Let's Go Solo

Reflections on Forty-Five Years of Travel

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With Gratitude

~ to my parents
who gave me wings and encouraged me to fly

~ to the Harvard students who researched and wrote
Let's Go Europe
the bible for young travelers for many years

Table of Contents

Author's Note

This book is based on journals written in 1980. I have fact checked as much as possible, but any errors are my own.

Before the European Union, each country had its own currency. I have converted to 1980 dollars for consistency, and I sometimes note the equivalent in 2025 dollars as well. (One 1980 dollar is worth just under four dollars in 2025.)

The spelling of place names can vary over time, and between languages and sources, especially when converting the Greek alphabet to English. For any given place, I chose one spelling and tried to be consistent.

Because the audience for this book is mainly American, I have used miles instead of kilometers.

Prologue

You must go on adventures to find out where you belong. – Sue Fitzmaurice

Which will hold greater rule over you: your fear or your curiosity? – Wonder Woman

A woman who is free to roam the world alone is unstoppable. – Rita Mae Brown

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As I write this book in 2025, it's been forty-five years since I took my first solo journey, at age twenty. This book is about that journey and how it shaped my life, but it's also about the rewards and challenges of traveling—especially traveling alone—the things I've learned in forty-five years of exploration, and some of the ways travel has changed in that time.

In early March of 1980, I took off to backpack around Europe. I'd worked for a year and saved two thousand dollars (equivalent to about $7600 in 2025). My goal was to travel for as long as I could make the money last. I had a compact Sacs Millet backpack and a copy of *Let's Go Europe*, the most popular guide for young travelers at the time.

My money lasted nine months and took me to eight countries: Portugal, Italy, Greece, Holland, Belgium, Germany, France, and England. It was a life-changing and seminal experience that left me eager to expand my travel horizons.

After returning home, I finished college and got married. In 1985 my husband and I joined the Peace Corps. We served two and a half years in Togo, West Africa, and traveled in Ghana, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. In Togo, I spent hours alone on my motorcycle visiting my projects.

I returned to the States in 1987, where jobs, homeownership, two kids, divorce, and single motherhood made international travel economically or logistically impossible for many years. But I never forgot that first solo trip, or my time in Togo, and looked forward to the day when I could head out on my own again.

At last, twenty-six years after my first European adventure, I went off to Mexico to attend a Spanish language school and live with a family for ten days. That delightful experience reinforced my desire for more solo travel.

A few years later I journeyed to Guatemala, where I volunteered with a small NGO, lived with a Mayan family, and took rickety busses to rural villages to meet with women and health care workers. Since then I've gone on several solo trips to Europe, as well as one to Fairbanks (where I did not see the Aurora Borealis—as one person I met said, "It

wasn't my turn."). I've also taken "semi-solo" trips—traveling alone but meeting up with a group—to Brazil, Ecuador, and Jordan.

Hopefully there are many more journeys to come.

Just because I like traveling alone doesn't mean I don't also enjoy traveling with someone else, because I do! But that is an entirely different kind of travel. Traveling solo means there's no one to share the experience with, but it also means the experience is yours to curate and craft. There's no one to coordinate with, so you can go where you want, when you want, and change your plans without anyone else's approval. Solo travel also offers more opportunities for contemplation, observation, and cultural immersion—all things that are important to me.

Travel has changed a lot in forty-five years. In 1980 there was no internet, and no personal computers, digital cameras, or smart phones. Long-distance calls were prohibitively expensive. I rarely exchanged phone numbers or addresses with people I met, because staying in touch would have been impractical. This made for some sad goodbyes. Film and processing were costly, so I didn't take many photos.

I carried only cash and traveler's checks—I didn't have a credit card, and the budget places I patronized probably didn't even accept them. If there were ATM machines, my bank didn't offer debit cards, so the first order of business in a new country was to find a place that would cash a traveler's check. There was no European Union and no euro. Every country in Europe had a border with customs and passport control, and they each had their own currency. To minimize exchange losses, I tried to cross each border with little or no leftover cash.

What was it like being a twenty-year-old traveling alone in Europe in 1980? How did I know where to go and how to get there? What did it cost? What adventures did I have, and what kind of people did I meet? What were the challenges? Ultimately, what did I learn, and how has that influenced my life, and the way I travel now? This book reflects on all of this and more. Some of my experiences are unique to being a woman, but most of them are not.

As I was thinking about writing this book, I wondered whether anyone

would be interested in reading about a trip taken so long ago. But then I remembered how much I love to read about the exploits of travelers from earlier ages, whether Marco Polo in the 1200s, the great British travel writers of the 1800s, or the young people who followed the Hippie Trail in the 1950s and ‘60s.

In a hostel on the Camino de Santiago in 2024, I spent an evening chatting with some intrepid young women who were all traveling solo. They seemed fascinated by my tales of what traveling was like in 1980—No cell phones! No Facebook, Instagram, or WhatsApp!—and their interest encouraged me to follow through on writing this story.

While this book is mostly about my 1980 backpacking trip around Europe, it is also an ode to solo travel in general. As a friend of mine said after returning, exuberant, from her first solo trip at age sixty, “If you never try traveling alone, you’ll never know what you’re missing out on!” Like many things, traveling by ourselves is something we get better at with practice. If you have never been on a solo voyage, I hope this book will inspire you to try it!

Part 1: Taxiing

I'm in love with cities I've never been to and people I've never met. – John Green

Life is short and the world is wide. – Simon Raven

Life begins at the end of your comfort zone. – Neale Donald Walsch

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Delivery Flight

I am not a fearless person—heights? no, thank you!—but traveling solo has never felt scary to me. From a young age I spent time alone—wandering in the forest behind the house where I grew up, going on long solo bike rides, or taking buses into nearby cities to explore. When I travel I stay out of sketchy areas, and use basic street smarts—just like I do in my own town. I believe that if you take common sense precautions, there is no reason to be afraid to go anywhere.

As for my wanderlust, maybe it's genetic. My parents took me on my first cross-country road trip at age three months in their Ford station wagon. When I was growing up, my dad traveled the world for his job and returned with stories, slides, and souvenirs from exotic places. In one of his many roles over the course of his long career at Boeing, he traveled far and wide helping foreign airlines learn about the airplanes they'd purchased. He met people from all over the world, and when they came to Seattle, he invited them to our house for dinner. He knew how lonely it could be for a business traveler far from their home and family. These visitors gave me opportunities to chat with people from multiple countries and practice the French I was studying in school. Thanks to the hostess gifts they brought, I heard music from other cultures, and sampled specialties from other cuisines.

When I announced that I wanted to backpack around Europe, my dad did two amazing things for me. First, he told his European colleagues about my trip, and every single one of them extended an invitation for me to visit, or even to stay with them—a testament to the high esteem they held him in.

The second thing my dad did was finagle me a free ride on a delivery flight to Lisbon. Even in a pre-9/11 world, this had to have been a feat of diplomatic proportions. Air Portugal had purchased a new Boeing 727, and was sending a crew to fly it back to Lisbon. Once there, the interior would be fitted out—for now, it contained just enough seats to get the crew and me across the pond.

On March 4, 1980, my parents drove me to Boeing Field in south

Seattle, where I met the friendly Portuguese crew members for the first time. As I climbed aboard the brand-new plane, I didn't notice that my mom was sobbing. I learned years later how wrenching it was for her to say goodbye to her eldest child, who was only twenty, knowing she might not see me for months, and that our only means of communication would be letters that might take weeks to arrive. Kudos to her for hiding her fear from me. I'm grateful to both of my parents for literally and figuratively giving me wings.

Two crew members with Air Portugal's brand new plane at Boeing Field in Seattle

Flights were much more expensive during my childhood, and few families could afford them. The only other time I had been on an airplane was when I was six years old, and I had no memory of it.

The flight lifted off at 10:30 a.m. As an aeronautical engineer, my dad had often tried to explain the physics of flight, but it still seemed implausible to me—how could anything that big and heavy defy gravity? I was a bundle of nerves as the plane taxied down the runway. When the plane began climbing into the air, fear grabbed my stomach and twisted. I no longer get nervous when flying, but I still marvel at how such an enormous and heavy object can sail through the atmosphere.

After we had risen above the clouds, the summit of 14,410-foot Mt. Rainier appeared in the clear, blue sky. I had climbed most of the way

to the top of this majestic peak just a year before, getting a closeup view of its height and mass, but it looked even bigger from the air, dwarfing the shadow of the plane.

We flew northeast, across the Canadian Rockies, and I saw for the first time how much higher, snowier, and more rugged they are than the Cascade mountains I was so familiar with. Then we were over the Canadian prairie, with its flat, treeless plains stretching for miles. A thin coating of snow blurred the boundary between roads and fields. I marveled at the enormous size of Lake Winnipeg.

The food on the flight was first class—fresh fruits and vegetables, whole wheat rolls, even Perrier. As we flew, I met the crew members. Most of them spoke fluent English. The women were all named Maria, and the pilots were Manuel and José. Francisco, the navigator, was the only unmarried crew member, and was quite the charmer—I made a note to watch out for him. (Just a few years later, electronic navigation systems eliminated the need for civilian flight navigators.)

The 727 was a short haul plane. Air Portugal had bought it to use for inter-European flights, but first they had to get it from Seattle to Lisbon. That meant making several stops for refueling. The first stop was Montreal, where we spent the night. I assumed I would pay for my room, and was nervous about the cost, but the crew said it was all covered by the airline. What a way to start my budget backpacking adventure!

It was wintry cold, and a chauffeured car took us from the tarmac to the terminal. From there we taxied to the Le Chateau Champlain hotel. It had door service, room service, TVs in every room, and marble showers. I had never stayed in a nice hotel, and it all seemed impossibly luxurious. I felt out of place with my backpack, tennis shoes, and jeans. My private room had an enormous bay window with a 180-degree panorama view. The posted rate was sixty-four dollars a night, or $245 today. The crew invited me to dinner, but I was worried it would be too expensive, so I declined.

It turned out that Francisco, the charming navigator, wasn't going to dinner with the others. He called my room, insisted that I shouldn't eat

alone, and invited me to dine with him. I'd had plenty of experience with men promising that there were "no strings attached" when they took me out, but then changing their tune, so I was reluctant to accept.

I would often need to set boundaries on this trip, and I'd get a bit better at it with practice. Meanwhile, my hunger won out over my worries. We ate at L'Escapade, a quiet and chic restaurant on the thirty-sixth floor of the hotel. When I offered to pay for my dinner, he told me the bill would go on his expense account, so I let myself be wined and dined without feeling any pressure to "repay" him for his generosity.

Sunrise over the coast of Portugal

The next day was gray and biting cold, with flurries of snow. For some reason our plane wouldn't leave until that evening—perhaps it was required down time for the crew. Francisco squired me to an expense-account breakfast, then showed me around the city. Montreal had an extensive subway system with underground shops that provided an escape from the winter weather. Aboveground, we walked through the Parc Mont Royal, an expansive open space in the heart of the city where sparkly snow blanketed the trees and muffled the noise of traffic, and

cross country skiers glided along trails. I asked Francisco to teach me some Portuguese, and I struggled with the pronunciation.

By dusk we had boarded the plane and were sitting on the tarmac, but the weather forecast wasn't good, and there was a chance we might have to shuttle back to the hotel and spend another night in Montreal. Out the window I could see a thick carpet of glistening white. I was eager to be on our way, and hoped for no delays. At 7 p.m. we lifted off, and I crossed my fingers for good weather and a safe journey.

At midnight we landed for refueling in Gander, Newfoundland. In the dense darkness I could see workers bundled in arctic gear, and blowing snow illuminated by klieg lights. After we took off again, I slept for several hours, and woke to a deep red sunrise spanning the horizon. I was invited into the cockpit to watch daylight spilling over the coast of Portugal in vibrant purples and reds. It's a moment I will never forget.

A Hub Away From Home

At the airport in Lisbon, I said goodbye to the crew and was grateful when one of the Marias offered to share her taxi, and escort me to my destination. I had been invited to stay with the family of Capt. Enrique Maya, who I'd met several times when he'd come for dinner at my family home in Seattle.

I was happy to learn that Zé, his round and jolly wife, spoke both French and English. I already knew that the family had fourteen children! Several still lived at home, along with two grandchildren whose parents (Zé and Enrique's son and his wife) had died in a car accident several years before.

The Mayas lived in a suburb of Lisbon called Benfica, in a large two-story house with many rooms. Some of the windows were made of thick, chunky glass, which I think was quite old. The walls and floors on the main level were covered in lovely blue and white tiles with delicate geometric patterns.

Zé gave me a room of my own. From the window I could see an open area filled with gardens and tar paper shacks, surrounded by cement

apartment blocks with red tile roofs.

The kids who lived at home were twenty-six-year-old Gonzales, twenty -year-old Delphi, nineteen-year-old Tata, and fourteen-year-old Rita. The orphaned grandchildren were Christina, twelve, and Miguel, ten. I showed Tata and Rita my little Portuguese phrasebook with the pronunciation written out phonetically, and for some reason they found this hilarious—they laughed so hard they were almost rolling on the floor. The older kids blasted ZZ Top from their room.

Rita, Tata, and Miguel Maya

The next day, Tata accompanied me into Lisbon, teaching me how to use the modern bus and metro system before she continued on to her college classes. Public transit was fast, frequent, and affordable, and most people used it to get around.

Cars were tiny, honked a lot, and drove fast. Rules of the road were different than I was used to, there were few crosswalks, and pedestrians did not have the right of way—you could cross anywhere, but had to look carefully and be quick!

The Portuguese currency was the escudo. I cashed a traveler's check and got fifty escudos to the dollar. Everything seemed cheap—I paid twenty-eight cents for a loaf of whole wheat bread (about a dollar today). I soon realized though, that prices seemed high to the Portuguese, whose economy was struggling—inflation was at thirty percent! I later learned that the minimum wage was the equivalent of about twenty dollars a week (seventy-seven dollars today).

View of Benfica from my bedroom window

I didn't understand the complexities of Portugal's economy, but I have memories of a sense of depression in the country, both emotional and economic. The cities seemed dark too, as if there were insufficient resources for dealing with grime.

As I walked around, I felt like the men were staring at me. I wasn't sure if they were just curious, or if I was breaking some sort of social taboos. The children also stared with big eyes, and some of them giggled. Tata later explained that it was unusual to see a woman with a backpack, and that tourists were a novelty in some areas.

It was my first time in a place with a different language and culture from mine, and it felt a bit overwhelming. I was too nervous to walk into a restaurant—they were crowded, I couldn't read the menus, and I felt self-conscious standing on the street with my dictionary. This has

all gotten easier with practice, and Google Translate has reduced language barriers—you can even use it to read menus.

The Maya's home in Benfica, and a typical tiny car

Most of the men were dark-haired and handsome, and sported flattering wool slacks, shined black loafers, cardigan sweaters, and short, jaunty scarves around their necks instead of ties. The young women were thin, and many dressed in skin-tight corduroy pants and high heels. In contrast, older women were often plump, wore loose dresses and flat shoes, and toted shopping bags or baskets. I got a sense that the older generation had had to labor hard to make ends meet, and it showed in their faces and physiques. Other than a few joggers, I was the only person I saw wearing a synthetic jacket or jogging shoes.

After wandering around for most of the day, I was relieved that I was able to find my way back to the Maya's on my own, retracing the route I'd taken with Tata that morning. It felt like baby steps toward independence. It was disconcerting to be dependent on this family who hardly knew me, and I didn't want them to feel obligated to look after

me. They were all being extremely kind, and I felt at a loss to express my gratitude.

Meals with the Mayas were lively, tasty, and hearty, filled with laughter and conversation. In the morning there was black tea instead of coffee. Breakfast consisted of soft, fresh white rolls bought from the bakery man who came door to door early every morning. We smeared them with butter and *marmelada*, quince marmalade so thick you sliced it with a knife.

Lunch was soup, salad, and an entrée—one day it was a thick pea stew with hardboiled eggs and ham. At 5 p.m. the family had tea, with more bread, butter, and marmalade.

Dinner wasn't until 9 p.m., much later than I was used to. One evening we had a brothy vegetable soup, lettuce tossed with olive oil, and a delicious dish they called "green eggs"—hard boiled eggs cut in half, rolled in beaten egg and bread crumbs, and fried. Another dinner consisted of macaroni soup, salad, bread, mashed potatoes whipped with lots of butter and milk, and roast pork. For dessert there were various kinds of fruit, some of them new to me—I had never seen or eaten such small or sweet bananas.

It was common for families who could afford it to hire help. The Mayas had a maid named Aida who helped Zé with housework and cooking. She had worked there for many years and was considered part of the family. She came every day except Sunday to cook, clean, and do the shopping. It made things much easier for Zé, who was busy with so many children. Despite Aida's competence, the house was not especially tidy. It was a big place with a lot of people living in it, and I got the impression that spending time with her kids and grandkids was more important to Zé than tidying up—an attitude I applaud.

Enrique would not let me help with anything—he almost got mad when I tried, as if I was offending his hospitality. It was hard for me to receive so much and do nothing in return. The kids seemed to do very little as well, however. I now wonder if Enrique felt proud of his ability to provide for his kids so that they could focus on study and play. Had he had to work hard in his childhood, and didn't want that for his kids?

Parents sometimes want to give their children an easier life than they had.

The Mayas were a boisterous and goofy family, and great fun to be around. Enrique was often gone on business trips, and I suspected things weren't quite as free-spirited when he was home. Zé adored her children, and when they made her laugh, which they did often, her eyes crinkled with mirth.

There seemed to be constant construction in the neighborhood. Workers re-stuccoed walls, or pulled up cobblestones to work on pipes under the street. The cobbles were about two inches square, and when the pipe work was done, the cobbles had to be reset by hand.

I learned that cemetery plots could have time limits. One day the family received a letter telling them they needed to move Grandma. It had been five years, and it was time to have the cemetery put the bones into a more compact box, to free up the plot for the next person in line. This was not a taboo event hidden from the children, but was shared and discussed matter-of-factly by everyone in the household.

As the child closest in age to me, Tata took me under her wing, and whenever she had time off from school we went sightseeing. One day our outing was to the Mosteiro dos Jerónimos (Jerónimos Monastery), about thirty minutes away by bus. The route went through the Parque Monsanto, a two-thousand-acre national forest in the heart of the city. There were oak, pine, and eucalyptus trees, as well as a campground, swimming pool, tennis courts, trails, and picnic areas. I made a note to come back to explore.

The Jerónimos Monastery dated from the 13th century. It was the first time I had ever seen anything so old or ornate, and my brain hardly knew how to process it. The interior was a fairyland of carved marble, where old women prayed in shadowy candlelit nooks. When the sun shone through the finely-detailed stained glass windows the colors were so dazzling it took my breath away. A serene central courtyard thickly planted with trimmed hedges and trees was where the monks had once gone for walks, and was the only place they had been allowed to talk.

In the adjacent Museu de Marinha (Maritime Museum), we saw beautifully-painted old boats, and naval artifacts from Portugal's long history of colonization and world trade. As we walked along the river we came to the Padrão dos Descobrimentos (Monument of the Discoveries), an immense stone sculpture shaped like the prow of a ship. It had been built in 1960 to commemorate the five-hundred-year anniversary of the death of Prince Henry the Navigator. Henry's tarnished legacy included establishing the Portuguese Empire, kickstarting European colonization, and spearheading the transatlantic slave trade. In his favor, he also contributed to the advancement of science and navigation.

We walked along the river to the Torre (Tower) de Belém, a 16th-century fortification with Gothic ornamentation that made it look more like a castle. From here, Portuguese explorers embarked on foreign conquests, returning in ships laden with spices or plunder. The loveliness of the tower belied its fearsome purpose. Only the litter-strewn ground around it detracted from the beauty, and it occurred to me that post cards and tourist guides show sanitized versions of a place, and not always the reality. The Tower was closed, and I hoped to come back again and see the inside.

Another day, Tata took me to the boarding school she'd attended for six years, Mosteiro de Olivelas, a few miles north of Benfica. She had lived there during the week and gone home on weekends. Fernanda, a sweet older neighbor of the Maya's, tagged along.

The large property had two lush courtyards with fountains and flowers. No-longer-used areas of the school were preserved like a museum—a former kitchen had tiled walls, a cooking fireplace, big copper pots, and a cast iron bread oven.

Inside the school itself, women dusted and polished the heavy, old, dark wood tables and chairs, scrubbed the stone steps, and arranged vases of flowers in every nook and cranny. Large windows in each room let in light and views of the courtyards. The nuns, her former teachers, greeted Tata warmly. It looked like a pretty nice place to be a student.

We stopped in a coffee and pastry shop near the school to buy

marmalade and almond cakes, specialties of the area. Display cases were laden with an enticing array of pastries, and Tata told me that Portugal was known for its baked goods.

Purchases in hand, we hopped on another bus to a lovely park called Campo Pequeno, where we walked around a lake with small oar boats for rent. Tata bought some salty pickled lupini beans and showed me how to pop them out of their soft hulls and into my mouth. She also bought us some long, thin sugar sticks in various flavors, which I liked quite a bit better than the puckery beans.

After bussing back to Benfica, we walked to Tata's sister's house. Menna was twenty-eight and had two children, including darling two-year-old Filipa, who everyone in the Maya family doted on. Tata's brother Delfim stopped by with his girlfriend, and she was prevailed upon to sing us some Fado, the hauntingly beautiful Portuguese folk music. She had a rich, resonant voice.

One morning I went with the Maya's son Gonzales, one of his sisters-in-law, and her kids to a dog breeding kennel, where Gonzales picked up the papers for his darling three-month-old German Shepherd, named Nate. Everyone in the family teased Gonzales that Nate was his child, because he was so attached to it. I remember somehow cramming all five of us and the dog into a tiny car, and careening down congested roads at alarming speed.

After a few days of Seattle-like weather—52 degrees and overcast—it turned warm and sunny. But I had come down with a bad cold, and slept for almost two days. I was so grateful to have my own room, and people to check on me and feed me. (I used to get sick every time I flew somewhere—now I wear a mask in airports and on planes.)

I had studied French for six years in school. Portuguese, also a Romance language, had familiar elements, but the pronunciation was quite different from French. Christina and Miguel were wonderful teachers, endlessly patient and encouraging, and I was racking up new words and phrases every day. On my walks I could say *Bom dia* and "How are you?" to everyone, and respond that I was *Bem*, *obrigado* (fine, thanks), but I longed to be able to say more. I was usually greeted

with curious smiles, and since I knew that any stares were not hostile, I found it kind of fun to be a curiosity.

The Maya family was unstintingly kind to me. Even their neighbor, Fernanda, treated me like a daughter. One evening she and Tata took me to a coffee shop in Benfica and taught me the ropes. I learned that a "café" was a demi-tasse of frothy black espresso with a whole packet of sugar. My dad had brought home a stove-top espresso pot and a set of tiny cups from one of his trips, and I had learned to like the thick, strong brew.

Coffee in the cafes cost more if you sat at a table, so most people grabbed a shot at the counter, tossing it back in one gulp. I got the impression that Portugal might grind to a halt without these regular infusions of caffeine.

When I mentioned that I'd like to go walking in the Parque Monsanto, Gonzales warned me that it was not a good place for a woman alone because seedy men hung out there. He suggested I take Nate. With a dog, I also looked a bit less like a tourist, although I did wear my backpack, and men still assumed that I wanted company. I was glad that Gonzales had taught me how to say, "I want to be alone."

Most of the men I saw in my walks around town were either clean-cut business types, or blue-collar guys in work clothes, but the cues were different than what I was familiar with, and it was harder to trust my intuition, and to tell if a guy was "weird" or not.

Despite all the walking I was doing, my clothes were getting tighter. The large meals and fluffy buttered rolls were taking their toll!

The walls of Benfica were covered in graffiti and layers of posters from a presidential election two months before I arrived, and some sort of local election that was happening while I was there. Apparently a communist party was in the running, and their symbol was three overlapping rings. When Menna went to vote, two-year-old Filipa said, "Mama, don't put your foot in the ring!" Out of the mouths of babes—the adults howled with laughter. I did not ask the family about their political leanings, but I got the impression they were centrist, whatever that meant then.

I learned that young people usually lived with their parents until they got married, because jobs were hard to find, and moving out was prohibitively expensive. Partly for this reason, families were close. Dating couples either hung out in public places like coffee shops, or at their family homes. I doubted that pre-marital sex was as common as in America.

By mid-March the temperatures climbed into the mid-70s, which felt hot to me, yet the locals were still wearing sweaters and jackets—they were used to real heat, and to them, 75 was not that warm. They called this weather "false summer," and said it was not good to be in the winter sun too long or you would get sick.

One day I walked up to Castelo de São Jorge (St. George's Castle), an ancient bastion perched on a hill in the middle of Lisbon, and explored the delightful maze of turreted walls and bird-filled gardens. I was blown away by how old everything was. It also sank in how woefully little I had ever learned about European history. My guidebook did a great job of teaching me the basics.

As I roamed around randomly, I wondered whether I was missing out by sightseeing alone. Should I be doing guided tours to learn more? Would I have more fun if I had a travel companion to share things with? Yet I rebelled at the thought of either—it just didn't feel right for me.

I met many nice people in my wanderings. In a single day I encountered a man on the bus who spoke English and was curious about my trip, three chatty businessmen from Scandinavia, and a woman from Berlin who was also traveling alone. Later on, when I traveled with my first husband, I realized how much harder it can be to meet people when you're a couple. This is partly because you're so busy talking with each other that you're less inclined to interact with strangers, and partly because strangers are more inclined to interact with someone who is alone.

Another day I met a polite young Portuguese man who was eager to practice his already-excellent English. He invited me to a cafe for a glass of sweet Port wine. That turned into lunch at a charming restaurant on the Praça do Comércio, a large open square on the harbor.

I had squid (*lulas*), boiled potatoes with olive oil, salad, and sweet espresso. The food was heavenly, and he was good company. When he invited me to the cinema that evening, I impulsively said yes. Later, I had second thoughts. I craved opportunities to speak English, but I knew that a "second date" would probably come with awkward expectations, and I didn't want to deal with this. So I just didn't show up. It felt like a rotten thing to do, and I vowed to handle future situations more forthrightly. Alas, I didn't always succeed.

After a few weeks hanging out at the Maya's and exploring Lisbon on my own, I felt much more comfortable, and I knew my way around without a map. Although it was a big city, with twice the population of Seattle, it didn't feel overwhelming. Yes, it had pollution and noise and traffic, but mostly it felt new and different and interesting, with its carved and sculpted buildings, red tile rooftops, cobbled streets, and shops blaring Portuguese folk music. Still, I'm not a city person, and I couldn't wait to get out into the countryside and explore some smaller towns.

I made plans to go to Cascais and Estoril, but the night before my departure, Tata informed me that the trains would be on strike the next day. It turned out that strikes were planned! At least this helped minimize the disruption.

Feeling thwarted and restless, I looked for something else to do. I decided to try the zoo, thinking it might be quiet and peaceful, but it was noisy there too. It was also primitive and depressing, with barren, dirty cages, animals pacing in confined spaces, and no shade for any of them.

I hit a low point. I was now tired of the cacophony and commotion of the city and longed for time in nature. I was also learning that traveling could be hard work, and some days I just didn't have the energy to go exploring. Compounding all of this was homesickness. I had distressing dreams about my family—they seemed very far away, and somehow more vulnerable because of the distance. I didn't succumb to tears because I didn't want anyone to see, and I now understood the phrase "choking back tears"—it really does constrict your throat and make it hard to breathe.

I was also realizing that although I appreciated seeing the impressive museums and buildings and castles, it was the unplanned things that brought me the most joy—a smile that crossed language barriers, a chat with a kind person, cute children. Some of my best travel memories involve interacting with kids.

I got impatient waiting for the strike to end, and seriously considered walking to Estoril. It was only fifteen miles, but the family said the road was too busy and not safe to walk on. When at last the trains were back in service, I packed up and said a temporary goodbye to the family. The Maya house would be my hub, the home base I'd return to between adventures for the next two months.

Going Solo

At last I was truly on my own. I don't remember why, but I decided to go to Costa do Caparica instead of Estoril. It was located just twelve miles from Benfica, across the river south of Lisbon, but it took about three hours to get there. I thought I'd never get out of the city. Finally, the bus wound down a steep narrow road, and ahead lay the ocean, sunshine, and a peaceful sandy beach. Soon I was taking my first dreamed-of barefoot walk along the Atlantic Ocean shore.

Caparica was a funky seaside town, with wall-to-wall restaurants and snack bars, but just a handful of people in early spring. It would explode during the summer when hundreds of Portuguese flocked there to escape the city. I walked way down the beach, thinking that if it became deserted enough I'd spend the night in my sleeping bag. But I couldn't get away from side roads and little shacks.

Suddenly I felt very alone, and wished I had someone to talk to. For the first time, I wondered what it would be like to spend the coming months by myself.

I'm an extrovert, and it was hard not being able to communicate with people. It was rare to meet someone who spoke enough English for an easy conversation. Many of the men were unbearable—if I even glanced at them they took it as permission to touch me or say lewd

things—and I found myself saying hello to few people. I didn't like having to pretend to be unfriendly.

The men weren't latching onto me because I was beautiful—I was just your average hippie chick with long hair and a friendly smile. I did not dress provocatively. I think they were drawn to me because a light-haired foreign woman was an exotic novelty. Other women travelers I met had similar experiences.

As I walked back toward town I saw two young Portuguese women on the beach. One was playing the flute. I smiled and said hello hopefully, but they didn't speak English, so I continued on.

In town, I found a pension called Capa-Rica. My sparkling clean room cost less than five dollars (nineteen dollars today) and had a double bed, closet, table, chair, dresser, and shower. The owners spoke only Portuguese but welcomed me warmly. After settling in, I went for a walk, feeling much lighter without my pack.

My mood had lightened as well, and I didn't feel so lonely. I was beginning to learn that all moods pass, even dark ones. The scenery helped too—the late-afternoon sun painted pale lavender streaks in the cream-colored sky, gentle waves tickled the sand with foamy fingers, and the sea sparkled in the angled light.

After an espresso pick-me-up, I started walking around town and met some gregarious young people who took me under their wing. One was a guy about my age named Amir. He seemed to know everyone in town, and spoke good English. He invited me to his family's home, right on the beach. They shared their delicious meal of battered and fried squid, rice, beans, Sumol (a carbonated fruit drink), spice cake, tea, and coffee. To my delight, everyone in the family spoke English. I reveled in a long and interesting conversation, and was delighted when they invited me to come back again.

After dinner, Amir showed me around Caparica. He said it was sixty percent rich people and forty percent fishermen. I couldn't imagine that the two groups mixed much. I guessed that the wealthy folks came there mainly for weekends and vacations.

It was a Friday night, and the pubs and clubs were packed with people eating, listening to music, or dancing. I've never been big on nightlife, but it was fun to watch the scene. My casual attire clashed with the fur coats, tight pants, and high heels most of the women were wearing. I tried my first Portuguese beer—Sagres claro (light)—and liked it.

I would have stayed out later, but Amir was getting a bit too friendly, so I extricated myself from what was fast becoming an uncomfortable evening, pretending I was tired. I still found it difficult to just say I wasn't interested. I was so disappointed that Amir had taken a fancy to me—I knew it meant I wouldn't be going to visit his family again.

On the way back to my pension, I saw Romani people (the term "gypsy" is pejorative) sitting around a fire. They were nomads who moved from place to place selling things. I got the feeling they were tolerated but not considered part of the local community, and I wondered if they preferred keeping to themselves. Those I saw looked like perfectly ordinary people, well-dressed and clean.

Saturday dawned warm and sunny. I ordered tea at a coffee shop for twenty-five cents and they brought me two pots. I downed them both, then sloshed my way to the beach. It was much cleaner near town than it had been farther down by the shacks I'd seen. The water was a bit cold for me, but there were hardy souls swimming. People fished off the rocks and jetties.

Portugal felt laid-back compared to the U.S. People told me they worked as little as they could get away with, and they welcomed weekends with relish. Early Saturday morning they appeared with beach gear and spent the whole weekend lounging on the sand and playing in the sun.

Back to Benfica

After spending another day on the beach, I returned to the Maya's. I found out there was a direct bus between Lisbon and Caparica that took only twenty minutes instead of three hours. Another travel lesson learned: you will make all kinds of mistakes costing you time or money,

and by the time you get a new place figured out, you'll probably be moving on. In the end, the time or money doesn't matter at all—learning to let go is the reward.

On a glorious sunny day back at the Maya's, I sat inside listening to rock music, inhaling it as if I were starving. I couldn't believe how much I craved familiar tunes. I was grateful to Mr. Maya for letting me sit in his study and use his stereo when he was gone—he didn't even let his children do that!

The next day, Menna and I went out for coffee and pastry, then caught a bus to the Torre de Belem, which had been closed the first time I was there. The tower served as a departure point for many ships during the Portuguese Age of Exploration in the 15th and 16th centuries. The King's Room allowed monarchs to view ships on the river, and still contained a throne and other ornately carved wooden furniture. The fortress had once been on an island in the middle of the Tagus, but the river had changed course and the tower now straddled the shore.

Along the river there were green parks filled with trees, and people enjoying the sunny weekend. Soccer games filled every field (they sensibly called it football, it being a sport played mainly with the feet). It was insanely popular, although I only saw men playing it. Those who weren't playing football wore their Sunday best, even to romp in the park.

In the evening we went to Delfim's girlfriend's home for a private Fado concert. I was very impressed to learn that her father had been a European champion of the round-bodied, twelve-string Portuguese guitar. The combination of his playing and her singing was powerful and moving, even though I couldn't understand the words. Later, we all piled into the dad's car for a harrowing high-speed drive to a restaurant for a late dinner.

The popular hangout was packed, even at 2 a.m. It was also filled with cigarette smoke, which gave me a headache. It sometimes seemed like almost everyone in Portugal smoked, and smoking was allowed in offices, eating establishments, and stores. No one complained, as they did in the U.S., where people were beginning to feel they had a right to

breathe clean air. Thankfully there was no smoking allowed on buses and trains.

I took a day trip to Sintra to see the royal palaces and villas. The weather had reverted to cold, overcast, and windy. Without a map, and with my limited language skills, I wasn't sure how to get to the Palace of Pena from the train station, so I splurged on a taxi. The palace sat high up in the hills surrounded by lush woods and gardens. From the ramparts I could see for miles to the ocean and Cabo da Roca (the westernmost point in Europe). Near the castle were green fields, the town of Sintra spread out below, and glimpses of other palaces and villas, some dating as far back as the Moors.

The Palace of Pena was a sprawling, multi-colored fairytale castle with opulent interiors. It had been used by royalty until 1910, when the Portuguese monarchy ended. Each room was furnished in a different style, with treasures brought back from trading trips around the world. The kitchen displayed copper pots and porcelainware, other rooms held furniture from India and China inlaid with mother-of-pearl, hand-embroidered bedspreads, stained glass windows that gave the impression of velvet, translucent porcelain from Germany, intricate and colorful carvings, and detailed tapestries. This was my first visit to a royal palace, and it was beyond anything I had ever imagined. These days Pena is so popular they recommend making reservations in advance to ensure you can get a ticket.

When I couldn't absorb any more opulence, I strolled down through the gardens, got a bit lost on a trail through the woods, and finally emerged in the town of Sintra. The sun had come out. As I sat in a quiet coffee shop writing in my journal, two young children approached. They were fascinated by the English they couldn't read, and stood next to my table staring. I smiled to let them know it was OK to look, but how I wished I could talk to them!

On the train back to Lisbon, I met an American guy my age and we had a delightful conversation. It was such a treat to be able to compare experiences and talk rapidly using idioms and slang instead of having to speak slowly and use simple words.

We decided to go to a Fado show that evening. The utterly absorbing performance included folk dancers in traditional costumes. The wine we ordered came with bread, peanuts, and crackers, and that was our cheap dinner. We had great fun joking with the waiter, and ended up staying until three in the morning, when the place closed.

I was happy to have a companion so I could experience Lisbon at night without getting hassled by men. The streets, fountains, and monuments were all illuminated, and the Castelo de São Jorge glowed under spotlights on the hill above the city.

The Mayas were expecting me to return that night, but by the time I left the restaurant the trains had stopped running. I felt bad for making the family worry, but I had no way to call them, and there was no such thing as a text message. I took the earliest train back, around 5 a.m., and apologized profusely. I had abused their hospitality and I felt terrible.

The next day was rainy. I did some shopping in Benfica, and studied Portuguese with a first grade book that Delfim had once used. Then I went to the Museu Nacional dos Coches (the Coach Museum) to see the collection of carriages used by Portuguese royalty from the 17th to 19th centuries.

The coaches were much bigger in person than I'd imagined, and strikingly elegant. The wheels were three or four feet tall and the coach floated in the center with heavy leather straps to support it—the original leaf springs. The conveyances were decadently carved, painted, and upholstered. There were coaches for every occasion, from an era when Portugal was immensely wealthy.

The museum also displayed riding gear, musical instruments of the heralds, portraits of royalty, and clothing. It dawned on me for the first time that all the outfits, banners, and accoutrements I'd seen in period movies were based on real items, and people actually dressed and traveled like this once upon a time.

Estoril-Cascais

After waiting out another two-day train strike, I headed off to Estoril-Cascais, conjoined towns on the coast near Sintra, about an hour west of Lisbon. The weather was dry and warm. For five dollars I got a comfy room at the Pensão Londres-Estoril, which included breakfast in the morning with the family who owned it.

The Estoril casino had a beautiful garden, where I met a friendly couple from Montreal. They told me I would regret it if I didn't take lots of pictures of my trip, and I vowed to start taking more. I had only brought five rolls of film, and could already see that it wasn't enough.

Later I happened upon a quiet, shady forest in a shallow ravine on the side of the Hotel Estoril-Sol. There were birds singing, and the flowers and trees smelled heavenly—I soaked up the time in nature, and reluctantly left when a man blew on a horn to signal that the park was closing.

I walked a couple miles into the town of Cascais, arriving just as the colorful red, yellow, and black fishing boats were returning to the beach. The heavily-laden dories anchored in deeper water while smaller boats ferried the crates of fish to shore. Men unloaded the boxes and carried them across the sand to the sidewalk, where women waited to sell the fish. I was amazed at the variety of sizes, shapes, colors, and patterns! The sellers were soon bargaining with buyers who gathered around.

Meanwhile, people dragged and pulled the now-empty dories up onto the beach, where they rested together in a photogenic line. I felt I was observing an ancient ritual that had existed practically unchanged for hundreds of years. I knew that fishing must be incredibly hard and dangerous work, but it was thrilling to witness something so different from anything I had ever seen before.

The streets and gardens of Cascais boasted palm trees, colorful flowering shrubs, and citrus trees heavy with fruit. Huge homes hid behind iron gates and high walls—I was told that many rich people lived in the area, including ex-royalty. An old fortress jutted out into

the bay, and the waves crashed high against the walls, as if annoyed by the obstruction.

Waterfront vendors sold expensive sweaters, shawls, and embroidered tablecloths. It was the first time I'd heard sellers use "tourist English" to try to reel me in: "Good price today only," "Cheap for you pretty lady," "How much you pay?" I found it quite irritating, and wished I could just look without being accosted.

Unfortunately there were lots of irritating men as well, who seemed to think it was OK to treat a stranger in ways they would never treat a woman they knew. They hissed and called to me as if I were a dog. Sometimes I wanted to scream, claw their faces, or spit at them. I tried to ignore them, but they drove me nuts! Now when I travel I rarely see men behaving this way, perhaps because I'm no longer a young woman, or perhaps social mores have changed, or men have been trained by the women in their lives to behave better.

A woman holding a baby wrapped in dirty rags begged for money and I gave her a coin. Then a young boy rushed over and demanded money in a rough, low voice. His demeanor kind of freaked me out, and I turned and walked away. This was my first experience with beggars, and it felt strange and confusing. I couldn't afford to give to everyone, so how should I choose? Now I try to give to local organizations that help the needy instead.

I sat on the beach as it grew dark and watched the lights of fishing boats blink on at sea, like fireflies in a watery black meadow. A sliver of moon hung suspended in a sky papered with stars. It was idyllic, but I felt lonely and uncomfortable being outside alone, so I went into a coffee shop to write in my journal. I was learning that these moments of loneliness would pass, and to not let them get me down. Things always looked better after a good night's sleep.

That night I dreamed about friends who seemed impossibly far away, and I woke up still feeling a bit glum. It rained on and off all day, which didn't help. I walked up to Boca do Inferno, a hole in the rocks where the sea roared and pounded. It was a magnificent sight, but the sky was gray and I kind of felt that way too. My mood was brighter when the

sun was shining.

That evening I found a cozy family restaurant called Comibem. I chose it because they were playing Beatles music. I even wrote down the names of the songs so I could remember them to sing later while I walked. I often wanted to sing, but to my surprise I sometimes couldn't think of any songs. I missed familiar music with an ache. Sometimes I passed record stores playing American tunes and I'd stop and listen for a while.

I ordered the three-dollar fixed-price menu and they brought me a basket of bread, a bowl of thick bean and sausage soup, and then a bigger bowl of pea soup with sausage and hard boiled eggs. The meal also included dessert and coffee. It was much more than I could eat, but I gave it my best effort. Although part of me was worried about my expanding waistline, I also wanted to stretch my food dollars!

There were charming lamps hanging from the ceiling, made of two-handled clay jugs with holes punched in the bottom. The walls were covered in Portuguese travel posters. While I was eating, the friendly owners also sat down to their meal and watched an old British serial called "The Professionals," with Portuguese subtitles. It almost felt like I was a guest in someone's home.

I was learning that Europeans cut food with the knife in their right hand, like I grew up doing, but then ate with the fork still in their left hand, instead of switching back and forth the way most Americans do. I thought it made a lot of sense, but found it took practice. They also kept both hands on the table and considered it strange and "American" to keep one hand in the lap.

When the waiters weren't serving, they stood at the counter talking and laughing with each other. They seemed delighted that I liked the music so much, and turned it up. When the Beatles ended they played the Bee Gees—not my favorite, but at least I knew the songs and could hum along.

I spent most of the evening there, writing in my journal, reluctant to leave the cocoon of music and laughter. I left feeling buoyant and content. I was learning that travel would bring highs and lows,

sometimes several times a day. If I could learn to ride them like a roller coaster I would be fine.

Getting back to the Maya's the next day was brutal. I wrote in my journal that I was worried I'd die in the process. It was rush hour and the buses were so crowded that if I hadn't been by the window I thought I might have suffocated. I wondered how people could endure that every day, especially in hot weather.

It was Friday and the family was taking me touring on Sunday, so I needed to stick around. It was raining again and I had cabin fever. Enrique was at work and I spent part of the day reading and listening to music in his study, escaping from the cacophony of the household. However, in this gregarious family, keeping to yourself was cause for concern, so I eventually emerged.

Ten-year-old Miguel could be tiring. He was a high-energy goofball but also smart and inquisitive. He liked to come into my room, look at my things, and ask me endless questions. My Portuguese had improved, and we could communicate fairly well, but it took a lot of effort. Sometimes being with him was draining and felt like babysitting, but it was good language practice, and it was the least I could do for all the hospitality I was receiving.

On Saturday, Miguel and I went to the local farmer's market, and that was a more enjoyable way to spend time with him. Most of the produce was grown right in Benfica. There were many varieties of greens, some familiar—like cabbages, kale, and lettuce—and others new to me. Some of the leafy bundles were so large that people carried them slung over their shoulders. Live rabbits were carted off in net bags, and sturdy, thick-shelled eggs were sold loose in plastic bags. There was also fresh fish and bread, as well as clothing and household items.

Later I walked to the neighborhood park by myself. It had cobbled paths, leafy trees, a children's playground, and a concession booth. The benches were uncomfortable, so I found a patch of grass and slept for a while in the warm sun. After I woke up I went into a coffee shop, and when I came out it was hailing, then raining cats and dogs. It seemed the sky was as changeable as Seattle, where we say, "If you don't like

the weather, wait ten minutes."

I was again getting worn down by being in the city. It felt like an endless pallet of gray cement blocks, and there was nowhere to escape the incessant noise. The roar and whine of mopeds and motorcycles was the worst.

