

April, 2005

Two years ago my mother was doing a particularly thorough cleaning of our family home (and attic). In the process, she uncovered a bundle of letters that I, as an 18 year old, had sent home from a 6 month trip trying to reach India. I had not seen those letters since I had written them more than a third of a century before. They are fresh windows into an old adventure that has become largely memory and stories: David Bergen as a young guy, on his own and wandering around the world.

I still remember that feeling. High school had finished in June 1967. The plan was to go on to university. I was on a journey with many years of schooling behind me and many ahead. And then I stepped off that particular train. I quit, dropped out, and went to work. The plan was to raise funds for half a year and then spend the next half year wandering the world, with getting to India as a possible objective. It was an amazing time - a first brush with the freedom and possibilities of adulthood. A time of huge confidence and without the experience of setbacks and complexities that life throws at us, which transform us from unbridled optimists into more realistic and cautious human beings.

On January 5, 1968, I was at the Kitchener CNR station standing in the snow with my family and backpack, waiting for the train. It was going to take me to Toronto and from there across Canada, on the first step of that trip. Suddenly I discovered that my train ticket was missing. There was a great flurry of activity that saw my mother drive back home to look for it and a general unpacking of the pack. The ticket reappeared, having been hidden away in a safe place. My mother returned, the train arrived, I hugged everybody goodbye, got on the train and was off¹.

The trip was recorded in a journal that I kept episodically, and in those long lost letters. They offer interesting views into those travels and how things were in the eyes of that 18 year old.

Journal: Day 2 (Sat, Jan 6)

Day 2, 12:00 - my first entry since I was too exhausted for words in Day 1.

Endless trees spring, snow-laden against grey skies, rush past my window. The train sways relentlessly. I'm so unorganized it hurts, but this will be remedied in Winnipeg. We stopped in a bleak northern town and I stepped outside into glorious cold, such a change from the suffocating warmth of our car.

During the early part of the trip I stayed with relatives that were strategically located across Canada. The price was right and it was an easy way to get used to independence. I spent time on the docks in Vancouver trying to work passage on a freighter across the Pacific. Although I

¹ It was not until a few years ago that my mother confessed that much of her panic was the thought "Oh, no - he's going to be here for another day!" Apparently I was thought to be a more difficult teenager than I had realized, and my departure for the far side of the world was seen as a good thing all around. Being a good mother, however, she hid her relief at my departure and I felt missed and loved for my entire time away. More loved than missed, I now realize - what with being a fairly determined oldest child and all.

was on a number of vessels, I wasn't able to arrange things, so I decided to head down to San Francisco and try there.

Letter: Day 32 (Mon, Feb 5)

Tomorrow I leave for San Francisco. In a few weeks you'll be getting a bundle of clothes etc. There's a roll of film which needs developing (if you're interested in the pictures up 'til now). The guy I was going to S.P. with isn't going because he has to get some papers from home and they haven't arrived yet. Has Karl destroyed the serenity of my room yet? How is Grandpa's recovery coming? Tell him I hope that he's well soon and say hello to Grandma.

Letter: Day 37 (Sat, Feb 10)

I'm in Eureka, California, staying in an ancient hotel. I bussed from Vancouver to Portland, where I stayed at the Y. I hitchhiked from Portland to Lincoln City (near Taft) in Oregon. I liked the Pacific coast and stayed there for 3 days and yesterday I went by bus to Port Orford and today to Eureka. Tomorrow I should be in San Francisco. I would have hiked all the way down but I got the word that hiking down the coast tends to be a dangerous way to travel. This isn't Canada.

Journal: Day 39 (Mon, Feb 12)

San Francisco is the most beautiful city I've ever seen, and the most terrifying. It's too big and I'm alone. I arrived here today and already some guys have tried to pick me up: "like to come up for a cup of coffee?" and as I walk by: "you got a girl? You got a nice white girl for tonight?" This is all pretty much out of my experience.

Letter: (undated)

I'm in San Francisco, sort of a wildly beautiful place. I'm flying down to Uncle Peter's in Chicago and then to Europe.

Journal: Day 46 (Mon, 19 Feb)

I've been twice across the continent and 46 days out from home and I'm averaging \$5.28 a day. But the next slice hurts - \$225 to Portugal. I like it at Uncle Peter's. Chicago isn't as interesting as San Francisco. It's just a big ugly city. But there are more free things. Picasso - is he putting us on? Monet is great.

