GO NOW!

Adventures and advice
mostly about travel,
but not entirely

Nick Zoa

Cover photo of Nick Zoa at Rozafa castle Shkoder, Albania by Yves Gabriel © 2021

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Table of Contents

Preface

This book is dedicated to my father because I wish he had written a book like this.

My father grew up in Beijing in the final years of Imperial China. He spent World War II underwater in submarines developing SONAR. In Nashville, he was the vice president of the largest non-union electronics company in America. He was our much-loved Boy Scout scoutmaster.

My father was a natural teacher. He taught by example and by answering questions. He rarely lectured me – except when I was naughty. As my teacher, he had a thoughtful and complete answer for any question I asked, no matter how erudite or silly.

As I grew up, I was never told what to do. My father supported everything I did. He gave me the confidence and curiosity to go out and find what I was interested in and to pursue my interests. After high school, I left home for college and graduate school. Soon, I was traveling overseas, starting a computer company and raising a family. By then, I was so busy with my own life I was no longer asking my father questions.

If my father were alive today, I'd ask him to tell me his stories. I'm sure he must've had a lot of adventures – adventures I never heard about. Had he written a book, I'd be able to read his experiences, to understand how he thought, and to get his advice about life. Since he's not here to tell me his stories, I'll tell some of mine.

Although my father passed away peacefully in bed, I might not. Working as a field seismologist and traveling by unconventional means, I have a high-risk lifestyle. That's one reason I'm writing this book. I want my children – the two most important people in my life – to be able to read my stories and pass them on. Another

difference between me and my father is that, while he had a house, a pension and a wife, I have a small pack and a wanderlust. From my experiences, I offer my travel advice to those who need it. Maybe I can even encourage a few folks to become happy nomads. In any case, I hope you find my stories entertaining and my life lessons refreshing.

A typical Kosrae beach with surf breaking on the reef

As I write this book, I'm sitting in an apartment by the beach on an island in Micronesia. The island is Kosrae. It's an extinct volcano, sixteen kilometers wide. I've been here for more than a year. The trade winds blow scents of the ocean and flowers through my apartment. It's raining hard, as it does here about three or four times every day. Outside my door, a neighbor's rooster is crowing. Out the back window, I hear the surf pounding on the reef beyond the mangroves. A cat who has adopted me sits in my doorway watching the rain come down, waiting for me to feed him. Like the cat, I've gone almost nowhere in the past year. I haven't finished traveling – or living – so I haven't finished learning. I reserve the right to revise this book occasionally. But here it is for now: A guide to my travels and what I've learned so far.

Throughout these stories, I'll occasionally mention an organization called UMUC which stands for the University of Maryland University College. Headquartered in Japan and Germany, this was a branch of Maryland's principal state university which provided face-to-face college courses to U.S. military personnel, their dependents and sometimes local nationals all over the world. Classes were held on U.S. military bases as well as various other sites. From 1980 until 2015, I taught off and on for UMUC at more than twenty locations overseas. Teaching terms lasted eight weeks. This meant that an instructor would be in one country for eight weeks before shifting to another country for the next assignment. Transportation and housing were often included. This was the ideal job for someone who wanted to teach and travel. This job introduced me to the joys of traveling and allowed me to see a lot of the world I might otherwise never have seen. Thank you UMUC.

Finally, I say thank you to Bob, David, Marvin and Shannon for reading the first draft of this book and encouraging me to finish it. Thank you Suzi Patterson for proof-reading. And thank you Will Akers and John Stifler for editing this book and for teaching me how to make my stories come to life.

1 – Marooned in Paradise

On March 6, 2020, United Airlines flight #155 delivered the last tourist to Kosrae before the Global Pandemic began. That tourist was me.

Kosrae International Airport

I'd planned to stay in Kosrae for only three days. At Kosrae's airport on March 9th, Maureen, the United ticket agent, explained my ongoing flight to Majuro in the Marshall Islands had been cancelled. Our conversation went something like this:

> *Majuro is temporarily closed. If you like, Dr. Zoa, we could fly you to Honolulu. From there, you could fly back to the States.*
>
> There's no reason for me to return to the States. Honolulu's nice, but that's not where I was hoping to go. Is there any way for me to get to Majuro?
>
> *We're showing a flight to Majuro on March 23rd. Would you like me to rebook your ticket?*
>
> Yes, thank you, Maureen. Let's do that.

Okay, all done. Maybe the Marshall Islands will reopen by then.

So, at Maureen's suggestion, I rebooked my Majuro ticket for two weeks later. Maureen and I figured that by then the pandemic would have sorted itself out and the world would be back to normal. Two days later, the World Health Organization declared a Global Pandemic.

Two weeks passed. The Marshall Islands – along with Micronesia and several other Pacific island nations – extended their travel bans. With no passengers flying between the islands, United Airlines did the logical thing: They suspended all flights between Kosrae, Majuro and the other islands of Micronesia.

On March 23rd, United Airlines offered one final flight for anyone who wanted to be evacuated from Kosrae. On the morning of this final flight, my phone rang. It was a call from the United desk at the Kosrae airport:

Good morning, Dr. Zoa. This is Maureen at the airport. Remember me?

Yes, Maureen. I remember you. Kom fuhkah? (I was practicing my Kosraean.)

I'm fine, thank you. I have some news for you about your ticket to Majuro.

Yes?

Your flight has been cancelled. There will be no more flights to Majuro.

Oh, okay.

And today is the last day that United will take any passengers out of Kosrae.

Really?

Yes, today is the last flight.

Where is the plane going?

To Guam, sir. From Guam, you could fly back to the States.

And there won't be any more flights out of Kosrae? For how long?

We don't know. Maybe a few weeks. Maybe a few months. No one knows.

And when is this flight leaving for Guam?

In two hours. Would you like me to hold a seat for you?

(… pause …) No thank you, Maureen. I think I'll stay here in Kosrae.

Are you sure? There won't be any more planes for … well, we don't know.

I like it here, Maureen.

So do I. Welcome to Kosrae.

It was a quick decision, and I think the right choice. That afternoon, I started volunteering at Kosrae's Historic Preservation Office (KHPO), one of several organizations I worked for during 2020 and 2021. Finding work in Kosrae was easy thanks to the fact that businesses, government offices, schools and churches remained open during the pandemic. How was this possible?

Micronesia is one of six Pacific island nations that remained 100% free of Covid-19. This is partly due to geography: Micronesia's islands are isolated. Kosrae is 550 kilometers from its nearest neighbor. Kosrae can also thank the government of Micronesia for acting quickly to impose a total travel ban, with no inbound international traffic by ship or plane starting early March 2020. Because of its travel ban, Micronesia kept Covid-19 out and everyone healthy. No one wore masks. There was no need for social distancing. Life was normal here. Delightfully so.

So, how did I end up in Kosrae? I came first to Chuuk in western Micronesia, in February 2020, to scuba dive in the Truk Lagoon, famous for Japanese ships and planes sunk during World War II.

From Chuuk, I flew east to Pohnpei for five days to explore the mysterious ruins of Nan Madol, a massive stone city built about 1,000 years ago. Archaeologists dub Nan Madol "The Venice of the Pacific." The mystery of these ruins is that, with no written language or artifacts, little is known about this civilization or how 750,000 metric tons of rocks were transported to build this city.

From Pohnpei, I continued east on United's "Island Hopper" to Kosrae, arriving on March 6th. Kosrae is Micronesia's forgotten island. It has no world-famous attractions. In an average year, only about 1,200 international visitors come here. I'd planned to be on Kosrae for three days. My next hop was to Majuro in the Marshall Islands.

And then, the Global Pandemic of 2020 happened. On March 8th, the Marshallese government closed its airports and harbors to all inbound traffic to prevent the possible introduction of Covid-19. Other island nations soon enacted similar travel bans.

By the time I finished writing this book, I was marooned on Kosrae for 500 days, just over sixteen months. Before coming here, I'd seen a lot of the world – 158 countries so far. Kosrae is one of the loveliest places I've ever been. Kosrae is an excellent place to live, work, play or be marooned. It was a stroke of luck to have been given the chance to get to know this tiny corner of the world.

This book is about my life on Kosrae and some of the journeys that led me here. This wasn't the first time I've been marooned on an island. Getting marooned on an island is an adventure that should happen to everyone at least once.

2 – Stranded on Likoma

In 2011, I took my first trip through southern and central Africa. My journey started in Johannesburg. I made my way to Kruger National Park where I camped inside a reinforced, chain-linked fence. My guide, Andre, explained that the fence was for my own protection. At night, hyenas and lions came to look at the humans inside their cage. The cage, though high and strong, didn't keep all the wild animals out. One night, I had a near disastrous encounter with a honey badger, an animal known for being one of Africa's most vicious creatures.

I got up during the night to use the loo. Returning to my tent, I heard scratching noises in the rubbish bin. I looked inside and saw an animal that looked like a cross between a cat and a skunk, but bigger – and more muscular. I tried to shoo the animal away. I was surprised when the creature ignored me. I tried again to shoo the animal away. This time, I got the animal's attention.

It climbed out of the bin. It looked me in the eye. It seemed to grin at me as it hopped to the ground and swaggered towards me. Although not much larger than a cat, it was unafraid. I backed up slowly and then more quickly as it advanced. Its confidence worried me. Thankfully, it paused and sniffed the air. Perhaps it wasn't interested in me after all. Or perhaps I wasn't worth bothering with. It grinned at me once more, showing two rows of long, sharp teeth. Then, it hissed at me and returned to scavenging the rubbish bin.

In the morning, I told Andre about my encounter and asked what sort of animal I'd met. He listened calmly and then explained "Mate, you're lucky not to be in hospital this morning. That there was a honey badger." Later, I read about honey badgers and how nasty they can be. There's a viral YouTube video of a honey badger encountering a cobra. The cobra strikes first. The venom from the cobra stuns the badger. The badger staggers momentarily as it shakes off the effects of the venom. Then, the badger bites off

the cobra's head and eats the snake. The honey badger is one of nature's most successful predators. I'm lucky that my close encounter was so uneventful.

This digression about the honey badger has nothing to do with being stranded on an island, but it illustrates an important life lesson: Although you shouldn't be afraid to spend time in nature, know – and respect – the animals.

Two months after my wildlife adventures in South African game reserves, I was 2,000 kilometers farther north at the southern end of Lake Malawi in a village called Monkey Bay. There, I awaited the Ilala Ferry which sails somewhat regularly north up Lake Malawi to Tanzania and then back again. The ferry takes about a week to travel the 500 kilometers from one end of the lake to the other. This voyage is long and slow because, like all African forms of transport, the Ilala Ferry makes many stops along the way – scheduled and unscheduled.

The Ilala Ferry

The ferry was supposed to depart in the morning. It didn't leave the dock until late that afternoon because loading passengers and luggage took a long time. I watched as people got on and off the ship many times. Their boxes and luggage were opened, examined and repacked as goods were bartered and exchanged. Finally, the flow of traffic on and off the boat ebbed. The ship blew its horn. The dock lines were released. We drifted slowly away from the pier. The old diesels coughed into gear.

It took two nights and two days to get from Monkey Bay to Likoma Island, a third of the way up the lake. On the Ilala, I splurged for a first class ticket, which cost $2 more than second class. First class passengers were entitled to sleep under the stars on the top deck – on foam mats (rented for an additional fifty cents). We spent our nights gazing at brilliant constellations and counting meteors.

We arrived at Likoma Island in late afternoon. The departure and unloading process was much like boarding at Monkey Bay, except more awkward and comical because Likoma Island had no pier or dock to which the Ilala could tie up. A motley assortment of rowboats, canoes and other floating conveyances greeted our ferry. These small craft were packed with people and goods leaving Likoma. As soon as the small boats touched the Ilala's hull, boarding passengers threw their bags and boxes onto the ferry's decks and scrambled up rope ladders.

Simultaneously, disembarking passengers tossed bags and boxes into waiting boats and swung down the side of the ferry. Remarkably, none of the boats, canoes and other floatation devices capsized or sank. Although nobody ended up in the water, a few packs and packages fell into the lake. Carrying only a small day pack, I descended a rope ladder into a wooden skiff without incident. I found a seat near the bow and was joined by about twenty other people and their luggage. The skipper stopped accepting more passengers when we had five centimeters of freeboard. As we pushed away from the Ilala, I tried to judge whether the water sloshing in the bottom of our boat was due to a fast leak, or a slow one. Happily, we made it to shore while the skipper directed passengers to bail water as fast as possible.

In lieu of a dock on Likoma Island, there was a floating platform made of wooden planks thrown across inflated inner tubes. I teetered across the wobbly boards to dry land without getting wet. The water below didn't look or smell clean.

The sun was setting. The immediate question was where to go from here. The foreign tourists who'd arrived with me were

surrounded by touts offering transportation to accommodations. Most tourists allowed themselves to be herded into waiting pickup trucks. They tossed their backpacks and suitcases (Imagine traveling in Africa with a suitcase!) into the truck beds and shouted out where they wanted to go. It was unclear who the drivers were or how much the ride might cost. Although I was pushed towards a truck and encouraged to climb in, my gut told me not to get into the trucks.

Earlier, on board the Ilala, I heard the captain mention a hostel on the far side of the island called Mango Drift. From the way the captain described the place, it sounded like a mellow place to hang my hat for a few nights. My Garmin indicated that the other side of Likoma was three kilometers west. Carrying almost no luggage, I had an easy stroll through the baobabs and over the hill to the beach on the far side of Likoma.

I arrived at the beach as tropical twilight descended into total darkness. For the last 400 meters, I followed Lucky Dube's reggae to the Mango Drift. Except for the bartender, the place was empty. I dropped my pack on a bunk in the dormitory and settled into a bean bag chair with a cold beer under the bar's thatched roof. About 45 minutes later, eight passengers I'd met on the Ilala ferry straggled into the bar. They'd been driven all around the island for an hour. They'd had to change from one pickup truck to another. They'd been shown several over-priced lodges. In the end, they had to argue long and hard to retrieve their luggage from the truck for a fee of $10 – each! I'm glad I walked. It was faster, cheaper, less stressful and lots more pleasant.

The Mango Drift, on the west side of Likoma Island, was a glorious spot to spend time. The hostel had several bungalows, all located under baobab trees along a beach. Across the lake, fifty kilometers away, we could see the misty Kaningina Mountains that form the west side of East Africa's Great Rift Valley.

Sunday morning, after an early breakfast on the beach, I hiked back over the hill and through the baobab forest into town. The hike felt shorter in the daytime than it had been the previous night.

At 8:00 am, I arrived at Saint Peter's Cathedral, which is said to be as large as Winchester Cathedral in England. Although Likoma's roads aren't paved, homes are made of driftwood and thatch, and electricity runs for only a few hours every day, this little island has the largest church in southern or central Africa. With its massive brick walls, tall bell tower and stained glass windows, the cathedral seems out of place on this primitive island. In the early twentieth century, Anglican missionaries decided to build it on Likoma Island for ease of defense.

Saint Peter's Cathedral, Likoma Island, Malawi

I entered the church and was impressed to see about 4,000 people in the congregation. That's roughly half the island's population. As I looked for an empty spot in a pew, I tried not to draw attention to myself. This was hard to do since I was the only non-African there.

There were five choirs in church that morning. I remember an anthem which began with the girls' choir. Singing from the highest balcony, their voices sounded like angels. For the second verse, the girls were joined by their brothers in a lower balcony. At the third verse, their mothers, standing in the nave, harmonized with their strong voices. The grandmothers joined next, dancing and playing tambourines. Finally came the men with rich, deep voices and drums. Although I'm not a religious person, this was the most evocative and powerful choral music I've ever heard.

The man sitting next to me saw a tear coming down my cheek. Even now, writing about the singing gets me choked up. The words ethereal and heavenly come to mind. The service lasted for three hours. The choirs sang for at least half that time.

Inevitably, we came to the point in the service I was quietly dreading. After making a few announcements, the minister asked if there were any visitors. 8,000 eyes turned towards me. Someone put a microphone in my hand. I introduced myself as a teacher from California. When I said I was from California, there was audible excitement from the congregation. I thanked the choirs for their beautiful singing and was applauded.

After the service, Father Brighton introduced himself. A member of his staff guided me up the bell tower to see the commanding view of the island and sparkling Lake Malawi all around. A man named Precious invited me to join him and his family for lunch at his home. After our spicy fish and taro stew, we sat in the shade of the baobabs and watched a neighborhood soccer game. Knowing that I'm a teacher, Precious asked if I'd like to visit his school the next day. Naturally, I said "yes." My day ended back at the Mango Drift with a game of beach volleyball, a refreshing swim in the lake, and dinner.

Monday morning, I borrowed a bicycle from the Mango Drift and rode to the school. I was greeted warmly, introduced to the students and asked if I'd like to say a few words. This initial classroom visit turned out to be the first of many days I spent at Precious's school. After class, I had lunch with the students.

On my return to the Mango Drift, I heard loud and anxious voices coming from the bar. The Ilala Ferry had broken down in Nhkata Bay on the other side of the lake. There was no word as to when the ferry would be repaired and back in service. A replacement part was needed from Monkey Bay. The Ilala Ferry is the only scheduled transportation to or from Likoma Island. Several Mango Drift guests were worried that they'd be unable to leave on schedule.

For the worried guests, their days dragged on. By Friday, news arrived that the replacement parts had arrived at Nhkata Bay, but that the new parts were the wrong size. There was much speculation as to whether the parts could be resized or if new parts could be ordered from Tanzania. While I sympathized with the worried guests, I hid my delight in being stranded on Likoma.

The following Monday, the Ilala Ferry remained out of commission. Two English tourists were now in a panic about this disruption to their travel plans. They spent hours on their mobiles trying to negotiate a way off the island. Finally, they arranged for a seaplane to come from the mainland to collect them and fly them to where they wanted to go ... for about $1,000. When the English tourists left Likoma, the remaining foreigners stood on the beach at Mango Drift to wave as the seaplane flew away. The ferry remained out of service. In the following days, other tourists hired private boats to carry them to the mainland, either to Mozambique in the east or to Malawi in the west.

Since I had no firm plans for where to go after Likoma, this delay in departure wasn't a problem for me. I was enjoying my job at Precious's school. After school in the afternoons, I went snorkeling in the clear sparking waters of the lake. Lake Malawi is a fresh-water lake. Unique species of tropical fish live here. These are the tropical fish that people buy in pet shops to put in their fresh-water aquariums back home. Evenings, I dined with Precious and his family. I was glad to have home-cooked meals and the chance to get to know local foods and customs. Precious confided in me that the Ilala Ferry would be non-operational for a while. "Maybe not fixed for two or three weeks" he said.

As the days passed, I taught geography and physics at Precious's school every day. The students were engaged and interested. The students spoke some English. Precious translated unfamiliar words, like "ice", "gravity" and "planet." There were lots of questions.

In our classes, we learned about the African Rift Valley and the tectonic spreading that created Lake Malawi. It soon became

apparent these students had never had a science class. They'd never seen a world map, either. Using a stub of chalk, I began to draw a world map on the classroom's concrete wall. I started with Likoma Island and Lake Malawi. This was a part of the world the students recognized and understood. To the east, I added Mozambique, to the north Tanzania. In the west, I drew Zambia on the other side of the Kaninginas. Although Zambia was a place the students had never seen, they knew it was beyond the mountains on the other side of their lake. So far so good.

Class continued like this for two weeks as we drew the whole world. I'd been prescient to place Malawi in the center of the classroom wall, and to draw it small enough to have room for the rest of world. As I drew the map of the world, country by country, I told stories about the places I'd visited, about the terrain, the weather, the languages, the customs and the people.

When I drew Madagascar and the Indian Ocean, their eyes got big and hands went up. "Is that water over there?" they asked. "Yes" I said. This surprised most students. They had never been told that Earth has large bodies of water – called oceans – which are bigger than Lake Malawi and too salty to drink.

The mood in the classroom was like a village gathered around a bonfire while a story-teller entertains his rapt audience with chimerical legends of imaginary places far, far away. Every day, there were more students in the classroom. When we ran out of chairs, new students lay on the floor listening spellbound to these tales. We paused from time to time for questions, water and snacks.

Finally, we came to where I had to explain that the world was round, like a melon or a soccer ball. This was a most astounding fantasy. Yet the students were bright enough to ask "You mean, like the moon?" Indeed!

The following week, I let the students' questions guide the curriculum. From geography, we ascended to astronomy. The students asked about the sun, the moon, the planets, the solar

system and then the Milky Way. After the generators shut down at 9:00 pm, Likoma Island has no electricity. With clear skies and no light pollution at night, every student was well-acquainted with the stars, the constellations and the wonders of the night sky. They knew the Milky Way as the path left by the feet of their ancestors as they wander across the sky. Learning that their ancestors' pathway is comprised of billions of stars – stars like our own sun – was mind-expanding.

My students on Likoma Island
with Precious in the white shirt

Precious's school kept me busy for three weeks. By my third Sunday, I'd become a familiar face at the cathedral. The music was always inspiring. The hymns were remarkably complex in rhythms and harmonies, with no lack of enthusiasm from the congregation.

Finally, the Ilala Ferry returned to Likoma. Precious made sure that I got a discounted ticket and a free foam mat for my cruise to the west shore of Lake Malawi. Several students came to the beach to wave goodbye. With no ferry service for three weeks, there was only one other tourist leaving the island with me that day. Patti and I had the top deck to ourselves. I played chess with

the bartender while she flirted with the captain. We had a smooth starlit crossing of the lake, arriving at Nhkata Bay at first light. Patti and I stepped off the ship at dawn, strolled around Miyako village and took a few photos. I found a hostel, and used their slow Internet to collect three weeks of emails.

Being stranded on Likoma Island gave me pause to think. Do I really need to be in constant contact with the rest of the world?

There was another time I took a detour to a remote island, not of my choosing.

3 – Beached on Boracay

From the mid-80's until the mid-90's, I consulted for a private bank in the Philippines. The bank was in the remittance business. Many Filipinos live and work in California. Their families depend on their sons and daughters in America to send money home every week or two. This private bank had a dozen offices in California where a customer could walk in, put $107 in cash on the counter, and know that $100 worth of pesos would be delivered in cash to a designated recipient in the Philippines within 24 hours. The California offices handled about a million dollars of remittances per day at a seven percent commission. The company also made an extra percent or two on the exchange rate from dollars to pesos in Manila. It was a lucrative business.

I was hired by a man named Oscar to create a private intranet that allowed his offices to accept funds in California and to direct them electronically to the appropriate offices in the Philippines. To make this happen, I created a multi-site database, made several trips to Manila, and installed dozens of 3COM servers in California and in the Philippines.

Soon, I realized that Mr. Oscar was well-connected politically. On one trip to Manila, my checked luggage included about $25,000 worth of servers. I had no idea how I would get these servers past customs. When I deplaned at the Manila airport, a well-dressed gentleman was holding a sign with my name on it. He asked me for my passport and suggested I follow him. While the other arriving passengers queued up at passport control and immigration, my escort led me through an unmarked door. My passport and an envelope were handed to another well-dressed man. We then exited the terminal, descended an exterior staircase and got into to a black Mercedes limousine.

A chauffeur drove us quietly out of the airport. Because the limo's windows were heavily tinted, I could only see outside when the chauffeur's window was rolled down at checkpoints. Thirty

minutes later, we were at Mr. Oscar's house in Makati. Somehow, my computer servers had arrived ahead of us and were stacked neatly in the living room. My luggage and my passport – with a valid entry stamp in it – were waiting for me in my room along with an ice-cold San Miguel. This is the sort of service and convenience I came to expect on my business trips to Manila.

During one of my visits to Manila, there was a coup attempt against President Marcos. I was awakened at 2:00 am by one of Mr. Oscar's assistants. He told me to get my laptop and to come with him immediately. In a sleepy fog, I started to get dressed. I heard him say "There isn't time to get dressed. Wear this," as he put a bathrobe over my shoulders. Barefoot, I slipped out into the steamy Manila night and into one of Mr. Oscar's black Mercs. (He told me later that he owned forty.) The limo burned rubber leaving Mr. Oscar's house. I heard explosions nearby. Even through the tinted windows, I saw flashes of light.

Thirty minutes later we were out of the city. After about three hours, we started driving uphill. As the sun rose, we passed through two checkpoints with armed guards. Then, I was deposited, barefoot and wearing a terrycloth bathrobe, at the door of a magnificent A-frame vacation home on a mountain peak overlooking steep valleys terraced with hundreds of rice paddies. This was to be my home for the next two weeks.

There were two other people in this house with me, a man and a woman. Neither spoke English. The man provided me with clothing and showed me where I could work, eat and sleep. The woman, who I assumed to be his wife, watched me discreetly all day long and brought me delicious things to eat or drink whenever I appeared to be hungry or thirsty.

Although I had no idea how long I'd be at this house, I enjoyed sitting in the fabulous living room, looking out through a two-story picture window over the misty valleys of the northern Philippines. I used my time well. I redesigned, tested and debugged the systems used at Mr. Oscar's bank. When I was done with that, I upgraded the databases I maintained for other clients in California.

The view from Mr. Oscar's vacation home
in northern Luzon

Finally, after two weeks of peace, comfort and productivity, a black Mercedes returned. I was chauffeured back to Manila. The city had a new look. There were damaged tanks, burned out vehicles, and bomb craters along the roads. The coup attempt had failed.

On another visit, Mr. Oscar took me golfing. I'm not much of a golfer, but I was happy to get a break from sitting in front of my computer. When we arrived at the clubhouse, I noticed several security vehicles parked in the lot with armed guards standing beside. Mr. Oscar explained that VIPs were playing that afternoon. On the course, Mr. Oscar pointed out the vice president in the foursome ahead of us.

The golf course was beautifully manicured. The weather was hot and steamy. My game was hideous. My drives were hooking and slicing all over the place. By the time we'd come to the ninth hole, I'd already lost nine balls to ponds or dense underbrush. I was tired of having to pay my caddie a dollar every time I lost a ball. When I lost my tenth ball, I told my caddie I would go find my

ball. Although he tried politely to stop me, I insisted on heading off into the elephant grass beside the fairway to find my ball.

I hacked and slashed around with my 5-iron to clear a path into the brush. Then, I heard metal striking metal. I pulled the elephant grass aside and found myself eyeball-to-eyeball with a soldier in full camouflage and my 5-iron resting on the barrel of his M16. With a nod of his head and his eyes, he directed me to where my ball was lying. I collected my ball and took the penalty shot. After that, my game improved significantly. As I teed up for my next hole, I had new motivation to avoid hitting my ball into the rough.

At the end of every visit to Manila, Mr. Oscar insisted on taking me to dinner someplace extravagant. Whether it was sushi at a rooftop garden above the Manila fish market or a feast of Philippine delicacies at the golf course club house, it was always a memorable meal. At the end of these meals, Mr. Oscar would tip the waiters generously and then hand me an envelope full of $100 bills. He never asked for an invoice for my services. He simply gave me a Benjamin for every hour that I'd been in the Philippines. It was a good job.

Now that you know what it was like to work for Mr. Oscar, you're ready for my story of how, on one visit to the Philippines, I ended up on Mr. Oscar's island.

Along with his forty Mercedes limousines and real estate, Mr. Oscar owned a travel agency. His agency always made my travel arrangements between San Francisco and Manila. I never knew exactly when I would depart or which flight I'd be on until someone handed me a ticket. At the end of one of my longer visits to Manila, I bid farewell to the household staff who'd served me well. Then, I climbed into a black Mercedes with tinted windows waiting in Mr. Oscar's circular driveway.

The ride to the airport was uneventful. I'd seen the congested streets of Manila often and didn't look out the window. But then, we passed the international airport and turned into Manila's small domestic terminal. The limo stopped in front of a low building. A

gloved porter opened the limo door and took my bag. He ushered me into the building and then into a modest waiting room. Although this was a boarding area from which one might board a plane, there were no signs posted to indicate where my flight was going. There were no big jets outside ready to fly me across the Pacific to California. There were no other passengers.

After a few minutes, I was guided out onto the runway. I boarded an unmarked, single-engine plane with wings over the fuselage. There was a pilot. I was his only passenger. I queried my escort and my pilot. With limited English, they smiled and explained that I was going to Mr. Oscar's island. Apparently, this was Mr. Oscar's way of thanking me for my hard work.

The plane took off. We flew low over Manila. I watched the glass and concrete skyscrapers go by. Next, we flew over Manila's vast slums with muddy streets and metal-roofed shacks. Then, we passed over dozens of emerald isles at the edge of the deep blue South China Sea. After about an hour's flight, the plane descended to a palm-covered island with wide beaches.

There were no formalities on my arrival. I stepped down from the plane with my small bag. A smiling fellow greeted me saying "Welcome to Caticlan." We hopped into a white Toyota van parked on the runway. After leaving the airstrip, we followed a rutted dirt road through a jungle of coconut palms until we came to a rocky beach.

My driver opened the door for me and led me to a longboat. This was a boat typical of East Asia. The hull was wooden, about seven meters long and a meter wide. Bamboo poles supported a tarp over the boat for shade and rain cover. The engine in the stern was attached to a long drive shaft at the end of which was a single propeller. The skipper powered the boat by adjusting the throttle. He steered by pushing the engine from side to side. I took a seat on a thwart in the shade of the tarp. My driver didn't get into the boat with me. His last instructions were that I should "raise the green flag" when I was ready to return.

The boat left the beach and headed towards a small island about a kilometer away. We circled the island's south end and then approached the whitest beaches I'd ever seen. In the middle of the beach there were two huts and a flagpole.

Between us and the beautiful white beach was a surf line breaking about a meter high. The waves crashed towards the beach. The skipper motored back and forth twice, outside of and parallel to the breakers. He studied me, my clothing and my little pack for a few seconds. I was wearing a t-shirt, shorts and a pair of flip-flops. This is what I usually wore in the heat of summer in the Philippines. He shut off the engine. He pointed to the flagpole. He assured me "Not deep. You okay walk."

I understood that I would have to wade ashore through the surf with my bag. The water was crystal clear and chest deep. I could see the smooth sandy bottom. I stuffed my flip flops into my pack and hopped overboard. The skipper handed me my bag, started his engine and waved goodbye.

Looking towards shore, I saw a tall man standing beside the flagpole. He waved. Carrying my bag over my head, I waded about fifty meters through the surf to where he was. By the time I splashed through the surf and reached the beach, I was wet up to my neck. I was relieved to find that my host spoke fluent English. He introduced himself as one of Mr. Oscar's cousins. He welcomed me to the island of Boracay – a place I had never heard of. In the 80's, few other people had heard of this island, either. Boracay had no dock, no paved roads and no electricity.

I followed my host to a small house on stilts. This would be where I would sleep. Most of the island – including its shop and restaurant – was owned by Mr. Oscar's family. Because I was Mr. Oscar's guest, I would not have to use any money while I was on Boracay. The island was a paradise. Boracay's White Beach has such soft white sand it looks and feels like sugar. My host explained that when Mr. Oscar's grandchildren came here the first time, they thought that the dazzling white sand was snow.

Boracay's White Beach in the 80's

So, there I was on an undeveloped island, far from civilization. My hut was raised about two meters above the sand. There was a bed inside. The floor was made of bamboo slats spaced half a centimeter apart. This was a clever design. As I walked through the hut, the sand on my feet rubbed off and fell between the slats to the beach below. Ocean breezes blew up through the floor to keep me cool. There was a toilet and a spigot on the wall from which I could get a trickle of water for showers or for washing hands. As far as I could tell, I was the only foreigner on the island. There were huts in the island's forested interior. There was a beer shack nearby. With no electricity, the beer wasn't cold.

Although I didn't know where I was or how long I would be on this island, I was happy to rest after sitting in front of a computer for twelve hours a day for two weeks. This was a delicious break. I lay down and took a long siesta. When I awoke, it was sunset. I shuffled barefoot out to the beach feeling the powdery sand between my toes, watching the sun sink into pink clouds on the horizon.

I was accustomed to having Mr. Oscar take care of all my needs while I was in the Philippines. I was getting hungry. I wondered where my next meal would come from. I heard a slight noise behind me. I turned to find a folding table and chair placed on the beach. On the table was a San Miguel. I heard giggling coming from the palm trees.

I sat down and enjoyed my beer, even though it was warm. I smelled wood smoke from a nearby grill. When I finished my beer, a young woman wrapped in a sarong greeted me with another beer and asked if I'd like fish or lobster. I chose the lobster. Soon, the woman came back to place a beautiful meal of lobster, rice and greens in front of me.

I enjoyed my meal as I watched the sun set over the South China Sea. I heard more giggling which suggested that my evening wasn't over. This time, three young women appeared. They whisked away my empty plate. One woman brought another warm San Miguel. The second had a guitar. The third asked "You like us music you?" I nodded. The personal entertainment was sweet. They all sang and danced on the sand as I enjoyed my beer, then another and maybe one or two more. This was heaven.

Although I'd have been content to stagger back to my hut for a good night's sleep, the leader of the group asked "Which one you want?" pointing first to her friends and then to herself. I was stunned, flattered and delighted by this invitation. I smiled. They posed for me, each one. They turned, this way and that. I admired each woman, looking first into her eyes, enjoying her smile and admiring her athletic, slim body. I enjoyed their preening and showing off. Then I chose the guitarist. She gave the guitar to her friends, took me by the hand and helped me stand up. The other two women collected the table, the chair and the empty beer bottles and disappeared into the forest. The guitarist led me to the water. She tossed off her sarong and ran with me into the warm sea. She became my companion while I was on Boracay. During the day, she disappeared and left me alone. I beach-combed, snorkeled and read books under the palm trees. She and her friends joined me every evening for sunset dinners on the beach. I never got her name.

Besides swimming and reading, there wasn't a lot to do on Boracay. My host came around occasionally for a chat to see how I was doing. To keep me occupied, my host loaned me a mountain bike. I pedaled the sandy paths around the island. I knew nothing about the island, so I mapped it. Boracay is about seven kilometers

long and one kilometer wide. There were a few small groups of huts. I doubt there were more than 500 people living on the island. A man asked me if I wanted to buy part of the island for $10,000. I declined, but he gave me a coconut and a straw anyway.

At the island's north end was an imposing, steel gate enclosing a compound. Behind the gate was a modern white building perched on a rocky cliff overlooking the sea. I saw a Western-looking man standing on the balcony. He wore white drawstring pants. He had no shirt, which showed off his tanned torso. As he gazed out over the sea, he reminded me of a character from *Miami Vice*. Later, I asked my host who he was. My host deflected my question, saying simply "We don't ask about him."

I stayed on Boracay until my birthday. It was one of my more memorable birthdays. The day after my birthday, I asked my host to raise the green flag. I gave the guitarist all my Philippine pesos and kissed her goodbye. The longboat arrived to collect me and my bag. As before, there was heavy surf. I got pleasantly wet wading out through the surf to the boat. We motored back to the rocky beach on Caticlan. A few hours later, I was at Manila International, checked in for the long flight back to San Francisco.

All this happened a long time ago, before Boracay was awarded "Best Island in the World" in 2012 by the international travel magazine *Travel+Leisure*. By 2017, Boracay had 400 hotels, three casinos and a golf course. In that year, Boracay received two million tourists and fifteen cruise ships. Half the tourists were from the Philippines. The other half came from China (375,284), South Korea (356,644), Taiwan (40,802), USA (22,648), Malaysia (20,585), UK (17,416), Saudi Arabia (15,944), Australia (15,365), Russia (14,074) and Singapore (9,897). To serve all these visitors, Boracay's hotels employed almost 20,000 people.

Unfortunately, Mr. Oscar and his family didn't plan for the garbage and sewage problems that would come from this much tourism. By early 2018, the pollution dumped into the ocean around Boracay produced a toxic algal bloom that turned the White Beach green. President Rodrigo Duterte called the island of

Boracay a "cesspool" and ordered the closure and complete rehabilitation of the island. Under new rules, no more than 19,200 tourists will be allowed on the island at any time. Fire eaters, masseuses, vendors, stray dogs, bonfires and builders of photo-op sandcastles have been banned from the beachfront. Electric tricycles have replaced gas-powered vehicles.

Satellite views of Boracay, 1985 and 2019


White Beach in 2017

I was beached on Boracay a few decades before all this happened. It was a blessing to have been there before the island was discovered by the rest of the world. There aren't many remote, undeveloped islands – like Kosrae – left. This is one reason you must travel now. Don't wait until everyone else does.

4 – What's a Hodophile?

I'm a hodophile. Traveling is my life. In 2010, while enjoying my dinner on a balcony overlooking the Paseo de Marti in Havana, I decided that I would visit every country in the world. A good meal and a couple of beers will do that.

My dinner and the view of the Paseo de Marti

As I sat on my balcony in Havana, I made myself five simple rules. For me, transiting through an airport doesn't count as a country visit. To say that I've been somewhere, I have to do at least five things:

1. Change money.
2. Eat a local meal.
3. Learn how to say "thank you."
4. Have a conversation with someone who lives there.
5. Visit more than one city (if the country has more than one city).

As the shopkeepers on the Paseo de Marti closed their booths for the night, I realized I'd need a list of all the countries of the world so I could start checking them off.

Many hodophiles can claim to have visited every country in the world. For most, their list consists of the 193 countries recognized by the United Nations. When they've been to their 193rd country, they're entitled to say that they've been to all the world's countries. But they haven't been everywhere and they haven't seen everything. Not even half of it.

Although my ambition is to visit every country in the world, I won't be the first person to do this. Hundreds of people have already done this. Many of these hodophiles have documented their journeys with slick travel blogs and vlogs, some of which I subscribe to. Unlike several environmentally conscious globe trotters, I won't be able to claim to have visited every country without flying. I certainly won't be the youngest person to go everywhere. (That record is held by a 21-year-old Californian whose parents are travel agents.) I travel slowly, so I won't set a record for visiting every country in the shortest time. After spending more than a year in Kosrae, I might set a record for taking the *most* time to visit all 193 countries – but that's not much to brag about.

To me, the 193 members of the United Nations are an incomplete list of the places that make our planet what it is. For example, a list of United Nations countries doesn't include Greenland, Madeira, Kosovo, Zanzibar, French Guiana or Diego Garcia. Tibet, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau aren't UN members either. Although Indonesia is one sovereign state, its seven major island groups are like distinct countries, each one of which deserves a visit. By the time I finished my dinner that evening in Havana, I had refined my goal: To visit all the *places* in the world.

I left Cuba six weeks later. By then, I'd studied a world map and added 136 territories, regions, protectorates, enclaves and micro-countries to the basic UN list of 193. My list now has 329 places on it, of which several are so remote and/or militarized that it may be impossible to get there. But the list I made in 2010 was a good start. Today, as I write this book, I've visited 158 UN-recognized countries, plus 61 unique and intriguing regions that aren't countries but are places well worth visiting.

I still have a long way to go. I think of our planet as a cross between a giant museum and an amusement park. It's open 24/7 and 365 days a year. It contains everything there is to know and do. If there were a museum or a park like this, wouldn't you want to see the whole thing?

Sometimes, I think of Earth as a gigantic house. Suppose someone gave you a big house. Before you unpacked and settled in, wouldn't you want to go upstairs and downstairs, visit every room, and open all the drawers and closets? Could you live in a house without having gone to its attic and its basement at least once?

As a resident of Earth, I want to know this big blue ball of ours. How's our planet doing? Is it a clean and healthy place to live? What can we do to keep it that way? As I travel, I make notes about Earth's treasures and its problems. I look for ways that I can make a difference.

My current lifetime may be my one and only chance to see and experience what's here. I haven't been everywhere yet. Someday, after I finish exploring, I'll return to my favorite places to reunite with friends I made there. When I can no longer travel, I'll know the best places to retire because I'll have been everywhere – or well, almost everywhere.

At this point, Kosrae is high on my list of places I look forward to returning to.

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

5 – Don't Take Anything You *Might* Need

"If you want to figure out what is truly essential to survive, force yourself to carry it." – John Colter, member of the Lewis & Clark expedition, 1807

I've been traveling since 2008. I'm often asked if I tire of traveling. Nope. One thing that can make traveling tiresome is lugging around too much luggage. I've met novice travelers who tell me their bags are full of stuff they *might* need. I watch these poor souls drag their oversized wheelies through crowded, cobblestone streets and wonder how long before they realize that *might* equals *might not* when it comes to luggage. Most tourists burden themselves with three or four times more stuff than they need. Not me. I leave behind everything I *might* need because if I *might* need something, then I *might not* need it. Why carry something that's not needed?

(Speaking of wheelies, they're fine for city-to-city business trips. You can roll them out of your home to a taxi, across tiled airport floors, along moving sidewalks, up and down escalators and onto your airplane. At your destination, you wheel out of the airport, across a smooth sidewalk into another taxi, through your carpeted hotel lobby, into the elevator, and down the hall to your room. But for your holiday in Venice, Cusco, Jakarta or Kampala, wheelies won't work. Cobblestones, gravel and rough sidewalks have a way of breaking those nice wheels. Have you ever tried to carry a wheelie? I have a personal rule not to travel with anyone with a wheelie.)

Think about all the things you might need on your travels – and then leave them behind. Don't take something unless you're absolutely sure you're going to need it. This means that you wear one shirt, and pack one. You wear one pair of trousers, and pack shorts. You wear one set of underwear, and pack two or three.

Wear one pair of comfortable shoes you can wear every day, and pack flip-flops.

I didn't always travel light. When I started traveling in 2008, I carried a 60-liter backpack that weighed at least twenty kilograms. I soon realized I was using less than half of what I was carrying. The rest was dead weight. So, I downsized and got rid of two thirds of what I was lugging around. The little pack I carry now holds about twenty liters. It's been with me since 2010. It sits on my lap on cramped buses. It fits under the seat in front of me or in the smallest overhead bin. It goes with me up and down mountains. I can sling it over my shoulder as I stroll through towns and cities. When I go to the loo at the train station, I don't have to ask someone to watch my bag. I can get in and out of taxis quickly. (This can be a good thing.) I never have to check a bag, which saves lots of time at airports. Customs officials rarely ask to look inside because it's so small. I never lose my luggage.

I'm now on Kosrae in Micronesia. As I prepared for what was supposed to have been five months of swimming, scuba diving, hiking and island hopping across the South Pacific, I packed only the essentials: Swim suit, mask, snorkel, short wetsuit, two changes of underwear, extra shirt, laptop, flip-flops and toiletries. These items fit into my little pack with room left over for lunch. As for hat, shoes, shirt and pants, I was already wearing them.

Packing light turned out to be critical for my getting to Kosrae. With only carry-on luggage, I used the self-service kiosk at the Guam airport to generate my boarding pass to Chuuk, my first stop in Micronesia. Having bypassed the check-in counter, I sauntered to my departure gate. No questions were asked. If I'd checked luggage, I'd have been asked if I'd visited a country where there were any cases of Covid-19 in the previous fourteen days. That was a question I wanted to avoid answering. (I'll say more about this later.) When I arrived in Chuuk, I passed the temperature test and was stamped into Micronesia.

Naturally, there's little room in my small bag for souvenirs. If I buy anything larger than a pencil, I take it straight to the post office

and mail it home or to a friend who might like a surprise. When I return home or visit my friend months later, I enjoy seeing these forgotten treasures again. Here's a photo of what's usually in my bag, plus what I wear during the day. There's nothing here I *might* need.

None of these items are expensive or irreplaceable. If my bag were to disappear, I'd be inconvenienced, but not devastated. I could replace everything for $500 in a few days and then resume traveling. I've read travel blogs published by people who say they would go nowhere without such and such shoes, or a certain brand of shirt or pants. This is either rubbish, or their travels are being funded by advertising certain brands of clothing.

Ask yourself about your last big vacation or trip somewhere. Did you use or wear everything you packed? I doubt it. One of the biggest mistakes people make when they prepare for a trip is to spend a lot of time and money planning and shopping for everything they might use or wear when they get to where they're going. Their suitcases are filled with garments and accessories to cover every possible contingency.

For any travels other than a short business trip, my advice is to wait until you get where you're going. Then, look around to see what people are wearing. Whatever clothing the locals are wearing is ideally suited for the customs and the climate. If your home is in America, Europe or Japan, whatever the locals are wearing is also probably cheaper than what you might have bought back home. When you pack only the minimum, you may need something that you don't have. When that happens, you go shopping. Or maybe you rent it. Whatever you need is likely to be available wherever you are. Flip flops and sun hats are for sale all over Thailand. Siberia is an excellent place to buy a warm coat. Clinics in Africa sell the most effective Malaria medication. There are umbrella shops in Cherbourg. (I saw the movie.) Whatever you really need can be found wherever you are.

Since arriving in Kosrae, I found one thing I didn't pack that's essential here: A machete. In Kosrae, every man, woman and teenager has a machete. A machete is needed for opening coconuts, for hacking your way through the jungle, for making an umbrella out of a taro leaf, and for catching fish on the reef flats at low tide.

A machete is essential for opening coconuts.

Did I pack a machete? Of course not. The TSA would not have been happy to find a machete in my carry-on bag. Since machetes are essential and ubiquitous on Kosrae, it's no surprise that Kosrae's hardware store stocks seven sizes and styles of machetes. I bought the perfect machete for $9. Of course, I won't be able to take this machete in my carry-on luggage when I leave. No problem. When it's time to leave this island, I'll find a friend who can use an extra one.