That evening, Tata took me to her boyfriend Jorge's family home. I had an absolutely delightful evening, although I was sort of shocked by the amount of alcohol they served. Before dinner there was Licor da Merda, an unusual but tasty liqueur made with milk, herbs, vanilla, cocoa, cinnamon, sugar, and citrus. This was followed by martinis with lemon vermouth, which I declined. We had the obligatory red wine with dinner, followed by a small glass of sweet port. I passed on the after-dinner pear brandy because it smelled like kerosene.

Dinner was pork and sausage cooked on a hibachi, with tomato rice, and a delicious thick soup of some kind. We listened to recordings of Fado, which I now loved—Amalia Rodriguez and Carlos do Carmo were the top artists at the time. Jorge's dad spoke some French and English, and with my smattering of Portuguese thrown in, we were able to communicate well. We watched an old American Western, which were quite popular, and talked and laughed until about 1:30 a.m.

Day Tripping

The next morning I dragged myself out of bed at 7:30 for the family excursion with Enrique, Zé, Rita, Christina, and Miguel. Zé packed a gourmet picnic of cheese and meat sandwiches, meatballs, rice, and fruit. The day started out cloudy and rainy but later graced us with warm sun and a blue sky.

First we visited Zé's sister, who was a nun in a cloistered convent near Batalha. When she'd arrived there forty years before, the nuns visited through a grillwork that didn't allow them to be seen. Now they could talk to visitors through open wooden bars. We met the Mother Superior and some of the other sisters. They were plump, rosy-cheeked, and radiant, and they seemed happy. They grew fruits and vegetables and

raised cows, pigs, and chickens on their tranquil farm. They sent us on our way with armloads of oranges, apples, flowers, and cabbage.

We packed our bounty into the small car, and headed north to the exquisite old Gothic monastery in Batalha. It had been built to commemorate a decisive victory in a 14th-century battle against Spain, and took about two hundred years to complete. I couldn't believe that stone could be carved in such detail. A highlight was the "unfinished chapels," a breathtaking octagonal room with no roof, just cerulean sky above.

Outside in the courtyard, a large group of men and women in traditional costumes were playing folk music and preparing to dance. Happily, they still did this for themselves, not just for tourists. They weren't ready to start, alas, and we had to leave, because we had so much else to see.

We drove twenty minutes south to Alcobaça. The late-March countryside was lush and green. A variety of crops grew on pocket-size farms, and the rolling hills were covered in a picturesque patchwork of circles, stripes, and squares filled with wheat, cabbage, sheep, and yellow-flowering bushes. Then the road entered a forest of cork, eucalyptus, and pine trees. Deep orange poppies bloomed along the roadside. We stopped to eat our picnic in the woods, using the car hood as a table.

Alcobaça was an attractive, smallish town. Unlike Lisbon's gray façades, the buildings were light-colored and free of pollution grime. The Gothic Alcobaça Monastery, built in the 12th century, was plainer and simpler than Batalha's, but no less stunning.

Enrique took me to a shop that sold typical local crafts, including hand-painted ceramics. I was keeping my eyes open for souvenir gifts, but while these were beautiful, they were expensive, and not my style.

My philosophy of souvenirs has changed over time. I've realized that most people don't actually want a souvenir from a place they've never been (unless it's edible). As for me, I'm running out of places to display travel treasures in my home, so now my souvenirs are mainly photos.

From Alcobaça it was a short drive to Sitio, a whitewashed town perched on a sheer cliff above the sea. From there you could look down on the sleepy fishing village of Nazaré, its long sweep of sandy beach, and the sun-dappled ocean beyond. Colorful wooden fishing boats leaned at jaunty angles on the sand. Tourist brochures touted Nazaré as the most picturesque fishing village in Portugal, and I didn't doubt the claim. Three years later, a new harbor opened and most of the fishing boats moved there.

A picnic in the forest with Zé, Christina, Rita, Miguel, and Enrique

A tram ran up and down the steep hill between the two towns, both of which had delightfully narrow streets. In Nazaré it was still common to see women wearing the traditional skirt with seven petticoats (supposedly to keep the women warm while they waited on the beach for the fishing boats to return), as well as head scarves, embroidered aprons, and large lacy gold earrings. Many of the women dressed all in black, often in mourning for family lost at sea—the rough ocean could be merciless.

Children played ball in the street while women sat in sunny doorways

knitting and talking. There was no sign of any men, so perhaps they were at the pubs or coffee shops.

We drove south along the coast to São Martinho do Porto, a dune-circled horseshoe bay with a narrow, rocky opening to the sea. Colorful fishing dories were hauled up on that sandy beach as well. I learned that each village had its own style of boat. The beach looked like an idyllic place to swim or camp, and I made a note to possibly return and spend more time.

A bit farther south and inland was the medium-size town of Caldas da Rainha ("the Queen's hot springs"). Named for the thermal waters that cured Portugal's beloved Queen Leonor in the 15th century, it is where she ordered construction of the first "thermal hospital" in Europe. We walked through the verdant grounds, which had been turned into a public park, following in the footsteps of patients who'd once strolled here because wise doctors believed that time in nature would speed their recovery. I find that nature is indeed the cure for many ills.

We stopped just long enough in nearby Óbidos to purchase a bag of roasted pine nuts, or *pinhão*, the seeds from the cones of the long-lived stone pine tree. I made a note to return to this charming town as well, but there were so many other places to see that I never did go back.

As we drove through the serene countryside, hearty-looking farmers walked along the roads, often leading mule-drawn carts piled high with firewood or vegetables. A woman in layered skirts rode sidesaddle on a burro with a large cloth-covered basket strapped to each side. The tidy towns we passed through looked cozy and inviting, and each one had a small church.

As the sun began to set on a long and whirlwind day, Enrique, who had done yeoman driving duty, turned the car back toward Benfica. I was worn out from all the new things I'd seen and learned, and welcomed the darkness so I could sleep as we drove, without worrying about missing a moment of scenery.

Setúbal

The next day I packed up for another solo excursion to the peninsula south of Lisbon. I took a ferry across the Tagus River to Barreiro, and then a train to Setúbal, where the tourist office gave me a bus schedule and directions to the town of Sesimbra. Before catching the bus, I found a place to eat lunch. I had decided that soup, salad, and bread was affordable, healthy, and abstemious too—I was determined to lose some of the bread-and-butter weight I'd gained at the Maya's. I never tried a Portuguese soup I didn't like.

The bus to Sesimbra wound through some of the prettiest countryside I'd ever seen, with tranquil vineyards, tidy farms, lush gardens, and rich brown soil. The town itself had a beach ringed with trees, more gaily-painted wooden fishing boats arranged like a still life on the sand, and a castle gazing down from a cliff top.

I watched fishermen cleaning their catch on the beach, then went down to the docks and met two young men who spoke a bit of French. They showed me the wholesale warehouse, where workers were stacking and sorting hundreds of boxes of every size and shape of fish imaginable.

The guys then helped me find a pension for four dollars a night. The clean, cozy room had an antique wood armoire and iron-frame bed. I found a no-frills restaurant for dinner and, after turning down an invitation from the waiter to go dancing, came back to my room, pleasantly exhausted from the long day.

In the morning I woke up early, packed, and checked out of the pension. It was already warm, and puffy white clouds gave welcome shade as they floated across the sun. Fishermen stood on the beach patiently untangling fishing line. I walked up through the hills to Santana, a mile away, and caught a bus to Azeitão. My plan was to hike over Mount Arrábida and back down to the coast, but the path proved elusive and I found myself wandering on unmarked trails amid grapevines and wealthy-looking *quintas* (estates).

My guidebook said the region was one of the most scenic and fertile in Portugal, and I definitely couldn't argue with that. Sun-warmed flowers

released their perfume, and cork and pine trees grew above a thick understory of ferns and shrubs. Metal sap-collecting cups hung from some of the pine trunks—the resin was used to make turpentine and other products. I passed a wine cellar that offered tasting tours, but didn't go in. I wanted to visit the Quinta das Torres estate because it was said to have beautiful tile work and gardens, but it appeared deserted.

As I walked I had a lot of time to observe. In the smaller villages, many older people were dressed in black from head to toe: shoes, stockings, skirt or pants, sweater, scarf, purse. Besides being the color of mourning, it was apparently practical as well because it hid dirt.

There were no idle hands. Whenever I saw a woman sitting, on a bus or a bench, she was crocheting or knitting.

I noticed many leg deformities—were these caused by polio? It's easy to forget the incredible progress that has been made in world health in just the last forty-five years. Polio has largely been eradicated due to the vaccine, and boy am I grateful for that.

I'm also grateful for the fluoridated water I grew up with. Almost everyone I saw in Portugal had yellowed and missing teeth. The older I get, the more I realize the importance of dental care for our physical and mental health.

Due to the high cost of cars and fuel (gas was fourteen dollars a gallon in today's prices), and the excellent public transit, relatively few people seemed to own cars. I was amazed at the extent of bus service, even in the remotest villages. People also walked a lot, often carrying parcels in their hands. I've sometimes wondered why backpacks aren't used by more adults to make carrying groceries or other items easier—they're a staple for schoolkids, but I almost never see older people using them.

I don't believe I ever found the elusive Mt. Arrábida, which my guidebook said had "superb views of the sea." In any case, it had clouded over, and there weren't any views to be had. After hours of walking I arrived at the coast near a ghastly factory spewing toxic-looking clouds of smoke. The road wound along the water, and by the

time I finally arrived on the outskirts of Setúbal, I was exhausted and ravenous.

I dragged myself into the first restaurant I saw and ordered a local specialty called *caldeirada* (fish stew with potatoes). To my dismay, the fish was not filleted, and it took a lot of patience to pick out all the bones when I was so hungry!

A group of kids was absolutely fascinated with me and stood around my table in that wonderfully unabashed way that children have. My Portuguese was improving, and I was able to carry on a simple conversation. When they discovered that I spoke French and English, they picked up a few words from their parents, and that extended our chat. They were a delight—as I've mentioned, kids are one of my favorite things about traveling.

I left the restaurant and started toward town, but became utterly lost. I was learning that whenever this happened, some kind person always appeared to offer help. Sure enough, a car stopped and a Canadian couple asked in English, "Do you need a ride?" I gladly accepted. Although they were headed in the opposite direction, they drove me into Setúbal. Their kindness boosted my spirits a millionfold. Sometimes we will never know how much a small gesture can mean to a stranger.

I found a room in a *residencial*, which was basically a pension without breakfast. The woman owner was as kind and sweet as could be, and the simple room was comfortable and clean. She asked for five dollars, but later gave me back sixty cents because she said she liked me!

At the time it felt like a lot to pay for a room, but I wrote in my journal that it was worth it for a few extra comforts, even if it meant I'd run out of money sooner. As a woman alone, I didn't feel safe sleeping in a field to economize, and at the end of a long day, nothing was as appreciated as a private space to unload my pack without worrying about anything getting stolen, a comfortable bed, and perhaps the luxury of a shower.

The landlady recommended an inexpensive mom-and-pop restaurant for dinner. The owner spoke English, and boy, could she cook! She and

her husband had come from Mozambique two years earlier, leaving everything they owned behind. She uncomplainingly told me about their life: six days a week, she started cooking at 4 a.m., they closed at 8:30 p.m., then they cleaned up, went to sleep, and started again the next morning. They were in their fifties, which to me at the time seemed much too old to have to work that hard! Besides the fact that the food was great, I wanted to support their business, so I went back in the morning for breakfast.

Later that day I returned to Lisbon, arriving early enough to help with a dinner party Zé was hosting. She showed me how to put almonds in hot water to remove the skins, then toast them in olive oil with a little salt—they were delicious! Guests included a British man, some of Enrique's coworkers and their wives, and a few relatives. Everyone spoke English, and I very much enjoyed the conversations. With dinner we had *vinho verde branco* (young white wine), which I liked much better than the *tinto*, or red.

Tata and Zé, like so many Portuguese women, did masterful knitting and crocheting. Tata wanted to make me a sweater, so she took me to a store where I bought some deep burgundy wool. While we were out, I was delighted to also find a shop that sold bulk chamomile and peppermint—I'd been craving herb tea.

One afternoon Delfim took me to Campo Grande, a national horse stables that trained and sold thoroughbreds. He volunteered there, sometimes for ten hours a day. I've never been a horse person, but I couldn't fail to appreciate these gorgeous animals.

Almoçageme

I was chomping at the bit to do more exploring, but a couple days of rain dampened my enthusiasm, and I decided to hole up until the weather improved a bit. This resulted in a mix of cabin fever and homesickness—I felt lonely and bored, and I really missed my family.

One evening, Enrique's niece, São, and her husband, Manuel, came for a visit with their nine-month-old baby, Monika. As they were getting

ready to leave they suddenly asked me, “Would you like to spend a weekend at our house?” I jumped at the chance, and quickly packed. They lived in a village called Almoçageme, west of Sintra near Cabo da Roca. Their place was simple and tidy (so unlike the Maya’s!). From the open window of their guest room I could hear the steady pulsing drone of a lighthouse and the murmur of waves on the beach.

Manuel and São (holding Monika) with Zé and granddaughter Filipa

On Saturday morning we walked to the local shops to buy food. Most people had small refrigerators and only bought fresh items one day at a time. Stores right in the neighborhood made that easy to do.

In the afternoon, we drove to a pretty town called Azenhas do Mar. It sat on a high cliff, and below it a series of terraced pools stepped down

to the sea.

In the evening, two of their friends came over for dinner. Afterward, we joined what seemed like half the town at a nearby cafe for coffee and TV. Portugal had only recently gotten color television—about the same time as I'd arrived. Almoçageme wasn't a large village, so everyone knew each other. On the way to the cafe, we walked past a place hosting a teen dance, blaring out rock and roll. I was impressed that there were teen dances in such a small town.

Sunday morning I went for a walk in the village. It was peaceful and quiet—a welcome change from Lisbon. As far as I could see there were only green farms, trees, and small white buildings with red tile roofs. The serenity was food for my soul.

Sunday was family day in Portugal. In the afternoon São's grandmother and aunt (Enrique's mother and sister) came to visit. The grandma had thirty-four *great* grandchildren! Then Enrique, Zé, and three of their brood showed up and we all spent several hours drinking tea, eating pastries, and watching television.

I had planned to get a ride back to Benfica with the Mayas, but Manuel and São invited me to stay longer, and I couldn't resist.

On Monday, São and Manuel went to work, leaving the baby at home with a nanny from the village. This young woman stayed with Monika five days a week, twelve hours a day, for forty dollars a month ($150 today). She also cleaned and did laundry. She seemed to like the job. She dressed all in black and had lived in the village her whole life. She was probably about nineteen.

I walked to the coast along a narrow, winding road with few cars, basking in the warm sunshine. Flowering roadside shrubs blended seamlessly into bountiful vegetable gardens. Bamboo grew in abundance, and was used to build attractive garden fences. The weather was perfect. I was over the moon to be in that spectacular place, walking along without a care in the world. I had the sensation that I was floating, and felt I could have walked forever. It was a magical travel moment, and whetted my appetite for more.

The first beach I came to was pristine and undeveloped, with no hotels, shops, restaurants, or litter. Local men fished with long bamboo poles propped upright in the sand. I fell instantly in love with the lush, green coast, and its dramatic bluffs and headlands. It was off with the shoes so I could run in the surf!

Shoes back on, I followed a narrow trail over a bluff to the north, and emerged onto Praia das Maçãs, a long curve of golden sand rimmed by shops and eateries, and almost empty of people in early spring. I chatted with an older couple from England who'd come south to escape late winter weather in London. At a little shop I bought two earth-colored, locally-made pottery bowls, which I later shipped home. One broke en route, but the other is still on display in my kitchen.

Then I walked south to nearly-empty Praia de Adraga, along a winding road through shrub-covered hills, with no buildings in sight. The half-moon beach was hugged by a curving, rocky cliff that trailed out into the sea in a jumble of eroded blocks and pillars. The waves pounded high against the rocks, shaking the ground and creating streaming waterfalls. The ocean was cool but comfortable, and I immersed myself in it blissfully, staying close to shore to avoid the strong waves. This was in the days before I knew about the dangers of sunburn, and I happily watched my skin turning pink.

All of a sudden the entire beach was shrouded in a thick, clammy gray mist. I hadn't known about these regular evening fogs, and it happened so fast it startled me. I quickly dried off, abandoned my plans to watch the sunset, and headed back to São and Manuel's. On the way, I bought a bottle of red wine, a half pound of cheese, and two bags of fruit as a household contribution, all for less than ten dollars today.

The next morning it was still gray and overcast, and I decided it was time to end my stay. I packed up, said goodbye to my generous hosts, and caught a bus twenty minutes south toward Cabo da Roca. The sun came out as I walked the last mile or so to the end of the rugged, rocky point. I sat for a while in solitude, savoring the gentle breeze and ocean view. I could have stayed there all day, listening to the waves and watching the birds. I was then, and still am, an avid birder, and I wished I had binoculars to better observe and identify them.

There were few tourists, and I had the place almost to myself. I splurged on a one-dollar certificate that said I had set foot on the westernmost point in Europe, and the clerk wrote my name in medieval script.

Certificate attesting that I had been to the westernmost point in Europe

At last I pulled myself away from my idyll and took a bus to Sintra. I wanted to see the National Palace, but if there had been smart phones, I would have known that it would be closed. No matter—it was a beautiful day, and I was glad to be back in that lovely place.

It hit me how lucky I was—I had nothing to do each day but look for interesting things to see and do. I bought a container of strawberries, then walked around offering them to people. Everyone accepted.

Northbound

After a night at Maya's to repack, I caught a morning train north to Porto, Portugal's second largest city, and the birthplace of Port wine. The crowded trip took seven long hours and cost seven dollars. I wasn't planning to stay in Porto, however—at that time it was a dirty, industrial city that held no appeal. My plan was to continue on to Viana do Castello, fifty miles north.

I had to change trains in Porto, but I didn't know where to make my connection. In a combination of luck and instinct, I found the right track and hopped on board just as the train was pulling out. I patted myself on the back—I was getting more confident at navigating unfamiliar situations.

Happily, the one-hour ride to Viana was less crowded. As we chugged north, the hills grew higher and the scenery got prettier. The tourist office in Viana was closed, so I was on my own to find a bed for the night. I relied on a variety of sources for finding places to sleep: my guidebook, tourist offices, other travelers, and the signs that establishments hung above their doors. I found a teeny room for three dollars. The landlady was crabby, but other places were asking at least seven—more than I wanted to pay.

Sitting in a coffee shop drinking tea, I met a local guy named Fernando, who spoke good English. He showed me an inexpensive restaurant where I had a feast of *lulas fritas con batatas* (fried squid with potatoes). Then he took me to a bar where he often hung out with his left-wing friends. Bob Dylan and Elvis Costello provided the soundtrack to a gathering of locals and Germans. We communicated in a mix of French, English, and Portuguese. I was getting much better at the latter, and was pleased to be told that my pronunciation was good.

Language is like a key that opens doors, unlocking a treasure chest of cultural experience and connection. They say that language ability is partly genetic, and I'm grateful I got the genes. Language feels intuitive to me, and I can learn a new one fairly quickly, especially if I'm immersed in it. I'm also not afraid to make mistakes—they are one of the best teachers.

The bar was the first real evidence I'd seen of a counterculture in Portugal: long hair, no-nuke buttons, marijuana, and anti-fascist/pro-communist posters. The politics of the country were complicated and I didn't understand them. Viana do Castello appeared to have a vibrant youth scene and many hippie travelers. Fernando told me these vagabonds slept in the parks and on the beach in the summer.

People I met often wanted to compare the U.S. and Portugal. America is a big country—you could fit more than ten Portugals into it—and it was impossible for me to generalize about our attitudes, lifestyles, or politics. However, these conversations taught me a lot about Portugal, and made me realize how poorly I knew my own country. Since then I have spent time in all fifty U.S. states and have a better sense of the enormous cultural, historical, and scenic diversity of this sprawling nation I call home.

Viana was a relatively prosperous fishing town, nestled at the confluence of high green wooded hills, a clean river, and the sea. It was called "the garden city of Portugal," and it indeed had an abundance of green spaces. It also had many old churches, some dating from the 15th and 16th centuries. The waterfront was mostly given over to the port and boatyards. I watched fish being auctioned and wandered past sheds where men were building traditional wooden dories.

The next day was the Thursday before Easter, which fell on April 6 that year. It was hot and sunny, and the streets of Viana were full of happy people taking advantage of a four-day weekend. Many were from Spain, as the border was just twenty miles away. Portugal's constitution adopted separation of church and state in 1976, but public holidays were often religious. (This is still the case across Europe.)

Banks were closed for the long weekend, so I cashed a traveler's check at a travel agency. These checks were the safest way to carry my money. They required two signatures: you signed all of the checks once when you received them, then signed each one again when you cashed them—the two signatures had to match. You kept a record of the check numbers, and if they got lost or stolen, you could supposedly replace them—I'm glad I never had to test that.

I wore a soft cloth money belt under my clothes, and this is where I kept my traveler's checks, cash, and passport. I had to plan carefully to protect these when I went swimming. I was told that if I slept on the beach, I should never stash valuables at the foot of my sleeping bag, where someone could slash and grab.

I met up with Fernando and we walked two and a half miles on a winding cobbled road up to the Santuário de Santa Luzia. The path went through a serene, shady forest resonant with birdsong and scented with flowers. At the top was a lovely Byzantine-inspired basilica and a magnificent view—it was a clear day and we could see for miles.

We paid ten cents to climb to the top of the cupola for an even grander vista. Below lay a fancy hotel, gardens, wooded areas, and the ruins of a stone village built before the Romans conquered the area.

We took the tram back down and spent the afternoon wandering through town. The churches were decked out for Easter, their ornate interiors brimming with flowers, candles, and people praying. I'm not religious, but I felt strong emotions inside these old churches. I believe there are multiple paths to the sacred. My personal path does not involve a particular denomination, ritual, or location, but I can feel a connection to the divine in any sacred space. Easter itself brings back happy childhood memories of egg hunts, colorful new outfits, baskets stuffed with chocolate and toys, and family feasts.

After spending the morning with Fernando, I went off on my own to find lunch. Café Sport, in the center of town, was noisy but cozy. I had *sopa da peixe* (fish soup) with bread, and topped off my meal with a piece of heavenly peanut cake and a pot of tea.

That morning I had checked out of my room and left my pack at the train station, where all-day storage cost thirty cents. After lunch, I retrieved my pack and met up with Fernando. Along with a few of his friends, we were going to spend the night at the beach. We walked a mile or two to a bar where a group was gathered for a farewell party—the three Germans I'd met the evening before were leaving the next morning. We drank beer and talked, but I grew bored—I couldn't seem to get much of a conversation going with anyone.

That night, a few of us slept on the beach, serenaded by waves under a full moon. I was so happy to find people to do this with, since I loved sleeping outside, but hadn't felt comfortable doing it alone.

In the morning we walked back to town. It was shaping up to be another perfect mid-70-degree day. Fernando showed me the vibrant local market, where once a week people came from all over the area to buy clothes, kitchenware, and other household items. I bought two traditional floral scarves.

It was Good Friday, and they had somehow stuffed even more flowers and candles into the churches. Fourteen stations of the cross had been erected all over the city during the night—large wooden crosses were draped with purple shrouds, the ground around them piled high with flowers, candles, and other offerings.

I grew tired of Fernando's company, and I think he was ready for a break from me as well, so we said *tchau* (the Portuguese young person's version of ciao, or goodbye). Partings were awkward without the option to exchange phone numbers or emails, and I often felt sad that the goodbyes were probably forever.

I checked back into the crummy pension, stashed my pack, then found a park where I could read and nap. The grass was strewn with lounging young people, many of them getting high or drinking beer. A little of that went a long way with me, and I found myself avoiding the stoner crowd.

The next morning I rose early and took a bus twenty five minutes south to Esposende, a quiet town where a river met the sea. It had a long beach as well as a youth hostel, but I discovered that the hostel wouldn't open until summer, so I continued on.

I bussed to Barcelo, where I could transfer to Braga. Barcelo wasn't appealing, and I was glad I didn't have to stay the night. A kind old man helped me get on the correct bus to Braga, making sure I took the direct bus, instead of a local one, which he said was "not so nice." He then instructed the driver to take care of me because I was a foreigner!

This was just one of innumerable kindnesses I was shown on my trip,

from strangers as well as my dad's friends. I've never forgotten those gestures. In 2012 I heard about Airbnb and decided it could be a great way to "pay back" some of the hospitality I had received in my travels. For six years I hosted travelers from all over the world in my home, and did everything I could to make their time in Seattle enjoyable, from picking them up at the bus station or airport, to taking them hiking or inviting them for dinner. Some became friends and have welcomed me to their homes abroad.

Before I get back to Braga, you may be wondering how I decided where to go each day. The main source was my *Let's Go Europe* guidebook. I also got information from tourist offices. Fellow travelers were another inspiration, and I often changed my plans after hearing someone recommend a place that wasn't on my radar.

It was dark by the time I arrived in Braga, and the whole city was lit up for Easter. I hadn't known it beforehand, but Braga was the main religious center of this Catholic country. I couldn't have happened into a better place to spend the holiday.

Nearly everyone I saw was carrying pieces of *pão de ló* (sponge cake) for their Easter feast the next day. These enormous cakes were sold by the kilo—you told the shop how much you wanted, and they cut off a hunk, as if it were a giant wheel of cheese.

I got a room at Pensão Oliveira for four dollars, and then found a place to eat. I decided to try *bacalhau* (salted, dried codfish), the national dish and a staple of Portuguese cuisine. I didn't like it, but I was too hungry to care.

After dinner I walked back to my room, intending to sleep, but I saw fireworks from my window and heard a loudspeaker—who could resist? So back out I went. I followed the sound to a church, where I watched the opening blessing of a mass. Then I continued to one of the main squares. It was festooned with lights, and crowds of people lined the street, so I settled in to see what would happen.

I noticed a group of young people looking at me, and I smiled at them. Eventually they worked up the courage to approach me, and in a mix of French, English, and Portuguese I was swept right into the group.

The one girl, Fatima, was especially sweet, and when she left for home later that evening she gave me a kiss on both cheeks—an endearing custom between friends. I was left with a group of about eight high school-age boys. One of them spoke excellent French and served as translator. They took me on a short walk around town, then deposited me back at my pension, with plans for a rendezvous the next day.

That night I wrote in my journal:

> *Everything that is happening to me is just exactly the way it should be. Each person I meet, each experience I have, whether good or bad, in the long run appears to have had a purpose, by helping me to better appreciate something, by perhaps leading to another event or adventure. It never ceases to amaze me how everything just falls into place—whenever I need something it comes to me, whether it be transportation, a place to eat, or someone to talk to.*

On Easter morning I was awakened by the cacophony of exploding sky rockets. I dressed quickly and headed out. Priests were walking in procession from house to house, bestowing blessings, and boys in crimson robes walked ahead. Some rang bells, one held a crucifix for everyone to kiss, and others fired off the deafening rockets. A van with roof-mounted speakers followed, blaring loud music. The streets were lined with arches draped in purple flags.

Braga was ordinarily a quiet city, but on Easter Sunday the center of town was bustling and noisy. The churches and cathedrals were lavishly decorated for the occasion. I went inside several, but for some reason they made me feel sad—I think I was getting a bit tired of churches.

In the afternoon my new friends met me at my pension. There were several more girls this time. We walked three and a half miles up to the most famous sight in Braga, the Cathedral of Bom Jesus. It perched high on a wooded hill at the top of a long Baroque stairway with five hundred and seventy-five steps that zigzagged up past fountains,

statues, gardens, and a series of chapels with life-size dioramas portraying the fourteen Stations of the Cross.

Surrounding the church was a large park, with pools and waterfalls created using water from natural springs in the hill. My young friends rented several rowboats, and we all piled in and rowed around a small and crowded lake. There was lots of zany teenage energy.

I went back to my pension, grabbed a quick dinner, and met my friends again about 9:30. Portuguese nightlife started and ended late, and I still wasn't used to it, but I made myself stay awake. We walked to a park, where a large group of their friends had gathered. They all seemed to really enjoy each other's company. They weren't into smoking pot or drinking, but like almost all of the men I'd seen so far, most of the boys smoked cigarettes.

The kids all seemed so interested in me. I guess I was a novelty. If they talked slowly I could carry on a simple conversation in Portuguese. We played a rollicking game of soccer in the dark with a little plastic ball.

Later we walked to the main square, where loud music blared, and a tall thin wooden pole had been erected. A loaf of bread and a codfish were tied to the top, and the pole was coated with something slippery. Young boys took turns trying to climb up and grab the food, and sliding back down to much hilarity. The winner would receive a few escudos, along with some wine, fish, and potatoes. It looked nearly impossible, and when we left, no one had yet made it more than halfway.

The evening ended with a breathtaking display of fireworks. The smoke from the explosions was so thick it looked like boiling masses of clouds in an intense lightning storm.

The next morning I explored the city on my own. Though it wasn't large, there was a lot to see, and every building was incredibly old. There were literally dozens of churches, and when the bells rang each hour the sound ricocheted around the city like a dispersed symphony.

Braga was an attractive city surrounded by green fields and forested hills unmarred by sprawl. Many of the streets were lined with leafy trees. The gardens were manicured and formal, with fountains, trimmed

hedges, and myriad flowers. Cobbled sidewalks had designs worked into them. Ornate towers and ramparts of ancient buildings dotted the low-rise cityscape.

My Braga friends: Domingo, Carlos, Fatima, Teresa, Lola, Tony, and others

In the afternoon I met my friends and we went back to the park at Bom Jesus. After another boat ride, we drank Sumol, took a lot of photos, and just goofed around. They were super friendly kids and a lot of fun to hang out with.

I wanted to get a relatively early start the next morning, so I decided not to go out that evening. I said goodbye to everyone except Fatima, who wanted to show me the Cathedral of Sé, the oldest in Portugal. Its museum contained breathtaking religious treasures from the 10th century: vestments woven with silver and gold thread, and crosses, statues, and chalices made of gold, silver, and ivory. I think they were the oldest things I had ever seen in person, and I couldn't get my mind around the fact that they were over a thousand years old!

Back at my pension, I watched a rosy sunset over the layered hills beyond the city. It was the perfect end to an unforgettable day.

In the morning, while waiting for the bus to Sameiro, I was amazed to run into one of the Marias from my flight to Lisbon. She seemed delighted to see me, and invited me to visit when I returned to Lisbon.

Sameiro was an old church set high on a hill east of Braga. It was a

gorgeous sunny day, and as the bus wound its way up the mountain, birds sang exuberantly, farmers worked in the fields, and the smells of cooking wafted from homes near the road. All around me lay verdant hills and farmland, houses and barns with red tile roofs dotting the landscape. From the hilltop I could see Braga, nestled in a green valley far below, surrounded by mountains and forest.

Guimaraes

Another short bus ride took me about eight miles south to Guimaraes. It's known as "the city where Portugal was born," both because Portugal's first King came into the world here, and because a decisive battle that established the Kingdom of Portugal was fought nearby. The town became a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2001 due to its exceptionally well-preserved medieval elements.

The historic center was packed with beautiful old buildings, but like many of the towns I'd seen in Portugal, Guimaraes was growing outward, spreading gray concrete warts over the surrounding farmland. Since the independence of Portugal's African colonies five years earlier, the population of Portugal had increased markedly, as about half a million people returned from Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Angola, Cape Verde, and São Tomé and Príncipe. This influx had resulted in an acute shortage of jobs and housing. The bourgeoning construction trade was helping to "solve" both problems, but gobbling up farmland in the process.

The majority of dwellings in the area were duplexes or apartments. Few people could afford a single-family home, unless they lived on a farm. Even then, I was told that most agriculture in the region was on a sharecropping basis, which I think meant that farmers didn't necessarily own their land or houses.

Many aspects of rural Portuguese life seemed more ancient than modern. Families were large, and women appeared to age quickly—many looked too old to have such young children. Women washed clothes and linens by hand in community washing areas, and it wasn't unusual to see a woman with a huge basket balanced on her head and a

large sack in each hand, trudging slowly down a long rural road. Work in the fields looked backbreaking—hoeing, digging, or cutting grain by hand, bent over all day in the hot sun. Part of me was grateful to not have that life, but part of me wondered if rural farmers were happier than all those city dwellers living in drab concrete apartment blocks and stuck in offices all day.

Urban folks seemed to look down on farmers, disparaging their values and way of life, and that made me sad. Why denigrate people who grow the food we depend on, who know how to fix tools and machines, who are tuned in to the cycles of nature? Are we envious of their lives, but not willing to take the pay cut it would entail, and so we tell ourselves they are "less than" as a way to justify living mostly indoors, disconnected from the sky and the earth? This division between white and blue-collar workers still exists in many places, as does the resulting urban-rural political and social divide.

Many of the young Portuguese I met idolized American culture. Sure, America had a lot of good music, food, cities, and movies, but so did Portugal. I heard people express pride in being Portuguese, but there didn't seem to be a lot of love—especially among the young people—for the folklore, customs, or country itself. I realized that we often don't appreciate our own backyards—the grass can indeed look greener on the other side of the geographic fence.

The four-dollar pension I found in Guimaraes was pretty basic. I didn't mind the bare bones room, but I missed hot water, which I hadn't had for a while. I couldn't make myself take a cold shower, so I made do with a sponge bath.

The next morning I rose early and walked four miles up to a hilltop called Penha. The walk began on a busy road, and I was relieved when I could turn off onto a wooded path. The trail wound upward through a dry pine, eucalyptus, and juniper forest that reminded me a bit of Eastern Washington. It was a warm, breezy morning. I felt a great sense of peace, and it was a joy to walk and take long, deep breaths of the fragrant air. When I reached the practically-deserted summit I could see for miles.

Back in town, I visited the doll house-like Guimaraes fortress, with its crenellated parapets, and the palace of the Dukes of Bragança, an opulent 9th-century mansion decorated with exotic woods, tapestries, and Chinese porcelain.

All day long I heard "psst" from men I passed. I was learning fast that I had to completely ignore them, and their questions (Where was I from? Did I speak English?). One word or look in their direction and I was stuck with a "pal" it was very hard to get rid of. I was dismayed at how easily everyone could tell I was a foreigner. Sometimes it's fun to be noticed, but I was craving invisibility. Besides, being noticed is not necessarily flattery—at times I felt disapproval, especially from older women.

The Alberto Sampaio museum was housed in a 10th-century monastery. As I perused the religious art and relics, I chatted with a guide who spoke French. He was an older man, intrigued with this young American girl traveling alone. I felt safe talking to him, since he couldn't follow me out of the museum, and I asked him why the men were so offensive. He basically said that was just the culture.

In the afternoon I caught the bus to Povoa de Varzim, an hour away on the coast. I was getting used to slow, bumpy bus rides, and kind of liked them—I could relax and observe the countryside and villages, even if through a dusty window.

The friendly folks at the tourist office found me a nice room for five dollars—and it had hot water! After so much sightseeing, I was ready for some down time. Povoa's beach wasn't especially scenic, and the tall cement apartment buildings springing up next to it didn't add any charm, but I enjoyed watching the sun set in a pallet of understated reds.

I was noticing that Portuguese people (and Europeans in general, I would learn) touched each other more than Americans—women held hands with their teenage sons and daughters, everyone gave cheek kisses, even men touched each other more. I found it heartwarming.

Seeing men in teeny bikinis was a new and eyepopping experience for me, one that I did not find heartwarming, let alone attractive. I much

preferred the good old baggy boxer-style shorts I was used to back home!

Aveiro

The next morning I woke early, strolled on the beach, and read my book, then caught an afternoon train south to Aveiro. I had to transfer in Porto, which required traversing the city to a different station. I'd heard unflattering things about Porto and was curious to see if it lived up to its reputation. It was definitely big, noisy, and gray, with not a green thing in sight. I hear it's much nicer now.

In contrast, the train to Aveiro chugged through lovely wooded areas, where the scent of eucalyptus pervaded even the stuffy air of the cars. The area was laced with rivers, most of them clean green ribbons winding through agricultural land. But there was also a lot of litter—it made me sad to see huge piles in the middle of a beautiful field, stream, or riverbank.

When I finally arrived in Aveiro, I was tired and not feeling well. I found a spacious cold-water room for four dollars and took a nap before heading out to explore.

Aveiro was a city of canals, built around a lagoon at the mouth of a river. It broke my heart to see how polluted the waterways were. It seemed to me that environmental regulations and attitudes in Portugal were about fifty years behind the U.S. Paper and chemical factories north of the city spewed stench and smoke into the air, and foul-looking foams straight into the water, and no one I spoke to seemed concerned. I was told that not long before, the river had been black from effluent and industrial waste. I saw little open space or unused land to help filter the toxins. Happily, the river and canals have now been cleaned up, and Aveiro is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Portugal.

The Mayas had a friend in Aveiro. Like seemingly half the women in Portugal, her name was Maria. She was easy to find, however, because she owned a well-known flower shop, and I got the impression that almost everyone in town knew her. The women in the tourist office told

me how to get to the shop, and I was delighted to learn that Enrique had called to say I was coming, and Maria was expecting me.

She and her son Pedro drove me to Barra Beach for a delicious meal of fried eel and seafood rice with white wine. After lunch, Maria went back to work, and Pedro and I took the train to Ovar, a quiet town with wealthy-looking homes thirty minutes north of Aveiro. This is where Pedro lived with his mom, stepdad, eighty-six-year-old great aunt, and their maid (also named Maria). On weekends his ebullient twelve-year-old brother, Gustavo, came home from boarding school. The whole family spoke English because they had lived for quite a few years in South Africa.

Twenty-something Pedro was a soft-spoken artist, laid-back and a bit spacey. He gave me his room, and told me to help myself to his stereo and records. I must have played Dylan's *Nashville Skyline* a dozen times during my stay, and I will forever think of Portugal when I hear those songs. It was just wonderful to have a comfortable place to relax, listen to music, read, and recharge.

The house was huge, and I was amazed to learn that part of it was three hundred years old. Handsome antique furniture had been passed down through the generations. The meals were delicious and the easygoing family made me feel completely welcome. I spent Saturday sleeping, eating, reading, and walking around Ovar, then luxuriated in a hot bath.

I felt incredible gratitude for the kindness and generosity that was being showered on me. My dad was clearly loved by Captain Maya, who was treating me like his own daughter, and doing everything to make my stay in Portugal as enjoyable as possible.

I also believe that many cultures revere guests in ways that Americans do not. This can even extend to an insistence on paying for everything. At age twenty, I really appreciated this, but later, when I could afford to pay my own way, this level of generosity sometimes felt awkward.

Many years later I committed the immense faux pas of trying to repay a French couple's generosity by giving them money. I had visited them four times over the years, and each time they had insisted on paying for everything. On my last visit, my adult son was with me. Again, this

couple insisted on paying for meals and even Versailles tickets (which are not cheap). This made me very uncomfortable. In fact, I felt like a mooch. Since they wouldn't let me give them any money, I left a note in their guest room with some euros. They were shocked and, I later realized, offended. I wrote them a letter apologizing for my lack of cultural sensitivity, blaming it on my American conditioning.

Pedro's older brother Afonso was married to a South African woman named Jacqui. They invited me to spend a few days at their home in Quinta de Azenhas, south of Aveiro. They had a cute baby boy named Mikah. Poor Jacqui was terribly homesick, and was glad to have an English-speaking woman to talk to. She was unhappy living in Portugal, and longingly showed me slides of South Africa. She gave me a lot of insight into the challenges of cross-cultural marriages—love isn't always enough.

I went back to Ovar and spent a few more days with Pedro's family. They didn't seem to be tired of hosting me, and I enjoyed being there. Part of me was eager to leave Portugal and move on to other adventures, but it was so easy to let the warm, sunny days slip by, one after the other, and there was always something new to explore.

Wandering around town one day, I met a woman my age from Montreal who was spending two weeks in Portugal after studying in France. She and I were so much alike we could almost have been clones. We spent a fascinating afternoon in Furadouro, a coastal town just a few miles west of Ovar where people made a living fishing, growing rice, and harvesting seaweed and salt.

The wind blew briskly as we watched gaily-colored wooden dories returning from the sea, their prows and sterns as curved as crescent moons. After unloading the fish and nets, people used oxen to haul the boats up onto the sand. It was fascinating to watch, and so different from Cascais, where the fishing had already turned into a show for the tourists.

The hardworking Furadouro locals also collected seaweed in special flatbottomed *moliceiro* boats, and used it to fertilize their fields. They diverted fresh water from the estuary into paddies and grew rice. They

harvested salt by channeling seawater into square enclosures—as the water evaporated, they scraped the salt crystals into huge cone-shaped piles, then covered these to keep the salt dry. Traditionally the piles had been covered with straw but, sadly, plastic was becoming more common.

On Friday, Pedro and I took a train to the well-preserved medieval town of Coimbra, where ancient stone buildings clung to a steep hillside. The narrow streets of the noisy commercial center at the base of the hill were clogged with traffic, but car-free alleys and staircases wound steeply up to the older, quieter part of town. We had lunch in a popular hole-in-the-wall restaurant only big enough for a dozen diners. Dark and windowless, it was crammed with odd, dusty trinkets, and posters from exotic locales. The food was heavenly. My flavorful *sopa de pedro* (stone soup) came with a scrubbed stone in it, a nod to the enduring folk tale—it seems there is a version in every culture.

After lunch we strolled the grounds of the 16th-century Universidade de Coimbra, where handsome buildings surrounded a broad courtyard. Then we visited two 12th-century cathedrals—both had restful green cloisters and ornate interiors, but one was almost destroyed on the outside because of pollution. Remember acid rain? Thankfully, stricter air pollution regulations since the 1980s have slowed the destruction of old stone monuments.

On Saturday I returned to Jacqui and Afonso's and we went for a long, sunny walk near their home. The fields were thick with wheat, vegetables, rice, and grapes—wine was a staple beverage with meals, so most families had small vineyards and made their own vino.

The area was beautiful, but every square inch of land was privately owned, and there were no trails to walk on, only roads. Houses, barns, chicken coops, and hay lofts crowded right up to the edge of the tarmac. The few wooded patches were widely spaced between large tracts of farmed land. The only other natural vegetation was along the rivers and streams.

The farmers worked dawn to dusk every day, often plowing by hand or with oxen—I don't remember seeing any tractors. I did see many

weary, weather-beaten faces.

Jacqui felt the local people resented her for having money and not toiling to earn her daily bread. She said they stole things from her and Afonso. She knew almost no one who shared her lifestyle, socio-economic status, or beliefs about politics, nutrition, sanitation, ecology, or much of anything at all. No wonder she felt so isolated and lonely.

Sunday was another lovely warm day, and we all went for a scenic drive. I was thrilled to get farther out into the countryside. We drove about an hour and a half east to Viseu, through miles of pine and eucalyptus forest and the riverfront town of Agueda. It was late April, and flowering heather covered the hillsides. We stopped at a museum in the mountain town of Caramulo, where we were surprised to find original paintings by Picasso and Dali. The classic car museum in town was unexpectedly fun.

Jacqui, Afonso, and Mikah in the mountains

We returned on a different road, through what seemed like an endless succession of hamlets. The scenery got prettiest just east of Albergaria-a-Velha, where there were rivers. I was so happy to be in the mountains,

but it seemed impossible to escape from people, towns, and litter.

The next day, Jacqui and I went to visit a German woman named Gisela. She was married to a Portuguese man, and had lived in Aveiro for a dozen years. She was Jacqui's only real friend in the area. We talked about traveling, and Gisela made some comments that got me thinking.

She believed there is one way of traveling where you simply seek out new sensations and experiences, letting them all flow freely in and out of your heart. You take home with you a happy heart.

Or you can travel with a different focus, a mix of heart and mind. You read about the history and culture of the places you are going to visit, and try to understand the springs and currents underlying life there. You take home with you a greater depth of understanding, and a heart that, while happy, is tempered by some of the realities you may have discovered.

It seemed to me that I wanted both. Sometimes I wished my trip were more exciting and full of that crazy, fun abandon many young travelers enthusiastically raved about. This kind of "just for fun travel" can feel more carefree, but it can also feel less impactful. I craved learning about places, even when not all of it was enjoyable or easy to digest (poverty, discontent, misogyny, or attitudes that I found unpalatable). I was learning things about myself, and about the way other people thought and lived, that I could absolutely never learn without being there. That was important to me.