It is worth noting here that I had been earning \$2.40 an hour (big money for a student in 1968) at Schneiders, job that now pays \$15.00, so multiply costs by a factor of 6 to get the equivalent in today's dollars.

Journal: Day 59 (Tues, March 5)

I have arrived. I have left the continent (North America) behind. Portugal, or Lisbon, to be more exact, is real, authentic. In my first day I blew \$9.00. That has to come down to \$2.50 or \$3.00. The people here are simple, unconcerned as to what is right and in. The standard of living is quite low and so living is very inexpensive. Bus is 4 cents and an elevator ride (up the side of a hill) 2 cents. So far I can get by with English, but have already have learned some Portuguese

(obrigado- thank you).

Journal: Day 62 (Fri, March 8)

An up look - I'm not sure. I'm on the brink of freedom, and I'm afraid of it. I can hitchhike anywhere if I am willing to get out there. And I think I will Tangiers, Marrakech, back to Lisbon, off to Istanbul. Good luck Bergen! And the drivers! Are brakes illegal in this country? I saw a woman flying across a street today after being hit by a car.

Letter: Day 67 (Wed March 13)

The kid is still in Lisbon, and now residing at the Hostel. I've found a guy and he has a car and together we're going on to Moscow or India (we hope! ! !).

Send money to Athens: David Bergen c/o American Express; PO Box 671; Athens, Greece

A shortage of funds seems to have developed. The usual plea to the parental units ensues.

Journal: Day 70 (Sat, March 16)

Perhaps one of the best days. We awoke in Porto to rain and cloud and ventured to a maker of Port wine (Calem). Maria, a young woman employed by the Calem Port Lodge, gave us a great tour, several glasses of wine (one 60 years old). She then invited us to dinner at her family's apartment overlooking the Duoro River. They had two servants. I had a martini, rice with octopus (boiled and fried) followed by a huge platter of beef cutlets, 2 large glasses of wine, a 1920 brandy and returned to the Port lodge where she opened a bottle of Port from 1897. Smooth and I was feeling mighty fine. Octopus is good.

Mennonite kid discovers wine, revealing some possible deficits in his sheltered upbringing.

Letter: Day 72 (Man, March 18)

And yet another letter to the home front. I'm in Madrid, a large, modern city. The \$ situation is getting interesting. I have \$210 left after I deduct the \$120 needed for gas for the trip. I'm travelling with Brian Gruhl, a guy from Hamilton with a 1955 Volkswagen and have 100 days to go. It works out to \$2 a day and on one meal a day I'm losing weight like its going out of style. So ... how would you like to provide me with a fantastic birthday present - something like 2 meals a day? Yes? Wonderful! Send it to DB c/o American Express, PO Box 671, Athens, Greece.

If the Portuguese were friendly, then the Spanish aren't. The country is beautiful, but no one is happy. And there the Guardia Civil is everywhere with unsheathed bayonets and real, ready to fire machine guns.

PS - we nearly got mobbed by a swarm of gypsies when we tried to take their picture, but we kept them happy with some \$.

The one meal a day was a considerable exaggeration, but it added pathos to my plea. We did become very familiar with bread, oranges and sardines however - our usual fare.

Letter: Day 80 (Tues, March 26)

Having arrived in Florence, I'm spending most of my time touring art galleries and sitting in the sun. I met some kids yesterday and we wandered about and then I splurged and had a bowl of spaghetti AND a pizza. It cost about 60 cents. SEND MONEY! I haven't been down to Athens yet, so I don't know what's waiting for me there, but I do know that that I'll need at least \$100 to get home on top of what I have now. Please send whatever is needed to make up this amount. I will even pay you back!!! My income tax returns should cover part of this. Europe seems very disorganized when compared to North America, but the people have a feeling of a very deep civilization about them.

Next on the itinerary is Rome, Pompeii, down through Yugoslavia to Greece (where I will position myself firmly upon some beach for 2 weeks), Turkey, up into Romania and Bulgaria, hopefully (if we have enough \$ and a visa) into Russia, also Russian roads aren't open to foreign cars until June 1, so, as I begin work on June 24, this could be a little tense.

Dishonesty is the big problem, since landing here I've been short -changed at least 10 times and I talked to a guy who had his car broken into 3 times in Naples. I watch my stuff pretty closely, especially my camera, film and passport. Our car is a 55 VW and we are hoping like mad that the thing holds together.

