, heading south towards Indonesia.

# 6. Revolution, drug busts and other strange happenings…

## Thailand, Bangkok, Ayutthaya, Chiang Mai, back to Bangkok, onwards by air to Burma, Rangoon, train to Mandalay, paddle-steamer to Pagan

The train to Bangkok was fabulous - modern, air-conditioned, and supremely comfortable. For reasons unknown, I expected something makeshift and rattletrap. We had comfortable berths and a vendor came by to sell us Mekong whisky. The trick with this beverage we learnt, was to read the date of manufacture from the back of the label. This could generally only be accomplished by drinking enough of it to make the handwritten date visible through the glass. On the way down the bottle, you could demonstrate a certain prowess by making an accurate estimate of the date from your tasting. It was rarely more than a few days old. Local connoisseurs assured us that the closer the label date was to today’s date, the better the whisky. Harrison grudgingly admitted that it did not taste that bad - for lighter fuel.

We slept most of the way to Bangkok in our snug berths oblivious of the fact we were heading into a major political upheaval.

Bangkok was all tanks, soldiers, barbed wire, and gun-emplacements. For the first couple of hours, I wondered naively why the Thais were so nervous about guarding their public buildings. One of our first jobs was to visit the *poste restante* and check for waiting mail. On arrival, we found it surrounded by tanks and razor wire and guarded by soldiers who only reluctantly let us through the cordon. I could not get to grips with what was happening around me, and Harrison was equally baffled.

Sometime during the early afternoon we managed to get hold of an English language newspaper and pieced together the story by talking to a few other travelers in a cafe. Although the newspapers were censored and the other travelers almost as confused as we were, we gradually caught up with events. We had arrived just as many people were getting out; there was an attempted coup in progress.

Harrison decided more or less immediately that he did not want to stay in the city. The military feel of the place repelled him. His plan was to make a right turn at Bangkok after a few days anyway and head by air for the bright lights of Hong Kong. All he was doing was just bringing his schedule forward a little.

We dropped into a travel agent in one of the luxury hotels on Rama IV an hour or so later, and things moved swiftly. Surprisingly, considering the general exodus, tickets were available. Yes, on today’s flight, no problem. Yes, there was time to get to the airport if we were quick and yes, all documents were in order. A couple of phone calls and a taxi later and it was all arranged. Harrison was off to Hong Kong.

I called after him as he climbed into his cab with some considered advice on the wisdom of falling in love with any Siberians he might meet on the train to Moscow. He yelled back cheerfully, ‘Don’t get killed in the war...’ and was suddenly gone. I would see him in London in a few months after his Trans-Siberian railway trip. I felt disconsolate and alone in this unexpectedly alien city after his departure. This feeling was heightened when I tried to leave the bar I was in and was told that as it was now after the curfew hour, I might be shot if I insisted on leaving. I booked into a room and was pestered by pimps banging on my door and offering girls, and eventually boys, all night long. The curfew did not seem to have any effect on their activities.

The next day I went to Thammassart Square for an illustration of just how schizophrenic a thing a military coup can be. On one side of the square was a huge bonfire; from some distance away I could make out some kind of wild disturbance around it. Approaching it, I was horrified to see what seemed to be several makeshift gallows arrangements. Nooses were hanging from the branches of the big trees and the crowds around were angry and the situation confused.

In the melee, people were dragged about and beaten as I watched in disbelief. It was utter turmoil. I could not tell who was doing what, or to whom. Surely those people were not going to be burnt alive? Or hung? The hapless targets of the violence were flotsam on the crest of an unpredictable wave, forced first in one direction and then another. Who were the good guys here and who the bad? It was impossible to tell. The crowd was like a swarm of bees haphazardly moving and alighting but dangerous wherever it was.

Less than a hundred yards away from this mayhem I began to have doubts about the wisdom of approaching any closer. I stopped walking towards the angry milling mob and turned to look behind me. Just another hundred yards or so at my back, market stalls were operational and it was business as usual for a throng of shoppers. I was in the uneasy no-mans land between revolution and a normality intent on not noticing anything amiss. I decided to head towards the shoppers. Later it was confirmed in the local and international press that students from the nearby university were hung in the square - two or more had also been burnt alive. I had almost strolled into a lynch mob.

I stayed at the market side of the square for an hour or so, with the feeling of being in a grotesque and improbable drama. Lynch mob and shoppers ignored each other and I did not understand how this could happen in a sane world. This surreal impression of Bangkok was heightened a few minutes later by another quite extraordinary sight. An old woman approached through the throng of shoppers wheeling an over-sized pram, more a wheel chair really. In the chair was a child with the slight body-build of perhaps a sturdy three or four year old, but an enormously over-sized oval head.

The appearance of this strange couple confused me even more. This huge bald and egg-shaped dome, perhaps twice the size of the head of a normal adult, looked wild and uncanny on such a tiny body sitting in a pram. The eyes of the child were large and very alert. It occurred to me that those eyes were way too large for normal human eyes and they were set much too far apart in the oval face. By comparison the mouth was small and the nose both very small and snub.

After a moment or so, I lost my grip on what I was seeing for the second time that afternoon. I really could not tell if this was a child, or perhaps an adult with atrophied limbs and some congenital condition causing a hugely developed cranium. It was a totally alien and alienating experience, I felt baffled, and all the extraordinary sights intensified the feeling of estrangement I had felt since arriving. I was so unnerved by all this strangeness and abnormality I felt tempted to follow Harrison’s lead and quit the country completely. Instead I got out of Bangkok and took the bus to Chiang Mai, in the northern border hill country. I thought things might be a little less weird there.

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Chiang Mai was a happier place. Still, it was a rumor- mill, a potpourri of backpackers, junkies, hippies, uniformed police and soldiers, mixed with the inevitable tour groups. I arrived via the ancient Thai capital of Ayutthaya where I spent a relaxing afternoon re-establishing a feeling of normality with a stroll in the impressively overgrown ruins of the old city. Afterwards, I booked into a small hotel where a tall and busty Thai girl in her mid-twenties stopped me in the corridor. Her face was acne-scarred and her English difficult to understand, but her message was plain enough. Without any sort of preamble she offered to sleep with me for thirty cents American. I thought I had misheard her when she made this offer and asked her to repeat the price. There was no mistake. I gave her a polite ‘No thank you,’ baffled as to why she was bothering and sure that I would never see her again. But she was made of sterner stuff - later that evening she broke into my room via the fly-screen door leading to the first-floor balcony.

She told me she had decided to sleep with me anyway because I reminded her of a film star. *A film star?* I did not ask her which one. The fact that I was sharing my small dormitory in this crowded hotel with two Dutch travelers who were staring at her in total bewilderment did not seem to put her off.

Before leaving huffily, she dropped her robe briefly and did a little naked twirl to show us all what we were missing. I half expected her to climb back out through the fly-screens and disappear down along the balcony the way she came. In the event she replaced her robe with haughty concentration and left by the more conventional exit to the corridor. She left us all wondering why some things that happen, do happen - and why thirty cents American?

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At this same hotel, I met a man who owned three elephants. I assumed this made him a wealthy entrepreneur; he certainly looked the part. He told me he kept elephants for both logging and tourism, and they were currently running wild in a patch of forest east of Chiang Mai. They had been foraging for several weeks, left to their own devices while he was busy elsewhere. Now, or at least within a few days, he would track them down, catch them, and return them to the logging operation. He ran tours to the logging operation as a sideline to the main business. The tours provided visitors with an opportunity to watch real working elephants in action.

When he saw that I was interested in his business operation, he gave me an address written in Thai, and told me that I was welcome to join him on his elephant hunt if I wished. All I needed to do was to show the address to any taxi-driver in Chiang Mai.

I spent a pleasant evening with a group of Americans and Canadians at a local restaurant. They were trekkers, backpacking the mountainous border regions where the hill tribes live. Many were marking time, waiting for the situation in Bangkok to be resolved. The group was abuzz with rumors of police and army activities, especially a series of actions targeting local drug dealers and users. I received several warnings against keeping any kind of drugs on my person or among my possessions while this purge was in progress. This part of northern Thailand is well inside the ‘golden triangle’ region that supplies most of the raw opium and therefore the heroin, for the entire world.

Several locals told me that the police crackdown was a periodical thing, more than one cynic maintaining this was only a token cleansing of undesirables to fulfill some obscure quota. It would be back to business as usual soon. In the meantime, people were justifiably nervous - penalties on conviction could be savage in the extreme. Despite the warnings, I was not at all concerned when I reached my hotel room. The strongest drug I had in my possession was paracetamol. Even so, the expectation of my dinner companions was so great that I half expected a raid during the night. But nothing happened, although the clerk at reception told me there had been a police raid three days earlier and all occupied rooms were searched.

While shaving the next morning, I lifted a hand to adjust the cracked mirror dangling from a hook on the wall and a large plastic bag full of ready-rolled joints fell out from behind it. Unusual to say the least. Searching around the room I found three other stashes of drugs, all hidden behind the ugly pictures on the walls of my room. There were two bags of marijuana and some small lumps of hashish, plus another two or three hundred grams of a resinous substance of some kind.

I thought I might be able to guess what this substance might be. I was not sure what form the local opium product usually took, but this stuff had the strong whiff of illegality about it and I was not pleased. I felt I had been set up. If the police raided the hotel - and by all accounts that was a reasonably likely event - I might have taken the blame for possession of some stranger’s drugs. Conceivably I could have then spent several years serving an undeserved penal sentence in some Thai hellhole for simply renting a room and using it innocently for the night.

I was annoyed.

After thinking about it for a while, I was more than annoyed, I was angry. Before I left, I took the time to destroy all four of the drug stashes. I broke them into small batches and flushed the lot down the toilet. Since they were fairly large stashes, this took a long time, but I felt the time and effort were worth it. If I was to be staked out as a dumb decoy to protect some smug local dealer, I considered the least I could do was make him pay in some small way. And, if the drugs *had* been left by accident, this was carelessness that definitely deserved punishment. After this satisfying little act of vengeance I checked out and never went near the hotel again.

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I arrived for the elephant hunt by pre-dawn taxi. The meeting-place was a small village of raised thatched huts set high on tree-trunk stilts in a forest clearing. A narrow wooden bridge crossed a swift flowing river nearby, and gave access from the highway to the village. The elephant owner would not be accompanying us in person after all. He was there to make sure that the days work commenced without problems, but he was dressed for the office rather than the jungle. Chain-smoking and drinking hot coffee in the pre-dawn gloom, he introduced me to the three elephant handlers I would be traveling with. They were three wizened men, but nevertheless, only middle-aged. Only one of them had a smattering of broken English. When I asked my host how long we were likely to be out, he shrugged and told me maybe only one hour, maybe two days. First we had to find our elephants...

We set out on our elephant hunt before first light with the village still quiet. A few women were squatting on the ground, starting cooking fires beside their huts. Here and there a hurricane lamp was burning. I could see a few wraiths of mist down near the river and the red glow of the men’s cigarettes as we walked up the trail. The calls of forest birds were only just beginning to resonate in the still morning air as we climbed to the top of the first forested ridge above the river.

The early morning trek through jungle country was worth the trip in itself. It was a beautiful cool morning and we were walking through rugged territory full of mature growth timber. The forest had been selectively logged at some time and the canopy was quite open in these parts. The lush ferns and shrubs under it were so high that I did not see the first elephant until we were almost on top of it. The handlers were almost hysterical with laughter at my failure to spot a fully-grown elephant from less than ten meters away. They pointed and laughed and pointed again - but still I could not see it.

It melted into the shadows so successfully I had to hunt for it, methodically quartering the landscape until I saw a pile of foliage move. Yes, there was my elephant, a mound of earth and uprooted foliage on her back. Left to my own devices, I would have walked right past her. One of the men got the elephant to kneel and then climbed up to ride in comfort. The rest of us walked.

It took two more hours to find elephant number two, but number three was discovered close by within minutes. How the men knew which area of the forest to search in was beyond me. Somehow, their sixth sense seemed able to head them unerringly in the right direction. It was getting hot and sticky by the time we found the last elephant and only now did I realize that whereas all three of the local men now had a comfortable seat, I was to be the lone hiker on the return trail. There was also a surprise package with elephant number three, she had a baby. A not-so-small bundle of energy and mischief just the right height to look me straight and level in the eye.

While the adult elephants plodded slowly down the forest track and I followed on foot, the baby ranged around, sometimes galloping ahead and sometimes stopping to investigate some interesting feature. We had been walking for almost twenty minutes and I had not seen the baby for around ten minutes, when I was suddenly shoved hard from behind and pitched headlong into the tall ferns at the side of the track. The men riding roared with laughter. The baby elephant had purposefully pushed me over into the damp shrubbery at the side of the track. Five minutes later he did it again, to the great delight of the riders comfortably ensconced above.

It was probably fortunate that I could not understand the handlers and their shouted comments about my plight, but there was no doubt they were highly amused. From now on the little elephant tormented me relentlessly all the way back to the village. At one point he charged and forced me to jump aside into the underbrush or be flattened on the path. At another he caught my arm with his trunk and dragged me at breakneck speed until I could no longer keep pace and fell ignominiously into the shrubbery.

Laughing uproariously, one of the men indicated with vigorous gestures that I should defend myself with a stick and drive my tormentor away by force. I was suspicious, but decided I had nothing to lose. I squared off to my opponent weapon in hand as he waited at a narrow point on the track. We looked into each other’s eyes pugnaciously from an arms length distance. He did not look as worried as I probably did.

‘Hit, hit!’ was the advice from the grinning handler, who was gesturing from his safe seat on top of his own animal. I hesitated for a moment because I really did not want to hurt the baby elephant, I just wanted to be left alone. Experimentally I tapped him lightly on the forehead with the branch. His response to this was to tap me back lightly on the forehead with his trunk. ‘Hit!’ urged the handler again. This time I gave the baby elephant a reasonably forceful whack, which he immediately returned in kind by swiping his trunk down heavily across my skull. I felt as though I had been sandbagged. I saw stars and a brief blackness and almost buckled at the knees. I felt weak for a long moment then looked up to see the men above almost crying with laughter.

They were rolling back and forth, holding their stomachs and howling with uncontrolled mirth. Being incapacitated by hilarity, they were in serious and imminent danger of falling off their mounts. By contrast I was beginning to feel elephant hunting was a job best left to the experts. A tabloid headline popped into my head as we continued down the trail, the handlers in high spirits and me sorrowfully: ‘CRAZED TOURIST IN REHABILITATION AFTER LOSING FIST-FIGHT WITH ELEPHANT.’

I kept a close eye on the baby elephant as we approached the village, but he had me on the run now and he knew it. He pushed me over twice more before we reached our destination in the early afternoon. When we did get back to the village, a bus-load of German tourists had just arrived to see the working elephants bathing. They were watching and snapping pictures from the narrow wooden bridge. Three of the adult elephants from the village were lolling ponderously in the shallow river and getting scrubbed with long-handled brooms. The handlers accompanying me took their own animals down to the river to bathe while I kept a wary eye on the baby as he approached the tourist crowd. He received a chorus of ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’ directed at his perceived cuteness as he lumbered towards them with mayhem on his mind.

I had received enough of a battering from him for one day and was glad he had turned his attentions somewhere else. My gut feeling was that his mischief making was not yet finished yet. As expected, before long the appreciation of the tourists for the baby elephant turned to apprehension and then to a chorus of screams. Not more than a few minutes passed before he sidled up behind two unsuspecting middle-aged Germans and pushed them straight off the unfenced bridge and into the fast-flowing river, cameras and all. The rest of the group scattered in panic as the locals rushed to restore order.

I had the bruises for a week from my thrashing by that baby elephant.

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Back in Bangkok, life seemed to have returned to normal. I booked into the Malaysia Hotel, a once luxurious high-rise accommodation now long gone to seed. The Malaysia was for many years a legendary crossroads on the backpackers' route and one of the best places to meet other overland travelers in Bangkok and exchange news. After a day or two in the city, my intention was to fly through to Rangoon in Burma, but in the event, I decided to stay for a few days more since the trouble now appeared to have quietened down.

I did the usual tourist things in the Thai capital: a trip to the floating markets, a stroll around the massive reclining Buddha at Wat Po. I went to see the Emerald Buddha, took a couple of trips to the bars and fleshpots of Patpong Road, and rode a slim taxi boat on the Chao Phraya River. I chatted to Buddhist monks carrying their begging bowls and spent a morning with one less than totally dedicated monk in his monastery near the river.

Nearly all the monks I met in Thailand were part-timers, temporary devotees with no real vocation. They were middle-class Thais wearing the monk’s robes for a year because it was expected of them. This pious behavior brought kudos to their families and businesses. The novice I spoke to was spending his year as a monk working his way through language courses in English and Spanish.

I learnt that although the locals name for Bangkok, ‘Krung Thep,’ may not trip off the tongue as easily as ‘Los Angeles,' the two meanings are the same: ‘City of Angels.’ But no amount of temple glitter and pageantry could hide the fact that Bangkok is sleazy, overcrowded and highly polluted. Despite the recent fighting in the streets it was also teeming with visitors. At one temple, I strolled casually towards a huge crowd and a local man grabbed my arm enthusiastically: ‘You are so lucky to be here today!’ he said beaming at me, ‘To visit us and to see the king! He was here just now!’ But I had not been quick enough to catch sight of the King of Thailand; I saw only the crowds dispersing in the moments after his visit.

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Since Thailand is one of the forgery capitals of Asia, and Malaysia Hotel tradition seemed to demand this of all its patrons, I bought myself a fake student ID card from one of the many vendors of such items in the hotel lobby. Then I strolled a few yards to the travel desk in the same lobby, where an airline booking agent who had just witnessed the entire illegal transaction, scrutinised it carefully before he allowed me to use the cards discount facility to buy my ticket onwards to Rangoon. I did not want to stand out in the crowd as the only person not traveling with an illegal discount. That sort of anti-social behavior might be frowned upon.

There in no road route to Burma any more, nor has there been for many years. There are only the trails of smugglers and outlaws. The Burmese borders are bandit country, long since given up by the authorities and generally controlled by rebels, warlords, smugglers and drug-barons. Given the weakness of government control, there are only three places a foreigner can generally visit in Burma: Rangoon, Mandalay and Pagan. But since the Burmese government was only issuing visas valid for visits of seven days, there was barely enough time to see what was allowed to be seen anyway.

On arrival at Rangoon airport, the Burmese government proved itself not above indulging in a little shady money-making venture of its own; forcing each and every hapless traveler to change money at an extortionate ‘official’ rate. This rate in practice amounted to the official confiscation of around seventy-percent of each traveler’s check changed. The Burmese government gets badly needed hard currency in this way, while the traveler gets a handful of almost worthless kyats and the warm feeling of knowing a part of their precious travel fund is helping prop up an undeserving tin-pot military regime.

To compensate in part for this sanctioned form of larceny, all the knowledgeable travelers on the plane bound for Rangoon purchased a bottle of Scotch at Bangkok duty free for around US$3.50. Scotch is a highly negotiable commodity in Burma as are toiletries and batteries of all types. Just ninety minutes after take-off, a $3.50 bottle of Scotch could be sold to the taxi-driver between Rangoon airport and the city for the equivalent in kyats of almost US$50 at the official exchange rate. I successfully pulled off this little trick, but at least two people on the plane had their Scotch stolen by taxi drivers who left them standing in seedy lobbies waiting 'a few seconds' while slipping out through a side door with their Scotch in hand. Honest crooks can be hard to find.

Black market dealings were all the rage in Rangoon. I swapped a couple of five-dollar wristwatches purchased in Singapore for locally made jade necklaces and bracelets and was pleased with the trade. These items seemed well worth the minuscule outlay.

The standard Burmese economic modus operandi requires that citizens and visitors alike develop the ability to thrive on marginal shady dealings. When we reached our destination, the Rangoon YMCA, I found that my new bottles of shampoo and hair conditioner, just purchased in Bangkok, had been stolen from my pack. Checking around for other possible victims of petty theft, I found one person had lost razor blades, another batteries from a transistor radio, and yet another a tube of toothpaste. Most new arrivals said they would probably have assumed they had mislaid or used the missing items if they had remained unaware that everyone was missing some small item.

Our conclusion was unanimous, our bags had been systematically lightened at Rangoon airport. But in each instance the take was so trivial that no one would bother to complain. Multiply the haul by the number of foreigners on the plane though, and someone made a nice little black market profit on incoming visitors. Batteries, razor-blades cosmetics and toiletries were the favored items for the light-fingered; the airport workers probably did not dare to invite trouble by stealing the more expensive items. Elsewhere in Rangoon though, it was a different story. Shortly after we arrived at the YMCA an American I was talking to made the mistake of putting his camera down for a moment on the bench top at our side. Ten seconds later it was gone forever, though it had been just inches from his fingers and neither of us saw a thing.

At the YMCA we were told that only dormitory accommodation was available, the entire planeload of us was packed into one long room lined with beds on both sides. The beds were jammed so closely together, that effectively, there was just one huge bed down the left side of the room and another down the right: ‘Oh goody - we can have an orgy!’ Commented one humourist as we were escorted into this room. But not only were there no sheets or blankets or even pillows - there were no mattresses either. 'Getting comfortable’ was a matter of laying our own sleeping-bags on the hard wooden boards, and making the best of it. Perhaps the mattresses had been sold on the black market by a management strapped for cash and eager to sell off ‘non-essential’ equipment.

Lack of mattresses was not the only problem we had to contend with; Burmese standards of hygiene are arguably the worst in the world, frequently worse even than those prevailing in India. The first warning came when I bought a packet of biscuits to find a crushed giant cockroach sandwiched between the biscuit layers. The local mineral waters in Burma were simply bottled dysentery, and many locals spat giant gobbets of sticky-green phlegm everywhere. These last disgusting items were particularly difficult to avoid at temples, as shoes had to be removed before entry. The long climb to the hilltop temple in Mandalay, which has to be done in bare feet, was one long obstacle course of this revolting tuberculous sputum.

Despite all that and more on the negative side, I liked Burma. Time apparently stopped there sometime immediately prior to World War Two and the citizens have lived in that era ever since. The cobbled, patched and potholed streets are lined with decaying Victorian buildings and filled with wooden buses and vintage cars. The horse-drawn buggies, handcarts and ox-carts add even more historic ambience. Men and women alike smoke giant homemade conical cigars and during the rains, they paddle cheerfully around the muddy streets in bare feet. If you closed your eyes to the vendors selling toasted grasshoppers, and other only marginally more appealing snacks, the whole place could also be a suitable set for a Dickensian tale. Even the smell and blowflies seemed wholly appropriate to the general ambience of a Victorian metropolis in terminal decay.

The temples and pagodas were impressive and farcical by turns. Goats and cattle grazed in their courtyards, pilgrims and hustlers haunted their precincts. Sometimes the temples featured incongruous flashing neon signs on their altars, perhaps an ancient carved-stone Buddha with a string of cheap plastic Christmas tree lights around the neck. Everywhere the ancient and the venerable rubbed shoulders with the garish and the tawdry. Often there was a bevy of hustlers who wanted to sell the visitor stolen or fake antiques, or to change black market money. The hustlers were not inhibited in conducting their raucous negotiations in the sacrosanct areas close by the shrines. I read in my guide that the Shwe Dagon temple has a dome covered in gold leaf and encrusted with gemstones. But, I was more taken by the extraordinary mix of humanity in its courtyards and the religious musical extravaganzas featuring much energetic clashing of cymbals and blowing of horns.

Burma was bustle and energy and the will to make do. It was the kind of determined enterprise that keeps old cars running and even looking new, for decades. Even though no spare parts were imported, old vehicles were fixed in Rangoon. In fact there *were* no parts other than those that could be repaired and recycled, or fashioned in local workshops from junk materials. Nevertheless, the will and the ingenuity to get the job done was there: the workshops worked and consequently the old cars worked too.

But Burma also reeked of stagnation. It was the actual stagnation of the iridescent green and soupy waters in the putrid moat around the fort in Mandalay, which shone like a brilliant jewel but reeked of decay. It was also the economic and physical stagnation its towns and cities, its transport systems, its public buildings and its utilities. Burma was peeling plaster, rotting woodwork, tumbledown buildings, decaying elegance and general decrepitude. Burma was a time-warp in which the steam-engine could still be a state secret. The Burmese military are very keen that the secret of steam is not revealed to the rest of the world, a soldier made this quite clear to me when I tried to take a picture of the ancient Mandalay train the day after I arrived. For a moment or two I thought I was going to lose my camera to his zeal for security...

On board the aged, windowless, and top-secret steam-train to Mandalay. I discovered that travel by romantic steam in an open carriage meant a face streaked with soot and no protection from the rain. As for Mandalay, it showed little sign of Hollywood glamour, being a dusty town with not much in the way of fascination once you have climbed the much spat-upon steps of the famous hill and admired the view. Slightly disappointed, I took the paddle-steamer on the Irrawaddy River to the ghost city of Pagan.

The trip on the glorious old steamer could have been heaven, but it was hot and oppressively close, and the passengers were jammed on deck as miserably as condemned convicts readied for transportation. I had visions of us all on some rotting hulk awaiting carriage to a place of penal servitude. The only ‘amenity’ on board was a barrel of ‘drinking’ water, which was refilled by the simple expedient of lowering a bucket into the murky depths of the river at periodic intervals. One large tin drinking-mug was supplied for the use of passengers and the several hundred people on board all shared this item.

The ‘drinking’ water was the colour of weak milky tea. As a useful amenity the barrel was an abject failure. As a device for spreading dysentery, cholera, typhoid and other unspeakable diseases, it was clearly in a class of its own. But people used it; in fact there was nearly always a queue of thirsty individuals at the barrel. These were hardy travelers who evidently thought that warm raw sewage mixed with dirt and sputum in a grimy cup was an acceptable beverage.

Unable to face the water-barrel despite the blistering heat, I took only cup after cup of black tea, brewed by a raggedly dressed cigar-smoking lady with a gummy, toothless smile. She brewed over a tiny charcoal stove set unsteadily on the wooden deck. I thought personally that the whole business of deliberately starting a fire over an unstable wooden floor was a fundamentally flawed concept - the tea-brewing setup was an appreciable fire hazard. But I was grateful for it anyway. At least I knew the filthy river water had been boiled, if only briefly.

Pagan was worth the uncomfortable trip, an unexpectedly fantastical and serenely beautiful landscape of thousand-year old temples and pagodas. Some of these ancient and intricately sculpted buildings were fortress like. Others were still partially covered by the jungle that had hidden them for generations. Giant stone representations of the Buddha gazed over the tree tops towards the dirty river and even that less than pristine waterway shone like a strip of pure gold in the reflected sunset. There were no vehicles and hardly any people. I clopped around the byways of a largely deserted old city in a horse-drawn buggy. For the first time in Burma, I blessed my good fortune in just being there.

In the evening, excellent Chinese food was served at the nearby rest house and I purchased a packet of hand-painted watercolour postcards of the old city. I was comfortable and would have liked to stay for a day or two, but my seven days in the country was almost up - having accepted my contribution to consolidated revenue, the government was throwing me out.

To save precious time I decided to fly back to Rangoon on the one and only jet aircraft owned by Burmese Airways, a ravaged-looking old Boeing. My ticket cost just $8, surely a bargain. But there was a goat and several large crates containing live chickens in the cabin. Casting around with a critical eye, I noticed some of the moulded plastic ceiling panels were cracked and hanging down loosely. I also discovered that my seat did not have a belt that could be fastened. The thought crossed my mind that if the mechanics of the aircraft were as neglected as the cosmetics; the whole enterprise was an accident waiting to happen.

I was petrified until we landed safely in Rangoon. Several people were actually standing in the aisle and holding on as best they could for both take-off and landing. I was not surprised when I read some time later that sadly, the plane had crashed in a swamp and killed everyone on board.

Burma had turned me, and most of its other foreign visitors as well, into petty criminals with its black markets and underground economy. Queuing to leave the country, I was startled to see that every single bag belonging to embarking passengers was being thoroughly searched for contraband. It is unusual to be searched on the way *out* of a country. I had a set of antique brass opium-dealers weights, each cast in the shape of a rooster and of various sizes according to weight. I had acquired this souvenir set after much bargaining just that morning and it was currently wrapped in my sleeping bag.

Seeing the thorough searches in progress at the head of the queue, I wondered for the first time if it was completely legal to take these artifacts out of the country. I believed it probably was, but having swapped a cheap Singapore wristwatch I had no receipt I could show to prove my purchase. I sought reassurance from the American standing next in line to me, a college student from New York State. As soon as I spoke about my potential problem, I wished I had not; his face lit up immediately at the prospect of my being in trouble.

‘Oh man, are you fucked,’ he told me gleefully. ‘The minimum, I mean the *minimum* penalty for a stunt like that is a month in jail. I mean, like a whole goddam month in a stinking *Burmese* jail, sleeping on concrete in a little cell with forty other guys and everyone shitting in the same bucket!’ I had no idea where he obtained this detailed information from but he seemed convinced of it, and quite happy about it.

It was a long ten minutes before I reached the head of the queue. The customs officer ordered me to empty my pack and I did, first lifting out and laying aside the rolled sleeping bag containing my opium weights. He checked everything, even opening my toiletry bag and feeling along the length of my tube of toothpaste. But he ignored the sleeping bag. I was very relieved to be on that plane an hour later. Even though in retrospect I was almost certain that my dealing had been perfectly legal - sometimes you just cannot tell.

# 7. Rites of passage...

## Calcutta, Darjeeling, Tibetan tea, Kanchenjunga, Nepal, through the Nepalese lowlands and onwards to Kathmandu.

I tried to avoid the sadistic college student from New York State, as we flew over the Bay of Bengal towards Calcutta. His only comment as we both crossed the tarmac and boarded was a terse: ‘You are one lucky son-of-a-bitch.’ He seemed more than slightly disappointed that I had not been dragged away kicking and screaming to be be aten with heavy clubs before being hurled into some hellhole by armed guards.

Now he was in the row of seats immediately behind me, and I could not help but overhear him crowing about his surefire moneymaking scheme for India. He had heard there was a severe shortage of electronic calculators in India and that an ordinary calculator would sell for a premium price there. He thought perhaps the price might be several times that paid in Singapore. To capitalise on this shortage, he had agreed a wholesale deal on calculators while he was in Singapore and had bought no less than forty-eight of them for a song. He intended to resell them in India and finance his entire trip around the country with the profit he made. And this was the same person who had been gloating at my accidental smuggling!

It was late night and raining when we reached Calcutta, I entered India on my British passport and without fuss was granted an unlimited stay by an obliging and efficient immigration officer. When I left the customs hall, the wheeler-dealer from New York State had just been detained by another official who had clearly realized exactly what he was up to with his calculators. I heard the budding entrepreneur solemnly assuring the disbelieving customs officer that he had *not* brought the calculators to India to sell them.

I thought that just telling a whopper like that with a straight face deserved some form of sanction.

Then, as I by-passed by the would-be calculator king of Calcutta, I heard him being told sternly that he was granted permission to enter India for a maximum of thirty days only. Furthermore, the serial numbers of every one of his calculators would be specially endorsed into his passport before he was allowed in. Since he had already given assurances he was not importing them for resale, there would be a very severe penalty if he could not produce every one of them when he was asked to do so at passport control on the way out...

He looked like a man who had just been kicked in the stomach as I strolled past him into India. I almost cried tears of laughter right there in the customs hall at the thought of him carrying those forty-eight useless calculators around the entire sub-continent. What a classic double bind! Now instead of selling, he would be forced to protect his stock from thieves and accidental loss, unable even to dump them as the useless dead weight they were. Yes! I thought exultantly - there is a Santa Claus...

Leaving customs, I was trying hard to think of the word that described the feeling that this person had experienced when he thought of my adversity and that I later felt in turn when I witnessed his. It tormented me for days until eventually I went to a public library and looked it up. The elusive word and its definition was *schadenfreude*, the enjoyment of others misfortunes...

There must be a little of that in most of us. I certainly have my share.

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I did not stay in Calcutta this time around; I was saving that for later. It was getting into late summer, and I wanted to be in the Himalayas when the skies cleared and the best weather for high-altitude trekking came. I headed north by train immediately for the mountain country of Darjeeling.

The night before the ascent to the resort of Darjeeling I spent in a sweltering hotel on the steamy Indian plains. Arriving late in the evening only to be told by the manager that the place was full, I was about to leave and try my luck elsewhere when he apparently had a brainwave and called me back.

‘Wait a minute! If you don’t mind sharing...?’ he said.

I nodded resignedly, fully expecting to be put into a crowded dormitory. Instead I was escorted to a room where a terrified English girl was propped up in a four-poster bed, obviously wondering what sinister motive was behind the intrusion. I could see that she was wearing a white nightgown, but she pulled the sheets up to her chin protectively as we entered. The manager pointed me towards a sofa bed in the corner and said only: ‘You must share!’ as he wagged a stern finger at the nervous girl, who had not uttered a word. He then left us to it. It was not the most diplomatic of introductions.

‘Look I’m sorry,’ I began lamely. But the girl sitting up in her bed shot me a look of pure loathing. I was tempted to give up and check out again immediately but it was late and it all seemed very difficult. I settled myself quickly on the sofa bed and attempted to make light conversation to prove myself a decent and respectable human being. All these efforts were in vain and got me only monosyllabic replies. My roommate was worrying about the logistics of such things as how she was going to get her clothing, which was across the room on a chair and what would happen if she needed to go to the toilet...

After a while I gave up on trying to reassure her and dozed fitfully, only to wake around 2am feeling breathless and uncomfortably tight across the chest. I sat up suddenly on the sofa bed in the semi-darkness and the girl in her four-poster almost jumped out of her skin, stifling a shriek as I moved. I realized she had been awake and terrified all this time. She was just waiting for the inevitable moment I would cross the room to assault her. I was breathing heavily and snuffling in a hay-feverish sort of way and knew that I was allergic to the horsehair stuffing leaking from the sofa bed I was lying on.

My roommate clearly thought that my heavy breathing had some more sinister cause. Even in the darkness I could sense that she was shaking with anxiety and strain. She must have had some fairly unpleasant experiences in India to bring her to that pitch of fearful tension. I realized the situation was hopeless; I could not sleep on that sofa bed anyway and my roommate was ready to either scream or start whimpering.

As gently as I could, I told her I was leaving and to please lock the door behind me. I did not even know her name. I really wanted to yell: ‘Go home! Can’t you see how scared and miserable you are? You shouldn’t be traveling India alone!’ But instead I gathered my few belongings and carried my pack along a darkened corridor. Here, navigating by guesswork, I found my way down to the hotel kitchens. Fumbling through the kitchens I found a back door I could unlock and beyond that, a patch of grass in a walled garden under the stars. There I could breathe a little easier.