The more time I spent in Portugal, the more I became aware of how difficult life there could be. For the vast majority of people, every penny earned was spent. Few could save anything at all, and monetary gymnastics was a way of life. It was almost impossible to find an empty dwelling to buy or rent, and new flats were tiny, poorly built, and cost nearly a family's whole salary. Just in case you missed this staggering data point earlier: inflation was at thirty percent!

The day before I left Ovar, I went back to Furadouro, this time with Pedro. It was a wonderful opportunity to watch the fishing boats with

someone who spoke the language and could explain what was happening.

It was a calm, sunny day, and the fishing was good, so everyone was in a buoyant mood. The brightly painted vessels, with their high, peaked prows and sterns, sat on logs on the beach. The whole village helped to launch them. First, ten or twelve men climbed into each boat, three or four to an oar. Everyone else then pushed the boats toward the water, rolling them on the logs, and guiding them with long poles and ropes. As the boats moved slowly forward, people took the logs from behind the boats and placed them in front. When the boats reached the water, everyone gave a final mighty shove, the heavy vessels went crashing into the surf, and the men began to row out to sea. It was a slow and cumbersome effort that looked exhausting.

There were long ropes attached to the ends of the nets. One end stayed on the beach while each boat rowed perhaps a quarter mile out, towing its net, made a U-turn, and rowed back to shore. Dozens of people then grabbed onto the rope ends and began slowly pulling in the heavy nets. As the ropes emerged from the sea, men untied the knots holding the lengths together, coiled up each section, then carried the coils on long poles hoisted across two people's shoulders, and dumped them next to the boat. Men then tied the ropes back together and fed them into the boat.

Meanwhile the hauling in of the nets continued, with occasional bursts of song and laughter. Everyone could probably tell how good the catch would be by the weight of the net, so that might have explained the boisterous mood!

After nearly an hour of pulling, the enormous nets finally appeared. There were shouts and whoops and a frenzy of people running to look. It was indeed a good catch, and the beach came alive with silver fishes sparkling in the sun. Children ran and shouted gleefully. Men scooped the fish into smaller nets suspended on shoulder poles, carried them up the beach, and dumped them into piles. The fish flopped and jumped and glinted like jewels. Bigger fish were separated out from the sardines and small fish that made up the bulk of the catch. When the big net was empty it was folded up and carried back to the boat in a

long drooping line across many shoulders, like firefighters carrying a heavy hose.

Women brought buckets, bags, and baskets of every shape and size for their purchases, and the auctioning began. A crowd gathered around each pile and the auctioneer rattled off prices until it was sold to the highest bidder. While the crowd moved to the next pile, the buyer began to pack up her fish, which she would take to one of the nearby towns to sell. The money from the auction was split between the men on the boat.

Very soon the fish had all disappeared and the boats went out again. In good weather they could go more than once, and that day they went out four times. The catches ranged from seven piles to forty-two! I was mesmerized. It was one of the most captivating experiences I had ever had, made all the better because I had Pedro as a buffer against any bothersome men.

We returned to Aveiro, and in the late afternoon I somewhat reluctantly boarded a train back to Lisbon. It was hard to say goodbye to these people who had treated me like family for most of two weeks. It was especially hard to say goodbye to Jacqui, and I hope she eventually found contentment.

I arrived in Lisbon late on April 24th to find it decorated with flags and banners, and crowded with stalls, stages, and people. The next day would be Liberation Day, commemorating the largely-peaceful 1974 Carnation Revolution (so-called because soldiers placed carnations in their gun barrels) that marked the end of Portuguese colonialism and the beginning of a democratic government.

While I watched the preparations in Rossio Square in the heart of the city, I talked with a local man named Marco who spoke great English. He invited me to dinner at a restaurant with a group of Swiss and Portuguese friends. I couldn't resist the opportunity to have people to experience more Lisbon nightlife with.

It was a fun and crazy evening! A dozen of us ate and drank and laughed a lot. The women wanted to go dancing, so after a wild subway ride we ended up at a disco club. What a study in human behavior! It was quite

revolting in a way—a real meat market. I sat in a corner with Marco, drinking mineral water and people watching. When we finally left, at 4 a.m., I got a ride back to Maya's. It was too late to knock, so I fell asleep in their garden for a few hours. They thought it was very funny when they spotted me out there in the morning.

On Sunday afternoon, Enrique and Zé took me to the National Palace of Queluz, once the residence for two generations of monarchs. Called the Portuguese Versailles, it was in fact modeled in large part after the famous French palace. The exterior was understated, but the interior was stunning, with a rich collection of gorgeous furnishings.

We then drove to Sintra to see its National Palace, which had been closed on my previous visit. The oldest palace in Portugal, it was built around the 10th or 11th century when the area was under Moorish rule. The beautifully-preserved ancient tapestries, tiles, and furnishings transported me into the past.

Afterward, we walked around the Feira de São Pedro, a huge Sunday market where tables were piled high with local crafts and foods, including pastries, cheeses, and vegetables in a rainbow of colors.

Algarve

Two days later I got up at 5:30 to catch an early train to Portugal's fabled south coast, called the Algarve. As the train chugged away from Lisbon, the countryside became more open. Jumbled, high rolling hills were strewn with flowers and dotted with cork trees instead of the olive trees of the north. Flat areas along river valleys served as pastureland—there were few houses or people, but many sheep.

The landscape got more and more scenic the farther south we went. Rockrose shrubs blanketed whole hillsides, their white blossoms showing off yellow centers with bold black dots. Even without binoculars I could pick out a soaring hawk, a small falcon-like raptor, and large black and white storks with orange legs and bills. This part of Portugal seemed wilder and less polluted than the north.

It took five-hours to get to Lagos, a town tucked into the southwest

corner of the country. The center of town felt touristy, and most of the people appeared to be visitors. Restaurant menus were in five languages. The streets were crowded, even though it wasn't yet high season—I couldn't imagine what it must be like in the summer.

The whole south coast of Portugal was devoted to tourism. Part of me was horrified by the way this had turned a pristine natural area into a playground for sunburned humans, with wall-to-wall hotels, shops, restaurants, and noise. It was not my scene.

I wondered how tourism affected the local people and culture. It's always a tradeoff—tourists inject money into the economy, but utterly change the community dynamic. The local women generally avoided the tourists—the moms no doubt wanting to protect their daughters from the drinking, carousing foreign boys in skimpy beach attire. Young kids had learned to steal or beg from tourists. As for the local young men, many of them moved into the campground for the summer and spent every night trolling for foreign girls to lure back to their tents. As in so many cultures, a double standard prevailed—only men could be promiscuous without damaging their reputation.

Outside the touristy center and away from the crowded beach, Lagos turned out to be a nice town. An old stone wall wrapped around most of it, and the streets were litter-free. The coast was breathtaking, with crystal clear water in uncountable shades of blue and green. Gray-brown cliffs of clay and pebbles and stones had been eaten away by the ocean into fanciful spires, towers, arches, caves, and grottoes. Pocket-size beaches nestled in coves, so different from the long stretches of sand in the north. The father from town I walked, the fewer people I saw.

That night I met two ebullient Australian women. After a fun conversation over a glass of wine at the Vasco de Gama pub, they invited me to share their camping spot. The campground was a barren cement-walled enclosure packed with dilapidated trailers, and tents of all sizes, with a few trees for shade. Most of the campers were young people. It was a somewhat squalid place, but it did have clean bathrooms and showers.

In the morning I walked into town, went to the post office and bank, and bought whole wheat crackers and cheese for a cheap and tasty breakfast. Then I went back to the beach to hang out with my Australian friends. It was roasting hot in the sun, then shivery cold whenever a cloud came by.

Late in the day the Aussies left town, and I returned to the campground for the night. There was no one at the reception, so I just went in and found a place to sleep. I figured I'd pay in the morning. About 1 a.m., one of the security guards woke me up, shining a flashlight in my face, pulling my hair, and demanding my passport. I could smell alcohol on his breath, and there was no way I was giving him that valuable document. I spoke to him in Portuguese, which only seemed to make him more persistent. Finally another guard materialized and told the drunk one to leave me alone. After probably disturbing everyone in the campground, he finally walked away and I slept. In the morning he was hanging around watching to make sure I paid. I couldn't get out of there fast enough.

On the way to town, I ran into an American couple I'd met on the train from Lisbon. They were somewhere around fifty, lived in northern Sweden, and were avid travelers. They had backpacked all over the world, walking long distances, taking trains and busses, and staying in pensions. Their intrepid spirit inspired me—that was the kind of traveler I wanted to be.

It was the first of May, Europe's Labor Day, also known as International Worker's Day. This was an important national holiday, and the town was setting up for a running race. A large platform held big trophies for the winners. I decided not to hang around to watch, and caught a bus to Sagres, twenty miles away at the southwest tip of the country.

Despite a cloudy sky that muted the colors, the countryside was lovely—dry and open, carpeted in flowers, grasses, and succulents. The road followed cliffs that dropped steeply down to the water, with jagged cuts where the sea had worn away the land.

Sagres was full of young travelers speaking every language except

Portuguese—I didn't even feel like I was in Portugal. I walked half a mile to the youth hostel, located in a fortress on a long promontory jutting into the ocean. The tip of this rocky headland had been known since ancient times as "the end of the world."

I wasn't in the mood for small talk with fifty other young travelers, so I decided not to check in to the hostel. I wasn't sure where I would stay, and felt a bit lost, so I headed to the empty end of one of the beaches to spend the afternoon in the shade. When I got hot, I went swimming to cool off.

Walking through the village later that day, I heard accordion music. I peeked through a window and was elated to see young people dressed in folk costumes! I learned that they were preparing to dance in the main square. I hung around so I could watch them parade down the street, led by two accordion players and a woman playing a metal triangle. I love local happenings that have nothing to do with tourists. All the parents came to watch their kids dance, and it felt like a real community event. I was glad to see children learning the traditions.

For about a dollar I had a tasty meal at a popular place called "Lord Jim's"—fish soup, salad, bread, butter, and tea. Other hostelers were eating there, but I still wasn't in the mood for company. There were times I craved conversation, and times I craved solitude. Sometimes I couldn't find conversation when I wanted it, and sometimes I couldn't find solitude when I wanted that, but I learned to trust that it would balance out. To paraphrase the Rolling Stones, you can't always get what you want, but you often get what you need.

A while later I ended up talking with a few young travelers, and mentioned that I'd rather sleep outside than in a crowded dorm room. Two of them said they'd like to join me, and some young Portuguese guys showed us a hut with a roof and three walls and big stacks of foam we could sleep on. It was quite comfy, and also lucky, because it rained a bit during the night.

The next morning my fellow campers and I went back to Lord Jim's for a breakfast of bread and omelets. I used the bathroom to freshen up, and was delighted to find it had hot water.

I learned that the banks were closed for yet another four-day weekend—it was only Friday, so I had to make my cash last until Monday morning.

Four of us walked to a beautiful, deserted beach. The cracked and creviced cliffs reminded me a bit of the canyonlands in the Southwestern United States. It began raining again, so we found shelter under a rock overhang and climbed inside our sleeping bags to chat and read. There were no e-books, and paper books are heavy and bulky, but every hostel and traveler hangout had a book exchange—you could leave a book you were done with, and take a new one. Thanks to this, I never ran out of things to read.

I didn't feel disappointed by the rainy weather—I enjoyed the wildness of the pounding surf and wind. I was more interested in the scenery and culture of the south than in sunbathing, and I didn't want to spend my precious and limited travel time lying on a beach—it was a nice break when I got road-weary, but a day or two was enough for me, and then I was ready to keep exploring.

I was learning that every young traveler had a copy of *Let's Go Europe*. If I wanted to avoid crowds, I would need to find places that weren't in the book. Overtourism has only increased since then, and while I like seeing famous places, often there are lesser-known spots that are every bit as worth visiting, without the hordes.

Once the rain stopped, I spent the afternoon walking on the hills above the beach. Thick masses of cloud wrestled in the sky, and far below I could hear waves pounding up through holes they'd been carving in the rock for millennia.

That night I couldn't find anyone else who wanted to sleep in the hut, so I stayed in the hostel. It had a spacious lounge area, but the sleeping quarters were cramped and claustrophobic. The bunks were full of giggling girls, and it took me a while to fall asleep. Now I carry earplugs when I travel!

This was my first youth hostel experience, and my first time being around so many young travelers. Most of them had Eurail Passes (I did not), and a typical answer to the question, "Where have you been in the

last few weeks?" was, "Oh, Paris, Nice, Rome, Venice, Athens, Madrid, Sevilla, Lisbon..." They must have lived on trains!

The youth hostel felt like an international youth camp. There was a sense of excitement at being with other young travelers from all over the world, but also a bit of resentment that there were so many of us. The hostelers ranged in age from eighteen to twenty-six. Most were trying to see as much of Europe as possible in a few weeks or months, while also drinking a lot of booze and partying. A few were hippies or vagabonds, who had less money, dirtier clothes, no time constraints, and no train pass to max out. While booze was consumed with abandon, pot was illegal, and the penalties could be steep, so I don't remember anyone smoking it.

The next day I visited an interesting local museum showcasing the culture and natural history of the Algarve. There were beautifully-preserved birds, nests, and animal specimens from the area, which I found fascinating. Other rooms displayed historic photographs, fishing and farming implements, handicrafts, and dioramas of local industries such as olive oil pressing and ceramic kilns. This gave me insights into the way of life in this area, which was quite different from the rest of Portugal. There were also photos of the iconic Algarvian chimneys—reflecting their Moorish influence, they looked like minarets, with scrollwork openings for smoke.

The next day I took a train forty miles west to a town called Lagoa, and was disconcerted to find that the train stop was in the middle of nowhere. I started walking toward the beach, four miles away on an empty road through open countryside with no shade and few signs of human habitation.

The south was more Mediterranean and desert-like than the north. Inland, almond trees were covered in fuzzy green nuts, and under them grew a carpet of bright red poppies. Near the coast there were cacti, bamboos, succulents, and perennials blooming in a palette of colors.

I stopped at a restaurant for soup, and met an English couple who offered me a ride to the nearby town of Portimão. I walked around for a while but couldn't find an affordable pension, so I sat on a bench to

write in my journal and think about what to do. Moments later I looked up and saw an unassuming sign that said “Quartos” (rooms). For five dollars I got a deluxe room, with not only hot water, but a shower with good water pressure, something I hadn’t had in two months. Once again, the Universe provided.

At 5 in the morning I was startled awake by a deafening siren-like wail. It sounded so close I thought my building must be on fire. I went out on the balcony to look and had to hold my hands over my ears. Satisfied my pension wasn’t burning, I sat there shaking with adrenalin until the shrieking finally stopped. I never learned what it was.

In the morning I donned my pack and walked half an hour south to check out Praia da Roca beach. It was lined with hotels, and the beach itself was covered with umbrellas and chaise lounges set up every morning by the beach personnel. Not my cup of tea, so I walked back to town on a trail through a pine-eucalyptus wood, where I watched graceful white egrets with black bills patiently fishing in a wetland. More then ever, I wished I had a European bird book … and a flower book … and a tree book … and binoculars.

I wanted to explore southern Portugal, and the best way to do that seemed to be to hop from town to town, stay a bit if I liked a place, and then move on. So I continued west by train to Albufeira, and walked the three and a half miles into town from the station, past meadows of flowers and rows of almond trees.

Albufeira sat on a hilltop chockablock with picturesque whitewashed houses. Surrounding these was an unsightly clutter of shops and high-rise apartments. The coast was spectacular though, studded with arches and haystacks. The beach was crowded, so I followed a narrow path westward, and found a hidden cave just beyond the end of the trail. I must have spent the night here, although my journal isn’t clear about that. As I’ve said, generally I avoided sleeping outside alone, but this must have felt like a safe place. Traveling teaches you to trust your intuition about people and situations.

Evora

When I woke up early the next morning it was pouring rain, and I decided I'd had my fill of the coast. I caught the train a hundred and forty miles north to Setubal, and then a bus to Evora, sixty miles west. It was a long travel day, and a good one to spend indoors because it never stopped raining until I arrived at my destination.

Evora was a well-preserved medieval town with a historic university inside its old walls. Roman, Moorish, and Visigoth monuments testified to the occupation of every conquering horde that ever made it to Portugal.

I checked into the almost-empty youth hostel. There were only three of us in the women's dorm, but it turned out there were several university students who lived in the men's dorm. One of them was an absolutely charming guy named Alvaro. He was studying ecology, and spoke fluent English. Ecology was my major too, and I was delighted to have someone to ask all my questions about the natural history of Portugal.

The next morning was sunny and warm, and I spent the day happily wandering the town. I'd had my fill of museums and churches, but I couldn't miss the famous "Chapel of Bones." Built in the 17th century, its walls were covered in mosaic-like patterns created from the skulls and bones of five thousand people exhumed from local graveyards. It had been a creative way to empty the overflowing cemeteries while still honoring the deceased. It was kind of macabre, but also moving and reverent, and a good reminder that we are all mortal, so seize the day.

Evora was an intriguing mix of ancient and modern. The residents seemed old-fashioned, and reserved in their dress and demeanor—local women didn't even go out alone after dark—but because of the university, the city also had a modern youth culture, with posters touting jazz concerts, communist party meetings, no nukes, and alternative energy.

I loved the medieval vibe of the walled old town, but the narrow streets were crowded, claustrophobic, and choked with diesel fumes. My blood pressure went up every time a car honked at me to move out of

the way. In contrast, the countryside around Evora was serene, with forests of olive and cork trees.

Alvaro was the first Portuguese guy I'd felt drawn to, and when he asked if I wanted to go to dinner that evening, I said yes. He led me to a student hangout called "The Cooperative," just down the street from the hostel. For less than two dollars we got as much hearty soup and bread as we wanted, and a choice of three entrees. I chose perfectly-seasoned fish fillets with rice and salad.

It was a warm night, and the sky pulsed with stars. As we strolled around town, we stopped to listen to a traditional Cante Alentejo choir practicing. I couldn't understand the words, but the powerful acapella voices were both melancholy and uplifting. The style of singing is so deeply rooted in that part of Portugal, and has been such an important part of the community fabric for so many generations, that it now has UNESCO heritage status.

Leaving Lisbon

On Wednesday morning I returned to Maya's. Alvaro spent weekends with his family in Lisbon, and he called when he got home on Friday. We spent a lovely evening walking around the Benfica neighborhood. He was shy, smart, and easy to talk to. I definitely wasn't looking for a boyfriend, but we really enjoyed each other's company.

On Saturday evening I met up with the delivery flight Maria I'd run into up north. She and her husband Jose took me on an electric trolley ride up to a fancy hilltop wine bar and tasting room sponsored by the Port wine companies. The menu had about ten pages of Port to choose from, and they ordered several for us to sample. They treated me to dinner at a nice restaurant, and then we went to a small gathering at their friends' house. It was a really enjoyable evening.

Alvaro called on Sunday. It was raining, so we tucked under his umbrella and went for a stroll through the bustling streets of Benfica and into Monsanto Park. I realized I was feeling quite attached to this guy. He ran every day, ate healthy food, drank lightly, didn't smoke,

and had a strong love of nature. His academic focus was environmental landscape design—how people could restore ecological equilibrium and green spaces to their cities and neighborhoods—something that has always been a passion for me. He knew a lot about many subjects and conversation flowed easily. But despite his excellent English, the language barrier was sometimes frustrating, and it was challenging to convey nuances or trade quips.

I had been planning to leave Portugal in a few days, but decided I wanted to spend a little more time with Alvaro. We arranged to meet up for a short camping trip in the Algarve.

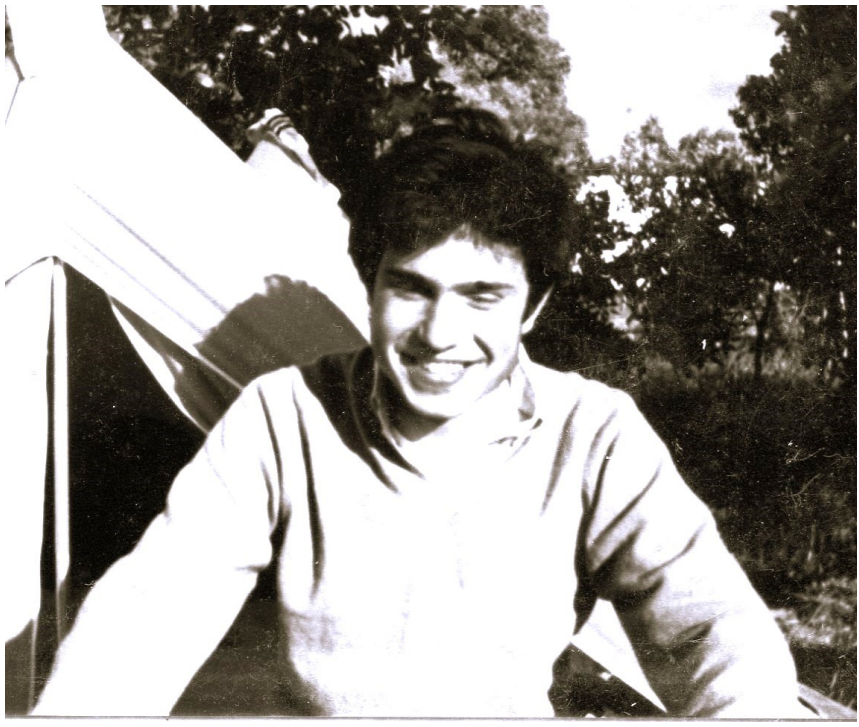
Two days later I said a sad goodbye to the Mayas, who had been my surrogate family for over two months. I kept in touch with them via letters for years, until Enrique died. I often wonder how their children are doing, but I don't have enough information to find them online. Do they still remember that crazy American girl who slept in their garden and made them laugh when she was learning to speak Portuguese? I will certainly never forget their generosity and kindness, and I hope I did an adequate job of conveying my gratitude.

Alvaro

Alvaro and I met up in Evora and took the train to Lagos—a place I never thought I'd go again! But he knew how to avoid the tourist crowds that had bothered me before. We stayed at a quiet campground away from town, up above the ocean. It felt like paradise—warm sun, soul-filling scenery, long walks on the cliffs, swimming in the sea, lying on the sand, eating dinner each night at inexpensive, cozy restaurants with a bottle of wine. He bought me delicious local almond cakes and figs to try. It was romantic and wonderful.

Alvaro and I had many things in common. Like me, he craved time in nature. He knew the names of the plants and birds. We both liked alone time, and sometimes went off by ourselves or sat together quietly, reading or writing. He had an exam on Monday, and diligently studied his textbook.

He felt discouraged about his future. He said there were no jobs in Portugal, that life there was stagnant, nothing ever changed, and those who left looking for better opportunities were looked down on in other parts of Europe. He later wrote to me, “Here we can’t be ambitious or we face a terrible deception.” Sometimes non-native English speakers have a great way of putting things.



Alvaro

It was hard to say goodbye to him, but neither of us was looking for something long term. Cross-cultural relationships can be a challenge, and I marvel at people who have made them work. Neither one of us wanted to leave our home, family, friends, language, or culture. We kept in touch for a while, but that predictably tapered off. I still think of him often. I hope he is happy and found meaningful work.

Tchau, Portugal

I had bought a hop-on-hop-off train ticket to Greece through a brick-

and-mortar travel agency in Lisbon (there being no internet). It cost a hundred and twenty dollars ($460 today). I'd have to stay on a specified train route, but I could get off whenever I wanted, and it was good for up to two months. The route went through northern Spain to Hendaye, France, along the south coast of France to Genoa, then down the spine of Italy to Brindisi, where I'd catch a boat to Greece.

On May 19, after ten weeks in Portugal, I boarded a train at the Lisbon station. Special compartments for international travelers had doors and curtains. I could stand in the hallway outside the compartment, open a window, breathe the outside air, and see the places we traveled through with no glass in the way.

At Coimbra, the train turned east, and I soon had to amend some of the generalizations I'd made about the north of Portugal being polluted and overdeveloped—here there were miles of scenic pine and eucalyptus forests without people or villages or litter.

As we climbed through the mountains to the border town of Guarda, the afternoon sun laid a rose-colored blanket over the forested hills. People in the fields waved and smiled. I could smell ripe figs and eucalyptus. Later, a quarter moon glowed in a sky festooned with stars.

I wrote in my journal that the next time I traveled I wanted to bicycle and bring camping gear—that way I could be closer to the land and the people and get away from big cities. I have never yet traveled by bicycle, but I've found other ways to get into rural areas: a 2019 overland camping tour of Africa took me to many remote places; to celebrate my 65th birthday, I walked part of the Camino de Santiago in northern Spain, and reveled in long walks through the countryside; and in 2025 I hiked around Jordan.

I was alone in the train compartment, and every single man who walked by invited himself in to try and start a conversation. I just shook my head and they left me alone. That is, until three slightly drunk Portuguese men came in, sat down, and leered at me. Two didn't have papers, however, so the police made them get off. Amazingly, the other one didn't bother me after that, and I slept for a blissful nine hours.

Part 2: Taking Off

The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only one page. – Saint Augustine

I haven't been everywhere, but it's on my list. – Susan Sontag

I travel not to escape life, but for life not to escape me. – Unknown

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France

My time in Portugal had been like taxiing: I'd been traveling for almost three months, but hadn't really left the comfort of the runway. It was time to take off into the great unknown.

I woke to a barren, cloud-covered landscape in northern Spain. We were approaching Hendaye, an off-the-beaten-path seaside town, just over the Spanish border on the west coast of France. We arrived about two hours behind schedule, after much stop and go in Spain. It appeared that the rumors about Spanish trains being impossibly slow, and always late, were true. (This is no longer the case.)

The French Customs agents were affable, and didn't check my bags—but then one of them invited me to his hotel room. That shut down my smile in a hurry. Why did men always seem to think that being friendly was flirting?

I had grown up believing that policemen, train conductors, customs agents, and other government employees were trustworthy authority figures I could depend on for help if I needed it. Yet many of the ones I'd encountered on this trip behaved inappropriately and unprofessionally, whistling at me, making lewd comments—or inviting me to their hotel room. Maybe if I actually needed help they would have put that behavior aside, but I hoped I wouldn't have to test the theory.

Hendaye felt like Portugal, with its old buildings and small shops, but the people looked a bit different, and were generally taller. It was strange and exhilarating to arrive for the first time in a new country with no one "looking after me," as they had when I'd arrived in Lisbon.

I had five hours to wait for the train to Italy. The stores were closed for *sieste*, so I walked to the harbor to admire the sailing and fishing boats. When things re-opened after the long mid-day break, the empty streets came alive. It was the first time I'd been in a French-speaking place, and it was a thrill to hear the language being spoken all around me.

After exchanging my leftover escudos for francs, I went to a small

grocery and bought a feast for the long train ride: grapefruit, apple, orange, pear, banana, carrot, cheese, yogurt, and bread. A little old lady asked me to read her the price on a package—granted, she had poor eyesight, but I was glad to be mistaken for a local. It was fun to be able to speak the language, although I was having trouble keeping the Portuguese out of my French.

I wrote in my journal that I was enamored with France and I'd only been there five hours in some quiet border town.

On the train to Italy, I loved listening to the mix of languages being spoken—I recognized Portuguese, Spanish, and French. It was seven hundred miles to Genoa, and the overnight trip took about twenty hours. This time my compartment was full, and I slept as best I could sitting up. The Customs agent at the Italian border woke us up, checked our passports, and took a cursory glance into my purse.

Italy

I arrived in Genoa, Italy, about noon, and met Tony, an Italian traveler from California. He helped me navigate the train station, which was pretty confusing. Even though he was a native speaker and could read all the signs, on the first leg we missed our transfer point, so we had to hop off and buy a ticket back one stop! While we waited, I tried my first gelato, and it was a revelation: denser, smoother, and more intensely flavored than the ice cream I was used to. I vowed to eat it every day while I was in Italy—"when in Rome."

Back at the transfer point, we found we'd missed the express and would have to take the milk run. The cars on this slower train had varnished wooden seats and trim work, which reminded me of a paddlewheel steamer on the Mississippi—I kept expecting to look up and see a fan revolving lazily on the ceiling.

It was late when we finally arrived in Bologna. The only room we could find was a double. If it wasn't for Tony's ability to speak Italian over the phone, we would have never found the room, and I would have been sleeping in the train station. I was exhausted after not getting much

sleep the night before, and I trusted this guy, so I agreed to split the twelve dollar cost. The room was large and airy, with a table and chairs, a large bathroom—and two beds. I was out before my head hit the pillow. In the morning, the kind landlady said we could leave our stuff there all day while we went exploring.

Bologna is large and old. It struck me as dark and crowded, maybe because all the main streets had covered walkways. We climbed 498 steps to the top of the Asinelli Tower for a breathtaking view over the city, which looked like almost solid rooftops.

The city felt affluent and cosmopolitan. Unlike Portugal, where stores mostly sold the basics, Bologna's shop windows were filled with luxury goods, and people wore expensive-looking clothes. You could buy many things I hadn't seen in Portugal—good quality hiking gear, fur coats, modern furniture, chewing gum, greeting cards—and prices were comparable to the U.S.

In the center of town we came upon a large square that appeared to be a popular hangout for young people. It felt like a scene out of the '60s, with guitars, harmonicas, and Bob Dylan music; long hair, long skirts, and long beards; and hippies selling Indian scarves, beaded jewelry, and hash pipes. In keeping with Italy's reputation as the center of Catholicism, there were plenty of nuns and monks as well, the former in habits, the latter wearing long robes tied with waist ropes.

I noticed a few stores sporting a blue "T" sign saying "Sali e Tabacchi." It turned out these were historically the only places allowed to sell tobacco and salt, which were price-controlled by the government. The rules had changed, but the signs remained as a quaint nod to history.

People seemed lively and amiable. And the language! It was just like in the movies—they really did speak with their hands, and put a strong uplift on the penultimate syllable of each word, as if they were singing. It was charming!

Tony and I looked all day but couldn't find a grocery store, so we had pizza for lunch, from a little take-out window. It was hot from the oven and really good. In the afternoon we retrieved our luggage from the hotel, and went our separate ways. I found a self-service restaurant for

a dinner of lasagna made with green noodles, apples, and mozzarella—the place was kind of institutional, but the food was cheap and edible. (Are you noticing the cheap food theme here? I looked for the most affordable way to get calories every day, and price was more important than taste.)

Midnight found me sitting in the train station. I planned to try to get some sleep on a bench, then catch an early train to Florence. I wanted to keep moving and get to Greece as soon as possible. I'd ended up staying much longer in Portugal than I'd planned, and I didn't want the same thing to happen in Italy. I thought I'd spend a day in Florence, two or three in Rome, make a quick stop in Pompeii, then head to Athens.

This plan was soon out the window. I met two women who told me Florence was absolutely packed with tourists, and in my sleep-deprived state this sounded utterly unappealing. I decided to skip the city known as "the cradle of the Renaissance," and instead I hopped on a 5 a.m. train to Pescara, where I could connect to Rome. I managed a few cat naps before arriving in Pescara at 11 a.m. I couldn't find any markets nearby, so I breakfasted on nuts, whole wheat cookies, and other train station fare.

When I finally got to Rome I was extremely spaced out from lack of sleep. The train station was enormous and overwhelming and I was so tired I couldn't think straight. I approached a young couple who were speaking English, and asked where they were planning to stay. I was extremely grateful when they invited me to join them to look for a place. Amit was from Israel and Annki was from Sweden. We found a triple room for about five dollars each, then had a great meal for about the same. Back at the hotel, I lay down and was out like a light.

I woke up feeling clear-headed and full of energy. I was noticing a pattern—when I first arrived in a place, it could seem hostile and overwhelming because I had my heavy pack on, I was usually tired, and I didn't yet know my way around, or where I'd be sleeping. But once I had a place to stay, food in my belly, and a map, I felt ready to conquer anyplace, even Rome!

First things first, I went to a travel agency to buy a boat ticket to Greece. It cost fifty-seven dollars ($220 today, which seems like a lot). Once that was taken care of, I turned my attention to exploring Rome.

It was a glorious sunny day. Amit, Annki, and I found a fruit and vegetable market where they could buy provisions for their train trip the next day. There was a wider variety of produce than I'd seen in Portugal—artichokes, eggplants, exotic fruits—and prices were higher as well.

After stashing their purchases at the hotel, we picked up a map at a tourist kiosk and set out walking. Rome was huge and instantly fascinating. Ancient ruins and monuments had somehow survived the construction of modern city streets and buildings, and were tucked in everywhere—crumbling sections of walls, wide piazzas, fountains, domes, and orphaned columns from bygone temples and government buildings. Somehow "The Eternal City" didn't feel like the massive place it is, even with the crowds of people. The main streets were noisy and reeked of exhaust, but the side streets were quiet and appealing, and the whole city was surprisingly clean.

St. Peter's Square was lined with rows of columns leading to the imposing domed basilica, which didn't look all that magnificent—the exterior was kind of grimy, perhaps discolored by air pollution. Nevertheless, it was exciting to be there, in this place I'd heard about all my life (I was raised Catholic). It was all so fabled, and so rooted in eons of history, that I couldn't help feeling awed. There were priests and nuns wandering about, and monks in brown cassocks with long beards cascading down the fronts.

Then it was on to see the imposing Roman Colosseum, towering over everything around it, and the perfectly-preserved Pantheon, with its grand Corinthian columns. The Pantheon had been built as a temple in the second century and was still in use as a church. These places were packed with history, but if I hadn't read about them in my guidebook, I wouldn't have understood what I was seeing.

I soon learned that Amit and Annki were in the process of splitting up—not a fun thing to go through in the middle of a backpacking trip around

Europe. We spent the day walking single file, with me in the middle, her striding ahead, and him sulking behind. Annki cried a lot and wanted to tell me all about her frustrations with Amit. He occasionally issued angry retorts that sailed over my head to reach her. I did not like being in the middle, and seeing their struggles made me glad to be traveling alone!

In the morning the tumultuous twosome left for Greece. I was relieved to be free of the drama, and went off to find a new place to stay. My guidebook led me to Pensione Katti, a popular young traveler hangout with an English-speaking proprietor. I landed the only open room, for about five dollars a night.

It was the last Sunday of the month, and by lucky coincidence the Vatican museum was free. I managed to get delightfully lost trying to walk there while avoiding the busy streets. (Getting lost is a great way to discover surprises. Now that we have Google maps, we don't even have to worry about finding our way back.)

The museum was vast. I was learning that one or two hours was my museum limit, no matter how fascinated I might be, so I breezed through much of it. I especially liked the museum's Egyptian displays—the collection of mummies included cats, which, along with falcons and scarab beetles, were sacred animals to the ancient Egyptians.

Try as I might to appreciate them, I just couldn't get excited about the dark and dour old religious oil paintings, frescoes, and tapestries, no matter how famous. I couldn't tell the difference between a Michaelangelo and a John Doe. To my surprise, I did enjoy the section on modern religious art, which was bright, cheery, and life-affirming.

The Sistine Chapel was impressive, but it didn't live up to the hype. I've since learned to have no expectations for famous things—sometimes they wow me, but if they don't, I'm not disappointed.

It was another warm, sunshiny day. I sat in St. Peter's Square to rest my feet, write in my journal, and watch the parade of people. I noticed a lot of women walking arm in arm—maybe to stave off male harassment? Although I wasn't finding Italian men to be nearly as ill-

behaved as I'd been warned, and so far they were better than Portugal.

I went inside St. Peter's Basilica with a guidebook I purchased, which made it a lot more interesting. Then I walked to the Forum and spent several hours wandering among the scattered remnants of the old Roman city center, now overgrown with grasses, shrubs, and flowers. It was a tranquil contrast to the busyness of the city, and strange to think that once upon a time it had been the bustling heart of Rome.

To get back to my pension, I passed through the Circus Maximus. Once a Roman chariot-racing stadium and entertainment venue, it was now a large, overgrown dirt path, apparently popular with seedy-looking men. I didn't linger.

I climbed the grand Cordonata staircase up to Campidoglio Square, an impressive hilltop plaza designed by Michelangelo in 1538. It was said to be one of Rome's most beautiful squares, but the Palazzo Senatorio was covered in scaffolding, detracting a bit from the grandeur. It's always discouraging when a building I'm hoping to see is hidden behind drapery, but old treasures must be maintained.

Earlier in this book I mentioned acid rain, and how it was eating away at ancient monuments. I hadn't remembered how bad it was until I read these excerpts from a 1980 Associated Press article:

> *Some of Rome's most famous marble monuments have disappeared behind green cloth cages meant to protect them from the automobile pollution that is turning them to dust. [They] may remain hidden from public view for as long as 20 years, until Rome finds the money – and the technology – to preserve them. Many delicately carved faces … have been destroyed, their noses, eyes, and cheeks completely eroded in the past 20 years.*
>
> *Acid rain is the villain. Sulfur emissions in auto exhaust mix with rain to form a weak sulfuric acid, which eats away at marble and turns it to a chalky substance that crumbles easily. The … cloth*

[covers] ... protect the monuments from the wind and rain and slow the deterioration.

If nothing is done, [the city's superintendent of archeology] predicts, [80%] of the Roman sculpture made from the first to fourth centuries A.D. will be wiped out by 2000.

I arrived back at the pension quite tired, but summoned enough energy to chat with other travelers in the common area until I couldn't keep my eyes open. I liked Katti's. It felt like the best of two worlds—the friendly atmosphere and young travelers of a hostel, but with private rooms.

The next morning it was overcast, drizzly, and cooler—a refreshing change from the heat of the previous day. I went out to explore and decided to try roasted chestnuts. They were a bit pricey, and also chewier than I expected. The flavor was a mix of buttery and charred—an acquired taste, I concluded.

I mailed some letters from the Vatican post office, which claimed to be "days faster than Italian mail." Since I didn't track how long it took to arrive, I can't say whether or not that was true, but I thought the recipients might get a kick out of the Vatican postal stamp.

I was excited to see the Spanish Steps and the Trevi Fountain, made famous in the movie *La Dolce Vita*. Like many of Rome's other monuments, these were almost hidden between large buildings—I turned a corner and they suddenly appeared. Both lived up to the hype, however. The steps overflowed with artists, flower sellers, buskers, and gawkers. The spectacular fountain had roaring cascades and jets of water splashing into a big half moon pool, and larger-than-life-size marble men and horses plunging through the churning spray.

I spent the rest of my last day in Rome figuring out train schedules and shopping for trip food. The next morning I was up bright and early to catch a 7 a.m. train to Brindisi, where I would get on the boat to Greece. I was full of that special anticipation that traveling brings—new places and faces, and who knew what adventures lay ahead?

Greece! I'd always dreamed of going there, but didn't have any real sense of what it would be like, except that there would be hordes of tourists. Someone said that Greece was probably the most visited and least explored country—I fervently hoped I could do a bit of justice to the latter.

On the day-long train ride to Brindisi, I met a lovely French woman who asked me if I wanted to be a companion for her kids in June at their house on the Italian coast! I would take them on outings to the sea and the mountains, and expose them to English language and American culture. I was enormously tempted, but regretfully declined.

After she got off the train, I had the compartment to myself for a while—until an Italian fellow came in and sat down. He sidled closer and closer and worked his way up to putting a hand on my leg before I hit him. He left, but then another guy took his place. I tried ignoring this one, but he inched so close he was practically sitting on my lap. I got up and left the compartment. I guess I'd spoken too soon about Italian men being less obnoxious than Portuguese. I hoped their Greek counterparts wouldn't be as bad.

Part 3: Soaring

Solo travel is the best way to be your true self. – Kirsten Neuschwender

When you travel solo, you learn to trust yourself and the universe. – Gloria Steinem

In the solitude of solo travel, the mind expands, and the spirit dances to the rhythm of the open road. – Jack Kerouac

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Greece

Brindisi is a port city on southern Italy's Adriatic Sea coast. From here I would take a seventeen-hour, 340-mile ferry ride to Patras, Greece. On my way to the terminal, I walked through a large square with a fountain, where locals strolled, shopped, and dined al fresco while kids zoomed around on bikes. Groups of men lounged about doing nothing while their wives were probably at home working. I purchased the last of my daily gelatos and was rewarded with a kiss on both cheeks from the kindly and enthusiastic old vendor (old men can get away with that sort of thing).

I arrived at the dock about 9 p.m. to a scene of chaos. There were no signs, and passengers scurried around looking lost. I managed to find a kiosk where they stamped my ticket and collected the five-dollar port tax. They then pointed me to another window, where someone checked my passport against a "wanted" list before sending me to customs. Finally I was allowed onto the boarding ramp, where I filled out another form, showed my passport, and got it and my ticket stamped again. A succession of "ushers" then showed me where to go, where to leave my luggage, and where to sit. They put me next to some creepy-looking guy. Sorry fellas, I'd had enough of that for one day—I moved to a window seat.

Once the boat got going, I found my way onto the deck, laid out my sleeping bag, and enjoyed a long, uninterrupted horizontal sleep. It was a clear, starry night, but there was a strong breeze. In the morning the sky had turned stormy and it rained a little, so I moved back inside. The boat was pitching and rocking, and I felt nauseous until the rain stopped and I could go on deck for some fresh air. In the afternoon the sun broke through, the waves subsided, and the rest of the trip was delightful.

I met a sixty-two-year-old American man who'd been retired for a while and spent his time traveling, hiking, doing volunteer work, building a cabin, and gardening. It was the life I dreamed of having someday. We discussed a wide range of interesting-to-me topics, like the Sierra Club and self-sufficiency, and it was one of the most

enjoyable conversations I'd had on my trip.

It was refreshing to talk to someone older—I hadn't been too taken with most of the young travelers I'd met. At times the Eurail crowd reminded me of a cattle stampede: rush off the boat and herd to the train station, herd from the train station to the youth hostel, and spend the evening herded together in common areas or local bars, drinking wine or beer and rehashing the same old subjects: "Where are you from, where are you going, where have you been, were the showers hot?" I completely understood the appeal of peer bonding, it just wasn't what I was looking for.

As we approached Greece and entered the harbor at Patras, I took in the jagged, brown, rocky hills in the foreground, and the high, snow-capped mountains in the distance. It felt like the beginning of a new chapter in my travels—I had "lifted off," and I was looking forward to soaring.

I couldn't pay for anything without cash, so the first order of business once we docked was to get some Greek currency, called drachma. With those safely stashed, I struck out for the campground, which my guidebook said was about two miles from the ferry dock. I had to lean into a strong headwind as I walked.

I passed several lovely old Byzantine-style Greek Orthodox churches, with squat onion domes at each corner and a taller one in the center. I saw an old man herding sheep, and fishermen repairing boats. A few men hissed or called to me. Please, I silently prayed, don't let the men here be worse than Italy—I didn't know if I could stand it.

The campground was fifty drachma (about a dollar twenty) for a piece of ground to lay my sleeping bag out of the wind, and clean bathrooms with showers. The next morning I had the dollar fifty breakfast—fresh bread and butter, hard-boiled egg, fresh-squeezed orange juice, and strong coffee with hot milk. I saved the packet of apricot marmalade to put in the yogurt I planned to buy for lunch. Then I shouldered my pack, walked back into town, and hopped on a train to Athens. It was June 6, and I had been traveling for three months.

The train had hard wooden bench seats, and the hundred-and-thirty-

mile trip took four hours. The conductor blew the whistle almost continually, and I arrived in Athens with a sore butt and a splitting headache. (Another reason I now travel with earplugs!)

I found myself in a small station on the outskirts of the city. My rudimentary map was in English, and most of the street signs were written in the Greek alphabet, so I took a guess at which direction the center of town lay, and hoped it wasn't too far. My backpack was heavy and uncomfortable, and I trudged along feeling weary. But as I looked around me at this exotic new place, my spirits rose. Old women dressed in black carried woven baskets filled with produce from the market, or live chickens in net bags. Crowded shops displayed colorful handwoven wool blankets and bags, Greek-motif pottery and jewelry, leather purses and sandals. The tantalizing smells of feta cheese pastries and souvlaki kebabs wafted from curbside kiosks. So what if my backpack was digging into my shoulders—I was in Greece!

Athens

Once I'd found the center of the city, I went straight to the American Express office to see if I had any mail. It had been weeks without news from home, and I was delighted to find three letters waiting for me.