Shopping in foreign countries is a great way to experience the local culture and to see how business is done. It rained hard in Georgia (the Republic of). Did I pack an umbrella? No. The first rainy day, I paid 15 lari ($8) for a sixteen-spine, black and plaid umbrella with a wooden handle. It was a classy accessory and unlike anything I could have brought from home. I was happy to support the local economy. As part of my purchase, the store clerk gave me a free lesson on how to count from one to fifteen in Georgian. As I strolled down the street with my new Georgian umbrella, I looked less like a tourist and more like someone who lived there. Before I left rainy Georgia for the rainless deserts of Jordan, I gave my umbrella to a neighbor who needed it. Also, while in Georgia, I was invited to a wedding. I rented a suit and dress shoes. Wearing the latest Georgian men's fashion, I was perfectly attired.

I got off a plane in Seoul in March. Before going there, I'd spent two months in Indonesia bopping around in flip-flops, shorts and a t-shirt. As I exited Seoul's Inchon airport, the cold wind bit through my thin, cotton clothing. Checking in at my hotel, I asked where I could buy warm clothes. Judging me as a typical foreign tourist, the clerk directed me to a fashionable shopping mall in Seoul's business district. There, I ducked into a brightly-lit, high-rise department store to get warm. I found racks of American and European brand-name jackets and hats. They were expensive because they were imported. They were not what people in Seoul were wearing. I chatted with a friendly salesman and asked him where he bought his clothes. He suggested the street market at a nearby subway stop.

On my brisk trip to the market, I checked out the fashions of the average guy on the street. About half the men rushing past me wore black, fake-leather jackets with zippers down the front. I found the street market. Right away, I spotted a dozen shops selling black, fake-leather jackets with zippers down the front. Bingo! This was what I was looking for. It took about two minutes to find a jacket that fit. Better yet, it cost one tenth of what the imported brand-name jackets cost in the shopping mall. Best of all, when I returned to the subway, I blended in. Even though I don't look Korean, people seemed to accept me as a local, or at least a resident. When I ordered gochujang noodles at a kiosk, I wasn't given an odd look or asked if I wanted my noodles served without chili paste. I was served right away – piping hot, both in temperature and flavor. *Mas-issneun!* (Delicious!)

A similar thing happened in Mongolia. I arrived underdressed for the cold winds of late winter. As in Seoul, the first place I looked for a jacket was a shopping mall in downtown Ulaanbaatar. I found Columbia, North Face and other brands, priced at triple what these same clothes cost in the States. I asked the clerk where he bought his clothes. He sent me to the open-air market down by the river. The market by the river was huge. It covered 5 hectares. Everything was for sale there. Searching for jackets, I passed potatoes, onions, chickens, horses, camels, portable stoves, satellite dishes, yurt kits, auto parts, farm tools, axes, tractors, construction supplies, building materials, electronics, furniture, boots, snowshoes and hats. Finally, I located the jacket department. The jackets were all Mongolian style jackets, with huge pockets, fleece-lined hoods, double zippers, and extendable sleeves to cover one's hands. I found the perfect jacket for about $20. It was a heavy, quilted jacket with an outer water-resistant layer. There were two hoods, a thin soft inner one and a heavy outer one. The pockets, inside and outside, were large enough to hold two meals and a couple of canteens.

I spent the next two weeks in the Mongolian steppes with a group of western tourists. They had Gore-Tex and down jackets from home. One night as we trekked back to camp through a dusty blizzard, the other members of my group complained they were

freezing. The icy wind blew right through their hats and jackets. My Mongolian coat was so ideally suited for these conditions I didn't notice what the weather was like outside. I also didn't go hungry.

This jacket kept me warm the following month when I was trekking in Tibet. After my tour of Tibet, I knew I wouldn't need this jacket again. My Tibetan guide, Puchong, had admired my jacket throughout our trip. As a tip for his services, I gave my Mongolian jacket to Puchong. He was more pleased to receive my jacket than any cash I could have given him, saying he could never find a jacket this warm or well-made in China.

The Mongolian jacket at Drölma Pass, Tibet

Another place I needed warm clothes was in Darjeeling, elevation 2,000 meters, in India's northeastern Himalayan province. Looking around Darjeeling, I was impressed by the knee-length, embroidered, wool overcoats all the men were wearing. I bought a beautifully crafted one with Buddhist symbols embroidered all over it. It kept me warm on cold nights in the mountains. It was so handsome that I couldn't part with it. I mailed it back to myself. I still have it.

A refreshing difference between Darjeeling and the rest of the great Indian sub-continent is that prices in shops and markets are fixed and non-negotiable. For weeks in the lowlands of India, I'd haggled for everything, with the initial asking price often five to ten times higher than the price I eventually paid. In Darjeeling, vendors state a price that's a fraction of what a lowland Indian merchant might ask. If you like the price, you buy it. If you don't like the price, you go somewhere else. Buying clothes in Darjeeling taught me one of the cultural differences between upland and lowland India.

In Indonesian Papua, also known as Irian Jaya, most men wear colorful short-sleeved shirts with wild tropical prints. I went into a local shop where there were hundreds of these shirts to choose from. When I tried one on, I realized why men wore these shirts. The cotton fabric was light. It was cool and loose-fitting, ideal for the climate. It wicked the moisture off my skin. As I wore my new shirt out of the store, I was no longer a foreign traveler. Now I looked more like an expat who lived and worked there. My shirt made me comfortable in more ways than one.

When I arrived in the Balkans, I noticed that people made an effort to be fashionably dressed. So, at a shop in Sofia, I picked up an inexpensive yet stylish-looking dark blue blazer and wore it everywhere for the next month. It was the appropriate accessory for visits to Orthodox cathedrals, evenings on the boulevard and nights at the symphony. On the blustery afternoon when I toured the Rozafa castle near Shkoder, Albania, I wore my blazer as I climbed over the medieval stone walls of this ruin. Although tourists were dressed in shorts and t-shirts, the Albanians wore nice clothes – even though it was awkward for the women to negotiate the rough paths and stone stairs wearing dresses and high heels.

The photo on the front of this book shows how I was dressed that day. There's a story behind the photo. It was taken without my knowledge by Yves, a professional photographer from Belgium. After he took it, Yves came up to me, introduced himself and gave me a digital copy and the rights to use it. What a great guy! Would he have taken that photo had I been dressed in shorts and t-

shirt? Probably not. With a photo like that, I had to write a book to go with it.

Here in Kosrae, men wear t-shirts with local business names and logos stenciled on them. These t-shirts are giveaways or bonus gifts at the shops in town. People who wear American football jerseys or shirts that advertise foreign brands are outsiders. Do I want to look like an outsider? No. Over time, I've acquired a collection of Kosraean t-shirts that I couldn't have brought from home. I had to wait until I got here to be properly dressed.

The point of these stories is to explain that I leave home wearing what I need to wear on the airplane and maybe the first day at my destination. After I get to my hotel, I go out to stretch my legs and do some people-watching. When I've seen what everyone wears, I enjoy a shopping trip to a local market where clothes are sold. With my new clothes, I blend in. When it's time to return home, I give my clothes to someone who needs them. If I love my new wardrobe, I carry – or mail – my new clothes home. Back home, if someone asks "Where did you get that!?" I have a story to tell.

Here are two last thoughts about travel clothes:

1. If you pack as light as I do and you travel for more than two or three days, you'll probably need to do laundry. People have told me that that they pack a week's worth of clothes so they only have to do laundry every seven days. This is nonsense. Whether you use a hotel's laundry service or you do your own laundry in the sink, washing one shirt every day is the same work as washing seven shirts once a week. I recommend lightweight clothing that dries overnight.

2. When you travel, you'll meet new people every day. You'll be the only one who knows you're wearing the same outfit today that you wore yesterday. Pick one or two comfortable and durable outfits, and leave your extensive wardrobe at home. Nellie Bly did this in 1889 when she circumnavigated the Earth in a record-breaking 72 days. She made her travels easy by

carrying only one small bag. Her lesson learned about traveling light is still true.

In 2012, a young friend, Caldwell, was about to embark on his first trip overseas. As he was packing, I emailed him a synopsis of this chapter. On his return, Caldwell said my advice on traveling light was “the most important email I've ever gotten in my life." Travel light! That’s one of three things I advise anyone who plans to travel. Don’t take anything you *might* need.

6 – Thank You!

Here's my second most important piece of travel advice: Say "thank you." Specifically, say thank you in the native tongue. You'll be amazed at what a difference this will make in your travels.

During the 19th century, the islands of Micronesia were claimed by the Spanish. Germany bought Micronesia after the Spanish-American War. In 1918, the League of Nations mandated these islands to Japan. After World War II, control of these islands was transferred to the United States. In 1979, four groups of islands – Yap, Chuuk, Pohnpei and Kosrae – petitioned for their independence. Finally, in 1986, they formed the Federated States of Micronesia.

Although the foreigners who occupied and governed these islands taught the Micronesians to speak Spanish, German, Japanese and English, the Micronesians preserved and maintained their own languages. By keeping their languages alive, they also retained their unique cultures, fashions and folklore. This means that when traveling through Micronesia, one needs to know how to say thank you four different ways:

Yap	Kammagar
Chuuk	Kinisou chapur
Pohnpei	Kalahngan
Kosrae	Kuloh ma luhlahp

When I was in Yap, I went for a hike in the jungle. I got lost. When I found someone to ask directions of, he pointed towards town. When I said "Kammagar," he offered to guide me part way there to make sure that I found the right path.

I did a lot of scuba diving in Chuuk. It was difficult to climb the boat ladder after every dive with heavy gear on my back,

especially when the seas were rough. When I said "Kinisou chapur," the dive guide on the boat assisted me every time.

In Pohnpei, I said "Kalahngan" when a waitress took my order. I was served my beer right away and my dinner came from the kitchen hot and steaming ten minutes before the tourists at the next table – who had ordered before me – got their order.

When I arrived in Kosrae days before the Coronavirus lockdown, I said "Kuloh ma luhlahp" to the customs officer when I handed him my passport. This seemed to break the ice. He didn't interrogate me about my health or where I'd been for the past two weeks. I was the last tourist allowed to enter Kosrae before the island was locked down. Since then, I've learned a lot more Kosraean, but "Kuloh ma luhlahp" is the most important phase of all and the one I use most often.

Knowing how to say thank you in the local language once saved my life.

Back in the days when Yugoslavia was a single sovereign state, I took a bus ride from Athens to Venice to see *mia fidanzata* Anna. It would be a long bus ride. It was October. Winter was coming. I boarded the bus in Athens, hoping to be in Venice with Anna 24 hours later.

The bus rolled north all day long and into the night. Most folks on the bus were asleep when the bus broke down at 3:00 am. I looked out the window. There was snow falling. The driver told us in Greek, and then in poor English, that we would be going nowhere until morning when he would find a mechanic to fix the problem. We were welcome to stay on the bus, he said. But with the engine off, there would be no heat.

Soon, the bus got cold and I got hungry. Unlike the other passengers, I wasn't carrying a blanket or a sleeping bag to curl up in. I saw a light up the road and hoped there might be someplace

where I could buy food and drink, and stay warm until morning. I got off the bus.

This wasn't a big town. I don't know if this place even had a name. It was a rural village on a long dark highway. I was somewhere in what is known today as Serbia. But exactly where, I didn't know. Having briefly traveled through the area the previous April, I knew only two words: "Hvala vam," meaning "thank you" in Serbian.

As I trudged through the snow towards the building with the light, I was concerned by vehicles I saw parked outside. There were dented sedans, beat up pickup trucks and a Harley. There was music inside though. I heard voices. So, I figured that the establishment was open for business. I pushed the door open and stepped inside.

I had entered a bar. A rough bar. As soon as I was in the warmth of the bar, the music stopped. Conversation ceased. About twenty heavily armed men turned and looked at me. I considered leaving immediately. A large man stepped in front of the door and blocked my exit. No one talked for several seconds.

Then, a huge man, dressed in dirty leather with a fully-loaded bandolier slung over his shoulder, stepped forward. He pressed the barrel of his gun against my chest. He leaned over me and spoke gruffly. Although I have no idea what he said, he didn't sound complimentary. He was either insulting my mother, my country or my manhood. When he finished excoriating me, he spat on my muddy boots and jammed his gun against my chest even harder. I couldn't move. I didn't know what to do or say. So I looked up at him and said the only thing I knew how to say: "Hvala vam." My assailant looked surprised. He and I each drew a breath. He looked me up and down again and then stepped back. His gun was still pointed at me, but it was no longer pressed into my sternum.

Now, another man stepped forward. He held a nasty-looking sword. He lodged it under my chin and then began a tirade similar to the curses I'd received from the first warrior. His face was close

to mine. I remember his smell and his alcoholic spittle on my face as he uttered many words that included a lot of harsh Slavic consonants. Again, I doubt he was complimenting me. Although I recognized a few words from what the first man said, my Serbian language skills were still limited to only two words. When he finished, I swallowed hard and said "Hvala vam." The man was mildly amused. He smirked at the first man. He withdrew his sword from under my chin and took one step back.

Suddenly, I was grabbed from behind. Something cold, sharp and metallic was slipped across my throat, not quite breaking the skin. A voice spoke directly into my right ear. I could feel the heat of his breath as he spoke harshly. By now, I recognized some of the same words used by the first two men. But judging by the leers and sneers on the faces of the men in front of me, the man behind me was using particularly colorful slang. When he finished speaking, he tightened his grip on the blade against my throat, waiting for my reply. I paused for a second, and then asked "Hvala vam?" I heard a deep chuckle behind me and the blade was slowly withdrawn from my throat.

I continued to be threatened with knives and guns until most men in the bar had their opportunity to vilify me. There was a pecking order within this militia. The curses and threats gradually became less ugly and more jovial as the smaller, less-heavily-armed men made their threats. To each one, I replied "Hvala vam."

Finally, when everyone had had his turn, someone handed me a mug of beer. With a smile, I raised my mug and shouted "Hvala vam!" The bar erupted with a lusty cheer. Thus began a long night of drinking beer and rakia, eating gibanica and pljeskavica, sharing stories and talking politics. When the sun rose in the morning, I was warm, well-fed and drunk. My new friends helped me stagger back to my bus and get aboard. The leader of the militia from the bar spoke sternly to the driver while pointing at me. Whatever the militia leader told the bus driver, I was a member in good standing in his organization. For the rest of my journey, the bus driver was extremely courteous to me.

Lesson learned: Know how to say thank you and say it often. I credit my mother for teaching me to say thank you. As she would often say "Don't complain about what you don't have. Be thankful for what you've got. Say thank you every moment of every day."

Saying thank you may even save your life.

I have no photo of my night in Serbia,
so here's a Serbian militia, circa 1908.

7 – One Way Ticket, Yeah

If my first travel rule is to travel light and my second rule is to say thank you, my third rule is to avoid making too many plans.

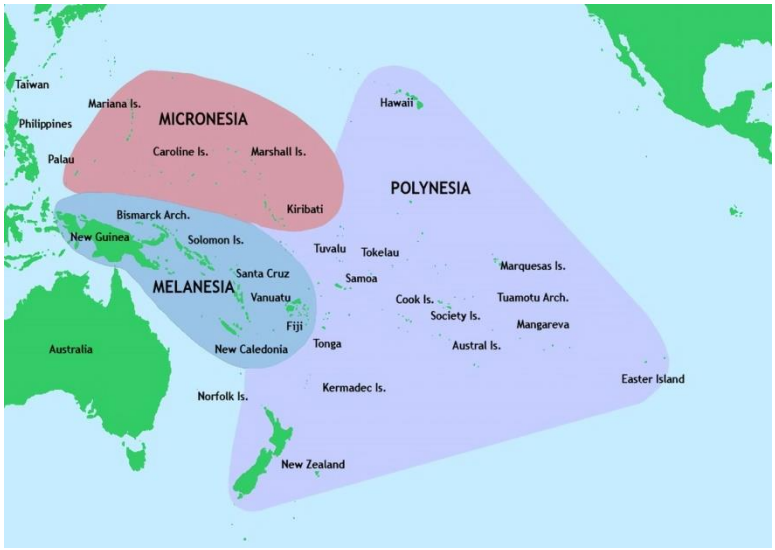
It's a luxury to travel spontaneously. Most folks have jobs, families and responsibilities. It's difficult to take off and go somewhere without telling everyone where you're going, what you're going to do, and when you'll return. Spouses, children, parents, professors and/or employers all expect you to come back on such-and-such a date ready to resume what you're expected to do.

So, this rule about not making too many plans applies to students on a gap year, young folks who aren't tied down, financially independent retirees, and nomads like me. Sadly, within this minority of unfettered adventurers, I've seen many travelers commit themselves to detailed itineraries weeks or months in advance. They work at their computers for days searching for the best deals, booking every hotel, buying all their airplane tickets, arranging every transfer and emailing guides. Although this works for many people – especially those who have limited time to travel – it doesn't work for me.

One way to avoid making too many plans is to buy one-way tickets. Although a round trip ticket often costs less than two one-way tickets, flexibility and spontaneity are worth the difference in price. I like to be somewhere for a while before buying my next one-way ticket. By not being tied to a fixed itinerary, I'm free to make spontaneous changes to my plans. I'm also in a better position in case my travel plans are derailed by an unexpected event ... like a Global Pandemic.

Before coming to Micronesia, I'd seen parts of Polynesia with trips to Hawaii, New Zealand, Fiji and Rapa Nui (Easter Island). I also toured Melanesia, a fascinating collection of islands northeast of Australia with cultural roots dating back 50,000 years. I knew

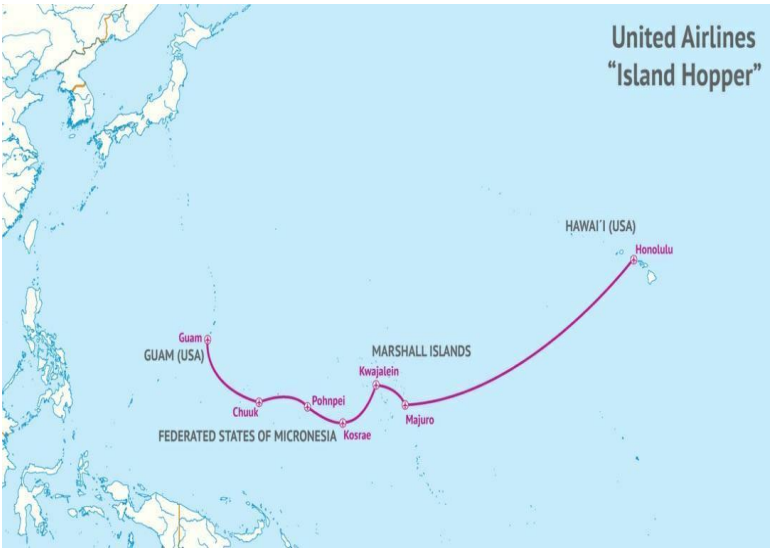
little about Micronesia except that this region's name is derived from the *micro* size of its islands.



To find out how Micronesia differs from Polynesia and Melanesia, I booked a one-way ticket to the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). FSM consists of 607 palm-fringed islands scattered across two time zones. If you include its territorial waters, FSM is the tenth largest country in the world. But because its islands are tiny, FSM is 99.73% ocean and just 0.027% land. It would take years and many boats to visit every island, so I decided to visit FSM's four biggest islands: Yap, Chuuk, Pohnpei and Kosrae. Big is a relative term here. Only one of FSM's 607 islands is larger than Nantucket.

I flew to Yap in October 2019. At Yap immigration, a bare-breasted woman lei'd me. During the following week, I hunted for World War II planes in the jungle, scuba dived with mantas, gawked at Yap's Brobdingnagian stone money, and grilled a sea turtle with fishermen on the beach. Having visited Yap, I could have checked FSM off my list and moved on to another country. Doing that would've saved time and money. But watching a video or reading about the other three states of FSM would've been no substitute for actually going there.

Before the pandemic, flying to FSM's other islands was easy thanks to United Airline's Island Hopper service. This is a Boeing 737-800 with four pilots, a mechanic, an extra set of spare parts, and a flight crew that gets paid extra for their sixteen-hour 7,000-km marathon. The plane makes three round trips every week between Hawaii and Guam stopping at Chuuk, Pohnpei and sometimes Kosrae. The Island Hopper also stops at two Marshall Islands: Kwajalein and Majuro. The hop between Majuro and Honolulu is the longest hop. That's when the second team of pilots take command. (During the Covid-19 travel bans, the Island Hopper was reduced to one cargo flight per month.)



The Island Hopper is like a bus service. If you miss today's plane, there'll be another one in a day or two. Each hop can be purchased separately. I studied United's route map and thought to myself "Why not get off the plane at each island to see what's there?" I bought each leg of my trip using United frequent flier miles, of which I've banked a few. This is the sort of unhurried travel I love, with one-way tickets and no deadline.

My first hop was from Guam to Chuuk. Fellow scuba divers had urged me to visit the fabled Truk Lagoon to explore the world's

largest naval graveyard. The bottom of the lagoon is littered with over 100 Japanese ships and airplanes sunk during Operation Hailstone, February 17-18, 1944, when the U.S. Navy did to the Japanese Navy what Japan did to the U.S. at Pearl Harbor in 1941. My visit to Chuuk went according to plan. When I'd seen everything and was thoroughly water-logged, I booked my flight to Pohnpei.

I didn't know how long I'd be in Pohnpei. I visited the mysterious ruins of Nan Madol. A local artist showed me drawings of winged spirits carrying 750,000 metric tons of prismatic basalt from one side of the island to the other to build an elegant port city 1,000 years ago. After five days visiting Pohnpei and its ruins, I booked my flight to Kosrae.

What does Kosrae have? Not much – at least, that's what I thought before coming here. Kosrae isn't famous. Unlike titillating Yap, Kosrae has a dress code that obliges women to wear shirts. Kosrae is Micronesia's "forgotten island." Kosrae gets so few visitors that the Island Hopper bypasses Kosrae two times out of three. I had to juggle my schedule to catch a flight from Pohnpei to Kosrae. Not expecting to find much, I figured three days would be enough to see this little island. After two days of sightseeing and snorkeling,

I booked my flight to Majuro in the Marshall Islands and downloaded my boarding pass.

Two hours later, the toast hit the floor, marmalade-side-down. The Marshallese government closed its borders to all international traffic to prevent the introduction of Covid-19 into their country. Any travel plans I might've had came to a complete and total stop. United Airlines cancelled my flight to Majuro and refunded my miles. I was glad I hadn't spent weeks planning an extended itinerary across the South Pacific. My flight to Majuro was the only thing that needed to be cancelled. This wasn't the only time that I was glad to have few plans.

In August 1982, during a one-month break between UMUC teaching terms in Japan, I rode north from Tokyo to Hokkaido on my Kawasaki 250 (more about this bike later). Hokkaido, like Alaska, has a short and beautiful summer. August is the best time to visit. Also like Alaska, Hokkaido has active volcanoes.

One of Hokkaido's most active volcanoes is Mount Usu. Since 1900, it has erupted four times. During winter, Mount Usu is a ski run. In summer, the ski lift stays open for tourists who want a spectacular view from the summit. At the ski lift ticket window, a posted price list offered a round trip ticket for 600 yen, or a one-way ticket for 400 yen. Following my rule of not planning too far ahead, I requested a one-way ticket. The ticket vendor was reluctant to sell me a one-way ticket. She explained that one-way tickets were intended for people with skis. I showed her my boots and assured her I could hike down the mountain. With a concerned look, she agreed to sell me a one-way ticket. With that, I rode the gondola to the volcano's summit. I enjoyed the view down into the steaming crater. I photographed the panorama of a dozen other volcanoes in the distance. (Hokkaido has 51 volcanoes.)

Mount Usu

Then, I met a group of Japanese volcanologists. They spoke as much English as I spoke Japanese, which isn't saying much. But it was enough for me to explain that I was a seismologist from California. This got their interest and attention. We drew charts and diagrams on their clipboards to discuss their use of micro-seismicity to estimate the magma chamber's position and volume, and to predict the next eruption. By the time we'd toured their field laboratory and instrumentation, it was getting late. They warned me that the ski lift would close soon. When I showed them my one-way ticket, they insisted on giving me a ride back down the volcano.

This was the first and only time I've ever ridden in a jeep outfitted with caterpillar treads. It was an impressive, one-of-a-kind vehicle that looked like something from a Jules Verne novel or a *Mad Max* movie. It was ideally suited for blasting up and down steep slopes of volcanic ash. On our ride down the mountain, our mischievous driver demonstrated the acrobatics that his hi-tech dune buggy was capable of, including jumping. No one was ejected from the vehicle thanks to four-point seatbelts in each seat.

At the base of the volcano, we skidded into the volcanologists' favorite watering hole. We polished off several plates of sushi and pitchers of beer. After midnight, we tumbled into their campsite. In the morning, they drove me back to the parking lot where my Kawasaki was parked. If I'd bought a round-trip ticket, this adventure would not have happened.

When traveling internationally, I'll confess to a subterfuge that the Internet makes possible. Many countries won't grant a tourist visa to someone who arrives without an ongoing or return ticket and a pre-booked hotel reservation. How to get around this problem? Easy. When I know that I'll need to show an ongoing or return ticket, I use one of several websites to book a "temporary" ticket that can be cancelled for free within 24 hours. I book the ticket, print it out and then cancel it. Likewise, it's easy to reserve a hotel room, print the confirmation and then cancel ... again at no cost. Printed in color on good quality paper, these documents can be very convincing.

In my experience, consulates and immigration officers don't have the ability or the motivation to check to see if your ticket or hotel reservation is valid. A friendly smile and a well-timed "thank you" will help ensure that your passport gets stamped with the visa you need. Once you've entered a country, you're free to decide how long you wish to stay. This trick may not last forever, but it still works today.

There are times when it's practical to plan ahead. For example, if I want to get off an airplane and into a rental car, I reserve my vehicle in advance. If I arrive in a city at night, I pre-book my first night's lodging – even though I might pay more than the discounted rate I could negotiate as a walk-in customer. If a country offers an e-visa, I go online, submit the required documentation, make my payment, and download my e-visa in advance of my trip.

Although planning ahead often saves time and trouble, *not* planning can lead to fun surprises. In 2019, Americans were required to have an e-visa to enter Brazil. Ooops! I forgot to apply for one. At the Lisbon airport, Transportes Aéreos Portugueses (TAP) wouldn't let me board my flight to Sao Paolo without an e-visa. Surprise! TAP changed my ticket to Rio de Janeiro with a 4-day layover in Madeira – which allowed time for Brazil to process my e-visa. Have you ever been to Madeira? I highly recommend it.

When I don't over-plan a trip, I'm often surprised by places, situations and opportunities I couldn't have known about in advance. With few plans, I'm free to pause and enjoy these surprises. Sometimes, I linger for a day or two. Sometimes I stay longer. This is especially true for exotic locations that are remote and difficult to get to. Thinking back on a few remarkable places I've stumbled onto ...

In Darjeeling, I stayed at the Bellevue Hotel perched on the side of a mountain. The old hotel creaked when the winds blew because it was made entirely of timber – all four floors. Though the Himalayas can be cold and damp, potbellied stoves kept the hotel warm and cozy. Stokers came around every hour or two to keep the coals burning. On clear mornings, we could see Mount Everest out the bedroom windows as we drank our chai.

On the coast of Mozambique, there are a series of beach towns. Beach towns rarely impress me. They're often similar, whether in California, Australia, France or Argentina. But Barra Village was different. Being off season, it was easy to step into the Andaca restaurant, get a grilled fish and a beer, and ask for a place to stay. I was offered a spacious beach bungalow with Wi-Fi for $21/day. The restaurant had a great menu. The beach was wide, long and empty. Just down the beach was a fully-equipped dive shop. In the evenings, the bar was packed with South Africans rooting for their favorite rugby team. There was enough here to entertain me for a week.

My bargain beach bungalow in Barra

Farther up Mozambique's coast is Ilha de Moçambique, three kilometers long and 350 meters wide. It's hard to find on a map and took me two days to get there. This wasn't someplace that I'd planned to stay for more than a night or two. On arrival, I found the historic *casa de hóspedes* Café Central which looked like it was built in the 16th century. Parts of it probably were. An airy bedroom in the tower spoke to me. The barista downstairs explained that her island was once the capital of Portuguese East Africa. She drew a map on a napkin and sent me on my way. From parapets at the island's north end, I photographed coral reefs below. Inside the fortress, I found a chapel which is the oldest European building in the Southern Hemisphere. In the center of the island stands a pink, pillared palace which was for centuries the biggest hospital south of the Sahara. For lunch, I ate lobster curry cooked over a fire on the beach. The island felt simultaneously desolate and vibrant, like a living ghost town. Although people live and work here, little has changed for centuries. I spent my days and evenings wandering the cobblestone streets soaking up the atmosphere. At night, I fell asleep to the sounds of surf beneath my window and doves nesting in the eaves.

My café in Ilha de Moçambique

On the Bolivian shore of Lake Titicaca, I stumbled into an eccentric hotel, Las Olas, with fantastic Salvador Dali-inspired bungalows. Each bungalow was different, with high ceilings, sculpted balconies, stained glass windows, hidden alcoves and curved walls. The view over Lake Titicaca was breathtaking.

One day, on my way from Soddo to Arba Minch, I got lost in the Rift Valley of Ethiopia. I wandered up to the Paradise Lodge to ask for directions. A traditional round hut with balcony was available. I spent the afternoon watching huge flocks of birds descend from the valley's rim to the treetops in the canyons below. In the evenings, the birds nested in the trees around me, not without first squawking and cackling to each other.

In the interior of China, a tuk-tuk dropped me off in Dòngzú village, tucked away in a misty mountain valley. Across the river, I found a room at a family-run guest house, the Dòng Village Hotel. From my balcony, I watched the river slowly turn a waterwheel before flowing under a Wind & River Bridge – a covered, wooden bridge this mountain community is known for.

The water wheel and the wooden bridge

In Sulawesi's Gulf of Tomini, I took a motor launch to a tiny archipelago. Balanced on these rocks were a cluster of little houses, the Poya Lisa lodges. They were primitive. But for $15/day, I had house #17 all to myself. My porch was cantilevered over turquoise water. I went snorkeling every day. In the restaurant were a lively group of travelers and adventurers. We played chess, drank beer and shared stories.

The bungalows at Poya Lisa, Sulawesi, Indonesia

I mention these places by name because they're colorful, unique, exotic, idyllic and scenic. I hope to return to some of them someday. Of course, these places may disappear, close or change management by then. I'm glad I saw them when I did. I've discovered many places like these where I've stopped and stayed

for longer than I'd planned. These were all places I couldn't have booked in advance. In some cases, I hadn't even planned to stop. Without a fixed itinerary compelling me to continue to the next place, I was free to change my plans.

Not every place I've been has been someplace I wanted to linger:

• Kingston, Jamaica • Guatemala City San Pedro Sula, HN	Colorful lively cities, but not safe to walk around in at night
• Lima, Peru	A sprawling maze of commercial and residential buildings with less charm than Houston
• Conakry, Guinea	So much traffic and garbage that it's hard to go anywhere
• Nairobi, Kenya Dar es Salaam, TZ	Useful as starting points for visiting East Africa's great game reserves
• Bahrain	Although the great mosque offers free courses in Islam, I wasn't impressed by the Thai hookers and expensive hotels that rent rooms by the hour.
• Dubai	A good place to change planes, period
• Maldives Seychelles	There are other equally beautiful islands in the Indian Ocean with fewer tourists.
• Macao	Colorful history and great food, but overpowered by the world's biggest and most garish casinos
• Wuhan, China	China has more than 100 cities with more than a million inhabitants. By the time I got to Wuhan in 2016, I'd seen ten huge Chinese cities. They were all starting to look the same.

I'm satisfied to have seen these places once. Because I'd booked nothing in advance, I was free to leave on the next boat, plane, bus or train.

Of all my unexpected travel surprises, Kosrae is one of my all-time favorites. Coming here, my plans were open-ended. When my departing flight was cancelled, I was in no hurry to go somewhere else. This is how my unplanned residency on Kosrae began.

"Life's a one way ticket." – Colin Tegerdine

8 – Just Go!

"People will tell you where they've gone. They'll tell you where to go. But till you get there yourself you never really know" Amelia – Joni Mitchell

It's true. No matter how much you prepare for going someplace you haven't been before, you can't know what it'll be like until you get there. There is no substitute to actually going. Get on the bus, the boat, the bike, the ferry, the tram, the train or the plane. Show up and introduce yourself. People are always interested in meeting travelers, so you're likely to get a warm reception. If you want to go somewhere and do something, *just go!* Everything else will fall into place when you get there.

When I started traveling, I was more cautious than I am now. In those days, I'd research a destination thoroughly. I'd study the guidebooks. I'd browse the country's tourism pages. I'd check the U.S. State Department's website (travel.state.gov) for travel information. I'd send emails to arrange my tour, my job, my hotel, etc.

Although research can be useful and educational, I've learned not to overdo my planning. Often it's impossible to plan what's going to happen when I get somewhere. For example, I'm now marooned on a beautiful, tropical island in the Pacific that's 100% Coronavirus free. Could I have planned this? Nope.

Before coming to Kosrae, I knew little about this island. My friend Marvin told me "Kosrae is gorgeous and isolated. What more do you need?" This was a sufficient recommendation to deplane here. The only research I did in advance was to study Google Maps to figure out which side of the island had places where I might stay. Beyond that, I didn't book accommodations or make any plans.

As I was clearing immigration at the Kosrae airport, I overheard another traveler mention the Treelodge Resort. I asked her if it

was a good place. "It's the best place on the island" she said. That was all the research I needed. She offered me a ride. On our drive to the Treelodge, she told me useful facts about the island. That's how I got current, first-hand knowledge of where to go and what to do. Who needs a guidebook? An hour later, I was snorkeling in the Blue Hole just off shore. The next day, I was hiking to the Menke ruins and kayaking in the mangroves.

Here in Kosrae, I don't have a car. I get around by hitch-hiking. Every time I'm picked up, I introduce myself and make friends. I like to discover where my new friends work or what they do. Sometimes I ask "Can I be of service? Do you need a teacher? A geologist? A computer programmer?" Offering to volunteer often leads to an invitation to drop by someone's office to talk about a problem that needs to be solved, some consulting I might do, or maybe a class I might teach.

Ashley was one of the first people I met in Kosrae. She works for Kosrae's Historical Preservation Office (KHPO) whose mission is to document and preserve oral histories and archaeological sites.

Ashley at the Lelu Ruins

In our first conversation, we realized that KHPO could use a geologist. The following week, we took a field trip to the Lelu Ruins, which are similar to the ruins of Nan Madol on Pohnpei. At Lelu are the remains of a palace built on a man-made island created with basalt quarried from other parts of the island. I was asked questions like "Are these stones naturally shaped like this – or were they carved?" "How old are these rocks?" "Did they all come from the same quarry?" "How much do they weigh?" Soon, I was a member of the team.

This was a job I could never have applied for. It wasn't advertised. There was no posting on the Internet looking for a geologist to explore ruins on a remote topical island. I simply showed up and made myself useful. I learned this lesson a few years ago on my first trip to Ethiopia.

Ethiopia was on my short list of places I wanted to visit sooner rather than later. I'd heard stories about what an amazing place it is. It can be a somewhat intimidating destination, though. I'd also heard that it's a rugged country with inhospitable mountains, impenetrable jungles, dangerous animals and poisonous deserts.

When I started considering a trip to Ethiopia, I was dating a nurse named Deb. I told Deb about my interest in Ethiopia. My enthusiasm was infectious. Deb knew a doctor who volunteered at the Soddo Christian Hospital in southwestern Ethiopia. Soon, we were planning a trip to Ethiopia together. We found the website where we could apply for volunteer positions at the hospital. Deb would volunteer as a nurse. I hoped that the hospital could use someone with computer skills.

The application process was long and tedious. We submitted scans of our passports and immunization records. We got complete physical examinations to attest to our good health. We obtained two references each. We composed the required essays explaining why we wanted to come to Soddo to volunteer at the hospital. We submitted all our paperwork. We waited three weeks. Then, we

received a terse email informing us that our application had been denied – without explanation.

We were puzzled. We reviewed all the steps and requirements of the application process. We composed new essays. We revised our availability dates to be as flexible as possible. We resubmitted all our paperwork again. We waited three more weeks and received the same denial without explanation that we'd received the first time.

A couple of months later, our relationship soured. Although we both still wanted to go to Ethiopia, we were no longer interested in going together as a couple. Without confirmed volunteer positions in Ethiopia, Deb opted to spend Christmas in Muskegon. I went to Barcelona. On my flight to Spain, I read Abraham Verghese's *Cutting for Stone* which made me more determined than ever to volunteer at a hospital in rural Ethiopia.

From Spain, I meandered across the Mediterranean until I ended up in Addis Ababa, the transportation hub for Ethiopia and much of East Africa. I got to know the city well and found the district where the hospitals are located. I visited all the hospitals and eventually found the administrative office for the Soddo Christian Hospital. The office didn't have regular hours. The office was closed the first three times I dropped by, but I persisted. One afternoon, the office was open. I went inside, introduced myself and explained that I'd come to Ethiopia to volunteer at the hospital. I asked "What's the best way for me to get to Soddo?" The kind woman at the desk replied "There's a van to the hospital tomorrow morning at 7:00 am. It's a long ride. Bring your lunch."

I returned the next morning at 6:45 am. Sure enough, there was a white Toyota van parked outside the office. "Soddo Christian Hospital" was stenciled on one side. The driver put my little bag in the back and told me to sit anywhere. After all those hours that Deb and I had spent applying for volunteer positions, here I was sitting on a van to Soddo having done nothing more than ask how to get there. I still didn't have a volunteer position though.

Two American doctors joined the van at 6:55 am. We left Addis Ababa on time – not typical for African transportation. The ride to Soddo took about eight hours. The first two hours went by quickly because the road was paved. I listened as my two traveling companions discussed the hospital's problems. The hospital had recently received a dozen new computers which needed to be configured and connected to the Internet. The hospital also lacked a database for managing the pharmacy's inventory.

About the time the paved road ended, they asked me who I was and what I was doing on their bus. I introduced myself and said "I'm going to Soddo to volunteer." They asked me what sort of work I could do. I explained that I installed computer networks and built databases. This was good news to my future employers. There would be plenty of work to keep me busy at Soddo. For the next six hours, the doctors and I worked out all the details of what I'd be doing for the hospital. Meanwhile, we ate our lunches and got "African massages" as we bumped and jostled along the rough roads of southwestern Ethiopia. By the time we got to Soddo, we were old friends and I was hired as their volunteer computer guy.

In Soddo, I toured the hospital and was introduced to the staff. The question came up as to where I would stay. One of the other doctors had just returned to the States for a family emergency. Would I like his house for $8/day? You bet! The house was a comfortable four-bedroom western-built home. It had all the conveniences of an American home including Wi-Fi. The house came with a housekeeper who did laundry. She would cook me three meals a day if I gave her money to go to the market to buy food for herself and for me.

For the next few weeks, I stayed busy. I was exactly the person the hospital needed. Soon, all the computers were talking to each other, to their printers and to the Internet. I created a database for the pharmacy. I got to know these doctors. Many had come to Ethiopia where, as they put it, they could be doctors instead of bureaucrats. Back home, they were so burdened with paperwork they could barely do their jobs. Filling out reports and patient notes took up more than half their time.

The entrance to the Soddo Christian Hospital campus

Here in Soddo, they were *real* doctors. A man might stagger into the hospital with a spear stuck into his side, after a three day trek getting there. The doctors went right to work to help the injured man. There were no insurance forms to fill out. If the patient lived, his family brought food and flowers as payment. If he died, his family would understand. These doctors could see and care for three or four times the number of patients they might see on a typical day at a hospital in America. I was impressed by how well this hospital worked.

I eventually found the person who reviewed on-line volunteer applications. She didn't remember having received my application. She said the hospital often doesn't have specific needs for volunteers or available housing. So, it's easier to just decline without explanation. My unannounced arrival avoided anyone having to make a decision. My skills were needed and I was ready to work when I arrived. This was a job I could never have applied for. I simply had to show up and be ready to work.

I learned a lot about Ethiopia when I stopped being a tourist and started working with real people. Just going there was the right thing to do.

While we're talking about Ethiopia, I want to say a few things about this marvelous country. This is a land of magic and mystery, where stories are often bigger than life. For example, Ethiopia claims to possess the Ark of the Covenant, complete with a golden pot full of manna, Aaron's rod, and the original, authentic stone tablets of the Ten Commandments carved by God and given to Moses. Although no one has seen the Ark for more than 2,000 years, the residents of Aksum in northern Ethiopia will swear that it's hidden in one of their churches ... where no one can see it.

Sometimes, the stories and situations in Ethiopia are so astonishing, they can only be true. In the town of Aksum, I hired a guide named "Internet." Asked how he got his name, this is what he told me:

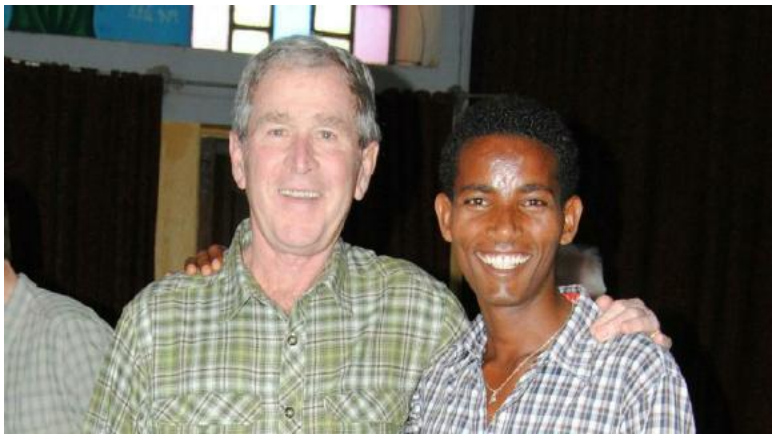
Before I was born, my father had a shop where he sold many strange things like toothpaste, deodorant and books in languages that no one could read. One day, a visitor came to our village saying that he needed to check his email. My uncle took him to the post office. The foreign man explained again that he wanted to check his Eeeee-mail and that he needed INTERNET. So, my uncle took him to my father's store.

My father showed the man all around his store, but the man wasn't satisfied. "Where is the internet?" he kept asking. My father apologized and told the man that he had just sold the last one that morning.

From that day on, whenever visitors came to our village asking for internet, they were brought to my father's shop, hoping that there might be some internet available that day. My father didn't know what an internet was, but he understood that it must be a wondrous and marvelous thing that everyone in the world loved and wanted. So, that's why he named me "Internet."

Ethiopia is a land of shortages and surprises. People make do with what they have. Ethiopians are generous, resourceful and intelligent. When they're not working hard, they know how to sing, dance and laugh. Internet is now about twenty years old. He

speaks fluent English and works as a tour guide taking international visitors to churches in Aksum that might contain the Ark of the Covenant. As you can see from this photo he emailed me, he's starting to make a name for himself among American tourists.



One of my most memorable unplanned adventures happened in Chile in 2010.

This story begins in late 2009. After teaching geology and algebra for UMUC at Iwakuni Marine Corps Air Station in Japan for two years, I got restless. Although Japan is a wonderful place and I had a beautiful inland sea on which to sail my sloop (more about that later), I needed a change of scenery and diet. I wanted to learn Spanish, eat spicy food and be in a warm place.

An excuse for leaving Japan came via a research paper published in *Physics of the Earth and Planetary Interiors* predicting a major earthquake on the central coast of Chile. The authors predicted a repeat of the Darwin earthquake of 1835 based on a ten-year GPS study of the tilting and flexing of Chile's coast. I told my boss in Tokyo I had to go to Chile for the earthquake. His reply was what I expected: "What earthquake?! If you leave your job, you'll be breaking your contract. Don't expect to come back."

Although I liked my job, my wanderlust was calling me. I said goodbye to my students at Iwakuni MCAS, emptied my apartment and flew to Guatemala. I went directly to Antigua for a crash course in Spanish. As this was my first visit to Latin America, I didn't know what to expect. Antigua turned out to be picturesque, friendly, clean, inexpensive and full of language schools. It has a beautiful setting nestled between three volcanoes, one of which is active. Music, color and delicious smells are everywhere. Antigua is one of the oldest cities in the Americas. The cathedral dates from 1541. It must have been rather impressive before being destroyed – more than once – by earthquakes. There were two moderate temblors the first week I was there. These little *terremotos* (earthquakes) put me in the mood for going to Chile.

A Spanish language school was easy to find. One-on-one, face-to-face Spanish lessons cost $4/hour, including study materials and fresh Guatemalan coffee. The school also helped me find a homestay with a local family. My host family did an admirable job of pretending they didn't understand a word of English. With nearly full immersion, my progress was *muy rápido*. I spent every morning at my Spanish school drinking coffee with my tutor. After two weeks, my Spanish was functional. I was ready to continue my mission.

