

# DELHI BELLY BLUES

BREEZING ALONG THE HIPPIE TRAIL IN 1975

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## INTRODUCTION

The following chapters recount a journey I took in 1975 from Scotland to India. I was 23 and had graduated from university in New York state the year before. Most of my fellow graduates embarked on corporate, public service, legal or political careers, but I was determined to see something of the world first. Little did I know that this short trip gave rise to a series of longer journeys to Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Alaska and elsewhere. The career just kept getting put off.

In this book I describe, in so far as I remember, my brief experiences on the overland hippie trail that stretched from European cities to Afghanistan, India, Nepal and Southeast Asia.

I was not, strictly speaking, a hippie, as many I met on the way were. For me just being in a place like Afghanistan in 1975 was a high. But I don't begrudge anyone their motivations or travel modes, unless, as I write in this book, they added to the hardships of local people.

In many ways, I miss the spirit of the times, the type of people I traveled with or met along the way, and the engaging, fascinating local societies. In places like Afghanistan, they'd soon torn apart in decades of war. These days, with our freedom to travel curtailed by a deadly pandemic, I think again back to those days on the hippie trail and the mostly young people out and about searching for something. It was a different era.

I wrote this short volume as practice for a more substantial, better remembered, more researched, and to be honest, more interesting book about traveling independently across Africa in the 1970s and early

1980s. Therefore, I hope this volume encourages you to consider checking out getting my latest book, *Slow Boats and Petrified Goats: Africa Overland Travel Memories*.

Cover photo: Herat, Afghanistan 1975

## A MERCEDES MOMENT

IT WAS March 1975 and Mr. Gürbalak was displeased. Alarmed and angered, he pushed me up against a wall inside his Munich automobile-dealership trailer. I'd just asked him in English whether he needed drivers for his operation. Gürbalak reacted instantly, yelling at me in accented English.

"Who are you? What do you want? Who told you about this place? Who sent you here?"

He moved to his hands up to my neck, and I feared our dialog wasn't going well. We'd passed the level of minor misunderstanding and while I might get away from Gürbalak there were still his employees.

"It was Scott," I blurted out. "Scott from Canada. You know him, don't you? He gave me your address. Scott said he drove a Mercedes for you to Tehran in Iran and how good it was. He said you might need more drivers soon. That's why I'm here."

That did the trick, and Gürbalak switched on a dime. He became all smiles and friendliness now, instructing a factotum to bring tea.

"Oh, Scott, you say. Scott, you know he is my very good friend. A good boy that Scott. Yes, he drove for me. You should've said so first instead of asking me about my business. Tell me, how is Scott? Is he still in Munich?"

Gürbalak sold vehicles but not just within the German Federal Republic. He smuggled batches of Mercedes cars and trucks eastward to Iran.

"I have nothing now. In a month, I'll send more. Do you want to drive a car or a truck?" he asked.

"A car."

"Where are you staying?" he asked.

"At the *jugendherberge* (youth hostel), but I may have to move."

"So, just come back here in a few weeks; then, I'll know better," Gürbalak added. With that, I left.

What Scott had told me made it seem like a lark. You'd drive for eighteen hours a day in convoy through the Balkans and across Anatolia, arriving in Tehran four days later if everything went well. For travelers like me going to India, that jumpstarted your journey. You'd get paid, too. It wasn't much, 600 Deutsche marks for bringing a car to Iran, more for a truck. But it was more than I was carrying with me in the spring of 1975.

\* \* \*

It's not that Iran didn't have an automobile industry of its own and needed everything imported, by fair means or foul. Starting in the late 1960s, Rootes Arrow of Coventry, England (later Chrysler Europe, then Peugeot) shipped thousands of Hillmann Hunter sedan CKDs (complete knock-down kits) to Iran for local assembly. These were rebranded as Paykans, Farsi for Arrows.

The original Hunter dating to 1967 was not exceptional for its era. Drivers complained of engine rattles, other reliability issues and over-thirsty carburetors, but advertising copy editors took a mild stab at dressing up what was a mediocre vehicle. One advertising blurb described the vehicle as safe, reliable, economical and comfortable: in short, the perfect modern family car.<sup>1</sup>

While Paykans were adequate for the budget-conscious, they were less so for the Iranian upper class and nouveau riche: bazaaris (merchants), urbanites, large landowners and anyone else within shouting distance of the royal court. Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, King of Kings and Shah of Iran, was on a spending spree those days and many Iranis got wealthy in the wake of his extravagance, legitimately or otherwise. Not for them a rebadged Hillmann Hunter.

Mercedes vehicles were popular in Iran, and the brand itself was favored by the shah, himself a major Mercedes shareholder. Later in his reign, the monarch encouraged the company to add a light-use military vehicle to its line. In fact, he placed an order for 20,000 once the company resolved on making one. The shah's interest sped development of the Geländewagen (G-Wagen), Mercedes' mid-size SUV. The



GW was ready in 1979, but that year the Pahlavi monarch lost his throne.<sup>2</sup> Mercedes continued the project and still makes the G-Wagen, but at a US base price of \$123,000 (2018 model), the late shah's inspiration doesn't come cheap. It also burns fuel like there's no tomorrow.

Customers in Iran didn't mind paying a Mercedes brand premium, whether for new cars or older models, but proved less enthusiastic over the associated fees such as taxes and the customs duties that importing them entailed. Those could markedly inflate the final cost. Thus, the door was wide open for smugglers with connections like Mr. Gürbalak to operate, though car smuggling predated my 1975 journey and continues today on a vast scale.

The way Gürbalak's handled this was clever. He registered both the vehicle ownership and the *carnet de passage* (a document needed for crossing international borders) in the foreign driver's name. In theory at least that meant you brought the vehicle into Iran and out again. A potential hiccup was being asked upon exiting where your car was. This was something "handled" at the destination, Scott said.

When I asked Scott what was to keep someone from, say, driving on to India or wherever with the Mercedes, then selling it when you tired of the car or ran low on money, he replied that Gürbalak had heavies in the convoy who made sure that didn't happen. Drivers had to part with their chariots in Tehran.

So far, so good, I thought, except for one detail. I'd never used a stick shift before, and the Mercedes Gürbalak sent didn't come with automatic transmissions; Scott was sure of that. Driving through the Balkans or Anatolia at night was neither the place nor the time for a crash course—no pun intended.

To get up to speed, I rented a small car in Munich for a day. A British couple, also staying at the hostel, acted as my instructors. The first few hours were dicey. I really needed a wide-open space—say an empty parking lot or airport runway—to practice the finer points of shifting gears and avoiding hitting things. Downtown Munich was not the best place.

I drove the wrong way down one-way streets. At one point, I blocked a tramcar by stalling on its tracks to the evident fury of the tram driver. Continuing the learning through mistakes approach, I drove way up a Bavarian woman's lawn in Dachau, just outside Munich. The angry homeowner approached with a large object in her hand—an ax or shovel, I forget which. "It's probably a very good time to learn to reverse," the British man said, trying to help. It worked.

By the end of the day, I felt confident using a stick except for working the clutch and brake pedal in unison to stop and start on a hill as traffic lights changed from red to green. I kept looking at my feet instead of straight ahead. Not a good technique. Was it still wise to join Gürbalak's next convoy, I wondered? At the very least, I'd need more lessons.

A day or two later at the hostel, a staffer read out a message in English and German to everyone before posting it on the bulletin board. I forget the exact words, but it had come from the United States consulate in Munich, warning that anyone considering driving someone's car to Iran shouldn't. Any US citizens still unsure as to why were requested inquire at the consulate. That and my difficulties with the clutch caused my intentions to waver. The next morning, I went to the consulate.

"I'm considering driving a car to the east and looking for information," I told the woman at the counter. "There was a warning at the youth hostel yesterday."

"Are you a US citizen?"

"Yes."

"Is it your car?"

"No, but they'll put something in the passport saying it's mine."

"Which country will you be driving to?"

"Iran."

"Don't move! Wait right here. I'm getting the consul."

The consul ushered me into his office and talked me out of the road trip with Gürbalak's crew in a matter of minutes.

Scott said there'd be a switcheroo with the documentation after the border that would transfer ownership of the car. However, it seemed that might depend on entering Iran without having immigration opening your passport, seeing the visa and ownership stamps. I needed a visa for Iran, the consul noted, which added an unwelcome complexity.

It was likely that Gürbalak had people to deal with inconveniences such as passport checks at the borders. And it should be noted that some out-of-favor countries (South Africa, Israel, Rhodesia, Cuba) would place important stamps on separated detached pages so travelers won't be barred from disapproving countries. Still, the best passports were those that required no visa for Iran. Customs might wave them past or stamp them without looking, whether compensated for their

discretion or not. Mine, however, required a dated entry-stamp. They'd no doubt see the ownership stamp as well, I thought.

Years later, I learned of one way US passport holders could evade such issues. US consulates in those years would add pages to American passports upon request. Those came in an accordion fold. One could insist that any unwanted stamps be placed on the foldout, then carefully cut the page out before any complications arose. I know of at least one person who did this.

But was it worth taking a chance there'd be a separate arrangement for me at the Turkish-Iranian and Iranian-Afghani borders? If not, to leave Iran without that Mercedes meant a huge tax penalty, the consul said. The word was US\$10,000 or so. Failure to pay could lead to an extended stay in Iran, possibly behind bars until money changed hands.

"What's more," the consul continued, "you might think you're just delivering a car. But what if they've hidden drugs in it? With the car in your name, you're legally responsible for whatever's inside. Is that worth the risk? You understand what I am saying?"

To get caught with drugs was bad. And drugs there were in Munich. Two American dealers were also staying at the hostel. The two talked about me one afternoon when they thought I was asleep. "I don't like that fellow," one said. "Keep an eye on him. I think he's a narc. Don't you? What if he tries something?"

I was still going east. But after the consular chat, I knew one thing; it wouldn't be by driving a Mercedes that, for a few days, I could call my own.

## JOURNEY TO THE EAST

TAKING the hippie trail to India and beyond to Australia wasn't the original plan. To Germany, yes, and to Yugoslavia—I studied a year each of German and Serbo-Croatian at university—that would be a start, possibly Tunisia after that. But going east? I decided while on the road. Many of us were swept up in a wave of young people heading to Kabul, Goa, Kathmandu and points east.

As long as I can remember, I'd wanted to see the world. Diplomats get to do that, so I tried to pass the US Foreign Service test three times while at university. Challenging does not begin to describe how hard that test was. During my final attempt, some test takers couldn't restrain themselves from laughing out loud and muttering comments like: "How the f\*\*k can anyone expect us to answer these questions?" One multiple-choice question showed a blurred city-building photo and asked you to choose its best description from four choices. One was: "The gargoyles are fundamentally eclectic." Whenever I see gargoyles looming above, I recall that sentence and wonder what exactly a gargoyle needs to do to acquire eclectic status. Must it synthesize the accumulated wisdom of earlier gargoyles? Or something else? Had I passed that test, and I came close, the examiners would next grade a separate written essay we completed during the test period.

That year, the essay subject covered overpopulation and what to do about it. In Konstanz, Germany I'd met Linda, an young American woman who'd taken the same test that year. She, the daughter of a high-level Californian politician, told me:

I knew there's no way I'd pass the first part, no chance in hell. So in the essay, I wrote that to solve overpopulation, I'd do it by machine-gunning large numbers of people. Next, a disease would help kill off any survivors. And after that, I'd bring in the vultures! They'll never read it.

Too many years of reading National Geographic, combined with a love of history, meant any corporate career for me needed to wait. The freedom of the open road beckoned. I did, however, go to a few job interviews for practice and out of curiosity. One interviewer, a man from the food processing giant H. J. Heinz, spent the allotted 15 minutes yelling in an annoying staccato voice. I needed to be a cog, an unquestioning cog, in the great, efficient, wonderful wheel that was H. J. Heinz.

"Was I a cog?" he demanded with a clear hint of menace. "Sure," I answered falsely, wanting the interrogation over. He used the same spiel on other interviewees. Later I heard that when he barked at Karen, a fellow senior, she barked right back, telling him to shut the hell up and talk like a normal person or she'd walk. He hired her on the spot.

It took a few weeks to get to Munich and the encounter with Gürbalak. In January 1975, I tried to summit Ben Nevis, the UK's highest, if not that high, mountain but failed in severe whiteout conditions. Soon after, I found a job opening with MK-Shand in Invergordon, a now-defunct piping company supplying the North Sea oil rigs. The company was eager to have me but needed to see a work visa. I traveled down to Croydon in South London, where the immigration office was located. Not happening, they said, so it was time to move on.

After leaving the UK, I hitchhiked from the Hook of Holland through the Netherlands and Germany, sometimes solo, other times with fellow travelers. I remember some of the rides. One driver in the Netherlands was a left-wing radical who distributed leaflets calling on Dutch soldiers to disobey their officers. Then, there was a hash-smoking, active-duty American soldier and his wife who gave a Canadian traveler and me a ride to their house near Bitburg. The Canadian was happy to partake of the offered hash although he'd recently had a scare when crossing into West Germany. His driver was arrested. "They obviously were waiting for him," the Canadian said. "They even opened his fountain pen and found pills inside."

The American couple lamented the fact they'd soon be deployed back to the USA, but their disappointment wasn't Vietnam War related since the American military was no longer directly involved. In fact,

three days later on March 4, 1975, the North Vietnamese launched an offensive that would overrun South Vietnam by the end of April. What the couple in Bitburg fretted over was having to leave the upmarket chalet they lived in. And after a night there, I understood their concern. In Mainz, I hitched a ride on a canal barge for a slow nighttime sail to Mannheim, about 60 miles away. A bar woman in Mainz taught me how to ask barge captains in German. "*Konnte ich mitfahren, ich bin bereit to arbeiten?*" That meant: Can I travel with you? I'm willing to work.

The barge docked in town at midnight. Short of paying for a hotel, the only place to sleep was the railway station, and I wasn't the only person doing so. The West German police had rules about that though so everyone had to sleep, if they could, sitting up. In the morning, I ended up walking over ten miles to find a suitable place to put my thumb out.

Freiburg, with its post-WW2, rebuilt Baroque city center was one of the prettiest cities I've ever been to, and Ganter, the local beer, proved so incredibly delicious that I went to the brewery to ask if they did tours. Alas, no. Accommodation was cheap at a student guest house, costing only DM3.5 (US\$1.50) if you had an international student card which I did. The only downside was a Greek student there who targeted me for a lengthy lecture on American crimes in general and ones over the Cyprus situation in particular. I should have taken that as a sign of the anger many Greeks felt toward the US, something I'd soon experience in Greece.

I hitchhiked to Titisee, wandered into the Black Forest, and after staying at the town's youth hostel, teamed up with Monica, a young, friendly Argentinian woman. I remember her telling me of the uncertain, increasingly dangerous conditions she'd faced back home and how worried her mother was that they would get worse. A year later, a military junta overthrew the Peronist government and ushered in several years of severe repression. Monica was glad to be in Europe. We planned to look for work in Munich before traveling on.

Hitching proved slow at first but then an interesting driver in a beat-up Kombi van stopped. At first it seemed odd, because he said he wasn't going anywhere in particular but offered, even insisted, that he'd take us wherever we wanted to go. We said Konstanz but had we said almost anywhere in West Germany, he'd have obliged.

In his thirties, the driver said he was in a rut after losing his job and suffering other personal torments. He sought time and space to think

and find answers to his problems by hitting the open road and giving free rides to hitchhikers. Every day for several weeks, the driver took hitchhikers like us to their destinations. So far, his only miscue, he added, was in giving a ride to a Soviet soldier in the old DDR (East Germany) at the behest of the man's senior officer. He'd just left West Berlin and was driving back to the de facto rest of West Germany. He asked the soldier to sign his hitchhiker's scrapbook, something he wanted everyone, including us, to do. The soldier became very agitated and demanded to exit the van.

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I vaguely remember the Zeppelin Museum in Konstanz. Graf von Zeppelin, founder of the airship company that bore his name had been born in that city. The Zeppelin era ended in a fireball when the airship Hindenburg caught fire in a spectacular disaster on 6 May 1937 at Lakehurst, New Jersey, 38 miles from where I grew up.

One illegal trick of the trade than many backpackers and travelers used in those days was to substitute English five-pence coins for West German one-mark ones. The British coins seemed to have the same size and weight and usually worked in German vending machines, especially older ones. A few years later, I tried it out inside the Dusseldorf railway station, only to have an inspector notice. He seized my coins and snacks, telling me to wait while he went for the police. I thought it best to leave at that point.