Since I had no permanent address, I told friends and family where I expected to be and when, and they could send letters to the American Express office in that city. When I moved on, I gave the office my next location, and they forwarded my mail. Otherwise, if I didn't pick up letters or packages within two weeks, they were returned to sender.

My first impression was that Athens was noisy and busy and ugly, although the center had a bit of character. The men were disappointingly ill-behaved, but if I totally ignored them they *usually* left me alone.

Let's Go Europe recommended The American House, a hostel near Syntagma (Constitution) Square, where a bed in a dorm cost less than three dollars. The rooms were a bit crowded, but the place was otherwise comfortable, clean, and friendly. The owner was a hip young

Greek guy and the staff were travelers who got a free bed in exchange for a few hours of cleaning or reception work each day. As in other hostels, English was the common language.

This was my first hostel that wasn't a youth hostel. As the name implies, youth hostels are generally only open to young adults, while regular hostels are open to people of all ages, including families with children. In addition to dorm rooms, they often have private rooms as well.

Unlike a hotel or pension, both kinds of hostels have common areas for hanging out or preparing food. Over the years, I've stayed in many all-ages hostels, and they are my preferred travel option. It's a great way to stretch your travel budget, and to meet people. As travel guru Rick Steves says, hostels are "the cure for expensive, lonely travel."

American House had hot showers, a kitchen with a fridge and stove, a sitting room, a book exchange, a stereo and records, a sunny front porch with clotheslines, and a secure place to store excess baggage if you wanted to take side trips.

The vibe was different from the youth hostels I'd experienced in Portugal. Most of the residents were young, but they were more intrepid and seasoned travelers, often traveling alone—many had been on the road for a while. Unlike the early curfews at youth hostels, American House didn't lock its door until 1:30 a.m.

After a short nap, I made myself a welcome cup of tea, then joined a group singing and playing guitar in the sitting room. About 9:30 I went out to look for dinner. Like the Portuguese and Italians, the Greeks often ate at 10 or 10:30, and I was finally getting used to the late hours.

The Plaka district near the Acropolis was the happening place to eat and hang out at night. One of the hostelers recommended Five Brothers Taverna, a restaurant with outside tables and a nice view of the Acropolis. It was a bit of a splurge, but the food was so good! The first thing you were supposed to do was have a look in the kitchen to see what was cooking, and point to what you wanted. When I sat down, they brought me a sample of their house retsina. This pine resin-infused wine is definitely an acquired taste. It was my first time trying it, so I

couldn't compare it to other retsinas, but theirs tasted fine to me, and the resin flavor wasn't too strong. I much preferred plain white wine, but it was hard to turn down free!

I ordered dolmades (chopped meat and rice wrapped in tender grape leaves and cooked in a thin, lemony sauce), moussaka (layers of seasoned ground meat and potatoes topped with a fluffy bechamel), and a Greek salad of fresh lettuce, tomato, cucumber, olives, and feta cheese, tossed with light olive oil and vinegar. Everything was delicious, and the salad was possibly the best I'd ever eaten.

After a while, two cute German girls joined me at my table and the charming and flirtatious waiters began dropping by for swigs of retsina. They were disappointed when the girls and I left around midnight without inviting them to come with us.

The next day I got up early and walked to the vegetable market in the Plaka. I had coins that said "50" on them, and I thought they were worth fifty drachma, so I kept offering them to the vendors and couldn't understand why they wouldn't accept. It turned out they were fifty lepta coins, which were worth half a drachma! It was an early lesson in travel humility. You will make all kinds of mistakes, and commit uncountable embarrassing faux pas—you try to learn to laugh about it and focus on what a good story it will make someday.

The market was bustling, crowded, and clamorous. Once I figured out the coins, I bought a kilo of yogurt, so thick they wrapped it in plastic. It was rich and creamy, with just a hint of tartness—nothing like the puckery, gelatinous stuff I was used to back home, where I had never seen or heard of Greek yogurt. I also bought some feta cheese, apples, oranges, tomatoes, potatoes, bread, and eggs. The hostel kitchen had oil and other staples, and I was looking forward to saving money by cooking my own food.

At American House, people came and went, with some only staying a night or two, and others settling in for days or weeks. It was basically a hippie house. The furniture and fixtures were old and beat-up, but the place was clean and comfortable. There was always someone in the kitchen cooking healthy food. It was my kind of place. I liked being

able to hang out, write in my journal, catch up on letters, and chat with other travelers. There were several children, and I enjoyed drawing or playing games with them.

Soon the thermometer began to climb and the afternoons became uncomfortably warm. I started going out early to avoid the tourists and the heat, slept or relaxed at the hostel in the afternoon, and ventured out again in the evening when it was cooler.

I spent one morning window shopping, planning which souvenirs I wanted to buy for myself and my family. I strolled for hours in the maze of tourist shops around Monastiraki and the Plaka, comparing prices and ogling the colorful handwoven wool blankets and bags, embroidered clothing, and jewelry. I planned to wait until I was leaving Greece to purchase most of my souvenirs, but I did buy a wool shoulder bag, a pair of baggy drawstring pants, and a cotton blouse for myself. I still have the bag.

The daily local market near Monastiraki sold everything from plastic dish tubs and produce to live rabbits and chickens. Wire baskets filled with eggs hung high above the heads of shoppers, and vendors used long poles to lower them down.

On Sunday I got up early and walked to the Acropolis, the ancient citadel complex that sits on a low hill in the center of the city. The most scenic entrance was from the Plaka, where a narrow path wound up between whitewashed houses and Byzantine churches crowded together on the hillside. I smiled at an old Greek woman who was tending her pot garden, and she handed me a sprig of a sweet-smelling plant.

I climbed a tall staircase and entered the complex through the Propylaea, a monumental ceremonial gateway. I stood and gazed around in amazement at the remains of the temples, trying to get my mind around the fact that they were built 2500 years ago.

The Parthenon was the largest structure on the Acropolis, and dominated the hilltop. At over two hundred feet long and a hundred feet wide, this enormous temple, with its soaring marble columns, wasn't even the largest in ancient Greece. Near it sat the petite Temple of

Athena Nike—at only five hundred square feet, you could have fit forty into the Parthenon. I was disappointed to see that the Erechtheion temple was hidden behind a maze of scaffolding (as I mentioned, I have learned to be philosophical when something I've traveled to see is covered up for renovation). The Caryatids (columns carved into female figures) that once held up the Erechtheion porch had been moved to a museum due to extensive pollution damage, and there were plaster replicas in their place.

My school history classes had relied on dry, boring textbook reading and memorization, and I thought I didn't like the subject. Visiting historical sites in person had completely changed that, and history became fascinating. It was a thrill to see these ghosts of ancient Greece in person, and I wandered around the Acropolis for a long time, soaking in the ruins, and the view of the modern city below, trying to imagine the lives that had been lived here, and the human ingenuity that had created this place. Part of me wished they could restore the temples to their original glory, to help visitors better appreciate how impressive they were, but I also understood the pros and cons of doing this, not the least of which was the cost.

Athens had terrible pollution. Cars with even- and odd-numbered license plates were required to alternate driving days, in an attempt to improve air quality. I often wore a bandana over my mouth and nose to block the diesel fumes. In addition to the pall that hung in the sky, the view from the Acropolis was drab as well, with blocky, gray buildings sprawling out to the foothills beyond the city.

Luckily there were a few green spaces where I could escape the traffic noise and exhaust. I spent an evening in the National Gardens, a forty-acre park in the heart of the city where the air was blissfully breathable. Unfortunately, it seemed to be a magnet for men with nothing better to do than try to pick up foreign girls. Every time a guy would sit on my bench, I moved to another bench. When I got tired of that, I worked up the courage to look them in the eye and forcefully tell them to get lost. It usually worked.

From my hostel, it was a fifteen-minute walk through a dry, aromatic pine forest to the top of Philapappos Hill. This promontory boasted an

expansive view of the city, as well as the marble tomb of a second-century Greek prince, and a cave prison where Socrates was said to have been held.

The tallest point in Athens was nine-hundred-foot-high Lycabettus Hill, which also had cleaner air and a panoramic view. You could either take a funicular to the top, or walk up a steep trail. I chose the trail, which was accessible from an upscale part of town that had expensive stores, modern new apartment buildings that looked like hotels, and streets lined with flower pots and gardens.

Me in front of the whitewashed church on Lycabettus Hill

Back in town that evening, after it had cooled down a bit, I went for a walk and chanced upon the changing of the guard near the Parliament building. Three Evzones, as the guards are called, marched down the

street wearing red clogs with large black pompoms on the toes. Nails on the bottoms of their shoes made a loud clacking sound, supposedly simulating the sound of battle. White stockings, short white pleated skirts, black and gold embroidered jackets, and red fez-like hats with black silk tassels completed the ensemble. The Evzones had worn this uniform since the mid-1800s. Their elaborate marching routine was fun to watch, and had to be the highlight of their shift, because otherwise they just stood unmoving.

New Philadelphia

One of the aviation people my dad had invited to our house for dinner was a softspoken Greek man named Tom Papageorgiou, a pilot for Olympic Airways. He'd offered to take me sightseeing when I was in Athens. On Monday afternoon he picked me up at the hostel and drove me to his home in an area called New Philadelphia, just north of the city.

There I met his wife, Katy, and her mother, Yaya (grandma). I had no idea what to bring as a hostess gift, and chose a small porcelain vase with Greek figures on it. I sort of wince when I look back on this, realizing that me giving her a Greek vase was a little bit like a visitor to Seattle giving me a Space Needle statue. Thinking of appropriate hostess gifts continues to be a challenge for me.

If Katy was taken aback by my choice of gifts, she certainly didn't show it—she was graciousness personified. Tom's English was fluent, Katy's was pretty good, and Yaya communicated with warm smiles.

Their house was like a museum. Tom had collected beautiful souvenirs from his world travels, and the walls also held Katy's impressive needlepoint works, so detailed they looked like paintings. I learned that Tom's grandfather had been an Evzone, and I was delighted to see a picture of him in his uniform.

We sat down to a table laden with a vast array of home-cooked dishes: moussaka, spanakopita, fried green peppers, marinated green beans, beef salad, feta cheese with fresh tomato, and rice with tender, slow-

cooked beef chunks. When I didn't think I could eat another bite, they brought out jello with fresh fruit, two kinds of cake, and chocolate and vanilla ice cream locally made by a shop near them! It was as if they wanted to make sure I sampled every Greek dish they could think of in one sitting, just in case I never had another opportunity.

After lunch, Tom, Katie, and Yaya took me on a scenic drive to Limni (Lake) Marathona, twenty miles northeast of the city. It was a manmade reservoir, but quite lovely. The air smelled of pine and herbs and the area reminded me of Eastern Washington. I loved being out in the country, away from the bustle and foul air of the city. Tom was a walking encyclopedia, and told me endlessly fascinating stories about the history and politics of Greece.

Katie and me at Lake Marathon

We stopped in the town of Marathon so Katy could buy some local tomatoes. On the plain of Marathon, they showed me the tomb of the enemy soldiers killed in the war with Persia in 490 BC. Legend says

that this grass-covered mound is where the marathon running race originated. According to the story, the victorious Athenians sent a messenger to run the forty-two kilometers to Athens with the victory news. In 1896, the organizers of the first modern Olympics drew on this tale to create a distance running race "recalling the ancient glory of Greece."

The tomb of the Athenian soldiers killed in the Persian war was a taller mound with a sweeping view of the surrounding hills and the sea beyond.

Next we drove to Mount Penteli, a still-active quarry where the marble for the Parthenon was sourced. The area was dotted with sumptuous villas, no doubt lined with the famous local stone. On the way back to Athens, we stopped at a store in Kifisia, an upscale suburb north of the city, where Katie bought me a big container of their popular yogurt. Spending the day with the Papageorgious was an absolutely delightful experience. I felt sad to say goodbye when they dropped me off at my hostel, and glad when we made plans for another visit.

The next few days were filled with window shopping, reading, helping to clean the common areas, doing laundry by hand, going for walks, running errands, getting to know some of the folks at the hostel, and playing with nine-year-old Emmanuelle, a bright and precocious French girl. She and her hippie mother, Françoise, had traveled all over the world together. They'd been staying at American House for a while, but lately there had been no other children to play with, so I found myself spending a lot of time drawing, making paper dolls, and playing imagination games. It brought back happy memories of my own childhood.

One morning I went to the post office to make my first phone call home. Overseas calls were expensive, so I kept it short, but I was shocked at what it cost. My journal says it was fifty dollars for ten minutes, which would be almost two hundred dollars today. Still, it was worth it to hear my parents' and brothers' voices, and let them know I was happy and safe.

In early June I went to a concert in the open-air amphitheater on

Lycabettus Hill, a World Wildlife Fund benefit to protect the Ionian and Aegean Seas. British musician John Martyn opened for a Greek composer who led a band with guitarists, piano player, xylophone, and singers performing hypnotically beautiful Greek songs. Although the day had been hot, the evening brought a freezing cold wind. I didn't have a jacket, so I reluctantly left a little early when I started to shiver.

The next morning I took Emmanuelle to Vula Beach, a thirty-minute bus ride away. It had a fifty-cent fee to access the gardens, restaurant, lockers, showers, and beach with chairs and benches. The weather was warm and slightly overcast. The water was also warm, and shallow for a long way out. It wasn't bad for a city beach, although I didn't love the roar of planes flying low overhead to and from the nearby airport.

On Saturday, Tom, Katie, and Yaya came to get me early, then we went to Patras to pick up their son George at the university. The drive along the north Peloponnese coast was gorgeous, with high rocky hills cut by deep green valleys. From Patras we took a short ferry ride north across the Gulf of Corinth to the mainland. (In 2004 a toll bridge replaced the ferry. At nearly two miles long, it's considered an engineering masterpiece.)

We followed the coast eastward, past villages tucked along the rocky shore or clinging to steep hillsides, and craggy islets with one or two houses or a church.

In Galaxidi we stopped to see the church of Agios Nikolaos. The interior was dark and cluttered with richly rendered icon art. This was my first visit to a Greek Orthodox church, and I was fascinated. I learned that icons are sacred images of holy people or events that are considered a window into the divine. Agios Nikolaos was famous for its ornately-carved wooden altarpiece, called an iconostasis, one of the most important architectural features of Orthodox churches. This screen made of icons separates the priest from the congregation while he's transforming the bread and wine for the Eucharist.

Although I don't practice any religion, I'm fascinated by the similarities and differences in world faiths. The Greek, or Eastern, Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church split from each other

in 1054 during what is called the Great Schism. One of the many issues was Papal authority, which Eastern Orthodox churches reject.

A picnic with Yaya, Tom, Katie, and their son

In the town of Delphi, we went into some of the shops, and Katie insisted on buying me a souvenir. She helped me pick out a soft cotton sundress in shades of blue. I couldn't believe how she and Tom were spoiling me. Their kids were about my age, and they only had sons, so perhaps Katie was treating me like a surrogate daughter. Or perhaps it was just their nature, or their culture, to care for guests so generously. Maybe it was a way of honoring my parents, who they held in high esteem.

Young people don't see their parents as others do, and at the time I didn't have a sense of what my Dad was like when I wasn't around, or what kind of traveler he was. As I got older, I came to realize that both of my parents were lifelong learners who were interested in, and curious about, everything, and both were kind and generous people. No wonder I was so welcomed by everyone who knew them.

Being with Tom and Katie was like having private tour guides. They answered my stream of questions about everything from Greek history

to plant life. Katie taught me the Greek alphabet, so I could begin to decipher the signs I saw. She told me that the flowers of the mullein plants we saw along the road could be dried and used as candles by floating them in olive oil and lighting them—they grow in Washington as well, but I have yet to try this.

Our next stop was the archeological site of Delphi, perched high on the precipitous south slope of snow-capped Mt. Parnassos. Far below lay a green valley, and above loomed steep, rocky crags. The ancient Greeks believed that Delphi was the "navel of the earth," and the spiritual heart of Greece. In its temples to the gods dwelled Pythia, the most prestigious oracle in all of ancient Greece. This high priestess channeled prophecies from the god Apollo, advising mortals who travelled from across the ancient world.

After we arrived back at the Papageorgiou's late that afternoon, Tom and I went for a long walk in a park near their home. People strolled and a band played in a cafe. Tom walked for an hour or two every day, ate healthy food, and cared about the environment—all things that are important to me—another reason I really enjoyed talking with him.

When we got back to the house, Katie, Tom, their son, and I went next door to a taverna for what they said would be a "light" supper. Their son's fiancée and a friend of his joined us. It was Saturday night and the place was packed. The tables were all outside, which is the way Greeks like it once the weather warms up. Tom and Katie had been coming to this taverna for many years, and were well known by the staff.

After we ordered our entrees, the waiter brought around a tray piled with small hors d'oeuvres plates. We chose a dozen dishes to share, including fried eggplant, spanakopita, potato croquettes, yogurt with garlic and onion, smoked fish, feta cheese, bean salad, eggplant salad, vegetable salad, fava beans in sauce, and shrimp. Every single one was delicious, and by the time I'd tried just a taste of each, I thought my stomach was going to explode. A rather pleasant form of torture, however. And then the main dish came! Mine was an enormous swordfish steak and it was just excellent. So much for a light supper!

After dinner they drove me back to the hostel laden with gifts: more yogurt, fresh cherries, post cards, a book they bought for me at Delphi, my new dress, and Mavrodaphne wine from Patras (a smooth dessert wine that was similar to Port). They were incredibly kind, generous people, and it was another day for the memory books.

Taverna feast with Papageorgiou family

Richard was a Brit from the hostel. On Sunday I helped him with cleaning and he paid me half his salary, so in effect I got a free bed for the night. In the afternoon, four of us went to Vula Beach. I was glad to get out of the city center, and despite the fact that the beach was crowded and the water and sand weren't very clean, I went for a long swim and lounged in the sun.

That evening Richard and I took the empty glass bottles we'd been collecting and cashed them in. We got about three dollars, which was enough for two orders of smoked fish, and lentil soup with bread. Then we headed to Richard's favorite pub on Adrianou, where I decided it was time to try ouzo, the national drink of Greece. It's an anise-flavored liquor, served with a glass of water. You dump the shot of ouzo into the water, and it turns cloudy. I liked the licorice flavor but not the strong alcohol taste.

Crete

On Monday I packed up my things, stored a bag of extras at American House, and took the metro to the port of Piraeus. There I bought a ferry ticket to Chania, the smaller of two ports on the island of Crete. Several people had recommended I pay extra and get a bed on the boat, since it was an overnight trip. I assumed that meant there was no place to sleep on the deck, so I paid the extra five dollars for a "tourist class" ticket instead of third class. It turned out that the deck would have been great for sleeping, and five extra bucks was a painful chunk of change on my budget. Ah well, another travel lesson learned.

My pricier ticket gave me a comfortable bunk in a compact four-person cabin with clean linens and an ensuite bathroom. The trip went by quickly. They showed an old episode of *The Waltons* on the TV, and it was fun to see if I could recognize any words in the Greek subtitles. They still looked like hieroglyphics to me for the most part, but I could at least pick out many letters.

I slept soundly and woke up to a glorious sunrise as the boat pulled into Souda Bay, about four miles outside the town of Chania. Although it was only 7 a.m., it was already quite hot. I walked into town along a street lined with tall trees, flowering bushes, little shops, modest houses, and fields where goats and sheep grazed.

All along the way, everyone I met smiled or waved. When I said "Kali mera," they'd reply enthusiastically, like they were thrilled I could say good morning in Greek. When I travel, I always try to learn how to say basic things like hello, please, and thank you—those go a long way in conveying an interest in the people and place.

I passed a bakery where a husband and wife were busy making long sesame loaves on a dough-rolling machine. I stopped to watch and inhale the tempting aroma. I chatted with the man, who spoke a little French. He offered me a couple slices of fresh bread, and invited me to come back another time and eat and drink with them. This was one of my first experiences with the incredible generosity common to many cultures—if there's a stranger passing by, you offer to feed them!

Farther along, I saw a grizzled middle-aged man and his wife sitting at a table in front of their house. They called me over, gave me a glass of lemonade, then brought out dried fish and bread and went across the street to buy some beer. They only spoke a word or two of English, but were full of smiles and kept urging me to eat. After a while the man grew loud and slurry with drink, and I bid them farewell.

I walked past cafes where men sat drinking coffee and ouzo. They motioned for me to come have a drink, but there were no women in sight, so I ignored them. When I got to Chania, an innocuous old man offered to show me the way to the tourist police, and I gratefully accepted. There were regular tourist information offices as well, but the tourist police were especially helpful for finding budget places to stay.

Another young woman was looking to share a room, and the office found us a place at the Hotel Fidias for about four dollars each. It was clean enough, had a sunny veranda with tables and chairs, and there were even hot showers. The young Greek proprietor spoke English. My new roommate was a petite blond-haired beauty, and her side of the room was soon strewn with lotions, powders, cute clothes, and Cosmopolitan magazines.

I gratefully shed my heavy pack and went out to explore. The town itself wasn't that attractive, but the setting on the Mediterranean made up for it. The Old Port was a picturesque walled harbor lined with tavernas, and popular with tourists. It had been built by the Venetians in the 14th century as a commercial hub, and the wall helped protect it against pirate raids. Despite the crowds, this part of town felt tranquil and charming.

Farther west I came upon a rocky beach where a shallow stream edged with grasses and bamboo flowed across the sand. Behind the beach rose blue-gray mountains still bearing crescent-shaped patches of snow. Despite some litter, the beach was a nice place to spend the afternoon. Birds sang, shorebirds foraged, swallows and insects zipped through the warm, dry air, and a bright green, eight-inch-long lizard hunted bugs near the stream.

The water was the perfect temperature for swimming. Submerged rocks

harbored fish and other marine life—a good sign, I hoped, that the Mediterranean Sea wasn't an ecological graveyard. Oil spills were common in the 1960s and '70s, and major incidents occurred almost every year. Plastic pollution and overfishing were already a problem as well.

As I settled onto the sand after my swim, a Greek guy came and sat near me. My heart sank. He spoke some English, but thankfully he only wanted to practice, and didn't try to pick me up.

On my way back to town later that afternoon, I stopped at an empty taverna on the beach and ordered a salad with huge chunks of tomato, cucumber, and onion drizzled with olive oil and vinegar. Like everything I remember eating in Greece on that trip, the salad was made with fresh, local ingredients, and bursting with flavor. The setting sun hovered above the horizon, and the only sounds I could hear were the sea and the soft music from the taverna kitchen. This was the Greece I had dreamed of.

Seven years later I returned to Greece and learned that no place is ever quite the same as you remember it—and of course we change as well. I wrote in my journal that the food was too oily and I had trouble finding a good meal! Maybe the food had changed, or maybe I got unlucky the second time. Who knows?

I walked back through the Old Port as daylight faded. It was even more packed with people strolling, sitting in tavernas, or dancing in the discos. I continued on to a quieter part of town and sat in a cafe for tea and baklava and letter writing. I am of the opinion that baklava is one of the best culinary inventions ever. When I'm in baklava territory, I try to have a piece every day!

My roommate stayed out all night, so it was like having my own private suite. In the morning I got up early. I took a bus twenty miles west to Kastelli, then another bus six miles south to a place called Platanos. There I found a ride with some tourists to my destination, Falasarna, an isolated stretch of beaches and caves said to be too far off the beaten path to attract many tourists. We drove through an arid landscape with a sprinkling of olive trees, a variety of Mediterranean plants, bird songs

I'd never heard, and a backdrop of tall rocky hills.

The headlands at Falasarna were gorgeous and it was definitely isolated, but the beach, although there were few people, was a grand disappointment. Besides being dotted with tar balls from recent oil spills, there was no place to hide from the blazing sun. The trip was worth it, though, if only to see the countryside.

As I walked back to Platanos I passed through the coastal village of Falasarna, with its maze of tomato greenhouses and humble abodes. Like everyone I'd encountered on the island so far, the villagers were friendly. As I trudged up the steep dirt road in the intense mid-June heat, once again the Universe provided—a taxi appeared and offered me a free ride to Kastelli! The driver said he was going back empty anyway. From there I grabbed a bus and was back in Chania by early evening, happy and tired.

Hiking to the Sea

The next morning I got up early again, checked out of the room (still no sign of my roomie), and caught a bus twenty miles south to Omalos, a mountain village at the head of the Samaria Gorge. The scenery along the way was spectacular, with villages clinging to rocky ridges above deep winding valleys. The slopes were terraced for farming, and barren rock mountains towered above.

I'd noticed that bus drivers hung pictures of saints in the cubbyholes above their heads. I didn't know if each driver chose their own saint, or if there was a particular saint that protected all busses. The cubbies also held family photos, so I guessed that the busses were owned by the drivers.

At almost ten miles, Samaria is the longest gorge in Europe. The scenery was "gorge-ous" (sorry, couldn't resist the pun) and reminded me of the North Cascade mountains of Washington State—pine trees scenting the air, ice cold streams dotted with blue pools, enormous granite boulders, and a profusion of flowers, insects, and birds. Scuttling along the ground were many of the large bright green lizards

I'd seen on the beach. The diverse mix of plants included ferns, cottonwood trees, rhododendrons, cacti, and exotic dragon lilies. Called *drakondia* in Greece, the lilies had dark-purple, funnel-shaped flowers about a foot high, with thick, shiny purple wands in the center that looked like radio antennae searching for a signal.

There were quite a few other hikers, but the trail didn't feel crowded. I was absolutely in heaven, as these were the first real mountains I'd been in for over three months. It was without a doubt the most beautiful place I'd seen so far on my trip. I was glad for everyplace I'd been, and had enjoyed them all immensely, but this place was like comfort food for my soul.

After walking for a few hours, I found a patch of sand next to the river to nap and journal and soak in the magic of the place. I wanted to stay in the Gorge as long as possible, and tried to time it so I'd get to the end right before dark. I wasn't sure where I would spend the night, but I was learning not to worry about it—something always worked out.

Halfway down the gorge I came upon the remains of the village of Samariá. It had been abandoned when the gorge was declared a National Park in 1962. I wondered how many generations of Samarians had lived in the gorge, where they raised bees and olives, before they had to leave. Most of the abandoned stone-block buildings were still standing, but were so patinaed with age they blended almost seamlessly into their surroundings. Several churches were built right into the rocks.

The exit from the gorge looked like a scene from a fairytale. The river opened out into a wide gravelly fan leading to the sea, and scattered on the delta were a few old stone buildings, an arched bridge overgrown with shrubs, and a crumbling fortress perched high on a hill. A friendly ogre wouldn't have seemed out of place.

Tiny Agia Roumeli, at the mouth of the gorge, consisted of half a dozen whitewashed tavernas with "Rooms to Rent" signs, a boat dock, and a long pebbly beach. There was no road access, and the town was completely isolated below tall cliffs dotted with caves. The only sounds were the waves, the birds, and the murmur of people chatting.

Most of the hikers had left on the last boat of the day. By the time I

arrived, there were just a few young travelers, some of them camping in tents on the beach. I'd met three hikers near the end of the trail. They hadn't intended to spend the night in Agia Roumeli, but they'd missed the boat and had no camping gear with them. I had left my sleeping bag in Chania to lighten my load. So we shared a four-person room for less than three dollars each. It was spacious and clean, with whitewashed walls, a cement floor, and a big window. There was no electricity, and only candles for light.

I went for a swim in the warm, clear water to soak my tired muscles, then enjoyed a meal of dolmades, Greek salad, and red wine with my three new friends and two Dutch travelers. I wrote in my journal, "Good food, good folks, and good talk." I walked back to my room under a sky blanketed with stars. Ah, what a day it had been! If I hadn't already been completely smitten with traveling, this day would have hooked me.

I woke up after a deep and restful sleep to the sounds of sheep bells, children playing, and women talking as they washed clothes at an outdoor fountain. The sun hadn't yet reached the cove, so I swam out to meet it and floated there in a dream world. Far below in the crystal clear water, I could see rounded rocks and miniature gardens of plants covering the sea bottom.

Later that day I boarded a small passenger boat to Sougia, ten miles west. Warm sun, cool breeze, turquoise blue water, the intoxicating scent of sea air, and more incredible scenery: warped and folded and layered cliffs eroded into blocks and columns, rocky gorges dropping steeply down to sheltered coves, and over it all a sparse cover of pungent herbs, flowering oleander, and pines.

Sougia was another isolated cluster of tavernas and rooms for rent at the head of a narrow valley, with a long cobbled beach. It had road access though, so was busier than Agia Roumeli. Some of the people camped on the beach looked like they'd been there a while. I could understand why—it was a piece of paradise. The sea was so warm I could have floated all day and not gotten cold. I swam lazily past coves and big rocks, my head poked above the water like a seal.

I had planned to catch the afternoon bus to Chania, but it wasn't running that day. So instead I went wandering. I saw a sign that said "to Lissos," and followed a path into a cool, shady gorge. I instantly felt transported to another epoch—the lush growth was like a prehistoric tropical garden, with tall oleander shrubs covered in bright pink blossoms and shaded by trees. A pterodactyl wouldn't have surprised me. The island of Crete must have been laced with these enticing canyons, which looked perfect for hiking and camping.

I didn't find Lissos, but I did come upon a few grazing sheep. Where was the shepherd? I wondered if he'd been sleeping under a pine for the past twenty years, like Rip Van Winkle. Anything seemed possible in that place.

Back in Sougia, I spent a lazy afternoon at a shady table in front of the taverna chatting with a few other travelers. Chickens ran around our feet, and the exquisite blue Mediterranean stretched to the horizon. The heat put us all into a pleasant stupor.

It was another starry night with a light, cool breeze, and I wanted to sleep outside, despite the fact that my sleeping bag was in Chania. I found an alcove in one of the buildings on the beach, where I felt perfectly safe, and I slept great. Did I sleep on the concrete? On the sand? I don't remember, but back then I could sleep almost anywhere, oblivious to hard ground. That is no longer the case!

I woke at 5:30 to a misty mauve sunrise tinting the hills. I boarded the bus to Chania and the old vehicle groaned up through rugged mountains along a steep, twisting road with harrowing drop-offs. Clusters of whitewashed stone huts appeared now and then in the most remote spots. I wondered about the effort it took just to visit your neighbor, and how people made a living. I saw a few sheep, terraces growing what looked like hay, and small vegetable gardens.

My seatmate was an old woman dressed in black. She handed me some white chamomile flowers, and a clove, pantomiming that I should chew on it. Chamomile grows wild all over Crete, and is used for tea and medicine. Clove sweetens the breath and has many medicinal properties. I wished I was able to talk to the woman about her life, and

learn more about local herbal remedies.

The small bus only ran once every day or two, and it filled up quickly. Soon the driver was telling people, sorry, no room, but no one seemed upset. I guess they were used to it.

Back in Chania, I shopped for a few supplies, retrieved the rest of my luggage, then caught a bus to Hóra Sfakion, an hour and a half away, back on the south coast twenty miles west of where I had been that morning. Crete is a hundred and sixty miles long, but narrow—in some places only eight miles wide. Bus connections were limited, and the hubs were on the north coast, so crisscrossing the island was sometimes unavoidable. I didn't mind—the bus trips were a nice way to see the countryside.

The mountains on this route were quite different from the ones I'd seen earlier that day—less rugged and rocky, more arid, with only a sprinkling of stunted trees, shrubs, and prickly pear cactus covered in yellow flowers. The sparsely-populated landscape had a stark, wild beauty. A broad valley midway across the island held a slip of a village surrounded by checkerboard fields. A large cluster of rocks rose from the valley floor, with the ruins of an old stone fortress on top.

I did a lot of thinking staring out the window on long bus rides. That day, it occurred to me that I liked traveling alone because it felt more adventurous and less predictable. Being with another person could also distract me from observing things. I'm aware of this even now, on my long daily walks. When I'm alone, I notice the plants, the views, and the tiniest details. When I'm walking with a friend, I focus on the conversation. Neither is better or worse, just different, and I'm glad for both in my life.

The road climbed up out of the valley, and soon we reached the steep cliffs of the south coast. The trip down to the sea was slow, winding, and narrow, and I held my breath for most of it, hoping the brakes didn't fail.

A Social Loner

Hóra Sfakion was a humble hamlet nestled at the base of rolling hills along a rugged, rocky stretch of coast. It had a few tavernas, rooms for rent, and a boat dock, but its beach was only about thirty feet long. It had once upon a time been a trade center, but now seemed to only exist because of travelers passing through by boat or bus. The setting was lovely, but it wasn't a place I wanted to linger.

I found a relatively clean basement dormitory for four dollars. I was the only occupant. After napping for a couple of hours, I went for a swim, took a hot shower, and had my favorite meal of fluffy moussaka with Greek salad at a beachside taverna. The setting was idyllic—the taverna lights reflecting in the water, the sky bursting with stars, and the sea murmuring in the darkness.

In the morning I struck out for Plakias, an intriguing-sounding place I'd read about in my guidebook. The bus didn't go all the way there, so I got off at an intersection and began walking. The road wound eastward along the cliffs, now and then passing through a village clinging to a hillside. I could smell wild thyme. A strong wind made it hard to walk, but helped offset the sun's intense heat. The landscape was stunning—wild open spaces dotted with tiny villages that somehow survived despite their isolation. I wondered where people found water.

I had bought a cheap, floppy-brimmed straw hat for sun protection. With my sundress, sandals, and rucksack, walking through the desert, covered in dust, I felt like some comical female version of the TV-show character Kung Fu on his endless pilgrimage through the Old West, stopping in each town for a short adventure-filled stay, then moving on in a ceaseless quest for … what? I couldn't define what I was looking for, but I knew I was finding it. And I sure was enjoying myself. I was utterly smitten with the desert and the sea, and wished I could somehow bottle them and take them with me.

In Frangokastello, I stopped at a coffee shop. The proprietress was a jolly plump woman who spoke only Greek. When she learned where I was going, she hustled me a ride on the local delivery truck, without

my even asking. I enjoyed several hours of being chauffeured through the splendid landscape, along a bumpy road that wound endlessly up and down along the coastal cliffs. The friendly driver spoke no English, and my limited Greek was soon exhausted. He played Greek music and offered me hazelnuts, peanuts, and pieces of toasted sesame-clove-raisin bread. We stopped briefly in each town to make a delivery or have a cup of coffee in a *kafenia* (coffee shop).

Greek coffee is made with beans so finely ground they're almost powder. This is mixed with water, with or without sugar, in a small, long-handled pot and heated over a flame until the mixture foams up. Then it's poured with a flourish into a small cup. You wait for the grounds to settle out, then savor the strong brew with small sips.

Kafenias were the equivalent of a town pub for men, many of whom seemed to spend large chunks of their days sitting at little tables drinking coffee or ouzo, snacking, smoking, talking, playing *tavli* (like backgammon), clicking worry beads, and watching the town pass by. Greek music was usually wafting from a radio or cassette deck—it had a strong Middle Eastern flavor, with gutsy singing, wavering bouzouki guitars, frenzied yet melancholy tempos, and pleasingly discordant (to Western ears) notes. I felt it reach right down and tug at my insides.

The kind truck driver deposited me in Plakias in the afternoon. It had a long sandy beach with calm water and few people. Crescent-shaped arms protected the cove from the sea. High rocky hills were covered in aromatic vegetation interspersed with ancient stone walls, the remains of old stone dwellings, and a few grazing sheep. (Speaking of sheep, a lot of the yogurt on Crete was made from sheep's milk, but it didn't taste sheepy.) An old man rode a mule along a narrow path below the cliff face.

The wind was still intense, so I turned away from the cluster of fancy hotels and restaurants at the end of the beach, and walked until I found a sheltered spot under a cypress tree at the entrance to a shallow gorge. I spent the afternoon in isolated tranquility, reading, writing, napping, thinking, and watching a light-colored falcon soar along the sandstone cliff.

I'm an extrovert, but I also like time alone—I call myself a "social loner." If you are thinking about traveling solo for the first time, you don't need to be a loner. Yes, traveling alone gives you more opportunities for contemplation and observation, but it also provides more opportunities to meet people and be social, if that's what you want.

The Greek islands had been a hot spot for young travelers for many years. The tavernas welcomed the vagabonds, providing amenities like outdoor showers, faucets for washing clothes, drinking water, and toilets. They didn't mind if you hung out at a table all day, or left your things inside when you went off to sleep on the beach at night.

In return, the travelers provided the tavernas with a large portion of their income, usually purchasing all of their food, drinks, and cigarettes there. The foreigners were also a source of local entertainment, as well as an opportunity to learn about other cultures—the world came to Greece.

The Greeks were used to us, but what curiosities we must have been, in our G-string bikinis and skimpy clothing, bangles and earrings, long hair and backpacks. Greek women dressed conservatively and I wondered if they were envious of our freedom of attire, or just found it scandalous. Most travelers had limited visibility into the lives of the young village women, who were closely chaperoned, and unlikely to speak English. Of course there was a double standard: it was fine for the village men to hang out with foreign women, but it was not OK for the Greek women to hang out with foreign guys!

Although the beachside tavernas were frequented by both travelers and older village men, the language barrier meant that the two groups mostly kept to themselves. Still, watching the old guys interact with each other gave me an interesting window into Cretan life.

I met many travelers to Crete who found an idyllic beach, settled in for a couple of weeks, explored the surrounding hills and desert, and spent long, lazy hours in tavernas with friends. I've always been a restless spirit, and if I hung out anywhere for more than a day or two, I got incredibly itchy to move on. This was partly because there were so

many places I wanted to see, and if I didn't keep moving I'd run out of time and money. I also loved the excitement of going to new places. But in truth, I hadn't yet found a place that tempted me to stay.

The food everywhere I went was local, fresh, and healthy. I ate a lot of yogurt, cheese, salads, fruit, and breads like pita or *paximadia*. Also called "rusks," paximadia are dry, crunchy slices of twice-baked bread that keep well, kind of like a thick cracker or a savory biscotti. They were delicious with feta, or drizzled with olive oil.

Most of the travelers I met in the south coast villages were German. Many older Greeks spoke German because the Germans had occupied parts of Crete for several years during WWII. Since I didn't speak that language, I often felt a bit "left out of the crowd," but I didn't mind keeping to myself.

Above me on the beach in Plakias rose a sheer sandstone wall, crumbly and weathered, with hardy shrubs growing out of cracks. I discovered a cave partly walled up with stones, the floor inside strewn with manure. Perhaps the sheep were brought there in poor weather, or kept there at night.

I walked half an hour on a dirt road to the village of Damnoni, in the next cove to the east. It had a nice beach with a taverna. I kept going on a trail over a hill, and came upon several more beaches. The last one was accessible by a potholed road from Lefkogeia, and three VW vans were camping there. On either side sat rocky headlands, enclosing the beach in an embrace. A stream lined with plants curved across the sand. Waves formed pools and waterfalls on the pitted sandstone. It was paradise! Each place I came to just got more beautiful. Perhaps that was one reason I kept heading east—who knew what I might find next?

I decided I'd spend the night on the beach, but first I walked back to Damnoni for a dinner of Greek salad and garlic yogurt in a taverna where I was the only patron. A cricket chorus and the backbeat of waves kept time with the music of Steely Dan and Jethro Tull on the stereo.

It was after dark when I walked back to the camping beach. I had a flashlight, but still managed to get off the trail and unnervingly close to

the cliff! I slumbered peacefully under the stars in my sleeping bag, and woke early to a pink sky, with the sound of waves at my feet and the river gurgling next to me. The Mediterranean has no noticeable tides, which made it easier to sleep on the beach without worrying about the water level rising in the night.

I found my way up to the road, cutting through fields and villages, and continued walking east. Inland, away from the sea breeze, it was hot and the countryside was pretty barren, but I enjoyed the wide vistas. I wasn't hitchhiking, but whenever someone offered me a ride I accepted. It was usually tourists, because local people mainly took busses.

The last ride I got was from two exuberant Belgian guys in an open-top jeep. They made several side trips to explore—a bonus for me, as I got to see more of the island. We arrived in the south coast town of Ierapetra in the early evening, a hundred miles from where I'd started that morning. It had been another long, hot, exhausting, and wonderful day.

Ierapetra had about 8500 inhabitants, and was the biggest town I'd been in for a while. I found a shared room at the Vila Petra Guest House for two dollars a night. The place was clean and freshly painted, with a basic kitchen, hot showers, a shady courtyard, and a friendly manager.

In the morning I went shopping for food and happened upon a bakery selling whole wheat bread—a rare treat—fresh from the oven. I bought a loaf and ate most of it while it was still warm! In the afternoon I went for a long walk in the fields outside of town, where everyone I encountered smiled and said hello.

The next day, Lela, a young British woman from the guest house, took me on her moped to a nearby village called Agia Fotia. This seaside enclave consisted of a handful of houses, a few tavernas, and a pretty even mix of locals, seasonal Greeks, and tourists. Lela had spent four and a half months living in the village, assisting an elderly Greek man named Manoli. He lived with a goat and a dog in a two-room cement shack, and made his living by fishing and growing vegetables. Lela helped him fish, garden, and cook, learned to speak Greek, and became

part of the local community. I was in awe of Lela's positive energy, confidence, and fearlessness. I could feel the genuine love she had for the village.

Manoli had built his whitewashed house out of inexpensive, sturdy cement blocks that kept it cool in summer and warm in winter. It had low ceilings, concrete floors, two windows, and double doors looking out toward the sea. The front room boasted a corner fireplace with a cone-shaped chimney, a twin bed, a low table in the center, three chairs, and a taller table in the corner. The second room held a larger bed, crocks filled with oil and olives, crates of potatoes, a large cupboard, and some shelves.

After serving us olives, melon, and raki (strong spirits), Manoli fixed us a delicious stew of potatoes, okra, and tomatoes he'd grown (with Lela's help), and fish he'd recently caught. He cooked over an olive wood fire on his front porch, using oil from his olives, salt he'd collected off a rock in the sea, and herbs he'd picked. Water came from a spring on the hill. Lela and I contributed a sweet watermelon—they were in season.

After a couple of delightful hours, we said goodbye to Manoli, and off we went on Lela's moped, winding along the seaside road, singing and laughing. That village visit was one of the highlights of my trip.

I badly wanted to speak more Greek. Each day I accumulated a few new words and phrases. People were patient, but it could be exhausting trying to communicate mainly with smiles and gestures. There was no Google Translate, so I relied on my pocket dictionary and anyone who could teach me a word or two. I learned a lot from Lela and Manoli.

The next day I walked twelve miles to the mountain town of Anatoli. The weather had turned cloudy and it sprinkled a bit. The setting was spectacular, with a view down to the sea, but the village itself wasn't terribly interesting.

The walk back on the long, empty road began to feel endless, but yet again the Universe provided—a car hove into sight from out of nowhere and offered me a ride to the coast. It was a friendly young Greek couple, and he spoke English. They took a rutted, rocky, and at

times nearly non-existent road, and it was quite an adventure!

They dropped me in Mirtos, a popular beach hangout nine miles west of Ierapetra. I was ravenous and ordered a big salad at a taverna. After I'd eaten, a group of English travelers invited me to share their table and try the infamous Greek brandy called Metaxa. In the interest of research I took a sip, but to me it tasted like gasoline. I thanked them and started walking back to Ierapetra. The sky had cleared, the road was empty and peaceful, and nine miles didn't feel long now that my stomach was full.

I spent quite a bit of time with Kay, an English woman from my dorm room. She'd been there for three months, spoke Greek pretty well, and seemed to know everyone. It was a small enough town that gossip spread like wildfire—there apparently wasn't much to do except mind other people's business—and Kay regaled me with the stories she'd heard.

In many villages, people grew up, married, settled down, and accepted the age-old traditions without question. Although I tried not to be judgmental, these traditions did not always sit well with me. Young women were kept isolated, and expected to spend all their free time helping their mothers—although I was there during the summer, and perhaps things were different during the school year. In contrast, the boys were free to roam where they pleased, carouse with their mates, and cement friendships. The young women were not only isolated from their female peers, but also from young men, so the two genders didn't have many chances to interact.

The marriages I got a glimpse of seemed a sad state of affairs—many appeared to be a tolerated, unquestioned bond. The women stayed home, raised the children, did the housework, cooked, and grew quite plump. In the evenings they often sat in their doorways, sometimes with their daughters or neighbors, to crochet or do needlepoint. Maybe the women were perfectly happy, but I wouldn't have been.

On Sundays, the whole family dressed up for the "volta"—the parade along the waterfront—the daughters held firmly on their mothers' arms.