Not knowing exactly when Chile's earthquake would occur, I didn't hurry. My route to Chile went via Buenos Aires where I stayed in a hotel near the Casa Rosada, famous for the balcony from which Eva Perón addressed her adoring crowds during the 1940´s. To practice my Spanish, I frequented cafés and tango shows. From there, I took buses south to Patagonia. The Argentinian long distance buses were first rate. On my first evening, the steward asked if I'd like fish or steak, with white or red wine. The drive to the southern tip of South America took four days. Towards the end, we endured hours of gravel roads that crossed into Chile and then back into Argentina (more about these border crossings later).

I came to the end of the road in Ushuaia, the southernmost city in the world. Like the northernmost cities of the world, Ushuaia is

cold, wet and windy. Of course, I packed no warm clothes. *No hay problema*. Ushuaia is an ideal place to buy a hat, scarf, jacket and boots, ideal for the climate.

The scenery was stunning. Besides being a beautiful little city, Ushuaia is the trailhead for hikes into the mountains and national parks nearby. A quick look at a map showed that I would have to pass through these rugged mountains to get to Chile. This meant another ferry across the Magellan Straits and a scenic twelve-hour bus ride to Punta Arenas. From there, another bus took me to Torres del Paine, Chile´s most visited national park. Chile's earthquake hadn't happened yet, so I figured I had time to hike up the valleys and witness the awesome power of ice and rock falling from hanging glaciers.

Torres del Paine National Park, Chile

On February 27 at 3:34 am, while I was camped in these mountains, Chile had its earthquake. With a magnitude of 8.8, it was the fifth largest earthquake ever recorded, and it occurred exactly where predicted. Because of the earthquake, transportation north towards the epicenter was problematic. Airports were closed. Bridges collapsed. Bus routes were suspended. The only transport service unaffected by the earthquake was the NAVIMAG ferry, which services the inland waterways of southern Chile. This ferry is the primary means for freight, livestock and people to travel between Tierra del Fuego and central Chile. There was a

boat leaving that day. Because few people were crazy enough to want to go into the epicentral zone, I got a discounted stateroom all to myself.

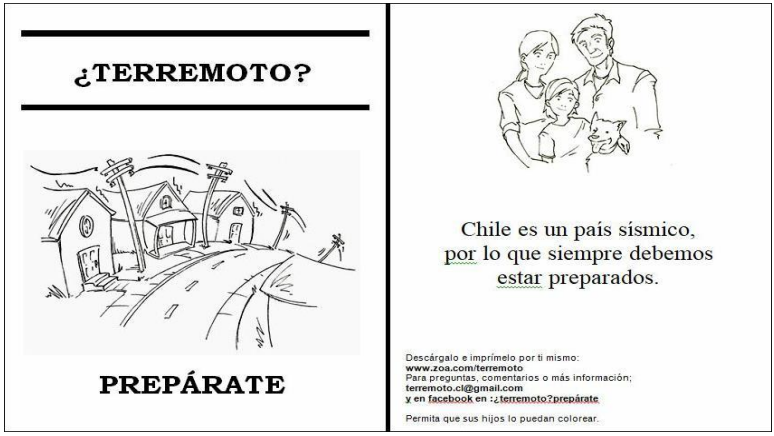
The ferry ride featured spectacular scenery and entertaining co-travellers, including Marvin and Trish from Sausalito, California whose easy-going style and love of adventure made them two of my favorite traveling companions. The weather was unusually sunny and clear – perfect for watching islands and fjords go by. Dozens of glaciers pour down into this inland waterway. Our ferry made detours for close-up views of walls of calving ice.

The ferry delivered its passengers and cargo to Puerto Montt. From there, I headed north by bus stopping for an overnight at Puerto Varas, a picturesque town on the shores of Lago Llanquihue, the second largest lake in Chile. Across the lake rises Volcán Osorno. I was now close enough to the epicenter to feel the aftershocks, several of which were quite strong.

A week after the main shock, I arrived in Concepción, Chile's second largest city. Concepción is famous for its Plaza Independencia where two centuries ago Bernardo O'Higgins proclaimed Chile's independence from Spain. The plaza was now a pile of rubble. Five percent of the buildings in the city had collapsed. Twenty percent of the structures were unsafe to go near. At the University of Concepción, an explosive fire originating in the Chemistry Department had destroyed half the campus. The most dramatic damage was in the nearby port of Dichato. Three tsunami waves washed over this town after the earthquake. The largest wave was seven meters high. Houses and boats were picked up by the waves and carried inland as far as eight kilometers. The combination of an earthquake followed by a tsunami shattered and washed away all the roads along the coast. Without roads or bridges, the only way to travel was by mountain bike.

I found myself at the center of a major relief effort. I volunteered with doctors, firefighters, police, architects and city planners. I interviewed survivors and published damage maps. Thanks to a

functional Internet, I exchanged data with seismologists at Berkeley. I created a pamphlet called *Terremoto Prepárate* to advise folks on how to survive in the aftershock zone. My daughter provided the illustrations. (Thank you, Mikka!) Student volunteers printed and distributed 10,000 copies.



Terremoto Prepárate was later used to teach earthquake preparedness in Concepción's elementary schools, where it became a popular coloring book.

As the only seismologist in Concepción, I was recognized for my work. Radio and TV stations interviewed me. *Gracias a dios* for those Spanish lessons in Guatemala! *Terremoto Prepárate* was advertised on the front page of the local newspapers. Unbeknownst to me, someone mailed one of those newspapers to College Park, Maryland.

Chile has great wine, delicious seafood, fresh fruits and our planet's biggest earthquakes. The largest earthquake ever recorded was a magnitude 9.5 earthquake in southern Chile in 1960. The memory of that earthquake is still fresh. The efficiency and generosity with which the Chileans responded to their disaster in 2010 were commendable. Despite the earthquake's magnitude and the damage it caused, the death toll was only 525. In two months, our cleanup operation was complete.

Dichato town after the tsunami, with architect Jaime Salazar

What was learned? Our damage maps identified geometric relationships between standing waves formed during the earthquake and Concepción's topography. With this information, we were able to tell the city government where not to rebuild. This research was published by the Geotechnical Extreme Events Reconnaissance Association (whose motto is "Turning Disaster into Knowledge") and sponsored by the National Science Foundation.

My work done, I headed north to Santiago, the most technologically advanced city in South America. Continuing north, I visited the Salar de Atacama, the world´s driest desert. It´s so dry here that parts of this valley have never recorded rain. In Peru, I paused in Arequipa where bull fights are notable for featuring contests where bulls fight each other. The fight ends when one bull runs away. Not far from Arequipa is the Colca Canyon where condors soar overhead like small airplanes and the canyon plunges 3,400 meters from the tops of snow-capped volcanoes down to a roaring whitewater river. My route led from there to Machu Picchu which I reached in five days via the Salkantay Trail – a path less traveled by. Later, I caught a river boat from the muddy frontier town of Puerto Maldonaldo down the Río Madre de Dios, a tributary of the Amazon. I fell asleep in the EcoAmazonia Lodge to the sounds of howler monkeys and awoke

in the morning to the screech of parrots. None of this was planned. I just went.

As my final stop in Latin America, I went to the Galapagos. Although this is usually an expensive adventure, here's a travel tip for budget-minded travelers. To go to the Galapagos, book nothing in advance. Plan on spending a few days in Quito first. Have coffee (your treat) with several travel agents. Visit each one every day, until one of them has a tour boat that's almost filled. I found an agent who needed one more passenger to fill a cruise. If I could pay in cash that afternoon, she could put me on an eight-day cruise at half price and throw in the airfare. Sold! I visited six Galapagos Islands. I felt like I was in a National Geographic documentary seeing frigate birds and red and blue footed boobies, snorkeling with penguins and Hawksbill turtles, walking with giant land tortoises, and basking in the sun with marine and land iguanas. Sea Lions were everywhere, playing like puppies.

When I finally returned to America, I learned that a newspaper from Concepción had made its way to the desk of the president of UMUC. With glowing reports of my work in organizing Chile's earthquake relief efforts, the newspaper credited me – incorrectly – as having predicted the earthquake. I received an email from the University president welcoming me back to my old job, with a promotion and a generous check to cover my travel expenses.

Don't make too many plans. Just go!

9 – Say Yes

I like to say "Yes!" as often as possible. I try to say yes to invitations, to opportunities, to suggestions and to new ideas. This isn't so much a travel rule as a generally good way to live. When you say yes to something, you're taking a chance that whatever you're saying yes to will turn out well.

In the interest of total disclosure, I'll admit that saying yes to everything hasn't always worked out. Although this book is mostly about my good decisions, I've made more bad decisions than good ones. About two thirds of the time when I've said yes to an offer or an invitation, it's been an embarrassment, a mistake, or occasionally a disaster.

One sunny afternoon in 1975, I was traipsing across the Berkeley campus when two pretty girls invited me to their house for dinner. Without hesitation, I said yes and asked if I could bring the wine. They laughed and told me that wouldn't be necessary. I hurried to their house that evening. It was a big house in an upscale neighborhood in north Berkeley. The door was open. As soon as I stepped in, I was surrounded by robed apostles of a Korean man I'd never heard of. Four hours later, I knew more than I ever wanted to know about Reverend Sun Myung Moon. Dinner was plain rice and lentils. Ugh.

In 1983, I said yes to helping a friend start a computer company. I worked 80 hours a week for a year. At the end of the year, I discovered my friend had been cooking the books and embezzling the company's revenue. The company filed for bankruptcy. My last four paychecks bounced. My credit card was maxed out and I was broke. I applied for unemployment to pay rent and buy groceries. Still, the experience wasn't a total waste. I learned what I might've learned had I spent a year in business school. With experience gained, I started my own computer consultancy and was more successful the second time around.

In 1998, my children's school called for parent volunteers to help beautify the campus. There was one job that no one wanted to do: Clean the dirt and leaves out of an unused shed behind the school. I said yes and convinced another father to join me. We spent the afternoon with rakes and shovels. The next week, he and I were sick with high fevers and rashes. Later, another school parent, a mycologist, verified that the decayed leaves were the habitat of a toxic fungus.

In 2002, a girlfriend offered to write a training manual for some software that I'd produced. I said yes. Six months later, our relationship ended. The training manual still hadn't been written, but she sued for breach of contract. Although the lawsuit was eventually settled, I had to spend a lot of time and money talking to lawyers.

In 2006, a neighbor asked to borrow $500. He offered as collateral a sleek red kayak, life jackets and paddles. He seemed like a nice guy and I knew where he lived, so I said yes. The following Monday, his house was vacant, his car was gone and the kayak leaked like a sieve. At least, I was able to sell the life jackets and paddles at a garage sale.

In 2012, I was riding a subway in Beijing. The train was packed and I was lucky to have a seat. An elderly woman with a cane hobbled onto the train and stood in front of me. She gazed pitifully at me with a forlorn look that said "May I please sit down?" Yes, of course. I stood up and gave her my seat. Thirty seconds later, after negotiating with a well-dressed woman standing next to me, the crone grinned, popped up, and tucked her cane into her bag – having sold her seat to the well-dressed woman for one yuan.

In 2016, I said yes to crewing on a catamaran bound from Singapore to Darwin. My skipper turned out to be an incompetent sailor and a con man. His yacht had a lot of deferred maintenance. Halfway between Singapore and Jakarta, I discovered a leak in the starboard hull. Then, one rudder broke off and the navigation system shorted out. By the time we limped into Jakarta, only one engine worked – and at only one speed, slow. I realized that my

yes should have been a no. I slung my pack over my shoulder, marched out of the Jakarta marina and never looked back. I learned later that the catamaran was reported as a derelict ship, abandoned in the Arafura Sea. Still not a total loss, the adventure taught me celestial navigation.

The catamaran that barely made it to Jakarta

Although saying yes has gotten me into trouble or turned out to be a mistake more often than not, my successful yesses have more than made up for all the losses incurred by my mistakes. If saying yes leads to wonderful results one time in three, that's good enough for me. The first time I said yes led to one of my most rewarding scientific experiences.

In 1973, I was a sophomore at Washington University in Saint Louis. I was a geeky, insecure, nineteen-year-old kid. At that point in my life, I could confidently do only three things: Do my physics homework, paddle a canoe and sleep. I was clueless about everything else. One morning after my class on Electricity & Magnetism, I was having a drink at a water fountain in the hallway of Crow Hall. A large bearded gentleman in a white lab coat was striding down the hallway with a determined look. He noticed me at the water fountain, with water dribbling down my chin. He sized me up and said "You! You want a job?"

Without a lot of thought, I said "yes."

The large bearded man in the white lab coat replied "4:00 pm, 4th floor, Tuesday." Then he disappeared into an office.

Typical of a nineteen-year-old kid, I didn't give this conversation a lot of thought. I didn't ask what I'd be doing, what I might be paid, or how many hours a week I'd be employed. But being a geeky kid, if nothing else, I knew how to be punctual. At 4:00 pm on Tuesday, I reported to the 4th floor of Crow Hall.

When I got to the 4th floor, I realized I'd never been to this building's 4th floor. I knew no one who had. The entrance to the 4th floor was barricaded by a sophisticated surveillance and security system. There was a video camera mounted above the door pointed at me. The door itself was heavy steel. There were no windows or signs to indicate what was on the other side of the door. There wasn't even a doorbell to call attention to the fact that I was waiting to go in. It all looked like something out of *Star Trek* – rather advanced technology for 1973.

I checked my watch. It was 4:00 pm. Above the doorknob was an electronic keypad which one used to gain access to the 4th floor. As I was about to try pushing buttons on the keypad, the door opened. A young man in a white lab coat asked "Are you the guy Dr. Walker hired?"

I asked "Does Dr. Walker have a beard?"

The man in the white lab coat said "Yep, that would be him."

"Then, yes, I'm the guy he hired."

The man ushered me into the 4th floor and instructed me "Okay, go down the hall to the first door on the right. Go in and follow the instructions on the wall."

I thought to myself "So far, this is a fairly easy job." Going through the first door on the right, I found myself in a small locker

room. A sign on the wall instructed me to put all my clothing, including my socks and underwear, into the locker provided and then to continue to the shower. After showering, I did as the next sign on the wall instructed which was to stand under bright ultra-violet lights with my eyes closed while counting slowly to 100. Next I powdered my body with an antiseptic-smelling white powder. In the next room, there was a fan and vacuum system with which I removed the antiseptic white powder. On hangers in the last room were hospital scrubs, a hairnet, slippers and gloves. After donning my new clothes, I pushed open the final door and stepped into a large glass box surrounded by nine men and two women wearing white lab coats. Among the observers outside the glass box was the man with the beard.

Dr. Robert M. Walker introduced himself and welcomed me to his laboratory. With his arms inside heavy black gloves that reached inside the big glass box, he pointed to an aluminum cylinder about sixty centimeters long and ten centimeters in diameter and commanded, “Open that cylinder and let’s see what’s inside.”

I looked at Dr. Walker. I looked at the cylinder. With my gloved hands, I picked it up. The cylinder was fairly heavy and it rattled when shaken. I carried it over to the table in front of Dr. Walker. The cap at one end of the cylinder was threaded on. I unscrewed the cap. I tipped the cylinder onto the table. Out of the cylinder came a few dozen rocks, some pebbles and a handful of sand.

The scientists around the outside of the glass box pressed forward to peer at the rocks. With his arms inside the rubber gloves, Dr. Walker picked up one rock, examined it through a magnifying glass attached to the inside of the glass wall, and then passed the rock to one of his colleagues. I stood quietly for about fifteen minutes as each rock was picked up, passed around and then returned to my gloved hand.

When the scientists were finished examining the rocks, Dr. Walker asked me “Do you know what these are?”

I brightly replied "No, sir!" knowing I was about to find out what this was all about.

Dr. Walker eyed his young colleagues as if to ask "Didn't anybody tell this kid what he was in for?" Then, Dr. Walker smiled through his big beard and said "These just came in from Apollo 17." I got goose bumps.

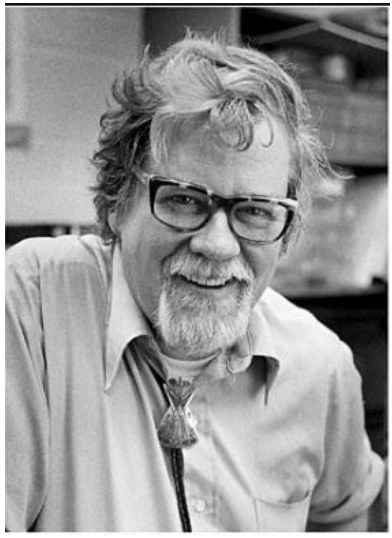
I spent the next year and a half working in Dr. Walker's lab. My first job was to weigh and catalog every moon rock. Next, I was shown how to use a microscope to estimate the makeup of each rock. Most rocks were granite, so I had to learn the difference between quartz, feldspar and olivine. Then, I was taught how to make thin sections using a diamond bladed rock saw. I was clumsy with the rock saw at first. One day, I accidentally obliterated about ten grams of moon rock – with an intrinsic value of a few million dollars. Knowing that every centigram of moon rock had to be accounted for, I swept up the rock dust, weighed it, and made an appropriate entry in my work log. At the end of my shift, I reported my accident to Dr. Walker. I expected to be fired – or worse. He earned my enduring respect when he smiled and said "That's science. See you tomorrow."

After I'd made the thin sections, I mounted them on slides and put them into an electron microscope so I could count the cosmic ray tracks in the quartz crystals. Although counting microscopic cosmic ray tracks for hours on end is about the most tedious job I've ever done, I felt an adrenaline rush the whole time I was doing it. These microscopic holes in the quartz crystals resulted from alpha particles blasted from the sun at 10% the speed of light. They had traveled 150 million kilometers through space onto and into the rocks on the surface of the moon. The density of cosmic ray tracks I found in these quartz crystals enabled Dr. Walker and his team to determine that the sun has been shining (i.e. undergoing nuclear fusion to produce light and energy) for 4.56 billion years.

Although my job paid only $4/hour, I didn't care. Dr. Walker later told me he wished he'd been the one to open the Apollo 17

cylinder. However, he would've had to shave off his beard to go into the Clean Room. That was something he didn't want to do, and neither did any of his lab assistants. This was 1973 when it was cool to look like Frank Zappa. I was hired because I had a short haircut and no facial hair.

In my final year at Washington University, I decided that I needed to take a geology course. I went over to the geology department to find out what was available. The receptionist at the geology department informed me flatly that I was ineligible for an introductory geology class because this was my last year at the school. I was sorry to hear this. I told her that I'd been working on the 4th floor of Crow Hall, that I'd learned a lot about Moon rocks, and that I'd hoped to learn about Earth rocks. Just then, the department head passed by and overheard the last bit of what I'd said. He told his secretary to please send me into his office. I spent the next hour answering questions about Dr. Walker's research. At the end of our discussion, the department head told his secretary to enroll me immediately in his Geology 101 and to give me the course textbook, for free.



Dr. Robert M. Walker

Saying yes to Dr. Walker led to my going to graduate school at Berkeley and getting a PhD in seismology.

Another of my favorite opportunities to say yes happened forty years later in Turkey. I was hiking in the Pontic Alps of eastern Turkey on my way to the Sumela Monastery. This is an Eastern Orthodox monastery founded in the 4th century. It's a spectacular pilgrim site which draws several hundred pilgrims and tourists

every day. It's spectacular because the monastery is built flush against a high, vertical cliff overlooking a beautiful, wooded valley.

I was minding my own business finding my way through the forest when I heard music. I thought this was odd because it was Ramadan. In Turkey, there can be no eating, singing, dancing or drinking between sunrise and sunset during Ramadan. I was curious, so I followed the music through the forest. I came down to a small river. On the far side of the river were men and women eating, singing, dancing and obviously drinking, too. Although the men were large and burly with big moustaches, I knew these people weren't Turks because the women didn't have shawls on their heads.

The Sumela Monastery, near Trabzon, Turkey

Someone in the party saw me and pointed across the river at me. The musicians put down their instruments. The dancing stopped. Two large men stepped into the river and waded across with determined looks on their faces. I wasn't sure what I was in for, but figured that my best defense was to smile, and to apologize for interrupting their party and invading their privacy.

The two men didn't speak English. They didn't speak Turkish either. They took me by the arms and carried me across the river. Then they put grilled chicken in one hand, a glass of wine in the

other and introduced me to the prettiest women I'd seen in months. These women had eyes – beautiful, dark, inviting eyes. They also spoke excellent English. They were English teachers from Batumi, Georgia, just across the Turkish border. They were on a field trip to visit the Sumela Monastery, which they explained was built by Georgians and which ought to belong to Georgia even though it's in Turkey. As it was Ramadan, they had hiked deep into the forest for their picnic so as not to offend the Turks who would be aghast at their violation of the rules of Ramadan.

I spent the next three hours eating fabulous food that contained a lot of eggplant, tasting Georgian wines which may be the best wines in the world, and learning to do Georgian dances. At the end of our party, as we packed up the leftovers, one of the beautiful English teachers, named Magda, asked me if I would like to teach English at her school. I considered her invitation for about two milliseconds before saying yes. Then, I added that I needed to return to Trabzon to collect my bag, but that I could return in an hour to ride with them in their van back to Batumi. Magda laughed and said "It's July! School's out for summer." She gave me her email address and suggested that I come to Batumi in October.

For the next three months, Magda and I exchanged emails to arrange the details of my teaching assignment. Georgia used to be part of the Soviet Union and remains hobbled by Russian bureaucracy. The Georgian government would require a lot of paperwork for the school to hire me. This might postpone my teaching assignment by a year. I suggested instead that I come to Batumi as a tourist. With the school's permission, I would visit the school every day to observe the students. If, while I was in a classroom, a teacher wished to leave to do something else, I could take over as a substitute teacher.

The only other detail to be resolved was to find someplace for me to live. My housing was taken care of by an extraordinary coincidence. While traveling in eastern Turkey, I bumped into my dear friend Amy from Barbados. The last time I'd seen Amy, she was in San Francisco negotiating with venture capitalists about her

start-up computer company. That was twelve years ago. Amy now owned an apartment in Batumi which she was happy to rent to me. Amy's apartment was within walking distance of Magda's school. I love chance encounters with old friends in faraway places.

In October, I arrived in Batumi with a one-way ticket and no specific plans for where to go afterwards. Although I'd expected to stay in Batumi for only one month, the immigration officer stamped my passport with a one-year visa. Amy's apartment was on the beach overlooking the Black Sea. My downstairs neighbor had a vineyard and made sure that I was never without wine. It was an easy decision to extend my teaching job at Batumi's Public School #9 from one month to three months.

My job was to teach English. The school hadn't seen a native English speaker for years. The teachers were delighted and excited to have me there. The first problem to solve was that the school taught English using a teacher-centered method modeled after Russian schools. In this system, the teacher reads a line from a book and then the students repeat it. Observing from the sidelines, I saw that only a handful of students, those sitting at the front of the class, were trying to speak and pronounce the words correctly. The students in the back of the class were staring out the window. Some even had their books upside down.

Working with Magda and the other English teachers, we created new ways to teach English. The younger children learned English by playing word and picture matching games. The fifth and sixth graders had spelling bees in which they not only had to spell words correctly, but also had to use the words in a sentence. Seventh and eighth graders listened to American and British popular music, talked about what the lyrics meant, and explained why they liked certain songs better than others.

Incidentally, Magda's school had never before held a spelling bee. Spelling bees are unknown to Georgians because their alphabet is perfectly phonetic. Each of their 33 letters makes only one sound. There's also no capitalization.

The Georgian alphabet, vowels shown in red

Magda taught fourth grade English. Her class was learning to read from a picture book full of animals and colorful characters. After reading the book aloud in class, the students and I created a story using the vocabulary in the book. Then, I wrote a script for their story with a speaking part for every child.

In our story, a group of children climb into a hot-air balloon. It rises in the air and floats across the ocean. Below them, the children see whales, dolphins, sharks and turtles. Suddenly, an eagle lands on the balloon and punctures it with his talons. The balloon crashes on an island with tigers, lions, elephants and hippos. To return home, the children turn their balloon's gondola into a boat and use the remains of their hot-air balloon to make a sail. The children sail back across the sea to meet their mothers and fathers on the beach waiting for them with pizza.

Okay, okay, I know it was a silly story. But our little play used more than half the vocabulary in the 4th grade English textbook. This story allowed every child to have a speaking part, too – which is important. With the script written, parts were assigned, dialog was memorized, and the children made costumes and props. Magda added three dancing and singing numbers with music from Michael Jackson, Crosby, Stills & Nash, and Lizi Japaridze (Georgia's heartthrob of 2014).

The play was performed in the school's auditorium, which hadn't been used for years. Every parent of a 4th grader attended with video camera in hand. There was tension and excitement backstage. Magda soothed the students who had stage fright. The curtain rose. The children delivered all their lines with big voices and well-practiced pronunciation. There were no technical glitches and no one forgot their lines. The audience was amazed and thrilled to see their children actually speaking English. Fathers cheered. Mothers cried. After a standing ovation, there were hugs all around. The school's headmaster told Magda he wanted to see an English speaking play from every grade the following year.

Magda's 4th grade class at Public School #9

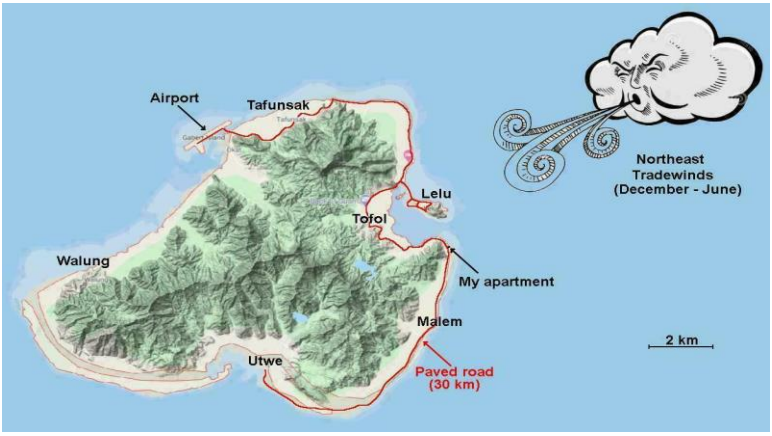
Back in the classroom after the play, there were songs, smiles and pizza. I told the students how proud I was of them and they thanked me – in English. I'm still in touch with Magda and the other teachers in Batumi. After I visit the 35 countries in the world I haven't seen, I'll return to Georgia. Georgia is one of my favorite places in the world.

When the pandemic struck, I said yes to staying in Kosrae. Say yes and see what happens. This is good advice not just for travel, but for life.

10 – Public Transit

A successful nomad instinctively knows how to get from one place to another. For me, the best travel adventures include making friends along the way. My favorite way to meet people is by riding public transit. Some of my best friends are people I met on boats, trains, planes or buses.

Kosrae has one paved road thirty kilometers long. It goes halfway around the island, from the airport on the island's north side to Utwe village on the south side. The road follows the eastern shore and is always close to the water. The speed limit is 40 kph, enforced by frequent potholes and an occasional speed bump.



Although most places have some form of public transit, Kosrae has none. I get around by hitch-hiking. At 40 kph (or less), drivers have plenty of time to see me and my smile. Sometimes I wave if I recognize the driver or the car. I never have to wait more than five minutes to get a ride. The only reason I sometimes have to wait for as long as five minutes is because there aren't many vehicles on the road.

Kosrae has little to offer in terms of modern entertainment. There are no movie theaters, bowling alleys, golf courses or shopping malls. For entertainment, people pile into pickup trucks and ride

around together, singing, joking, eating and waving at friends. My favorite rides are in pickup trucks.

My favorite form of public transit on Kosrae

The drive from my apartment to Tofol is enough time for me to learn someone's name, who they're related to and where they work. If I'm going to Lelu or Tafunsak, there might be enough time to get someone's life story. I often meet people I'd hoped to meet this way, such as government officials, school administrators and teachers. If I bought a car in Kosrae, I wouldn't meet nearly as many people.

The other morning after the rain stopped, I decided to run errands. I stepped out to the road and put out my thumb. As usual, the first car that came along stopped. Kosraeans like to pick up hitch-hikers. I never know who I'll meet. My first ride was with a fellow I'm doing a presentation with soon about Kosrae's Land Use Plan. Our ten-minute ride together was enough time to plan the agenda for our meeting.

In Tofol, I climbed the hill to the site where a new hospital expansion is being built. This is one of my volunteer projects. The hillside above the construction site has been carved away by bulldozers to make room for six prefab buildings. The building engineers asked me to evaluate the excavation site in terms of its landslide risk. After my inspection, I found all three engineers

standing at the construction site with their clipboards. Our meeting took about ten minutes.

From the construction site, my next ride was with the security guy who works at the airport. He brought me up to date on Covid-19 rules and regulations for flying in and out of Kosrae. I'll need to know these details soon. My third ride was with a woman who works at the Education Office. She attended a few of my recent public science seminars at the college. She gave me good feedback on topics that she'd like me to present. She dropped me off at the grocery in Lelu.

After I finished my shopping, I headed to the Treelodge Resort to make reservations for an upcoming party. I was picked up by a man named Kilafwa, whom I hadn't met before. As we drove along in his pickup, I learned his wife is one of the teachers with whom I previously co-taught a class. Kosrae is a small world, so it's not surprising that someone picks me up who's only one degree of separation from me. After my errand at the resort, I put out my thumb again. I was picked up by Hiram, who works in government administration and wanted to discuss environmental issues. He gave me a ride to his office in Tofol and invited me in for coffee so we could continue our discussion.

My last ride home was with a man I'd never met before. His name was Sam. I hoisted my grocery bags into the bed of his pickup and came around to the cab. His ten-year-old daughter stood outside, behind the cab, enjoying the breeze as we drove along. Sam was in the U.S. Army. He served two deployments in Iraq. When his tours ended, he came home to retire in peaceful Kosrae. He never wants to go back to the stress of being in a war zone again. Sam is the brother of my landlord's wife. Even though Sam was planning to stop at his house, he insisted on driving me all the way to my apartment which was out of his way. "It's no trouble!" he insisted. Along the way, we stopped at a roadside stand for Sam to get a bag of betel nut to chew. As we drove along, Sam spat red juice out the window as we chatted. Sam is the sort of guy I'd never meet on an airplane. Hitch-hiking enables me to rub elbows (literally) with the people who live here.

Public transit isn't always a pleasure. In China, I once found myself in a second class train car from Lanzhou to Xining in which almost every man was smoking – in spite of the no smoking signs posted on every window. The windows could not be opened and there was no ventilation. I had to do something. So, in my best Mandarin, I asked the man next to me to please stop smoking, or to come with me to the platform between the two cars where he could smoke. He was surprised by my request and reluctant to put out his cigarette. With hand gestures and a big smile, I escorted him to the rear of the car. I opened the door for him, thanked him for stepping through, and closed the door firmly behind him.

I repeated this conversation with every smoker in the car. There were about thirty of them. Some were more cooperative than others. But I smiled and persisted, sometimes even eliciting a laugh or two. Eventually, every man either put out his cigarette or moved to the breezy, open platform between cars. When the last cigarette was extinguished, the women in the train car gave me a standing ovation and produced a fantastic lunch for me.

At the next station, new passengers boarded our car. A couple of men started to light cigarettes. But before they could, all the men and women pointed to me and told them that they'd better not smoke or I would come and speak to them. Everyone laughed and I enjoyed my 5-hour train ride without smoke.

Traveling with a stranger for a few minutes – or a few hours – is a great way to get to know someone. Whenever possible, I avoid airplanes. Boats, buses, cars and trains are where you can find out what people's lives are *really* like. If you have the stomach for it, take public transport and travel as the locals do ... especially in Africa.

11 – West African Roadtrip

In 2017, I spent two months on a marathon overland journey through West Africa. West Africa isn't high on most people's bucket lists. Here's why:

- Expensive and complicated visa requirements
- Extreme poverty
- Poor infrastructure
- Heat, dust and mud
- Limited tourist services
- Police and immigration officers demanding bribes
- Dangerous undertows and stingrays on the coast
- Land mines from past conflicts in the interior
- Poisonous cobras and green mambas in the jungles
- Falciparum malaria, the most lethal type
- ISIS, al-Qaeda, ash-Sham and Boko Haram
- Occasional attacks and kidnappings of foreigners

This is a discouraging list. Before going to West Africa, I didn't receive the usual encouraging emails saying things like "Have a great time!" My worried friends and family wrote "Watch out," "Be safe," and "Do you really have to go there?" Despite these warnings and my apprehensions, I decided to plunge into West Africa anyway. To accomplish my goal of visiting every country in the world, I had to go to West Africa sometime. Looking on the bright side, the Ebola epidemic – which killed 11,000 in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia in 2014-16 – was officially over. If I were ever to visit this part of the world, 2017 seemed like a good year to go.

As always, I didn't want to hurry through a bunch of countries just to check them off my list. I wanted to experience the region, its cultures and the people. This meant that I would travel overland from Senegal to Benin – a distance of almost 4,000 kilometers. In 2017, half of this route was paved.

Senegal is the only country in West Africa where an American without a pre-arranged visa can arrive by air, land or sea, present a passport and be stamped in quickly and at no cost. This visa-free entry is why I started my West African adventure in Senegal. On arrival at the airport in Dakar, I was asked two simple questions: "How long will you be here?" and "Where are you staying?"

In Dakar, it took three weeks of roaming the city to collect the nine visas I needed, one for every country from The Gambia to Benin. Some embassies were easy to find with flags, emblems, steel gates and armed guards. Others were elusive because they'd recently changed addresses, they were hidden down sandy alleys, or they were simply unmarked. I'd have walked right past the Guinean embassy if I hadn't noticed the soldier with a Guinean flag on his uniform sleeping under a bush outside his ambassador's residence.

Dakar, population four million:
crowded, noisy, hot, dusty, dry

When I finally found an embassy I was seeking, I stood in a queue, filled out forms (sometimes in quadruplicate), submitted passport-sized photos, vaccination records, airplane tickets and hotel bookings, and paid my money – which was never a guarantee of getting a visa. Sometimes a letter of invitation, financial records, or a face-to-face interview was required. After doing my best to fulfill all the embassy's requirements, I received perfunctory instructions to come back in a day or two to collect my visa.

Travelers tip: I start every trip with at least twenty 51x51mm passport photos in my pack. They're needed in countless situations overseas, such as applying for visas.

After visiting the first couple of embassies, I learned the seven secrets to getting African visas successfully and in a timely manner:

1. Dress nicely.
2. Arrive when the embassy opens in the morning.
3. Have all your documents in perfect order and ready to present. An attractive crisp binder makes a good first impression.
4. As you present your documents, ask the staff person if she's having a good day. Passport clerks never look as though they enjoy their jobs.
5. Be patient. Act as though you have all day. Enjoy the air conditioning set at a refreshing 20°C (68°F).
6. Say thank you frequently − in French, English and Wolof.
7. Smile a lot, at everyone.

This being Africa, rules and logic are not strictly enforced. To obtain a tourist visa for Ghana, I needed a letter of invitation printed on letterhead. I knew no one in Ghana. I didn't want to book and pay for a hotel room in Accra to get a letter of invitation. So, I wrote myself an eloquent invitation to visit Ghana and printed it on quality stationery with a big, bold "ZOA Consulting" letterhead at the top of the page. My self-addressed invitation letter was all that was needed for my Ghanaian visa.

If, at the end of a week in Dakar, you have three new West African visas in your passport, you're doing well. If you get four in one week, you've graduated to being an African visa wizard.

I spent every morning visiting one or two embassies. In the afternoons, I toured hot and dusty Dakar. It's not one of my favorite cities. There was garbage everywhere. The traffic gridlock was terrible. Although Dakar is not a pedestrian-friendly city, walking was more interesting and sometimes faster than driving. I used Maps.me on my iPhone to take shortcuts through residential neighborhoods. On foot, I saw much more than I would've seen from the dirty or cracked window of a taxi stuck in traffic.

Despite being hot, dusty, noisy and chaotic, Dakar has friendly and helpful people. I was impressed by the positive attitudes and colorful fashions of both men and women. The food was good, too. The standard quick meal on the street is a *chawarama* which is a hot, juicy wrap filled with meat, peppers, onions and French fries. (Sitting here at my desk in Kosrae today, this is a meal I'd love to have for lunch right now. Sigh .... The ingredients for a *chawarama* – especially the spices – are unique to Senegal and nonexistent in Micronesia.)

Chasing visas all over Dakar, I got to know the city well. Just offshore from Dakar are two islets that were ideal places to rest and relax until my visas were ready to be picked up:

- L'île de Gorée, near the southern tip of Dakar, was for three centuries the largest slave trading center on the African coast. On the lower level of *La Maison des Esclaves*, I got chills as I stood in the infamous Door to Nowhere. Through this stone portal, millions of West Africans were pushed from their dungeons onto ships waiting to carry them to the New World. Afterwards, I soothed my nerves at a café under palm trees that served *poisson coco, banane plantin* and the best French wine I had in West Africa.

- L'île de N'Gor, off the north coast of Dakar, is a hang-out for backpackers and surfers. To get to N'Gor, I waded out to a waiting pirogue. Someone tossed me a life jacket – with no ties to hold it on. No worries. Had my over-loaded boat capsized, it wasn't more than a 200-meter swim to shore. On N'Gor, there are no roads or wheeled vehicles – only sandy paths. No one wears shoes. In the day, people swim, surf and sun-bathe. At night, people play drums and dance around beach bonfires. Alcohol is plentiful, as are other intoxicants.

No matter how unattractive a place is, I always try to find something pleasant or fun to do. Gorée and N'Gor were perfect antidotes to the traffic, noise, dust, heat and crowds of Dakar.

A pirogue to L'île de N'Gor

With my passport full of visas, it was finally time to hit the road. The question was which road and in what vehicle? Like the embassies, Dakar's transport depots are scattered all over the city. Typically, the depots are dusty parking lots with vehicles crowded haphazardly around in them. Finding transport is a matter of asking for the next vehicle going to where you want to go, and then negotiating a price.

Most of West Africa's intercity transport is done via *sept-place*. This vehicle is usually a Renault 21 hatchback station wagon with a luggage rack on the roof. This car won "Car of the Year" and "Best Family Saloon" in 1987. You won't see many of these antiques in France these days. They're all in West Africa.

The Senegalese call this vehicle a *sept-place* because it has seats for the driver and seven passengers. One lucky passenger rides shotgun next to the driver. The two bench seats behind the driver accommodate three passengers each. The passenger riding shotgun pays a little extra to enjoy fresh air, legroom and the view out the front windshield (which is usually cracked). The bench seat passengers are crammed shoulder to shoulder with small bags on their laps. Big bags are on the roof rack. The passengers in the rear seat get a discount because there's less room back there and the windows don't roll down. In Senegal, they put seven people into this vehicle. In other parts of West Africa, ten or more passengers are squeezed into this same vehicle. I would learn this lesson a month later when I got to Guinea.

At dawn one morning, I showed up at one of Dakar's transport depots. There were several youths clamoring for my business. One earned a small commission by putting me into a *sept-place* bound for Banjul, capital of The Gambia. Although I probably overpaid for the front seat, my ticket to Banjul actually cost less than the taxi fare from my guest house to the depot. I was still learning the West African transport game.

Since this is Africa, our driver didn't start his engine until all the seats were filled, the roof was sagging with luggage and the money was collected. The drive from Dakar to Banjul was about 350 kilometers. Our driver took advantage of the fact that the road was paved the whole way by driving as fast as possible. No one said a word, either because they were sleeping or because they feared breaking the driver's concentration. Curious to know how fast we were going, I glanced over to the speedometer. The red needle was vibrating steadily at zero. Naturally, there were no seat belts. Knowing there was no air bag, I held my pack high on my lap the whole trip. I figured it might soften my impact against the windshield in case of an accident. Compared to later trips, my drive from Dakar to Banjul was fast and quiet.

I spent the next week in The Gambia, the smallest country in mainland Africa. It's smaller than Connecticut. It consists of nothing more than the Gambia River and its north and south banks. Its capital and biggest town is Banjul, a sleepy village that can be explored in an hour. With a population of 38,000, it's Africa's smallest capital city. With short distances and a small population, The Gambia is one of Africa's quietest and calmest countries.

My first challenge in any new country is to figure out how to get around. The Gambia is rural. Its villages are spread out. The sites I wanted to visit were far apart. Travel by foot wasn't practical. Gambian taxis are unreliable and they over-charge tourists. What to do?

To know and experience a place, the best way to travel is to travel the way the locals do. Most Gambians travel by *gelli-gelli* (bush taxi). This is a Toyota mini-van which carries as many passengers

as are willing to be packed inside. To allow for extra space and easy entrance and exit, the side door has usually been removed. Teenage boys and luggage ride on the roof. *Gelli-gellis* are cheap. They cost about half a cent per kilometer. There's no need for bus stops because a *gelli-gelli* drops off and picks up passengers anywhere along its route. They're frequent, too. A *gelli-gelli* passed my guest house in each direction about once every minute.

The transport hub in Banjul

The best thing about *gelli-gellis* – and the reason I traveled everywhere by *gelli-gelli* – is that they're sociable. I met lovely people on every ride and got lots of news and travel information this way. The Gambia is the only country on my West African journey where everyone speaks English. Although I can get by in French and Spanish, understanding 100% of all conversations made socializing and doing business easy and entertaining.

With my transport sorted out, I was ready to see what's here: A big river, lush jungles, happy people and heartbreaking history. I first learned about The Gambia from Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. In 1977, Haley's book about his research into his family's origins was made into an eight-part mini-series, viewed by 130 million people.

Alex Haley is a name known to almost everyone in The Gambia. The colonial trading house, used from 1681 to 1857, is now a museum featuring Haley's research. The museum, stockades and prison are on the other side of the river from Banjul. There are no

bridges. To cross the wide, muddy Gambia River, you take a rusty, crowded and very African ferry. Cost, about fifty cents.

Shipping records estimate that ten to fifteen million slaves were taken from West Africa to the Americas between 1526 and 1867. A third of these slaves went to Brazil to work in mines. Mine work was generally a death sentence because working conditions were so harsh and dangerous. Another third of the slaves went to the Caribbean. The remaining third were shipped to British colonies in America. Three million of these slaves came from The Gambia. This is the reason many Americans – especially African Americans – visit this tiny country.

Where the Gambia River flows into the Atlantic is a network of salt water estuaries full of mangroves. This delta is undeveloped. A boat cruise through these natural canals is a good way to reach these areas. Birds are plentiful because Africa's west coast is on a migratory route. Thousands of egrets nest and feed in the mangrove forests in the evenings.

The Gambia's estuaries and mangrove swamps are also full of Nile monitors, a relative of the Komodo Dragon of Indonesia. These lizards are big enough to be aggressive. In my experience, they're not afraid of humans. They also swim well. On a stroll through the jungle, I spotted West Africa's most dangerous snake: The Green Mamba. If bitten, the victim dies within an hour. With Nile Monitors and Green Mambas slithering about, I was on full alert to be careful where I hiked or swam.

Most tourists who come to The Gambia stay at hotels on the Atlantic beaches. They spend their time at up-scale restaurants and bars. The problem with that sort of tourism is that you meet and spend your time with other tourists. That's not the way I travel. I headed inland. I rode *gelli-gellis* down sandy roads through the river delta until I came to a village called Kumbaya. Yes, that's its name: Kumbaya, like the song we used to sing at summer camp.

I wandered through the villages near Kumbaya taking pictures of the artwork painted on the whitewashed walls of the homes. Like

the Pied Piper, I was followed everywhere by packs of curious children. They were excited to see a foreigner in their village. They yelled "Toubob toubob!" This isn't a derogatory term. It's just the West African word for "white man."

There were no paved roads. One of the dirt roads led me to the rustic Wunderland Lodge, owned and managed by a hospitable couple named Kumba and Lamin. I rented a bungalow by the water for a pittance. Birds were singing in the trees. A raised boardwalk extended fifty meters out over the estuary. At the end of the boardwalk was a gazebo. Sitting there, I watched huge catfish and other exotic creatures glide beneath me. There was also Wi-Fi, cold beer and spicy food.

I was the only *toubob* at Wunderland. Kumba and Lamin's other customers were Senegalese and Guineans who knew a bargain when they found one. Evenings were spent eating fish, drinking beer and chatting with other guests. They educated me about how to travel in West Africa and what to expect on the road ahead. I spent three nights at Wunderland and could have stayed a month.

From The Gambia, I continued south to Guinea-Bissau on a GTSC (Gambia Transport Service Company) bus. Although advertised as luxury transportation, the A/C didn't work, the seats were salvaged from an old school bus, and we departed two hours behind schedule. At least the windows could be rolled down.

Our highway was full of potholes. We bounced through southern Senegal into Guinea-Bissau. The bus stopped frequently to pick up and drop off passengers. There were a dozen checkpoints where police came aboard to check our passports and/or IDs. Although it took twelve hours to go 300 kilometers, this was one of the fastest and most comfortable rides between The Gambia and Benin.

