

Safarnameh

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Safarnameh: A Traveller's Journey Along the Hippie Trail

Trevor W. Harrison

Safarnameh

Trevor W.
Harrison

*A Traveller's Journey Along
the Hippie Trail*

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To Ahmad, Maude, Moira, Rainer, Sandra, and Wybet

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Contents

Preface	ix
Acknowledgements	xiii

Introduction	i
1 Beginnings	25
2 Istanbul	37
3 Detained in Syria	45
4 Turkey Beyond Istanbul	53
5 In the Shah's Shadow	59
6 The Pearl of Khorasan	75
7 Wyhet	87
8 The Road to Kabul	97
9 Kabul	107
10 Into the Hindu Kush	119
11 The Khyber Pass	129
12 Echoes of the Raj	137
13 Into India	149

14	From Agra to Benares	165
15	Bombay	171
16	Moirā	175
17	The End of the Trail	189
18	You Can Never Go Home Again	195
	Afterword	201
	A Note on Interviews and Surveys	207
	Bibliography	209

Preface

It is quite true what philosophy says, that life must be understood backward. But then one forgets the other principle, that it must be lived forward.

—Søren Kierkegaard, from *Journal JJ* (1843)

Memories are undisciplined things. They rise up unbeckoned from a fog, conjured up by faint smells, sounds, or sights, sometimes even becoming the fog itself. Then they evaporate, until brought to life again.

As a twenty-three-year-old, I travelled overland from Turkey to India during the second half of 1976 and early 1977. When I travelled next to India, in 1983, the region had significantly changed. The Iranian Revolution of 1978–79 and the start of decades-long warfare in Afghanistan made the overland trek impossible. Instead, I flew from Athens to New Delhi (via Cairo and Karachi), from where I took a bus first to Kashmir and then to Ladakh, which had only recently opened to tourists. But I too had changed. I was seeking some sort of stability in my life, feeling a need to put down roots, so I ended up returning to Canada after only four months. The years that followed saw me embrace marriage, children, and the university, first as a student, later as a professor of sociology.

Over the next many years, these commitments kept my thoughts, my emotions—my life—tethered to Canada. Occasionally, something called up a memory. (Even now, the smell of diesel has a particular power to transport me.) For the most part, however, my recollections of the time I spent in the Middle East and South Asia remained dormant.

All that changed after 9/11. Within weeks of al-Qaeda's terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, Canadian troops became part of a US-led military action in Afghanistan that aimed to capture the attack's instigator, Osama bin Laden, overthrow the Taliban regime, end the threat of further attacks, and ultimately install a democratic government. Of course, peace and democracy were not the result, neither in Afghanistan nor in Iraq. Priorities differ, and antagonisms run deep.

In the months and years that followed, as I watched events unfold on television or the Internet, or read about them in the daily press, I found myself frequently carried back in memory to my journeys. In my dreams, I found myself once again backpacking through narrow, irregular streets in tiny towns, or sitting in cafés, talking to local hotel owners, vendors, and students and watching old men sip chai. I saw hard-working men pushing wooden carts and mothers leaning from windows to call down to their children playing in the streets. Or I rode buses, their roofs crowded with chickens and sheep, as my senses were bombarded by the smell of diesel, the sound of voices shouting, and the jarring sight of competing colours. It was a raucous world, filled with both squalor and splendour—authentic and human, for all of that.

Gradually, I came to realize that a part of me had never really awakened from my time travelling in the Middle East. It was an unexamined story—and what are our lives if not the sum of stories? I had to return to the stories from these travels to understand how they have shaped my life in the years afterwards.

I began writing this book as an academic. But as I wrote and rewrote it, I became acutely aware that I was engaging in a different kind of writing—a different kind of journey—as both subject and observer: a dialogue between the youth who made the journey and the aging man who now was remembering—or reimagining—the experience. What began as a scholarly treatise became a journey of personal rediscovery, a story, as William Wordsworth would have it, of the youth, with all his faults and foibles, who gave birth to the man.

This book has been long in gestation, in part the result of a lack of concentrated time to work, in part because I was wrestling with my role as narrator—am I an active subject or a neutral recorder? A third

impediment, which quickly became apparent as I began formal work on the project in 2008, was the relatively small cache of materials then available about travel to India during the period in question—materials that might help me to better reflect on my experience. A genuine benefit of this book's prolonged birth, however, has been the publication of several personal memoirs and the growth of Internet websites containing secondary data, the personal reminiscences of others, and photographs. The additional time also allowed me to conduct a series of interviews with many individuals who also made the journey. Their recollections stimulated and augmented my own.

This is not the book I thought I would write when I began. But writing a book is also a kind of journey. You never quite know what you have written until it is done. I trust readers will find the result worthwhile.

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Introduction

The road is life.

—Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*

In January 1976, David Dudeck and I flew from Toronto, Canada to London, England. After a brief stop there, we ferried to the continent and then took a Magic Bus to Athens. From Athens, we flew to Israel, where we lived and worked on a kibbutz in the Negev Desert for just short of three months. At that point, I flew back to Athens alone and took a ferry from the port of Piraeus to the islands of Lesbos and Samos. On June 11, I ferried to the Turkish port of Kuşadasi, on the Aegean coast about a hundred kilometres south of the city of İzmir. Thus began my overland travel to India.

Passport stamps and my personal notes provide a fairly clear account of dates thereafter. From Kuşadasi, I took a bus to the nearby town of Selçuk, site of the ruins of ancient Ephesus. From there, I made my way south, and by mid-June I was in Antalya, on Turkey's southern coast, a city I described as "big and bustling, torn between building and tearing down," before heading east to the beaches of Side, an ancient Greco-Roman port, newly awash with discos and the music of the Bee Gees. From there, I travelled north again, to İzmir, Bergama, and then Istanbul. After several days in Istanbul, I journeyed southeast to Adana and finally to Gaziantep, not far north of the Syrian border. I entered Syria on July 1 but returned to Turkey a week later and continued east to the city of Diyarbakir and the area around Lake Van, on the eastern Anatolian plateau. Throughout this period, I met few Westerners. I travelled exclusively by local bus,

conversing as best I could with Turkish villagers by way of a two-way Turkish–English dictionary.

On July 15, I crossed into northwestern Iran at the Gürbulak–Bazargan border station. I reached Tehran the next day, where I stayed for the better part of a week before travelling east to Mashhad and then entering Afghanistan through the Taybad–Islam Qala crossing. Late July saw me in the city of Herat, where I stayed nearly two weeks. At that point, I was lured back to Europe by what I might call a romantic errand: I was hoping to reconnect with a young Swiss woman I’d met in Greece before she left for Africa to join an aid mission in Zambia. To my disappointment, though, I learned that she was on holiday in Mexico. So, in the end, I turned around and travelled back to Turkey, arriving on September 26.

My eastern journey thereafter was fairly straightforward. From Ankara, the Turkish capital, I travelled more or less due east to the Iranian border and from there to Tehran and the Afghan border, then on to Herat again. This time, I stayed in Afghanistan, continuing southeast to Kandahar and then north to Kabul, with a side trip inland to Bamiyan and the lakes of Band-e Amir. I crossed the border into Pakistan on October 28 and proceeded to India from Lahore on November 3. My travels over the next two months took me first to New Delhi, Agra, and Benares (present-day Varanasi), before I headed south to Bombay (now Mumbai) and the former Portuguese colony of Goa, the latter in early December.¹ In early February, I returned to New Delhi with the intention of flying to Zambia, but severe pneumonia cut short these plans. Instead, I returned to Canada on February 8, 1977. Such was the basic itinerary of the journey I describe in this book—my *safarnameh*.

JOURNEYS

Safarnameh is a Persian word meaning an account of a journey or travel. In her study of the *safarnameh* in nineteenth-century Iranian literature, Monica Ringer notes that travel has historically been viewed not only as a

1. The names of a number of cities have changed since my travels. I use the older name, which was current at the time, but on first mention I provide the newer name.

means of getting from one place to another but as a transformational experience.² Travel may also involve a journey of reflection, a re-experiencing or reinterpretation—or even recognition for the first time—of a previous journey. And so, this book.

My journey in 1976 followed a sprawling and ill-defined route that came to be known as the Hippie Trail. At the time, that term was only beginning to come into circulation, indeed I don't personally recall anyone who used it. (Moreover, few travellers referred to themselves as hippies.)

The route that I and many others took eastward to India was broadly similar to that of the more famous Silk Road, along which trade goods flowed from China to the West. Like the Hippie Trail, the Silk Road was neither a single route nor clearly defined. Rather, it was an assemblage of what Nick Danziger describes as several “organized caravan routes,” or, in Colin Thubron's words, “a shifting fretwork of arteries and veins.”³ From China, one of its principal branches ran to the north of the Taklamakan Desert westward across Central Asia to Mashhad, in the far northeast of Iran, while a more southerly branch went through Kashmir to Taxila (a city now in northern Pakistan) and then west to Kabul and onward to Iran. The Hippie Trail most closely paralleled the latter.

I was one of perhaps millions of young people from the West who journeyed to India during the 1960s and 1970s. Our exact number is unknown. In *The Hippie Trail: A History*, Sharif Gemie and Brian Ireland suggest that the total was at least in the hundreds of thousands and more likely a few million.⁴ Tourist data from the International Union of Official Travel Organizations for the period from 1959 to 1979 point to a similarly broad but indeterminate range.⁵ Regardless of our number, though, we

2. See Monica M. Ringer, “The Quest for the Secret of Strength in Iranian Nineteenth-Century Travel Literature: Rethinking Tradition in the *Safarnameh*,” 148–49.

3. Nick Danziger, *Danziger's Travels: Beyond Forbidden Frontiers*, 7; Colin Thubron, *Shadow of the Silk Road*, 24.

4. Sharif Gemie and Brian Ireland, *The Hippie Trail: A History*, 6.

5. I draw here on statistics I compiled from the International Union of Official Travel Organizations, *International Travel Statistics*, for the years from 1959 to 1979. (Note that in 1975 the International Union of Official Travel Organizations became the

were a new kind of traveller, of a type that emerged in the Western world after 1945. We were the rebellious offspring of tourists. The latter, too, were an historical type that first put in an appearance around the middle of the nineteenth century and who, by the 1950s, had become customers of a growing commercial industry. Whereas in 1950 the number of tourists worldwide was a scant 25 million, over the following two decades postwar prosperity, changes in transportation, a series of cultural shifts, and simple demographics transformed travel into a mass phenomenon—what John Urry has evocatively described as an immense flow of “corporeal travel” involved in the “omnivorous producing and ‘consuming [of] places’ from around the globe.”⁶ By 2018, two years before COVID put a temporary halt to travel, the international tourism industry was servicing an estimated 1.4 billion customers, catering to a growing assortment of tastes, lifestyles, and expectations and to a range of consumers, irrespective of age, class, gender, or sexual orientation.⁷

The infrastructure of mass tourism enabled my generation to travel with relative ease, but broader cultural changes, discussed below, also created a desire for a different kind of travel experience. Many of us increasingly rejected the idea of pre-packaged travel in favour of what we viewed as a more authentic experience. The *idea*—the *meaning*—of travel subtly changed into an activity intimately tied to the search for and

World Tourism Organization, which later changed its acronym to UNWTO.) These statistics are admirably detailed, allowing one to determine how many people from a given Western country entered one of the Hippie Trail countries in a particular year. Yet the same person might have crossed the same border more than once in a given year (as I did in 1976, in the case of Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan), and of course not everyone entering a country was travelling on the Hippie Trail. As a result, estimates vary considerably for each combination of nationality, country of entry, and year.

6. John Urry, “Globalizing the Tourist Gaze,” 141; “[of]” in the original.

7. For more about these shifts in the tourist industry, see Peter Robinson, Sine Heitmann, and Peter U. C. Dicke, *Research Themes for Tourism*, especially Heitmann’s essay “Tourist Behaviour and Tourism Motivation.” On the initial transition from travel to tourism, see Daniel Boorstin, “From Traveler to Tourist: The Lost Art of Travel,” 84–85.

creation of identity. Many of us found the perfect locale for less commercialized travel in our idealized images of India.

For many decades, travel to the Middle and Far East remained largely an elite exercise, indulged in by generally well-to-do Westerners, often British. In the period from the late nineteenth century through to the Second World War, adventurers such as Lady Anne Blunt and her husband, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, Gertrude Bell, T. E. Lawrence, Freya Stark, Robert Byron, and Wilfred Thesinger all ventured into these regions. The mid- and late-1950s saw a host of other British adventurers travel further, to India. Among them were members of the Oxford and Cambridge Far Eastern Expedition, who drove from London to Singapore in a pair of Land Rovers; Michael Marriott and Nita Marriott, who journeyed by scooter from Britain to Australia; and Eric Newby, who travelled Afghanistan's Panjshir Valley, accompanied by diplomat Hugh Carless.⁸ In 1956–57, RAF Group Captain Peter Townsend and travel writer and adventurer Barbara Toy both travelled through Central Asian countries on their respective round-the-world journeys.⁹

For the most part, these elite adventurers made the journey heavily equipped, which allowed them to travel quite independently, with relatively minimal need to rely on local people and resources. By contrast, conventional tourism preferred to shun local resources altogether—its customers wary of accommodations that were often rudimentary and not necessarily very clean, of food and beverages that might not be safe to consume, of transportation that could be crowded and uncomfortable, as well as unpredictable, and of service that didn't align with Western expectations.

Such conditions were not an attraction compared to the allure of Hawai'i or the Costa del Sol. As the 1960s began, however, increasing numbers of young Westerners saw the lack of conventional comforts not

8. Tim Slessor, *First Overland: London-Singapore by Land Rover*; Michael Marriott, "Two-Up": *By Scooter to Australia*; and Eric Newby, *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*.

9. Peter Townsend, *Earth, My Friend*; Barbara Toy, *Columbus Was Right! Rover Around the World*.

as off-putting but as a challenge and an enticement, to which cheap costs and the mysteries of the East were an added bonus. The cohort of which I was a part were still tourists, but we tended to embrace less conventional travel as a means of self-discovery and rebirth.

TRAVEL AND SELF

This alternative mode of travel bears a strong likeness to the traditional pilgrimage. In both cases, the latter especially, a sacred site may constitute the journey's end, be it Mecca or Lourdes or the Sri Aurobindo ashram in Pondicherry (now Puducherry). In both instances the traveller seeks some form of transformative spiritual communion. In a traditional pilgrimage, this communion is closely associated with humility and worship, with the pilgrim subordinate to a greater source of power, whereas for modern pilgrims the communion is largely an interior process that involving a search for, or re-formation of, the self. In the words of Paul Theroux, "Travel holds the magical possibility of reinvention," the possibility, as Michael Barnes and Jayne Hoose argue, "of genuine change—and therefore self-transformation"—even if the traveller does not want to be changed.¹⁰ This is because, in the extreme, travel forces a person to be alone with their "self."

As Paul Theroux notes, travel is often characterized by solitude, disconnection, anonymity, temporariness, and loneliness.¹¹ But these conditions also compel the traveller to be—in the current terminology—"in the present," to be "mindful." Real travel cannot be navigated on automatic pilot. As Stephanie Rosenbloom argues in *Alone Time*, travelling on one's own can be both a creative and restorative experience, a chance to escape the "noise" of everyday life and reconnect with one's inner self. And because travel enables travellers to remain anonymous and disconnected from those they know and who know them, it also gives them a chance to try on new roles and identities.

10. Paul Theroux, *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star: On the Tracks of the Great Railway Bazaar*, 3; Michael Barnes and Jayne Hoose, "Tourists or Travellers? Rediscovering Pilgrimage," 25.

11. Theroux, *The Great Railway Bazaar*, 5 and 123.

Leaving home entails a voluntary, if unconscious, stripping of the inward and outward symbols of one's previous identity, a boiling down to one's essential character, which, by this very process, "emerges as though from an ordeal, fortified and wiser" and is thus "freed up for the creation of new realities and new selves."¹² One's past identity may seem to vanish as time on the road increases. Information about what is happening "back home" loses its intensity, acquiring instead an aura of nostalgia. The other world recedes, even as what Tim Severin terms "critical detachment" becomes necessary for psychological and emotional survival in the new environment.¹³ Travellers may often find themselves caught in a liminal space, marked by a tension between a self left behind and one not yet fully formed.¹⁴

Such lofty talk of self-transformation might risk making travellers sound a little like ascetics, renouncing worldly pleasures in favour of spiritual exercises aimed at achieving some form of transcendence. Far from it. As Ian Littlewood notes in *Sultry Climates: Travel and Sex*, the lure of travel is not necessarily intellectual, spiritual, or tied to the pursuits of high culture. Eroticism and sex are a frequent, sometimes obvious, sometimes hidden, element of travel—and, in any case, spirituality and sensuality are often kindred spirits, twin paths of self-knowledge and creation. For many of us who travelled to India during the 1960s and 1970s, there was no puritan separation of the spiritual and the sexual. Sensual pleasure was an intense part of a personal journey.

THE BIRTH OF THE COUNTERCULTURAL TRAVELLER

During my time on the road, I saw travellers run the gamut from those driving well-equipped travel vans to backpackers carrying small kerosene cookers and pots and pans to a few others with a blanket, a copy of Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*, and not much more. Some had carefully

12. Ringer, "The Quest for the Secret of Strength," 149.

13. Tim Severin, *Tracking Marco Polo*, 158.

14. See the first chapter, "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual," in Victor Turner's *From Ritual to Theatre*.

mapped out their journey; others had only a vague idea of geography, their destination circumscribed by wherever a bus ticket would take them. Some remained connected to the world at home, looking forward to letters waiting at the next Poste Restante; others were adrift and blank-eyed, floating from one hippie haven to another. Some had been travelling only a few weeks or months; others had been travelling for years. Some had clear plans of returning home; others no longer had a real and permanent home to which to return. Some were seeking enlightenment through religion; others an escape through drugs; and many simply an adventure. What we bore in common was a commitment to the journey, irrespective of—and sometimes even encouraged by—minor inconveniences or actual hardships in a region ill-equipped for traditional tourism.

The countercultural traveller did not emerge from nowhere, but out of specific material and cultural conditions. My own life is perhaps instructive. I was born in Edmonton, Alberta, in 1952 to middle-class parents. For most of my growing years, my father was an autobody mechanic, though in his forties he went to university and was later ordained as a United Church minister. My mother was an administrator at the city's largest hospital. Both had served in the Canadian military, my father as a radio reconnaissance operator in a Staghound armoured car in northern Europe after D-Day; my mother as an air force administrator in Ottawa. Their lives, coming out of the Second World War, were a testament to guarded optimism.¹⁵

Though born seven years after war's end, I was very much a child of that conflict. Although my parents seldom spoke about the war, movies,

15. As I later discovered, several of the individuals I interviewed also had parents who served overseas during the war. Trish Flindall's father, for example, spent four years fighting in Egypt. Roger Ledressay's father fought in Europe, while Bruce Finch's father flew thirty-six RAF combat missions over Germany. Arthur (a pseudonym) similarly reported that his father flew with RAF Bomber Command and was eventually shot down, but managed to escape the German army with the help of the Dutch and Belgian underground. Margot Miller's father was also in the air force and flew dignitaries to the Far East, including India, after the war; in fact, he was in India at the time of Partition in 1947.

documentaries, and books regularly stirred embers of the war to memory. Perhaps more importantly, because it was a worldwide conflict, it gave me lessons in geography, such that by the time I was ten years old, my brain possessed a workable map of the world: its continents, countries, seas, and oceans. Moreover, as both my school and our home were filled with illustrated books about history, art, and architecture, this map was also fleshed out with images of places all around the globe. This imagined world became an extension of the real world where I grew up. I, and probably many others of my generation, took for granted that we would one day travel the globe.

My sense of place in the world, and of the opportunities it presented, was a product of a particular time and place. The growth of transportation systems, particularly the advent of mass air travel, made international travel possible. But several other important economic, socio-demographic, and cultural factors also preconditioned my cohort's later interest in traveling to India.

The economic period between 1945 and the mid-1970s was a Golden Age in the West, especially for North America's middle classes, although for many English and European citizens, whose countries had been scarred physically by war, the good times had to wait a little longer. One impact of this staggered prosperity was that proportionately more North Americans travelled to India in the mid-1960s than did their counterparts in Britain and Europe, a trend that changed only later in that decade as the economies of Britain and western Europe improved.¹⁶

The Golden Age coincided also throughout the West with a spike in birth rates between 1946 and 1966. The rates for the predominantly English-speaking countries of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States were especially high during the postwar years and did not substantially diminish until the end of the so-called

16. This shift in the proportional distribution of specific nationalities is evident in the statistics I compiled from the International Union of Official Travel Organizations, *International Travel Statistics*, 1959 to 1979.

“baby boom.” Many of those who travelled to India during the 1960s were born prior to 1946. By contrast, most of those making the journey in the 1970s, myself included, were baby boomers.

The likelihood of individuals making the journey was also a product of the West’s emergent socio-cultural milieu. As political scientist Ronald Inglehart famously argued in *The Silent Revolution* (1977), the values of the postwar generation differed from the values of the generation born before the Second World War. Among those who had lived through the war, the focus fell on security and the material comforts available in an era of postwar prosperity. Having known little by way of serious hardships, however, members of the subsequent generation could turn their attention to such things as autonomy, self-expression, and quality of life.

At the heart of the postwar ethos is the modern conception of the self, comprised of such values as personal freedom, individualism, spontaneity, and authenticity—values, as we earlier saw, central to the self-identity of the traveller. Newness and self-discovery were paramount. The self was a project that could only be found, or created, through new experiences—as mediated, for example, through drugs, alcohol, sex, music, or religion. But as an all-encompassing experiential vehicle that brings together each of these modalities, travel was the means par excellence. Albeit unconsciously, many of us who travelled abroad during the 1960s and 1970s were backstopped by a sense of material and psychological security, which, when combined with the sense of immortality typical of youth, allowed us to engage in a degree of adventuring, even risk-taking, that had been rare in previous generations.

Indeed, taking calculated risks became a necessary requirement of individual expression and personal growth. Travelling for many Western youths became part of a coming-of-age ritual in the West. Such rituals were not new but became increasingly common in the West after the late nineteenth century as adolescence came to occupy a distinctive life stage between childhood and adulthood, a stage during which young people were more or less expected to be rebellious.

While by the second half of the twentieth century socio-economic developments and technical advances had put long-distance travel within the reach of more people, popular culture in the form of films, literature, magazines, and music also provoked a desire to see the world. By the 1950s, travel writing had become its own genre, exemplified by the works of Jan Morris and Eric Newby, and major magazines regularly profiled far-away places. Fergus F. told me, for example, that his interest in travel was prompted in part by books and magazines depicting distant places. Specifically, he remembers seeing as a child a *National Geographic* photo of Buddhist monks in a Tibetan monastery and similar photos in *Travel + Leisure*, which stimulated a desire to travel, in his words, to “spectacular and exotic places.”

The emergent culture of travel was wedded not only to curiosity but to the psychological desire for freedom. Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) crafts a positive mythology about the liberating qualities of travel. The book is almost Homeric in tone, but its celebration of travel was decidedly in tune with the West’s emerging cultural values. Sharif Gemie and Brian Ireland note, for example, the book’s appeal not only to North American but also to British youth.¹⁷

The celebration of travel coincided with the growth of the auto industry. The car came to represent a measure of prosperity and status. Roads and highways were expanded, and gas stations built. In North America, especially, suburbs and shopping malls flourished. Travelling long distances by car remained an unusual, and often arduous, activity, but when such trips did occur—a once-in-a-lifetime trip to New York or Los Angeles, say—they left an indelible impression in people’s memory.

The car was not, however, simply an instrument of travel or an emblem of status. It spoke to the possibility of personal reinvention and freedom. Travel was a central theme of many television dramas, best depicted in

17. Sharif Gemie and Brian Ireland, *The Hippie Trail: A History*, 13.

the American television series *Route 66*, which I dutifully watched every Friday evening.

The show, which ran from 1960 to 1964, was a sanitized version of Jack Kerouac's novel. Its main characters (Buz and Tod) drove a red Corvette and each week met up with new and interesting characters. But mostly the show was about the romance and excitement of travel. The point was not to get somewhere. The point was the journey itself. This theme was repeated in other television shows of the time. *The Fugitive*, *The Invaders*, and even *Star Trek* were, like *Route 66*, travel tales—the first about an escaped convict seeking justice, the second about a man tracking down aliens come to earth, and the third about spreading liberal notions of justice throughout the universe.

Such shows and numerous other books contributed to the desire for travel that emerged in the late 1950s. Several people I interviewed mentioned the influence of Tom Wolfe's *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968), which followed the exploits of Ken Kesey and his band of LSD-tripping merry pranksters; James Michener's *Caravans* (1963), about the search for an American girl who marries an Afghan national and disappears into that country; and Heinrich Harrer's *Seven Years in Tibet* (1953).

In short, travel in the postwar period became valued for its own sake. It was now woven into the fabric of Western culture. But it was especially woven into the emergent selves of those of us growing up in the West who felt estranged from the dominant culture. That culture seemed, in Nino Gualtieri's words, "decadent, exploitative, and superficial." We sought an escape. Travel became thus an important element of the 1960s and 1970s youth counterculture.¹⁸

18. Theodore Roszak defined a counterculture as a "culture so radically disaffiliated from the mainstream assumptions of our society that it scarcely looks to many as a culture at all but takes on the alarming appearance of a barbaric intrusion." *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*, 42.

As goes without saying, not everyone wholeheartedly embraced countercultural values. Yet fear and insecurity did spawn a fairly widespread questioning of political authority, and in some cases an outright rejection. For many of us, economic security—which we largely took for granted—was offset by threats of nuclear and conventional war, social discord, alienation, racism, sexism, and environmental destruction, concerns that are still very much with us. The threat of nuclear annihilation touched everyone. I vividly remember the government pamphlets that arrived by mail telling our family how to build our very own bomb shelter (a pointless exercise, as some of us even then suspected), as well as the decisive evening of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

While much analysis of the counterculture focuses on the discontent felt by American youth and their rejection of Western values and culture, it is important to acknowledge that these responses were not confined to the United States. The year 1968 was tumultuous not only in the US, marked as it was by the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, but also in Europe, where student riots broke out in France and Germany and the Soviet Union brutally put down Alexander Dubček's reformist movement in Czechoslovakia. The same year saw widespread protests throughout the African continent by students, intellectuals, and workers against neo-colonialism, imperialism, authoritarian rule, and South African apartheid. I was living on the safe outskirts of a small city in Canada at the time, but I haven't forgotten the visceral anger I felt toward the Cold War belligerents, the US and the USSR. The counterculture, and the political rebellions it spawned, were transnational; figures such as Jerry Rubin, Che Guevara, Steven Biko, and Rudi Dutschke were well known to enraged youth on both sides of the Atlantic.

Similarly, the counterculture drew widely from a shared cultural well of writers, poets, and musicians. Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman, Arthur Rimbaud and Hermann Hesse, The Who, Bob Dylan, and Jimi Hendrix fuelled an idealist ethos that rejected convention in search

of an authentic self, born of nature, a lifestyle woven together by a tapestry of art, music, and literature, as well as love and hope, that again transcended borders. California's communes found an echo in Berlin and Munich, as well as in countless experiments in rural Canada. That Jim Morrison was buried in Paris's Père Lachaise Cemetery is symbolic of the cultural and international solidarity of youth during that period.

For at least some of us growing up in the West's countercultural milieu, travel was not only a means of youthful adventure but also an individual, and often unruly, expression of dissent, while for others travel became, if often unconsciously, both an escape *from* and a search *for*. We were engaged, we believed, in making a cultural change. We saw ourselves present at the birth of a new age in which freedom and justice would reign. Travel was a means of finding and articulating that new world.

At the same time, a desire for travel could—and did—manifest itself in numerous places. The question then is, why did so many of us, including me, choose India?

THE ORIENTALIST INFLUENCE

Mere weeks before I set off on my journey in 1976, I went to see *The Man Who Would Be King*. The movie, adapted from Rudyard Kipling's 1888 short story, stars the late Sean Connery and Michael Caine.¹⁹

The film is a classic example of Orientalism, a term coined by the Palestinian literary critic Edward Said "to describe the Western approach to the Orient: Orientalism is the discipline by which the Orient was (and is) approached systematically, as a topic of learning, discovery, and practice."²⁰ In the Western imagination, the Orient is a vast and undifferentiated area, stretching from what was once Persia to South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Far East. It is the world of the Other, people and places perceived as exotic, mysterious, and dangerous, and, in the most racist and demeaning

19. "The Man Who Would Be King" first appeared in *The Phantom Rickshaw and Other Eerie Tales*, a collection of short stories published in Allahabad in 1888, but was later reprinted as a stand-alone book.

20. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 73.

portrayals, ignorant, untrustworthy, and cowardly—“uncivilized” in traditional Western parlance.

As the twentieth century began, Western audiences were already flooded with many conventional, erroneous, but comfortable, images of the Orient produced by writers, poets, and artists. Books published prior to the war included Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901), E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), and James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* (1933); among the films were *Lives of the Bengal Lancer* (1935), *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1936), and *Elephant Boy* (1937). The early postwar era contributed Edmund Hillary's *High Adventure* (1955), and the films and television series *Casablanca* (1942), *King of the Khyber Rifles* (1953), and *Tales of the 77th Bengal Lancers* (1956–57). The catalogue of Orientalist images was subsequently augmented by writers such as Dervla Murphy and Paul Theroux, films such as *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and the aforementioned *The Man Who Would Be King* (1975), and songs such as the Crosby, Stills, and Nash classic, “Marrakesh Express” (1969), and Three Dog Night's “The Road to Shamballa” (1975).²¹

For Edward Said, Orientalism was an instrument of imperialism. For many in the West, however, Orientalism amounted more to an exercise in romanticization, with “the Orient” increasingly seen as a place not only of enormous allure but also of salvation. If the West was the home of crass materialism, the Orient was the locus of wisdom.

EASTERNIZATION: THE OTHER SIDE OF ORIENTALISM

On the Road was first and foremost a travel tale in the vein of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. But much of that book and, even more, of Jack Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* (1958) echoed another theme: the growing attraction of Eastern religion and culture.

21. Basil Jay, who travelled the Hippie Trail with his family in 1974, noted that the “beautiful cities” they passed through had already been “made romantic to us through the poems of the likes of Rudyard Kipling, or the Rubyat of Omar Khiam.” *65 Days to Delhi: An Incredible Journey*, 5 (spellings per the original).

Long before any of us began travelling to India, Eastern values, beliefs, and practices had already permeated the West's cultural walls. Sociologist Colin Campbell notes that early interest in eastern philosophies "was confined to a small, elite group of intellectuals, writers, and artists" but grew after the 1960s "to embrace large numbers of ordinary, if generally middle-class, people."²² Intellectuals such as Aldous Huxley encouraged this embrace through the dissemination of images that meshed with the West's emerging popular culture. The result was a further enticement to Western youth whose minds had already been filled with images of the lands to which they would soon travel.

The turn to the East was reinforced by cultural icons such as Allan Ginsberg, who visited the ashram at Rishikesh in 1962, and the Beatles, who, along with Mick Jagger and Marianne Faithfull, also journeyed to Rishikesh in 1968 to meditate with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Within the West, the exotic East became a familiar presence through such books as *Be Here Now* (1971), by Ram Dass (Richard Alpert), which was popular among spiritual seekers.²³ The emerging counterculture was reflected as well in a newfound interest in Indian music and in instruments such as the sitar and tabla.

The East also came to the West through literature and film. Richard Blais had studied some Islamic and Indian history and art in college and recalled being mesmerized by the films of Satyajit Ray, especially *Parash Pathar* (1958), *Devi* (1960), and *Charulata* (1964), as well as Kipling's poem "Gunga Din" (1890) and the music of Ravi Shankar.

Donald Redfoot notes that the "Mystic East" was marketed through a series of cultural exchanges by "skillful entrepreneurs" who brought the East to the West. But, as time went on, individuals who travelled to India added to this embrace of Eastern images with their own personal experiences as conveyed by word of mouth or produced in pamphlets and posters.²⁴ Fergus F., who made the journey in 1969, particularly recalled

22. Said, *Orientalism*, 26.

23. See Grant John Szuveges, "The Overland Hippie Trail to India and Nepal in the 1960s and 1970s," 48–51.

24. Donald L. Redfoot, "Touristic Authenticity, Touristic Angst, and Modern Reality," 302.

the influence of the underground press in Britain—the magazine *OZ* and the newspaper *International Times*—that regularly carried exotic stories about “people who went to India and got involved with taking all kinds of hallucinogens and having all kinds of amazing mental experiences.” He adds, “There were many people who were going to Kathmandu and writing in the underground press about their experiences.” These collective images, part of what Brian Edwards has termed “hippie Orientalism,” were often more laudatory and accepting of the region and its peoples than the depictions found in the West’s dominant cultural discourse.²⁵ At the same time, this acceptance often fell short of a genuine engagement with the East, and depictions were often shallow and largely imaginary. A small press travel guide produced in 1973 captures the positive Orientalism espoused by some travellers:

People of the East, for the most part, have a much better perspective on life, time, people, drugs and living in general than do those of us who come from the West. They are more in touch with its realities than the cultures on this side of the world. We, by telling you the truth about all that we have experienced instead of veering it up to appease one unreal force or another, hope to help bring all of us to better understand ourselves and the Eastern world.²⁶

Not everyone who made the journey embraced such images wholly or uncritically; nor did we continue to hold them when faced with the reality we experienced. The journey we embarked on involved, to one degree or another, both an exchange and an experience, sometimes brief, sometimes extended, albeit filtered through our own personal and cultural circumstances. I had seen poverty and physical affliction before, but never on

25. On hippie Orientalism, see Brian Edwards, *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express*, chap. 6.

26. T. Master, N. Lahore, and S. Deals, *Head East*, 1. Nick Danforth has posted the guide on “The Afternoon Map,” accessed September 23, 2024, <http://www.midafternoonmap.com/2013/10/the-hippie-trail.html>.

the scale or intensity that I witnessed on my journey. Those sights, and the stories told me by shopkeepers, hotel owners, guides, and others, have long remained with me. They took root in my later academic efforts to understand the political, historical, and economic factors shaping the lives of the region's peoples. How far my efforts at fully understanding the people and places I encountered have been successful is difficult to say. What I do know, however, is that I would not have embarked on this later work had I not made the journey.

THE TRAVELLERS

Many existing accounts depict the new breed of Western travellers of the 1960s and 1970s as searching for, in the words of sociologist Katharine Rankin, “drugs and dharma.”²⁷ In *The Great Railway Bazaar* (1975), Paul Theroux likens a group of hippies on a train in central Turkey to a cult-like tribe made up of castaway teenage girls (“initiates”) whose leaders announce their advanced spiritual status by adopting appropriately exotic garb: “the faded dervish outfit, the ragged shoulder bag, the jewellery—earrings, amulets, bracelets, necklaces.”²⁸ Hippies are similarly depicted as spiritual seekers in several other books, including David Tomory’s *A Season in Heaven*, based on first-hand accounts provided by former travellers themselves, and Sharif Gemie and Brian Ireland’s *The Hippie Trail: A History*.

Drugs and the search for transcendence, as well as easy sex, *were* part of the experience of travelling to India, and indeed sometimes the motivation, but by no means always. Such travellers tended to congregate in certain locales, notably Kathmandu and the beaches of Goa, and were therefore more visible, and they also received far greater attention in the Western media. But because so much of the literature focuses on this particular group, it fails to capture the more general nature of Western travellers who journeyed from one end of Asia to the other.

27. Katharine Rankin, *The Cultural Politics of Markets: Economic Liberalism and Social Change in Nepal*, 167.

28. Theroux, *The Great Railway Bazaar*, 48.

Most of us were in our early to mid-twenties and came from white, middle- or working-class families. We were not wealthy, but we were well off by the standards of the countries in which we travelled. Males were in the majority, though the number of females on the road increased over time.

We set out on the journey with various and overlapping motivations and intentions. My childhood, surrounded by history books and pictorial atlases, had fuelled a deep curiosity about distant lands and peoples. I often thumbed through maps of foreign places, and by the time I was eight I was already dreaming of travelling to them one day.

Curiosity and a search for adventure were prime motivations for many who made the journey, but by no means the only ones. As Hippie Trail veteran Richard Gregory observes, “some sought spiritual enlightenment, some saw opportunities for profit, some were escaping a rigid conventional lifestyle (or the draft) and some just wanted to see the world.”²⁹ Among those I surveyed, John Hunter travelled with his wife to India in 1979 with the specific intent of studying yoga. Allen Dodds went to India in 1974 to visit the Tibetans in Dharamsala and bring them a typewriter donated by the Tibet Society in London. Max (a pseudonym) was inspired by Indian music to make the journey in 1972, while another individual said he travelled to India to learn to play the tabla. And many of us might have repeated George Mallory’s reply when asked why he wanted to climb Mount Everest: “Because it was there.”

David Lane recalled wanting nothing more than to escape the boredom of living in the small northern Alberta town of Peace River, not far from where I lived. (He made his escape five years before I did.) Karl (also a pseudonym), a German living at a time when Germany was torn by political violence and social unrest, said his reason for travelling in 1972 was to “look for a meaningful life, a human community, a society without exploitation and alienation.”

Besides curiosity, boredom, or overt alienation, many of us were simply at loose ends, caught between adolescence and social pressures to

29. Richard Gregory, *A Pukka History of the Hippie Trail: Overland to Asia in Search of Hashish*, 5.

settle down to job and family. The interregnum of travel was a performative act of freedom.

Some of us made the decision to travel spontaneously; others considered the possibility for quite some time. Many of those I surveyed had heard stories from people they knew about their travel to distant places before embarking on their own trip. Australian John Wall, for example, who journeyed through East Asia in 1964, had a “close friend who had made the trip from London to Singapore,” as well as another who had “travelled to England overland, but returned via Africa, where he was arrested and deported back to Perth at no cost.” Similarly, a friend told Ollie Cooper of his journey to India “in an old VW Kombi.”

Carol McLean had been living and working in England for sixteen months, far from her home country of Canada, when she and four friends (one male, three female) travelled in 1964 to the Levant in a brand-new Volkswagen bus. That was supposed to have been the end of their journey, but, spurred on by a woman in the group who had previously travelled to the Middle East, they set off on a second journey that would end in India.

Robert (a pseudonym) first made the trip in 1970 after meeting a member of a California-based ring of drug smugglers who had travelled the route on “business.” He joined the enterprise and made several trips to Afghanistan over the next few years. Bruce Shore’s then girlfriend (and later wife), Brenda Grant, had partially travelled the route two years earlier before they made the full journey in 1976–77.