I am never worried about snakes, spiders, scorpions or other creepy-crawlies - my experience is; they ignore me, I ignore them. I laid my sleeping bag down on the damp grass and slept soundly until the mosquitoes woke me at dawn.

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The narrow-gauge railway that winds up the mountain to Darjeeling is a legend; I was looking forward to this trip but was late in booking and told to come back tomorrow. Instead of marking time for a whole day I grew impatient and decided to look for alternatives. I quickly found a bus that ascended the mountain on a tortuously looping and climbing road that frequently crossed the railway line. Later I found I could also have made the ascent by cable car.

I was frozen when the bus arrived in Darjeeling town in the late afternoon. In a matter of hours we had ascended around 7,000 feet, and the lightweight clothing appropriate for the humid heat of the plains was totally inadequate at this frosty altitude. The air was thin in Darjeeling. It was possible to stand in the full sun and feel warm, then take just one step into the shade and shiver with cold. Only when I had put on thick socks, boots, a jumper and a jacket was I able to appreciate the charm of the place.

Darjeeling is a picturesque town with a majestic outlook in every direction. Holidaying Indian families strolled the streets in scarves, quilted jackets and festive moods. I booked into a hotel called ‘Timbertops Lodge’ enticed by the promise of ‘free hot showers and bed-quilts provided.’ But the ‘hot showers’ were actually situated in a poorly sealed lean-to where the cold mountain winds knifed in from outdoors through wide chinks in the wooden walls. The ‘hot water’ was actually a tepid dribble that lasted for around thirty seconds before reverting to its natural condition: an ice-cold dribble. But the views of Kanchenjunga were spectacular and the management friendly. Chilled to the bone after my experience with the ‘hot’ shower, I put on my warmest clothing before heading out to explore the town.

As I left the manager called, ‘I will make you a ticket to see the dawn from Tiger Hill tomorrow morning, yes?’

‘Yes please’ I responded, this was a famous sight and I did not want to miss it. But the manager made very sure that he had given me my ticket and taken my money before telling me that my Landrover would collect me at 3.15am, and I was, ‘Please to be ready as the dawn would not wait...’

He said he would get someone to bang on my door at 2.30am. As I left to explore I thought perhaps I had better have an early night tonight.

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A friend back in Alice Springs who had traveled these parts before and professed to know a thing or two, once advised that if I was ever offered Tibetan tea, I should drink it and smile appreciatively even if I did not like it very much. The Tibetans take their tea rituals seriously I was told, and to be anything but enthusiastic might risk mortal offence. At the time, I doubted my need for such information. But it proved useful on my very first day in the Himalayan mountain country. Darjeeling, I discovered is not just a delightfully cool and attractive hilltop refuge high up above the heat of the north Indian plains. Although I did not know this until I arrived, Darjeeling has a fair size Tibetan community in exile.

Within a matter of hours of my arrival, I found myself ensconced in a Tibetan teashop and deep in conversation with its amiable proprietor. Once we were well acquainted, his smiling and rosy-cheeked Tibetan wife appeared, wearing a colourful shawl on her shoulders and a leather apron around her waist. With a flourish, she placed at least a half-liter of the famous tea in front of me. Plainly there were to be no dainty half-measures here. We were to drink our tea from mugs that could have usefully served as chamber pots.

I did my best to make all the right noises when the drinks appeared, but I was secretly appalled. The tea gave off a truly stomach-churning stench and there was an awful lot of it. The prime ingredient that makes Tibetan tea so distinctive is butter. For complete authenticity, this is preferably salted and made from the milk of the yak. A fair sized dollop spooned into the tea gives it an interestingly creamy texture and taste. I discovered that the freshness of the butter was very much a secondary consideration - my extremely generous portion had taken on an oily greenish tinge, apparently a long time ago.

As the thick, lumpy butter slowly melted and collapsed into my steaming tea, the whole rancid, fatty, curdled mess took on the diseased runny look l have in the past associated with doggy tummy trouble and unspeakable messes to be avoided at all costs.

In the face of this adversity, I told myself silently but sternly to lighten up a little. After all, gorgonzola cheese smells like a terminal case of athletes foot, but I love it. With great trepidation I took a sip of the tea, it was very salty, very oily, kind of herbal and yes, it tasted even worse than it smelt. I smiled, coughed to hide the fact I had also gagged on that first sip and smiled again. I wondered if I really would give offence if I admitted I did not like the tea. On balance, I thought perhaps it was better not to take the risk, I would steel myself and drink it. It could not be that awful surely?

For a whole hour the tea sat there. Meanwhile the friendly Tibetan proprietor and I continued to discuss the state of the world in general. I glanced at the brew from time to time as it slowly congealed into a nauseatingly oily soup topped with greenish scum. Each time I looked, I quickly turned my attention back to mine host and resumed our animated conversation. Just looking at that mug made me shudder. I simply could not muster the intestinal fortitude required to tackle it.

After a while I thought perhaps I might just have managed to get away with not drinking it. But the proprietor beamed and pointed out my full mug just as I thought I might safely make my escape.

It was the moment of truth. I steeled myself; picked up the mug with all the bravado I could muster and drank it down in a single long draught. I had the immediate impression that ‘down’ was not necessarily where it was going to remain. Feeling slightly hysterical, I smiled through gritted teeth, smacked my lips, still (remarkably) with gritted teeth, and told the proprietor that his tea was marvelous, his establishment was a delight and he himself a national treasure.

I wondered if there was a discreet corner I could vomit into close by, and whether I could possibly find it in time...

The proprietor was prepared to take my fulsome praise at face value.

“You are my honored guest,” he said. His smiling wife appeared from nowhere, and swiftly refilled my mug with boiling tea while I was still too stupefied to protest. She then dropped another rancid tennis-ball of smelly butter into it with a triumphant flourish of a filthy wooden spoon.

“You must have more tea!” said the proprietor.

I sat down, gazed at my tea, and realized I might not get an early night at all. It might in fact be a very long night...

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I awoke for the Tiger Hill trip feeling dull and unenthusiastic. I had managed a little less than four hours sleep and I was wondering why I had voluntarily crawled out from under my warm quilt to dress in the dark at 2.30am in sub-zero temperatures. However on the bright side, I had managed to keep down two large portions of Tibetan tea.

There was a crackle of ice under my boots as I walked to the waiting vehicle, but inside the cab was all cheerful warmth, a heater working overtime and a flask of hot coffee to hand. Reinvigorated by the caffeine, I began to enjoy myself as we drove along the twisting mountain roads in the darkness. Our small convoy of vehicles stopped at various hotels en-route to pick up sleepy sightseers for the Tiger Hill spectacle. We climbed steadily upwards to the lookout, an icy and exposed ridge in absolute pitch darkness. There was a bare and desolate feel to it despite the basic visitor shelter offering a balcony vantage point.

Around fifty people were gathered in the cold awaiting the sunrise, stamping their feet to keep warm and clapping their mitten-clad hands. They were mainly middle-class Indian families on vacation in the hill country, but there were a few foreigners as well. Two German girls muffled in thick scarves asked me to take a flashlight picture of them in the pre-dawn gloom. I agreed, but could see little through the viewfinder except the tips of two red noses under two woolen caps.

Suddenly, as we stamped around in darkness, there was a glow to the east and then a shaft of sunlight from horizon to horizon. The high snowcapped peak of Kanchenjunga became the first sunlit ground of the new day. Within minutes the Himalayan chain was silhouetted from horizon to horizon against the pink dawn light and the cameras were snapping madly. But it was the kind of giant vista that fades to nothingness when you put a frame around it. I took the photos, but I knew they would be disappointing. I descended back into Darjeeling ready for a large, hot breakfast very pleased that I had taken the trouble to get up early and make the Tiger Hill trip.

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Darjeeling is a small town and frustratingly, although the locals could hop onto a Landrover transport and drive without fuss to nearby Gangtok, this route was closed to foreigners. Assam, Sikkim, and Bhutan remained strictly out of bounds; Darjeeling was the end of the line. In order to get any further into the Himalayas, it was necessary to backtrack a little and return to the steamy heat of the Indian lowlands. From there it was possible to enter Nepal from the eastern border before the long climb back up into the mountains again. At least it would give me the opportunity of making the return trip on the famous train.

The train trip was everything they said it would be, worth a high country trip itself for the experience of descending from the clouds by narrow-gauge rail on a precipitous cliff-face. I was invigorated and ready for anything when we reached the lowlands again and really looking forward to climbing into the Nepalese mountains.

The border post entry to Nepal was one of the more friendly and relaxed customs operations of my experience. It was a small wooden hut on the left side of the road. A bus dropped me at the Indian side and a few curious locals paused to take a look as I strolled over from India to Nepal. Even while the border official was searching diligently through my pack in the customs shed, several people were clamoring at my elbow to sell me hashish. This made me wonder exactly what it was the officer was looking for in my bag.

I reasoned that any customs post at which you can actually buy drugs could not be overly concerned if you happen to have a few ounces of the local product in your possession. I naively assumed that the double standard would be just too flagrant even for these parts. Eventually, I decided the customs man was just genuinely curious to see what was in my pack. He was certainly being thorough. I sat down to chat with one of the dealers while the poking around in my belongings continued.

‘What is he looking for?’ I asked the dealer I judged to have the best command of English. He was a smiling young Nepalese with a ‘Woodstock’ T-shirt. He openly displayed a large block of honey-coloured hashish for my admiration and potential purchase just three paces away from the officer searching my bags - a fairly bizarre occurrence inside any customs post.

‘Oh hash, ganja,’ responded the dealer casually.

I was a little confused. The officer could just about reach out and touch enough hash to addle the senses of an entire regiment. It was in plain view.

‘But... You have the hash here?’ My confusion must have been evident.

‘Ah, yes,’ he said smiling, ‘but I have not crossed the border! It’s all ok!’

‘But, if I buy hash from you here,’ I nodded still perplexed, towards the customs officer: ‘What does he do?’

It was not that I wanted the hash, I just wanted to know what, exactly, was the logic behind this situation.

‘Its all ok,’ the dealer assured me again, ‘I give you hash when he finish search, all ok!’

‘But what if *he* sees *you* giving me the hash, and searches me again?’ I persisted. The dealer snorted at this ludicrous suggestion. His scathing look told me that he now had my measure, he was clearly dealing with an idiot who knew nothing about the operations of customs posts.

‘He not search anymore,’ he said firmly, ‘He already search and anyway maybe we give him little bit hash too!’

The customs officer it seemed was prepared to back up this statement. He motioned me to retrieve my bag and, gesturing towards the dealer I was talking with, told me in confidential tones: ‘His hash very good! I like very much!’

I gave up trying to work out the intricacies of customs and jumped on the waiting wooden bus without buying hash. It was an excruciatingly uncomfortable mode of transport, six abreast wooden seats, a narrow aisle and no room for the knees of anyone over five feet tall. But there were only about eight people on it, so I thought at least I would be able to spread myself out a little. As we set off down the rough road I was in high spirits at this unexpected piece of luck, breathing space can be a scarce commodity on Asian transports. Then, just two hundred yards down the road we stopped again, and this time the entire population of southern Nepal appeared at the roadside and attempted to get on the bus. About half of them made it.

I was jammed in so tight that we could have hit a rock wall at full speed and I doubt I could have moved more than an inch. There were twenty people standing in the aisle and I had seen at least a dozen more swarm up onto the roof. Another dozen or so hung on, apparently by their fingernails, outside the bus as we creaked and lurched along a gravel road.

After a while we came to a river running rapidly and broadly over a bed of gravel and large boulders. I was interested to see what our driver would do when we reached this obstruction, especially since there was no sign of a bridge. In the event he was quite undeterred. He plunged unhesitatingly into the torrent and we bumped and ground our way between and over the boulders. I was glad of all the extra people during this maneuver - at least we were too heavy to be washed away downstream.

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We arrived late in the evening at a small hostel in a tiny village. We were to leave very early the following morning and there was little time to stroll around. With faint hope of obtaining a decent meal, I accompanied an American couple on a search for a restaurant. They had shared the same bus that I was on for several hours, but we had been packed in so tightly I had not even seen them until we all got off.

A brisk two minute walk in any direction brought us to the edge of town with no restaurant to be seen, I was about to suggest we throw ourselves on the mercy of our hotelier, when a man appeared before us as if by magic.

‘Come eat!’ he said smiling, ‘Very good food, very, very good food!’

We were all suffering the pangs of imminent starvation, but I asked him cautiously, ‘What sort of food?’

‘I have omelets, or mutton curry!’ he said proudly.

That was a good enough pitch for me. Eggs are a reliably hygienic staple in rough and ready kitchens, easily spotted if they do happen to be bad. In a climate like this and with no refrigeration within a day’s drive, previous experience suggested extreme caution with the ‘mutton’ curry. It could be any kind of meat, of any degree of freshness or antiquity. This was a menu item best avoided. Unfortunately, the American couple had no such reservations because they had only recently arrived from the States by plane and had yet to experience some of the more dramatic highs and lows of the local cuisine. They said they would prefer the meat dish.

When our host ushered us into a thatched lean-to with a dirt floor, I was glad of my choice; this was clearly no gourmet kitchen. We sat down to await events and the bustle commenced immediately. A tiny fire was lit, two eggs produced and a skillet set over the heat, rice was brought, already prepared in a heavy steel pan and placed to keep warm next to the fire.

When the children arrived a few minutes later with a hapless old billy-goat on a short chain, it took me only a second or two to realize what was about to happen. I leaned over to warn the bemused couple; but it was already too late to recommend the eggs. The hotelier produced a large curved knife and with a swift movement hauled up the goat by its two front legs until it was standing nearly as tall as he was. The blade was plunged into the animal just below the breastbone and forced upwards into the heart. There was a tortured squeal, an abruptly deafening silence and a splashy rush of warm blood onto the dirt floor. The animal was dead.

The carcass was laid unceremoniously in the dirt and the knife-blade reversed in a practiced motion then swiftly drawn back down the full length of the goat’s belly. A sudden slithery gushing of pale and purplish entrails obscured the lake of blood on the floor.

The American couple were in shock, too stunned to either move or take their eyes off the proceedings.

The restaurateur reached into the huge open incision in the animal and carved a lump of meat from somewhere deep inside. This tidbit was swiftly diced into chunks and tossed into the skillet. Some of the pieces were still twitching with residual nerve and muscle spasms as they skittered around in the hot pan. A group of laughing and excited children now came forward and pushed dirty hands inside the dead beast. They pulled them out clutching bits of raw offal in their fingers, which they ate immediately, licking warm fresh blood from their hands. Still the American couple did not say a word, gazing at this scene with pale and drawn faces.

‘This very good mutton!’ said our host, without looking up from the task at hand. He was in high spirits, he was probably thinking that he could charge the Americans the full cost of the goat and still feed his family for days on the rest of the carcass.

Looking at my dinner companions, I could tell from the grim expressions on their drawn faces that their appetite was gone. I suspected that the world would now have two more vegetarians to join the cause. I tried to introduce a note of levity by suggesting that at least they were guaranteed the meat was fresh, but they simply looked at me as though I had suggested something loathsome.

The incident with the goat at dinner put something of a damper on the rest of the evening, it was certainly a conversation stopper. Ultimately, sustenance for the whole of that day consisted mainly of sweet tea served in greasy glasses. Even my eggs were more than a little difficult to eat in the presence of all that blood and guts, although I turned my back on the carnage and picked at the meal as best I could. The two Americans had learned a very hard lesson about what foods it was appropriate to order in a tiny and remote Asian village. The intestinal fortitude required to enjoy dishes made from animals killed in front of your eyes does not come easily to western city-dwellers.

Perhaps farm-raised people would fare a little better.

Of course, I felt a little sorry for my companions; they had not had the time to adjust gradually as I had. I really think they expected the host to open a tin of mutton, or perhaps produce a couple of shrink-wrapped dinners and pop them into an oven. For my part, I had expected him to produce a flyblown hunk of long dead and semi-putrid meat and cut the worst of the green bits away before serving the rest. Even that would have been preferable to what actually did happen.

With conversation flagging, I left the couple to work out their food trauma in peace and returned alone to the hostel where incredibly, hot water was available for a shower. The discomforts of the day were banished; it was heaven.

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The following morning we commenced the long climb into the Himalayas proper, traveling via the winding road originally constructed by British military engineers. It was a spectacular trip, the narrow strip of bitumen twisting and turning up through the mountains, and precipitous drops just inches away from our wheels. The bus laboured for hours in low gear and at one point, I could plainly see the road we had traversed several hours before snaking around the folds of the mountain-side far below and almost directly underneath us.

We inched along rocky ledges, and passed oddly vertical farms where a scant three steps forward from the front door of a tiny farmhouse would bring an unwary pedestrian to the brink of a vertiginous drop into space. On these farms a series of tiny walled ledges hacked into the slopes served to trap water and crop rice and vegetables. Chickens scraped around on the cliff tops looking incongruous in their high eyries and ready to soar like eagles over the distant valleys visible far below. The occasional cow was balanced precariously on the hillside looking as though it should really be anchored securely against a sudden disastrous plunge into the depths.

In the early afternoon, we stopped for lunch and saw a vista of the Himalayas stretching for perhaps a hundred miles from horizon to horizon. Dozens of snow-capped peaks dotted the vast skyscape where pillars and crags of rock and ice poked up through the woolly carpet of clouds beneath us. The bus driver pointed out Mount Everest for me, crisp and clear despite the immense distance, but looking surprisingly unimpressive in this company.

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According to my locally acquired Nepalese guidebook, the first tour groups ever to arrive in Kathmandu were organised by Thomas Cook in 1955: a very late entry into the travelers market for a premier destination. Before this, with rare exceptions, the city was completely isolated from the outside world. Nevertheless, ninety thousand visitors a year were arriving by the 1970’s and Kathmandu was *the* dream destination on the trail for many. Kathmandu was the end of a very long road and it had everything; cheap living, reasonable food, legendary drugs and a relaxed and sociable lifestyle close to the spectacular visual panoramas of the highest mountain chain in the whole world.

To be an Overlander and arrive in Kathmandu was to be on top of the world in every sense.

That evening as we descended to the plateau on which Kathmandu is situated, I sat on the hot steel of the engine cover to chat with the driver as we made our approach to the city. From this vantage I had my first view of the plateau and the cheesy yellow disk of a full-moon rising above red-tiled rooftops as we approached through medieval suburbs of ramshackle housing. I was hungry and my backside was numb from sitting in the bus for so long, but it had been a good couple of days traveling.

I paused just long enough in Kathmandu to establish a base in the old city a few meters from the busy central thoroughfare of cafes and hash-houses known only as 'Freak Street' to locals and visitors alike. Here I could store unnecessary belongings and carry only a light pack of absolute essentials up into the mountains. The weather was perfect and the city sights could wait, I was going to take a long walk through the high mountain country...

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*A little girl carries her brother in the Kali Gandaki gorge, Nepal. Her house (behind) is a ramshackle affair with walls little more than waist high to a normal adult. (Photo JP)*

# 8. The ‘high’ country...

## Nepal, on foot through the high country, trekking to Jomosom, the Kali Gandaki River Gorge, Muktinath, local 'A grade' hashish, Ghorepani, monkey business.

He looked like a street kid. Poor, definitely in need of a wash, but fit and alert, strong, and with a quick glance that could comprehensively sum up your likely value as a prospect for whatever his next scam might be.



Across the Gravel bar: The Trail through Kali Gandaki Gorge, Nepal

He was actually a young Tibetan trader and we were just a few kilometers from his homeland in Jomosom. Jomosom is the anglicised version of the Tibetan name more accurately written as ‘Dzongsam.’ It is a tiny Tibetan community nestled on the floor of the deepest river gorge in the world; the Kali Gandaki River Gorge in northern Nepal.

Jomosom is a close-packed, traditional Tibetan-style village; small and sturdy stone houses huddle together around tiny sheltered courtyards as protection against the freezing winds that sweep down daily from the high mountain passes on the border with Tibet. Many of the flat roofs are overlaid with thick coverings of stockpiled firewood, all of which must be carried for miles. There is barely any local vegetation to be seen in this high and barren landscape other than moss and a few hardy shrubs and grasses.

Somewhere not too far ahead, across and beyond the monstrous gravel bar that covers the floor of the Kali Gandaki Gorge for mile after mile, lay the fabled mountain kingdom of Mustang. It was just a few hours walk, and I had already had more than a week of walking to get this far. But I knew now that I was not going to make it.

The local military commander had examined my documents, scrutinizing my passport and trekkers permit issued by His Majesty's Government of Nepal, and the verdict was: ‘No’. The commander had an aide who told me in fractured English that the border was a sensitive area and most definitely off limits to foreigners. I could be shot, he said. Instead he validated my trekking permit with an authorization to travel onwards to Muktinath, the end of the line and another 3,000 feet higher into the mountains. From there I would literally be able to see into Tibet. Muktinath is a fabled Hindu pilgrim destination and has a temple where fire (in the form of a jet of natural gas) and spring water issue from the same ground. It was a worthy destination, but still, it was a pity.

Mustang appealed to me, I had already met some of its citizens wandering through the high country. It is a feudal nation of wild extrovert horsemen; physically they resemble Native American Indians, high Mongolian cheekbones and long straight, dark hair. They dress eccentrically in leather aprons and loose-fitting black pants, and wear twisted copper bangles, roughly burnished silver and heavy polished gemstone jewelry. Their long black hair was sometimes tied in plaits with colourful red ribbon. Mustang was a nation of polyandry, where brothers might share a wife. Vehicles and machinery of any kind were unknown. It was a nation barely touched by foreigners, a place so wild and inaccessible that only a handful of westerners had ever visited. And now I would not be going either.

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The street-kid brought me back to the immediate present; we had been chatting amiably at the tea stall since we met there around dawn. His favorite word was ‘Acha’ and he used it continually. It could mean ‘no,’ ‘yes,’ ‘maybe,’ ‘I completely agree,’ ‘or even ‘see you later,’ depending on the intonation he gave it. We were standing at the northern edge of Jomosom village, on the ancient trading route to Tibet frequented for centuries by local travelers. Kathmandu and its big city delights were a week or more behind. At our back was the Dhaulagiri icefall, all gleaming ice and dark rock towering skywards just a few miles down on the right side of the valley. On the left was the Annapurna Himal – himal is the local word for three-headed peak, and the source word for Himalayas. The two monstrous ranges, among the highest peaks in the world, soared almost 8,000 meters into a cloudless morning sky.

Between the two giant peaks was the Kali Gandaki River Gorge. I was standing in it, the deepest and most precipitous river canyon in the world, dwarfing even the Grand Canyon in its vertical scale. A full five kilometers deep where it passes between the two peaks, the gorge carries the mighty Kali Gandaki River through the Himalayas towards the lowlands of northern India.

Ahead, the trail led straight towards Tibet via a stout wooden bridge, then across the interminable gravel bar and up over an undulating series of ridges running at right angles to the main valley. But these lower crags were simply a rugged preamble to the mountains proper, an endless series of high ridges, snow-capped peaks and soaring rocky outcrops on both sides of the valley.

The scale of the place was epic: far ahead down the gravel bar and several hours walk from the spot in which we were standing, I could clearly see the place I expected to be towards the end of the day’s trek. The trail descended from the ridges at that distant point on the right of the river and appeared to be following the line of the watercourse again. Not long after first light, I had also noticed a series of distant and indistinct moving dots on the valley floor to the left of the river. Now, as they moved towards us, these dots were revealed as four heavily laden yaks plus a man leading a mule.

They were not following any trail indicated on my map. It crossed my mind that a short cut might be possible - a straight trek across the gravel bar to intersect the path again beyond the ridges. I broached this idea to my companion who responded with a long and languorous ‘Acha’ accompanied by a thoughtful expression and a nod of the head. I took this as agreement and hurried to finish one last cup of the strong, sweet tea we had been drinking since dawn broke. Then I shouldered my pack for the last leg of a long walk. Behind me a low and distant rumble like far-off thunder reverberated through the valley. I had heard that low noise several times over the last few days. The Dhaulagiri icefall was grumbling. Down the valley, a few hundred thousand tonnes of ice was on the move.

One of the first rules of traveling alone in wild places is to stick to any marked trail. In just about every circumstance, the traveler can be guaranteed that this will be easier, quicker, and safer. I rarely break this rule because my experience is that I invariably regret it later. This jaunt was to be no exception. I took the short cut because my destination for the day was a small hamlet, which I knew from my map, was only a few hundred meters distant from the gravel bar I was walking across. Indeed I could see it, a couple of low, square stone buildings, still hours away but plainly visible. The cold, clear mountain air enabled an extraordinary clarity of vision, untainted by any hint of pollution or distorting shimmer of heat haze.

Not having to navigate by using a map had made me careless. I didn't stop to consider that if the short cut was easy, there would be no reason at all for the locals to take the trouble to cut the higher trail in the first place. No sensible person would abandon an easy direct route in order to climb the series of ridges that rose several hundred arduous meters above the floor of the valley before once again dropping down to meet the river.

I had been walking for about an hour when I encountered the first problem, and I had already discovered that endless deep gravel beds are not the most comfortable surface to trek across. The first obstacle appeared trivial at first glance. A tributary of the main river had cut a channel in the gravel bar that blocked my path. It was about a half-meter deep, and perhaps five or six meters across. The water was crystal clear and swift flowing. It seemed easy, I could wade across.

I took off my boots and socks and placed them in my pack. The gravel was very cold, rimed with frosty white patches here and there along the banks of the torrent where water splashed and froze on the pebbles and boulders. As I stepped into the flow carefully to feel my way across, the nerve-endings in my feet and legs were immediately assaulted by a degree of insane coldness I would not have thought possible. It was a cold I could never have anticipated. This was melt-water straight from the snowy heights and the only thing preventing it from freezing solid right now was its turbulent speed over the gravel.

After one step, my feet were in severe pain, after three steps they were totally numb, I felt nothing, and the numbness, with burning pain just ahead of it, was creeping up my legs.

I realized that I had to move slowly. If I were to cut or otherwise injure my bare feet on a rock, I would be stuck literally. It was several days walk to the realms of roads and traffic. I hobbled across as quickly and as best I could and sat down on the gravel to recover. My frozen feet did their best to stick solidly to the frozen rocks. For almost a quarter of an hour I massaged and warmed my feet and legs as best I could; they were like dead things, slabs of chilled and lifeless veal, they felt as though they did not belong to me.

I wrapped them in my padded jacket and waited, shivering slightly and considering tabloid headlines: ‘FOREIGNER LOSES FROST-BITTEN APPENDAGES FOLLOWING ILL-CONSIDERED STUNT,’ and ‘TREKKER DIES OF EXPOSURE WITHIN SIGHT OF DESTINATION.’ After a long time, I was able to chafe the beginnings of a pink glow which spread down my calves and into my feet, and finally to my relief, into my toes.

This was followed by the agony of the circulation proper returning. The pain was intense and shocking and I did in fact discover a small but deep cut on one heel which began to bleed as soon as the circulation returned. It was only after another ten minutes of marshalling my resources that I was able to patch the cut, put my socks and boots back on and move gingerly forward, still suffering burning sensations and prickly pins and needles in both feet.

Within ten minutes of recommencing my journey, I encountered the next water crossing. It was if anything even wider and deeper than the last. I suspected it was another loop of the same tributary I had just crossed, but I had no intention of following its winding and meandering across the several kilometers width of the gravel bar to find out. Beyond this crossing, I suspected, would be another and another. This was why there was a path over the ridges. I could not do it this way - I would have to turn back.

Giving up and going back is always a demoralizing thing to contemplate. In this instance I had the added problem of re-crossing the stream I had already crossed, and I had absolutely no desire for a repeat of my last painful experience. When I reached the tributary again I followed its course back for a kilometer or two in the wrong direction, and eventually found a spot where the watercourse widened to perhaps thirty meters in splashy shallows, and was mostly only ankle deep.

I repacked my boots and socks in my backpack in preparation for fording the watercourse but this time, I delved deeper into the pack and put on my spare sandshoes. Wearing these to protect my feet from cuts, I braced myself and literally sprinted across the ice-cold shallows. The tactic worked, I had only a few minutes of toweling and warming before I could put my boots back on and there was no numbing and agonising loss of circulation. By the time I got back to my starting point I had wasted more than three hours on the abortive ‘shortcut.’ The next time I did this, I swore, I would follow the trail even if it took me straight to the peak of the nearest *himal*.

It was very late afternoon when I reached a tiny, and according to my map, unnamed, settlement at the foot of an enormous scree slope. It could have been the settlement of Kagbeni, but the map was ambiguous. It did not really matter, because given the usual unfailing Tibetan hospitality of the region, I was immediately welcomed despite being a complete stranger, and taken home to receive the local hospitality. Once inside a small dwelling, I was invited to sit on the dirt floor by the tiny fire and given a plate of rice and dahl to sustain me.

My hosts, stocky Tibetans who spoke no English, insisted in courteous sign language that I take one of the beds. In order not to offend them, I accepted the offer even though I would have been more comfortable on the floor. The bed was designed for a person only five feet tall and had no mattress, it was just a couple of thick and very dirty fur covers spread over a rough wood and rope frame. In the absence of electricity, everybody went to bed soon after sunset, and rose just before dawn. Notwithstanding the uncomfortable bed, I slept like a log and was awakened the next morning only by the bustling of the lady of the house as she made tea over a small fire in the pre-dawn gloom.

After two cups of sweet tea I felt ready to tackle the next leg, the 2,000-meter climb to Muktinath. The steepest part of the ascent came in the first two hours of the climb from the river gorge. I reached a barren rocky plateau well above the tree line in the late morning. I had seen no one since my breakfast of hot tea, and there was no sign of occupation, nevertheless, two teenage girls appeared on the trail just ahead. They giggled shyly, speaking the only English word they knew in a hopeful, questioning way: ‘Chocolate?’

Unfortunately, I had none. My supplies had run out some three days before. Sadly, no guidebook had sufficiently stressed the importance of chocolate when traveling the Himalayas. Not only is it instant energy on an arduous trek, it also comes in very handy when dealing with the locals. I realized that the girls must have spotted me labouring up the steep slope some time before and had waited for me in hopes of receiving chocolate. They were both dressed in traditional Tibetan costume, thick dark fabric with colourful embroidery on hems and lapels, and they were carrying huge bundles of firewood strapped on their backs. I judged they must be on their way to a family fuel stockpile a little further up the mountain at Jharkot.

We continued up the rocky slope together, with communication necessarily limited to smiles and gestures. Around noon I sighted a series of massive caves in a cliff face way across the valley to our left. The caves showed signs of previous occupation, but I was unable to establish what they might be. I began to feel lightheaded and a little dehydrated and paused to drink and rest by a swift flowing stream of meltwater captured in an irrigation channel. The girls went on ahead without me when I paused to rest yet again shortly afterwards, they were carrying their heavy loads easily and puzzled by my lack of stamina.

But by this time, I was conscious of a headache and began to think I may be showing some symptoms of altitude sickness, always a potential problem when ascending above the 10,000 foot mark. Since the consequences of ignoring these symptoms can be nasty or even fatal, I was going to need altitude acclimatisation before ascending very much further. But I did not have the necessary equipment and supplies to camp out in this frozen, rocky and wind-scoured landscape. I would have to either continue upwards for the time being to find shelter, or go back.

After consulting my map and determining that I had less than a couple of hundred meters of actual ascent left to make, I continued on my way. The views were fabulous, but by the time, I arrived in Muktinath, my breathing was bubbly and congested and I felt terrible.

A friendly Tibetan woman plucked me off the street and plied me with tea, eggs and rice in a straw-strewn residence with a biblical feel. She was sharing the living space with half a dozen goats and two small children. I perked up sufficiently after a rest to stroll around the town after my meal. But I was feeling slightly disoriented and breathing badly even before I reached the fabled temple, so back I went to bed down in the straw with the goats. The next morning I awoke with a splitting headache and felt very short of breath. I knew that the only sure cure for this malaise was going to be a rapid descent, and I set out shortly after dawn to retrace my steps.

After less than an hour, my spirits rose considerably. With each easy downhill stride I felt better and better. The temperature was hovering around freezing point but the sky was blue, the sun was shining and I was literally on top of the world. I skipped down the barren slope it had taken me all the previous day to climb in less than three hours. This time I paused more to admire the views than to regain my breath. I was still high enough to be walking on land well above the clouds. Below and across the width of a wide valley, the high peaks of forbidding rock and gleaming ice-fields poked improbably and spectacularly skywards through a sea of fluffy white cloud a long way below. The little villages I saw all had masses of festive white prayer banners flying from long bamboo poles, I was reminded of one of the original literal translations of the masculine principle Yang: ‘banners flying in the sun’

It was far too early to consider camping for the night by the time I reached the gravel bar back down in the gorge. I now felt as fit as a fiddle, breathing easily, headache gone and spirits soaring. I hoisted my pack and took the well-worn trail back towards Jomoson. To my amazement, I was back in the settlement easily by late afternoon. The ascent, which had taken me two days, was less than a full day’s downward hike.



*Tibetan kids near Jharkot, Nepal - a days hike or so from the borders of their homeland. Personal hygiene is not valued highly in these parts! (Photo JP)*

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I returned to the same house in Jomosom in which I had previously enjoyed the local hospitality. This dwelling was part of a cluster of stone buildings surrounding a sheltered courtyard. Two sides of the sheltered square was formed by single-level buildings with flat roofs, the other two, taking the brunt of the northerly wind - were on two levels, with space under the living quarters for animals. The ground-floor living area was eccentric in design to say the least. In one corner of the dirt floor a small cooking fire burned in a ring of stones under a high ceiling. This rudimentary kitchen had no chimney to channel the smoke away - when the smoke got too thick, one simply opened the door. From this low point, the floor of the room undulated upwards in a series of apparently random steps until it reached a point in the far corner with less than five feet of headroom. There was absolutely no furniture; the only objects were a few battered old cooking-pots. A couple of flat-topped rocks had been dragged in to the living space to serve as stools and table tops.

When I arrived, some sort of celebration was in progress. I was dragged willy-nilly into the excitement but there was no one around with enough English to tell me what was going on. About a dozen people were present, the assembled company ranged from children to a couple of grizzled old men squatting under the low ceiling at the high point of the room. The old men smiled often to display huge expanses of pink gums decorated with the stumps of one or two brown, chipped and jagged teeth and the children had jet-black dirty hands which looked as though the grime had been lacquered on.