On this bus ride, I got a good lesson in how business is conducted in West Africa. When we entered the 1,000 meter no-mans-land between Senegal and Guinea-Bissau, one passenger – a Gambian in his mid-twenties – confessed to our driver that he didn't have a

passport or an ID card, and that the immigration police in Guinea-Bissau probably would not let him cross the border.

The bus stopped. The driver shut off the engine. My excited fellow passengers were impressed and amazed this young man had slipped through all the previous ID checks and border crossings without showing any documentation. Everyone began brain-storming how to solve the young man's problem. Meanwhile, 500 meters behind us was a platoon of Wolof-speaking Senegalese armed guards. 500 meters ahead of us was a platoon of Portuguese-speaking Bissau-Guinean armed guards. Vendors came aboard to sell us cashews and sodas and to change our money. We sat in the closed bus discussing this young man's predicament.

It was decided that our driver and two men on the bus would accompany the young man back to the Senegalese border to sort out a solution. The rest of the passengers remained on the bus eating cashews in the sweltering heat. Half an hour later, our negotiating party returned successful. The young man was smiling as he waved a piece of paper covered with enough stamps and signatures to allow his entry into Guinea-Bissau. No one complained about the delay. We arrived in the city of Bissau before dark, which was good enough.

After the dusty streets of Banjul and the muddy two-tracks of The Gambia, I was surprised to find that Bissau has paved streets, sidewalks and traffic lights. The city's streets radiate out from the Place d'Independence and the Presidential Palace. Although looking faded and worn, these grand colonial edifices have a European style to them, as do Bissau's cafés and restaurants.

The biggest difference between The Gambia and Guinea-Bissau is that The Gambia has tourists. In 2017, I think I was the only tourist in Bissau. People were surprised to see a foreigner, especially an American. Within the first two hours of my arrival in Bissau, I was asked three times "Why did you come here?" This is an easy question to answer. I travel to learn about people and places I don't know about. What's written about a country often

doesn't tell the whole story − or even half of it. You can't know what someplace is like unless you go there. I came to Guinea-Bissau to see for myself what's here.

The reason Guinea-Bissau doesn't see many tourists has a lot to do with the country's recent history. This little country spent the 60's and 70's in a long and bloody war of liberation from Portugal. The 80's was a decade of coups and experiments in socialism. The 90's saw growing corruption, national strikes and civil war. Extreme poverty motivated farmers to replace cashews with cocaine, which resulted in a lucrative but dangerous drug trade. In 2009, the president was assassinated. From 2014 to 2016, Guinea-Bissau cycled through five prime ministers. After that, the government was dissolved. Although my *Lonely Planet* guide had little to say about this country, it assured me that attacks on civilians and visitors were rare.

Guinea-Bissau feels like a new frontier. I met European entrepreneurs who came here to start new lives and new businesses. The government is trying to encourage tourism. Someday, they hope to offer an on-line e-visa. For now, foreigners can buy a 5-year residency permit by filling out a one-page application and paying €100. There are direct flights between Bissau and Lisbon.

Despite its problems, Guinea-Bissau is colorful and interesting. The people are friendly, easy-going and never aggressive. This is a former Portuguese colony, so everyone speaks Creole Portuguese. Although the city of Bissau is run-down, it's got potential.

While much of the country consists of swamps, subsistence farms and poor villages, the offshore islands are beautiful, especially the Bijagós Archipelago. This is a sunken river delta at the mouth of the Gêba River. There are 87 forested islands here. Except for twenty settlements, which are home to a few thousand people, the islands are mostly untouched wilderness. Millions of birds nest in vast mangroves and wetlands. The clear, clean waters are inhabited by dolphins, salt-water hippos, manatees and sea turtles.

To get to the Bijagós Archipelago, most Bissauans take the Consulmar Ferry to the island of Bubaque. I bought my ticket at the shack on the pier. I boarded the ferry about thirty minutes before the scheduled departure time to get a good seat. I sat back with a book and naively anticipated a comfortable cruise with lots of space to spread out in. I also noted that the ferry floated high enough in the water that one could step directly from the dock onto the deck.

More passengers arrived. Many carried large, heavy boxes or bags. Two hours later, every seat was taken and many people were standing at the rails. More passengers arrived, carrying more luggage. Three hours after our scheduled departure, the ferry had sunk about two meters below the height it had been when I boarded. A step ladder was brought on deck to allow the final passengers to climb from the dock down to the deck.

The ship's whistle blew. The passengers cheered. Our ferry wobbled sluggishly out of the harbor. There were thirty life-jackets to accommodate about 250 passengers. Fortunately, the sea was flat and there were no threatening storm clouds. I estimated our route using Maps.me. I was glad to see we wouldn't be more than four kilometers from land at any point. Four kilometers is the farthest that I can comfortably swim.

I gave my seat to another passenger and moved to the ship's rail in case I needed a quick exit from the ship. Peering over the rail, I could see about thirty centimeters of freeboard between the water line and the lower deck. Overloaded as she was, the ferry managed the fifty kilometers to Bubaque in four hours. We only ran aground twice. Ah yes, African public transit.

Bubaque felt like the end of the world, but it wasn't my destination. From there, I hired a motorized canoe to the Afrikan Ecolodge on Angurman Island, where I'd booked a thatched-roof bungalow on booking.com. I figured that any place that was as primitive and remote as this, but had a web presence, might be worth checking out.

I wasn't disappointed. The Afrikan Ecolodge consisted of three en-suite bungalows. I chose the one on the point, right on the beach, shaded by a huge baobab tree. There was a kayak at my disposal for exploring the mangroves. I wasn't bothered by mosquitoes or stingrays. I had the entire island to myself for four days except for ...

- A native family who cleaned and maintained the bungalows
- Four French tourists who came ashore for a picnic one afternoon
- Three Portuguese nurses from the Azores who stayed for one night
- A few fisherman who slept on the beaches
- And François who managed his Ecolodge and prepared fabulous four course meals over an open fire

In the center of François's camp is a gigantic Kapok tree large enough to shade the northern third of Angurman Island. The tree looks like something out of the movie *Avatar*. My meals were served on a rough-hewn log table under this tree. I asked myself "Am I making this place up? Will this magical place exist if I return someday?"

François was my host and companion while I was on his island. He told me that, after years working as a chef at an upscale restaurant in Paris, he wanted fresh air and a more adventurous lifestyle. He came to Guinea-Bissau in 2009 shortly after its president was assassinated. When he applied for a business permit, the government granted him free permanent residency. He "purchased" Angurman Island for three pigs. By making periodic donations to chiefs on nearby islands, he's allowed to operate his Ecolodge without interference. He buys fish and vegetables from fishermen when they sail past. In a stone oven, he produces baguettes equal to anything one might find in a boulangerie on the Champs-Élysées. His biggest challenge is importing decent wines. He offered to sell me a 49% share in his Ecolodge for €25,000.

An anthropologist could be busy in the Bijagós Archipelago for years. There are 27 ethnic groups scattered through the jungles and islands. Among these tribes, 45% are Muslim, 10% are Christian and 100% are Animist. I had a rare invitation to join seven fishermen one morning for an Animist ceremony under the baobab trees on the beach. The ceremony began with chanting and praying to a large, round stone wrapped in a shawl at the entrance of a thatched hut. I was told that inside the hut was a fetish object that no one was allowed to see. To maintain our energy through an hour of chanting and praying, we snacked on grilled fish and passed around a bottle of rum. When the bottle was passed around the last time, each man took a swallow and spat the remainder (of the rum) onto the large, round stone wrapped in a shawl. As with fisherman rites worldwide, we prayed for a good fishing season and safety at sea. I prayed for a safe return to Bissau.

Throughout West Africa, I met a few European tourists but almost no Americans. In Guinea-Bissau, the visitors were Portuguese and French. François told me I was his second American guest. The only other American who ever visited his Ecolodge was a travel writer from *Lonely Planet*. I felt in good company. This corner of Africa is unknown to Americans, which made this journey feel like an exploration to an undiscovered place. It was exhilarating.

From Bissau, I rode bush taxis into Guinea-Conakry, formerly known as French Guinea. Guinea-Conakry is not the same as Guinea-Bissau, which was a Portuguese colony. Neither should be confused with Equatorial Guinea, formerly Spanish Guinea, which is 3,000 kilometers to the southeast. And then there's Papua New Guinea, which is north of Australia and nowhere near Africa. Have you ever wondered why these former European colonies are named Guinea? The word Guinea comes from the 15th century Portuguese word *Guiné*, meaning "black man." Perhaps political correctness will someday lead to eliminating Guinea from the names of these four countries. The people of Guinea-Conakry call their country just plain Guinea. So will I.

Guinea was a French colony until 1958. That's when Charles de Gaulle offered all of France's colonies the opportunity to be free

and independent, or to remain supported by and dependent upon France. Guinea was the only French colony to choose independence. Under the leadership of President Ahmed Sékou Touré, Guinea voted overwhelmingly "to be poor and free, rather than rich and enslaved." I got the sense that Guineans are happy and proud to be free, even if it means being indigent.

What I'll remember most about Guinea is its people. When I asked for directions, Guineans often escorted me to where I wanted to go. If I offered to pay them for their help, my money was refused. When I shopped at markets, I was charged the local price. When I accidentally overpaid a taxi driver, he promptly gave me back my overpayment. Contrary to what the guidebooks say, the police were polite and friendly, and never demanded a bribe. These sorts of things don't happen in most of West Africa. Perhaps this is the result of Guineans being proud and free.

Guinea remains poor even though it's the world's second largest producer of bauxite, and has deposits of diamonds and gold. Guinea's poor infrastructure discourages development. Until Guinea was declared Ebola-free in 2016, this country saw zero tourists and no international commerce. Like Guinea-Bissau, it has potential.

For travelers, the biggest challenge in Guinea is getting from place to place. An ad hoc transportation system has evolved to move as many people as possible as cheaply as possible, with the key word here being "cheaply." As in Senegal, the most common transport in Guinea is the Renault 21 hatchback station wagon. In Senegal, this car is called a *sept-place* because there are seven seats for passengers. In Guinea, this same car carries eleven adults, plus children sitting on laps. Luggage, goats, chickens and extra passengers ride on the roof. These Renaults must be very durable vehicles to survive the rutted, unpaved roads of Guinea.

The first time I went to a shared taxi depot, the ticket handler suggested that I pay for two seats. I didn't know what this meant, but was glad to have taken his advice. Buying two seats meant that I rode shotgun next to the driver. Normally, the front passenger

seat is occupied by two people. By buying two tickets, I had the entire seat to myself. I looked over my shoulder to see how my fellow passengers were doing. There were eight adults packed into the two back seats, with three babies on laps.

We then drove 360 kilometers in ten hours in 35°C (95°F) heat on bone-jarring dirt and gravel roads crowded with vehicles. I was glad to have a window seat and even more amazed to have a seat belt. I'll never complain about cramped seating or turbulence on commercial airplanes again. Most foreign tourists who come to Guinea avoid shared taxis by hiring a private tour guide with an air-conditioned 4x4. Had I done that I wouldn't have met all the wonderful people I met along the way.

A fully-loaded Renault 21 shared taxi in Guinea

I'd now been in West Africa for more than a month, and learned the secrets to enjoying a ride in a shared taxi, also known as a bush taxi:

- Arrive at the taxi depot at dawn. That's when the taxis fill quickest and the wait is shortest.

- Buy two seats and make yourself comfortable in the front passenger seat. This will mean paying $16 (instead of $8) for a journey of a few hundred kilometers.
- Introduce yourself to the driver. He'll be pleased to be sharing the front of the car with only one passenger. This will allow him easy access to the gear shift.
- Buy snacks from the vendors who come to your window before departure. Plan on spending a dollar or two.
- When the taxi pulls out of the depot, distribute snacks to the driver and to all the passengers crammed into the back of the car. You now have ten new friends.
- Join your new friends at the lunch stop. They'll show you where and what to eat.
- When you come to a checkpoint, smile. If a policeman or a soldier asks you questions, your fellow passengers will vouch for you − loudly, if necessary. The officer will return your passport quickly and wave you through. You won't have to pay a tax (i.e. a bribe).
- At your destination, your fellow passengers will ensure you find your way to wherever you're going next. You might even exchange email addresses or Facebook handles with the wonderful friends you've made today.

The northern and central parts of Guinea are 1,000 meters above sea level. It's cooler up there. The air is clean and fresh. The scenery is nice. There are good places for hikes. You'll find traditional round houses nestled against steep cliffs. Markets offer beans and rice for lunch with oranges, papayas and pineapples for dessert. For anyone seeking something positive and adventurous to do, Guinea's highland interior is an attractive place to do volunteer work. The weather is cool(er). The cost of living is low. The Guineans are friendly and honest. They could use some help. Anything you could do to improve their lives would be appreciated.

Down on the coast, Guinea's capital city Conakry is squeezed onto a polluted and crowded peninsula. The traffic is permanently gridlocked. There's garbage everywhere. Young men play soccer

on the beach at low tide because it's the only open place in the city that's garbage-free. Conakry reminded me of a dirty version of Kolkata, India. Yet, the city is full of life. The sidewalks overflow with people buying and selling. Loud music plays from noon until 3:00 am.

Having now gotten the hang of overland travel in West Africa, I was ready for my bush taxi ride from Guinea to Sierra Leone. The potholes along this route were large enough for a buffalo to bathe in. Sometimes the driver had to ask buffalos to relinquish their bathtubs so we could pass. As usual, there were many checkpoints. My good friends, i.e. my fellow travelers, shooed away the police. There were no lengthy "interviews" or bribes to pay. As we crossed from Guinea into Sierra Leone, my fellow travelers escorted me through the gauntlet of immigration officials, vouching for me and ensuring that my passport got all the right stamps.

Then, on entering Sierra Leone, we came to a brand-new, paved, 4-lane, divided highway with toll booths. I thought I was dreaming. I hadn't seen a road like this since the Ohio Turnpike. It didn't take long to spot the Chinese construction equipment and supervisors. China built this road specifically to extract the iron and hardwoods from Sierra Leone's back country. The tolls collected on this highway go to China, not to Sierra Leone. This is what foreign colonization looks like in the 21st century. It's sad to see exploitation like this throughout Africa. Still, I was thankful for a paved road.

On arrival in Freetown, I was warmly welcomed at Mrs. Kaikai's guesthouse. I felt like I was back in South Carolina, complete with Mrs. Kaikai's Creole ("Krio") home cooking. A little background information is necessary here. My story about my Sierra Leone homestay starts way back in Dakar when I applied for my visa. Mr. Kaikai is the chief of Sierra Leone's consulate. He was curious as to why an American wanted to visit his country. He invited me into his air conditioned office for coffee. We had a sociable conversation, at the end of which Mr. Kaikai urged me to stay at his wife's guesthouse in Freetown. He gave me a note

introducing me to Mrs. Kaikai − with a generous discount on my room and board. It's not every consulate that provides both visas and lodging.

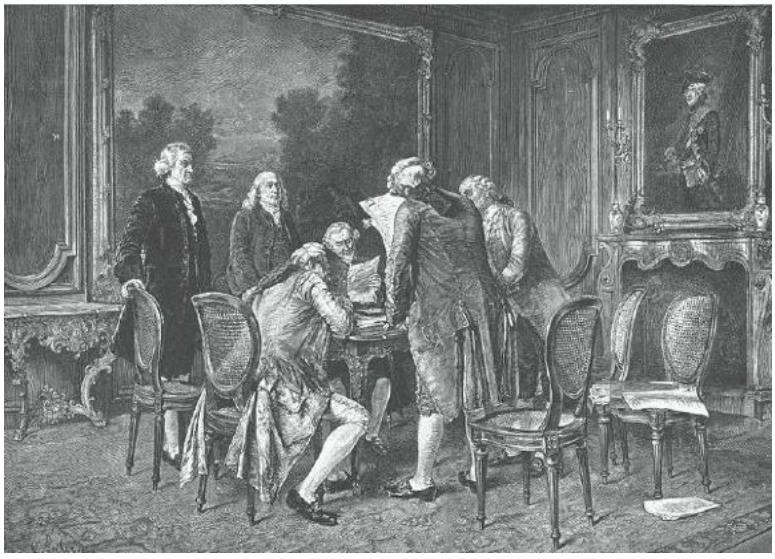
Sierra Leone and South Carolina have a lot in common:

- They're about the same size.
- They're hot and humid.
- Rice grows well in both places.
- They were both British colonies.
- Most slaves taken from Sierra Leone in the 18th and 19th centuries were sold to plantations in South Carolina (and Georgia).
- After the Civil War, many freed slaves emigrated from South Carolina (and Georgia) back to Sierra Leone.
- Sierra Leone feels like the Deep South. The cuisine, the architecture, the music and the people are similar − and even related.
- People in both places speak creole dialects of English known as Gullah or Geechee.

For the United States, Freetown is arguably the most important historic city in Africa. Freetown is also the largest natural deep-water harbor on the continent of Africa, which is why Britain was keen on capturing and holding this port during the 17th and 18th centuries. At the top of Freetown's harbor, located as far upriver as tall ships can sail, is Bunce Island. This is where British slave ships met the canoes and flat-bottomed riverboats coming downriver. On Bunce Island, the British built a fort and slave trading center.

I spent a few days wandering around Freetown learning American history from a new perspective. During the 1770's, Bunce Island was owned by Mr. Richard Oswald. On the other side of the Atlantic, in Charleston, South Carolina, Mr. Henry Laurens managed the largest slave-trading operation in North America. Mr. Laurens received the British slave ships from Sierra Leone, auctioned the captives to local rice plantations, and sent the proceeds to London. In 1777, Mr. Laurens succeeded John

Hancock as President of the Continental Congress. At the end of the Revolutionary War, Laurens helped negotiate America's independence at the Treaty of Paris. The British negotiator, sitting across the table from Laurens, was none other than Richard Oswald. It's an important historical note that American independence was negotiated between a British slave dealer and his South Carolinian business agent.



Nineteenth century engraving of the signing of
the Treaty of Paris (Library of Congress)

Here's another historical tidbit: In the early days of Bunce Island, the British branded their slaves with the acronym "RACE" which stood for Royal African Company of England. Entomologically, the word "race" comes from "racine" meaning root. But could this acronym "RACE" explain how the word "race" got into popular usage in colonial America?

In 1792, Freetown was established as a place for American slaves to be free. When the first freed slaves landed here, they gathered under a cotton tree near the shore and held a thanksgiving service for their deliverance to a free land. This Cotton Tree stands today. It has become the historic symbol of Freetown's freedom. Seeing

this magnificent tree in the middle of downtown sent shivers up my spine.

The Cotton Tree in the center of Freetown

In the center of town is a market full of tie-dyed and batik fabrics. Something I noticed here, and later in Liberia, were groups of people dressed in the same fabric. This is a tradition called *eshowbi*. It's a way for everyone in an organization or family to show that they're part of a group doing something together. *Eshowbi* will be important in the next part of this adventure.

I continued overland from Freetown, Sierra Leone to Monrovia, Liberia. This was the roughest and most memorable leg of my overland journey. Freetown to Monrovia is a jungle route with 600 kilometers of potholes, mud and water. (The Chinese haven't paved these roads yet.) I heard that some travelers manage to do this journey in one long day. In my case, this trip turned into a two-day enduro involving a car, a bus, a motorcycle, a Land Cruiser, a ferry across the Moa River near Jaiwulo, another motorcycle and a bush taxi. Obstacles included flooded roads, a border closure and a flat tire. Of all my overland journeys in West Africa, this was my favorite!

The car ferry across the Moa River

My traveling companions were a wedding party en route from Freetown to Monrovia to see their sister get married. Like everyone else I met in Sierra Leone, these folks were friendly and hospitable. By the time we'd shared five meals, pushed our vehicle through the mud, pulled the ferry across the river, and camped overnight at the border, we were old friends. When they presented me with my *eshowbi* shirt, I was a member of the family. This sort of thing doesn't happen when you take an airplane.

Wearing the bride's family *eshowbi* colors
at the wedding in Monrovia

The groom's family in Liberia was as friendly and hospitable as the bride's family from Sierra Leone. I spent my entire time in Monrovia eating, drinking, talking, dancing and getting to know these two wonderful families. The wedding was one of the happiest, most exciting, high-energy events I've attended in a long time.

Sierra Leone and Liberia were nothing like what I'd expected. Civil wars in these two countries from 1989 to 2003 killed about a million people, and displaced two million more. Then in 2014, as these countries were recovering, the West African Ebola virus killed another 11,000 and closed their borders for two years. Despite surviving civil wars and the Ebola epidemic, these people were the most joyous people I met along my journey. Maybe it's because the survivors are thankful to be alive.

After bouncing through the two Guineas, Sierra Leone and Liberia, I came to Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. These two countries could be

described as "Africa Lite." Most roads are paved. Public transit − including shared taxis and mini-vans − are not overloaded. Windshields are rarely cracked and seat belts are provided. Intercity buses run on time and have assigned seats. The phone network is 3G and sometimes 4G. Hotels have hot showers and fast Wi-Fi. After a month of roughing it, I didn't mind a hot shower and a cold beer.

I spent Christmas in Abidjan, the capital of Côte d'Ivoire. I knew no one here. I had no families to celebrate with. That's just the way that the calendar worked out for me. Alone in a city far from home, my Christmas present to myself was a stay at the Sofitel Abidjan Hotel Ivoire. I rarely stay at 5-star hotels. But where else can you get a penthouse suite with all the perks, plus a balcony view of a major city for $220/night? The terrycloth bathrobe, chaise lounge and private Jacuzzi were luxurious. The service was impeccable.

La Cathédrale Saint-Paul d'Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire

Conveniently, the Sofitel was close to the one thing I wanted to see in Côte d'Ivoire: La Cathédrale Saint-Paul d'Abidjan. Designed by Italian architect Aldo Spiritom and completed in 1985, St Paul's Cathedral is a bold and innovative modern cathedral. The design is intended to resemble Jesus lifting and pulling the cathedral forward. The seating and standing capacity is about 5,000. The huge stained glass windows that cover the exterior walls feature wildlife and scenes from life in Africa.

I knew the music would be good at the cathedral on Christmas morning, but I didn't know how good. I went to the 8:00 am mass, and stayed for the 9:30 am and the 11:00 am services to see and hear all the choirs. There was a different and inspiring choir for each service. I recognized many of the Christmas carols, sung in French. What I didn't expect to see was the choirs dancing!

For my Christmas dinner, the Sofitel offered goose and turkey with cranberry sauce and mince pie. But what's the point of traveling to distant lands if you live the way you do back home? I ventured out to dine with the locals at a *maquis* (a rustic, open-air restaurant). Sitting on a stump by a wood fire surrounded by a big, happy family, I ate barbecued chicken smothered in peppers and onions, served on a wooden tray. The hot sauce would've melted the icicles on Santa's sleigh.

I spent only 48 hours in Côte d'Ivoire. Although this isn't enough time to get to know a country, I had an appointment to keep in Ghana with an NGO named People To People International (PTPI). I learned about this NGO from a fellow traveler named Natalie, with whom I celebrated Christmas in Bethlehem two years previously. Natalie and I arranged to meet in Acra to tour two of PTPI's projects together.

Here's a quick observation about fellow travelers: People who go to unusual and interesting places tend to be unusual and interesting people. When I meet people I like, I get their email addresses, stay in touch and find ways to cross paths again. Reunions with old friends in far-off destinations are like coming home and can be an antidote to travel fatigue and home-sickness.

PTPI was founded by President Dwight Eisenhower to promote international friendship through humanitarian projects. With Natalie, our first project was to deliver food and supplies to an orphanage in Kumasi, in rural Ghana. Our second project was to help fund a library for a middle school in nearby Aduman village. The school visit was entertaining. Although classes were suspended for Christmas vacation, 700 students returned to their school and spent a morning marching, singing, dancing and

drumming to thank us for providing books, desks and chairs for their new library. The students performed traditional Ashanti dances. This was the real thing, not a show for tourists.

Here's another travel tip: To avoid being a typical tourist, donate your time and money to good causes. You'll meet great people, get to know cultures, and visit authentic places that aren't in the guide books.

Nevertheless, tourism is sometimes necessary to experience and understand a place. Ghana has the oldest landmarks in the history of the Atlantic Slave Trade. On Ghana's coast are two well-preserved and infamous slave castles. The dungeons, shackles, and Gates of No Return are there to remind us of the millions of people imprisoned here. Nearly half of them died before they arrived in the Americas.

Elmina Slave Fortress with fishing boats in foreground

Near Acra is the Elmina fortress, built by Portugal in 1482. It was the first European building south of the Sahara. Though initially established simply as a trading post, this is where the barbaric Atlantic Slave Trade began. These slave castles are poignant sites to visit. Although not for the squeamish, they're essential for understanding mankind's past. These slave castles rank right up there with Auschwitz, the Killing Fields of Cambodia, the boneyards of Rwanda, Armenia's Genocide memorial and Hiroshima's Peace Park. It's important for sites like these to be

preserved and visited so that people can remember and hopefully prevent these sorts of atrocities from occurring again.

From Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana all the way east to Nigeria, there's a wide, paved highway that follows the coast. Travel from town to town is easy thanks to shared taxis. When you want to go somewhere, stand by the road. Wait a couple of minutes. When a car honks at you and slows down, you've got a ride. The driver will ask where you want to go and tell you how much it'll cost − usually a dollar or two. Hop in and make friends with the other four or five people in the car. Shared taxis whisked me from Côte d'Ivoire to Ghana to Togo to Benin. With my visas pre-arranged, border crossings were fast – even friendly and welcoming.

Thanks to a connection Natalie helped me make while I was in Ghana, I joined up with the Togo chapter of PTPI for a visit to an elementary school in Ando village. Although by the time I arrived the building construction was almost complete, I was pleased to provide funding for the finishing touches. $1,000 goes a long way when labor costs are almost zero. While in Togo, I was hosted and guided by Newlove Bobson Atiso (yes, that's his real name) and his cousin Senna. Driving around Togo in Newlove's air-conditioned SUV is not my style, but it would've been rude to refuse Newlove's offer to chauffeur me everywhere.

The ferry across Lake Togo

On my own, I visited Lomé, Togo's cosmopolitan capital city and commercial and shipping center. The most interesting areas are the lively fish market and the old center of town, where the cathedral is. I went to church on a Sunday morning − as I often do in Africa. The music was uplifting, as always. The Christmas carols were accompanied by a brass band. When the trumpets improvised on a jazzy version of *Gloria in excelsis Deo*, I thought I was in New Orleans. Near Lomé is Lake Togo, a twenty-km-long lagoon separated from the Atlantic by a wide sandbar. This is a pleasant lake for a swim because it's one of few lakes in Africa that has neither man-eating crocodiles nor the parasitic worms of bilharzia.

Benin, with its hot, humid weather, brought more lush jungles, coastal lagoons and beautiful beaches. Benin is famous for Voodoo. Voodoo is officially recognized as a religion. About half the citizens of Benin and Togo follow Voodoo practices. In addition to praying at a mosque on Friday or attending mass at church on Sunday, they observe Voodoo rites. Voodoo cosmology centers around spirits that govern the Earth, nature and human society. These spirits are similar to saints or angels, but they take the form of animals, streams, trees and rocks. In Voodoo, the spirits of the dead live side by side with the world of the living. In Benin, one doesn't forget to bake a birthday cake for one's great-grandmother buried in the back yard. Pythons are household pets in Benin and there's a Voodoo fetish market.

The village of Ouidah is the Voodoo capital of the world. Curious about Voodoo, I spent a few days here. It was a little creepy to wander through a town full of snakes, bats, skulls, weird statues and scary murals. Voodoo picks up where Christianity leaves off. In Ouidah, the Basilique de l'Immaculée Conception and the Temple of Pythons face each other across the town square. Holy snakes!

And then there are the beaches. Generally, all beaches are similar. Sand, sun, water and surf maybe. Seen one, seen 'em all, right? What surprised me in Benin and Togo was how clean and empty

the beaches were. West Africa could become a beach destination if enough people learned how nice its beaches are.

My road trip across West Africa ended in Benin because I couldn't get a visa for Nigeria. I visited five Nigerian consulates between Senegal and Benin and received five different reasons why I couldn't have a Nigerian visa. I'll try again at the Nigerian embassy in Washington DC.

Friends and family have asked about the specifics of this journey, so here's a quick summary:

- Trip length: Eleven weeks
- Distance covered: About 4,000 kilometers
- Best meal: Christmas dinner at a rustic *maquis* in Abidjan
- Most memorable lodging: Afrikan Ecolodge on Angurman Island
- New friends made: At least twenty
- Illnesses or injuries: Zero

West Africa has a reputation for being an unsafe place to travel because of thieves and corrupt authorities. In eleven weeks of travel, I had two minor incidents hardly worth mentioning.

When crossing by land into Côte d'Ivoire, a large man who claimed to be a drug inspector, searched my bag thoroughly. He found no drugs, but insisted that a small wooden bird I was carrying was an African cultural treasure. He assessed me a fine of 5,000 CFA ($9) for smuggling. This man weighed twice as much as I do and carried a gun. I decided that it would be easier to pay than to argue.

In the Grand Marché in Lomé, I noticed three youths shadowing me. I avoided them for about ten minutes. But when they cornered me between two vendors, a fourth guy slipped up behind me and deftly emptied my back left pocket. (I'll say more about this incident in a later chapter.)

After I left West Africa, I was told an unfortunate tale by four Taiwanese tourists. They were searched on departure from Mauritania. Customs officers found and confiscated €4,500 because they hadn't declared the cash on entry into Mauritania. Although I was carrying almost as much undeclared cash when I left Mauritania, the customs officers wished me a safe trip and gave me a bag of grapes.

I attribute my successful journey through West Africa to being friendly, aware and confident, and for traveling by public transit. Thieves target tourists who have nice luggage and pay for private taxis. Thieves tend not to hassle people who smile, look them in the eye, and act as though they know where they're going. It also helps to be surrounded by African friends. Had I flown from capital to capital, hired guides to show me around by private car, and stayed in tourist hotels, I'd never have gotten a sense for what West Africa is like or made friends with the people who live there. I'm still in touch with many of them.

I came to West Africa with low expectations. Many friends said they had zero interest in this part of the world. A few friends who've been here say they won't return. Granted, the infrastructure is poor. It's not easy to find a hot shower, good Wi-Fi, cold beer or paved roads. There are language barriers. Travel in half of these countries can be difficult if you don't speak French. However, I was pleasantly surprised by West Africa. What struck me most was the people. Time and again, I was treated to their generosity, good humor and hospitality. Everywhere I went, I met open-hearted, honest people. If you want to meet them, travel with them.

12 – About Flying

It's another gorgeous day in Kosrae. I'm surrounded by banana trees and coconut palms. Although the equatorial sun is hot, trade winds keep me cool. Two hundred meters offshore, the surf pounds on the reef. Beyond the reef, the deep ocean is cerulean blue. Puffy clouds on the horizon are brilliant white. Looking up, all I see is blue, blue, blue. There's not a plane in the sky. That's because of our Covid-19 travel restrictions.

Although cargo ships occasionally ferry passengers between the islands of Micronesia, the easiest way to get to Kosrae is by air. For the past year, United and its regional competitor, Caroline Islands Air (CIA), have rarely landed at Kosrae's airport. CIA shuttles folks from island to island within Micronesia. About once a month, a United flight lands in Kosrae to carry passengers one-way out of Micronesia to Guam or Hawaii.

Caroline Islands Air (CIA), Micronesia's regional airline

Airplanes are wonderful things. They're fast, safe and clean (usually). They whisk you from point A to point B in a fraction of the time that any other form of transport might take. For long journeys across an ocean or over a trackless jungle, they're miraculous ways to avoid the stress and discomfort of travel. But there's a drawback to air travel. On an airplane, you learn nothing about the places that you're flying over. The views out the window are just shapes from maps at school. Where are the houses? The farms? The people? A flight from London to Delhi is a quantum leap from one culture to another with no sense of

what's between points A and B. Although air travel is usually boring, I've had a few exciting adventures in the air.

In October 1981, I flew from Bangkok to Kathmandu. Seated next to me on the plane was a Canadian named Randy. He was from Vancouver. Neither of us had been to Nepal before. We were equally naive and excited. We agreed to be travel partners. When we deplaned into the chaos of Kathmandu, we had to fend for ourselves from the first. I was glad to have someone to watch my pack while I went to the loo.

Those were the good old days of travel in Nepal. Nepal's tourism industry hadn't taken off yet. Kathmandu was a hideout for hippies seeking off-the-beaten-path adventures. There were no hotels, guides or trekking tours advertised on the Internet. There was no Internet. Inns and hostels were found by word of mouth. There were more animals in the streets than cars. The temples smelled of incense, flowers and rotting fruit. The sidewalks reeked of manure and hashish. Neither Randy nor I had any plans or reservations. Randy had heard that the Annapurna Loop was a good trek. So, we made this our plan.

Traveling light as usual, I had none of the equipment that I'd need for a trek in the Himalayas. No problem. Kathmandu is an excellent place to rent trekking equipment thanks to customs regulations. At that time, Nepal allowed mountaineers to enter the country with as much equipment as they needed. However, there were severe limits on how much gear and equipment foreigners could return home with. International mountaineering expeditions were often forced to jettison their trekking gear, or give it to their Sherpas in payment for guide services. This enabled Sherpa families to open shops in Kathmandu where they rented mountaineering equipment. For a few dollars, I rented everything I needed: A down jacket, a sleeping bag and a pack left behind by a Polish expedition to Mount Everest. This gear would keep me warm and toasty on my Annapurna trek.

Before leaving Kathmandu, I took care of one final transaction. I cashed $100 worth of Traveler's cheques into rupees. The bank teller wasn't used to dealing with such a large sum of money – and I was too inexperienced to request small bills. I left the bank with some small change and a 1,000 rupee note in my wallet.

The next part of our plan required getting to Pokhara in western Nepal, a distance of about 200 kilometers from Kathmandu. We were apprehensive about our first bus ride in southern Asia. Randy and I boarded early to claim our two "reserved" seats. As the remaining 60 or 70 passengers squeezed into the bus, we realized that our two seats were intended for four people. Luckily, we only had to share our seats with one other passenger ... and her chickens and children. I watched as luggage and packages were thrown onto the roof and lashed there. After a couple dozen men made themselves comfortable on the roof of the bus, we were ready to depart.

The bus ride was long and bumpy. The mountain road had lots of hairpin turns. As we swung around tight corners, the suspension groaned. I was glad to have a window seat. The views were breathtaking and nerve-wracking. With an equal number of left and right turns, I reasoned that I had a fifty-fifty chance of escaping through the window if, on one of the hairpin turns, our top-heavy bus toppled over onto its side – provided the bus didn't fall off a cliff.

The children sitting with us were fascinated by our packs. They acted as though they'd never seen zippers or Velcro. Zip open, zip close, zip open, zip close, zip open. Little hands were curious about what was inside our packs. My red and blue hiking socks tumbled out. At that point, I zipped my pack firmly shut and handed a sock to Randy. On cue, Randy and I slipped the socks over our hands to make sock puppets. For the next two hours, we entertained the children with the adventures of Hawkeye and Radar. This helped pass the time and made me stop worrying about our bus falling off a cliff.

By late afternoon, we arrived in Pokhara tired, shaken, but uninjured. There we dealt with the bureaucratic challenge of getting our trekking permits. Although it was Sunday evening, the permit office was open. How convenient to be in a Buddhist country, where government offices are open on Sundays – provided it's not a Buddhist holiday.

On Monday, the first day of our trek, Randy and I hiked four hours to a village called Naudanda. It was a gentle uphill stroll. By this time, I was getting used to Nepal, the people, their way of life, and their curried *dal bhat* (lentils and rice). As for Randy, he wasn't happy with the food. He was growing impatient with the Nepalese. He wanted to see Annapurna as soon as possible. Although I was concerned that our travel partnership would have problems, I needn't have worried. After lunch, Randy picked up his pack and marched out of town. I found a nice place to spend the night in Naudanda. We never saw each other again.

This brief travel partnership was a lesson learned. Travel is a fluid process. When you find someone going your way, it's natural to fall into step with someone else. If later you and your partner have different ideas of where to go next, it's equally natural to say goodbye and never see each other again. The way that short-term travel relationships can develop and then disappear is refreshing. In all my travels, I've never begun an extended international journey with anyone. My best travel partners have been people I've met along the way. (I'll say more about travel partners later.)

On Tuesday, a troop of Nepalese packers overtook me on the path. They were carrying huge bags of apples up into the mountains. The bags strapped onto their backs must've weighed forty kilograms, yet they passed me as if I were standing still. They were hiking without shoes. Six days later, this same troop of barefoot packers came back down the trail carrying refrigerators on their backs. They were returning from the Chinese border. With my hiking boots, my modest pack and at my unhurried pace, it would take me ten days to do half of what they did in six.

As I continued up into the breathtaking Himalayas, I found hospitable villages along the trail. Around mid-day, women would put bowls on tables in front of their homes as an invitation for lunch. Late afternoons, children greeted me and took me by the hand to show me their family's homestay. I ate my dinners indoors, sitting with families around an open fire. I slept on straw mats on the floor, glad to have the comfort of my well-padded Polish sleeping bag. In the mornings, the children showed me where to wash up at the nearby spring. After breakfast, they would follow me to the edge of their village hoping to get a sweet from the bag of candy hidden in my pack.

For the first few days, I had sufficient small bills to pay for my food and lodging. But eventually, the only money left in my wallet was the 1,000 rupee note from the Bank of Kathmandu. One morning, I produced my 1,000 rupee note to pay my host for my overnight in his home. There was a gasp of amazement from everyone present. They'd never seen such a large bill – or even known that one existed. My host reverently asked if he could touch it. Then, he invited his neighbors into his house to see my 1,000 rupee note. Soon, the whole village came running to see this wondrous sight.

1,000 Nepalese Rupees, circa 1981

For the next few days until I reached the Chinese border, I found no one who could change my money. I bartered my pens, pencils, candy, postcards, spare shoe laces and Eveready batteries for lodging. Sometimes, I received free food and drink in exchange for exhibiting my 1,000 rupee note. It was an awkward yet

comical situation, much like Mark Twain's comedy *The Million Pound Bank Note*.

By the time I reached Jomsom at the Chinese border, news of my 1,000 rupee note had preceded me. The innkeeper in Jomsom, assuming that I'd be staying at his place for a few days, dining at his table and drinking at his bar, was prepared for my arrival. He had canvassed the local community and collected 900 rupees. When I checked in at his establishment, I received 900 rupees in small bills and a 100 rupee credit good for lodging, food and drink. I had only to spend 100 rupees for a private room, dal bhat and *Raksi*. The innkeeper became the proud owner of the 1,000 rupee note, which many people – i.e. customers – flocked to his inn to see.

In Jomsom, I reached an impasse. The border from Nepal into China was closed to foreigners which meant that continuing north was not an option. From Jomsom, the Annapurna Loop trail climbs east over the Thorung La pass, elevation 5,416 meters. Winter was coming. Although the pass wasn't yet closed, it was due to close soon – at any minute. My only alternative was to hike back down the same long valley that I'd just hiked up. Although it had been a scenic trek, I didn't want to retrace my steps.

I suspected there might be one more option. Hiking into Jomsom, I'd noticed the logo of the Royal Nepalese Airlines stenciled onto a whitewashed building next to a gravel landing strip. I asked my innkeeper if there was air service out of Jomsom. He laughed and said "Too much wind. Plane can't land." I persisted and asked if there was a flight schedule. The innkeeper pointed to a gentleman reading by the fire and said "Ask him."

The gentleman reading by the fire was Mr. Datta Tary Roy, Jomsom's representative and ticket seller for the Royal Nepalese Airlines. Mr. Roy was as pessimistic about flights in and out of Jomsom as the innkeeper had been. No planes had landed for two weeks due to high winds. Although there might be a break in the weather in the next few days, all seats were sold to a Korean

mountaineering expedition. If a second or a third flight got into Jomsom after that, those seats were already sold, too.

I bought Mr. Roy a glass of Raksi and we continued chatting. The fire and the alcohol kept us warm. Conversation flowed. Mr. Roy was an avid cribbage player. I told Mr. Roy I might enjoy a game or two with him. I didn't tell Mr. Roy that I'd been playing cribbage since I was six. Mr. Roy placed his cribbage board and a well-used deck of cards on the table between us. We started playing.

Knowing I had 900 rupees in my pocket, Mr. Roy bought a round of drinks and suggested that we play for money. I agreed and began to lose. I won an occasional game, but made sure that Mr. Roy won four games out of five. I lost 300 rupees. As the fire burned low and everyone else had long ago gone to sleep. I offered a final wager: My remaining 600 rupees (about $50) versus a plane ticket from Jomsom to Pokhara on the next flight. Mr. Roy readily agreed. I played our last match the way my father taught me to play and I skunked him.

The next day, dawn broke with blue skies and no wind. Mr. Roy met me at breakfast. He made good on our bet and handed me a ticket. He had only to tell the Koreans that 75 kilograms of their climbing equipment would be sent on a later flight. Mr. Roy asked me one favor. He admired my Canon AE-1. He asked if I would take his photo with his plane in the background, and mail it to him. This was an easy favor to grant. After our coffee, Mr. Roy escorted me out to the runway. As the plane landed, I snapped a shot of Mr. Roy with his plane and Annapurna in the background. Two weeks later when I was in Melbourne, I had the photo printed and enlarged to an 8x11 glossy, and mailed it to him.

My flight out of Jomsom was unforgettable. Because the airstrip was deep in the Kali Gandaki River gorge, surrounded by peaks like Annapurna (8,091 m), it's difficult for a plane to get out of this valley. We took off going north towards China. The plane spiraled upwards to gain altitude. We circled perhaps a dozen

times until we could see over the high ridges that surround Jomsom.

The pilot then pointed us south, gunned his engines, and headed for the shoulder of Annapurna. From my window seat, I watched anxiously as we approached the ice field. From where I sat, it looked like we were going to land – or crash! – on the glacier. But the pilot knew his route well. A few meters before the icy ridge, a warm updraft from the Indian lowlands lifted the plane over Annapurna's shoulder. The prop wash from the propellers stirred up the snow beneath us, blowing a sparkling white plume behind us. As we crossed the ridge, Annapurna's magnificent peak seemed close enough to touch. Once over Annapurna's shoulder, the ground beneath us dropped away to Nepal's lowlands 6,000 meters below. My heart was in my throat.

Royal Nepalese Airlines and Annapurna

The pilot eased back on the throttle and we glided down to Pokhara. Although there'd been a few moments of concern, I enjoyed this flight so much I took another Royal Nepalese Airlines flight from Pokhara back to Kathmandu a week later. This saved me from spending a full day crowded onto a bus full of children and animals. Sometimes the view from an airplane window gives you a chance to see something you might not see from the ground.

Much has changed in the forty years since my 120-km trek up the Kali Gandaki valley. It's now possible to drive from Pohkara to Jomsom on a mostly paved road. Jomsom even has a bus terminal. Tourists who come here book their treks online with a tour company, follow a guide, and stay in lodges with beds, electricity and indoor plumbing. The Jomsom airport (IATA code: JMO) has a paved runway and offers daily flights to Pohkara. Adjacent to the airport are ten hotels, four banks, two shopping arcades and a German bakery. One thing that hasn't changed is that weather and terrain still make flying out of Jomsom risky. In the past ten years, there have been three plane crashes and 38 fatalities.

In 2018, I flew Air Niugini from Port Moresby to Rabaul, which is a town on the island of New Britain northeast of Papua New Guinea (PNG). As usual I did almost no research about Rabaul before going there. I'd simply met someone who said it was worth seeing. After I got to Rabaul, I discovered four reasons to come here:

1. During World War II, Rabaul was the headquarters of the Japanese military in the South Pacific. Admiral Yamamoto planned Japan's Pacific War from his underground bunker here. New Britain is full of World War II relics and ruins.

2. Rabaul sits on the rim of a flooded caldera and is surrounded by active volcanoes. In 1994, the city was buried in ash by a volcano I wanted to climb.

3. Rabaul has off-shore thermal areas where one can soak in hot sea water. In cooler water beyond the hot springs are reefs with excellent diving and snorkeling.

4. Perched between three of Rabaul's active volcanoes is a seismographic station monitoring micro-earthquake activity to predict eruptions.

Hot springs on the beach below the volcano

My Air Niugini plane took off from Port Moresby more or less on time. The flight crossed over the spine of PNG with considerable turbulence. From my window seat, I watched as we descended into New Britain. Then, the plane did something odd. We made a U-turn and climbed back up to cruising altitude. The captain came on the overhead speakers to apologize that the plane's landing gear didn't engage. He explained that the air strip at Rabaul wasn't long enough and didn't have the emergency equipment required for a belly-down landing. So, we would have to return to Port Moresby, land there and hope for the best.

The plane climbed back over the spine of PNG through the same thunderheads we passed through before. The turbulence was as bumpy as it had been the first time. Then, curiously, as we approached Port Moresby's airport, we heard the distinctive rumble of landing gear descending and locking into place. Why had the landing gear not worked on our approach to Rabaul? Why was it working now? Did the second round of turbulence knock the wheels back into alignment perhaps? Who knows!