In Konstanz, Monica and I went to the Bodensee, Germany's largest lake, and where the haunting, almost-tropical-even-in-chilly-weather island of Mainau provided a welcome break from standing on secondary highways with thumbs out, since the authorities forbade hitching on the autobahns. Aside from eucalyptus, banana and other trees, the island contained a menagerie: Vietnamese pigs, Shetland ponies and numerous birds.

Also in Konstanz we met an engaging Australian-German couple living the van life, but they clearly had no room for us since they already had 18 other passengers, all small dogs. "They're our dearest family," the wife insisted. "How could we possibly leave a single one behind?"

Hitchhiking from Konstanz, we got as far as Fussen, a Bavarian town near the Austrian border and gateway to the exuberant, Romanesque exterior-styled Neuschwanstein Castle (aka the Disneyland Castle to travelers). It was commissioned in 1868 by the Bavarian

king, Ludwig II, and in dramatic setting and sheer extravagance, the castle has few if any rivals. For some reason, I most remember the kitchen's advanced-for-the-time rotisserie and its central heating system. Backpackers talked of moving into the place at a moment's notice, had that been possible. Ludwig's relentless castle building exhausted the royal coffers and threatened to start doing the same with state funds, so his ministers contrived a means to depose him and have the monarch committed. Three days later he died under mysterious circumstances. Yet, today Neuschwanstein is one of Germany's premier tourist attractions.

The hostel was new and parts were still being finished and not yet open. There was but one shower available for male and female guests inside. Whether or not the warden and staff knew or cared, it was very popular with travelers, some who felt the need for repeated visits to the mixed-gender facility. A decade later, when working in Japan, I'd visit a mixed-gender hot spring, or *konyoku onsen*, in Hokkaido, Japan. There, the patrons weren't younger backpackers surprised by the open amenity, but mostly older farming couples who'd been bathing that way for years.

\* \* \*

Available jobs in Munich looked limited in mid-March 1975. There were some dishwashing positions but those required fluent German. One willing to overlook that, a Wimpy hamburger joint, wanted a three or four-year commitment. Monica and I went to the *Arbeitsamt* (employment office) to see if officialdom could help. They told me Americans qualified for residency permits allowing work, providing they paid 50 marks. As an Argentinian, Monica could obtain neither residency nor work permit, but she had better job-hunting luck. The sympathetic *Arbeitsamt* official who dealt with us said she could call a certain number. A family he knew needed a live-in *au pair* and after a few days, off she went.

There was a lot of chatter in the Munich hostel and elsewhere in town about going east to India and beyond. That's where I ran into Canadian Scott, Mr. Gürbalak's 'friend'. Scott, though, if I remember correctly, hadn't continued further east along the hippie trail.

By 1975, the trail's high noon had passed, but the route was still popular and well-traveled. The Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, both of which would seal it shut, were yet to come.



I understood little of the region's politics. Iran's shah was unpopular with the exile community in the West, I knew, and many of his people both detested and feared SAVAK, the regime's secret police. Posters and protester at European campuses assailed the shah's regime. At demonstrations, protestors chanted: "Down with the shah, the shah is a murderer."

I knew less about Afghanistan. The leader then, Mohammed Daoud Khan, had toppled his cousin King Zahir Shah with local communists' help in 1973, ending Afghanistan's monarchy. Daoud then tried to curtail his allies growing power. He failed. Those leftists would overthrow and kill him in 1978. Afghan communists, now in charge, fought among themselves until, in December 1979, the Soviet Union invaded the country and installed a favored communist.

\* \* \*

I use the term "hippie trail" to label the route east, yet I heard 'overland' attached to it much more often. I've since read in publications that overland travelers to India and Nepal called themselves *intrepids*. It was a term I never heard used back then.

Budget travel was the rage for college students. Many, especially North Americans and Australasians spent large chunks of time in Europe—for the latter it could last years—and some used illicit ways to ensure fast and free free travel. At German stationery stores you could buy a set of three liquids: acetone, neutralizer and base, and use them to alter the expiration dates of Eurail passes, extending them indefinitely if you wished. "I'm getting sick of train travel now," an American woman told me. She'd extended her one-month pass by eight.

Those wanting to go to India also had inexpensive options. You could hop on the Magic Bus, or on one of its more structured competitors like Penn Overland and Top Deck that would take you all the way to Kathmandu. Magic bus tickets ran a little over US\$100 from London or Amsterdam, less if hopping on board in Istanbul.

There were other possibilities: driving personal vehicles, hitchhiking, public transportation, cycling, flying, even walking. Or working for someone like Mr Gürbalak. In 1970, an American named Dave Kunst began a 14,452-mile (23,258 km) walk around the world. He started in Minnesota in the US with his brother John. The Kunsts carried a letter of introduction from former US Vice-President Hubert Humphrey that helped square dubious officials along the way. Through Turkey, the

brothers walked together with their second mule (of four) and second and third dogs, Turkish sheepdogs having mauled to death the second. In 1972, disaster struck when bandits attacked the brothers in Afghanistan. They injured Dave but killed John. Dave Kunst resumed walking after he recovered, accompanied by another brother, Pete.

They finished in October 1974, and I remember reading about it in America. The account of the two siblings' walk through Afghanistan was sobering, so I would not try to replicate it. I didn't want to go by air; thus, for me, hitchhiking and public transportation were the best options.

I didn't know how far I'd get hitchhiking: to Istanbul, I hoped. Afterwards, costs would be cheap enough. I could get as far as Nepal and return with whatever money remained. Or, once family sent some of my money to an American Express office in India, I might, with luck, make it to Australia where I could look for work. After traversing the Indonesian archipelago, the final step would be a US\$70 flight to Darwin from Baucau in Portuguese Timor. Work was easy to find in Australia, other travelers claimed. In Munich, I read the practical how-to's of traveling east in another traveler's printed guide, published in London. I'd later see other travelers with this guide, *Overland to India and Australia*, published in London by the BIT information service, a fixture of London's alternative scene. The first Lonely Planet guide, *Across Asia on the Cheap*, was available, but I saw no one carrying it. A year later I'd show up at BIT's London office with a friend who'd buy their *Overland through Africa* guide.

The BIT guides covered not only the essential practicalities (visas, vaccinations, travel modes) but also addressed the black market and narcotics. Sections on the latter highlighted prices, availability, quality and the levels of tolerance (or lack thereof) by local authorities. And if you needed an international student card for travel discounts, or a press card to talk yourself out of sticky situations, the BIT guide told how to get them.

If you got into trouble in Kathmandu and needed a get-out-of-jail card, a subsequent edition of the BIT's *Overland to India and Australia* guide told you by name which cop would spring you out for a US\$100 consideration. The 1975 edition noted there was a female Pakistani officer at the Wagah border post with India not averse to reaching into men's underpants to see if dope stashes were hidden there. I remember one such woman at Wagah. "All of you now listen to me," she announced. "Tell me if you have any drugs. You must give them to me.

You cannot take them with you across the border. Not to worry; nothing will happen to you. Just give them to me, and then you are all free to carry on." We stayed silent, wondering if she took us for fools. Fortunately was no probing hand of authority that morning.

I've located and bought a copy of the 1975/77 *Overland to India and Australia* guide on eBay. But even a quick glance at the 1972 version—a small section is available online<sup>1</sup>—shows how cheap it was to travel east then using public transport. With the right mix of trains and buses, you could make it from Istanbul to Varanasi in India for UK£8.70 (US\$21.75). The 1975/77 BIT guide has those costs rising to roughly \$35. My actual 1975 transportation costs from Istanbul to New Delhi added up to US\$41. Not bad at all and half what a Magic Bus ticket would have cost.

As for the consequences of getting caught with drugs, those ranged from negligible to expensive to dire. In Greece, conviction for possessing a single gram of hashish led to an automatic two years behind bars, the 1972 BIT guide noted. In Turkey, the gentleman who sold you hashish might then turn you over to the police who'd return the dealer his or her product. It was recycling and financially lucrative, but for you not so good.

The BIT guides had contact information for travelers doing time on the trail. There were listings for Istanbul, Adana, Mashhad and Kabul. In the 1975/77 edition one fellow, J. R., languished in a Mashhad jail doing two and a half years for smuggling an astounding 248 kilos of dope. The BIT guide also offered a word to the wise. Iranian customs, it declared, had been trained by America agencies—the FBI or Bureau of Narcotics, it claimed—and could take your vehicle apart in minutes and find whatever you'd hidden. And while you could buy your way out of predicaments in some countries like Afghanistan and Nepal, smaller amounts got you more time in others. And today, even the death penalty. Turkey was harsh in the 1970s and several foreigners were doing 30-year terms in Turkish jails, including Billy Hayes of *Midnight Express* fame. Aside from visiting them to offer moral support, we could, if so inclined, drop off useful items: books, multivitamins, cigarettes and food.

When I went east in 1975, I carried no guidebook. For most travel information, you talked to local people and other travelers. Besides infrequent, expensive phone calls, contact with home was done by receiving *Poste Restante* letters at main post offices or ones sent to American Express and by sending aerogrammes.

## BALKAN INTERLUDE

HITCHING TO GREECE WAS A BREEZE. The first driver was an Austrian returning home with his Mercedes taxi after getting a new engine installed in Munich. In America, I'd considered the Mercedes an expensive luxury brand and couldn't imagine, outside of Beverly Hills or another rich enclave, people using, say, Cadillacs to ferry paying passengers. West Germany, I assumed then, was either incredibly prosperous or didn't distinguish so much between status and utility.

At the Austrian border, an Iranian man, also driving a Mercedes, waved his car keys in front of my face and begged me to drive it to Tehran for him. Either he'd lost the driver he had, or he had border-crossing problems himself. Another Austrian gave me a lift south from Graz in Austria but said he needed to divert to his hog farm for an hour before taking me to the Yugoslav border. He gave me the full farm tour and was especially proud of the oinking critters, some of whom he'd given names.

I knew a few words of Serbo-Croatian, a language that for political reasons has splintered into three tongues since the 1990s: Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian. At university, I'd studied it for a year although our professor, by job description a Russian teacher, admitted he needed to get up to speed on it by studying a few chapters ahead of us in the text. I also took a course on Yugoslav worker's self-management given by Richard Lang, an economist from the University of Zagreb. Lang spent many lectures wandering off topic, but those we found far more interesting. He'd been a partisan in WW2, fighting against the Germans: "We were starving, so everyone became excited when we

captured a German supply train. Unfortunately, the only food it carried was raisins so for three weeks that's all we ate."

Captured prisoners, he added, they usually executed but one time they made an exception after catching a contingent of Italian soldiers. "They were such bad soldiers we felt sorry for them and let them go. 'Try not to get captured again,' we told them."

Familiarity with local history and something of the language led to smiles and repeated offers of beer from locals after I crossed the Austrian border. But all was not well among national components of the federal state. A Croat driver near Zagreb demonstrated the universal throat-slitting gesture while saying, "After Tito, Croats and Serbs like this." The aged strongman and marshal, he communicated, was all that kept the country together. The driver was correct if off by a decade or two. Southern Yugoslavia, now independent and called North Macedonia, looked sparsely inhabited but highly picturesque, evoking a past era. One saw wooden plows and ox carts everywhere, while the plum trees were in full bloom.



*South of Belgrade*

In Belgrade, I toured the huge Kalemegdanu fortress, some of whose ruins may date to pre-Roman Celtic times. In AD 1456, its Hungarian defenders held off the Ottoman Turks, inflicting an epic, if rare, defeat to Mehmet II, the conqueror of Constantinople. Later, I went drinking with an American woman who'd lost her passport and was awaiting getting a new one from the embassy. Thinking I might continue to Australia after India and Nepal, and hearing that Australian visas were hard to come by, I stopped by their Belgrade consulate to see if they'd issue one. No dice.

My first ride south from the Yugoslav capital was cramped inside a locally assembled Zastava with three young workers. They raved about

the newly bought vehicle, showing me several promotional brochures and pointing out its key features. After 50 miles, the effect wore off when the vehicle broke down and got a flat tire to boot. Ever friendly, they loaded me up with black bread and *pivo* (beer), and me well while trying to get towed back to the capital. An Italian truck driver stopped next and took me past Niš. A former foreign legionnaire for the French, he had interesting ideas on parenting: "My son is ten. When he's fourteen, I will throw him out of the house, no matter what the wife says. A man must learn to live on his own."

Hitchhiking through Greece became more challenging. April 6, my first night in the country, I tented in a downtown Thessalonika park. After a second night in the city's youth hostel, I crashed by a rock pile in the woods outside Kavala, only to have ravenous, noisy goats nibble at my tent's fabric. Few drivers stopped now, and most were locals traveling short distances. However, some gesticulated angrily as they sped past.

"It's your sign," a sympathetic driver between Komotini and Xanthi revealed. "It says Istanbul. That's bad. People are very angry over Cyprus. Make a new one with Constantinople. That may help." To be sure, the Ottomans had used Constantinople for centuries until Atatürk changed the name after World War One. So, in Xanthi, the next large town, I bought a magic marker and did as the driver suggested. At times, I ran into three other backpackers heading east: a fellow American, a Dutchman and an Irishman from Belfast who I'd see several times more along the overland trail.

Cyprus, which has a majority Greek and minority Turkish population, had gained independence from the British in 1960, minus two enclaves the British still have. Archbishop Makarios, the country's leader in the early years, tried to maintain independence in the face of repeated Greek call for *enosis* (union). This was despite the younger, pre-independence Makarios having supported union.

On July 15, 1974, the Greek military dictator, Dimitrios Ioaniddis, forced the issue and ousted Makarios, paving the way to *enosis*. Turkey, however, was decidedly not on board. Its army invaded the island five days later and set up a separate Turkish authority in the north that exists to this day. Therefore, things Turkish, never much popular in Greece, became toxic. Americans were also unpopular and the name of Kissinger, the US Secretary of State, was almost a swear word. The US had supported the unpopular Greek dictatorship that caused the debacle.

Other travelers had told me local buses were giving free rides to hitchhikers, but the only time one stopped for me there was a nationality test. "Angelika, Kanadika, Germanika?" demanded the conductor.

"Amerikanos," I answered. The bus conductor spat at me and slammed the door shut.

A day later, I made it to Alexandroupolis, the last city before the Turkish border, and slept on the city's beach with tiny sand crabs and a stray dog for company. That was enough of hitchhiking for a while, so in the morning, I boarded a bus to the Turkish border. When confronted with menacing glares from other passengers, I uttered American Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's last name and made a thumbs down gesture. Handshakes and smiles abounded; there was an instant mood change.

Just after Ipsala, the Turkish border post, the Dutchman, American, myself and one more backpacker tried to hitch rides to Istanbul, but our numbers made finding one hard. Only once in ninety minutes did a driver stop. He was a gaunt-looking, fast-talking German in his 30s, but there was something creepy about the fellow. "I can take all of you to Istanbul," he said, "but along the way I must stop for some hours and take pictures of my dog. I will have you do some things with the dog."

Things with a dog? What things? No one got in his car. "It's best if you just keep driving," the other American told him. Luckily, a Turkish bus doing a long border run from Istanbul came by and we all hopped on for its return leg. By late afternoon, our bus approached the Queen of Cities.

## THE QUEEN OF CITIES

TRAVELERS OFTEN COMPARE expectation with observable reality. Such exercises are colored by history, poetic license, creative photography, television, Hollywood adaptation, even by dreams. Consider the road to Mandalay; it's one the poet Kipling never took. Or the Casbah in Algiers, with its dual suggestions of romance and menace. Menace yes, at least during the Algerian War of Independence. But romance as in the Hollywood film *Algiers* of 1938? Less so. One can't always expect their imaginings confirmed by reality.

But in entering Constantinople, I felt no such disconnect. The formidable Theodosian land walls were just as I'd imagined. Those fortifications protected not just the Eastern Empire in its darkest hours but Europe itself. The failure of the siege of Constantinople in AD 717 was arguably far more important than the Frankish victory at Tours fifteen years later in checking the advance of the Umayyad Caliphate into Europe.

Our bus passed through the walls, magnificent even in their 1975 dilapidated state. I reflected on one of the great set pieces in Gibbon's classic *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. The last emperor, or Basileus Romanioi—for the word Byzantine was a 16th century affectation—was Constantine XI. By 1449 when he gained the throne, his empire barely extended beyond the city's walls, though Constantine's fractious brothers held on to bits of southern Greece.

Constantinople was down at the heels and its remaining inhabitants had abandoned several urban neighborhoods. Major buildings were decaying shells and their property given over to farmland.



The strongest force in the region, the Ottoman sultanate, had decades before settled the real question over who would dominate the region when, in 1389, they annihilated their Serbian rivals in what is now Kosovo. Constantinople, an imperial city lacking a buttressing real empire, was on borrowed time. At length in 1451, the determined, young Mehmet II became sultan the Ottoman sultan, determined to capture Constantinople and make it his center. Two years later the new sultan offered Constantine a way out, offering to spare the emperor's life if he'd just surrender the city without a fight.