In addition, many of the Hippie Trail travellers I contacted had already made shorter trips to places whose cultures pushed the boundaries of their experience. Diane Warren’s journey from England to India in 1972 followed on an earlier “escapade”—her word—in 1967, when she and some friends purchased “a double-decker bus and drove it, via Spain and Italy, to Istanbul.” David Pearson had travelled to Eastern Europe in the early 1960s and was in Prague in 1968 when the Soviet army moved in. Prior to their journey in 1974, Roger and Terry Ledressay had taken a five-week Contiki tour through the Soviet Union. Before travelling to India in 1976, Bruce Shore had lived in Belize and Guatemala for six months, at the age of nineteen, and later journeyed to Europe and the Canary Islands, where he again lived for five months. And David Dudeck’s

overland journey along the Hippie Trail, in 1974–75, had been preceded by travel to Spain and Morocco via London in 1971.

My own experience was in many ways similar. Three years before I began my trip to India, I had travelled for five months through southern Europe and the Canary Islands before ending up on the Greek island of Mykonos, where I encountered a group of people returning from India. They were garbed in kaleidoscope-coloured kaftans and beads and brought with them carpets, saris, jewellery, and perfumes—all of which were for sale. They were, in fact, the epitome of Theroux's exotic hippie travellers. After a month on the island, however, I was running short of money and, in retrospect, feeling rather homesick, so I flew home. But a fire had been lit in my imagination by that encounter.

For many people, India was only part of an extended journey. Henry Hamilton and Alastair Harper, both recent graduates from medical school, travelled from Istanbul to Nepal in October to December 1962 before flying to Hong Kong, where steady jobs awaited. Mark Godfrey set off a year earlier in 1961 on a journey of a few months that lasted four years.

John Wall made his first trip to India in 1964, but the lure of travel brought him back for two more journeys, in 1968 and again in the early 1970s, to see things he had missed on earlier trips. For three years he lived in northwestern Iran, in the city of Tabriz.

Trish Flindall left home in central London at the age of fourteen with plans to become a hairdresser, but in her early twenties she read Dervla Murphy's *Full Tilt* (1965), an account of bicycling to India. In 1968, Flindall and her sister answered an ad in *The Times* from “three English boys”—a photographer working for a magazine, a young man heading to India to work for Oxfam, and an artist—who were driving overland in a specially outfitted Land Rover to the east. The journey of seven months ended in Australia.

Bruce Finch and his wife began their journey in 1970, not long after they married. It took them first across Canada, through Latin America, then to Australia and New Zealand, and then to Hong Kong, at which point they flew to Pakistan and travelled overland back to Istanbul and Europe—a journey of five years.

Kaarel and Lana Parn set off in September 1973 from Toronto on a trip that lasted two years and took them around the world. Bruce Shore and Brenda Grant's journey through the Middle East and Asia lasted thirteen months. David Lane travelled back and forth across Oceania, East Asia, and the Middle East during the years 1967 to 1974. Sometimes he flew, but he often took local buses. "In those days," he remarked, "life was an extended trip."

If one was open to new experiences and opportunities, and had no immediate ties to home, life could sometimes evolve in quite unexpected ways. Steve Crawford set off in 1972 with the intent of going to Kathmandu or Goa, but after failing to get a ride east from Istanbul, instead hitchhiked south through Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq, eventually ending up in Iran, where he experienced a visa problem. While he waited for the problem to be resolved, he met the editor of the *Tehran Journal*, who, learning that Steve was a travel journalist, offered him a job as sports editor. Armed with a work permit, Steve stayed in Iran for another sixteen months.

Fate also played a part. David Hodges and Bill Kerr were among the contingent of university students who took part in the ill-fated second Commonwealth Expedition (COMEX 2) in 1967. Not far from Zagreb, one of eleven coaches returning from the three-month round-trip journey from London to New Delhi collided with the unsecured jib of a mobile crane. Fortunately, neither Hodges nor Kerr was on any of the buses, but fourteen of their fellow students were killed. Hodges, who had been the driver of one bus, contracted infectious hepatitis in Afghanistan and was unable to continue on the return trip (he later flew home from Tehran), while Kerr stayed on in India for a year before slowly making his way back to the UK along a path that saw him stay with a Scottish missionary in Kabul, get robbed in Tehran, and travel by dhow from Abadan to Kuwait, before eventually landing in Israel, where he worked for two months in the Timna copper mines.



During the two decades before 1979, after which events in Iran and Afghanistan made the trip impossible, a bizarre caravan of vehicles—cars,

vans, minibuses, bicycles, motorcycles, and bicycles—began an overland trek between Turkey and India. Those travelling in them (or occasionally on them) were sometimes joined by hitchhikers. My own journey was largely by local buses, and a few trains in India and Pakistan. Several people I interviewed had dared to take one of the proliferating commercial buses—such as the famous Magic Bus—only to find themselves stranded somewhere, faced with a choice between using local transport or hitchhiking.

The following account is not, of course, intended to be representative of all overland travel to India during this period. It simply recounts my own journey, taken from the extensive notes that I wrote at the time, portions of which are reproduced in the text. These notes are augmented by material I gathered from a total of forty-eight individuals who travelled the Hippie Trail themselves, most of them in roughly the same period that I did. My account may serve to expand on, sometimes confirm, and occasionally challenge prevailing images of those who made the overland journey to India during the so-called hippie era. In the end, though, it remains my personal safarnameh.

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1

Beginnings

We are embarking upon something that very few people do, or have done. The sense of adventure is high, the total belief in our infallibility is complete. The days are full of promise and the future beckons.

—Basil Jay, *65 Days to Delhi*

On May 11, 1976, I boarded a ferry from the port of Pythagoreio on the island of Samos, bound for the Turkish port city of Kuşadasi. I watched the verdant Greek coastline turn grey and misty, then white and uneven like weathered baseboards. The rough sea rhythmically threw our ferry up, then down, in the watery trough. Tossed in white spittle for two-and-a-half hours, we at last pulled into the Turkish port.

Only days before, I had bid farewell to the young Swiss woman I'd met and with whom I had fallen in love. She was flying home prior to leaving for Zambia, where we planned to meet again early the next year after I had travelled to India. But now I was on the ferry.

I remember little of arriving in Kuşadasi. It seemed to me small and crowded, and like all such ports, a mix of diesel and dirt. Its enclosure provided no means of imagining the journey before me—five countries in all, varying in size, origin, and complexity: Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and finally India.

Despite the port's appearance, everything brimmed fresh and new. Even its ancient dirt seemed rife with novelty. I collected my thirty-pound backpack, including a blue sleeping bag, a change of clothes, books, and a small camera. I slung it over my right shoulder and headed for a bus station.

As I left the ferry at Kuşadası, I was decidedly, and intentionally, alone. My decision to travel alone fit my personality—I have always enjoyed being on my own. Solitude eliminates clutter: it brings with it a certain purity of experience. I wanted to have inner space for my own reactions and thoughts, absent the distractions posed by the need to interact constantly with companions. At the same time, I wanted to immerse myself as fully as possible in the new culture I was experiencing, which comes far more naturally to an individual who is isolated from others. This isolation isn't anti-social but meta-social.



I had in my possession, as I left the port at Kuşadası, a map of Turkey, but with no particular destination in mind. So, buoyed by a lack of geographic intention, I took a minibus north through the parched and yellow countryside, past myriad commercial signs and trailer camps, to the nearby town of Selçuk. There, I stopped to eat breakfast at Mustafa's restaurant, a place to which I returned later that day for supper and its ambience. The restaurant had a ledger of names of people from around the world who had previously eaten there. Some had left personalized poems; other's stories and pictures of Mustafa. Someone had written, not too originally, "Mustafa been a beautiful baby."

I made a side trip the next day to the impressive ruins of Ephesus—once a great port on the Mediterranean. But that sea was now six kilometres away, the result of isostatic rebound, as I later learned. I remember being intrigued by what seemed like a walk through architectural time as the buildings on the main road leading to the sea proceeded first in Grecian style, then Roman, then Byzantine, before disappearing into a silt bog.

Leaving Selçuk, I travelled southeast to the city of Antalya, on the coast of the Mediterranean. At the time, the city was in the early stages of

a major tourism development project, intended to capitalize on its inviting expanse of soft, sandy beaches. I described it as “big and bustling,” a place of “building and tearing down.” Later that evening, I took in a Turkish film at a movie theatre, and the next day headed east to the ancient port city of Side.

Quite apart from its own supply of exquisite beaches, Side is home to numerous Greco-Roman ruins, including an enormous amphitheatre and a temple to Apollo. It was busy and full of tourists. Seeking a moment’s respite, I stopped at a chai shop where I got into a conversation with Ayhan, a history student, and Metin, a biology student. Both attended Ankara University, the first institution of higher education founded after the Republic of Turkey was born, in 1923, and both were politically active. The country had experienced two military coups, in 1960 and again in 1971, the latter followed by a period of severe political repression of the Turkish left-wing, including the declaration of martial law in certain parts of the country. Although elections had been held in 1973, Turkey remained in the throes of political unrest, and universities were flash-points of protest.

My newfound Turkish friends and I carried on what I wrote was a “heated discussion about communism and fascism.” I would later meet other politically engaged, but similarly frustrated, university students in Diyarbakir. These young people were angry about ongoing repression and the failures of the state to address serious social and economic issues, as well as with what they perceived as the undue influence of the United States on Turkish politics. In the coming years, unrest would devolve into violence, as clashes between the capitalist, fascist right and the communist left intensified, culminating in a third military coup in 1980.

Probably very few Western travellers at the time knew much of the region’s politics, let alone of deeper histories and cultural tributaries. Certainly, I didn’t. But to the extent that we took time to absorb our surroundings and talk with local people, at least some of us did broaden our understanding of how others perceive and interpret the world. Looking back, I can attribute much of my future interest in international politics to encounters such as those I had with Ayhan, Metin, and others.

Despite the growth of commercial tourism, it was still possible to find quiet spaces. The next day, I sat on a near-deserted beach, reading



Metin (left) and Ayhan (right), two students at Ankara University whom I met in Side, a city on the southern coast of Turkey. The country had been in a state of political and social turmoil for quite some time, and students were often actively involved in political agitation.

De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), which I had bought the previous day. In the afternoon, I began exploring the ancient walls above the beach:

The walls ran for miles and there was a mill in good shape. It was hot. I wandered into a field where I spotted a young, grubby-faced boy sitting under a tree surrounded by clothing, pots, and pans. He was clearly the guardian of the wares.

I had earlier that morning had a successful, if limited, conversation with a goat herdsman named Hussein and decided to press my luck with the boy. He stared at me blankly. I picked up a small watermelon lying nearby and

asked if it was good. More stares. I began walking away, but finding another melon, cut it open with a jagged piece of porcelain that lay on the ground. I ate the red, juicy pulp, seeds and all, then looked back on the boy who now had a slightly amused look. As no melon had ever tasted so delicious, I grabbed another one, but it was hard and raw. A core of white moss greeted me as I opened it.

The boy pointed to another, a larger melon. I split it, and it was good. I offered him some, but he demurred, content it seemed to simply watch this curious stranger. I devoured the lush fruit, first half, then all, casually tossing the skeletons away. The juices ran down my knuckles. Particles of pink pulp clung to my fingernails. I wiped my beard and mouth on my arm, then looked back on the boy, who had witnessed the entire orgy. His look now was of puzzlement, as though he had seen a visitor from another planet. I hurried away, but not before waving goodbye and saying “Teşekkür ederim” (“Thank you”).



The days slipped by. I spent time walking the beaches and reading. I was also trying to learn some Turkish, convinced as I was that speaking another person's language, however badly, when you are in their home is a sign of respect. Indeed, many of the people I encountered seemed genuinely pleased when I attempted to speak Turkish. At the same time, given the ubiquity of English in urban settings, it was all too easy to fall back into it—or to discover that Turkish speakers were themselves trying to learn English and preferred to speak that. But I persisted. Especially in smaller, more rural communities, where many people knew little, if any, English, being able to make myself understood in Turkish was a definite advantage.

A few days after meeting the boy, and after a substantial breakfast of bread, jam, and Turkish coffee, I set off armed with my camera and a water canteen and hiked into the countryside to the north of Side:

At first curling through the thick and thistly underbrush, I emerged at last into a semi-desert of sand and scrub, florid with tiny purple and pink buds, and shoots like onion tops springing from the ground. There were bits of stone, some marble, everywhere littered with the shelled remains of curious slugs. With every step, my past ones seemed to disappear, swallowed into the desert. The sand, the heat, the eternal ruins. It was disorienting. I walked on.

At last, the blue sea rose a hundred metres to my right, and soon appeared the remains of an old fortress, several arches of which revealed it to be Roman. Like so many other ruins, it was being slowly devoured by the patient landscape. Much of its walls had already been confiscated, and the sand had made substantial forays into the inner courtyard. Small, spiny plants hovered at the fortress's borders.

I continued on my way again, this time coming on to a creek overlooking a verdant pasture where several tethered cows were chewing. Descending the slope, I took a path through a glade of trees where at once I was aroused by the weighty scent of pine. The cones were scattered on the ground, but the wind was feathering the aroma skyward. I stood and sniffed the air again, but the moment proved ephemeral.

A little further on, an old Turk reclined beneath a tree. I think he believed me lost but quickly made clear his reluctance to have me in his presence, so I waved and moved on in the direction to which he pointed. He was perhaps directing me toward civilization and, soon enough, I heard the barren drone of a tractor from a nearby wood. Nearby, a winding river ran, the trees on each side embracing to form a perfect canopy. I stood on the bank for a few minutes, then moved on again.

A side road took me back along a series of farmer's fields, until expanding at last into an asphalt highway and,

from there, the city. The desert, the flowers, the ancient ruins, the cows, and the old man receded into the past.



I remember fondly each of the people I met, but except when I was exploring the sand dunes and ruins, I never felt at home in Side. It seemed to exist for the sake of tourists. I woke every morning to the duet of a rooster and the muezzin's call to prayer, which would then set off the counterpoint of cows mooing in the street below my window. Never entirely certain of the time, though I knew it was early, I would seek out breakfast, then try to think of some way to spend my day. I could read—I was now enjoying Henry Miller's *Colossus of Maroussi* (1941)—or I could practice Turkish, but the city's headlong pursuit of tourism left me feeling disconnected and out of place, as if I were being forced into a role I did not want to play.

So I bought a bus ticket and headed back to the north, this time to İzmir, a city known by its Greek name, Smyrna, until well after the First World War. In 1919, Greek armies marched into the city, setting off the Greco-Turkish War, from which Turkey emerged victorious in September 1922. Very shortly after the Turks regained control of Smyrna, a catastrophic fire broke out that burned for ten days, during which the Greek and Armenian quarters of the city were completely destroyed. Although some of the tens of thousands of refugees managed to escape to Greece, many others were massacred or expelled into the interior, often to die in harsh conditions.

I knew little of this history at the time, however. On a scrap of paper, I wrote my impressions of the countryside approaching İzmir:

The mountains deal in strange, inky blotches of shadow that give one a false sense of where the sun must be, but isn't. The mountains are so tall and contoured, yet seem as hasty afterthoughts, dragged in and plopped down on the monotonous plain; and they are grey, with bushes strewn in broken lines horizontally, the appearance of typewriting or cuneiform, perhaps a message written

on the wilderness, decoded only by shepherds and a few
vagrant poets who rediscover the parched testament.

The ride had threatened to be a long and dreary one, but toward the end of the trip a young Turk got on the bus and sat beside me. His name was Esat and he was about to write a history exam on Europe. As his English was even more limited than my Turkish, it was the latter in which we managed to communicate for the next hour.

“Your Turkish very good, good Turkish,” he said at intervals. He told me he hated Greeks because they slit Turkish throats. Because I kept scribbling things in my notebook, he thought I must be a writer. This impressed him.

He invited me to stay at his sister’s place in İzmir, which I accepted. He then paid the cost of a *dolmuş* to the location, but at the door he discovered he had no key, so back through the blinding lights of Saturday evening traffic we went.¹ Esat clearly felt bad and bought me a sandwich. He then hailed another *dolmuş* to take me to an address I had been given in Side, but no one was home at that location. He invited me to visit his parents two days later, after his exams, but I thought it best to turn the offer down.

I was wearing my khaki shorts, my jeans packed away in the backpack still slung over my shoulder. I set off once more in search of a hotel, first down a side street that led past a block of apartments and nowhere, then back to what could only be described as İzmir’s slum section. In bewilderment, I encountered first a vendor and in turn was accosted by three Turkish youths who wanted to converse with me and help me out. We went first to one

1. A *dolmuş* (pronounced “dall-moosh”) is a shared taxi. The term comes from the Turkish word meaning “stuffed,” which accurately describes the experience of passengers.

hotel, but it was full. At 11:00 at night, everything is full, and so we went to a second, a run-down joint beside a train station. I motioned that I'd even take a space on the floor, and that is what I got for ten Turkish lira.² It was a shabby place, walled with photographs of Kemal Ataturk and the Turkish version of a Sears-Roebuck calendar. The manager, a dubious sort, unshaven and unsteady, hustled up a couple of stuffed blankets. These he lined on the floor as a mattress. Nearby, on three beds, two gentlemen and a baby already nestled, sleeping. I changed into my long jeans, and then taking my valuables, went off with the Turkish chaps who wanted eagerly to take me for chai.

I made it a quick night even though I was not overly tired, mainly because the overt friendliness of everyone was wearing me thin. I thanked the boys warmly and entered my room, but not before relieving myself in a can down the side stairs of the hotel that was already swimming in piss and water and sundry waste. My roommates were all snoring (except for the baby) as I bunched up my mattress and threw my valuables under a leaf of it. Using my jacket as a pillow, I slumped off to sleep. There was a faint light from the lobby and the familiar smell, though not unpleasant, reminding me of every foot that ever stepped in the place. I lay awake on the mattress (it wasn't cold), sniffing the blends and listening to the sounds around me. Half an hour later, a train whistled and rocketed by my head, vibrating the windows. Soon after, I fell asleep. I woke often to roll over and once in the early hours to crawl under the torn sheets as the room had cooled off, and then slept successively as the boarders grumpily took their leave. I arose fairly

2. The official exchange rate at the time was about 16 Turkish lira to the US dollar, so 10 lira were worth a little less than 65 cents.

early and in a jaded state of confusion decided to leave the hotel.³

Soon I was on the autobus to Bergama, a name I picked out at random, as I still had no map, but realized was somewhere north and at least in the general direction of Istanbul.

Bergama, which is about 80 kilometres north of İzmir, is the site of the ancient Greek city of Pergamum, ruins of which still stand. There, I stayed at the Merkez Hotel, room 7, which I described as “big enough only for the brass bed, but comfortable.” I also noted that it cost a “relative pittance” (12½ Turkish lira). The next day, I bought a cheap carrying bag from a carpet dealer who then showed me some alleged antiques that he said he would sell to me real cheap. But I left with only the bag and headed to a shoe store:

I dash in and in five minutes have new shoes for 75 lira. I probably should have bargained. I don’t think they will last long. And while they do, they may murder my feet. The salesman was carefully wrapping up my soulless Hush Puppies, which gave me an opportunity to use my scant Turkish.

“No, no,” I said, making a gesture as if I were lighting a match: “Kibrit—poof!”

The salesman and his attendant thought this quite funny.

That same day, I met on the street a Turkish youth who spoke reasonably good English. He told me much about Bergama and about himself—rather

3. This was not my last experience of sleeping in crowded and less than hygienic circumstances, though I did not make it a regular practice. When I did, it was usually the result of arriving late, of limited available space, or of personal finances. For some travellers, however, this was standard practice, paid accommodation being the less occasional choice, as Ollie Cooper put it, “in order to freshen up.”

too much about himself as it turned out, proudly informing me that he had three testicles, a revelation evidently well known to three of his admiring friends whom I met later that afternoon. Did I think it unusual to have three testicles? Nonplussed, but not wanting to offend, I replied, "Yes."

That introductory conversation out of the way, our troupe walked up a street, stopped at various chai shops, and passed the students' garden, situated above main street. Everywhere, I was greeted with endless introductions and handshakes and was bought tea and pastry. Finally, I was invited to the young man's home, where his father cooked up a stew of tomatoes and eggplant, with yogurt on the side. I was something of a novelty, if not a celebrity—a wandering hippie.

The unusually well-endowed young man told me he was a singer in a band playing that night for a wedding party in the local cinema. He invited me to attend as his guest; in fact, he said he would place a chair on stage where I could sit with the band.

I arrived at the cinema that evening about 9:30 p.m., clad in my blue jeans and an old jacket. Not wishing to attract attention, I sat down on a creaky wooden chair in the front row of the central section of seats. I was surrounded by an assemblage of older women in traditional dress and meticulously groomed children in suits.

Immediately, a titter ran through the crowd. My new friend came down from the stage and explained that the middle seats were reserved for the families of the bride and groom. There ensued a short dispute as he insisted stubbornly, against my wishes, that I join the band on stage. In the end, I relented.

On stage, I sat beside a large audio speaker and the bass guitarist, who benignly smiled at the crowd that in turn smiled back at me. Shortly after, the bride and groom arrived, and the musical set began. After an opening dance number, the band burst into full stride, thumping out its brand of up-tempo pop. No longer the centre of attention, I relaxed into my honoured role, from which I could survey the audience. As I expected, the sexes stayed strictly apart, though mimicking as best they could the dance steps popular in the west. One young girl, dressed in blue, imitated a go-go dancer. The scene briefly reminded me of junior high sock hops. I was briefly tempted to join in the dancing but thought better of it and

quickly retreated into my assigned role as invited guest and more-or-less discreet outsider.

My role completed, I snapped a couple of night pictures of the band using the flash-cube in my camera and left the wedding. It was around 11:00 p.m. I stopped briefly for chai at a café on my way back to the Merkez Hotel, then continued my walk.

On the way, I looked through the window of a furniture store where two television sets were on, one of them showing a soccer match. The owner spotted me and came to the front door. The game was the European Football Championship final between Czechoslovakia and West Germany, and he invited me in to watch. It quickly became apparent the owner had two addictions, football and tea, and he ordered two more of the latter. He said he drank countless cups of chai in a day, and before the night was gone he had ordered me another, and himself two more, and me a Coke.

The German squad, trailing two to one, had been very unlucky, which allowed me at one point to use the Turkish word “kismet” (fate). The store owner immediately broke into a huge smile and shook my hand. (In fact, he shook my hand maybe fifteen times during the evening, always smiling as if I were a prodigal son returned.) In the end, the German team lost the game on penalty kicks. We shook hands once more, and he reminded me to send him a picture of myself, as he had given me his. I remember fondly that couple of hours, a nearly wordless moment in which a very human connection was made.

To a person, the Turks I met were generous and friendly. As I boarded a local bus bound for Istanbul, I was in high spirits.

Istanbul

It's frightening, this wave of idlers from all over Europe coming here to nose about everywhere.

—Pierre Loti, *Constantinople* (1890).

Save for the latest of technologies, and despite half a century of political upheaval during which Turkey was created and Constantinople was renamed “Istanbul,” the city of 1976 would have seemed familiar to Loti. Described only a few years earlier as a “sweet, melancholy city of ramshackle wooden houses and crumbling city walls, without tourists or touts,” Istanbul had grown to a city of 2.5 million people.¹ It was, and remains, one of the world’s great cities—a place still vied over by the forces of tradition and modernity, by religion and secularism, where muezzins call the faithful to daily prayer five times a day from loudspeakers atop thousands of mosques, their voices competing with the blare of motor vehicle horns and the sound of pop music from radios and clubs.

While some Western travellers camped on the city outskirts, most of us ventured into the heart of Istanbul. There we stayed, clustered around the city’s old section, known as Sultanahmet. That area is the site of several historic attractions about which I wrote brief notes, including the Blue

1. Rory MacLean, *Magic Bus: On the Hippie Trail from Istanbul to India*, 18.

Mosque and the Hagia Sophia, the Topkapi Palace, and the Roman-era cisterns—not to mention the famous Grand Bazaar and a host of souks (markets) and hammams (Turkish baths).

Close by these attractions was an assortment of cheap accommodations. I got a room at the Gulhane Hotel, which I described as “bedbug-infested,” but “at twenty lira I am too lazy to move.” My description squared with that of David Tomory, who writes that the Gulhane was a “doss-house”—a cheap lodging house for homeless people and tramps—adding, “Its heyday was from 1963 to the end of the sixties.”²

There were other hotels similar to the Gulhane, and, if not a hotel, there was the youth hostel, located across from the Blue Mosque, just down the street from the Topkapi Palace. A chief advantage of these accommodations was their closeness to the already famous Pudding Shop where I went on my first day in the city.

I took a seat at a small empty table at the front of the restaurant. To my immediate left, but across from me, sat a German youth of nineteen years. He was thin and pale and had a stunned, dishevelled look. I said, “Hello.” He was clearly agitated, twitching nervously, even shaking, the whole time we spoke. I thought for a moment he was going to grab me, but he didn’t. Instead, staring past me, and without a trace of affect, he told me how, the previous day, he had seen a man—“an Arab,” he called him—come out of an alley, put a pistol to the head of “another Arab,” and “pull the trigger” before running away.

We talked a few more minutes, but there was not much else to say. The young German was lost to his thoughts. After a few minutes, I left. I never saw him again. He had no way of knowing the dead man’s ethnicity, and neither did I challenge him, as that first encounter and the nature of his story aligned with my already existing Orientalist conceptions of Istanbul as a place of mystery and intrigue. Nor was I unnerved by his emotionless retelling of the incident: in fact, I was rather excited. I felt as though I had walked into a novel at the same time as my life seemed more real than ever before. I recognize only now the unspoken implications of his narrative of which I was not aware—and not even shocked by—at the time.

2. David Tomory, *A Season in Heaven: True Tales from the Road to Kathmandu*, 42.

But it was not Istanbul alone that, for many of us at the time, had an air of mystery to it. Indeed, the Pudding Shop bore its own reputation. It was there that Billy Hayes (of *Midnight Express* fame) made the drug deal that saw him later arrested by Turkish police in October 1970 and subsequently jailed. Hayes's story, and others, added to Istanbul's mystery but also conveyed a warning.

The Pudding Shop is the best-known marker of those years, and still exists. It was founded in 1957 by two brothers, Idris and Namik Çolpan, and the café's actual name— Lale Pastanesi—suggested nothing of its later notoriety. In fact, early travellers to Istanbul rarely mentioned it. Rory MacLean contends that “for a couple of years, well-to-do Turks stopped by for frothy black *kahve* [Turkish coffee] and honey-soaked baklava topped with green pistachios.”³ But one of the shop's specialties particularly attracted Western travellers: *tavuk göğsü*, a pudding made from pounded chicken breast, rice flour, milk, and sugar, all topped with cinnamon: hence the restaurant's name among Westerners.⁴

As its popularity grew, so also did the Pudding Shop's size. MacLean notes that in 1969, “a refectory and an authentic-looking wooden façade were added,” followed in the 1970s by “a self-service counter.” Tellingly, he adds, “as travellers morphed into tourists, the Çolpans started writing bus tickets and making hotel bookings, charging a dollar for each service.”⁵

As its website proudly boasts, the Pudding Shop became over time “the only place in the area the adventurous could get direct transport to Asia and tourist information on Turkey.” It continues:

The tourists made the Pudding Shop famous, using it as a meeting place and message center.

Idris explained that “pilgrims” travelling East, often driving old cars or Volkswagen vans, would stop at his restaurant to meet new acquaintances and find other travellers with whom to share

3. MacLean, *Magic Bus*, 28.

4. Rowley Leigh, “Food and Drink and Silver and Spice and All Things Nice,” *The Guardian*, November 16, 1996, 52.

5. Maclean, *Magic Bus*, 30.

expenses and experiences. The Çolpan brothers put up a bulletin board to handle all the messages from people offering or hitching rides to Europe or the Far East.⁶

Not all Western travellers were enamoured of the Pudding Shop. Marjorie Kircher was put off by its unwashed walls and floors, the “blue smoke” that hovered on the air, and the famous puddings, which she viewed as “tasteless.”⁷

It was neither food nor mystery alone that brought many of us to the Pudding Shop, however. The fact remains that it was a central hub of information about the countries east and west of Turkey that was useful to young travellers.

This information went beyond maps, which had improved over the previous decades. By the late 1960s, sometimes crudely produced photocopied pamphlets carrying travel information were in circulation. *Play Power: Exploring the International Underground* (1970), by Richard Neville, founder of the magazine *OZ*, contained important information on how to navigate the overland trail. This was followed in 1973 by Maureen Wheeler and Tony Wheeler’s publication of the Lonely Planet’s first guidebook, *Across Asia on the Cheap*, a more extensive version of which appeared in 1975.⁸ Other, less well known, guidebooks soon emerged. When he travelled in 1976, Ernest (a pseudonym) used Paul Dowsey-Magog’s *Overland Through Asia: An Underground Guide* (1974). Beyond simple maps and guidebooks, embassies and consulates proved necessary, if uncomfortable, in helping with such things as visas, passports, legal help, medical advice, or warnings—often out of date—of dangers lying ahead.

But the Pudding Shop carried other useful information, too. Traveling in 1969, Fergus F. remembered seeing an oversize book filled with

6. “About Us,” World Famous Pudding Shop, accessed June 6, 2024, <https://www.puddingshop.com/about-us/>.

7. Marjorie Kircher, *The India Traveler: Overland 1973, Returns and Reflections 1983, 1997*, 43.

8. MacLean, *Magic Bus*, 145; see also Tony Wheeler and Maureen Wheeler, *The Lonely Planet Story: Once While Travelling*.

stories of travels, people's contact information, and transportation opportunities. A large bulletin board contained personal notes through which friends could keep in touch.

In May 2014, I returned to Istanbul's Pudding Shop, which was still owned by members of its founding family. It had been thirty-eight years, but I made a point of greeting them. I noted with some pleasure a poster board sporting comments from new and perhaps nostalgic travellers:

3.01.2011: Hey travellers, new age hippies, weirdos! We wanna re-open the hippie road to the east in 2014. We'll go to the ocean with our van. Hope to see you somewhere on the road. Peace and Love—Magic Bus 2011.

3.5.2013: It was great to return to the Pudding Shop. The last time we were here was 1974 on our way to India. We're glad to see you are still thriving—Pam and Stuart Davis, Arlington, Virginia.

8.10.2013: Long live the Hippie Trail.

Dear travellers, if you are curious, we love you. Curiosity is a beautiful thing.

There were other sources of information in 1976, such as hostels or the American Express offices, but no place surpassed the Pudding Shop when I made my journey.



Few Western visitors to Istanbul ventured outside Sultanahmet, but those who did enjoyed the city's architectural beauty and bustling energy. Bruce Finch remembered touring Istanbul in dolmuş taxis. Today, the vehicles are licensed and regulated minivans, but in the 1970s, "You could ride in a '54 Chevy or Ford packed with people. One had a portable 45-record player. The records skipped and bounced, but not knowing the music, I had no idea whether it was on track or not!"

I walked throughout the Sultanahmet area, touring the major mosques and the Grand Bazaar. At the best of times, the bazaar is an

overwhelming place, a myriad of sights and sounds, of displays of fresh food, carpets, clothing, and more. There, one day, I stopped at a counter where a young dealer was selling jewellery and precious stones. I was convinced to go with him to an apartment where he said he would show me a special selection of stones. Like many travellers, I had no fixed schedule, and I thought the experience might prove interesting. We took a taxi to a nearby building and went up several stories to a small apartment where we were greeted by another Turk. The three of us sat around a low coffee table. As the custom, they gave me chai and a small plate of Turkish sweets. Over the next hour, the two of them poured out onto the now velvet-clothed table an array of stones—purportedly, opals, pearls, diamonds, sapphires, and more—that they said I could sell for a sizable profit when I returned home. I am not a gem expert and was wary that the alleged precious stones might be made of no more than coloured plastic. The young Turks were aggressive salesmen, however, and as the minutes passed, I became more uneasy that the situation was potentially dangerous. Their hostility increased steadily as they became aware I was not going to buy anything. But I like to think that I carried myself in a way that suggested it would be a bad idea to mess with me. I hurriedly left the building, looking back occasionally, and made my way back to more familiar settings.

Not everyone liked Istanbul. Brenda Grant described the city as “busy and noisy (horns honking continuously) and dreary and smelly and drab.” She remembers with anger a man leading a bear around by a leash attached to its nose. The bear was wearing a “silly” hat and “pink ribbons,” while people paid money for the chance to take pictures.

My own initial observations of Istanbul and its people were not generous. I described the city as having a “snickering” quality, as though a “not-so-clever joke is being perpetrated on you, the mechanics of which are only visible to the locals.” I went on, saying that it had “a touch of the sinister, of milling, shoving, exasperated and exasperating crowds, endless reams of traffic with their supercilious horns, and a carbon-monoxide air that one can almost chew.”

I see now in retrospect how my upbringing in a medium-sized Canadian city had ill-prepared me for one as large and complex as Istanbul.

Had I lived in New York or Toronto, my reaction would likely have been different. As the days passed, however, my views of the city and its inhabitants moderated:

One evening I waited on the Galata Bridge for the sun to set and form a proper skyline for a photograph. I had already heard that the Turks are very kind to animals. On this occasion as I watched, a gentleman walked out amid the passing cars and lifted to safety, placing on a curb, a seagull which had only at that moment been hit by a car windshield. The bird was flopping helplessly, and I expected that someone would bash its head in and put it out of its misery. Instead, its rescuer set it down. And though he walked off, a series of concerned pedestrians filed by until finally a pudgy, middle-aged passerby in a white shirt picked it up gently in his two hands and carefully walked away down the bridge. I have no idea of what he later did with the bird. For all I know, he may have throttled and eaten it, with some rice on the side, but I doubt it.

The incident of the seagull touched me. In a city that some from the West viewed as harsh, this moment stood out as contrary to that view. Not for the only time was I moved by the care shown to animals. As I wandered through the city, I noticed there are small, doll-like houses outside the gates of the Topkapi Palace where stray cats are protected and fed.

At the same time, life was both hard and relentless:

Everywhere in Istanbul, millions of people are scrambling to make a living. They tug at your sleeves. They call out at you. Old men at fruit stands; boys of various ages standing or sitting on the curbs with packages of Marlboros; hustlers, money-changers, buyers, sellers: they pester and annoy you, but at base you have to commiserate with them. There are only a limited number of tourist dollars,

and if a man is to get them and feed his family, he must beat everyone else to them. The pursuit of the means of existence never ends. There can be no day off. His work must be his leisure; his work is his life.

Reading this today, I wince at the gendered language. Yet, as in many patriarchal cultures, men were responsible for earning an income. As I roamed around the city, men were the people with whom I generally interacted.

On my last evening in Istanbul, I sat upstairs in the Pudding Shop with two Turkish friends, one an economics student, the other a musician with the Istanbul Symphony whom I had previously met in Side. The latter had recommended the name of a well-known Turkish rock musician, Barış Manço, and was pleased that I had bought one of his cassette recordings. We were joined by a Sudanese student from a Munich university. Over Tuborg beer, we discussed soldiering, the futility of war, the mail service, and girls.

I left the next morning to the south.

Detained in Syria

Even paranoids have real enemies.

—Anonymous

In late June, I travelled southeast to the cities of Adana and then Gaziantep. On July 1, I crossed the border into Syria. The last miles of Turkey before crossing into Syria were in stark contrast to the miles before. The beautiful, multi-hued hills sank lower and lower into the earth, until finally I was squirted out onto a burnt, flat plain. As was the custom with many travellers, I stayed my last night in Turkey in the city of Gaziantep, then wearily the next morning took a bus to the border town of Kilis—a dirty grey place, as all border towns tend to be. Even then, Syria did not have a robust reputation for safety. Except for wary journalists, consular officials, and arms merchants, few foreigners went there. I was anxious, frankly, as I began walking through an endless battery of check points, my anxiety combining with fatigue and a bout of diarrhea that required me to enter a mosque along the way to use its latrine.

As I set off again, I remembered that I had in my backpack a small tube of toothpaste that I had bought while in Israel weeks earlier. The tube's contents were written in Hebrew lettering, which was a problem as Israel and Syria were not then—or now—on cordial terms. Paranoia struck deep. What if the border guards searched my pack? What if they

found the offending item? I decided to take no chances. I unslung my backpack on the side of the road, took out the evidence, and deftly—I thought—threw the tube away between some bushes.

The deed done, I looked around me and saw a nicely dressed young man staring at me with narrow and perplexed eyes. How should I answer his look? Should I search amid the bushes and retrieve the toothpaste? Would that allay his suspicions—if indeed he was suspicious at all? Would it only bring more attention to me?

I decided to walk on. I told myself to not give way to paranoid thoughts. But anxiety is a mistress hard to ignore. At a distance of about thirty metres, I turned to look backwards. The young man was still looking at where I had thrown the tube, but now he was joined by an older woman in peasant garb. What were they thinking? Would they search the bushes? And if they found the tube, would they turn it over to the authorities? Although I was still on the Turkish side, the political divide likely meant nothing to the common people whose allegiance must surely be with the Syrians and not the Israelis. Would they alert the Turkish and Syrian police?

No, I told myself. Don't be ridiculous. As I turned to walk again, a car picked me up and took me to the Turkish post. There I met two French travellers, Bernard and Jacques. Their presence and friendly conversation eased my anxiety about the toothpaste tube. We walked the asphalt no man's land between the two border posts in forge-like heat, talking all the while of where we hoped to travel. It was a nice distraction. Half a mile later we arrived at the Syrian HQ.

The border guard's questioning was cursory and polite. I had not obtained a visa earlier and needed one now, a process that caused a delay of a few minutes. My French colleagues and I were given tea while we waited. At last, visa in hand, we went to a nearby shop to change money while a swarm of officials inspected our passports anew. We then flagged down a taxi to take us to Aleppo.



I had thought that the peoples on either side of the border would be similar, but they were not: time and political boundaries create different

peoples. I had learned a little Turkish but was at once engulfed by Arabic. The common dress too was different. Whereas most Turks wore Western slacks, shirts, and jackets, many of the Syrians dressed in long djellabas and kaftans. And where the traffic of Turkish towns was a meshed cacophony of off-key horns and merry jingles, the horns of Syrian vehicles seemed harsh and grating, joined with the grind of angry and impatient gears.

In Aleppo, the three of us got a room at the Zoofaram Hotel. It cost twenty Syrian pounds. The manager demanded our passports, which he kept—a not altogether unusual demand in many of the countries. Our room had no windows and the door wouldn't lock, so we left the door open and stored our baggage downstairs during the day. The result was a welcome waft of wind at night that allayed the otherwise incessant heat.

By day, Aleppo's streets were busy with buyers and sellers, water-bearing boys, boot blacks, Bedouins in traditional robes and headdress, businessmen in grey, striped jackets, and women modestly draped in abayas. The three of us spent the next two days visiting chai shops and the city's main souk. We visited a hammam and took in a Syrian movie. On another occasion, we met, then escaped, the eager sales pitch of a well-dressed Syrian gentleman who, by his account, fluently spoke six languages and who tried to sell us ancient artifacts of no doubt recent manufacture, for which none of us had either interest or money.

In the evenings, we experienced the desultory squalor of our hotel roof, drinking a bottle of cheap Syrian wine, a kind of muscatel that left an unpleasant aftertaste but which we drank anyway. We looked out at countless lighted windows and other rooftops where equally countless poor and vagrant Syrians rented cots on hotel roofs under a heavy quilt of Middle Eastern stars. The sights, sounds, and smells drowned out any memories of the border incident.