All the passengers were relieved to be safely on the ground. Rosie, Air Niugini's customer service representative, arranged for everyone to be shuttled to downtown Port Moresby for a free night

at the Holiday Inn. Having spent the previous week in primitive villages on the north coast of PNG, I was happy to have a hot shower, a cold beer and a room without mosquitos. Before breakfast the next morning, we shuttled back to the airport to try again for Rabaul. It was the same airplane as the day before. On a hunch, I asked Rosie if there might be another flight to Rabaul later that day. Rosie said "Yes."

After Rosie rebooked me on the afternoon flight, I taxied back to my hotel for a breakfast buffet, another shower and a generous lunch, all compliments of Air Niugini. When I returned to the airport that afternoon, I met the same people whom I'd seen board the plane that morning. Apparently, their plane had once again been forced to return to Port Morseby because of landing gear problems. For the afternoon flight, Air Niugini provided a different airplane. We took off from Port Moresby. We crossed the spine of PNG. This time, the landing gear descended properly. We landed safely in Rabaul.

I've flown thousands of miles on dozens of carriers all over the world. I've never had what I'd call a dangerous or frightening flight. I'll keep my fingers crossed that I'll continue to have good flights. No matter what sort of transportation you take, it's good to stay aware and to follow your hunches. Don't be afraid to change plans – or planes – if you think you should.

In 1982, I was stationed at Yokota Air Base, on the west side of Tokyo. One term, UMUC scheduled me to teach afternoon classes at Yokota, followed by evening classes at Yokosuka Naval Base on the east side of Tokyo. This meant that I would have to traverse Tokyo in one hour – a distance of about 65 kilometers – between 5:00 pm and 6:00 pm, i.e. rush hour.

By train and subway, one might get from Yokota to Yokosuka in two hours, on a good day, not during rush hour. To do this trip in one hour would be impossible at any time by any means – I thought. My brilliant UMUC boss, Julian, was a wizard at solving

logistical problems. He was also adept at negotiating with the military. In Tokyo, the U.S. mail is carried from base to base by helicopter. Julian arranged for me to travel with the mail across Tokyo on the evenings when I taught at Yokosuka.

So, every Tuesday and Thursday, as soon as my afternoon class concluded, I hustled from Yokota's Education Center to the airfield where a UH-1 Huey, loaded with crates, bags and packages, waited for me. To allow for fast loading and unloading, there were no doors. I was strapped into a seat facing outwards. My toes hung outside the door. I wore a helmet to muffle the thunder of the engines and the whir of the helicopter blades. A headset allowed me to listen to the crosstalk between pilots and ground crew.

A UH-1 Huey about to depart from Yokota Air Base

We flew across Tokyo about 100 meters above the tallest buildings. Hedgehopping over the roofs of Tokyo at sunset was a thrilling way to get to class. After a flight like that, I taught my evening classes at Yokosuka with extra adrenaline. When my evening class concluded, I had a long ride back to Yokota by train.

I taught for UMUC at many military bases, all over the world. Flying military was an entertaining and enlightening contrast to flying commercial. Not everyone enjoys flying military, but I always did.

13 – Own Your Transport

Whether you travel by plane, ship, bus, train, taxi or thumb, you're a passenger in someone else's vehicle. You rely upon the pilot, captain or driver to be well-trained and sober. You trust the vehicle to be mechanically sound. Although you might have a say in your route, you don't have the final word. You buy your ticket. You take your seat. You sit back, relax and try not to worry about things over which you have no control. Although this is how I often travel, there are times when I like to be in command.

My favorite form of transportation is walking. Although I don't walk on water and I can't go as fast on foot as I can by flying, driving or sailing, I prefer walking over every other form of transportation. I trust my feet. I see more when I walk. Traveling constantly, I like to stay fit and healthy. Walking is exercise I can do anywhere.

Bicycles are wonderful. As a Boy Scout, I learned to maintain and repair a bike for my Cycling merit badge. Like walking, bicycling is good exercise and you see a lot on a bike. Motorcycles are nice, too. Although you won't get much exercise, motorbikes are lots faster than bicycles, and they can carry passengers. Remember to always wear a helmet.

I like boats, especially canoes, kayaks and sailboats. With my own boat, I'm confident that I'll get where I want to go. A large enough boat provides transportation *and* housing. Drop anchor anywhere. I sleep well on boats.

I don't mind driving a car. I've driven in over forty countries. With my own car, I decide when I want to leave, which route I'll take and how fast I want to go. Cars are especially convenient if you're transporting friends or equipment.

When traveling by car, you can take everything you *might* need, including the kitchen sink. There's an indulgent feeling knowing

that you can transport enough stuff in the trunk and back seat to be prepared for almost any contingency. I suspect that the luxury of being able to take everything with you is what entices people to buy motor homes. A motor home lets you travel without leaving home. To me, this is a paradox.

I've been driving the same 1967 VW for over fifty years.

I've been lucky with transportation of all types – knock on wood! In all the thousands of klicks I've flown, sailed, railed or driven, I've never been in a serious accident. Not even a fender bender. I like to think that I've travelled "wrecklessly" and hope my luck will continue. The best thing about having your own transport is that you're able to go places that most people might not know about. This brings us to a simple travel suggestion – not necessarily a travel rule. Arrange your own transportation when you can. The freedom is wonderful.

In 1981, when I was teaching for UMUC at the air base in Iraklion, Crete, I received a telex (Remember those things?) from the Asian Division in Tokyo asking if I might be interested in teaching at Harold E. Holt Naval Communication Station on Australia's Northwest Cape. I said yes immediately – with enthusiasm.

Knowing how much there is to see and do between Greece and Australia, I negotiated a long break from teaching so I'd have plenty of time to travel to my next assignment. From the Iraklion post office, I mailed my rock samples, books and slides to the Education Office in Exmouth, Western Australia, and hit the road.

I took five months to get from Greece to Australia. My route wandered through Egypt, Israel, Yugoslavia, Italy, Austria, Nepal and Thailand. By the time I got to Melbourne, I was cashed out. Fortunately, I had friends there who gave me a free place to stay.

My next challenge was to find cheap transportation to Exmouth, which is about 5,000 kilometers by road from Melbourne. In 1981, flights from Melbourne to Perth cost $500 AUS. I could fly to Perth, but that would leave me 1,200 kilometers south of Exmouth. Buses from Melbourne to Exmouth were an option, but that would take a week and cost $400 AUS.

My Melbourne friends showed me the newspaper want-ads and suggested that I buy a motorcycle. The motorcycles were listed alphabetically: BMW ... Honda ... Kawasaki ... Motorcycle ... Suzuki ... Yamaha .... I backed up to Motorcycle. Here was a motorcycle of unknown make or brand with no price listed. I phoned the number. An old woman picked up and explained that the bike had belonged to her husband who had "kicked the bucket" many years ago. "If ya want it, ya'd better bring a truck 'cuz the donk's carked up." She added that it wasn't worth a "brass razoo," so I could have it for $50. The price was right.

My friend Rod had a pickup truck, known in Australia as a "ute." We found the woman's farm at the end of a dirt road. She greeted us with "Are you the nillwits that want my husband's rooted bike? It'll be hard yakka to haul it out of the shed and get it running again, but for $50 you're welcome to give it a burl!"

To get to the back of the shed, Rod and I had to chase away the chooks, move heavy farm equipment, lift a few bales of rotten hay and dodge the hornets. There, beneath the spider webs, mold and chook poop, was what used to be a motorcycle. We dragged the heap out of the shed. The tires were rotten. The battery had long ago exploded, corroding the paint on the frame and gas tank. The seat was an ant's nest. Fortunately, it wasn't a heavy bike, so we were able to hoist it into the bed of Rod's ute.

I paid the woman her $50 and we drove back to Rod's garage. I felt bad about bringing this piece of rust and decay into his sparkling clean garage. He said "No worries" as he pointed to his high pressure water hose and the drain in the floor. Then, with gloves, rags and steel wool, I got to work cleaning this thing. The next day, I was chipping away the chicken droppings from the speedometer. There, through the unbroken glass of the speedometer read Harley Davidson. I almost dropped my chisel.

I spent a week in Rod's garage restoring my little Harley. It turned out to be one of the Italian two-stroke Harleys made for the European market in the early 70's. I had to dismantle the entire bike to clean out the corrosion. The engine came completely apart to replace rotten gaskets. Half a can of Liquid Wrench was required to extract the decayed spark plug – there was only one. The drive chain went into an anti-rust bath. I rewired everything from headlight to taillight. Finally, with new oil, tires, battery, lights, air filter and a re-sewn seat, I rolled it out of Rod's garage into the sunlight.

I didn't know what to expect from this motorcycle. Although I'd applied all the skills I learned from Cycling merit badge, motorcycles are more complicated than bicycles. I prayed that my time and money hadn't been wasted because, if this bike didn't work, I didn't have enough money to get to Exmouth by bus or plane. I put the transmission into neutral. I pumped the fuel line to prime the carburetor. I turned the ignition. I kicked the starter. And the engine purred to life – on the first try. What joy! I was afraid to shut the engine off, so I drove around Rod's neighborhood for an hour. It ran surprisingly well. The six-speed transmission was smooth. With its single 90cc cylinder, it had limited acceleration, but it got great gas mileage. Now I was ready for the 5,000 kilometer ride to Exmouth.

But first I had to visit friends in Canberra and Sydney. I reckoned that a test ride would be a good idea before crossing Australia during their summer. On the back of my Harley, I strapped a tent and a sleeping bag. I planned on camping along the way to save money and to see the interior of Australia, aka "Oz." The ride up

to Canberra meant crossing the Snowy Mountains. I think they got this name because someone once saw snow in these mountains.

I loved the winding roads that led through and over the Snowies. There wasn't much traffic. I had the road to myself. A few times, I forgot that in Oz people drive on the wrong (i.e. left) side of the road. This is an easy mistake to make on a motorcycle because there's nothing about the vehicle, such as a steering wheel, to remind you which side of the road you should drive on. A few times, I came around a corner and found myself head-on with a car or a ute. I made this mistake only about three times. Fortunately, on these occasions, the oncoming vehicle wasn't going fast, or there was a wide shoulder onto which I could escape.

I remember one campsite in the mountains. At dusk, I pulled off the highway into a eucalyptus grove by a river. I pitched my tent under the shade of the coolabah trees, filled a pot of water from the billabong and waited for my billy to boil. A jumbuck came down to drink while I was having my dinner. Corellas were nesting in the trees above me. I fell asleep listening to them coo. It was a perfect night for camping.

The next morning, after I ate my brekkie and packed my gear, I started the bike. Though my little Harley didn't have the deep roar of a chopper, it had enough of a bark to startle the corellas into panic. I cowered as the whole forest screamed and took off with the thunder of thousands of flapping wings. I was sorry to have wakened all the birds so rudely. After the birds flew off, the quiet returned. I eased out onto the winding highway, being careful to remember to drive on the wrong side of the road. With the corellas gone, it was quiet again. My little Harley putted along.

That's when I heard footsteps. Running footsteps. It was an odd sensation on this calm, quiet morning to hear someone – or something – running behind me. I checked my rear-view mirrors, left and right. I saw two big reds coming up from behind. I checked my speedometer. I was doing a leisurely 15 kph in first gear.

The two roos came up even with me, one on my left and one on my right. With me sitting on my bike, our eyes were all about the same height. I looked at them. They looked at me. I quietly shifted into second gear and accelerated to 25 kph. My companions didn't skip a beat. They weren't even breathing hard.

I tried third gear to see if they could keep up with me at 35 kph. They increased their cadence and stayed right with me. They had no trouble matching my speed.

I advanced the throttle to 45 kph. They were still with me. Each roo was about a meter to my left and to my right. I admired them – such strong, sleek animals – loping along beside me. Then, they looked at each other, nodded and accelerated to 60 kph in two hops. They took off, waving their tails at me and leaving me far behind.

The road came to a sharp left turn. Instead of turning, the roos flew over a deep culvert beside the road, bounced to the top of the hill overlooking the road, turned around and watched as I leaned and banked into the turn. I was humbled, outclassed by their speed and maneuverability. I also felt gratified that they'd shared two minutes of my journey with me.

From the Snowy Mountains, I found my way into the planned metropolis of Canberra to the home of my friend Jessie. I knew Jessie because he'd been a grad student at Berkeley when I was studying there. He was now a geology professor at Australia's National University. In his free time, he worked on his other passion which was opera. He was the technician in charge of sound and lights at Australia's National Opera.

As soon as I arrived, Jessie asked me how long I could stay in Canberra and if I had any experience working with large animals. Although I thought these were odd questions, I was happy to say I wasn't in a hurry to go anywhere and that I'd mucked out horse stables and worked as a ring attendant at dog shows. That was good enough for Jessie.

That night, Jessie and I went to a rehearsal for *Aida*. The opening night was a week away. In this national production of *Aida*, the baritone was scripted to make his grand entrance riding on the back of a live elephant. The bloke whose job it had been to feed and train the elephant had suddenly gone crook (i.e. gotten sick). There was no one available to tend the elephant. Would I please fill in for the elephant handler until he got well? I often say yes to invitations and opportunities with little thought. Just then the elephant, who'd been watching this conversation, gave me a wink. So, yes it was. I started carrying water and shoveling elephant poop that night.

Soon, I overcame my fear of this enormous beast. She let me pat her trunk and bring her food. She agreed to follow me when I paraded on and off stage. Now all I had to do was to teach her where and when she should kneel to allow the baritone to mount and dismount. She was cooperative and followed my instructions politely. She was a quick study and learned her part faster than I did.

Opening night, the original, official elephant handler was still crook in bed. As his understudy, I reported to the opera house for costuming and make-up. I was dressed as a Nubian slave with full body paint, which meant that I was rather dark. For my costume, I wore a leather sash and a loincloth. Nothing else. The prop master handed me a long staff similar to a shepherd's crook. The elephant, who had a mischievous streak, got cheeky and lifted my loincloth to see if I was painted black underneath.

Opening night went off without a hitch. The baritone rode confidently out to center stage on the elephant. As he finished his magnificent aria, there were many flashes of cameras. The next morning, my photo was on the front page of Canberra's newspaper. I mailed the clipping home to Nashville. My mother, being an opera fan, was proud to show her bridge club that her son had performed in *Aida* in the Australian National Opera.

I had many excellent adventures on that bike riding through Canberra and Sydney and running down the Sapphire Coast. Back

in Melbourne, I waved goodbye to Rod and headed west along Australia's south coast.

The Twelve Apostles on Australia's South Coast.

West of Melbourne are a string of beach towns with friendly pubs, perfect for a beef pie and a pint at the end of a long ride. At one pub, I remember coming in, sitting on a bar stool, and putting my helmet on the counter beside me. A fellow nearby asked what I was riding. I didn't lie when I said I was riding a Harley. This seemed to give me credibility and legitimacy at the bar. A few other folks gathered around and we had a good time. The cold amber flowed freely until 10:00 pm, which was when bars in this town were required to close. I thought it was odd to close an Aussie bar at 10:00 pm. I asked my new friends what was the point of that? They laughed and said "No worries! We make the pubs close early so that we can go party at our place. Come with us, mate!"

They all piled into their utes. I followed on my Harley. We drove out to a big barn set up as a private concert hall and pub. The friends I'd made climbed up onto the stage, plugged in their amps and tuned their guitars. As we all helped ourselves to the keg, the band started singing ...

"Do you come from a land down under?
Where women glow and men plunder?
Can't you hear, can't you hear the thunder?

You better run, you better take cover."

If you're as old as I am, you recognize these lyrics. By chance, I'd met the band who would later be known as *Men At Work*.

The next morning, my musical comrades sent me on my way to visit their mates in Adelaide. There, I got cautionary advice about the road ahead – specifically, the long deadly highway that crosses the Nullarbor Plain. This is the middle of Australia where there's nothing. Not even a tree. Hence the name, Null Arbor. It's flat, arid and hot. There are no towns or gas stations. It's not a good place to ride a motorcycle, especially in December which is Australia's summer. My Aussie mates weren't kidding when they said "It's fucken stinkin hot out there. You'll end up red as a lobster if you're out there for more than five minutes I reckon."

So, when I got to Port Pirie at the edge of the Nullarbor, I bought an economy seat on the India Pacific Railway and put the Harley into the mail car. It took three days to cross the Nullarbor. The train was chockers with young folks heading back to Perth after the holidays. My traveling companions were a Catholic girls' school and a rugby team. We had ourselves a three-day B&S (bachelors & spinsters) Ball. The games and costume parties went non-stop. Being New Years, no one slept.

On the second afternoon, in the middle of this bleak and desolate plain, the train came to an unexpected halt. We were nowhere. There were no roads, fence posts or telephone poles. Everyone puzzled as to why the train had stopped. We jumped out of the train and hustled to the engine to ask what was going on. Why were we stopping here? The conductor wouldn't give us an answer, nor would the other staff on the train. The bartender winked.

Then we heard an airplane. A small prop plane came in for a landing. It bounced to a stop next to the train. The bartender came out of the train and asked the rugby team to give him a hand unloading. We all gazed inside the plane and saw it was full of beer. Evidently, our train was about to run out of beer. With a day and a half left to get to Perth, the train conductor and bartender

knew they'd have a riot on their hands if they ran out of beer. Only in Oz!

Train tracks on the Nullarbor

Arriving in Perth, my train mates invited me to their home where I hit the hay heaps (caught up on my sleep). After five months on the road, I hadn't forgotten that I had orders from UMUC to teach seismology and astronomy at Australia's Northwest Cape. Well-fed and rested, I headed north on my Harley 1200 kilometers towards Exmouth, riding alongside the Indian Ocean.

Halfway between Perth and the Northwest Cape, I saw a sign for the Hutt River Province. Curious to find out what this place was, I turned off the main highway and followed a dirt track across the desert. In the middle of about 75 square kilometers of nothing, I found a house, a barn, a tool shed and a windmill.

I was greeted warmly by Prince Leonard Casley. His wife, Princess Shirley, served me lemonade. They stamped my passport – that's one more country! Then they began their story. A decade before, Mr. Casley found himself near bankruptcy due to the imposition of wheat quotas. Unable to sell his wheat, Mr. Casley found what he believed was a legal loophole in the Australian constitution enabling him to secede from Australia. Since then, his micro-nation thrived by printing its own currency and postage

stamps which were popular worldwide among numismatists and philatelists. The Hutt River Province, though not recognized as a nation by the Australian government or by any other government, was larger than Monaco, Nauru, Tuvalu, San Marino and The Vatican. (Sadly, the Hutt River Province was dissolved in August 2020, amidst disputes with the Australian Taxation Office.)

One night, I camped on a beach beside a large bay. Like much of Western Australia, it was deserted. The sandy beach was wide and free of litter or footprints. There were no houses, shops or boats. I went for a swim at dawn to rinse off the dust. With my mask and snorkel, I headed out into the bay. The water was as clear as air. Oddly, the floor of the bay, which was all sand, appeared out of focus. Then I realized that the sandy floor of the bay was moving. I froze and watched carefully. Rays had been sleeping on the floor of the bay, buried under the soft sand. My swimming awakened them. Like a flock of giant birds, they spread their dark wings and skimmed across the bottom of the bay. I hovered motionless above these rays and watched for about ten minutes as thousands of rays woke up and glided beneath me out into the deep blue waters of the Indian Ocean.

As I continued north towards the equator, the afternoon temperatures were brutally hot, over 50°C (122°F). The heat and mirages were intense. Instead of seeing the road ahead of me, I saw illusions of water. The horizon was a blur of wavy lines. I worried about the engine overheating. There was no way to ride in the daytime. So, during the day, I slept in the shade of bridge overpasses or culverts. I rode at night.

Although free from heat, I encountered a new problem when riding at night. The nocturnally-active kangaroos responded strangely to my headlight and the sound of my engine. As I rode across the desert, the curious roos stood beside the road, waiting for me. Then, as I passed them, the roos would panic. They had a dangerous habit of jumping towards my headlight. After nearly colliding with three roos, I did what I had to do. I unplugged my headlight and rode without a light. The moon was full, so I could see the road ahead as I rode across the desert in the cool night air.

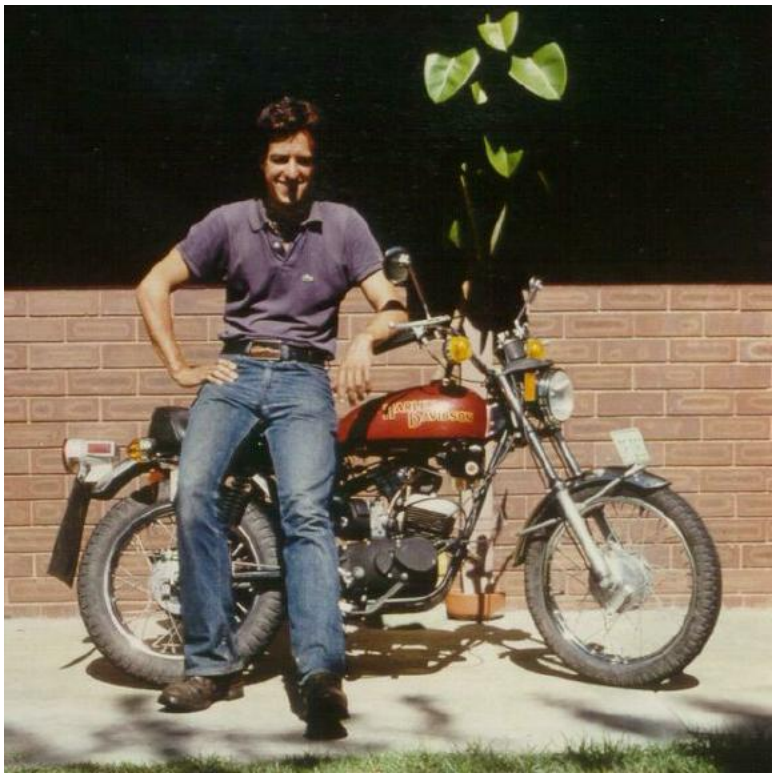
With no headlight, I arrived at Harold E. Holt Naval Communication Station at midnight on Saturday, January 9, 1982, *during a lunar eclipse.* The security guard at the front gate studied my crumpled orders, my tattered passport, my Harley, my long hair, my dirty clothes and the moon ... and asked if I wouldn't mind accompanying him to the brig. "No worries!" I said. Honestly, I was delighted to have an air conditioned cell, hot showers, a flush toilet, American TV and three meals a day.

By Tuesday, a telex from Pearl Harbor verified and confirmed my orders. I was released from captivity, given a haircut and presented with a spacious apartment. For the next eight weeks, I taught seismology and astronomy at one of UMUC's most remote outposts.

The Northwest Cape of Australia has unexplored limestone caverns nearby which made for exciting field trips for my students. The year before my arrival, seismic surveys had detected a large natural gas field a few kilometers outside the base. The gas company allowed me and my seismology students to visit the site to see the exploration and drilling equipment in action. With dry air, no clouds and the nearest city 1,200 kilometers away, this was an excellent place to teach astronomy. The night skies were ideal for learning the constellations and observing meteor showers.

I would have extended my stay at H.E.Holt except that UMUC needed me in Korea. I bid farewell to my little Harley. Although he served me well all the way across Australia, there was no way I could take him with me. One of my students bought the Harley from me and got a good deal on a collector's item. There's one listed on eBay today for $6,000.

With hindsight, the cost of restoring the Harley plus gas and a train ticket might have been more than the cost of a bus ticket to Exmouth. But with my own wheels, I saw a lot more of Oz than I would have on a plane or a bus. The following year, I saw a lot of Japan thanks to a Kawasaki 250.



1973 Harley-Davidson/Aermacchi X-90

The runway at Yokota Air Base near Tokyo is 3.5 kilometers long – long enough to handle giant military transports that fly in and out of Yokota. During the day, the runway is busy with military aircraft. The ear-shattering jets sometimes made it hard to teach. We often had to pause for a few minutes during class when F-15's were doing touch-and-goes. At night, out of consideration for our Japanese neighbors, no planes landed or took off. The runway was vacant, dark and usually unguarded.

I owned a Kawasaki 250. It was lightweight and easy to handle. It was a fast bike, with neck-snapping acceleration. I used to take my Kawasaki out onto the runway late at night. Even with Michiko, my tennis partner, riding on the back of the bike, we could peg the

speedometer at 200 kph and have room to slow down before coming to the sound wall at end of the runway.

On this Kawasaki I had one of my favorite motorcycle adventures. In August 1982, during a one-month break between terms at UMUC, I rode north from Tokyo up the east coast of Japan. Until now, the only time I'd been far from base, I'd been with other people on guided tours. This was my first excursion into Japan on my own. I loved it.

Soon after I left Tokyo, my motorcycle coughed and lost power. I opened my owner's manual to figure out how to maintain the engine. Although I'd been in Japan long enough to speak the language, I realized I'd have to learn to read Japanese. After a bit of practice, I could sound out キャブレター as carburetor. My Kawasaki owner's manual got me started on the long learning curve to reading Japanese. This would be a valuable lesson because in those days northern Japan had little English signage.

With the bike again running smoothly, I enjoyed the ride north up Japan's rugged Pacific coast. This was before the days of GPS's and smart phones. I didn't book reservations, nor did I have a guidebook. I had a paper map to show where the roads went. I

overnighted in *minshukus* (family-run bed & breakfasts) along the way. I always reassured my gracious hosts I didn't mind sleeping under a futon on a tatami mat, and that I loved Japanese food – with the possible exception of *natto* (fermented bean paste).

I rode up the Shimokita Hanto, which is the axe-shaped peninsula at the extreme north end of Honshu, the main island of Japan. This is a sparsely populated part of Japan. It's also a fairly flat part of Japan. One sunny afternoon, on a long, straight stretch of highway with no villages nearby, I couldn't resist winding out the engine at 200 kph. Then, I noticed a flashing blue light in my rear view mirror. Whoever was following me was having a hard time catching up. So, I slowed down and stopped on the shoulder to give him a chance to say *Kon'nichiwa* (hello).

I wasn't expecting much of a conversation, so I left my helmet on. When the officer in blue arrived, he grabbed his ticket book, yanked off his helmet and marched towards me. His aggressive behavior, even from a Japanese policeman, surprised me. I took off my helmet. My long hair spilled down onto my shoulders. In my warmest Tennessee accent, I said "Howdy! How're y'all doin' today?"

When he saw I was a *gaijin* – who apparently spoke no Japanese – he stopped in his tracks. His shoulders slumped. I suspect he was disappointed not to give me a well-practiced lecture about motorcycle safety and traffic laws. Instead, he closed his ticket book. He gazed at his boots for a moment. Then, fixing his eyes on mine, he said simply "Your mother. She worries." Then, he returned slowly to his motorcycle and rode back where he had come from. I didn't speed after that. I appreciated this warning. It was a civilized way for a policeman to express concern for my health.

Not far up the road, I came to a rustic *minshuku* in a pine forest on a beach facing the sparkling waters of great Mutsu Bay. I may not have been the first foreigner to have come this way, but I was the first long-haired American wearing a black leather jacket riding a motorcycle that the proprietors of this *minshuku* had ever seen.

When I stepped into their restaurant and took off my helmet, they shouted “Peter Fonda, Easy Rider!”

They treated me like a celebrity and invited me to stay for a few days. We came to a business arrangement which made everyone happy. I was welcome to pitch my tent on their beach, use their hot springs and enjoy all the fish, rice and beer I could consume. In exchange, I stood outside the restaurant next to my motorcycle at mealtimes, wearing my black leather jacket, waving at passing motorists, and shouting “Irasshaimase!” (Welcome!) Many cars stopped to see what was going on. There were frequent “Peter Fonda, Easy Rider!” exclamations. I got lots of practice speaking Japanese and drinking Sapporo.

At the north end of Honshu, I rode onto the ferry to Hokkaido. Hokkaido, like Alaska, has a short and beautiful summer, and active volcanoes (mentioned previously). I had a glorious week riding the circuit around Hokkaido. I climbed the volcanoes, stayed at campgrounds and youth hostels and hung out with college students on holiday. In those days, there was no tunnel between Hokkaido and Honshu. To return to Honshu, I put my Kawasaki on the ferry from Tomakomai to Hachinohe.

From there, I followed the highway down the west coast of Honshu to the fabled Oga Peninsula, a rugged spur that juts out into the Sea of Japan. There’s a haunting tradition associated with this place. The Oga Peninsula is the home of the Namahages. Like our Santa Claus, the Namahages know which children have been naughty and nice. On the appointed night in mid-winter, they slip into all the homes in Japan to deliver toys and sweets to the good little boys and girls.

This is where the similarities between the Namahages and Santa Claus end. The Namahages are not plump, jolly, old men with kind words and big smiles for everyone. Namahages have fangs, horns and resemble ogres. After they’ve delivered gifts to the good children, they eat the bad children. I’ve never forgotten this twist on the Santa tradition. Perhaps this explains why all Japanese children are well-behaved.

Namahages on the Oga Peninsula

Continuing down the west coast of Japan, I came to Niigata. From there, I put my bike on the ferry to Sado Island, famous in ancient times for being Japan's only source of gold. This island is a charming, out-of-the-way part of Japan that doesn't get many visitors, especially foreign visitors. I enjoyed the hot springs and spelunking in the old mines.

The last week of my month-long road trip coincided with Obon. This is when half of Japan visits their grandparents' villages to pray for and honor their ancestors. On Sunday afternoon, on the final day of this holiday, everyone drives back to Tokyo. The resulting traffic jam that year was astounding. The four-lane highway was backed up bumper-to-bumper from one side of Japan to the other – from the Sea of Japan to the Pacific Ocean. I was glad to be traveling by motorcycle instead of by car. I white-lined between stopped cars all the way back to Tokyo in about two hours. On Monday morning, the traffic news reported that cars were still backed up bumper-to-bumper.

Monday evening, I was back at the Education Center with a new group of UMUC students, introducing them to the basics of

classical mechanics: Energy, momentum and velocity. After class, I had stories to share with my students about Japan.

This is as good a time as any to tell how I finessed a Japanese motorcycle license with little expense or trouble.

It all started in Crete, when I bought a moped. After paying for a 50cc Peugeot, I asked the guy at the shop if I needed a motorcycle license. "Tipota, it's nothing!" he said. For $5, he sold me a handsome paper booklet which attested to my skills on a motorcycle in six languages. I had only to affix a photo of myself to the appropriate spot. No test – written or practical – was required for this Greek motorcycle license.

After I restored my 90cc Harley in Australia, I had to register it. At the Aussie DMV, I was informed that I needed a motorcycle license. I presented my very official-looking Greek international motorcycle license in six languages with color photo affixed. This satisfied the registration officers in Melbourne. For $10, they took my photo and laminated it onto an Australian motorcycle license.

At Yokota Air Base, I bought my Kawasaki 250 from a mechanic in the Air Force. When we went to the base vehicle office to transfer title, I presented my Greek and Australian motorcycle licenses. This was good enough for the American licensing officer. He issued me a U.S. Department of Defense motorcycle license, at no charge.

To ride my motorcycle off base, I needed a Japanese license. At the Japanese DMV, I presented my Greek, Australian and U.S. military licenses. This satisfied the Japanese officials. For a few yen – and without the usual driving course or practical test – they issued me a license authorizing me to ride a motorcycle in Japan.

Eventually, I returned to California and bought a Suzuki 400. When I went to register it and get my motorcycle license in San Francisco, I showed the clerk at the DMV my four other licenses.

I filled out a form, handed it to the clerk behind the plexiglass window and paid $20. A week later, I received a California motorcycle license in the mail. No testing required – written or practical. Easy!

After wonderful two-wheeled adventures in Greece, Australia and Japan, I did not enjoy motorcycling in America. In Greece, Australia and Japan, motorcycles are respected and entitled to occupy space on the road. In California, drivers of four-wheeled vehicles consider two-wheeled vehicles to be an annoyance and an obstacle to be overtaken. I didn't keep my Suzuki for long. I haven't owned a motorcycle since.

Nevertheless, a motorcycle is an ideal way to travel in many parts of the world. A motorcycle is easy to load onto a truck, a train or a boat. A motorcycle can be stored indoors. On islands like Crete, Bali, São Tomé and Rapa Nui, having two wheels made it possible for me to go where cars couldn't go.

When I first came to Kosrae, the first thing I thought about buying was a motorcycle. However, few Kosraeans ride motorcycles. After a week of hard rain, I understood why. Kosrae averages 233 days of rain per year with a mean annual rainfall of about 5 meters. Kosraeans joke that the rainy season lasts eleven months and thirty days. Sometimes it's better just to hitch-hike.

14 – Sailing on a Silver Sea

My first deployment with UMUC was to Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan. Although I later taught at more than twenty other military bases in Europe and Asia, I taught more terms at Iwakuni than anywhere else. Iwakuni is where I met Setsuko, UMUC's locally-hired Japanese instructor and the mother of our two wonderful children.

I arrived in Iwakuni on a Military Airlift Command (MAC) flight from the Philippines. I was 26. Although I had no idea what to expect, I was excited to be in Japan for the first time. My eight-week teaching assignment went by too fast. When UMUC transferred me to Misawa Air Base, at the north end of Japan, I promised myself that I would return to beautiful Iwakuni – and to Setsuko – someday.

Twenty-five years went by. After marrying Setsuko, raising our children, founding and selling a company, and then divorcing, I reapplied for a position with UMUC. By what felt like an amazing coincidence, I received my new assignment by email from the same man I'd worked for 25 years earlier. Bill was still coordinating UMUC's faculty from his office in the Education Center in Tokyo. The second coincidence was that Bill assigned me to Iwakuni. It was like coming home.

Although the base had been rebuilt in 25 years, the feeling of Iwakuni was unchanged. The dark hills behind the base cast the same cool afternoon shadows on the town. The historic bridge that spanned the river was the same as I'd remembered – though it had been repainted to look exactly as it always had. The cherry trees blossomed along the river and families gathered underneath them for picnics in the spring as they have for generations. There were the same 3,000 tiny green islands floating in the nearby Setonaikai (Inland Sea).

When I met my new boss in 2008, the first thing he did was show me an advertisement in the *Stars and Stripes* for a sloop for sale. I went to the marina to see the boat. The major who owned the boat was due to leave for Afghanistan within a week and was caught in an awkward situation. His commander and Japanese maritime law required him to sell his boat to an American with a U.S. skipper's license. That would be me. Within ten minutes, I was the owner of a fully-equipped seven-meter sailboat and trailer.

I named the boat *Daisy* and started exploring the 3,000 islands in the Setonaikai. This is Japan's largest national park. Most islands are uninhabited. *Daisy* could anchor in any of their quiet inlets for lunch or for overnight stays. For the next year, I spent most of my free time sailing, sometimes alone, often with friends and students.

In those days, I taught geology – which involved field trips. Although mainland Honshu has limestone caverns and metamorphic fold belts, several unusual outcrops on the islands in the Setonaikai are accessible only by boat. *Daisy* turned out to be useful for geology field trips. I took students out to the Setonaikai to collect rock samples from the islands. Pillow basalts can be found only under water, so snorkeling was often part of our field trips. *Daisy* could accommodate seven. So, for a class of thirty students, this required me to take field trips with students almost every Saturday.

Daisy was also useful for astronomy field trips because it allowed us to get away from the city glare of Hiroshima. From Iwakuni's marina, it wasn't far to the other side of a high island where we could get dark night skies. Sailing on the Setonaikai was easy, day or night. The shipping lanes and maritime hazards are well marked. For most of the year, there are reliable southerly breezes off the Pacific. The small islands prevent large ocean swells.

Ready for a field trip to the Setonaikai
(my son Dan second from right)

During breaks between terms, I often sailed around the Setonaikai alone. One calm, cloudless night, the Setonaikai was alive with phosphorescent plankton. With bright stars above and twinkling sea jellies below, it was hard to tell where the sky ended and the sea began. It was like being suspended in a magical universe of lights.

Daisy anchored in the Setonaikai

In 2010, I taught my final term at Iwakuni. I sold *Daisy* to one of my students, who has retired in Iwakuni. He still owns *Daisy* and says that I'm welcome to come back and take her for a sail anytime. I hope to take him up on his offer one day. Meanwhile, I've been seeking sailing options in Kosrae. I'm sorry to say that the traditional outrigger sailing canoes, in which Micronesians and Polynesians explored the entire Pacific, have been replaced by motorboats with gasoline engines. I'll keep searching. Until I find my own boat, I'll hitch rides on fishing boats and dive boats.

15 – Border Crossings

Border crossings can be stressful. Rules change. Policies vary. Immigration officers can be suspicious, unpredictable and occasionally corrupt. I estimate that I've smiled and handed my passport to an immigration officer at least 300 times.

Although you can't travel internationally without a passport, experienced travelers have two. If you've followed my travel blogs, you may have wondered how I keep traveling from country to country while my passport might be sometimes sitting at an embassy or in the hands of FedEx/DHL for weeks at a time. The secret is to have two passports.

The U.S. State Department allows Americans to hold two valid passports under either of two conditions:

1. You travel frequently. You need one passport for your current travels while your other passport is at an embassy awaiting a visa.

2. Your travel plans involve visiting a country that won't allow you to enter because your passport shows prior entrance to a specific other country.

I fall into both categories. I used RushMyPassport.com to get a second passport. I paid $167 and received my original and second passport back in three weeks. Both passports have 51 pages. My original passport is valid for the standard ten years. My second passport is good for four years.

Having two passports saved lots of time in Addis Ababa when I was applying for visas for Uganda, Eritrea, Sudan and Burundi. With two passports, I was able to apply simultaneously for visas at two consulates. Without two passports, I wouldn't have been able to come to Kosrae on the eve of the Global Pandemic.

Visa processing for Burundi and Sudan

Although I've gotten used to changing countries, I sometimes face unexpected situations. Usually, finding a solution is easy, and I pass smoothly into the next country. Sometimes, I have to use situational awareness and maybe a little luck. A hero of my youth was Obi-wan Kenobi of *Star Wars* fame. He always knew how to handle unexpected situations. My favorite scene is when he calmly explains "These aren't the droids you're looking for." The Imperial Storm Troopers wave him and Luke through the checkpoint. Through the years, I've tried to hone my Obi-wan skills. I've also learned that it helps to have the right documents, smile, never raise one's voice and always be gracious. Entering Micronesia was one time when I had to apply all these skills.

I booked a week of scuba diving in Chuuk and crammed my wetsuit, snorkel, mask and dive computer into my pack. Anticipating a week of crystal clear tropical waters, I headed to the nearest international airport. That airport was Bangkok, Thailand. The date was February 20, 2020, the onset of Covid-19 travel restrictions.

En route to the airport, I received an email from United Airlines informing me that the Federated States of Micronesia had decreed that no one would be allowed into Micronesia if they'd been in a country with a single case of the Coronavirus within the past fourteen days. A quick Internet check confirmed that Thailand had its first reported case of COVID-19 on January 13, making it the first country outside China to experience the Coronavirus. To date, there'd been 35 cases of Covid-19 in Thailand. Although I'd spent the past two weeks in a remote village in northeastern Thailand with no cases of Covid-19, my passport would betray me. I had a

Thai entry stamp dated February 7. I would soon have a Thai exit stamp dated February 20.

To add to my problems, by mid-February every country in East Asia had had at least one case of Covid-19. Thus, the only people allowed into Micronesia were those who'd been in Guam for the previous fourteen days because, at that time, the Coronavirus had not yet come to Guam. So, how was I going to be allowed entry into Micronesia on February 21? This was an occasion when it's handy to have two passports. I wasn't sure I had a solution, but I had a plan. It worked like this:

- Before coming to Thailand, I'd been traveling in East Africa using my first passport. The last country I visited in Africa was Uganda. I exited Uganda using my first passport. My Ugandan exit stamp was dated February 6.

- By chance, I'd used my second passport when I entered Thailand on February 7. This same passport was stamped when I departed Bangkok on February 20.

- To fly from Bangkok to Chuuk, I had to change planes in Guam. When I entered Guam on the morning of February 21, I showed my second passport.

- Relaxing at a coffee shop in the Guam airport, I buried my second passport deep in my pack and took out my first passport, which was last stamped in Uganda.

- To check in for my flight from Guam to Chuuk, an automated kiosk scanned my first passport and generated my boarding pass. With no checked luggage, I didn't have to queue up to the United Airlines counter where I might have been asked where I'd been for the previous fourteen days.

- When my plane landed in Chuuk, the immigration officer inspected my first passport carefully. He noted that the last exit stamp in my passport was dated February 6 in Uganda. He

did some quick math to verify that I'd left Uganda fifteen days ago. I had no other stamps since then. He concluded that, since my plane was arriving from Guam, I must have been in virus-free Guam for the past two weeks.

- I smiled, said *Kinisou chapur* (thank you) and he stamped me into Micronesia.

It was a nice bit of passport and immigration sleight of hand. I was glad to have had the awareness to be ready for this border crossing. I was one of the last tourists allowed into Micronesia. I wouldn't be sitting on a beach in Kosrae today if I hadn't been allowed into Chuuk in February 2020. This wasn't the first time I've crossed an international border in a somewhat irregular manner.

16 – Stowaway

One of my favorite teaching assignments with UMUC was the summer of 1981 on the island of Crete. That spring, I'd been teaching at the U.S. Air Force base in Aviano, Italy. To get from there to Iraklion, Crete, I had orders to take a Military Airlift Command (MAC) flight. MAC was how UMUC's instructors – and their teaching materials – were shipped from base to base.

Flying MAC, I never knew in advance what sort of aircraft I'd be flying. Sometimes I might be on a big C-5, a cavernous, windowless cargo plane, unheated, uncomfortable, noisy and slow, its seats made of webbing on metal frames attached to the outside of the fuselage. The best C-5 flights were the flights where the cargo included tanks, jeeps and/or trucks. On those flights, after takeoff, the savvy passengers climbed inside the tanks, jeeps or trucks. The seats inside the vehicles were padded. Being inside a vehicle on a C-5 was also quieter and warmer.

For my flight from Aviano to Iraklion, I was on the Nightingale, a 727 converted for use as a hospital plane. Its route circled from Germany to Italy to Greece to Turkey and back to Germany. It was outfitted to accommodate soldiers with broken legs or patients strapped onto gurneys. Every other row of seats had been removed. I've never flown with so much legroom anywhere before or since. Even first class seats on an Airbus 380 don't have this much legroom.

My plane landed at Iraklion's civilian airport. The UMUC field representative welcomed me at the bottom of the stairs. I carried my bag to her car and we drove to the base. My passport was not stamped. The last stamp in my passport was my arrival into Italy with a Department of Defense work permit. Although this was before the formation of the European Union, it didn't occur to me that I might need a Greek entry stamp in my passport. This little omission would create a problem two months later when it came

time for me to leave Greece. For now, I was just glad to be in Greece. The only thing on my mind was dinner.

Iraklion Air Station was sixteen kilometers east of the airport; though an Air Force base, it was a non-flying facility. Its purpose was to provide administrative and logistical support to the 6931st Electronic Security Squadron. It was a place with lots of tall antennae that monitored radio communications in the Middle East. Many of my students were fluent in Russian, Arabic, Turkish or Kurdish. They spent their days inside sound-proofed bunkers underneath communication towers listening for suspicious radio communications. Two months later, the fact that the air base didn't have its own airstrip would be my second problem.

At the base, I taught seismology and astronomy for eight weeks. The seismology class went on a field trip to a limestone cavern nearby. On clear nights, the warm, dry air made for excellent star gazing for the astronomy class.

At this base, Greek nationals could enroll in UMUC's classes. One of my favorite students was a fortyish woman named Popi. She was a good student and asked detailed questions about the geologic hazards specific to Crete. She was also well-connected to local businesses and knew people who got things done. Popi's farm provided fresh produce sold at the base exchange (BX). When we took our field trip to the cave, Popi arranged for our field trip to be catered. When we emerged from the cave, we were greeted by a long table under the olive trees covered with souvlaki, olives, dolmades, moussaka, tzatziki, melitzanosalata, and hummus. I fell in love with Greek food.

I got to know Popi and her family well. I was invited to her home for a few meals because she wanted her children to practice their English with a native English speaker. Popi was especially interested in having me teach her eighteen-year-old daughter Georgia how to speak English. Georgia was a stunning *néa gynaíka*. She looked like a cross between a young Sophia Loren and Brook Shields. Greek food wasn't the only thing I fell in love with that summer.

The end of UMUC's teaching term coincided with national elections in Greece. Andreas Papandreou and his party swept into power in a landslide. During his campaign, Papandreou had promised to withdraw from NATO, to order U.S. troops and military bases out of Greece, and to imprison all the American contractors who had entered Greece illegally and were taking jobs away from Greeks.

There were only two Greek seismologists in Greece at that time. I knew them because they'd been at the Berkeley Seismographic Station when I'd been there in the 70's. They were employed in Athens. So, although I wasn't taking any jobs away from any Greek nationals, my status as a military contractor with an Italian work permit in Greece was awkward.