A tough-looking young man in a filthy homemade leather coat launched into a long and humourous monologue - obviously some kind of joke at my expense. The company seemed to appreciate his humour though; everyone looked at me and roared with laughter at my failure to respond in kind to the comedian. The truth was I did not have a clue what was happening.

Then a large chilum was produced, a form of clay pipe with a trumpet-like shape, and I guessed what was coming next. The comedian briefly disappeared but soon returned carrying a whole marijuana plant, complete with leaves and flowering heads. This he offered to me much to the delight of the assembled audience. The plant must have been well over two meters high originally and he had broken it into four lengths - nevertheless, it took both my arms outstretched to hold it. When I took the whole plant, its compressed and leafy bulk extended from my waist to my chin.

I was puzzled, I knew enough about local snobberies and affectations to predict that these people would disdain all but the very finest quality local hashish resin or oil. This prized essence they extracted by gently teasing it from the flowering heads of the living plant, everything else was considered second rate, fit only for domestic animals such as the pigs, who really did live the high life. They may have been poor, but they were hashish snobs, connoisseurs of their local product.

Then the penny dropped. I was being made fun of. The leaves and flowers of the plant were indeed rubbish and of no interest to the local fanciers of the gourmet product. But they were good enough for the silly foreigners who knew no better. This was the text of the comedian’s message: he would fob me off with rubbish so they could keep and smoke the good stuff themselves! Once I understood, I was able to able to play along and belittle my second-rate pile of marijuana with the sort of theatrical facial expressions of mock horror that I hoped were appropriate.

Surprisingly, my poor attempts at humour brought the house down, the plant was taken from me and thrown unceremoniously and with finality into the courtyard, I was dragged bodily into the smiling circle around the fire. Here a huge, heavy sausage of dark-coloured, very oily, and very plastic hashish as long and as thick as my forearm was produced and laid on a flat-topped rock for general inspection. This, I gathered, was the good stuff.

I am generally too self-possessed to be really comfortable using drugs. On the other hand, I have occasionally been too curious to give them the wide berth they generally deserve. This curiosity about influence and effect is generally in conflict with my dislike of not being in total control of my faculties. Because of this, I do not like to get drunk either, although I enjoy a few glasses of wine or a couple of Scotches. Right now though, the options were limited, this was to be one of those occasions of, ‘when in Rome...’ I was the center of attention in this company, and the company were intent on getting me well and truly smashed.

Resistance was plainly futile.

It made me smile to think that in the middle of all this obvious poverty, in a house with no glass in the windows and barely any furniture in its empty rooms, the householders had just discarded enough marijuana to keep them all in luxury for a year at the street prices prevailing in many western countries. I had a fair idea of the value of the product from chatting with other travelers. An ounce or so was a lot of dollars, perhaps several months average wages expressed in Nepalese terms. What is more, the quality of the western product would almost certainly be vastly inferior to the large pile we had just casually thrown away.

The huge slab of local ‘A grade’ hashish which was now being carelessly carved into golf-ball size sticky lumps before my eyes, was probably the dollar equivalent of a lifetime of wealth in these parts. Or, come to think of it, in quite a few other parts as well.

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Nepal is a land profligate in hashish use. At first I had been told I would see cannabis growing everywhere, and was a little surprised when I did not. Then I realized my mistake; I had been expecting plants on the scale of those grown illicitly by smokers in western nations. My eyes expected something in the region of one or two meters high. I was actually surrounded in the lowland valleys by giant plants three, four and five meters tall and more. These huge plants were simply too big to catch my attention, they were trees by my reckoning, and I walked by them for days without realizing my mistake. Some had thick trunks, chain-sawable boles that would easily support the weight of a man on a tall ladder as he extracted the oil from the flowering tips of the upper branches.

I found these huge old plants even more remarkable than the ten-meter high rhododendrons that grow on the lower ridges by the Kali Gandaki. On several occasions a hospitable hash farmer invited me to sample his fresh product as I passed by his flowering crop and I politely refused, knowing that to stop and accept the invitation would mean the certain end of the day's travel.

One day I met an American who *had* stopped to take up a farmer’s invitation. He was drinking tea and packing a chilum by a freshly harvested crop. I found him admiring the view from a ridge-top cabin, about a day’s hike out of Pokhara and paused to drink some tea and swap stories. He told me his name was Lee; he was a spiritual wanderer in the original hippie mould from San Francisco. He related his tale to me in a tone of wonder. He'd been traveling with a companion for several months until their arrival in Kathmandu. In a mood of celebration at arriving in Nepal, Lee’s friend had unwisely decided to eat a small ball of hashish. Within an hour he had lapsed into delirium, then complete unconsciousness. Lee could still barely the story himself.

‘That was some really strong shit man. Some *really* strong shit. He was out for three whole days. I thought he was gonna die. He shit himself *twice* man. He pissed in his bed, he drooled like a baby. Then he was *still*. I kept thinking he’d stopped breathing. Man, he was out so cold I didn’t know what to do. He was *totalled*.’

‘When he came around after three days, he drank like, a whole gallon of water man, and was like, still completely wild - eyes popping, bugged out - completely off his head. It was a *week* man, a whole *week* before he knew what day it even was. Then he told me he never wasn’t *never* ever gonna eat or smoke *no* shit no more. He meant it man - he took the next plane back to the States and he was still shaking when he got on it.’

But I noticed that Lee continued to pack his chilum methodically as he told this story, it had clearly not put *him* off the product and I asked him why.

‘You just take it one small toke at a time man, just one small toke at a time’ he said philosophically as he filled the chilum. ‘That way you can stop when you are only half-crazy…’

All things in moderation was Lee's axiom. Just a few days before I heard this story I saw a local in a Kathmandu teahouse take a large block of already ultra-potent hashish and lace it with the addition of a thick greyish seam of pure opium. The hashish and opium were then squeezed and moulded together using more ultra-potent hash oil to make a homogenous plasticine whole. Perhaps the unfortunate traveler swallowed a ball of that potent mix. Rather him than me; Western consumers are accustomed to having their already inferior product cut with something innocuous, the super-potent enriched drug cocktails of the Nepalese will hit like a neutron bomb if used in the quantities accustomed to back home.

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Meantime, our own hash was ritually toasted to help it burn in the pipe properly. I still had no idea what the celebration was about, but the toasted hash was now commandeered by a capable individual in our little group and packed into the capacious clay mouth of the chilum. The big chilum will never become a popular implement for smokers in the west because it takes a king’s ransom to fill it, and once filled, it is a wholly inefficient method of using an expensive product. It generally burns too fast and too hot, especially in the hands of a non-expert. Most of the smoke is wasted, simply blown out into the air. But there were no worries about waste on this occasion, there was enough hashish in this room to incapacitate a good-sized town and, I suspected, plenty more where that came from.

The chilum was lit by one of the older men, and passed around a couple of times. The large room quickly filled with aromatic blue and heady smoke, and the attention shifted away from me and onto the progress of the huge pipe. As expected, the hashish was incredibly strong, it went to my head like a quart draught of champagne. I took a couple of puffs to fulfill my social obligations, then quietly took myself off to the flat roof at the south side of the courtyard to contemplate the scenery and do a little reading in peace.

In my backpack I had a copy of Jean Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness.* This was a second-hand volume purchased from a street vendor in northern India a few weeks before, and no doubt acquired by him from some destitute or overburdened backpacker with a philosophic turn of mind. I had made several sallies into it earlier with no luck: I just could not engage with it. The complexities of the being-in-itself, and the being-for-itself simply made my head spin. Now I opened it again at page one and quite suddenly, it all made sense. I sat reading, totally engrossed in a hashish-induced empathy with the existentialist mindset, until the light began to fade and I came to with a start.

I had been so absorbed, I had completely forgotten where I was. Before me the floor of the valley was almost dark and it was getting very chilly. I could see an oil lantern already lit in a nearby building. At some distance I could hear gruff Tibetan trader voices in conversation, and just three meters below my rooftop I could hear the heavy footsteps of a fully loaded train of yaks and mules passing in the narrow lane-way. Doleful clanging bells around the necks of the yaks betrayed their position in the shadows of the lane-way as they passed. Dead ahead, the triple peaks of Annapurna and Dhaulagiri were topped with a few wisps of cloud and still floating in full sunlight; apparently suspended in the air a kilometer or two above the already darkened valley below. It was as if a couple of hundred million tons of mountain had just detached itself from earthly constraints and floated majestically into the evening sky. I was thunderstruck.

I decided to stay until Sartre was finished. A sunset like that was worth at least a second look.

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I turned the last page of the Sartre opus towards the end of my third day on the sunny rooftop. Despite my reservations concerning mind-altering drugs, I had read the whole thing with occasional creative assistance of the large chilum downstairs. For the whole of the three days I paused in my reading binge only to stretch my legs around the little township, eat, and drink some tea and watch the awe-inspiring sunsets.

I once saw a fanciful medieval depiction of an exotic giant snake that had just swallowed an elephant whole. In the old print, it was possible to clearly see the painful-looking, distinctly elephant-shaped bulge about half way down the body of the monster. That was how I felt after my three-day sojourn with *Being and Nothingness*. I had just ingested Sartre’s existentialist position in one enormous lump and it sat hugely bloated in my consciousness and refused to budge. I thought perhaps a weeks stroll would be just the right tonic to aid this mental indigestion and packed my bags without delay for the trek back to the nearest road at Pokhara.

In the event, my thoughts would not leave the book. The bleakness of Sartre’s philosophy can be unnerving and after a day on the trail, I could not regurgitate it and I could not digest it. I was forced to stop and exorcise Sartre from my system by writing a jumble of thoughts on being and nothingness into a notebook. The lesson here is probably: do not spend three whole days reading *Being and Nothingness* while smoking hash. This is a volume best absorbed in smaller and more conventional doses.

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Three days later I was soaking luxuriously in hot springs a few meters from the icy torrent of the Kali Gandaki River near a small village called Ghorepani. Having purged French existentialism, it was great to be immersed and relaxed in one of the most spectacularly scenic hot tubs in the world. I had just witnessed a small mountain drama on my way to this overnight stop. It happened as I was walking along a pathway which was really nothing more than a very narrow ledge on a sheer cliff face. Below was a drop of several hundred meters to the river and rocks below. As I was hiking along the narrow path, I was aware that a mule train had been approaching from behind for some time. I could hear the shouts of the drovers from a mile or so away and after an hour or so of gradually gaining on me, a dozen or so beasts were now rapidly intent on overhauling me. The problem was that on this narrow ledge, there was literally no place for them to overtake me safely. I quickened my pace a little in order not to slow the mule-train, but they were setting a cracking pace and after a while, I felt the need to ease off, relax, and take in the scenery a little. I decided to slow the pace a little – the mules could wait.

But the lead mule in the train had other ideas. He was setting the pace for the whole team and seemed determined to maintain it. I first felt his breath on my neck, then when I failed to take the hint; he actually began to push me forwards, urging me to greater speed with an occasional muscular shove of his nose against my backpack.

I was forced to move faster or risk losing my footing and possibly being pushed right off the track and into the gorge far below. Getting out of the way became my top priority. Luckily, I spotted a crevice in the rock wall that I thought I might be able to squeeze myself into. I headed for it, but suddenly there was a wild commotion not thirty meters behind.

I turned to see an amazing sight. One of the over-burdened mules on the narrow trail behind had missed his footing and slipped off the edge of the path. He was snorting with terror and scrambling frantically for a foothold on a short and very steep scree of loose stones. Without the huge load on his back to overbalance him, he probably would have made it back onto the path. As it was, he seemed to hover over the void for a long moment before tumbling helplessly, turning over and over in slow motion as he fell. It was a very long way down. He disappeared for a moment as he crashed through the crowns of a stand of trees way down the valley, then there was a messy, but from this height barely visible splashdown on the bare rocks of the riverbank far below.

Pandemonium erupted as the Nepalese drovers yelled to each other and stopped the caravan. One man was already carefully turning his mules in an impossibly confined space in order to retrace their route. Although the beast below was obviously beyond saving, its load was not: salvage operations were well in hand when I left them to it and continued on my way. I had been told many times how sure-footed and dependable these mountain pack animals were, evidently they were not infallible. I felt sorry for the mule but after seeing that accident I would certainly hesitate to ride in the mountains.

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Accommodation for tonight was already arranged. I would bed down in a Spartan, but clean dormitory in a small trekker hostel within earshot of the river. My fellow guests were a polyglot international collection of Himalayan hikers. Two Canadian women, an intense young Japanese man, and an athletic German couple in their mid-twenties comprised the assembled company. They were all outward bound towards Jomosom, whereas I was the only person heading back towards the towns and cities.

Our genial Nepalese host was an engaging character who spoke excellent English. He had served in the British army in one of the Ghurka Regiments and his souvenir of military days was a dress sword of which he was inordinately proud. He passed it around, as was obviously his custom, for our polite expressions of admiration. Most of us weren't really interested but the eyes of the Japanese man began to gleam immediately. It was an obvious case of love at first sight. He eagerly took the sword and swung it tentatively to test its weight and balance in his hands. That old sword exercised a powerful fascination on the Japanese guest. Later I saw him engrossed, sitting cross-legged and alone in the cold dormitory, stroking the gleaming length of the sharp and naked blade cradled in his lap. He was still there as I left the hostel later to take my hot bath, the first for a week. He was crooning softly and unselfconsciously, a man lost in a Samurai dream world.

This little episode with the old sword came back to memory quite forcibly a while later when I read the short and very dark piece simply titled ‘Patriotism’ by the Japanese author Mishima. If ever a blade fascinated a person, it was Mishima. In this famous and profoundly disturbing tale he dwells with agonising and almost loving care on the act of ritualised suicide. The exact feel of the sword entering the body to sever entrail and muscle is graphically explored. Page after page of harrowingly intricate detail takes the reader through the process of suicide by disembowelment.

As an insight into the Mishima psyche and a celebration of violent mutilation, the story is painful in the extreme to read. In some respects it is a vile work. But it is also compelling. And what makes it all the more morbidly fascinating for the reader is the knowledge that the author ended his life in just this precise manner a few years later.

Mishima was a man mesmerised by Samurai heritage and tragically drawn to this hideous final act - a messy but honorable traditional death. I wondered what were the other-worldly thoughts going through that young Japanese traveler’s mind as he sat cross-legged and alone in a cold room in a foreign land, singing softly to a sword in his lap.

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Dark thoughts aside, the hot bath was nothing short of fabulous, a cleansing plunge pool of volcanically heated water bubbling from a spring on the rocky riverbank. The piles of dung around were a fair indication that wallowing buffalo also used the pool, but I plunged in without hesitation. It was not overly hygienic perhaps to lie in a buffalo wallow, but I reasoned that extreme heat and the fast flow from the underground springs would be sufficient to keep the water fresh and clean.

Yet despite the heat, there were many small water insects apparently living comfortably and unaffected by the high temperatures. If they could manage, presumably germs and viruses could. I decided not to worry about it.

A cloud of steam rose from the hot pool into the cool afternoon air, and the ambience was pure luxury. The views from this natural spa were outrageously scenic, the sort of extravagant dream landscape of a paradise lost that you expect to see under the dark patina of an eighteenth-century romantic canvas. Straight-ahead as I lolled in the steamy shallows was a snow-capped 7,000-meter peak. To my right, the icy torrent of the Kali Gandaki River seethed in white foam over house-sized boulders. A little further upstream, a small, but spectacular waterfall plunged several hundred meters in a great arc from the rugged top of the gorge walls far above.

My reverie in the hot tub was disturbed by the arrival of the German couple from the hostel. They were clearly hoping to take a bath in privacy, their demeanour indicated that three was a crowd. Regretfully, I wrapped myself in my towel and left them to it, picking my way through a jumble of huge rocks to the edge of the river to complete my riverside ablutions by cleaning my teeth.

I sat watching the shadows lengthen in the gorge for another half-hour before arising to retrace my steps back to the hostel. As I passed close by the hot springs I witnessed a remarkable sunset tableau: the German girl standing naked on top of a high flat rock, arms fully outstretched and muscular body straining tautly towards the gleaming snow-capped mountains and the thundering waterfall. She was completely still in this pose for a long moment. There was no sign of her companion. It was a moment of pure pagan delight.

Trying not to break the spell, I gave her as wide a berth as possible. But I could not resist another sideways glance as I turned upwards to the track above the riverbank. She spotted me at the periphery of her vision as I turned, and became an awkwardly protective tangle of arms and legs as she jumped down from the rock and scrambled for her clothes. When she arrived back at the hostel twenty minutes later she looked slightly embarrassed but flashed a quick smile in my direction. No hard feelings.

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The following day, climbing towards a high mountain pass, I had the persistent and uncomfortable feeling of being watched. I looked behind expecting to see another hiker in the distance, but each time there was no one in sight. I had the whole mountain to myself. Yet I could not help continually turning and scrutinizing the surrounding area for signs of life.

After a while I made a deliberate attempt to forget this strange paranoia and succeeded in losing myself for a while in thoughts of the three-dimensional nature of the landscape I was in. I had just lately begun to realize that altitude was as much a cultural as it was a geographic factor in the Himalayas. I was now accustomed to the idea that it was possible to spend the night in a sub-tropical valley with oranges in season and yet still trek up to an icy barren tundra on a wintry plateau by the afternoon. The seasons changed in a matter of hours with the altitude. Winter, summer, and all points between: all were immediately accessible by the simple method of aiming for either a low warm valley, or a high cold ridge or tableland.

Walking in and out of the seasons casually, I was struck by a realisation probably taken for granted by anthropologists: some social groups are based on altitude proximity or vertical distance, rather than the more usual standard of horizontal proximity or distance measured along the ground. The people in this valley at 4,000-feet were nothing at all like the people on that last ridge at 7,500-feet, but had a lot in common with the valley people I saw yesterday, who lived at a similar altitude. Although the horizontal distance seemed to separate them, I speculated that the communities at similar altitudes were related family groups.

I stopped for lunch at the top of the ridge and was thinking about these complexities when something definitely *moved* at the edge of my vision. The feeling of a living presence close by and watching returned again in force. Someone, *something*, was there on the ridge with me.

I sat still, concentrating on any movement I might pick up with peripheral vision. Soon there was a rustle in the vegetation and then another, suddenly I was surrounded by a troupe of curious monkeys. They were grayish-white in colour, and some, presumably the males, were bearded. The biggest and boldest was a powerfully-built animal standing around four-feet tall despite his bowed legs and stooped and hunched way of walking upright.

At first I enjoyed the novelty and the opportunity to see these animals at close quarters, but the big male advanced closer and closer in a series of threatening rushes. Suddenly he came very close indeed, baring a set of enormous tombstone teeth and bright-red gums at me. He looked as though he could tear me limb from limb, and he was most certainly not afraid.

Up until that point, neither was I.

I stood rapidly and grabbed a tree branch to swing around and protect myself. The monkeys retreated a few yards. They lunged forwards, then backed off in a repeated pattern that brought the furthest and presumably more timid animals closer and closer in with each sally in my direction. Within ten minutes they had chased me right off the ridge top. I began a rapid descent, after which I saw no more of them. Would they have attacked if I stayed? I do not know; but the possibility was there, I was sure that at least the thought of attacking had crossed some of their little monkey minds.

You could lay a safe wager that many ‘Yeti’ legends from these parts are based on encounters with these grizzled-looking monkeys. They look very human when quickly glimpsed. I think this troupe must have been surreptitiously watching me for a while, plucking up the courage to investigate only when I sat down and looked small and inoffensive. But once they plucked up the courage to approach, they were not easily driven away, at least not by a lone traveler. Back in Kathmandu a few days later a morbid trekker from New Zealand assured me that I could contract rabies from the vicious bite of these monkeys, and one should not, on any account, approach them. I felt he was missing the point: ‘Yes’ I said in frustration, ‘but suppose *they* approach me?’

Soon after the experience on the ridge I descended to a tiny teashop in a small shack lower down the valley. For an alleged wild frontier, Himalayan travel has some very homely touches. The scenery may look majestic and untamed, but anyone can see that people have been coming this way for a very long time. The small human additions that soften valley landscapes are apparent everywhere: a small wooden bridge to keep the traveler’s feet dry, a foothold, a series of steps carved long ago into the steep hillside to aid the ascent and descent of passing travelers.

The mountain trails also feature hilltop cairns of stones, plus prayer wheels and prayer flags scattered all along their routes. Invariably, just when refreshment is needed, the apparently empty landscape will disclose a tiny wooden shack and a smiling face offering hot tea and perhaps a dish of rice and dahl. The wildernesses in the Himalayas are the high and barren rocky plateaus, the deserts above the snow line. Down in the valleys is hospitality and homeliness with the elements of nature usually well under control.

While I was drinking my tea, a diminutive Nepalese man approached. He was limping painfully and his feet were bandaged. Despite this, he was carting an enormous load in a wicker basket on his back. A broad leather strap passed around his forehead supported the burden and forced him to adopt an uncomfortable, forward-leaning posture with straining neck muscles. He dropped his huge load close by and asked me for medicine.

He spoke only a few words of elementary halting English, I explained as best I could that I had only basic medical supplies: aspirin, Band-Aids and the like, and no medical training. He seemed to think that all foreigners were qualified doctors. He unwrapped a filthy piece of cloth from an otherwise bare right foot to reveal a terrible mess, black and dead-looking toes only loosely attached to his foot. Huge cracks where toes joined foot revealed dirty and suppurating flesh and a rainbow of colours ranging from black to yellow, from virulent green to raw red. He must have been in agony. These major injuries were far beyond my rudimentary first aid skills. He needed a doctor and my guess was that he was going to lose the toes and probably his foot, if he did not get good medical treatment soon.

Over tea, he told his story as best he could. He had taken a job as guide/porter for some European hikers and climbers, being unable to resist the lure of some fast money. But the foreigners were fully equipped for high-altitude travel and he was not. He had undertaken an extended trek, including several days above the snow line, in bare feet. The Europeans had given him an anorak, which he still had, but they had no boots that would fit him. At the time he assured them it did not matter about boots, and that was the truth. Until now, it had not mattered about boots, he never spent any time in the cold high regions, he stayed in the valleys.

On this trip, he endured stoically. When the party came down from the frigid heights he simply wrapped his frostbitten feet in strips of old cloth and assumed they would get better in a few days. His left foot for some unknown reason, was recovering quite well, his right foot was severely infected.

I stressed to him as urgently as I could that he needed to get to the hospital in Kathmandu before the infection spread. He looked doubtful, surely I could fix it for him right here? I could not. All I could offer in the way of medication was some antiseptic ointment and a few painkillers, which I gave to him. Even for a healthy person, it was close to a week’s walk to the only properly equipped hospital in the entire country. I have no idea if he eventually made it and saved his foot.

# 9. Where the grotesque is quite normal...

## In the shadow of Machupuchare, Kathmandu again, the Living Goddess, Calcutta again, Wayne – the lost American

On the last day of my trek I dressed by candlelight before dawn and then walked out into the still-darkened streets of Pokhara, a small town under the giant mountain shadow of Machupuchare. Despite the hour and the cold, there were already people abroad on the streets. On my previous visit to the town at the start of my trek, clouds hid the peak of Machupuchare. Now it was suddenly there: towering improbably at the end of Main Street and so huge I needed to tilt my head back to see all of its 6,996 meter bulk. The upper snow-covered slopes and black crags gleamed brilliantly and ethereally in bright sunshine that had not yet found its way down to the town below.

I found a small cafe in the central district of Pokhara where a warm fire was lit and I could enjoy the spectacle of daylight creeping slowly down four miles of solid rock. As I watched the light slide downwards, I ate a dish of steaming and nutritious porridge, followed by a plate of fried eggs. When the whole lot was washed down with two cups of strong hot coffee I felt on top of the world. Several weeks of walking through the mountains carrying my pack had brought me to a peak of health and fitness. I was ready for anything!

I took the bus over the stretch of sealed road between Pokhara and the capital. Back in Kathmandu, the old city was awash with newly arrived and freshly stoned-out-of-their-brains travelers. Some backpackers had started to lose their grip on reality by this point in their long journeys. A few had traveled way beyond the reasonable limits for their available funds just to get here and their future was uncertain to say the least. It was hard to blame the Nepalese authorities for conducting the occasional purge to get rid of some of the penniless hippies that cluttered their streets.

On the way to my accommodation, I met one group of recently arrived desperates who had suffered a financial crisis en route. They had driven all the way from Europe in a fifty-two seat Mercedes Benz bus and were now trying to sell their transport to any pedestrian who would listen in the streets of Kathmandu.

A succession of stoned, broke and penniless backpackers were being hassled with an unlikely sales pitch: ‘Hey man, wanna buy a really cool bus?’ Hopeful handwritten signs were taped on the front of the huge bus they read, ‘FULLY AIR-CONDITIONED!’ ‘RELIABLE,’ ‘PIPED STEREO!’ ‘WITH CAMPING GEAR,’ and ‘GREAT BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY FOR JUST US$5000!’ Perhaps they were hoping some hippie with indulgent parents would be just stoned enough to hand over a large wad of travelers checks in exchange for a monster bus. Of course, the buyer would then have the problem of getting through at least a dozen border posts without proper ownership, insurance, or travel documents...

Passing through the Yin and Yang restaurant in Durbar Square on my way to first floor lodgings at the Sugat Hotel, I noticed that freshly baked hash cakes were being served in a smoky atmosphere which seemed to be already around fifty percent hashish. Bizarre wide-eyed, and disoriented people wearing an assortment of exotic clothing spilled out from the hash dens and tourist shops of Freak Street to wander, pupils dilated in addled appreciation, around the stalls, restaurants, and temples of the old city. Across a wide paved expanse covered in improvised market stalls, the Palace of the Living Goddess rose imposingly, I could see the occasional movement behind the palace windows from my hotel room across the square. Perhaps it was the Goddess herself taking a peek at the hippies and weirdoes?

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A local told me the goddess is chosen as a young child; selected by some arcane procedure and brought to live in luxurious isolation in the huge city palace. She lives a privileged life - with a catch. One of the proofs of her divinity is that Goddesses never bleed. Once she does, the Goddess loses her divine status. If she should cut herself, or menstruate, she is dismissed forthwith - relegated to the status of mere mortal and thrown out on to the street to fend for herself while a replacement divinity is chosen.

Naturally enough, the tenure of this position becomes difficult when a girl reaches her teens. However, this current living goddess was aged well into her twenties, so it is a matter of conjecture how she coped with the rather strict requirements of the job on a month to month basis. Bearing in mind the lack of a pension plan in early retirement, perhaps her minders and close attendants were able to give her some sort of herbal potion to ensure that her period never came, or perhaps it came but she simply never mentioned it. Whatever her story, she was still there, living whatever high-life it is that goddesses live in Kathmandu.

The rest of Kathmandu had no qualms about the sight of blood. Strolling through the huge square that evening an excited crowd drew my attention, people were rushing from far and wide to gather around a small stone altar. Candles were lit and the altar decorated with incense sticks and flower-blossom. Something was about to happen. I approached as close as I could, but the tight press of people continually squeezing in front prevented me from seeing what was going on. I could hear a continuous and high pitched squealing above the excited anticipatory buzz of the crowd and I gathered that a pig was about to be sacrificed. The purpose of the sacrifice was impossible to tell, but the atmosphere was pure carnival: electric with a buzz of happy expectation.

If any around me spoke English they were too engrossed in what was happening to be troubled to explain events to me. The squealing went on and on for long minutes as the ritual proceeded, and reached an almost unbearably high-pitched crescendo of pain and terror before terminating abruptly. I still could not see a thing. After a minute or two I looked down and realized my boots were covered in blood. I was standing in a river of it. In fact, we all were. So much blood from just one pig; or maybe they killed two pigs. I could not tell. I walked away feeling slightly revolted and leaving bloody red boot marks on the pavement. As I moved away from the butchery I had no idea what it was all for, and I never found out. It was just another of those mysterious things that happen inexplicably sometimes in front of travelers.

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Elsewhere in the same enormous square, I could see a harmonium concert in progress and at least two chilums of hash in circulation. The pipes were passed from musicians out to the watching crowd and back again. The music was a wild and impromptu gypsyish sort of melody that had the crowd of both locals and foreigners swaying and tapping in unison. The musicians played with manic intensity, a relentless, hash-focused, high-energy jam session without letup. They sweated freely despite the evening chill, and each tune lasted around twenty minutes. They paused only briefly to tend their chilums before starting again.

At first sight, all the musicians appeared to be toothless grandfathers, but apparent ages in Nepal can be deceptive. The phenomenon is mainly due to the lack of dentistry. Anyone over thirty is likely to have an expanse of toughened gums with a few chipped and broken stumps of discoloured teeth. The local cure for toothache in Kathmandu is to bang a nail into a special tree with magic powers. This may have some placebo effect on the pain, but it was doing nothing for the visible damage.

Down a narrow side street, a hash den catering to foreigners and called ‘The Monk’s Pleasure Rooms’ was in full, though dull, swing. I went inside following a couple of anxious and hungry-looking young Swedes wearing short-sleeved Afghani sheepskin jackets. The place was astonishingly silent, though packed to the gills. It was a mass of thin, furtive and sorry looking westerners and as quiet as a public library.

I was bemused that this was a ‘Pleasure Room.' All I saw was a sea of silently forlorn, confused, drug-addled, lost, pinched and mean faces. It could have been the waiting room of the dentist’s surgery that Kathmandu so desperately needed for all the fun they were having. Not a smile was visible from one end of the room to the other.

What had happened here? Perhaps I had just missed the final act in some awful tragedy played out before these grim faces. Perhaps this was a wake: or maybe they were on some kind of mass downer, experimenting with their own darkest impulses. Perhaps this scene was a minor and a temporary aberration in a place usually reflecting laughter and sunshine. Whatever it was, I did not like it, I left them to their dubiously monkish pleasures, and went to a brightly-lit eating house down the lane where people were relaxing and playing chess.

In this little restaurant, a Nepalese teenager with very little formal schooling, but a formidable talent for chess, comprehensively trounced me twice over coffee and biscuits. On leaving I felt mildly stoned and decided the biscuits I had eaten with my coffee had probably been laced with hash. No big deal. Whatever it was, I was in expansive mood, and impulsively ordered a silk dressing gown with a gaudy multicoloured embroidered dragon from neck to hem. The commission went to a street-trader tailor who waylaid me on the way back to the hotel.

I reasoned that any entrepreneur still touting for business at midnight on a frosty night deserved a win for his efforts and his asking price seemed absurdly cheap. Approaching the hotel, I once more avoided a pathetic beggar who had successfully spun me his hard luck story at least twice before. He was not a local, he was a washed up trail-casualty from the East End of London and was touting for cash in his usual spot, near the entrance to the Yin and Yang. The Nepalese have enough poverty of their own without having stupid, hash-addled foreigners importuning strangers in their streets. On the first two occasions I gave this particular beggar money he said he was putting together a fund for his fare home. At first I believed this hard-luck tale, but now I knew he was just smoking it as fast as he collected it.

Back in my hotel room at the Sugat, the air was damp and chilly on the first floor and there was no hot water for a shower yet again. In fact there was no water at all. The toilets were dank and smelly at best, and right now just repulsive. Loud thumping music came through the open windows from at least three different bars in the adjacent Freak Street. Down in the square below a man walked by leading a sad and defeated looking elephant. He was ignored by the harmonium crowd who were adding to the noise, still dancing and smoking up a storm. Over by the sacrificial altar on the far side of the square the crowd had long since gone and the blood congealed into black pools and rivulets on the rough pavement. Tomorrow, when the sun took away the night chill, the flies would have a feast.

It was Friday night in Kathmandu. I decided to pick up my new dressing gown and head south.

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Calcutta was drenched - hot steamy air sluiced with hot steamy drizzle. I paid my Sikh taxi driver the equivalent of around half of the average Indian income for an entire year to get from the airport into town. My complaints about the overcharging not only fell on deaf ears, he repaid my hostility by dropping me off around 11pm at one of the worst flea-pit city hotels I have ever seen. Lesson: do not upset the Sikh airport Mafia. The rain started to come down in buckets just as I had to pick my way through the pavement people with hollow cheeks who huddled in rows under sheets of plastic and cardboard outside the scruffy hotel.

‘Welcome to Calcutta,’ was my thought.

Inside the hotel, a surly night manager told me that only dormitory accommodation was available, the situation would improve in the morning when several people would check out.

Would I like to sleep with the other Australians and Americans?

No, I would not.

But the taxi was gone, the rain was coming down, and the manager had promised a private room in the morning. I felt my way through the darkened dormitory and fell asleep on the first lumpy bed I came across that did not have a body in it.

In the morning I slept in, semi-conscious but ignoring the rustle of movement around me. I thought I had the dormitory to myself when I finally swung my legs out of bed. But then I noticed a young Australian girl sitting on a bed in a corner and sobbing. She seemed quite inconsolable, and quite oblivious to my presence. I felt I ought to comfort her, but I felt a little inept and unsure of myself, not least because she was naked to the waist and her generous breasts were wobbling at me with every sob. The exact etiquette for comforting half-naked strangers in Asian dormitories can be difficult to ascertain. I did my awkward best in the circumstances, and after a while she became calmer and slipped a T-shirt on.

By then a number of people had heard her sobs and popped their heads around the door of the dormitory to check on whether she may need assistance with this bloke who had obviously upset her and was now probably about to molest her. I offered to buy her breakfast and she brightened a little.

She was nineteen years old and from a small country town in New South Wales. She had been in India, Malaysia, Singapore and Bali in the past three months. She was crying because everyone hated her and her friend was dying. Over breakfast at a nearby cafe, I got the fuller version of her story.

She knew everyone hated her because she had been walking around the city the day before, just sightseeing with a friend and going nowhere special. But in the course of their wanderings they strayed unawares into a Muslim neighborhood. Because it was so hot and sticky, she was wearing only shorts and a short-sleeved shirt and had suddenly realized she was getting some very hostile looks. All other females on the street were swathed from head to toe in the traditionally modest garb of Islam.

Trouble really started when someone hissed at her unpleasantly and a man shouted that she was a prostitute; within seconds she was running terrified from a storm of verbal abuse. Although she was not really hurt, she felt the impact of a couple of small stones, probably thrown by children as she fled. This morning she felt depressed and reluctant to leave the dormitory. She was traveling with her friend who had gone out to buy rail tickets to Delhi, and was at a loose end until her friend returned. As we both knew, buying rail tickets in India could take all day.

Why was her dying friend buying rail tickets? I inquired.

No, I had it all wrong.