On the Saturday morning after our arrival, we had breakfast and visited a hammam, then returned to our hotel to pack and leave for the ancient city of Palmyra. The hotel manager, passports in hand, greeted us. Looking dour and suspicious, he asked Jacques to fill out a desk card, something we had already done on our first day.

He then looked at me. “Are you the Canadian?” he asked. In my life to that point, I had been threatened by American police (twice), nearly arrested by the French gendarmerie in Marseilles, and forced to strip to my underwear by custom’s officers in Edmonton on an earlier return from Europe. But this seemed different. There was something especially ominous about the way the Syrian manager phrased his question.

“Yes,” I replied and reached to take my passport.

“You must wait,” he said, and reached for the phone. It was clear he was calling the police.

I grabbed my passport and told my unaware French companions to get their packs. As we were leaving, the manager kept ushering us to sit on a nearby settee. He pointed a finger at the card I had signed and then over at a police sign in the corner. I attempted a bit of subterfuge, as much for Jacques and Bernard as the manager, saying loudly that we had already paid and that it was no use trying to get more money out of us. It was an absurd interpretation of the situation, but it served to persuade the confused Jacques and Bernard to join me in hurrying away.

We walked quickly to the nearby bus terminal where I handed Bernard a ten-pound note and told him to buy me a ticket while I went to the W.C. Having decided (correctly as it turned out) that the police would catch up to us any minute, I took from my backpack my diary notes from my time in Israel. I haphazardly shredded them and dumped them into the toilet, along with a tiny medallion stamped “Nazareth.” As I left the W.C., Jacques came up and said the bus was leaving and that we had no time to lose. We ran outside and boarded a Homs-bound bus, a typically colourful dilapidation that looked like a jar of mixed olives.

We had made our escape. Or had we? I pondered whether I had let paranoia capture me and mourned the loss of my notes—for what?

The question was answered a few blocks away when the bus was flagged down by the whirling lights and screaming siren of a police van. A brace of Syrian officers boarded the bus and ordered the three of us to get off. We were placed in the back of the van. I mumbled something again about having paid the hotel bill and tried to appear calm if not amused. The van’s driver was a uniformed cop, but two others were in civilian

clothes. The one in charge wore a tweed sports jacket. He had a dark, thick moustache set against a tight, scrawny face. His eyes were hidden by thick sunglasses. Tonelessly, he asked for our passports, a request with which I, feigning nonchalance, cheerily complied.

Was I in serious trouble? Were we being arrested? Might the Syrian police believe I was a spy? Was this the start of an international imbroglio? Or was this about nothing, only my paranoid imaginings? My immediate thoughts ran to my parents and to my Swiss girlfriend, as well as to my innocent companions with whom I would need to quickly disclaim any connection.

We arrived at the police station. The officers left with our passports and went inside the building. We were alone. More paranoia. Was the van bugged? I steered the conversation away from anything serious. Jacques must have thought the same thing and remarked only half in jest that perhaps the police van had microphones. We stayed very cool and calm, never mentioning anything about Israel or Middle East politics in general.

After a few minutes, the chief policeman came out and handed us our passports. It was all a case of mistaken identity, he said, and drove us back to the bus terminal. There, he apologized again, and brusquely shook our hands.

An hour later, we were on a bus to Homs. There, we took a dolmuş, packed with women and children, and—crammed among the luggage—a lone goat that bleated as we bounced along the desert floor. We arrived in Palmyra around 11:00 p.m. and got a hotel room, which we quickly vacated when we saw it was infested with one-and-a-half inch cockroaches. We slept that night, and the next two that followed, under an ancient temple's entablature, beyond which myriad stars sparkled against the indigo sky. It was more painfully beautiful than any night I had ever known. I hold even more fondly today my memories of that moment, knowing that the temple where we had slept, which had survived two thousand years of cold, heat, and winds, was perhaps one of those destroyed in 2015 by ISIS terrorists. How near, I wonder, had we slept that night to the public square where, that same year, archaeologist Khaled al-Asaad was beheaded, at

the age of eighty-three, for his efforts to rescue priceless artifacts from the city museum?



My fears of our earlier detention should now have been put at rest as the next day we boarded a bus to Damascus. After all, we had been released. But I was not relieved, and thoughts swarmed through my head. Was my release temporary? Was I let go in the hope that I might lead authorities to someone else? But who? Still uneasy, I replayed the events, each reiteration reinforcing my anxiety.

Years later, I view the incident as largely an exercise in paranoia, sparked by an overactive imagination and fatigue. Adding to this, the region was then (as it often was) riven with conflict, and a civil war raged in nearby Lebanon. Besides, I had only just finished reading George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), in which he describes being on the run from the Spanish left and right.

Perhaps I had even enjoyed the thrill of being wanted by Syrian authorities, as though I was playing a part in a spy novel of my own device. It was an intrigue of my own making, as I had, albeit unconsciously, begun the strange adventure by throwing away a toothpaste tube days before. It was absurd and irrational. Yet standing against any notions of rationality were the suspicious actions of the young man and peasant woman at the border and the fact that the authorities had clearly been looking for a Canadian traveller, of which there could only have been a handful of us in Syria. Finally, I could point out that I actually had been detained, even if briefly. Which might be my preference—that I was arrested under actual suspicion or was guilty of active paranoia?

I still felt uneasy as the three of us arrived in Damascus. The city was hot, dry, and dusty. The summer heat was already pushing 38°C. The traffic was loud and abrasive, and the streets dirty. We canvassed the cheap hotels for a room, but they were full and permanently occupied. At last, we visited a tourist bureau and a nearby chai shop.

A young Pakistani man joined us. He said he worked construction in one of the Emirates but had just returned from a holiday in Europe. “Mostly Copenhagen,” he said, though he had stayed long enough in Istanbul “to purchase a whore” for 150 lira, less than ten dollars. “Very good looking, too,” he assured us.

He began asking a lot of questions about how long I’d been travelling. The incident renewed my paranoia. It was time to leave Syria.

I said goodbye to my French colleagues, and the next day took a bus to Homs, where I stayed the night in a youth hostel—one of the few cheap accommodations without bed bugs or cockroaches. Next morning, I took a bus to Aleppo and finally a dolmuş to Azaz and a two-pound taxi ride to the border crossing. I walked briskly to the Syrian police quarters and pushed my passport through the slot to a desk clerk who looked at it and quickly handed it to his superior standing nearby. The clerk ordered me to step aside.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Harrison.”

“Speak clearly,” he growled, then copied the passport information onto a paper and stamped it. In all, the ordeal lasted two minutes, followed by an equally short visit to the money exchange.

It was another blistering afternoon as I set off for the Turkish outpost half a mile away on the other side of no man’s land. Yet I felt as if Atlas had lifted me high, high up among the clouds. I looked down at the welcoming Turkish flag, snapping in the khamsin wind.

A hundred metres from the first gate, an old woman beckoned me over to help her with a large duffle-bag with which she was struggling, along with a smaller one. A kind of gratefulness came over me, demanding I assist her. And so I did, despite the large bag’s full weight of at least seventy pounds. A few steps later, I was safe in Turkey. It was July 8.

Thus ended my six-day travel in Syria, an otherwise poor, run-down military zone of oppression—a brief journey into the realm of imagination and fear, whose borders are always open, always multitude. I remembered the translated English words inscribed on a ring in the Palmyra Museum, the spacing of which highlighted a particular meaning: “He who fears for his end will achieve no thing.”

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Turkey Beyond Istanbul

Stepping past Istanbul in those days was very much a leap into the dark.

—Simon Dring, *On the Road Again*

For the traveller setting off from Istanbul, much of interior Turkey seemed harsh and unrelenting—small towns and shepherd's huts, people trying to eke out a living from a dry, unforgiving land. Westerners intent on getting to India quickly spent little time in any interior town or city. A stop might be required in Ankara, a fairly modern city, to get a travel visa, or in other cities, such as Erzurum, out of curiosity. Otherwise, stops were mainly caused by vehicle repairs or extreme weather: heavy rains and flooding in spring, punishingly hot temperatures in summer, and bone-chilling cold in the fall and winter.

Following my brief arrest in Syria, I travelled eastwards to the city of Diyarbakir, a fortified ancient city that remains one of Turkey's primary military outposts. There, I again met several Turkish youths eager to know my impressions of their country. We strolled along the city's crumbling parapets for several hours, talking.

The next day I travelled to Lake Van. I took a small room at a small hotel abutting a simple farm outside the city of Van. The city borders on the lake, beyond which rises Mount Ararat.

I did not know when I arrived there of the region's troubled history, but I soon learned. In the spring of 1915, during the early stages of the Armenian genocide, Van was the site of a protracted battle between Ottoman forces and the city's Armenian residents, who were facing certain death. They were ultimately rescued after Russian troops arrived and liberated the city, but at least another three-quarters of a million Armenians were not as lucky. Yet the Turkish government continues to deny that any genocide occurred, preferring to claim that the Ottomans never intended to kill Armenians—merely to resettle them for their own protection.

One day, as I sat reading, a young boy—the hotel keeper's son—came by, obviously curious of the stranger. We had a brief conversation, as best we could. Afterwards, I wrote a poem recounting our meeting:

On the banks of Lake Van,
I sit reading Hesse
and looking out upon the turquoise and chalk water.
The local women,
faceless in their niqab,
walk to the reedy shore.
Ten miles to the west lies Akdomar Isle;
at my back, an ancient Urartu Temple,
now a peasant hut
hung with white laundry.
In the mornings, I bathe my face
in the glacial stream
that flows from the hills.

There is a boy, the hotel owner's son.
He is a Kurd.
One day he tells me of a time, long ago,
when his people were shot in the fields
by Turks on horseback.
He wears a pin
beneath his coat lapel bearing
the image of a Kurdish leader

who was hanged.
The boy makes me tea.
We speak no more.

The boy gave me his pin, which I still have.

The moment was quite moving. I have thought often of that encounter in the years since. After 1984, Kurdish nationalists intensified their fight for an independent country that would include parts of Syria, Iraq, and Iran, as well as Turkey. Following a brief ceasefire from 2013 to 2015, fighting between the Kurdish and Turkish forces has renewed with no end in sight.

On July 15, I waved goodbye to the boy and took a bus to the Gürbulak–Bazargan border crossing into Iran.



No description of Turkey of the period is complete without reference to its roads. In all seasons, Turkey's notoriously poor road conditions added to the difficulties faced by overland travellers. Basil Jay, who set off on the journey with his family by van in 1974, notes that "The road surface was bad all day. The bends treacherous. Drops to both right and left of at least 2 feet. . . . There was no hard shoulder. . . . There appeared to be no road network whatsoever, just meandering tracks."¹

Margot Miller recounted a particularly harrowing experience that she and her companions had driving in their van along Turkey's coastal northeast in late 1971. The road was at first paved and "gorgeous," but soon after, as they headed into the mountains, it became a "dark and dangerous, narrow dirt road." Their driver downshifted on some gravel, causing the van to head toward a cliff, stopping just on the edge, with "the van's lights shining out into the abyss, going nowhere, hitting nothing." They all sat paralyzed, then leaned to the left as they gingerly got out the front of the vehicle. It "teetered like a rectangle," Margot recalled, "its left front and the rear right wheels on the road, while the left rear tire clawed for air."

1. Basil Jay, *65 Days to Delhi: An Incredible Journey*, 241.

Miller and her colleagues were saved when a Turkish farmer, who had seen the van's lights, came along with his tractor and, tying a rope to their vehicle, pulled it back onto the road.

David Pearson recalled a different kind of harrowing incident in Kurdistan. He and Bess Blackwell had stopped their Land Rover on a hillside to watch sheep grazing and began climbing the hill. But partway up, David turned back to get something from the vehicle only to see a Turkish man get out of a car stopped by the road and point to the gas tanks on the side of their Land Rover. The tanks carried thirty gallons of gas due to the scarcity of gas stations in eastern Turkey. The man pointed at the tanks and made it clear he wanted at least two cans of the gas, which he took down the road to a larger storage tank nearby. "When I gestured that he should pay for the gas," Pearson said, "the man moved his hand across his throat. That was the end of the discussion."

An accident or vehicle breakdown in winter could be equally life-threatening. The winters in eastern Turkey are extremely cold and usually accompanied by an enormous amount of snow. John Wall told of a journey in 1968 when the bus he was on went through "a tunnel cut through the compacted snow. The passageway was about one foot wider than the bus and well above window height." Erik Pontoppidan similarly recalls a two-day train ride in 1969, during which they passed through "a beautiful, but very desolate landscape of plains and mountain" before arriving in the city of Erzurum, which sits on a high plateau in the eastern Anatolian region. Throughout a bitterly cold February night, he drank "gallons of tea to keep warm, watching the horse-drawn sledges on the streets," while waiting for a local bus delayed by snowstorms to take him eastwards.²

David Dudeck provided a wonderful account of a journey by Magic Bus through eastern Turkey in 1974:

The owner was English. The bus was old and only got us to around Erzurum. It was February and really cold—it might have been minus forty. The radiator didn't work—they didn't have much in the way of antifreeze—and finally the bus wouldn't

2. Erik Pontoppidan, "The Hippie Trail: The Road to Paradise," n.p.

start. Someone was pulling the bus and sure enough the driver didn't hit the brakes in time and, "crack," the windshield broke. But even then, the driver didn't want to stop. He was like the Black Knight in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. We drove with a broken windshield for a while, but it was just too friggin' cold, and we couldn't get someone to tow us. Finally, we gave up and took a taxi into Erzurum. I huddled in a little hotel where we had to buy wood for the little wood stoves. Not expecting it, I didn't have a thick blanket or sleeping bag. I woke up in the middle of the night with ice a quarter inch thick on the inside of the windows. Luckily, we were in the last place in eastern Turkey where you could still buy beer.

Such accounts of travel on Turkish roads are commonplace in the stories I gathered about travels on the Hippie Trail. In retrospect, they offer a sense of shared experience in what could often be a lonely, isolating, and greatly varied existence on the road.



After departing Turkey in mid-July, I spent about ten days in Iran before crossing into Afghanistan. Around the end of the first week in August, I interrupted my journey to make my ultimately fruitless trip to Germany to see my Swiss girlfriend, but I was back in Turkey by late September. My second journey across Turkey followed a more conventional, and more direct, route, which led initially from Istanbul southeast to Ankara, the Turkish capital. I travelled by bus, entranced by the landscape along the way:

The countryside is exquisitely beautiful, a gentle blending of greens and yellows, parcelled out in even patches between the smooth, deep hills. At times the earth turns the red colour of dried blood, or maybe a brown, but whereas the Greek landscape is so rugged and majestic, its colours vibrantly bursting out at your senses, the Turkish

terrain flows gentler, more serene. Near the city of Bolu, a bank of clouds, like hard-edged wool, shot out of the valleys and sifted over the slopes, a frail and conjuring mist that set me pondering as to where the road was leading. For it seemed as though some frozen waste, a no man's land was beckoning just ahead, a mysterious cleft in history spilling out into the Anatolian Plateau.

But then it began to rain, and in the last villages before Ankara, the streets were flooding, sewers backing up. In Ankara, amid violent downpours, I followed a generous Turk to where I might find a cheap hotel. I was hungry, but I was too wet to go out in the storm. Instead, I read for a while. A tourist manual's disparaging description of the city mirrored my less than positive initial reaction of Ankara. I left for Kayseri the next day.

From Kayseri, which is situated roughly in the middle of the country, I travelled northeast to Erzurum and shortly thereafter to the border to begin my second journey across Iran.

In the Shah's Shadow

To travel is to discover that everyone is wrong about other countries.

—Aldous Huxley, *Jesting Pilate*

I crossed into Iran from Turkey on two occasions, first in mid-July, the second time in late September. Both times were by bus. Both times were at the Gürbulak–Bazargan crossing. I remember the bus rumbling down into the dry wadi that straddled the border. The smell of diesel and dust hung over everything. The heat was intense. Suddenly, the bus drew to a halt. We sat. And sat. Nothing and no one moved. Basil Jay's account of his family's crossing by van two years earlier was eerily similar to my own:

For almost four hours we were pushed from pillar to post amid the most unbelievable disorganization, form filling, arranging insurances, carnets and a hundred and one other bits of paperwork. Eventually exhausted we drove through and into Iran. We camped just 20 miles over the border and attempted to clean off the thick layers of dust that lay over every imaginable surface of both ourselves and the vehicles.¹

1. Basil Jay, *65 Days to Delhi: An Incredible Journey*, 302.

Since the late 1960s, Gürbulak–Bazargan had become the major crossing for Westerners travelling east from Turkey. Before that time, travellers had another option: to breach the Iranian border by way of Iraq. This was the route taken by the Oxford-Cambridge crew in 1955–56; David Harvey and his companions in 1962–63; Henry Hamilton and Alastair Harper that same year; and Carol McLean and her friends two years later. At the time, Iraq was considered one of the Middle East's most modern and westernized countries. However, a military coup in 1968 paved the way for Saddam Hussein to gradually gain power. While some travellers continued to follow the Iraq route into Iran, this route came to a final halt beginning in 1974 with the outbreak of war between the Iraqi state and its Kurdish minority and, finally, the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–88.

By whichever route one arrived, Iran's main highways were generally good. Two exceptions were the eastern mountain passes in winter, which receive a large amount of snow and can be impassable, and many of the country's roads and bridges in spring, when they often wash out. To these seasonal issues must be added two wholly human actions that might also complicate road travel, both noted by Basil Jay. First, when a vehicle broke down, which was "very frequent," lorry and bus drivers would surround their vehicles, from about fifty yards back, with large rocks "spread into the middle of the road," which were "designed to prevent vehicles (particularly at night) from driving into their unlit and immobile vehicles." If an animal is killed in the road—goats, sheep, "even cattle"—villagers would immediately come out and "then proceed, still in the middle of the road, to skin, cut up and share the luckless carcass around their numbers."²

Side excursions were possible, for example, visits to the northern region, the Elburz Mountains, and the resort towns of the Caspian Sea. Such trips were only a small diversion before travelling to Tehran, yet I chose to head straight to that great city.



Tehran, a 7,000-year-old city, was home to a little more than four million people in 1976. Some Western travellers have unhappy memories of

2. Jay, *65 Days to Delhi*, 334.

Tehran, but I am not among them. Perhaps their impressions stemmed from spending little time in the city. Most Western travellers treated Tehran as a weigh-station for getting visas and such. This was unfair, as I have come to realize more over the years. Tehran was a very modern city in many respects. As Iran's capital, it housed foreign embassies, international banks, and postal services. If required, visas could be obtained there, or vehicles could be repaired. While one traveller I interviewed questioned the cleanliness of a health clinic where she received a gamma globulin shot, the fact is that Tehran sported a good medical system.

My second stay in Tehran, in late September, was much shorter but no less memorable:

Half of the city stores are crammed with sinks, bathtubs, or toilets; the others are stereo shops or (on Ferdowsi Avenue) carpets. No one seems to eat sitting down. The sidewalks are filled with food stands. You can buy a banana or other fruit shakes for about 25 cents (2 rials). They are quenching and delicious. . . .

I met a thirty-year-old literature student from Tabriz with whom I had a spirited conversation first over Israel and the Arabs, then later a calm lecture from him on Persian authors. He wrote in my passport, in Arabic, a poem about Muhammed written by the Iranian poet Saadi Shirazi. He told me, too, the tale of why there are so many young men bearing on their backs cold water in metal tanks walking Iran's city streets in summer—that, centuries before, many people had died at the hands of a cruel ruler who cut off the water supply to the people, so that now water is viewed as a public good.

Westerners who came to know Iranians almost invariably found them gracious, kind, and polite but also reserved and fiercely proud. Many travellers, however, viewed the city as emotionally cold and overcrowded. The chaotic state of traffic was a particular source of both amusement and shock. In the words of James Truman, "Driving etiquette in Tehran

is modeled after the chariot race in *Ben-Hur*.”³ New concrete buildings were sprouting up everywhere. A pall of dust seemed to hang perpetually over the city.

Tehran, by the 1970s, was a very westernized city. Margot Miller recalled spending a week in Tehran in 1972. One night, some Iranians took her and some friends to a disco. “We ate pizza and drank beer,” she says. “Everyone was dressed to the nines. The women were beautifully turned out in high heels, jewellery, and silk scarves.”

But not all Western travellers enthused over the city’s modernization. Brenda Grant wrote in her diary, “It seems they’ve lost the good parts of eastern cultures and picked up the busy, bustling parts of the Western world.” In my notes, I similarly described Tehran as “offensive to the spirit; loud cars and money grabbing. It’s as if the worst aspects of Western cities were transported here.”

I see now how I and many others who made the journey too often took an observer’s stance, laden with preconceptions that focused on the exotic or simply made unfair comparisons to our own culture, without really getting inside the lives of the people in Tehran or other places. The result are descriptions I sometimes wrote that now seem often thin and doubtful. It is a lesson learned regrettably late.



In retrospect, I think some of the negative impressions Westerners held of Tehran were also the result of the relatively small area in which we stayed, a stretch of avenue known as Amir Kabir. The avenue was named after Mirza Taqi Khan Farahani (1807–52), who is better known as Amir Kabir. He was an influential Persian politician (premier) who attempted to reform the country’s administration and was assassinated for his efforts.⁴ Lacking entirely its namesake’s illustrious status, the avenue was instead the repository of all sorts of motor parts—tires, radiators, timing chains, etc.—for

3. James Truman, “Gods, Kings, Mystics, and Mullahs,” 187.

4. Abbas Amanat, “The Downfall of Mirza Taqi Khan Amir Kabir and the Problem of Ministerial Authority in Qajar Iran,” 577–78.

every type of vehicle, including mopeds. But the avenue also featured a host of cheap accommodations: the Goodyear Guest House, the Youth Hostel Ferdosi, and—most famously—the Amir Kabir Hotel. Second only to Istanbul’s Pudding Shop in notoriety for Western travellers, the Amir Kabir Hotel became a central place of information-sharing and money transactions.

I stayed at the Amir Kabir in July and tried to get accommodation once again in September on my second trip, but the hotel was full due to Ramadan. To make things worse, the bus I had taken from Maku, just across the border, had lost my small travel bag. Two very long days passed before it finally arrived.

That first night, I slept curled up on some canvas in the corner of an alleyway near the Amir Kabir. My “room” the next night was a cot on the roof of the youth hostel. It was a blessing, as the city was baked in intense summer heat. “It was very pleasant and warm,” I wrote, “watching the sort of dusty clouds that swept in so low that you could almost suck in the dirt and blow it away again.”

But, for all its penthouse appeal, the roof did not feel particularly safe for anyone used to the security of walls. I was pleased to finally get a room at the Amir Kabir the next night. I described the hotel as a “tourist rattrap and fleabag”—hardly an idiosyncratic assessment. Terming it the “traveller ghetto,” David Tomory provides an accurate description of the Amir Kabir as “a concrete U with balconies and walkways, the hotel itself occupying the second and third floors,” while the first floor housed “a tyre emporium whose merchandise had overflowed into the U and the surrounding streets, so that the Amir Kabir was lapped by a sea of tyres.”⁵

For sixty rials—a little under a dollar at the time—travellers could get a single mattress and one dirty sheet in a dormitory room with multiple beds. An oil heater occupied the centre of the room. “For breakfast,” said Bruce Finch, “you would shout down and they would bring eggs and chips to your room.” At the end of the hall was a toilet.⁶ Arthur remembered

5. David Tomory, *A Season in Heaven: True Tales from the Road to Kathmandu*, 48–49.

6. Rory MacLean, *Magic Bus: On the Hippie Trail from Istanbul to India*, 84.

the Amir Kabir as the only hotel in the countries he visited where the proprietors took one's passport and locked it up for you.

Like many travellers, I found a ready market for my jeans: a young man in the tire shop purchased them. As in other countries, Marlboro cigarettes and Johnny Walker were also in high demand. A thriving black market also existed for money exchanges. (Jay describes changing money at "unbelievably good rates" in Mashhad's bazaar, adding that the currencies were "probably either stolen, or counterfeit." ⁷)

Simply "being" in a place can be an education. My two stays at the Amir Kabir taught me much about Iran's politics. By talking and observing, I learned of the seething anger that would soon bring down the Shah's regime. I had a rudimentary knowledge of Iran and other countries in the region before travelling, but speaking to people gave me a deeper understanding of Iran's recent political history. My journey through Iran and the countries that followed provided important material lessons regarding the interplay of states and social forces. I owe much of my later career as a political sociologist to those lessons.



How we experience another country is a product not only of the preconceptions we bring with us, though this is important, but also a matter of timing. Like many countries after 1945, Iran tried to escape the West's domineering influence, especially that of Britain, which controlled the country's oil industry, and the United States. In 1951, the Iranian Parliament overwhelmingly elected a staunch nationalist, Mohammad Mosaddegh, as the country's new prime minister, who promptly nationalized that industry. As Mosaddegh's power grew, tensions developed between him and the Shah, who was relegated to the role of a figurehead. But the UK's MI6 and the US's CIA staged a coup in August 1953 that overthrew Mosaddegh's government and returned the Shah to power.⁸

7. Jay, *65 Days to Delhi*, 431.

8. Karl E. Meyer and Shareen Blair Brysac, *Kingmakers: The Invention of the Modern Middle East*, 323–47. See also "Anglo-Persian Oil Company," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, accessed June 6, 2024, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/anglo-persian-oil-company>.

Years later, Mosaddegh's overthrow still rankled many Iranians, who viewed the Shah as a puppet of Western imperialism. In 1963, the Shah introduced a series of modernizing social and economic reforms meant to appeal to urban, Western-trained liberals, as well as oil companies and Western governments.⁹

Many Western travellers immediately after 1953 and later were generally sympathetic to the Shah and his regime. Tim Slessor's account of the Oxford-Cambridge expedition of 1955–56 disparaged the “stagnant traces of Mossadeq,” who was “still regarded as a national hero, albeit a misguided one.”¹⁰ Cycling through the Iranian countryside in 1963, in the immediate aftermath of the Shah's land reforms, Dervla Murphy spoke to peasants who had suddenly become landowners. “They genuinely love their Shah,” she noted, “—and would you blame them!”¹¹ Henry Hamilton, who journeyed through the region in 1962, held a similarly benign view: “There was agricultural reform going on. The women could wear short skirts and go to university. There was prosperity and everyone was quite friendly, though Mashhad was a little more conservative. But it really didn't look too bad.”

Attending a theatre in Tehran in 1972, Bruce Finch remembered that the audience stood for the playing of Iran's national anthem as the movie began. Finch “didn't notice any anti-Western feeling at the time or any religious fervour,” although he added, “Now I was talking mostly of course to people of my own age group, probably a more educated group.”

Only months earlier, Iran celebrated the 2,500th anniversary of the State of Iran and the Persian Empire. The main event, full of pomp and ceremony, was held at the ancient site of Persepolis, where King Darius had first erected a palace in the fifth century BCE before Alexander the Great levelled it in 330 BCE. Now it was restored.

The celebration was meant to legitimate the Shah's rule but was based on a wholly manufactured historical claim. The sham cost an estimated

9. Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*, 144–51.

10. Tim Slessor, *First Overland: London-Singapore by Land Rover*, 74. “Mossadeq” is one of several alternative spellings of Mosaddegh.

11. Dervla Murphy, *Full Tilt: Ireland to India with a Bicycle*, 26.

US\$22 million and was decried by critics as a bald and ultimately failed effort by the Shah “to inflate his own faltering regime with the grandeur of history.”¹²

The Peacock Throne was in serious trouble, as I learned. Discontent was rising across several social groups: displaced farmers, urban workers, conservative clerics, intellectuals, students. Each group might have its own reason to be angry, but nationalism and anger with the West was the unifying element.

Leaving the Amir Kabir Hotel, I walked every day past shop windows filled with the newest appliances and televisions, designer apparel, Mercedes-Benz cars, and more. The streets of Tehran dripped with wealth, the product of burgeoning oil revenues following the 1973 OPEC crisis. But these things remained beyond reach for most Iranians, especially as inflation was surging. I remember vividly seeing farmers beating helplessly at the dry and unyielding fields with simple implements. James Hooley and his wife recalled a heartbreaking moment in 1975 when, over dinner, an Iranian couple offered them their infant as “it would have no life” in their own country.

But the emerging crisis was not only economic. It was also cultural and political. For many, the intensified commercialization of Iranian life symbolized the country’s subordination to the American empire. To the outside world, the Shah’s regime appeared as a modernizing liberal democracy in the Western mould. Iranians knew better, although the political, military, and economic elites were quite happy.

Behind the façade of liberal democracy lay an authoritarian regime propped up by American arms. Its chief instrument was the Shah’s American-trained secret police, SAVAK. In conversation one day with an American who had lived in Iran for some time, I was told of a prison in Tehran built in 1972 primarily to hold the Shah’s political opponents,

12. For the expense figure, see Cyrus Kadivar, “We Are Awake,” *The Iranian*, January 25, 2002, <https://iranian.com/CyrusKadivar/2002/January/2500/>; Truman, “Gods, Kings, Mystics, and Mullahs,” 199–200.

but Westerners arrested on drug charges were liable to end up there as well. That building was the notorious Evin Prison.¹³

The Iranian state intensified its policy of suppression after 1973. In 1976, the same year I travelled to Iran, an Amnesty International report noted it had the “highest rate of death penalties in the world, no valid system of civilian courts and a history of torture which is beyond belief. No country in the world has a worse record in human rights than Iran.”¹⁴

Watching the Shah and the Queen, Farah (Diba) Pahlavi, pass by in a parade car in Isfahan in 1977, David Pearson and Bess Blackwell recalled that the crowd was neither celebratory nor hostile, just silent, even pensive. There was no sense of reverence, let alone love, only curiosity.

But Jean (a pseudonym) recalled something darker in 1975: fear. She remembered talking with university students on a beach somewhere who were terrified of discussing even mildly political questions. “You had to walk miles away, down the beach,” she said, “so you could make sure no one was listening.” Travelling through the country in 1976, Bruce Shore similarly sensed an atmosphere of anxiety and depression gripping the Iranian people, a feeling that things were “off balance” and that the weight of events was shifting in a dangerous way.

My strongest memory is of the Iranian youths who worked at the Amir Kabir Hotel and the tire shop below. They were angry. They loved rock and roll music and jeans but hated America and the West generally. After I returned to Canada in February 1977, I repeatedly told people that a revolution was brewing in Iran—even as American state department

13. Evin Prison remains in use today, repurposed to house “enemies” of the Islamic Republic. One of my colleagues—Kavous Sayed-Emami, a professor of sociology at Imam Sadiq University, in Tehran, whom I met in Lethbridge in 2017—was arrested in early 2018 and died in Evin Prison under mysterious circumstances only two days later. The prison continues to be used to hold, torture, and kill the regime’s opponents. See Sarah Reiger, “Iranian-Canadian Academic’s Death in Iran Prison a ‘Profound Tragedy,’ Says Alberta Prof,” *CBC News*, last updated February 11, 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/kavous-seyed-emami-lethbridge-1.4530435>.

14. Quoted in William Blum, *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II*, 71.

officials and military advisers continued to insist that the Shah's regime was in no danger of collapse.

Early in 1978, protests broke out across Iran. A Polish journalist, Rzyard Kapuściński, described a massive march in Tehran as "a human river, broad and boiling, flowing endlessly, rolling through the main street from dawn till dusk. A flood, a violent flood that in a moment will engulf and drown everything."¹⁵ Beyond seeking to overthrow the Shah, however, the protestors initially lacked a shared objective. The protests were an expression of inchoate nationalism and hatred of the regime. Although Shia clerics wielded enormous power, and many segments of Iranian society—especially in the rural countryside—were staunchly religious, much of the urban population was young, increasingly secularized, and liberal (or Marxist). In short, the eventual outcome of events as they unfolded was not at first clear.

Years later, I met Helga, a German-born woman sitting at a small table in Istanbul's Pudding Shop who told me of how she had hidden in her room at the Amir Kabir Hotel in December 1978 as mass protests broke out all across the country and angry crowds thronged the streets below. Afraid to leave, Helga at last got a car ride to Mashhad and then a ride with some engineers to Afghanistan, another country soon to explode in turmoil.

In mid-January 1979, the Shah—now terminally ill with cancer—left Iran at the behest of his new prime minister, Shapour Bakhtiar. At the start of February, the prominent Shia cleric Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran after more than fourteen years in exile. Khomeini quickly became the revolution's leader, against which opposition—including the Iranian military—melted away. The Islamic Republic had been born.

The Iranian Revolution ended overland travel between Turkey and India. The route was no longer safe or even possible. The number of tourists entering Iran in 1979 was officially zero, and that number has remained paltry. More than forty years later, the revolution's tragic legacy endures.

In the years since, I have sometimes wondered how many of the frustrated and angry young men I saw at the Amir Kabir and clustered in the tire shop below were among those marching in the streets and besieging

15. Quoted in Jason Burke, "False Optimism May Cloud What We See on the Streets of Tehran," 46.

the American embassy. Probably many. And how many would also soon lose their lives in the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), which the United States encouraged through the sale of arms to Saddam Hussein in the first of many acts of revenge. Sadly, I suspect, some also.



There are two main overland routes heading east from Tehran if one's goal is to eventually get to India. The first is more circuitous, but more interesting. It leads south to the Holy City of Qom, then on to ancient Isfahan. From there, a traveller might journey southeast to Kerman and Bam, with perhaps a side trip to Persepolis, before enduring the seemingly endless salt deserts of southern Iran on the way to the town of Zahedan and the nearby Pakistan border. Regrettably, I did not take that route.

Instead, I took the second, more conventional, easterly route to the city of Mashhad, home to the Shrine of Iman Reza and of the poet Abul-Qâsem Ferdowsi Tusi, or simply Ferdowsi, author of the *Shahnameh*. In contrast to Tehran, Mashhad seemed spotlessly clean and orderly, and devoid too of the roiling anger I had sensed in the capital. But its beauty held only a passing allure. Its mosques were almost too perfect, and I left after a few days, bound for Afghanistan via the Taybad–Islam Qala border crossing. I had been there once before, in late July, travelling by local bus. This time, I crossed in a minibus in the company of three other Westerners—two Irishmen and a Brit—whom I had met in Mashhad.

Borders often elicit colourful stories. But stories about the Iran–Afghan border differed depending on the direction one was travelling. Entering Afghanistan was slow and at times comically bureaucratic, if largely unproblematic. Entering Iran, however, was slow, bureaucratic, and threatening—and, ever since the American-led crackdown on drugs entering Iran and Turkey, dangerous, if one was stupid enough to carry drugs.



Drugs were a relatively minor lure for travellers in the early 1960s. As Mark Godfrey recalled of his journey in 1962, “In Herat, I bought a chunk

of hash, about half the size of a small chocolate bar, cost maybe twenty-five cents. I forgot about it and carried it home to the US”—“a sort of souvenir,” he added with a laugh.

John Wall, who travelled through India two years later, similarly reported that drug use was still a minority activity. He remembered a Frenchman with whom he shared a room in Kandahar who had smashed up his car and had lost his ATA carnet and now couldn't leave without the car or else paying duty—although he had drugs to ease his pain. “He was in real trouble but was too happy to care,” Wall told me. “The hotel keeper would make him eat, then go through his wallet for the money. The hotel keeper knew he would eventually have to call the police.”

By the mid-1960s, however, drugs had moved out of the subterranean precincts of Western culture into the mainstream. Promoted by prominent writers, self-proclaimed philosophers, and musicians such as Alan Ginsberg, Alan Watts, and the Beatles, drugs merged seamlessly with the quest for enlightenment. By the early 1970s, the drug culture was flourishing all the way from California to Kathmandu, creating new markets for profit.

Emblematic of the symbiotic relationship between spirituality and capitalist enterprise was the Brotherhood of Eternal Love, a group formed in southern California in the mid-1960s. Originally a commune dedicated to psychedelics and mysticism, the brotherhood swiftly evolved into a criminal operation engaged in the international smuggling of pot, hash, LSD, and cocaine. In his fascinating account of the organization, Nicholas Schou quotes information to the effect that, in the late 1960s, a kilogram of hashish cost \$5 or \$6 in Afghanistan (a price of roughly \$2.27 per pound) but would fetch about \$100 in California.¹⁶ And the profit margins kept rising. According to David Tomory, in the early 1970s, a pound of top-quality hashish was worth about \$8 in Afghanistan but would sell in England for \$400 and in California for \$2,000.¹⁷

Given the money to be made and the relatively lax enforcement by state police forces around smuggling, drug trafficking went big time. As

16. Nicholas Schou, *Orange Sunshine: The Brotherhood of Eternal Love and Its Quest to Spread Peace, Love, and Acid to the World*, 82.

17. Tomory, *A Season in Heaven*, 244.

Robert explained, a member of southern California's Brotherhood of Eternal Love inspired his first trip along the Hippie Trail. In 1970, he and a friend flew to Germany, where they purchased a new Volkswagen camper bus that they outfitted with driving lights and KONI racing shocks. After picking up a third friend in Amsterdam, the trio drove to Istanbul and onto Afghanistan and Pakistan with the single intent of buying hash to smuggle back for sale in the US. It was Robert's first of many extended trips to Afghanistan to obtain drugs. His last trip was in 1979, six months before the Soviets invaded.

An American-led war on drugs, beginning in the late 1960s, impacted even occasional drug users in Turkey and Iran. It simply was not worth it. In Don Skelton's words, "There were a lot of cops and the idea of going to jail was not attractive." Steve Crawford was a lone exception: while spending a month in Kerman in 1972, he had his first experience smoking opium in a Persian opium den.

It was at the border, however, that the crackdown had its most obvious impact. Before this time, except for seasonal problems, border crossings generally went smoothly. Much of the traffic involved vehicles carrying goods or itinerant workers, whose papers might get a look, but buses carrying tourists got an easy pass. Richard Gregory accurately describes the Afghan trucks as "a riot of colour, the cabs heavily decorated and the body panels painted with colourful scenes."¹⁸

Border crossings later became long, onerous, and fraught with fear, even for those not carrying drugs. Entering Iran from Afghanistan in the mid-1970s, Angela Ford recalled seeing glass cases containing seized objects used to smuggle drugs, displayed as warnings. Patrick Welland, who travelled in 1975, remembered seeing graphic pictures of executed drug smugglers covering the walls of the border's customs building.

The Iranian border guards were renowned for their workman-like thoroughness in destroying anything that might carry drugs. Writing of his journey home to London in 1974, Richard Gregory remembers the "thorough going over" he received at the Iran border: "A customs man squeezed

18. Gregory, "The Hippie Trail 1974: London to Kathmandu," "Afghanistan" section.

out my toothpaste tube, disappointed.”¹⁹ Writing of his own travel in 1974, Basil Jay describes “luggage, boxes, bags, etc. opened and carefully examined . . . the contents being emptied on the ground” and gear boxes being drained of oil “in an effort to find hashish or opium.”²⁰ That same year, Bill Fillmore saw border guards rip out the back seats of a vehicle. I was told of the spines of backpacks being broken in search of drugs hidden in the metal frame. If found with drugs, foreigners were likely to face a long prison sentence—or worse. Patrick Welland noted that two weeks before he crossed into Iran “a Frenchman and a German were reportedly shot for drug smuggling.”