The emperor's reply, the final diplomatic message from a Roman emperor to a hostile enemy, was defiant:

"To surrender the city to you is beyond my authority or anyone else's who lives in it, for all of us, after taking the mutual decision, shall die of our own free will without trying to save our lives."

After building a fortress to control the Bosphorus strait, Mehmet besieged the walls. His forces, some 80,000, outnumbered not only the 7,000 defenders by a factor of at least ten to one but also the entire city's population. Where once 600,000 thrived, a mere 50,000 now lived. The sultan had cannon, courtesy of a Hungarian armorer who offered the sultan his services when the besieged city couldn't afford them.

As it was, the inhabitants were already melting down silver plate from the churches to mint the Eastern Empire's final monetary issue: small, roughly struck coins to pay the soldiers manning the walls.

Yet for weeks Constantinople held out although its eventual fate was only a matter of time, even should this siege fail. The city's defenders repaired cannon breaches speedily enough, for the Ottomans found their new artillery difficult to manage and reload. That kept Mehmet and his allies, including Serbian vassals, at bay. Tiring of such delays, the sultan ordered a determined, full and final assault for May 29, 1453.

The day before, and knowing what was coming, Constantine addressed his forces, the most effective of which were some 700 Genoese mercenaries. The great historian Edward Gibbon called this speech, whose actual words and very historicity is disputed, "the funeral oration of the Roman Empire." One version, attributed to the emperor's friend and courtier George Sphrantzes, included the following:

I hand over to you my glorious, famous, respected, noble city, the shining Queen of cities, our homeland. You know well, my brothers,

that we have four obligations in common, which force us to prefer death over survival: first our faith and piety; second our homeland; third, the emperor anointed by the Lord and fourth; our relatives and friends... Present your shields, swords, arrows and spears to them, imagining that you are a hunting party after wild boars, so that the impious may learn that they are dealing not with dumb animals but with their lords and masters, the descendants of the Greeks and the Romans.<sup>1</sup>

It was to no avail. The next day, the city fell and 1500 years of imperial history ended on those ramparts. At the crucial moment, the sultan sent in his shock troops, the Janissaries. The Genoese commander was severely injured and fled, followed in panic by his entire force. According to one account, the emperor, knowing the city lost, tossed aside his imperial cloak, drew a sword, and went where the fighting was thickest. He was never seen again.

Istanbul in 1975 was a time capsule. Its taxi fleet would have looked sleek and modern in the 1940s or 50s. Succumbing to Hollywood fantasy, I half expected Sidney Greenstreet or Peter Lorre to alight from a taxi, scanning the street for the arch-criminal Dimitrios. It was part of the experience to ride in a *dolmuş*, the Turkish word for these aging clunkers.



*Istanbul 1975*

A magnet for budget travelers, the Sultanahmet district was also a living museum whose buildings showed influences from both the Byzantine and Ottoman eras. The Ottomans were great builders, adding remarkable touches to an already ancient city. In 1459, Mehmet II began constructing the Topkapi Palace, which served as his residence, administrative center and seraglio.

Two of the most imposing structures, the Sultan Ahmet, or Blue Mosque, and the Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom), were but a short walk from each other and represented the best of both Byzantine and Ottoman traditions.

Sultan Ahmet I ordered the construction of the Blue Mosque early in the 17th century. It's flanked by six minarets, a number deemed presumptuous by the Grand Mosque guardians in Mecca who countered by adding more. The builders intended the new mosque to serve as counterpoint to the nearby Hagia Sophia. It was to be a demonstration in marble, stone and mortar of the new Islamic order.

Hagia Sophia began life as a Christian church commissioned by the emperor Justinian, who ruled at the empire's zenith in the sixth century AD. Justinian's cathedral was the world's largest for a thousand years and innovative for its time, especially in dome construction and with its dazzling use of interior light. Hagia Sophia would serve as an architectural inspiration for countless other churches and mosques, including the Blue Mosque. The day the city fell, Mehmet II decreed that Justinian's church was now a mosque. And so it was until Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey and a secularist, changed it to a museum in the 1930s. In 2020, a more Islamist Turkish ruler, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, made the ancient edifice a mosque once more.

I visited both the Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia—the former gave its name to the nearby area where budget travelers stayed—but spent more time jostling with hundreds of other shoppers in the cavernous, labyrinthine Grand Bazaar, marveling at the red carpets, silverware, clothing, everyday goods and more in the hundreds of shops. Merchants expected vigorous bargaining, so agreeing to their first price, while lucrative for sellers, produced mild disappointment. Negotiation was an art form, powered by proffered cups of tea from shopkeepers at the better shops. When not selling, stall owners stayed glued to their TV sets. I remember them watching Johan Cruyff, the Dutch soccer player, and another program featuring Julie Andrews. Less salubriously, while walking along the waterfront later, I came upon an outdoor shooting gallery where some Turks were receiving injections. I didn't inquire as to what of.

\* \* \*

The Gungor Hotel hosted budget travelers headed eastward on the hippie trail. In my time, a dorm bed cost under two dollars, a double

went for four, and showers cost \$0.25. Along with the nearby Yucel, the Gungor was among the best known of the cheap crash pads for wanderers either heading east or returning from there. Other way stations included the Amir Kabir Hotel in Tehran, the cheap hotels or guest houses clustered near or on Chicken Street in Kabul and those on Freak Street in Kathmandu.

As of 2015, the Gungor building was reportedly intact but no longer a hotel. In my time, it was close to two other hippie trail haunts: the next-door Pudding Shop and Yener's, a cafe-restaurant. Most accounts highlight the Pudding Shop as "the" place for travelers to meet and share information, but I found it mildly disappointing after hearing so much hype. Still the pudding—rows of small glass bowls with your choice of chocolate or vanilla under the counter—was both welcome and excellent. Even better, the Pudding Shop had Tuborg beer on tap.

One traveler returning from the east and then in Istanbul was a thin, bearded Englishman who'd just come from India. He was in a bit of a pickle. In Jaipur, India, the Englishman spent almost all the money he had, some UK£400, on sapphires and other precious stones. He planned to cash in by smuggling them back home but was now almost broke.

"I knew I could make thousands of pounds," he said, "I knew exactly where to go in London. But in Tehran someone got into the bag when I wasn't looking and pinched them. Bastard! I don't even know if it was a local or another traveler?"

Over the years, I'd meet others doing this, smuggling gemstones and other items. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't, and not just because of theft or customs seizures. I remember an anxious American in Bangkok who'd given US\$1,000 to a local on the resort island of Koh Samui for what he thought were sapphires and emeralds. They were colored glass.

The gemstone trade is buyer-beware, even for experts. Around 2006, a professional gem dealer in Thailand told me, "I never travel without a spectrometer. Fakes are everywhere, at least 50 percent of the time. And they're getting better. They even use heat treatment to induce imperfections to make you think it's untreated, natural stone."

The Englishman at the Gungor had a more pressing issue. He wanted to go home and work. Maybe he'd try Jaipur again. But, so far, he'd failed in two attempts to reach Britain.

"I tried hitching to Calais. I can find a truck there to take me across on a ferry. We'd tell anyone who asked I was the second driver. If that

failed, I'd go to the embassy in Paris and get repatriated. That would be cheaper than it'll be from here. But twice at the Yugoslav border, customs asked to see how much money I had. When they saw how little it was, they wouldn't let me in. I'll have to go to the consulate here and ask them to repatriate me."

The process wasn't difficult for travelers with a UK passport, he explained. You'd tell the embassy you were stuck, and then they'd put you on a plane home. This service came at a price, he noted, because you signed a document making yourself responsible for repayment. Also, the British authorities kept your passport until you paid them back. Such an escape hatch was not available for me although American consulates can help citizens stuck abroad to contact their relatives for funds. I would meet British travelers abusing the repatriation policy or thinking of doing so. Sample conversation:

I think I'll stay in India, go to Goa for a while, get stoned, laid and just sleep on the beach. There's money enough for me to return now but f\*\*k it. What if I never come here again? I'm here now, so when the time comes, I'll go to Delhi and get them to fly me back. After all, that's what they're there for.

Another Gungor guest had difficulties, but he was closer to home and still had some money. "How could this happen to me? I am a Turk. How could I let myself be cheated, and cheated by a Western traveler no less? That is not how it's supposed to happen," he wailed, as if he'd let his side down. He'd lost a good part of his travel funds in a scam involving telexes and reported lost, but not really missing, travelers cheques.

\* \* \*

Istanbul was an eater's delight, but I wasn't that adventurous towards some delicacies. I said no to baked sheep's head, to sheep's head sandwiches, and to *kelle paça*, sheep's head soup. You'd see rows and rows of these heads lined up or stacked in shop windows, whether butcher shops or restaurants, and I felt their eye sockets were glaring at me. Generally, I stuck to *labmacun*, the cheap and almost-addictive, beef-laden mini-pizzas that street kiosks sold. Or in the evenings, when I needed a break from Yener's or the Pudding Shop, there was delicious grilled fish sold at the Galata Bridge which spans the Golden Horn.

One night as four of us, including a British backpacker I'd met in Thessaloniki, wandered near the bridge, five Turkish men came up and introduced themselves. One spoke passable English, and they offered to show us the real Istanbul nightlife. As if to reinforce their bonafides, the English speaker told us, "You see my good friend here. You do not know, but he is a big movie star in Turkey. He makes a movie with Tony Curtis and my friend is a star. They make this movie here in Turkey."

I wondered if he was making this up. Tony Curtis in Turkey? When? What kind of movie? What was the name?

"It is hard to say in English, but it is true, I tell you, my friends," the man insisted. It sounded dubious, but at a distance of forty years, and thanks to the Internet, it seems to add up.

In 1970, Tony Curtis and Charles Bronson headlined the film, *You Can't Win 'em All*. Set during the Greco-Turkish war that followed World War I, it featured a cast that included several Turkish actors. The Turk with top billing was Fikret Hakan, and the name Fikret strikes just the dimmest of echoes across the decades since then to make it possible it was Fikret among those we met that night. Hakan died in 2017.

They took us to the Sark Club, what they called a bar. It resembled an ornate living room and looked well above our budgets. "Is no problem. It is our treat. You are our guests here," the English speaker assured us.

An odd series of paintings, some of landscapes and others more erotic, lined the walls. The inviting red carpet on the floor was plush and of the type displayed in pricier bazaar shops. Everyone sat on the rug or on embroidered cushions. Young, good-looking ladies dressed in almost folkloric attire brought us alcoholic drinks and snacks while they smiled and laughed. They sat, when not pouring drinks, on comfortable divans set against one wall. Things seemed to be going well.

Then two young Japanese men entered. They acted uninterested in either the ambience or the drinks. They briskly negotiated prices in a mix of English and hand gestures and took two ladies into nearby rooms. So this was a brothel, albeit a higher-class, ornate and atmospheric one, redolent of bygone Ottoman interior styles. The ladies expected us to take full advantage of their services too, and those did not come cheap. Our supposed new friends' largesse ended at fronting that for anyone interested. Upon our declining politely and leaving, the

ladies assaulted us with the cushions, angered at the rejection. They followed with face-slapping and, lastly, by throwing snacks at us.

Outside in the street, one of the Turks, not the movie star, tried selling us hashish. The other travelers stayed to talk. They bought nothing, they told me later, but I took off, uninterested and wary. The word in the BIT Guide was to be especially careful in Istanbul. There were dealers in league with the police, as well as fake cops with violent tendencies. Billy Hayes was in a Turkish jail then.

## ENLIGHTENMENT AND ITS DISCONTENTS

THE NEXT MAGIC BUS heading east wasn't due for at least a week, and after several days in Istanbul I was ready to go. Plus, when the magical mystery tour coach showed up, it might already be full. We'd also heard that in Eastern Anatolia, Kurdish people sometimes targeted the freak buses with well-aimed rocks.

There was a weekly ferry hugging the Black Sea coast from Istanbul to Trabzon. Deck class was just a few dollars. From Trabzon, buses went to Erzurum, and from there other buses departed for Iran. However, the next day there'd be a direct coach to Tehran run by Mihan Tour (*mihan* means homeland in Farsi), an Iranian long-distance coach company. Mihan's fares were more expensive than hitchhiking or going by rail but still reasonable at US\$25 to Tehran. And reaching Tehran would cover about half the distance from Istanbul to Delhi, so I bought a ticket.





*Scheduled bus to Têhran*

Westerners comprised half the passengers, and, aside from the two Japanese brothel patrons who left with us, the rest were Turks going east or Iranians returning home. A few of the overlanders were on repeat journeys. Those, whether genuine freaks or not, exuded confidence and hints of know-it-all-ism, but had good advice for the rest of us. Some were already dressed for the occasion in countercultural frippery: bracelets, beaded necklaces, psychedelic-patterned paisley shirts or blouses, plus a few shawls. At least one had a flute she'd play from time to time, not well though. Two or three others wore *pusteens*, embroidered, knee-length Afghan sheepskin coats with soft leather exteriors and long fleece interiors. Fleece strands also ringed the coat's outside edges.

Later in Herat, I'd trade two pairs of jeans and a jacket for an Afghan coat. It rested at the bottom of my backpack for months until I tried giving it to my sister as a present. "I can't wear that thing in New Jersey," she objected, handing it back. "Are you crazy! It looks like it came from a diseased llama," she added. The unloved garment languished in a closet for decades before going in a donation bin. By then, its pale, originally white interior wool was turning black, generally not a good sign.

There were several non-hippies like myself. We considered ourselves travelers or overlanders, as opposed to freaks or, heaven forbid, ordi-

nary tourists: a typical conceit of the time. As for those who traveled on freak buses and the more packaged-tour ones from London, we thought them to be living in bubbles. With our public transport mode, one interacted with local people more, we convinced ourselves. In the fullness of time, I've regretted such ill-formed musings, given my striking lack of knowledge then about local people and culture. We also clustered in travel bubbles.

Some on the bus traveled east to get high, escape consumerism, and relax on Goa's beaches. But individual motives were mixed and often flexible. There were those seeking enlightenment aside from any interest in induced highs or mere vagabonding. Those wanderers talked of ashrams further on—from Poona to Pondicherry. Or of Himalayan monasteries which some believed to be repositories of older, unvarnished truths.

Whatever the motivations or mixes thereof, travel to the East was not new in the 1960s and 1970s. These pathways had been well-trodden for millennia. Macedonian phalanxes, Silk Road traders, Church of the East (Nestorian) prelates, Arab conquerors, explorers, diplomats, all manner of saints and sinners, and whatever else in between had come and gone.

In the medieval period, the Islamic world's relative cohesion meant some of history's greatest travelers arose from that milieu. The ninth-century Arab geographer Al-Masudi and the peripatetic Moroccan scholar and Islamic law expert Ibn Battuta were but two. In the 14th century, Ibn Battuta produced a travel account engagingly entitled, *A Gift to Those Who Contemplate the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Traveling*.

Christian Europe had its wanderers, too. Marco Polo comes to mind, but there were others. Those included the Italian monk Odoric, author of the *Travels of Friar Odoric*, and Jordanus, a French Dominican whose *Mirabilia Descripta* featured a considered overview of Indian regions, regions, customs, flora and fauna.

There were also spurious scribblings like the 14th-century, plagiarized bestseller, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* and the earlier but equally entertaining *Wonders of the East*, an illustrated miscellany of fantastical creatures. Those volumes helped foster a sense of distant otherworldliness that enticed travelers, at least those they didn't frighten off. The Mandeville book author spoke of woolen chickens, dragons and dog-headed half-humans. *The Wonders*, extant in Anglo-

Saxon England by AD 1000, described horned donkeys and fire-breathing *conopenae*, hybrid combinations of horses, dogs and boars.

As for the spiritual angle, the notion that the East possessed untapped reserves of wisdom was not new either. It existed even before Swami Vivekananda helped introduce and popularize eastern thought and yogic practices to the West in the late nineteenth century. But there was more sense urgency in the 1960s and 70s. The West was undergoing a crisis of confidence over the Vietnam War, the 1968 political tumult in several countries scandals, elite failures and other socio-cultural fractures. Young people rebelled against conformity, and movements for civil rights gained strength. There had to be, many believed, cultures and people more pristine, older and wiser, away from a conformist, consumption-oriented developed world that had lost its way.

Many imagined Tibet to be such a place. Though closed to foreign travel in 1975, it was considered a land apart, mythologized as Shangri-La in both book and film as uncorrupted, best left alone or open to only a few open-minded individuals capable of braving the harsh elements. India, however, was more accessible and more varied. You had to know what to look for and where to go.