I had an apartment off base. I was on base running errands and getting ready to leave Greece on the morning that the election results were announced. Immediately, a crowd of angry Greeks gathered at the entrance to the base. They were waving scythes, pitchforks, shovels and other weapons of mass destruction. They demanded the release of the American civilian working on the base so they could escort me to jail.

I went to visit the JD (Juris Doctor) at the base's legal office. When I entered his office, he seemed to have been expecting me. He closed his office door and told me quietly that the base had destroyed all records of my being there – for my protection. All I had to do was to get off base and out of Greece with no one seeing my passport. Since there was no airfield on the base, I couldn't leave Greece by military transport. The commercial airport was not an option either. As a consolation, I was free to remain on base inside the chain link fence as long as I liked. I was welcome to use the bank, the grocery and other facilities. I could sleep at the Bachelor Officers Quarters if I wanted to. However, once I left base, I wouldn't be allowed back in.

As I left the JD's office, the crowd outside the base had grown considerably. I wondered how does one leave a country without

showing one's passport? On my way over to the BX for a snack, I met Popi. Like the JD, she also had been expecting to see me. Thankfully, she was more helpful than the JD. She said "Come with me. You help me. I help you. Everything will be okay."

Popi led me to her pickup truck. Together we unloaded several dozen cantaloupes and stacked them on the shelves inside the BX. Then, Popi lifted the canvas tarp she'd used to cover the cantaloupes. She said "Okay, now you get under here and act like a melon." I began to understand her plan. She fastened the tarp tightly over me, gave my head and my butt a farmer's squeeze, and then drove out of the BX parking lot. I could tell by the increase in the noise level we were approaching the base's main gate. An angry mob was chanting outside.

As we exited the gate, Popi honked and hollered with all her friends, demanding the release of the American interloper. Then, she drove slowly through the crowd and took me to my apartment a few kilometers away. She kept a lookout while I ran inside and gathered a few of my possessions. She told me not to get everything because someone would come back later to get the rest.

Then with my little bag, I buried myself under the tarp again. We headed up into the hills towards her family's farm. When the pavement ran out, the ride got a little bumpy, but I was relieved to be getting farther and farther away from the scene unfolding at the base.

After about an hour, we arrived at Popi's farm. This wasn't the first time I'd been up in these hills. I recognized the crests of the Valley of Lasithi in eastern Crete. On the far side of the valley, I could see the entrance to the cave where Zeus was born. Below me were bright green fields, well-watered by the classic windmills that spun slowly in the breeze. At the center of the property stood three or four ancient white farm houses with terra cotta tile roofs. These homes were surrounded by an olive orchard. From there, the hills sloped upwards covered with trellised grape vines. This would be my hideout for the next month.

The valley of Lasithi, Crete

Popi poured me wine, and gave me a plate of bread and olives. Then she excused herself saying she had to go collect more food. For the next hour or two, I sat alone enjoying the waning afternoon and the warm breezes out of North Africa. Then, Georgia arrived in her little red Morris Minor. She liked to drive fast. Before I saw her I could tell it was her from the dust tornado she made as she fishtailed up the mountain to the farm. Georgia jumped out of her car, ran over to me and gave me a big kiss. She then produced my luggage, my school materials, my books and the rest of my clothes. Inside the big house, she showed me where my room was, which was adjacent to hers.

Later, while we were relaxing with our wine, bread and olives, I noticed an old woman dressed in black stirring the fire. I asked Georgia who this woman was. Georgia was proud to tell me this was her *yiayia*, her grandmother. The old woman was then joined by another smaller woman also dressed in black who was even more hunched over than Georgia's *yiayia*. "And who is that?" I asked. Georgia said "my *proyiayia*, my great-grandmother." The two women sat on the stones drinking their tea gazing over the valley where their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren were working in the orchards and the fields. I can still picture this unforgettable moment.

I spent the next month in total Greek immersion. Georgia and her mother were the only English speakers. I was a helper on the farm and a member of the family. I picked grapes. I worked the olive press. I cleaned the irrigation ditches. I patched a roof or two. It was satisfying work. Working with Popi's nephews, I learned a lot of Greek.

At sunsets, everyone gathered in the courtyard between the two largest farm houses. Long dining tables were placed end to end and covered with white sheets. Women laid out huge feasts on the tables. There were usually about twenty people at these meals. Dinner started as evening fell and went long into the night. First there'd be the sounds of eating and drinking. Spirited conversations led to lively debates and eventually to laughter. Someone would bring out a mandolin, accompanied soon by a couple of bazoukis. The singing would begin, followed by dancing on the flagstone courtyard. Candles and oil lamps provided illumination. The dancers' shadows played across the white walls of the farm houses.

Within a month, the political situation in Greece calmed down. It was time for me to leave Crete, but I still had a problem with my passport which the military JD couldn't solve for me. I took the ferry to Athens to ask for assistance from the American embassy. They couldn't help me either.

While in Athens, I visited an "American restaurant" hungry for a hamburger and a beer. Having lived in Greece for three months, I greeted the maître d in Greek. He immediately blocked my path and explained that I couldn't eat there. This was a restaurant for tourists only. I switched to English and told him I was an American. He asked to see my passport, which I'd left at the hotel for safekeeping. He said "I don't know where you learned your English, but you're from Crete." I persisted for a few more minutes but finally shrugged off with *antio sas* (goodbye). I took pride in having learned to speak Greek well enough to convince an Athenian that I was a Cretan.

Since leaving Greece, I've had few occasions to speak Greek. Someday, I'll return to Crete. When I do, I hope to recover the Greek language skills buried somewhere deep inside my skull. It was a language that came to me naturally.

While I was in Athens, Popi and her husband, Dimitris, devised a covert way for me to get out of Greece. Dimitris worked at the Iraklion port authority. I went with him one day to the offices down on the wharf. There, I met with stevedores and customs officials. For a few hours, I sat in their sparse office drinking Greek coffee (the bottom half of which is as thick as mud) and smoking cigarettes (the <u>only</u> time in my life I've ever smoked). The dock hands and I got to know each other making small talk well into the afternoon.

They all agreed that with a name like Nick Zoa I was Greek or had Greek ancestry. My spoken Greek was good enough to convince anyone that I was from Crete. That I had an American passport was irrelevant. I was one of them. It was decided therefore that I should come back the next morning when the cruise ship came through.

I had one more starry night on Popi's farm up in the Valley of Lasithi. After the eating, the singing and the dancing were done, the dishes washed and the leftovers put away, I went upstairs with Georgia. The sheer white curtains billowed in the tall windows as the breezes from North Africa wafted through our rooms.

Dimitris woke me at 4:00 am. It was dark. As planned, I got dressed, picked up a small leather pouch containing my passport, toothbrush, camera and a paperback copy of Ted Simon's *Jupiter's Travels*. In the darkness, we drove down the mountain to the port authority.

There, shining like a floating office building, was a huge white cruise ship. (Actually, the ship wasn't that big. It looked huge sitting next to Iraklion's small pier in the dark.) It was the *Dana Sirena* arriving from Brindisi, Italy. I shook hands with the same sturdy fellows that I'd had coffee and cigarettes with the day before. Now, we were all stevedores handling luggage, freight and supplies.

Our final task was to load a pallet of Popi's cantaloupes into the ship. The crew employed a big yellow crane to hoist pallets from the dock into the ship's hold. We had to stack the cantaloupes so they would stay on the pallet and not fall into the water while being lifted from the dock into the ship. There was only one way to ensure that all the melons ended up where they needed to go. Someone had to stand on the pallet and hold the melons to keep them from rolling off. That would be me.

The *Dana Sirena* sank in the Red Sea in 1983.

Dimitris handed me my travel pouch and gave me a wink. I stepped onto the pallet and was lifted from the dock up about fifteen meters into the air and then down into the ship's hold. No cantaloupes were lost.

Once aboard the ship, I unloaded the cantaloupes. I heard the ship's horn blast once. A crewmember directed me to the gangplank to exit the ship. I knew what I had to do. When I was out of sight of the ship's crew, I ducked into a head, closed and locked the door, and opened *Jupiter's Travels*. I felt the ship start its engines. The dockhands called to each other as they threw off the lines. By the time I'd read the first three chapters, I could feel the ship rocking gently. We were at sea. I emerged from the head and went to the bar.

It was now about 8:00 am. Although the sun had barely risen, the bar was packed and voices were loud. I heard British accents. I moved in to see what was going on. Here was an English rugby team on tour through the Middle East. After playing a few matches in Italy, they were now on their way to Egypt for a brief cultural tour of Egyptian highlights. I quenched my thirst with a beer, had pretzels for breakfast and got to know these fellows.

I told them my story about how I'd ended up on the *Dana Sirena*. They grinned and then shared their news: When they left England, they were a team of forty. But one of their teammates had met a woman in Brindisi and had missed the boat yesterday. Now, they needed one more man to complete their team. They handed me the key to his stateroom, his meal coupons, his pass to the Egyptian museum in Cairo and his ticket to the Sound & Light show at the Pyramids. Naturally, I bought the next round. For the rest of the cruise, unless I was sleeping in my stateroom, I was with the rugby players in the bar or by the pool.

I wasn't sure what would happen when our ship arrived in Alexandria. So, I visited the ship's purser. He was from Avignon, a picturesque town in southern France where I spent the summer of 1973. When I told the purser – in French, of course – that I'd studied in Avignon and lived with the Olivier family in the Croix

des Oiseaux quarter, he immediately brightened "*Ne t'inquiète pas"* (don't worry). He assured me that, as a member of the British rugby team, I'd have an easy entry into Egypt.

Two mornings later, the *Dana Sirena* docked in Alexandria. Most passengers queued up for the long and bureaucratic process of passing through Egyptian immigration and passport control. Meanwhile, the French purser corralled the rowdy rugby players for whom special arrangements had been made for our tour. We exited the *Dana Sirena* via a VIP gangplank. Waiting for us at the bottom of the ramp was an air conditioned tour bus. There were forty seats. We filled them perfectly. At this point, I was carrying only my leather pouch. This was all the luggage I would have for the next two months.

We started with a tour and lunch at the papyrus factory. From there, our bus drove us to the Egyptian museum in Cairo. After a big dinner at a western hotel, we headed out to the Pyramids for the glamorous Sound & Lights show. The sphinx was brilliantly illuminated at the end. As the music faded, our Egyptian guide marched us back to our tour bus. With our one-day tour of Egypt completed, we were all supposed to board the bus and go back to the *Dana Sirena*.

The Sound & Lights show at the Pyramids

Except for me. The French purser had suggested that I would need to leave the tour at some point. This seemed to be a good time to do so. I said to our guide "Thank you for being an excellent guide today. I love Egypt. I think I'll stay here."

The guide appeared perplexed and then annoyed. His job was to ensure that everyone got back on the bus. He put his hand on the holster attached to his hip and said "No. You must return to boat now."

I smiled as I reached for my wallet. I said *shukraan* (thank you) again for an excellent tour and offered him a crisp $5 bill. This resolved the matter. He smiled, took my $5, shrugged his shoulders and said "Okay, you stay." The tour bus closed its doors. I waved to my fellow rugby players as their bus drove off into the night.

17 – Land of Pharaohs

It's raining again – not in Cairo – but here in Kosrae. It rains here ... a lot. It rains hard a few times almost every day. Thanks to the rain, there are lush jungles and flowers everywhere. The mountains are full of waterfalls. I love the rain. It's usually accompanied by cool and refreshing breezes. On the downside, humidity is high. Any clothing hung up in a closed closet is quickly mildewed. I don't mind the rain. It gives me a good excuse to stay at my computer and keep writing this book.

The last chapter left off with my stowing away on an Italian cruise ship, bribing an Egyptian guide and saying goodbye to the rugby players. There's still more to this story, including another unsanctioned and possibly illegal international border crossing.

So there I was standing in a sandy parking lot as the tour bus of rugby players drove away. Behind me were the sphinx and the three great pyramids of Giza, illuminated with powerful spotlights from the Sound & Lights show. As the spotlights turned off one by one, the pyramids vanished into darkness. When the last light on the sphinx was extinguished, I saw an ocean of stars above me in the black night sky. To the east, Cairo glowed on the near horizon.

There was only one light left. It was a single bare blub hanging from a wire at the snack shack. This was a dusty, temporary structure made of scrap wood and sheet meal where cold drinks and post cards were sold during the day. Beneath the light were two men. One stood inside the shack and the other outside at the makeshift counter. They were talking.

I ambled over to the shack, rested an elbow on the dirty, wooden counter and said hello. Conveniently, they spoke English. They were only mildly surprised to see me. The guy behind the counter, who was the proprietor of this fine establishment, asked if I'd like to buy a Fanta. I had an orange one. It was refreshingly cold.

The other fellow, i.e. the customer, introduced himself as Tony. The three of us chatted for a bit. I told them I enjoyed the Sound & Lights show, and I was now hoping for a ride into Cairo and a place to stay for the night. Tony said that he was a free-lance tour guide. He offered to let me stay at his house for the night and to be my guide to Cairo and other ruins the next day. Accommodations at Tony's house would cost $10, including breakfast cooked by Tony's mother. Tomorrow's tour would cost $20.

This seemed reasonable. It was also an attractive alternative to sleeping in a sandy parking lot at the edge of the Sahara. So, I said yes. After Tony and I finished our Fantas, we headed into town in Tony's Impala. Tony's Impala rattled a lot. The front end sounded as though the wheel bearings were gone. The right front fender was missing. So was the right front headlight. The windscreen had suffered from years of sand abrasion. It was difficult to see out the front window. As it was a warm night, we had all the windows rolled down. Tony could see where we were going by leaning out his side window.

We descended into Cairo. At first, we drove on wide, 4-lane, paved streets. Then Tony turned onto a 2-lane street which narrowed as we drove into his neighborhood. The pavement ran out. We kept going. Soon we were on a road of packed sand with tall featureless walls on both sides. Finally, Tony turned hard left into a dark alley barely wide enough for his car. He drove several meters into the alley and then shut off the engine. I wondered what I'd gotten myself into.

Tony quickly reassured me by pointing to a high wall whose only features were peeling paint. He said "Here is my house." There was barely enough room to open the door, the alley being so narrow. I squeezed out of the car, along with my small pouch. Tony led me to a door which one might otherwise not recognize as a door. He banged on the door, and called out. In a moment, I heard shuffling of feet and then a metallic sound as a bar on the other side of the door was slid through brackets. The door opened and we stepped inside.

We entered a large hallway with a black and white tile floor. A curved sweeping staircase led to the second floor with a balcony overlooking the entrance. People appeared, dressed in night clothes. Tony introduced me to his father, his mother, his brothers and a couple of other people. I understood that I could have breakfast whenever I woke up in the morning. Given that it was now after midnight, I also understood that everyone would go back to bed and that I should do the same. Tony showed me to a room at the top of the stairs and wished me a good night's sleep.

My room had a high ceiling and one tiny window high on the wall. There was a sink with running water. The water was neither cold nor hot. The bed had an old brass frame with a high headboard and foot. I turned to close the door. There were four substantial bolt locks on the inside. I engaged each lock, as quietly as possible, which was difficult to do because they were heavy metal locks that needed to be oiled.

Beside my bed was a night stand with a drawer. I opened the drawer. Instead of a Gideon Bible, I found a vintage German Luger, perhaps from World War II. I checked the cartridge and found it was loaded. I quietly put the gun back into the drawer and closed it. The loaded gun made me feel safe – sort of. I wondered how recently it had been fired.

The room lacked any fan or air conditioning. It was August. Cairo had had another blisteringly hot summer day. The stone and stucco walls of the building still radiated heat. I didn't know how I'd sleep in this heat, but figured I'd have to do my best. I turned off the light, put a wet towel over my face and lay down. I lay in the darkness sweating and trying to fall asleep. At least, I didn't have to worry about mosquitos.

Then the snoring began. Snoring like I had never heard before. Deep, sonorous, rattling snores were coming from somewhere in the house. I listened for several minutes, hoping that the snoring would fade or, better yet, disappear. It seemed to get louder and

louder. With that much snoring going on, there was no way I could sleep.

I went to my door and listened. Quietly and slowly, I unlatched each of the four locks on the inside of my door. When I opened the door, the snoring was much louder. I stepped out onto the balcony to determine the source of the sound. The snoring was coming from downstairs. A shaft of moonlight through a window above the entranceway illuminated the stairs. I tiptoed down. About halfway down the staircase, I gazed through an archway into the living room. It also was illuminated by moonlight. There, lying on a Persian rug between couches, was a camel, its chest rising and falling as it snored! In a neighborhood like this, one would bring one's camel indoors at night. Satisfied that I'd found the source of the snoring, I crept back up the stairs, returned to my room, latched all the locks, got into bed and fell asleep.

During the next couple of days, Tony proved to be an able guide as we rattled and rolled through Cairo in his beat-up Impala. After our tour, I felt acclimated to Cairo. I said goodbye to Tony and took off on my own. My first and most important errand was to visit the American embassy. With my U.S. passport, I was allowed entry into the building. I sat down with an American official. I told him the whole story about how I left Crete and ended up in Cairo. I also added that I'd like to return to Greece some day to collect the rest of my belongings. After listening patiently to my whole story, he thanked me for not causing an international incident. Then, he took my passport and filled it with so many stamps that it was impossible to tell where I'd been or when I'd been there. He assured me that I'd now be able to re-enter Greece as a tourist any time I liked, but that I should wait a month or two before returning.

The next day, I hiked across Cairo. It was an all-day adventure. I didn't have a map but found Cairo easy to navigate. The city straddles the Nile. Downhill takes you to the monuments, the plazas, the hotels and the river. Uphill takes you to the residential areas, the ghettos and a few of the bigger mosques. Although I learned later that I'd passed through questionable neighborhoods, I

realized that if I minded my own business and strode along as though I knew where I was going, no one would stop me or bother me.

At the entrance to the grand mosque above Cairo, there were racks of shoes. An old man by the door pointed to my shoes, nodded towards a rack, and held out his hand, palm up. I understood that, if I gave him a coin, my shoes would be there when I came out. The inside of the mosque was deliciously cool on a hot afternoon. Sitting on a rug with my back against a stone pillar was a good way to cool off after hiking up the hill to the mosque.

At one point, I decided to try riding a city bus to get from one part of Cairo to another. I found a bus stop. I was horrified and amused to see how boarding and exiting worked. When the bus stopped, people wanting to get on the bus pushed so forcefully into the bus that the departing passengers could not exit through the door, even if they wanted to. Standard procedure was for departing passengers to exit by climbing out the windows and then dropping to the street. I decided to walk.

Having seen the papyrus factory, the Egyptian museum and the great pyramids, I figured that the next thing to do in Egypt would be to visit Karnak, the largest religious building ever constructed. Tony had suggested that I take the train, which was good advice. He directed me to the great hall in the train station where tickets were sold. When I got there, I saw right way that getting a ticket would be a challenge. There was a mob of about forty Egyptian men all gathered around the ticket booth. Everyone was talking loudly and waving their arms in the air. There was no queue.

I approached the mob. From the edge of the crowd, on my tiptoes, I saw what was causing this ruckus. In the center of the crowd, there were a pair of blonde heads without hijabs (head scarves). I pushed through the crowd and found two American tourists. These young ladies were elementary school teachers from San Diego, on holiday in Egypt. Like me, they wanted to take the train to Luxor to visit the ruins of Karnak. Their problem was that everywhere they went they were being harassed by large crowds of men who

prevented them from doing anything. They couldn't understand why.

I regarded them. They wore white sleeveless tops and short white skirts. Their long blonde hair was uncovered. Although they were dressed appropriately for a tennis outing in Southern California, they hadn't read the guidebook on how women are expected to dress in Cairo. I told the two ladies I could probably solve their problem if they would stand quietly behind me. I turned and faced the seething crowd of men, and said in a loud and firm voice "Stop bothering my wives!"

The crowd quieted and took one step back. I then turned to one of the older and more distinguished gentlemen in the crowd. I asked him if he spoke English. He said he did. I told him "We'd like three tickets in two adjoining cabins for tomorrow's train to Luxor." I handed him Egyptian pound notes, sufficient to cover the cost of three tickets in two cabins plus his service fee. The rest of the crowd dispersed.

I introduced myself to Pam and Cindy and suggested that they return to their hotel to change into clothes that would cover all their exposed flesh, to buy head scarves and to meet me in the morning at the train station in time for our departure. This is how I ended up with two traveling companions for the next week.

The train ride from Cairo to Luxor exceeded expectations. I anticipated the usual African transport – crowded, dirty and non-punctual. This train turned out to be German made and German run. It departed from Cairo exactly on time. The air conditioning worked. Our cabins were spotless. The porters were well-dressed. The only element of Egyptian-ness was their expectation of being tipped for everything they did. Accustomed to this by now, I had lots of small bills and coins to put into open palms.

The train tracks followed the east bank of the Nile. By design, the train's cabins were on the west side of the train. So, going south, we had a continuous view of the Nile from our windows. While

we enjoyed our Riesling, we watched camels drinking as the feluccas sailed gracefully up and down the river.

August isn't a popular month for visiting Egypt. It's hot. Very hot. I had no way to check the temperature, but it was well over 40ºC (104ºF) by 10:00 am every day. At least, it's a dry heat. With a hat, lightweight clothing and plenty of water, it's tolerable. The best part of being in Luxor in August is that there were almost no tourists. We had no trouble getting excellent rooms at the Winter Palace Hotel. The high ceilings, the marble floors, the formal dining room with fine China and crystal wine glasses were like a scene from the grand British colonial days. I half expected to see Colonel Lawrence (of Arabia) come striding through the hotel lobby at any moment.

Winter Palace Hotel, Luxor

We began our visit to Luxor with the standard tour of Karnak. It's an amazing sight to behold all those rows of impossibly high stone pillars adorned with hieroglyphics.

The Temple of Karnak

A clerk at our hotel suggested we might want to cross the Nile to see the other ruins over there. This sounded like a worthwhile adventure. Pam and Cindy were up for it. The next morning, we ferried across the Nile. On the west bank, we rented three donkeys for our transportation. With plenty of water, we rode off into the dunes. Our competent and talkative guide led us through and over the dunes into a canyon at the end of which was a hole in the sandstone cliffs.

We approached the entrance to this man-made cavern and dismounted. I was met by two Americans who were friendly, but said that this area was off limits. Curious, I asked a few questions and learned these fellows were archaeologists from the University of California, Berkeley – my alma mater. Having been in the geology department, I knew the name of one of their archaeology professors. After chatting with me for a few more minutes, the archaeologists decided that maybe it would be okay for me to come into their excavation and look around. That morning, they'd discovered a new passageway. They advised me that I'd be entering at my own risk. Pam and Cindy weren't comfortable with entering an unexplored dark cave; they stayed outside, sat in the shade and watched the donkeys.

With flashlights in hand, we entered the cavern and went into a tunnel that I was told had been opened only yesterday. There were no handrails or safety lines in place. At one point, we had to traverse a rather narrow ledge. To the left was a smooth sandstone wall with no handholds. To the right was a dark pit. My guides didn't know how deep it was. We dropped pebbles into it but didn't hear them hit the bottom.

After several somewhat harrowing minutes feeling our way through this tunnel wondering if we might encounter a 3,000-year-old booby-trap, we came to a magnificent chamber. The walls were richly decorated with paintings and hieroglyphics. In the center of the room was a large sarcophagus with a heavy stone lid. Being the first people into this tomb since it was sealed eons ago raised the hair on the back of my neck. This was an *Indiana Jones* moment.

My two guides hadn't gone this far into the cavern before today. We stood in stunned silence as we marveled at this discovery. We agreed to touch nothing and to breathe as little as possible. This was where our spelunking ended. They said they'd need to get their professors in here and to document everything before anything else was done. We tiptoed carefully back out to the sunlight.

After another week of touring ruins and visiting oases, the time came for me to say goodbye to Pam and Cindy and to leave Egypt. Following the advice I'd been given at the American embassy, I decided it was probably too soon to return to Greece. Since I'd never been to Israel and it was nearby, this seemed like a good time to visit the Holy Land.

In Cairo, I located a bus that supposedly went to Tel Aviv. The ticket was cheap and departure was the next morning. We left Cairo at dawn. I observed my fellow passengers. They were all tourists, mostly American. They'd seen the pyramids and were ready for their pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Bethlehem, the Jordan River and the Dead Sea. The back half of the bus was stacked to the ceiling with their luggage.

As the sun rose above the desert ahead of us, the air conditioning broke. The passengers complained. The driver apologized. Nothing changed. We continued east across the Sinai as the August sun rose higher and hotter.

After about four hours, we saw on the horizon a towering cloud of Biblical proportions. The cloud was reddish, like the sand of the Sinai. One might have mistaken it for a dust storm, except there was no wind. Just before noon, we arrived at the edge of the cloud and realized where all the dust was coming from. Today, August 30, 1981, was the day on which Jimmy Carter, Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat had agreed that most of the Sinai should be relinquished to Egyptian control.

The dust cloud was being created by two armies as they rolled slowly eastward across the desert. As the Israeli army moved east, they were dragging an enormous roll of barbed wire. The Egyptian army followed close behind, pushing the wire and untangling it from rocks and other obstructions along the way. At this point, three things happened:

1. Our bus driver announced this was where the border was last week. This was where the immigration kiosk had been. This was where we were supposed to get our passports stamped and transfer to the Egged bus which would take us to Tel Aviv. And this was where our bus had to turn around. If we drove any farther east, we wouldn't have enough gas to get back to Cairo.

2. Most passengers started shouting and arguing. Some demanded to be returned immediately to their air conditioned hotels in Cairo. Others insisted on being driven to Tel Aviv. Both groups wanted their money back. I wasn't part of either group. The driver took me aside. He pointed through the dust cloud at a white school bus with a blue Star of David painted on the side. He said, "That's your bus."

3. The two armies stopped for lunch.

Once again, I was thankful to be traveling with almost no luggage. While the other passengers argued and shouted about their rights, how they'd been cheated and how hot they were, I stepped off the bus.

Now that the armies were no longer moving, the dust settled. The air cleared a bit. I could see the white bus about two kilometers away. I passed through the Egyptian army with all their tanks and jeeps and soldiers. Although a few soldiers pointed their guns in my general direction, no one acted alarmed to see an unarmed civilian strolling through their picnic. I didn't wave or make any sudden movements. I nodded to a few of the Egyptian soldiers. They let me pass.

I came to the great roll of concertina wire. Its razor sharp blades were glinting in the sun. The roll itself was about three to four meters in diameter, enough to stop a vehicle effectively. However, an agile, thin pedestrian, carrying only a small leather pouch, was able to step through the wire loops if he were careful not to be snared by the blades.

When I extracted myself from the east side of the concertina wire, several Israeli soldiers stood up and gave me a good lookover. As before, I didn't make any sudden movements. I gestured to the white Egged bus at the perimeter of their battalion. This seemed enough of an explanation. I entered Israel without showing my passport or answering any questions.

When I got to the Egged bus, the door opened. The air conditioning was working! Although the driver had watched me pass through the two armies, he asked "Are you the only one?" I smiled and replied yes. We both laughed. He put his bus into gear and we headed east towards Israel.

18 – The Holy Land

Life in Kosrae is wonderfully relaxing. For starters, I love the weather. It's cool enough at night to sleep without air conditioning, yet warm enough that clothes are unnecessary. Food is plentiful and fresh. I went to a neighbor's birthday party last night. Her husband has fishermen friends who provided a dozen lobsters to accompany mangrove crabs, reef fish, rice, fruits and vegetables. Although it rains frequently, when there's no rain and the sun comes out, the island sparkles. I'm writing quickly today so I can get to the beach with my mask and snorkel. I hope to see Hawksbill turtles grazing in the sea grass on the reef flat.

Thanks to the rigorous travel restrictions currently imposed in Micronesia, I'm blessed to be in a place where there's no Covid-19. We also don't have crime or homelessness. It's peaceful, safe and relaxing here. Kosrae is a good place to write a book.

Crossing from Egypt into Israel without showing a passport would be impossible these days. You can't even cross the Blue Water Bridge from Ontario into Michigan without answering questions and showing proper ID. Yet, back in 1981, the Middle East was relatively peaceful. Unlike today, 1981 had few travel restrictions.

After learning I would be his only passenger that afternoon, my Egged bus driver tossed me a few more questions: "Are you hungry? Do you like music? Would you like to meet my friends?"

Naturally, I answered yes to all his questions. This led to his opening his picnic basket and serving me chicken and various baked goods. He did all this with one hand on the steering wheel and without slowing down. Next, he turned on his music system. I didn't recognize the music. It wasn't Greek. It didn't sound Egyptian. He explained this was his music: Palestinian music.

To find his friends, the bus took a detour off the main highway. We drove through agricultural communities and dusty residential

areas along the Mediterranean coast. The driver honked and waved at his friends. When they waved back, this was a signal that they'd like a ride.

When his friends boarded the bus, the driver greeted them warmly. When his friends noticed me, there was usually a short pause. The driver explained something to them. Whatever he said allowed me to be accepted among the growing party gathering in the bus.

For the next few hours, we drove around in what I learned later was the Gaza Strip. Without a firm deadline for his return to Tel Aviv, my Palestinian driver used the Egged bus to transport his friends and family from place to place, like a free taxi service. Everyone who got on board gave me snacks to try. Delicious! Soon, we were singing to the music. A few passengers carried tambourines. It was an entertaining afternoon. I had a thorough tour of the Gaza.

Eventually, it was time to deliver the bus to Tel Aviv. I said goodbye to my Palestinian friends. The driver and I rolled back onto the main highway and headed north. As the sun set over the Mediterranean, he delivered me to a hostel run by a friend of his. I was given the local rate and a good meal. Thinking back, I feel fortunate to have had the rare opportunity to take a road trip through a part of the Middle East that's no longer easily accessible or peaceful.

In Israel, I was a typical tourist. I spent a week in Jerusalem, fascinated to be able to pass through and between three different cultures with only a few steps. The Arab, Jewish and Christian quarters are like three different countries. I took an Egged bus down to the Dead Sea to swim in the saltiest body of water in the world. Actually, it's impossible to swim there. Your body bobs high in the thick brine, while your skin stings anywhere that you have the slightest abrasion. I caught another bus to the southern end of the Sinai Peninsula. In September 1981, the tip of the Sinai was still part of Israel, but for only one more week.

The Wailing Wall, Jerusalem

The Dead Sea, Jordan in the distance

When checking in to my hotel in Sharm El Sheik, I was given unusual instructions. As this was the last week that Israel would own and operate this hotel, the cleaning and maintenance staff had gone home. There would be no room service, and no fresh sheets or towels during my stay. There would be no security deposit

required. If I broke or damaged anything in the hotel, I would not be required to pay for repairs.

The scuba shop would remain open as long as there were tanks with air. I would not be required to return any of my rented equipment. The restaurant and bar would remain open. By international agreement, the hotel must be emptied of all alcohol before the end of the week. Liquor prices were reduced 50%. Refills on draft beer were free as long as supplies lasted. These rules made for a lively hotel stay.

The scuba diving in the Red Sea was excellent. When the other divers and I finished with our scuba equipment, we traded our gear for handicrafts with the Bedouins camped at the edge of the city. The Bedouins were particularly interested in our weight belts. We were puzzled by this and asked why. The Bedouins explained that they planned to melt down the lead scuba weights to make bullets.

The guests in the hotel were mostly German and Australian. Knowing that all the booze in the entire town had to be consumed in one week or else poured into the sea, they started drinking early every morning and continued late every night. That the hotel didn't care about damage to the property gave license to spirited contests. The most electrifying one was held between the Aussies and the Germans. The contest was to see who could throw a television the farthest from the roof of the hotel. Extra points were awarded if a television landed in a swimming pool.

After a week of mischief, misbehavior and mayhem, I caught the last Egged bus out of town. I went north to Tiberias on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. There, I met a former Israeli tank driver named Oded who gave me a personal tour of the Golan Heights. Oded was proud to show me the blasted hulks of Syrian tanks he'd destroyed during the 1967 Six-Day War. On our tour, he pointed out pairs of poplar trees standing about two meters apart. I asked why many of the poplars were damaged. Oded gave me a fascinating explanation.

On a clear day, you can see Jerusalem from the Golan Heights. The Syrians, when they occupied these hills before 1967, recognized their strategic value; they fortified the Golan with concrete bunkers housing big guns pointed towards Jerusalem. Unbeknownst to the Syrian military, one member of the unit that installed these bunkers was an Israeli agent. As a gardener, he had a critical mission. His job was to provide greenery and plantings to camouflage the Syrian bunkers. He planted bushes next to each gun emplacement, one bush on each side of each bunker. Although the bushes resembled local shrubs, they were actually poplars. They grew fast and tall, as poplars do, and grew to be twenty meters tall. During the Six-Day War in 1967, the Israeli Air Force sent jets to the Golan Heights where they dropped a bomb between every pair of poplar trees. The Syrian gun emplacements were wiped out in ten minutes.

I spent a few days at the Sea of Galilee, hanging out with Israeli soldiers. I admired how much training they got and how well educated they were. One of these soldiers, named Orna, was particularly intelligent and attractive. She and I have stayed in touch all these years. When I returned to Israel for Christmas 2015, I stayed with Orna's family in Tel Aviv. It's good to stay in touch with people. With good friends all over the world, I never get homesick.

After a few weeks of traveling from one end of Israel to the other, it seemed safe to return to Crete. I missed Georgia and hoped that she missed me as much as I missed her. Before leaving Jerusalem, I visited the gold sellers in the Arab quarter. After much drinking of tea on rugs in back rooms, making small talk about families and debating politics, I convinced a jeweler to sell me a diamond ring for a price I could afford.

Looking forward to seeing Georgia again, I headed to the Tel Aviv airport. At the airport, the Israeli security police were suspicious of how little luggage I was carrying. They were also skeptical of my story about how I'd entered Israel without a stamp in my passport or documentation to confirm the date and place of my entry. I was detained and questioned. My travel pouch was

searched thoroughly. I'd made no effort to conceal the ring I was planning to give to Georgia. It was discovered immediately. This raised the interest of the security police one more notch. When they didn't find more diamonds in my luggage, they assumed that I must be carrying diamonds somewhere else on my person. I had never been strip searched before, but knew that it would be in my best interests not to fight or argue. Fortunately, the police stopped short of a cavity search. I was allowed to keep Georgia's ring. I got dressed and hurried to my plane.

When I deplaned in Athens, I made sure that my passport was properly stamped with a Greek tourist visa good for thirty days. After three challenging border crossings in a row, I hoped that the next few crossings would be easy.

19 – Let's Talk

Although Spanish ships landed on Kosrae in the 16th century, no westerners lived on this island until the 19th century. While Africa, South America and southern Asia were colonized and enslaved by Europe, Kosrae had the good fortune to be forgotten. In this way, Kosrae escaped much of the corrupting influences of colonialism. Not until 1852 did two missionaries from Maine set up permanent residence here. The missionaries taught English, converted everyone to Christianity, and replaced Kosrae's monarchy with a Congregationalist democracy. Although these were major changes, the Kosraeans retained much of what makes them unique: Their independence, their culture and their language.

Today, there are about 10,000 Kosraeans. 6,000 live in Kosrae. (I've met almost half of them.) Another 4,000 live in America, mostly in Guam, Hawaii, Washington and California. Their cultural unity is intact because they've preserved their language. Although 80% can speak English, their first and primary language is Kosraean, spoken at home and at church. Some high school classes are taught in English – like mine, for example. But most teachers teach in Kosraean. Although PowerPoints at government meetings are presented in English, the meetings themselves are conducted in Kosraean. Although Kosraean is native to this island only, it's not a dying or vanishing language. The other three states of FSM have also retained their own languages.

Kosraean resembles none of the languages I've previously studied, but it's not a difficult language. Although Kosraeans usually speak English to me, I make an effort to reply in Kosraean. Here are common words and phrases I use every day:

Good morning	Tu wo
Good day	Lwen wo
Good evening	Eke wo
Good night	Fong wo

What's up?	Mac?
How are you?	Kom fuhkah?
I'm good.	Wo nga.
My name is Nick.	Inek pa Nick.
What's your name?	Suc inem an?
I'm from California.	Nga mwet California.
Where are you from?	Kom mwet oyac?
I teach at high school.	Nga luti ac high school.
Thank you very much.	Kuloh ma luhlahp.
See you later	Kuht fah ohsun.

Fish	Ik
Coconut	Nu
It's raining.	Afi.

To get to know people, you have to talk to them. This is why I try to learn languages everywhere I go. As I study any language, I keep three maxims in mind:

- Language is essential for communication.
- Communication enables understanding.
- Understanding leads to friendship.

During my year in Kosrae, I've volunteered for several organizations and taught at the high school and the college. Because this island has been isolated for generations, everyone is related to each other. Working and talking with Kosraeans has enabled me to get to know their families and understand their traditions. I've mastered the basic greetings and can introduce myself in Kosraean. These are good ice-breakers. If I stay here much longer and really learn the language, I'll become one of the family.

Dinner with the George family

At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, every tourist and most foreigners were evacuated on the last flights out of Kosrae. I'm one of a handful of foreigners who remained. Kosraeans, being kind and compassionate, are concerned about me. They often ask why I stayed here. They worry that I'm unhappy, marooned here far from my home and family. That's when I use a phrase that always gets a smile:

I love Kosrae! Nga luhngse acn Kosrae!

20 – 你好吗？

I spent the summer of 2012 in China – a country I initially found hard to penetrate and understand. I visited the palaces of Beijing, the Great Wall, the mountains near Tibet, and the minority cultures of the southwest. Like most Westerners, I felt as though all the Chinese were the same. It wasn't until I learned to speak some Mandarin that I began to make friends and to know people as individuals. I learned Mandarin two ways. I went to school and I had a job.

Bicycling in the countryside around Yángshuò
with my fellow students

First, I signed up for a two-week immersion course at the Omeida Chinese Academy in Yángshuò, Guǎngxī province, southern China. My school taught English to Chinese students and Mandarin to foreigners. I was the only foreigner enrolled in the school. I was offered a room in the all-Chinese dormitory across the street from the school. Naturally, I said yes. I was assigned a single room on the third floor of a five story building packed with

students from all over China. They all wanted to practice their English. I wanted to practice my Mandarin. It was a perfect fit. On weeknights, we sat in the hallways doing our homework together. On weekends, we bicycled around the countryside and found fun places to eat and drink. This language immersion program prepared me for what came next.

In July, I reported to Xibei Gongye Daxue (Northwestern Polytechnical University) in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, for an assignment with UMUC to teach conversational English to thirty 22-year-old polytechnic students. These were brilliant young people. In their spare time, they did things like build drones and play classical music. They knew how to read and write English, but they'd never been taught how to speak English. As a native English speaker, that was my job.

In many ways, my students were like the soldiers that I taught for UMUC on U.S. military bases. They were punctual, respectful and motivated. But unlike American soldiers, they were extremely shy. As students, they'd always been in teacher-centered classrooms. They were accustomed to teachers who stood at the front of the classroom, explained things, corrected homework, proctored tests and assigned grades. My students had rarely been called upon to speak in class. My first challenge was to get my students to talk.

Getting the students to introduce themselves on our first day was difficult. Fortunately, my students had one universal character trait that made my job easy: They were obedient. They were also attentive to detail. On the whiteboard, I wrote "Name, hometown, interests, favorite food." Understanding what was expected, each student stood up, performed exactly as directed, and then sat down.

On the second day of class, Kim, the class monitor, asked if there might be an opportunity for the students to meet with me one-on-one to practice their English. I flippantly suggested that I'd be happy to meet anyone for dinner any time. In three minutes, Kim organized the class into fifteen pairs of students, and scheduled them on his mobile phone's calendar. For the duration of my

teaching assignment, I had dinner every weeknight with a different pair of students.

My students at Xibei Gongye Daxue

Each night, I was escorted to a different restaurant in Xi'an and exposed to foods I would never have found on my own as a tourist. The following day before class, I would overhear the students conferring with one another as to which restaurant I was taken to the night before, what I ate, and whether or not I liked the food. Although my Mandarin was limited, I overheard lively discussions that sounded like "You took him THERE?! He ate THAT?!" This led to a competition to see who could take me to the most unusual or exotic place for dinner.

Part of our semester occurred during Ramadan. Two of my students were Uyghur from Xinjiang province. For their dinner date with me, they took me by bus far out of town to a tall apartment building. We rode an elevator to the 9th floor. There was no indication of a restaurant, but I followed willingly knowing I was probably in for a treat. We entered a private apartment. On the walls were photographs of various mosques around the world and a live webcam of the Kaaba in Mecca. We sat on the floor, ate with our hands, and had a traditional *iftar* (evening meal):

- *Dates* – to whet the appetite after a day of fasting
- *Chuchure* – wonton soup with minced lamb, tomatoes, onions and turnip seasoned with cumin and peppers
- *Polo* – braised rice with lamb and carrots
- *Goshnan* – a flat meat pie filled with onion and lamb
- *Tarhamak* – cucumber salad with garlic and oil dressing
- *Desert* – melons and pears cut in decorative shapes

I felt moved and honored that my students had shared this special meal with me. There's no better way to know a people and their culture than to sit down together and break bread.

My students and I were in class together five days a week for six hours every day. Through the next few weeks, I gradually broke down their inhibitions. I realized quickly that they were comfortable with karaoke. So, one assignment was to learn and sing a song in English. The students were uncomfortable singing alone, so I allowed them to sing in pairs, which went well. Their Chinese-accented renditions of "Home on the Range" and "Yellow Submarine" were adorable.

Another assignment required each student to stand up in front of class and tell a joke in English. The first time I tried this, I got quite a few one-liners copied from the Internet and read aloud from a 3x5 card. From then on, I was more creative and specific with my assignments. The second time we had joke day, the joke had to last for at least one minute. Also, rather than being read from a 3x5 card, it had to be memorized. Finally, if no one in the class laughed, the joke had to be explained.

As the students overcame their shyness, I gave more creative assignments. I asked each student to give a five-minute talk about what his or her life would be like at the age of forty. This was an assignment that couldn't be copied from the Internet. I was surprised and impressed by the thoughtful responses I got. Many students envisioned a future in which they were married with <u>two</u> children, that they were entrepreneurs running their own

companies, and that they lived in an environment without air or water pollution.

At one point, I tried a spelling bee. This was a novice mistake and a good learning experience for me. My students had been well trained in reading and writing English. After an hour, everyone was still standing. Although I gave them words I can't spell without a dictionary, no one missed a single word. My students had no problem spelling words like pharaoh, weird, pronunciation, gobbledygook or misspell. I gave them all A+ for the lesson and a personal round of applause.

One of our most successful in-class exercises was a day of improvisational theatre. In my class of thirty students, there were twenty-six boys and four girls. Every day, the four girls sat quietly in the back corner of the room together. There was never much interaction between the girls and the boys. Nevertheless, the girls were clearly good students.

For our improvisational theatre exercise, I created four scenarios:

1. You are watching TV with your family. Everyone wants to watch something different on TV. An argument begins. Grandfather wants to watch an historical documentary about the Ming dynasty. Father wants to watch business news. Mother wants to watch her favorite soap opera. You want to watch an exciting and sexy adventure movie. There will be much debating about which TV show to watch.

2. You must go to the dentist for a serious tooth problem. Your father is there to make sure that the dentist does a good job. Unfortunately, the dentist is cruel and he doesn't like you. The dentist has a cute assistant with a crush on you. The people waiting in the waiting room are impatient and angry that you are spending too much time with the dentist. Eventually, the tooth must be pulled out. It will be painful!

3. You and your friends are driving in a car. Suddenly, you see a police car with its lights flashing and its sirens blasting. The

policeman orders you to stop your car and show your driver's license. The policeman explains what you were doing wrong. Everyone in the car makes excuses and tries to convince the policeman not to take your license or give you an expensive traffic fine. However, the policeman is not easily convinced.

4. Several construction workers are at the site of a new building. Digging with shovels, they unearth an ancient buried treasure! Although the treasure should be given to their boss, the workers want to keep it for themselves. There is much discussion about how much the treasure is worth and how they will divide it. In the middle of this discussion, the boss arrives and asks "What's going on!" The boss is suspicious.

For this assignment, the class needed four directors, one for each scenario. The directors would then choose which students were to perform which role and in which play. My students were stunned when I assigned the four girls to be the directors. The boys gasped. The girls smiled. The boys had to "try out" for the different acting roles. It was liberating to watch the four girls take charge, organize their casts and assign roles. As teams, the students wrote their scripts in English. It was a fascinating exercise to overturn the class's hierarchy by putting the girls in charge. The plays were a huge success. They were videotaped by the "audience." The students and I practically fell out of our chairs we were laughing so hard.

A final assignment required each student to take an unaccompanied field trip to one of Xi'an's cultural sites to meet an English-speaking tourist. For this assignment, students were required to:

- Introduce themselves
- Learn the tourist's name, city, state and home country
- Ask what the tourist liked or had seen in China
- Answer any questions the tourist might have about Xi'an
- Assist the tourist if he or she needed help or guide services

- Exchange email addresses or Facebook handles if the tourist was willing
- Take a selfie with the tourist

Back in class, each student proudly showed his or her selfie on our classroom's projection system. As a game, other students had to guess what country the tourist was from. Having recently seen Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me* in class, the students correctly identified 90% of the Americans. My students loved sharing stories about their encounters with tourists and were thrilled to have been able to talk to and make friends with foreigners.