In contrast, my crossing from Afghanistan into Iran on my way to Europe in August went smoothly. The tour bus I was on was thoroughly searched but proceeded after the customary wait of four hours. No mangled backpacks, no sacrifice of toothpaste.

Similarly, both my crossings into Afghanistan—in late July and again at the start of October—went smoothly. Ernest, however, recalled a near mishap that occurred in June 1976 at the Afghanistan border:

It was a desolate, desert frontier with a hut on each side and no electricity. Two barbed wire fences about 50 yards apart delineated the no man’s land in between. We pulled up on the Iran side as the sun was setting. Our bus driver, Mark, said the border was about to close and that to get stuck in the no man’s land overnight invited a serious risk of getting robbed or worse. But we got our passports stamped anyway and pressed on through the rapidly increasing darkness. On the Afghan side the gate was already closed and the customs officials were out the door of their hut and about to disappear. Mark called to them, and one came over as our desperation increased. As it turned out, Mark was well prepared for an eventuality like this with baksheesh, including bottles of Jack Daniel’s. The officials returned, opened

19. Gregory, “The Hippy Trail 1974: London to Kathmandu,” “The Journey Home” section.

20. Jay, *65 Days to Delhi*, 446–47.

the gate, and stamped our passports in the now dark hut as we held our flashlights.

A foolish gamble, no doubt, but a good story. Fortunately, my three traveling companions and I required no rescue. We crossed the border without any trouble and were soon on a minibus to Herat.

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The Pearl of Khorasan

To awaken alone in a strange town is one of the pleasantest sensations in the world.

—Freya Stark, *Perseus in the Wind*

The border post lay behind us; fabled Afghanistan lay ahead. But we were not in Herat quite as soon as we had anticipated:

We had to wait in the shade for a minibus until 5:30 p.m. Having been warned already of a game the Afghan drivers played, telling travellers the fare to Herat was 50 Afs (46 to the dollar), then stopping halfway there and demanding 100, we were not surprised when it happened. But we refused to pay and just sat, while the Afghan boy who rode in the back kept running around the windows saying “100 Afs.” We got off the bus and stood outside for two minutes. After about an hour, the driver capitulated and agreed to 50 Afs, but we said we wouldn’t pay him until we got to Herat.

Herat is the first major Afghan city after the country’s border with Iran. It is an ancient place, associated with the Persian Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BCE), specifically with a region then known as Aria or, in Persian, Haraiva.

In 330 BCE, Alexander the Great captured and rebuilt the city of Artacoana, capital of Aria, on or near the site of modern-day Herat. The Arian region subsequently came under the control of the Seleucid dynasty of Macedonia, before briefly becoming part of India's Mauryan Empire and then of the Parthian Empire, ruled by an Iranian dynasty.

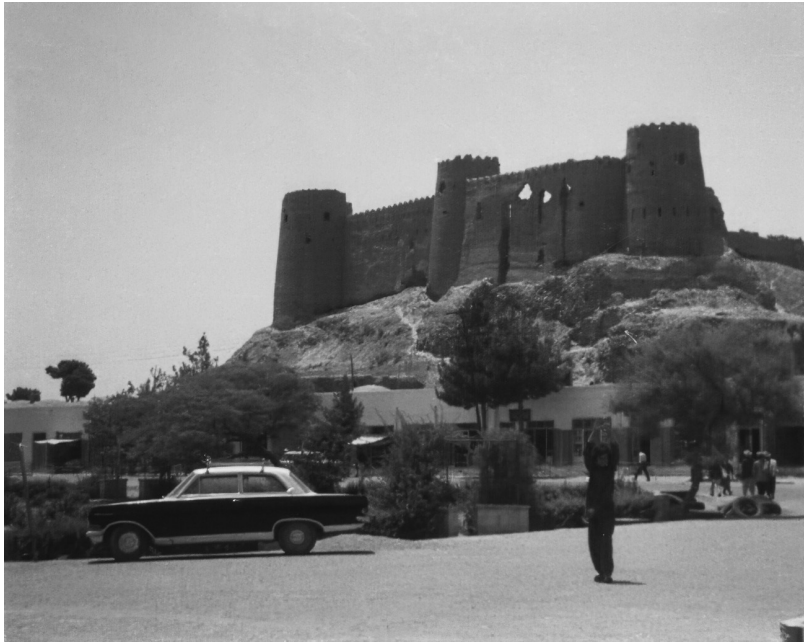
The Parthians stayed in power until the third century CE, when they lost the region to the Kushans, who came from northwestern China and who, like the Mauryan king Ashoka before them, embraced Buddhism. As the Kushan Empire began to fragment, Aria was incorporated into the Sasanian Empire (ca. 225–650 CE), where it became known as Harev. During this period of Iranian rule, Herat became one of the main cities of Khorasan, the easternmost province of the empire, earning its nickname the “Pearl of Khorasan.”

As was probably true of most Western travellers, I knew almost nothing of this rich and complex history when I stepped off the minibus in Herat. Rather, I was immediately swept up in a ritual to which Westerners entering towns and cities east of Istanbul swiftly became accustomed. Unless arriving as part of an organized tour, in which case bus operators took passengers to a specified hotel, travellers often disembarked in a state of confusion made worse by severe fatigue and, sometimes, real illness. Small children and avid young men would hang around train and bus stations or in the main squares bearing signs advertising specific hotels and bombarding arriving travellers with questions and assertions. (“Do you want a room? I know of a very good place. Come with me.”) The competition was fierce, sometimes leading to angry exchanges between vendors or their representatives—though physical confrontations were rare.

My arrival in Herat in July followed this script. Tired and dirty, I was led to the Jammi Hotel where I spent one night before moving to the Caravan Hotel.¹



1. I kept no record of what I paid per night at these hotels, but Richard Gregory notes that his hotel in Herat cost 10 Afs a night. “The Hippie Trail 1974: London to Kathmandu,” “Afghanistan” section.



Arg-e Herat, Herat Citadel, believed to stand on the ruins of a fort built by Alexander the Great. The present structure, which dates to the early fifteenth century, was on the verge of collapse until repairs were undertaken in the late 1970s.

Whether coming from the east or west, travelling through the sensory overload of India or the relentless modernity of Tehran, most travellers found Herat a welcome refuge; an oasis of calm, good food, and pleasant music where Westerners could recharge before going on. They could also find there easily accessible drugs, especially hashish.

Herat's hotels, restaurants, and street scenes left a particularly strong impression on everyone who visited the city. Arriving in the city in the early 1970s, Margot Miller remembered staying in a small hotel room whose window opened onto the sight of the camels and donkeys tied up, and "animals, cars, and three-wheeled Chinese trucks arriving, bringing bundles of goods."

David Lane's recollections of being in Herat in 1971 offered a similarly romantic vision of a place caught in a time warp:

It was winter and there were loads of snow. I remember Herat as a really beautiful place with lovely blue and white and turquoise colours surrounding you. We stayed in some old hotel. It had a big central area which was warm, but the rooms were cold. If you wanted to have a shower, you had to thaw the pipes out. Everything was heated by wood. The hotel was on the second floor of the building, and when you looked outside, it was like something from a Russian novel. There were troikas drawn by lovely Arabian horses with bells sliding up and down. . . . You stayed pretty close to the hotel. The coffee houses were all male; you couldn't go in with a woman.

Yet not everyone had such quaint memories of Herat. Geoffrey Seccombe told of being treated for meningitis in the city in 1971 “by a German doctor who turned out to be a Nazi war criminal in hiding there.” What was Seccombe’s evidence for this claim, I wondered. *Was* the doctor a war criminal for whom the police were seeking, or was he only a former member of the party, as so many Germans once were? I had only Seccombe’s questionnaire, so I tried to get in touch with him again, in hopes of more information, but unfortunately I was unable to reach him. So I have no answers.

What we do know is that Afghanistan and Germany had close relations going back to the nineteenth century and that during the early years of the Second World War certain elements within the Afghan government, notably finance minister Abdul Majid Zabuli, favoured a formal alliance with the Axis powers.² The idea that a former Nazi might later seek refuge in the country is therefore plausible.

At the time, I was already becoming conscious of Afghanistan’s strategic but delicate position in Cold War politics, receiving aid from both the US and the Soviet Union and finding it increasingly difficult to steer an independent course between the two powers. But Afghanistan

2. See, among others, Ludwig W. Adamec, *Afghanistan’s Foreign Affairs to the Mid-Twentieth Century: Relations with the USSR, Germany, and Britain*, chap. 8, esp. 245–46, 249–50 ; Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan*, 480–81.

had often been caught up in empire building, if seldom willingly. During both my stays in the city, I wrote up some historical notes on Herat's conquest by Alexander the Great and subsequent capture and near-destruction by Genghis Khan's son Tolui during the Mongol invasion of Khorasan, early in the thirteenth century. I was assisted in my efforts to understand Herat's history and culture by historian Nancy Hatch Wolfe (later Dupree), whose *Herat: A Pictorial Guide* had been published a decade earlier. In it, she quotes a fifteenth-century historian who wrote, "In the Candlemakers Quarter, near the Iraq Gate, in the vicinity of the House of Mullah Ibrahim the Bookbinder, there is a mosque near which lies the tomb of saintly Bibi Nur." As legend has it, somewhere around 900 CE, Bibi Nur and her sister Bibi Hur built the magnificent Pul-i-Malan, an arched bridge over the Hari River, to the south of Herat, for which they are said to have used a mixture of clay and eggshells. The writer goes on to say that Bibi Nur "possesses a warm spirit and may realize all your desires if you visit her tomb on Wednesday night. This is a proven fact."³

Unfortunately, many of these sites had long ago disappeared as a result of war and pillaging, although the city has since been experiencing a welcome renaissance. On most days, I simply walked the streets, observing. Within shops, I watched metal workers hammering on silver or weavers spinning sheep's wool. They were always pleased to have visitors watch while going about their work.

One day, I played a chess game with an eight-year-old boy, the son of a shop owner. He beat me handily and brutally. My pride was stung. I played him again. It was a marginally better game, but I still lost. I looked at the shop owner. "He does that to everyone," he said.

I often wandered through the Herat Bazaar, a cluster of covered markets in the heart of the Old City. Most travellers to the Middle East and Asia will be familiar with a centuries-old act in which buyers and sellers perform well-established cultural roles. Conversations, starting the moment one even casually looks at some item—a jacket, an ornament—usually

3. Nancy Hatch Wolfe, *Herat: A Pictorial Guide*, n.p. The Iraq Gate is one of the four gates of Herat's Old City, from which travellers would set out in different directions.

begin with the question, “Where are you from?” This is followed by an invitation to enter the shop and the injunction that any discussion of business must wait until one has drunk chai or coffee, accompanied by sweet cakes or candies. An important element of this performance is that the prospective buyer is not strictly required to buy anything, though the seller hopes, of course, that conviviality will carry the day. Such engagements were usually enjoyable and sometimes did result in me making a purchase or effecting a trade, as my diary reminds me:

Today I traded my worn-out sleeping bag and my Turkish shoulder bag for a larger, more ornate Afghan shoulder bag. It required much haggling. The young shopkeeper wanted more than I offered, and I had to say no, no, no many times, but eventually I got the new bag. Afterwards, some people thought I was foolish, a bad trader, and could have done better, but I was happy. I had gotten what I needed.

On another day, I got myself outfitted for a white linen shirt and pants, of the type many Western travellers on the way to India were buying. My purchase was not entirely a fashion statement. Typical Western garb—jeans and T-shirts—was simply not appropriate to the temperature and climate of India, which was where I was going. As I soon discovered, however, the fabric was prone to shrink, so that wearing the clothes after their first wash would have required me to lose several pounds and at least two inches in height. In the end, I just left them behind at the hotel, free for the taking.

Beyond the market stalls, a different chance encounter led me to see another side of daily Herati life. I met a dark-haired Italian woman, Sandra, during my first time in Herat. She was a schoolteacher, and one day we visited an elementary school for girls. It was not far from five minarets that date to the fifteenth century. I have since learned that the minarets, though heavily damaged, are the last of twenty such towers. They are among the ruins of what was once a large Islamic religious complex that includes a mosque, a madrasa, and the mausoleum of Queen

Gawhar Shad, who commissioned the complex's construction beginning in 1417.⁴

We watched the girls at study and play for several minutes. They wore colourful dresses and seemed like all young girls everywhere; happy and smiling, and curious about the foreigners. That experience owed much to Sandra, as female travellers were better able to engage with local women and children than were Western males. Anna Danielle, who travelled through Herat around the same time, recalled seeing the unveiled faces of young girls and one day being invited into a home. Such invitations did not happen to male travellers.

But mostly I experienced Herat's sense of timeless calm and serenity. What I wrote at the time now seems heavily romanticized yet somehow indicative of the mood the city inspired:

Herat is a lovely town. The Afghanis have the most divine serenity in their faces. They don't hound you to buy. They seem simple and gifted with the beatitude of silence. The jingle of bells on the red tasselled bridles of the horses pulling hansoms in the street is like trickling water. It's like Xmas without snow, a gentleness hovering over every rooftop and head; the white-bearded faces of Afghanis aged in wisdom and wise through age, squatting on sidewalks in white turbans, cracking open melons, and letting the centuries pass, one into the other. . . .

Walking down the streets of Herat, with the cool-warm wind in the evening blowing endlessly through the guarding pines and spilling out over the hash-smokers on the curbs, one has an almost divine sense that one could fly down the street—just raise one's arms and be lifted clear over the town, the rough-hewn sand and cement shacks, the smiling men in their sleep, lifting and blowing through a hundred open windows to the source of every thought and heart.

4. Wolfe, *Herat: A Pictorial Guide*, n.p.

In the market, tall, striding men walk with easy smiles and eyes that seem drawn from Afghanistan's desert and cold mountain landscapes; a thousand years wrinkled in their foreheads, they walk, leading burros carrying packs, muskets, and endless bags of uncured skins of wolves and foxes.

In the years following, the easy smiles of Afghan people—men, women, children—were vaporized in recurrent wars and acts of repression. I have often thought since of the young girls that Sandra and I visited in the school, schools which they would later be prohibited from attending, and the young chess player who taught me a lesson in humility. I think of the tradesmen in their shops, the women going about their familial tasks. May the Afghan people be granted the peace and prosperity they deserve.



Afghan music was embedded in Herat's daily life and left a distinct impression on me and others. Journeying through Herat in 1974, Brenda Grant met an old man named Abdul who ran an antique store. He played a *dutar*, while his thirty-five-year-old son played *tabla* and a Western traveller played guitar, while Abdul's grandson watched. Grant recalls Abdul making them a special meal, a sort of omelette sprinkled with granulated sugar, cooked on a tiny charcoal brazier that sat on a Persian rug on his shopfloor.

Two years later, when passing through the city with Bruce Shore, Brenda Grant again found Abdul. He had aged a little but could still play, as she put it, "a mean *dutar*," while sporting a "distant enchanted look." Richard Gregory recalls entering "a *chai* shop where thirty Afghans sat around the walls cross-legged on a raised platform." He took a place on the floor as green tea and pipes of hashish circulated. "Then the music started. Musicians in the centre of the room played diverse local instruments and several men around the outside had hand drums. There was a communal singalong that reminded me of a football crowd back home."⁵

5. Gregory, "The Hippie Trail 1974: London to Kathmandu," "Afghanistan" section.



A typical street scene in the city of Herat. Traditional horse-drawn carriages share the road with trucks, cars, and jeeps.

Gregory's tale points to the casual role that drugs played in Afghanistan culture. Afghan men squatted on street corners and in their shops smoking hashish. Foreigners could casually buy a lump of hash on the street and toked up in broad daylight. My hotel keeper one day upbraided me for purchasing hash when he would have given me some for free. Whether one chose to partake a lot, a little, or not at all, drugs were simply woven into Afghanistan's daily life and culture. As Ernest remembered:

We arrived in Herat well after midnight and pulled up in front of a two-storey low-cost hotel/hostel. Greeted warmly by the manager and an entourage of adoring little kids, we were ushered into the manager's office. Beaming with pride, he handed us large chunks of a variety of hashish, some blonde, some dark, all with beautiful stamps we couldn't read. Smelling and examining them

carefully, we chose two and were shown to our rooms, not sure what to expect next. Ten minutes later one of the kids showed up with an already stoked “habli babbli” with multiple hoses for smoking. The kid knew what he was doing, and within a few minutes we were all quite pleasantly relaxed enjoying the cool Afghan night air and smells coming in through the screen-less window.



At the Caravan Hotel, where I moved on my second day, I was treated to a musician's playful sleight-of-hand:

I was sitting on the floor carpets in the Caravan's chai shop, after smoking two hash joints, a small table in front of my folded legs, when an accidental performance was put on for me. Directly ahead of me, an Afghan musician dressed in the typical garb of the east, sat on a divan and played his instrument, a tambour. A small boy was running around, carrying in his hand a pheasant-plumed fan. As he ran, he let the fan rise and descend over the heads of the sitting customers, mine included. Several persons had attempted to relieve him of the fan with little success, as he would immediately emit a frightful cry. Whereupon, however, the musician, at his rest, took the fan away, and then with a display of artful gesticulation, raised it first over the child's head, behind him; then, as the child turned, brought it up abruptly, and deftly twisting his wrist, tucked the fan between his legs and thrust it under the divan; followed quickly by his hand passing over the child's returned gaze while pointing in a false direction to which the object had seemingly gone. The child, completely bewildered, whimpered once, and stared all about the room, but the musician only gazed upwards and indicated that the fan had flown far away—and since such was a divine occurrence, not to mention

being awesome, the situation was irredeemable. The child soon took the fan's loss in stride and was quiet.

This play took less than one minute, but I can't forget the almost mystic and sage-like aura that permeated this event—a parable, too, of the wonder of discovery and the mystery of loss that so complete every life.

Beyond the artful legerdemain of any musician, Herat seemed at times magical. It existed in the sounds of tinkling bells on horse-drawn carriages and the thousand-fold stars that danced across the night sky. But, more than anything, the magic of Herat could be seen in the quiet demeanour of its people. Soon, however, the magic was to end.

In April 1978, a violent military coup led by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) overthrew President Mohammad Daoud Khan and installed a communist government friendly to the Soviet Union. Its heavy hand in forcing change upon Afghan society was resisted by much of the population outside the capital of Kabul. The first major revolt occurred the following March in what is known as the Herat Uprising. The communist government responded to the insurgency with an aerial bombing of the city in which an estimated 25,000 people died. The insurrection was put down for the moment, but uprisings continued until finally the Soviets stepped in, invading the country in December 1979, thereby inaugurating a decade of bitter warfare.⁶

6. Ali M. Latifi, "Remembering Afghanistan's Herat Uprising," *Al Jazeera*, February 13, 2014, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2014/2/13/remembering-afghanistans-herat-uprising>.

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Wyhet

I hope that someday I may return this evening to you.

—Traditional Afghan saying

The owners of the Caravan Hotel were Wyhet Seljuki and his colleague, Ahmad, whose last name I never learned. Wyhet Seljuki was a teacher by training—his English was very good—and the hotel's congenial front-man. He was a slight man who sported a thin, dark moustache, but was otherwise always clean-shaven and well-groomed. I rarely saw him wearing anything other than dress slacks and a suit jacket. Ahmad stayed mainly in the background. Shorter and stouter, he usually wore casual pants and a shirt. Both were married, with young children.

On details of the hotel, my memory is a bit hazy. I recall it had a spacious dining area, replete with carpeted floor and Kilim rugs on the walls, one of which I bought and shipped home. We sat at low tables on the floor to eat. At one end of the restaurant was a divan where musicians played. Jean's description of a below-ground restaurant she went to on her first night in Herat in 1975 suggests that it may well have been the Caravan: "We descended a stone stairway into a room full of rugs and pillows. A guitar player sat on a very low stage that was curtained in the middle of the room. It seemed an exotic dream." Back of the first-floor restaurant were a set of bedrooms, with more upon a second floor, where there was

also an open shower. One night, a scorpion came into my room: “I killed it with a brick that lay at hand,” I wrote in my notes. Wyhet was visibly upset the next day when I told him casually of the incident, offended that a scorpion had accosted a guest.



Meeting others, whether fellow travellers or local peoples, is a central joy of travelling. Places are interesting; some sites are breathtaking. But it is often the people one meets who leave the strongest memory. I am reminded of one by the notes I kept:

Visitors from all over would somehow find their way here. They often travel with only a floor mat or thin sleeping bag, and a small carrying bag or kit, large enough to carry two shirts and a book. Virtually penniless, they weave their way over whole continents for a year, two, three—forever; homeless and at home where they have that day’s meal; unburdened, uncared, and seemingly happy.

One day, I met a traveller from Brazil. He was my age, but like many Japanese or Thai travellers seemed no longer to have a country. In his early days, he had lived and worked among the thieves and brigands of the Rio carnival—stereotypical greasers, he said, with pistols in their belts and knives between their teeth, committing illegalities to survive. But he left Brazil for Europe where he polished his school-bred English, and soon added French, Spanish, and Italian. He then returned to Brazil, but finding it had changed, returned then to Europe, but it too had changed. So now, he was alone in the world, but also seemingly content.

The candlelight by which we spoke ran its course. It was now very late. He was leaving the next morning. We shook hands. I never saw him again.

While this particular conversation left an impression on me, it was not unusual among my encounters. I met several individuals who had been travelling for many years, and who now seemed homeless. They were travelling light, not only materially but in their emotional attachments to their past lives.

I live today in a nice, comfortable home. I am surrounded by things—a warm bed, books, a car in my garage, a plethora of modern communication devices—the envy of many people. But I also sometimes envy the simplicity of life “on the road.” I once wrote that one does not so much have possessions as be possessed by them. And, not infrequently, I wonder how I would adjust if it all went missing tomorrow?

I think also of recent anti-consumerist movements among some young people. Are they perhaps getting back to something many of us lost along the way?

For the moment, the Brazilian and I had found a home in the Caravan Hotel.



I do not know why Wyhet took to me, but he did, and I to him. I trusted him completely, such that for several weeks I left my backpack and valued notes stuffed under the divan when I briefly returned to Europe.

Perhaps because of my interest in Afghan culture, Wyhet seemed to treat me as more than a paying guest. He became my teacher. There was not a lot of literature on hand dealing with Afghanistan, but I found two small books, *Herat: A Pictorial Guide*, written in 1966 by Nancy Hatch Wolfe, and *The Afghans*, by Mohammed Ali, published in 1969. (The latter, though now musty, remains something of a prized heirloom.) From these books, but mainly from Wyhet, I learned several Afghan parables and aphorisms, like “Some people have good steps and some people have bad steps” and “Because you are my friend, I will forget what you said; but if ever I should have cause to remember, that day our friendship will end.”

Wyhet’s poise and kindness were repeatedly evidenced. One day, sitting at the low table and drinking tea, I coughed, spewing the dark concoction over the carpet, my clothes, and even my face. Wyhet, ever

the diplomat, said, “We say in Afghanistan, when the tea fights you, you have been remembered by a friend.”

I would read something and discuss it with him. We spoke often during the time I was there, especially when the restaurant settled down for the evening and he did not have to concern himself with the customers.

I returned one day from shopping in the market. I purchased cheaply from a small shop a salmon-coloured velvet cloth. The cloth, which I still possess, is about 30 inches by 16 inches in size, with a finely embroidered floral pattern and bordered with white frills. I liked the cloth’s pretty simplicity at the time but treasure it more now. It likely has little monetary value, but to me its value lies in the larger story it tells. I showed the cloth to Wyhet. Seeing it led him to tell me about an Afghan wedding ceremony, which I recorded in my notes:

About 15–20 days before the wedding night, the bride’s parents take a gold pin and string a green thread, synonymous with life and happiness, through the corner of a kerchief sewed by the bride-to-be. The kerchief is placed on a glass plate on a tray of sweets. The groom’s parents come to the home of the bride’s parents, at which time one-half of the bride’s purchase price is paid, the minimum being 50,000 Afs. (The rest is to be paid on the wedding day.) The parents then go to the home of the groom’s parents where others are waiting for the tray of sweets and to celebrate. There is a party with much singing. Candy is placed in the groom’s hair. Any of the candy that falls is a treasured item of the unmarried boys.

On the wedding night, the women of the bridal party take the bride aside. The women shave and bathe her as she sits upon the embroidered cloth—a *sozani*—of the type I had purchased. Once prepared, she is then taken to a house wherein a mattress has been laid central to a room. She and her husband lie down upon the mattress, at which point the man looks at her through a mirror, and she at him in the same way. Next, he gives her a

spoon of sweet water, but the movement of her hand to her mouth is controlled by her mother. Then, she returns the deed, but his hand too is controlled by her mother. This part of the ceremony is meant to show that the bride is indifferent and does not desire a man. She should be solemn and sad.

At last, the bride's mother tells everyone gathered to leave so that the marriage can be consummated. But if they are undesiring of children at that time—for example, they are completing studies—they may merely sleep together that night, while she returns to her father's home the next day. The husband may visit his wife two evenings every week, but the marriage is not consummated until such time as the object is children. By tradition, when the marriage is finally consummated, the bride must show each of the mothers the next day a kerchief bearing her blood.

I felt honoured that Wyhet took the time to tell me of this ritual. But there was something else quite profound about the simple bridal cloth I had bought. It was, in fact, a sacred item, a treasured part of the marriage ceremony. That it was selling for a pittance in a Herati shop must surely have said something important of the seller's desperation.

In fact, it said a great deal. Our discussion of the ceremonial cloth revealed for me a larger story about Afghanistan. Hard to imagine now, but many foreigners travelling the country before 1970 saw it during what Western scholars have termed Afghanistan's Golden Age (1949–73).¹ That period saw a modern university and a national museum built in Kabul and a liberal constitution introduced in 1964 that provided for free elections, as well as civil rights, including women's rights.

But the Golden Age unravelled after 1970, the year Afghanistan experienced a severe drought, although elements remained, as we can see from Margot Miller's recollection of a scene in Kandahar in 1972:

1. David C. Isby, *Afghanistan: Graveyard of Empires*, xii.

We talked quite freely to some Afghan women, though they were covered in a chador. There was a big, open circle where you drove around and a statue or a fountain, but no water in it, and open boulevards with medians full of marigolds. We sat on the street to watch the king go by in a big black American car, a Cadillac or something, waving.

But all was not well in Afghanistan, despite such displays. The drought, coupled with growing concerns about the government's failure to implement promised reforms, culminated in the overthrow of King Mohammad Zahir in July 1973 by his cousin and former Afghan prime minister Mohammad Daoud Khan. Zahir Shah had ruled the country for forty years, presiding over a period of peace and modernization, including a new constitution that laid the foundations for future democracy.² Don Skelton, who travelled through Afghanistan later that year, had clear memories of the coup's immediate aftermath:

People were very sad. Everybody had a portrait [of Zahir Shah] in their house with a little scarf over the picture. There were a lot of great public displays of sadness. But there were also a lot of secret police. You didn't see anybody carrying a banner down the street; it was a pretty quiet place.

I learned later that many items of classical Afghan culture were stolen and sold cheaply to foreign buyers during the period after 1970. The cloth I had purchased was a small part of the country's heritage being sold, but it also told a larger story about Afghanistan's political troubles. While poverty and starvation stalked the rural countryside, corruption was running rampant. A few members of the elite, centred in the capital, were getting wealthy, while the majority suffered. Hunger and hopelessness soon gave way to anger. As in Iran a few years later, the monarchy bore the immediate brunt of this discontent. But anger also fell on those petty officials who

2. King Zahir Shah remained in exile in Italy until 2002 when, after the Taliban had fallen, he returned to Afghanistan. He died in 2007, at the age of ninety-two.

aggrandized themselves and too often besmirched the traditional values and morals of conservative Afghan society. Another vignette of my time at the Caravan tells such a tale.



One day, a high official in Afghanistan's Education Ministry came to the hotel. Though living now in Kabul, Herat was his birth home. He stayed a couple of days. One evening, he, a couple of his friends, several Western visitors, and I were sitting around the low restaurant tables when the mood suddenly changed:

There was an American girl in her early twenties, dark-haired and subtle in her moves like a jazz dancer. She was lithe and pretty, and very flirtatious. One night, in the hotel, she began dancing an elegant dance that mixed Middle Eastern belly-dancing and Western ballet. It was beautiful, sensual, and sexual.

It was also dangerous, as in the room were several powerful Afghan businessmen and local bureaucrats. One of them was an education minister from Kabul. He struck me as cold and sleazy. He, in particular, almost drooled watching the American girl. We talked. The more we talked, the more we did not like each other. But more than that, I sensed danger.

There was a man who waited tables in the hotel. His name was Ferooq. He struck me as being a weasel, but a transparent one, and so fairly harmless. But he too was apparently worried, and—unbeknownst to anyone else present—slipped me a note to give to the young dancer that read, “Miss! This Kabuli man who is talking with you is not a good man. Several times he wanted to find you and have you but I didn’t show your hotel to him. If he asks your address, please don’t tell your address to him and tell him ‘I leave tomorrow.’ Thank you, Ferooq.”

I succeeded in steering the young woman away from accepting invitations or giving out information to the businessman.

At one point during the night, the businessman gave me a look of suspicion, perhaps anger. He sensed that I had intervened in some way. Minutes later, he and his entourage exited the restaurant.

The next day, Wyhet told me more about the minister. How he had married at the age of sixteen but habitually cheated on his wife and never told anyone about her. He was wealthy enough to have four wives, the maximum allowed under Islamic law in Afghanistan, but no one wanted to marry him because of his reputation. It was common knowledge that he harassed women in the bazaar and had raped at least two women in the past. Then, as now, he seemed to think that his wealth could solve all his problems. I have no doubt that the young woman was spared harm by our intervention, though she remained unaware of what had occurred. I saw her again at points along the trail to India, the last time in Goa where she was dancing beneath a full moon.

That memory haunts me still. I think often of how a single meeting or event can take on a weight of meaning that far exceeds any other particulars. This was the case of my all-too-brief encounter with Wyhet.



During one of our conversations, Wyhet told me about his father. I later wrote the story in the form of a poem titled—“Ode to Saladin Seljuki,” which I dedicated to Wyhet:

Son of many sons
a Turk
and the son of kings;
a statesman; more,
a philosopher, who once wrote
two books, each of five thousand pages
concerning the resonance of one line

of the Koran.
When he died, his second wife—for his first
had preceded him after bearing
his two sons—purchased
a great tomb
wherein her own future estate
was made secure beside him.
There each Holy day she comes,
bringing dishes of his favourite foods
yet, sitting, eats nothing.
She weeps.³

After writing the poem, I left it in the drawer of memories that I never expected to revisit again and that I thought at the time was relevant only to me. How wrong I was.

A few days before I left, Wyhet invited me to overwinter for free in his hotel. Foolishly, I declined the offer. I was anxious to depart to India; why, in retrospect, I do not know. That I did not do so remains to this day a regret, one magnified by the events that shortly befell the country.

Knowing that I was leaving, Wyhet said he wanted to make me a special meal. He said proudly that he had obtained fresh goat and lamb for the occasion. I had somewhat studiously avoided meat to this point but could not refuse his generosity. My last evening, I was treated to a large and sumptuous meal of several servings, the best of spicy meats and sauces, sweets, and fruit. I have learned since that it is part of Afghan hospitality to repeatedly encourage guests to eat fully of every dish offered and for guests, in return, to eat however full one is.⁴

The next morning, Wyhet and I shook hands and said goodbye. I said we would meet again, and genuinely believed what I said, but it was not to be.

Sometime in the early 1990s, I was at a Heritage Day festival in Edmonton, which celebrates Canadian multiculturalism. There were a

3. Trevor Harrison, *Another Voice*, 26.

4. Mohammed Ali, *The Afghans*, 31.

number of tents set up to reflect the country's cultural diversity in dress, music, and food. There was an Afghan tent, and I went in. I got talking to a young man who told me he was from Herat. I asked him if he knew of Wyhet Seljuki. He said, "Yes," and told me that Wyhet and his family had escaped to the United States. He took my address and phone number. I did not think about it further; it seemed a far-fetched possibility that anything might come of it. But a few weeks later I received a phone call from Wyhet. After many years, I still recognized his voice. Like before, he told me stories, but this time they were not happy ones but ones of suffering and torture, of how he and his family had survived for a time in a Pakistani refugee camp, things upon which he subsequently elaborated in a letter I received. To my eternal regret, however, I did not immediately reply. When I did, my letter—including the poem I had years before written in honour of his father—was returned. Wyhet and his family had moved without a forwarding address.

Wyhet was a good man in a good country who deserved better from me and from the world. May the time since have brought his family and him some peace, hope, prosperity, and happiness.

The Road to Kabul

*If I must choose between the world and you,
I shall not hesitate to claim your barren deserts as my own.*

—Ahmad Shah Durrani,
eighteenth-century Pashtun emperor

I boarded a local bus the next day, bound for Kabul in the company of other visitors from the West, among them Maude, a young Swedish woman, and Rainer, a brown-haired Dane with a neatly trimmed beard. We would travel together the next few weeks.

I think of Afghanistan as enclosing a rhomboid shape formed by its four main cities: Herat in the west, Kandahar in the south, Kabul in the east, and Mazar-i-Sharif in the north. The Hindu Kush mountains stretch across the interior of the country, rising to heights of roughly 7,000 metres to the northeast of Kabul. Kabul lies more or less due east of Herat, yet the intervening mountains make a direct route between the two very difficult, though not impossible.¹ Similarly, the secondary road from Herat northeast to Mazar-i-Sharif passes through some mountainous terrain before finally reaching the northern plains. For this reason, most Western

1. An exception is Rory Stewart, who made the journey on foot across central Afghanistan in 2002, which he recounts in *The Places in Between*.

travellers took the southern route, from Herat southeast to Kandahar, and then north to Kabul.

Among travellers heading east, Afghanistan's roads were considered the worst. This was especially the case in the early days. In his account of the Oxford-Cambridge expedition, Tim Slessor described the road through Afghanistan as "just an endless strip of corduroy, of rocks and holes and dust."² The road had not greatly improved when Henry Hamilton and Alastair Harper journeyed by Land Rover in 1962. "We drove at about 45 mph," Harper reported. "The roads were usually dry, but we got caught in a flood a few times. They weren't actual roads. Oil barrels, about a hundred yards apart, marked the path."

After the 1960s, however, while Afghanistan's secondary and tertiary roads remained poor, often accessible only by truck, the main highway between Herat and Kabul via Kandahar became reasonably good—ironically, perhaps, because of the Cold War. Eager to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people, the Soviet Union and the United States competed to prove which country could build the best roads. During the 1960s, the former built the Herat–Kandahar section, while the latter financed the Kandahar–Kabul section. Both Afghans and Western travellers benefited greatly from this rivalry.

Fergus F., who hitchhiked nearly the entire journey from Istanbul to Calcutta (today Kolkata) in 1969, remembered how difficult it was to get a lift in Afghanistan:

There was little road traffic: No private vehicles, just people with camels; once in a while, a jeep with some Russians. Around Herat, carts and horses with little buggies. One guy had a little truck filled with people he was picking up; another guy was very grateful for my company; another quite indignant and offended when I offered him money. But mostly the people were delighted to help and quite fascinated to pick up a young man with long hair and a beard, a bag over his shoulder, wandering the road.

2. Tim Slessor, *First Overland: London-Singapore by Land Rover*, 243.

I did not hitchhike any of the way. It was unreliable to do so and, in any case, the buses through Afghanistan were very cheap to ride.

But there was another important reason besides cost. Despite the stress and fatigue involved—I remember well sleeping on my feet at times—the fact is, travel by local bus brought us better in touch with the surrounding culture and people; not merely seeing the countries as though on a movie screen. Don Skelton, who made the trip in 1973–74, recalled “travelling in these beautiful buses crammed with people, goats, and chickens.” Richard Gregory also remembers the goats and chickens but contends that the main difference between Afghan and Indian buses “was that many Afghans seemed to carry guns, ancient Enfield rifles being popular. I never felt threatened though, and they probably deterred the bandits who were known to rob buses out in the desert.”³

These paltry—or poultry—discomforts and ensuing misadventures are the source of endless tales for many of us who made the journey. But I also remember the generally intense quietness of the travel. Occasionally, very young children would glance at me, curious, and a mother would subtly gesture to them to desist. I was to be left alone, although not, it seemed, because they were wary of strangers but rather out of a sense of politeness. Sometimes I might be asked, usually by a young man, where I was from. Other times, someone might speak to me, by word and gesture, about a mistake I had made, such as not paying the correct fare or possibly missing a bus stop—though in such cases people invariably spoke respectfully. But most bus rides took place in silence, even among Afghans themselves.



Despite later road improvements, even the major highway remained dangerous, especially in winter. Margot Miller’s near-death experience in Turkey found its near-tragic sequel—in two parts—only weeks later while she was driving to Kabul from Kandahar. In both instances, the van she was

3. Richard Gregory, “The Hippie Trail 1974: London to Kathmandu,” “Travelling Alone” section.

driving hit black ice and did a series of 360-degree spins. The first time the vehicle wiped out a toll road barricade and a small officer shack—it “went up like matchsticks,” she recalls. The second time, they barely avoided an Afghan bus carrying people and livestock. Miller and her colleagues shortly thereafter happily sold the van in Pakistan for \$2,000, which they then exchanged on the black market for an additional \$1,000 in profit.

Fortunately, no accidents occurred during the bus trip I took from Herat to Kandahar to Kabul. It was sometimes slow, to accommodate road repairs and detours, but no more inconvenient than what I might have expected in Canada. Bruce Finch did, however, recall an incident on the route from Herat to Kabul when the bus in which he was traveling ended up in the midst of a short rock-throwing battle between a few Afghan passengers and a group of tent dwellers. Finch wasn’t sure what was going on, but he himself was in no danger.

Nino Gualtieri faced a more palpable threat when he and his family encountered a Kochi camp between Kandahar and Kabul. Gualtieri remained in the van while his wife, Peggy, and their children ventured out to meet a group of women. The latter put out a welcome blanket and Peggy soon returned to the van to get some glass jars for the women in exchange for their hospitality, at which point Nino joined them. It was then, while they were having tea, that the Kochi men arrived back from cutting firewood in the surrounding hills, and the gathering took an ominous turn. As Gualtieri later described it:

Suddenly, one of the guys put his gun in my face, perhaps because I had seen the women’s faces. I thought I was going to get my head blown off, but the women interceded. They pointed to the blanket and extended their hospitality. I made a proper gesture of apology and obeisance and walked back to our van. Peggy and the children followed a little bit later. I jokingly offered to give the head man my wife and van if I could have his tent and his women. It was, in the end, a very good memory.