Some travelers mentioned Gregory Gurdjieff, the Greco-Armenian mystic and philosopher who, in the early 1900s, had journeyed east in search of wisdom. The BIT guide praised Gurdjieff's, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, in part because he traveled cheaply, working as he went. For example, the mystic wrote that he'd join locals diving in Istanbul's Golden Horn for coins, lost or thrown from ships.

Quest stories were in vogue in the 1960s and 70s. College students, including myself, consumed the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Herman Hesse's books, both his accessible *Siddhartha* and the more allegoric *Journey to the East* commanded large readerships.

Though not about Asia, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* was immensely influential, attracting readers with its stream of consciousness writing style and the thematic combination of a physical journey with an inner spiritual one. And there were the Beatles. They flew to India in 1968 to study meditation at the Maharishi's ashram in Rishikesh and composed many of their *White Album* songs while there. The Fab Four's stay ended poorly amidst a welter of accusations, but it further popularized overland journeys.

As Bob Dylan suggested, the times were changing. Or maybe not.

Pushback came as writers, diplomats, local people and others saw naïveté or worse in Westerners exoticizing the East. American academic Laurie McMillan may have coined a phrase when she wrote her 1999 article *Enlightenment Travels: The Making of Epiphany in Tibet*. In *Karma Cola* (1979), Indian writer Gita Mehta skewered West-meets-East enlightenment encounters, seeing many as transactional, replete with gullibility and cultural misunderstandings, even fraudulent.

At a scurrilous, more lowbrow level, Indian author Captain F. D. Colaabavala wrote that in *Hippie Dharma* (1974) he was providing a no-holds-barred investigation of hippies and their lifestyle. The captain focused his eye on two themes, drugs and sex. Colaabavala had a prurient fascination with the latter and wrote in a style meant more to titillate than disgust. He viewed hippies as almost a subspecies of humanity: ignorant, drug-addled and wanton. As is often in the case with moral scolds, he joined in with the fun and shared drugs with his subjects, only drawing the line, he says, at casual sex, except to write about it in lurid fashion. Hippie women, according to the captain, could be nautch girls, lissome babes and licentious lasses eager to cuddle, or even voodoo priestesses, ready to seduce the unwary or hopelessly enraptured. *Hippie Dharma* sold well in India, much to the vexation of BIT guide readers who wrote printed complaints to the guide. The captain's volume is still sold today; I picked up my copy in 2019 in Kathmandu.

Were these criticisms fair? Minus the sanctimonious, hypocritical and salacious overload of *Hippie Dharma*, yes, in some cases, particularly over drugs and the flaunting of local sensibilities. The lure of freedom and fun, so prized by Western youths in the 60s and 70s could, when overindulged, lead to disappointment and a severe reckoning to mind, health and personal freedom. One of the best descriptive accounts of how this happened is found in Cleo Odzer's *Goa Freaks: My Hippie Years in India*. Odzer, a one-time model and rock groupie, recounted her years at Goa's hippie haven, during which she became heavily addicted and resorted to drug smuggling when the funds ran low.

Yet over time, I've met many counterculturally inclined travelers who both were and are sincere seekers of answers and truths, tolerant towards others, unpatronizing, and open new or alternative ways of thinking and living. They may use but aren't defined by drugs. No one size fits all of us.

Over the last few decades, memoirs and studies of life on the trail have offered more sympathetic takes as to motivations and experiences.

One recent entry is a volume by two cultural historians, Sharif Gemie and Brian Ireland. *The Hippie Trail, a History* (2017) takes a more nuanced look at the whole phenomenon of the journey, whether life-changing or not for participants, placing it within the context of the times and stressing the large variety of personal experiences.

## BLUE JEANS AND BURGERS

THE BUS to Tehran lasted three nights and four days. The first evening, the drivers—there were three—stopped in Sivas in central Anatolia, telling us we'd have to disembark and pay for the night at something called the Kent Hotel, alongside which the bus had parked. An uproar ensued. "We already paid our fares," passengers complained. "Why don't you drive through the night? You have three drivers? You get a commission from the hotel, don't you? We don't have Turkish lira."

However much many travelers hoped to leave the West's decadent materialism behind and embrace more cosmic energies, day-to-day financial concerns intruded. After some spirited back and forth, everyone compromised. We'd sleep in the hotel but could pay in any amount and in any currency. Out came the coins and a few notes: Yugoslav dinars, Italian lira, Greek drachmas, even some Ugandan shillings. I paid with Dutch currency, several of those tiny, pre-Euro, 10-cent coins.

The hotel dispute resurfaced the next day after a short ride to Erzurum in eastern Anatolia. This time, a loud contingent of freaks simply just refused to disembark and pressured other overlanders into doing likewise. The furious drivers eventually gave way but locked us inside until morning. During the night, several of the men aboard needed to urinate and did so through the coach's windows. It's no wonder local people, even those whose businesses benefited from travelers, looked askance at young, unkempt Westerners who were loathe to spend. Seeking freedom but counting pennies and peeing in parking lots.

The last Turkish settlement was Gürbalak, a village with the same name as the Munich car smuggler's. There were no problems at the Turkish border post. Iranian immigration, however, carefully checked my passport and asked whether I had any guns in my backpack. At least, I had no Mercedes to declare. An official stamped me in and quickly did the same to the other passengers except for one, the Irish fellow from Belfast.

"Don't you be calling me British now! I'm not British and I don't like you doing that. I'm Irish. Don't you know where Ireland is?" he demanded, testing the patience of Iranian immigration.

"So, this is your passport or not?" an officer asked.

"It is," he answered.

"It says British Passport on the cover; that makes you British, doesn't it? What's your problem?"

"No, I don't care what it says. I'm not British, I'm Irish," the backpacker countered.

After more banter, the Northern Irishman backed down. If he hadn't, he'd have had to spend more time at the Iranian post or return to Turkey. And our bus wouldn't wait for such nationality issues to be sorted out.

At Tabriz, one driver left and another, the one who'd driven most of the way so far, took a sleep break. That left the third man. He was the friendliest of the three but there was a motive: our jeans. Those, he wanted to buy, especially Levi's, which were highly sought after in Tehran. You could more than double your money by selling them. Some returning foreign passengers brought extra pairs with them just for this purpose and added that you could increase their value even more by bleaching the denim. But they cautioned it was best to wait until Tehran where prices were higher.

The third driver's physical impairments affected his motoring skills. He had only one arm and was missing an eye. The difficulties in switching gears, keeping the wheel under control, and doing all this at night proved too much. He smashed into a large cow on the road, killing it. No long after, the bus swerved wildly off the highway and barely avoided tipping over. Several passengers stood up, screaming at the driver. Then the tired but better driver retook the wheel and drove the rest of the way to the capital.

Where downtown Istanbul exuded a 1950's film-set atmosphere, Tehran looked more up to date, at least downtown. The route from West Germany, in a visual sense, had represented a gradual turning back of the clock, and, in Afghanistan, a speeding up of that process. Thus, Iran felt discordant and out of place. The BIT guide writer, never one to shy from rendering socio-political judgements, disparaged this as the result of a hugely oppressive, corrupt and ridiculously puffed-up government rushing headlong into modernity, ignoring rural poverty and rising conservative opposition. The result: a soulless imposition likely to come a cropper sooner rather than later.



*Tehran*

The shah did indeed fall within a few years when his monarchical system collapsed amidst swelling popular protests, but, as is often the case after revolutions, the victors began to eat their own. More tolerant factions are quickly crowded out or suppressed as the better organized, more ruthless ones—in Iran, it was led by clerics—rise to power and create governments often as authoritarian, sometimes more so, than those they replace.

\* \* \*

Tehran's road traffic was a nightmare; it was the worst I'd ever experienced, and crossing streets required heightened alertness. Those Mercedes, Cadillacs and Paykans needed somewhere to go, and when they did, they went at speed, disregarding irritants such as traffic lights or signs. Tehran also had numerous stylish cafes, pricy restaurants and American-style fast-food joints. These catered to, among others, stunningly attractive Iranian women wearing high heels, some of whom had



also donned mini-skirts, unthinkable in today's Iran. Many Iranian men chose more casual styles, such as sporting long hair and wearing bleached Levis, thus mimicking many of the Western travelers passing through.

The spacious, though grotty, Amir Kabir Hotel, named after a nineteenth-century reformer, was atop a tire shop. A bed there cost 100 rials (US\$1.80), so it was similar to the Gungor. Otherwise, Tehran was pricier than Istanbul as Iran had money then, big money. Being very inexpensive for Tehran, the Amir Kabir was packed with budget travelers. Tehran was where many of us got our Afghan visas. Mine took only a half hour to obtain.

There was a large American expat community in Iran who worked for the likes of Bechtel and Bell Helicopter. Yet even itinerant travelers could pause in Iran and reload their wallets by teaching English. For Americans, there was the Iran-American Society (IAS). The word was you could get a teaching contract from them paying up to US\$18,000 a year, a tidy sum in those days. Whether the IAS insisted on special qualifications, I didn't know.

What I remember most about the Amir Kabir was its traveler's bulletin board: more interesting, I thought, than the Pudding Shop's one. In Tehran, I saw the first of those "Have you seen this person?" message you'd see when going east. One for a missing daughter went something like this:

Has anyone seen [name] from [city], [state]. She is [age] and [description]. [Name] was last heard from in [location] on [date]. If you have, please contact the nearest American embassy or consulate... Her parents are extremely worried and haven't heard from her for months...

Scuttlebutt among travelers at the Amir Kabir centered on one person to beware. "There's this Frenchman in India killing hippies... No, I don't know his name, just that you should be careful, like if you're going to Goa. I've heard this more than once."

Though I remembered this well, I didn't dwell on it for years. There were hundreds, maybe thousands, of Frenchmen between Tehran and Kathmandu. With those numbers, anything was possible. It could've been just a rumor chain.

Years later, it turned out there had been someone of French nationality doing that. Could the 1975 chatter have been about Charles Sobraj, a Frenchman of mixed Indian-Vietnamese origin? Sobraj, also called the

Serpent or Bikini-Killer, is a notorious psychopath and serial killer who drugged, robbed and murdered travelers on the hippie trail and elsewhere in Asia during the 1970s. Eventually, Sobraj's luck ran out, and he's doing life in a Kathmandu prison.

It's unlikely, though, the Tehran warning was about Sobraj. Some years later, in an Athens hostel that only allowed foreign travelers to stay, a thief drugged and robbed me. He or she was a traveler or pretending to be one. Sobraj was in an Indian jail then, but others used his technique.

\* \* \*

The revolution that overthrew the shah and ushered in theocracy put paid to Tehran's open society. The trendiest women stopped clothing themselves in the shortest of skirts. Nor did they flirt openly with passersby once religious conservatism became *de rigueur*, at least in public. You can't stay at the Amir Kabir Hotel. The word is that a mob trashed it during the revolution and the business never reopened.

The once large American expat community in Iran vanished and the Iran-American Society is no more. Kathryn Koob, a US Embassy cultural officer, was its last director. The militant students who attacked the Embassy on November 4, 1979 seized Koob and William Royer, one of the society's English teachers. Koob and Royer spent 444 days as hostages.

In 1981, in New Zealand, I ran into an Englishman named John who'd just left an teaching English job in Tehran. He'd started there just before the revolution and lasted almost almost two years. A confirmed drinker, John spoke first of the difficulties getting buzzed under the new order. The clerics had shut the bars and instituted fines or lashings for those still tippling, so you had to brew your own in secret. Some bought brewer's yeast at pharmacies and did their brewing in apartment bathtubs.

John showed me a pile of photographs he'd taken during the US embassy seizure. Many showed animated students with raised fists or waving "Death to America" banners. Other photos showed the same people sitting, smiling, smoking and chatting away without a care, as if this were a community-sponsored picnic. "That depended on which way the cameras were pointed," John explained. It was no picnic for the hostages. After their release, they spoke of poor conditions, repeated beatings, and mock executions.

\* \* \*

Of Mashhad in eastern Iran, I have few memories. It was large but housed only a third of the 3.6 million people it does today. However, the city did seem less frenetic Tehran had been: Its streets were wide and the traffic not as frightening; roadways were easily crossable. Two Iranians met a few of us at the bus terminal. One said he was an economics major, and both insisted they worked at the tourist office. They felt, they said, obligated to help out travelers by driving them to hotels and recommending attractions. Also, they admitted to having an imminent English language test and needed practice. The two made no sales pitches of any kind, but elsewhere, hawkers tried to interest me in buying Persian rugs or moonstones, saying I could sell the latter in India for a significant mark-up.

I spent time wandering around the main mosque complex, the Imam Reza shrine, said to be the world's largest in area. An Iranian man approached and encouraged me to go inside. There was one caveat:

"You should go inside; it's easy to do. But to do this, you must declare yourself a Muslim and submit to Allah. Otherwise, you cannot enter. That shouldn't be a problem for you because once you leave, you can renounce Islam and continue walking around the city."

I refused to do that, thinking it cavalier and selfish. Could a belief system be like an item of clothing, to be put on or discarded depending upon whom you wished to impress or deceive? Were the same man saying that a few years later, he might have been charged with a capital offense. Mashhad in Farsi means 'place of pilgrimage,' and the Imam Reza shrine is a holy one in Shia Islam, dedicated to the eighth of twelve revered imams, and who is buried there.

Iranian food, with its kebabs, fruit and spicy rice dish was delicious. But one night in Mashhad the effects of Western consumerism and fast food tempted me in the form a fast-food burger restaurant named Wimpy. This was either a Wimpy franchisee or a local clone of the multinational chain. In one guidebook, maybe the BIT, the writer showed an emphatic and virulent animus towards Wimpy and its offerings but refrained from naming it to avoid legal repercussions, he added. I thought the meal a little bland but hardly vile, and remember enjoying Wimpy burgers at their London Victoria Station outlet. Perhaps a case of "your mileage may vary."

The next day at the Taibad border post, I discovered was a problem with my visa stamp. It said I'd be exiting Iran at Bazargan on the

Turkish border, not the Afghan one. Not to worry, the smiling Iranian officer said. Minutes later, I was singled out for special attention, while twenty of us were standing in front of another immigration officer. That fellow stood on a platform behind a podium which all our stamped passports were. Once we got those, we'd be free to proceed to Afghanistan. "Who's the American here?" he asked. I was the only one. "Come here," he instructed.

"I want to thank you very much on behalf of Iran for visiting our country. I wish you a safe voyage ahead and hope you will one day be able revisit my country," he said while handing me my passport and vigorously shaking my hand.

Then he called out the other nationalities: German, Italian, Norwegian, etc. and threw them their passports. I remember feeling embarrassed and have wondered whatever became of the official in the years ahead. If I had to guess, he either went into exile or, seeing which way the wind now blew, changed his tune to something more suitably hostile towards the "Great Satan" and its citizens.

## FROZEN IN TIME?

SEVERAL MILES, I believe, separated the Iranian and Afghan checkpoints. The minibus fare to the Afghan post was pricy, and the drivers refused to bargain. I suggested to four or five of us that we walk the distance, forgetting David Kunst and his brother's story. An Italian backpacker on his second journey east went ballistic. "Are you f\*\*king crazy?" he yelled. "That's the stupidest thing you could do! There are armed bandits in that area. Do you want to die?"

No, I didn't, I replied, chastened. The minibus brought us to the Afghan side and the Islam Qala border post where we got our passports stamped. I made a note in Herat that night about opium use at Islam Qala. We backpackers knew it best to have evidence of required vaccinations in order to avoid the possibility of customs jabbing us with the used needles they had. On the subsequent bus ride from Islam Qala to Herat, there was some momentary excitement when the driver prepared to battle with a passenger, an older Afghan man who refused to pay his fare until he'd arrived at his destination.

\* \* \*

Herat was by far my favorite stop on the hippie trail though I stayed but three or four days. The city had some 100,000 inhabitants then, but it felt more like an overgrown village or medium-sized town. It wasn't too hard to find a cheap hotel. The bus driver drove to one where he had a commission, but we demurred and went to another the Italian said was much better. Discerning budget travelers could choose

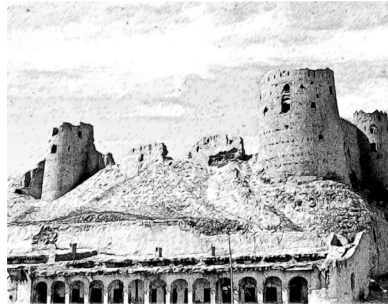
among the Bezhad, the Super Bezhad, and the New Super Bezhad, all named for Kamal ud-Din Bezhad, a celebrated miniaturist painter who died in Herat in AD 1535. He's buried just north of the city.