‘Jenny is not dying, Wayne’s dying, Jenny is buying tickets and I am Linda.’

‘Why is Wayne dying then?’

‘Wayne is dying because he can’t get good shit here in Calcutta. Once he gets to Bangkok he will be all right. Wayne has lots of good friends in Bangkok who can take care of him and give him all the good shit he needs to get by, he just needs to get there.’

After our breakfast of eggs and fruit juice, I bought a loaf of fresh crusty bread from the local bakery to take back for lunch, but an obviously starving six-year old cornered me within five meters of the bakery. I broke off a hunk of bread that he wolfed in three seconds flat and suddenly twenty other starving kids appeared from nowhere. We were mobbed. I gave away the bread, bought another and gave that away too. I had discovered a weakness in myself I could never quite overcome. I could not walk past a person who was starving if I was carrying food. I had better start eating my bread *in* the bakery.

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Calcutta is most definitely a slimmer's paradise for a visitor with these sorts of qualms. As I gave away the last piece of the second loaf of bread to a boy with match stalk legs we walked away determinedly. I thought perhaps that was enough gritty realism for one morning, but I was wrong.

A few meters away down the street, a man with a bloated leg split like an overripe banana waved a piece of paper at me. It was a quotation for his medical treatment: a neat assessment of the surgery, dressings and drugs he would require. The quotation had been placed in a clear plastic envelope to protect it for the long term; nevertheless it had seen a lot of use and was falling apart. It was really more an accountant’s itemization of his condition than a medical opinion: the drugs, the bandages, the doctor’s time, the bed, all were neatly tabulated and calculated. I gave him a couple of small coins as we walked by.

It is only possible to take so much personal responsibility for the poor in India before a kind of manic sense of impotence takes over. This is followed I am told, by utter indifference to the suffering. Thankfully, I never spent enough time in India to really reach this level of detachment, and I hope I never will. Nevertheless, I saw plenty of evidence of people who have.

A little further down the road a gaunt, skeletal cow was eating a cardboard box in a desperate attempt to ease the pangs of starvation. Being a sacred animal is no guarantee that you will get fed in India. A little further down the main road a ten-year old boy was apparently feigning death on the pavement while his father wailed above him and waved a collection plate. But was he really feigning? I was not sure if this was a staged drama or not. Perhaps the boy *was* really dead. He was deathly still, pale complexioned, lips bluish. The crowds on the pavement broke around the pair like surf hitting a rock. But three days later he was still there. One afternoon I saw the child get up stiffly from the pavement and go home after a long day of pretending to be dead and having his father wail over him for eight hours. It was a living of sorts.

Back at the hotel just off the bustle of Chowringhee Road, a smartly dressed man offered to buy my Seiko wristwatch. He strode straight up and asked me to name my price, at least I knew now that not everyone here was dirt poor. I inquired how he knew that I had a Seiko wristwatch. He replied that he had seen it the night before. I was staggered by this observation. I had stepped from taxi to hotel, a distance of just a few meters, in the rain, in the dark, and wearing long sleeves. I had been on the street perhaps fifteen seconds. As I politely refused his offer, I wondered how many other people had so quickly summed up my likely asset value: probably every person on the pavement.

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Linda’s very good friend Wayne was in a delirium when we checked on him at the hotel. He was sweating it out in a hot and darkly squalid little cupboard of a room with no windows. He was lying in a filthy bug-infested bed with discoloured sheets. In reality ‘discoloured’ was a description that came nowhere near to describing Wayne’s sheets; they were spectacularly stained and torn pieces of ragged and smelly fabric. If you were the sort of disgusting person who was cruel enough to expect a dog to use bedding like Wayne’s, most Western jurisdictions would have an animal welfare group showing you the error of your ways before a judge within days.

Wayne was a junkie. A far-gone mainline heroin user, only twenty-six but shrivelled and cracked and ancient. His skin was gray and flaky, he was severely malnourished, his arms were blotchy and tracked with needle marks, and he had no muscle tone at all in his stringy body:

‘No one can get him to *eat*’ said Linda mournfully, ‘but he’s such a *sweet* guy’

He did not look it as he tossed and turned in a sweaty fever and seemed unaware of our presence. He had headlice, and he needed a fix bad.

‘Its hard to get here’ said Linda, ‘grass is easy, you just go to the government ganja store around the corner, but heroin is hard and bad.’

I had to agree with her on that one. I agreed to walk with her to the government drugstore to get a little something to calm Wayne down. A smiling salesman at the officially sanctioned drug store - presumably a public servant - passed us a newspaper cone full of marijuana (stamped ‘quality guaranteed by the Indian Government’) through a grille of iron bars in exchange for a few rupees. He also sold us cigarette papers and even offered a no-obligation free trial smoke of his new stock ‘Just in today, very good ganja indeed!’ - which we declined.

Back in Wayne’s room I rolled him a large joint while Linda went to rustle up soup and drinking water. The instant the joint was lit Wayne came alive, gathering his scattered wits and reaching for the cigarette instinctively. While I rolled him number two, he dragged deeply on number one several times, before he coughed consumptively and began to talk. He was croaky, but surprisingly lucid considering the state he had been in a little earlier in the morning. His story came out in bursts; his first priority was holding in a huge lung-full of smoke for as long as humanly possible. He held each breath until the stress and strain showed in bulging cheeks and a distorted grimace and he looked ready to explode.

He was from Washington - the state not the city - and he had been in Asia for around eighteen months. At first he had traveled pretty widely. He saw a lot of cool places in the first six months, surfed in Bali, hung out in Bugis Street in Singapore and at Batu Ferringhi in Penang. He also trekked through Sumatra’s Lake Toba region and cruised down through the Malay Peninsula. He had even taken a short side trip to Laos. Then he went to Bangkok.

In the Thai capital, Wayne gravitated as I had, to the notorious Malaysia Hotel - once a luxury tourist high rise property, now a dilapidated haunt of pimps and pushers. It may have been reduced from its former glory, but the Malaysia was still a favorite stopover and crossroads meeting place of young travelers on the trail between Australia, Europe and the Far East.

As he drew on his joint and warmed to his theme, Wayne said that he had got himself a girl in Bangkok: a local girl, real pretty and funny too. Wayne thought she liked him a lot, he was sure she really liked him, even though he knew she also wanted his money. But they had a lot of fun anyway.

Wayne went to her place one night. It was a tiny apartment in a high-rise block across town, a place with dingy rooms and thin walls. They were in bed; just talking at first until they argued about something, Wayne could not remember what it was and it didn’t really matter anyway, he had worked it out now. It was all money to her. Her pimp was listening. Wayne had not known it, but he was waiting just outside the door. In the heat of the argument he suddenly burst in and stabbed Wayne through the left shoulder as he lay in the bed. He then tipped him quickly out onto the tiled floor so he would not spoil the bed sheets with his bleeding.

While he was lying there and losing blood steadily to an ever-growing pool on the grubby tiles, the girl and the pimp rifled his wallet and the pockets of his clothes. They talked in Thai to each other and Wayne could tell they were laughing at him. He was conscious enough to realize he had been set up from the start. At first he thought he might die of blood loss, but he did not. The next thing he knew, he was outside; still bleeding and without pants or shoes on.

He got himself patched up by some fellow travelers back at the Malaysia Hotel, it was a messy but not particularly serious wound. He was never quite sure how he made it back without pants or shoes, but when he was all cleaned and bandaged up, he phoned his parents: a collect call to the States. It took him a long time to get through. But he did get through eventually; he got them to send him more money urgently. He told them that he was in a bad way, had been attacked and robbed, and suffered a stab wound. They were alarmed, in fact they were really concerned. For the first time ever they sent him more money than he asked for. They said to hold onto the extra in case he needed to get a good doctor.

That was around a year ago and it was the last time he spoke to them. After that he shifted hotels and took in a little of the stronger shit - the smack - just to ease the pain in his shoulder a little. Then he just could not seem to get his head together to talk to the folks or do anything very much. He spent most of his time lying in bed shooting up in some back street rat-hole in the suburbs of Bangkok. ‘Friends’ came by and delivered his shit. They were locals, good people all of them: he paid them by signing over travelers checks from his dwindling but still reasonably substantial stock of American dollars. They brought him food too, girls if he wanted, but he didn’t really want girls anymore and he didn’t eat much either. Sometimes he stayed in his lodgings for many days at a time.

One day he woke up and had a moment of clear lucidity when he realized what was happening. He had come to India in a desperate last-ditch attempt to make a clean break and get away from all that shit in Bangkok. He had flown on the spur of the moment direct from Bangkok to Calcutta. Maybe he could go to an ashram or something. He had heard there were some good, cool places where he could get his head together, but he was not quite sure where they were. But coming to India had been a mistake and things did not work out. Things would never work out here.

Since arriving in Calcutta, Wayne had barely left the hotel and had given up his ashram dream as a wild fantasy. Now he desperately needed to get back to Bangkok: back to the good dependable shit. Here in Calcutta was only bad shit, in Bangkok he had connections. He would phone his parents when he got back, when he had his head together. He had only a few hundred dollars left, maybe enough to get back to the States yes, later maybe. But definitely enough to get back to Bangkok and get a place. Oh yes, and a stash of good shit too, enough for weeks maybe...

He needed that first.

And after that?

Well, he had friends, you know, there are some real good people in Bangkok...

Wayne was dreaming, unlikely to leave except on a stretcher; he was incapable of buying a plane ticket let alone making the trip. Customs and immigration would never let this wide-eyed shivering and raving lunatic through the system. Wayne could not usually even get to the bazaar a couple of hundred meters down the street. Most of the time he was delirious and often could barely walk without help.

He looked ok during his few good moments, but Wayne was a basket case, out of control and spiraling helplessly towards oblivion. He suffered from delusions and paranoid fears and was prone to raving dementedly for several hours daily. Without the care and attention of a few other travelers at the hotel – even as casual as that care was - he probably would have died in his bed by now, starved himself to death less than ten yards from the kitchens. It was nothing new in Calcutta, it was happening on the streets outside on a daily basis.

Over the next few days I tried several times to get his parents address or telephone number out of him. He just changed the subject, or ranted, or rambled. I think he had forgotten it.

Perhaps he was really an orphan.

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Linda and her friend Jenny showed me around Calcutta for a few days while they waited for their train to Delhi. They were two innocents abroad, personable and much-too-young-to-be-in-India-alone Australian girls who had been at school together. This was their first trip overseas and they trusted everyone they met and took ridiculous risks with their personal safety. They were the type who might stroll into a war zone and smile trustingly at the combatants. They had no sense of place or appropriate behavior. They would sunbathe topless without regard to the local mores in the most unsuitable locations; even the small courtyard of our sleazy hotel where they were spied on endlessly by the horny young male staff who were driven mad with lust in the adjacent kitchens.

Linda and Jenny seemed incapable of moderating their laid-back style and skimpy dress even when they knew they were in an area where local women were covered from head to foot. They could not comprehend that sometimes their presence, even fully dressed, was an unbearable provocation to the local men. They could not see a problem with their shorts and low-cut tops. They complained of being continually hassled by guys, but at the same time thought that everyone they met was genuinely nice. Fortunately, most of the time they were right. They said they might try Afghanistan soon. I thought life in that austere place would be a miserable experience for them but they were undeterred.

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Together we peered into the famous, but unimpressive black hole of Calcutta, which is actually a cellar beneath the post-office. Then we saw the largest tree in the world on the edge of the city, though actually it more closely resembles a small forest than a single tree. We bargained for batiks in the market place and drank freshly squeezed fruit juices and lassi at tiny cafes. But we avoided the grimy roadside stalls that promised only cholera and typhoid.

On an impulse, we visited a gloomy and dusty Victorian edifice of a museum, and squandered a whole afternoon on a single room of exhibits: a ghoulish, but irresistibly fascinating display of deformed animal and human fetuses. Jar upon jar of monstrosities floating weightlessly in discoloured preserving fluid.

These weird foetal exhibits were seemingly displayed in random order on the cluttered shelves. We were like kids visiting the zoo for the first time- totally astounded by the undreamed of things we saw in this room. Here was a six-legged goat to be goggled over in amazement and this weird thing was - ‘Look at this will you!’ - a two-headed human baby! Adjacent to those oddities was an oddly misshapen chicken with three legs and next to that - ‘Oh my God!’ - a human baby with one huge eye in the center of the forehead and no ears at all. Some of these genetic mistakes had faded handwritten labels and some were difficult to identify at all - ‘Do you think this is human?’ - we could not always tell.

It all seemed perfectly in keeping with the somewhat surrealist spirit of Calcutta.

In the evenings we ate excellent curries from tiny plates in tiny restaurants, and drank coffee or tea afterwards while chatting to other travelers. Sometimes hungry children watched us through the windows, but the proprietor would usually chase them away if they importuned his customers too forcefully. I still had not successfully made it back from the market to the hotel a few hundred yards away carrying food of any description. Regardless of what it was I had just bought for lunch or dinner, and my determination to keep it, I always felt compelled to give it to someone in the street who obviously needed it more than I did. I was losing weight fast. Despite the good curries I had to make another hole in my belt to cinch it tighter.

Back at the hotel on the day before the girls left for Delhi, Wayne had scored good shit from one of the hotel kitchen hands and was elated. Out of bed and chatting to all and sundry in the courtyard he was a new man; dirty, skinny, weak, but rolling joints and making plans. His head was together; he had good shit and things were happening. Wayne was euphoric; he was finally on his way. But the next day when I returned from the railway station after putting Linda and Jenny on the train to Delhi, he was semi-conscious and drooling, moaning softly to himself in his filthy room.

At the railway station I swapped addresses with the two girls and gave each a chaste and friendly peck on the cheek as they prepared to board their train. Outraged by this breach of public decency, two armed and uniformed guards appeared and warned me sternly that they would tolerate no further public immorality. I then had to try hard not to laugh as they made their way down the platform. It was as if they were deliberately emphasizing a yawning cultural chasm. The two soldiers were sauntering along the platform hand in hand, rifles slung incongruously over their shoulders and fingers intertwined. They looked for all the world like some tongue-in-cheek military parody seen televised from the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras.

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Next morning, I was relieved to see a group of Australian travelers had taken Wayne under their wing and were organizing his breakfast and the early morning drugs that would bring him from catatonia to a semblance of normality. I took myself off for a walk down a street of identical Calcuttan terraced houses. Obviously a legacy of the British Raj, they had a very solid empire-grand old feel, but were now utterly decrepit, crumbling and teeming with humanity. Each three-floor terraced dwelling had been divided into multiple separate tiny apartments, but there were few toilets or plumbing of any kind to service this mass of humanity. The only ready sources of water were hand-pumped standpipes in the street.

Each of these old houses had a ground level alcove designed to accommodate two rubbish bins of normal proportions. In each of these tiny waist-high spaces, a family had now taken up residence. Sitting folded up in one of these alcoves, a small Indian man or an average woman could not quite sit upright, instead they sat with the backs of their heads touching the rough brick ‘ceiling’, heads forced forwards and eyes to the ground. In some alcoves, old people or babies were sleeping. In one, incredibly, a numb and fatigued looking woman was cooking over a tiny fire. A life in miniature.

On the way back to the hotel, I saw a dead woman lying by the tram tracks near busy Chowringhee road, it was hot and her face was patchwork chalky gray and blotchy purple. Passers-by were studiously avoiding noticing her. I decided it was time to move south again.

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The Indian train system is cheap, efficient and excellent - once you are boarded. For a rail buff who enjoys the thrill of travel by steam locomotive, it must be close to heaven. I really do not care if I travel by diesel or steam: I am a transport philistine at heart. The humble diesel, for all its lack of charm, is much less sooty and smelly when the wind is in the wrong direction and I count the getting there as generally more important than the method.

Simply buying a rail ticket in India can take longer than the journey. Foreigners usually get precedence and are often embarrassingly ushered to the front of a silent, but watchful and occasionally resentful queue that has obviously been static for hours. Even with this unfair advantage, ticket buying always involves some degree of tedious queuing and may last for many hours. If you are an unlucky local without any special precedence, your quest may last for days of waiting at window after window.

Buying a ticket is not simply a matter of handing over the appropriate amount of cash either. There are endless forms in which Indian Rail demands to know such essential details as your passport number, your date of birth, your street address in your country of normal residence, your entry point into India and even your mother’s maiden name (true!) Once you are aboard though, and especially if you are traveling first-class, the level of comfort and service is generally excellent.

Sometimes the people at the railway station cannot handle your outlandish request for a ticket, a referral is necessary to higher authority. Then you have to visit some rail bureaucrat who may be located miles away across town in some enormous Dickensian warehouse of an office. Here you can be ushered into a room of aircraft-hangar like proportions. As you get used to feeling like a character from Kafka, you will note that ancient wooden desks are arranged in serried ranks as far as your eye can see. At each desk is a toiling clerk who is invariably male and apparently engaged in an attempt to bury himself in paperwork. As a cog in the mighty wheel of Indian Government, your status in the bureaucracy is in direct proportion to the amount of paper you can squeeze onto your desk.

As a useful guide to Indian paperwork, for those contemplating a career move - any conscientious clerk should have a paper bulwark of not less than thirty to forty centimeters in height lined in a solid protective phalanx along the entire front of his desk. But it is at the elbows the real statement is made. This is where an official can show the world the overwhelming burden that is his workload. Mid-range bureaucrats will have as a matter of course, in-trays that are piles of documents extending over a meter high. They are balanced by similarly gargantuan out-trays. Entire forests must be leveled and pulped to supply one such office for Indian Rail.

However, I did not really care, I was off to the tropics, and traveling first-class. I was going down to the southernmost tip of India at Rameswaram, where I would board the ferry for Sri Lanka and recuperate in some sun-drenched, postcard pretty, palm-tree shaded, beach front paradise. I would be smugly detached from the bureaucracy and far away from the filth and stench of Calcutta.

But I was in a foul mood when I finally got onto the train, having sat for over an hour on the platform being teased and tormented by an ever-growing crowd of onlookers who thought it funny to hurl abuse and taunts at me. The staring and pointing, the whispered interest in the minutiae of the foreigner’s looks and dress can be relentless and nerve-wracking in India. But when a couple of local wits decide to try to outdo each other in a noisy public contest of comic prowess in which *you* are the butt of an incomprehensible stand-up comedy routine; and all to the screamingly hilarious delight of fifty or so onlookers, patience quickly evaporates. I felt a huge wave of relief when I was finally ushered into my private, well-appointed and most of all, peaceful compartment.

On the train, I purchased a cup of tea, passed through the window of my compartment in a disposable clay cup. Then I settled down to relax. A dirty, skinny beggar’s hand came through the open window a minute or two later outstretched in mute supplication. I pushed it away angrily, still fuming from my ordeal on the platform. When it reappeared a few seconds later I got up to close the window and lock out the hand for good. The guard’s whistle blew notice of imminent departure as I rose. I had the window partly closed when I noticed that the hand belonged to a young woman dressed in tattered rags.

She was crying; tears rolled down dusty cheeks from big, wide and haunted eyes. Under her eyes were huge black and baggy bruises over prominent cheekbones. She looked gaunt, hungry and sick. In her bare and match-stalk thin arms was a bony, starving baby, bald head lolling from side to side in an ominously uncontrolled and unnatural way. She was plainly too sick to feed the child herself. She was pitifully thin and malnourished. Every place I could see flesh on her body, I could also see the outline of bone. I was taking out my bad temper on a sick, starving woman with a dead or dying baby. She was perhaps twenty-five years old.

I suddenly needed to help her. I reached for my wallet as the train started with a jolt; it was not in my pocket. The woman now realized I was going to give her money and kept pace as the train began to move. She had broken into an unsteady trot when I finally found my wallet on the seat under my backpack. I fumbled out the first note I reached, but she could not keep pace. Her face was no longer at the window. I threw the money from the window but other faces were now flashing by at a faster and faster rate. She was gone. I could not see if she got the money, but I doubted it.

Some days, India was just too much.

We left the city quite slowly, passing a massive rubbish tip where fires smouldered and hundreds of people combed through mountains of refuse. I could smell the unwholesome stench of the place from inside the train. Kites circled lazily above and two vultures perched on top of a dead and rotting pig. A little further on was a shallow river, another hive of activity. Here were people washing clothes and carting drinking water. Others were squatting in the shallows a few yards away to defecate or clean their teeth.

I closed the window blinds and shut them all out for the next several hours.

# 10. From heavenly sanction to diabolical plot…

## A horse-drawn buggy tour of Rameswaram, the Elephant God, via ferry to Sri Lanka, Hikkaduwa, Anuradhapura, Kandy and Colombo

In Rameswaram, the Calcuttan air of desperation was a distant memory. The long train journey was cleansing and relaxing. Middle-class Indians were holidaying genteelly and speaking impeccable English to their well-groomed sons and daughters. Many of these privileged offspring had taken off their highly polished leather shoes to paddle in the gentle surf. A big and jovial local policeman befriended me over a cup of tea at a local cafe, and offered a guided tour of the town by horse-drawn buggy. I accepted at once. He pointed out the sites to me with an air of considerable civic pride. This was his town and he wanted me to like it: I did.

Rameswaram is a dusty tropical town with some charm. Tourism marketing is generally keyed to the domestic religious pilgrimage trade. It felt delightful not to be the primary target of every sales pitch for once. Near the beach, a pilgrim-oriented market place was selling mainly Hindu souvenirs and cheap hand-made jewelry and clothing. The huge temple looked interesting, but my new found friend was more interested in showing me where he worked. He pointed out the tiny police station and said sorrowfully that alas, as yet he had no cells to lock up offenders once they were caught.

‘But, what do you do then, if someone commits a crime?’ I asked. I was genuinely intrigued.

‘Well, what else can I do really’ he sighed and said in his sing-song lilt, ‘I simply beat them black and blue and let them go!’

I saw him in a new light after that. To me he was an affable and humourous guide to the town, a good conversationalist with a twinkle in his eye. But to some he was a scourge. I noticed that his words to the townspeople we encountered were couched very much in the peremptory and no-nonsense-tolerated style of a military command. He was accustomed to giving orders, treated with deference by the townspeople and generally obeyed instantly. He may have walked softly, but he carried a big stick; and it was not a stick of a metaphorical nature. His one regret in life was that he still did not have a wife, but he was still hopeful. As soon as he had a wife he said wistfully, everything would be just perfect.

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A magnificent old walled temple complex dominates Rameswaram, complete with enormous towering pyramidal structures called ‘Gopuram’ rising high into the air. Golden domes, huge stone colonnades and ornately carved masonry made the place irresistible. The next morning I joined the end of a long queue of Hindu pilgrims entering the temple by means of a brick tunnel through the outer walls into an inner reception room. In that room, I learned, our entrance to the temple proper was to be personally sanctioned by a God.

Which god? I thought. What form of sanction? A friendly fellow pilgrim told me that the heavenly representative would take the form of a real live elephant. His purpose was to test the goodwill of each pilgrim and visitor. He would touch me on the shoulder gently, as he would touch all visiting pilgrims to indicate that all was well. Only after passing this scrutiny would we be allowed to pass into the temple proper.

I had a niggling anxiety about this procedure. Suppose he did not like me? Suppose he took offence at my strange white skin, suppose he could smell my alien unorthodoxy? I put my fears to the helpful English-speaking pilgrim next to me.

‘You have absolutely no need to worry’ he said, with heavy emphasis on his ‘absolutelys.’

‘He would absolutely only kill you if you were a very bad person...' Seeing my worried expression he felt compelled to elaborate:

‘...And this is something that absolutely hardly ever happens!’

It was too late to back out; I was hemmed into the narrow entrance tunnel by hundreds of pilgrims. To the Elephant God inside, *they* would all look alike, dress alike, smell alike and act alike: *they* would be routine. *I* was the surprise package in this morning’s queue of almost identical pilgrims.

After a while it was my turn and I was directed into a very small chamber containing a very large elephant. He was decked out in an elaborate caparison of gold, precious stones and sumptuous fabric. Even his huge tusks were decorated: sharp little gilded cones adorning their business ends. No doubt this was to make these massive spikes look their absolute best. Perhaps it was also to assist the Elephant God in his more effective goring of hapless and ungodly foreigners?

I have no idea how they got such a huge beast into such a tiny room. He certainly did not get there by the same route the pilgrims used. It would have been the equivalent of my gaining entry to a house via the letterbox. He snorted and lumbered up closely while the sensitive end of his trunk moved delicately and without haste in an explorative pattern over my body. I could smell him. He seemed to be taking an inordinately long time in vetting me. Could he *smell* my apprehension?

I wondered if he killed unbelievers by knocking their head off with his trunk, running them through with a golden tusk, or stamping them to death with his mighty feet. His options certainly seemed more open than mine did. As I was wondering, he raised his enormous leathery trunk high above his head and then brought it down in a great swooping arc. I had time to think: ‘Ah, so he *does* kill with one blow of his trunk...’

Then he tapped me delicately on the right shoulder and I was admitted.

The temple was well worth the ordeal of entry. It had everything, spectacular and ancient stone carvings, and huge stone water tanks the size of Olympic swimming pools. In the corridors wandered Hindu functionaries and Saddhu holy men in their exotic regalia as well as hordes of worshipping pilgrims, I spent several hours traversing the stone colonnades and soaking up the ambience.

In the afternoon I drank sickly sweet soft drinks at a cafe on the beach and enthused about the temple to a group of British travelers who had just arrived on the ferry from Sri Lanka. As they left they assured me they would be visiting it the next day. Sadistically, I did not tell them about the Elephant God.

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It was early the following evening when I got onto the ferry for Sri Lanka. Ticket purchase and the lumbering bureaucracies of passport control and customs had taken all day. It had been a hot and sticky, dusty and dreary day, spent wholly in queues around the port. I had spent much of the long day of waiting in conversation with a Buddhist monk, one of a party of a dozen or so on a pilgrimage to visit the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic in Kandy.

The Buddhists, in their flowing saffron robes, are a familiar site in these parts, Buddhist pilgrims mingle everywhere with Hindu pilgrims as they await the ferry to Sri Lanka. But what made this particular monk so interesting was his ethnic origin. He was Swedish. His English was excellent, as was that of most other European travelers likely to be encountered on the trail in Asia. This was his second prolonged stay in Asia; a few years previously he had traveled from Sweden to Australia on the hippie trail. He had spent some time during that trip in the famous ashram at Pondicherry. Arriving in Bangkok, he experienced a spiritual revelation when he met a local monk who presented a begging bowl to him one early morning at a cafe on the banks of the Chao Phraya River.

The monk invited him back to visit a monastery a few kilometers down the river. This one-day visit was followed by an invitation for a month-long religious retreat. He had taken up this opportunity and felt inspired and somehow ‘cleansed’ afterwards. Later, he bummed around in Java and Bali and then earned some money as a casual fruit picker in Australia. After that, he completed his circumnavigation of the globe, flying back to Sweden via stopovers on the US west and east coasts.

But his thoughts had stayed with that Buddhist monastery.

Hearing this story, I thought of poor Wayne in a drug-crazed delirium back in Calcutta. His conversion took place in Bangkok too. Unfortunately for him though, his conversion was to heroin. For a dusty, sleazy city Bangkok certainly seemed to be a catalyst for change of life-style. Every traveler interprets a place differently.

I learnt that this monk was called Nils, though it was a name he had all but abandoned now. When Nils returned home he felt unsettled. He had an academic background, but after a year or so of odd jobs he was restless. He traveled back to northern India in a three-month long overland trip by mainly local buses and trains from Sweden. After another cleansing month-long Buddhist retreat at a monastery in Nepal, his mind was made up. He became a novice monk. That had been three years ago and he had no regrets. He no longer had any contact whatsoever with his family in Sweden and he had no desire to go home.

Nils' voice had an unhurried, mild and serene cadence, though slightly detached he was always alert and polite. We both quickly realized I was never going to get my tongue around his polysyllabic adopted Buddhist name – he was Nils for the duration of our meeting.

Nils was an otherworldly character who seemed to live a happy and fulfilled life; but I still did not envy him his philosophical retreat from Europe. Strangely, the officials we encountered during that long and unnecessary day of queuing, all treated Nils with a uniform rudeness and contempt I could not fathom. They distrusted and resented this foreigner with his shaven head, his air of piety and his apparent posturing in monkish robes. Nils was unfailingly polite and seemed either accustomed or oblivious to this sort of behavior. When I asked why it was *he* thought he was drawing this excessively hostile treatment he only smiled and shrugged his shoulders. It did not matter in his scheme of things.

The small party of monks vanished when we reached the ferry, standing a mile or so offshore in deeper water. It was a beautiful warm and balmy evening as I climbed from the launch up to the ferry deck. Lights were twinkling in the town ashore and from the deck, I could clearly see a star-glint that was slowly but distinctly moving: an orbiting satellite. Rameswaram is almost on the equator and a great spot for satellite watchers.

A Landrover was being hand-winched from a raft next to the ferry up to the deck just above where I was standing and I leaned out to watch its progress as it passed my deck level. It occurred to me as I watched that the slings holding it were somewhat ramshackle, the cables very worn, and the voices of the winch operators above sounded a lot more anxious than confident.

I moved out of harm’s way just in time. Thirty seconds later the ferry lurched ponderously in the swell of a passing steamer and the Landrover swung suddenly and wildly seaward for a long moment. For a second or two it hung heavily in its sling before - inevitably - it swung back again towards the ferry. It came crashing through the steel guard rails about where I had been standing a few moments before, and then swung back drunkenly through the shattered guard-rail to hang over the raft below.

One sling broke as the raft beneath moved away as smartly as possible; I could see anxiously up-tilted faces below. They must have been wondering if the Landrover was about to fall on them. The car seemed to hang by its back wheels, in imminent danger of crashing through the raft on its way to the ocean floor. Incredibly, it was not dropped; it was finally successfully winched aboard considerably dented and scratched. A seaman stretched a rope barrier across the hole in the guardrails and things were normal again in moments. I gave the rest of the loading operations a wide berth.

Once freight loading was complete there was a calm moonlit trip across the narrow straits to Sri Lanka. It was restful enough for me to wish Sri Lanka was a lot further off shore, but all too soon, we reached dry land again. On the Sri Lankan side some kind of ethnic sorting was in progress. The Europeans on the ferry were separated from other passengers and directed to a ramshackle wooden railway carriage: apparently the train for Colombo. There were only foreigners aboard this carriage which was a little curious; the saffron-robed monks, holidaying Indians, jet black Tamils and graceful Sinhalese had all been diverted elsewhere for reasons not explained to us.

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After a twenty-minute wait, our carriage began to move slowly but this proved to be a false start. A few minutes later we were shunted into a distant and very quiet railway siding among towering coconut palms. Here in the darkness our carriage was uncoupled and we were left alone in the darkness with no power and only tropical night noises coming through the open windows to emphasise our isolation. We chatted for a while in a stranded and desultory way; a mixed bag of Europeans, Australians, and Americans. No one knew what was going on and now there was no one around we could question. We were simply stuck.

After an hour or so with no sign of movement imminent, people began to resign themselves to a long wait and some settled down to get some sleep. A few got off the train to stroll around and relieve themselves under the coconut palms. A Spaniard produced a large machete-type knife from his pack and expertly notched several coconuts he found on the ground outside and passed them around for those who wanted to drink the sappy milk inside.

Since the doors and windows of our carriage were all wide open, I tucked my wallet, passports and other valuables into a slim leather case which I slung around my neck and then tucked down inside my shirt before sleeping. This was not particularly comfortable, but it was my usual practice when security of important possessions was looking dubious. Then with my valuables underneath, I eventually lay face down on the floor wedged under a wooden railway seat and on top of my half-unrolled sleeping bag. Once in position I arranged my pack as a pillow. With long experience I can sleep anywhere and in a minute or two I was dead to the world.

The commotion started a few hours later, just as dawn was breaking. Our carriage was now connected and moving slowly through coconut plantations and everyone was waking bleary-eyed after a cramped and uncomfortable night to find that they had been robbed. I checked my belongings quickly; all was well, but I was in the minority. Some person or persons had crept through the carriage during the early hours and systematically relieved us of our small valuables. Dismay spread through the carriage; at least a dozen passports of various nationalities were missing, plus an unknown but substantial amount in travelers checks and cash of various currencies.

A couple of cameras had disappeared along with a wristwatch. But the thief or thieves were well organised, concentrating primarily on small, valuable and portable items. No backpacks were missing, though most people in the carriage were not as careful as myself when bedding down for the night. The train was now moving in a leisurely way through a forested and rural tropical landscape and there was no corridor access to carriages either in front or behind. We would not even be able to report the thefts until we reached our destination. It seemed to be the perfect crime.

A lot of travelers were going to be involved in days of hassle in Colombo as they tried to replace their money and passports and attempted to deal with Sri Lankan officialdom as well as their own embassy and consular representatives. I was just glad that my own paranoid routine of sleeping with money and documents inside my shirt when bedding down in doubtful circumstances had paid off. The whole episode smacked of a well-organised set up.

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Despite this reception, I loved Sri Lanka and forgave it everything. A rather famous expatriate who calls this place home is Arthur C. Clarke, he writes of: 'slender palm trees leaning over the white sand, the warm sun sparkling on the waves as they break on the inshore reef.... This alone is real; the rest is but a dream from which I shall presently awake...'.

The place *is* a paradise, a balmy island of fabulous beaches, beautiful scenery, friendly good natured and good looking people, plus a glorious hinterland of tropical mountain splendor. The names given to this island throughout history tell the tale. ‘Sri Lanka’ *means* the ‘Resplendent Land,’ or ‘Blessed Land.’

Although lots of the locals still call it Ceylon, to the Moors it was *Tenerish*, the Isle of Delight, to the Chinese the I*sland of Gems*, or sometimes the I*sland Without Sorrow*. To later Arab traders, it was *Serendib*, from which is derived the word ‘serendipity,’ meaning the lucky or happy coincidence. Ptolemy calls it *Simundu*, The Head of the Sacred Law. Almost inevitably, Sri Lanka has been troubled for years now by a bitter, vicious and violent dispute between northern Tamils and southerly Sinhalese. There is always something to spoil a paradise.

I decided to spurn the immediate delights of big-city Colombo for a more relaxed sojourn in the small southern towns and villages around Hikkaduwa and beyond. Here small canoes and outriggers were hauled out of shimmering blue water on to soft white sand in picturesque settings straight out of a Hollywood travelogue.