In this case, anger directed at an apparently disrespectful male gave way to a peaceful resolution, aided, one suspects, by the interventions of the

Kochi women themselves. Bill Fillmore also had an encounter with a group of Kochi, although without similar incident. Like the Gualtieris, Fillmore and his wife were driving through southern Afghanistan when they saw a row of black Kochi tents on the hill in the middle of nowhere. They stopped their car, got out, and walked toward the tents, where a man greeted them politely. "There were three girls all dressed in luminous skirts, embroidered blouses, and vests; silver hanging everywhere," he remembers. "They didn't speak English, and we didn't speak their language, but we had a good conversation anyway. We joked around and they offered us tea."

To be sure, one could face real threats, and many Afghans carried weapons. But genuine dangers were more imagined than real. I cannot remember an instance where I felt a real sense of threat. One did have to be cognizant, though, of Afghan customs and expectations, especially those around religion and women. Anyone who disrespected these, even accidentally, was inviting trouble.

The Afghan people are often said to be fiercely proud, and that was my impression as well. Theirs is also a firmly patriarchal society in which gender roles are clearly defined and men might easily take offence to a perceived insult to their wives and daughters, as Fergus F. discovered on two occasions during his travels in 1969. The first incident took place when he was invited into the home of a villager, his wife, and their thirteen-year-old daughter:

We were sitting on the carpet; there was no furniture, just carpets everywhere. The man's daughter was in the corner making tea. At one point, she dropped her face covering, exposing her nose and eyes. I happened to look over and she smiled. The father saw this and exploded. He threw her outside and screamed at her. I spent the night at the house anyway, and we all slept in the same room, but it was tense.

Here, the man's wrath was directed at his daughter, who had behaved immodestly, although Foley, their guest, was implicated inasmuch as he had provoked her behaviour, albeit accidentally.

The second incident occurred when Foley and a male companion got a lift in a small pickup truck. The truck was carrying an older Muslim man and two women who were completely covered. Ignoring Foley's advice, his companion repeatedly looked at the women, until finally the Muslim man began shouting and pulled out a rifle, which he pointed at the offender's chest. So reprimanded, Foley's companion made a show of obeisance, and the incident drew to a bloodless close.

The various accounts of Western travellers to Afghanistan often highlight second-hand tales of assault, even murder, at the hands of wandering "tribesmen" or local police. Tomory recounts, for example, a story told to him of three hippie travellers going to sleep in an Afghan village and the next morning one of them wakes up to find his two companions beheaded.⁴ The tale has all the earmarks of an urban legend, though on my arrival in Herat I was similarly told quite matter-of-factly about a Western visitor who had recently been axed to death in a rural village.

Stories about bandits were also plentiful. Richard Gregory writes that "banditry was common in outlying districts, and Herat was under a night-time curfew when I was there."⁵ Similarly, Jean recalled spending the night in a travel bus somewhere in the desert between Herat and Kandahar in 1975. "The driver was quite concerned about bandits," she noted, "so the men took turns staying up, keeping an eye out for anybody coming in the distance." It was not that incidents of violence, or threats of violence, were purely fictive, but such stories were often based on rumour, and they were told in disproportion to the actual occurrence of violence. As is generally the case, real physical harm awaited the unwary, the unlucky, or the culturally obtuse, but there is scant evidence that, at the time, Western travellers were in greater danger in Afghanistan than elsewhere.

In retrospect, I realize that Pashtuns, whose cultural code includes the obligation to avenge insults to honour, were well suited to the role of dangerous Other. I also now see how a desire for adventure fed into our

4. David Tomory, *A Season in Heaven: True Tales from the Road to Kathmandu*, 65.

5. Richard Gregory, "The Hippie Trail 1974: London to Kathmandu," "Afghanistan" section.

attention to perceived dangers. Even the mere hint of threat added an excitement to the otherwise often mundane events of travel.



Our bus arrived in Kandahar. We were driven to a hotel determined by the bus driver, which is where we stayed overnight. I was exhausted by the time we arrived and still shaken by the events of days earlier involving the Kabuli education minister, but I was also thinking about the evening before and Wyhet's kindness and generosity.

I remember nothing of the hotel, and regrettably little of the city. Beyond physical or emotional fatigue, I think I was also too concentrated on heading to that shiny object in the distance, India, and not the jewels that lay at my feet—Kandahar being one of them. Impatience is a dubious attribute of youth.

It's a shame, as I have since learned, for Kandahar was, and is, a remarkable city, an ancient one with an intricate, if also turbulent, history. Over the centuries, its geographic location on the trade route between East and West and, most particularly, between Herat and Kabul has made it wealthy but also a magnet for invading armies.

Modern Afghanistan is said to have been founded in 1747 by Ahmad Shah Durrani, who united several warring chiefs into a new confederation—an act for which he was crowned Afghanistan's first king at a site near Kandahar. The city subsequently became for a time the country's capital, but this was reversed following his death in 1772. Ahmad Shah was buried in a mausoleum in Kandahar, but his son and successor, Timur Shah, moved the capital to Kabul. The young country soon faced challenges from outside forces, especially Russia and Britain. British efforts to rule the country faced particularly stiff resistance from Kandahar's largely Pashtun majority throughout the nineteenth century. Opposition to imperialist rule runs deep in Afghanistan.

When I was there in 1976, only three years had passed since King Zahir Shah had been overthrown. The political and economic crisis was deepening, but, like many travellers, I remained unaware of these tensions. Those of us on the road often watched the country through

the windows of a bus or a hotel room, and sometimes the hotel stuck in our memory perhaps more than what we saw through the window. For example, David Tomory's notes on Kandahar focus on the Peace Hotel, which he said was "like dying and going to heaven," while Richard Gregory describes the city's New Tourist Hotel as "a nice two storey property with a courtyard and garden."⁶ Margot Miller similarly remembered her group staying in an expensive guesthouse in Kandahar where, one day, "a young boy came out from behind a gorgeous old floral chintz curtain to serve us breakfast. I thought, 'I wonder how this got here?' It looked like beautiful old British chintz fabric."

I too wonder, how did it get there? Was it a survival of the British occupation of Afghanistan in the nineteenth century? Throughout the country, in one small shop after another, I found miniature statues, snuff boxes, rings, and other such personal items—each presumably with a story begging to be told but now laying silent on the display shelf. On my bookshelf is a small metal figure of Shiva. By which route did it end up in Afghanistan? On the same shelf is a metal powder flask, likely of Kochi origin. To whom did it once belong?

Every object has a story of its own. But rarely do we learn these stories: we must settle for more generic impressions. In attempting to describe those impressions, however, travellers to the East can at times lapse into Orientalist imagery. Describing Kandahar, Erik Pontoppidan, for example, recalls "the smell of exotic spices and the sound of bicycle bells everywhere" and "camels and bedouins walking along the road," a depiction seemingly lifted from *Arabian Nights*.⁷ One individual I interviewed similarly described Kandahar as "an oasis of fruit and walled gardens, a lot more sophisticated than Herat"—with "sophisticated" implicitly reflecting Western standards and values.

Such images—at once romantic and formulaic—reflect the influence of enduring cultural stereotypes, which too easily overshadow the lived reality behind the stereotypes. Captivated by the exotic and unfamiliar,

6. Tomory, *A Season in Heaven*, 60; Gregory, "The Hippie Trail 1974: London to Kathmandu," "Afghanistan" section.

7. Erik Pontoppidan, "The Hippie Trail: The Road to Paradise," n.p.

travellers hold themselves at a distance, gazing at what surrounds them but not venturing to look below the surface.

As I noted earlier, most Westerners, myself included, were largely unaware of our privileged circumstances as we set off on the journey, though we sometimes became more aware in the course of travelling. The realization often came subtly, sometimes only on reflection. Consider, for example, something as simple as a decent shower, with plenty of hot water—the sort of luxury that Western travellers easily take for granted. Journeying overland along the Hippie Trail and staying, by necessity or choice, in cheap accommodations, travellers soon learned to revise their expectations.

The taken-for-granted-ness of a good shower was cast in a new light when travelling in Afghanistan or elsewhere in the region. Terry Ledressay particularly remembered the shower in one Kandahar hotel: “It had three sides, all made of tin, except for the door. You’d turn on the water and it would make a really loud noise.”

Lana Parn recalled taking an outdoor shower where noise proved a minor concern:

The water was coming off the roof in the garden. I got a pail of water to wash our clothes; you don’t have washing machines while you’re travelling. When we were back at the campsite, I happened to look down into the pail, and saw it was full of all kinds of worms and creepy crawly little things moving around in the water. And here I had been taking a shower and splashing the water on my face and hair, and everything. It was quite unpleasant to think about.

While some travellers admittedly complained that things were “not like home,” the majority of us took things in stride, often with amusement. The petty irritations of life became just that—petty annoyances. They faded into the day-to-day course of living in a different culture and, in so doing, drew most of us closer to the people of the region. Even if we could not entirely understand each other, a kind of empathy did emerge from day-to-day encounters. There were not the obvious walls set up by class or

the flaunting of wealth as sometimes seen in Mexican tourist resorts. But the walls could not be scaled in the short time most of us had in places like Kandahar. And, as always, many of us continued unconsciously to fall back on cultural tropes—prejudices—long engrained.

Under deepening grey skies one morning in late October, I and my fellow travellers boarded a local bus. A few hours later, we were in Kabul. But, as I realize now, Kandahar was a lost opportunity.

Kabul

*Before a winter of wolves and snow
we float as travellers or tourists . . .*

—Mike Ramsden, “Kabul”

Afghanistan’s fabled capital, Kabul, lies in a long, narrow valley that slices through two ranges of the Hindu Kush mountains. By the mid-1960s, it was a sprawling and rapidly westernizing city of roughly 400,000 people, with foreign embassy staff—especially Americans and Soviets—visibly present.¹ Many Western travellers of the time thought that Afghanistan was, like Iran, a peaceable and modernizing kingdom, while at the same time retaining its aura of traditionalism. Remembering his stop in Kabul in 1974, Bill Fillmore noted the inhabitants’ quiet serenity and “guys with long beards, turbans, and long-sleeved silk coats sitting on a rock wall by the river’s edge.”

But Mike Ramsden, a teacher-cum-poet who travelled through Afghanistan in 1971, captured the city’s less romantic reality in his poem “Kabul” (1973):

1. Don Skelton still has an Afghan recipe book put together by the wives of diplomats at the US embassy in Kabul and printed on a hand-cranked machine, for which he paid ten cents.

Sitting in a chai-house here in Chicken Street
donkeys nod along the street
laden with plums, apples, cherries, melons
weighed by a man, scales in his hand,
with stones for weight;
someone selling honey in coca-cola tins;
a young man like a prince,
walking by with a hawk on his wrist;
men from the high plains
selling horses, antique rifles;
and the Western kids
smiling benignly
at the tattered children
trying to sell a single rose of carnation
baksheesh, baksheesh they cry
the wandering children.

Ramsden was writing at the beginning of the drought that, in part, broke the Afghan political order. Describing Chicken Street three years later, Basil Jay writes, “Poverty is everywhere, from the absence of cars on the roads, to the downcast looks of most of the inhabitants,” later adding, “There were men selling ‘funny dust,’ men selling money, men selling camels, men selling sheep, men selling their sisters and even wives.”²

When I arrived in 1976, Afghanistan was in the early stages of a period of political instability that had begun with the overthrow of King Zahir Shah three years earlier and the advent of autocratic rule under President Daoud Khan, though few of us at the time recognized the enormity of these events with respect to the country’s future. As travellers, we saw the agonizing poverty and were moved by it, but most of us knew too little to understand the larger story that was being written.

2. Basil Jay, *65 Days to Delhi: An Incredible Journey*, 529. Jay also writes of wandering for several hours through a “dusty, dirty, and ramshackle town” in Afghanistan where everything appeared “to be incredibly cheap, brassware and antique weaponry, particularly” (502–3).

Merely walking in the street could be emotionally and psychologically draining. Fending off street vendors and beggars, often children, or haggling over small items of purchase took an emotional toll:

One of the more dreadful feelings in the aftermath of dealing in the marketplace is that of meanness, or parsimony bordering on crude belligerency. You find yourself quibbling over mere pennies that don't mean a fig to you, yet—in the strange new world in which you find yourself—take on a heightened importance. It cloaks itself in the name of principle and justifies itself as an antagonism to pestering. You find yourself brushing off beggars left and right, like summer flies on your sleeve, or arguing, as I once did, over two Afs for a cheap bracelet, and then watching the agony of my victory as the beaten old man gave in. I had offered either a pack of Marlboro cigarettes or eight Afs, but he wanted both, or ten Afs. His kid wanted him to take only money. When I won, I felt like giving him the cigarettes anyway, but I thought he might throw them in my face.

While bargaining could sometimes be fun and challenging, almost a game, it was also wearing, especially when one stopped to realize the shameful pettiness of one's role in the transaction being conducted.



As young Western travellers, our impressions of Afghanistan were shaped by the country's major cities: Herat, Kandahar, Kabul, and in some cases Mazar-i-Sharif as well. We did not understand that the Afghan government's authority did not carry much beyond Kabul, that elsewhere the country was governed by a tradition of local autonomy and tribal loyalty, and that the polity was divided by history, religion, and culture, truths that I and others—not to mention Western governments—would only tragically learn years later, and perhaps do not understand even now.

But my impressions and those of my fellow travellers were even more restricted. As in Istanbul and Tehran, our experience of Kabul and its peoples was largely shaped by acquaintance with a specific area—in this case, Chicken Street.

No two people's descriptions of anything are exactly alike, but taken together they can sometimes create a reasonably coherent montage. Journalist Christina Lamb described Chicken Street as "a favourite destination back in the days of the hippie trail, with all its little shops selling carpets, shawls, and lapis and garnet stones set into silver rings that would soon blacken."³ One of the travellers to whom David Tomory spoke likewise mentioned the panoply of goods for sale: "Chicken Street was a great wash of embroidery, rusty cutlasses and unidentifiable knickknacks to poke around in." Another recalled a visit to a dimly lit haunt: "A gigantic hound, a mastiff, guarded the doorway to a room like a dark, domed cave. Inside were three people and a gigantic hookah. The ceiling was encrusted with soot." Yet another all too vividly remembered "Flytop Pudding," a confection whose raisins, upon closer inspection, rose, hummed, and hovered in the air. For more stable fare, travellers headed for Sigi's, a restaurant and hotel run by a German man named Siegfried ("Sigi") that featured a giant-sized chessboard and pieces in its garden. "The main room inside was filled with Afghan carpets and cushions," said one traveller. "You had a little seat, a little table, an outsize German schnitzel, *so* big, hanging off the plate, and potato salad."⁴ As was typical of tourist haunts, the restaurants catered to Western musical tastes, with the Rolling Stones and the Beatles on regular offer.

3. Christina Lamb, *Farewell Kabul: From Afghanistan to a More Dangerous World*, 19. In the late 1980s, Lamb travelled with a group of mujahideen as they crossed the border from Pakistan into the Hindu Kush to fight the Soviets. She returned to Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11.

4. David Tomory, *A Season in Heaven: True Tales from the Road to Kathmandu*, 64. Tomory uses the spelling "Siggi's," which is not uncommon. But the restaurant was actually named "Sigis," with no apostrophe—the possessive form of "Sigi" in German. Gregory also recalls Sigi's "large chess board laid out in the courtyard, the pieces being two or three feet high, and chess sets were provided at tables for less energetic customers." "The Hippie Trail 1974: London to Kathmandu," "Afghanistan" section.

Rainer, Maude, and I stayed at the Eagle Hotel on Chicken Street. My recollections of our hotel square with those of Basil Jay, who recalled a Kabul hotel where his family stayed in 1974 as having hot water, a wood burning stove for heat, and unlimited electricity that powered “a single, shadeless light bulb hung from the ceiling.”⁵

In her diary, Brenda Grant remarked somewhat enthusiastically on staying at the Super Payam Hotel in 1974, at a cost of 30 Afs per person per night. The hotel came with “hot showers and a restaurant,” the latter having the additional benefit of being an “evening hangout.” Bruce Shore described a room at the same Kabul hotel, where he and Grant stayed in 1976, as “a very comfortable, pleasant place. But, of course, the electricity was intermittent, hot water was difficult, and bed bugs were rife—the other side of the coin.”

A mile from Chicken Street lay the European and American sector, home of the foreign embassies. Except to obtain visas or deal with medical issues, only a few of us wandered outside Chicken Street to take in the broader city. Arthur recalled a poignant moment at the site of Bala Hissar, or “High Fort,” the ancient fortress on the southern edge of Kabul, when he was there in 1977. He had pulled out a book while sitting on a tiny ledge overlooking the city’s old part, its slums, when a young Afghan boy came and sat down a few feet away. Saying nothing, the young man took a wooden slate and some chalk from his bag and began doing his homework. And there they sat for several minutes, quietly, without speaking, until it was time for each to leave.

One Friday afternoon, I took in a buzkashi match at the city stadium.⁶ Buzkashi is an ancient team sport played throughout Central Asia involving horse-mounted players competing for the carcass of a goat. It is considered Afghanistan’s national sport, much like hockey is to Canada. In days of yore, games might take place over several days and hundreds of miles. Today, buzkashi continues to be played in several countries. The

5. Jay, *65 Days to Delhi*, 513–14.

6. “Buzkashi: The National Game of Afghanis,” Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Canberra, Australia, accessed September 23, 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140930234340/http://www.afghanembassy.net/cultural/buzkashi>.

size or type of field used remains largely unregulated in Afghanistan's northern provinces, where as many as 500 riders may participate, but a more regulated version is played in Kabul.

Though still dangerous, games in Kabul take place in a stadium on a field roughly the size of a football pitch, at the lengthwise end of which are goal posts. Teams compete to throw the goat carcass, only recently killed and—in the contest I watched—still dripping blood, into the goal area. The Kabul games consist of two teams of ten people, five playing in each of two 45-minute periods, with a 15-minute break at the half. A field master (i.e., referee) is present to punish fouls. The game I watched had all the intensity of any Western sporting event. The crowd cheered as the riders, who barely stopped short of whipping an opponent and his horse, tried to take away the quarry. Sometimes they swooped low—feet firmly strapped in their saddles, reins between their teeth—to pick up the fallen carcass, then pass it to a teammate. It was one of the most amazing feats of horsemanship I have ever witnessed.

Tragically, after coming to power in 1996, the Taliban used the same Kabul stadium for show trials and executions, while banning the game as immoral. Buzkashi was revived, however, following the Taliban's overthrow in 2001. Since its return to power in August 2021, the regime has continued to allow the game to be played and has even embraced the sport.

Apart from short excursions such as mine and Arthur's to Bala Hissar, those of us on the trail generally confined ourselves to Chicken Street. Our contacts with the local peoples were thus largely transactional, mere glimpses only of a proud culture forced by outside forces to play in a Great Game far beyond any contest of man and horse.



People today often assume that travellers along the Hippie Trail were on a spiritual quest of some sort. But this was far from universally true. I saw a few kaftan-clad souls who were clearly headed straight for India in search of enlightenment, or at least the appearance of it. But for most of us—including myself—the prospect of spiritual awakening was not a

significant drawing card. In fact, until I got to Afghanistan, religion was rarely a topic of conversation among the overland travellers I encountered.

Like other travellers, I was passing through devoutly Muslim countries, where religion pervaded daily life. There were mosques everywhere, and the five sonorous calls to prayer could be heard throughout the day. But I was not a Muslim, nor were most Western travellers. I was respectful of the faith, but I felt like an outsider. Islam wasn't merely a religion but an entire culture, one to which I did not belong and on which I could not intrude.

My first sustained encounter with religion occurred in Kabul, but not with any traditional or orthodox faith. Rather, the Children of God had set up shop in several cities on the route to India.⁷ The cult began as a breakaway from Christianity in the late 1960s. Its founder, David Berg, was a former ordained minister of the Christian Missionary Alliance. Exploiting America's cultural upheavals at the time, including rapidly mounting protests against the Vietnam War, Berg sought out disaffected youth. By the mid-1970s, the movement had morphed into Berg's own vanity project, whereupon he changed his name to Moses David and declared himself a prophet. His messages were heavy on enlightenment through sex: his religious injunctions included orders that his female followers should become "flirty fishers" of men, seducing them into becoming members of his church and giving him money.⁸ Perhaps a few male travellers, being fatigued and lonely, were easy prey for their siren call, but I suspect not many.

I had heard vaguely of the Children of God before heading to India. In Kabul, I met several female cult members. I was handed a pamphlet David had written, titled, "Jimmy Carter: America's Last Chance?" It sold for 5 cents. The pamphlet called for America's repentance and listed

7. See Tomory, *A Season in Heaven*, 148.

8. See Faith Jones, *Sex Cult Nun: Breaking Away from the Children of God, a Wild, Radical Religious Cult*, 55–58. Bernie Howgate tells movingly of falling in love with a woman who joined the Children of God and, in turn, brought him into the family. Eventually, he pulled himself out, but at the cost of losing her. *Tales of a Travelling Man*, 140–51.

other “CHILDREN OF GOD colonies near YOU!” in Madras, Calcutta, Bombay, Bangalore, and New Delhi. Meeting with the women led to an intriguing encounter of another kind, of which I wrote:

One day, I go with a couple of the young women to the main Afghan prison. They are visiting a Western prisoner, named John, being held on drug charges. He is thin, bearded, and dirty, but seems otherwise healthy and alert.

John says the prisoners must pay for absolutely everything, including a bed or blankets, and must buy their own food or otherwise starve. The prisoners and guards regularly smoke hash, yet John has been in jail for ½ kilo and a recently arrived German had only 20 grams of hash. John told of another man, an English citizen, who was now in a “helluva schmozzle” because he had been acquitted of a charge in court, but the prosecutor was now reviewing whether to appeal the case, and so he was in limbo. Ironically, had he been convicted, he likely would have bought his way out of prison already. But even if you pay off the fine and the prison “residency” costs (50 Afs per day), a sentence might be extended on some whim. Moreover, the longer one is in the prison, the number of people to be bribed increases.

As John and I talk between the bars separating us, he nods to a balding Afghani. “He killed five people,” says John.⁹

Arthur had similar recollections of the Children of God as “the only people apparently in Kabul who would take care of the prisoners.” Angela Ford, who travelled in roughly the same period, remembered eating “a Christmas turkey dinner in Kandahar provided by the group members.”

9. Among his account of several harrowing experiences on his journey, Basil Jay recounts spending “a very long night in an Afghanistan police cell, accused of killing a man, and told that execution was what I could expect come the day.” *65 Days to Delhi*, xviii–xix.

While prominent, the Children of God were not the only cult in town. The road to India was laden with spiritual opportunists. Patrick Welland recalled staying in a cheap hotel in Kabul where he and his future spouse “fended off an offer from a lunatic American couple to join their religious cult.”



Chicken Street offered a relatively safe, familiar environment for Western travellers. One could eat traditional Afghan food but could also have meals suggestive of Western cuisine: hamburgers, French fries, and omelettes—though there were also surprises, such as when Bruce Finch one day discovered the minestrone soup he was enjoying was made from sheep’s heads.

Chicken Street was a key transit point for travellers coming from the east (Pakistan) or the west (Iran). It was the hub especially for the commercial bus companies that, by 1976, had grown in number, yet were no more reliable than before. Of these, the Magic Buses were the most famous. As Gregory notes, the company was primarily “a booking agency and didn’t run a fleet of branded buses.”¹⁰ MacLean describes the company’s original office as operating “from a cockroach-infested office on Amsterdam’s Dam Square,” out of which a string of subcontracted buses, “diverse and decrepit,” took passengers across Asia.¹¹

It was out of Amsterdam that I took my one and only Magic Bus, to Athens. The bus was of British origin, a right-hand drive vehicle. As a result, its co-pilot would act as a spotter and shout instructions to the driver from the back of the bus when a lane change was needed. After Athens, I travelled primarily by local bus and train. I did not regret my choice.

The buses travelling under the Magic Bus name were not uniform. As such, the soundness of the buses was often in question—and that of the drivers and their assistants even more so. In consequence, the bus tours faced

10. David Gregory, *A Pukka History of the Hippie Trail: Overland to Asia in Search of Hashish*, 6.

11. Rory MacLean, *Magic Bus: On the Hippie Trail from Istanbul to India*, 82.

frequent customer complaints. All too often, passengers changed companies and buses in mid-journey. Having survived their journey to Kabul, many chose to travel the rest of the way to India by alternative means.



To the uninitiated, my account of travelling to India might seem carefree and exciting, perhaps even exotic. One imagines the mundane activities of day-to-day life subsumed beneath a stream of adventures. And, to a degree, this is correct. Absent were some particularly repetitious demands and routinized activities, like showing up every day for work or school, and responsibilities in general. The relative lack of material goods to be maintained and protected was also a relief, while the possibility of the new and unexpected hovered over each day's horizon.

But as the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz has noted, "No one lives in the world in general. Everybody, even the exiled, the drifting, the diasporic, or the perpetually moving, lives in some confined and limited stretch of it—the world around here."¹² Human beings require routine. Gradually, much of everyday life on the road takes on an everyday quality. The days become filled with quite ordinary activities, albeit in changed material and cultural contexts, involving predictable problems and challenges.

Granted, some travellers did engage in activities that stepped outside the ordinary, such as exchanging money or peddling contraband goods on the black market or selling hair (to make wigs) or blood. Angela Ford reported that money could be made smuggling pistachio nuts and honey from Afghanistan into India, while Jean remembered selling a bottle of Scotch she had purchased at Heathrow's duty-free on New Delhi's black market for US\$200, enough to pay for her flight back to London. A few travellers found paid jobs at hotels or worked as movie extras, as did John Hunter's wife, Pamela, at Madras Movie Land, one of the city's many flourishing film studios. Inevitably, though, moments of adventure and excitement are replaced by long stretches of boredom and loneliness. Repetition returns.

12. Clifford Geertz, afterword to Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, *Senses of Place*, 214.

Outside of days spent in vans or on buses and trains going somewhere, or nowhere, my daily activities often took on a functional similarity to life in Canada. Typically, my day began with a visit to the nearest toilet—ubiquitously, a squatter—and washing up, followed by breakfast (often eggs, toast, and coffee or tea) in the hotel or at a nearby café. Breakfast might morph into lunch at a local café, such places as Sigi's being a kind of meeting place cum hideaway. Catering to their Western clientele, the proprietors generally provided a musical diet of rock and roll. (Bruce Finch remembered the Green Door Hotel constantly playing Johnny Rivers songs.)

We might read novels. Hesse's *Siddhartha* was especially prominent, but books by Emily Brontë, Carlos Castaneda, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, James Michener, Harold Robbins, and Jacqueline Suzanne were also common. Or we might play cards or other games (chess, checkers, and backgammon). Like Istanbul's Pudding Shop, Kabul's cafés were a conduit for exchanging information. These activities were often accompanied by the passing of a joint, which all but assured further time would be spent in the café.

Once I left the café, a series of other mundane activities would fill the day: cashing traveller's cheques, getting travel visas, or buying train or bus tickets; shopping for food or toiletries; getting a haircut—often performed in-house by fellow travellers; or making small sewing repairs. Some days I walked to the Poste Restante to send or receive mail, or simply for something to do. Mail service was slow and unpredictable, but inexpensive. Brenda Grant sent two small postcards from Afghanistan to Canada and England for 33 Afs; the cost of aerograms was 10 Afs.

The receipt of mail was complicated by the fact that we did not always know where we would be and might not stay in one place for long. In consequence, I received very few letters during my travels, but in truth I was also a poor correspondent. Letters from home were both bearers of comfort and bringers of homesickness.



Travel is always to some extent a challenge, all the more so when it takes us into cultures radically unlike our own. Fergus F. noted that travelling

overland through Europe and Greece, and then to Turkey, could help travellers gradually acclimatize to the changing cultural landscape.¹³ But no amount of preparation through reading or talking to others could entirely prepare anyone for the strange and often unsettling sights, sounds, and smells—the sense of awkwardness and psychological stress or the fatigue and ill health that often accompanied these constant changes. Don Skelton remembered his panic early on when, as the only Westerner on a passenger train crossing Turkey, he suddenly thought to himself, “What have I gotten myself into?” Then, suddenly, he was in Kabul.

13. Fergus F. observed that those who “just flew in from San Francisco to New Delhi” had more trouble adjusting. They “would just freak out and start banging on the embassy door looking for medicines and things.”

Into the Hindu Kush

Like the rivers that flow out of the Karakoram and the Hindu Kush, the inspiration they generate washes down to the rest of us. It waters everyone's fields.

—Greg Mortenson, *Stones into Schools*

Once in Kabul, travellers frequently headed directly for the Khyber Pass into Pakistan and then on to India. But other options beckoned. Before leaving Kabul for points east, one could travel by truck or bus through the Hindu Kush mountains to the province of Bamiyan, west and slightly north of Kabul. The town of the same name had long been famous for two magnificent sixth-century statues of the Buddha and was also the starting point for an excursion to the glacial-fed lakes of Band-e Amir. Alternatively, one could travel north from Kabul along the main highway to Mazar-i-Sharif, a city not far from what was at the time the Soviet Union. Bruce Shore and Brenda Grant managed to combine the two destinations, travelling to Mazar-i-Sharif and then to Bamiyan, before returning to Kabul. They and Don Skelton were the only travellers I interviewed who journeyed to Mazar-i-Sharif from Kabul, and to this day I regret that I didn't.

The name Mazar-i-Sharif means “tomb of the exalted one,” a reference to the city's magnificent Blue Mosque, venerated as the shrine of



The truck in which we travelled from Bamiyan to the lakes at Band-e Amir, in the Hindu Kush mountains. Such trucks tended to make frequent stops, whenever someone wanted to get on or off or pause to do something. Local villagers, such as those in the foreground, often travelled along the same route, whether to transport supplies or visit relatives or for some other purpose.

Ali ibn Abi Talib, the first imam of Shia Muslims. Arriving in the city, Shore and Grant stayed four days in a hotel room that had hot showers and cost them 30 Afs each. Quite apart from the beauty of the city itself, they remembered a card game, played with the locals, whose rules seemed unflinchingly opaque. “There were tricks and certain cards had power,” Shore recalled, “but this kept changing. One hand, having a queen was good; the next hand, not. I’d slam my cards down in triumph, but instead of excitement, the locals just looked at me puzzled.”

From Mazar-i-Sharif, Bruce Shore and Brenda Grant travelled south to Bamiyan. The trip, for which they paid 80 Afs, was supposed to take only eight hours, but night came and they were forced to stay in the tiny

mountain village of Tala, still several hours from Bamiyan. They were at first going to bed down in a teahouse, along with other passengers from the bus, that was run by some of the local people. But a very persistent policeman kept badgering Shore and finally took him to the chief of police, who told him, "Those guys are no good. You can't stay there for the night, it's too dangerous. Go back and get your family and come." The police chief then escorted Shore, Grant, and their "family" (that is, the rest of the group) to the house of a schoolteacher who spoke some English. And that's where they spent the night, joined by some local musicians who arrived and played music for them.

Shore's story reminds me of my earlier experience in Herat when Ferooq warned me of the possible danger that the young American woman faced, dancing provocatively in the way she did. Such expressions of concern were not unusual, though rarely as dramatic as that which Bruce Shore and Brenda Grant experienced.

The next day, Bruce and Benda continued their journey to Bamiyan. Their transportation was a truck of open-box military design, much like the one in which Rainer, Maude, and I travelled from Kabul. The box had a metal frame, but the canvas was down. Shore's description of their trip likewise rings a chord with me:

The truck carried forty to fifty people. Sometimes, it would load up cargo and then everybody got on top of the load. Every three hundred metres or so, the driver stopped to pick someone up or drop someone off, so that the journey was slow. At one point we picked up a hunter, a guy with a rifle. We were following the river valley a lot of the time and he spotted a duck swimming. The truck stopped, he got off, shot the duck, and brought it back to the truck. Then we started again.



Few travellers visited Bamiyan in 1976, though certainly more than in 1968, when Trish Flindall went. She and her sister stayed at a small hotel

and drew a tourist map in English for the hotel keeper to give to tourists just beginning to visit the valley. In return, the keeper let them stay at the hotel for free.

She has fond memories of Bamiyan. One day, she took part in a volleyball game against one of the local villages. The Afghan players were flying about in their long-sleeved coats. Afterwards, she and some other travellers were invited to eat, although it was Ramadan and the villagers themselves could not. The village's chief brought out his beautiful stallion and proudly put on a horse display.

Nino Gualtieri and his family also visited Bamiyan, which he said they found "enchanted." At the same time, he was reminded that pride can at times be a source of misunderstanding, as it can be difficult to predict where it resides.

There were a number of little restaurants and places to sleep on the main road. We chose one at random and had to sort of crawl in; it was just a packed mud shelter. You had to step over the sill of an open window to get in, and then step down several ledges inside. It cost twenty-five cents a night for the six of us.

A night or two later we made the mistake of walking down the street to try another little restaurant. But where we stayed, the proprietor—a very handsome man and a great musician, actually—had prepared a meal on his little charcoal burner on the street, and I didn't realize part of the understanding is you stay there, you eat there. I gave him some money for the accommodation, but I remember the disdain with which he threw the money into the street. One of us had to retrieve it. After that, we ate our meals there and became friends. But his pride had been injured.

"It is easy to give offence," Gualtieri remarked, "when you don't understand the culture." I had similar experiences along the way. Bargaining, as I have mentioned, can be enjoyable, but both parties must feel that the exchange is fair. Pushing too far could result in a purchase falling through or only grudgingly being accepted, as conveyed by a bitter look and a

quick grabbing of the cash. My own sensitivity to not giving offence lay behind my eating somewhat recklessly of the meal Wyhet had prepared for me as I left Herat. But offence could occur in different ways. Some Westerners, certainly not all, could be loud or dress inappropriately. I made a point of speaking quietly and being respectful regarding any, even small, gesture of kindness, such as someone bringing me a cup of tea.

Despite, or perhaps because of, its moonlike appearance, Bamiyan was beautiful and intensely moving in its simplicity. The people of the city were going about their work, unsurprised and perhaps unimpressed by us. Bamiyan, and the province of the same name, is an agricultural area but it was late October when we arrived, and the land was drying and the weather chilly. I wore a jacket and jeans, Rainer a grey Afghan vest over a long shirt and jeans, and Maude a woven sweater, also with jeans. We slowly picked our steps through the village's dry and rocky cemetery whose graves were arrayed with tiny flags, bearers via the wind of prayers to God.

The truck we were travelling in allowed us only a short time in Bamiyan, just long enough for Rainer, Maude, and me to walk its sand-blown streets and to make our way to the foot of the two giant Buddhas for which the area was famed, one 53 metres in height, the other 40 metres. They had been carved into the sandstone cliffs during the mid-to-late sixth century and had survived largely intact through the centuries that followed, presiding over the Bamiyan Valley. The sheer size of the statues left us in awe. We entered a narrow tunnel in the cliff that spiralled upward to an opening above the smaller Buddha's head from where we gazed out for a few minutes at the sprawling valley below. We then returned the way we came. Looking up at them again, I thought of drawing the Buddhas but realized my skills were not up to the task. We returned to the truck and the driver, who seemed anxious to depart.

Years later, in 2001, I read about the destruction of the Buddhas at the hands of the Taliban. The word came out first in rumours and vague news clips. *Impossible*, I thought, as did many others. But then photographs confirmed the news. The destruction of the Buddhas was a senseless loss to the entire world, but especially so for Afghanistan and its people. In 2003, the Bamiyan Valley was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Since then, measures have been undertaken to prevent the

vacant niches from collapsing and to protect the site from vandalism, and there has been talk in some quarters of trying to reconstruct the Buddhas. Following its return to power in 2021, the Taliban government professed a commitment to preserving the country's heritage and has made efforts to promote the Bamiyan Valley as a tourist destination. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this apparent change of heart has met with a certain skepticism.¹



Lake Band-e Amir is a series of six connected lakes high in the Hindu Kush. The sapphire-blue water—the result of its high mineral content—is clear, allowing one to see deep into it where plankton grows and fish swim. We stayed there several days, during which I wrote the following, rather overwrought description:

There are places on this earth where all at once, the Gods took only perfect steps, and Band-e Amir is one of them. From the palisading cliffs, gently eroding, and rolling to silt in the valleys long plain; to the languid soul-aching blue waters as they make their cool southward descent, till leaping off the mossy cascades and into the revolving wheels of a primitive flour mill, then moving on: through every search by eye and foot (and at each for the latter a new aspect configured so much so as to make each scene not only a new perspective but a new vision!) a voice

1. See Rick Noack, "Cash-Strapped Taliban Selling Tickets to Ruins of Buddhas It Blew Up," *Washington Post*, June 15, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/06/15/afghan-buddhas-taliban-bamian/>. Regarding efforts to preserve the site, see "Commemorating 20 Years Since the Destruction of Two Buddhas of Bamiyan, Afghanistan," UNESCO, news release, March 11, 2021, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/2253>. See also "Bamiyan Buddhas," Whose Culture? The Creation and Management of World Heritage, Department of History of Art and Architecture, Harvard University, accessed May 26, 2025, <https://whoseculture.hsites.harvard.edu/bamiyan-buddhas>, which offers a thought-provoking argument against the notion of reconstructing the Buddhas.

hollers out between and beyond the canyons, that here is a glimpse into the universe; that nature has exposed her dearest flanks, and left man revealed as an insignificant speck indeed! Eternity is grandeur.

In the evening, darkness falling about 5:30 p.m., after a short walk out under the dark, muddy skies, we sat—thirty or forty of us—in the carpeted back room of the Band-e Amir restaurant, some of us reading, some carrying on quiet conversation, a group of six Japanese young people playing a card game. The heat of the wood stove filled the tiny room, making us all sleepy, but it was too early to sleep. The kerosene lamps glowed white and pure, save one that flicked and sputtered, in and out, and was constantly under repair. A young boy, the manager's son, roamed about the foreigners, throwing hats at them and hitting them, and generally having a good time. The travellers didn't seem to mind; it was all very quiet and easy.

The following morning, Rainer, Maude, and I walked out to see the lakes at first hand. We stood amid the bulrushes and autumn trees gazing out on one lake, with its intensely blue mirror-like surface. The reflections stretched across the water to the line on the far side where the base of the sheer cliffs collided with itself, mirage meeting reality. We crossed a stream, dancing barefoot from stepping stone to stepping stone.

On the opposite side of the lake, we goat-stepped our way around the turreted cliffs, before clambering up to a dusty plateau, where we stared down at the glassy surface of the lake and the series of ragged travertine palisades that held it in. I found a large flat piece of stone that I raised on its edge and then rolled over the side of the cliff, where it crashed downward with a cannonading boom, hurling shattered fragments into the water. It was a carefree time.

We encountered few locals until, passing around the edge of a shallow lake, we ran into a goatherd squatting on the ground, minding his mottled flock. He offered us bread, which we gratefully accepted. Thinking to return the favour, we offered him some nuts and raisins that Rainer had,



Maude looking out on the waters of Band-e Amir, Afghanistan, 1976

but he gently refused. He scraped up some cold water into his acrylic glass and drank, while we moved on.