As for the married men, they seemed to spend a lot of time sitting in coffee shops flirting with tourist girls. They weren't very good at it, but maybe they weren't truly serious about it either. It felt sad and pathetic to me, and it bothered me that their wives had to put up with it.

The unmarried men took the flirtation much more seriously, and many of them spent their nights in one of the local discos, dressed in skin-tight clothes, hoping to get lucky. They assumed that any foreign woman traveling without male companionship was "looking for a good time." Forget trying to have a conversation—they were more interested in other things.

The only time they seemed genuine was when they danced with their mates to Greek music. Toward the end of each evening, discos switched to traditional tunes and the local men began to dance. They linked arms and moved in a slow, shuffling circle, then took turns dancing solo in the center—eyes closed, moving slowly at first, as if in a trance, then speeding up, leaping and grinning, acting out the music as they felt it, a la *Zorba the Greek*. It was kind of analogous to break dancing, without the down-on-the-floor moves. I found it quite touching to watch them abandon their flirtatious facades and show authentic emotion.

Greek men had mesmerizing eyes, whether translucent blue or deep brown, and I could see why so many women fell for them. To me they seemed a bit sad, as if they had yearnings they weren't even conscious of because they were so tradition-bound.

I spent a week in Ierapetra. The days passed lazily, and time began to feel like a disconnected dream. Greek life away from Athens was epitomized by one word—*sigha*—meaning slowly, slowly. There's always tomorrow, always time. It was easy to slide into blissful oblivion, sipping coffee or beer, napping away hot afternoons, walking along the cafe-lined waterfront, taking hours to stop and chat with acquaintances along the way.

The day I tore myself away from Ierapetra I felt a melancholy slipping over me—it was something I was beginning to understand and expect. At first I thought of it as a wrenching loneliness, but it came to feel

more like nerves, as I left the known and comfortable and stepped out into the unknown again. When I was on the move and alone for a while, I got used to it, but after I'd settled down for a few days or a week, and grown attached to people or a place, it took time to regain the contentment of aloneness. I knew this would get easier with practice.

Hospitality

It took two busses and two hours to get to tiny Zakros on the east coast of the island. The drivers played loud Greek music, and I tapped my foot as the breathtaking beauty of the island unfolded beyond the open windows. The music and vistas perfectly complemented each other.

In Zakros I met an Australian woman, and together we walked to Kato (lower) Zakros, a coastal town four and a half miles away. Layered gray-blue hills made a scenic backdrop. At the entrance to a deep, green gorge, a few goats grazed and a farmer winnowed wheat, throwing up dust that sparkled in the sun. Soon a tightly-winding ribbon of road began descending to the coast. Below us we could see a cluster of brilliant white cube-shaped buildings, and a curving shingle beach between high rocky headlands. A Greek couple stopped to offer us a ride the last leg.

It was another hot day, and we raced to the water to cool off. We spent the evening in a taverna owned by another Manoli (a common Greek name with many variations), where we had an excellent meal of souvlaki, salad, and wine. Later we joined him and an international collection of his friends to drink raki and listen to a guitarist and violinist play Cretan music.

At this point you may be thinking that I was quite the drinker. I was certainly offered a lot of alcohol, but I didn't actually drink that much. And in case you've lost track of all these libations, the Greek repertoire included regular wines, retsina (wine infused with pine resin), ouzo (anise liquor), raki (also anise liquor, but stronger than ouzo), and Metaxa (brandy). I didn't really like any of them.

Manoli offered to let us sleep at his place, because he would be

elsewhere that night. I was amazed by his hospitality to complete strangers. In the end we opted for sleeping on the beach under the moon and stars. The pebbles weren't exactly comfortable, but I slept well, and woke to a soft morning sky streaked with lavender.

My Aussie friend and I spent the day in lazy enjoyment of this brimming-with-beauty place. It was blazing hot, even in the shade. The wind didn't have much of a cooling effect, it just pushed the waves of heat at us, but at least the air was moving.

Late in the afternoon we walked far up into the gorge we'd seen on the way down. The stream bed was dry, but tall trees provided shade.

The next day we left early to try to beat the heat on the uphill walk back to Zakros, but the merciless sun started pounding on us the minute it rose. Even with my sunhat and lots of water, I think I was very close to sunstroke by the time we arrived. We headed straight to an ice cream shop.

I said goodbye to my companion and got on a bus to Sitia, a town of about 7000 on the north coast. I found a shared room for less than three dollars, dropped my pack, and went exploring. The bay was lined with tavernas, and freshly-painted fishing boats bobbed in the harbor. The town appeared deceptively lifeless and unattractive at first glance, but a short walk uncovered picturesque streets and a beautiful view of the hills across the bay, their silhouettes etched against the blue sky. The shoreline was wild and undeveloped, and the town nestled against the hillside, with stairways leading up between the buildings.

That night I was serenaded by the loud throb of the local disco (which thankfully was playing music I liked), and a nearly full moon shone brightly through the open window. Sometimes I had trouble falling asleep in the hot, still air, although at least it wasn't humid. Sleeping indoors, the sun didn't wake me, and I slept late the next morning.

Continuing my counter-clockwise circuit of the coast of Crete, I took a bus to Kritsa, a large mountain village on the north coast about an hour west of Sitia. It was touristy but charming, carved into a steep, rocky hillside with terraced gardens. Everything from morning coffees to enormous bundles of produce had to be lugged up steep stairways.

I walked a sweltering two miles up to Lato, the stony ruins of an ancient town perched in a saddle high above two rugged, tree-dotted valleys. In the distance I could see the Bay of Mirabello, the town of Agios Nikolaos, and the brown-gray hummocks of the Sitia Peninsula, blurry in the heat.

I sat for a while on a shaded rock and gazed at the sea far below. I thought about getting a room and staying the night in Kritsa, but I wanted to get an early start the next day, so I grabbed a bus to the slightly larger town of Agios Nikolaos. When I got there, however, I was dismayed to discover absolutely no cheap rooms available. Once again I wished I could just sleep outside, but I didn't see a place that looked hidden enough. I wasn't sure what to do, so I decided to have dinner, because everything looks more manageable after a good meal. I found a cozy taverna with Greek music and a friendly waiter, and ordered my go-to repast of moussaka and salad.

After dinner I walked back toward the center of town. This city of 8000 was a tourist hotspot for the well-to-do, with dressed-up people, expensive restaurants, and high-end hotels. Two guys began following me, cat calling and whistling as if I were a dog. At first I ignored them, but when they didn't stop, I turned to them and in the simplest strong English I could manage in my anger told them to leave me alone or I'd cause a scene. Eventually they disappeared, and I began feeling a bit despondent about the problem of where to sleep. With guys like that around, sleeping outside was definitely not an option.

At last I spotted a handwritten sign that said, "We rent rooms." My gut feeling told me to go up the steps, despite the fact that it was now 11 p.m. Luckily the residents were awake, but they didn't speak any English. With the few Greek words I understood, I finally deduced that the guy in charge wasn't there, and they weren't able to give me a room. I wondered if they would let me sleep on the flat roof, but didn't know how to ask. As if reading my mind, one of the women laughingly pointed to the roof, and I said, "Naí, kalo, poli kalo!" (Yes, good, very good!) They seemed delighted that such a simple solution had been found to my problem.

One of them rushed to fetch some cardboard and lay it out for me.

Another showed me the toilets and water. They were so kind! The children were fascinated, and watched as I laid out my sleeping bag. How I wished I could talk to them. At long last, after many "Kali niktas," they wandered off to their rooms.

A word about yes and no in Greek: *naí* sounds like nay but means yes; *oki* sounds like okay, but means no. To make things even more confusing, Greeks shake their heads no when they mean yes, and yes when they mean no. It took me a while to sort this out, and to stop confusing people if I shook my head in the wrong direction.

Windmills, Caves, and Saints' Days

I slept soundly on the rooftop, awoke with the sun, and caught a bus to Psychro, a little town 3000 feet above the sea on the Lasithi Plateau. I headed straight to the Diktaean Cave, a sacred site of the Minoans, a Bronze Age culture centered on the island of Crete five thousand years ago. The cave is one of several that claim to be where Zeus was born, and where his mother, Rhea, hid him from his father, Cronus, who wanted to swallow all of his children to prevent being overthrown by any of them.

I paid for my ticket and walked down a long and slippery stone stairway into the upper cave. Dripping stalactites dangled from the ceiling and stalagmites rose from the floor like tapered candles. Recent rains had created a deep pool that blocked the entrance to the lower cave. During the German occupation in WWII, partisan resistance groups had used the cave as a hiding place.

One of the guides followed me down into the cave, said a few words, allowed me a perfunctory glance around, and then informed me that I owed him a hefty tip! Had I not made it clear that I didn't want a guide? Was a guide required? Like so many things when traveling, I wasn't sure how to handle this one, so I very grudgingly gave him the money.

Back at the entrance, I chatted with Petros, the ticket seller, and his friend Manos, who both spoke excellent English. Petros told me he was in charge of incident response for the cave, and he was a tour guide as

well. The three of us had an interesting conversation comparing family, traditions, and politics in our two countries.

They helped me find a nice room for five dollars—the cheapest in town— and bought me a coffee. Then they took me on a walking tour of the lovely fields below the village, where local farmers raised potatoes, beans, corn, artichokes, fruit trees, and goats on small plots of land. Both men were married, acted like gentlemen, and helped restore my faith in Greek men by never saying or doing anything inappropriate.

The Lasithi Plateau was known for its thousands of picturesque cloth-sailed windmills, or windpumps, whose purpose was to pump water into cement reservoirs, where it then flowed along ditches into the fields.

Each windpump sat on a cement platform over a shallow well enclosed by a round stone wall. On top of the platform was a tapered, scaffold-like tower about fifteen feet tall, with a spoked hub on top where the sails were attached. As the wind turned the sails, the rotating hub turned a crankshaft, which raised and lowered a rod and piston in a sealed cylinder, causing the water to be pumped up from the ground and along a pipe into a reservoir. The triangular white sails twirled photogenically in the breeze.

Ten thousand windmills once covered the Lasithi Plateau, and there were an estimated five thousand left when I was there, dotting the land like giant white flowers. There are many fewer now, but there is a movement to restore as many as possible.

I was already passionate about alternative energy, and these windpumps seemed like a practical, effective, and earth-friendly technology. In fact, the design was copied by UNICEF engineers for use in Africa and India. At that time in my life, I read Mother Earth News magazine and dreamed about living on a farm and being energy self-sufficient. It never came to pass, but I'm still fascinated by clever, low-tech solutions.

On our way back to Psychro we stopped to visit Petros's mother-in-law. She lived in a tidy whitewashed house surrounded by a tree-shaded

courtyard filled with pots of flowers. She served us peanuts, biscuits, raki, homemade goat cheese, and my favorite—paximadia with oil and salt. She was a sweet lady—people's character shines through even without language.

Petros was leading a group of British tourists to the Diktaean Cave the next day, and invited me to tag along. It was a much better experience than the previous day—Petros told interesting stories, and we were allowed to spend more time in the cave.

Afterward, Petros invited me to his parents' house for a lunch to celebrate his "name day." Like the Catholic Church, the Greek Orthodox Church commemorates one or more saints for each day of the year. I learned that everyone with the name of that saint celebrated their name day just like a birthday. I happened to be there on June 29th, St. Petros's (Peter's) day.

Petros, Manos, and their wives and children were there, along with a few other family members. There was a feast of goat meat, noodles, salad, paximadia, goat cheese, and homemade wine. The food was delicious, and everyone was incredibly welcoming and kind to me. I had a wonderful time, and was utterly exhausted when I left—I went back to the hotel and slept for four hours!

In the evening I had coffee with Manos, Petros, and two of their friends. It felt strange to hang out with a group of married men, without their wives. I wished I could spend time with the women, but they didn't speak English, and they weren't even invited. Not for the first or last time, I wished I had a "gender neutral" cloak that let me be one of the guys, without all the sex baggage—I was not looking for romance, I just wanted to meet local people and learn about Cretan life.

Late in the evening we all went back to Petros's parents' for an even larger saint's day celebration. Two dozen relatives and friends gathered on the terrace of the little house, with its sweeping view of the plateau and surrounding hills. Not long after dark the full moon began to rise, painting the hilltops gold before peeking over the horizon in a flash of blinding brilliance, and bathing the countryside in fairytale light.

We ate and drank, then ate and drank some more: goat, rabbit, pork,

noodles, bread, wine, watermelon. Then we danced to Cretan music. I loved every minute of that amazing evening. Sadly, I have no photos of Petros, Manos, or their families because my camera was stolen just a week later.

Ancient and Modern

The next day, after goodbyes and heartfelt thank-yous to Petros and Manos, I took a bus to Heraklion. Manos invited me to visit him and his family there, which I later did.

Heraklion was the only huge city on the island, with a population of 100,000. I was not looking forward to being back in an urban enclave, but it was the hub that would get me to other parts of the island. As I walked from the bus station to the center of town, two young Greek guys catcalled and rode circles around me on their bicycles. When they got too close, I reached out and pushed one of them, and they left.

As I'd expected, the city was crowded, ugly, and cacophonous, though not as bad as Athens. Despite their drawbacks, both cities did have certain European charms that I never saw in the States: pedestrian streets, fountains, and open-air restaurants and markets. The streets outside the center of Heraklion were congested, dirty, and oppressively drab.

The Cretan Sun Hotel, tucked into a busy market street near the center of town, was a bit of an oasis, with a covered roof where you could sleep on a mat for two dollars a night. I liked the vibe there, and the colorful cast of travelers.

One of the denizens was a gregarious and funny German guy named Peter. He worked part-time at the hotel and busked with his guitar in the evenings. I ran into him when I went to dinner, he invited me to sing a few songs with him, and that became part of my daily routine. He generously split his earnings with me, and it was usually enough for dinner and beer.

Late that first day found me at a restaurant table with other travelers and locals, everyone telling stories and laughing. Soldiers from the U.S.

naval base strolled past with their Greek girlfriends. Peter, who had spent a lot of time on Crete and spoke quite a bit of Greek, taught us a few phrases using mnemonics he'd invented. *Parakalo* (please) was "Perry Como." *To logariasmo* (the check), was "two long orgasms." Adolescent humor, but I still remember how to ask for the check in Greek all these years later!

When the restaurant closed we moved down the road to Michalis's jewelry shop, where we listened to his fabulous collection of music—everything from Abba, Bach, Beatles, and bouzouki to Zeppelin.

The next day I ran into Françoise and Emmanuelle, the mother and daughter I'd met in Athens, and they filled me in on all the gossip from the American House hostel. I was learning that the Europe travel circuit was kind of a small place, and it wasn't unusual to cross paths with people you'd met somewhere else.

In the afternoon I settled in at Vasili's for coffee and journaling. His place was popular because he played rock 'n roll and jazz. At the table next to me a group of Greek hippies drank beer and chain smoked. They had scraggly hair, body piercings (not that common in 1980), and bloodshot eyes. I'd always assumed that hippies were a U.S. phenomenon, started in protest over the Vietnam War, but in fact the roots lie in European bohemianism, an anti-establishment movement going as far back as the mid-1800s.

It seemed to me that there were two kinds of hippies: those who practiced peace, love, activism, and ecology, and others who, as I wrote in my journal, were "dirty and scraggly," used a lot of drugs, and lived off handouts. I know it's way more nuanced than that, but I wanted to be, and hang out with, the former kind of hippie, and not the latter.

I didn't like Heraklion in general, especially the clamor and traffic and leering men, but I liked the niche I had found, with its laid-back coffee shops, a welcoming place to stay, and new friends, including Peter the busker, Michalis the jewelry store owner, and a local squid diver named Lampros. Some of us met for coffee in the mornings at Vasili's. In the evenings we ate at Kosta's tavern, where the owner knew us all. Later we'd move to a bar with an open-air garden and good music.

Soon the days stretched into a week.

It was early August, and the weather seemed to grow hotter by the day. In her 1971 song *Carey*, about the two months she spent living in a cave on the island of Crete in 1970, Joni Mitchell wrote, "The wind is in from Africa, last night I couldn't sleep." The hot sirocco wind from the Sahara does indeed blast its way to Crete in the summer, and it really was difficult to sleep. I now understood why people stayed up so late, strolling around town to catch the cooler evening air before the next day brought more scorching heat.

Part of me wanted to move on and see other parts of Greece and Europe before I ran out of money, but I kept thinking of reasons to stay on Crete: I'd sent to Athens for my mail, and had to wait until that arrived; I wanted to see the village in the mountains where Peter lived part-time; my twenty-first birthday was coming up, and it would be nice to spend it with people I knew; and perhaps not least of all, I had fallen in love with Crete, and just wanted to spend more time there.

It wasn't all coffee shops and hanging out with friends—Crete was the center of the ancient Minoan civilization, and there were many world-class historic places to visit, including Knossos. This important archeological site was a major center for the Minoans starting around 1900 BC, and was the legendary location of the labyrinth that features in the Greek myth of Theseus and the minotaur.

Before going to the site, I went to the Archeological Museum to see the treasures that had been found at Knossos and elsewhere on the island. I was finding that museums could be overwhelming and exhausting, but I was developing an approach that worked for me. First I would buy a guidebook—nothing too detailed, just an overview of the exhibits. Then I sat and read it. With a sense of what the museum contained, I could then wander through, and only spend time looking at the things I was most interested in. After an hour or so I'd take a break and review the book to see what I had missed. I found my museum limit was, and still is, about two hours—after that I get a headache and nothing holds my attention.

My favorite items in the museum were the stunning necklaces and other

ancient jewelry made of alabaster, stone, and gold. I also liked the large drawings depicting what ancient Knossos may have looked like at its peak.

The next day I went to Knossos itself. I'd been dreading the crowds and the heat, and I thought it would be only a boring pile of rubble. The crowds and the heat were bearable, and I was wrong about the pile of rubble. In fact, much of the palace had been restored to its former glory. The original frescoes and treasures were safe in the museum, but reproductions had been put in their places, making it much easier to imagine this once-luxurious villa with its colorful art and grand, spacious rooms.

It was pretty thrilling to be there. I met a guy from Virginia who joined me on my self-guided tour. I happily led the way through the maze of rooms and corridors, reading aloud from the guidebook I'd purchased. We took time to linger and try to picture what the place had once been like.

Other than having a cold in Portugal, I hadn't been sick so far on the trip, or had any issues with food or water. But something got to me on this day, and after saying goodbye to Mr. Virginia, I had a sudden bought of diarrhea. I couldn't make it to a toilet in time, which was mortifying. Once in the bathroom, I was able to clean up enough to get myself back to the hostel. I mention this not to gross you out, but to say that I got through it, and it taught me that I could handle a "worst case scenario." Yes, I felt helpless and overwhelmed and embarrassed, but I learned that I could manage even this on my own.

A few days later, Manos, the guy I had met in Psychro, took me on a scenic drive. We followed an old road that wound up through the mountains. In the hour and a half it took to get to the coastal town of Rethymnon, I saw only three cars, and some of the loveliest scenery on the island. As the sun set, a white crescent moon hung in the sky, and the layered hills faded into dark purple silhouettes.

Looking back, I'm sort of horrified at my naivete—going on a three-hour drive alone with a married man I barely knew! What was I thinking? I so wished that I could have spent time with Greek women

instead, but as I've mentioned, they either didn't speak English, or didn't have the freedom to hang out with foreigners.

Back in Heraklion, we went to Manos's house with some of his friends. I felt pangs of shame as his wife served us watermelon and Greek coffee. I decided that I was not going to spend any more time alone with this married man. I had no way to tell his wife that nothing had happened between me and her husband, and who knows if she would have believed me anyway. Hopefully she trusted him.

Manos was an amateur radio operator, and was eager to show off his hobby. He owned an impressive array of electronic equipment, and had built a large antenna on his roof. In short order he spoke with operators in Germany and the Caribbean. His log listed hundreds of places he had contacted all over the world. It's a hobby I've never felt drawn to, but it was fascinating to learn about it.

On Saturday morning the Cretan Sun cleaning lady quit. Since I was planning to be there for at least a few more days, I offered to help. I got paid eight dollars for about three hours of work in the morning, and had the rest of the day free. The money covered my room and meals, and the scrubbing and sweeping and bed changing was good exercise.

On Sunday afternoon, craving an escape from the city, I went to Amnissos Beach, just east of town. It was disappointingly dirty and crowded, and the overly-warm water was too choppy for swimming. I missed the beaches of the south coast!

One afternoon I was hanging out at Vasili's with a few people when a man bumped into me from behind. "Oh, excuse me, did I ruin your hat?" he said, in impeccable English. I turned to see a middle-aged, gray-haired Greek man smiling down at me. Then he said, "I'm just dying to see your hair." Normally that would have set off my "avoid this man" alarm bells, but he seemed different.

He introduced himself as Lawrence, and we invited him to join us. He offered everyone a round of drinks. He was a philosopher, just like me, and fascinating to talk to. We covered a wide range of topics: traveling, books, writing, human nature, the joy of doing things for others.

Two hours later, everyone else had left, and we hadn't run out of things to talk about. He announced with such enthusiasm that I couldn't refuse, "Come, I want to buy you a special ice cream." It was delicious, and while we ate, we sat and talked some more.

When I told him I was planning to go to a concert that evening, he said, "I'll buy you a ticket, and afterward, I'll take you to dinner." I assumed he meant "dinner with benefits," so I thanked him and said I wasn't interested in anything more than conversation. He swore that was all he wanted as well. He claimed that he enjoyed my company, and that I could trust him to keep his word—so I let him buy me a concert ticket and agreed to meet him for dinner.

Within the old city walls there was a small theater called Oasis, with tall trees for a backdrop. I watched a falcon skim the treetops, and at dusk bats darted through the air. The concert was a mélange of contemporary Greek music and drama skits. The instruments consisted of keyboard, bassoon, electric guitars, electric bass, drums, and three women singers with fantastic voices. The humorous skits were in Greek, but I understood the gist from the actions alone. The crowd was in hysterics.

At 11 p.m. I met Lawrence at a restaurant. I learned that he was a fifty-year-old Cretan native who had moved to England at age twenty-four. After sixteen years there he went to New York for most of a decade, and had recently come back to live on Crete. He sold wines and agricultural products all over the world, and had done quite well for himself. He had a profound joie de vivre.

He ordered a sampling of dishes for me to try, including round, breaded slices of a light meat that looked and tasted like pork. After I'd eaten it, he told me it was pig testicles! "I knew you wouldn't try it if I told you what it was," he said, "but it was good, right?" I had to admit that it was.

After dinner, he and one of his friends and I went to a restaurant with live Cretan music. He ordered melon and wine and his friend taught me some Greek dances. It was so much fun! Lawrence kept saying, "I just want you to have a ball tonight!" Well, I did, and he kept his promise

of not pressing me for more. I arrived home around 2:30 a.m.

I'd had such a good time that I accepted his invitation to dinner again the next night. But when he presented me with a bracelet, my heart sank, because I realized that he was hoping I had changed my mind about "benefits." At that point our easy camaraderie began to feel strained. It made me so sad that we couldn't just be friends. I tried to return the bracelet, but he insisted that I keep it. I didn't see him again, and that bracelet, which I wore for years, has gone the way of all things.

Still, Lawrence was one of the better behaved Greek men I had met. Beach towns were crawling with guys who spent all their time hustling tourist girls for sex. They were called *kamakia*, Greek for "harpoons." You can read all about them online. They were shameless masters of the transparent pickup line: "You are beautiful." "Have time for a coffee?" Many were semi-fluent in multiple languages. They could guess your nationality and correctly address you as "Fräulein," "Miss," "Mademoiselle," or "Señorita." They were charmers extraordinaire, and so many women fell for them that they assumed we were all interested.

I am no prude, but if I was going to sleep with someone, I wanted to have a genuine connection. I often spent time at Vassili's by myself, writing or reading and listening to music. A woman sitting alone at a table was assumed to be waiting for action. I got good at ignoring the pickup lines.

One sad night my camera was stolen from the hostel sleeping area. There were no lockers, so it was important to never leave anything valuable unattended, but I had forgotten and left the camera in my pack. I lost a whole roll of film with all of my pictures of Crete thus far. I was heartbroken. I bought a cheap camera a few weeks later, but the pictures were lost forever.

My cleaning job was going well, although the hotel owner, Nico, was a misogynistic cad. I learned to plaster on a smile, even when I felt like kicking him in the balls. He was a slimy charmer, and many of the young women at the hostel fell for his advances.

One of them was an American woman named Elizabeth. She had stayed

at the hotel, fallen madly in love with Nico, and gotten pregnant. He had lost interest in her even before he found out she was expecting, but she refused to let him go. She made regular visits to Greece with their now nine-month-old baby, and kept the pressure on him to marry her. She was staying with his parents in their village on Crete, and they were pressuring him as well. Nico resented this, and was in a sour mood much of the time.

I adored chubby baby Manolis, and got to be friends with Elizabeth. I felt bad for her, but I also wished she would give up on Nico, as I was pretty sure he would only make her miserable.

One day my friend Peter and I finally took a day trip to his adopted village of Xoudetsi, where a local family had loaned him a little house. I wanted to take advantage of every opportunity to visit villages, and had been eager to see this place he'd talked so much about.

Xoudetsi was about half an hour from Heraklion. We stepped off the bus to a chorus of "*Yasou, Petros!*" (Hi, Peter!) from all the villagers. As we made the rounds of the local coffee shops, he was welcomed back with coffees and ouzos.

The village felt refreshingly calm after the hubbub of the city, and everyone was so friendly. My journal describes eucalyptus trees, old stone buildings, brightly-colored flowers, and shady courtyards with tables and chairs for whiling away the afternoon heat. The old men drank coffee and nibbled paximadia, women crocheted lacy table covers, and children pushed sticks with toy wheels wired to their tips. Cucumbers cooled under an open tap from the mountain spring.

Braving the heat, Peter and I went for a walk in the hills around the town. The valley was an undulating patchwork of striped and checkered fields, patterned like a child's drawing. There were vineyards and olive groves, and fragrant oregano grew in the dry, rocky soil.

Back in Heraklion later that day, I was thrilled to finally meet a young Greek woman who spoke English. Katarina went to the university in Athens and spent summers in her hometown. She had outgrown her provincial island friends and was feeling lonely. We had coffee and a long chat, and she kindly loaned me her camera to use until I left town!

I was so glad I could take pictures of all my friends.

Katarina and me eating ice cream in Heraklion

The days went by and still my mail hadn't come. Sometimes I felt restless to move on, but most of the time I was content hanging out in coffee shops, swimming in the harbor, meeting new people every day, and feeling a part of this town I hated a little, and loved a little too.

The day before my birthday, Lampros killed an octopus with his spear gun (this was before I knew about the extreme intelligence of octopuses, and I shudder to think of killing one now…). That evening, he and Peter and I went to a taverna owned by Lampros's friend. It was off the tourist track on a quiet side street. The friend sauteed the octopus in olive oil and garlic, and served it with salad and fish. Everything was superb.

July 14 was my twenty-first birthday. That evening some of my friends

took me to dinner at Kosta's. Lampros gifted me a sundress from his brother's shop, Peter played "Happy Birthday" on his guitar, and then we had a sing-a-long. I drank a glass of wine. Later we moved on to Vassili's, where I made the mistake (unbeknownst to me at the time) of drinking a small glass of ouzo on top of the wine. I assume that was why I spent most of the next day curled up in a horizontal ball. I felt OK, except when I tried to stand up... Happy birthday to me!

On Saturday my new friend Katarina and I bussed to the nearby town of Sisi, then followed a dirt path down to the sea. We walked along the rocks to a sandy spot with clean water, no people, and no buildings in sight. An old WWII cargo carrier lay in the shallows. We swam out and explored the still-intact hull and wooden decks. It was kind of creepy underwater, but up on deck the sea splashed gently around the hull and there was a cooling breeze. Around us were layered brown hills, white sand, and blue sky. It was a welcome contrast to the developed tourist beaches, with their crowds, litter, and scruffy concrete buildings.

A House in the Hills

On Tuesday my mail finally arrived, and the next day I got on a boat to the island of Ios. Peter walked me to the port about midnight. He had begun to have strong feelings for me. I adored him as a friend, and had a ton of fun hanging out with him, but I wasn't attracted to him, and things were getting increasingly awkward between us. It would be good to get some distance. Plus, I had already decided I'd be returning to Crete, so it wasn't a true goodbye.

The boat was crowded, but I found a sliver of space to lie down, and slept soundly until we reached the island of Santorini. I woke to the sight of massive volcanic cliffs of gray and white pumice towering above the boat. There was nothing resembling a beach, just walls of stone rising straight out of the sea. A cluster of houses perched far above, reached by a steep and tortuous set of stony switchback steps. I wondered what would lure anyone to live in such a difficult-to-access place. I guess it would be easy to repel invaders!

The next stop was my destination, the tiny island of Ios. I'd heard it had

a good camping beach. The small harbor was lovely, but the dense cluster of buildings along the shore was not, and there were absolute hordes of backpackers. I took a bus to the nearby village, but that didn't look appealing either, so I continued on to Mylopotas Beach, at the end of the road just beyond the little town.

Most backpackers got rooms in the village or at the port. A few stayed at Mylopotas, but it turned out that you weren't allowed to sleep on the beach after all, only in the campground—police patrolled the stretch of sand, and people had gotten fines for sleeping there.

The beach was gorgeous, but literally overrun by young backpackers parading up and down, showing off their scantily-clad bodies. Listening in on the chatter was like being in a high school cafeteria: who went to which disco, how much they drank, who was sleeping with whom, that place was great—we got *so* drunk one night, that place was horrible—nothing but *tourists* (this with a grimace of disgust).

There was garbage everywhere, despite the signs asking people to please not litter. Someone paid a diminutive old man to pick trash off the beach, and he retrieved sacks full. I was discouraged that visitors would be so discourteous, and I felt disillusioned with my generation—we were supposed to be more enlightened about taking care of the planet.

I was also dismayed by the number of travelers who had no money and were mooching to get by. Some begged, some stole, others sold anything they could find or steal, helped themselves to food from farmer's fields, ate leftovers off taverna tables, and bummed drinks or cigarettes. It made me grateful I had family to turn to if I ran out of money or if mine got stolen—many people didn't have that option. I met some who had no money and couldn't save enough from odd jobs to get back to wherever they were from.

I didn't like the vibe on the island, but there wouldn't be another boat until at least the next day. I settled in at the Far Out Café (because of course a cafe in this hippie haven would be called Far Out). I wrote in my journal, observed the scene, and waited to see what kind of plan the universe would provide.

This plan came in the form of a young Greek fellow named Jorgos. He spoke good English and was trying to sell me a watermelon (which I later found out he had filched from a local field). He was thin as a willow sapling, with dark skin, big brown eyes, and Bambi lashes. I didn't especially like him—he was clearly a moocher. Why I hitched up with him was selfish—he offered to show me a place to stay in the mountains in exchange for food. I could tell that he was harmless, and the chance to get out of town was too tempting to pass up.

I told him I would go, and pay for food, but that he'd need to give me solitude. We'd leave first thing in the morning.

By the time I finished food shopping it had grown dark. Rather than deal with the campground or the beach police, I went back to the cafe and slept with my head on the table. Jorgos arrived just before dawn. He led me along the beach for a ways, and then we turned up into a valley. Slabs of rock formed natural stairways and terraces. The slabs were also used for building walls and houses, and the crumbling remains of both dotted the landscape.

After about an hour we came to a modest stone building covered in peeling whitewash. Two rooms were open to the sky, and one had a makeshift roof. Several window openings faced toward the sea, visible in the distance. The kitchen had stone shelves and an arched stone fireplace in the corner. Palm trees, a few eucalyptus, and a conifer with curving umbrella-shaped foliage shaded the house. Jorgos explained that the place belonged to a shepherd who didn't mind people staying there.

I instantly felt an overwhelming sense of belonging and peace. I was eager to unpack and settle in, but Jorgos wanted to show me around. A stream that began far above in the hills formed a series of pools just below the house. Water trickled over rock ledges, tadpoles darted in the clear water, and flowering oleander cast dappled shade.

Mid-morning, the tinkling of bells began to fill the valley. The sound grew closer and louder, and soon a long string of goats emerged from below and fanned out to graze. Behind them came Petros the shepherd, owner of the house. He wore sandals and baggy pants, and carried a

woolen bag over his shoulder and a wooden staff in his hand. Jorgos pretended to be German, because he said the locals weren't kind to Greek tourists…whatever. By now I could speak quite a bit of Greek, so I was able to converse with Petros.

The stone house on Ios

The first thing I managed to decipher was that Petros was angry with two British women who had been staying in the house. He said he'd felt sorry for the girls because they didn't have much money, and he'd brought them goat's milk, cheese, and cigarettes, and shared his lunches with them. The previous evening he and another shepherd had taken them into town on mules, and bought the girls dinner and drinks. By the time the men were ready to head back to the valley, the girls had become interested in two other Greek fellows and gaily waved goodbye to the shepherds, saying, "Thanks for everything."

Petros told me he didn't want the girls to stay at the house anymore. When they showed up later that afternoon, I gave them Petros's message. They got angry and basically told me to mind my own business, so I shut my big mouth and went for a dip in the shady pool. When I returned they had packed up and left. I felt bad, because it hadn't in fact been any of my business, and my personal motives were so selfish—I wanted them to leave so I could have the place to myself. (I was pretending Jorgos wasn't there.) I got the feeling they'd been ready to move on anyhow.

With them gone, I bagged up garbage, swept the floor with fallen eucalyptus branches, and organized my stuff. I had brought potatoes, rice, cucumber, tomatoes, bread, and cheese. Jorgos had wild limes and onions. There were odds and ends left from previous inhabitants, like salt, tea, and sugar, and some old pots, plates, and silverware. Many people had apparently stayed there before me.

In the afternoon Jorgos and I walked about fifteen minutes up the valley so he could show me a larger pool. I would have never found it without a guide—it was enclosed on three sides by walls of stacked granite slabs covered with mosses and button ferns, and overgrown with bamboo and shrubs. The stream flowed over the top of the wall and into the pool, creating a small waterfall. I could hardly believe that such a magical place existed.

I asked Jorgos to leave so I could be alone there. The pool was crystal clear, and just big enough to paddle around in. The sun-warmed water was the perfect temperature. The goat bells sounded like wind chimes, and the waterfall made its own music. With the cicadas chirping and the wind rustling the bamboo leaves, the whole effect was like an orchestra. The most peaceful sound I know is the sound of nature. Thinking of that pond still brings back blissful memories—it's one of those proverbial happy places I choose when asked to remember somewhere that makes me feel calm and serene.

Back at the house, we built a fire and cooked a delicious stew of potatoes, rice, and onions. We ate sitting on a stone bench looking toward the sea as the almost-full moon rose above the hills. Afterward, I read and journaled by candlelight. It was incredibly tranquil, with only

a few mosquitoes and flies to remind me I hadn't died and gone to heaven.

The sleeping room was about ten by ten feet. The makeshift roof kept it comfortable in the heat of the day and blocked the wind at night. It had a stone floor, stone benches along the wall, and pegs for hanging things. Two small windows and a door opening faced toward a mountaintop across the valley. At night the moon rose in the doorway and shined into the room. I slept comfortably on a straw mat with a light cloth over me.

Jorgos was fairly innocuous to have around, but at times he infuriated me. He thought that if he needed something he could just take it, from anyone. It turned out that he had swapped his old worn-out shoes for someone else's good tennis shoes, because he "needed better shoes for the mountains." He didn't see anything wrong with this. When he told me, I read him the riot act. He sheepishly asked if he should go back to the beach in the morning and try to return them. I said I thought that would be a good idea. I went with him, but when we got to the beach, the shoe owner was gone.

Each afternoon, Petros the shepherd came by with his goats. Probably in his mid-forties, he had a handsome face and a nice smile. He was tall and slender, with dark leathery skin, high cheek bones, and muscular arms that were so thin the veins stuck out. He generously shared his lunches with us—fresh creamy goat cheese, grilled goat meat, and paximadia. I shared vegetables and fruit and practiced speaking Greek.

A cooling breeze blew up the valley, keeping the hot afternoons comfortable. Stone benches provided shady places to sit and contemplate. I watched a falcon dart through the air and plummet down for an unsuccessful attempt at a meal.

One night, just after dark, an owl flew into a tree in front of the house. It was a tiny thing, about eight inches tall. I was thrilled and wanted so badly to know what it was (Google now tells me it was a "little owl," *Athena noctua*). Owl sightings are generally rare, because these creatures are silent and nocturnal. I still consider it a privilege to see one.

I wrote this journal entry during my stay:

> *I find myself in a world quite isolated from anything outside whatever island, village, or mountain valley I happen to be in at the moment. Politics, news, and world affairs in general seem unreal in this place of unearthly blue skies, stark landscapes, heady smells of herbs, hypnotic cicada choruses, and a pace of life that is more than slow—it's like being half-drugged, but with unexpected clarity. I feel healthy. I sweat and swim, walk, write, read, and am infused with an uncannily energized lethargy.*
>
> *Recently I saw a TIME magazine. The cover headlines were sufficient to inform me of major world events: Middle East sagas, rampant terrorism, revolutions, the usual dictatorial declarations. Since time immemorial, these things have existed.*
>
> *As I write this (by candlelight), I am lying on a mat on the stone floor of a stone house in the mountains on the island of Ios. The full moon has just climbed over the hilltops across the valley, illuminating the roofless half of this old, old structure, casting eucalyptus leaf shadows across the crumbling plaster-covered walls with their vacant squares for windows and doors. The only sounds are cicadas and the bells of the goats left by the shepherd to graze in the valley.*
>
> *I am greedily drinking in the incredible beauty and peace and isolation of this mountain paradise. In the hot afternoons I swim under a waterfall in a pool surrounded by granite slabs, oleander, and a lush growth of ferns. At night I cook rice or potatoes with vegetables over a fire on the stone hearth in the roofless kitchen. I am very happy here.*

I was happy there, but I grew weary of Jorgos. After half a week that went by in a blink, I decided it was time to move on. It was wrenchingly hard to say goodbye to such a magical place. I knew I would never go back, partly because if I did, it wouldn't be the same.

So one morning we rose early and walked back to "civilization." I said goodbye to Jorgos, leaving him to find the next person to take to the little stone dwelling in exchange for food. I took the bus to the village to buy a boat ticket, only to learn that the boat wouldn't be coming until the next day.

The village was a jumble of buildings hugging a steep hill, the whitewash so bright it hurt my eyes. The streets in the main part of town were narrow and so packed with people that I had to elbow my way through. It appeared to have been completely taken over by travelers, and I saw few locals. At night it was wall-to-wall drunken bodies and discos blaring. Welcome to Greece, girls and boys!

Happily, I discovered real Greek people away from the center of town. On a little side street I came upon a house where two old women sat weaving. One was winding balls of string from a revolving cylindrical wooden structure holding skeins of wool. The other was threading an immense, ancient, wooden hand loom. They invited me to watch, and I was mesmerized.

I heard the sound of squealing pigs and followed it to what turned out to be the local slaughterhouse. I peeked inside and the men called, "Ella, Kopella!" (Come, miss!) I think they thought it would be funny to see my reaction, and they probably expected I would leave right away. So I went in and stayed, partly to prove that I could, and partly out of curiosity. I wanted to be not just another tourist, but someone interested in their way of life, who even spoke their language a little. Plus, if I was going to eat meat, I felt I should be willing to see how the animals were butchered.

The abattoir was a whitewashed stone building with a bamboo roof. Inside there were five men, four pigs, three sheep, and tools of the trade: knives, cleavers, buckets of water, and an assortment of rusty pulleys and meat hooks.

I was appalled by what I saw. The pigs were the first victims, and the men laughed while they kicked and pushed them around. Maybe after slaughtering so many they didn't think of them as living creatures any more, or maybe this was their way of staying disconnected from the animals, making it easier to kill them. I didn't blame them for the killing—they relied on the meat for sustenance—but did they have to be cruel?

The men clubbed each pig repeatedly on the forehead with a thick wooden stick until the animal fell over, screaming piercing, loud, terrified shrieks, even while its throat was being slit. There were torrents of blood, and horrible gushing and sucking noises, and then the pig went into violent convulsions. The body continued to quiver even after it was skinned. I was surprised that the other pigs seemed to have no reaction to the carnage—they walked over and around their dead brethren, seemingly unfazed.

After skinning, the pigs were hung, quartered, and sent off to the butcher. It surprised me that the men threw away a lot of parts that I had seen eaten or sold elsewhere.

The sheep killing was much quicker—there was no clubbing, the men just grabbed the hapless critters and quickly slit their throats. They didn't even cry out. An air nozzle stuck under the skin of one leg helped loosen the rest of the skin, which was otherwise hard to remove.

It was exhausting, smelly work, and the men swore a lot. I sat on the steps, for some strange reason determined to bear witness to this reality. After a while the men's attitude toward me changed. They seemed amazed that I had stuck around, and surprised that I could ask questions and understand some of their responses.

Two young boys stopped by. They asked the men questions about me in Greek, but I understood and answered, and the boys gave me surprised smiles. I left feeling good about the cultural exchange, though just a tad queasy. I surprised myself by gobbling up most of a salad afterward, though I couldn't bring myself to eat the mound of creamy goat cheese on top.

In the morning I boarded the boat back to Athens. It was a long, hot, crowded trip, with stops at the islands of Naxos and Paros. I met a guy named Lambros who spoke such impeccable English that at first I didn't even realize he was Greek. He said he lived with his sister in an apartment in the Athens suburbs. When the boat docked late in the evening, the swarms of backpackers headed downtown to look for rooms. I didn't relish joining them, so when Lambros invited me to stay the night with him and his sister, it was too tempting to turn down. I hadn't gotten any awkward vibes from him, and I intuitively felt I could trust him, so off I went with an almost-complete stranger. Lambros did indeed have a sister, who graciously welcomed me, and I happily crashed on their living room floor. The neighborhood wasn't exactly scenic, but it was quiet, and it was nice to not be crammed into a dorm.

The next day I thanked my kind hosts, and walked to American House. Prices had gone up now that it was high season, so I opted for a cheaper place in the Plaka, where I paid less than two dollars for a foam mat on the floor in a big room.

At first Athens felt a bit hostile after Crete and Ios. Little things rankled—a kiosk worker wouldn't make change, a waiter wouldn't serve me only a salad at a restaurant. I figured that as tourist season wore on, service workers were getting crabby. Big cities are not known for their warmth to strangers, in any case.

But soon I saw kindnesses everywhere. As I sat in a busy coffee shop, a Greek couple asked to share my table, then paid for my coffee to thank me. A shop owner took the time to draw me a map to a shop where I found an honest-to-goodness *Field Guide to the Birds of Europe*. A fellow in a camera store gave me a discount on my film developing, "just to be nice."

To put the cap on a great day, the owner at American House offered me a discount to entice me back to staying there. And there wasn't even a line for the showers.

While I was eating dinner one evening, I met a cheerful Greek fellow

named Tassos and a sweet Italian girl from Bologna. Tassos had a car, and the three of us picked up a friend of his and drove to the summer wine festival at Daphne. A two-dollar entrance fee got us unlimited samples of wine, including retsina, reds, whites, even Mavrodaphne and Moschata (a delicious yellow, sweet dessert wine that tasted like apricots). There were several stages set up, featuring costumed dancers and music ranging from traditional *sirtakis* (think *Zorba the Greek*) to contemporary Greek music to rock 'n roll. Concession booths sold *loukoumades*, Greek donuts with honey and cinnamon. People danced, most of them merrily tipsy. I had a blast.

Tassos worked as a flight engineer for Olympic Airlines. He never showed any romantic interest in me, he just seemed to be a nice person who wanted to be hospitable to a visitor. One day he and his friend took me to the beach and taught me how to play beach-racket—it's like ping pong with no table, using oversized paddles and a tennis ball on a sand court. It was quite fun, and great exercise.

That evening Tassos took me to a soccer match at the stadium in Piraeus. The cheap ticket section was packed standing-room-only with a few thousand men and just a handful of women. There was a lot of screaming and cursing and drinking and smoking. The local high school boys were out in force, cheering, waving scarves and flags, and blowing whistles. It was a well-appointed stadium, and the game and people watching were both quite entertaining. The rules were slightly different than American soccer, and it was a bit more aggressive, but basically it seemed like the same game.