The Sri Lankans are the most physically attractive people imaginable, everywhere were beautiful, laughing and friendly locals who welcomed visitors with easy hospitality. Even the food was a delight: succulent dinners of fresh and aromatically spiced seafood and delicately flavored vegetarian extravaganzas. Once my Sri Lankan routine was in place, these delicious meals were generally made while I sipped an ice-cold beer in the tropical moonlight with a few congenial companions, or swam in the warm waters of the sheltered bays and lagoons. It was a million-dollar lifestyle on a few dollars a week.

I met a young Spanish traveler named Carlo, a hippie musician who played the most fluent flamenco guitar I ever heard outside a concert hall. He spent at least half of every day practicing and could pinch out a lighted cigarette between his callused and guitar-hardened fingertips. We traveled together for two weeks or so, lazily taking in the sights and local ambience of the southern coastline. Although my musical talents were far from equal to his, we put on regular impromptu musical entertainments of singing and dancing in the small bars and restaurants we visited.

At Anuradhapura we wandered awe-struck among the monstrous domes of the stone pyramids, massive statues and temple structures. Some of these buildings and artifacts dated back hundreds of years, others as far back as the 2nd Century BC. We marveled at the hundreds of life-size carved stone elephants and the giant Buddhas, still standing serenely after a thousand years and more. We saw the pilgrims by the ancient gnarled tree under which (it is said) the Buddha was sitting when he attained enlightenment. The tree is still alive and decorated with silver bells.

At the magnificent Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic in Kandy, we saw the paintings and statuary and afterwards started a guitarfest in a small hostel as the palms swayed gently by the placid lake nearby. The party continued well into the early hours and we seemed to have been introduced to everyone in town by then. Free beds were offered for the night and the company was fine.

The island was idyllic. Just get rid of that ugly little war and Sri Lanka would probably sink under the weight of tourists.

But there were also the usual brazen attempts to fleece tourists, even in this charming setting. Arriving back in the capital and regretfully farewelling my flamenco friend who was taking ship for Africa, I noticed at one restaurant in Colombo that some tables had red menus and others blue. I learnt that the blue menus were for foreign tourists and were identical to the red in every respect, except that the prices were two or even three hundred percent higher for every item. I queried this practice with the restaurant manager who told me indignantly that he was a very poor man and that I was very rich; I should just accept that it was my responsibility to pay more. He did not look very poor and I did not feel either very rich or very much like accepting this responsibility so I ate elsewhere.

After three weeks or so of rest, recuperation and the unmitigated bliss of total relaxation, I began to feel as though I might have the strength to tackle the stresses of India again. I took the ferry back to Rameswaram from Tallaimannar.

# 11. Several kinds of sick, and the toilet from hell...

## Rameswaram for a minute, Cochin, a nameless town, passing the night in a cage, Mysore, the Sultan's Palace, Bangalore, meeting Werner, Mangalore, Goa

I took afternoon tea with my policeman acquaintance in Rameswaram, who greeted me like an old friend. He told me sorrowfully there was still no sign of obtaining the long petitioned-for prison cell block. Worse, no further developments could be reported in his campaign to get a wife. I wished him well and took the train for Cochin. As we rumbled out of Rameswaram the tracks led straight across the bridge over the narrow straits that separate Rameswaram Island from the mainland proper. From the windows at either side was nothing but waves and open sea. It felt unreal, an eerily lightweight ocean voyage by train, as though the carriages were just skimming the wave tops.

Southern India has a more relaxed and lazy feel than the north, so those who find even the north a bit slow are facing disappointment. Fortunately, I was in no rush. I wandered inland after almost a whole day of torture inflicted by a street vendor determined on selling me a souvenir cobra skin. The snake had been well over a meter long when alive and the skin roughly tanned and preserved. It had a few ragged scraps of snake flesh still adhering to it and smelt powerfully of chemical curing agents. I found it altogether repellent and did not want it under any circumstances.

Undeterred, the salesman followed me for two hours asking over and over what price would I offer for his skin. He was my shadow. Finally in desperation, I named a figure less than five percent of his asking price. I thought he would give up at that and go away in disgust, but this was my big mistake. I had started to bargain: therefore I was interested. All day long he trailed me, and I oscillated between being determined not to buy to punish him for ruining a pleasant day out, and feeling ready to pay any price to get rid of him.

Of course I caved in. Once it was mine, I triple-wrapped this grisly artifact in plastic bags to keep the smell out of my other belongings and resolved to throw or give it away at the earliest opportunity. But in fact it slipped to the bottom of my pack and stayed there completely forgotten for thousands of miles more of traveling. Months later I discovered it, hidden under my dress shirt and shoes which rarely saw the light of day in Asia. The smell inside the plastic bags was the same potent chemical mix of preserving fluids I remembered so well; a single whiff transported me straight back in memory to southern India, by then a long way behind.

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From Cochin I took a meandering bus inland towards Mysore and as evening fell found myself in a small and dusty main street in an unappealing and apparently nameless town. There was no sign of available transport out of the place and no sign of even a basic hotel. I had not seen another European face all day long. As darkness fell, I came across one of the more bizarre rental accommodations of my experience and in desperation, grabbed a bowl of dinner-rice from one of the street-vendors close by and turned in for the night.

The ‘hotel’ had apparently been constructed in an abandoned warehouse or possibly it had been a factory. It was certainly not a purpose-built accommodation facility. The ceilings were very high and it was dirty, gloomy and windowless inside. The ‘accommodation’ was a gridwork of adjoining steel cages laid out in rows separated by narrow corridors. The cages were made from thick weldmesh - the material often used as reinforcement in a concrete floor, or in the construction of animal enclosures at the zoo. There was absolutely no privacy. Each cell was completely exposed to the next and each contained only one or more grubby steel-frame single beds on a bare and gritty concrete floor.

Even the ceilings and doors of the cells were steel mesh and there were no lights or fans inside them. There were however a couple of lights and fans set well above the ceiling bars, and these served as shadowy illumination and cooling for everyone in the cages below. I have no doubt many criminals live in prisons more attractive than this ‘hotel.’ It did not just lack appeal; it oozed awfulness, desperate ugliness and total depression. Despite this, to my surprise it was packed solid with Indian men. Almost every tiny cage had two, three or sometimes even four occupants.

As I locked myself into my own miniature cage, I was cheered by the thought that it was just for one night. I had the consolation of the traveler: the certainty of escape and the sure knowledge of never having to repeat that particular bad experience. I also made a mental note to be a bit less lackadaisical in future about seeking accommodation before the need became extreme.

I settled down in my own clean sleeping bag on top of the filthy bed. My intention was to banish my surroundings by reading James Joyce’s ‘Ulysses’ in the paperback edition, a book I had been carrying in my pack for a while. But I had barely got as far as Buck Mulligan’s early poetic description of Dublin Bay as ‘The snotgreen, scrotumtightening sea’ before someone decided on lights out and plunged the cells into semi-darkness without warning. Settling down resignedly, I thought at least I would get a good long night of sleep.

No such luck.

‘Lights out’ was the signal for whispered conversation, followed by the sound of cell-doors opening and closing softly and a great deal of furtive scurrying and padding of bare feet up and down grimy corridors.

At first the purpose and meaning of this activity baffled me: shadowy figures were passing back and forth just a few inches away on the corridor side of my cell, and I could not work out what it was all in aid of. Finally, I realized what was going on. Assignations had been made and appointments were being kept. For the next hour it seemed everyone was engaged in frantic homosexual activity. The moaning and the grunting, slurping, chafing and heavy breathing went on relentlessly. I fell asleep eventually only to be woken by a similar dawn chorus of passion. I was reminded of the four girls in Malacca who had so methodically worked the hotel. Compared to this, that seemed a sophisticated and squeaky-clean little operation.

On the way out of this miserable parody of a lover’s retreat I met an English traveler with a dry sense of humour. Also stranded and desperate for accommodation he had checked into the cells sometime after me. We were both happy to have put that particular experience behind us.

‘Look at that,’ he said as we left. He was pointing to a cell which had been the scene of some particularly noisy and prolonged bouts of furious night-time action. Three blandly self-possessed Indian men in their mid to late twenties were now packing their possessions inside the cage, all looking quite rested despite their overnight activities.

‘Not a used condom in sight and sore bums everywhere!’ said my companion, waving at the *menage a trois* who also smiled and waved pleasantly back. Then as an afterthought: ‘And, I really hope those blokes are using a good mouthwash...’

Over a breakfast of tea and vegetarian samosas he said that he had occasionally witnessed similar nocturnal activities in other dormitory accommodation during his time in India. His name was Jeff and he was from Essex in the English Home Counties. He also said he had seen nothing quite as crude and brutish as either last night’s accommodation, or last night’s exhibition of feverish passion. I was surprised that in spite of the overnight activities, there was no homosexual ambience to the place. There were no camp-sounding or overtly feminine men, no flamboyant transvestites, and no pouting cross-dressers. This was not one of the run-of-the-mill fleshpots of Southeast Asia, the morning after revealed only a bunch of fairly ordinary-looking business types.

‘Its a cultural thing,’ Jeff surmised over tea. ‘These are blokes who don’t even get to talk to a woman except their mum or sister until their wedding day. They spend the first half of their lives thinking women are joined together at the knees. Of course they screw each other rotten; it’s all they know until they are thirty or so and all their mates are doing it as well. In fact mostly, they are doing it *with* their mates!’ he paused to sip his tea reflectively before delivering his final verdict: ‘I think it would be true to say that only about the same percentage of Indian men are really gay as any other nationality; the rest of them just get sucked into it!’

Jeff had already been to Mysore, which he described succinctly as ‘a shit-hole.’ However, he said that if I wanted to treat myself to a night or two of luxury, I should try the ex-Sultan’s Residence. This was a palace of sorts converted to luxurious hotel accommodation. Jeff was now heading for Goa, the old Portuguese colony on the east coast and legendary promised land for travelers in search of sun and sand and all the other accouterments of the good life on the trail. From Goa, he told me it was possible to take a coastal steamer cheaply and arrive in Bombay by ship after a short, but restful sea-voyage. The idea appealed. We spent the morning swapping travelers notes, and I made a tentative arrangement to meet him in about three weeks in Goa by either leaving a message of my own at the local post restante, or collecting his. Then I caught my bus to Mysore.

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I had eaten something bad during my first day in town. ‘Mysore Belly’ an Aussie traveler called it lightly while recommending a small hotel where I might rest up. But I was far too sick to appreciate the attempt at humour. My stomach rebelled in a major way. The malady began with vomiting and diarrhoea and then became a fever that just got worse and worse. Then came meltdown; total liquefaction of the bowels and a light-headed tremulous weakness. I went to bed in my hotel and stayed there, sweating it out without food or drink under the ceiling fan for twenty-four hours. Then, dangerously dehydrated and semi-delirious I staggered downstairs.

‘You are sick and should be in bed,’ said the hotel proprietor coldly and not too helpfully.He was a well-fed and prosperous looking man with uncompromising hard eyes. I agreed with his diagnosis, even if not his dispassionate method of delivering it. I asked if he could please send up bottled drinking water, some food, and some paracetamol or other medication that might be suitable for headaches. On the way back to the room I asked him when there would be hot water in the shower.

‘Every morning, only at 4am’ was the response and when I raised my eyebrows at this he added smugly, ‘that is how the bulk of my customers like it.’ I had a strong feeling he was enjoying this and I did not like him at all.

‘Well not the bulk of this customer,’ I snarled at him weakly and went back to bed sweating and shaking. I set my traveling alarm clock for 4am and went back to sleep after drinking a half-liter of water and eating a little boiled rice. It was not long before I threw most of it back up again and another exhausting round of diarrhoea and vomiting started. I felt slightly better when the alarm went off at 4am, though by then the bed sheets were drenched from my feverish sweating during the night. Sure enough the water was now piping hot and the long shower I took very refreshing. As dawn broke I felt weak, but reasonably rested.

The hotel manager dropped by just after first light to tell me that my presence was not welcome in his establishment any longer. He said he was concerned that I might have something infectious and he told me pompously that he had the welfare of his other customers to consider. He said he was sorry about this, but he certainly did not look it. He looked like an officious man with a very large chip on his shoulder; he was letting me have my just desserts for my insolent slur on his 4am hot water service. I was too sick to respond to his rudeness immediately.

But as I checked out, still shivering feverishly, I told the manager his hotel was a fleapit. I told the guests checking in that the manager was a pig. Then I caught a little three-wheeler tricab taxi to the ex-Sultan’s place. In retrospect, it was really just as well I was ejected. It was time for some real pampering, and I doubt I could have motivated myself to make the move had the decision not been taken for me.

The palace looked like an English stately home. It was set in extensive and carefully manicured grounds and had a huge domed atrium entrance featuring a pair of impressively massive curved stone staircases to the first floor. Heavy tapestries and thick brocade curtains tied with thick golden cord were the dominant feature and neatly uniformed personnel padding around in soft slippers completed the impression of limitless wealth and order. Everywhere was marble and gilt opulence.

The receptionist looked somewhat askance at me as I checked in. A wild-eyed, gaunt and sick-looking foreigner, sweating copiously, carrying a grubby backpack and wearing crumpled clothing well overdue for laundering.

I decided that I might as well use some of the extra service I would be paying for

‘Can you launder my clothes please?’ I asked.

‘Certainly sir’ was the response.

‘Terrific’ I said weakly, ‘Please send someone to collect them from my room in half an hour and bring a pot of tea and a jug of iced drinking water. I am going to bed.’

Grappling with my odd appearance, and my strange desire to go to bed before 10am, the receptionist nevertheless agreed without question. I was assigned a very senior naval officer - at least judging by the imposing military uniform and rows of campaign medals - to carry my grubby back pack to my room.

Once in my luxuriously appointed quarters, I ignored the antique furniture, the thick and ornately patterned hand-woven carpets, the million dollar view, the Chesterfield, the regal black marble bath tub with the gold taps and the (apparently) genuine old masters on the wall. I just piled my dirty clothing by the door along with my shoes, flopped into my giant four-poster with the mosquito net surround and slept.

I do not really remember all that much about my stay at the Sultan’s Palace, I was very weak and sick. Occasionally, I heard the eerie cries of peacocks in the grounds. I went for a short walk only once in three days and then flopped back onto my huge bed again feeling as weak as a kitten. Room service was summoned by tugging on a length of thick gold-tasselled rope, a procedure that rang a distant bell somewhere in the building. That ornately plaited and tasselled rope became my lifeline as I made my slow recovery, and after four days or so of pampering, I perked up sufficiently to believe I might survive after all and immediately started to fret about the possible size of my bill.

From this brief taste of the rich life, I learnt that if your bathtub is solid marble, the water you put into it needs to be scalding hot. This is because the mass of the cold stone conducts the heat away as fast as you fill it - not very practical really, but highly sybaritic. I ate good food, slept in clean sheets, read a little and worried periodically about the damage being done to my limited travel fund. In fact I need not have troubled, the whole bill came to little more than a similar length stay in a budget motel in Australia or Europe. It was a king’s ransom still by local standards, but it was worth it. Checking out after four days I was fit and well, freshly shaved and laundered, boots polished, spruced and ready to go.

However, I had to make yet another notch in my belt to catch up with my shrinking waistline. India was steadily cutting me down to size.

I caught the train to Bangalore.

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In the excellent vegetarian restaurant at the Bangalore railway station, I met a slightly-built young German backpacker who said his father was a big wheel in the automobile industry in his home country. Werner spoke excellent English with a discernible American accent. He had been on the road too long and was budgeting his money within very tight margins. Werner was attempting the impossible; to live as cheaply as the locals. He was one of those paranoid and tormented travelers you often meet on the trail: far from home and running out of cash. Werner was the type of traveler who painstakingly counted every penny, begrudged every expense and was haunted by the spectre of deteriorating exchange rates. He had been a year in South America before he came to Asia and it was all getting too much for him. Werner did not give to beggars anymore ‘on principle’ and he bargained ferociously for absolutely everything he purchased. In short, he was an obsessive hippie cheapskate, though an intelligent and often humourous one.

Before I had known him for five minutes he had bummed a meal off me. This was because, he explained apologetically, he had not been able to get to the bank to change a travelers check yet. He complained with some bitterness that the guy at the State Bank of India had yesterday tried to charge him a full percentage point higher than the *real* rate - he had been forced to walk out in protest.

‘You have to watch rip off banks locally,’ he said earnestly.

‘You need to know always what the rate in Delhi is, and then make sure when you see the banks that *they* know *you* know. They'll rip you off if they can.’ I'm sure Werner thought they were always trying to rip him off – he believed in constant vigilance.

Werner carried money in German marks and US dollars and had a few pesos left as well. It was not good to put all your currency eggs in one basket he explained earnestly. And in case the bank rate was no good, he had a secret weapon, a small stash of crisp US$20 bills, very negotiable items in the market places of most cities. But there was no way, simply no way, he would even *think* about changing a bill with the sort of official exchange rate deal they had on offer at the State Bank of India today.

Werner could appear annoyingly petty at times, but he was a great person to have around when you were trying to cut a deal. Werner could be relied on to get a cheap taxi or a bargain room-rate at a hotel. He took me under his wing, promised value for money and delivered. Firstly he showed me to a bright, clean, airy and cheap hotel room, next to the one he was sharing with an Australian from Perth, then he passed on the inside information on the best and most economical deals on everything around town.

Werner knew the locations of the restaurants with the best and cheapest food, and even what to order at each place to get best value from the menu. He had an instinct for the best place to buy anything at a cheaper rate than ever seen before.

I found out quickly that Werner was the butt of a continuous running joke among the small group of foreign travelers back at his hotel. They were well aware of his obsession with getting value for money and they teased him without mercy. Someone would say: ‘What rate did you get today on the dollar Werner?’ Whatever the reply, the next predictable step was a superior frown from the interrogator. Werner might say ‘8.62’ or ‘8.65.’ - It didn’t matter - someone always claimed to have done slightly better. The differences were insignificant; a matter of less than a cent or two in each dollar changed. But it was enough to bring a worried look to Werner’s haunted face. He swore he would do better - he would rather starve than change his precious currency at any less than the very best rate. The other travelers all chuckled knowingly, but there was an element of cruelty in their targeting of Werner’s obsession.

Any declaration containing the word ‘expensive’ was enough to awaken the demons of anxiety lurking under the skin in poor Werner. The word alone made him flinch as though touched by a cattle prod. He would vacillate for hours wondering if he should, or could, save ten cents. He even claimed at one point to have accustomed his stomach to drinking Indian tap water in order to save money on purchasing drinks. Remembering my recent ordeal in Mysore I did not want to imitate that particular thrifty behavior.

During the late afternoon of that first day, someone rolled a joint and gave it Werner before he ate his evening meal. Under its effect, all of his paranoid tendencies were grotesquely exaggerated. He ate his food with one protective arm thrown around his plate and head lowered, scowling like an overgrown toddler at any one who approached too closely. His eyes regarded everyone with slightly befuddled and not totally undeserved suspicion.

After dinner someone suggested we all go to the movies, but as we prepared to leave, someone unkindly suggested to Werner that it might be ‘very expensive’. He was crestfallen and ready to abandon the trip before I offered to pay for his ticket. It cost me less than twenty-five cents. He saved even more money by not buying any sticky Indian sweets to take inside. But I noticed he took them from others if they were offered.

Going to the movies in India is like joining the gang at the Saturday morning kid's matinee session. The excitement is palpable and completely unselfconscious. The auditorium is packed and a carnival atmosphere fills the building. The baddies are hissed and the goodies are cheered until the walls vibrate. It does not even really matter if the film is not in English, though many are. Many excellent Indian movies are made in the studios around Bombay (‘Bollywood’) and the plots are timeless: singing and dancing, sumptuous sets, an array of mythological heroes, some dastardly deeds and a suitably voluptuous (though chaste) heroine. Naturally, the good guys always win. Very predictable and very satisfying. I found myself heading for the local cinema in India whenever I needed some lightweight rest and recreation in the evening.

A couple of days later Werner negotiated a cheap half-day hire on a tricab and we spent a few hours poking around the city byways. I was fascinated by the weird and wonderful signs and public notices seen on the trail in Asia and had started a collection in my notebook. EVE TEASERS WILL BE PROSECUTED was an early enigmatic example in India, aimed at those who either verbally or physically molest a local woman on public transport. PLEASE USE THE SPITTOONS PROVIDED was a flashback to an earlier age in Europe and fair warning to choose a seat as far away as humanly possible from the said revolting receptacle. Typically it would be brim-full and gelatinous and sitting in a puddle of multi-coloured sputum.

One sign spotted in a small restaurant spoke of a certain intolerance on the part of the management, or some very bad previous experience. I was reminded of the hotel manager in Mysore who evicted me for being sick. It read: INFECTIOUS AND LAZY PEOPLE WILL NOT BE SERVED IN THIS ESTABLISHMENT. Along similar lines was another sign that was confusing at first, but read: MANAGEMENT MAY REFUSE TO SERVE PEOPLE WHO SIT IN THE SAME PLACE FOR TOO LONG.

From the cab, I spotted a gaudy strip of flashing pink neon incongruously attached to a ramshackle wooden shed. Its proclamation was surreally exuberant: THIS WAY TO THE ELECTRIC CREMATORIUM! There was also the ever-present vegetarian’s exhortation: BE KIND TO ANIMALS BY NOT EATING THEM, and the sinister - NO LEPERS ALLOWED.

One gaudy billboard made a particularly proud boast: OUR TONIC IS GUARANTEED FOR LIFE - IT WILL MAKE YOUR HAIR GROW AND IS GOOD FOR YOUR BRAIN! I wondered about the scientific evidence to back that claim. There was even a remnant of my childhood, a slogan thought gone forever, but spotted on a faded billboard in letters six-feet high and still triumphant: NOTHING SUCKS LIKE ELECTROLUX! But I did not see any sign more appealing than my all-time favorite, the stern admonition spotted long ago at a Balinese temple door. It read: WOMEN ARE NOT TO BE ENTERED IN THIS TEMPLE DURING THEIR MENSTRUAL CYCLE. Surely a message designed to make the traveler snap to attention and shout, ‘No Sirree!’

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Werner was good company when not being tedious. He told fascinating tales of his trip through South America where he'd contracted hepatitis and fallen sick in some nowhere small town while hitchhiking between Brazil and Patagonia. A family of complete strangers had taken him in and nursed him back to health over months of extended care on their small farm in the southern regions of Argentina. He spent the long months of his recuperation perfecting his Spanish, which he now spoke like a native. Werner had a considerable talent for languages and spoke English and French in addition to Spanish and his native German. He even had a smattering of several local Indian dialects and his English was good enough for me to have taken him to be a Canadian when we first met.

Werner had cruised the Amazon River in a motorised canoe and traveled the Pan-American Highway all the way from Canada to Amazonia. He had camped in the ruins of Macchu Picchu and taken a truck to Tierra del Fuego. Both Easter Island and Pitcairn Island featured on his itinerary, without doubt two of the most remote destinations in the world. He had spent weeks in the generally inaccessible regions of the Indonesian province of Irian Jaya. Even by the standards of the footloose and mobile on the trail, Werner was exceptionally well traveled. On an impulse I asked him if he would like to come to Goa and maybe take a ship to Bombay. He said he would love too. Yes, if it was not too expensive...

From Bangalore, Werner and I took a bus, hoping to strike the coast at Mangalore that same evening. What we actually struck, less than two hours out, was a sacred cow. One moment we were bouncing along at speed on pot-holed bitumen; then came a terrific crash and a jolt that threw everyone forward. This was followed by the scream of tortured metal from our engine and our immediate deceleration.

I peered out of the side window at an amazing sight. A Brahman cow was doing somersaults alongside us. First her head and then her hooves appeared at window level as she flip-flopped along at speed, keeping pace easily with the decelerating bus. As we slowed and stopped, the cow actually overtook us, finally coming to rest on the road in an untidy tangle of broken limbs about three meters in front of the halted bus.

We all got out. The bus was a mess. My first impression was a total write-off. There was a cow-sized dent in the front, a cavity easily big enough for a grown man to crawl into if he had a mind to do so. This hollow was lined with bits of twisted and torn metal and the remnants of a shattered radiator. The big diesel motor had been pushed right back off its mounting, and although now stopped, it was still hissing and blowing steam, water, and oil like an injured monster itself.

Incredibly, though the bus appeared well and truly dead, the cow was still alive. She lay there, flanks heaving as the passengers gathered around uncertainly. A policeman with pistol on hip came over to inspect the scene, but appeared to have nothing useful to contribute. Werner stepped forward and suggested in all seriousness to the policeman that it might be a good idea for him to shoot the cow with his pistol right now and put it out of its obvious misery. The policeman only stared at him as if he was mad. He began to show definite signs of anger and hostility when Werner pressed his case.

I dragged Werner away from the scene and we sat on the roadside to await events. I felt that if there *was* a protocol for putting sacred animals out of their misery, it was probably wiser we did not interfere in it. The cow died anyway about ten minutes later, still surrounded by a crowd of on-lookers. It never made a sound other than its stentorian breathing, or moved a muscle except for the occasional shuddering and flickering of eyelids; it simply got quieter and stiller until the shudders turned to twitches and it was gone.

No one was hurt, which was surprising considering that the force of the impact threw everyone forward so abruptly. Passengers wandered around the accident site looking somewhat baffled and bewildered until the bus driver took the initiative and flagged down a passing truck to carry a message requesting help. An hour passed and a range of local entrepreneurs appeared from nowhere. We now had a ready supply of hot tea, snacks, and cold drinks. By the end of the second hour, our little camp at the accident scene was starting to get a permanent look and feel. Two cooking fires were lit, blankets and bedding had been spread to lie on in the shade, and a half a dozen hawkers were circulating. A group of local children had also gathered to watch the show. I was just debating with Werner the advisability of walking to the village we could see a little further down the valley when the cavalry arrived in the form of another bus sent to pick us up. It was a sight that inspired the passengers to give a heartfelt cheer. Up until that point we all thought we may have to camp the night at the roadside.

We eventually reached Mangalore without further mishap and Werner and I shared a hotel room at the uninspiring Ashiva Hotel. It was a poor choice, rocky beds and a bathroom that was little more than a dirty kennel of a room with a dry tap. Escaping this dreariness, we meandered slowly northwards up the coast towards Goa. I needed a booster injection to keep my vaccination certificates up to date and, by chance, a doctor’s shingle was spotted outside a small cottage just north of Mangalore

Knocking on impulse, I was escorted into a small and very cobwebby surgery where rusty trays of ancient surgical implements littered a grubby bench top. A doctor appeared, looking so unsure of himself that I was tempted to ask to scrutinise his qualifications. He nervously selected a needle from a tray and a small vial from a dirty fridge, and then wedged a very blunt needle painfully into my arm. I wondered when that needle last saw an autoclave. But in the event, although Werner regaled me with stories of the ravages of hepatitis and worse for several days, I contracted no nasty infections, just an arm that was stiff and sore for a few days.

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*Traditional sailboat off the coast of Goa, India (Photo JP)*

Arriving in Goa was like an arrival amongst friends. The town is a famed beauty spot, one of the greatest of trail crossroads. To a good many travelers, Goa is *the* highlight. As backpacker havens go, the town is right up there at the head of the big league. I met up with fellow travelers previously encountered in Calcutta, Singapore and even way back in Bali. At the poste restante was a message from Jeff. He was staying at a guest house with bed and breakfast, the food was excellent, it was by the beach, and he would love to see us there.

We settled in quickly at the big house on Calangute beach with a cosmopolitan mix of Europeans and Americans. There were arrivals and departures most days, and each morning, eight or ten people would linger over a communal breakfast of homemade jams and crusty bread to discuss the day's agenda. Impromptu groups were formed on the spot to pursue favorite activities. The beach, the markets, a visit to the Portuguese cathedral or another of the local sights, or sometimes simply a hammock and a good book under a shady tree in the garden were the best possibilities on any given day.

In the evenings there were card games, good conversation and excellent local cafes. There were guitar sessions and late strolls on the beach with a swim in the surf. Bathing attire was generally not compulsory at Calangute, although every so often a scandalised policeman would drop by and insist that all visible bare flesh be covered immediately. The only peculiarity of the lodgings, and one that caused much hilarity at the expense of new guests was the uniquely novel design of the toilet facility…

My first experience of the ‘toilet from hell,’ was the morning after arrival. It was a strange looking affair, a squarish, low and wide wooden box with a standard toilet seat on top. It was clearly designed to be used either western style as a sit-down toilet, or as a traditional Asian squat. It was possible to swing back the seat and crouch over the hole with feet planted on either side. But what made the facility really bizarre was its situation on top of a meter-high wooden platform reached by climbing a small flight of stairs. The toilet was built into a largish high-ceilinged room and the overall effect was of an outlandish mock-regal throne on a stage.

The toilet had one other unusual feature. When the lid was lifted, the view was an unexpectedly open vista straight down onto the ground in a small alcove under the house and open to the garden. ‘Strange,’ was my first impression, but Asia is full of strange things and is certainly a long way from universally piped sewage. The following morning I seated myself on this throne for the first time, relaxed and lazily contemplating the day ahead. I thought I felt a slight draft on my nether regions, the merest breath of warm wind. Knowing the toilet was all open air underneath, this was not surprising and I ignored it.

Then, quite suddenly and without warning, something revoltingly wet and slobbery, soft, cold and rubbery was thrust hard against my backside. I was almost lifted off the seat by the shocking impact, but it was the sheer unexpectedness of the assault that brought a moment of pure adrenaline-fed terror. My strangled panicky cries brought cheers and howls of hilarity from the other guests who were already at the breakfast table in the kitchen close by. They had been listening and waiting in hushed anticipation for exactly this to happen.

I leapt to my feet and looked down into the toilet. Underneath the throne and looking at me effectively from *inside* the toilet, was my assailant, a large, dark-coloured pig, bristly and rubbery snout raised questioningly towards me. Now I knew the toilet emptied directly into the pigpen. My unwelcome visitor had wandered into the alcove from outside, presumably to witness events. He had given me a friendly and helpful prod with his snout when I appeared to be a little tardy in producing the expected goods.

The slight gust of wind I felt before, I now identified as his hot breath on my backside. From now on, whenever I used this toilet I squatted Asian style, and well out of piggy snout reach. Even then I kept a continual and nervous lookout. I discovered that the guests also generally avoided bacon when the lady of the house offered it. For as Werner remarked: it was difficult to really *appreciate* the quality of the homegrown bacon, once you knew what it was the pigs were routinely *fed* on!

Later that same day, as a new initiate to the long-running toilet joke, I enjoyed the little frisson of anticipation that ran through the guests as a pair of new arrivals checked in; a Dutch couple from Amsterdam. Would it be him, or her? Would a pig show up immediately, or would they be unmolested first time around? Bets were quietly laid, and we all hung around expectantly trying to appear nonchalant. In the event, it was him. We were rewarded with a shriek of dismay an hour or so later as another unsuspecting traveler had his first experience with the toilet from hell.

Following this bonding experience, new arrivals became fully-fledged members of the group: the pig-in-the-toilet ordeal was our ritual initiation. As icebreakers go, it was very effective in breaking down inhibitions. Visitors might enter that toilet reticent and aloof and return babbling and ready to cling to the first person they met.

Jeff said darkly that he thought: ‘One of those bloody pigs might really start a riot some day and bite somebody’s balls off, instead of just giving them an affectionate snuffle around the bum.’

But the consensus among those in the know was that this ordeal was more whimsy than danger. However, initiated members made sure it was not *their* private parts left dangling invitingly. Because, as Jeff also said:

‘If you *were* the first person in history to be emasculated by a pig you could *never* expect your serious condition to be taken seriously. The humiliation would start with the doctors falling about laughing in the emergency room and things would just degenerate from there. Think of the insurance claim! It would be pinned to office notice boards so your disability could be laughed at for generations to come...’

But despite this, no new arrival was ever forewarned about what awaited them in the toilet.

On the fourth day a snooty Frenchman and his reserved girlfriend checked in. He spoke good English, but addressed everyone in French at first meeting. In the spirit of casual enquiry, I made the mistake of asking if he encountered very many people who spoke French these days, since English seemed to have been so comprehensively adopted along the trail…

In retrospect it was a tactless question. It certainly turned out to be a wonderful way to observe the nuances of Gallic hauteur. He informed me frostily that French *was* in fact the pre-eminent international language and not, as I had mistakenly supposed, English. Furthermore I should know that French was spoken almost everywhere around the world *and* was the language of international diplomacy. The name ‘lingua franca,’ for a language transcending national boundaries, was itself a reference to French was it not? He was a very smugly self-satisfied chauvinist and I could not wait for the pig to get him.

Unfortunately I was not around to gloat when it did.

As it was I was forced to settle for a graphic description of his overheard encounter with the pig. I was glad it was he and not his quiet girlfriend. We all learned a lot of French swear words.

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Aside from the toilet ordeal, life in Goa was about as relaxed as it is possible to get. After two weeks I was fully reinvigorated, and ready for the sea voyage to Bombay. This was to be another little slice of heaven. Around twenty European travelers were aboard and we simply camped under a huge awning rigged to shade the meter-high hatch covers. On this raised and sheltered ten-meter square platform we had magnificent ocean views and cool breezes. We spread blankets and sleeping bags for comfort and read, chatted or strolled the decks during the day. Magnificent sunsets and the lights of coastal settlements made for peaceful evenings.

Simple vegetarian meals were brought to us at regular intervals and tea or cool drinks whenever requested. Jeff and Werner were both among the familiar faces on board. For entertainment, there were guitars, flutes, mouth organs and a sitar, spontaneous parties erupted in early evening with the singing and dancing sometimes continuing for hours.

A burly Scot was the life and soul of our party, a devotee of a local guru near Bombay. He had taken up permanent residence in India to dedicate himself to his cause. He often sang, and told long and fascinating stories. He was the most happy and satisfied soul I ever met and charmed everyone with his natural and unselfconscious appeal. The few children on board followed him around adoringly, and found him a huge playground of a man, unfailingly patient and gentle.

He told me in his composed and tranquil way that he lived in Glasgow before his conversion and was a street fighter and vicious drunk not averse to using a broken bottle or a knife to settle an argument. I could barely imagine it. He issued a general invitation for all to come and see his spiritual master at the ashram. A couple of people accepted this invitation, but I passed on it. I was not ready to devote myself to an Indian guru however worthy. I wanted to see the bright lights of big-city Bombay.

# 12. Robbers and madmen...

## Bombay, Scotch whisky, street crazies, a narrow escape,New Delhi, a ghastly hotel, queuing in the hospital

We entered Bombay through the huge triumphal dockside arch that is a legacy of the Raj. The city was an ants-nest, alive and crawling with humanity. Werner, Jeff, two Canadian girls from the boat and myself all made for a huge Victorian warren of a hotel. Werner and Jeff shared one room, the two girls another, and I - luxury! - Had a room to myself for the first time in several weeks. As I carried my pack into my fifth floor room, a sprucely dressed Arabic man in dazzling white robes approached with a gleam in his eye.