The next day, after a breakfast of porridge and chai, Maude, Rainer, and I began our hike to and up the mountain. We crossed a series of trickling streams and passed by some flour mills around the bottom of the falls. I recall slipping on a rock and having to hang my wet sock over my waistbelt to dry. We had to stop several times on the way up, as it was a steep climb, and the altitude got to us. But it was worth it for every glance at the panoramic views that surrounded us. “The lake, a pink and blue mirror of the mountains at lower heights,” I wrote at the time, “asserted itself, took on the dark blue of the sky. To our right, the mountains were cleft by a valley and another village, with the white spine-tips of the Hindu Kush stretching up some 5,000 metres in the far distance. On the left, steep palisading cliffs paraded out in a march to the south.”

We saw several fields along the way and wondered what the Afghans farmed, for although the earth was tilled, all that survived were the

sparsest weeds, some looking like frost-covered porcupines, along with a few withered sticks and stems.

As we neared the end of our climb, we paused for a moment to recover. When my heart finally stopped racing and settled back into a steady beat, I made a dash for the summit and gazed out into the distance. There, before me, was “the wide, wide earth,” I wrote. “I walked, even pranced, unthinking of the cold wind that funnelled over the plateau, standing at the apex of a great topographic map.”

It was after four by the time we got back home. I lay on my sleeping bag for two hours, not so much tired as hopelessly stoned by the altitude. Later, we played cards and then went to sleep.

On another day, Rainer, Maude, and I rented horses and rode around the lesser lakes and villages of Band-e Amir. It was not a cold day as we forded a narrow stream rounding a mountain top. Rainer and Maude gained distance as we went, while I and my horse loped behind. I was singing a made-up cowboy song when we entered an alleyway blocked by burrows and a brace of children who began throwing rocks. At this my horse, which was of a singularly stubborn disposition, began belligerently rearing its head. A group of men were watching and their actions at that moment suggested they knew my horse and didn’t like its character, although my poor horsemanship probably didn’t help its reputation. Steering past, I forded a nearby creek before doing a slow gallop across the sodden plain to where my companions were. They suggested we exchange horses, as Rainer was clearly a more experienced rider. My new horse was old and at least as stubborn as the first, but even slower afoot. The result was a thankfully slow shuffle throughout the rest of the ride, punctuated by moments when my steed refused to move at all.

Sadly, such languid days were bound to end, and soon we found ourselves back in travel mode, first making our way back to Kabul and from there on to Pakistan and India. But when I see photographs of Band-e Amir today, I am still transported back to that time. In my mind, it remains one of the most beautiful and serene places I have ever visited.

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The Khyber Pass

*It's wrong what they say about the past, I've learned, about how
you can bury it. Because the past claws its way out.*

—Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*

Until 1947, Afghanistan shared a border with British India—the so-called Durand Line, drawn by the British in 1893, which sliced through the homeland of the Pashtuns. At the time India was partitioned, Pakistan inherited this border, and thenceforth those heading to India went initially to Pakistan. Most immediately, travellers from Kabul journeyed east to Jalalabad, a major centre of Pashtun culture, and from there to the town of Torkham, at the Pakistan border, and then through the Khyber Pass and on to the city of Peshawar, in northwestern Pakistan.

For those travelling overland to India, perhaps no other place has proved as visually evocative as the fabled Khyber Pass—a rocky valley flanked by towering cliffs of stone that stretches for more than 50 kilometres. Traversing the pass in the late 1970s, David Pearson recalled the “old coal-fired trains chugging black smoke going up the rail line,” while Gregory describes the “steep winding roads with precipitous drops and hairpin bends” and “taxis coming the other way—1950s Chevrolets packed

with passengers, some sitting on the roof.”¹ But of course I recorded my own experience:

We took a minibus to Jalalabad on October 31, then rode on the roof of another bus to Torkham just over the border, sitting in among the array (or disarray) of local Afghanis and one pink-blue sheep. Maude was wrapped to her eyeballs in her new scarf and Rainer was in his Saudi kaftan, but my skin was baked and windswept into leather; still, a beautiful trip. We laugh and smile the journey away while the bus sways and bodies swing from the rafters, windows, and doors of the lurching bus.

We crossed the border in good time: a harried clerk at his typewriter did his thankless job in exemplary fashion. The border point looked as if a carnival had hit town. It featured an assortment of chai shops, beggars, baksheesh boys, peddlers, pushers, a skeletal dog (or two), drivers, soldiers, and finally Western travellers (but few women). Maude, Rainer, and I packed into the front seat of a jeep truck beside the driver.

We entered the pass. Abandoned clay forts and circular parapets surrounded us, towns marshalled against towns. My eyes and ears were filled with Kipling's world. Bridges, train trestles, suddenly raised skywards, spans of steel and wood. The answering “clap” of rifles being fired at a distance echoing through the valley.

The India-born Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) was a controversial chronicler of the British Raj, often celebrating British imperialism but also deriding upper-class pretensions and predicting the empire's demise. Kipling described the Khyber Pass as “a sword cut through the

1. Richard Gregory, “The Hippie Trail 1974: London to Kathmandu,” “Kashmir and India” section.

mountains”—a long gorge connecting Afghanistan to India. Fearful of Russian expansionism, twice during the nineteenth century the British sought to seize control of Afghanistan and topple the ruling Barakzai dynasty, in an effort to create a buffer zone.² But they were repeatedly thwarted by powerful resistance from Pashtun armies, at whose hands the British suffered one of their most devastating, and humiliating, defeats as they attempted to retreat from Kabul at the end of the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839–42). I still remember seeing large cement plaques commemorating the British regiments that had served in the Khyber Pass.

As we slowly made our way along the winding road, Kipling's lines “The flying bullet down the Pass, / That whistles clear: ‘All flesh is grass’” lingered in my mind. But the place I was travelling through was not Kipling's world, even though traces of it remained. Much had changed since the British left, yet a martial atmosphere still hovered over the pass—a reflection in part of ongoing border tensions between Afghanistan and its new neighbour, Pakistan, as well as pressure from Pashtun nationalists intent on uniting Pashtuns on both sides of the border.

Once we were across the border, it was only a few kilometres to the town of Landi Kotal, situated at the summit of the pass. There we made a short stop. Describing his own trip across the border, Gregory recalls that as the barrier lowered behind the bus, “local traders besieged us, banging on the windows and offering to sell hashish, opium, acid and guns, all of which were on open display.”³ This was, in fact, a worthy preview of Landi Kotal itself. Ernest, who travelled in the same year I did, offered a memorable account of the town's main road:

2. Omar Waraich, “History Shows the Khyber Pass Is the Key to Afghanistan,” *The Independent*, October 5, 2010, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/omar-waraich-history-shows-the-khyber-pass-is-the-key-to-afghanistan-2097659.html>. Afghanistan had been ruled by Pashtun dynasties since the mid-eighteenth century. The country was, at the time, caught up in the so-called Great Game between two empires, the Russian and the British, both contending for hegemony in Central Asia, and was hence of strategic importance to Britain's defence of India.

3. Gregory, “The Hippie Trail 1974: London to Kathmandu,” “Kashmir and India” section.

We found a bustling marketplace, primarily of all sorts of weapons, including large-calibre machine guns, land mines, and nasty-looking missile launchers, all beautifully laid on blankets, brightly lit by well primed and pumped hissing gas lanterns. You had the feeling that on the outskirts of town you would also find tanks and fighter jets. There was also an assortment of drugs, and one of our group bought a sealed bottle of pharmaceutical cocaine from Germany.

He might have been describing my own experience:

Small shops lined the road. We had chai amid a crowd of local merchants attempting to sell us hash, opium, morphine, or guns. Guns were everywhere: rifles, automatics, semi-automatics. One shopkeeper told me they could replicate any gun I wanted. They used original weapons—Kalashnikovs were popular—as models. At one shop, I was offered for sale a stainless-steel single-shot pen gun. The shopkeeper showed me how it unscrewed, revealing a chamber where a bullet—I think it was a .38-calibre—could be inserted, then fired with the pen clip. I was tempted to buy it, as it would have made for a fabulous conversation piece, but in the end decided not to.

I was told that there were no police in Landi Kotal, which I took to be true. The entire town exuded an aura of frontier lawlessness. It looked as if it had been lifted from a Hollywood backlot.

Beyond Landi Kotal, the entire Khyber Pass had a reputation for danger. Although Western travellers were often ignorant of the surrounding culture, the region had long been home to a number of Pashtun tribes, who naturally felt a sense of ownership. As traffic through the pass increased, Pashtun residents sometimes took to demanding payment for safe passage, as a source of badly needed income. Basil Jay describes travelling through the pass in 1973 when, roughly halfway across, a “small group of men with rifles and bandoliers” blocked the way. The group’s



The town of Landi Kotal, in Pakistan. Located in the Khyber Pass, only 5 kilometres from the border with Afghanistan, the town is the administrative centre of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, still known in 1976 as the North-West Frontier Province.

leader pointed his rifle, smiled, and with a mixture of hand signals and makeshift English demanded a tribute—US\$10—which Jay was swift to bestow.⁴ David Pearson similarly remembered arriving at the Khyber Pass in 1978 only to be stopped by a man demanding his camera as the price of proceeding. Pearson kept his Land Rover running, and when the man came around toward the driver's side, he gunned the engine and escaped.

Such tales notwithstanding, we exited the pass safely, as indeed did most travellers, our sense of relief dimming before the raw excitement of having just travelled through a place we believed to be dangerous.

Dusk began to settle over the valley as we continued on our way. The sky was darkening, the clouds pierced by golden rays of the setting sun

4. Jay, *65 Days to Delhi*, 558.

as a purple haze gently descended over the mountains. We stopped for the evening prayer and then drove on, enchanted, through a deepening landscape, reality dissolving into history and myth. The world seemed inconceivably beautiful, too much for my heart to hold.



Not quite a decade after I left Afghanistan, a photograph appeared on the cover of the June 1985 issue of *National Geographic*. Titled simply “Afghan Girl,” it was taken in 1984 in the Nasir Bagh refugee camp on the outskirts of Peshawar. The image is unforgettable. At once wary and defiant, the girl stares straight at the camera, her green eyes wide open. Only in 2002 was her identity established: a Pashtun woman named Sharbat Gula. Her family had fled Afghanistan after their village was attacked by Soviet helicopters, travelling on foot across the mountains. As she later confirmed, she did not wish to be photographed—a violation of Pashtun cultural norms.

The Soviet–Afghan War was, of course, only the beginning. After the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in February 1989, a violent civil war ensued, which culminated in 1996 with the victory of the ultraconservative Taliban, which upholds an extreme form of sharia law that, among many other things, places excessively severe restrictions on acceptable behaviour for women. The Taliban government was overturned not long after the US invaded Afghanistan in October 2001, setting in motion a disastrous war that dragged on for nearly two decades. Yet the Taliban once more emerged victorious, returning to power in August 2021.

Gula lived as a refugee in Pakistan until 2016, when she was arrested by Pakistani authorities, who accused her of possessing a forged identity card. She was deported to Afghanistan the following year, where she was given a state welcome and a large home—only to be evacuated to Italy four years later, shortly after the Taliban formed its new government.⁵

5. Jenny Gross, “‘Afghan Girl’ from 1985 National Geographic Cover Takes Refuge in Italy,” *New York Times*, November 26, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/26/world/europe/afghan-girl-national-geographic.html> (with subscription).

She has become a celebrity of sorts, although not by her own choosing, but otherwise her story is little different from that of more than six million other Afghan refugees. Never could I have imagined such a future in 1976, and I find it all but impossible to reconcile it with the warmth of my memories.

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Echoes of the Raj

The British Empire passed quickly and with less humiliation than its French and Dutch counterparts, but decades later, the vicious politics of partition still seems to define India and Pakistan.

—Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger*

It had been nearly thirty years since Pakistan and India had gained independence from Britain, but it still had the *feel* of empire when I travelled there. As a Canadian, my immediate sensation in crossing the border was one of intense familiarity. Outside of francophone Québec, the English-speaking part of Canada in which I grew up was still very British. “God Save the Queen” was still sung in schools and at formal events, Queen Elizabeth II’s portrait (circa 1952) still graced institutional walls, and her face was on Canada’s currency. Only a decade before had Canada adopted its own flag, shorn of its British hallmarks.

For the many British travellers who made the journey to India, the sensation was even more intense. Grant John Szuveges notes that British travellers experienced a kind of nostalgia for a time and place seemingly so near, yet so far—a world in slow retreat.¹ Upon entering the subcontinent,

1. Grant John Szuveges, “The Overland Hippie Trail to India and Nepal in the 1960s and 1970s,” 58–60.

says David Tomory, people with “British connections saw their own history reveal itself.”² David Harvey, who travelled in the early 1960s, remarked on the British legacy in one of his letters home:

Coming into Pakistan is like coming home again. First of all, you go back to driving on the left which is rather difficult to get used to again. All the road signs are in English and are exactly the same as the English ones. The roads in Quetta are all called Pretoria, Mafeking, Victoria, Queens, Lytton, Curzon, and Ladysmith. It was strange seeing the familiar red pillar boxes and the soldiers all looking exactly like British soldiers. Even the advertisements telling you to use the Post Office Savings Bank all look so English.

The nostalgia lessened in later years. By way of an ironic acknowledgement of the empire’s decline, many Britons travelled to Asia simply because their money went further. Alastair Harper, who left Britain in the early 1960s to travel to India, pointed out that Britain was an extremely poor country after the war, with no luxuries, few opportunities to travel, and severe restrictions on capital withdrawals. But if you were able to leave Britain, you wanted your money to go far.

Leaving Britain also represented a kind of cultural escape from a place Harper described as riven with a kind of “meanness” that was “unpalatable” and “stifling.” For him, “Britain seemed a rather dull and drab country, not very exciting compared to other parts of the world.” By the late 1960s, however, Britain had become the centre of Western counterculture. Heading for India no longer meant a *fleeing from*, but a *going to*. Fergus F. recalled that “everybody I knew in London’s counterculture scene either wanted to go to India or were planning to go to India because it had become so much part of the literature, the music, and even the superficial attire of the time.”



2. David Tomory, *A Season in Heaven: True Tales from the Road to Kathmandu*, 67.

Once we were through the Khyber Pass, the landscape changed, broadening out, but the roads and the traffic changed only quantitatively, with the relatively less occupied roads of Afghanistan giving way suddenly to the multitude of vehicles and pedestrians that occupied roadways in Pakistan and India.

Basil Jay describes Pakistan's roads as "thoroughly congested" not just with motor vehicles but with "masses of people" and "all manner of beasts of burden: water buffalo, oxen, horses, donkeys, and even cows, pulling carts of various sizes and descriptions, but some like camels, and even elephants, just trudging along with their back piled high with all manner of cargo."³

My fellow travellers and I arrived in Peshawar late on October 31. Our first task was, as usual, to find a hotel—or, rather, to allow ourselves to be guided to one:

We walk in long circles until a grey, old man, smacking his gums, but speaking some English, takes us to the Rainbow Guest House.

"See Park Hotel," the old man says, pointing. "Fifty rupees for a bed. Crazy, Park Hotel. Too much money. Rainbow, good bed, hot showers, six rupees."

"Peshawar good city," he adds.

I tip him one rupee. Is that enough? He seems disappointed.

Our walk to the Rainbow Hotel involved the usual gauntlet of curious onlookers who, as David Dudeck remarked, believed that people from the West "drank Scotch, went to discos, and couldn't control our sex drive." One offshoot of these perceptions was that Western males were sometimes tested by local youths wanting to show off their macho fitness, or alternatively, were sexually harassed. Though homosexual behaviour is condemned in Muslim societies, local men sometimes made subtle sexual advances, by look or touch, to Western males.

3. Basil Jay, *65 Days to Delhi: An Incredible Journey*, 620.

Macho contests and occasional sexual invitations aside, we males were far less likely to be molested than our female counterparts. Western women often faced harassment and casual sexual assaults in the form of unwanted groping as they moved through throngs of people on the street or were pressed into close quarters on buses and trains. Ever present was the chance that groping might escalate into a more dangerous physical assault.

Such incidents reflected common cultural beliefs, fuelled by imported movies and television, about the character of Western women—that Western women were without “honour.”⁴ Writing of the Middle East, Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit argue that the veiling of women in Muslim cultures aims to safeguard their privacy and protect them from male lust, while the “exposed women of the West . . . are regarded by devout Muslims, or indeed ultra-orthodox Jews, as whores and their men as pimps.”⁵ In my experience, Western women were sometimes viewed by local males as “easy,” as objects simultaneously of both irresistible allure and dangerous temptation. A woman travelling alone, an act thought both unusual and unwise, might add to negative views of her character, and her choice of dress could easily be seen as too “free.”

Female travellers therefore tended to travel in groups, often accompanied by males, or to take chartered buses, and often dressed down so that clothing was neither provocative nor accessible. When directly threatened, some responded forcefully. Dervla Murphy carried a gun and fired it on at least one occasion.⁶

None of the women I met carried a gun—at least as far as I know. While they were strong and independent individuals, as a male I typically

4. Tomory, *A Season in Heaven*, 95; Sharif Gemie and Brian Ireland, *The Hippie Trail: A History*, 79.

5. Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies*, 132. Views of Western women as sexually available and lacking in modesty were not, of course, restricted to devout Muslims and Orthodox Jews but were, and remain, quite pervasive in colonial and postcolonial contexts. They found their counterpart, and still do, in the Western white male view of women of colour as sexually voracious, at once threatening and magnetic.

6. Dervla Murphy, *Full Tilt: Ireland to India with a Bicycle*, 17.

also often found myself in the role of bodyguard. On crowded streets I might walk in front of the women, with another male walking behind them, always alert to potential troubles. Bruce Shore remembered standing guard whenever women used a washroom in train or bus stations.

Moving through crowds while also looking out for the safety of one's companions could become exhausting, but as we made our way to the hotel, Maude made my work easy. She was tall, fit, and quite independent. She quickly dispensed a swift punch to a few gropers along the way. The effect was that the sea of bodies ahead of us parted as we approached.

Minutes later, we arrived at the Rainbow Hotel. I got a bed in a dormitory: it had four doors, four beds, six windows, a toilet, a shower, and an unworkable sink, along with numerous water-beetles and a lifetime's supply of ants. As I stepped onto the balcony, I felt a sense of *déjà vu*. The balcony overlooked a noisy car parts store, just as my room at Tehran's Amir Kabir had. But, as I noted, the room's temperature was "warm and balmy, pleasant."

After checking in, we set off in search of a hearty meal of "curried rice, French fries, toast and jam, and Coke." It was 8:30 at night. We walked the streets of Peshawar, entranced by the blend of architectural styles—European colonial buildings, interspersed with beautiful examples of traditional architecture variously illustrating Mughal, Persian, Central Asian, Sikh, and South Asian styles. "It is night," I wrote,

but not pitch-black, only a pale blue, and though the streets are poorly lit, yet the crumbling façades seem to emit their own light. There is something unreal and majestic pulsing from everywhere. The mini-taxis swarm in and out like bumper cars at a circus. The people stream out of alleyways and shows. In the narrow side streets, convoluted, broken stone, stagnant water, and chai shops thrive. The red-hot coal of a brazier is burning. An old man in his fez smokes his hookah pipe, a fine, grey smoke. There are fruit vendors and simple friends, dogs sleeping.

I stop to take a flash photo of the street where a Pakistani man with his new, larger camera, a gift from his

brother in Kuwait, is also taking one. He gets a picture taken with Maude and me and says he will send us pictures. It is his hobby.

Another Pakistani man asks, will I go to North Vietnam? To Mozambique? When will I go to South America?

I have no answer for him.

As we walk, I become aware of a strange sense of dislocation, as if I were observing from a distance an experience in which I was intensely engaged:

I look at the streets and feel as though we are being painted into a picture. The artist is moving us deeper into the scene—perhaps a Dutch painter with a fine sense of detail and an attraction to the beauty of the low and the outcast.

I conclude that Vermeer is painting us and tell Maude that I've discovered I'm in love with the world.

Perhaps I was stoned when I wrote those lines, but Peshawar somehow reached into me and touched my soul, summoning up a tenderness and compassion.

Maude and I sat in a chai shop above the main street and watched the milling crowd, the continuing surge of arrivals by car, by bus, and by foot. We drank our tea and listened to horns and a singer growling on a car radio. Turning to Maude, I said:

"If I was the best writer in the entire world I couldn't describe how I feel right now."

Maude is smiling, bemused and stoned, but completely naturally. She has been like this all day and is quite beautiful when so. Rainer is beside himself.

I stare out into the mass of humanity, hot, sticky, loving, hating, breathing, beautiful humanity. They are alive, and I have never felt as alive as on this journey, nor ever felt such a reason for living.

I stare and I laugh.

I laugh because I want to laugh. What more can I say?

Okay, yes, I was definitely stoned. But there was also something about the common decency and serenity of the people I saw and met, even in the briefest of conversations, that left a mark on me. Even today, it is the sense of these moments, and not any particulars, that remains with me.

That night, the night before our departure, I lay in my bed listening to the syncopated rhythms rising from below my window, of men at their work, the high-pitched “chink” of hammers on rails, hammers on nails, voices, and the warning peel of a train coming from far off.



Bruce Shore and Brenda Grant did not share my liking of Peshawar, describing it as “too busy, filthy, grey, and chaotic.” They decided to travel north into the Swat Valley instead. Shore’s brother had told them of a friend named Sean who had fled some legal difficulties in Britain and now lived in the interior hill town of Madyan. Shore and Grant took a bus over poor roads and through a fertile valley with “flowing rivers and streams,” Grant wrote in her diary. They shared the road with donkeys, horses, and trucks, and as they got off the bus in Madyan, they immediately had to step aside to make way for a dozen men on horseback. They had bandoliers full of ammunition strapped across their chests, and short swords dangled from their sides. Bruce recognized their rifles as Lee–Enfields from the early 1900s.

Shore went to the post office and asked the postmaster where they might find the Englishman, Sean. The postmaster said he had never heard of a Sean but asked where someone might find Bruce himself should someone come asking. That evening, a police officer came to Bruce and Brenda’s hotel, checking their passports and asking why they had come to Madyan, then left again. The next morning a young man showed up who took them on a ninety-minute walk to Sean’s farm, where they spent the next two days visiting.

Bruce asked Sean about the mounted horsemen they’d seen and was told they were local tribesmen. They maintained order, as they had done

for hundreds of years, moving about and doing business as they wished, trading in such things as arms, food, drugs, and jewels.

In the past, Sean told them, the Pakistani government had tried to assert their authority over the valley. They sent tax collectors, accompanied by a few soldiers, but they disappeared. The government then sent more tax collectors, along with a platoon bearing light machine guns. This time, he said, a lone soldier returned with the message, “Don’t send any more.” The government got the message. Beyond the positions of chief of police and postmaster, the authority of the Pakistani state ended.

Many years later, I was reminded of Shore’s account when I read about the attempted murder in October 2012 of fifteen-year-old Malala Yousafzai, a young activist advocating for the right of women and girls to receive an education. As she was on her way home from school, the bus in which she was riding was intercepted by three members of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, or TTP, who, like their Afghan counterparts, adopt exceedingly restrictive attitudes toward woman but who also openly engage in terrorist activities. One of the three shot her in the head, though he failed in his mission to kill her. She recovered and in 2014 was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, the first Pashtun ever to win one.⁷ The attack took place in Mingora, the largest city in the Swat Valley, where Yousafzai had grown up. As I subsequently learned, “Yousafzai” is also the name of one of the most powerful Pashtun tribes, who have dominated the Swat region since the sixteenth century.



As in Turkey and Iran, the United States had leaned on both Pakistan and India to crack down on drugs. Pakistan agreed, but their crackdown was

7. “Malala Yousafzai, Biographical,” The Nobel Prize, accessed September 18, 2024, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2014/yousafzai/biographical/>. See also “Assassination Attempt of Ms. Malala Yousafzai, October 11, 2021, World Organization Against Torture / Organisation Mondiale Contre la Torture (OMCT), <https://www.omct.org/en/resources/urgent-interventions/assassination-attempt-of-ms-malala-yousafzai>.

soft, and buying drugs was reasonably easy. Trish Flindall recalled seeing “lots of young Europeans shooting up” in Pakistan’s and India’s hotels and hostels in 1968–69. Fergus F., who travelled there around the same time, remembered that “I sometimes met very sad, beautiful young boys who had no idea how to cope, not only with the drugs, but with their so-called freedom. Some guys went off the rails.” Of travelling through Pakistan three years later, Ann Woodruff said that drugs could be obtained from “taxi drivers and everyone else.” And Don Skelton told the sad tale of crossing the border into Afghanistan in 1973, en route from Quetta to Kandahar. His bus stopped five kilometres from the border point at Chaman and he began walking: “There were dead trucks and cars, and big crowds of people walking both ways. I met a Westerner, in some hovel, a heroin addict. He’d lost his passport and been there for years, and now couldn’t go either way.”⁸

As I mentioned earlier, border crossings were a typical locale for police searches, but trains also offered a particular opportunity for enforcement. As in Afghanistan, anyone carrying drugs had first to avoid being caught, and second, if caught, to quickly pay any bribes before the demands escalated. Travelling by train from Peshawar to Lahore, Maude, Rainer, and I narrowly missed ending up in trouble:

We pushed on to a car, only to have to file out again as there was no room in the car. The inhabitants in the next car, about eight men lying on the bunks, tried to tell us it was reserved, but dismissing this as bullshit, we took up squatter’s rights and settled in. A replica of Edward G. Robinson sat on a top bunk facing us, three less Hollywood types stared at us from below. Immediately above us, from another top bunk, an arm and occasionally two feet

8. Skelton’s tale is surpassed only by Frank Sullivan, who related the story of waking one night in 1979 to the sounds of a couple in the room they shared in Benares, needing to get their fix. “They were trying to stick in a needle, but it was dark and they couldn’t find the vein. It was horrific: the noises, the grunting. Any sense I had that heroin might be a romantic thing vanished.”

dangled, their owner unseen. A black-haired Pakistani with fair English sat beside me.

After an hour, during which the train cars shunted back and forth, we were on our way. I finished reading Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and lay back. Maude lay half asleep on my shoulder. At last, an officer appeared at a stop and after a preliminary feel of the locals' bags, turned to Rainer and had him dismantle his pack. I thought it might end there, but when he began to search Maude's pack, we decided to jettison the small quantity of foil-wrapped hash bought at the Afghan border. With one hand, Maude deftly fingered the package out of her basket while the locals watched motionless, then handed the package to me. I stood up, coughing into my hand, and threw the evidence out the open train window. Sitting down, a smile passed between the Pakistani passengers and me.

"Is it gone?" asked Maude.

I nodded while the officer gave us a puzzled and somewhat suspicious look. He knew something had happened, but he didn't know what. A moment later, his hands were exploring the basket, now safe. He made a cursory search of my bag before the train halted and he departed.

"You are good people," the Pakistani man beside me said.

"What?" I asked, uncertain.

He repeated his comment. At a later train stop, he made up a joint to smoke. We had one toké and then tried to sleep. About five in the morning, I crawled up to sleep in the bunk that Edward G. Robinson had earlier vacated. I slept well, half dozing through a train stoppage—apparently, a thirteen-year-old boy had fallen off the train, breaking his neck—before arriving at Lahore around 9:15 a.m.

In Lahore, we took a room at the Ringo Bell Hotel. The city still exuded the heavy legacy of British culture. I walked past several small parks, the High Court, and a Catholic church, all of which were distinctly neocolonial. It could have been London, except for the water buffaloes, horses, goats, and sheered sheep that shared wide streets with motor vehicles.

In the evening, Rainer and I bought some canned Dutch Gouda cheese, which cost us eighteen and a half rupees. We ate all of it while Maude recuperated from the day. I then returned to my hotel room:

The room costs five rupees, and it came with several live, running lizards. I am lying on the bed. It is getting on to midnight. A sultry warmth hovers over the silent town, a silence broken only by the occasional sound of a motorcycle and the fan spinning overhead.

The room's walls are green, the panelling a grubby brown. Scribbled on the wall: "Take care of the dirty bunch of thieves working in this hotel. They will try anything."

The next day, early, we took a bus to Wagah, at the Indian border.

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Into India

*The wounds will take decades to heal, centuries to overcome
the trauma.*

—Gulzar, *Two*

Prior to Partition, the village of Wagah was located in the Punjab province of British India, as was the village of Attari, barely 2 kilometres to the east. At the stroke of midnight on August 14–15, 1947, however, residents of the two towns suddenly found themselves in different countries. Sadly, from the moment of their birth, conflict between Pakistan and India was inevitable. In the northwest, the newly drawn boundary cut through the Punjab province and, in the east, through the province of Bengal. In the immediate aftermath of Partition, millions of Muslims fled from India to East and West Pakistan, while millions of Hindus and Sikhs fled in the opposite direction.

It was not a peaceful migration. Millions on both sides were massacred, often with horrifying brutality.¹ Nor was the boundary between

1. For examples, see Vidhi Doshi and Nisar Mehdi, "70 Years Later, Survivors Recall the Horrors of India–Pakistan Partition," *Washington Post*, August 14, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia-pacific/70-years-later-survivors-recall-the-horrors-of-india-pakistan-partition/2017/08/14/3b8c58e4-7de9-11e7-9026>

West Pakistan and India settled. Within months, the two states were at war over the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, a conflict that was terminated in 1949 by a UN-mediated ceasefire line that left the underlying tensions unresolved. The ongoing dispute devolved briefly into a second war in 1965, which again ended in a ceasefire agreement that both countries soon violated. Thereafter, the de facto border became increasingly militarized—a volatile situation marked by continuing skirmishes and another brief outbreak of war in 1999, with no end to the hostilities yet in sight.

The tensions between the two countries are reflected in an event that takes place daily at what is today the Wagah–Attari border crossing. In 1959, both countries began to observe a long-standing military tradition, in which a nation's flag is ceremoniously lowered at sunset. But while “retreat,” as the custom is called, is usually a short and solemn occasion, an elaborate nationalistic ritual has developed at the Wagah–Attari crossing, involving drums and bugles and soldiers marching in a highly stylized manner, kicking their legs in the air and generally mimicking a military encounter, before finally ending with a handshake symbolic of peace. The ceremony remained relatively modest at first, but as the performance became more theatrical, it began to draw large crowds on both sides of the border, with onlookers shouting nationalist slogans and cheering their own soldiers on. Despite the handshake, the ceremony is above all a display of national rivalry and pride.

Several of the travellers whom I later contacted shared memories of crossing the border, though none happened to arrive at sunset. Christine Davies recalled a brief wait at the Wagah crossing back in 1961, which she spent drinking chai in “a mud hut with an earthen floor while a friend played chess with a border guard.” In contrast, Don Skelton remembered seeing “lots and lots of military installations” when he entered India twelve years later, in the fall of 1973. The first person he met on the Indian

-4a0a64977c92_story.html. An enormous amount has been written about Partition, of course, but one of the most visceral introductions remains Kushwant Singh's riveting novel *Train to Pakistan*, first published in 1956—less than a decade after the events it describes.

side, “some sort of intelligence officer,” he recalled, asked him, “Did you see any tanks? Did you see any guns? Did you see any emplacements?” This encounter took place little more than a year after India and Pakistan signed the Simla Agreement, which established the so-called Line of Control in Kashmir to serve as an unofficial boundary between the two countries. But neither recognizes the Line of Control as a genuine border.

Rainer, Maude, and I had taken a bus from Lahore to the Wagah border crossing, a distance of only about two dozen kilometres. Because we arrived in the morning, we missed the flag-lowering ceremony. But I did take note of two signs at the border: “Discipline makes a nation great” and “Save the poor. Support prohibition.”

We entered India that day wholly unaware of the precarious state of democracy in the country. In June 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had instructed India’s president, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, to declare a state of emergency. The declaration, which was revoked only in March 1977, allowed the government to carry out mass arrests, to censor the media, to defer elections, and to embark on a series of controversial measures, including forced sterilization. In declaring the Emergency, Gandhi pointed to “internal disturbances” that were allegedly jeopardizing the country’s national security. It was no secret, however, that her central purpose was to strangle dissent and hobble her opponents—and in this she succeeded, at least for a time.²

In retrospect, I sometimes wonder how I could have been unaware of the Emergency, which had been ongoing for some six months when I left Canada early in 1976. At the same time, Canadian media—television news, especially—seldom gave extensive coverage to events in India and other so-called developing countries, and Alberta was, if anything, even

2. The Emergency has generated no shortage of commentary. One useful analysis, written from the standpoint of democracy in India, is Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, “The Indian Emergency (1975–1977) in Historical Perspective.” See also Adrija Roychowdhury, “48 Years of Emergency: Here Is What Happened over the Two Years That Changed India’s History,” *Indian Express*, June 25, 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/research/emergency-48-years-timeline-history-8685088/> (with subscription).

more insular. Then, once I arrived in India, my day-to-day experience on the ground gave me nary a hint of the country's now-suspended democracy, or at least none that I could perceive. As an outsider, I had no insight into the impact of the Emergency on people's lives, nor was it a topic of conversation among other travellers. I saw no riots, no protests: in this respect, the suspension of civil liberties had accomplished its purpose. Only after my return to Canada did I discover the history that had escaped my notice.

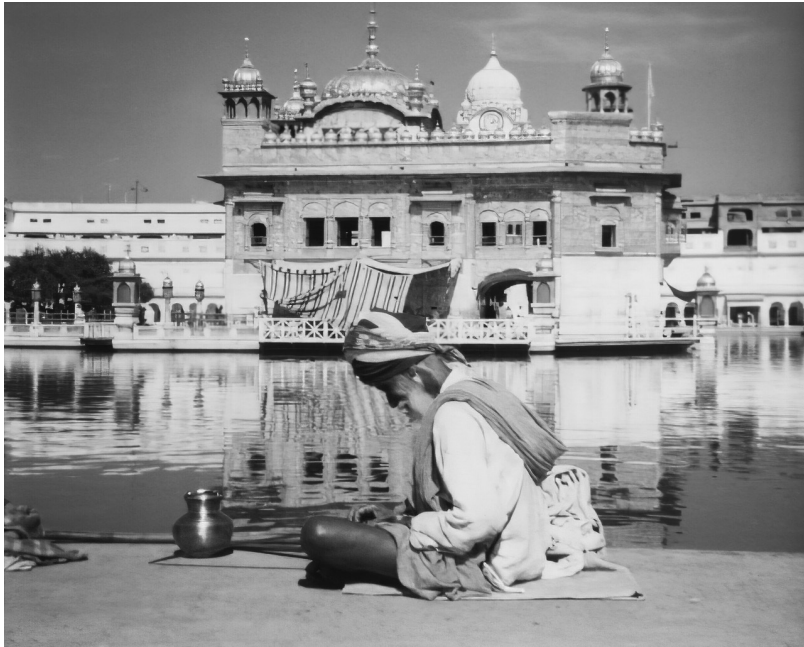


The highway from the border inland was good. This was the case, actually, with most Indian highways and secondary roads, though the quality of the roads made little difference to the speed of travel. As Gregory notes, "Progress along Indian roads was usually slow, for while few could afford cars there were trucks, taxis, rickshaws, scooters, cycles, buffalo carts, hand carts and the occasional elephant sharing the same tarmac, and cows, of course, had privileged right of way on any road."³

India is a very large country, and once one is there, a veritable smorgasbord of possibilities beckons.⁴ From Amritsar, one could travel north into Jammu and Kashmir, despite the tensions along the disputed border, hiking in the mountains and perhaps renting an elegant Raj-like houseboat on Srinagar's Lake Dal. Alternatively, one could head southeast to New Delhi and from there pursue one of several further options: northeast to Kathmandu and the mountains of Nepal; south to Bombay and then down the west coast to the states of Goa and Kerala; southeast to Agra and Benares and then on through Bihar and West Bengal to Calcutta, from where one could then travel down the east coast and then south to

3. Richard Gregory, "The Hippie Trail 1974: London to Kathmandu," "Kashmir and India" section.

4. Time, money, fatigue, sickness, or simply homesickness often precluded supping at the entire plate of India's possibilities, but a few tried. Frank Sullivan travelled all the way south to Sri Lanka before heading north again to Nepal where he trekked. Margot Miller similarly travelled as far south as Goa before going to Nepal.



The Golden Temple, in Amritsar. The fifth Sikh guru, Guru Arjan Dev Ji, presided over the construction of the gurdwara (temple) and the expansion of its sacred pool during the closing decades of the sixteenth century.

the cities of Madras (now Chennai) and Pondicherry. And this is hardly an exhaustive list.

Our immediate destination was, however, Amritsar itself, in India's half of the Punjab. The city is little more than thirty kilometres from the Wagah–Attari border crossing and only about fifty-five kilometres from Lahore. Our intent was to visit the famous Golden Temple, the holiest shrine in Sikhism, which was constructed over the last two decades of the sixteenth century. As of 2017, the temple was attracting 100,000 visitors per day, and more on religious occasions.⁵

5. Harpreet Bajwa, "Golden Temple Wins Laurels as World's Most Visited Religious Place," *New Indian Express*, November 25, 2017, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2017/Nov/26/golden-temple-wins-laurels-as-worlds-most-visited-religious-place-1711154.html>.

Our plan in 1976 was to rest in Amritsar for a few days before travelling further. That first night, we slept in one of the Golden Temple's corridors. It was not a particularly restful night:

Guards in their turbans, brandishing spears, a sword dangling at their sides, clatter about the cloistered walls throughout the night. They shout and declaim and march, while lights burn our eyes and lizards scurry across the temple ceilings.

I am sleepless, writing books in my head, and in heat, thinking of sex. I drape a kerchief across my eyes, and fleetingly pass out. But about 5:00 a.m., a chant breaks out that continues for over an hour. I later learn that, at this time, the holy scriptures are opened and at whatever first sentence is revealed, so begins the day's readings. With more chanted prayers, the book is then carried by the priests into the Golden Temple where it resides until around 10:00 a.m.

Amid this ritual, a group of chai boys arrives, to which I demure and buy an early tea, then drift again into a halting sleep until 8:00 a.m.

The city awakes. I take a victorious crap, then buy an omelette and Coke nearby. I set off for a bank only to discover the theft of €210 in traveller's cheques. I have to wait until New Delhi to deal with it, as there is no American Express in Amritsar.

I returned to the temple, where I watched the Sikh holy men at their readings. Later that morning, I also encountered a dishevelled youth, German, I guessed, or possibly Dutch. I'd seen him before, in Herat and Kabul, and he was wearing a hat that reminded me of Corporal Agarn, on *F Troop*:

He drifts through the rooms of the Golden Temple,
laughing a crazed and sinister laugh, and making mad

gestures. He tells a Pakistani girl asleep in the walkway, “If you want to know about Brain Smuggler Suzy, I’ll be in the room.” But she hears no more than I understand, and he walks, cackling his way, to another place.

I see him again later that day, and this time we talk.

“You are walking down za ‘I shot the sheriff’ road to meet za sheriff who is on horseback with silver spurs, and you look, and you have guns on your sides, too. But zen you’re in prison—I met a friend there, but I wouldn’t want to say who he is—and za only way to get out is you must wait to meet za sheriff.”

“You have met?” I asked.