The train back to Athens was crammed with loud, boisterous fans. It had been a disappointing game, and feelings were running high—there was some name calling and blustering between opposing teams.

I wanted to go to Cape Sounion to see the ruins of the Temple of Poseidon, built in the 5th century BC to honor the sea god and ask him to protect ships. The young women at the tourist info desk were so mobbed and distracted that they gave me the wrong public transit information. After an hour or so of walking and waiting at various stops, I finally found the right bus. The ride itself took about two hours.

The temple sat on a high bluff looking out over the sea. The site was crowded, so I walked along a ridge and sat in the shade of some bushes to read my book and admire the temple from a distance. The waves made a gentle shushing sound, a soft breeze blew, and boats glided by.

The last return bus was standing room only, because the previous bus had never come. People took it quite well, and there was even some boisterous singing and camaraderie to pass the time. I felt mildly irritated with the whole Greek tourist organization, which was understaffed and inefficient. In many ways the day had been a comedy of errors, but mostly I was able to see the humor in it.

The next day I went to the National Archeological Museum, which had the usual ancient stone sculptures, pottery vases, and miscellaneous artefacts. A little of that went a long way with me. I did like the statues of Poseidon, and one of a bronze racehorse bearing a tiny jockey.

Here I saw Socrates' prayer to Pan for the first time. In his book *Phaedrus*, Plato says that Socrates uttered this prayer when he was outside the city of Athens with his friend Phaedrus, enjoying a walk along the banks of the Ilissus River. I found it so wise that I transcribed it into my journal:

> *Oh beloved Pan, and all ye other Gods of this place, grant to me that I be made beautiful in my soul within, and that all external possessions be in harmony with my inner man. May I consider the wise man rich, and may I have such wealth as only the self-restrained man can bear or endure.*

One night I went to watch folk dancing at the open-air Dora Stratou theater, nestled on the side of Philopappus Hill. A group of musicians played and sang while two dozen dancers in colorful traditional costumes whirled around the stage, performing a selection of dances from various parts of mainland Greece and the islands. Simple line dances were interspersed with acrobatic stunts and intricate choreography. Not surprisingly, my favorites were the dances from Crete.

I was thrilled to learn that Joan Baez would be performing at the

amphitheater on Lycabettus Hill the next night. Unfortunately it was sold out, so about three hundred of us who didn't have tickets climbed onto the surrounding rocks, from where we had an excellent view of the stage. Joan was radiant, and I felt transported just watching her and listening to her soaring soprano voice.

Halfway through the concert a guy ran down out of the seats and sat on the stage right in front of her. A hushed murmur went up—what would the police do? Nothing. A girl ran down, then a few more people. All of a sudden about fifty fans surged off the hill and onto the stage. When Joan finished the song she was singing, she said to the audience, "In case some of you don't know, I prefer it this way." Everyone laughed and clapped and cheered. The positive energy was electric.

The police then formed a line to limit the flow of people. A bunch of us came down off the rocks and stood just behind the stage. Every once in a while a few people would break off and run closer. The police were cool about it—they didn't hassle anyone, they just tried to keep us from overcrowding the stage. Eventually I was able to sit right in front of Joan, perhaps twenty feet away. She was even more beautiful up close.

She sang songs for Cambodia and South Africa (these were the years of genocide refugees and apartheid). She performed Dylan songs, old traditional songs, and '60s classics: *Dona Dona*, *Let it B*e, *The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down*, *Joe Hill*, *Blowin' in the Wind*. I was utterly transfixed. Being there brought back intense idealistic feelings about changing the world for the better, and everybody loving each other. I wished the sense of community we all felt could last once the concert ended and we dispersed. I left on a cloud, and sang all the way back to the hostel, which was a long walk, because I got a bit lost.

On the way, I passed the American embassy. It was the first U.S. embassy I had ever seen. It was enormous, imposing, and flashier than the other embassies. I had mixed emotions as I walked by, thinking about all the unconscionable things my country had done around the world. Part of me felt protected by that towering edifice, yet I wondered how much the people inside really cared about little me.

The days clicked by in Athens. When you stay in a place for a while,

you develop routines because, in effect, you now live there—laundry, shopping, cooking, cleaning, correspondence, sightseeing, and socializing filled my time. I also picked up a hobby—in one of the ubiquitous needlepoint shops, I bought a kit with a design of the port of Ios. I worked on it over the next few months, and I still have the finished picture framed on my wall.

Island Hopping

The day came when I was finally ready to get out of the big city. I had hoped to see the Papageorgious before I left, but they weren't answering their phone. Lambros, the guy I'd met on the return boat from Ios, had invited me to visit him on the island of Aegina, where he worked at his cousin's hotel. It was the closest island to Athens, and popular for weekend getaways, but midweek, the boat wasn't crowded, and mine was the only backpack in sight. On the two-hour trip I met a friendly Greek Canadian family who offered me a ride to Lambros's hotel in Perdika, despite their car being already stuffed to the hinges.

I'd had no way to tell Lambros I was coming, and he seemed surprised to see me. It occurred to me that maybe he had only invited me out of courtesy, and hadn't expected me to actually show up. But there I was. I offered to get a place in town, but he insisted that I was welcome. In hindsight, he might have been worried that I was interested in him, and as it turned out, he had a girlfriend. In fact, perhaps he didn't think she would be thrilled to see me!

The Aegina Maris was a huge resort complex, with a towering main hotel surrounded by beachside bungalows, a disco, a beach bar, and tennis courts. To me it was a monstrous obscenity, marring the landscape, looking grossly out of place. The sand between the lounge chairs and umbrellas was strewn with trash, but the water was clean and warm, and the setting was lovely.

The hotel was a successful and popular resort in the 1960s and '70s. Not long after I was there it was abandoned, literally overnight. According to Google, no one knows where the owners went, why they left, or even how to find them. The complex still stands today, a gated

and crumbling eyesore.

Lambros worked in the beach bar, where he played cassettes of Roger Whittaker, Simon and Garfunkel, and Cat Stevens. He served me watermelon, grapes, fresh orange juice, and a tequila sunrise! Later he fed me at the employee canteen and gave me a place to sleep. I asked if this would get him in trouble, but he assured me that all of it was allowed. Everyone who worked at the hotel seemed to be from the same village in Cyprus, many of them were related, and they all looked out for each other. Friends were treated like extended family.

I spent the next day hanging out until Lambros got off work, and then a group of us went for dinner and dancing. Lambros's attractive and kind girlfriend didn't seem to mind that I had shown up. The open-air disco wasn't too loud, and they even played some music I liked.

Lambros had the next day off, and we all went swimming, kayaking, and motor boating. It was a lot of fun, and everyone was nice to me, but I didn't really fit in. Besides the fact that I didn't speak their language, they were glamorous people who liked fancy living, which wasn't my style.

That night we went back to the disco again. Once had been enough for me. The next morning I got up at daybreak, said farewell, and walked into town while it was still relatively cool.

I took a tiny boat to Methana, forty minutes away on the east coast of the Peloponnese Peninsula. My destination was Githio, a hundred and sixty miles south, where I could catch a ferry back to Crete. I have no memory of what my plan was for getting there, as I don't believe there were any busses. It was mid-August, and temps were up to a hundred degrees during the day. I guess I was just hoping that people would offer me rides.

I met two young Austrian fellows on the boat who gave me a ride partway, and bought me lunch at a taverna. It was the first of many acts of kindness that day.

After that I must have walked for a while. When I stopped at a cafe in the town of Tripoli, the fellow working there wouldn't let me pay for

my drink, and told me I could use the kitchen sink to wash up and fill my water bottle. Farther down the road, some Greek folks sitting in a cafe called me over, bought me a drink, and asked me lots of questions about my travels.

Later I passed a barn where two Greek guys were working. They offered me water and showed me the chickens and baby rabbits. Their mother, a gentle, gray-haired woman, gave me pears and cucumbers from her garden.

I made it to Githio just before dark. It was normally a sleepy town, except on the two days each week when the ferry went to Crete, and then there was *poli cosmos* (lots of people). While waiting for the boat to arrive, I had dinner at a taverna, and got a terrible stomach ache afterwards. I don't know if it was the food, or the heat and exertion.

The boat was scheduled for 3 a.m., but didn't show up until 6, as the rising sun was pasteling the hills. The boat was grimy, and the eight-hour ride was crowded and miserably hot. I felt intensely nauseous the entire time. I managed to get some fitful sleep, but when I finally stumbled off the boat in Kissamos, I felt like death warmed over—several times.

It was sweltering, and the waves of heat made it an effort to breathe or move—it was like being in a sauna. On the boat I'd met Sam, a lawyer from New York who lived in Paris and came to Crete as often as possible. I gratefully accepted his offer of a ride to Chania.

We were both eager to go for a swim to cool off. Near Kolymvari, we turned off toward the water. A dirt track wound under tall, arching bamboo and past vegetable gardens, and we emerged near a long stretch of deserted, clean, pebbly beach. After two showerless days of sweating in the heat and dust, that water glittered like gold. We didn't leave the water until the sun was setting. Without clouds or pollution, the Cretan sunrises and sunsets were more subtle than spectacular, and it got dark or light quickly, as if someone had flipped a switch.

We drove on toward Chania and stopped for a cheap meal at a roadside taverna. The owner was surly, and his bad mood infected me, so I felt a bit down. But the salad was good.

Sam deposited me at a relatively isolated beach about two miles east of Chania, where I could safely spend the night. As I walked blissfully barefoot down the sandy beach, gazing up at the stars, I smashed my toe hard against a large rock. My flashlight revealed a bad gash, and it hurt like crazy. I bandaged it as best I could, rolled out my sleeping bag, and despite the pain I was out like a light.

I woke up with the sun, already sweating from the heat. It was sheer bliss to plunge into the water, and it was good to soak my toe, which was throbbing. I limped into Chania and bought some mercurochrome and more bandages. I hadn't been able to get all the sand out of the cut, and hoped it wouldn't get infected.

August is vacation month for most Europeans, and Crete was swarming with sun seekers. On the one-hour bus trip from Chania to Rethymnon I saw at least a dozen hitchhikers, and a steady stream of cars. Rethymnon itself was surprisingly uncrowded, however, and the beach right in town was almost empty. The small city had a nice vibe. A big old Venetian fortress perched on a hill, overlooking the taverna-lined port.

I continued east toward Heraklion. This part of the coast was a succession of high hills, rocky coves, and pockets of sand. A perpetual wind blew from the north, making the sea choppy.

I stopped for the night at a pristine slip of beach about twelve miles east of Heraklion, where there were a few other people camping. I had trouble sleeping because my toe was really bothering me. I'd wake up and stare at the stars until I could drift off again.

At one point I looked up and there were no stars. I thought I was having a bad dream—it didn't occur to me that it might be cloudy. Who could imagine a cloud in the Greek sky? That was like smothering the gods with a pillow while they slept. Sacrilege! But sure enough, the morning dawned overcast, cool, and windy. Perhaps it was a blessing, because it motivated me to go to Heraklion and get my foot taken care of—it was getting pretty nasty looking.

It was painful to walk, so I took a taxi to the hospital and they found someone who spoke English. She brought me into a room right away

and cleaned out the cut—oh man, did that hurt—then wrapped my toe in a big bandage. I was incredibly grateful for the treatment, and it didn't cost me a cent. It was my first—but not my last—experience with the blessings of universal health care.

Now I was hobbling around with a comically large bandage that looked like a cartoon toe. There would be no more swimming for a while!

Hotel Crud 'n Sin

My humorous busker friend Peter referred to the Hotel Cretan Sun as the "Hotel Crud 'n Sin." When I showed up at the hotel later that day, there was Peter, looking tan, healthy, and happy. We spent the evening in our old Heraklion routine—busking, then dinner at Kosta's. It was nice to say hi to the folks at the taverna and see familiar faces.

In the morning Peter, his friend Jacques, a French girl named Bernadette, and I loaded into Jacque's little car and drove an hour to the town of Matala on the south coast. We zoomed through the peaceful Greek countryside, windows down, blaring Jethro Tull on the cassette deck. The elderly villagers dressed in black seemed a strange contrast to the rock 'n roll, and being in a car blasting loud music seemed a strange contrast to wandering alone through the countryside with my pack. I was grateful—without Jacque's car, I would have been stuck in Heraklion waiting for my foot to heal.

Matala Beach was crawling with tourists. The caves in the cliffs by the sea had once provided homes for hippies, and in the song *Carey*, her ode to the time she lived in a cave there in 1970, Joni Mitchell wrote: "My fingernails are filthy, I got beach tar on my feet." The scene eventually got out of control, and the police closed the caves. Now the "freaks" hung out in the coffee shops—and were required to wear swimsuits.

Just north of Matala we found a surprisingly quiet beach called Kommos, a long stretch of sand with a single taverna at one end. The sandy hills all around were dotted with wild grape vines, low shrubs, and weatherbeaten cedar trees. The only thing marring the natural

beauty was a cluster of tents under a grove of trees, where some hippies had set up camp—the entire area was strewn with garbage and toilet paper. It was pretty disgusting and disheartening.

We spent three days hanging out in Matala, on Kommos beach, and in Pitsidia, a village with a couple of laid-back coffee shops and tavernas. The mornings were cloudy, providing some relief from the intense heat. At night we slept under an ancient, spreading cedar tree on an empty beach a little farther north. To get there we drove a quarter mile down an unmarked dirt road, parked, then walked a short distance to the beach.

I felt a bit bored and restless, but it still hurt to walk, so it would have been hard to go off on my own.

On Saturday we returned to Heraklion, where Jacques and Bernadette dropped Peter and me at the hospital. I was hoping to get my toe looked at, but there was no doctor available. Back at the hotel, several of us inspected it and decided it wasn't infected, but was just a deep wound that would take a while to heal.

Late in the afternoon Jacques drove us to Xoudetsi, Peter's adopted village. I was happy to be there again, and my Greek now sufficed to carry on simple conversations. The villagers were friendly and kind, and the food was delicious and cheap. The whole village felt like a big family, and they considered Peter one of them.

It was almost time for the grape harvest. A motley collection of foreigners had come to the village to work picking grapes, and there were seven of us staying in Peter's small house. I especially liked Diana from Australia and Franz from Austria. They had met while traveling and fallen in love, but were grappling with the predicament of each wanting to go back to where they were from, which made it impossible to stay together.

Peter had been "adopted" by Alexo, who owned a cafe where the seven of us spent a lot of time. He was a tall, thin older man, with bushy, gray "maestro" eyebrows, longish silver hair brushed back from a high forehead, and a leathery face covered with a fine network of wrinkles. His wife was sick in a hospital in Heraklion, and he was sad and

worried. I bought a colorful wool rug handwoven by his mother, and it hangs in my house.

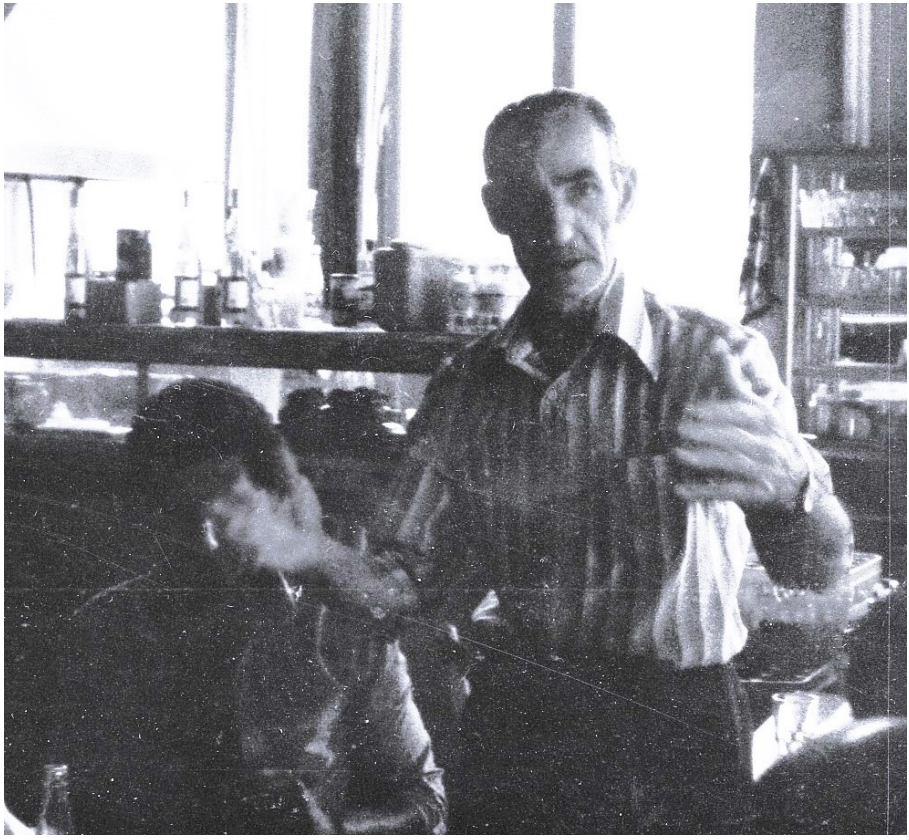
Peter, Diana, and Franz in Xoudetsi

On weekends, many of the young men who worked in Heraklion came back to the village to visit. It was a touching custom in a way of life that was slowly disappearing. Al Stewart put it well in his song *On the Border*:

> *In the village where I grew up*
> *Nothing seems the same*
> *Although you never see the change from day to day*
> *No one notices the customs slip away*

I was grateful for all the opportunities I'd had to get behind the "tourist facade" and immersed in local life. The majority of Greeks I met

appeared content. They smiled, joked and laughed, and expressed enormous love for their children, the beauty and traditions of their land, and their music, food, wine, and women. They seemed to appreciate and enjoy their lives.



Alexo in his cafe

In contrast, the Portuguese people had seemed to me, in general, a bit somber and sad. They often bemoaned their poverty and simplicity of life, smiled less, and made sadder music. Life there seemed a heavier burden, infused with melancholy. They lacked the Greek joie de vivre. From what I've been told, Portugal is now a happier place, partly due to a stronger economy.

I was learning that the longer you stay in a country, the more you discover what it's like below the polished surface of the holiday visitor. I loved many things about Greece, but even if I had been looking for a

new place to live, I would not have wanted to make it my home. There are good and not-so-good things everywhere in this world—wherever you live, you can choose to overlook the things you don't like and focus on the things you do. Still, the lack of forests, the intense summer heat, the misogyny, and the scarcity of job opportunities were all showstoppers for me. Plus, traveling had given me a greater appreciation for the place I was from, and I didn't feel a desire to live elsewhere.

As much as I loved being immersed in village life, it was stifling as well. As the only outsiders, we were always on display. I had to be careful to dress and act conservatively, and to be equally friendly to everyone, so no one felt slighted.

It was difficult to know what people really thought of us. The men seemed to find us entertaining. The children stared, mimicked us when we spoke Greek, or chanted "tourist!" But for the most part, everyone was kind.

Crete, although quite large, was still an island, and an island mentality pervaded everything. It was its own self-sufficient, isolated world. It had always been that way, and its inhabitants didn't seem to want it to change.

My idyll on Crete, and in Greece, was coming to an end. I would soon take the boat back to Athens and then go north to France, Germany, Belgium, and England, where there were people and places I wanted to visit before I ran out of money. Peter offered me a ride to Germany with him, but I was ready to be back on my own. Plus, it was time to say goodbye to Peter—when I told him I did not have romantic feelings for him, he began to mope around as if he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders, and his already heavy drinking increased.

Peter and I lost touch after I left. Sixteen years later, my parents received a letter from him. He had remembered my last name and the name of my city, and when the internet became widely available in the mid-'90s, he found my parents' address online. He and I began to correspond via email. He had written and recorded a lot of music he

was able to share with me, and we even collaborated on a few songs long distance.

In 2010, his daughter, Julia, became an au pair in Portland, just three hours from Seattle. She came to visit, and she and I have been friends ever since. A few years later, she and her dad came to Seattle together, and Peter and I had a happy reunion. In 2018, he sadly died of cancer. In 2023, I spent a week with Julia and her adorable four-year-old son in Germany, and she took me to see the forest where her father's ashes were buried.

Athens Again

Altogether, I spent six weeks on Crete, and it will always have a place in my heart.

Back in Athens, I met up with Elizabeth. Nico had reluctantly agreed to come to the States, and she had a lot of paperwork to do at the embassy. I took baby Manolis for walks while she ran errands. She invited me to share her room at a fancy hotel, and treated me to upscale coffee shops on Syntagma Square. We even took an occasional taxi. It was two days of luxury living for me.

On Saturday, I helped Elizabeth board a boat back to Crete. Because of the baby, she went first class, and I got to see what her room was like. Among other posh amenities, it had a bathroom with a shower.

The time had come for me to head north. I bought a ticket for the next Magic Bus to Amsterdam. It cost eighty dollars (about three hundred today). At the time, this budget travel option was less expensive than a train or plane. Google tells me I could now fly from Athens to Amsterdam for less than two hundred dollars.

I moved back into American House. The bus didn't leave until Friday, so I had five days to fill. I offered to help at a cafe owned by Andreas and Tommy, a Greek-American couple I'd met. They were swamped and understaffed. It was a tiny place that served drinks and simple food like salads, omelets, and souvlaki. I liked serving the customers, meeting people, and being busy. In addition to my tips, I got meals, and

they gave me a few drachmas. They desperately needed help for another month, until the tourist rush ended, and they offered me a place to live, and more money, if I would stay. It was tempting, but I was ready to move on. Plus I'd have had to forfeit my bus ticket and try to extend my visa.

One day I met Lee, a vivacious American woman with waist-length dark brown hair. I liked her immediately. She was an anthropology masters student at Brown University in Rhode Island. She had done research in Athens for six months the previous year, and was back for another three, staying with Lambros, the boyfriend she'd met on her first trip. He and four other guys shared an apartment in the hip Plaka neighborhood.

Lambros and Lee

When I wasn't working at the cafe, I spent hours talking with Lee and hanging out at the apartment. The guys were goofy and loads of fun. Lee made fabulous Greek salads, tzatziki (yogurt-cucumber salad), and marinated fava beans.

As part of her master's thesis, Lee was writing a paper on kamakia, of all things. It was fascinating to talk with someone who was knowledgeable on the subject of these Greek guys who spent their time

picking up tourist women. I wish I could have read her finished thesis.

Magic Bus

On Friday, August 29th, after three unforgettable months in Greece, I said tearful goodbyes to friends, and climbed on the Magic Bus. It was a comfortable forty-passenger tour coach, and the driver played light rock and folk music. An attentive guide told us how long we'd be at each stop, helped us transfer busses, handled our passports, and collected port taxes. He was friendly and funny, and gave loud, clear instructions. I enjoyed not having to worry about logistics.

We drove to Patras, where our guide led us onto the boat and showed us a tucked-away spot with comfortable seats. I slept or read for most of the seventeen-hour trip—I was feeling a bit down about leaving Greece.

Our route to Amsterdam would take us up the east coast of Italy, through Austria, Germany, and Belgium. I was hoping to see the Alps.

Except for a gaggle of tipsy women who talked and laughed loudly, everyone on the bus was mellow. We left Brindisi after dark, and since I couldn't see out the window, I slept. At one point we stopped at an all-night gas station with a mini mart. It looked like any highway pit stop in the States, and felt very different from Greece. The dawn sky was cloudy—another big change from Greece.

Later, we pulled off at a busy rest area with several gas station-grocery-restaurant complexes called "auto grills." It was next to a noisy four-lane motorway, and other than signs in Italian, we could have been in Western Washington. It was jarring to suddenly be back in a place that looked so much like home—a kind of reverse culture shock.

We wound through picturesque northern Italy, past wooden chalets with bright flowers spilling over balconies, fairytale churches with tall spires, steep green slopes, precipitous mountains, and waterfalls. We were delayed crossing the Austrian border because one of the passengers was South African—there were trade sanctions against South Africa during apartheid, and there must have been travel

restrictions as well.

The Austrian villages we passed through were even more charming than the ones in Italy. The Alps, however, were mostly hidden behind tall trees—I caught only an occasional glimpse of a far-off crag or snow-dusted ridge. We drove on a busy multi-lane asphalt speedway bristling with lights and signs.

I woke up at the German border to see a futuristic superhighway, with reflective signs, banks of streetlights lined up with military precision, and blacktop so new it glittered. It was drizzling and cloudy most of the way through Germany.

We crossed the Belgian border about 3 a.m. I fell back asleep and woke up four hours later in Zeebrugge, the port where the London-bound folks would leave the bus.

After three months of soaring through the exotic sunlit landscapes of Greece, northern Europe felt like landing on familiar ground. It was clear that the modernity, weather, and scenery would be a very different experience than the southern countries. I'd have some adjusting to do.

Part 4: Landing

The more I traveled, the more I realized that fear makes strangers of people who should be friends. – Shirley MacLaine

A journey is best measured in friends, rather than miles. – Tim Cahill

You don't have to be rich to travel well. – Eugene Fodor

Holland

The day dawned with puffy pastel clouds floating across a brilliant blue sky. The cool air felt refreshing after the heat of Greece. As we drove the last hundred and sixty miles to Amsterdam, the countryside sparkled with dew. After three months in the brown hues of Athens and Crete, the intense green felt surreal. It was marshy near the sea, and the fields were laced with canals and shrub-lined irrigation ditches where motionless herons watched for frogs, gulls soared, and quail scuttled.

We drove through a part of Belgium with a mix of farmland and enormous estates—sprawling red brick mansions embellished with towers and turrets, crisscross windows, paved courtyards, and manicured gardens. When we stopped for coffee, I took a short stroll along the edge of a moist, green wood. It was crispy cold, and the weather and scenery reminded me of home. The area looked tailor-made for walking and biking.

My first impression of Amsterdam was the prices. The least expensive place I could find to sleep was five dollars, and it was a real pit—I thought I saw a few fleas hopping around. Coffee shops and restaurants were way beyond my budget: seventy-five cents for coffee, five to ten dollars for a meal. I would be sticking to grocery stores and bakeries, which, I was delighted to see, sold whole grain bread.

The day had gone gray and drizzly, and I was feeling a bit low. That wasn't unusual for my first day in a new place, but the gloomy weather didn't help—it was a big adjustment after three months of sunshine. A bit of travel fatigue had set in as well—I'd been a nomad for six months.

There were obvious contrasts with life in the U.S., such as the charming architecture, but in many ways Amsterdam felt like being in the States—there were McDonald's and Burger Kings and everyone spoke English.

I was tired of cities, so I made my way out of the downtown core, hoping to find a more peaceful area. Away from the center of town it

was blissfully serene. Narrow, cobbled streets wound along canals or squeezed through alleys lined with dilapidated red-brick buildings. I noticed some seedy-looking men in the alleys and decided I'd stick to the main streets after dark. In other sections of the city there were Vietnamese, Chinese, and Indonesian bars and restaurants—an ethnic variety that didn't yet exist in my home town.

Despite the gray skies, Amsterdam felt quaint and picturesque. The canals didn't look too clean, but they were litter free, and edged with old-fashioned lampposts and large, spreading trees whose leaves were just beginning to fall. Moored along the waterways was an assortment of house barges, pots on the roof gardens overflowing with tomatoes and flowers.

The city boasted beautiful architectural elements. Wealthy merchants of old had built their richly-decorated mansions along the main canals, and many of the buildings had fanciful turrets and spires. The graceful bell towers of old churches rose above the rooftops, and the enormous buildings in Dam square, such as the Royal Palace, had ornate facades.

I met an American fellow named Terry who'd been living in Amsterdam for a while, and he showed me around his neighborhood. It felt like a college town during a festival—old and young alike sported outlandish outfits or smoked pot in public, and absolutely no one cared. There were a few too many drugs around for my liking, and a few too many panhandlers, but I relished the carefree vibe, the street music, and the sidewalk artists.

As we walked, Terry pointed out his favorite bars and coffee shops. He seemed to know everyone we passed. It makes all the difference in the world to get the inside scoop on a town, and with Terry as my guide, I started to like Amsterdam a lot more!

It turned out that if you knew where to go, prices were only a bit higher than in the States. Terry showed me where to get a fairly cheap pint of beer, then took me to his favorite cafe, The Golden Haun. It had a warm wood interior, mellow music playing, and patrons sitting at tables drawing, writing, or talking. The menu was hippie vegetarian, and I ordered an immense bowl of chili with hearty bread for just two dollars.

Terry lived rent-free in a shabby old canal boat. It was basically a crash pad, with folks coming and going as they pleased. He invited me to sleep there too. I was happy to save some money, and get out of my fleabag room. I felt completely safe staying with strangers, but I didn't want to leave my things unattended, so I stored them in a locker at the railroad station during the day.

I loved walking around at night. It was hushed and still, but didn't feel soulless or sterile, like so many cities. The street lights cast a soft orangey glow on the burnished wood and brick buildings.

The blue-sky weather continued. Leaves were dropping off the trees, and the cool air smelled like autumn. I happily wandered along the streets and canals, past the espresso bars, cafes, and tiny shops packed together side by side. Apartment windowsills above them were crowded with plants and flowers.

Amsterdam was a city of bicycles—thousands of them. There were special bike paths and parking areas, with rows and rows of two-wheelers parked in front of every building. Most were single-speed, upright "granny bikes"—perfect for a place with no hills. People of all ages rode them, from postal workers to office workers to old ladies shopping to kids with school bags.

It was also a city made for walking—the sidewalks were wide, but people safely mingled with the cars as well, which traveled at about the same pace as walkers on the narrow, congested streets.

I visited the Anne Frank house, tucked away along one of the canals. After viewing an exhibit summarizing what was happening in Holland during WWII, I entered "the Annex," the series of rooms behind the famous bookshelf, where the Frank family and a few friends lived for just over two years. The walls in Anne's room were still papered with posters, photographs, and magazine pictures of movie stars. From the window of the wood-beamed attic where she wrote in her diary, I could see a large church tower peeking over the rooftops.

Another exhibit told about Anne's life, with excerpts from her diary. The last display pointed out the alarming number of neo-Nazi and fascist groups that were spreading propaganda claiming that Anne's

diary was fake, and that concentration camps and gas chambers never existed. It was incredibly sickening and scary.

Forty-five years later, these same hateful elements still poison our world. It's shameful and discouraging, but it's important to realize that it isn't new. I don't know why some people believe in fake news conspiracies, but I can't fathom how anyone who has actually seen Anne's attic could be unmoved or unbelieving.

I found a vast green park where I could escape from traffic noise and process what I had seen. People sprawled on rolling lawns sloping down to ponds, and I found a spot to sit and contemplate. I started thinking about the human ability to spend hours staring at sparkling or moving water, whether it's a lake, stream, waterfall, or ocean. Water represents life in many ways, so perhaps we are drawn to it by our biology. There was a fellow playing steel drums, which I think is one of the happiest sounds on earth. The warm sun made me feel lazy, and the music made me feel a bit floaty, but maybe that was all the hash smoke in the air! Seeing where Anne had spent two years trapped indoors, living in fear, left me feeling profoundly grateful for my safety and freedom.

That evening I couldn't find my way back to Terry's boat. I stubbornly refused to pay five dollars for another flea-ridden hovel—I just knew that something would turn up. At a cafe called The Magic Inn that served heavenly fresh fruit smoothies, I met two nice Dutch women who invited me to join them for a cheap dinner of tasty, organic vegetarian food at a restaurant called The Golden Temple. It was run by a Sikh family, and I believe these were the first turbaned men I had ever seen in person.

My new women friends invited me to stay at their apartment, and I gratefully accepted. I slept on the floor of their tidy, cozy sitting room, amidst pillows covered in fabrics from India, and a low wood table with cloth mats, candles, and bowls of fruit. Not a flea in sight. I fell asleep listening to a long Neil Young cassette and slept like it was the Ritz.

A passing trolley woke me at six, when it was still a bit dark. I made tea, packed my things, and said goodbye to my generous hosts. The city

was quiet as I started walking, and the air was refreshingly crisp. (I missed many things about Greece, but not the sweltering heat.) Soon commuter hour was in full swing, and bicycles went rolling by me in the thousands.

I was relieved that I had managed to spend under twenty-five dollars in almost two full days in Amsterdam. Speaking of money, Dutch bills were colorful, with notes in bright blue, red, or green—it looked like play money compared to U.S. currency in its single shade of dull green. Dutch bills also had a series of raised dots for identification by the blind, something the U.S. has talked about for decades, but still hasn't implemented.

Belgium

I don't remember how I traveled the hundred and thirty miles from Amsterdam to Brussels, but I do remember noticing that the Dutch countryside was quite manicured. Most of the land had been reclaimed from the North Sea, and it had all been diked, ditched, plowed, and planted. Trees ran in straight rows, fields were square and lined with ditches or canals. But there was an encouraging variety of wildlife habitat, from open fields to fresh water, salt water, forest, and hedges of wild rose with fat red hips. Black-headed gulls wheeled overhead.

I also remember two young guys driving by in a truck on a country road and screaming obscenities at me as I walked. It shattered my serenity and left me wondering what I had done, and why they would treat me that way.

I arrived in Brussels in the late afternoon and checked in to the youth hostel, the cheapest place in town at about six dollars a night. It was clean, but felt institutional, and the neighborhood was a shabby mix of bars, billiard rooms, and rundown buildings. It was clearly the low-rent district. I was dismayed to see that food prices were quite a bit higher than Amsterdam.

The heart of the city was the Grand Place, a compact square lined with dark, imposing, elegant old buildings. A live orchestra played classical

tunes that echoed off the ancient facades. I sat in a cafe to watch people and listen to the music. A splurge at a dollar fifty for a half pint of dark beer, it was worth it for the atmosphere and location. The foamy, malty Belgian beer was a treat as well.

I chatted in Portuguese with a Brazilian fellow named Bernardo, who invited me to a gathering at a restaurant owned by a friend of his. We walked a few blocks down the animated Rue Boucher, a narrow street filled with mussel bars (these mollusks were a popular snack), buskers, portrait painters, and vendors selling wooden cars, puppets, jewelry, and glowing yoyos. It felt a bit like a fair.

The restaurant was a cozy place called Les Arcades. The gathering turned out to be a private event for a group of Bernardo's friends, and he was the chef! We all watched him make fresh pasta and toss it with butter, cheese, and ham chunks. It paired perfectly with a glass of Chianti.

I left "early" (by local standards) to get back to the hostel before it closed at 11:45. The next morning I took full advantage of the hostel's included buffet breakfast, which consisted of bread, butter, jam, and cheese. Like most of the other hostelers, I also made myself a sandwich to eat later in the day so I wouldn't have to spend money on lunch.

I sat for a while in the Jardin Botanique, a manicured park with a lovely but neglected old conservatory. It was another gray day, and I told myself I'd better get used to it.

The city was a true language melting pot. Besides French, English, and Flemish (the dialect of Dutch spoken in northern Belgium), I heard Spanish, German, Italian, and Portuguese. I imagine that these days there are many more languages spoken there, just like everywhere.

Another of the many European colleagues my dad had befriended and invited to dine at our home over the years was a man named Roger Verhulst, an engineer with the Belgian airline, Sabena. His daughter, Annich, had stayed with my family in Seattle four years earlier. He had invited me to stay with his family at their home in Tervuren, a suburb of Brussels. He would drive me there when he got off work, but first he invited me to meet him for lunch at his office downtown.

It had been years since I'd seen him, but he easily spotted me and my pack. It could be awkward meeting these friends of my dad's—people I hardly knew, but who'd invited me to visit or stay with them. I wanted to be a considerate guest, so they wouldn't regret their invitation.

Roger was a reserved person, but he spoke excellent English, and we managed to find things to talk about. If I remember correctly, we ate in the Sabena cafeteria—a delicious lunch of tomatoes stuffed with tuna salad. Wherever we ate, it had a great view down toward the Grand Place and the tower of the town hall.

I spent the afternoon wandering around until Roger got off work. I window shopped in quaint old stores with eye-catching displays of food, crafts, paintings, candy, books, or lace. My favorites were the pharmacies and health stores displaying herbs and books on natural medicine, two of my interests. I found a used book store and bought a few novels in English.

There were many car-free walking streets, some of them covered with clear glass domes—in one, two musicians played Handel duets on flute and violin, the notes echoing inside the corridor. I've never been a classical music fan, but it seemed to belong in that setting—if you ignored the modern elements, you could imagine it was three hundred years ago.

It took some searching, but I finally found the Manneken-Pis, one of the best-known symbols of Brussels. It's a small bronze fountain sculpture of a little boy urinating—a farfetched legend says the boy valiantly quenched a fire in the town hall by peeing on it. The original 1619 statue was vandalized or stolen so many times that it was moved to a museum in 1965 and replaced by a replica.

For some reason, since the time he was installed the Manneken has worn actual clothing. The day I saw him, he sported a green army dress uniform with a matching beret. A diminutive thing only two feet tall, he stood there with the fly open on his khaki pants, endlessly pissing away. Google says he has over a thousand costumes, most of them gifted, and many of which can be seen online or in person at the Manneken-Pis clothing museum. The city publishes a calendar of what

he will be wearing, and a city employee has the job of official dresser.

I wandered through the ornate medieval cathedral of St. Michael, whose construction began in the 11th century. Its facade was sadly black and grimy from pollution, but the stained glass windows were still breathtaking.

In the late afternoon, I rode with Mr. Verhulst to Tervuren, about ten miles from the city center. He took a longer, scenic route to show me a lovely forested area with trails and ponds. The leaves were falling, and I looked forward to rosy-cheeked walks through the woods, kicking leaves in the air. We drove down a poplar-lined road, passing by rolling fields of grain and the blink-and-you'd-miss-it town of Tervuren, and at last we reached their street.

It was uncanny how much their house and neighborhood felt like where I grew up. The homes were the same size and style, although made of red brick instead of wood. They were surrounded by landscaped yards with green lawns and trees. Annich must have felt more at home with us than I'd realized. When the Verhulsts had built their house fourteen years before, the area was still rural woods and farmland, but new developments were spreading into the surrounding fields. Slowly but steadily, the city was encroaching on the countryside.

Roger's wife Christiane welcomed me with a bright smile. She was an attractive woman of about forty, tanned, blond, and full of energy. Their home felt warm and modern, with brightly-colored oriental rugs, shelves filled with books, and artfully-displayed photos, ceramics, and copper urns. The living area had a huge overstuffed brown sofa with two matching armchairs, glass-topped coffee tables, a few plants, a vase filled with fresh flowers, and a tidy stack of wood near a fireplace. It felt a bit like a décor magazine. They invited me to put a record on the turntable, and I chose Dave Brubeck.

On the main floor there was a living room, kitchen, dining room, and study. Open wood stairs led up from the slate entry hall to three bedrooms, a bathroom, a shower room, and a storeroom. Annich was living at a nearby university, so I was given her attic bedroom, accessible by a trap door ladder. Her space was filled with earthy

tchotchkes and candles, and gave me a few clues to what she was like now. We seemed to share common tastes, and I was optimistic that we'd get along well. From pictures I saw around the house, she was very pretty.

It seemed to be a loving, "normal" kind of family. The two younger kids still lived at home. Sixteen-year-old Dirk spoke quite a bit of French and English, but was shy to use them. Seven-year-old Mark was an adorable little blond bundle of energy. He didn't yet speak English, but his French was good.

The tranquil backyard was a large semi-circle of lawn surrounded by a thick stand of trees, and shrubs with pink, purple, and white flowers. We sat on the back porch for a snack of pickled herrings and cold trout with aperitifs. Dinner was spaghetti and red wine, followed by a selection of four kinds of gourmet cheeses, and then a bowl of fresh fruit salad.

In the evening we watched TV. Stations were either in French or Flemish. The Verhulst's primary language was Flemish, but they also spoke French, so we watched a show in that language for my benefit, and I was excited that I could understand much of it.

The next morning, Christiane put out a large selection of breakfast foods, probably because she wasn't sure what I might like. There was strawberry yogurt, bread and butter, four kinds of jam, honey, milk, and coffee. There was also something I had never eaten before, because it wasn't yet sold in the States: Nutella. Chocolate for breakfast! I was in heaven.

Like most Americans of my generation, I was raised to believe that America was the greatest country in the world: the wealthiest and best educated, the most advanced in science and technology, and morally superior. I wasn't consciously aware of these biases, but once I left the States, it didn't take long for me to realize that I had been brainwashed. Not only did Europe have hundreds of years more history and experience than America did, but most European countries had exceptional universities, less wealth inequality, better access to health care, an effective social safety net, and excellent infrastructure.

I had unconsciously expected European homes to be older and more basic than American ones, and it was a surprise to realize that not only did many Europeans live in very nice houses, but they were way ahead of us in some ways—a few examples being the quality of their appliances and windows. I was surprised to see that the Verhulst's kitchen had every modern appliance, including a dishwasher. And of course European automobiles were considered superior even by many Americans.

On Friday evening we drove to Leuven, ten miles away, to visit Annich at the university. She was staying on campus for summer break, living in a deluxe one-room student studio with a kitchenette, spacious bathroom, and huge picture window looking out at nearby woods and farms. The whole family, plus Annich's boyfriend, Bruno, went to dinner at a Greek restaurant in town, where I had fun speaking Greek with the waiter.

Then we moved to a pub with dark wood beams and comfy booths, where I tried another delicious Belgian beer, called Golden Carroll. I stopped drinking in 1989 when I was pregnant with my first child, and never started again, but back when I did drink, I preferred dark beer, and Belgian beers were my favorite.

Eighteen-year-old Annich had changed a lot from the fourteen-year-old who had spent part of a summer in Seattle. I quickly realized that she was extremely self-absorbed. In hindsight, I think her behavior might have masked low self-esteem, or maybe she was just spoiled. She wore meticulous, understated makeup and dressed in expensive-looking down-to-earth clothes. She seemed to find me a bit strange and boring—I definitely felt unwanted. I also got the feeling she wasn't getting along well with her parents, especially her dad. Like many teens, she seemed to be reveling in her independence and freedom, and didn't want mom and dad cramping her style.

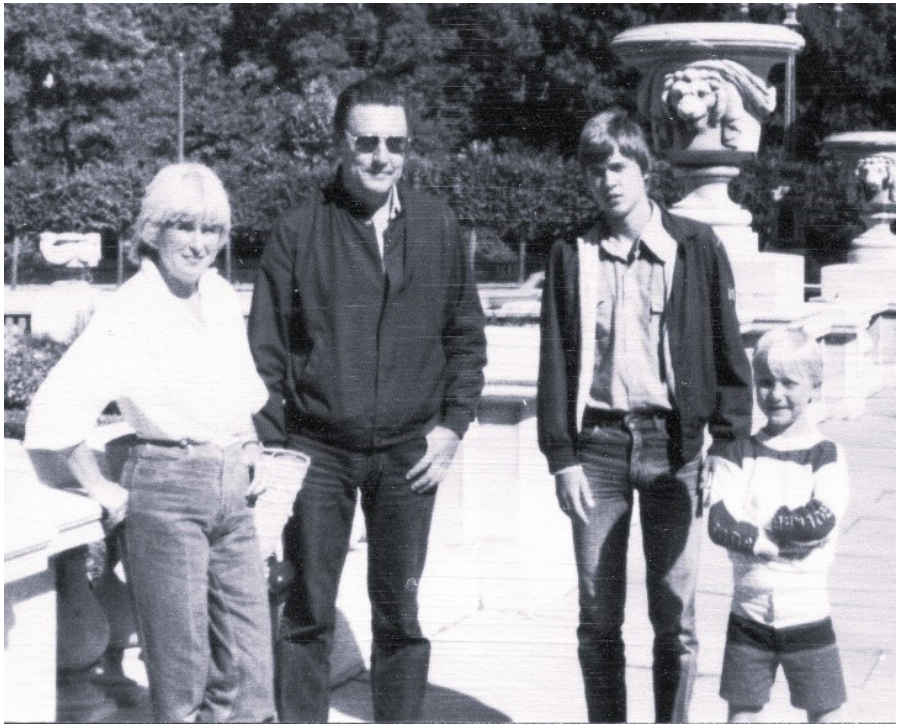
She and Bruno had been together for five years, and she treated him like a pet, alternately ignoring him or showering him with kisses. He was also errand boy, chauffeur, and sounding board for her wide mood swings. I liked Bruno, and wondered why he put up with her. I later learned that she was also going out with other guys on the sly.