‘You like Scotch whisky?’ he said.

I agreed that I liked it - very much indeed. His mention of it reminded me it was ages since I last had a taste.

‘Later, we will drink Johnny Walker!’ he said expansively, ‘Tonight if you like!’

His name was Ahmed, and he was from Jeddah. Incredibly, he said he came to Bombay most weekends, because here he could drink whisky and find women. At home he explained; he played a subdued role as a conservative traditionalist who reflected conventional values. But being the fun-loving person he was, he needed to let his hair down somewhere. I was intrigued by his story. Ahmed admitted that his family had no idea he drank Scotch by the crate, had informal contact with young western travelers, and had a string of girlfriends of several nationalities. But without this double-life he could not bear the formality and inhibition of his hometown life. He had been educated in England and the US; so Western tastes and attitudes were now a part of him.

'But why Bombay?' I asked him.

'Well, access is easy', he explained, 'The scheduling of flights suits me and it's city big enough and far away enough for me to relax in complete anonymity.' Ahmed had made an investment in a local business in Bombay a year or two previously, and overseeing the operations of this business was the ostensible reason for his frequent visits.

It seemed that Ahmed was always in high humour when in Bombay. He was slumming it, taking time out from his responsibilities and loving it. His eyes twinkled and he looked like a schoolboy up to mischief. Because of his frequent visits, he knew lots of people in and around the hotel, and with his expansive generosity and perpetual good humour, he was a popular local character.

‘I will send you Johnny Walker right now,’ he promised as he walked off with a jaunty step. He was true to his word. When I returned from investigating the laundry facilities a half-hour later, I could smell the Scotch as I entered my room. On the old-fashioned dresser, the hotel had provided a Victorian ceramic jug and hand basin, the jug was a massively heavy container which required two strong hands to lift even when it was empty. It had contained clean water for washing when I left. It was now full to the brim with Johnny Walker. Ahmed must have tipped at least four large bottles into it.

I called Jeff and Werner and the two Canadians, Melissa and Ginny over to my room for an impromptu celebration by banging on their doors and yelling ‘Party time! Bring a cup!’ Jeff shouted a query through his closed door, wanting to know why the sudden celebration.

‘Would you like pint or two of free Scotch?’ I called.

‘Does a bat hang upside down to take a shit?’ Was his slightly cryptic response, followed by a short pause and:

'Would that be Scottish Scotch of the drinking kind?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’d give my left nut for it!’ Jeff assured me cheerfully.

I told him to bring a cup and a sharp knife for the sacrifice. Using an assortment of plastic and ceramic teacups in the absence of proper glasses, we drank a toast to bless Ahmed and another to our good fortune. By the third tot, Werner and Jeff were showing definite signs of wanting to settle in to drink another and perhaps another. But I had no intention of spending the afternoon drinking Scotch until I fell in an untidy heap. I decanted a generous liter or so into another jug obtained from the dining room downstairs, and sent them off to their own room with it. I did not want to spend my first day in town getting a hangover. I was more keen to go with the two girls on their planned trip to the markets and get a feel for the style of the city.

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Melissa and Ginny were keen buyers of local crafts and artefacts. They were flying home soon to British Columbia and anxious to find all the missing things on their extensive shopping lists in the teeming markets of Bombay. As the day wore on at the huge open markets, we all gradually became weighed down with the string and canvas bags they purchased to carry it all in.

Ginny asked me to look out for a Hindu calendar. She wanted one of the garish wall-calendars complete with pictures straight out of grotesque acid nightmare. They typically featured a rampant Kali decapitating and disemboweling poor mortals in glorious colour along with Ganesh the elephant god and Hanuman the monkey god romping improbably through a primary-coloured landscape straight out of hallucinogenic fantasy.

Glancing over her shoulder as we were talking, I noticed a very large and thuggish-looking man about twenty meters away. He looked familiar. As we drifted around the stalls, he seemed to drift along in unison with our little group and the more I saw of him, the more I did not like the look of him at all. He was a very big, fat and tough man in a crowd of much smaller and skinnier men who all seemed to avoid him. When he stared, as he did the first time I caught his eye, he had the cold and menacing look I associate with the genuine street crazies.

My internal alarm bells began to ring. Anyone spending time on the trail, or on the streets of any big city, will meet some bizarre characters. Most cranks and misfits are harmless enough and in the case of the few individuals who appear threatening or dangerously unhinged, my instinct is to disassociate myself as soon as possible. I saw many strange people on the trail, but until I talked about this with Jeff, I never thought of them as a particular group.

It was Jeff who told me about street crazies. He had read somewhere that India has almost no facilities for mental patients and concocted a personal theory he believed went some way towards explaining the bizarre events that all visitors to India will sooner or later witness.

‘A country this size should have millions of mental cases,’ he said over breakfast one morning in Goa: ‘Schizoids, psychopaths, deranged killers, molesters, sadists, hallucinating weirdoes, mutilators, manic depressives - you name it. The law of averages says that in a population this size there should be millions of them in treatment, but there are not. Know where they all are?’

I admitted I did not know.

‘On the street, that’s where, look for them - you’ll see what I mean! They are all around us! India is full of street crazies!’

A few days later, I recalled these words when a trishaw driver approached and offered to take me anywhere I wanted to go. I said ‘thank you,’ politely, but I did not need him, my destination was just fifty meters down the street. He insisted against this reasoning, and when I said ‘no’ again, this time more firmly, he flew into an uncontrollable screaming rage and literally spat abuse at me all the way down the street, a non-stop stream of obscenities.

I escaped at the entrance to my hotel, completely bewildered by the way this fury came out of the blue from a complete stranger. The trishaw driver gave me a look of pure hatred, and hissed his final furious message at me. He said that he, ‘could kill me’ as his parting shot. Not that he *would* kill me, or he *might* kill me, or even he *should* kill me, but he *could* kill me. It was a statement of fact rather than intention, but very strange and menacing. He was my first instantly recognised and labelled street-crazy and I would not forget the fanatical gleam in his eye.

I discovered that I had been running across and avoiding street crazies long before Jeff put a name to them for me. Once detected, my immediate impulse is to get away fast. When I really thought about it, I realized that street crazies are not just an Indian phenomenon. They pop up on street corners around the globe. Although admittedly India sometimes did sometimes seem to have more than its fair share...

As we circulated around the market, I began to unobtrusively watch the fat man watching us. After another half-hour, I was sure he had a plan for us. His cold gaze almost never left us. I was convinced he was assessing ways and means for a robbery. We had made a lot of purchases and he had judged us loaded with cash, but the markets were crowded with people. I was sure he would not try anything until he followed us to some place a little quieter. I said nothing about our shadow to the two women who were chatting together and totally absorbed in the business of shopping.

Even though I trusted my instinct, it was another thing to explain it convincingly. When I thought of trying to justify my impression to my companions I felt mildly silly and paranoid. After all, it was just a feeling and difficult to rationalise. I thought the two women would either think I was crazy myself, or even worse, perhaps be totally spooked and communicate this fear to the fat man. I preferred not to have to deal with either of these eventualities. I wanted us to stay with the crowds, look nonchalant, get quickly into a taxi and disappear.

When it started to get dark and the crowds began to thin, I suggested we find a cab, but Ginny was engaged in a long haggle over a bracelet of polished stones. Peering at the fat man through a hole in a canvas awning covering the next stall, I distinctly saw him make a gesture, apparently to a person behind us. I glanced quickly behind and scanned the crowd, but I could not make out who he might be signaling. I was even more worried by this. I knew he had at least one accomplice and was even more convinced we had been targeted.

As Melissa and Ginny gathered their possessions, I noted with some alarm that it was becoming quite dark. The crowds were getting thin and scores of people were streaming away from the stalls and back to the sea-front esplanade a few hundred meters away. Groups of people were taking shortcuts through a series of narrow and darkened streets and alleys, leading away from the brightly-lit market place. Any of these dark side streets might be the perfect place for a robbery once the crowds disappeared.

Carrying a big bundle of bags and parcels, I tagged us onto the end of a large Indian family group who were leaving the market together. Feeling a sense of urgency, I stopped a young boy and told him if he ran ahead and brought us a taxi immediately I would give him five rupees. We headed down the emptying street with the fat man about ten meters behind. Incredibly, the boy returned with a taxi in under two minutes. He could hardly believe he had made such easy money. I paid him and threw our purchases quickly inside. As we got in, the fat man was standing with two other men just a few meters away. They were all biggish, grim looking men, arms crossed and glowering. I was tempted to give them the finger as we drove off, but thought better of it.

Melissa saw me looking back, ‘You seem a bit pre-occupied,’ she said, ‘Seen a ghost?’

‘Probably nothing,’ I said, ‘I just don’t really like the look of those guys very much. Thought they might have been pick-pockets or something.’

‘Oh, I don’t think I noticed them.’ she said, peering back through the window in mild surprise.

But I trusted my instincts, I felt we had probably had a narrow escape and I was looking forward to a tot of Ahmed’s Scotch.

When we arrived back at the hotel, I helped the two women to their rooms and went off in search of Jeff and Werner. They were nowhere to be seen, but I heard voices raised in raucous laughter even before I knocked on what I had already guessed was Ahmed’s door.

‘What are you up to in there?’ I called through the door, Ahmed’s voice came booming through the door.

‘We are consorting with prostitutes!’ he shouted, ‘Come on in! Jack, you are my very good friend!’

They were all horribly drunk and swigging neat whisky from teacups. Ahmed had an apparently unlimited supply of hard liquor. Persuaded no doubt by substantial wads of Ahmed’s equally hard cash, two sari-clad Indian women had joined the festive gathering. The men urged me to join them, but they were way too far ahead of me. It was one of those parties where arriving too late, you know instinctively you will never be able to tune comfortably to the same tipsy wavelength everybody else is on. I had one Scotch and left them to it.

As I left, Werner was trying drunkenly to unwrap one of the women from her sari and Jeff was telling Ahmed a joke. It was something about a bloke in a pub in London and they were all laughing uproariously, though how much sense an English pub-joke told in India to a drunken Saudi-Arabian and a paralytic German is hard to say.

Aside from the ready availability of Ahmed’s duty free Scotch, Bombay had limited appeal for me. It was interesting, but big, polluted, and crowded. True, it had all the big city facilities and a plethora of historical sites. There was the vista from the hanging gardens, and the brooding quiet of the parkland near the Towers of Silence, where the Parsees ritually lay out their dead. But things seemed very quiet after Ahmed left a day or two later to resume his sober and industrious life back in Saudi Arabia.

Melissa and Ginny stayed a few days more, then they too left by air for New Delhi and a connection for home. We spent several more days looking around the city, until Jeff suggested we all take the train to Delhi when the last of Ahmed’s Scotch was finished. This was a plan that suited everyone.

We traveled second-class sleeper. Werner naturally was worried about the expense, but I for one flatly refused to save two or three dollars by cramming myself into one of the sardine tins of third-class and below where you could strap-hang for hour after hour until reaching a fever-pitch of sweaty exhaustion. Second-class had tiers of hard wooden bunks and was crowded without being stifling. I struck up a conversation with a professor from Benares Hindu University who despite his lofty station and retinue of three servants asked very similar questions to the rest of India - How much had I paid for my wristwatch? What money did I earn in my home country? Did I own a car?

I hated these questions, they always drove a wedge between my interrogator and myself. True to form, the professor said I was much richer than he was, and that my country should give much more to the poor of India. I pointed out that unlike him, I was not in a position to afford three personal servants, but he refused to be mollified. Jeff pretended he only spoke Gaelic.

On our first day in Delhi we found a fabulous restaurant and a terrible hotel. We booked into the hotel in the late afternoon, dropping off our packs into the care of a strange duo, an overeager, hyperactive manager and his cringing idiot son. While our rooms were being prepared we went out to find some food.

The restaurant was so good we lingered for hours. It was a place packed with overland travelers from all around the world and had the most extensive menu of any restaurant I have ever been in anywhere. In addition to the huge selection of Indian food, there were French, American, Chinese, and Thai menus. The friendly proprietor claimed he could get his chefs to reproduce any dish from any cuisine on demand. This was no idle boast, this establishment became our regular eating and meeting place and over time we saw the kitchens turn out everything from pizzas to chili-con-carne and frogs-legs. The food was generally very good and always served with a theatrical flourish. It was a whole new experience to be in India and yet regularly eating well.

We arrived back at the hotel very late on that first night only to be told by the owner’s slightly demented son that there were no rooms available after all, we had been placed in a dormitory. This son, who was apparently left in sole charge at night, was a very strange person. A street-crazy for sure according to Jeff, who dubbed him the ‘rocket scientist.' But a relatively harmless street-crazy we all judged. He was about twenty-five and clearly mentally unbalanced, but too frail and spindly to be a physical threat. I noticed earlier that his father continually gave him a slap or kick whenever he came within reach. No doubt a few years of that sort of treatment had contributed to his present condition. Now he cringed and whined as he gave us the bad news about our accommodation.

It was very annoying, the more so as it was now too late to do very much about it. We decided to make the best of it given the late hour, although the dormitory was a narrow, prison-camp horrible room with around twenty men in it. During the night we were disturbed continually and bitten ferociously by bed bugs. There was also a small-scale overnight reprise of the feverish homosexual encounters that Jeff and I remembered so vividly from our chance meeting in the cages south of Goa.

Around 2am I awoke to find the ‘rocket scientist’ kneeling beside my bed and going through my bag. He was making no attempt to be quiet or discreet about this, he was simply rummaging through my possessions distractedly. When I confronted him he said he would go away only if I gave him ganja to smoke. I sent him away anyway, convinced now that he was quite mad. A little later I drowsily awoke again to hear him whining and begging for ganja from bed to bed despite the hour. By this time it was almost 3am.

Eventually he struck a deal and crawled into bed with one of the patrons for a noisy homosexual interlude. An hour or so later I got up to use the toilet and saw him sitting at his desk in the dimly lit reception area with tousled hair and wild eyes. He wore a grubby shirt but was naked from the waist down. He was groaning softly to himself and rocking back and forth in a steady rhythmic motion. Seeing him there made me very impatient to leave the hotel and never return, but it was still an hour before dawn.

The toilet proved to be an airless room with three filthy floor-level porcelain basins, each with excrement piled into and above it a foot high. The concrete floor was swimming in yellowish pools of urine in which islands of dead blowflies floated. The stench was palpable. I had not seen anything that bad since my formative outdoor pop-festival days in England. The ‘rocket-scientist’ followed me back to the dormitory and when I waved him away, shook Jeff awake once more to offer himself in exchange for more ganja.

First light saw us checking out of the Nu-Delhi Hanuman Guest Lodge very smartly. The ‘rocket scientist’ had acquired an egg-sized, purple lump on his forehead during the early hours, and had finally obtained his ganja. His movements were so uncontrollably spastic under the influence of the drug, and his already limited thought processes so jumbled, that it took us another half-hour just to get out of the place. He was barely functional as a human being.

However, he did explain the lump on his head. He said that he sometimes he became so angry when no one would give him ganja to smoke that he just banged his head on the wall...

Jeff remarked on the way out that he would prefer it if the street crazies stuck to their streets and did not try to be hotel night-managers and offer to get into bed with him at 4am in foul dormitories in exchange for drugs. I had to agree. It was another hotel hell.

The next hotel was hot and close with a clanking air-conditioning system that was forever breaking down. It also had an unusual hazard. We were warned that if the windows were left open while we were out, the troupes of urban monkeys that roamed the surrounding rooftops might swarm in, steal our possessions and trash the room. If we chose to leave our windows open, we would be responsible for the damage. Every few days saw us changing hotels in Delhi, but unless we were willing to pay the prices demanded by the big international hotels, no accommodation we found was ever better than simply mediocre. Werner moaned and groaned about having to pay New Delhi prices, which were often double or even triple those rates we had been used to outside the metropolitan areas.

After seeing a few of the sights and wandering the city for a week. Werner and Jeff said they were ready to go on to Agra to see the Taj Mahal and from there to Varanasi. I was tempted to accompany them, but after a little thought I let them go on ahead and stayed alone in Delhi.

It is pleasant to travel alone sometimes, just follow your nose without having to discuss or justify your actions. Besides I had another motive for staying. Two of the tropical ulcers, which had plagued me in Java, were feeling sore, swelling and becoming angrily inflamed. If the infection flared, I would need another course of antibiotics. With memories of one very uncomfortable journey in Indonesia, I wanted to be confident the situation was completely under control before moving very far.

I suppose it would have been possible to find a doctor in one of the bigger hotels frequented by foreign tourists, but this seemed a bothersome rigmarole. My first instinct was to walk into the nearest local hospital and ask to see a doctor. This is what I did, trusting to a cab driver to find the closest hospital.

The outpatients at the decrepit hospital I eventually found myself in did not look like a medical facility at all. It looked like an enormous gymnasium with just one desk visible at the distant far side of the cavernous room. Aside from the desk, there was the chair the doctor sat on, a lightweight privacy screen made of printed fabric stretched over a wooden frame on castors, and no other furniture or equipment at all in this huge space.

There was however a long queue of silent sick people, a queue that stood in a miserable line snaking from side to side down the entire length of the room. Every so often it shuffled forward a step or two as the doctor dismissed a patient and the nurse called ‘next!’ There was no privacy in the medical consultations at all. No matter where the small screen was placed, dozens of people in the meandering queue could still see the examination.

The doctor was brisk, examining, diagnosing and prescribing generally in a matter of moments. He had to be fast with his enormous workload - there were at least two hundred patients in the queue. Despite the speed of the consultations, I resigned myself to at least a half day of waiting. But when the nurse spotted me in the queue, I found myself being immediately gestured forward and encouraged to bypass all the people in front of me. Feeling the discomfort of all those eyes trained on me, I shamefully queue-jumped. I reasoned that to insist on remaining in my place would only cause even more embarrassment and whisperings.

I explained my problem swiftly to the doctor and suggested I may need an antibiotic prescription. He agreed with this and quickly lanced my ulcers, now swollen to become suppurating boils. He then matter-of-factly squeezed a large ball of sticky green gunk from each ulcer in turn with his thumbs, leaving two gaping and blood-seeping craters in my right leg. While this excruciating treatment was going on, I told myself sternly there was no way I was going to faint in front of all these interested spectators. But it definitely hurt.

When I was dismissed thirty seconds later I was bleeding slightly as I hobbled towards the pharmacy - but my ulcers were clean. Reaching the pharmacy, I found I did not really need the doctor’s prescription for drugs at all. Provided I knew what to ask for, I could buy any drug they had without restriction. Mindful of the possible consequences if the infection did flare again, I took extra precautions, purchasing another course of the antibiotics to stash in my bag for emergencies.

Before leaving for Agra, I returned to some of the more interesting historical sites. Visiting alone I was able to linger at will in the massive Red Fort in the Old City of Delhi and later test the stamina in my legs at my favorite place, the Qutub Minar. This huge seven hundred year old tower is the Delhi equivalent of the famous tower at Pisa. I also had a look around some of the cultural sights of the new city, but had to give this up. My taxi driver had developed aspirations of riches beyond the dreams of avarice and refused to drive me further until I made him a rich man.

On my last night in the city I engaged a new driver to take me to a place where I could enjoy a beer, but after more than an hour of searching, I was forced to give up and drink orange juice. Delhi can be unremittingly dry unless you go five-star. My driver was perplexed at my obtuseness. He gave me an argument that was a perfect illustration that morality is a function of time and geography.

‘Why do you waste your time looking for illegal substances like beer?’ he demanded. ‘I have perfectly good ganja right here and its legal! It’s also cheaper! Smoke it! It’s much better for your health!’

Good and bad, right or wrong - moral, ethical and even legal - it all hinges on your point of view and that point of view generally hinges on where and when you were born.

# 13. Yes, it’s lovely, but....

## Agra, Varanasi sweatshops, searching for Wayne in Calcutta, Thomas and his Winnebago, Werner's 'unmentionable' problem

Werner and Jeff had moved on when I finally reached Agra. I spent more time than expected in recuperating and pottering around Delhi, I caught the express train to Agra only when confident I was really on the mend. The Taj, it struck me, is a building that would benefit from a little less hype. It was everything they said it would be, but the expectation created by all those superlatives was hard to satisfy.

Yes, I thought, it is lovely. Wow! All those thousands of workmen for how many years? But if I could not drink in the ambiance without some hustler feeding me the raw statistics with an eye to emptying my wallet, I was more interested in a leisurely trip around the city in a pony and trap. I felt churlish for being so unimpressed and went back later for another look. It made no difference. The Taj remains one of the loveliest sights I ever grunted at in a non-committal way.

Being so totally unmoved by arguably, the most famous piece of architecture in the world was a symptom of a certain impatience I had been feeling of late. I was finding myself preoccupied and wanting to move on. I felt I had unfinished business to attend and I could feel a mission building. Quite frequently as I got closer and closer to Calcutta again, I was thinking of Wayne, last seen drugged to the eyeballs in his squalid hotel room. I felt a few pangs at leaving him there at the time and occasionally wondered if there was not something more I should have done. Maybe I should have pushed him a bit harder. I thought perhaps now I should make one more attempt to get him in touch with family or friends back home.

I had tried to get a contact name and address for Wayne’s folks from him before without success, perhaps this time I would have more luck. A phone call or just a note might get him the care and treatment he needed. I decided that if I returned and he would not tell me what I wanted to hear, I would search his possessions for the information while he was in one of his demented collapses. There was no point in contemplating the days of travel involved without a fairly definite and resolute plan. Perhaps I could turn up someone who could take responsibility for him. Once I made up my mind to actually do this, I was impatient to get started and left Agra without regret. The most beautiful sights are the most unexpected, and though there would be no other Taj, there would be something else.

It was a fairly long trip to Calcutta and would take a couple of days, but the actual cost of the tickets, even for a sleeper, was minuscule. I broke the train journey at Varanasi, and found Werner and Jeff in a small, comfortable family hotel close by the banks of the Ganges. This hotel had a flat roof equipped with a few old lounge chairs and a birds-eye view of a small section of the riverbank. Here a continuous procession of pilgrims came to pray and ritually wash in the sacred river every day from dawn to late evening.

Despite Werner being somewhat morose and uncommunicative, we spent a day in Varanasi old city wandering through narrow back streets. Many of the curtained doorways led into tiny sweatshops, producing belts, hats, shoes, and other items. Inside were rows of ragged children sitting cross-legged in hot and sticky semi-darkness. They stared at the visitor with big brown eyes and stitched away furiously at some article in their lap.

It was sad to see young children being exploited, but as Jeff remarked, those kids at least were not starving and worse things were possible. He was right. A later campaign against child labour succeeded in closing some of these enterprises only to force many children to become prostitutes or starve once deprived of the minimal subsistence the sweatshops provided.

The cautionary lesson I suppose is that it does pay to at least examine the likely consequences before taking the moral high ground on some of the less appealing aspects of Asian economics.

While we were playing tourist and taking in the atmosphere in Varanasi, I ordered a sitar from a musical instrument manufacturer. I had long wanted one these instruments and as each was built to order, it was best to get the craftsmen started on the task now. It would take around two weeks to make a sitar to my personal specifications. Taking a break for cold drinks and not finding any beer, we marveled at the fact that there are more than six hundred shops around the city of Varanasi where marijuana is legally sold, but it is almost impossible to get an alcoholic beverage. The city is under strict prohibition.

That evening, over a fiery vegetarian curry, I learnt why Werner was so morose; he confessed 'he might have caught something' back in Bombay. Jeff spelled it out for me helpfully and considerably more directly than Werner.

‘Werner has a dose,’ he said matter-of-factly, ‘He’s been diagnosed with the clap. Not to put too fine a point on it, Werner is afflicted with the pox.’

When I got over the initial shock of hearing this news, I realized why Werner had been so deflated. He was flinching slightly at Jeff’s description of his predicament, but said he had obtained antibiotics and commenced a course of treatment. Despite this he was worried. The doctor had told him he should be back to normal in a couple of weeks, but right now he was sore and sorry, and it hurt like hell.

For Werner of all people to catch a sexually transmitted disease was an amazing turn of events. He gave the appearance of being primly celibate, but he was actually just too miserly to pay the fees of the prostitutes who pestered him. He was the last person I would have expected to see in this situation.

Werner had acquired his ‘dose’ courtesy of free-spending Ahmed with his bottomless reserves of Scotch and cash. It was just ironic that Werner was suffering while far more likely candidates for this affliction got away scot-free. Harrison for instance, spread himself around the prostitutes of Southeast Asia with such careless gusto that he routinely lost count of his encounters. Of course, with Harrison it was love every time and he at least thought this made him bulletproof.

The truth was that one Harrison was the carnal equivalent of an entire platoon of lecherous soldiers. It was ironic that he was able to indulge so recklessly without even catching a cold, yet poor monastic Werner contracted something awful the first time he let himself go under the influence of a free Scotch. I boarded the train for Calcutta the next morning still marveling at this.

Almost exactly seven months after I left the grubby hotel in Calcutta where I met Linda and Jenny and listened to Wayne telling his sad story of how he became a junkie in Bangkok, I returned after completing a full circuit of India. The place had not improved, it was every bit as seedy as I remembered it. Pushing my way through the usual crowd of street-people outside the main entrance I looked for a familiar face. I was eager to find out right away what had happened with Wayne.

I had a notion that if he was still there; I might start right now on getting him to contact his family, or perhaps call them immediately myself. I saw several familiar faces among the staff, but no one would own up to even remembering Wayne, let alone knowing where he had gone.

This unexpected obstructiveness was totally exasperating, surely they must remember? But I pushed to no avail, Wayne had vanished. I wandered through to his old room just off the tiny courtyard. It had been cleaned up I noticed, and no longer looked like the burnt-out rats nest it resembled during Wayne’s tenancy. Now it had two single-beds in it and was occupied by a couple of Dutch hippies on their way to Kuta Beach in Bali. Neither of them had ever seen or heard of Wayne. The hotel manager asked me if I was checking in to stay for a while, but I had the strongest urge to leave immediately when I drew such a comprehensive blank. I pressed him again on what had happened to Wayne, but he only looked mystified.

‘Do you remember *me*?’ I asked him in frustration.

He smiled, ‘But of course!’

‘Ok, so you must remember the American, Wayne?’

But all I got was an embarrassed shrug. I could not tell if he really knew nothing or was just being evasive.

As I left I wondered if Wayne might have died in that dingy hotel. It was possible. Or perhaps the manager had tired of his demented ravings and tossed him out into the street. That would account for his ‘failure of memory’ and lack of communication now. It was also possible that Wayne had simply checked out on one of his good days, and was spending the last of his money shooting up heroin somewhere else - maybe even back in Bangkok.

Somehow I could not imagine that he had made it home to the US.

Not finding Wayne made Calcutta feel sinister and unwelcoming. I had expected at least some small nugget of information and achieving so little made me regret I had bothered to return at all. I was tempted to leave immediately and take the train straight back to Varanasi. After a suitable pause for reflection, I resisted this impulse and switched to another hotel nearby. Another night or two in Calcutta would allow some time to consider what other options might now be available in my quest.

Checking into my new hotel in the afternoon, I came across a harassed looking Swiss who did not fit the mould for an overland traveler, he appeared more businessman than a backpacker. He was casually but smartly dressed and a few years older than most of the other nomads on the overland route. Following our brief introductory chat in the hotel reception, it was obvious he was starved of conversation and eager to talk. For my part, I wanted to discuss Wayne’s disappearance with someone and perhaps spark an idea or two on what, if anything could be done next. We arranged to meet for dinner after I showered and changed.

This hotel, just a few hundred yards from the other, was a quantum leap upwards in brightness, cleanliness and comfort and yet very similarly priced to the grimy and dingy accommodation I had just left. I wondered why on earth I had suffered the dirt and sloppy service at the fleapit hotel for so long before. Sometimes it is just easier to stay put and not risk another disappointment, especially if you have congenial company to make life bearable.

Thomas was the name of the Swiss traveler, and his advice on the problem of finding Wayne was concise. ‘Forget it,’ he said. I spent around twenty minutes giving him the background to the story, ending with the disappointment of today and the quandary of the next logical step. Thomas reasoned, probably rightly, that in a chaotic city like Calcutta it would be easy enough to lose someone forever even if they were actually living in the same street. He pointed out that in the case of Wayne’s disappearance: firstly, I knew virtually nothing about him, secondly, I had not seen him for seven months and was unable to even say reliably what country he was in, and thirdly, unless my name was really Sherlock Holmes, I was wasting my time. I should face these facts and give up.

Thomas had a point. In fact he had several points. I would give up on Wayne until seized by further inspiration. It had been a long trip for such a resoundingly negative result, but that had always been the risk. Changing the subject, I asked Thomas how long he had been in Calcutta. To my amazement he said he had been in the city for just over a year and that he would desperately love to get away, but he was stuck here. Over drinks at one of the bigger international hotels in town, he told me his story.

My original assessment of Thomas as a slightly unusual character on the trail was correct. Thomas was a wealthy man, or at least he had been. He said that he was now in some financial difficulty. He and his wife had decided to take two years off from their successful import/export business in Switzerland and travel the world together a couple of years ago. They had planned their departure in some detail, and appointed a manager to run their business affairs. When all arrangements and contingency plans were satisfactorily in place, they began their trip of a lifetime by flying to the US on the Concorde.

Soon after arriving in the States, They commenced the second phase of their travel plan, buying a mobile home that was to carry the two of them, plus all the essentials of the good life, for the duration of their trip. Thomas did not believe in roughing it. The mobile home was a monster rig that could swallow trunk-loads of personal effects and had all the comforts of home.

The vehicle they settled on was a custom-built and luxuriously outfitted Winnebago. Among its features such traveler’s essentials as a proper bathroom with a small bath as well as a shower. The mobile home was of course, air-conditioned, it had piped stereo, colour TV, proper cooking facilities and a standby generator for AC power in the wilds. Naturally, there was a fridge to keep the wine cool and a freezer for the steaks and gelati. The vehicle boasted a comfortable queen-size bed, a fully stocked cocktail bar, and every other imaginable convenience.

Thomas and his wife had driven this beast happily all over the US and Canada and even wandered as far south as Central America before they returned northwards to California and put their mobile home on a ship to Australia. While the vehicle was in transit, the couple island-hopped through the Pacific by plane, eventually picking up their transport once again in Sydney, New South Wales. From Sydney they traveled around Australia at a leisurely pace and after some months, put their vehicle on a boat once again. This time bound for Singapore from the port of Fremantle in Western Australia.

While the vehicle was in transit, Thomas and his wife rested in Bali. Then from Singapore they traveled slowly through Malaysia and Thailand, criss-crossing from coast to coast in the southerly regions. They continued traveling northwards, until eventually they were thwarted by the lack of a land route through Burma.

They wondered at this point if they should put their vehicle on a boat to Africa and sidestep Asia altogether. What eventually swayed them was a novel idea they would not have considered by themselves. A shipping agent they consulted in Malaysia proposed, incredibly, that they should *fly* their huge vehicle to Calcutta. He had a business contact engaged in the import of goods to Kuala Lumpur who sometimes returned a very large and otherwise empty cargo plane to India. He could negotiate a rate that was a relatively economical proposition compared to the option of freighting to Africa. The major advantage of the cargo flight was of course the speed.

Rapid transit time would perhaps save Thomas and his wife weeks, even months of kicking their heels waiting for a slow cargo vessel. Plus, when they did arrive in India they would have a clear land route home. Barring political upheavals, they could drive all the way back to Switzerland.

Thomas was sold on the idea, but their troubles were just beginning. When the vehicle rolled off its huge air-transport in Calcutta and came under the scrutiny of customs, it transpired that its travel documents were not in order. In fact there was a serious problem with the paperwork and the upshot was that Thomas and his wife were accused of illegal importation of their vehicle. Effectively, it was alleged that they were attempting to smuggle the massive bus into India under the very noses of the local customs officials.

This would have been a foolhardy crime if ever there were one. Anyone sneaking through customs with a massive mobile home secreted amongst their personal effects could surely expect problems. Thomas treated this as a joke at first, unable to believe that such an accusation could be serious. But it was, and his appeals and protestations were in vain, the vehicle was seized. To make matters worse, inside the mobile home and now inaccessible was most of their clothing and other possessions, as well as the purchases they had made so far in their extensive travels.

This incredible story would have been extremely funny were it not for the serious consequences for Thomas. He had been involved in negotiation and litigation with Indian bureaucracy ever since this disastrously miscalculated arrival. He had been compelled to engage local lawyers and had now wasted a whole year in an expensive, and so far fruitless effort to have the case resolved. During that time he had reduced his hotel standard to a bare minimum in order to keep his escalating costs down. His wife had eventually flown back to Switzerland and left him to continue the battle alone.

Thomas said his wife had left partly because their business needed someone to be there after their long absence and partly because she could no longer bear the thought of a seemingly endless struggle to regain their property. The dream trip had turned into a nightmare. Thomas now had to wait another six weeks before his case was again heard in a court of law. If that failed, he said, he might consider forgoing any possible further appeals with their attendant delays and write-off his total investment of around $200,000 before going home to Switzerland.

I stayed a couple of extra days in Calcutta to talk over our respective situations with Thomas and see if any other avenues of inquiry might come to light in the disappearance of Wayne, but on the third day, I realized I was just marking time. I said farewell to Thomas, and wished him the best of luck as I boarded the train back to Varanasi. I also gave him a number of poste-restante addresses and the approximate times I expected to be in each place. This was so that we might catch up again further along the trail towards Europe in the event that he brought his case to a happy conclusion. As it turned out, our paths did not cross again and that was the last I saw or heard of either Thomas or of Wayne.

Back in Varanasi, Werner was frantic with worry, he had finished his first course of antibiotics and it had not worked. The infection was resistant to the medication. The doctor was still calm and suggesting a different type of antibiotic, but Werner had lost what little faith he ever had in the capacity of Indian medicine to effect a cure for him. After a couple of days of dithering hesitation, he was hovering on the verge of abandoning everything and making a rapid return trip back home to Germany. Once on his home ground, he was confident he would be able to seek out reliable treatment.

To complicate the situation for Werner and make matters even worse, a local drug courier approached him while he was in this vulnerable state. He was promised an all-expenses-paid ticket to London plus five hundred dollars in cash if he took ‘a small package’ back with him. In his current state, Werner thought this offer was highly attractive and reasoned that once he was in London, handing over his package and receiving his money, he could be home free in Germany in a matter of hours.