“No, I’m still in za ‘I shot the sheriff’ jail. You see, I am a brain smuggler. So are Brain Smuggler Suzy and Brain Smuggler Laura. Sometimes, zough, I only want to go to Jimi Hendrix country.”

“Where is that?”

“It’s not a real country.”

“A town?”

“Yes—no: a field.”

This strange conversation went on a while longer, during which he told me he had been beaten by a Goan (“a misunderstanding”) and then related, “I have a friend, a French junkie, Pierce. He has been in India seven years. He goes between Goa and Kathmandu. I don’t know if he’s still shooting.”

I have no idea whether this “brain smuggler” was simply strung out on drugs or whether he had an underlying psychiatric condition. But he was one of many lost souls who ended up in India.

Less than eight years after I was there, on June 1, 1984, the Indian Army launched an attack on the Golden Temple, on the order of Indira Gandhi, with the goal of capturing Sikh militants who had taken up residence there as part of an ongoing demand for the creation of an autonomous Sikh state within India. Troops surrounded the temple, and a

heavy bombardment began a few days later, severely damaging the temple complex and completely destroying the holy Akal Takht. At least several hundred Indian troops, Sikh militants, and civilians were killed, although many estimates place the death toll in the thousands.⁶

At the time of the assault on the Golden Temple, I was working in a childcare facility in Alberta, where I met a young Sikh who was also employed there. His anger was palpable, and he wished aloud that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi would be assassinated.

His wish came true only five months later, when she was killed by her two Sikh bodyguards.



On November 7, Maude, Rainer, and I took a train from Amritsar to New Delhi, roughly a nine-hour trip. Until then, we had all travelled by bus or some other road vehicle, so trains were something of a novelty. Indeed, few Westerners travelling between Turkey and Afghanistan went by rail, except in parts of northern Turkey. In India and Pakistan, however, rail travel was long established and was simply a more efficient mode of transportation over long distances. Yet trains did have their downside. Travelling by train meant experiencing mainly the cities and missing small villages. Unexpected delays and stoppages were not uncommon, and depending on the destination and the class of ticket, trains could also be very crowded. Describing a train trip from Amritsar to Delhi in the late 1960s, one traveller astutely observed: “Bars on carriage windows and ridiculous overcrowding all provide perfect climate for claustrophobia.”⁷

6. For a summary, see Arjun Sengupta, “39 Years Since Operation Bluestar: What Led Up to It, What Happened,” *Indian Express*, updated June 6, 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-history/operation-bluestar-history-explained-8648026/> (with subscription).

7. Quoted in David Tomory, *A Season in Heaven: True Tales from the Road to Kathmandu*, 81.

John Hunter and his wife took a train from Amritsar to Delhi about a decade later, in December 1978. Hunter's description of third-class train travel paints a memorable picture of "ridiculous overcrowding":

You can reserve seats in 1st and 2nd class, but they often fill two or three days in advance. So if you just arrive at station, you buy a 3rd class ticket and take your chances. This means waiting for a train to pull in, running for seat space, then floor space, then windowsill space, then door space, then doorstep space. . . . A seat for four will have six on it. Over each seat is a rack for luggage. But no Indian carries luggage, so three people will be curled up on each rack. They sleep under the seats, then sit on the floor filling the aisleway, then gradually the entranceway between coaches. Finally, when you think no more can get in, as the door is blocked, they come thru windows. I was near the doorway, and as the train pulled out people grabbed onto handles on the outside of the car and begged to be let in. . . . An argument went on inside as to whether they should be let in. As the train was picking up speed and the man's face on the outside began to distort and his hair was straight back, they let him in.

In contrast, those who could afford to travel first or second class were guaranteed a reserved seat and sufficient space for luggage. Travelling in the comparative luxury of second class, I began to fall under the spell of the railways—the rhythm, the sense of time passing at its own pace, indifferent to my own needs and wishes. Erik Pontoppidan's fond recollections resonate with my own: "The yelling sound from the tea vendors, the heavy noise from the rains crossing the iron bridges, the minor keys of the whistles from the locomotives."⁸ The sounds soon became a lullaby, transporting me into a world of contentment and calm.

Upon arriving in New Delhi, we were met, as usual, by an enthusiastic greeter who escorted us to rooms at Mrs. Colaco's Guesthouse on Janpath

8. Erik Pontoppidan, "A Tribute to the Indian Railways!" n.p.

Lane, in the downtown core. My notes described the hotel as “a drag of Westerners, lights on to all hours, mice, graffiti.”

Similarly greeted by a “street hustler” upon arriving in New Delhi, Brenda Grant and Bruce Short were led a few miles to what Grant described as a “grungy” hotel in the same area where we stayed. “Dirty room, dirty us, dirty sleeping bags—sometimes I can’t stand it,” she wrote. The next day they got up early and went to Janpath Lane where they got dormitory beds at the Jain Guest House.

Maude, Rainer, and I got along well on this trip. But inevitably tensions arise over what people want to do and see or where they want to go. So our trio split up at this point—I left for Benares and Goa, and they went where the road and desire took them. As with so many people I met or travelled with, I never saw them again.

I moved a few days later from Mrs. Colaco’s to the Eagle Hotel in the Paharganj district, which was popular with low-budget travellers at the time. I slept the first night in a room adjoining the hotel desk where the clerk’s “buzzer went off all night and fat rats scurried along the open sewers and up pipes across our floor.” I then moved to the hotel’s “penthouse,” featuring “two beds, a table, and a window overlooking the evening streets.”

Staying at places such as the Eagle or Mrs. Colaco’s was not particularly by choice. While the big cities of Istanbul, Tehran, or New Delhi always had very expensive, luxurious hotels, most of us were trying to stretch our money for as long as we could. The price and quality of hotels decreased as one moved from Turkey to India, though the price was never high and the quality never stellar. In David Dudeck’s words, accommodations “varied between poor to very poor,” or as Bruce Finch said about most of the hotels, “to call them a one star would be a stretch.” The cheap hotels usually clustered around train stations and bus drops, though in some countries, truck stations.

9. Terry Ledressay recalled staying at a hotel in India where one night a rat tried to drag a large duffel bag, containing the collective passports of passengers on a bus tour, into its hole. The bus driver blocked the hole with a wardrobe, but the rat got out and tried again to drag its quarry away, until finally it was driven off.

In 1976, the stock of low-cost hotels and guest houses remained small, and their names passed along from one traveller to the next like the gift of a Kula ring: Istanbul's Gulhane and Palace Hotels; Ankara's Konak Hotel; Tehran's Amir Kabir Hotel and Goodyear Guest House; Kandahar's Peace and New Tourist Hotels; Kabul's Khayyam, Green Door, and Mustafa Hotels, and Sigi's Hotel; Jalalabad's Spinghar Hotel; Lahore's Ringo Bell Hotel; Bombay's Crown Hotel; Calcutta's Modern Lodge; Benares's New Quality Hotel and Indian Youth Tourist Hostel; and Kathmandu's Matchbox and Hotchpotch Hotels.¹⁰ And, of course, in New Delhi, Mrs. Colaco's Guesthouse, and the Eagle and Crown Hotels.

I stayed in New Delhi for six days, during which time I regularly frequented the nearby financial and commercial district of Connaught Place (today, Rajiv Chowk). I visited the Canadian Embassy twice (to get a new passport), the General Post Office once, a postal branch office twice, and American Express twice (to deal with my stolen travellers' cheques).

In a letter home on November 9, 1976, I wrote that I was "basically quite fit," but had developed a "slight touch of diarrhea." I went to a nearby hospital where I was diagnosed as having amoebic dysentery and was given a two-week regimen of antibiotics.

Regular power cuts in Paharganj meant that the ceiling fans in hotels often stopped, rendering the heat in rooms "oppressive," as Richard Gregory puts it. He remembers a restaurant in the market area, the Metropolis, that had air conditioning, which made it something of an oasis, its "chilled air icy in comparison to the sweltering conditions elsewhere." But he also recalls an equally chilling incident:

10. See Tomory, *A Season in Heaven*, 44 and 65; Christina Lamb, *Farewell Kabul: From Afghanistan to a More Dangerous World*, 19; Richard Gregory, *A Pukka History of the Hippie Trail: Overland to Asia in Search of Hashish*, 64–67. Acclaimed journalist Robert Fisk described Jalalabad's Spinghar Hotel—where he interviewed Osama bin Laden in 1997—as "a relic of the Afghanistan hippy trail, a high-ceilinged hotel of the 1950s with large rose gardens and tall palm trees which, even in winter, bask in the warmth of the winds coming up from the valley of the Indus." *The Great War for Civilization: The Conquest of the Middle East*, 15.

The noise in Pahar Ganj was incessant, so I paid little attention when, while playing my Swiss roommate at chess one day, I heard a loud bang outside the hotel. Wandering out a while later I saw a man sweeping a bloody mess into a pile—apparently a boiler had exploded and someone had been next to it, these were human remains. The busy market traffic flowed around the scene, unconcerned. They had seen it all before. Life was cheap in India.¹¹

Life did indeed seem cheap, and so did death. There was no escaping the poverty, ill health, and sadness of India's streets—indeed, of so many streets along the route, where travellers bore witness to a relentless spectacle of pointless suffering. Faces scarred and distorted by burns; limbs broken, twisted, or missing; children hunched and scrawny, blind, with open sores—scenes that became almost mind-numbing as time and place went by. The lines from Mike Ramsden's poem "Kabul" that describe the crippled beggars on Chicken Street could have been written just about anywhere:

scuttling crabs moving on pads
covering stumps of what were elbows or knees
or sit there holding up for us to see
blunt and shiny objects: their flesh.

Those who made the journey frequently retain images too heart-wrenching to forget. Jean could still recall the sight of a "woman in Delhi with a dead baby, begging." Similarly, Karl watched as a young woman in Old Delhi drew open the cloth covering her withered breasts to reveal a half-starved baby. He also remembered a man he saw one evening sitting in a dirty gutter, his hands stretched out, who the next morning lay dead and stiff on a cart that would soon take him away to be burned on a woodpile.

Yet side by side with these tragic scenes was an overflow of life, a carnival of the senses that seemed more immediately human than anything

11. Gregory, "The Hippie Trail 1974: London to Kathmandu," "Kashmir and India" section.

we had experienced at home. Fergus B. remembered “Delhi’s smell of mingled dust, sweat, cooking fires, and excrement”—an aroma that comes to evoke the city for many who have spent time there.¹² My time in the city involved walking teeming streets where life seemed to be bursting out on all sides. There, and elsewhere, my senses experienced a cumulative assault: glittering displays of brassware, baskets full of brightly coloured vegetables, women wrapped in exquisitely decorated saris, the enticing aroma of grilled foods, the repellant smell of offal, people shouting, animals braying, vehicles roaring. Of Delhi, I wrote:

Amazing country. Snake charmers, snakes, monkeys, elephants, emaciated beggars, and opulent wealth. Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, Hare Krishnas, Children of God, atheists, agnostics, and me. There is nothing in the realm of the imaginary that hasn’t taken form and substance here.

At night, the streets are filled with rickshaws, horse carts, and motor carts; and on the curbs, banana vendors—ten for a rupee—and apples; some restaurants. The rickshaw drivers are phenomenal: lean, muscled, hard-working bastards on gearless wrecks. They peddle on the straight and wisely walk the hills, coasting down the other side, recklessly wheeling and dealing in and out of traffic, fast on the break.

On the street, an elderly Indian man gathers around him his charts on palmistry. Though not believing in it, I pay him two rupees. He tells me something about holy men, Delhi, and money, none of which I understand because he speaks in Hindi.

12. David Pearson remarked of getting off a plane in Delhi in 1987, “As soon as the air hit me, I knew I was in India. You can smell India. And I love the smell. I don’t want to think about the smell’s ingredients, but it’s just a fabulous smell.”

It is the eve of a holiday commemorating the birth of Guru Nanak.¹³ Bands stream in and out of the ribboned streets; drums and pipes, better than Mardi Gras!

New Delhi's streets, as in so many cities across Asia, were filled with vendors selling all types of goods, some valuable, some not, but invariably intriguing. Travellers might stop on the street to view the cheaply priced wonders of a vendor's wares spread out on blankets along the sidewalk: old muskets and knives; leather water bottles; off-the-rack dental plates made from animal bone; ill-fitting wire glasses with Coke-bottle lenses; hair combs, shoulder bags, and wallets; small carvings made of wood or ivory or bone; inexpensive necklaces, silver rings, and bangles; ornate belt buckles. All the while, small children scurried about or, if younger, suckled at their mother's discreetly covered breast.

Typically, market shops, whether just off the main street or within a bazaar, specialized in certain goods, such as handwoven carpets, Kashmiri woollens, or leather goods, as well as jewellery made with precious or semi-precious stones: diamonds, garnets, lapis lazuli, opals, sapphires, and turquoise set in gold or silver amulets, necklaces, bracelets, or rings—though the traveller needed to be cautious of persuasive fakes.

Also abundant in New Delhi were movie theatres. Rarely did they show films made in the West, though Jean remembered seeing the 1971 high-speed thriller *Vanishing Point* in a theatre in Lahore. Several times I attended Indian films (only some with English subtitles). India, even then, was a prodigious producer of Bollywood films. The plotlines seemed easily understandable: star-crossed couple, evil antagonist, happy ending, much singing and dancing, great fun.

13. The birthdate of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, is disputed, although the most widely accepted date is April 15, 1469. Sometime around the middle of the nineteenth century, however, the anniversary of his birth began to be celebrated in November, on the day of the full moon in the month of Kattak (roughly mid-October to mid-November), and according to some traditions he was born on the fifteenth day in that month.

On another night in New Delhi, I attended a circus show. It was held in a small arena with a low tent ceiling. Perhaps five thousand people were in attendance. A couple of elephants ambled around the ring, disinterested. Two lions posed lazily on stools, moved only by the whip of a silk-gowned ringmaster. All the animals seemed thin and old, wanting more than anything to be left alone for a nap. A trapeze artist and a baton-bearing gymnast seemed equally ill-disposed to performing, though the ringmaster refrained from using his whip on them.

On November 9, I wrote a letter home, the same day that American Express provided me with replacement cheques for the ones that had been stolen. Two days later, the Canadian embassy handed me my new passport. On November 13, a Saturday, I went to the nearby railway station to board a train to Agra and from there to Benares.

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From Agra to Benares

India has 2,000,000 gods and worships them all. In religion all other countries are paupers; India is the only millionaire.

—Mark Twain, *Following the Equator:
A Journey Around the World* (1897)

Much has been written about Indian train stations, most famously by Paul Theroux in *The Great Railway Bazaar* (1975). My experience of New Delhi's train station echoes other vivid descriptions of a community of desperate outcasts living in near-permanent isolation from the greater city. People—men, women, and children—slept amid soiled blankets and sheets on the side of train tracks. When not sleeping, the huddled masses milled about, waiting for trains to arrive. When they did, a hundred hands would be suddenly thrust upwards toward the train windows, sometimes bearing food and trinkets, but more often simply begging. The noise emanating from the makeshift community was loud and incessant; the smells of curried food being cooked on open flames equally so. Life along the tracks was also dangerous. Our train to New Delhi arrived an hour late because, as we learned, someone had been killed on the track.

Seventy kilometres from New Delhi lies Vrindavan, the town of Krishna's birth and thus the locus of his worship and a long-standing site of pilgrimage that, in 1967, became the centre of the International Society

for Krishna Consciousness. In 1975, the year before my journey, the Hare Krishnas established a temple in Vrindavan and the city soon became an assemblage of other “temples, ashrams, and dharmshalas,” attracting a large swath of Western devotees.¹ Bruce Shore, who went to Vrindavan in 1976, said his impression was that Indians viewed the Hare Krishna disciples as “only dressing the part, as triflers.” But the faux acolytes kept coming.²

I was not interested in exploring ersatz religious experiences, so I did not disembark in Vrindavan with the pilgrims who had journeyed with me. Like many others who made the journey to India, I enjoyed simply the sensory thrill of being free to walk through teeming cities, visiting ancient and revered temples, seeing different peoples, and sometimes smoking pot or hash.

Agra is only a two-hour train ride from New Delhi. My notes suggest I was ill and ill-disposed at the time, still taking my course of antibiotics, still fatigued. The endless arguments with rickshaw drivers and quibbling with street sellers and storekeepers over *everything* also wore on me. My hotel room became my only safe haven, but not even that proved to be an entirely safe space, for then I was alone with my thoughts, which posed a different kind of threat. I was reading too much Plato and Hesse and books about Hinduism and longing too much for my Swiss girlfriend, who as far as I knew was now in Zambia working with the aid mission. When awake, I felt depressed; when sleeping, I was beset by dreams of unresolved conflicts. I was, in a word, a mess, which no doubt coloured my lack of appreciation for the Taj Mahal upon arrival. It was, I intoned, beautiful and exquisite, “as perfect as anything mankind could build, a testament to the skilled craftsmen,” yet it left me “strangely unmoved”: it was *too* perfect. Despite my disappointment, I stayed in Agra and over

1. Charles R. Brooks, *The Hare Krishnas in India*, 8. A page later, Brooks writes that the priests at the Krishna-Balaram temple “are unmistakably non-Indian,” the head priest being French, the temple manager American, and the Brahman cook English.
2. David Lane, who travelled overland to India in 1972, scathingly described the acolytes as wealthy people trying to copy the Beatles visiting the Maharishi “or who went to ashrams to hang out and pick up chicks.”

the next three days I was there, my mood steadily improved so that by the time I left for Benares, I was genuinely excited about getting there.

I had first heard of the ancient city as a youth from some of the many books about history and world cultures that graced our home, supplemented by *National Geographic* magazines. Like many Westerners on the road, I had also read Hesse's *Siddhartha*, his account of the life of the Buddha, who is reputed to have given his first sermon at Sarnath, not far north of the city.

After arriving in Benares, I found a second-floor room at the New Quality Hotel. "I have a hardwood bed," I wrote,

with a canopy for a fly net and mirrors at both ends, but with so many age spots as to be unusable. There is a table, three chairs, and another bed. A large, panelled door, with side windows, opens out on to a balcony, but it is locked and bolted. My windows look in at an office of what I surmise to be barristers.

Another panel of doors opens up beside my bed but going where I know not. They are also locked and bolted. There is a large window, garish green in colour, again locked and bolted, and another small window that is boarded.

Down the hallway, around a balcony that cordoned a courtyard, there was a toilet that emitted a frightful stench. The water from the taps was grey. As always, there were mice. A temple, built into the hotel, or I should say, around which the hotel was built, stretched from the second to the third floors.

It was still early, so I took to exploring the neighbourhood a bit more. Not far from the hotel I found a small café, which I later realized was the place the balding servant at the hotel would go when I, or another guest, asked for a Coke. Back in my room, I could hear the tinkle of a rickshaw and the incessant noise of fighting dogs. Then a whistle, followed by silence.

In the morning, I took a short walk to the Ganges River. Religion formed part and parcel of everyday life in Benares, and that sense of easy

unity among the disparate elements of life seemed to flow through everything. Music joined with laughter and sorrow, by day and by night. I passed by one of the two ghats—wide flights of steps leading down to the river's edge—at which bodies are cremated, fires blazing constantly, day and night. I lingered, and when I finally took my leave of that place, it was with an already familiar sense of oneness, even in death, as though the dead were merely entering a new day in a new place. At the same time, even in death there is a class element. Wealthy families can afford to include significant quantities of richly fragrant sandalwood in funeral pyres, whereas the less fortunate must content themselves with corkwood or mango wood.

Later in the day, I took a ride in a rowboat, accompanied by a boy of sixteen and the oarsman. The boy spoke fair English and was hoping that I would go to see his father's brocades. As we oared out into the river, I gazed back at the intricately carved towers of temples along the banks, silently absorbing the panoramic view:

There were small boats tied to the shore. Further out, two fishermen sat at ease in the water, their net draped over the side. We rowed on to the burning place where the fires were high and four bodies, draped in orange and red silk, waited their turn to be bathed. The young boy and I disembarked while our oarsman stayed. I followed the boy up a winding street to his father's shop, yet I saw no brocades or other wares on sale. Unsure what its business was, I decided not to enter and returned instead to the boat. We rowed further down the shore, past a temple sinking slowly into the Ganges. During monsoon season the waters are very high, often reaching well up into the temples, and the burning place must be moved. But as I saw it now, I thought it might be the most elegant and picturesque shoreline I had ever seen.

On the way back, my eyes rested on the serene picture of the burnings before me. There seemed to be something medieval, holy, and commonplace all at once about the proceedings. In the water beside the boat, black chards of

ash and garlands of orange and red flowers floated by. We pulled up once for the young chap to relieve himself, then moved on again to the mooring where I'd first boarded. An Australian couple had rented a houseboat there and wondered if I was interested in staying with them. I declined, as I was leaving in two days.

After some brief haggling, I paid the oarsman two rupees, said my good-byes, and walked away, up a flight of steps that were obscured by sand. Having reached the plateau at the end of the stairs, I looked back. A ring of tour boats, houseboats, and rowboats clung to the riverbank like a garland in the waning spans of the evening.

A couple of children called out "Hello, mister!" as I crossed a busy market street, and a man tried to entice me to come to his house to view his wares. But I'd had enough for the day, so I declined the invitation and made my way back to the hotel, stopping only at a shop where a family was polishing agate bowls and pipes. Then I returned to sidestepping rickshaws and pedestrians. At the hotel, I dragged my body up the stairs, unlocked the door to my room, and collapsed on the bed.



My collapse was likely due to the ongoing effects of amoebic dysentery. It is a simple fact that anyone travelling to India then, and even in some parts now, will become ill. As poet Mike Ramsden wrote, "bowels tend to dominate the day."³ Many travellers adopted elaborate measures, some fantastical, to escape illness. Henry Hamilton and Alastair Harper cooked meals in a pressure cooker, avoided local eateries and restaurants, and used chlorine tablets to sterilize water.⁴ Bruce Shore and Brenda Grant adopted a strictly vegetarian diet, while Ernest ate only "hard boiled eggs

3. Mike Ramsden, *Road to Kabul*, 24.

4. On a somewhat comical note, on an earlier trip in 1973 I met a young man in southern Italy who said he took a chlorine tablet every day so as to be protected against contaminated water. One can only wonder about the condition of his stomach lining.

with shells that weren't cracked, and melons that we sliced with knives sterilized with candles."

Despite such precautions, illness was common, for which travellers readily exchanged folk remedies. One oft-repeated remedy for diarrhea was the "Coca-Cola cure," the theory being that if soda could corrode metal, it could also kill any stomach invaders. When he got sick in Quetta, Don Skelton "just drank tons and tons of ginger ale for a couple days."

The intensity of any illness ranged from mild or moderate, but manageable, to serious enough to require antibiotics and possibly hospital care. Fortunately, my illness was now on the mild to moderate end of the scale, and so, on November 25, two weeks after arriving in Benares, I took the bus to Bombay, still ill but on the mend.

Bombay

*Bombay isn't India. Bombay is an own-world, a world in itself.
The real India is out there.*

—Gregory David Roberts, *Shantaram*

Accompanying me on the bus ride was Moira, a twenty-two-year-old woman from Sydney, Australia, whom I had only recently met. At five foot six, she weighed a mere 110 pounds. While her temperament matched her red hair, she was also by equal measure brave and warm. Like all of us at that age, she was insecure, although I had learned to hide my insecurities behind a shield of bravado.

I often heard people say that Australian women come fourth on a list of importance among Aussie men—behind football, mates, and beer. While this may be apocryphal (or at least I hope it is), I did get the sense she had been hurt in the past. We were together for nearly two months. I owe her more than I recognized at the time, perhaps even my life. But I was young, and male, and sometimes stupidly unaware—an ailment for which the only cure is time and experience.

The bus from Benares to Bombay was a journey of 1,500 kilometres through a series of towns and cities, many of which I now know hold religious and cultural significance. The bus did not stop long anywhere, but the journey still took two days. On the first night, Moira and I stayed

over in a crowded rest stop, almost an open garage with small cots, then boarded the bus again the next day.

We arrived in Bombay lacking any real knowledge of the city. We had heard from other travellers, however, that the Red Shield House on Mere-weather Road, near the Gateway to India monument, was a good place to stay. It was known as an international hostel and had been run as such by the Salvation Army since the early 1930s. It had a reputation among travellers for good Western food and good clean beds and was considered safe from thefts—all of which was true at the time, though it seems nowadays to have also garnered a reputation for bed bugs. Moira and I checked into the three-storey building but left after two days because, despite all its advantages, the hostel had one significant problem: the floors were segregated and males and females were not allowed to sleep in the same room, unless married. We moved to a nearby hotel.

I was feeling better at this time. I had finished the last of my penicillin prescription, and on one of my first days in Bombay went to a nearby health clinic for a stool test. The antibiotics had done their work: on December 1, a stool examination conducted by the Breach Candy Hospital came back negative. I was home free. Or so I thought.

Today, Mumbai is the financial and commercial capital of India. In 1976, it was still called Bombay—the name officially changed only in 1995—and was not yet the financial giant it is now. The history of the city was overshadowed by its position as an important outpost of the British East India Company. My sense of Bombay at the time was of a city “on the make,” a habitat of both legitimate and not-so-legitimate entrepreneurial wannabees. The hustle and bustle of cars and rickshaws, policed by khaki-clad soldiers carrying lathi sticks, did not offer much hint of its eventual prosperity.

Like any large city—especially large port cities—Bombay had its seedy side. The black market thrived, as did the drug trade. Margot Miller remembered well its opium dens: “We were going in and what looked like very strong beautiful women were shaking our hands, ‘Come in, come in,’ and then we realized that they were all in drag. They were eunuchs.”¹

1. Miller is presumably referring to *hijras*, a term often translated as “eunuch.” In the past, eunuchs were employed in royal courts, often serving as guards to harems. Today,

But Bombay also had beautiful and spacious parks, where people picnicked on colourful cloths spread out on the ground, children ran around laughing and shouting, and pickup games of cricket were played. Its architecture, then as now, was also beautiful—a mix of neoclassical, Victorian, and Art Deco.



Moira and I did not stay long in Bombay: we boarded a ferry bound for Goa on the morning of December 5. Three days earlier, I had written a letter home. Moira took it from my hand and cheekily wrote on the bottom, “Have just spent a few days with Trevor and we’re on our way Goa shortly, shall take care of him. Take care, Moira (Australia).”

The sea voyage was, by 1976, well known to Western travellers. We rode deck class, squeezed in with mixed-blood Portuguese returning home and what I described as “extraneous foreigners of the world.” The seats were not designed for comfort—“hard benches covering life rafts made in Yugoslavia.”

There was an American girl on the boat who said that she had been on the same boat once before and had witnessed a different captain allow a passenger to drown through sheer negligence. She had been briefly arrested by the captain, she claimed, when she denounced his actions, but the passengers circulated a petition and succeeded in having him replaced by someone else. I did not see our captain, but his loudspeaker announcements were enunciated in a perfect Oxford accent—a colonial holdover of status one encountered throughout the former British Empire.

There was also a well-spoken Catholic woman on the ferry. She had been to several countries, but now she was returning to Goa. Fifteen years earlier, Goa had still been a colony of Portugal. Internal opposition to the Portuguese administration had been building for several decades, with support from India, until finally, in December 1961, the Indian government sent in its army and expelled the Portuguese within the space of two

however, relatively few *hijras* are castrated males. In India, they are recognized as a third sex.

days. The woman remained bitter about the takeover. She hated Indian bureaucracy. "It was better under the Portuguese," she said.

The ship and the day moved on. We tossed in the waves, but gently, like a cradle in the breeze. Another passenger, an American of Yemenite origin, waxed poetic: "Soon, brother sun will sink and then, wonder of miracles, sister moon will rise." I pointed out the moon had in fact been already visible on the horizon for several hours. He argued that this was impossible. The poetic moment was broken, though it did not stop me from waxing poetic about the sunset myself:

The sunset was exquisite, beginning with gold and apricot orange, then after the sun was gone, making its spectacular encore, first with soft pinks and turquoise blues, then tinges of green, and the pink giving way to arterial reds forging the bottom rims of greying clouds. We stand on the middle deck for twenty minutes, my arm wrapped around Moira's shoulder, our breathing measured to that of the changing sky.

Moira and I made sandwiches and drank tea. Later, we made beds on the aft deck and retired for the night, which we spent in "a broken but harmonious sleep that took us to the sun's rising."

Moira

And once the storm is over you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, in fact, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm you won't be the same person who walked in.

—Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*

Moira and I disembarked late the next morning at the port of Mormugao, near the coastal city of Vasco da Gama, on the southern side of a broad estuary. Knowing nothing about the town, we immediately set off for the tourist bureau but were quickly approached by a Goan man of about fifty. He asked many questions and answered a few we asked, as well as a good many we hadn't asked. Following this Q&A, he launched into his own account of 1961, which I wrote down:

One day, I was returning from Karachi, and when I got here, Goa was “liberated.” That’s what they called it. It was invaded. The Portuguese did not call it a colony; they called it a province, but the Indians took it. They arrested me for a month because I had a Portuguese passport. They flew the Portuguese officials home or put them on a ship.

He gave us his name and address. He said I should write him a postcard and come stay with him sometime.

The Indian state's takeover clearly remained front of mind for many Goans. Whether by coincidence or not, that event coincided with enormous cultural changes that occurred soon after.

Thirty kilometres north of Vasco da Gama, but roughly forty-five minutes by bus, is Goa's capital city of Panaji, located on the far side of the estuary in the district of North Goa. To the north of Panaji is the subdistrict of Bardez, which features three golden sand beaches separated by rock outcroppings—Anjuna, Vagator, and Calangute. Attracted by these beaches and the quiet serenity of the people and their culture, some twenty to thirty Western travellers arrived in Goa in the mid-1960s.¹ One of the first arrivals was Yertward Mazamanian.

Born in the United States in 1915 to Armenian parents, “Eight-Finger Eddie”—as he became known, having been born with only three fingers on his right hand—Mazamanian moved to Goa in 1966. In time, he earned the title of “king of the hippies,” though he declined to call himself that, preferring to see himself as a hipster, “a generation even before the beatniks.” Eight-Finger Eddie spent the rest of his life on the Indian subcontinent, dividing his days until his death in 2000 between Kathmandu during monsoon season and Goa the rest of the year. He started a flea market in Anjuna and was a welcoming figure to Western travellers—hippies and freaks—over the decades that followed.²

One year before Moira and I landed, a beautiful and wealthy young American woman arrived in Goa: Cleo Odzer, who would soon become a major international trafficker of cocaine and heroin. In her autobiography, she summarizes Goa's transformation between the 1960s and the 1970s: “As the early residents of Goa involved themselves in the drug trade, the lucrative business transformed the sixties hippies into the rich freaks of the seventies. Soon the loose cash led to the widespread use of cocaine,

1. David Tomory, *A Season in Heaven: True Tales from the Road to Kathmandu*, 143.

2. Andrew Pereira, “The Hippie Who Got Goa the Globe,” *The Times of India*, November 22, 2015, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/goa/The-hippie-who-got-Goa-the-globe/articleshow/49875431.cms>.

which led to cocaine nerves and then to the discovery of the soothing smack effect.”³

Irrespective of the impact of any crackdown on drugs elsewhere—and this was minimal—the effect was nil in the two locales of Kathmandu and Goa, where Odzer set up her business. Don Skelton said of Goa, “It was beautiful and cheap, the drugs also cheap and easy. You could live there for nothing. Some wealthy European parents sent their kids cheques in the mail every month.”

Like Cleo Odzer, Patrick Welland arrived by ferry the year before Moira and I did. He recalls the place as still inhabited by “empty golden sands peopled by the odd papaya seller and leftover hippies from the 60s” but notes that, even then, “Goa’s secret was out.” It had become a party place where drugs of all sorts flowed—especially on the beaches. According to Bernie Howgate, the “Children of God monopolized the fallen in Calangute,” whereas “in Vagator, Timothy Leary, the undisputed king of Acid, reigned supreme.”⁴

Full Moon parties began in the mid-1970s. Arthur remembered that parties held on Anjuna Beach attracted hundreds of Western youths, often high on drugs, and the entertainment was provided by rock bands. People would carry sound systems by hand to the beaches and erect stages where bands would play all-night concerts. The parties were in their infancy in 1976 when I arrived but became legendary over the next few years for the ubiquitous use of alcohol and drugs and public displays of sex.



Moira and I took a bus to Panaji and then on to Anjuna Beach, where we immediately set about finding accommodation. In the early 1970s, travellers could rent entire houses in Goa for 100 rupees a month, little more than ten dollars.⁵ This was the cost of Patrick Welland’s beachside one-room cottage in 1975, though there were downsides:

3. Cleo Odzer, *Goa Freaks: My Hippie Years in Goa*, 76.

4. Bernie Howgate, *Tales of a Travelling Man*, 188.

5. Tomory, *A Season in Heaven*, 145.

At night the walls and canopy above our bed were vibrant with roaches. Lavatory facilities comprised a concrete plinth under palm leaves with a chute at the bottom of which a grateful pig waited for its noisome treat. We had a roast, suckling pig for Christmas. I don't remember feeling very happy about that.

Moira and I purchased a thatched hut on Anjuna Beach from local "builders." It, too, cost 100 rupees. If lucky, such huts lasted two months before wind, heat, and insects dismantled them, at which point you simply bought a new home.

Our hut was only a hundred yards from the water, one of five together at the farthest end of the beach. It was about 14 feet by 16 feet and, like all the others, was made of supporting palm trunks and cross pieces and thatched with palm leaves. It had a sand floor, typically strewn with towels, shirts, socks, and underwear, along with the occasional orange peel.

A young traveller had set up his tent to the left of our hut, looking out on the Arabian sea. Every morning, he sat cross-legged and silent in meditation. To our right, the beach stretched into the distance, with a gradually diminishing number of huts as you looked farther out. Behind our hut, roughly fifty metres from the water, was a jungle of palm and mango trees, and a tangle of flowering and edible plants, some of them medicinal—if you knew what you were eating. The thick underbrush was also habitat for cobras that sometimes moved into homes. I watched one slither away from me one day while walking into town for lunch. I was told of a foreigner who had recently been bitten by a cobra and was now in hospital receiving a series of anti-venom injections.⁶

Naturally, we spent much of our time on the beach:

6. There were several myths about cobra venom: that it was not poisonous unless mixed with adrenalin; that some sadhus would meditate for several days, draining the adrenalin from their bodies, and then inject cobra venom; that cobra venom was a hallucinogen that could be smoked; that there lived in Goa a freak who got his kicks only by letting cobras bite him and then taking the antidote. I was also informed that cobras could sense danger and would move away if you wore shoes, but not if you walked in bare feet. If there was truth in any of these tales, however, I was unable to confirm it.

The water is warm, if a bit salty; it compels one to stay. The waves are high at times but break too close to shore to body surf. Water snakes sometimes wash up on the shore. I pick them up by the tail and throw them back into the surf.

We sit naked on the beach while Goans pass with their fishnets, or men specializing in cleaning ears come by. They all have certificates issued by some pharmacy in Margao attesting to the fact they are experienced ear cleaners and can do it without pain.

The beach features several places to eat. For breakfast, Angels has good tea, so-so porridge, and a charming and efficient waitress. Unfortunately, she is replaced in the afternoons by two doped-up young men and the service drops off. They play Pink Floyd or Wings most of the time.

We usually eat supper at Vinny's. The food is good and cheap. It has comfortable bamboo chairs and soft lighting, and a good range of taped music. The only detriment are the numerous dogs that beg, bark, fight, and fuck—sometimes under your feet—while you eat.

An alternative is Josepha's. Its culinary claim is good, but expensive, omelettes, served up to the Rolling Stones.

A tea shop at the crossroads sells masala dosa for 60 paise, seera—a kind of semolina—for 50 paise, and an omelette for 125 paise. The place is quiet.

Every day, a woman comes to our hut to sell bananas, mandarins, and papayas. She usually gives us something extra for free if we buy three rupees' worth. Another guy sometimes comes down the beach with coconut bread.

Life along the beach was pleasantly languorous: a sense of drift occupied many of our days. I still remember walking along the shore, stepping over narrow streams full of small fish stranded by the receding tides, tiny crabs scurrying beneath my feet. In the background, yellow-green palms hung their heads, drunk with coconuts. On the horizon, the golden disk of

the setting sun cast a warm glow over the water. Idyllic stuff, the life of the lotus-eater. I was surrounded by hard-working Goans, women selling produce, men fishing, while I enjoyed the life of the indolent elite.



For many itinerant Westerners, life in Goa centred around the cafés and restaurants, where travellers congregated. Some had journeyed overland and were staying only a short time; others—those more heavily into drugs—intended to stay longer. A few, like a former Los Angeles advertising agent who now fancied himself a writer, had flown to India for the sole purpose of partying. It was an eclectic assembly. Our evenings were usually spent at Vinny's in the company of American, Australian, British, Dutch, German, and Israeli expats, the majority of them men. Beer, food, and the passing of joints, to the music of Carlos Santana and others, filled the space between conversations we thought were deep, or at least clever.

In the morning, the sun's unfiltered rays usually woke us early. If one chose, there was much to do in Goa. There were motorcycles and bicycles for rent, and one could spend many days visiting old churches, historic sites, and markets. Music and exotic smells were everywhere in abundance.

One day, we travelled to the city of Margao (now Madgaon), in South Goa. As we wandered around, a diminutive woman in a red dress told some children nearby that they were being silly for calling us hippies. She then told us that she and her family had come to Goa five years ago—five children, three of them now living in London and another in Delhi, and her retired husband. We continued our walk and later had something to eat at a restaurant. The waiter handed us the bill. "Four rupees," he said. "Four rupees is nothing to you." Stung by his remark, I retorted, "It is four rupees more than nothing," and paid him. We then visited the tourist information office, just as it was closing. Clearly annoyed by our arrival, a young woman in a polka dot dress thrust some pamphlets at us. I filled out the guest book, and we left.

It took me some time to realize that the undercurrent of hostility I detected in some of interactions I had in Margao and elsewhere in Goa had little, if anything, to do directly with me and should not be taken

personally. Rather, the attitude I encountered was evidence of an underlying tension between local residents and people from the West, especially young people. Most of us were harmless enough, but we tended to be self-indulgent and rather shallow. Although some were stoned a lot of the time, others were only occasional users and then only of hash or marijuana. But the clash in values was very real. Many of us made a conscious effort to be respectful of cultural differences, but we were often unconscious of the ways in which our privileged status revealed itself.⁷

Additionally, most Goans were devoutly Catholic and no doubt offended by our nakedness—and on occasion open sex—on the beaches. It conflicted sharply with their sense of moral decorum, even as it also sent confused messages to impressionable young Indian men. Not all Western travellers to India indulged—or at least overindulged—in sex and drugs, but Goa was an oasis of hedonism. Over time, the attitude toward Westerners became more negative.⁸

In the face of any breach of cultural mores, most local people remained polite and friendly. But the increased use of drugs was a different matter. By the time I arrived in 1976, Goa's drug scene had already morphed from hash and marijuana to opium and heroin. The harmless days of a few spaced-out hippies had given way to larger numbers, some of whom now flew to India to take in Goa's party scene and amped up the use and variety of drugs. My notes listed the cost of various drugs that could be purchased in Goa: "Opium = 20 rupees per tola; hashish = 40 rupees per tola; cocaine = US\$70 per gram; acid = 20–25 rupees per tab or microdot."⁹

7. Cleo Odzer's account in *Goa Freaks* of her life as a drug queen in Goa is an extreme example of arrogance and privilege. Goan peoples do not appear in her book as anything other than wallpaper to her life of indulgence.