Journal: Day 86 (Mon, April 1)

Rome was really getting me down and I was glad to get out. What a rotten, confused and tedious place it was - maybe it was me. I love travelling and being on the move. Just sitting around a big place like that tends to get to me. I'm suffering a few pangs of homesickness, but I should hold out.

Afghanistan and India and Nepal are the places to be - we meet lots of kids that have been there and those places are reported to be amazing.

Journal: Day 92 (Sun, April 7)

Yugoslavia is great. We have travelled down the Adriatic and had to head inland to bypass Albania. Everyone has their own home, and there is friendliness, although reserved. The government is not intrusive; there are fewer police than I saw in Italy. The north is barren, but the south seems quite productive. There are still many peasants in the original context of the word, but the cities do have some sophistication. Most of the buildings are modern, indicating that the greatest changes have occurred just recently.

We camped, sleeping in the car all through Yugoslavia (the VW converts into a sleepable 6'2" bed if you take the backrest off the front seat and remove the rear backrest). We met an American (ex-army) and his French girlfriend. We spent 3 days with them. Could she cook!!

Feature this: night, camped beside a river in the Yugoslavian interior a full moon rising over the distant hills, a fire blazing, lonely songs (Sinatra) from a tape player and a great steak roast with lots of accompaniments. Steam locomotives traverse the night on the line behind us. What more could I want? When we woke up the next morning a shepherd was driving a flock of sheep through our campsite. We visited with him and two of his buddies. They were resistance fighters during the Second World War, fighting with Tito against the German occupation.

One of the great meals of my life, and one of the great camping spots - the joys of the open road.

Journal: Day 93 (Mon, April 8)

Athens: Tension ties my mind into knots. I'm sitting in the VW waiting for the mail from home - Brian has been away for a half hour getting it. We're parked on a side street. The sky ahead is white-golden haze. Two girls walk by holding hands. Billboards to my right cover the wall of a construction barrier. They are torn and shredded, advertising MONO toothpaste (who wants it?), BP Super Visco-static and such. All sorts of people walk by, yelling, laughing and talking.

PS - Mail came. Yahoo!!

Letter: Day 93 (Mon, April 8)

Athens: This being a great day in the life of a wanderer, I thought it a good thing to share. After a month or so of isolation, I got 9 letters from home, 4 being from you. Thanks. Also thank-you for the money - I really appreciate it and I'll try to bring back as much as possible. For the past week I've been looking forward to getting my mail and today the tension was unreal. We got to the American Express office, and it was closed for an hour and we sat around and waited and waited. The night before I dreamt that I got 1 letter and no money and when all of this finally came the relief was tremendous. I have \$220 plus the \$180 that you sent me and so I should survive. I had already conditioned myself to living on the former amount.

Russia appears to be out. We can't enter by car until June 1 and that's too late to really see much and it costs a lot. So we're going to Pakistan and India instead. As it appears now we're going to Istanbul, leaving the car there and bussing to Kuwait, selling some blood there (\$30 a pint we hear) and taking an Arabian dhow to Karachi or somewhere and then if time, \$ and health permit we're heading into India and perhaps Nepal or somewhere. Don't be surprised if a lot of this falls through. We're still groping for direction.

Maybe I'm getting old, but selling blood in Kuwait seems like a particularly dumb idea. Sadly, the dhow ride didn't materialize. We drove to Istanbul. We met travellers that had been everywhere and they agreed almost to a person that Istanbul was arguably the most remarkable city in the world. It is alive, chaotic and filled with thousands of years of history: first a thousand years or so of Byzantine Empire and then the Ottoman Turks. From there we took a train across Turkey, ending up in Erzurum, the end of the line. Thereafter we made our way to the Iranian border via a series of smaller and smaller buses.

Journal: Day 108 (Tues, Apr 23)

Border station at the Turkish - Iranian border. Day 108 has been rotten. A horrible, filthy, rotten day. Here I am at the Iranian border and no visa. A 24 hour wait and I want to get going. I must continue, and yet things will get worse and we have to return that long depressing way back through Turkey. And those flea bitten bus drivers overcharging us 5 lira each. Need to relax about all of this.

As I recall I was also suffering from serious intestinal upset at this point, requiring frequent visits to the really marginal facilities. One vivid memory is when the bus stopped for lunch at a village high in the mountains.