The Italian brought us to the Super Bezhad where a bed cost 40 afghanis, equivalent to US\$0.75. That was a bit on the expensive side for the country but seemed the most popular and recommended of the the Bezhads. Not too far from its entrance, I'd trade for the unloved sheepskin coat and, for 150 afghanis, buy a curved, bone-handled dagger I still have.

At the risk of overdramatizing a brief stay, I thought Herat everything I'd imagined Afghanistan would be. You could walk about the city center with ease, but it was much more fun to use the the horse carts known as *tongas*; those acted as taxis and produce haulers. Herat, I wrote in letters home, was "like stepping back into the Bible," a religious metaphor likely of offense to many Heratis, whether Sunni or Shia, modernizing or traditionalist. "Resembling a movie set" was preferable. I always wanted to return there, even filling out an unsuccessful US Peace Corps application and listing Afghanistan as a preferred posting.

Herat had plenty of craftsmen's shops: silversmiths, weavers, glass-blowers and more. Shops and stalls sold carpets, knives, glass, lapis lazuli, assorted items of clothing, fruit and vegetables. One could just wander the streets at will or stop for tea with Heratis, observing vignettes of local life along the main roads and in the smaller, dusty alleyways. People were friendly and hassles were non-existent. The effect was atmospheric.

Only two minor incidents marred the general conviviality. In the first, four of us stood outside Herat's famous citadel, just down the road from the Super Bezhad. The Italian backpacker insisted we go inside just as Alexander the Great had done so over two millennia before.



*Herat Citadel*

Many writers attribute the citadel's first iteration to Alexander, whether accurately or not. Subsequent conquerors and the elements took their toll over the centuries, however, and the structure looked almost a ruin. A smartly dressed and armed soldier halted us. The Italian, who spoke some Dari or Pashto, tried to facilitate our entrance with a small bribe. Within seconds, he was lying on the ground, nose bloodied after the soldier punched him in the face. We became alarmed, but after picking himself up the Italian said not to worry.

He said we can't go in because it's now a military base, but look at that place. How could anyone think of putting a base inside? I didn't believe him and thought he wanted money, so I offered him a few afghanis. Then he did this. It surprised me...No, it wasn't a surprise that he punched me. I can't believe he didn't take the money. This is Afghanistan.

Both Genghis Khan and Tamerlane (aka Timur the Great) assaulted Herat, once known as the Pearl of Khorasan. Shah Rukh, one of Tamerlane's sons and successors, undid much of the damage his father inflicted on the city and its citadel and made Herat his capital. Under the Timurids, it became an influential center of learning, one noted for its architectural styles, particularly in mosques and mausoleums.

In recent years, the Aga Khan Foundation has renovated and restored the citadel to something of its original glory, but in 1975, it appeared from outside to be dilapidated and crumbling. Nevertheless, the massive sandstone fortress glistened in the bright overhead sunlight, suggesting that while hurt by the ravages of ferocious invaders

and advancing age, it still stood proudly for all to admire, psychologically unbroken.

Walking back to the Super Bezhad, we ran into a scraggly Frenchman begging on the streets. He approached us almost with menace, hands out and demanding money. But with his sunken wild eyes, constant fidgeting, and almost cadaverous appearance, he looked unable to hurt anyone but himself. The Italian knew him.

"He's just a junkie; he's hooked on heroin. His girlfriend just left him and went on to Iran because he's broke and has hepatitis, syphilis, and maybe something else. I don't think he'll live much longer; we can ignore him."

There wasn't much of a black market for Afghan currency at the time, so I went to a bank to change some dollars. However, one bank teller was open to a better rate without my asking. He instructed me to wait a few seconds while he emerged from behind the counter. "If I stayed there," he explained, "I'd have to act in my official capacity and charge you the official rate. Here in front of the counter, I can offer more." The distinction was lost on me as we were still inside the bank, but I thanked him. The Irish nationalist from Belfast—he was also in Herat—had a different experience.



*Herat mosque*

I've met Canadians who decorate their backpacks and jackets with multiple maple leaf patches, in part for national pride but more to avoid being confused for Americans. But the Northern Irishman went a step further in his animus towards things English: He refused to carry British pounds, either as notes or in travelers cheques. Instead, since Irish pounds weren't that fungible, he had thirty to fifty Scottish five-pound notes, his entire stash. In Herat, these notes, legal tender in Scotland and often accepted elsewhere in the UK, baffled both Herati



bank clerk and local moneychangers. For example, the 1975 Bank of England five-pound note featured Elizabeth II on its obverse (and the Duke of Wellington on its reverse side). Scottish banks had their own design ideas. The Bank of Clydesdale, one of the issuing authorities, had the poet Robert Burns on its five-pound's front and a large mouse on the back. Afghans knew who the queen was, less so of Burns, the author of *Ode to a field mouse*, a poem warning what happens one's best-laid plans.

No bank or moneychanger would change the Scottish notes in Herat. We later heard the Northern Irishman found a fellow traveler agree to buy one or two notes, giving him enough to get to Kabul where he hoped to sort things out. Legally, foreign banks were not obliged to accept Scottish money. Some had during the Northern Irishman's travels, but in Herat, this was not to be.

Some days before at American Express in Tehran, I'd been lucky. Sweat had gotten onto one of my travelers cheques, hidden in a money belt around my waist. The moisture caused the word VOID, in large letters, to appear on the obverse. The Iranian bank teller said there was nothing he could do since he wanted no trouble with his manager. But, he added, "You can try the teller at the main counter upstairs. She has bad eyesight and it wouldn't surprise me if she can't see those letters. Then it's her problem." It worked.

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One night several of us went to the Herat Samovar, a restaurant located under the tourist office. Dinner was not cheap at 100 afghanis (US\$2), but it proved to be a veritable feast: delicious bowls of rice in meat sauce and potatoes accompanied by dozens of kebab skewers. The restaurant's furnishings were reminiscent of the Istanbul's Sark Club with its red carpets and plush, comfortable cushions but the interior lacked any hint of impropriety. There was entertainment. At first, a mandolin musician strummed local favorites. Then, an Afghan woman, speaking through a translator, related folk story. In truncated form, it went like this:

In years past there was this young man. He loved a woman here in Herat very much and wanted to marry her, but the woman's family objected. The man was too poor, they insisted, as was his family. Therefore, he could not afford to marry their daughter. Only if he were to earn enough

money would her family relent and allow the marriage to proceed, despite the man's abiding love for the woman and hers for him.

So, he went into the mountains to earn a living as a shepherd. He worked for other people who owned the sheep and goats. This young man endured horrible cold winters and blistering summers. His was a most difficult life. The man was almost always alone and had to face snowstorms, dust storms, wolves and other perils. Unlike what many people believe, the work itself was strenuous, and he needed to take great care with the animals; you don't just sit and watch them. To lose them would have ruined him, so he worked diligently. He did this year in and year out, suffering great physical and mental hardships. Only his love for that young woman kept him going. And the young woman waited as promised.

Finally, after eight years, he came down from the mountains. By then, he'd saved enough to marry his beloved and start their life together.

At this point, the storyteller concluded and didn't continue. We asked the obvious: "What happened then? Did they marry and live happily after that?"

"No," she replied. "As soon as he came down from the mountains, he became very and died almost immediately." That was it, a story that should have had a happy ending but didn't. The signs were probably in the telling had we listened closer or understood the original Dari. It was, I later thought, something of a metaphor for Afghanistan. The more open 1970s, the hard work and optimism gave way to destructive outcomes after Daoud's April 1978 assassination. Troubling signs were there in 1975, but we noticed not a one.

## HONEY FOR SALE

BY THEN, I'd teamed up with four or five others on their way to Kathmandu and beyond. We decided on a direct bus to Kabul after westward-bound travelers insisted Kandahar was dusty and hot, as well as dull and too religiously conservative.

Had we been familiar with the late Nancy Hatch Dupree's excellent *An Historical Guide to Afghanistan*, there'd have been little justification for our dismissal of the place. Kandahar was already an ancient settlement 2,500 years ago when the Persian ruler Darius the Great built a highway network connecting it with other cities in his empire. Two hundred years later, Alexander the Great rebuilt the city, naming it Alexandria Arachosia. Its current name is a derivation of the Macedonian's. As of 1977, Kandahar was, according to Dupree, thriving and justly famed for its orchards and markets.

Also, her book confirmed that the Afghan military was using Herat's citadel, so offending the upright soldier was on us. My excuse for ignorance in those days was I wanted to see, hear and smell places before learning more about them. That, I believed, inspired fresher perspectives. More likely, it just channeled a kaleidoscope of passing first impressions into pre-existing or inchoate notions. Wisdom, as Hegel said, arrives when the owl of Minerva spreads its wings, late in the day.

Over half the bus passengers were locals traveling short distances. In the way of strangers meeting, we attempted communication, punctuated with gift offerings back and forth. I remember a tribesman with three wives seated behind him on the bus. He handed me a mostly

rotten apple with visible maggots. What to do? I avoided offense by eating some of it and mimed that I had a queasy stomach and would save the rest for later. Once the man and his spouses disembarked, I tossed it.

We passed through arid, rugged and captivating countryside. While the foreground was mostly flat, small craggy mountains and foothills loomed in the distance from time to time before giving way to more level and open terrain, punctuated by the occasional nomadic, tented settlement and camel herder. Despite a lack of contrasting colors, the hills distinguished themselves in black, gray and brown shades, varying with the light's intensity. Vegetation was sparse though rows of trees had lined the roadsides closer to Herat, and one saw occasional patches of cropland or scrub further on. There were shrines and villages, the latter comprising mud-hut compounds. As we neared Kandahar orchards came into view.



*Between Herat and Kandahar*

The highway—Afghanistan's main transport artery—was part of a ring-road system intended to link Herat with Kandahar, Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif. In the south, it paralleled the route Darius the Great had built. Competing great power rivals, the US and the USSR worked on separate sections. The Soviets helped with the Herat to Kandahar stretch, and the Americans did their bit from Kandahar to Kabul. Except for a thirteen-kilometer rail line at the border with the Turkmen Soviet Republic, Afghanistan had no railways in 1975.

After a brief stop in Kandahar, a dimming, dusty memory, we paused hours later for a short break at Ghazni, a small city that had once been a capital like Herat. The tenth-century conqueror Mahmud of Ghazni had made the namesake city his center. From there, he seized

territories from Persia to India. The Ghaznavid Empire lacked staying power and declined after Mahmud's death.

While we ate and drank tea in Ghazni, a tall, burnous-wearing man wielding an ax came by and watched us, glowering. No one thought to ask him why.

The bus reached Kabul around midnight. We backpackers went to the Shahi-naw area of the capital where Chicken Street (real name: Chahrahi Tauraboz Khan) was and knocked on the gates and doors of by-now, locked guesthouses. After a while, one, the Green Guest House, opened up and let us in. Dorm beds ran a mere 25 afghanis (US\$0.40).

Today, it's impossible to imagine impecunious foreign travelers wandering around Kabul at midnight, banging loudly on doors and requesting rooms. Independent foreign travelers do sometimes pass through Kabul, but later write of seeking "low profile" hotels and being disguised as locals so as not to attract undue attention.

As Rory Maclean noted in his 2007 book, *Magic Bus: On the Hippie Trail from Istanbul to India*, the decades of strife and carnage in Afghanistan have produced a sea change in personal security worries. Internationals based in the capital typically stay in secured hotels and compounds, rendering them more isolated from local people than we in the hippie trail days were. Given the ongoing, as of 2019, civil war and the Taliban's frequent attacks in Kabul, many foreigners take such physical and social distancing for granted. And not just outsiders. Locals with known connections to international companies, agencies and embassies who work in the country face death threats. Their position is more precarious since they have families in-country and lack the escape hatch a foreign passport provides. Such social isolation can be self-defeating for the aims of foreign aid, diplomatic and military programs.

Even rural villagers receive warnings from the Taliban. The insurgents often couch their *shabnamah* (night letters) as implied threats or metaphors. One well-known example is: "The Americans have the wristwatches, but we have the time."

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For a brief period after 2001, conditions didn't appear as dire as they do now. The idea was that an end to strife would foster healing, reconciliation and reconstruction. Though hardly high on the list of priorities in a ravaged country where human rights, basic infrastructure, good

governance and personal safety needed immediate attention, perhaps part of the old overland trail, minus cash-starved hippies, could be revived and tourism revenue aid in reconstruction.

In 2002, Rory Stewart walked through central Afghanistan from Herat to Kabul, relying on his wits, local hospitality, and a decent familiarity with regional dialects. Despite winter weather and dangerous moments, the British ex-parliamentarian lived to tell the tale, something Stewart wrote about in his book, *The Places in Between* (2006). Dressed to blend in, he had two Afghans as bodyguards for the first part of the trek but walked mostly by himself, accompanied only by a large fighting dog named Babur.

In Rwanda in 2008, I met a young, adventurous British woman on vacation from her flight attendant job with Emirates Air. She told me that a few years before she'd hitchhiked by herself from Peshawar in Pakistan through the Khyber Pass to Kabul without incident. Furthermore she wandered the Afghan capital and surrounding region with few worries about safety.

Kabul had the feel of a colorful, laid back urban center with semi-rural trappings. In the 1970s, it boasted some 750,000 inhabitants, a far cry from the 4.6 million estimated now. It's been Afghanistan's capital since 1776; even earlier, in the sixteenth century, it briefly served the same function for Babur, the first Mughal emperor. Babur described Kabul as "a scenery of mountains and valleys, wilderness and gardens, so beautiful that the realization of this beauty completely satisfies human taste."<sup>1</sup>

In 1975, while younger Kabuli women didn't dress as provocatively as their Iranian counterparts in Tehran had, they did so more casually than the women I saw in Herat. Burqas, albeit frequently visible in the capital, were not mandatory. In clothing, at least, the modern mixed with the more traditional. Kabul's setting was without doubt picturesque. Though already situated at roughly 5,900 feet, the far higher, snowcapped Hindu Kush range rose majestically in the distance.

\* \* \*

One afternoon, I witnessed some marketplace justice. Three of us, a Canadian, a tall, thin Dutchman named Willem and I, walked through a bazaar when I noticed a young boy, no older than ten, following close behind. He edged closer to Willem and matched his steps, gazing intently at Dutchman's shoulder bag. I signaled to the Canadian that we

should back up and be ready to stop the lad, should his hands go into the bag. They did and we grabbed the boy's shoulders, spinning him around.

We only meant to scare him. But all this took place in front of a shop stall and the lad received more than a fright. The stall's owner ran out and decked him, knocking him out cold. It was, the man communicated, bad for his business that the attempted theft had occurred there.

Later, a bedraggled, bearded older man approached and followed us. In fact, he'd pester us and others on successive days, ignoring our brusque calls to back off. All he'd say, and in English, was, "I have something for you, honey!" with rising stress placed on the last word. We assumed he was gay, aggressively so, and wanted company. Local men in Afghanistan often walked together holding hands, and, despite being told that didn't mean they were gay, the first impression took some time to shake.

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The Chicken Street neighborhood was popular with freaks and backpackers. Aside from bakeries where everything tasted the same, there were stalls selling sheepskin coats, rugs and assorted knick-knacks. Bakeries abounded but all too often their visually enticing and varied offerings possessed the same bland taste. Used English books were also popular, and sellers set their prices according to page counts. Thus, a copy of Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea* cost much less than an 800-page lowbrow saga of lust and greed by Harold Robbins. Sigi's, a German-run hotel and restaurant near the Pakistan Embassy, was very popular place for dinner and justly famous for its freak ambiance. Once inside, I was transported far from Kabul: to a mix of surreal college campus and psychedelic nightclub.

We sat on large cushions facing an interior central courtyard containing a massive chessboard. Each three-foot high chess piece was recognizable, whether as a pawn or more powerful rook or queen. Strobe lights, placed at corners well above the courtyard, radiated downward onto the pieces. Rotating multi-colored disks fronted the strobes. The effects was mesmerizing and the musical accompaniment loud. We heard one song several times: You Won't Get Fooled Again by the English rockers *The Who*. The song's lyrics conveyed a meaning I didn't realize at the time. One should be wary of revolutions; they often sweep aside ideological distinctions and devour their young.

As I enjoyed a tasty mutton dinner that would have its revenge over the next few days, one traveler not with us pulled out a hash pipe and began puffing away. His reverie ended when management quickly intervened, telling him to put it out or leave. Smoking hash was now illegal in Afghanistan, they said. Sigi's also forbade sleeping in the restaurant, so one had to avoid becoming overly comfortable on those cushions and dozing off to dreamland.