One thing all the students wanted my help with was choosing a western name for themselves. They knew that names like Zhang Wei and Wang Xiu Ying are difficult for westerners to spell, pronounce or remember. For this reason, most youths in China adopt western nicknames. It was an honor and a big responsibility to give each student western names they would feel proud of and which would suit them. I'm still in touch with Kim, Alice, Sherman and Raymond.

Although Mandarin and Cantonese are spoken as a first language by more people than any other languages in the world, English is becoming the world's universal business language. Every aspiring Chinese student studies English at school. The Chinese government plans to hire one million native English speakers to teach English in China. If you want to go to China, apply to be an English teacher. Although you won't be paid well or have luxurious accommodations, you'll get to meet and interact with Chinese people. You'll also learn to speak Mandarin by immersion – which is always the best way to learn a language.

After four months in China, I was by no means fluent in Mandarin, but I could get around and make myself understood. More importantly, I'd had the opportunity to meet Chinese people and to know them not as a nation of 1.4 billion people, but as individuals. I was a few steps closer to understanding our world.

21 – ¿Hablas Español?

One language I have learned is Spanish. Speaking Spanish makes travel easy in Latin America and especially in Cuba. English isn't widely spoken in Cuba. Knowing Spanish opened doors in Cuba and helped me make friends with a few Cubans.

While traveling around Cuba, I stayed at *casa particulares*. For $25 a night, I could get a room in a private home with my own bath and a full breakfast. These homestays sometimes included free use of the family's bicycle which was quite handy. Knowing Spanish made it possible for me to join my host family's activities like birthdays and other gatherings. Naturally, my hosts made sure that I found the best restaurants in town – often run by a relative, of course.

One of the most convenient features of these homestays was that, after my first stay at a *casa particulare*, my host family telephoned their friends in the next town I was going to. On arrival at the next town, the host family met me at the bus station, had my room prepared, and knew what I liked for breakfast. This chain of referrals made Cuba one of the easiest countries I've ever traveled through. In six weeks, I stayed with nine families in nine towns.

I was in Playa Girón, Bahía de Cochinos, on April 17, the anniversary of America's failed invasion of the Bay of Pigs. I was the only tourist present. More notably, I was the only *American* present. I expected to be reviled. To my surprise, I was regaled like a VIP. The whole town wanted to show me the American tanks that they'd captured, the planes they'd shot down, and the uniforms of the soldiers whom they'd taken prisoner. It was a happy and festive occasion that included pony rides, a bicycle race, live music and fireworks. The Cubans were pleased to have an American to show their war trophies to. I returned the favor by admiring the restoration work they did on the captured American military hardware.

A captured American Sherman tank

In the Bay of Pigs, there are remarkable scuba diving opportunities. I arranged to meet a chap at his dive shack on the beach. With scuba tanks on our backs, we trudged to the beach. From there, we swam 200 meters off shore to an American PT boat, circa 1961, which was now encrusted with corals and full of fish. After exploring the wreck, we returned to the dive shack where fajitas and fresh air tanks were waiting for us. For our second dive, we crossed the road and filed 100 meters through the jungle to a fresh-water cenote. We jumped in and dove down into a dark world of stalactites and stalagmites. To do a wreck dive and a cave dive from one location on foot was a first for me – unique even. I don't think this combination of dive experiences exists anywhere else in the world. This adventure was made possible because I spoke the language and made friends.

At the western end of Cuba are tobacco plantations rich with karst topography. Rising above the farms are steep limestone cliffs, caves and underground rivers. My adventure started in the town of Viñales. One morning at dawn, I hiked west past the tobacco fields. My goal was to find the legendary Los Aquáticos. These are people who, absent any medical support during World War II, resorted to the cleansing properties of the calcium rich waters that flow out of their mountain springs. Perhaps the water has healing powers or it's a placebo effect. Los Aquáticos became convinced that the water in their mountains is sacred, holy and capable of

healing. I wanted to visit these people. The only way to get there was to go on foot and to ask directions as I went along.

I met a man on the road. He and I struck up a conversation and he invited me to join him to go up into the mountains to visit a friend. He showed me the way, along narrow, unmarked paths up steep cliffs into the mountains. I would not have found the way without his help.

At the top of our climb, we came to his friend's village. A tall, dark-eyed woman greeted me with a cool glass of water. It was delicious. It was the most refreshing drink I could have been served. I spent the afternoon chatting with Los Aquáticos, learning about the medicinal properties of their water while sitting in rocking chairs on the verandah of their farmhouse. We shucked corn and squeezed the juice out of sugar cane. It was an experience I could not have had if I hadn't been able to speak Spanish.

I'm glad I visited Los Aquáticos when I did. In 2010, this area was an unknown destination. I've heard that since then a National Park office has been added. The region has become well-touristed and is now full of guides.

The more I travelled in Cuba, the better my Spanish got. Gradually, I got fluent to where I could talk to anyone and blend in. I traveled like a Cuban. I exchanged my money into the local currency. By paying with the local currency instead of tourist pesos, I reduced my costs for food and transportation by 90%. Going to Hemingway's home, I took a public bus instead of taking the standard guided bus tour from Havana as most tourists do. At Hemingway's home, I was allowed to roam freely around the property with the other Cubans, instead of being herded with the foreign tourists and led by a guide.

One of the most remarkable things about Cuba is the dancing. Everyone in Cuba dances. They say that Cuban children dance before they walk. I believe it. In bars and clubs at night, many people of both sexes are there just to dance. If you buy a Cuban a

drink, he or she will dance with you and make you look like you know how to dance. With a good partner, I was soon doing the salsa, the mambo, the bolero and the cha-cha-cha – or at least I think I was.

One evening, I watched an old man with a cane limp down the street towards the music. Curious, I followed him into the dance hall. Inside, I watched as he left his cane at the bar and glide gracefully across the dance floor. As soon as he started to dance, his limp disappeared.

This brings me to my three-part strategy for how to know a place and its culture:

1. Dance the native dances. Although I'm not the best dancer, I try. When I'm far from home and no one I know is watching me, I'm less inhibited.

2. Eat the local foods. With few exceptions, there's delicious food all over the world. If the natives look healthy, then it's probably safe to eat whatever they eat. (I'll say more later about how to maintain a healthy stomach.)

3. Speak the language. Language is the ultimate ice-breaker. Knowing a few words of the local language goes a long way. If you can talk to people, you'll make friends and doors will open. Whether a place has palm trees or glaciers, jungles or deserts, what makes one place different from another? The people. Language is the key to knowing people. The more languages you speak, the more you'll understand the world.

If you can dance, eat *and* talk with the natives, then you are one of them.

22 – Words to Live By

Today is another good day for writing. It rained hard last night. Sunshine woke me this morning. After breakfast, the rain resumed for a few hours. Around lunchtime, there was a short break in the weather. I went jogging. The pause in the rain didn't last long. On my way home, the clouds opened up. It rained so hard I could barely see. When I got home, I wrung out my clothes, toweled off and got back to writing.

Kosrae will have the same weather again tomorrow. With perpetual springtime, it's easy to lose track of time. Days have no structure. Kosrae is close to the equator, so the sun rises and sets at about the same time every day all year long. When I sit down at my computer, I have to check the clock to see what day it is.

Whether self-isolating at home during the pandemic or stranded on an island with no seasons, it would be easy to eat and sleep and then eat some more. If I did that, I'd get out of shape – maybe even fat. With time slipping away, I might get depressed. Exercise routines help keep me fit and on task. I start every day with fifteen minutes of yoga and stretching followed by a twenty-minute run. This is a good way to start my day, but I need more than this.

Our time on this planet is finite. We all want to make the best use of our limited time and to fulfill our potential. How to do this? Everyone has to find his or her own path by following beliefs, ideas, words, thoughts and/or principles. When I started traveling, I discarded most of the material possessions weighing me down. At the same time, I simplified my personal path to four words that have become like a mantra to me:

DISCIPLINE

Is what I'm doing right now the best use of my time? Am I moving towards my goals? If not, I should start doing

whatever I need to be doing. Never waste time, energy or resources.

PATIENCE

Things don't always work out the way I expect them to or when I want them to. Relax. Wait for the universe to bring me what I want or need.

AWARENESS

The universe is full of opportunities, dangers and surprises. By staying aware and alert, I can anticipate situations and solve problems before they happen.

LOVE

There are many kinds of love: Love for a person, love of knowledge, love of life and spiritual love. Love gives meaning and purpose to what I do. Whatever I do, I'll love what I do and do it with love.

Here are a few more travel stories to illustrate how these four words guide me.

23 – An Afghan Winter

The opposite of Kosrae would be an unhappy, unhealthy place that's arid, landlocked and war-torn. That would be Afghanistan.

In 2011, I learned America was spending a billion dollars per day on our "peacekeeping mission" there. Curious to see how anyone could spend a billion dollars per day, I requested a 5-month downrange teaching assignment with UMUC. Afghanistan turned out to be the most miserable place I've ever lived and worked. It was also a fascinating learning experience about the modern military, and a credible test of my ability to function in unpleasant environments.

Before flying to Afghanistan, I spent a week at Grafenwoehr Army Base in Germany where I was trained on important survival skills, such as: How to put on IBA (Interceptor Body Armor) in thirty seconds or less, how to treat punctured lungs and arterial bleeding, what to do when one encounters an IED (Improvised Explosive Device), and how to extract oneself from an overturned MRAP (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected) vehicle. I also learned a lot of military acronyms.

I participated in workshops and simulated exercises about what to do if captured by a hostile force. My first step if captured would

be to determine the military affiliation of my captors. Then, depending on who my captors were, I would wait patiently for my rescue, work covertly with other prisoners to attempt escape, or pray for a non-violent death without torture. I was also issued a bag of potent earplugs and was told that I would need them.

Military Airlift Command (MAC) was how I travelled from base to base within Afghanistan. To prevent planes from being shot at while departing or arriving on base, MAC had an unusual flight schedule: Specifically, there was no schedule. To go from Kabul to Sharana, I went to the airfield and put my name on a list. Then, on a day when there *might* be a flight to Sharana, I donned my helmet and IBA, reported to the terminal, took a seat in the waiting area, and settled in for what I was told would be a wait of between fifteen minutes and fifteen hours. To pass the time, I watched endless reruns of recent American sporting events on gigantic high-definition monitors.

Flying MAC in Afghanistan

After several hours, there was a single, brief announcement over the PA system that my flight was ready to depart. Thankfully, I was awake enough to hear the announcement. The soldiers and I grabbed our gear, exited the terminal and marched double-time across the tarmac into a plane whose giant propellers were already spinning. Boarding was fast and efficient. For a large plane with

100 passengers, boarding took barely five minutes. There were no boarding passes, seat assignments or metal detectors. We found seats, strapped in, and lodged our rifles into the gun brackets – except for me. I was the only unarmed passenger. I was also the only passenger without a grenade attached to my belt. The plane started rolling as the rear door closed. Once in the air, I was glad to be wearing my IBA. It kept me warm in the unheated C-5.

My first assignment was at FOB Sharana, a Forward Operating Base in the mountains near the Pakistan border. My classroom was inside a Quonset hut insulated by sandbags. I lived in a Russian-built bunker. My "bedroom" was a cubicle whose walls were made of plywood tacked to 2x4's. There were no windows. The indoor temperature alternated between freezing and sweltering. The toilet and washing facilities were 100 meters away on the other side of a morass of mud and snow.

Porta-potties with a view of the Hindu Kush

For my second assignment, I was deployed to Camp Leatherneck in the desert near the Iranian border. Inside a canvas tent with folding tables and chairs, I taught geology and computer science. I lived in a shipping container. Compared to my first abode, this was luxurious. I had a concrete floor, electric lights, heating and a window. Although my housing was better than at FOB Sharana, I still had to slither through 100 meters of mud to find a Porta-potty.

Leatherneck was surrounded by a flat plain. The highest point in the region was the base's garbage dump where discarded materials

were bull-dozed into piles twenty meters high. Afghan scavengers sorted the materials for metals and things to sell. On cold days, they ignited the garbage to keep themselves warm. Toxic smoke from burning tires and smoldering packaging (i.e. Styrofoam) would drift across the base. I maintained a habit of checking the wind direction before going outside.

At both locations, the weather was dismal. Winter in Afghanistan alternates between blizzards and bone-chilling winds. When wind blows across the desert, dust and snow mix together. The resulting icy precipitation is brown and sticky. It plasters itself against every surface and then congeals. Sometimes we had rain. Beneath the dusty topsoil was an impermeable hard pan. The rain turned the topsoil into mud. Since the moisture had nowhere to go, the mud remained mud for weeks and eventually turned into a brown slush several centimeters deep with the consistency of whipped cream. As convoys plowed through it, the mud splashed and splattered on everything.

Springtime at Camp Leatherneck

Whether it snowed or rained, everything was brown. My shoes, my clothes, the buildings and the floors inside buildings were all brown. In the Quonset huts and bunkers where I lived and worked, there were few windows. To see out a window required ten minutes of work with a scrub brush and an ice scraper.

To add to the tribulation of being here, loud explosions occurred frequently and at random intervals. Some explosions resulted from bombs lobbed at the base by the Taliban. Other explosions occurred when land mines and IEDs were detonated or defused. Many explosions occurred at night. I slept with earplugs.

Before going to Afghanistan, I knew that I'd be living in a war zone. I expected falling missiles, exploding bombs and death – hopefully not mine. I didn't expect three bizarre events that occurred while I was stationed there:

1. At a nearby base, Americans detained several Taliban. The Americans discovered that their prisoners were communicating with each other by writing notes in the margins of their Korans and then exchanging their Korans. To prevent further subterfuge, the Americans burned the Korans – a serious Islamic taboo. An Afghan soldier, who was part of the international defense force, was so incensed by this act that he entered the American headquarters one morning and assassinated the base commanding officer.

2. While on patrol, American soldiers ambushed and killed several Taliban. After collecting the bodies of the Taliban, the Americans videotaped themselves urinating on the corpses. This video was uploaded to YouTube, reported by Al Jazeera and widely viewed in the Middle East. This resulted in two weeks of heightened tension between American troops and their Afghan counterparts.

3. On my last night in Kandahar, an American soldier got drunk on illegal home-made alcohol. He staggered into a nearby village and killed a dozen women and children with his automatic rifle. My flight out of Kandahar was the last one to leave before the airfield was closed in anticipation of local retaliation.

My deployment in Afghanistan had the potential to be a deeply depressing experience. In 2012, the U.S. military's suicide rate surpassed combat deaths. I heard seasoned troops tell new recruits

that the best way to get through a fourteen-month deployment was to sleep twelve hours a day. That way, fourteen months in Afghanistan would feel like seven. I didn't immediately dismiss this idea. I was teaching classes I'd taught before. Although it would've been easy to retreat to my quarters, put in my ear plugs, close my eyes, and sleep twelve hours a day, I maintained my discipline and discovered many reasons to stay awake and engaged. More than one student told me that their classes with UMUC were the only things keeping them sane. This was true for me as well.

Astronomy 100 at Camp Sharana

I taught Astronomy at FOB Sharana, elevation 2,237 meters. One benefit of being stationed on a military base in a war zone is that every light source is blacked out at night to prevent the enemy from targeting weapons at the base. On cloudless nights, the combination of Sharana's altitude, the cold, dry air and no light pollution enabled fabulous star gazing. To prepare for our first evening of star gazing, I asked my students to bring to class any telescopes or binoculars they might have. The night-vision military hardware that showed up that evening was powerful enough to see Titan orbiting Saturn and the Andromeda Galaxy. Thanks to some good timing, we started class one evening with a stunning lunar eclipse rising over the snow-capped Hindu Kush.

Geology field trip at Camp Sharana

Rock identification class in a tent at Camp Leatherneck

Afghanistan was a great place to teach geology, too. Many of my students were involved with mine-sweeping operations. One student told me she didn't know that rocks had names. She went on to say that being attentive to rock types and geologic formations made it easier to spot IED's. One of my mine-sweeping crews accidentally drove their MRAP over an IED which exploded,

overturning their MRAP. That evening, my students came to class excited by the rock samples that they'd been able to collect from the blast crater.

Mine sweeper with a Christmas wreath

During the Russian occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980's, the Russian military built many large bases. When Russia withdrew in 1989, Afghan clans took ownership of these bases. When America invaded Afghanistan in 2001, it made sense for our troops to occupy the existing Russian fortifications. To accomplish this, America negotiated with the Afghan landlords to pay rent. America also agreed to permit local nationals to provide goods and services on base. Consequently, the shops at Sharana and Leatherneck weren't the typical U.S. military base exchanges full of boring and imported American products.

Outside Leatherneck's housing area was a row of Bedouin tents with camels tethered to tent pegs. Inside were exotic crafts that resembled treasures from Aladdin's Cave of Wonders. Afghanistan is famous for its untapped mineral wealth, especially its "blue treasure." I made frequent visits to the rock shops in the tents to buy specimens of Lapis Lazuli. After doing my Christmas

shopping here, I had a U.S. post office at my disposal from which I could mail these gifts back to America at domestic rates.

Afghanistan's "blue treasure"

Every base I visited had a fitness center. These fitness centers weren't small rooms with a few barbells. There were treadmills, rowing machines, stationary bicycles and workout benches to occupy at least 100 athletes at a time. Televisions broadcast sports and news in front of every machine. People came to these exercise tents to work out for hours at a time. Staying physically healthy was a good way to maintain mental health. The gym organized basketball games. The weight room offered bench press competitions. These events were well attended. Being surrounded by active, health-conscious, disciplined soldiers helped me focus on my routines and duties. My students and I supported each other's ideas and programs. The UMUC classes helped me and my students stay sane. I taught some of the best courses I ever taught.

Because Afghanistan is a conservative Islamic country, the U.S. military enforced a strict no-alcohol policy at all bases. To compensate for this restriction and to support the morale of the troops, the military went overboard with its food service. Friday nights were surf and turf night. On Friday nights, our troops enjoyed all the Maine lobster and Nebraska beef they could eat.

On other nights, guest chefs and their ingredients were flown in from San Francisco, New York, New Orleans, Tokyo, Mumbai and/or Paris to prepare feasts for the 200,000 soldiers and contractors stationed here. Meals were served four times a day in huge air conditioned mess tents. As I saw – and ate – these fabulous meals, I began to understand how America's expenditures in Afghanistan could be a billion dollars per day.

Many Kosraeans have served in the U.S. Army and have been deployed to Afghanistan. Sharing stories with them about our Afghan deployments gives us lots to talk about. Many of these former soldiers returned home to Kosrae with renewed discipline.

24 – Patience, Patience

I've been in Kosrae for more than a year. Marooned on a small, remote island during this pandemic, I'd go crazy if I didn't have patience. I've adapted to "island time." My internal clock has slowed. No one here ever shows up on time, so I don't hurry. I don't worry, either. In the past, I had to make a conscious effort every day to be patient. This interlude in Kosrae has given me a chance to let go of the clock and the calendar, and to embrace patience.

A few days ago, I was hitch-hiking into town. I was picked up by Joe. Joe works for United Airlines at Kosrae's airport. Joe and I got to talking about life on the island. Joe told me that United hopes to resume regular flights in and out of Kosrae two months from now. Until then, United will continue to offer occasional "evacuation flights" to enable people with medical or personal emergencies to leave Kosrae if necessary. Joe and I laughed about United's optimistic plans. We'd be surprised if regular flights resume soon. It's a good thing that neither of us is in a hurry to leave Kosrae.

Patience is a good thing to cultivate whether you're stranded on a remote island or you're traveling. Patience is essential for survival in the modern world.

I've been to Africa eight times. It's a vast continent – as big as China, India, Europe and the continental United States combined – and every bit as complex and varied. Many travelers on African safari hire a professional guide with a Land Rover. For a few hundred dollars per day, your guide will greet you promptly at your hotel every morning and drive you to places for you to photograph. This style of tourism makes sense for families or groups because everyone travels together and shares costs. Land

Rovers are more reliable, comfortable and punctual than any alternative African public transport.

The problem is that, if you travel in an air conditioned Land Rover with a hired guide, you won't experience Africa. Although you may see other guests at your hotel, you probably won't make many friends. In my experience, tourists who stay in safari resorts have their own agendas and aren't easy to meet. The only Africans you'll meet will be the people who carry your luggage, serve your food and clean your room.

Traveling alone, I have no one to share guide fees or transportation costs with. Hiring a private guide or chauffeur is expensive. That's why I travel by bus, bush taxi, ferry and train. In Africa, this requires patience. Buses and bush taxis don't have fixed schedules. They go nowhere until every seat is filled. Although African ferries and trains have schedules, the posted departure and arrival times are only approximations.

The African system of bush taxis is inefficient. It's common to see three or four half-filled bush taxis parked side by side, all bound for the same destination. None of them will go anywhere until every seat is filled. Drivers attempt to inveigle potential passengers into their vans. With equivalent vehicles and prices, there's no reason for any traveler to choose one van over another. Under this system, the bush taxis tend to fill up slowly and then depart at about the same time. I've occasionally witnessed impatient tourists paying other passengers to move to their van to fill it up faster and get going. I'd love to see a logistics expert try to teach the benefits of filling and departing one van at a time – but this would never happen. Not in Africa. So, I simply got used to sitting in bush taxis waiting for them to fill up.

With any African transport, there's always lots of waiting. This is when I practice patience. This is also when I meet my fellow passengers and make friends. I've made many friends on African public transport. There's always someone who speaks English, or who wants to practice their English. Soon, we're Facebook friends.

Madagascar was a place of delays. If my friend says that he'll meet me at 9:00 am, I might see him in the morning. If a soccer match is scheduled to start at noon, that's when the food vendors set up their stands. The soccer players will arrive about 2:00 pm. When I go out for dinner, I take a book. I'll probably read a few chapters before my meal is served.

Then there are the typhoons. On the Wednesday when I planned to fly from Antananarivo, Madagascar to Dzaoudzi, Mayotte, the scheduled departure of my flight coincided with the arrival of a typhoon. As the winds rose, rain hammered on the metal roof of the terminal. Wet travelers straggled into the airport seeking information. The ceiling-mounted black & white TV that normally listed flight times displayed only flickering diagonal lines. The airport staff couldn't provide information because their phones and computers were down. Would planes be landing and taking off today? Nothing was certain. No information was available. Passengers were told to wait.

I did what any seasoned traveler would do. Since the departure area was chair-less, I found a scrap of dry cardboard to sit on and read my book. No planes landed or took off for a couple of hours. Soon, people drifted away from the airport. I eventually assumed my flight wouldn't be happening that day. I phoned Samy, my favorite taxi driver. He returned to the airport. Dodging potholes like small swimming pools, we navigated back to my hotel. 48 hours later, the storm passed and the skies cleared for my flight.

The delay was well worth the wait. When I finally got to Mayotte, I discovered the beautiful Jardin de Maore with its pristine beach, a calm lagoon brimming with turtles, and the deep shade of baobab trees filled with lemurs.

Baobabs on the beach at Jardin de Maore in Mayotte

After a few days of playing with turtles and lemurs, I returned to Dzaoudzi for the ferry to Anjouan in the Comoros Islands. The ferry was delayed, of course. I was the only white person waiting for the ferry. The women were wrapped in colorful scarves. They carried large baskets of fruits, vegetables and new clothes. The men had big boxes of electronics and other goods that weren't available in the Comoros. Mayotte, being a French *département* and a member of the EU, is where Comorians go shopping.

Waiting for the ferry to Anjouan

No one was concerned that the Anjouan ferry was delayed. While waiting for our ferry, I said hello to a smartly-dressed businessman

who spoke English. We had an informative conversation about all the islands between Madagascar and Mozambique. He told me things I would never have learned from a *Lonely Planet* guidebook. (Actually, the Comoros Islands are so far off the tourist track that there's no *Lonely Planet* guidebook written specifically about the Comoros Islands.) Our ferry departed Dzaoudzi six hours after the scheduled time.

Learning to travel in Africa has made my travels elsewhere more comfortable and relaxed. At the end of an odyssey through Africa, I flew from Addis Ababa back to JFK in New York. At JFK, I'd expected to have a two-hour layover before my connecting flight. After I arrived at my gate and made myself comfortable, there was an announcement that my connecting flight would be delayed by an hour. Several passengers in the waiting area gathered anxiously at the service counter to complain about this delay. They were unhappy. They wanted the ground crew to do something about the problem.

Two more hours passed. There was another announcement that our flight would be further delayed. My fellow passengers became more agitated. What was the status? Why was there a delay? What was the airline going to do for them? I remained unconcerned. Had I been in Africa, the flight would still be considered more or less on schedule. I was thankful to have a comfortable chair to sit on – instead of a scrap of cardboard.

In response to passenger complaints, the airline issued amenity coupons for food and drinks by way of apology to the waiting passengers. I accepted my coupon thinking how magnanimous it was to be compensated for such a minor inconvenience. In most of the world, there'd be nothing to do but wait. The delay wasn't the fault of the ground crew. There was nothing they could do to make things go any faster. Someone somewhere was doing the best they could do to resolve the problem.

While waiting for my flight, I did the same thing I did when I was in Dzaoudzi waiting for my ferry to Anjouan. I scanned for a friendly face. I found an attractive, young woman from New

Zealand. She was witty and had good travel stories to tell. Time passed quickly.

Last Monday, there was supposed to have been an "evacuation flight" from Kosrae to Honolulu. Unbeknownst to the United staff at Kosrae, the plane broke down in Pohnpei. Passengers ticketed for that flight waited at Kosrae's airport for six hours. Finally at dinner time, the United staff concluded the plane wasn't coming. Everyone was sent home with the suggestion "Come back in the morning. We think there'll be a flight to Honolulu tomorrow." Patience is always necessary when you're traveling.

So, here I am in Kosrae. I'm not in a hurry to leave my island. I have a comfortable place to wait – and a chair.

25 – Eyes Always Open

When I travel, I tune my sixth sense to be aware of everything around me, to watch for opportunities and pitfalls, to avoid being taken advantage of, and to sense problems before they occur. Although 99.9% of the people in the world are good folks, one out of a thousand has the potential to be a hustler or a thief. I smile and greet everyone I meet in a friendly way, but I never let my guard down when I'm in public. I pay close attention to people and to my surroundings.

In all my travels, I've never had a seriously unpleasant encounter or an injury – knock on wood! I walk confidently. I dress conservatively and inconspicuously. Although I don't always make eye contact with everyone, I mimic the body language of the people around me. I use my body language to let people know that I'm aware of their presence. I listen to conversations. Even if I don't understand the language, I pay attention to the tone of conversations, especially to *changes* in tone.

I don't wear a watch. My clothes aren't expensive. I have no jewelry. The pen in my pocket is an ordinary Bic ballpoint. (I carry many pens in my pack. They make better gifts for children than candy or money.) If I need to consult a map or my phone, I do so in private. For luggage, I carry a 20 liter daypack with zippers and a waterproof inner lining. It's the color of dirt and has no logos on it. With hobo patches all over the outside, no one ever mistakes my pack for their own. My pack doesn't appear to contain a laptop, a cell phone and cash – although it usually does.

In Latin and Arab countries, my olive complexion allows me to blend in. If most men have moustaches, then I grow one. When I first arrived in Casablanca, I felt conspicuous. In the streets, I was getting the look that said "Where is that foreigner from?" Becoming inconspicuous was easy. I stepped into a barber shop and asked the barber to give me a haircut like his. When I left the barber shop, vendors in the market greeted me with *marhabana*

and *salaam alykum*. I was no longer a foreigner who'd just gotten off a plane.

Men don't get hassled nearly as much as women do. As I've aged, I don't attract as many unwanted solicitations as I used to. Being a man with a few grey hairs is more than just a convenience. It makes me the least likely target on the street, for which I'm thankful. I've wandered through the Arab quarter of Marseille, the barrios of Buenos Aires, townships in Johannesburg and questionable neighborhoods in Cairo with no problems. Still, I walk as though I have eyes in the back of my head. I keep my eyes open. I stay aware.

Being aware isn't merely street awareness. One afternoon in Tunis, I hailed a cab to return from the National Bardo Museum to my hotel. The driver wouldn't quote me a price for my fare, but pointed to his meter already ticking away. As we left the museum, the driver turned and sped north. I knew that my hotel was to the south. At the next red light, I stepped out of the cab. The driver stammered to explain that he was going to take me to my hotel via a route "with less traffic." There was no traffic on the road going either north or south. I smiled, walked away and found another taxi.

Despite trying to be aware of everything around me, I'm shamefully <u>un</u>aware of my possessions. This is my worst problem as a traveler. I pay more attention to my environment and to the people around me than to what I'm carrying. Consequently, I lose things – especially on public transit.

I lost a favorite hat on a bus in Chile because of a charming French woman seated next to me. When she got off the bus at my stop, my head got off the bus – while my hat remained on the overhead rack. Graciously, my new traveling companion was *très sympathique* to my loss. The next morning, she accompanied me to the bus station to see if my hat was in the lost and found. *Dommage*, my hat was not there. All was not lost though. The generous staff at the bus station offered to let us choose any other

item from their lost and found bins. As it was raining, we chose an umbrella.

I had a similar brain freeze on a train from Hong Kong to Shenzhen. I was thrilled to be speeding into China for the first time. Seated next to me was a pretty *gūniang* who spoke fluent English and who was eager to tell me all about her wonderful country. As we chatted, I took a few things out of my bag to show her. When we arrived at our destination, I repacked carelessly. I left behind a small black bag which contained my electronic cables, adapters and a diamond ring.

After an evening stroll through ornate gardens in Shenzhen followed by an elegant dinner at a tea house, I returned to my hotel. As I was getting ready for bed, I searched for my adapters to recharge my laptop and my Kindle. I had a sinking feeling when I realized they weren't with me anymore. I'd left them on the train. The next morning, I returned to the train station to visit the lost and found office. Alas, this was China. There was no lost and found office. The good news was that most of the world's electronic adapters and cables are made in China. Not far from the train station was a shopping mall full of every electronic gadget known to man. All of my electronic gizmos were quickly and cheaply replaced. Sadly, the diamond ring was lost forever. It had sentimental value. Its loss – and my lack of awareness – haunts me and motivates me to be more aware.

A few months later, I lost my bag of cables and adapters again, this time on a bus in eastern Turkey. Three minutes into my journey, I realized I was on the wrong bus. I hurried to explain my error to the driver. Once again, as in China, I repacked my bag and forgot to include my electronics. Replacing electronics in eastern Turkey was harder than in China.

Twice, I've almost lost my laptop on airplanes. Late one night, when arriving in Islamabad, I was tired and anxious. My journey to Islamabad had been stressful. To check in for my flight, I endured a gauntlet of suspicious security police in Dubai. My departure was delayed for several hours for "security reasons."

Because of an air war between India and Pakistan, planes were being routed over Afghanistan's Hindu Kush to avoid Indian air space. The flight was alarmingly turbulent. As we came in for a landing, the flight attendant gave stern instructions to stow my laptop in the seat pocket in front of me. On arrival, I retrieved my bag from the overhead bin, prepared to deplane quickly and forgot my laptop. Had my seatmate not pointed out my forgetfulness, I would've left my laptop on the plane. All my seismology presentations were on that laptop. Had I forgotten it on the airplane, my usefulness in Pakistan would have been limited.

Arriving in Khon Kaen from Bangkok, I repeated this same mistake. This time, there was no seatmate to point out my forgetfulness. While enjoying a beer in a noodle shop thirty minutes after landing, I realized my laptop was gone. By then, my plane had departed for Bangkok. Thankfully, I was flying Thai Smile Airlines. Their wonderful staff radioed my plane en route to ask the flight crew to check for a laptop in the pocket in front of seat 20A. Two hours later when the next flight returned to Khon Kaen, my laptop was delivered to me with a big Thai smile. *Khawp khun khap*! (Thank you!)

For a couple of years, I lived in Ban Pao, a village in northeastern Thailand. There, I was blessed with kind and honest neighbors who often saved me from my absentmindedness. One day, I dropped my iPhone in the market. A stranger found my iPhone. Seeing that the home screen was in English, he asked around and concluded that it was probably mine since I was the only *farang* in Ban Pao. He came to my home to give it to me. The Thais are almost as wonderful as the Kosraeans.

Living in Kosrae for the past year has allowed me to relax. There's no crime here. Robberies are unknown. I don't lock my door at night. Many homes don't even have doors. All Kosraeans are related to each other one way or another. Everyone greets each other as a friend. I've never lived in such a relaxed and generous community. This is one place where I can trust everyone. I can let down my guard.

Kosraeans are more than honest. They're generous to a fault. People give me food all the time. One morning, someone left fresh fish and bananas at my door. When I hitch-hike, I'm frequently offered food before I can say hello or ask how far they're going. Business meetings always include a buffet, or at least a table of snacks and drinks. On special Sundays, churches prepare lunch for everyone who stays for the whole service. For a child's first birthday, parents throw big parties and invite all their friends and family. Everyone is sent home with a tray of food which is often too much to eat at one sitting. Yesterday, while I was strolling home from school, a man I'd never met before stopped his pickup to give me a basket of coconuts.

A basket of coconuts

I do a lot of hitch-hiking in Kosrae. I never worry about what might happen when I hop into a stranger's car or pickup truck. If I'm going someplace beyond the driver's intended destination, the driver often goes out of his way to take me where I want to go before making a U-turn to return to where he was originally going.

Sometimes Kosraean generosity goes too far. One day, I was hitching to Lelu, about seven kilometers from my apartment. I was

picked up by a family on their way to the hospital, which is halfway to Lelu. The driver said that he'd take me to Lelu first, before going to the hospital. Sitting next to me in the back seat was a man with a nail stuck through his hand. Under his hand, he held a rag to catch the blood. He was in pain. I inquired if he was going to the hospital. He nodded. I asked the driver "Please let me out at the hospital. Your friend is bleeding. I can catch a ride from there to Lelu."

"No, no, no, it's okay. I take you to Lelu first," he replied. I practically had to beg to be let out of the car at the hospital. As I got out of the car at the hospital, the driver apologized for not driving me all the way to Lelu. He added "I'll come back and pick you up after I drop him off at the ER." This is an example of how Kosraeans will go out of their way to help a stranger and how safe it feels to be here.

There's one peculiar Kosraean cultural trait that I've had to get used to. Kosraeans aren't particularly concerned about who owns what. In Kosrae, "to borrow" means "to have." In my first month in Kosrae, a fellow dropped by my apartment with a welcome gift of coconuts and tangerines. As we were chatting, he mentioned that he needed to borrow $20. Being Friday evening, the bank would be closed until Monday. He promised to pay me back on Monday. Monday came and I didn't hear from him. A co-worker explained this is how Kosrae works. If a Kosraean asks to borrow something, it's a request for a gift.

In a small, isolated community where everyone knows each other, possessions are not possessed as they are in most parts of the world. I went to the library to borrow a copy of Eldon Buck's *Island of Angels*, a detailed history of Kosrae. The librarian laughed as she handed me a brand new copy of the book and told me to keep it. She was surprised when I returned it. Kosraeans raise and eat pigs and chickens. Although pigs are kept in pens, chickens are not. Chickens are treated like fish in the sea. If a chicken lays an egg in my yard, it's mine. If I catch a chicken in my yard, I'm welcome to eat it. I have a friend who, every time I see him, drives a different car. He doesn't own a car. When he

needs to go somewhere he borrows a car from his brother, his uncle or his neighbor. Kosraeans freely share their things and their money. As a traveler, I know how rare this sort of behavior is.

It's wonderfully relaxing to be in Kosrae. I can let down my guard and enjoy the honesty and generosity of the Kosraeans. This is one way that Kosrae is a paradise. If I stay here too long, I might forget how to be aware of people, my environment and my possessions. When I leave Kosrae, I'll need to renew my constant level of awareness. The point of all these digressions is that, when I travel, I remind myself constantly to be alert and aware – especially of my possessions. Although it's exhausting to be always on guard, my constant awareness of people and my environment has enabled me to avoid thieves and hustlers – except for one time in Togo.

Although crowded markets in poor countries are risky places, I don't avoid them. I'm attracted to the color, the smells, the excitement and the commerce. Street markets are wonderful places to soak up the atmosphere and culture of a city.

A brass band playing *Gloria in excelsis Deo*
after Christmas services in Lomé, Togo

On a sunny Sunday after Christmas, I took a stroll through the massive market of Lomé, the capital of Togo. When the church

service ended, a noisy parade flooded the streets with musicians, carolers and shoppers.

In the market around the church, the aisles between the shops were packed. The vendors were busy. As I wandered past the colorful tents and tables, viewing the crowds and the articles being sold, I noticed in my peripheral vision four young men shadowing me. As the only white person in the market, I was their obvious target.

I pretended not to notice I was being followed. I changed directions a few times and strolled down different alleyways to try to shake my stalkers. After a few direction changes, I knew I was being followed. At that point, it was too late. I was trapped. About one second before it happened, I knew I was about to become a crime victim. I just didn't know how serious a crime. They made their move. Three of them came around the end of a line of shop stalls and pretended to bump into me. At the same moment, the fourth guy slipped up behind me and artfully relieved me of the contents of my back left pocket. The four bandits then disappeared into the crowd.

I was relieved. Actually, I was laughing in my socks. My back left pants pocket is where I keep litter until I can find a rubbish bin. The thieves had just stolen an ATM receipt, an orange peel and used Kleenex. I felt safe knowing that my passport and wallet were concealed in the pickpocket-proof, double-lined, zipper pouches of my REI cargo pants and that my cash was hidden in my Eagle Creek money belt.

Despite being ever vigilant, there've been a few occasions when I've been discreetly robbed. These were minor thefts which would've been difficult to anticipate or avoid.

In Siem Reap, Cambodia, I went out for a day of site seeing at Angkor Wat. Not wanting to carry all my cash with me, I left a few hundred euros in my bag in my hotel room. When I returned to my room that evening, one €50 note was missing.

In a similar situation in Meknes, Morocco, a €20 note was removed from my pack in my *riad* while I was tramping through the wild flowers at the ruins of Volubilis.

In a hotel in Bujumbura, Burundi, $20 was taken from my pack while I was dining at the hotel's roof restaurant as the sun set over Lake Tanganyika

In each case, there was no room safe or front desk where I could secure my cash. Also, in each case, there was more cash in my bag than was actually taken. Whoever stole my money must've hoped that I wouldn't notice or make a fuss if only one bill was taken – and they were right. I didn't make a fuss. I didn't even report the theft to the management. These were all poor countries. I'm sure the staff was underpaid. I felt sorry for the cleaning ladies who had to resort to going through my luggage to take money from me. I considered the theft to be a tip for their services. At each hotel, the next time I went out, I hid my excess cash elsewhere ... or I took it with me.

In thirteen years of travel through 158 countries, I've experienced one pickpocket and three petty thefts, which is an acceptable record. They were all minor losses. Other travelers have told me horrible stories such as being hijacked by a taxi to a remote location and robbed of everything; driving in a tuk-tuk with a reckless driver who caused a serious accident; being robbed on the street at knifepoint or gunpoint. Have I been lucky? Although I may have a guardian angel, the best explanation is that I've kept my eyes and ears open. I keep my awareness tuned for trouble. Being aware is how I stay safe.

26 – Why Travel?

"I'm always trying new things and learning new things. If there isn't anything more you can learn ... go off and die." – Morgan Freeman

To say that I'm addicted to travel isn't completely accurate. I'm addicted to learning. Although I've been to school, read books, watched documentaries, and talked with people, I've learned more about the world by traveling than by any other means. Travel is my favorite teacher. Travel has taught me about ...

- People
- Cultures
- Languages
- History
- Politics
- Religions
- Art
- Music
- Foods
- Animals
- Plants
- Geology
- Astronomy
- Ecosystems
- Climate
- Health
- Friendships
- Myself

... and this is just a partial list. Many of these subjects didn't interest me in school. Yet, when I experience them face-to-face and on a daily basis, they come alive. Of course, I've still got lots to learn. I've only scratched the surface. This is a good thing because it means I'll never run out of new things to learn.

This is why, for me, being just a tourist is boring. I'm not content with sitting on a beach, following a guide, or taking selfies in famous places. I need to have a reason for going somewhere. When I go someplace I haven't been before, it's an opportunity to learn something new. Travel is especially important these days because the media is rife with misinformation. If I want to know what's really happening in the world, I go there in person to see for myself:

- Before I went there, I thought of Vietnam as a totally socialist country. Although it has a one-party government, its shops, stores and street markets function in one of the world's most

competitive, unregulated and capitalistic business environments.

- Traveling between Thailand, Japan and Tibet, I realized there's more than one kind of Buddhism. Although all Buddhists seek to attain Nirvana by transcending the self, Theravada Buddhists in Thailand pray to their monks for good marriages and successful businesses; Mahayana Buddhists in Japan enjoy minimalist Zen homes and lifestyles; Vajrayana Buddhists in Tibet seek enlightenment through austerity and meditation.

- Much of West Africa has been maligned in the media and by politicians. Although there's poverty, disease and violence there, my West African friends are some of the most joyous, vibrant people I've ever met.

- While here in Kosrae, I've watched the ocean rise almost two centimeters due to climate change and a La Niña condition which peaked last December. In the past fifteen months, I've seen the shoreline next to my apartment retreat thirty centimeters. I didn't appreciate the impact and severity of climate change until I witnessed it myself.

The more I learn about the world, the more problems I become aware of. This brings me to my second reason for traveling. Our world has problems. I can't fix them all, but I can help with a few. Because Kosrae is small, it's been easy to meet people and find ways to be useful:

- I taught at the high school and the college. With the Peace Corps and World Teach closed down, Kosrae's schools are desperate for native English speakers.

- I volunteered with two of Kosrae's environmental NGOs to map parts of the island's geology, research water pollution issues, prepare environmental impact reports and help update Kosrae's Land Use Plan.

- Working with Kosrae's Department of Transportation & Infrastructure, I consulted on a new gymnasium, a flooded roadway, a hospital extension and a bridge.

Volunteering and working in a community is an excellent way to learn about a place. I've gotten to know this island and made a hundred friends. In a small community like Kosrae, it's possible for one person to make a difference. I'll use what I've learned here about the effects of climate change and sea level rise when I visit other Pacific islands.

My greatest fear is failure to achieve my potential. I'm blessed to have no health or financial problems. Other people's problems are more serious than mine. The few troubles I have – such as my hair turning grey and my eyesight weakening – are trivial by comparison. Simply bumming around the world as a nomad is not enough. This is why, as I travel, I look for ways to be helpful. At the end of the day, if I've done worthwhile work and helped others, I'm satisfied. Learning about the world and doing worthwhile work is how I hope to achieve my potential.

To complete my goal of visiting every country, I didn't need to come to Kosrae. Because of its isolation and United's flight schedule, this was not an easy place to get to. But that's exactly why I wanted to come here. The harder someplace is to get to, the more new things I can learn there. Remote places also tend to have healthy natural environments and friendly people. Going out of my way to get to Kosrae isn't the only time that curiosity about the world has led me to a remote, hard-to-reach destination.

In the middle of the Indian Ocean are 65 islands called the Chagos Archipelago, also known as the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). The largest of these islands is Diego Garcia, named for a 16th century Portuguese explorer. I first learned the name of this island when I was contacted by the security department at Naval Support Facility Diego Garcia (NSFDG). They wanted to license a computer program I'd written. Beyond that, I knew nothing about

this remote atoll. Like Kosrae, Diego Garcia is too small to appear on most world maps.

Diego Garcia is one of the most difficult places in the world to get to. Although it's a stunning atoll with a crystal clear lagoon, pristine white beaches and untouched reefs, tourists are not welcome. Yachties wait months for an expensive permit to anchor at one of the nearby atolls. The Travelers' Century Club envies my having been there. No one goes to Diego Garcia without an invitation from the U.S. Navy, permission from the BIOT, and a security clearance.

Naturally, I wanted to go there. Conveniently, UMUC offered classes at NSFDG. In Mumbai in January 2009, I was thrilled to receive Navy orders to report for duty in Diego Garcia on March 11, 2009. This gave me two months to cross India with stops in Rajasthan, the Taj Mahal, Khajuraho, Varanasi and Darjeeling. Then from Kulkata, I flew to Singapore and transferred to a military airfield that's not found on published maps. I boarded an unmarked, windowless 727 at sunset, being told that we had to fly at night because there are too many birds in the air over Diego Garcia during the day. The birds on Diego Garcia are so unafraid of humans they'll let you approach them. Once, a red-footed booby mistook my head for a perch.