8. Tomory, *A Season in Heaven*, 156. In contrast, Sharif Gemie and Brian Ireland say most travellers on the Hippie Trail "found the weeks or months they spent on the road surprisingly austere and sexless." *The Hippie Trail: A History*, 70. See also Grant John Szuveges, "The Overland Hippie Trail to India and Nepal in the 1960s and 1970s," 44. But Goa was different from the overland Hippie Trail experience; it was, and is, an intensely sensual place, warm and lush.

9. A tola (also written as tolah or tole) is equivalent to roughly 11.7 grams.

An individual told me of a particular house on a hill in Vasco de Gama where drugs were sold. It seemed to me a place of mystery, vaguely Kafkaesque:

I had visions of exotic wealth, of rooms lined with mottled carpets and opium smoke, and hookahs on the floor sat 'round by intense men sitting on cushions. A single, dark house with many pathways leading to it, none more correct than any other, with tangled, stripped trees arching over the sky. Lights appear at windows and are gone. The owner has a paisley housecoat, a bald head, and a Fu Manchu moustache. He is fat and smokes thick cigars and has a gold ring on his left forefinger. He forces the doorway to make room for him as he begs you to enter. His arm motions, and he follows you in behind and shuts the door. You see the doorknocker, and the door locks, while J. Arthur Rank pounds his gong.

The reality is more mundane, as one foreigner tells me:

“It’s a one-room house, and this middle-aged guy with his wife and kid live there. She’s really beautiful. There are lots of houses around. You’d have to know which one to find it. No, it’s not a big deal. There are usually about ten other people around buying. He asks if you want to buy a kilo, but most just want a tola. I think he said he gets it from Rajasthan.”

Cleo Odzer bought a house in Goa shortly after arriving there in 1975, out of which she ran her drug operation. I have often wondered since whether it was Odzer’s house and whether she was the woman the man had referred to.

Inevitably, drug dependency led to other problems. Desperate, burned out, and strung out on heroin, some Westerners turned to theft for survival. John Wall, who travelled overland several times, commented

that “India was full of desperate travellers living on rice and dal . . . more interested in survival than in enjoying being in India.”

Often victims, sometimes victimizers, some Westerners who travelled to India during that time died of drug overdoses; a few were murdered, often by fellow travellers.¹⁰

Goa was the site of some of these tragedies.



After months of travelling, its ordinary strains and stresses magnified by the hardships of the route, I was glad to settle down for a while in a spectacularly beautiful setting with someone whose company and sexual closeness I enjoyed.

Moirra could be tempestuous and stubborn, which sometimes annoyed me, and was not averse to calling me out (correctly) when I was condescending or thoughtless (which also sometimes annoyed me). But she was also warm, generous, and funny. Our guards dropped as the weeks passed, and our relationship subtly changed. We became a couple, an “us,” rather than two solitary travellers.

Our occasional arguments were followed by intense lovemaking. We communed better in our sex than in our conversations. Makeup sex was not exactly the basis for a long-term relationship, but it worked for the time.

We both knew the relationship would not last. Yet here we were in it, and I was content to live in the moment. I had little real interest in the future; in fact, I didn’t much think about the future and what it might bring.

On Christmas Day, Moirra and I went to Angels, where we had fried fish and egg-fried rice, topped off with white wine. As we ate, my attention was drawn to an elderly priest standing nearby. He was evidently in ill health and seemed uneasy and bewildered. I invited him to join us. He sat down at our table, tucking his white frock in. He mumbled and at times it seemed as though he was addressing no one who was actually present.

10. Howgate, *Tales of a Travelling Man*, 188–92.

We carried on a conversation of sorts, but one so inordinately stiff that we couldn't relax either.

Suddenly, he asked, "Do you have any games with you?"

I had to confess we didn't. He was obviously disappointed. "Do you like playing games?" I continued.

"No, no," he replied.

The conversation changed to what Goans thought of foreigners. Not much, it turned out. Then he reverted to his main question, which concerned a game of some sort. At last we realized that he wanted to know about backgammon—once anathema to the Church as a temptation to gambling. Moira wrote its name down in his little book so that he could try to find a set somewhere.

That evening, we had supper at Vinny's and then went back to our hut, where we made love, sang carols, and exchanged gifts. She gave me sandals; I gave her a sari. Afterwards, we went for a walk to the sounds of Christmas music in the distance.



Theft was a constant problem on the beach. Moira and I began burying our passports and travellers' cheques deep under the sand in our hut but left other less valuable items available. A few nights earlier, I had written: "We were robbed last night of eight bananas, two coconut breads, one bag of dates, a half bag of sweets, one bar of soap, one deodorant, and one knife. The bastard slipped between the hut's locked door and the post."

A few nights later, the thieves returned. My account details my stupid response to this second theft. My behaviour was shameful then, and I still look back at it with regret:

After supper one Sunday, going on midnight, Moira and I returned to our shack and found a travel book scrambled on the ground. "Wild dogs," I thought, as I had attributed the earlier theft.

"Thieves," said Moira, quite correctly as it turned out. Our packs plus all the clothing hung and strung from the

width and breadth of our rafters was gone, leaving only our sleeping bags (thank God!), the clothes on our backs, and whatever had been left on a small table. I had buried my notes two days earlier and now was quite relieved that they were safe, but several rolls of exposed film had been taken, now lost.

After a cursory inspection, noting that our passports were safe, we set off about the immediate environs. I held a candle in one hand, shielding it from the slight breeze with my other, while Moira wielded a stick that was left lying about the hut. Of course, it was fruitless. We were heartily pissed off but also a bit amused, I think. Then, as we returned, we saw a silhouetted figure approaching from the beach. I thought it was Derek or John, our neighbours, and Moira, being in a playful mood, rushed out flailing the stick about her head and uttering pagan hysterics. Immediately, however, the figure shrieked and backed far away, and Moira laughing said, "Oh, it's an Indian!"

It occurred to me in that moment that the person Moira had frightened away could be the thief, so I handed her our passports and set out after him. It was not overly dark, and I could see the man ahead of me, but in watching him, I tripped over an object. "Stop that man!" I yelled as I stumbled. I recovered and quickly gained ground again, but my cries woke our neighbours. When I did catch him, I could sense he was terrified. He was down on his knees, with his hands clasped together above his head, pleading, "Please mister, please." As I shook him, the whites of his eyes rolled up at the moon, and his mouth hung slack. With a sense of revulsion, I realized I was enjoying the sense of fear I had instilled in him. I felt stupid and ashamed.

At that point, another Indian man arrived. In embarrassment at my actions, I stabbed both men in the chest with my finger and walked off to find Moira. She was not at the hut, and I learned she had gone back to Vinny's for tea with our neighbours, John and Derek.

It was not my finest hour. I might have blamed my bad behaviour on illness but will not. The incident still causes me deep regret when I think about it. But learning unpleasant things about oneself is a part of growing up.

The following morning, Moira and I found some of our missing belongings strewn about a nearby clearing. We reported the incident, but the policemen barely pretended that they would do something about our loss as they made us fill in the forms in triplicate.



January came and along with it a return of my amoebic dysentery. I will spare the details but to say that it is the great leveller of class and status. It renders one a plaything in the epidemiological universe. To her immense credit, Moira didn't make fun of my predicament and did not really comment at all. She just stayed by me as I suffered through the repeated bouts.

We spent our last weekend together at Anjuna and Vagator beaches, as well as taking a biking tour through Old Goa. At some point, we stopped to walk along a river road. A dead cow was floating in the water, fat and bloated, its tits purple. Several days dead, I thought. Further on, a white rat had met the same fate. Sailing ships in the harbour were bent to the breeze. A small, red cargo carrier steamed up the other shore. Moira and I walked on the sea wall a way, our hands joined in mid-air, outstretched.

We stopped at a village four kilometres upriver and had a chai and Limca, a lime-flavoured soft drink ubiquitous in India. The proprietor smiled and asked where we were from. The other patrons stared. It was uncomfortable, as situations of that sort always seem to be in these countries, not unfriendly, just hopeless. By that time, Moira and I both sensed that our relationship was floating out to sea, and there was little we could do to stop it, even if we wanted to. In Old Goa, we visited Se Cathedral, the cathedral of the Archdiocese of Goa and Daman as well as the seat of the Patriarch of the East Indies, and the Basilica of Bom Jesus. St. Francis Xavier is buried there in a silver casket entombed in a marble mausoleum built in the Florentine style. At last, we returned to Panaji, to the Bhonshe

Bar where we had been staying, weak with fatigue. My notes reflect that fatigue, but also a sense of sadness as our relationship entered its final days:

There, we had an early supper and went to our hotel. We wanted a late chai, but everything had closed, so after reading a while, we pushed our single beds together and made ready for the night. Unfortunately, the walls of the room did not go all the way to the ceiling, for reasons of ventilation, I suppose, and we could hear the sounds of gentlemen—I reckoned three of them—coughing and, later, having sex in the next room.

The next day saw us up at 8:00. After a light breakfast, we boarded buses first to Mapusa and then on to Anjuna. We spent the early afternoon at the flea market with friends of Moira. There was an assortment of freaks and travellers selling everything from rings, bracelets, and clothes from all over, to dope and food, banana fritters and hash brownies. There were also middle-class Indians looking to buy goods, though not dope. Likewise, neither Moira nor I were seriously into dope, and we couldn't afford any of the goods no matter how elegant they were.

We hiked over a nearby bluff, opposite a café where we'd earlier had rice, and moved down onto the broad beach, now resplendent in the mid-afternoon with several people swimming in the water and others strolling on the beach. Further up the sands, a crescent of bush awaited behind which, doffing our clothes, we entered the water for a brief swim and made love against a rock while the water splashed around us. We then took a bus back to Anjuna Beach.

It was January 19. Our last night together, we had a quiet meal in the Indian restaurant—bhaji and chapati—followed by a beer at Vinny's. Back at the hut, we started a fire and burned our accumulated garbage.

“There’s something quiet and serene about a fire,” I said. “It calls the rest of the world to ‘stop’ and draws all the energies to itself before releasing them again.”

“You’re a romantic,” she said, just as she had the day before on a beach as we gathered stones.

“Do you want to make love by the fire?” I asked.

“No, let’s go inside.” And so we did, one last time before morning came.

The bus came too quickly, but then what more was there to say? Our farewell words were short, our last kiss a mere brush on the lips. Moira lofted her backpack, climbed on the bus, and was gone.



Moira was gone and I immediately missed her. I wished at that moment I could hold her again in my arms, but part of me was also glad she was gone because, although I liked her, I did not love her. Such are the contradictory emotions of youth.

I never saw Moira again, though a couple of years after I had returned to Canada, I received a postcard from somewhere in India where she was again travelling. I foolishly ended my correspondence with her at that time, and even now regret it, not because we had any future together but because she had been part of my vanishing past. It was my way of dealing with relationships at the time: not an honourable trait, but an accurate reflection of who I was then.

The End of the Trail

Most travel disasters turn into something else: a story of survival, a story of bravery, of heroism, sometimes villainy. You just don't know when it starts where it's going to go because they are unexpected events.

—Mitchell Zuckoff, quoted by Lynn Neary

Although I did not recognize the signs at the time, my own departure was imminent. On January 22, I wrote:

Five hours after Moira got on the bus, all I had left of her was a hazy passport photo. I moved out of our tattered hut; caterpillars were busily ravaging its walls and black rot was spreading over the sand floor.

My guts were aflame with dysentery that had begun again the day before, a mix of blood, phlegm, and shit. I hurried to the familiar underbrush behind our now deserted hut.

I would need a new place to sleep. I found one down the road and into the trees, thirty yards from Ganesh's chai shop.

"The bread is hard today," says Ganesh.

“How much is it?”

“Twenty paise.”

Down the road, three children were walking hand in hand and singing something about Mahatma Gandhi to the tune of “John Brown’s Body.” I joined in. They smiled.

In the evening, I sat at a pinewood table in a café listening to the crickets and the shuffling of a sleeping bag on the porch. There were two lit candles on the table, one stuck in a bottle of Real Soda, the other in a bottle of Crunet. A red-tipped incense candle was stuck in a crack in the table, surrounded by litter: orange peels, coconut shells, three partially used bottles of honey, hair conditioner, soap, matches, palm leaves, a purse, a spoon, a pair of scissors, a copy of Time magazine, and books ranging from Plato and the Quran to the poetry of Hafiz and Whitman. Above the table was a calendar of the past year presented by Shah Brothers Battery Works in Margao. On the walls were several portraits of Jesus, all of them suffering.

I remained in Goa until January 25, when I took a train north to Bombay. There, I booked into the Rex Hotel. It was early, so I went for breakfast at the Cornucopia Bar Restaurant—two boiled eggs, bread, and tea—before walking up Patil Marg and Maharshi Karve Road to Churchgate Station, past a group of avid cricketers.

The next day, India’s Republic Day, I took a train to New Delhi. I had in my possession a flight ticket to Zambia, but the dysentery had returned with vengeance, not that it had ever left. Beginning in November, my notes tell of recurring illness, punctuated with brief improvements, following which I would only become sick again. When I arrived in New Delhi, I was desperately ill. I weighed perhaps 125 pounds—had lost roughly 30 pounds since the fall.

Dealing with a severe illness in India meant going to a large, bureaucratic hospital or, alternatively, a small clinic; making an appointment

(not always on the same day) with an unknown doctor; and finding a reputable pharmacist if medicines were required—all of this taking place in circumstances where communication was difficult and I was struggling to navigate systems of organization that seemed to an outsider arcane, while also feeling both physically unwell and emotionally distraught.

To make things worse, New Delhi was experiencing a rare cold spell. The city's streets and rooftops were blanketed with snow and sleet. My cryptic notes tell of my last days in that city:

1st day. I watched a parade for a half hour, then returned to a hotel where I shared a room with three other people: a girl, a practicing Buddhist, who has been fourteen months in India, stares at the wall and mumbles for hours at night; another girl, pretty, is one the Children of God; the third is a guy translating Tibetan Buddhist books. My first night is spent listening to a dissertation on Tibetan language. Discover wall is no wall, but pillars draped with a thatched blanket. Still, pretty warm.

2nd day, stay at same place. Go to doc. "Hello, I've come that you can make me well again." Pills.

3rd day, I move to Mrs. Colaco's Guesthouse on Janpath Lane. The hotel's windows had only shutters, through which the winter winds blow at night. I later write a short description of her ("fat, talkative") and one of her staff.

A Tibetan worker in a long dark cord overcoat and earmuffs rushes in and out of rooms at all hours counting heads and asking if we've paid. One day a blanket is missing, and he comes in and lifts mine. "One?" he asks. "Whatdya doin'? Get outta' here, you jerk," I call out. He reminds me of Ingmar Bergman's dark, menacing figure of Death in *The Seventh Seal*.

4th day, Saturday. Buy cord jacket, 60 rupees. Breakfast at Old Bazaar, porridge 1 rupee—the Kashmir

Emporium on Janpath Lane; two ragged beggar kids, dirty faces. Every time you buy something, they're there to collect the change. Potato sellers work under the boardwalk of the Regal Building. In my room at Mrs. Colaco's is B, from New Zealand, with near bronchitis, and an Aussie with a bad cough. The pills are giving me serious gas pains. First X-ray. "How is it?" I ask. "Normal," the nurse lies.

5th day. Walk around Emporium. Boring, read, eat lots, hours in dirty restaurants, but good coffee. Buy good Western leather boots, 90 rupees, perfect for walking in Africa.

6th day. The father of an Israeli roommate dies; the Israeli arranges a flight home. No one in the room knows what to say, so we avoid him. To our relief, he leaves. I am growing more ill. We all joke that we have a sick room, decide to ask newcomers what they have as part of their entry. Doctor says he wants to see my X-ray.

7th day. The doctor seems concerned. I'm always first in, bad sign. The doctor says the X-ray is cloudy in a very bad spot. He says, it's either pneumonia or TB, but he thinks TB. I am numb.

8th day. Aussie moves to Ringo's Guest House. Doctor wants me to take second X-ray. He is 95% sure already. I try to give a sputum sample but my throat hasn't any left, only a dry rash.

10th day, Friday.¹ X-ray. Area has enlarged. "Confirmed," says the doctor. "Thank you, you're a good doctor," I tell him. If money arrives, I can fly out early next week. If not, he can admit me to a hospital.

11th day, I briefly check into the hospital, but after arriving there, check myself out again as the costs would have soon left me penniless.

1. Apparently, nothing of note happened on the 9th day.

12th day, I meet a grey bearded palm reader. He tells me I will not die of illness, that I will live long, but not be wealthy, and that women like me.

In between these visits to the doctors and clinics, I contacted my parents, who arranged to fly me home to Edmonton, to recuperate. I would not be heading to Zambia, as I had planned.

My final night in New Delhi, hoping to distract myself from how sick I was but also aware that I might never have the opportunity again, I attended a performance of Indian dance in a theatre near Connaught Square, then returned to my cold hotel room. My chest hurt with every breath. I could not stop from shivering violently. I did not trust my body to breathe automatically, so instead lay awake throughout the night, consciously taking in each shallow breath, even as doing so caused severe pain in my right lung. My chest felt as though it would split in two. The next day, Tuesday, February 8, 1977, I flew home with my X-rays—kindly given me by the Indian hospital—in hand.

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You Can Never Go Home Again

Traveling—it gives you a home in a thousand strange places, then leaves you a stranger in your own land.

—Ibn Battuta, quoted in James Rumford, *Traveling Man*

In the end, the dark spot on my lung proved to be a severe case of pneumonia, not tuberculosis, as I had feared. I gradually recovered physically. With antibiotics, the X-ray spots disappeared. I ate and slept well and soon regained weight. The privileges that had allowed me to travel overland to India had now also rescued me from wasting illness, and perhaps death, in a foreign country.

Psychologically and emotionally, however, I was at loose ends. The sudden shock of being in India one moment, the next being in the far too familiar—but also strange—confines of Canada left me dazed and fraught. I felt as though my body had failed me, or I it. My relationship with the young Swiss woman ended. At moments, I pondered catching a flight back to India, or perhaps to Zambia as I had originally planned, as somehow those places seemed more real, more authentic, than where I was. But I did not, and a lack of money was only one reason. I was caught between two emotional worlds, at sea and untethered, asking, “Where is home?” Whatever the circumstances of our return, many of us likely asked that question.



Given that many of us started out with little money and strung it out as long as possible, it is no surprise we often came home relatively penniless and, as in my case, in less than perfect health. Fergus F. recalled being “freezing and shivering, wearing Indian sandals and Indian clothes” when he arrived at a railway station in London in 1969, after travelling to India. “My brother met me and immediately took me to his house where he gave me some warm clothes.”

I doubt I’m the only traveller whose first appointment upon returning home was to see a doctor. More difficult than the physical adjustment, however, was the emotional and psychological adjustment. Far from comforting, home was stressful. The magnitude of the travel experience—the sheer cultural strangeness—could make the return difficult, especially if it was abrupt or followed a long period away from home.

Victor Turner describes a liminal, “sacred space and time . . . beyond and outside the time which measures secular processes and routines.”¹ This captures the sense I had after I returned. I found conversing with anyone who had not made the journey difficult. There was an existential gap, a kind of “no man’s land” of experience separating us, one that I can only imagine soldiers returning from a warfront or medics returning from a terrible disaster must feel. This book is in part an attempt to articulate an experience that, in the past, I have only spoken of in dribs and drabs, and not even fully to myself.

Travelling has its own rhythm, so that returning to stable routines, including relationships, takes on a strangeness of its own. I had always been restless; travelling intensified a sense that I was always in the wrong place, that I should be somewhere else. Some individuals to whom I spoke talked about living in a state of permanent unease, of never again feeling quite at home anywhere. Said Karen Rogers, “After nine and a half years living in Europe, and travelling to Afghanistan, I was never again able to fully integrate into American life. Even today, I feel that I don’t belong in the US and still have dreams of leaving.”

1. Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, 56–57.

Bruce Finch echoed the difficulty of transitioning from the emotional “high” of travelling to the mundane life back home: “I really missed the constant adrenalin of travelling, the edge you always felt. It took me a time to settle down to the routine of nine to five.” David Tomory similarly quotes an individual who remarked, “How could you go back to being a clerk when you’d had a real life? Lots of people could never go back to that.”²

Not being tied to anyone or anything was liberating. Ann Woodruff said that travelling to India gave her “the courage to pack up and go,” to leave her circle of safety. A life of travel means neither possessing nor being possessed. It requires being adaptable and innovative. Above all, it means learning how to do without. “Travel made me realize I could survive anywhere,” said John Wall. “I liked nothing better than arriving in a strange place about which I knew nothing and finding out how it worked.”

My recovery from living between two realities began when I embarked on a new adventure—going to university—but full recovery took several years. In the process, I lost touch with the experience and with several people—those to whom this book is dedicated—who, only gradually, I came to realize I would not meet again.



As David Lane observed, the experience of travelling in your late teens or early twenties stays with you for life: “You always think that some day when the kids are grown up, I’m going to put on that backpack again and go back on the road.” Years after I travelled to India, my dust-covered backpack hung in the garage, grudgingly discarded only during a move to another house. When I began travelling overseas again in 2008, my luggage was once more a backpack.

For some, their first journey to India was not their last. Fergus B. made the overland journey twice, in 1970–71 and 1972–73, as did Alan Dodds in the years 1973–74 and 1975–76. John Wall and Geoffrey Secombe both travelled to India three times, the former in 1964, 1968, and

2. David Tomory, *A Season in Heaven: True Tales from the Road to Kathmandu*, 240.

the early 1970s, the latter in 1969, 1971, and 1973, both staying for a longer period. As I noted earlier, I too made a second trip, in 1983, although I ended up returning home sooner than I'd originally planned. Though I was only dimly aware of it at the time, a new phase of my life was beginning to unfold.

The initial trip to India also stimulated the urge to travel to other countries. While David Hodges later revisited many of the same countries to which he journeyed in 1967, he subsequently went farther afield, driving cars overland from London to Beijing and Hong Kong and from London to Cape Town. After travelling to India in 1974–75, David Dudeck travelled to Kenya in 1976, where he taught with CUSO (Canadian University Overseas Services). In 1980, he taught English in Borneo before travelling the next year to Thailand, Nepal, and India once again.

For some, the impetus to travel had also an intergenerational effect. In later years, Ann Woodruff took her children to India, where her son eventually completed his final year of university at Dharamsala. Bruce Shore and Brenda Grant later travelled with their adult children to Bali, Mexico, and India, where their daughter subsequently spent five months on her own.



Despite the challenges of readjustment and an inclination to future travel, the vast majority of travellers did eventually settle into conventional lives. We finished our educations, began careers, and raised families.

Of the forty-eight individuals I interviewed or surveyed in writing this book, eight ended up working in financial services and five in managerial positions, while two more owned small businesses. Four became university professors, and another four took up other teaching careers. Four became doctors, one a nurse. Three more became psychologists, two were lawyers, and three pursued careers as journalists and writers. Two more became engineers, while another six went into trades such as carpentry and landscaping. Finally, two individuals worked in community services, one was employed as a secretary, and one became a real estate salesperson.

In some cases, these careers led to further opportunities for travel. David Atkings, for example, who travelled to India in 1970 with COMEX 4, went on to become a mining engineer, a career that eventually took him to the coal mines of Turkey, Pakistan, and India. Fergus B. explicitly noted that travel “had a direct and lasting impact on me professionally.” He became an international journalist, returning to India in 1981 and 1986. Travel, he wrote, “gave everything a human dimension,” opening him up to the “political, social, cultural, and religious realities” of the countries through which he passed.³

Beyond its impact on specific life trajectories, the journey also broadened the understanding of most of those who made it. Both David Lane and Frank Sullivan felt that they viewed events in the news very differently than they would have otherwise. To give an example, the American-led invasion of Afghanistan was at the top of my mind as I did my interviews. Several individuals I spoke to were critical of that action, viewing it as a product of hubris and ignorance that could only end in failure.

Many said the journey made them more tolerant of new experiences, more knowledgeable of other religions and cultures, and more aware of their own privileged circumstances. In the end, if for a time some of us seemed to lose our home, we came also to see the world as a larger place where we could live.

3. In addition to his work as a journalist, Bordewich has had a very successful career as an historian, specializing in the US Civil War and the struggle to end slavery. At the time he responded to my ads, he already had five books to his credit, with a sixth on its way (though he modestly didn’t say so).

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Afterword

The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.

—Lesley Hartley, *The Go-Between*

The overland route from Turkey to India became impassable in its entirety after 1979. Only a few Westerners—excluding thousands of foreign troops—have trekked even parts of it since, while still fewer have left accounts. Among the latter are Philip Glazebrook, who travelled through Turkey in the early 1980s as far east as the city of Kars, to the northwest of Mount Ararat (not far from what was then Soviet Armenia); Sheila Paine, who travelled in Iran and the Hindu Kush in 1990; Rory Stewart, who made a remarkable—or perhaps foolhardy—journey through the interior of Afghanistan just after 9/11; and Kate Harris, who, in 2018, travelled by bicycle the route along the Silk Road allegedly taken by Marco Polo.¹ In

1. See Philip Glazebrook, *Journey to Kars: A Modern Traveller in the Ottoman Lands*; Sheila Paine, *The Afghan Amulet: Travels from the Hindu Kush to Razgrad*; Rory Stewart, *The Places in Between*; and Kate Harris, *Lands of Lost Borders: Out of Bounds on the Silk Road*. Another thought-provoking account is that of the Canadian writer, poet, and journalist Mark Abley, in *Strange Bewildering Time: Istanbul to Kathmandu in the Last Year of the Hippie Trail*. Although Abley travelled in the spring of 1978, prior to the events of 1979, he bore witness to the growing unrest in Iran following the violent suppression in January 1978 of protests in the city of Qom and was also obliged to revise his itinerary after Afghanistan essentially closed its borders in the wake of the April military coup that toppled Daoud Khan and installed a communist

addition, a number of journalists have provided useful accounts of the Middle East and the multiple conflicts that have marked the region in recent decades.² Few, if any, however, have travelled in Afghanistan since the Taliban's return to power in 2021.

I have often wondered in the years since what the local people thought of us. Prior to the late 1960s, Western visitors to Istanbul, Tehran, or New Delhi had generally been older, wealthy males—businessmen or government officials—who rode in limousines and stayed in high-end hotels and therefore remained largely invisible to most of the population. David Tomory quotes a traveller who noted that, at the time, “a white man travelling third class on a train was considered seriously weird.”³

In contrast, the Western youth who arrived later in the decade stayed in low-rent districts and rubbed shoulders with local people. Simon Dring quotes a Nepalese businessman who noted that the arrival of the hippies broke down stereotypes of “the foreigner” as the wealthy English.⁴ The hippies, said the businessman, “helped us understand that the children of white men can cheat and lie too, and can be poor and ill, and that they are not all supermen.” More recently, travel writer Rolf Potts, in a review of Tomory's *A Season in Heaven*, argues that while hippies were in a sense pioneers, blazing a trail through areas that had seldom seen many visitors before, “they also tended to be petty, competitive, self-ghettoizing, and self-deluding.”⁵

Other less-than-flattering portraits include *Hare Rama, Hare Krishna*, a 1971 film made by the well-known actor and producer Dev Anand, which claimed to provide insight into the hippie lifestyle—replete,

government. Among other things, his reflections capture the sense of an era on the verge of dissolution.

2. See, for example, Tony Horwitz, *Baghdad Without a Map and Other Misadventures in Arabia*; Robert Fisk, *The Great War for Civilization: The Conquest of the Middle East*; and Jason Burke, “False Optimism May Cloud What We See on the Streets of Tehran.”

3. David Tomory, *A Season in Heaven: True Tales from the Road to Kathmandu*, 82.

4. Simon Dring, *On the Road Again: Thirty Years on the Traveller's Trail to India*, 188.

5. Rolf Potts, “Remembering the Hippie Trail,” *Vagabonding* (blog), August 7, 2015, <http://www.vagablogging.net/remembering-the-hippie-trail.html>.

as Richard Gregory notes, with the requisite scene of “chillum-smoking” would-be seekers of transcendence.⁶ Then, in 1974, F. D. Colaabavala—a retired Indian Army captain turned author of semi-hysterical sex-ridden accounts of seamy spaces—published *Hippie Dharma*, a sensation-alistic exposé of “a bizarre world infested with drugs, sex, nudity, and wanderlust.”⁷ I read the book while convalescing in New Delhi before flying home and was not impressed. “Unabashed horseshit!” I wrote in my notes.

Granted, Colaabavala’s account was unusually hyperbolic, but there were other contemporary negative depictions. In *Karma Cola* (1979)—her critique of what has come to be called spiritual tourism—Indian-American writer and filmmaker Gita Mehta introduces Hippie Trail travellers as “that long red line of loonies” who came “straggling in” from Afghanistan to South Asia. “What an entrance,” she exclaims. “Thousands and thousands of them, clashing cymbals, ringing bells, playing flutes, wearing bright colors and weird clothes, singing, dancing and speaking in tongues.”⁸

Hippies also do not come off well in Paul Theroux’s *The Great Railroad Bazaar* (1975), in which they variously appear as slovenly, inconsiderate, hedonistic, arrogant, and supremely self-centred. Encountering hippies travelling on a train in Turkey, he notes that some “simply lay on their seats lengthwise, hogging half the compartment, and humped under the astonished eyes of Turkish women.” Nor had hippies shed their middle-class values. During a stop in Herat, Theroux recalls watching “groups of hippies standing in the thorn bushes complaining about the exchange rate.”⁹

In Theroux’s view, hippies are hypocrites, although they are themselves unaware of their inauthenticity. Writing two years later, in *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977), V. S. Naipaul similarly dismissed the

6. Richard Gregory, *A Pukka History of the Hippie Trail: Overland to Asia in Search of Hashish*, 10.

7. Quoted in Dring, *On the Road Again*, 185.

8. Gita Mehta, *Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East*, 5.

9. Paul Theroux, *The Great Railway Bazaar*, 48, 72.

hippie embrace of Hinduism as a “sentimental wallow.” They may appear to have achieved an inner equanimity, he argues, but theirs is a fragile equilibrium: “they break just at that point where the Hindu begins: the knowledge of the abyss.”¹⁰ One suspects that he is largely correct—yet not all of us were spiritual seekers, pretending to a serenity that we did not possess, and many of us did grapple with issues of authenticity.

Such negative commentary notwithstanding, most of us who travelled the trail probably saw our presence as at least benign, and perhaps even beneficial. Some of us viewed ourselves as informal ambassadors, conscious of the image we would leave behind: we didn’t want to be viewed as the archetypal “ugly tourist.” A few travellers I spoke to even believed that our mere presence might have infused the youth of these countries with a sense of possibilities. As Fergus B. learned, however, even the best of intentions can go awry unless they are accompanied by a realistic understanding of the circumstances of others.

Fergus still remembers the incident that taught him this lesson. He was waiting in a train station when a lowly sweeper approached him and asked, “Can I go to America?” Somewhat flustered, but wishing to be helpful, Bordewich gave him some practical information, which the sweeper misinterpreted to mean that Bordewich was offering to take him there. At that point, another man in the waiting room intervened, explaining emphatically that sweepers can’t go anywhere and reproaching Bordewich for sowing false hope—for putting ideas into the heads of such people about things they cannot have. It was, wrote Bordewich, “a small, harsh lesson in the straitjacket of caste and poverty in a place where individual choice, at least for a man such as the sweeper, was non-existent.”

Certainly, there were occasions on which travellers touched the lives of local people, and vice versa. Looking back on it now, though, I don’t think we who made the overland journey to India left any singular, overarching legacy, whether good or bad. We slid across the surface, and our influence upon others was minor and evanescent. Collectively, we

10. V. S. Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, 20.

were a moment in human history, although a moment not yet wholly forgotten.



Writing of two childhoods, her mother's and her own, Carolyn Kay Steedman notes that "people use the past to tell the stories of their life."¹¹ We tell stories repeatedly throughout our lives in an effort to convince ourselves and others of who we were, are, or would like to be. Stories help us to give meaning to the arc of our lives.

My safarnameh—my journey—to India took place twice: the first time as described here, the second—and longer—in the years it took me to recount it. I am not the same person today who made the first journey, but retravelling the route in the course of writing this book enabled me to recognize and reconnect with that youth—his hopes, his failings, and all. If he saw me now, I hope he would not be too displeased with the person he fathered.

With time, I have grown more aware of how fortunate I was to have made the journey while it was still possible. The world has changed enormously since then, and so has the nature of travel. In the West, soaring costs and dwindling wages—another legacy, this one of neoliberalism—have conspired to put long-distance travel out of reach for many people. At the same time, the proliferation of war zones, the advent of rigidly right-wing, dictatorial regimes, and a rising tide of xenophobia have reduced the number of places that might otherwise be inviting to tourists, while to some extent increasing the risk of journeying on one's own—of seeking to meet others in their own spaces and on their own terms (and perhaps, in the process, coming face to face with oneself). The newly global world has grown smaller and less hospitable, the fences between peoples have grown higher, buttressed by fear, anger, violence, and inequality. If this book has awakened an interest in a region that was once more accessible to visitors from the West, and if it has captured

11. Carolyn Kay Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*, 8.

something of the sense of possibility that Western youth once felt, I will consider it a success.

I wonder sometimes of the person that I would be today had my journey ended differently. What if I had not become ill in India and had continued my travels? What if I had made it to Zambia where the woman I then loved waited? Would I still have become a university professor, or would I perhaps have become a journalist, or travel writer, or aid worker, or tour guide? Or something else entirely?

But let's start at a different beginning. What if I had not made the journey to India at all?

A Note on Interviews and Surveys

Formal work on research for this book began in the fall of 2008 when I applied to the University of Lethbridge's Human Subject Research Committee for approval to interview people who had made the journey. By this time, I had already identified through ads in the *Globe and Mail* fifteen individuals who had travelled between Istanbul and India before 1980. A second ad, run in same paper in the spring and summer of 2010, identified nine more individuals, to whom were added two other people I knew who had made the journey. In total, between August 2009 and July 2011, I conducted interviews with twenty-six individuals—among them, three couples—who had made the journey during the period in question. All these interviews were conducted using a standardized questionnaire that included open-ended questions that allowed for more in-depth follow-up questions. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed by a graduate student, Abraham Tinney. In reproducing their words, I have on occasion made minor adjustments, typically for the sake of clarity, but have in no way altered either the content or the spirit of what they said.

In November 2014, I ran a third ad in the *Globe and Mail*, which read simply, "Wanted: Photos, diaries, or notes from individuals who travelled over land between Istanbul and New Delhi before 1979." The premise of this ad was that, while recollections were useful—as obtained in the earlier interviews—memory can be faulty and that original documents might provide additional information. Within days, and even after the ad had been withdrawn, I received numerous phone calls from

interested parties, many of whom had notes, diaries, letters, photos, and other memorabilia from their Middle East travels that they willingly dedicated to the cause.

As I began writing in spring 2015, I realized that my sample lacked respondents from outside Canada and the United Kingdom. (Many of the interviews I conducted in 2009–11 were with transplanted British citizens now resident in Canada.) I subsequently ran a fourth series of ads, beginning in the fall of 2015, in Australia (the *Herald Sun*), Germany (*Die Zeit*), the United Kingdom (the *Telegraph*), and the United States (the *New York Times*). The following summer, I placed the same ad in the *Los Angeles Times*.

Twenty-two individuals wrote responses to the same questionnaires used in conducting the earlier recorded interviews. Out of the total of forty-eight individuals, all but five agreed to have their names used, although I later provided a sixth individual with a pseudonym. These six appear in the text as “Ernest,” “Jean,” “Karl,” “Max,” “Robert,” and “Arthur.”

The vast number of those I interviewed or who completed questionnaires had been born in Canada (19) or the United Kingdom (15), with others from the United States (6), Australia (2), West Germany (2), and one each from India, Ireland, Sweden, and Venezuela. At the time of their journey, the vast number also were citizens of Canada (21) or the United Kingdom (17), with others coming from the United States (6), West Germany (2), and one each from Australia and Ireland. The disproportionately Canadian contingent reflects my initial reliance on ads in the *Globe and Mail*.

Of the forty-eight individuals, thirty-five self-identified as male and thirteen as female. The average age at which they set off on their first journey to India was twenty-four and a half. Although most were baby boomers, thirteen were born prior to 1946. In keeping with the period, the mothers of most of those I interviewed were homemakers or held clerical jobs, while the fathers were the primary breadwinners, variously working in blue-collar, managerial, or professional jobs.

The names and dates of all those interviewed or who completed questionnaires are listed in the bibliography.

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The following individuals consented to be interviewed or completed questionnaires:

Recorded Interviews

Arthur [pseud.], March 2010
Bess Blackwell, August 2010
Jeff Brar, June 2010
David Dudeck, May 2011
Bill Fillmore, May 2011
Bruce Finch, August 2009
Trish Flindall, June 2010
Fergus Foley, June 2010
Nino Gualtieri, June 2010
Mark Godfrey, August 2009
Henry Hamilton, June 2010
Alastair Harper, March 2010
Jean [pseud.], May 2011
David Lane, May 2011
Roger Ledressay, May 2011
Terry Ledressay, May 2011
Carol McLean, June 2010
Margot Miller, July 2010
Kaarel Parn, August 2010
Lana Parn, August 2010

David Pearson, August 2010
Brenda Pulvermacher, March 2010
Bruce Shore, July 2011
Don Skelton, May 2011
Frank Sullivan, March 2010
Ann Woodruff, July 2011

Questionnaires

David Atkings, November 2015
Richard Blais, December 2015
Fergus Bordewich, December 2015
Ollie Cooper, November 2015
Steve Crawford, January 2016
Anna Danielle, January 2016
Christine Davies, December 2015
Alan Dodds, November 2015
Patrick Earle, December 2015
Ernest [pseud.], December 2015
Angela Ford, December 2015
Richard Garner, September 2016
David Hodges, November 2015
James Hooley, November 2015
Karl [pseud.], April 2016
Bill Kerr, November 2015
Max [pseud.], February 2016
Robert [pseud.], September 2016
Karen Rogers, August 2016
Geoffrey Seccombe, November 2015
John Wall, November 2015
Patrick Welland, December 2015

In addition, a number of individuals shared letters, notes, and reflections:

Jean [pseud.]. "Travelling on a Freak Bus from Istanbul to Nepal—Summer 1976." *Reminiscences*, 2018.
Brenda Grant. Diary notes, 1976.
David Harvey. Letters home, London to Singapore, September 9, 1962–February 2, 1963.

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