"I'm sorry," the traveler responded sheepishly. "It's that I've just come from Kathmandu, and I got so used to smoking there. There was no hassle, none at all. I didn't think you couldn't smoke here."

In fact, by 1973, the production and sale of cannabis were illegal in both Nepal and Afghanistan, reportedly under pressure from American president Richard Nixon, then engaged in his "war on drugs." Enforcement was another issue. In Nepal, usage went indoors, if that, while in Afghanistan then, one could still get high without much fuss even though establishments like Sigi's followed the letter of the law more strictly to avoid being targeted.

In May 1973, an American diplomatic cable, since released by Wikileaks, accused King Zahir's retainer, a man "closer to the King than any of his sons" of trying to smuggle 40 kilograms of hash oil into the United States. The cable advised that the shipment be halted, the contraband seized, and any Afghan embassy staff members dealt with. But as for the king's man, the "delicacy of the case" needed to be understood. They were to leave the retainer untouched.

That same January, American agents from the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs kidnapped Dr. Timothy Leary, the famous counterculture figure and "High Priest of LSD" at Kabul Airport. Leary, who'd been sprung from prison in 1970 by the Weather Underground and smuggled to Algeria, had dallied with other radical groups like the Brotherhood of Eternal Love (aka the "hippie mafia"). From Kabul, American law enforcement flew Leary to Los Angeles, imprisoning him and hitting him with a huge-for-the-time, pre-trial bail of US\$5 million.

Some travelers were already serving time in Afghan jails. We speculated as to what conditions there were like inside them since they had to be many levels below our grotty guesthouses. No doubt false, one rumor painted them as mere holes dug into the ground, with the unfortunate prisoners tossed into them.

Being stuck in an Afghan jail guaranteed you a room but not necessarily full board, other backpackers said. Often your sentence included fines, and you remained incarcerated until you paid those off, either by



working for pittances inside the prison or by receiving money from friends and family. Meals for busted foreigners were being taken care of, someone told us, by the Children of God. This was an American cult, now known as The Family International, whose followers became notorious for "flirty fishing," the group's term for having its female followers use come-ons and sex to entice young men into join. They lived in a commune near Chicken Street. In Amsterdam several years later, an American female acolyte accosted a British backpacker and me on the street and seductively begged us to visit their center that night. We did go to see how far we could get without any commitment to join, but the atmosphere became too weird and we left after a few hours.

In Kabul, the same traveler who'd told us of their prison work said he'd met the sect members in town and had a long chat with them. "They've asked for all of us to drop by one evening and meet them but not to bring Afghans with us."

"Did they mean Afghan money or hounds?" we asked, confused. They'd probably want money, wouldn't they?

"No, they meant Afghan people. They say they're dirty and they don't trust them."

"Imagine being locked up in some jail, and to eat better, you need to listen to that lot preach to you?" one of us observed. It was, I thought, another reason to avoid getting into trouble.

\* \* \*

The morning after our dinner above the psychedelic chess set, a group of us boarded the daily Pakistani government bus that went through the Khyber Pass to Peshawar. A call went out for one person, a Canadian who was running late. At the last minute, he showed up, disheveled and more a little stoned. He'd smoked a fair amount of hash the night before.

This fellow, whose name I've forgotten, was a skinflint and hard bargainer, arguing over minuscule amounts. However, the drug's effect released him from those limitations and transformed the Canadian into either the worst shopper in Kabul, or, from a seller's perspective, one of the best. That night he prowled the streets and alleyways on a shopping binge, often paying more than they asked and without haggling. Sensing an easy mark, sellers offloaded unwanted wares. The Canadian's shoulder bag was stuffed with over fifty-dollars worth—a decent sum for us—of junk: broken leather sandals, colorful Afghan-style shirts

with large holes or rips, belts missing buckles, assorted broken bric-à-brac, obscure metal items of no discernible use, plus one or two well-worn, potboiler novels missing pages.

But it was one purchase that intrigued us the most: a small jar of honey for which he'd also well overpaid. "Remember that old guy who kept following us all around?" the Canadian asked. "He was a honey salesman. That's all he wanted to do, sell us some honey, and I gave him five dollars for this? I must've been really f\*\*ked up!"

## CROSSING BORDERS

THE JOURNEY from Kabul to Peshawar was dramatic. We first descended through the treacherous Kabul Gorge to Jalalabad. In 1842, on or near this gorge, tribesmen annihilated a retreating British military expedition as only a few Indian sepoy and a British military surgeon reached Jalalabad alive. The British incursion had comprised some 4,500 soldiers and 12,000 camp followers, and many of the latter were Afghan women. They'd formed liaisons with the foreigners and feared, with good reason, retribution.

The 1842 disaster, along with the Soviet defeat and the present American debacle, is why observers often call Afghanistan the "graveyard of empires." Perhaps it is, yet more talented or ruthless invaders such as the Macedonians, Sassanians and Mongols managed to keep control for extended periods.

By 1975, danger in the gorge came not from tribal levies firing their flintlocks from the jagged peaks above before charging downward with scimitars drawn. It came from predation and hazardous road conditions. On October 21, 1972, about 32 kilometers east of Sarobi village, the two world-walking Kunst brothers were camping when bandits attacked and killed John Kunst, shooting him twice and fatally in the neck. Although wounded, David Kunst played dead for an hour while the bandits ransacked the brothers' belongings. Help arrived in the form of local police five hours later after a passing truck driver alerted them. They took the surviving brother to a Kabul hospital to begin a four-month recovery process.

In the 1970s and today, the most immediate threat to life and limb

comes from road accidents. The attack on the Kunst brothers would also claim victims that way. The Afghan military sent soldiers to find the bandits, but their vehicle overturned on a road curve. Two soldiers died and six others were severely injured.

The highway had been paved a few years before we traveled it so it was smooth enough. However, the sheer cliffs, sharp curves overlooking narrow ravines, and terrible motoring habits of local drivers made for frequent accidents and regular fatalities. Buses only traveled through both the gorge and over the Khyber during daytime. Night travel was just too dangerous.

Today, you need to add a deteriorating asphalt surface and the Taliban to the mix of hazards. It's easy to see why some consider this roadway stretch the world's most deadly. CNN, the American news outlet, rated dangerous roads and gave the Kabul Gorge section a 9.5 out of 10, its highest death rating.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the roadway's decent paved surface in 1975, our old bus still bumped along. That hurt my insides, the mutton dinner having by now declared war. My only memory of Jalalabad is of the checkpoint's outhouse where I needed to spend some quality time. It was fetid and reeked to the nth degree.

Forty-six miles past, Jalalabad, we reached the Afghan customs post at Torkham. The conductor ordered us to pass our passports forward and ensure each contained either 50 afghanis or one dollar. Those documents came back with exit stamps but minus the money, something that surely eased our passage and avoided lengthy baggage searches. Just before the Pakistani border post, a rush of tribesmen, at least twenty, approached the bus. They carried large sticks of hashish for sale and pushed them through the coach's windows for anyone interested to inspect. Ironically, the bus had stopped beside a prominent English-language billboard stating that such drugs were illegal and severe penalties existed for possession. But tribal writ ran here, not any government's.

Close by the Pakistani post, another sign stood but not one about drugs. It went something like this: "Photographing tribal women without permission is illegal and dangerous." I asked another passenger why:

The Pakistan government doesn't really control anything here. The tribes do. If you take a photo of a Pathan's wife, you've insulted him and that could start a blood feud. He'd have to answer what you did in order

to maintain his honor. It doesn't matter whether you hide or die before they get you because they'll go after your family. And these feuds can last for generations. I heard that one Pathan even traveled to London to find someone's son twenty-five years after whatever it was that started the feud. He then killed that son of his enemy.

It's wise not to offend local sensibilities. However, if when in Rome, you can't always do as the Romans do, it helps to have Roman friends. For David and Pete Kunst, upon entering Pakistan, that came in the person of a tribal leader who walked with them during that stage of the resumed journey. The man told the brothers, whether accurately or not, that they were the first non-Asians to traverse the Khyber since the Macedonian phalanxes pushed their way through.<sup>2</sup>

\* \* \*

At Torkham, the Pakistanis performed cursory searches of our bags, but they weren't interested in drugs. They were looking for maps. If you had one showing any part of Kashmir as being under Indian control, customs would confiscate it. Since only maps not made in Pakistan would, any ones we had would be suspect. However, the officials uncovered no offending cartography.

One passenger, an older, mandolin-playing American hippie, did have a problem. Immigration wanted us to list our occupations on their immigration entry forms. Almost everyone wrote "student" which satisfied immigration. However, the American left the space blank, so the official asked why. He was "flowing" the American replied. Occupations, he added, were mundane and materialistic, and he was well beyond that. Flowing meant living in the moment, and to do otherwise, he insisted, was only pretending to live. The unsympathetic official demanded he answer the question, regardless.

After more argument, the mandolin player, by now perturbed, declared, "All right, I'm a meditation teacher. There, are you satisfied now? You can write that down on your dumb form."

"Oh sir, what kind of occupation is that?" the official asked, all the time giggling. "That is most silly. I tell you, it is the most silly thing I am hearing today. How can you support yourself in such a ridiculous thing? That is not a real job."

Any remnant of a hip demeanor lost, the American abandoned the flow and retorted: "It is a real job. It's the best goddamn job in the

whole world! And it's better than being a stupid, worthless customs official like you!"

The official, who'd been baiting the American to amuse himself, stamped the flowing meditation teacher's passport and let him continue on the bus.

The Khyber Pass was less rugged and scary than the Kabul Gorge, but the famous pass has quite a history. Hilltop forts—still occupied, I was told—dotted the rugged landscape. In their sandstone hues, those forts matched their semi-arid surroundings. The route was divided into two parallel paths, marked off by a signpost: one for vehicles, the other for camels. Overall, the setting didn't appear so much medieval as it did pre-medieval, reminiscent of a Dark Age milieu where the controlling legions had long since departed and security devolved to localized warrior castes.



*Khyber Pass*

The pass has been both an invasion route and a trade one. Persian forces under Darius the Great traversed it over 2,500 years ago. Alexander's main column probably came this way two hundred years later, although the conqueror himself took another route. Still others followed after Greek power faded: Parthians, Kushans, Hephthalite Huns, Sassanians, and Arabs. Mahmud of Ghazni's tenth-century armies used the Khyber; subsequently Mongols, Mughals and British

did as well. In recent years, it's been a vital supply route for NATO forces in Afghanistan.

In the time of the Kushan Empire (AD 100 to 300), a polity controlling large parts of what's now Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, the Khyber facilitated long-distance trade and was linked to the heavily traversed Silk Road routes further north that went via the Ferghana oasis, also under Kushan control.

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Our one brief stop of less than an hour was at Landi Kotal, a small town with a rail line (defunct as of 2006) connecting it with Peshawar. Foreigners could not stay the night in Landi Kotal, we'd been informed, though later in New Delhi, I'd meet an Englishman who had. The town was an important settlement in Pakistan's Wild West, or to be more accurate, its northwest. Its market teemed with money traders, fruit sellers and other commercial activity. Most of tribesmen carried rifles, and many of those resembled relics. Were they Lee-Enfields, perhaps? In Landi Kotal, talented local gunsmiths were not just rehabilitating older weapons but fashioning new ones, or new-old ones like many of those Lee-Enfields, from scratch.

As our bus exited the Khyber and came onto level terrain, we saw, off to the right, the garrison base of the locally recruited Khyber Rifles, part of Pakistan's Frontier Corps. I knew of this unit from the 1953 Hollywood film, *King of the Khyber Rifles*. In that production's filming, scrubby Californian hill land near Fresno had substituted for the Khyber. But we were seeing the real thing.

Three of us, Willem, a heavy-set Canadian named Larry and I, got a spacious room with four beds at Peshawar's Rainbow Guest House, popular with freaks, despite its misspelled "no smocking hashish" sign and noisy location near the railway line. On the plus side, the room cost just 12 rupees, or less than US\$2. With my bowels still disturbed, I declined a chance to explore the city and crashed on one of the beds. I did, however, see enough of the immediate area near the hotel to notice several gaudily decorated transport trucks and the prevalence of men carrying rifles. Willem and Larry ventured outside for a better look and locked the door behind them, using a padlock management had provided. That way, in case I fell asleep, our gear would remain safe.

Within thirty minutes, I heard a slight sound just outside, that of a latchkey turning inside a lock. Intrigued, I said nothing and remained

quiet while the door creaked open and someone slowly entered. I did have that Afghan dagger stashed somewhere inside the backpack but didn't think of it then. The unannounced intruder was the hotel manager. Seeing me on my bed, he did a shocked double-take, realizing that his counting of who'd left guest house was off by one. Recovering with impressive quickness, he blurted out, "I wanted to come in and tell you that there are many thieves in Peshawar. You should always be careful to lock the door." I said nothing, but we all bought separate padlocks to forestall any future management malfeasance.

The next day we boarded a bus to Lahore for a nine-hour ride along the ancient Grand Truck Road. Somewhere before Rawalpindi, two men boarded. Standing in the front, they screamed, gesticulated and pointed their forefingers in what we thought was our direction. This continued for ten minutes, and imagining it to be an anti-foreigner harangue, we wondered what to do. The other passengers were nonplussed and that gave us pause. Were they debating whether to join the rabble-rousers or staying mute, grateful for not being targeted?

We could hardly have been more wrong. "Not to worry," a local passenger told us once the screamers disembarked. "Those two are just dentists or claim to be," he added. "They are trying to sell us some toothpastes and pills, and no one wanted to buy anything."

After Rawalpindi, we passed through Jhelum, a small city located on the Jhelum River, a branch of the mighty Indus. I remember thinking for no good reason to myself, "That's an odd name for a city. It sounds like jello." The name may have been derived from an ancient portman-teau word for pure snow water. I didn't know it then, but a few miles from the city, Alexander won his last victory in the east by besting the Indian king Porus and his elephants at the Battle of Hydaspes. Their clash was brutal, and afterwards Alexander, as a mark of respect, allowed Porus to continue ruling. But the conqueror's soldiers were tired, and near today's Amritsar in India, they refused to go any further. Alexander was said to have sulked in his tent for three days, lamenting that there'd be no more worlds to conquer.

In Lahore, we stayed at the Holiday Guest House on McLeod Road near the railway station, a place I made a brief notation about as being a complete hole. The manager was put out that we had padlocks and didn't avail ourselves of his, which he insisted was safer for protecting our gear. That was just as well. The BIT guide warned of that place, whose real name was the Raenbow [sic] Hotel. As word of management



stealing guests' possessions spread, they'd change the name from time to time.

Lahore served as a curtain-raiser for the sweltering, crowded, ever-noisy cities of the subcontinent. India now beckoned, so the next morning, we went to Wagah and the border. There, the female Pakistani official asked everyone us to fess up and turn over their drugs. Her male counterpart lied to everyone by saying Pakistani rupees couldn't be exchanged in India, but that he could, and at an awful rate, perform that noble service for us. The India border was but a hundred yards away but, in my case, the passage to India took a tiny bit longer than that of the other travelers, except for a Franco-German couple whose passports lacked Indian visas. "Got back to Kabul and get them if you want to enter India," Indian immigration told them.

When I reached the Indian side, the official there took a quick look at my passport. He asked, "What took you so long? Why weren't you here yesterday?"

"Your exit stamp from Pakistan is for yesterday," the official pointed out when I looked befuddled. "You need to go back to Pakistan and get them to fix that before we let you in." The Pakistanis did so after asking why I was returning.

I remember being asked to fill out a money declaration on the Indian side. I only had eighty dollars in my possession, thinking that sufficient until I got to the American Express office in Delhi or Calcutta (now Kolkata). Yet eighty dollars was a bit low to tell immigration, because they might peg me as another nearly broke freak come to beg or live off the land. So, I wrote that I had 120 dollars, but no one batted an eye. I've since wondered why I ever thought there was some imaginary higher degree of outward respectability between those two small amounts.

## INTERNATIONAL BOB

“YOU MUST NOT SAY I am Indian, for I do not have one nationality,” the sweating, rotund, middle-aged Indian man in New Delhi declared. “I am all nations; all countries are my friends. You must call me Bob. I am International Bob. I am everyday a very international person.”

International Bob owned the Skyway Guesthouse in India’s capital. Larry, Willem and I checked-in there after a night train from Amritsar. A dorm bed cost five rupees and the cheapest room set you back eight, or one US dollar. The convenient Skyway lay within walking distance of Connaught Circus (a circular downtown boulevard) and even closer to the Nepali Embassy, making it popular with travelers needing visas.