Back in Tervuren, Roger and Christiane took the boys and me to the Sabena Club for a Saturday barbecue. Many people spoke French, and I was happy to get to practice. I was thrilled that I could understand much of what they said, even when they were talking rapidly. A few told me that I spoke without an American accent—the highest of compliments!

Bruno and Annich

The afternoon entertainment was soccer games. After the first "serious" game, there was a comedy match between the younger women and the older men. A few of the younger guys dressed up as "ladies" and joined the women's team, to much hilarity. The referee wore a wig, a short black skirt, and an overstuffed bra. He handed out "free beer" penalty cards. Two costumed "physicians" rushed onto the field to bandage players pretending to be injured. Laughter mixed with beer and warm sunshine made it a very fun afternoon.

On Sunday morning, Roger, Christiane, Dirk, Mark, and I went into Brussels to tour the Royal Palace. It was used as the administrative offices of the monarchy, as well as for official events, so it was only open to the public in the summer. We strolled through the immaculately manicured gardens and the elegant interior, with its crystal chandeliers, embroidered silk upholstery, and inlaid wood floors. Belgium still has a king and queen, but they are constitutional monarchs.



Christiane, Roger, Dirk, and Mark at the Royal Palace

We continued on to the flea market at the Place du Jeu de Balle, held every day in a cobbled square in an old rundown part of town called the Marolles. It was warm and sunny and the square was packed. Music wafted from record shops while people of all ages, in all manner of outfits, perused the stands overflowing with trinkets and treasures, or sipped espresso at outdoor tables in the crowded cafes lining the plaza. Most items at the market seemed a bit expensive, but there were some deals to be found if you kept looking. I bought a shirt for myself, and some hand-painted Dutch china to give my grandmas when I got to New York.

We lunched at an upscale French restaurant called Au Pain Perdu (*pain perdu* is French toast). It was a casual name for a fancy place with tablecloths, candles, and classical music. The service was excellent, and the food even better—the French have good reason to be proud of their cuisine. We feasted on mushrooms and marrow in butter sauce for hors d'oeuvres, followed by rabbit in a cognac cream sauce (bliss!) with a glass of red wine. To top it off, a scrumptious, strong Irish coffee.

Then we dropped Dirk off at his job and went to the Sabena Club to hang out. If there are corporate clubs like this in the U.S., I've never been to one. I do wish we had more "third spaces" in America to provide community social opportunities. I can see pros and cons to having your main friend group be your coworkers, but for many, work is the best way to meet people.

On Monday morning I took a bus to Leuven to visit Annich. I didn't really want to hang out with her, and I don't think she wanted to hang out with me, but I didn't feel I could tell her parents that.

Leuven was having a huge festival, and thousands of people thronged the town. The streets were closed to cars, and lined with booths selling clothes, food, and crafts. Cows, pigs, and horses stood in makeshift pens waiting to be auctioned.

Annich, her friend Patsy, and I spent the day wandering around the fair. Patsy was very kind to me, and a lot of fun. Annich, however, didn't pay me much attention. I didn't know if she was shy, uncomfortable around me, or just didn't like me. Her family had money, and she was a spender. She bought so many things we could hardly carry them all: six plants, shoes, a fish, and more. She expected Patsy and me to be her porters.

Patsy stayed at her parents' that night, and kindly offered to let me sleep in her college room. I sat up late listening to music and writing letters.

The next day I ate at the student mess with Annich and some of her friends—the food was typical mediocre college fare. I was glad when Annich handed me off to one of her friends, Chris, who took me on a walking tour. The campus had trails through forested areas, reminding me of Evergreen State College in Washington State, where I had spent

two happy years. Leuven was a fun and friendly college town, with numerous pubs, funky shops selling herbs and posters, and beautiful architecture—the Town Hall had tall, lacy Gothic spires.

The Groot Begijnhof, or Great Beguinage, was a town-within-a-town founded in the early 1200s for beguins, lay religious women who lived in community without taking vows or leaving the world behind. The completely restored compound comprised a dozen cobbled streets and about a hundred brick buildings, which had been divided into apartments. These were inhabited by wealthier students, who often waited a few years for an opening. I was enchanted by the medieval mullioned windows, the overgrown flower and fruit tree gardens, and the footbridges over a canal.

I returned to Tervuren and spent a day exploring more of Brussels. I didn't love the Museum of Ancient Art—too many dark paintings of gloomy landscapes or depressed-looking people in various states of torture and torment. I did like Bruegel's depictions of peasant life. I had hoped to see the Reubens, but those were temporarily off display.

The Parc de Bruxelles, once the royal hunting grounds, was a large forested oasis in the city. The Victoria Jazz Band was playing a noon concert in a round cast iron bandstand from the mid-1800s. The musicians were lively and talented, the pianist rocked, and the brass instruments glinted under lights. It was a grayish drizzly day again, but when they started blowing that Dixieland jazz, people came out of the woodwork and were all but dancing on the benches. It made me feel fonder of Brussels.

On September 4, 1980, *The Empire Strikes Back* was released in Belgium. When I saw it listed on a theater marquee, I had to go. The luxurious theater was almost empty. Tickets were a bit pricey, but I was thoroughly captivated by every minute of the film and the music. When I walked out at the end it took me a minute to even remember where I was.

The next day I got up late, luxuriated in an actual bathtub, wrote in my journal, made popcorn in the Verhulst's kitchen, then went riding on their thirty-year-old, three-speed granny bike. It was easy to ride, and

what fun to be on a bike after so long!

I rode to Tervuren's Royal Museum for Central Africa. Originally built to showcase Belgium's Congo colony in the International Exposition of 1897, it included exhibits of flora and fauna, jewelry, arts, crafts, and sculpture from multiple African nations. It was my first exposure to African folk art. I was especially taken with the colorful necklaces made of shells, beads, and cord. Little did I imagine that just a few years later I would be living in West Africa, immersed in its fascinating culture, and buying locally-made folk art that I now get to enjoy looking at every day in my home.

The museum had extensive zoology exhibits with hundreds of specimens of African insects, fish, reptiles, amphibians, mammals, and birds. I do love birds—especially colorful, exotic ones. I was so captivated by the displays that it was tempting to commit myself on the spot to a lifetime of work in the dark recesses of some formaldehyde-suffused museum basement.

I left the museum and cruised around the bike paths of Tervuren Park, a peaceful green forest with duck-covered ponds. On the way back to Verhulst's I stopped for a few groceries, and the modern store felt uncannily just like the ones I shopped in at home.

The next day I read nearly an entire book, listened to rock and roll, and went for an exhilarating, blustery walk through the nearby fields and woods. In the village of Sterrebeek I had coffee at a cozy cafe-pub with dark wood booths, flower-print upholstery, hanging plants, low lights, and heavy curtains around wood-framed windows.

Everything about Belgium was neat and tidy—people, restaurants, roads, transit. Even the public bathrooms were spotless, and always had toilet paper, but you usually had to pay about twenty-five cents to use them (that would be a dollar now). The roads were pothole-free, litter-free, lined with greenery, and almost never crowded. Restaurants had cheerful service and excellent food, but were expensive. All these things were in marked contrast to Greece, which was scruffy but cheap.

On Saturday the family took me to Bokrijk Park, about an hour east of Tervuren. It was an enormous complex with an arboretum, castle,

playground, forest, restaurants, tennis courts, and its claim to fame, an "open air museum"—a collection of restored buildings showcasing the history of life and culture in Flanders (northern Belgium).

There were dozens of buildings, from windmills, barns, and humble huts, to inns and 16th-century mansions, all nestled in acres of forest. They'd re-created villages and hamlets from different eras, each with some combination of homes, church, inn, corner-house, pillory, bakehouse, or mill.

The structures were fully furnished inside: the kitchens had pots and pans and plates, the alcoves had beds with lumpy stuffed mattresses, and in most of the dwellings there was a fire burning in the hearth. There were demonstrations of crafts and farming methods. We stopped at an inn for something called "pudding," which turned out to be a tasty custard.

One of the most interesting displays was a tiny one-room hovel dug into a slope, with a mushroom-shaped thatched roof covered in living ferns and plants. Inside it was dark and damp, with a fire for warmth and light. A large stump with carved depressions served as both table and bowls. The poorest folk lived like this once upon a time, and although it felt quaint and charming to visit, I'm sure it was miserable for the inhabitants.

In another building, I was drawn to a clever oil lamp hanger: an L-shaped wooden arm attached to the wall, with a lip to hold the lamp hasp. The arm could be raised and lowered on a series of toothed hooks, and swiveled to light different parts of the room.

The open air museum was utterly captivating, and I wrote in my journal that it was worth any trouble to get there. The Village Historique Acadien, in New Brunswick, Canada; Skansen in Stockholm, Sweden; Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia; the Fortress of Louisbourg in Nova Scotia; Mystic Seaport, Connecticut—I haven't met a living museum I didn't love, and I try to go to them whenever possible.

On the way back to Tervuren we stopped in Leuven to take Annich out to dinner, and I tried mussels (*moules*) for the first time. They've been a staple of Belgian cuisine for centuries, as they are plentiful and

inexpensive. We ordered them *au naturel*, steamed in a flavorful broth with celery and onions, served piping hot in a huge crockery pot, still in the shell. We dipped them in a mustard sauce, and ate them with *frites* (French fries) and beer. I'm not sure I could bring myself to eat them now, as I've become a less adventurous eater with age, but back then I gobbled them down avidly.

On Sunday, Christiane took Mark and me to the annual Tervuren grand parade. It was a small town extravaganza with majorettes, marching bands, floats, and groups from nearby towns and villages in traditional costumes. I found it a bit boring, but Mark was enraptured, and I enjoyed watching him have so much fun.

On Tuesday morning I went off exploring for a few days. I took the train to Antwerp, forty-five minutes away, and found a place to stay for less than six dollars, breakfast included. The room was in a huge old Baroque mansion with high ceilings, wood-banistered stairways, a maze of rooms and corridors, and easygoing proprietors.

I liked Antwerp. It was laid-back and pedestrian-friendly, and there was no lack of things to do and see. Most of the two dozen museums were free, so I could wander in and out of them as I pleased.

The Royal Museum of Fine Arts had a large collection of paintings by Peter Paul Reubens, the most famous Flemish painter. He was skilled technically, but I found his subject matter a bit dour. He lived in Antwerp from 1609 until his death in 1640, and I visited his treasure-filled mansion, with its sumptuous, flowery garden.

The Ridder Smidt Van Gelder Museum had once been the stately townhouse of a wealthy man. He'd donated it to the city in 1949, along with its splendid collections of furniture, paintings, rare books, ceramics, porcelain, and glass.

The weather had toggled back to warm and sunny, so I sat for a while in the Stadspark, on a grassy area next to a big pond. It had the first skatepark I had ever seen. I was amazed by the tricks people could do on those wheeled boards.

I took the #11 tram to Cogels Osylei, an avenue lined with jaw-

dropping mansions built at the turn of the 20th century. Each one was a work of art, like a sculpture park made of houses. Styles ranged from Art Nouveau to Gothic Revival, Neoclassical, and Mock Tudor, each home with a unique combination of architectural embellishments: round windows, ornate brickwork, sculptures, turrets, grillwork, carved doors, or mosaic tile designs. The only streets I've visited since that were as stunning were the Royal Way and Mariacka Street in Gdansk, Poland.

From Antwerp, I took a train to Ghent and spent most of a day wandering around. It was off the main tourist route, and felt just a smidge grubbier and more down-at-heel than Antwerp. Quite a few buildings were closed for repair, and many of the open ones were a bit run-down and musty-smelling. The dark, dusty Museum of Folklore was crowded with knickknacks, and felt more like a thrift shop or storeroom.

The Museum of Decorative Arts normally displayed a collection of antique furniture in period rooms, but it was currently housing an exhibition of modern cubist furniture. I found the black, white, and blue squares a jarring contrast with the interior of the old Baroque manor. I was happy to see one space with period furnishings—a well-appointed dining room with an oak table and chairs, the table set with beautiful blue and white china.

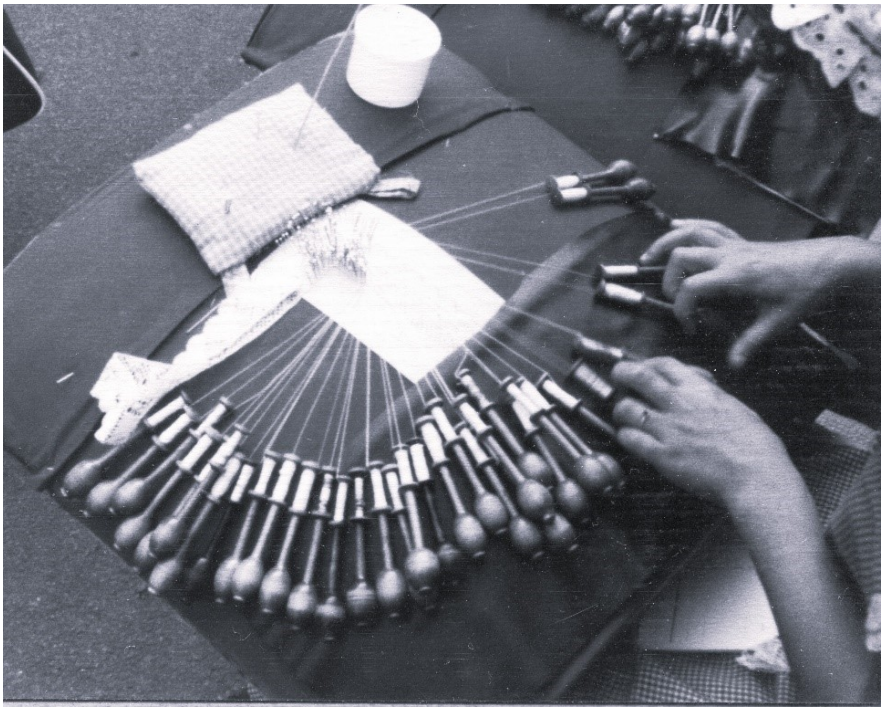
The crumbling 12th-century stone fortress of Gravensteen, also called the Castle of the Counts, had a chilling display of torture instruments. There's nothing like Medieval history to remind me that no matter how bad things seem, the world has made progress.

I took an evening train thirty miles northwest to Bruges and found a room in the endearingly-named Snuffel Sleep Inn. It was cheap by Belgian standards, at less than five dollars. It wasn't terribly clean, but there were a lot of nice people staying there. It had a cafe downstairs with affordable drinks and food, and they were playing music I liked.

The next day it rained and I went out wandering with a fellow from the inn. It was nice to have someone to explore with, as I was feeling a little down from the weather. Bruges felt like a medieval fairytale setting

that hadn't changed much throughout eight centuries.

Saturday was back to warm and sunny, which boosted my spirits. I perused the big town market, where vendors sold food, clothes, veggies, fruit, and flowers, then climbed the 272-foot medieval Belfry of Bruges (Belfort van Brugge) for a superb view of the town.



Eleven-year-old girl making lace with flying fingers

Starting in the 1400s, Bruges became famous for handmade lace. It was especially popular for religious vestments. I walked to a part of town where you could see women demonstrating how lace was made by hand. I watched a young girl and two older women working with amazing speed and dexterity. It's an extremely time-consuming craft (I thought needlepoint was slow), and for that reason handmade lace is no longer sold commercially.

Bruges also had a 13th-century Beguinage, where lay nuns had once lived in community. The large property was now inhabited by Benedictine nuns who still wore 15th-century vestments. It was an exquisitely lovely place, with a Gothic-style church, a row of

whitewashed houses from the 16th to 18th centuries, a central courtyard, and tranquil gardens.

On Saturday night I returned to the Verhulst's. The next day Christiane's parents came to visit and Annich joined us as well. We sat in the sunny yard for an early dinner of cheese fondue. Then I went back to Leuven with Annich to celebrate her nineteenth birthday at a late dinner with her girlfriends. Although a few of them chatted with me in English, mostly they spoke Flemish. I didn't expect them to do otherwise, since it was a special birthday dinner for a bunch of good friends, but I got bored not being able to understand a word they said. As usual, Annich completely ignored me, but on Monday morning, as I prepared to leave, she acted hurt that I wasn't staying longer. So I reluctantly went to lunch with her and two friends. Again they all spoke Flemish, and that was enough for me—I left after lunch and went back to Tervuren.

The next day I wandered around Brussels again, but I was running out of things to see and do. As much as I love exploring new cities, I have learned that I don't fare well on a steady diet of churches, museums, and beautiful buildings.

I offered to cook dinner for the family, and spent the whole day making lasagna and carrot cake. Luckily everything turned out well and they seemed to like it. I'm not sure where I got the recipes, as there was no internet. I can wing lasagna, but not carrot cake. I suppose it's possible that Christiane had a recipe written in English.

Another day I somehow made my way to Gaasbeek Castle, fifteen miles away. Home to various lords since the 16th century, it was donated to the state in 1923, complete with an impressive art collection and lavish furnishings. The countryside around it was luxuriantly green, and I walked down the quiet road in a contented reverie.

One evening Christiane took me to a modern ballet at the opulent Theatre Royale de la Monnaie, the opera house in Brussels. I'm not a ballet fan, but I enjoyed the show. One thing I've learned when traveling is to try everything—even if I think I won't like it, it's always a worthwhile experience. Context makes a difference too—Greek

music sounds best in Greece, for example, and ballet seems made for a European royal theater.

Me with seven-year-old Mark Verhulst

On my last weekend with the family, Roger, Christiane, Mark, and I drove to Roger's cousin's farm in a village in Wallonia, the French-speaking southern part of Belgium. Roger had spent a lot of time here when he was growing up. We drove the tractor out into the pasture, picked plums, and milked the cow. It was peaceful and green there, and I loved being in the country! On the way back we ate dinner at Les Montagnards restaurant in Sosoye-Anhée, whose menu featured fish and game from the local area.

On Sunday we drove to Waterloo, the battlefield where Napoleon was defeated once and for all in 1815. It was interesting but extremely touristy, and there wasn't much to see.

The rain returned on my last day in Tervuren. I said goodbye to Roger,

Dirk, and Mark in the morning before they left for work and school. Then Christiane's mother came from Antwerp, and the three of us drove to Leuven, where we spent the day shopping—rather, we spent the day watching Annich buy clothes with her birthday money. I put on my game face as we strolled from shop to shop, muttering oohs and aahs while she modeled one outfit after another.

Christiane wanted to buy me some sort of souvenir. I told her it wasn't necessary, and I didn't have room in my pack, but she insisted. Would I like this pair of expensive shoes, or this leather purse? I decided I'd better find something that wasn't too pricey, and that I would actually use. I finally settled on a dark blue polyester vest. It was warm and comfy, with pockets big enough to keep my hands warm. Winter was approaching, and I figured I'd get a lot of use out of it. In fact, I still have it and wear it often.

I've kept in touch with the Verhulst family over the years, and visited them again seven years later with my first husband. Annich and Bruno got married and had two children, but the marriage eventually ended, and tragically, Annich committed suicide. Roger died in 2024.

Germany

After a nap in Annich's room to recover from shopping (a pastime I still avoid whenever possible, and find exhausting to this day), I hopped on the night train to Freiburg to visit Sue, a friend from Seattle who was studying there. It took about nine hours from Brussels. The train was full, so I dozed off and on sitting up. It was a mostly sleepless night that I remember with a strange fondness—maybe it was the excitement of going to a new place, or maybe it was the altered state I was in from lack of sleep!

I arrived in Freiburg at 4 a.m., and unfurled my sleeping bag on the nearest train station bench. When I slept in public places, I threaded my arm through my pack strap so I'd wake up if someone tried to take it. I slept deeply until 6:30, when I was woken by a fellow speaking German. I thought he was telling me I wasn't allowed to sleep on the bench, so I packed up my bag before realizing he just wanted to make

sure I didn't miss my train!

I waited until what I thought was a reasonable hour before calling the phone number Sue had given me. The woman who answered only spoke German. A bit dismayed, and still half asleep, I trudged to the tourist office to seek assistance. After Holland and Belgium, where almost everyone spoke good English, I was surprised that the folks at the Freiburg tourist office did not. They were able to figure out what I needed help with, however. They called Sue's for me, found out when she'd be back from school, and arranged for her to meet me that afternoon. Running on fumes, I found a corner in a quiet park and slept a welcome few more hours.

Sue met me in the afternoon, and we chattered non-stop about our adventures. It did my heart good to see a friend from home. We walked all over town, and climbed the cathedral tower for a sweeping view. Freiburg was a charming university town with an abundance of cobblestones and students. The women in particular were thin, healthy, and earthy-looking. The walkable town was dotted with neighborhood markets that sold flowers, fruits, vegetables, and crafts.

When we stopped into an out-of-the-way cafe for a beer, the fellow announced that, as it was our first visit to his establishment, refreshments were on the house! He and his smiling mother brought us beer, schnaps, sausage, bread, smoked ham, and garnishes. It was all delicious, and we couldn't quite believe their generosity.

Back at Sue's place, I met her host family. The daughter was Ushie, a bouncy young woman Sue's age, who had spent the previous year on a high school exchange in the States. Her vivacious single mother also spoke excellent English and made me feel welcome. The snug apartment had two bedrooms. They made space on the floor for me in the room Sue shared with Ushie, and we chatted long into the night.

The next day Sue showed me more of Freiburg. We stopped for a while to listen to two musicians playing Irish folk songs on guitar, dulcimer, drum, and tin whistle, and they were so good we gave them all of our change—which is saying something, because we were both watching our pennies.

In the Stadsgarten, we joined a group of spectators at a game of sidewalk chess. It's common in parks all over the world now, but this was my first encounter with three-foot-tall chess pieces.

We took a cable car to the top of forested 4200-foot Schauinsland Mountain. At the summit cafe, we treated ourselves to coffee and onion cake (Zwiebelkuchen), a savory autumn dish made with caramelized onions, bacon, and sour cream—the ultimate comfort food.

We popped in and out of shops, and were especially drawn to one filled with cards, posters, books, and paintings by my favorite artists: the Impressionists. I hoped to see some of the original paintings in person when I got to Paris.

In the evening we trudged back to Sue's, tired and happy. I packed up, said goodbye, and went off to catch the night train to Paris. This time there were only two people in the compartment, and I slept the whole night comfortably stretched out in my sleeping bag.

France

My train arrived at Gare de l'Est early in the morning, and I watched it grow light from a cozy coffee shop across from the bustling station. I was thrilled to at last be in Paris, a city I'd dreamed of visiting since I was young.

I was a born Francophile—my birthday is on Bastille Day—and when I was young, my parents, who must have been some of the few Americans who had even heard of Bastille Day back then, dressed me in red, white, and blue outfits on my birthday—these being the colors of the French flag, called the *Tricolore*. When it came time to choose a language elective in school, of course I chose French, and I studied it for six years.

Even in October shoulder season, almost every hotel in the city was booked solid, but a few hours and quite a few telephone calls later I at last found a place to stay. At just under nine dollars, it was cheap by Parisian standards, and no more expensive than the youth hostels, where I didn't want to stay because they had bad reviews and were far

from the center of town.

Even better than a hostel, I had a private room. It was small, but there were big windows that let in the afternoon sun, a sink with warm water, a bidet (although I didn't have a clue what that was for), a table and chair, a comfy bed, an armoire, and shelves, with a shared toilet and shower down the hall. It also boasted flowered wallpaper that clashed startlingly with the red-orange carpet. It was in a great location, near the Basilica du Sacre-Coeur, and directly across from a Metro entrance. The Algerian proprietress was warm and friendly, and I felt right at home.

My private room at the Hotel Regyn had a bidet—I'd never seen one before.

Paris was sensory overload! Every corner of the city had its own unique mix of people, shops, cafes, and atmosphere. As I strolled around, all the Parisian names and places I'd ever heard about came alive, sparking memories of long-ago French classes, when we'd discussed the City of Lights as if we lived there. I wrote in my journal that being in Paris was like being given an enormous fruitcake and wanting to eat it all. At first

you gorge, but soon you're stuffed, so you start nibbling more slowly. Like a fruitcake, Paris had sweet morsels, sour bits, plenty of nuts, and some plain cake filling.

As I walked around, the city unfolded before me, *rue* by *rue*, *quartier* by *quartier*. Famous monuments appeared as I rounded corners. The Metro system was the first I'd ever seen, and it wowed me—with a single ticket you could speedily go anywhere in the city, transferring to your heart's content, using easy color-coded maps to find your way.

One day I happened upon Place Pigalle, the infamous enclave of sex shops, porn cinemas, and prostitutes. It was noisy and frenetic, with lots of flashing neon and sleazy-looking men. I found it depressing, yet there were a surprising number of businesspeople eating lunch in relatively nice cafes right next to twenty-four-hour peep show parlors. The French are known for being much less prudish than Americans.

As for me, I hurried out of there. I walked to the Place de l'Opera, a traffic-jammed square dominated by the imposing edifice of the Palais Garnier Opera House. This opulent former social hub was the setting for *The Phantom of the Opera*. The wide front steps were crowded with gawking tourists and lunchtime brown baggers, everyone soaking up the warm sunshine—as well as the warm, though much less pleasant, engine exhaust. This part of town was overwhelmed by tourist busses and other traffic.

A little farther on I came to the Eglise de la Madeleine. This church looked like a Neoclassical temple, with Corinthian columns marching around all four sides. I went inside, expecting another typically gloomy, cavernous shrine, but was quite literally stopped in my tracks—it was the most beautiful church I'd ever seen, bright and radiant with white marble and stone. I'd never felt so moved by a religious space. I sat there for a long time, in a sort of trance, staring at the immense white stone sculpture behind the altar, and the bright frescoes painted on the domed ceiling of the nave.

I followed the Rue Royale down to the Place de la Concorde, with its immense obelisk and fountain, then turned onto the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, home to many of the ritzier shops in Paris. After a while

I noticed that famous names were hidden in plain sight: Maxim's peeked nonchalantly from a barely-visible sign, Pierre Cardin's boutique boasted only petite gold lettering in the corner of the window. It was a strange feeling to realize I was walking past some of the most exclusive places in the world, and perhaps mingling on the sidewalk with some of the richest people in the world.

I submitted my absentee ballot application at the helpful U.S. embassy, right on the Place de la Concorde. I don't remember how I was actually able to cast my ballot in that fateful 1980 presidential election, but I do remember being crushed when Ronald Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter, and how devastating Reaganomics was, and continues to be, for America. As I write this, Jimmy Carter has recently died at age one hundred, after a life filled with compassion and kindness. Good riddance Reagan, long live Jimmy Carter's legacy.

I entered the Tuileries, the Italian Renaissance garden commissioned by Catherine de Medici in 1564. Even under renovation it was magnificent. From the center of the garden you could look down toward the obelisk of the Concorde and the hazy silhouette of the Arc de Triomphe beyond. Off to one side sat the homely red Eiffel Tower. I couldn't quite believe I was seeing these iconic symbols in person.

I wandered out of the garden, past the elegant buildings of the Louvre, into the bougie Right Bank neighborhood, so-called because when you are facing the ocean, it is on the right side of the Seine River. This part of town was a quiet oasis of monuments and culture, and the streets were nearly empty of people.

Except the *quais*, that is. These were the roads that ran above the river on both sides, and they were filled with people perusing the popular pet shops and used book stalls. The sidewalks were lined with bird cages, fish aquariums, teetering piles of dusty volumes, and faded oil paintings of Parisian landmarks.

The booksellers, or *bouquinistes*, have been a fixture on the quais for something like five hundred years. Hundreds of dark green wooden boxes are clamped to the walls that line the river, each one overflowing with second-hand books, prints, and posters. It's estimated that there

are at least three hundred thousand books in those stalls. Ernest Hemingway and countless other writers hunted for treasures here. In 1992 the area was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site, and it is said that the Seine is "the only river in the world that runs between two bookshelves."

Down below, on the cement walks lining the river, lovers smooched—after all, Paris had its reputation as "the city of love" to uphold.

I crossed a bridge onto the Île de la Cité, one of two natural islands in the Seine River. I couldn't wait to see the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, one of Paris's most famous landmarks. The exterior was absolutely stunning, but for some reason I can't remember, I decided to save the interior for another day.

Nearby was Sainte-Chapelle, an ornate 13th-century Gothic chapel with soaring walls of stained glass that caught the light like multi-colored jewels and took my breath away.

I came upon a whole square filled with greenhouses, and strolled slowly through each one, soaking in the heady scents and colorful blooms. Then I crossed onto the Left Bank and into the heart of the Latin Quarter, where students at the Sorbonne once strolled the streets conversing in Latin (thus the Quarter's name). Now the students spoke French, and mingled with street musicians and sidewalk artists—one man juggled torches while balancing on a tightrope strung between two lampposts.

Cafes and restaurants were pricey, so students bought take-out and ate standing in the street, or sitting by the monumental Saint-Michel fountain. Cheap options included Tunisian sandwich shops displaying rainbow-colored pastries, Greek souvlaki stands, and couscous eateries. There were no prohibitions against drinking beer in public, and the scene felt like a party.

I rambled for hours and never got bored, but being alone was kind of a drag because the men were extremely rude and tenacious, especially after dark. It was interesting to glimpse a bit of Paris night life, but it wasn't worth the harassment, so about 10 p.m. I stuffed myself into the crowded Metro and headed home.

In my journal, I refer to every place I stayed as "home." I'm sure I meant it as shorthand for "the place I was staying," but it also conveyed that home can be any safe place where you lay your head. Even wanderers crave a sense of home, however transitory it may be.

The Metro was busy even at this time of night. There were drunks sleeping on benches in the waiting areas, and a lot of tired-looking people, presumably heading to wherever they called home. It made me sad to see the dark black African men and boys sweeping up, because they looked so downtrodden. Humans have always migrated, and immigrants have always worked hard for low wages and little respect, trying to make a better life, but this doesn't make it palatable or easy to witness.

Saturday was another sunny day, and I took the Metro to a large flea market on the north edge of town. Stalls sprawled along crowded streets and squares, selling every imaginable kind of trinket and tchotchke, and vendors loudly hawked their wares. The constant pestering by men wore me out, though—I spent a lot of energy avoiding them and trying to lose the persistent ones in crowds. It was the shabbily-dressed guys who bothered me the most, and I was shocked at the offensive things they said.

I escaped the flea market and climbed the long flight of steps up to Sacré-Coeur, a striking white basilica perched on the top of Montmartre Hill. The summit area was packed with tourists. The view of the city from up there was of a cement jungle that stretched for miles.

I took the subway back to the Latin Quarter, where I had decided to splurge on couscous for lunch, as I had never had it before. They brought me a huge bowl of what I thought was a grain, but learned was pasta, plus a bowl of mushy cooked vegetables, a bowl of garbanzo beans in broth, and a plate of fatty meat. It was enough for two or three, and despite my best efforts to get my money's worth, and "eat for the hunger that comes," I couldn't finish it all. The meal didn't wow me, and I wondered if it was authentic. Years later I ate couscous in Morocco and was surprised to find the vegetables just as overcooked, and the meat just as globby, so I guess the Paris couscous was the real deal after all.

Stuffed to the gills, I walked over to see the inside of Notre Dame. I felt a bit disappointed by the somber interior—the walls and pillars of the immense Gothic cavern were darkened by centuries of candle soot. Then I saw the stained glass windows. They stood in dazzling contrast to the dim interior, and the colors of the two rose windows were so vibrant it brought tears to my eyes—I was especially enchanted by the ethereal blue glass. The harmonizing voices of a men's choir resonated inside the soaring interior, adding to the celestial effect.

Notre Dame was restored after the devastating fire in 2019, and the interior stone is now light-colored again. A friend who recently visited said it is "Amazing and bright." Perhaps I will return someday.

As I walked along the river I met four outgoing and fun young American guys who were traveling together. I tagged along to a restaurant and sat with them while they ate dinner (I was still stuffed from the couscous). The waiter said it was "not allowed" to sit at a table if I wasn't ordering. I don't know if that was an actual rule, or if he was just having a bad day, but I apologized for not knowing, and he grudgingly let me stay. I think it helped that I spoke French.

After dinner, we walked to the Eiffel Tower, brightly illuminated by banks of lights. We stood underneath looking up, and twirled around and around, getting dizzy watching the tip of the tower high above.

On the Champs-Élysées, we came upon tens of thousands of people marching in protest of the bombing of a large Jewish synagogue the night before. The entire avenue was closed to traffic. The attack had killed four people and injured dozens. It was the first deadly attack against Jews in France since the end of the Second World War. I felt sad and angry, and moved by the size of the crowd and the sense of togetherness and sorrow. It's incredibly disheartening that anti-Semitism continues today. I believe humanity has made incremental progress, but we have a long way to go.

It was quite an experience to walk on the Champs-Élysées without cars, right down the middle of the street (which I was surprised to discover was cobbled). Along the boulevard I saw many of Paris's most famous cafes and clubs. I might have been quite dazzled, if it hadn't been for

the horror of the bombing. Since 2016, the Champs-Élysées is now closed to traffic every Sunday for happier reasons: reducing air pollution and noise and allowing people to walk and bike together.

The guys and I continued up to the Arc de Triomphe, floodlit and glowing against the night sky. Then we took the Metro to Place Pigalle to see what it was like after dark, and to find a cheap place for a drink. Being with a group of guys, I was safe from the predations of the male denizens. I realized that I was only a block from my hotel, so after one beer I said good night and trudged back to my room for a long, deep sleep.

On Sunday I returned to the Eglise de la Madeleine for High Mass. The organ and choir weren't as transfixing as I'd hoped, but the interior was even more lovely, aglow with candles and fragrant with incense. After only hearing English-language masses growing up, it was interesting to hear one in French.

Paris was more serene on Sunday. Relaxed-looking people strolled the parks and gardens all dressed up. I took the Metro to the controversial and relatively new Georges Pompidou Cultural Center. It had opened in 1977 to mixed reviews, due to its ultra-modern architecture. It was an "inside out" building, with its steel girders and multi-colored mechanical tubes visible on the outside of its glass walls. It was ugly and hip at the same time (kind of like a Cybertruck…).

Inside the cavernous interior there were art displays, bookstores, a library, reading and listening rooms, cinemas, and theaters. The museum and exhibits were free on Sundays, and the place was packed. Outside in the courtyards, crowds watched street performers, gathered in coffee shops, or devoured ice cream cones. The Pompidou Center (or Beaubourg, as it's known by many), is still one of the most popular attractions in Paris.

By 8 p.m. I was exhausted by the crowds, the irritating men, and the city in general, and I went back to my hotel, grateful for a quiet place to rest and recharge. I spent the next morning doing errands—bank, post office, food shopping—and then I braved the Louvre. It wasn't as large or overwhelming as I'd feared—in fact, it was fascinating and

peaceful, and I ended up staying for four hours (far exceeding my usual two-hour museum limit).

There were two-and-a-half floors of exhibits. I walked through most of the rooms, but even in four hours I only had time to linger in a few. My attention was held as much by the décor of the building as by the exhibits. I kept reminding myself that the Louvre was once a grand and magnificent royal palace, and this was still evident in the splendor of the rooms, long alcoved hallways, frescoed ceilings, polished marble walls, and fluted columns. I couldn't imagine a more perfect setting for a museum of some of the world's most magnificent art.

The Mona Lisa was fun to see in person, although any legend risks paling in reality. I was surprised at how small it is. The area was packed half-a-dozen deep in gawking tourists with their droning guides, which made it a bit difficult to stand transfixed and contemplate the serene and timeless beauty of Madame Lisa (or *La Joconde*, as she's known in French).

I especially liked the museum's displays of handsome old furniture, and the royal treasures: jewelry, precious stones, alabaster and jade cups, inauguration crowns.

I suddenly realized I wasn't feeling too well—no energy, and achy all over. By the time I got back to the hotel, I had a whopping cold. Illness and depression are closely linked, and being sick brought on an attack of the blues. I wrote in my journal:

> *I feel pretty down in the dumps—not depressed, just lonely, tired, restless, a bit bored. I hate being in the city, even this one where there's so much to see and do. I feel like a hermit crab inside my shell, peeking out mistrustingly and befriending no one.*
>
> *I look around me and see crowds of people in fashionable clothes rushing, arguing, or looking sad; noise, exhaust fumes, and gray concrete; unaffordable restaurants and cafes. I'm starting to find it all a bit unbearable. A few days is OK, but*

how can anybody live in such a big city continually?

Granted, there are some nice parks and gardens, and the refuge of your own home, if you live here, but there are always crowds, dirty air, and noise. Oh, how it gets on my nerves! And so many creepy men. Being a woman alone during the day is bad enough, but at night it's intolerable.

People in cafes and stores have been friendly, but I find myself avoiding people on the street. It makes me extremely sad to realize how cynical, distrustful, and unfriendly I've been feeling. I'm so tired of being pounced on, picked up, mooched off, leeched onto, and otherwise hassled. Being a woman in Paris alone—I wouldn't recommend it.

Big cities are the epitome of "aloneness in a crowd." I'd love to sample Paris's delightful and dazzling array of cafes, spectacles, and culinary delights, but besides not being much fun alone, it's beyond my means. The cold, gray weather isn't helping my mood either.

I slept most of the next day. The hotel was run by a sweet Algerian family: mom, dad, a son my age, and an absolutely adorable four-year-old boy. The mom called my room about noon to say they were worried that I hadn't come down yet, and to make sure I was OK. Their kindness brightened my spirits immeasurably. Later they brought me a welcome pot of steaming hot tea, and invited me to watch TV with them that evening.

The next day I still felt rotten, but I had made plans to lunch with Sam, the Paris-dwelling American lawyer I'd met on Crete. I refused to miss out on the chance for a meal in enjoyable company, and I rallied with determination. I met Sam on the Champs-Élysées and he led me to a bustling Italian restaurant.

My luscious, cheesy pizza was the first good meal I'd had in Paris. The food tasted even better because I was eating it in good company (and because I wasn't paying for it—I offered to pay, but he wouldn't let me). It was fun filling him in on my adventures since we'd met weeks before. I'd been starved for English conversation. I talked his ear off, and he listened courteously.

I was getting to know my neighborhood, and despite being sick of the city as a whole, I liked my corner of it. All the necessities were just minutes from my door: post office, bank, cafes, Metro, and every kind of specialty shop imaginable, whether meat, fish, bread, pastries, dairy products, flowers, candy, or ice cream.

In the mornings the neighborhood became a pop-up market, with stalls lining the narrow streets. What a joy to wander around listening to the animated transactions, and looking at the huge array of colorful, fresh products. It was unlike anything I'd ever seen, with a vast selection of cheeses, fruits, vegetables, meat, fish, shellfish, and freshly-baked loaves of bread.

There were many fewer overweight people than I saw in Seattle, probably because they ate smaller portions of healthier food and walked a lot. I have since learned that French people spend a larger percentage of their income on food than Americans do—eating fresh, quality food is important to them.

With the red-light district (Place Pigalle) just one block away, the square where I lived was an unusual mélange of tourists, women of the night, schoolchildren, and colorfully-dressed North African women doing their shopping. While it's now expensive to live there, I think at the time it was a more affordable part of the city.

There was also a large Catholic church—on Saturdays there were funerals, on Sundays there were crowds of churchgoers, and every quarter hour the musical clang of church bells, a sound I had become quite fond of, and never heard back home.

I also discovered that the Moulin Rouge—birthplace of the French Can-can dance, and late-1800s hangout of the artist Toulouse-Lautrec—was only two blocks away. The iconic red windmill still sat

on top. An evening show cost forty-two dollars without dinner ($160 now), so needless to say I didn't go.

One highlight of Paris was the talented street musicians. In the Metro one day there was a young man playing classical tunes on a violin, accompanied by a cassette-tape piano track. The notes reverberated off the concrete walls like surround sound. It was so moving that I almost wept. I was grateful that he brought music into that soulless place, and perhaps a smile or an uplifting moment to the gray and weary-looking throngs shuffling through the corridors. I wondered if he enjoyed playing such beautiful music in the bowels of the city. As for me, how I longed for mountain, forest, river, and the sounds of nature!

Another highlight of Paris was the Parisians. Despite what I've said about grim-faced automatons, the city was liberally sprinkled with colorful, fashionable, kooky, and physically attractive people. The women, especially, were often dazzling—some of the most eye-catching females I'd ever seen. Their outfits upheld the reputation of Parisians for being à la mode and avant garde fashionistas. Many wore spike heels (on cobblestones!). Loud colors were popular for shoes, lips, nails, hair, and clothes—magenta and hot pink seemed to be the "in" colors that season. I also saw a lot of baggy sweatshirts over Indian block-print skirts, pointy-toed boots, and skintight pants.

It had been drizzling on and off all day, but after my lunch with Sam, the sun emerged. I was feeling better, so I decided to take advantage of the energy spurt, and rather than go back to the hotel to rest, I spent a few hours in the Jeu de Paume art museum. It housed nearly all the Impressionist works that weren't in private collections, including Renoirs, Toulouse-Lautrecs, Gauguins, Van Goghs, Cezannes, Degas, and Monets. I have always been nuts about this style of painting, and seeing them in person brought me a ton of joy. (Paris's Impressionist works were moved to the Musée d'Orsay in 1986.)

I especially liked the brighter, bolder works—some of the Van Goghs, some of the Renoirs. My favorite by Lautrec was called *La Toilette*, a painting of the streetwalker he fell in love with—she sits on the floor half-dressed, with her back to the painter. I liked his posters better than his paintings, but they had none of those on display. I'm not a big fan

of still lifes (I learned that the French word for them is "nature morte," or dead nature) but the Impressionist versions felt full of life.

I was intrigued by the portrayals of women in the paintings. They were usually plump, some exceedingly so, but no less alluring because of it. Many of them were nude, but in regular daily life settings—Manet's *The Luncheon on the Grass* depicted an unclothed woman at a picnic with two fully-clothed men; a painting at the Louvre showed a nude woman in a drawing room watching an artist paint, surrounded by a crowd of fully-clothed men, women, and children. These paintings were often riffing off the classics to make statements about art or society.

When the Jeu de Paume closed, I took the Metro back to my hotel and went straight to bed. I had overdone it, and I felt lousy. I spent the next day in my room, or sitting with the family, who kindly fed me coffee and croissants. I felt quite a bit better the following day.

Emmanuel Michal was another friend of my father's I had met at my family home in Seattle. An engineer with Air France, he lived with his wife and young son in a village on the outskirts of Paris. They invited me to come for dinner on Thursday, and spend the weekend. I was excited to visit them, and eager to get out of the city, but I did feel sad saying goodbye to the Algerian family. When I left, the mom gave me a big hug.

Emmanuel met me at the station and we took the train to Gif-Sur-Yvette (Gif for short, pronounced *zheef*), a charming old village out in the country—kind of a long commute for him, but at least he could take the train instead of driving. It was early October and pouring rain, and I was grateful to be staying in a dry, warm house instead of a drafty hotel room.

His wife, Genevieve, was a kind and pretty woman in her forties. Their seven-year-old son was Denis. Emmanuel was the only one whose English was strong, so we all spoke French. This was great practice for me, but a bit exhausting.

Genevieve liked to cook. She served a lovely dinner and I learned about the French way of eating—they take their time and savor each course

individually. Lunch and dinner usually began with soup or salad. Then Genevieve cleared the plates (she would not let me help) and brought out an entrée and a vegetable. After clearing the plates again, out came a selection of cheeses and bread. French cheeses are heavenly, and it's not unusual to have seven or eight to choose from on a platter. There's a whole protocol for how you cut the cheese (no fart jokes, please!), and how much you take.

After the cheese came dessert. Sometimes it was simple, perhaps fruit salad or butter cookies. Other times it was cake or a flaky fresh-fruit tart. Genevieve liked to bake, but occasionally purchased from a local pastry shop. Always to finish off a meal there was coffee. I learned to be a nibbler and eat a small portion of each course, or it was far too much food.

Wine was also a staple with lunch and dinner. The Michals bought theirs by the cask at a vineyard and bottled it themselves.

The family ate a light breakfast: croissants or bread and butter dunked in a bowl of *café au lait* (coffee with lots of hot milk).

On Saturday morning, Genevieve and I went to the annual Salon Artisanal in Gif, an upscale craft fair where artisans sold expensive handwoven clothing, one-of-a-kind jewelry, and other artfully-made creations.