It is certainly not unusual for a traveler on the trail to be targeted by a local with a get-rich-quick scheme, and drugs and currency deals are the perennial favorites. The dealer had spun Werner a fairly predictable tale. Firstly, he had been assured that this was a sure-fire scheme and that lots of people had previously made easy money doing exactly the same thing. According to the dealer of course, no one was ever caught, he suggested that suitable palms had been greased in advance to make the journey smoother.

Werner was invited to visit the dealer’s premises where methods, travel details and all else would be explained, and doubts laid to rest. Both Jeff and I pointed out to bemused and befuddled Werner that these were exactly the kind of glib reassurances any self-respecting international drug dealer would be expected to give when recruiting a dumb and highly expendable courier. But Werner was sorely tempted. It was a plan that appealed directly to his skinflint soul while simultaneously answering his necessity of making a quick trip home.

Werner met the dealer through a destitute Londoner staying in a fleabag hotel close by. This character had already accepted the dealer's assurances, and the offer of tickets plus cash as a cheap way of getting home quickly. He was now strongly encouraging Werner to do the same. The Londoner was inordinately keen that Werner join forces with him and Werner for his part was obscurely comforted by the thought that he would not be totally alone on the trip. Both these potential convicts-in-waiting seemed hell-bent on deluding themselves that this was a plan which simply could not go wrong.

Werner was even having a hard time with the fundamental premise that the course of action he was contemplating could be classed as a serious criminal offence. Werner had been away from home and Europe, for nearly three years, most of that time in environments where drugs were either completely legal, or tolerated. In Varanasi for instance, obtaining drugs could be as simple as asking directions from the nearest policeman. In Werner’s mind, carrying a few kilos of hashish was a petty, trivial thing, surely only a misdemeanour even if he was caught.

Werner was losing his grip.

I held an impromptu council-of-war with Jeff. We had to dissuade Werner from volunteering for a long rest behind bars in one of Her Majesty’s Prisons. We started our campaign by badgering him unmercifully. English prisons are not holiday camps we told him, he would be fed disgusting slops and forced to spend his days in mindless tasks. His nights would be spent as a plaything for repulsive deviants. He would not see his family for years. He would forget what sunshine was, and the dismal highlight of his convict week would be a walk around a high-walled courtyard and a distant view of some gray clouds. He was scared, but not yet dissuaded.

Jeff and I decided to go with Werner on his planned trip to meet the drug dealer, and if possible, sabotage the entire scheme.

When we arrived at the dealer’s premises, they did not look like the headquarters of an international drug cartel. In fact, they bore a remarkable resemblance to a single-car garage in a narrow back street. It was a run-down garage at that, with exposed brick walls and a cramped workbench down one side. The floor of this windowless room was dirty concrete, and only one ‘tradesman’ was engaged in producing the export goods for the ‘team of international couriers’ that the enterprise had allegedly recruited. This was not an operation at the cutting edge of technology. Nevertheless, the method used to carry drugs was quite cleverly executed.

The enterprise was based on the premise that lots of young travelers carry musical instruments - guitars mostly, though sitars, mandolins, fiddles and even flutes and accordions are not uncommon. But it was not a matter of simply stuffing an instrument with drugs. The shifty-looking leader of this cartel showed us a custom-made guitar case that looked quite ordinary, but was constructed almost entirely out of hashish.

This was accomplished by rolling the pliable and oily hash just like pastry. First it was squeezed into thin sheets perhaps five to ten millimeters thick. These sheets were then cut to the required sizes and pressed and dried until the drug formed a hard, brittle layer. Once dry, this layer was sandwiched between two wafer-thin veneers of ply, which served the double purpose of both hiding the drug and of giving the case some structural strength. The case was then covered and finished by gluing black vinyl-type material on the outside and a thick, patterned, fleecy fabric liner on the inside. With the addition of a small brass lock and hinges, a carry handle, and some decorative piping along the seams, the result was a fairly professional and sturdy-looking instrument case. It was the sort of thing that would probably not draw a second glance: unless you happened to be a routinely suspicious person - such as a customs officer.

The modus operandi was to custom-build the case to suit the instrument. Once the new case was scuffed and dirtied a little, it would appear as though the two had been together always. Since the case had to be totally dismembered to reveal the hash - and even a thorough and damaging search which might involve removing the lining would only reveal plywood, our dealer told us proudly that we would all be safe from all the usual searches. I did not believe a word of it, but he seemed to think that the presence of Jeff and myself meant that we were now all three of us willing and able to act as couriers for his little venture.

The already recruited Londoner turned up just as the dealer was explaining how Werner would be met at the London end and would hand over his guitar case within an hour or so of landing. The newly recruited courier from London was a skinny and snuffly character named Peter with a glottal pronunciation that cleft and mangled the words in his already jumbled speech. He pronounced his own name as ‘Pete-ah’ and he backed up all the dealers’ reassurances eagerly. I noted that he was the first person I had ever met who could whine exultantly:

‘I fuckin’ tole you, didn’t I? Didn’t I? This is piss-easy!’ Pete-ah was chortling with the heaven-sent simplicity of it all.

‘Its a fuckin’ doddle man! Wot chew fink now den?’ he crowed, ‘I betcha fought it was all bollocks! Eh? But we’re not swallerin’ none of it are we? No fuck off! We’re not stickin’ it up our arses are we? Fuck no! We don’t have to tape no shit to our ribs do we? No! Bollocks mate! All *we* got to do is ‘ave a couple of beers on the way over, an’ stroll on through wiv our bags!’

‘ Know how many jumbo jets they get in London everyday? ‘Bout one every firty seconds dats wot! Dats a fuckin’ lot of people! Fink dey can search everbody? Get fucked!'

Pete-ah was a greedy idiot, easily led and custom-built to perform stupid risk-taking stunts for manipulative criminal types. For him, the overland adventure would probably lead straight to jail, without passing ‘go.’ I thought he would probably fit in there fairly well, he certainly had the elocution and command of expletives up to scratch. As we walked away, I thought I managed a passable impression of Pete-ahs adenoidal intonation to Jeff.

‘We’re not swallerin’ none of it are we?’ I said.

‘No, fuck off!’ he replied immediately in a fair imitation of his own.

Werner was swallowing it though. The courier run was set for just a week away, and would be a direct flight from New Delhi to Heathrow. We had only a few days to prevent Werner from going through with his plan. We took him out to a cafe we frequented regularly, a place where every evening, the same three old men squatted on their heels in the dust by the entrance chatting and smoking ganja. We gave the men a few rupiahs for a chilum full of their best product, and attempted to get Werner so comprehensively stoned and so immensely paranoid he would lose his nerve and back out. It worked up to a point, he was babbling by the time we gave the chilum back, but his paranoia was focused on all the wrong things. He was worrying that someone might steal his stuff from his hotel room while he was out having dinner. He also complained that the ganja made him even more intensely aware of the exquisite pain he was getting from his dick.

But he was still making no promises.

Neither Jeff nor I had anything to lose, we let our imaginations run riot. We told Werner the dealer might have set him up to deliberately fail, he would be an expendable decoy for a bigger package. We told him he was a sitting duck, an idiot like his good friend Pete-ah and a lamb to the slaughter. We told him drug smuggling was playing Russian roulette. He looked uncertain.

The big picture was not really Werner’s forte right now, all he wanted to do was grab his money and run. Eventually, Jeff threatened in exasperation to give him a swift kick where the infection was worst.

Werner finally said, ‘But its no big deal crime anyway is it? Why all the fuss and bother?’

Sensing an opening, we told him in lurid detail the penalties for illegal importation of banned substances in the UK. We invented what details we had not gleaned from tabloid horror stories and the TV news bulletins. We told him there were special highly trained anti-drugs operatives at Heathrow with top-secret techniques designed to outwit people just like him. We had no idea if this was true, but it could have been. We told him that while he was in jail and on remand he would be worrying for months about a possible life behind bars. What is more we lied, his infection would receive only cursory treatment and his illness would get worse.

Werner was starting to waver. We told him a week was a long time, if he followed our advice, he could be home clear tomorrow or the next day and getting the urgent treatment he needed. We hinted this might be the only thing that would save his manhood and eventually permit a new generation of little Werners to be born.

He was hooked; we put him on the plane before he had time to recollect how expensive it was going to be. He was still semi-stoned when he embarked and weepy with gratitude to us for saving his life. Who knows, it may have been true.

We missed Werner once he was gone, although right up to the last minute his mean streak prevailed, I bought him coffee and sandwiches at the airport and Jeff paid for the taxi. But we forgave him everything, even when we got back to the hotel and discovered he had ‘forgotten’ to pay for a couple of nights accommodation there too. Werner could be exasperating, but you could not help but wish him well.

‘Pete-ah’ came by the next day and was most put out he could no longer count on Werner. After his initial surprise, he was also vocal in his condemnation, he took Werner’s sudden exit from the scheme as a personal slight on his character.

‘Well fuck 'im den! Wanker!’ he snarled, ‘Wasting my time. Bugger it!

‘I fuckin’ tole ’im it was money for jam! If he wants to be a fuckin’ chicken, well, bollocks to ’im! Some people are just too fuckin’ stupid to be fuckin’ told!’

Jeff pointed Peter, still spluttering fucketty-fuck, towards the door and told him nicely as he pushed him out and closed it in his face, that he was a dickhead, and to please have a long and a happy life in the slammer back home and not to call us if he ever got out. After that, all that was left to do in Varanasi was pick up the new sitar and leave. From here, Jeff was heading northwards to Kathmandu, so regretfully, we swapped addresses and parted company.

I had heard there was trouble brewing in Pakistan, and I wanted to pass through the country while the going was good.

# 14. Reptile medicine…

## Amritsar, over the border to Pakistan, Lahore, Peshawar, through the Khyber Pass to Afghanistan, George the horticulturist (wink, wink) Kabul, Kandahar, Iran, Teheran, Turkey

I crossed into Pakistan hastily from Amritsar, pausing only for a quick look around some of the famous holy sights. My mind was on the logistics of further travel. There were border skirmishes between Pakistan and India and reports of serious street unrest following political tensions in Pakistan itself. Bhutto looked set to be overthrown and Zia to take over. Street mobs, riots and demonstrations were the order of the day.

The border situation in this area is always volatile and if it worsened, the access points might close and leave westbound travelers like myself stranded on the Indian side, possibly for an indefinite period. I decided to push through Pakistan and on through the Khyber Pass into Afghanistan as quickly as possible. Violent street demonstrations and some fatalities had been reported in Lahore, but all seemed fairly normal as I passed through on a rattletrap bus jammed with people. The bus was bursting at the seams with humanity a half-dozen turbaned daredevils even squatting on top of a mountain of bags in the luggage rack on the roof.

I began to relax a little when we passed through Rawalpindi and reached Peshawar. There were rumors of public executions, but things seemed quite normal and the destination was almost within reach. I went for a walk around the market place. Though crowded, it had the feel of the wide-open spaces after the cramped bus journey. In one corner of the square, groups of people were gathered around an unkempt salesman loudly declaring the virtues of his product. Some sort of sales demonstration was in progress and I wandered over casually to join the onlookers.

I saw as I came closer that there were actually two people involved in the enterprise. One man was engaged exclusively in attracting and occupying the crowd with a string of sales patter quite incomprehensible to me. The other was there to do the actual work, a strange and grisly business in the extreme.

The ‘worker’ took a large cardboard box from a pile stashed on a heavy wooden handcart. He opened it with some care: inside the flimsy box was layer upon layer of large and very much alive lizards. Each was short, fat, and about a foot long, though a few were twice that size. The reptiles were heavy and lazy-looking, with a grayish camouflage-patterned body and a thick and stumpy tail. As each lizard was removed from the box, the worker ran a sharp knife across its back near the base of the neck with a swift, practiced motion. This done, the lizard was tossed, bleeding slightly, onto a heap of animals similarly dealt with.

It was a minute or two before I caught on to what was happening: the lizards in the box were lively and ready to attempt escape. One or two *did* escape and had to be retrieved by giggling children who darted between the legs of the onlookers to recapture them.

The lizards operated on by the knife man were a different story. They were still alive, because their eyes could be seen moving and their tongues flickering in and out. Yet they made no attempt to get away. The reason for this unlikely compliance was that they had been incapacitated so they could *not* get away. They were all reptile quadriplegics; courtesy of the knife-wielding worker and a swift but expertly calculated severing of the spinal cord.

Disabling fifty or sixty of the lizards was only a few minutes work, meantime the salesman kept up his spiel and the crowd of onlookers continued to grow. When the small pile of lizards was five or six deep, the worker lit a small stove and placed a tiny cast-iron skillet on it. He then proceeded to take the lizards one by one and inflict yet another surgical procedure on them: one drastic enough to be invariably, though not instantly, fatal. I found myself hoping that the previously sustained knife wound had disconnected any sensation of pain for these hapless creatures.

The worker made a long incision down the length of the lizard’s abdomen and reached inside with fingers pushing purplish entrails aside, or pulling them forcibly out of the way. His mission was to find and remove an amber coloured little nugget located among the internal organs.

What this nugget might have been I had no idea, my knowledge of reptile anatomy was insufficient to tell, but it was this tiny item that was sought. Once found it was placed into the hot skillet and rendered down to a tiny blob of fatty oil while the rest of the carcass was discarded. Once gutted, the lizards were tossed onto an ever-growing blood-soaked pile of mutilated bodies that quickly became festooned with loosely dangling entrails. The whole revolting pile was half-hidden beneath a dense cloud of attendant blowflies. Dozens of these lizards were sacrificed to make one small bottle of the prized essential oil that was the object of the exercise. I badly wanted to ask someone what this oil was and what it was for, but surprisingly, no one in the interested crowd around me spoke English.

Later I described this process to a local man who could only tell me that it was ‘good medicine’, and remarked that it makes good sense to sever the spinal cord in the absence of any form of refrigeration. He pointed out pragmatically that paralyzed lizards could survive and remain useful for many days, or even weeks, whereas dead lizards start to decompose immediately in the heat. It was important for the medicine to be fresh and to be seen by potential customers to be fresh.

I found my own sympathies were all with the lizards.

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Aside from some of the strange produce in the markets, Peshawar gave an impression of barely contained anarchy. It was not so much the chaos of its streets, but more the sense of a prevailing frontier lawlessness that was to become an even stronger feeling in Afghanistan. Peshawar on the surface, was the wild west of Pakistan. Some of these people were bandits and rebels, some were arms dealers and yet others were refugees. Some were probably guerrillas, re-provisioning after their latest incursions over the nearby border. The arms trade was big here and guns aplenty were on sale. After nightfall, trade became even brisker with grenades and automatic pistols appearing on market stalls. From here through to Iran almost every male carried a weapon, usually a rifle, all the time.

Waiting for my bus through the Khyber Pass the following morning, I followed a hideous stench to a small tannery and saw animal hide being scraped and cured in a filthy back-street courtyard. The tannery was a revolting melange of smelly skins, scraps of rotting flesh, pools of blood and chemicals; all amid a bustle of toiling workers. In the middle of it all was a man who sat and watched proceedings in a detached and serene manner all the while sucking languidly on a golf-ball sized piece of chocolate. He seemed blissfully unconscious of being enveloped by the foul odors of the tannery and the nearby open sewer, even though the combined stench made me want to gag.

As I watched he casually extracted the sticky, chocolatey mess from his mouth with two grubby fingers and put it down soft, wet and sloppy, on the filthy wooden surface on which he sat. Here it was instantly hidden from view, engulfed by a bowling-ball sized swarm of shiny blowflies. This was pure blowfly heaven and the air in the small courtyard was thick with their plump healthy swarm.

In blowfly heaven I noticed; it was possible to flit from open sewer to a pool of fresh blood, then on to rancid dead animal flesh and sticky melted chocolate. The circle was complete with a short hop back to the sewer and it was all done in a matter of seconds. But for the man with the chocolate, the blowflies were less than an irrelevance, they simply did not enter into his conscious mind at all. He casually and automatically waved away the horde of flies every minute or so to indulge himself in another slow and deeply appreciative suck on the wet and flyblown mess that puddled and buzzed at his elbow. I was glad I was leaving; Peshawar had more than its fair share of the brutal and the stomach churning. It was no place to try to build up an appetite for dinner.



*Local transport through the Khyber Pass, Pakistan – Afghanistan. (Photo JP)*

The Khyber Pass is one of those places of legend. A name to conjure images of desperate feats of arms and last ditch battles against tribal hordes of fanatical opponents with overwhelming numerical superiority. Approaching from the eastern side the traveler passes a satisfyingly forbidding and imposing remnant of empire; the fort of the Khyber Rifles marking the northwest frontier of the old British Raj. From here our bus entered the pass proper, plunging into a twisting mountain passage through an arid rock-scape of bare pinnacles and boulder-strewn depths. As we entered Afghanistan, we also entered a time warp. I felt they should have warned us with some suitable announcement:

‘You are now entering Afghanistan. Please wind your watch back four hundred years, do not hesitate to shoot first and ask questions later, and remember: a woman is only your chattel!’

Afghanistan was not only feudal in its character; it was truly desolate, in ways that other desert landscapes seldom are. Desert appreciation is a matter of personal preference, the landscapes depressing or uplifting depending on your temperament. Unbearable monotony or exhilarating grandeur, the only thing that really changes is the point of view of the onlooker. But even the most stark and arid landscapes are generally relieved by occasional stands of tough shrubs and hardy grasses. In Afghanistan more often than not there was nothing at all to alleviate the unremitting bareness of it all. My eye had no focal point on which to fix; the dirt and rocks simply went out to every horizon, the top of every hill and the bottom of every valley.

Following a brief stop for refreshments and prayers in the pass, I chatted to George, the only other European on the bus. When not being a hippie on the trail, George was a lab technician at a university in the English Midlands. We shared a common mission as we both strode urgently away from the prayer mats unrolling towards Mecca and sought a place where a foreigner could relieve himself without either giving offence, or attracting ribald comment from the locals. There were no toilet facilities at these stops; the simple rule was women to the left of the bus and men to the right. The bus itself was often the only screen the modest could depend upon. At prayer time, the alternative to the offence of urinating in the direction of Mecca during prayers was to turn around and wave your member in the faces of the kneeling pious. Therefore it was usually necessary to walk some considerable distance you didn't antagonise a local with a loaded rifle.

We waited a decent interval after prayers in order to give the women the chance to complete their toilet on the bare rocks and modestly cover themselves once more from top to toe. Back on the bus we sat together and talked. One of the delights in conversing with a stranger far from home is the absolute frankness possible in the exchange. Away from the social context in which each of us may have been habitually guarded, we could tell all in the most astonishing way.

George it transpired, was a man with a mission and itching to tell somebody about it. His university work was in horticulture, what he did not know about propagating exotic plant species and fungi in laboratory conditions was not worth knowing. Being something of a dope freak, George had long grown his own marijuana in a custom-built temperature, light, humidity and nutrient-controlled greenhouse he designed himself. In constructing this small and highly specialised horticultural labouratory, he had used all the sophisticated know-how his university training was able to provide and he claimed the results were spectacular.

George grew his product for himself. Bettering his cannabis stock was his hobby and his passion, but he maintained he was not in it for profit. He said he was not a regular dealer of drugs and did not grow his marijuana in bulk for any mass market. But he did admit occasionally selling his excess stocks to friends and acquaintances to help finance his further researches. He was a true connoisseur of the weed and very proud of the quality of his produce.

I gathered that among the cognoscenti of such things, he had achieved some renown for the superior quality of his dope. But as a true perfectionist he was always looking for ways to improve the genetic line and smoking quality of his plants. George had begun to cultivate in a fairly casual and ad-hoc sort of way; now he was engaged in serious and systematic work to improve the strain and had a considerable fund of scientific knowledge to assist him in this undertaking.

George loved to talk and I guessed he must be seriously frustrated by having to keep it all so secret at home. He wanted to shout it from the rooftops. He had the precise diction and methodical speech of the empirical scientist engaged in serious research, but as he warmed to his theme, he became animated, gesturing with his hands, his eyes alight with the pure joy of it all. He was having a good time.

George had begun with a few seeds from Moroccan strains and experimented with seeds from various other sources. It was a hit and miss affair as the true origin and quality of the seeds was generally unknown. Many of the plants he propagated in the early days were not especially good by any standard.

But now he was collecting for himself; George’s expedition on the trail was almost entirely botanical, he cared little for the cultural and the artistic along his route. When George arrived in a new place, he first tried the local ganja and rated it for potency according to his own complicated evaluation system. If it passed muster, he would collect the seeds for later use and make notes on its cultivation based on his observations of the conditions under which it was grown and any information he could extract from local growers and users.

His method for getting his seed stocks home was simple but apparently quite effective; he mailed them. He had three English accommodation addresses, student residences shared by a number of people and with a steady flow of transients. Needless to say, if anyone asked, the person his letter was actually addressed to was no longer at that address. George would split his sample of perhaps a hundred seeds three ways and either tape them into the center crease of a greetings card or letter, or attach them to sticky tape in the bottom of an envelope. He then dispatched them, trusting to his friends to simply put aside his stock of seeds for later use.

The advantage of his system he said, was that a few grams of seeds were no big deal even if he was caught. Splitting everything three ways not only kept his samples tiny, it meant that most of them got through even though he was using sometimes erratic third world postal systems.

George said he had posted scores, maybe hundreds of samples back to England. By now he had lost count, but they were all meticulously recorded in his field notes. All of his postings had arrived without a hitch and his marijuana gene pool and database was now second to none by his reckoning. George posted his carefully considered best finds from Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Nepal, and intended collecting in Turkey and Morocco on the way back. He made copious notes for each collection of seeds to assist his later attempts to propagate and perhaps hybridise the varieties he collected.

While traveling, George also became interested in the possibilities of natural hallucinogens, particularly ‘magic mushrooms.’ He explained that these fungi generally contain the natural compound psilocybin, which has an effect similar to LSD. George turned out to have expert knowledge in this area as well. He was a mine of information on mind-bending fungi.

As our bus trundled through rocky desert country, George also rattled on. There are many different types of hallucinogenic mushrooms, with differing degrees of potency and toxicity I learnt. As a rule-of-thumb George said, you could tell if the psilocybin was present by squeezing the fleshy stem or crown of the mushroom. If you see a fluid bluish in colour or turning blue in a few seconds, the indications are that you have a hallucinogenic mushroom. But you need to be careful how you test its properties and calculate dosages as degree of potency and/or toxicity vary wildly.

George was very taken with his mushrooms. Because the spores were microscopic he could smuggle in millions of them in a teaspoon of dust, and propagate them very quickly later in a sterile jelly medium in a warm, dark cupboard well away from prying eyes. When he heard I had been in Australia and was intending to eventually return, he wanted to give me detailed instructions on collecting and shipping Queensland gold-top mushroom spores to his English lab. I backed away fairly smartly from that proposal. My impression was that George was a more or less harmless eccentric who wanted only the thrill of trying these substances for himself. However, I certainly did not want to be the person who helped him to introduce some potentially brain-melting essence to an unsuspecting public.

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In Kabul, I shared a hotel with George for several days. It was clean and the food was good, but it was like living in a freezer. There was no heating at all and the exhaled breath of the few guests in the building condensed in white clouds in the air of every occupied room.

While George methodically collected and tested his ganja from dealers around the suburbs, I wandered around the capital. The streets were full of Russian ‘military advisors’ and even the most poverty-stricken area of shanties and makeshift shelters seemed able to muster a formidable and highly visible level of citizen's firepower. Weapons were everywhere, but there was little else that was twentieth century in Afghanistan. The American embassy looked impregnable enough to resist a siege and actually *did* resist a siege just a short time later, but it fell eventually as Afghanistan itself fell. The resulting strife was to turn the whole country, for a while anyway, into a no-go area on the hippie trail for all but the most foolhardy thrill-seekers. It also turned back the reform clock in favor of more traditional Islamic values. Luckily I had already passed through when the axe fell.

Afghanistan's ramshackle buses and trucks rivaled even those of Burma in general decrepitude. Local drivers were extremely reluctant to switch on their headlights at night for reasons I could never fathom, since there were dangerous cairns of rocks on major roadways. When first constructed, the cairns served as hazard warnings for the frequent breakdowns and roadside repair sites. The problem was, long after the vehicles were patched and sent on their way, the hazard warning cairns remained as hazards in their own right. They were both memorials of the old disasters and prime causes of the later ones.

The residual function of these abandoned piles of rock was simply to be smashed into at speed by Afghani truck and bus drivers plying the roads without lights at night. Presumably, they were under the impression that by traveling without lights, they were saving wear and tear on their batteries, or perhaps not attracting sniper fire or something. I never did find out the real reason, or even if a reason exists.

Apart from traffic accidents, petty pilfering was the main threat in Afghanistan. I had a water bottle simply snatched from my hand in the streets by one brazen young thief who then ran like the wind, counting on my heavy backpack to slow me down long enough for him to get away.

It did. No wonder the locals all bear arms.

Another local oddity is the Afghani postal system, which is eccentric in its requirements for packaging goods for posting overseas. Parcels are sewn up tightly into white cotton bags and secured with wire and hot wax seals. For the convenience of the traveler, the main post office in Kabul employs a man who will sew your parcel into its officially sanctioned winding sheet and then direct you onwards to another window where the hot wax will be solemnly applied. The cross-legged functionary with his bale of cloth and the turbaned postal worker with hot wax and official seal all conspire to give a very antique and ‘Olde Worlde’ feel to the simple act of posting a parcel.

Hot wax aside, there is very little quaint or attractive in Afghanistan. It is dirty and poverty stricken and generally dull. Its people are mostly deprived of medical treatment and education, and women are treated abominably. Its legendary status on the trail is largely due to the availability and quality of its drugs and the cheapness of its food and lodgings. It is most definitely the sort of place you think about spending your life in and then shudder with relief that it is not going to happen. Passing through Kandahar on the way through to the Iranian border, the only thought I can remember having as we passed through the dismal streets of uniform mud walls, was: ‘Thank you God for not making me live here... Thank you God for not making me live here....’

Moments like these throw the comforts and conveniences of Western lifestyle into stark relief. Whenever I begin to think austerity measures are a positive thing, I need only recall Afghanistan to start feeling self-indulgent again.

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There is a grubby doss-house of a hotel in the wide flat no-mans land between Afghanistan and Iran. Here I stayed overnight with six other travelers, all Europeans heading homewards and veterans of months, or in some cases, years, on the trail. The food and rooms were awful and there was no hot water. We sat around chatting and exchanging stories, a group of seasoned overlanders heading for home. Some were smoking the last of their Afghani weed before they crossed the border and faced a possible body search by the Iranian authorities. A Frenchman spoke briefly of smuggling hash through to Iran, but was quickly dissuaded. Unwilling to simply throw or give away his prize, he said he might simply stay in the hotel for a couple of days and use it up. Looking at the desolate landscape and the dilapidated hotel, I thought only, ‘Rather you than me my friend...’

In the morning I was awake and ready to move soon after dawn, but there was no transport and no rush. To get to the border meant hiking on foot. I judged it must be a fair distance, looking towards Iran, I could see nothing but the road heading out straight and flat to the horizon. Amid a general reluctance to socialise at that early hour, I sat drinking strong coffee until all of the other travelers leaving for the western border with Iran that day had hoisted their packs and started walking. When the road was clear and empty right out to the horizon again, I hoisted my own pack and set out alone. It was a beautiful cool and crisp morning of blue sky and complete silence. I felt my spirits soaring as I walked out of Afghanistan and towards Iran. It was good to enjoy the silence, the perfect weather and the feeling of leaving one country and entering another by such a simple means.

After steadily walking for some time, I saw a blotch on the horizon that gradually took shape as a large, fortress like structure plonked down on the flat plain and blocking the road ahead - the Iranian border post. The building loomed ever larger as I approached but in reality, the intimidating exterior turned out to be nothing compared to the intimidating interior.

Entering the border post, I was glad I had taken my time and enjoyed getting there. Every one of the people who left before me that morning was now kicking their heels in a motionless queue in a long corridor. It looked like we were in for a long and tedious day with only a rather peculiar series of exhibits to engage the attention.

The Iranians had turned the Afghan border facility into a black museum illustrating the various ways unwise westerners had tried to outwit the eagle-eyed Iranian customs. As we shuffled slowly up the corridor, we passed display cases set into the walls, each revealing a different and futile attempt at smuggling..

There was a display case holding a shoe with a hollow sole and a heel stuffed with hash, and - shades of Werner’s aborted enterprise - a variety of musical instruments with hashish secreted inside them. Another display showed a large gas bottle cut in two to reveal the drugs canister welded within. There was a photographic display showing the systematic dismantling of a camper-van while the hapless owners looked on. The last sequence of photos showed the drug cache apparently hidden in a false petrol-tank.

The warning message implicit in this grim display was backed up with frequent signs in English attached to the walls in the corridor. The signs said: ‘Mr. Drug Dealer, We Have You Now, We Know Where It Is Hidden, And You Will Not Get Away’ and, ‘We Know All The Hiding Places, We Will Find Your Drugs’ and even, ‘We Know You Have The Drugs And There Is No Escape From Here!’

I could not imagine a smuggler cool enough to wait for an hour or two in such a display, and not betray some sign of nervousness during the search and interrogation that came next. We were called one by one to a table before two customs officials. One official began the task of searching my pack immediately, the other said in a friendly and jolly conversational tone.

‘Where is your hashish?’

‘I have no hashish’ I responded.

‘No hashish?’ the official was all laughing disbelief, ‘But hashish is good! I *know* you like hashish. Don’t you like hashish? Of course you like hashish! You *have* hashish don’t you?’ The customs official looked almost sorrowful at the thought that I may not like hashish.

‘No.’ I said.

‘Oh I think you do!’ said the jolly customs man laughing again, ‘I think you like it very much, Afghan hashish is very good, and I *am* going to find it!’ The twinkle in his eye and the casual laughter in his voice were all very genuine and a little chilling. Suppose he produced a piece of hash and said it was mine: what could I do?

The search was as thorough as any I have ever experienced. I had no doubt that if I betrayed any fear or anger at all, I would be strip-searched as well. In fact, I did feel nervous in this atmosphere, but I did my best to remain impassive in front of these determined officials. I had no drugs and no reason to worry, but faced with these implacable people, it was impossible not to be at least a little apprehensive. Despite the tough questioning, the customs officials were satisfied with making me turn out my pockets, empty my pack, and remove my shoes for inspection. But even as they were ushering me out, they were teasing me that I was now going to be taken somewhere else for a more thorough search. By the time I was shown through a door into the huge courtyard behind the customs building and realized to my relief that I was free, it was late afternoon. The border formalities had taken nearly all day.

In the courtyard behind the border post was a waiting bus. Not an ancient wooden, windowless, vintage Afghan vehicle with hard, narrow seats and an aisle full of tribesmen with rifles, but a modern air-conditioned, softly upholstered coach with acres of polished chrome and doors that hissed softly as they opened for me. I had seen nothing like it for months. ‘Tehran?’ the driver shouted questioningly. I nodded happily and climbed aboard.

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Tehran is a great place if you want to know exactly how a despised minority feels. It is especially good in this regard if you happened to be white and either American, Australian or European. The Iranians might tolerate the presence of western foreigners at this point in their history, but they certainly were under no compulsion to enjoy their company or make them feel comfortable. There were few friendly faces for trail people who had the misfortune to be in an Iran-in-waiting for the Ayatollah to return from his exile in Paris.

True, there were still bars and shops with frivolous western knick-knacks and pretty girls in short skirts on the streets. But, all that was about to change. The fundamentalist winds of change were blowing and if you were a foreigner you could feel the chill already. These winds were not yet the gale that would sweep away foreigners and their ways and hide women behind severe black robes for life, but the storm was coming. The Koran may not insist on the coverall uniform of purdah, but Iran was about to lock up its wives and daughters anyway.

Xenophobia was everywhere in the city, the first taxi driver I spoke to not only refused to carry me because I was a foreigner, he spat contemptuously at my feet before driving away. Another driver agreed to carry me only if I submitted in advance to paying the fares of any and all other people he picked up on the way and then doubled the amount on the meter at the end of the trip. I was forced to agree to these terms or walk miles in an unseasonable heat. Restaurants waved me away unfed, or said they had no food left after tolerating my presence only until I finally reached the head of a long queue. Sometimes I was grudgingly served a bowl of boiled rice. Hotels said they were not licensed for foreigners, or only wanted Iranians. If they did accept me, I was bluntly ordered to surrender a passport by hoteliers with implacably grim faces.

The city was almost unremittingly hostile, they did not want my money or my presence: they had oil. The high-rise parking was full of glittering Mercedes, but living between and among the expensive cars, were people in rags. The people who had not shared in the wealth brought by oil, the people who would be the first to welcome the coming Islamic revolution.

Every public building in Tehran, every cafe, every office, had its over-large pictures of the royal family displayed prominently on the wall. The feared and hated Shah gazed over every activity. People are only this obsessively nationalistic and royalist in places where they are afraid not to be. Whatever the politics, three days of being grunted and glared at and despised by the good people of Tehran was enough for me. I did not see any reason to be whipping boy for the sins of the western world. Other travelers felt the same; I met some at the bus station. Overlanders were arriving, glancing around, and continuing on to better places. The streets were gradually emptying of all foreigners who did not have to be here.

I bought myself a ticket on the next available bus to Istanbul and felt better as soon as it was safely tucked in my wallet. My bus was leaving that same night and I could not wait. I checked out of my mediocre and very over-priced hotel where the surly owner only consented to return my passport after making me wait for a full hour *after* I paid him. Then, at a loose end, I spent my last few hours in Tehran drinking imported English beer in a doomed mock-English pub full of fat Texan oilmen. The Texans were pointedly jovial and having a good time but they hated it as well. They were shutting out the alien world in this little nest of conviviality. Against my inclination, I had only two beers, I was almost, but not quite sure the bus would have a toilet.

It did not have a toilet. The outside temperature plummeted when the sun went down, but the air-conditioning on board was unrelenting. It took a near homicidal delegation of shivering passengers to get the sullen driver to bring the interior temperature up from frigid to just bearable two hours later. Once the temperature rose above deep freeze, I took off my shoes and put on two pairs of socks. Then using my thickest jacket as a blanket, I slept my way well into Turkey and another desert landscape. This time it was a cold desert, with patches of snow on hills and ridges, and a grayish threatening cast to the sky. The day passed in reading and desultory conversation with the other passengers. The dullness of the day matched by the listless apathy of travelers mostly focused on home.