The BIT guide noted that the place was run by an “amazing” character. It wasn’t wrong though the publication didn’t explain why. International Bob was a man with a plan. “Next year will be the [Summer] Olympics in Montreal. So you know, there is much construction and they need workers. It is my plan to send our son. We will follow him once everything is settled here. We need enough money to do this, but I have no doubt we will meet with big successes. Then I close this hotel.”

International Bob worked hard to make a few rupees here and a few there. Bob could help with train tickets, flights, money changing, officialdom issues and more, for commissions, of course. If our floor mattresses were too rough, we could pay more and have the nicest one in his establishment: the one he shared with Mrs. Bob. One night, someone took Bob up on his offer, and the couple decamped to a dingy, single-sized mattress on a dormitory floor, sleeping near other travelers.

International Bob's son, the aspiring Expo 76 construction worker, would also pitch in on other income-generating possibilities. In a low voice, he whispered, "I can get you anything, anything you want: student cards, flights, opium, ganja, heroin. Just tell me; I can get you a good price."

We wondered at times if Bob wasn't more than a little mad. But he appeared harmless, less strident in tone over his foibles than, say, the Irish nationalist from Belfast. I don't know if Bob or any other family member ever made it to Montreal. At least one budget travel guide still listed his hotel as a going concern in the early 1980s, although writers updated their guides' information less frequently back in the day.

Commissions were expected in India. Getting a train ticket meant going to a station, visiting different windows, getting a student discount (if you qualified) accepted, and jostling with dense crowds. That could take hours. Thus, if it wasn't too pricy, help was welcome.

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From Lahore onward, I usually encountered beggars on a daily basis. The question was "what to do?" At first, I gave them small coins, as did many Indians, but that often attracted a crowd wanting more of the same. As the days went on, it began getting a bit overwhelming so I ignored most, except for those who begged alone and looked to be in bad shape, such as cripples or lepers.

India's at fault for this, not us, we'd sometimes tell ourselves. But that sounded like a fudge to mask or explain away both feelings of guilt and those colder, judgmental reactions you sometimes feel when abject poverty stares you in the eyes. We didn't want the responsibility of being our brother's keeper. Unless one knew those unfortunates personally and understood the full context of their predicaments—something that might include mine and other traveler's country's politico-economic role and colonial history—how could we be so dismissive? We possessed literal passports to better opportunities than many of those poor folk would ever have. I believed myself on somewhat firmer ground judging the Western junkies begging on the streets. Those addicts, however suffering and in need of help, inflicted their wretched situations and lack of discipline upon more impoverished societies and competed with local people.

I've never resolved to my satisfaction how to deal with beggars on an individual level. Those face-to-face encounters that haunted me in

India decades ago still resonate. Poverty, despair and dislocation are not, however, unique to the subcontinent, nor are insensitive reactions. In 1997 in Sarajevo, I met a well-compensated Bosnian aid worker who said he'd worked out how one should deal with beggars. It entailed a large serving of tough love:

If a beggar comes up to me and sticks his hand out wanting money, I will punch him hard in the face and knock him down to the ground. If he gets up and tries it again, if he keeps begging, I will punch him again and again. And I will keep on punching him unless he stops begging. Now, if instead he punches me in the face, I will immediately get out my wallet and hand him a hundred US dollars. There, I'll say, you've finally done something for yourself.

One of the the Skyway guests was an English coach driver. He ran a small overland coach business and decided it would make life easier if he could get an Indian driver's license. The Englishman passed on International Bob's services and dealt with the matter himself. He got what he wanted, but there was no avoiding the inevitable surcharges.

When I found which office to go to, I told the chap what I wanted and filled out the application. He had a big pile of them on his desk. He pointed at it and smiled happily but did nothing more, so I gave him mine and the fee. Do you know what he did then? He lifted the pile—there had to be two hundred other applications—and put them all on top of mine. Okay, I get it. I figured something like this might happen anyway, so I got out five dollars and put it on the table. Then, and get this, he takes my application from the bottom. Next, he picked up half the pile and put my paper in the middle. I had to stop myself from laughing. Unreal! I gave the bloke another five. He split the pile, took mine out, and put it right at the top. He did all this without changing his face or anything nothing; he just kept smiling at me. I admire how he did this: no words, nothing, just that smile. But I learned the real price. Very professional in his corruption!

A few days later, I'd pay two US dollars to jump a long queue and see a doctor.

The most talkative traveler at the Skyway was another Englishman, one who enjoyed taking chances. He looked to be in his late 20s or early 30s and was the fellow who'd managed to stay a few nights in Landi Kotal.

"You had to meet the right people. I met someone who put me up with his family. The Pakistanis have a liaison there, but he has no real power. So, the Pathans keep him happy, and he keeps the government happy." The Englishman carried two souvenirs from his stay there: guns, he claimed. No one believed this until he produced one and let us hold it. It resembled an overlarge, metallic fountain pen, but it was a pistol and fired 22s.

"You'd have to be standing no further than a few feet away for these things to hurt anyone, at least that's what they told me," he explained. He'd paid ten dollars for each but bought no bullets. Too risky, he acknowledged.

To operate the pistol, you needed to unscrew the front where the ink tip would be. I can't remember, but you either put the bullet in there or loaded it in the back end of the pen. Lastly, you'd pull down the clip, the part that you might attach to a shirt pocket. Pushing in the clip would send the bullet to its destination, provided everything worked.

One reason the locals allowed him to stay in Landi Kotal, he added, was they wanted to recruit him. "They asked me if I'd drive a car for them, a Mercedes. I asked where to, and they said either Rawalpindi or Lahore. So, I answered that I wasn't completely sure, but was it only to deliver a car?

"No, not really" they replied, "there might be a little something inside the car."

"Something like what?"

"Not much. Just a little opium, morphine, or some heroin."

"I wasn't sure I liked that," I told them, "but I did ask what would happen if I get caught."

"We'll get you out and bring you back here."

"I see, I said, but what about my passport? They'll have kept it, and they know my name, anyway."

"Not to worry about that. We can fix it, but it'll take some time. At the moment, we have a Norwegian man here, and we're getting him a new passport."

We wondered how they'd do that when someone observed, "I wouldn't want to be a Norwegian man passing through Landi Kotal

right now. The simplest thing to do would be to steal his passport and doctor it.”

The Englishman brought his miniature arsenal across the India-Pakistan border. He now wanted to see Kathmandu and then return to India before flying back to London. “I know I can sell each one of these for a hundred pounds, maybe more, in Britain,” he said. “Or perhaps I’ll keep one for myself since they’re cool. The question is: how do I get these past the airport check? Any ideas?”

What followed was a discussion among half dozen of us over possible options. Was the security tougher at Delhi or Calcutta (Kolkata)? Should he stash them in carry-on or in check-in luggage? Or could he try to bribe an antique dealer to write out a certificate making the pistols unusable antiques? No, that might not work. And what about security at Heathrow or Gatwick? Cross that bridge when he got there, he said.

How about sending them by Indian post? No, the post office might insist on seeing what was inside, or the package might get lost, stolen or misdirected. There’d been talk of Indian post office workers steaming the stamps off unfranked letters and parcels and reselling them.

The consensus boiled down to this: he should fly from Kolkata and not Delhi or Bombay since, for unexplained reasons, we thought security would be laxer there. He shouldn’t stash the contraband in a carry-on bag either. Customs were more likely to search that, so check-in was better. Better yet, he might consider buying two bottles of thick, dark hair gel and suspending one pistol in each one. It would obscure the handguns, and the bottles would weigh the same. Would customs open a bottle of hair gel and spill it out? Unlikely, we guessed. I never heard what became of the Englishman and his 22mm pens.

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The train ride from Delhi to Agra took only three hours, but I was ill again. The day before, I’d fainted on Skyway porch after a particularly brutal bathroom session. My “Afghan belly” (some travelers nicknamed those the “Kabul trots”) had given way to a worse case of “Delhi belly” with the added bonus of a rising fever. With the outdoor, daytime temperature approaching 105°F, life became miserable by the minute. I crouched on the carriage floor in agony for much of the journey.

Upon reaching Agra, the three of us located the city’s cheapest and

worst guest house, courtesy of the rickshaw touts who waited for arrivals at the train station. The rooms were round, had cement walls, and lacked windows. The floors were just sand and the bamboo beds lacked mattresses. It was stifling hot inside, even worse than outside: the room both resembled and felt like a tomb. The only way to get any fresh air inside was to leave the thick wooden door open and become a mosquito's best friend. We left.

The Anand Hotel was far better. We booked a large room though one could also sleep cheaper on the roof where it was cooler at night. It was the Anand's Sikh owner who got a local doctor to check me out once the commission changed hands. It looked like infectious diarrhea but there was the slightest possibility of bacillary dysentery, the physician said, though he couldn't be sure without taking proper tests. He gave me antibiotics to take and said I should stick to white rice, boiled potatoes, plain tea and water for at least week. Sugary drinks were out. I'd already lost at least fifty pounds since leaving England. At 5 feet 11 inches and weighing 124 pounds, I looked skeletal.

Two twenty-something foreign women came to stay at the Anand: one French, the other Australian. They'd just come from Kathmandu and told us hepatitis was rampant there. Everyone, it seemed, was coming down with something. The second night Larry and Willem decided I could have the room to myself and moved to beds on the roof where they hoped to enjoy the intimate company of the two ladies. But the latter preferred to share a bed rather than entertain my traveling colleagues.

World news was filtering through, and it began to look problematic for traveling too far further east. Cambodia had fallen to the Khmer Rouge a few weeks before, South Vietnam was no more, and the Royal Lao government looked likely to change hands soon. Would Thailand, which also had a serious communist insurgency, be next, another so-called domino tumbling down? You could go by boat from India to Penang in Malaysia and skip Thailand, but East Timor was also looking dicey. Portugal was shedding its African colonies in the wake of the Carnation Revolution, so would those very budget-friendly Baucau to Darwin flights still be in existence?

I could have stayed in Agra a week, rested up, and kept going, but I decided against it. I'd fly back to Europe, rest up and regain some weight. There'd be another chance for Australia, and I'd only lose what I'd already spent on a train ticket to Raxaul on the Nepali border.

Ill or not, I couldn't just stay in bed all day moaning, or, like

Alexander in his tent, sulking at a journey's eastward limit. And certainly not in Agra. Like Herat, the city had been a Timurid capital, serving a series of Mughal emperors from 1556 to 1648, except for a brief period when the center moved to Lahore. I'd skipped the Friday Mosque and Red Fort in Delhi, but Agra offered versions of both. Moreover, Agra possessed one of the world's greatest architectural masterpieces in the Taj Mahal. One day, the three of us walked around the Friday Mosque and inside the Red Fort, but I most remember the Taj.



*Taj Mahal in Agra, 1975*

Everything about the structure and its grounds was remarkable. The Taj, with its symmetrical style, attractive courtyard and seamless combination of Islamic and Indian elements, represents the pinnacle of Mughal architecture. It was the dry season, so we had clear blue skies combined with a bright overhead sun. The building's white-marble shone brilliantly in the reflected light, although the stone appeared in hues ranging from grayish to pinkish at other times of the day.

Shah Jahan had commissioned the Taj's construction. He was the Mughal emperor from 1628 until 1658 when Aurangzeb, one of his sons, overthrew him, imprisoning Shah Jahan for eight years until he died. Family feuds, even large-scale fratricidal ones, were a common way of determining Mughal succession.

Over the years, Shah Jahan would marry ten women, but it was the third, Mumtaz Mahal, born in Agra of Persian heritage, that he loved above the others. Mumtaz Mahal was said to be a graceful and highly intelligent woman, possessing a predisposition towards beneficent displays of mercy. Shah Jahan was infatuated by her. He listened care-



fully to the third wife, often acting on her advice, and brought her on military campaigns.

It was on one such campaign and during a difficult childbirth that Mumtaz died. The distraught monarch had the Taj built as her tomb. Most writers say the edifice was a monument to his love, but it's likely also one to grief. Aurangzeb, one of the imperial couple's eight sons (they also had six daughters) would place his father's remains near those of his mother's inside the Taj.

Not only was the marble exterior beyond stunning, but the interior also provided a welcome respite from the sweltering heat. I sat on the floor for some time: relaxed, feeling better, and marveling at everything before I rose to view the ornately styled cenotaphs that honor the deceased lovers. It was only after descending into the crypt, their real burial chamber, that the pleasant spell was broken, and my insides threatened to shed any sense of decorum. Here I was in perhaps world's most romantic edifice and I seriously wanted to vomit. Not here of all places, I pleaded with my suffering guts, and for once they listened.

## THE TOOFAN EXPRESS

LARRY AND WILLEM traveled on to Kathmandu, and months later, I heard from them. Larry returned to Canada after spending time in New Zealand while Willem continued on to Indonesia to begin a required volunteer stint. The Netherlands had military conscription in those days, but registered conscientious objectors could perform alternative service, even overseas, and Willem chose that. He'd need to spend a year in Java doing it but ended up getting deported soon after starting his work there.

"I had a copy of *Das Kapital* with me," he wrote. "So I tried to teach the villagers about Marxism."

In the mid-1960s, Indonesia had consumed itself in a bloodbath after a coup attempt by a left-wing military faction, with many of the bloodbath's victims being real or suspected communists. The death count may well have exceeded one million. Willem was lucky that Suharto's New Order government only expelled him. I didn't hear from either after that, but I've since read that Larry became ill and passed away in British Columbia a few years ago.

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It would have been easier to return to Delhi and to fly to Europe from, but I decided to go to Kolkata for that, in part because a money cable was waiting at American Express. From Agra, I ended up taking the 2:30 p.m. Toofan Express to Howrah Station, India's oldest and largest by area and situated just across the Hooghly River from Kolkata proper.

The fare depended on the class: a first-class ticket cost 176 rupees (US\$22), while the cheapest, second-class unreserved, went for US\$49 (US\$6) with half off for international student card holders. In those unreserved carriages, one wasn't guaranteed a berth, let alone a seat, but conductors could assign you ones—if available mid-journey. Given my weakened state, I should have used what remained of the eighty dollars I entered the country with and splurged on first class or at least a reserved second-class one, but I didn't, opting instead for unreserved-class to save money. The 1975 BIT guide cautioned against that. It described second-class unreserved as nightmarish though possibly, it added, worth the experience just once so you could regale shocked family members in later years. It would be the one time on this journey I wrote down copious notes.

My train carriage, or bogie, was already crowded by the time I boarded. It possessed four sets of single seats on one side, plus, across the aisle, booths containing wooden benches facing each other. Above those benches were wooden bunks. All train seats were spoken for when I boarded; even the bunks were filled with passengers sitting on them. People also stood or sat in the aisles. My seating spot, which I was lucky to get, was on a large metal baggage crate wedged in between two facing seats. I was hot and miserable, still feeling ill and dehydrated. According to a sign inside the bogie, a maximum of 36 passengers were to occupy it at a time. I counted 91 and probably missed another five or ten more who stood out of sight.

Every half hour or so the train stopped at a station where a boarding ritual commenced. The ten or fifteen passengers closest to the doors formed a mass unit and tried to block them from opening. Even larger numbers of prospective passers outside applied equal force to try to force their way in. Still others attempted to enter via windows while those inside acted to repel them, treating the boarders as 17th-century merchantmen would do toward buccaneers, with space inside being the unit of value instead of silver pieces of eight. All this inevitably attracted policemen who, siding with the boarders and sometimes wielding rattan sticks, opened the doors. Some of the new passengers would then be carried horizontally through the carriage to wherever a few inches of standing space existed.

Six hours later, the still-crowded train reached Kanpur where I managed to switch from the metal crate to one of the seats facing it. My leg space was inches but it was still a welcome improvement. Though the seats were unreserved, meaning that if you got one you

could keep it, some conductors wrote chits that gave you more specific permission to remain in place. One man showed me a chit he said was for my seat. I refused to move, so he tried the same ploy on the person next to me and the next after that. The conductor who later sold me a chit for the cramped seat said that all the bunks above, throughout the train, had been spoken for. As were all of the better seats in the second-class reserved carriages.

Sleep was barely possible, what with other passengers' heads on your shoulders and knees and, where possible, your feet. One man managed to curl up entirely on my rucksack, which lay on the floor.

For me, the trip wasn't just crowds and tummy rumbles. Once dawn broke, sometime after we passed Varanasi, I could tune out as much as possible the interior hubbub and take in the exterior landscape of Bihar. I remember absurdly thinking that Patna, a city of 650,000 then and over 2 million today, resembled a ghost town. Such is the superficiality of generalizing from the confines of a passing train window. The terrain was level and dry and seemed to stretch limitlessly toward the horizon. It was still deep into the dry season. A few villages stood here and there, as well as the odd tree along with numerous wooden pumps. The latter resembled telephone poles lashed to wooden crosses. Herds of Brahma cattle came into view, some laboring at wells, others munching at the sparse vegetation or otherwise staring off into space. Farmers and, I assume, ordinary villagers came into the dry fields to defecate, seemingly oblivious to the hundreds of spectators passing by on India Rail.