In the afternoon the family took me to Versailles, not far from Gif, bravely navigating the weekend parking and crowds. It was a jaw-droppingly opulent place, even in the midst of extensive renovations, and indescribably enormous. The royal bedrooms and living quarters could only be seen with a guide, and we went with a French group. I was able to understand most of what the guide said, but she spoke extremely fast, and for a long, long time, so I began to tune out toward the end. It was bitter cold when we finished, so we didn't tour the gardens, the Trianon palaces, or the Queen's Hamlet. I was strangely relieved—I was so topped up on sightseeing that I feared I couldn't fully appreciate the experience.

I have since been back to Versailles several times, and have been able to see things I missed the first time. Of course, you never know if you'll

go back to a place, so it's nice to see as much as you can when you are there, but I've learned that I have to find a balance between trying to see as much as possible, and accepting that I'll never see everything.

My choice to skip Florence when I was in Italy still haunts me sometimes, but instead of focusing on all the things I haven't seen in my travels, I choose to focus on the things I have seen, or might see someday.

On Sunday I slept late, then wrote in my journal. (I often spend one to two hours a day journaling when I travel.) I felt like a boring guest, but hoped the family appreciated a break from hosting, and a chance to do their own thing.

The weather was quintessential fall—crispy-cold and clear. The Michals had a large yard with apple, pear, and walnut trees. Emmanuel was gathering fallen nuts, and I offered to help him collect an enormous basketful from the ground under the trees.

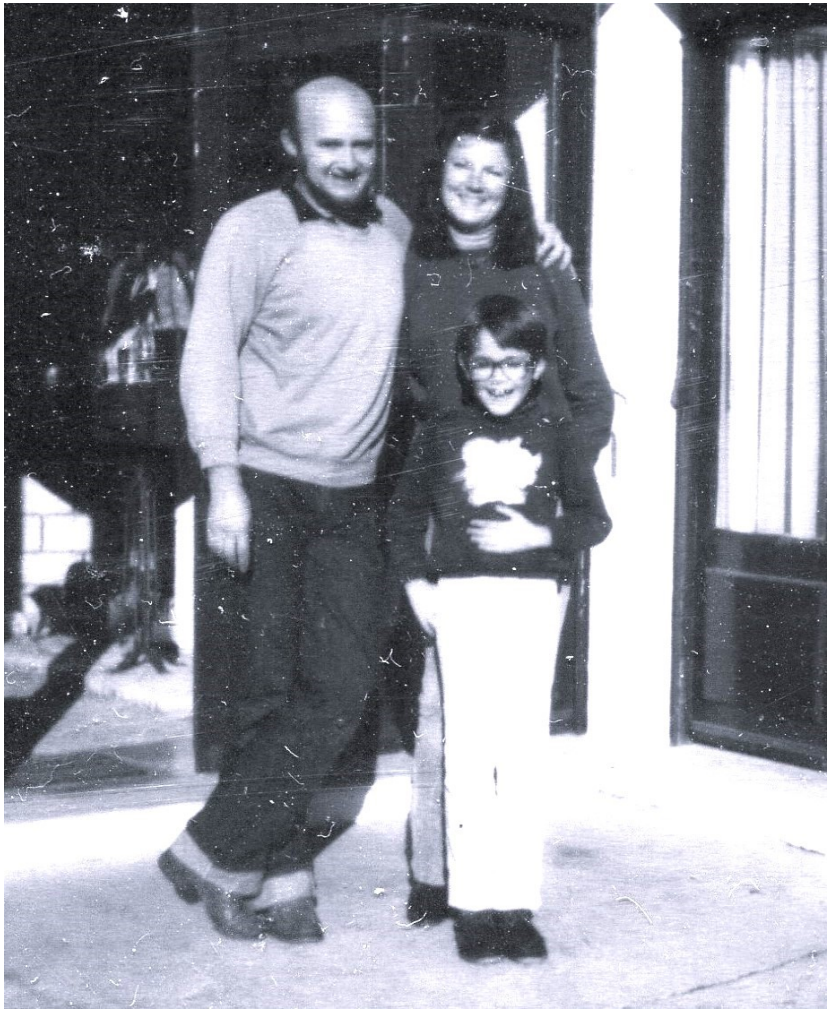
Late in the day I had the overwhelming urge to go for a long walk, and I gratefully realized my cold must finally be over. The area around Gif was tranquil and wooded. A short distance from the house was an enormous grassy meadow surrounded by green woods laced with trails. The evocative combination of nippy air, rosy cheeks, the smell of chimney smoke, and the crackle and whoosh of golden falling leaves made me giddy—although it did feel strange to be bundled up in a wool hat and mittens, when just a month before I had been living in a sundress and sandals.

As darkness fell I thought about Halloween and Thanksgiving, both American fall holidays. I felt a rush of nostalgia, and part of me hoped I would be back in the States by then.

That evening we picked up Genevieve's parents and went to her brother's for a gourmet dinner and endless drinks: aperitifs before dinner, wines with dinner, after-dinner digestifs.

After the first day at Michals, my timidity about speaking French had begun to dissolve. I was delighted to find that I could follow almost any conversation if I concentrated. It helped a lot to be near the person and

watch their lips move—for that reason, telephone and radio were more difficult. My speaking improved quickly, and I was amazed at how much I could say, and how well I was understood. My accent needed a good deal of practice, as did my grammar and vocabulary, but it was an awful lot of fun to spend three days speaking only French. I hoped I could find a way to get more practice when I got back to Seattle. As it turned out, just a few years later I would live in a French-speaking country for two years, and become fluent.



Emmanuel, Genevieve, and Denis Michal

On Monday morning I said goodbye to Genevieve and Denis, and took the train back to Paris with Emmanuel.

I went straight to a travel agency to book passage to London, and found a relatively affordable package deal: bus to Calais, hovercraft across the Channel, then bus to London. It was a chunk of change, but it was more affordable than flying. Now, flights across Europe are often cheaper than busses or trains—but that was definitely not the case in 1980.

England

The bus ride from Paris to Calais wound through scenic towns with patinaed stone houses and stalwart churches. The countryside was a mostly flat expanse of farmland, with freshly-plowed fields in a patchwork of fall colors: chocolate brown, dusty green, and golden yellow. Once we were out of the city, I could see an immense dome of sky stretching to the horizon, with patches of cornflower blue peeking out between towering clusters of thick clouds.

At Calais we left the bus and boarded the hovercraft. Like a strange hulking creature, it floated onto the paved landing dock on a cushion of air, hissing and blowing noisy clouds of spray. When the lift fans subsided, it sank down onto its black skirts, looking like a punctured balloon. After we boarded, the noisy fans started up again, and we glided out to sea.

The crossing itself was miserable. The roaring engines gave me a splitting headache, and even though the weather was good, the ride was anything but smooth—the boat slammed up and down as it bounced across the wavetops. We had to stay securely buckled into our seats and couldn't see a thing out the spray-covered windows. The hovercraft's only advantage over a regular boat was speed—it took forty minutes instead of ninety. After the Chunnel opened in 1994, the English Channel hovercraft era ended.

As soon as we landed in England, I felt at home (despite the fact that they drove on the left, which kind of freaked me out). Perhaps it was the familiar language, or the green countryside, or the autumn colors; perhaps it was the sense of shared history. On the bus, I chatted with an American fellow named Michael, who was returning for a visit after

having lived in London for a year. He was excited to be back, and told me about some of his favorite things to do and see and eat. We made plans to meet for a drink while I was there. So my introduction to London was a positive one.

After a bit of phoning around I found a bed in a room with two other women for ten dollars, breakfast included. The comfortable and friendly place was in a quiet street in an area called Bayswater, directly across from Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park, and not too far from the center of the city. It even had hot water, and I took a long, blissful bath.

One of my roommates was a despondent Jamaican who'd been wandering around the world surviving on menial jobs for 11 years. The other was a vulnerable Brazilian who was looking for a job but barely spoke English and didn't have papers. She constantly asked for advice, and I had nothing useful to suggest. My heart went out to them both, but other than listen, there wasn't much I could offer.

The next day I set out to explore. It was cold and clear, the best kind of early winter day. I crossed through Hyde Park, a delightfully informal oasis of grass and trees with no manicured shrubbery in sight.

In Soho, I stepped into my first English pub—a warm and cozy spot playing mellow music. I wanted to try that fabled British staple, steak and kidney pie, and ordered a Guinness to go with it. I don't think my brain had registered the fact that the pie actually contained kidney, or I'd never have tried it. At the time I thought it was delicious, but I'm not sure I could bring myself to eat it now.

I couldn't believe I was enjoying being in a big city again, after my Paris burnout. To my amazement, I relished every minute of that day. I fell quickly in love with London. People seemed mellower and warmer than Paris. The city felt less tourist-centric, and the parts I saw were clean and tidy. I liked the parks, the hangout-friendly squares, being able to speak English, listening to the charming British accent. The sunny fall weather definitely buoyed my spirits as well.

I had a small world moment when I ran into a friend of my mom's, who was in London on business with her husband. She said she would tell

my parents she'd seen me, so they'd know I'd made it safely to England. Her news would arrive much sooner than the postcard I'd sent.

The time had come for me to buy a plane ticket to New York, where I'd visit relatives before flying back to Seattle. There being no internet, I walked from travel agency to travel agency, comparing prices and schedules. All of the airlines were charging $187 one way. (That's $716 today! Google tells me I could now fly one-way London to New York with four days' notice for only $251.) I chose Laker Airways because they had confirmed seating and I could get a window seat (coincidentally, they went bankrupt just two years later). I booked my flight for Saturday afternoon, which gave me another four days in London.

After securing my ticket (paper of course—don't lose it!) I treated myself to "traditional afternoon tea" at the Ceylon Tea House on Regent Street. For about four dollars (fourteen dollars today), I got a huge pot of Ceylon tea with milk, a variety of finger sandwiches, and a thick whole wheat raisin scone with butter and black currant jam. I ate every tasty morsel and drank every drop of tea.

Then I strolled through a few parks, passed by Buckingham Palace and Trafalgar Square, and watched the city lights come on as darkness fell. To put a cap on the day, I went to see the Bob Fosse movie *All That Jazz*. I thought it was a good film, if a bit sad.

It had been a great day, made even better because I was not hassled by any men! It was such a relief, like a huge weight lifted, to walk down the street and not be catcalled or touched. After I left the theater I did get two polite requests to have a drink, which I easily ignored.

Wednesday was another cold but sunny day, and I went to watch the changing of the guards at Buckingham Palace. I couldn't see much for the crowd, and what I could see wasn't that interesting.

I wanted to climb the 37-story Post Office Tower to see the view—at that time, it was the tallest building around—but alas, the observation deck was closed.

When in London, one must go to a live theater show, so in the afternoon I scored a last-minute budget ticket to see *Annie* at the Victoria Palace Theater. It was a lovely old place, but the cheap seats were so tiny, and tiered at such a steep angle, I felt like I was going to tumble right down and over the edge. The theater wasn't full, so at intermission I moved to a roomier floor seat. The play itself wasn't as captivating as I'd expected—I found the acting a bit unconvincing, the story a little too corny, and the music, particularly the lyrics, not that catchy. Yet it got rave reviews. My favorite character was the dog (no joke—he was very cute, and so well trained).

After the show, I stopped in to see Winchester Cathedral, by chance just in time for evening Mass. A procession of priests and choirboys dressed in red and white gowns sang or swung smoky incense thuribles. The priest chanted most of the Mass and the choirboys joined in with high melodic voices.

Back in "my" neighborhood of Bayswater, I ordered a pot of tea in a cozy diner and set to writing in my journal. At the table next to me sat a jolly-looking older woman in a jaunty hat, drinking a glass of sherry, and looking the quintessential kooky old English lady—and I mean that in the very best way. I liked her immediately. She was outspoken yet refined, the sort of person who wasn't afraid to be different. She too was writing—short stories, I think. The waiter told me she had published several books but didn't like to mention it, and wouldn't reveal her name. She was a lot of fun to talk with.

At one point a busboy walked by carrying a large potted plant. He took it down to the kitchen to water it, and on the way back he carried it in one hand. I remarked to my new friend that, being such a large and heavy-looking plant, it seemed to me it wouldn't be possible to carry it in one hand, and that perhaps it was plastic. It did *look* plastic. She laughed and said it would make a good story—that in fact the plant *was* plastic, but the poor fellow didn't know it and had been watering it for years, and no one had the heart to tell him. On the way out I forgot to check to see if the plant was in fact real…

Captain Ray Jones, a pilot and simulator manager for British Airways—who liked to be called Captain—was the last of my dad's

airline friends I would visit on this trip. He and his wife, Margaret, lived in Guildford, thirty miles southwest of London. They invited me to come on Friday, spend the night, and Margaret would drive me to the airport on Saturday.

So Thursday was my last day in London. It was a dark morning with heavy rain, sort of peacefully gloomy, and I had no desire to go out. The saga of my roommates continued. Sandra, the hapless Brazilian gal, hadn't come back the night before. In the morning she walked in dripping wet out of the rain, and said she'd met two Egyptian guys and stayed at their flat the night before. They'd found her a job cleaning a hotel at night, and she was planning to stay with them. She seemed so young and naïve… Oh how I hoped she didn't become another victim of exploitation.

My Jamaican roommate and I got on fine, although I only saw her at breakfast and in the evening. She was a sweet but melancholy person, tall and thin, with a face drooped into a perpetual look of boredom and indifference. She read books like *Damien 2* and *Helter Skelter*, and talked to herself, saying the same phrases over and over in a low monotone: "I've gotta find another place; can't keep paying so much to stay in this place." "Gotta be a millionaire to live in this city." "Gotta find a job." I look back on this and feel so much gratitude for the lucky hand I was dealt—loving family, economic stability, good education, healthy brain chemistry. The older I get, the more I realize how much harder it can be to navigate life when you don't win the family or genetics lotteries.

About noon it quit raining, the sky cleared, out came the sun, and out went I, for lunch at Cranks Health Food Restaurant on Carnaby Street. It was a bit more upscale than my usual low-budget eateries, and had a cheery polished wood and wicker interior. The food was divine. The chain eventually folded, but for half a century they served up healthy, unprocessed food at multiple restaurants across London.

After lunch I wandered along Carnaby Street, a popular pedestrian shopping lane (have I mentioned how much I love car-free streets?). Hippie shops sold records, scarves, jewelry, and imported clothing. Now that I'd bought my plane ticket, and knew I had enough money to

get home, I began to consider buying myself that little something I was supposed to get with the birthday money my parents had sent.

I was tempted by the silky, brightly-colored, India-import dresses I saw in a shop window and decided to try one on. The sales guy was slick, and his practiced flattery (oh, that looks so good on you!) nevertheless convinced me to buy one of them. In fact, he was so charming that when he asked me out to dinner, I said yes. After leaving the shop, however, the spell wore off. I realized I did not want to meet him for dinner, and so I stood him up, which I felt bad about. As for the dress, no buyer's remorse there—I was especially charmed by the miniature bells on the tassels.

That evening I rendezvoused instead with Michael, the American chap I'd met on the bus from Paris. He introduced me to tasty traditional draught bitter from the barrel.

On Friday morning I hopped on the train to Guildford, and waved goodbye to London. Postcards did not do the city justice. Yes, the bones were a bit gray and dreary, but the details were delightful—I would remember the London that postcards didn't show.

Margaret Jones picked me up at the station and we spent the day in the lovely town of Guildford, window shopping, lunching at a pub, and visiting the local castle and old churches. The verdant countryside reminded me of Western Washington. The autumn leaves were reaching peak color.

Back at the house, Captain Ray was heading out on a flight, so I only saw him for a few minutes before he left for the airport. In the evening Margaret took me to see a play at the town theater, a hilarious whodunnit called "Find the Lady." Margaret was somewhere in her forties, attractive, vivacious, outgoing, independent, kind, generous, and voluble. Although Ray was more reserved, they were a social couple, often going to parties ("dos," she called them), or to the theater with friends.

Margaret had quit her paid job and kept quite busy doing volunteer work, serving on the local health commission, gardening, entertaining, going to "dos," and spending time with friends. She talked slowly, with

a breathy English accent that sounded very cultured to my American ears. She was extremely hospitable, and devoted the entire twenty-four hours of my stay to being the hostess with the mostest.

On Saturday morning she took me to Wisley Gardens, run by the Royal Horticultural Society, of which she was a member. It was another cold and sparkling sunny day. The gardens were spectacular, but I wasn't surprised—the Brits have a deserved reputation for being skilled growers of things.

There were model gardens for various types of yards and gardeners, magnificent hothouses, and acres of varied landscapes showcasing flowers, shrubs, and trees, as well as test areas for vegetables and fruits. I'd taken horticulture classes in high school, and I think I would have liked working in those gardens. Many times over the years since, I considered leaving my desk job for a more physically-active job working with plants, but I could never afford the huge pay cut.

Back at the house, Margaret served me a tasty lunch of smoked mackerel, green salad, and honeydew melon, then drove me along twisting, narrow, wooded country lanes to Gatwick Airport. She made sure I was all checked in before she cheerily waved "Toodle-oo."

It was time to say goodbye to Europe, and return to the familiar world of American English and dollar bills.

Part 5: Hangaring

Wherever you go becomes a part of you somehow. – Anita Desai

Travel is the only thing you buy that makes you richer. – Unknown

Travel far enough, you meet yourself. – David Mitchell

New York

The flight left an hour late, but other than that minor inconvenience, my transatlantic crossing went smoothly. The flight was packed and noisy and my seat felt tiny, but none of it bothered me. I paid for headphones and listened to jazz, the food was surprisingly good, and we were flying into a perpetual sunset. As we descended to Kennedy airport we passed through some rain clouds, and the turbulence left me green around the gills, so I was glad to land and get off the plane.

It felt strange to leave Europe after being there almost eight months. I was excited to be going home to family and friends, but sad to end my great adventure.

And soon, there I was, back on American soil. My first solo international journey had ended, but I knew it wouldn't be my last. To continue this book's flight analogy, although my trip wasn't technically over yet, returning to the States felt like returning to a "hangar," a sheltered place where I would put myself in park and stay for a while. I could already tell I would miss being "in flight."

As I waited at baggage claim, New York stereotypes appeared around me: the unmistakable accent; the listless, punky-looking baggage handlers; the big man who shuffled around the conveyor belt glaring at nothing in particular with a sullen and blank expression, slowly hoisting fallen suitcases back onto the belt. At one point a suitcase started a jam-up. He was standing right next to it, so it required him to only lean forward and push things along. Instead, he slowly walked to the wall and hit the stop button before readjusting the bags. Probably a safety requirement, but his unwillingness to hurry made me chuckle.

My pack didn't come and didn't come, and at last I happened to glance around and saw that it had been sent down the "odd parcel" chute. It was slightly wet and muddy, and one strap had been torn from its moorings, which made it a challenge to wear, but it was nothing a needle and thread couldn't remedy. I did learn to never check a backpack without putting it into a bag to protect the straps.

Customs was a snap—they didn't check a thing except my passport. When I emerged into the arrivals hall, there was my Grandma Heddy, waiting for me. I was so glad to see her smiling face! She had come alone, and didn't tell anyone else I was there, because she wisely knew I'd be too tired to socialize right away.

At seventy-two, my maternal grandmother still worked full-time, but she found time to cook me some of her specialties, take me to her salon to get my ratty hair trimmed, and have long conversations. While she was at work I got my film developed and made scrapbooks of my trip. (Now I make a Shutterfly book for each of my journeys.)

Grandma Heddy and me

I also visited other relatives my parents had left behind when they'd moved to Seattle after their marriage in 1958: my Grandma Ethel, my aunts Pat and Barbara and their families on Long Island, and my uncle Tom and his family in New Jersey.

Tom was an art editor for the special projects section of the Readers

Digest condensed book department, and he gave me a fascinating behind-the-scenes tour of his office on the thirty-fourth floor of the Pan Am building above Grand Central Station.

My cousin Carrie, one year older than me, invited me to a Halloween party, where I dressed as a gypsy in my London India-print dress. Another day she took me into Manhattan. The graffiti-covered subways were a shock, especially compared to the clean and quiet metros in Paris and London—like scarred metal monsters, they screeched and rumbled at ear-piercing volume. Manhattan was dirty and garbage-strewn, but otherwise less awful than I expected. (When I went back years later I couldn't believe how much cleaner and nicer it was.)

The main difference between New York and the cities I'd seen on the rest of my trip was the height of the buildings. In contrast to the five-or six-story edifices common in Europe, New York had solid walls towering seventy-five and a hundred stories above the streets, which felt eerie and claustrophobic.

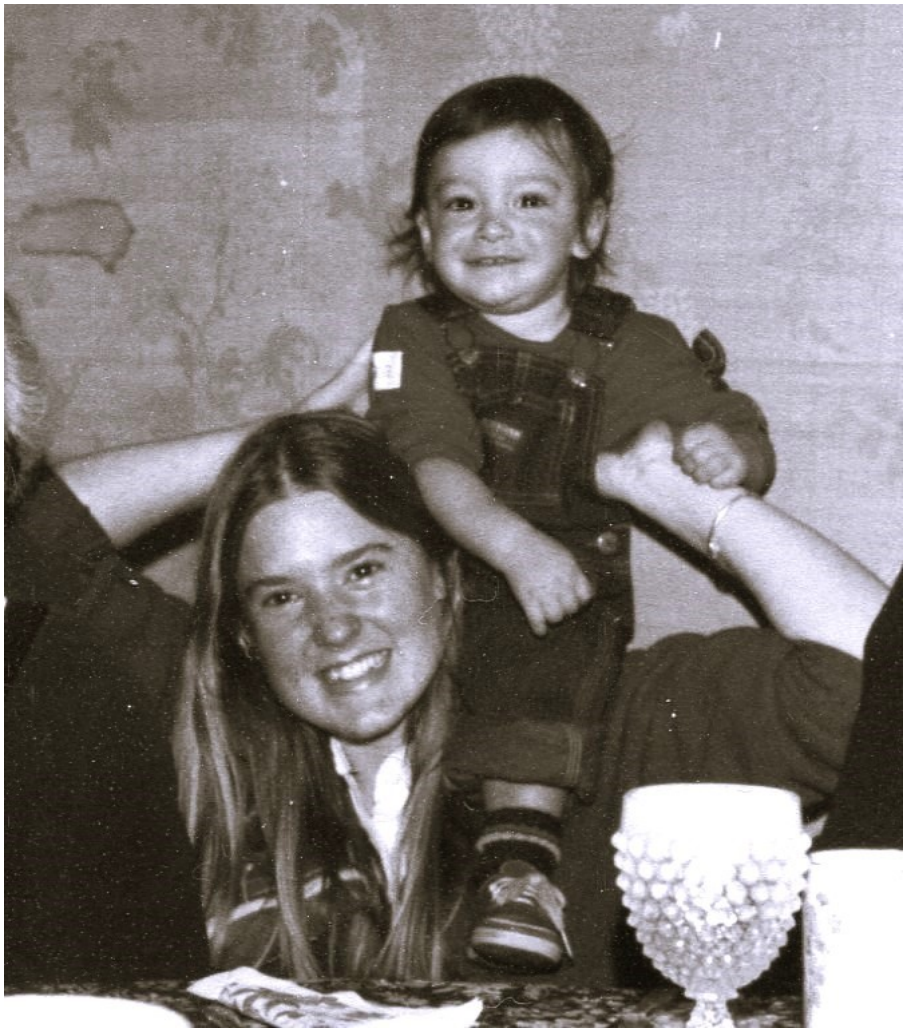
Carrie's older sister, my cousin Lauren, lived in a tiny, rent-controlled fifth-floor walkup. She was an uber-hip rock critic who wrote for the Village Voice under the pen name Trixie A. Balm (get it?), and played in successful rock bands.

As Lauren and Carrie showed me around the city, I was surprised at how friendly people were. The subway operators cheerfully announced every stop, and said, "Watch your step," "Have a good day," or "Welcome aboard." The bus drivers smiled, greeted passengers, and even answered questions. The elevator men at Carrie's college (they had elevator men!) said "Hello," and "Goodbye," and "What floor please?" and they smiled too. Commuters at Penn Station said, "Excuse me," when they bumped into you in a crowd. I realized that I had become cynical in Europe, where I was so often hassled by men, and sometimes suspected everyone of having ulterior motives. I was also re-learning the art of spontaneous pleasantries, which came more easily in my own language.

I spent an entire day at the Museum of Natural History. To my surprise, it was the best museum I'd been to on my whole trip. A new section

called Asian Peoples had just opened, and I spent a few hours learning about the cultures, dress, lifestyles, and religions of Asia, from the Islamic Middle East to Japan, China, Tibet, Russia, and Siberia. It was one of the most fascinating exhibits I'd ever seen.

My aunt Barbara took me to see the Impressionist paintings at the Metropolitan Museum, and I was amazed that the collection was much larger than the one at the Jeu de Paume in Paris.



Manolis and me in New York

Grandma Heddy drove me to visit my Aunt Pat and her kids—my cousins—out on the north shore of Long Island, in a quiet small town

with enormous trees spreading over the streets, walking distance to a beach strewn with foot-wide horseshoe crab shells.

I also visited Elizabeth, my friend from Crete. It was wonderful to see her again and reminisce. She was staying with her parents until Nico got his visa. I liked her folks, and I could tell it was difficult for them to accept that their daughter had a baby with some guy she'd had a brief fling with while traveling.

Elizabeth invited me to Manolis's first birthday party, which featured a cake from Bloomingdales. Another day we went into Brooklyn to visit her grandparents, swinging by a Jewish deli to pick up corned beef, roast beef, lox, salads, knishes, bread, and pastries. I lost touch with Elizabeth, and I often wonder if Nico did in fact emigrate, and whether they were happy.

Seattle

Then the day came when my trip really was over. Grandma Heddy drove me to the airport, I boarded a plane to Seattle, and I was home in time for Thanksgiving.

Being back felt like climbing into a machine that hadn't been run in almost a year, and patiently coaxing while it sputtered to life. Or maybe it was more like rebuilding the machine from pieces stored on a shelf, and finding the parts didn't fit quite right.

I did not experience what I would call culture shock—my rapid jump from Athens to Amsterdam had taken care of that, since northern Europe felt a lot like the U.S. But readjusting was wrenching in many ways. For one thing, life felt boring after months of new places and experiences almost every day. Also, I'd lived lightly for so long that I felt oppressed by all my possessions.

But the biggest adjustment was that I was a different person than when I'd left, with a much broader world view, and friends who hadn't traveled seemed a bit provincial. In fact, everyone seemed unchanged to me. I suppose I seemed unchanged to them as well, but I was definitely not the same—the trip had been nine months of condensed

personal growth. It was a challenge to integrate all the new things I thought and felt.

I was restless, moody, depressed, and extremely emotional. I wept easily and couldn't bear to see suffering of any kind. Even a wilted plant made me sob. It took months to regain my joie de vivre and feel engaged again. I think part of this was grief—I pined for the excitement and adventure of being on the road. If I'd had the money, I would have been tempted to turn around and head back.

Nostalgia kicked in right away and the trip took on a rose-colored glow. I quickly forgot the loneliness, hassles, and challenges. Every time I thought about my experiences I got such a huge feeling of satisfaction that my stomach would tingle, and I couldn't help smiling.

Thinking about my journey also felt bittersweet—bitter because the trip was over, and no one else could ever understand what it had meant to me, and sweet because I would always have the memories. I wrote in my journal that all too soon I had to stop daydreaming and put those memories "to simmer on the back burner of my mind, where at least their tantalizing aroma still fills my head."

I was eager to talk about my adventures, but I quickly learned that people weren't that interested. They'd ask, "How was your trip?" but if my answer was more than a few words their eyes would glaze over and they'd change the subject. I now understand that it can be hard to relate to something you haven't done yourself. I also get it that envy can block interest—sometimes people don't want to hear about your "incredible, amazing" trip because they don't have the time, money, or ability to travel themselves. It wasn't long before no one asked about my trip, yet my ache to talk about it was so strong it felt physical.

Many of my friends acted as if I'd never even been gone. I took this personally—how could they not have noticed that I was missing from their lives for almost a year? Looking back on this, I have to chuckle. How did I expect them to act? Plus, I can hardly keep track of my own life, let alone anyone else's. I often go a year or more between visits to old friends, and I'm certain that all kinds of important things happen to them in that time that I never even know about.

Nevertheless, this sense of people not caring or understanding how life-changing this trip was has stuck with me all these years, and since then I make an effort to ask people about their travels and to listen with my heart. I genuinely want to know about their experience, and how it changed them.

On top of all this, there was the comparison conundrum—I'd been to places that I liked better in some ways than where I was from, and I found myself questioning whether home was "good enough." Would I rather live somewhere else? Every place has its pros and cons—no place is perfect. It took a few more trips abroad before I realized there wasn't anywhere else I would rather live than Western Washington, with its mountains, forests, rivers, lakes, ocean, and temperate climate. My roots and culture are also here—it's where I was born, where my family lives, and where I have amassed a lifetime of history and memories.

Being in unemployment limbo was also a challenge. Big life transitions can be scary and unsettling, especially when you aren't sure "what's next." Like a field, sometimes you have to lie fallow for a while before seeds can sow and sprout. Meanwhile, you can feel empty and unproductive and like you are wasting time—it's hard to be a fallow field.

After two months, I got rehired by the Seattle Water Department, working on a road crew in the mountains. I could save money to go back to college in the fall. The job paid well, and let me spend time in nature and get a lot of exercise, but I worked with a bunch of redneck guys who had never traveled anywhere and couldn't relate to my worldview. (I grew fond of them anyway.)

Bringing the World Home

When I became a Peace Corps volunteer a few years later, I was told that part of my job was to "bring the world home." I do think travelers in general have an important role to play as teachers. None of us will travel everywhere, and even if some of us go to the same places, each of us will have unique experiences and insights.

I've since given a lot of thought to how to bring the world home. Creating photo travelogues suits my talents and storytelling style, and allows me to share my experiences without putting people on the spot—if they have the time and desire to look at my website, great, but there's no pressure, and I'll never ask. The biggest benefit of creating each blog is to help me process and relive the trip.

I've also worked on learning to be a better storyteller, so if someone asks about one of my trips, I can share a brief memorable moment or two that is more likely to hold their interest.

There have certainly been some not-so-pleasant moments in my travels. I choose not to think about those, and to focus instead on the highlights. To use a museum analogy, I think it's OK to curate our travels. As long as we're not misleading anyone, we can choose to tell only our favorite stories, to crop the garbage out of the photos, and to forget the heat or the bugs, the uncomfortable flight, or the surly waiter.

Like the proverbial saying that firewood warms you three times (when you cut it, when you split it, and when you burn it) travel warms your spirit three times—when you're planning the trip, when you're on the trip, and when you reminisce about the trip.

I know this about myself: I always want to have a trip to look forward to. I'm not sure what will happen if I grow too old or unable to travel, but I hope the embers of past trips will keep me warm. At least I will always have my travel pictures and journals!

Afterword

I am not the same, having seen the moon shine on the other side of the world. – Mary Anne Radmacher

Travel is fatal to prejudice. – Mark Twain

Travel is intensified living. – Rick Steves

I recently wrote a song called "Halfway to Somewhere" that sums me up pretty well:

I was born a restless soul, I never could stand still
Wandering 'round the corner or over the next hill
Every time I put down roots and try to settle down
I find my footsteps pulling me
Beyond the edge of town

Don't know where I'm going
Don't know why I roam
But I'm halfway to somewhere
And a long way from home

I've always lived on a pendulum: when I'm on the road for a while, I long for the settled life, but when I'm home for a while, I can't wait to hit the road. Is everyone like this? Maybe I just have a more extreme

version of wanderlust, or whatever this is called. Were people with wanderlust important to our ancestors, because they were the ones who explored new places, found new sources of food or shelter, and forged alliances with strangers, while those with the "settled" genes kept the home fires burning and ensured that the clan was protected and safe?

As for the post-trip blues, I now bounce back faster—I'm older, I've had more practice, and I have more life stability and ongoing commitments to come back to. I also have a lot of friends who travel, so there are always people to swap tales with after a trip.

A world map hangs on my dining room wall, handy for daydreaming about where I'll go next. I keep a travel wish list, sort of in priority order, but I try to stay open to opportunities. Like when a friend emailed me a few years ago to say he was putting together a private boat tour on the Amazon in northern Brazil at a price I couldn't resist, and that trip, which hadn't been on my list, rose to the top of the queue.

I also prioritize visiting friends whenever possible. Besides maintaining connections with people I care about, it gives me entrée to the world of a local, deeply enriching my sense of a place and its culture.

If I'm lucky I might have twenty travel years left, and if I'm really lucky I might have good mobility for many of those years. But I will inevitably slow down, so I'm always thinking about which trips I should do sooner, because they're more physically demanding. Friends of mine call this "the knees list."

So what is the definition of solo travel? Is it a multi-day trip all on your own, a local day trip, a tour where you don't know the other participants? I'd say it's all of the above—there is not a right way to travel solo. The important thing is to go somewhere and spend time alone, so we can truly observe and experience new things without distraction.

In the process, we get to know ourselves as if we are meeting a new friend. We learn that we are good company, that we are strong, and that we don't need to fear aloneness. I think this is especially important for women. Those of us who have male life partners stand a good chance of outliving those partners and spending the latter part of our lives solo.

Why not build those muscles now?

I'm not saying that you *should* travel solo, but if you've never tried it, I hope this book has piqued your curiosity, planted a seed, and convinced you that it's worth a try.

I believe the world is a safer, kinder, more generous and fascinating place than many of us give it credit for. Wherever you go, near or far, long or short, alone or with a companion, may you return with a renewed appreciation for yourself and for this big wide wonderful world we all share.

Bon Voyage!

Tours, Homestays, and Volunteering

As much as I love to travel solo, it can get lonely. That's one reason I prefer to stay in hostels, where I'm able to meet people in the dorms and common areas. In addition, the staff is more likely to have time to share information and suggestions. Many hostels also organize budget-friendly local group excursions. Volunteer work, language schools, and homestays are other ways to interact with travelers and locals. If a place I want to travel doesn't have any of these options, or if I don't know someone there, I may consider a tour.

I resisted tours for years. I do not like being herded around in a big group, or standing in one place for long minutes listening to a guide drone on. I want the freedom to wander unhindered, or to stay longer if I like a place. I also assumed I couldn't afford a tour.

When I planned a trip to Morocco with my husband in 2013, it turned out that a small group tour was less expensive than trying to do the same itinerary ourselves, and would allow us to pack more into two weeks than we could have done on our own. The tour was a positive experience, so a few years later we signed on for a seven-week overland trip through eight countries in Africa.

Camping in tents that we set up ourselves each night, and helping with cooking and dishwashing, meant the tour was much cheaper than paying for hotels and restaurants and safari camps. Not to mention the logistics of renting a car, crossing borders, and arranging visits to parks, villages, and remote sights, which would have been daunting. The tour exceeded my wildest expectations.

Tours can also make it easier to get out of cities and into the countryside, especially if you don't want to rent a car or bike. Solo hiking, for example, can be a challenge in a foreign country, due to transportation logistics, and safety (if you take a fall or twist an ankle with no one around).

The Camino de Santiago in northern Spain, with its network of hostels and wayfinding signs, is one exception. In 2024 I hiked a short section

of the Camino as a solo sixty-fifth birthday pilgrimage. I loved every minute of walking in the countryside and wanted to do more, so I decided to look for a tour that included hiking. In 2025 I embarked on a one-week, small-group hiking tour of Jordan. We trekked through stunningly scenic areas I could never have explored alone. Tacking a couple of days onto the beginning and end of the tour gave me a good balance between solo and group travel.

Tours can also give you access to villages, homes, and local culture. Communities around the world have learned that tourism can generate much-needed revenue, especially for women, via home stays, dancing or singing performances, meals and cooking classes, or selling and teaching crafts. These organized experiences can be a fabulous way to meet local people and learn about their lives without feeling voyeuristic or exploitative. They are often the highlight of a trip, but can be hard to suss out on your own—is it legit, how much should you pay or tip, are you actually wanted there? Tour companies have worked out arrangements in advance, so you can just savor the experience without any awkwardness about money or wondering if you're welcome.

When I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Togo, West Africa, in the mid-1980s, I had a motorcycle. One day several of us rode to a remote village known for its unusual mud tower-houses—two-story cylindrical huts with pointed thatch roofs. This was not yet a tourist destination, and there were no organized tours. An old woman offered to show us her dwelling, but afterward she demanded money. We had naively assumed that she was simply happy to have visitors admire her house—we had never been asked for money when visiting other villages. We didn't begrudge her the money, but it was an awkward situation that somewhat soured the experience.

In contrast, on my Africa overland trip thirty-five years later, we visited several villages. At a Masai compound in Tanzania, we spent the morning cooking and laughing with local women, then ate together. They taught us how to make beaded bracelets, gave us tours of their houses, and showed us how they used a mixture of clay, cow dung, and water to repair and waterproof their walls. The tour company took care of payment, so there was no guessing how much to pay or tip. Instead,

I could just immerse myself in the joy of interacting with these inspiring women and learning about their lives. They seemed to genuinely enjoy spending time with us, and I left with a glowing sense of connection.

On that same tour we visited a San (formerly known as Bushmen) village in Botswana. The people performed traditional songs and dances and encouraged us to take pictures. We happily purchased their beautiful jewelry made from seeds and ostrich shells, knowing it had been made by them. They seemed truly proud to share their culture.

In the Brazilian Amazon, our guide, who had lived in the area for all of his eighty years and knew the local river tribes, took us to a Tuyuca village. He had asked the people whether they would be willing to teach visitors about their culture, and earn some income. In a traditional ceremonial building on the bank of the river, the proud chief warmly welcomed us and talked about his culture and language. Tattooed Tuyucans in feathered headdresses performed heartfelt dances with sacred instruments. We sampled forest foods, including fried ants, and purchased jewelry made from local materials—I bought a necklace of red and black seeds with a caiman tooth pendant. That day remains one of my travel highlights.

All this to say that I am now open to taking tours, especially if it gets me access to things that would be difficult to do on my own.

There are many tour companies out there, at all price levels. Ask people you know for recommendations, and then check the company's website to see if they offer tours in your budget and travel style. I've had great experiences with Intrepid, which offers a range of options.

Check carefully to see what is and isn't included. Read all of the trip information to make sure the itinerary and physical demands fit your interests and mobility. If you're flexible, many companies offer great last-minute deals.

Cultural immersion experiences can also be had via homestays. In 2013 I lived for a week with a host family in a village in Guatemala. A grassroots charity had been helping women there form weaving cooperatives, but the market for woven scarves and tablecloths had cooled, and sales were down. Together with the weavers, the

organization developed a homestay program as an alternate way for the women to earn money.

Any woman who wanted to host tourists had to go through a training program where she and her family learned about the importance of hand washing, filtered water, and nutritious food for keeping “illness-prone gringos” healthy. The side effect was better health for the families, while giving visitors like me an unparalleled cultural immersion experience.

I also lived with host families when I attended two language immersion schools in Mexico.

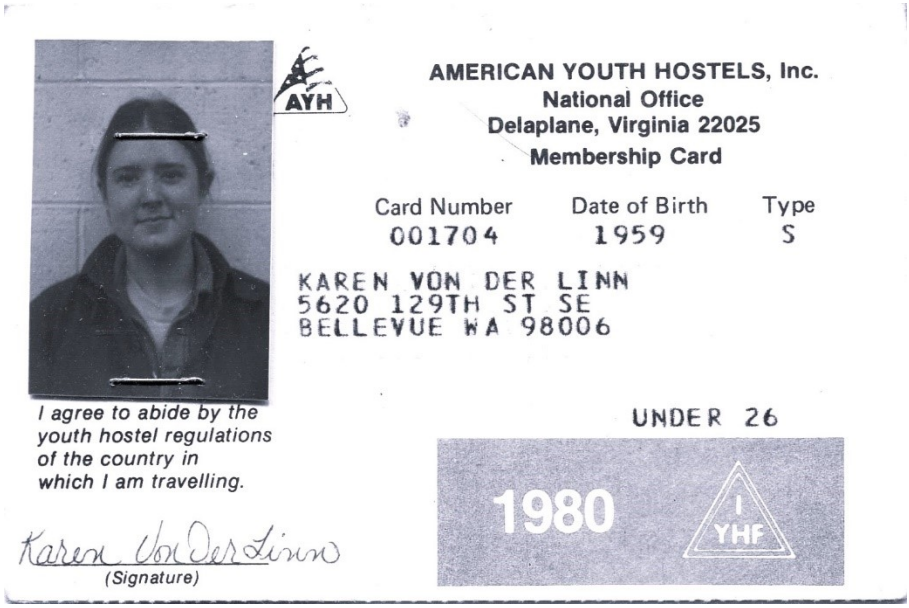
Before signing on for a home stay, language school, or volunteer program, get recommendations, read online reviews, ask questions, and make sure you understand the costs, and what is included.

Packing list

My packing list has changed over the years, as products have gotten better and lighter, and as my travel style has evolved. Since needs vary from trip to trip, I keep a "master" list on my computer, and make a copy I can modify for each trip. Here is a comparison between what I packed in 1980 and what I would pack for the same trip today (minus obvious things like underwear).

1980	**2025**
Wool pants and jeans	2 pair synthetic quick-dry long pants
1 pair tights + thermal shirt	Light long underwear top and bottom (for sleeping or extra warmth)
2 t-shirts, several long sleeve shirts	2 smart wool quick dry long sleeve base layer shirts (low odor, plus sun protection)
Light sweater	Light sweater if needed for "dressing up"
Flannel shirt	Hooded zip-front synthetic sweatshirt
Rain poncho (doubles as ground cloth)	Rain jacket (plus poncho if rain expected)
Wool hat and gloves	Scarf/hat/gloves (lightweight & compact extra warmth)
Wrap skirt	
Leotard (remember those?)	
Bathing suit	Bathing suit
Shorts	My travel pants roll up, but I prefer the sun protection of long pants
	Small down blanket (if cold weather expected)
Running shoes	Lightweight hiking boots
Huarache sandals	Comfortable walking sandals I can also wear in communal showers
2 hankies	2 hankies or bandanas
Camera and film	Cell phone with charger and cord
2 paperbacks	E-books on cell phone
Let's Go Europe guidebook (cut into sections)	Guide books on cell phone
Portuguese, Greek, Spanish, and French mini dictionaries	Google Translate (download language dictionaries ahead)
Hardback journal & pen	Spiral bound journal and pens

Pocket clock/alarm/calculator	Cell phone
Water bottle	Two half-liter water bottles (fit better in airplane and backpack pockets)
Bowl and cup, chopsticks, spoon	Heavy-duty disposable knife/fork/spoon plus ziplock baggies and a small lidded container for packing snacks or stashing leftovers
Money belt with passport, youth hostel pass, student ID card, driver's license, insurance card, medical shot record, emergency info, traveler's checks	Money belt with passport, credit card, ATM card, driver's license
Small notebook with duplicate addresses, plus passport and traveler's check numbers	Cell phone for notetaking and contact info; Photos of passport/credit card/etc. on the cloud
Personal toiletries	Personal toiletries
Toilet paper	Kleenex
Sewing kit with safety pins	Sewing kit with safety pins
Thin cord for clothesline, 2 clothes pins	Thin cord for clothesline, 2 clothes pins
Nail clippers	Nail clippers
Flashlight	Rechargeable headlamp; cell phone flashlight
Jackknife	Only if I'm checking a bag, which I avoid doing
First aid kit (bandaids and aspirin)	First aid kit: bandaids (large and small), hydrocolloid blister pads, Neosporin
Sunglasses	Sunglasses
Shoulder bag purse	Small fanny pack
Glue stick for poorly sticking stamps or envelopes, and to glue ticket stubs into my journal	Glue stick for adding things to journal
	Quick dry towel and washcloth
	Mosquito repellent and anti-itch cream
	Local outlet adapter, earbuds, charger cords
	Face masks for airport, planes, trains, busses
	Daypack
	Sun and/or rain hat
	2 pair earplugs + comfortable sleeping mask



My youth hostel card

Also by Karen Story

Travelogues: nwnative.us/Trips.html

A Yovo In Togo: My Peace Corps Experience in West Africa 1985 to 1987, available at nwnative.us/Karen/Portfolio/YovoBook.htm.