In the afternoon, we stopped at a hotel to eat and freshen up, and were told we could purchase use of the hot showers if we wished. Most of us jumped at the opportunity to shower after the long spell on the bus, but the hotel-owners were two fairly peculiar brothers with some strange ideas. They used passkeys throughout our short visit to continually burst in on showers and change rooms. They especially targeted the women for their unwanted attentions, but were remarkably democratic about where they obtained their cheap thrills. For both males and females, getting dressed, or showered in a locked room in this place was no guarantee of privacy. After twice having my peace disturbed while I changed, I wedged a couple of very heavy chairs against the door. This caused the owners to complain bitterly that I was preventing them from ‘doing their duty.’ This was cheering, I told them that my day was never complete until at least one peeping-tom had been thwarted, getting two at the same time was just a bonus for me.

They tried to charge me extra later, for not letting them watch me shower, I paid only the agreed amount and was very glad to get out and back on the bus with the comforting knowledge I would never have to return. As we left, our ‘hosts’ appeared at the door for a final leer at the females in our group. Someone opened a window as the bus was about to leave and expressed the heartfelt hope that the hotel would burn down soon, a sincerely expressed wish that brought a cheer of agreement from the other passengers.

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All the rest of that day and night we trundled on through northern Turkey, sometimes quite close to the Russian border. Someone pointed out snowcapped Mount Ararat, the mountain on which according to some legends, the biblical Ark became lodged and is possibly still to be found buried today, it looked desolate and cold and not at all the stuff of myth and legend.

We passed the time on the bus swapping seats and socializing as we approached Istanbul and the end of the Asian leg of our journey. Late in the evening I found myself sitting next to a quiet, reserved character who spent most of the trip reading a book. He was nervous and disinclined to talk and it was some time before he began to tell his story. When he did speak, he made me realize not for the first time, that the journey we were all taking through Asia was not always fun and indulgence. The trail could have its darker side too.

His name was Tony, an Englishman from the rural midlands who lived and worked in Birmingham. He had given up a good job as a representative with an electronics company to spend a year traveling. Surprisingly, he had set out from his home in England just eleven weeks before. He had traveled by train and bus from Paris to Istanbul, detouring via the north of Italy and the Yugoslav coast, and then hurried on through Iran to Afghanistan. His ultimate destination on this trip was Nepal and he had also hoped to visit Sri Lanka.

Tony said that all went well during the early stages of the trip. When he reached Afghanistan, he met up with two other English travelers who were also heading through to Nepal. After several days spent traveling together and staying at the same hotel in Kabul, they teamed up as a threesome to travel onwards into Pakistan and eventually to Kashmir. Here they planned to hire a houseboat and stay put for a while. Disaster struck for Tony on what was going to be the last night in Pakistan for the trio.

That night, the group was enticed into an opium den by a smiling local who invited them to try his product. Being three young adventurous males and ready for anything, they entered the opium den without hesitation and were soon ensconced with pipes alight in a room with a half-dozen or so local men.

From here on, Tony’s story became a little blurred in detail. Somehow, he had become separated from his two friends. One moment he was deep in conversation with a friendly local, then he looked around to find his companions had disappeared while he was talking. Tony was alone with the locals and still being plied with opium pipes. This did not unduly alarm him, he simply assumed that his friends would return in a few moments. Inevitably, while he was waiting he had one pipe too many. He was effectively helpless, semi-conscious in an opium trance. At this point he said, four or five of the Pakistani men had seized the opportunity to rape him.

After this ordeal, of which he could remember little, he was dumped in the street somewhere near his hotel. He had also been robbed, although his attackers had only taken his local currency, his store of travelers checks was still intact. Drugged and traumatised, he entered his hotel and lay on his bed wondering what to do next.

Tony’s friends appeared some time later, both unaware that anything was amiss. By their own account they had only been in the next room drinking tea and smoking a pipe when Tony was left alone, they had no idea what had happened to him while they were absent. Tony found he could not tell them the story, even when they wondered aloud where he got to when he ‘left them.’ to return to the hotel.

The next morning, Tony had lost his wish to continue onwards to Kashmir, he told his friends he would not be accompanying them any further. They argued for a while, but finally they shrugged their shoulders and continued, leaving him alone at the hotel. After a day of rest, he steeled himself to see a friendly local doctor, who said he was fine in a physical sense and recommended that he should report the assault to the local police who would be able to take appropriate action.

But the more Tony thought about this, the less attractive an option it seemed. He would be staying in Pakistan alone waiting, perhaps for a long and complex court case in a country completely foreign to him. He might need to engage lawyers and then try to explain his presence in an opium den in the first place. He might need to try to identify his attackers who were all last seen when he was drugged to the eyeballs. He was not even certain how many of them there had been. He began to think hard, and when he considered the situation in the cold light of day, he decided he might be better off simply forgetting the whole thing.

He did not say so, but it was clear he felt quite shattered by the attack. Nevertheless, in the immediate aftermath, he thought if he rested up for a few days, he would be ok and able to continue on his way. Three days on, he felt worse if anything. His confidence was destroyed and he did not even like to leave his hotel room. He marked time for a week wondering what to do next and speaking to no one, then decided to just turn around and go home.

So less than three months into what would have been a twelve-month trip, here he was already half way home. For Tony, there would be no album of photo memories and no identification with the happy lifestyle on the trail. He would just do his best to put his experience behind him and resume his life. As he sat on the bus he told me that he found himself re-focusing more and more on his old life. He had now begun to hope that if he was quick enough he might still get his old job back. He was toying with the idea of flying the last leg from Istanbul to London to get back home sooner.

Tony’s was a sad story; listening to him speak, I had the strongest impression that even though he seemed to be tough enough to come to terms with the assault, his traveling days were well and truly over.

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The general mood on the bus was subdued until we crossed the huge bridge and entered the European side of the city of Istanbul. We disembarked into a frenzy of city noise amid an aggressive pack of hawkers and hustlers. Seeing a new batch of potential customers, they descended on us with the determination of starving predators. A taxi driver seized my arm screaming, ‘Only eighteen dollars! Only eighteen dollars! This was straight into my ear at close range. I had no idea what was ‘only eighteen dollars,’ and when I asked him, he told me this was how much he would charge to take me to my destination. When I asked him how he knew this, since I had not told him where I was going, he gave up on me with what sounded suspiciously like a ferociously expressive Turkish curse. He then began to scream ‘only eighteen dollars!’ into the ear of another traveler from the same bus.

Almost everywhere on the trail, English is the preferred second language - in Turkey it was German. Germany was the promised land for Turks and everywhere were hustlers and taxi drivers who spoke a little of the language and were disappointed that I was not German myself. Since Tony had been in this city only a few weeks before, I followed his lead and rode with him by cab to a comfortable and inexpensive hotel in one of the older districts of the city. This was an area full of the accommodation houses, cafes and restaurants that cater to Istanbul’s huge transient overlander population. While Tony phoned home and began to make his final preparations for his return to England, I went off to the poste restante to pick up any mail that might be awaiting and stretch my legs after the long bus trip.

I felt the need to rest up and contemplate the direction from here. Asia was behind now and I had wandered back to Europe without any firm plan of what to do next.

# 15. Monstered by border guards…

## Munich via Bulgaria, a busload of chain-smoking Turks, Yugoslavia, A U-turn back to Bulgaria.

In the event, things worked themselves out as they always do. I saw Tony off the next day on his plane to Gatwick in the UK. He was elated following a flurry of long distance phone calls. One of the calls was to his old workplace and Tony heard that his job replacement back home had not worked out. The boss was surprised and pleased to hear from him so soon and the news was all good. Yes, he could have his old job back, but could he please hurry home; there were orders to fill and customers waiting. In less than forty-eight hours Tony would cease to be a trail nomad and resume his sober business persona, and he had never felt better. His life was filling with purpose and he was gaining confidence by the minute.

On the way back from the airport I stopped off to make a few tentative enquiries about further transport, perhaps via Vienna, but a hustler clinched it for me. He had a one way through ticket on a bus to Munich going cheap; would I like it?

Why not.

I could look up Werner and see if German medicine had finally managed a cure where Indian medicine had failed. The trip was to be via Bulgaria, for which I had no visa, but the hustler said no problem. The trip through Bulgaria was non-stop and a transit visa could be obtained for a small fee at the border.

The idea was that the express bus would whisk through Bulgaria in a matter of hours and my feet would literally never touch the ground. In practice everything almost went to plan, although I was irked to pay $US17 every time a Bulgarian official decided it was time to put a stamp in my passport. After all, I *did* only set foot once in the country and that was to use a toilet at a rest stop around the halfway mark between Turkey and the Yugoslav border.

The real problems began with Bulgaria almost behind us. The bus had actually passed through the Bulgarian border-post and was awaiting clearance into Yugoslavia. We were in no-mans land when the situation began to disintegrate. It was 1.30 am as we approached the guard-post on the Yugoslav side and a truly filthy night. Outside the bus, the snow was around a half-meter deep at the road edges and it was blowing a reasonable gale. Swirling white eddies danced across the bitumen, forming sizable hummocks and some deep roadside drifts. Inside the bus, heaters were working overtime and barely keeping the chill away.

The smoky bus-cabin was full of chain-smoking Turks on their way to enter Germany as immigrants and the atmosphere on board was wakeful and electric. Quite a few of the passengers were highly elated despite the hour and the miserable weather. There was a charged whiff of adrenaline and pure adventure in this journey they were all making, they were cutting ties and heading to a new life.

All passports were collected on the Yugoslav side of the border by a dour guard with an automatic rifle slung over his shoulder. He did an immediate double take when he saw my passport: I was the only non-Turk on the bus. As a gesture to my unexpected, surprising and evidently unwelcome presence, I was at once ordered outside into the icy gale.

For fifteen long bone-chilling minutes I stood freezing in the gale-force winds in my flimsy windcheater. Meanwhile the Turks pointed at me from the comfort of the bus, chain-smoked, and speculated carelessly on my fate. While I shivered, a hugely muscular young border-guard in full arctic kit paced around me scowling. He was not cold. He could have trekked the polar ice-cap in mid-winter and suffered only a mild sweat in the heavily padded gear he was wearing. Potential tabloid headlines flickered inevitably through my mind as I awaited events: ‘Hapless traveler Freezes To Death In Passport Control Mix-Up,’ ‘Wrong Suspect Shot At Border Post Stakeout,’ and:‘Foreigner Jailed For Masterminding Illegal Turkish Immigration Racket.’

For some unknown reason, this heavily built guard did not like me at all and he wanted me to be very aware of this. His demeanour told me I was in trouble. I was an offender, I was bad and I made him mad. I could follow his reasoning, even if I did not agree with it. After all, I was the one standing shivering in the snow and he was the warm one with the gun. By the same token, I was the dumb, dissolute and nonconformist backpacker; he was the representative of authority. It was game, set, and match really. Sherlock Holmes was not needed to piece this story together. I must be guilty.

The eyes of this guard I noted gloomily, had the authentic fanatical gleam of the street-crazy. Worse, to emphasise the gravity of the situation *he* was in control of, he occasionally grunted and waved an evil looking machine-gun at me as he paced around. Personally, I would not have trusted him with any implement more aggressive than a plastic spoon.

At the end of a long fifteen minutes, another guard emerged from the border post. He was carrying my passport and he now beckoned the bus-driver out of his warm cabin and out into the snow and the freezing wind to join us on the road. The bus driver complied very reluctantly with this request. Up until this point he had been only a casually interested spectator: getting personally involved in this affair was obviously not something he had planned on. The driver was the only person on the bus who spoke some English, but this was little comfort as he shot me a look of pure loathing while he unlatched the luggage compartment. His sympathies, such as they were, lay with the border guards. He had decided that whatever was happening was certainly all my fault *and* I was holding up his bus.

The guard gestured to me to point out my luggage, and once identified, it was immediately and forcefully hurled by the driver into the deepest of the roadside snowdrifts. Now that the bus-driver knew I was a criminal element, he was very keen to indicate his solidarity with the border guards who had seen through my pretence. I could expect no mercy from that quarter. While I went wading in the deep snow to retrieve my possessions and paused briefly to wonder why I was here and not still in some friendly sun-drenched paradise, the guard with my passport disappeared again. His task completed, the bus-driver climbed back into the warm cabin with a dismissive glance in my direction. I could see him there back in the warmth, already explaining the situation to the Turks on the bus. He was no doubt telling them I was some desperate and degenerate criminal type who was about to get his just desserts from the brave boys with the big guns.

To while away a few more idle minutes as my extremities turned blue in the snow, the heavy-set young guard now indicated with a series of commanding gestures the next amusement he had planned for the occasion. I was forced to open my pack and tip out all my possessions on the freezing road surface. My belongings were left to blow around in the wind on the snow and ice so that the young guard with the machine gun could have a good look at them. This was not to be a cursory look either, the guard took a very good, very long, and very lingering look at the entire contents of my pack.

Up to this point it was all very irritating but I was not really worried, having experienced my fair share of pointless animosity from hostile officialdom before. It was not until the bus air-brakes hissed a minute or two later and the idling engine note of the bus suddenly changed to something more purposeful, that I became seriously alarmed.

The driver was evidently preparing to leave me behind,

I waved to him as urgently as I could and reluctantly he opened his window,

‘You are not going to leave me here?’ I yelled to him. ‘I have a ticket paid through to Munich!’

‘Sure I'm going to leave you,’ he shouted back ‘You are trouble!’

And with just that and no mention of any refund for my pre-paid ticket, he drove off. A barrier was raised for him fifty yards down the road and the bus was gone. I took stock - the situation was not good. I was left shivering in a blizzard I was not dressed to withstand, in no-mans land in the middle of the night. I now had no transport and I was stuck with a mean-looking, machine-gun toting border guard who looked as though he could bench-press the equivalent of a small (but fully loaded) truck.

My anger at being treated in such an unfair manner temporarily overrode my apprehension. I now felt I had a valid grievance, and I wanted to tell someone. It was at this point I made my *big* mistake.

The only other person present at that moment to whom I could express my current mood of disenchantment was this huge body-builder border guard who was pacing slowly around me. I already knew he did not like me. I had already marked him as a street-crazy. I even suspected that he was exactly the kind of muscle-bound, testosterone-crazed half-wit who would munch steroids for breakfast and then be subject to uncontrollable and irrational spikes of emotion and sudden inexplicable surges of aggression throughout the day.

Despite all this, I approached him with all the belligerence I could muster, yelling my complaints and demanding an explanation. This was obviously not a very wise move, but that was an evaluation left to later analysis. For the moment, I was completely oblivious to his obvious lack of: a) English, b) brain power and c) any slightest shred of compassion.

For his own part, the guard had nothing to fear from me and he knew it. He sized me up slowly, training a dispassionately cold eye on me as I advanced, still gesticulating wildly. But he demonstrated he could move swiftly enough when I got within a meter or so of him. Then, he quite suddenly unslung his machine-gun from his shoulder, and with a fluid and evidently well-practiced motion, he twirled it deftly in both hands and whacked the solid butt of it hard into my stomach.

Actually it was very solid and very hard indeed.

I crashed onto the snow and ice and made a more or less immediate resolution not to antagonise him any further. Both my stomach and my lower ribs where he hit them, and my backside where I fell on it, felt sore and bruised. It was the kind of sore and bruised that indicated to me that the discomfort would be even worse at some later stage. I felt sorry for myself and I must have looked sorry for myself. I indicated to the guard with a helpless open-handed gesture that I had had enough.

However, it was apparent that it was already too late for appeasement. The guard lifted his automatic weapon in front of my face until I was looking quite literally down its ugly barrel, and something strange happened. For the first time he showed a flicker of emotion. Curiously, he kept glancing towards the lighted windows of the nearby office at the border post and then back at me. He was unaccountably twitching and fiddling with the evil-looking gun and keyed up with some electric inner tension. I was amazed to see that despite the fact that he so clearly had the upper hand, he was licking his lips nervously.

With a shock I realized that he really *wanted* to shoot me. He was glancing at the windows of the guard post. He was wondering if there were any witnesses. Who was watching and what sort of trouble might he get into if he actually *did* shoot me? Could he get away with it? He was aching to do it, but fearful of the possible repercussions.

It was such a bizarre turn of events, I barely had time to be afraid. I sat low and hunched on the icy roadside and tried to look as harmless as I could. For a long minute he twitched and paced, glanced into the windows and pointed the weapon at me. Then quite suddenly, the other guard reappeared, the gun went back onto the stocky guard’s shoulder and the moment had passed.

The second guard returned my passport to me and escorted me around to the back of the guard post. There he bundled me quickly into another waiting bus and informed me that I was refused entry into Yugoslavia until I was able to get my passport validated at my embassy. A few minutes later, I was retracing my journey, being driven back into Bulgaria and towards Sofia after being refused entry to Yugoslavia.

It was all a mystery until I reached the embassy the next day. There it transpired that my passport was suspected of being a forgery. I knew immediately what had happened; my photograph had fallen out of it on my trip to the magical healers of Bandung during the steamy Javanese monsoon. Innocently, I had stuck it back in with glue, but the two halves of an embossed official stamp did not meet quite as perfectly as before. A close look revealed clearly that my passport had been ‘tampered with.' It was obviously a very meticulous inspection by the guard because the border officials of at least a half-dozen other countries had not noticed this anomaly. The problem was fixed in a day when a new photo was laminated into my passport and endorsed by an embassy official and I was able to resume my journey

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I counted this drama with the border guard as a close call. It could all have ended right there and the experience certainly unnerved me for a day or two. Much later, when war broke out and Yugoslavia was torn apart, I sometimes pictured that muscle-bound border guard with the itchy trigger-finger and imagined him in the thick of some sickening ‘cleansing’ operation. In my imagination I always saw him as very happy there. He would be scowling, twitching, licking his lips, and shooting people.

A fulfilled man at last.

One of the tragic consequence of the ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia was that it left so many broken families, and so many family homes as piles of broken rubble. For my part, although I am not normally a vindictive person, I certainly *do* hope *that* particular border guard had *his* house reduced to rubble.

And if by a stroke of good fortune it *was* - then I sincerely hope that he was somewhere under it...

# 16. From dissidence to magnificence…

## Sofia, shadowed by a timid dissident, Austria, Vienna, France, Nice, St Tropez, Monaco, Monte Carlo, and on to Italy, Ventimiglia, Florence, Venice,France again, Aix-en-Provence, and ferry to Porquerolle.

Since I was now in Sofia anyway, I thought I might as well take a look around before continuing on. Perhaps not surprisingly, it reminded me of Belgrade - another Soviet-style workers Utopia. Like Belgrade, Sofia had broad boulevards and hugely imposing old buildings constructed to withstand the wear and tear of generations. The blunt authority of these buildings was emphasized by the clean lines of walls unmarred by advertising hoardings or promotional signage of any kind. The lack of signage in the heart of a big city was somehow uncanny, it made the place eerily pristine but strangely lacking in something essentially human. The city appeared severe and unfriendly, but on the other hand, immaculate trams provided cheap efficient transport through the scrubbed and polished streets, and everyone was at least tidy and well fed.

Kliment picked me up on the morning of the second day, I was looking for a shop, but despite being in the city center, there were no shops with any produce worth buying. A couple of queues leading into anonymous doorways were a clue that something was being sold there, but I had no intention of waiting around to purchase an unknown product which could be anything from brocolli to motor parts. I had already queued for over an hour at a restaurant only to be told they did not serve foreigners.

With unwelcome reminders of my stay in Tehran, several hotels in Sofia had informed me frostily that foreigners were not permitted to stay. There were also public buildings that foreigners were not permitted to enter. It was very tiring to be so rigidly ruled and regulated, even though the city was neat and tidy. I would have preferred an element of anarchy and chaos.

Kliment was the nearest thing to anarchy I would meet in Sofia, a timid dissident who whispered his mild protests while looking around nervously for signs of imminent retribution. I was aware he was following me through the streets of Sofia, and this knowledge fuelled a succession of fantasies involving the KGB and iron-curtain organizations dedicated to the elimination of suspected subversives. I was starting to feel like a character in a cheap spy novel when Kliment finally introduced himself and said that he was wondering if I had any foreign newspapers, books or magazines he might be able to have a look at?

I relaxed instantly when he spoke: Kliment was not a formidable character. I would have been happy to hand newspapers to him, but I had none. I had already noticed that the only English newspaper on sale in Sofia was the official mouthpiece of the communist party in Britain, the *Morning Star.* Feeling hungry for some news myself I had been able to read the *London Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* the day before at the Embassy while I was waiting for my passport difficulties to be sorted out, but this was not an option open to Kliment.

He was clearly nervous about being seen talking to foreigners on the street and led me to his nearby apartment with promises of coffee and a chat. Curious to experience a little Bulgarian domesticity, I walked with him, but he nervously insisted on walking a few paces ahead, presumably so that he could disassociate himself from the foreigner if any prying eyes might be watching. It seemed a little over the top; but it was his city so I went along without comment.

You could have swung a cat in Kliment’s apartment, but it would need to be a small cat and a short swing. Three paces in any direction brought you to the edge of his small world. It was a two-roomed apartment shared with his drawn-looking young wife and their baby. The wife spoke little English beyond a shy ‘hello,’ but Kliment more than made up for that, Kliment could talk the hind leg off a donkey. One wall of the small room was lined with books but Kliment wanted much more, he was the most culturally starved person I had ever met. He wanted nothing less than total freedom of the press, personal access to the great libraries of the world and the free and unfettered flow of all information directly into his eyes and ears.

Instead he got me.

His initial questions were unexpectedly difficult. What was going on in Europe and America? I didn’t know; I had been in Asia and Australia. What was the latest cultural wave? Who were the writers, the statesmen, the movers and shakers? What did people think? How did people live?

After a while I realized I had been almost as cut off from the mainstream as he had for the past few months. But Kliment valued even my dated information, our talk ranged over the entire gamut of western life and culture for hours as we drank cup after small cup of bitter coffee. The following day we did it all over again and Kliment still wanted more, he was the first grown man I ever met who could actually quiver with eagerness. But I was feeling claustrophobic and ready to move and unlike Kliment, I *could* move. He found my freedom to simply uproot and move on awe-some. After a day of admiring various heroic war memorials and the golden basilica, I presented Kliment with my paperback copy of *Catch 22* and took the first available transport over the border that presented itself. This happened to be a bus to Vienna, which was perfect, I felt back on track again.

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Vienna was beautiful, but incredibly expensive. The necessities of daily life made severe inroads on my depleted traveling fund and I knew I could not afford to stay for long. Also, after well over a year on the road I was starting to feel that some home comforts would be very welcome. I arrived with a busload of Russians and in an ironic reversal of fortunes from my experience on the Turkish bus, I was waved through customs casually at the Austrian side while the Russians were taken aside for a thoroughly punitive search. Such is the madness of East-versus-West politics.

Given the continuous severe drain imposed by Vienna on my financial resources, I abandoned my usual tactic of a series of random forays into city life and planned my assault on the city systematically. By this means I took in the main features in just three days. Between museums, palaces and a quick glimpse of the Lippizaner horses at the Spanish Riding School, I drank endless cups of coffee in the small cafes that dot the city and took long walks through the parklands. The home of Strauss, Freud and Hitler was fascinating. Although the weather was cold, the city was grand and I was sorry to leave it. I vowed to return to it some day when my wallet was fatter.

Meantime, a phone-call home to collect messages piled up since Istanbul resulted in a quick trip to the railway station. There was a party happening in Nice, in the south of France. A couple of friends had a rented an apartment, the weather there was balmy despite the season and I was invited to stay for a while.

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I settled in quickly in the two-bedroom apartment just a few meters away from the Promenade des Anglais in Nice. There were already four people staying, so as late arrival I was relegated to the bed-settee in the lounge. But this was still better accommodation than most on the trail After a night of partying, the floor was often littered with the bodies of those who had slept far less comfortably than I. The parlous state of my travel fund meant that Nice would be something of a finale to my journey, but at least my remaining cash would go a lot further here than in Vienna. The weather was mild enough to permit a few brave souls to sunbathe on the pebbly beach for a few hours a day and Nice was hopping with life.

The first night I drove with a couple of friends to Monte-Carlo, just twenty minutes dramatic drive away down the coast. The road was instantly recognisable to me even though it was the first time i had made the trip. It winds familiarly along sheer cliff faces overhanging the sea and through tunnels carved from solid rock – the deja vu is caused by the fact that this scenic piece of highway appears in Hollywood epics without number. It is usually viewed from the helicopter chasing the debonair hero in the sports car.

Arriving in Monaco, we peered at the rich and famous folks entering the casino and contemplated going in to try our luck ourselves. We settled instead for English beer at the Britannia Pub just across the square. After several beers, we thought about dinner and decided on pizza. We then drove another few kilometers down the coast to enter into Italy at Ventimiglia.

It seemed odd to cross a border for the express purpose of spending only an hour or so in the country eating pizza. But as my friend John remarked, at least this way we were sure to get the authentic item, *and* we were able to buy duty-free Scotch on the way back… He also said that if we wanted to get technical about it, we had actually left France twice that night, as Monaco is a principality and not part of France despite the lack of border posts.

Over the next couple of weeks we crossed the border several times more to spend evenings in Italy eating garlicky pastas and pizzas and each time we purchased a bottle of duty-free single-malt Scotch to take back with us; it made the meal seem free.

Nice is a city with everything, the facilities of a good sized metropolis, close proximity to Cannes and the other towns of the French Riviera, a stones throw away from Monte Carlo and the Italian border for a change of cuisine and some duty-free liquor. Two minutes from our front door in Nice was the Mediterranean, and a forty-five minutes drive inland brought us to the mountain ski-country and resort villages of the Alpes Maritime.

The Riviera scenery was breathtaking - just to take a simple drive along the Corniche to experience the spectacular coastline is worth the trip to the region in itself. We ate tasty Provencal seafood in small restaurants in the narrow streets of the old city and ranged far afield during the day in a battered old Citroen 2CV. The little car took us along the coast westwards as far as St. Tropez and eastwards well into northern Italy. Here we spent a day wandering around the awe-inspiring Uffizi Gallery in Florence, viewing arguably the best collection of of art and sculpture you might find anywhere in the world. After this, we drove northward to sample the delights of Venice and were disconcerted to find the town so overrun by visitors that entry quotas were in place. The once vibrant old city now appears more and more like a static exhibit than a real place for people to live and work.

At the end of the second week we ventured inland as far as Aix-en-Provence and spent a pleasant couple of days there meandering on foot through a maze of busy one-way streets. Here you could sit in an outdoor cafe with the traffic roaring by literally inches from your elbow. We wandered into several small bars for refreshment and incredibly, in one of them I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned around to see an old friend not seen for many years standing beside me. He was on his way home to Sussex in England after a brief holiday in France, but detoured with us for a couple of days so that we could swap stories and catch up on several years of gossip.

Squeezing six people and a guitar into the Citroen, we all went back to the coast and crossed by ferry to the small island of Porquerolle, a tiny and beautiful resort where motorised vehicles are banned and the excellent beer is served in monster tankards the locals call *formidable.* There we camped on the beach in a tiny bay full of yachts and played boules during the long and restful afternoons and evenings.

The south of France was just the tonic needed after the bleakness of Bulgaria and a fairly uninspiring trip through Iran and Turkey. I loved it, but the last of the traveler’s checks was about to be cashed and there would be no more money until England was reached - it was time for the last leg.

# 17. Great circle...

## By train to Dieppe, ferry to England, double-decker bus from Newhaven to Brighton

In the event I did overstay in Nice, the temptation was simply too great, I bought a rail ticket from Nice through to Dieppe and then on by ferry to Newhaven in Sussex. This ticket effectively brought me within twenty-five kilometers of my destination, my family home in Sussex. I could ring and ask for a lift. If necessary, I could even walk. With this ticket firmly in my wallet, I relaxed. I could make the final leg stone-broke if I had too.

I changed my last travelers check a week or so later, after a two-day jaunt into the high alpine snowfields. Arriving back in Nice, it was time for the financial crunch, I had a few francs left, and a few pounds sterling tucked into the back of my passport holder. It was time to go. We had one last lingering farewell dinner, in a restaurant in the old city and ate bouillabaisse washed down with carafes of house wine.

The next day I hung out of the railway-carriage waving good-bye and wishing I were not leaving. As my friends disappeared, the train trundled out of Nice and through a succession of impossibly quaint Riviera towns. It was a while before the sea-views became distant vistas and then vanished altogether. Leaving the coast we picked up speed and were soon roaring through the French countryside at a hundred and fifty kilometers an hour and more. Paris was less than a day away.

The trip on the French express was a sharp contrast to the Asian trains I was lately accustomed to. No broken windows and soot-stained faces here. We sped through the countryside at breakneck speed and in complete luxury. Connecting doors between carriages hissed open as I approached, and instead of ragged vendors offering tea in disposable clay cups, bottles of chilled mineral water were hawked at extortionate prices.

Arriving in Paris, I barely had enough currency left to cover a cab-fare across town to pickup my connection. Staying over was out of the question, but I had been in the city before and was not overly concerned. At the rail terminus the concourse was full of backpackers from all points of the compass. Most seemed new on the trail and their aluminium-framed backpacks had that pristine fresh-from-the-shop look which would be a distant memory in India and beyond. At the information booth, a harassed-looking woman was dealing with a long queue of fresh-faced travelers and answering questions in four languages on lodgings, taxis, and onward travel.

Seeing all these clean-cut backpackers made me take stock of my own appearance. I felt definitely the worse for wear. The travelers around all looked ready and equipped for anything. My own appearance was somewhat disheveled. My backpack was stained and grubby and falling apart, its frame twisted and crushed following a hasty repair job in India after a fall from the roof of a bus. My jeans were threadbare, my hair needed a trim, my shirt had not seen an iron for many months and my boots were looking distinctly seedy. I still had not put back on the weight I lost back in India, and my clothes were baggy. As I hurried across the city to catch my next transport, I promised myself a wash and brush-up at the earliest opportunity.

I was able to clean up and make myself a little more presentable while waiting for the sleeper to Dieppe. I passed the time waiting on the platform thinking about other visits to Paris: the time I decided to impress a friend by taking her to breakfast at Maxims, only to find that breakfast there was beyond my means by several hundred dollars. Then there was the time I blacked out a whole floor of my hotel after cleverly figuring out how to plug a a hair-dryer into a light socket... and the time I lost my wallet while purchasing a souvenir bust of Napoleon on the first stage of the Eiffel Tower. Following this incident, I decided to walk to my distant lodgings in the Bois de Boulogne. But then, in a succession of mishaps, first I got lost and got a nose-bleed, then it started to rain heavily just as the heel of my shoe came off and I started limping...

In spite of everything I was much better off this time around!

In fact, I felt great as I boarded the sleeper, especially when an American student on his way to London took pity on my destitute state and bought me a couple of drinks on the train. The journey was spoilt only by the presence of a large number of drunks both French and English, who grew increasingly more belligerent as the evening wore on. Finally, one of them took a swing at me for obscure reasons of his own, causing me to duck instinctively as the punch came my way.

The American student next to me was unfortunate. The haymaker that sailed harmlessly over my head connected solidly with the side of his jaw. For a while it looked as though battle might be joined in earnest, but drunken apologies and complicated explanations on mistaken identity settled things down. The drunk insisted we all had another drink before we settled down to sleep the rest of the trip to the channel coast. Of all places I might have expected to be in danger of physical attack on the trail, the Paris to Dieppe train probably rated close to the bottom. The traveler’s life is nothing if not surprising.

I was hungry when we trooped aboard the cross-channel ferry the next morning, I had not eaten for more than thirty hours. While my companions of the night before took a stroll around the ship, I made a beeline for the cafeteria. Did they accept payment in ragged old English currency? No problem. I ate my way more than halfway across the channel, finishing with two cups of coffee and a bar of chocolate. I was on top of the world when I strolled onto sunny decks to watch the famous chalky white cliffs looming closer.

I thought I was used to queues, but when English customs were almost as painstaking with my bags as the Iranians I nearly died of frustration. Evidently my appearance did not inspire much confidence despite my attempted spruce-up. The officer overseeing the customs green-channel seemed to think that there was an excellent chance I had filled my pack with hash back in Afghanistan and carried it all the way here across Europe. But finally, he realized I was not going to brighten his day and let me go.

I wandered out of the Newhaven docks on a crisp, bright English spring morning feeling culture-shocked and disoriented. I found myself gazing at the most commonplace of English street sights as something of strange and exotic significance: Wow! A fish and chip shop! Look a Woolworths! A real English pub! A car driving on the left! A road sign marked in miles instead of kilometers to London! I was also able to overhear again – to understand the jumbled conversations around me. It was sensory overload.

From the high street I caught a double-decker bus -(Wow! A double-decker bus! - along the coast road above Telscombe Cliffs and through picturesque Rottingdean to Brighton. Strolling the last few hundred yards along the busy seafront with the first of the season’s tourists, I arrived at the family home ready to make a dramatic entrance only to find, somewhat anti-climactically, that everyone was out. Strolling around to the local pub with backpack still on, an old friend waved from across the street and remarked that I must have been away somewhere, he had not seen me in a long time. Where had I been hiding?

Now I knew that home was the place where you melt into the background...

Finally, celebrating arrival with family a few hours later I was handed a stack of messages. Harrison was in London and wanted to know if I was coming to the city soon to meet his new girlfriend, Werner was home in Germany and fully recovered, he wanted to know if I was coming for the beer-festival. A post-card from Australia enquired as to when exactly I thought I might be arriving back in Alice Springs…

I put all the messages aside for now. I had arrived, and the only exotic experience I craved was stillness…

# Epilogue: Homecoming

Back in Alice Springs at the house on Larapinta Drive the sprinkler was still making pretty rainbows over the lawn and the swimming pool still slapped and gurgled invitingly. Cicadas buzzed in the eucalypts and the imposing heights of Mt Gillen shimmered slightly in the heat haze. I was weary after an eighteen-hour bus trip from Darwin and an even longer flight from London's Heathrow, and the twisted frame of my old and much repaired backpack hurt my shoulders.

Somehow, I couldn't bear to discard the pack in favour of something shinier, more comfortable and purposeful. I had brought it one last time more than half way around the world even though its seams were set to give way and its stains threatened to contaminate my possessions inside. I rattled the mosquito screen on the open door and receiving no reply, walked in. A note addressed to me lay on the kitchen table – *Couldn't wait. You are bloody late again! See you at the club or make yourself at home.*

I put my pack down for what I knew would be its last time. There was no rush. This time I wasn't going anywhere.

I made myself at home.

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Jack Parkinson