Train stops were more than simply places to embark or disembark. The moment we halted at a platform, peddlers surrounded and entered the carriages. Men with teapots full of steaming brew in one hand, and small reddish clay cups in the other, marched up and down the platform outside yelling "chai," but switching to "tea" once they saw me. Some sellers braved the aisles inside. Other peddlers sold chickpeas, fruit, betel nut, spices, pens, beads and newspapers. One man carrying a large burlap bag filled with ice and Coca-Cola bottles sold the sodas for 12 cents a bottle. Two years later, the Indian government would ban the bubbly soft drink when the parent company refused to divulge its secret formula.

Many peddler sales were preceded by extended haggling. But once the train began to leave the station, bargaining advantage instantly accrued to the buyers. As the train picked up speed, I could see sellers

leaping off onto the platform or to the ground itself, once we'd moved further on, struggling to maintain their balance.

Besides peddlers, there were beggars and sadhus, the latter being mendicant holy men. Some of the former had pocked faces, bloated bellies, varied deformities and skin conditions, suggesting leprosy, but I had no way of knowing for sure. Those unfortunates dressed in little more than rags. The sadhus, easily recognizable with their painted faces and saffron robes, walked up and down the aisles while singing and chanting, holding out cups for donations from pious passengers.

As we entered West Bengal, the parched terrain gave way to something more tropical, lush and inviting. The landscape was now bisected by rivers and streams and dotted with rice plots and foliage, suggesting that small pockets of rainforest existed even in this densely populated state.

Twenty-eight hours after it left Agra, the Toofan Express chugged into Howrah Station. Hundreds of poor lived inside the station, whose high ceiling provided protection from sun and rain. I recall fragments of my stay in the Indian metropolis such as buying what was labeled an old Naga headhunting machete. I had no problem flying out with it. And I took an all-day tour of Kolkata run by the Tourist Office. The tour coach stopped at St Paul's Cathedral, the Maidan and Victoria Memorial among other sites, but what I remember most is a science museum when Indian technological advances were shown. One room was devoted to video and showed what seemed like a limited demonstration of 1950's audio-visual technology: you could film something in one room and see it in another.

So, twenty-seven years after independence, India was still catching up to more technologically advanced nations, I thought then, patronizingly. Yet, by dint of its highly regarded university system, especially in the teaching of mathematics and computer science, India has not only caught up to the West in some disciplines with real-world practical outcomes, but it has moved ahead.

BELATED POSTSCRIPT: ONWARD FROM  
INDIA

IN MARCH 1977, I returned to India, flying to Bombay (now Mumbai) from Nairobi. I wanted to pick up where I'd left off and get to Australia. Money was running low after a few months in Africa, a journey I describe in detail, along with other journeys to Africa, in my new book: *Slow Boats and Petrified Goats: Africa Overland Travel Memories*. I'd end up flying from Kolkata, first to Rangoon (Yangon today) and next to Bangkok, as overland travel across Burma's borders wasn't allowed. Then, I'd go by train to Malaysia and, lastly, fly from Kuala Lumpur to Perth in Western Australia.

India was in a state of political ferment. Soon after I'd left in 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency, jailing her rivals. The unpopular emergency was now on its last legs and the country was in the run-up to elections.

The opposition Janata party's billboards and posters showed a simple message: "Vote Janata for Bread and Freedom." Those of the Gandhi family's Congress Party, however, displayed an unabashed narcissism: "India is Indira; Indira is India." That was misplaced since Mrs. Indira Gandhi and her heir-presumptive son Sanjay were unpopular. Indian voters blamed them, for example, for coerced male vasectomies done in an ill-conceived population-control program. Congress would lose the elections in a landslide.

I only stayed in Kolkata two nights. The first was in the city center and the second in the suburb of Dum Dum, near Kolkata's airport, Dum Dum International. The British had developed the small but deadly dum-dum bullet at an arsenal there in the late 1800s.



*Kolkata street scene*

While waiting for the bus to Dum Dum, I overheard a young American born-again Christian trying to convert two Sikh men. The Sikhs were having none of it.

“So, why are you telling us this?” one asked, perturbed.

“Because, I told you, I’m born again. It’s my duty to spread the good word,” the American said. “I want to save you!” he added.

“How do you propose to save me? I do not know you. What is this born again? How did you achieve such an amazing feat? Please to tell us this,” the Sikh added, in a tone dripping with unconcealed ridicule.

“Because I found Jesus. With his love I was saved and born again. If you aren’t saved, you’re damned.”

“Oh well, I am most happy for you. But, tell me, who are you to decide upon such serious matters?”

On and on they talked past each other. The American didn’t deviate from his smiling, zealous rapture. He was either oblivious to sarcasm or so consumed by faith; it mattered not.

On the road to Dum Dum there was a large, ambiguous billboard that read:

*Calcutta: Cultural capital of India*

*Calcutta: A definition of obscenity*

Harsh, I thought, more so as it was the tourism authority of West Bengal that had sponsored the sign.

\* \* \*

Yangon was a city where the clock had seemingly stopped decades before. Burma's military had overthrown the civilian government in 1962 and nationalized economic life in a ham-fisted way leaving little scope for personal initiative outside of corruption. The country also faced multiple internal ethnic and ideological armed conflicts. This delivered predictable results. By some estimates, the black market controlled over fifty percent of exports and imports.

At the main budget travelers' accommodation in Yangon, the YMCA, I met an eloquent ethnic-Indian trader who observed:

Some years ago I was a respectable gentleman. Myself and my family, we were doing quite well, thank you. I tell you this is very true and people looked up to me. I was the owner of four cinemas here. The government came in and took everything I had. But I did not give up as you can see here. Today, by the grace of God, I am a successful black marketer.

The trader was at the YMCA to meet incoming travelers and buy their duty-free items. Whether you bought them at Calcutta's airport or at Bangkok's, you wanted a bottle of Johnny Walker Red Label whiskey and a carton of 555 International cigarettes. You could live and travel for a week, all your visa allowed, in Burma on what they cost at duty free. You also had to change money at the airport at the horrendous official rate, but two dollars sufficed.

The YMCA was the cheapest place for foreign travelers to stay in Rangoon. At less than a dollar a head, if I remember correctly, we all slept together like sardines on what was a long, wooden dormitory bed. I passed on staying at the Strand, easily the country's most famous hotel. That would have cost only a few dollars. Today, prices start at US\$250 the last time I checked. The Strand, like Singapore's Raffles and the E&O in Penang, Malaysia, was one of those grand Victorian-style colonial hotels that dotted Southeast Asia. Just having high tea at the Strand today costs more than the 1977 room price.

With tourist visas over seven days unavailable, and large parts of the country off-limits, traveling choices outside Yangon were few. It was pretty much Mandalay, Inle Lake, Began or Maymyo, now Pyin Oo Lwin, a hill station. I went north to Mandalay, the country's second largest city and then eastward to Maymyo on separate trains. The second leg provided Burma's answer to *The Little Engine That Could*. It was only on



the third attempt, after backing up twice to increase the steam locomotive's running start, that we were able to crest a steeper grade in the tracks that brought us into the Shan Hills. Everyone in my carriage cheered. Maymyo was a pleasant upland town, home to the country's Gurkha minority. It was strawberry season and many of us gorged on milkshakes using the fruit. Pyin Oo Lwin was also home to Myanmar's West Point or Sandhurst equivalent and so had a strong presence of soldiers. One day a long line of them paraded past the guest house.

A decade later, economic stagnation and profound government mismanagement helped fuel a student-led rebellion the military crushed with great brutality. I've been to that country, now called Myanmar, several times since and written about it for varied publications. There's been economic progress in recent years, but the military still wields enormous power, both politically and economically, and acts with ferocity towards the country's minorities, not least against the despised and marginalized Rohingya who live in large numbers, or did, mainly in Rakhine State. In 2021, and amid public anger, the military overthrew what had been a qualified return to civilian rule, claiming election irregularities as an excuse.

After arriving in Bangkok, I checked in at Malaysia Hotel, another famous pit-stop on the overland route from Europe to Australia. For less than three dollars, you got an air-conditioned room and use of the hotel's pool. The Malaysia also allowed multiple travelers to share rooms. It was one of several hotels that had hosted American soldiers on leave during the Vietnam War; others included the Miami, the Grace and the Atlanta.

When the war ended, those hotel owners needed to attract newer clienteles. The Malaysia pivoted towards backpackers like myself in the 1970s and early 1980s while the Grace, in Bangkok's Arab quarter, became a bolthole for guests seeking the company of prostitutes in the hotel's infamous after-hours coffee shop. The Atlanta, which once hosted US General Westmoreland and his staff, would, by the mid 1980s, tack in the opposite direction. A sign inside during the early 2000's warned that sex tourists, bar-girls, rent-boys and catamites (it used those words) were unwelcome. One interesting footnote: The radio station sequences in the film *Good Morning Vietnam* were filmed on the second floor of the Malaysia. But Robin Williams, the film's lead actor, slept elsewhere in the city, though.

The Malaysia's bulletin board evoked memories of the one at the

Amir Kabir in Tehran. One message was from an American, down on his luck and wanting out:

I'm willing to trade my nationality for an air ticket. I will marry you and help you fill out the papers so you can go to the United States to live. But I need to go home now and have no money for a ticket. I'm desperate so serious people only. Ask for [name] at reception.

One night, a group of us drifted over to Patpong, Bangkok's adult entertainment district. We nursed beers at the Mississippi Queen go-go bar, opened in 1972 by Australian Tony Douglas, an ex-hippie. With the American soldiers no longer arriving in such large numbers for R&R, bar owners also hoped to expand their customer bases. Publicity helped. A few months later, Douglas's bar would get some for free, courtesy of Hollywood, when a film crew came to Thailand to film *The Deer Hunter*. They took over the Mississippi Queen—Douglas closed it for the occasion—to film one of the bar scenes. It featured Christopher Walken as an American soldier and Noi, a Thai bargirl, as a Vietnamese one. The Patpong bar, with its loud music, raucous atmosphere and friendly, scantily-clad ladies, had a more frenetic vibe that Istanbul's Sark Club had, but then it wasn't a brothel like the Turkey establishment was. That didn't mean the girls weren't available as indeed they were. If interested, and one of our party was, you negotiated a separate price with the lady and also paid a bar fine since the establishment would be without her services for the rest of the evening. The two of you then went to a hotel or apartment somewhere.

Bangkok's Australian embassy proved to be surprisingly easy for visas. The cabled funds I received in Kolkata, plus the American Express card I carried for emergencies probably helped.

Before flying to Australia, I stopped in Penang and Kuala Lumpur, staying in cheap hotels. Some budget travelers paid even less in Penang, opting to stay unregistered with local fisherfolk at the nearby Batu Ferringhi beach. The beach is now fronted by hotels and some resort ones charge over US\$100 a night. However, the beach was quieter back in the 1970s. At Batu Ferringhi, however you could get in trouble, staying with local families then since Malaysia didn't want you to. If you were caught, the authorities could deface your passport with a large, and literal, S.H.I.T. stamp: an acronym for "Suspected Hippie in Transit." That was bad enough, but it also meant you had a few days at most

to exit Malaysia. Typically, that meant a flight or ferry to Sumatra in Indonesia.

I met two interesting individuals at the Penang hotel. One, a disillusioned young Dane, had recently come from Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's ashram in Poona, India.

The Bhagwan's followers tossed him out of the ashram at the end of a two-week initiation period. The Poona ashram was, he recollected, a very good place to shed sexual inhibitions and enjoy yourself, but he had limits. There was one thing he wouldn't do. He refused to acknowledge the Bhagwan as a god. "How can a god have asthma?" he asked the sect leader's more devout lieutenants. Bhagwan's asthma was so bad, the Dane said, that sect members used scent checkers to sniff your armpits and other body parts for unacceptable odors before they allowed you into the master's presence. In later years, the sect move to Oregon where its leadership perpetrated the largest incident of bioterrorism (salmonella poisoning) on American soil as part of a voter fraud campaign.

There was also Vietnam War veteran at the hotel, a chatty African-American on a Thai visa run. He'd lingered on in Asia after the war ended and was doing very well, he claimed, as a smuggler:

Look, I do most anything. Antiques, gold, other stuff, you name it, I deal it. I got no problems except one thing. I don't deal in the white powder. I keep my distance. No way you see me dealing the drug stuff... Usually, I got no problems; I know who to pay. One time something goes wrong, don't know why. Thai police say they gonna put me in jail. I say, You gonna put "ME" in jail! Heck! You think I'm scared? You're kidding me, right? I've been in worse places than your jail. Heck, let's go; when we going? I only had to stay a few months, and I had money. You could buy anything you wanted: girls, drugs, whatever. It was almost a vacation. I was popular with the other inmates, and I got them some girls, too.

One time, I tell you, I had to leave town quick. Not here or Bangkok, but Laos. I was staying in Vientiane and doing some really good business. Life was real nice there, and I had a great place near the Mekong. Anything you wanted. If that Pathet Lao crap hadn't happened, I might still be there.

What happened was this: the commies took over, but I stayed and went about my business. My Thai police friend on the border—

we've done some business—said maybe I should leave, but I said, “No, not yet, man. Things are cool; I'll be alright”

One night the Pathet Lao comes to where I'm staying. They say I'm being arrested. So I say, “Hey man, it's really late now, I was just getting ready to sleep. Do I really gotta come now?”

Now they mighta been commies but they're still Lao. Very relaxed like. So they tell me, “No, no, it's okay. We didn't mean to disturb you. You can go to sleep; we'll come over tomorrow morning after you wake up.”

I ain't waiting for that stuff to happen, so I go to the Mekong and swim across to Thailand, leaving all my things behind. Man, I didn't enjoy that. I come up all wet and tired on some really old peasant lady's farm. She babbles something at me in Northern Thai, so I try speaking with her since I know some Thai words. I ask her how to get to the Nong Khai road because my police buddy lives there. Then, this old lady laughs like she's insane and falls on the ground. Next, she just gets up and runs away. I don't know what's going on with all this crap, but I make my way to Nong Khai.

I find my police friend. He's drinking whiskey on his porch. He sees me still wet and all and laughs, saying, “I told you so.” I tell him about the peasant lady and how she laughed like a madwoman after all I did was ask her in Thai for directions.

The police guy says, “OK, tell me what you told her,” so I do. Then he laughs, too. I say like “what's going on, man? What's so funny?” He says I messed up the language and tones really bad. He says I told the old lady I wanted to screw her water buffalo. No wonder she went all crazy like on me!

Australian visa in hand, I still needed a ticket there. In mid-1975, when I first went east, you could travel overland and on ferries all the way to East Timor. That December, however, the Indonesia Army invaded the former Portuguese colony and annexed it, igniting a fierce local rebellion against the Indonesian overlords. You could still fly from Bali to Darwin but that cost a lot more. I'd decided that going to Perth and flying there from Malaysia seemed the best alternative.

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In Kuala Lumpur, I went to buy a ticket from Pan Am, easy enough I thought since I had that American Express card for situations like more

expensive flights. The Pan Am agent went ballistic: "I know what you people [he meant either freaks or budget backpackers, I'm not sure which] do! You scam airlines like ours by buying a ticket just to get a visa and then get the ticket refunded. I want nothing to do with you and your ilk."

I showed him my passport with Australian visa already in hand, plus an onward open ticket to New Zealand with a receipt. The American Express card I bought it with added, I suppose, another ounce of supposed bona fides. The agent, a British expat, realized his mistake and apologized profusely. I was scruffy, he said, but perhaps not one of "you people." He brought me into his office for a cup of tea and explained in detail how some of these airticket scams worked. It did seem that the International Air Transport Association's ticketing and pricing rules were very much meant to be broken. Eight years later in Cairo, and as described in my Africa travel book, I'd meet a straight-out-of-central-casting Greek black-market fixer who did just that.

THE END



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**RICHARD HUMPHRIES** is a teacher, traveler and writer who's taught at Japanese universities, hiked the Appalachian, Camino de Santiago and Everest Base Camp trails and written two books concerned with human rights issues in Myanmar.

His latest book is *Slow Boats and Petrified Goats: Africa Overland Travel Memories*, a description and analysis of Richard's decades-past African journeys: through the Sahara, up the Nile and then overland to East Africa, across apartheid-era South Africa and Namibia, and, in 2008, to the turbulent Great Lakes region.







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