There was a young man with a remarkably swollen face, which I now realize was likely a serious

dental infection. The toilet facilities, apparently last cleaned early in the previous century, were built directly over a mountain stream, which then carried everything away to all the communities downstream.

Letter: Day 112 (Sat, Apr 27)

Failure, black and dismal stares me in the face. A cholera epidemic in Pakistan and Afghanistan has closed the borders between those countries and Iran thus effectively blocking our plunge into India. I'm in Teheran, Iran, one week from New Delhi and I can't go any further east. Actually, I can go further, but I can't get back into Iran and who wants to spend the next few months wallowing around in the monsoon rains of Pakistan, waiting for the border to reopen. It's not all bad: I have learned that there is nowhere in the world that I wouldn't survive; I'll come home a few days earlier (if we don't go up into Norway).

Teheran is a fantastic city. After the mud-hut civilization of Turkey and western Iran, this city amazingly western. They do have a bazaar (covered no less) here that goes on for 1/2 kilometre in each direction. A real maze. The border between here and Turkey turned out to be the low point of the trip. I was sick on some meat I had eaten in Turkey, the beds had bugs, it was cold and raining and we were stuck there waiting for a visa for Iran (which we had stupidly failed to obtain in Istanbul). Nothing good. The trip out of Istanbul and across Turkey was interesting. We (Brian and I) were travelling with an English guy and 3 drug-addicts (2 Americans and a Swede early 20's) who were off to Pakistan to buy heroin in Pakistan to resell in Europe. This was a regular run for them. They were smoking hash the whole way and we played 3 handed bridge.

We were considering Baghdad, but I heard it's just a dirty city with a strong anti-English sentiment.

In a sense it's a relief that the cholera epidemic occurred because according to travellers who got out of Pakistan before the borders closed, it's 110° F and climbing.

Everyone travelled in groups for reasons of security (things were fairly dodgy in eastern Turkey back then: bandits and Kurdish freedom fighters). The Americans were American deserters. They had been living outside the law for a while. Vietnam was in full war mode in those days, and because of the draft, there were basically no young American males travelling in Europe (or Asia) at that time. My daughter Maria, who has spent five months travelling through Europe recently reports that this is still the case - there are far more Canadians travelling than Americans. Given our relative numbers, it is interesting to speculate as to why this is.

Letter: Early May:

Hello back home,

I'm sitting by a riverside in the outskirts of Vienna. The sun is warm and a cool breeze is blowing. Vienna is a comfortable, old place, with all the trappings of an old empire and the warmth of a people who succeeded and are now devoting their lives to enjoying what they had achieved. After the disease and poverty of the east, the confusion of Istanbul and the drabness of Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary, this place really appeals to me. Things are more costly, but there is no fear of poor quality or of being cheated. Everything is beautiful and European in the best sense of that word.

Our car is getting new tires on the 2 rear wheels due to the stern warnings of a policeman who threatened to impound the beast due to baldness.

For the last six weeks I have got my living costs down to \$1.00 per day. This will change as we move north. In Sofia, Bulgaria we met quite a few students who fed us and showed us around and gave us a place to sleep. Up in a mountain resort we saw some North Vietnamese officials and many Russians who had come to Bulgaria for a vacation. It was a very humanly oriented city with many trees and beautiful streets.

Bucharest, Romania got our attention for about 2 hours before we left (fled). It was like Toronto with dirt streets and a vast low cost housing complex combined. Not worth revisiting.

Budapest was once a great city and has the buildings to prove it, but today it is empty and dead. It is amazing how communism has sucked the life out of these places.

The return of the author: Beyond this point, record keeping fell off to nonexistent - likely the transition from observer to participant. From Vienna we travelled up to Prague, Czechoslovakia where we found a flourishing society that was enjoying "The Prague Spring". The Russian tanks rolled in later that summer. From there we travelled through Germany, West and East, visited Berlin, West and East, and then were off to Holland. In Amsterdam I parted company with Brian, stayed with family friends and flew home in early June arriving with the proverbial (and actual) 23 cents in my pocket. I hitchhiked home from the airport, rang the front door bell sporting 6 months of hair growth and some very worn clothes. My mother answered the door and looked at me blankly. She did not recognize me until I smiled and said hello. Then there were warm greetings indeed. It was good to be home.

If there is one year in my life I could relive, this would be the one. It was a great roller coaster ride through life, countries, cultures and experiences. It was a time of endless possibilities. Times like those do not come often.