Chatting with a red-footed booby

My assignment in Diego Garcia was to teach astronomy and algebra to U.S. Navy personnel. Because Diego Garcia is near the equator, the entire night sky is visible – from the Big Dipper to the Southern Cross. With zero light pollution, it was a fantastic place to learn all the stars, planets and galaxies. NSFDG is not only a strategic military base, it also hosts a Ground Based Electro-Optical Deep Space Surveillance (GEODSS) observatory with extremely sophisticated telescopes. High-speed, 1-meter telescopes detect and track objects as small as basketballs at a distance of 30,000 kilometers. Coordinating with sister sites in Hawaii, New Mexico and Spain, these observatories ensure that the 25,000 man-made objects that orbit Earth don't collide with each other. GEODSS also provides early warning in case an asteroid is going to crash down on our heads. My students and I were invited to visit the GEODSS and to see their telescopes.

The lasers at the marina, ready for the Sunday regatta

In Diego Garcia, I enjoyed the hospitality of the Navy's generous MWR (Morale, Welfare and Recreation) department whose mission is to ensure that sailors stay happy while serving at hardship locations like NSFDG. Yes, this beautiful island is considered a hardship assignment because sailors must leave their spouses and families behind to come here for their twelve-month assignments. Besides providing a bowling alley, free movies with popcorn, and a fully equipped dive shop, the MWR organized

sailing regattas every Sunday afternoon. I was in heaven. The marina had a fleet of Lasers, rigged and ready to go on the beach every Sunday. Steady trade winds and calm waters inside the lagoon made for perfect sailing conditions.

As an added bonus, the American captain at NSFDG was an amateur astronomer. Before my arrival, he arranged for $20,000 worth of MWR funds to be invested in telescopes for use by UMUC students or any other interested astronomers.

An unexpected incident occurred while I was here. One weekend, Commander Carr, head of British security at NSFDG, wanted my opinion about tsunami risk on nearby Danger Island. So, he took me with him on security patrol. As this was a quick trip, his aide didn't think it necessary to inform the American captain of my absence from base. When I didn't show up for meals on Saturday or Sunday, a security team went to my quarters, and found my bathing suit, mask, snorkel and fins missing. They concluded that I'd gone snorkeling in the lagoon and had not returned. Scuba divers didn't find my body. The American captain was about to phone UMUC's headquarters in Tokyo to report that one of their professors had drowned. Fortunately, the base communications tech was a student in my astronomy class. He informed the captain what I'd told class the previous Thursday: I was on Danger Island for the weekend. The rumors of my demise were greatly exaggerated. As for my geologic consulting, I assured Commander Carr that, although a tsunami devastated the Maldives in 2004, an escarpment on the ocean floor just east of Danger Island and Diego Garcia deflected the tsunami and would continue to do so in the future.

Danger Island is the most remote and inaccessible place I've ever been. The reason for its name is a wide, shallow reef encircling the island, creating heavy surf. Boats that try to land here are smashed to bits. Hulls of wrecked ships litter the beach. The only access is by body surfing to shore with a tow rope. As Commander Carr explained, "More blokes have climbed K2 than have trod on Danger Island." In my landing party of nine sailors and myself, one man had to be medevaced out.

Commander Carr examining a brown noddy on Danger Island

Thousands of sea birds nest on Danger Island. Having never seen humans, they allowed us to approach them, study them and even pick them up. Other wildlife was similarly approachable. The entire Chagos Archipelago is like this. These islands are often referred to as the "Noah's Ark of the Indian Ocean" because there are species living here in huge numbers, that are extinct everywhere else. Unlike Boracay (chapter 3), the atolls of the Chagos Archipelago have no tourists, and will hopefully remain untouched, natural and pristine. However, the situation is complicated. Here's why ....

Originally, the atolls of the Chagos Archipelago were uninhabited because they have no fresh water and little economic value. They're also a long way from anywhere else. In the 18th century, the French used these islands as a penal and leper colony and a place to keep slaves. During the Napoleonic Wars, the British captured these islands from the French. Under British rule, a few copra plantations were established.

By 1965, the population of the Chagos Archipelago was about 1,700. Most of the islanders were from the Seychelles on 18-24 month contracts to harvest copra. The others were descendants of French prisoners, lepers and slaves. These people call themselves Chagossians and claim to be original residents of the islands.

During the Cold War, the archipelago acquired strategic military importance. Between 1968 and 1974, to allow for the creation of NSFDG, Britain repatriated most of the islanders to the Seychelles. The Chagossians were shipped to Mauritius, a former British colony.

Today, there are three to four thousand people in Mauritius who call themselves Chagossians and claim to be rightful owners of the Chagos Archipelago. In Mauritius, they have access to jobs, food, education and medical services; if they lived on these atolls, they'd have none of these things. Yet, in an appeal to the international community, their lawyers have sued the UK to be restored to their original lands. In 2019, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague ruled in favor of the Chagossians' request to be repatriated to the land of their ancestors.

While living and working in Diego Garcia, and by speaking with people in the Maldives, the Seychelles and Mauritius, I learned the rest of the story:

- Foreign investors, mostly from China, are seeking to invest billions of dollars to develop islands in the Indian Ocean as tourist destinations.
- In the Maldives, businesses must conform to Muslim laws, such as no alcohol, no gambling and no bikinis at the beach (or similar immodest activities).
- Foreign investors have been frustrated in their attempts to develop the Maldives because of these Muslim restrictions.
- The litigation by the Chagossians against the UK and at the ICJ is managed and funded by foreign investors.
- If the Chagossians take possession of the Chagos, they will sell their islands to the investors.
- The investors plan to develop the Chagos into a tourist destination bigger than the Maldives with resorts, hotels, casinos, golf-courses, non-halal restaurants, discos and bars.
- In exchange for their islands, the Chagossians will receive cash and/or jobs.

This is an oft-repeated story of poor people being inveigled and pressured to sell their land rights for a quick buck. If this happens to the Chagos, its pristine ecosystems will be polluted forever.

For now, the UK has refused to relinquish the Chagos to the Chagossians because NSFDG is an important military base. Although I'm not thrilled that Diego Garcia houses an arsenal of missiles, military control is better for the environment than the alternative. From what I saw, the British are honorable stewards of these islands. The British have prohibited commercial fishing and have exterminated feral rats, cats, dogs and pigs, allowing bird and sea life populations to return to their pre-human levels.

As long as Diego Garcia retains its strategic military value, the Chagos Archipelago is likely to remain the "Noah's Ark of the Indian Ocean." Then, the only problems these islands will face will be coral bleaching and sea level rise due to climate change – major problems, yes, but not as serious as massive tourist development. I feel lucky to have visited Diego Garcia when I did. This is the kind of world knowledge that comes from travel. Traveling is how to find out what's really going on.

A few years after Diego Garcia, I managed to reach another remote place I was curious about. In Tibet, there's a pyramid-shaped, 6,638-meter mountain called Mount Kailash. This mountain is sacred to four major religions: Hinduism, Bon, Buddhism, and Jainism. The snowfields on Kailash's slopes are the headwaters of four of Asia's greatest rivers: The Indus, the Sutlej, the Brahmaputra, and the Ganges. Fellow travelers had spoken in hushed tones about how their pilgrimage to Kailash had changed their lives. This was enough to pique my curiosity.

The Kailash pilgrimage is not an easy stroll. It's a 52-kilometer trek around the mountain which includes an ascent over Drölma Pass at 5,650 meters. For thousands of years, pilgrims have performed this feat. Most pilgrims are Buddhist or Hindu, who circle the mountain clockwise. The Jains and Bönpos

circumambulate counterclockwise. I did the trek following the Buddhists and Hindus in three days with four friends and two Tibetan guides. The experience was like an intense dream: Breathtaking, hard to explain and deeply moving. It is one of the most amazing treks I've ever taken. Only by hiking all the way around Mount Kailash and sharing buttered chai with other pilgrims could I understand the power and reverence behind these four religions.

Evening light on Mount Kailash

The Kailash pilgrimage wasn't my only adventure in Tibet. Traveling to Kailash, I saw a lot of Tibet along the way: The Potala Palace, Lhasa's temples, Everest base camp and the high deserts of central Tibet. Although I'll remember all these places, the Kailash pilgrimage was my main reason for visiting Tibet. I've visited many of our planet's holy and sacred sites, but Mount Kailash gets my vote for being the most spiritual of them all.

I have friends whose primary reason for traveling is to witness total solar eclipses. Most work regular 9-to-5 day jobs. At night,

they become amateur astronomers. Then, when there's a total solar eclipse, they jet off to seemingly random locations armed with the latest optical and recording technology.

A total solar eclipse is visible somewhere on Earth about once every eighteen months. Eclipse chasers mark their calendars, get out their world maps, and schedule their vacations around these events. They go to the ends of the Earth to stand in the path of the umbra just for two or three minutes of totality. I admire their pluck for going to places like Queensland (2012), Svalbard (2015), Indonesia (2016), USA (2017 – ok, this one was easy), Chile (2019) and Argentina (2020). Eclipse chasing is an excellent reason to travel. I've now witnessed three.

Ternate folk dancers ready for the eclipse

When the moon's shadow passed over Ternate in Indonesia in 2016, the island pulled out all the stops to host thousands of astronomers. Hotels were booked a year in advance. Every islander with a spare bedroom advertised on Airbnb to make their homes available to strangers for three or four nights. The sultan of Ternate opened his palace gardens for the viewing. The 16th

century Dutch fortress became the focal point for a full day of music, dancing and feasting.

My second total solar eclipse was in Nashville, my hometown. The umbra passed over Boxwell Boy Scout camp where I earned my merit badges fifty years ago. I was joined by fellow scouts from Troop 31. We watched from the top of Campfire Hill as the moon's dark shadow raced across the forests of Middle Tennessee. When darkness fell, the cicadas went silent. The birds nested. The stars came out. It was a remarkable way to celebrate a reunion of old friends.

If you're a serious eclipse chaser, you'll see some of the same people at every eclipse. In 2019, I went to La Serena, a beach town in northern Chile. There, I rendezvoused with a team of astronomers I'd met in Indonesia three years earlier. It was a perfect day for an eclipse, too. Dry air, no clouds, no breeze. Although the eclipse was in July – winter in Chile – the sunshine made for a perfect day at the beach. Everyone was there with family, friends, dogs, picnics, wine and guitars. What an excellent excuse to hold a huge outdoor party!

About 250,000 people came to La Serena, Chile
to see the eclipse of July 2, 2019.

By a rare coincidence, a total solar eclipse will occur in Kosrae on April 20, 2023. That might be the perfect excuse (i.e. reason) for me to return here for a reunion with all my wonderful Kosraean friends.

So, why do I travel? To learn new things and to help people.

I learn more when I travel than when I'm sitting at home. Money and health are transient. Knowledge is the only thing of permanence. I love educating myself about the world

Helping others makes me feel good, and helps me forget my own worries. When I'm someplace for more than a few days, I find worthwhile projects or ways to volunteer. Soon, I've made new friends and become involved with the community. That's what happened to me here in Kosrae. I love the feeling I get when I've done something that gives meaning and purpose to my day.

I've been told more than once that I should do what I love doing. This is good advice. Although travel and volunteering may not be for everyone, these are two things I love. That's why Love is one of my words to live by.

27 – Travel Partners

I usually travel alone. I live in the moment and do what I want to do. I make quick decisions about where to go, what to do and when to move on without consulting anyone else. There are no compromises. Traveling alone is simple.

I came to Kosrae alone. On the fateful morning when Maureen from United Airlines phoned to tell me to report to the airport ASAP to get a seat on the last flight to Guam, I didn't have to discuss anything with anyone. I had no one's feelings or needs to be considered but my own. Had I been traveling with someone else, we would have had to talk about it. Her family might have to be consulted. She would have to weigh whether she could be happy here for an indefinite period, far from friends and family. We would have to discuss our decision together. Being alone made it easy to decide to stay in Kosrae. I didn't have to explain or justify my decision to anyone. It was quick and easy.

People ask if I ever get lonely or homesick. More than once, I've sat down to dinner in a romantic setting wishing I could share a meal with someone. Just past the lighthouse near Praia, Cabo Verde is the Bar Panorama. With the surf crashing on the rocks below, the sun setting over the Atlantic, and a guitar being played nearby, I sipped my wine and enjoyed a perfect meal. I never let the fear of dining alone stop me from going to restaurants by myself. I've had many meals with only a book and a waiter for company.

There are enough solo travelers that I can sometimes find a dinner companion. A few times, I've gone over to a nearby table and asked "You're dining alone? So am I. Would you like company?" Usually, the reply has been "I'd be glad to have company." Conversations between total strangers are often easy, especially between travelers. We might share a pleasant meal and then say good night. If that's as far as the relationship goes, that's fine.

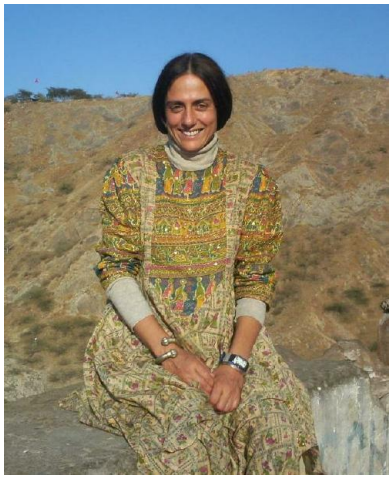
As for homesickness, I view the Earth as a geophysicist. No matter where I go on the surface of our planet, I'm always the same distance from its center. I'm no farther from Earth's core in Kosrae than when I'm in Avignon, Capetown, Nashville or Perth.

Besides, what is home? Is home where your stuff is? Except for a few boxes in storage, I have no stuff. Is home where you collect mail? I use my sister's address for what little snail mail I need to receive. (Thank you, Sarah!) When I'm asked for my address, I write nick@zoa.com. Is home where friends and family are? Mine are scattered all over the globe. Thanks to the Internet and email, I maintain regular contact with about 150 people I consider good friends. More than half of them live outside the United States. A reunion with good friends is an antidote to travel fatigue and homesickness.

There are a few places where it's practical and/or necessary to travel with other people. I didn't go alone to Tibet or North Korea. Although that's possible to do, it's expensive. Group travel allows transportation costs, guide fees and permits to be shared, thus reducing the cost of the trip. Also, in Tibet and North Korea, a solo traveler is conspicuous – and possibly suspicious. There's comfort and safety in numbers.

The joy of traveling alone is that you can make last-minute decisions without consulting anyone. For example, you're on your way to the Berlin Bahnhof to catch a train to Venice. You stop for coffee. Someone driving to Vienna invites you to come along. You don't have to stop to think about how a change of plans might affect someone else. Decision made. Since you've got almost no luggage, you know there'll be room for you *and* your luggage in her Fiat. Now, suddenly you're no longer traveling alone. There've been a few occasions when a chance meeting has led to finding a compatible travel partner.

One night in Rajasthan, I offered a cup of tea to a gypsy at a rooftop café. This started a conversation that lasted until dawn.



Chichi and I ended up travelling across India together. Then – and this is the great thing about travel relationships – our relationship ended as easily as it began. We left Kolkata on different planes. She returned to London and I went to Singapore.

Traveling with Chichi was intriguing enough for both of us that we met again a year later in Japan. I was living and teaching at the U.S. Marine base in Iwakuni. Chichi was good company and made friends with everyone, including the colonel's wife. The next year, we met in Buenos Aires. Born in Spain, Chichi was my interpreter, Spanish teacher and social coordinator. One morning, we got separated in the cavernous Catedral Metropolitana. An hour later, Chichi ran up to me to introduce me to her new best friend, Aurora, niece of Eva Perón. This new friendship led to home-cooked meals, tango lessons and a nice place for us to stay on the Valdez Peninsula.

As a travel partner, Chichi was full of surprises. On our way to Tierra del Fuego, we had to pass from Argentina into Chile and back into Argentina. At our first border crossing, Chilean customs officials opened Chichi's pack and discovered a *cucurbita moschata* (butternut squash). The officer explained that no fruits or vegetables were allowed across the border. Chichi snatched the squash away from the officer to show that it was a *cooked* squash – free of insects! She planned to eat it for lunch. As the officer became insistent, Chichi became furious. They argued. Voices rose. My Spanish was good enough to understand the vulgar language Chichi used as she attacked first the Chilean and then the Argentinean police forces. I backed towards the exit. While most of the police stood in stunned silence, one of the officers radioed for backup. Chichi grabbed her bag and made a break for the exit. We escaped to our bus and ate the squash before our next border crossing.

We met one final time for Christmas in Andalusia, Spain, where Chichi had family and friends. Without exposure to someone like Chichi, I would never have had the chance to have an authentic experience with gypsies feasting, dancing and firing guns on the beach at New Years. After our holiday in southern Spain, Chichi flew home to England and I ferried to Morocco. My last email from Chichi was a report about trouble she had on her return home. At Heathrow, customs found two kilos of prosciutto in her bag. The British police were less tolerant and forgiving than the Chileans had been. Chichi went to jail, and was bailed out ... by her husband.

Traveling with a partner differs from traveling alone in many ways. When I'm alone, one of the most common questions I'm asked is "Are you alone?" This question is asked with curiosity because most people are afraid to travel alone. When I'm by myself, strangers don't feel as though they're intruding on a couple's business by talking to me. They come right up to me and say hello. For this reason, I'm not lonely when I travel. Sometimes I retreat to a quiet hotel or to a remote beach so I can have some personal time. When traveling with a partner, the journey becomes an exploration of the relationship as much as the experience of being in a new place. Also, with an outgoing partner, I can more easily socialize.

One winter, I traveled with an outgoing woman named Nancy. She started conversations with everyone, especially other couples. Nancy loved animals. She often stopped to talk to dogs and cats. This often led to our meeting the owners. When I was with Nancy, I made friends with lots of pet owners.

Nancy and I first met on a cold, rainy day in Stonington, Connecticut. I'd been feeling under the weather and had gone out to get myself a bowl of chicken soup. So had Nancy. We started a conversation. We had dinner together that night. Then, I had to break the bad news to Nancy: I was leaving for Spain in two days

to spend Christmas with my son. I wasn't planning to come back to the States for many months.

Nancy and I exchanged email addresses. While I was in Spain and later in the Canary Islands, our emails became flirtatious. Eventually, she made a daring suggestion. She might like to spend a few weeks in Spain. We met in Barcelona. I rented a two-bedroom Airbnb apartment with a balcony overlooking the Ramblas. I met Nancy's plane. We rode back to the city on the metro. We played tourist for a couple of days visiting the Picasso Museum, Guell Park and the Sagrada Familia. In our two-bedroom apartment, we were getting to know each other. *Tiempos tranquilos.*

On our third morning together in Barcelona, Nancy told me she had health issues and that she didn't expect to live long. Oh dear, just when I thought I'd found the perfect travel partner! I poured us both another cup of coffee. We held hands across the breakfast table as I told her I hoped she had the energy and stamina for months – or maybe years – of travel with me. Understanding this, Nancy added that, with the help of pain killers and alcohol, she could be happy and a lot of fun to be with – at least for a few months. With that, we decided to become travel partners.

As promised, Nancy was a lot of fun to be with, as well as a remarkable dinner companion. She used to write weekly newsletters for The Food Emporium, based in New York City. She'd also been the banquet manager for a fancy food operation in Manhattan called The Silver Palate. She was quite a foodie. In Sicily, we rented an apartment owned by an organic farmer who brought Nancy wild asparagus and mushrooms collected from forests on Mount Etna. In exchange, Nancy created a photo catalog of his mushrooms and helped categorize his olive oils by taste and aroma. In every restaurant, Nancy ended up in the

kitchen with the chefs. She became such a regular at one restaurant in Sicily that a table was set for her every night by the fire and a dish named after her was added to the menu.

Because of her medical condition, Nancy preferred boats to planes. As we cruised from Barcelona to Majorca to Menorca to Sicily to Malta to Tunisia, Nancy knew this would be her last trip anywhere. She literally lived every day as though it was her last. Every new day was a gift. Every photograph was a precious memory. Every dinner was a last supper. This was an inspiration for how to live. We had a joyous time together. If Nancy were alive today, I think she'd be happy to be stranded in Kosrae with me for the past year. I wonder what she would do with coconuts, bananas and fish.

Another type of group travel I enjoy is to give people a totally new experience by taking them someplace they know nothing about and to see things they've never seen before. For Christmas one year, I took May and Pear, a widow and her nine-year-old daughter, from tiny Ban Pao village in northeastern Thailand to Moscow. I knew May because she was a beneficiary of a micro-finance project through which I bought an oven to start a bakery. May's bakery was successful. She now owns a farm where she grows bananas to use in her muffins.

In Moscow, May and Pear wore coats, ate borscht, saw a circus, went ice skating and made snowmen for the first time – and perhaps only time – in their lives. It was a vicarious thrill to see Moscow through their eyes and their amazement from doing things they'd only seen in movies. For a week, Pear lived her dream of being Princess Elsa in *Frozen*.

In all my travels, I've always started my journeys alone and then found partners along the way or become someone's guide. Whether you travel alone or with others, it's all good. But most of the time, I travel alone. It's simpler that way.

"The man who goes alone can start today; but he who travels with another must wait till that other is ready." – Henry David Thoreau.

28 – Lucky Streak

I travel about ten months a year. Every year, I visit at least a dozen countries, often more. When the Global Pandemic was declared, travel networks closed abruptly. Travelers all over the world were stranded because of Covid-19. Many people camped out in airports and paid huge sums for a flight back home. Others holed up in expensive hotels until they could be evacuated.

In early 2020, I visited Somaliland, Eritrea, Sudan and Burundi. Had the pandemic occurred a month or two earlier, I might have been stranded in one of these four countries. Being stuck in Khartoum or Bujumbura for several months would not have been a lucky break. If the pandemic had been declared a week later than it was, I would have been marooned in the Marshall Islands on Majuro, a featureless atoll with high prices. Instead, I had the good luck to end up in an ideal place: Kosrae.

As soon as my flight from Kosrae to Majuro was cancelled, I went to the local college and introduced myself to Dean Mike and Instructional Coordinator George. I asked if they needed an instructor. This was the first of many lucky breaks in Kosrae. Ms. Jamison, the college's science instructor was seriously ill (not with Covid-19) and needed medical care not available in Kosrae. She had to return to Oregon immediately. Dean Mike glanced over my resume and asked if I could start teaching at 1:00 pm. At the end of the week, Dean Mike handed me the keys to Ms. Jamison's apartment in faculty housing. This was excellent timing. This is how I ended up with an apartment on the beach – paid for by the college – and a part-time teaching job. Would this sort of thing have happened if I'd been stranded in Sudan or Burundi? Not likely.

Luck is something that I haven't quite figured out. Good luck is nice to have, especially when traveling. Where does luck come from? How does one get it? Is there a secret to having good luck? I'm a scientist, so I tend not to be superstitious. Still, I carry a

small Buddhist amulet I found in the Himalayas a few years ago. My Tibetan guide told me it would bring good luck. I also carry a polished piece of Lapis Lazuli from Afghanistan. This semi-precious stone is supposed to ward off evil spirits. Magical or not, these items are always with me.

I suspect that good luck or bad luck works like a placebo. It's a matter of perception. If you remember only the good things that happen to you, you'll feel lucky. If you feel lucky, you'll be lucky. Things will seem to go your way more often than not. If you obsess about things that don't go your way, you'll feel unlucky – and probably depressed, too.

I've often wondered if one can be born lucky. Queen Elizabeth II became queen of England in February 1952 when her father died. The royal astrologers wanted to ensure Elizabeth a long and successful reign. So, her coronation was postponed for more than a year until the most auspicious date possible. That date was Tuesday, June 2, 1953. I was born early the next morning. Is that why I'm always lucky? I would love to know if people born June 2nd or 3rd 1953 are luckier than most. If that's your birthday and you feel that you've always had good luck, please contact me. I'd like to know.

What about making your own luck? Many years later and a month after my 21st birthday, I was hired to do field work in central Nevada. I lived in a motel in Battle Mountain. I spent my days driving a jeep around the high desert maintaining seismometers. Our project was to locate potential geothermal energy sources by monitoring micro-earthquakes. At the end of every day, I returned to my motel parched and dusty. After two showers and a soak in

the swimming pool, I ate my dinners at the motel's restaurant/casino.

One evening, I watched a man play a gambling machine that rolled a pair of large black dice with white dots. To play this machine, the man inserted a one dollar coin and then bet on what number he thought the machine would roll. Naturally, different dice totals paid off with different odds. If he bet $1 on 7, he'd win $5 if the dice totaled 7. If he bet on 12 and won, the machine paid out $30. Naturally, these payoffs heavily favored the house.

The man playing the machine was drunk. He wasn't paying attention to what was going on, but I was. There was a design flaw in this machine. The machine worked by reading the amount of light reflected off the white dots on the dice – the more dots, the more reflected light. The man didn't notice that the machine didn't always read the dice correctly. It was a late summer afternoon. There was a bright shaft of light shining through the restaurant's western windows directly into the chamber where the dice were rolled. If the man's body blocked the sunlight, the machine read the dice correctly. But when he stood to the side of the machine, the sunlight flooded the dice chamber reflecting more light and making the machine read high. The dice might roll 3 and 4, but the machine would think the total was 9 and pay off accordingly.

About the time I finished my beer and my sirloin steak, the man gave up and staggered away. I scanned to see if management was watching. I took the man's place in front of the machine. I put in my dollar. We used Eisenhower dollars back then. I bet on 12. Then, just as the dice were being rolled, I stepped to one side so the sunlight shown on the dice. The dice rolled 5 and 6. The machine read the total as 12 and paid me thirty Ike dollars. I kept this up for about half an hour, betting on 12 every roll. Seventeen percent of the time, the dice rolled 10, 11 or 12. When this happened, the machine read the total as 12 and paid off thirty to one. The odds were no longer in the house's favor.

Unfortunately, the sound of all those big Ikes clattering out of the dice machine got the attention of the casino's management. The

manager of the casino came over, put an Out of Order sign on the machine and unplugged it. I was at least allowed to keep my winnings. This was not luck. This was just good math and an understanding of physics.

Just a month past my 21st birthday, it was intoxicating – figuratively and literally – to be welcomed into a casino to drink alcohol and gamble with real money legally. The next night, something rather remarkable happened. Feeling flush from the evening before, I played blackjack and craps. These are the only two games worth playing in a Nevada casino because the house margin isn't as bad as at other games. I wasn't winning, but I wasn't losing much either. I was ready to call it a night. It had been a long day. I was scheduled for an early start the next morning. As I passed the roulette wheel, I tossed a dollar onto my favorite number: Red 9. Then, I went to the rest room. I didn't bother to see what number would come up on the wheel. I didn't care.

When I came out of the rest room, an excited crowd rushed towards me shouting "Come quick! Come quick! It's not going to come up Red 9 *three* times in a row!"

I hurried to the roulette table to find a tower of $1, $10 and $20 chips on Red 9. I realized that when I first walked into the rest room, the wheel must've come up Red 9, paying off 35-to-1. Since I didn't collect my winnings, I'd left $36 riding on Red 9. That's when the wheel rolled Red 9 a *second* time, again paying off 35-to-1. My original $1 bet had turned into $1296 in two spins of the wheel. I collected my pile of chips, tossed the croupier a tip, said goodnight to all the other players and cashed in for the night. This wasn't physics. This was luck.

A few years later, I tried to test to see if I could generate bad luck for myself. I went to Las Vegas with the goal of losing $100 as quickly as possible. After checking into my motel on a Friday night, I went to the strip to play Blackjack, Craps and Roulette. I didn't bother with the machines. Those one-armed bandits are notorious for being poor bets. I made no special effort to win or to lose. I carried a small bag for my chips and coins. I intended to play until my bag was empty. It took until Monday morning to lose $100. I was surprised that it was so hard to lose my money. Meanwhile, the casino fed me and gave me lots to drink. It was an amusing way to spend a weekend. When I was done, I went back to my motel, turned the air conditioner on high and slept for eighteen hours. Was this luck? I'm not sure.

Luck is a good thing to have on your side when you're traveling. A lot of things can go wrong. Murphy's law kicks in all the time. Planes, trains, boats and buses are often delayed – or worse. Taxi drivers don't always show up on time. Sometimes they just forget.

Whether I'm traveling or just living, I don't navigate through the good and the bad by seeking answers in the occult. The occult distracts me and prevents me from seeing what I should already know. I try to use my instincts to sense cosmic forces. This is how to make one's own luck, I think. We all have mystic powers that can smooth out the bumps in the road and make wishes come true. It may be possible to create your own luck, but I still don't know exactly how to do it. There's a certain trust you have to put into your own judgment and to know when to do one thing or another.

Like tossing your dollar onto Red 9 and walking away, I have a simple recipe for generating good luck and making a wish come true: Make your wish. Believe in it. Visualize it. Imagine how good you'll feel when your wish comes true. Assume your wish will come true. And then let your wish go. Forget about your wish.

Before I started island-hopping across the Pacific, I had a dream of going to a warm and friendly place, sitting on a beautiful beach and just relaxing. Some people might consider being stuck in Kosrae bad luck. I don't. The sixteen months I've spent here has been a wish come true.

"Fortune brings in some boats that are not steered." – William Shakespeare

29 – Elasticity of Time

"Put your hand on a hot stove for a minute, and it seems like an hour. Sit with a pretty girl for an hour, and it seems like a minute. That's relativity." – Albert Einstein

One of my volunteer jobs in Kosrae has been teaching at the high school. To get my class schedule, I had to meet with Scott, the school principal. Scott's a great guy, but he's sometimes hard to track down. He often has meetings. Or he's at the gym refereeing a basketball game. Or he's conferring with the arborists as to which coconut palms need to be cut down. His secretary would tell me that he'll come back soon, and that I should wait for him. But this is island life, functioning on island time. Saying that someone might come back soon might mean ten minutes. Or it might mean after lunch.

I have a theory about how time works. Each of us has only a finite amount of time on this planet. Although none of us knows how many years, months and days we'll live, our time on Earth is finite – not infinite. Yet, time feels elastic. Time doesn't always seem to pass at the same rate.

Think back on the past week. Do you remember everything you did last Monday? Or was Monday so much like Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday that the days are indistinguishable from each other? If every day feels the same, then you'll probably feel as though the week went by quickly. What happened to those days between Monday and Friday?

Clocks measure time strictly. Every second ticks away at the same pace from the present into the future. As distance is measured in centimeters and meters, we measure time as if it's a dimension, in units of seconds and minutes. But to our hearts and souls, the passage of time doesn't feel uniform. Some days, weeks or months seem to last forever, while others vanish. What's the

difference? Why does time sometimes move more quickly than at other times?

Although clocks measure time in seconds and minutes, we measure time with our memories. Any event worth remembering is a landmark in our personal timelines. We think of other events in our lives as happening before or after specific events. In my life, the two days when my children were born are the two most significant landmarks in my life. All other events in my life occurred either before or after the birth of my children.

When an event gets lodged firmly in your memory, it becomes a landmark in time. Events like marriages, births, graduations and vacations mark the passage of time. Not all time landmarks are happy events. A car wreck, a flat tire, getting fired, breaking up with a partner, a financial catastrophe, or the death of a loved one can also be time landmarks. Whether happy or sad, we use these time landmarks to measure the passage of time. What I've found is that the more time landmarks between one day and another, the longer the time between these two days will feel. For example, if nothing memorable happened between Monday and Friday, I feel as though the week just zipped by.

On the other hand, suppose that on Monday you met your sweetheart at the train station in Budapest. When you finally found each other on the crowded platform, you rushed together for a warm embrace and a passionate kiss. That evening, you went to Swan Lake at the National Ballet, followed by a romantic dinner by the Danube. You had the perfect table right by the river.

Swam Lake at the National Ballet

Tuesday, you visited the iconic palaces and cathedrals in Buda. You took dozens of photos of each other eating ice cream and wearing silly hats in front of the castle. Returning to Pest, you and your sweetheart got completely lost on the subway and exited at one of the city's natural hot springs. Being without your swim suits, you rented suits and spent a leisurely afternoon in the baths talking about your relationship and where you were going next. After your soak in the hot springs, you had massages. That evening, you made a meal of hors d'oeuvres as you hopped from café to café on a tree-lined boulevard in the middle of town.

The Széchenyi Thermal Baths in Pest

Wednesday morning, you collected your rental car and drove out of the city towards Lake Balaton, Hungary's biggest lake. Along the way, you stopped for a swim. A fisherman caught a handsome Zander (perch) and was happy to sell it to you. By luck, you found a stunning place to stay at a guest house overlooking the lake. You grilled the fish on the patio as the sun set. The fish paired perfectly with the Juhfark you'd bought at a family-run vineyard that afternoon.

Thursday, you hiked from one end of the island to the other. You both got dehydrated and sunburned. Coming back to your guest house, all you could do was slather Aloe Vera cream on each other's skin, drink lots of water and collapse into bed. By midnight, the bedroom was freezing. You lit a fire in the fireplace, cuddled under hand-made quilts, and finished the Juhfark together.

On Friday, you drove to the town of Keszthely. You bought bread, wine, cheese and marzipan for a picnic in the ornamental gardens of a baroque Habsburg Palace. After your picnic, you were the last tourists admitted into the palace. The friendly guards told you to take your time and to lock the door when you left. You had the whole palace to yourselves. You waltzed in the ballroom and then held each other while watching the sunset from the tower.

Festetics Palace in Keszthely, Zala, Hungary

Returning to your hotel, your sweetheart tripped on the hotel stairs. You heard a disturbing crack when she caught her fall on a stone step. She'd broken her wrist. Although the hotel concierge spoke little English, she produced a map showing where to find the hospital. As darkness fell, you took a taxi to the hospital. The taxi driver spoke no English but deduced from your sweetheart's cries of pain that you needed to be delivered to the Emergency Room.

The hospital was dark and empty. You finally roused someone to come to your aid. No one spoke English. Using Google Translate, you communicated the nature of the injury. Finally, the receptionist understood the problem. Using your iPhone, she typed a message in Hungarian which translated "Now we will be ruthless."

After thirty agonizing minutes wondering what would happen next, an orderly took an x-ray. A doctor in a white coat arrived. He spoke Spanish! With excitement, you and your sweetheart stumbled through your clumsy Spanish and listened to his reassuring words. He prepared gauze bandages, pasted and wrapped your sweetheart's arm in a plaster cast, and provided her with pain killers that she'd need for the next few days. The receptionist handed you a bill for $70, apologizing for how expensive it was. Then, she phoned your taxi. That evening, you ended up at an outdoor café run by a Hungarian who went to cooking school in Acapulco. You washed down your burritos with Margaritas made with real Tequila.

Now that's a week you'd remember – down to the smallest detail. When you recall a week like that, you savor all the amazing things that happened. Was the week any longer than any other five days in your life? No, not in terms of the number of hours and minutes. But yes, much much longer because of all the unforgettable milestones that occurred between Monday morning and Friday night.

What if your whole life could be like this? If it were, you'd feel as though you'd lived longer. You'd have made time slow down. Your lifespan of 60, 70 or 80 years would be filled with so many landmarks it would take another lifetime to recount everything that had happened.

I spent the first fifty years of my life doing what I was expected to do. When I was young, I went to school, did my homework and sought the approval of my teachers – with a few notable exceptions in high school. Without stopping, I went directly to college and then graduate school. As soon as my PhD dissertation was signed, I flew to Canberra, Australia to deliver a paper about my research. After traveling and working overseas for three years, I returned to

San Francisco to start a computer company ... which went bankrupt within fifteen months. Now on unemployment and struggling to make ends meet, I worked three jobs. Soon, I was solvent again and made a down payment on a house whose mortgage I could barely afford. I got married, had two kids and built a successful business. Time flew by.

The second half of my life began when I gave my soon-to-be ex-wife the house that we'd lived in and hit the road with a small pack. Since then, I've had more landmark events worth remembering than in the first fifty years of my life. Are the two periods of time equal? In my mind and my heart, I've lived as much in the past seventeen years as I did in the first fifty. Time has slowed down. That's what much of this book is about. I'm recalling the landmark events of the parts of my life when I've been able to slow time down.

My friend Lisa often says "We won't get today back. Enjoy it and live it fully." When I keep Lisa's advice in mind, I find that time slows down.

30 – Keep a Journal

"Keep a diary, my dear, and some day perhaps your diary will keep you." – Mae West

I started keeping a journal when I was in elementary school. The first thing I wrote was a one-page essay about what happens to people when they die. This wasn't something that I'd been taught at church or at school. It was just my guess as to the answer to a question that everyone asks at least once. I shared my ideas with my father at dinner at a restaurant one evening. He said I should write them down, so I did.

I've maintained diaries irregularly. Some years, I made only a dozen entries. During other periods, I wrote two or three times a day. In my mid-twenties, every morning I recorded the dreams I had during the night. Sometimes, I wrote poems. Other times, I wrote dialogue. Many of my journals were addressed to a future self, asking questions I hoped to answer some day. My longest and most interesting journal entries were from periods when I was traveling.

Although my diaries were hand-written in flimsy, spiral notebooks, none were ever lost and they were all readable after fifty years. (Note: Pencil on paper fades after a couple of decades, so it's best to write in ink.) I spent several months rereading all my old diaries, transcribing them into MS Word on my computer, and culling from them stories and lessons learned. I did most of this transcribing work while I was teaching in Afghanistan. I'd been warned before being deployed that there'd be days and nights when I'd be confined to quarters "for my own safety." So, along with my teaching materials, I shipped my old journals to the UMUC Education Center. Rereading and transcribing old journals kept me busy in my bunker while bombs were going off outside. When I finished transcribing my hand-written journals, I sacrificed them on the ever-smoldering rubbish pile next to Camp

Leatherneck. There, they were reduced to ash along with Styrofoam, discarded tires and other toxic waste.

The smoking dump at Camp Leatherneck, Afghanistan

Keeping a diary can be a form of therapy. Writing in my journal gives me a way to voice my complaints about the world without burdening others. I try to be honest with myself, not to overreact, not to dramatize incidents, and to recognize what I'm responsible for and what I'm not. I often reread a previous week's entries to find that what troubled me or caused me to lose sleep last week is no longer a serious matter. Over the years, my journals may have saved me a lot of time and money on therapists. (Forgive this sardonic observation about lawyers and therapists: Their financial success depends on their clients' problems *not* going away.)

Sometimes, I use my journal to help make a difficult choice or decision. I draw two columns. One column lists all the reasons I should do a particular thing. The other column lists my arguments against it. Today, many years later, it's revealing to review the decision tables I made at important junctions in my life. Although I might not make the same decisions today that I made then, I'm reassured to know that I made conscientious efforts to consider everything before making important decisions.

Some of my journals contain detailed descriptions of specific incidents. Other entries are abstract ideas and feelings. If I were to change anything about my journals, I would record more of the

daily events that make life the joy that it is. I'd write down the things that made me laugh. Had I done this from the beginning, rereading and transcribing fifty years of journals would've been less tedious.

One of the surprises I've learned from rereading old journals is that my memory isn't as good as I like to think it is. I suspect everyone has this problem to some extent. Memories evolve with time. My journals clarify what I thought, felt or experienced at that time. They also document the facts. When I reread old entries, I'm sometimes surprised to see how different my memory is from what actually happened.

In 1980, I lived with an American family in Tokyo. They gave me a place to stay when there were no Bachelor Officer Quarters available at Yokota Air Base. In my journal, I wrote about how thankful I was for their help and how much I enjoyed their company. Yet, until I reread my 1980 journal, I'd forgotten their home, their names, or having ever met them.

A year later in 1981, I witnessed a fatal auto accident in Melbourne. The driver survived the accident, but was responsible for it. In 2006, she and I exchanged emails about this accident. One would think that an event like a fatal accident would be indelibly etched into the memories of every witness. Yet, her memory of what happened differed greatly from mine – and both of our memories differed from the facts that I recorded shortly after the incident. It's somewhat reassuring to know that I'm not the only person who can mis-remember an incident that occurred long ago.

I've discovered several more incidents and conversations which I remember differently from how they're described in my journal. The logical conclusion is that my memory is faulty. Rereading my journals has convinced me of the value of keeping one, if only to remember the actual events and real people that have blessed my life. When I was in my teens, I wrote about my father and about our conversations as well as our arguments. Years after my

father's death, rereading these entries is like talking with him again – in the present.

Sitting here in Kosrae, it's easy to write this book because I've got years of journals to draw from. Several chapters of this book have been cut and pasted from old journals – with editing and spell-checking. If I hadn't written these stories as they were happening, I could never remember all the details of my life and my travels. In a sense, I've been writing this book for the past fifty years.

Some of my past journals make entertaining reading. My journals from my twenties are some of the best – and funniest – things I've ever read. Although there were times there wasn't much to write, at least I recorded the landmark events so that those events and those years didn't just disappear. When I traveled, I wrote in my journal every day. If I hadn't, there's no way I could have remembered all the details of the stories in this book. If you travel, I recommend you keep a journal. Later, you can write your own book.

31 – Practical Advice

Before coming to the final chapter of this book, I'd like to offer three bits of travel advice about money, passports and health.

Money

In my opinion, there are only four things worth spending money on:

1. Food
2. Housing
3. Education
4. Travel

Having a roof over your head and good food to eat are essential for health, which should be everyone's primary concern. (If you need medicines, let's include them with food as an essential item.) After that, knowledge and experiences are the only things of lasting value. Everything else is luggage that will burden you. If you can resist the temptation to buy expensive things, you may end up with enough money for education and travel – which are the same thing anyway. Travel is an excellent teacher.

Travel can be expensive. Airplane tickets aren't cheap. Eating in restaurants and staying in short-term housing like hotels and Airbnb apartments adds up. Many hodophiles fund their adventures by working hard for a while, saving up enough money to travel, and then hitting the road. Unless you can accumulate a substantial nest egg, you'll burn through your cash and have to return home to restart the process. That's too much of a roller coaster for me. It's like living for the weekend. I'd rather not have to start all over again at the end of brief travels.

I've always been careful with my finances. When I finished college, I had no debt. In graduate school, my expenses were covered by a scholarship and part time work. I lived like a student, i.e. frugally. I rented a small apartment in Berkeley with no heat,

which is possible to do in California. I bought my clothes at thrift shops. I built my bicycle from spare parts scrounged from bike stores. My vacations were camping trips.

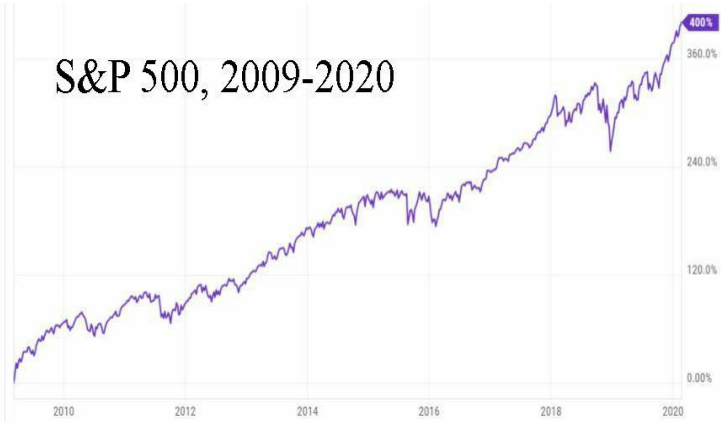
Thanks to a frugal lifestyle, when I finished grad school, I had $10,000 in the bank. Originally, I dreamed of using my savings to buy a sailboat to sail around the world. During grad school, I crewed on a yacht in San Francisco Bay and did oceanographic work off the coast of Oregon. During these maritime adventures, I realized that living on a boat is not as glamorous as I thought it would be. I spent a lot of time bouncing around on waves. Everything got wet. My quarters were cramped. The food was monotonous. I could never stretch my legs.

Instead of buying a sailboat, I applied my $10,000 to going places I'd only seen on maps. In 1979, I left California. One of my first stops was New Zealand. I tended bar in Auckland and mended fences on a sheep ranch in Christchurch. From there, my PhD and a couple of letters of recommendation got me a job teaching on U.S. military bases for UMUC. UMUC sent me to many countries. Transportation and housing were reimbursed. Sometimes food was included. Although I flew by military transport, lived in barracks and ate in mess halls, I was seeing the world – and getting paid to do it. UMUC sent me to a different military base every eight weeks which suited me just fine. Eight weeks is enough time to learn something about a culture. Even the coldest and most dreary place can be tolerated for eight weeks. The great thing about this job was that I taught only 24 weeks per year. This gave me the rest of the year to be a nomad. The travel bug bit me. With the income I earned from teaching, and by being careful with expenses when I wasn't teaching, I supported my travel addiction. After three years of teaching and traveling all over the world, I returned to California with $10,000. At that point, I understood a simple truth: One can do anything forever – such as travel – if income equals expenses.

Living and working in San Francisco during the high-flying early years of the computer boom turned out to be more expensive than being a gypsy scholar. Fifteen months after returning to

California, I was broke and unemployed because I'd invested all my time, energy and money in a computer startup that went bankrupt. (This was an educational experience that might be told in another book.) I went back to living like a student. To pay rent and buy groceries, I started a computer consultancy. This time, I was more successful. The computer consultancy grew into a company. I made enough to buy a house in San Francisco and to pay my kids' tuition from kindergarten through college. During this time, I discovered no-load index funds.

After sitting at a computer for twenty years, I'd saved enough to retire and to return to my wanderlust. At 55, my dream was to travel, travel and travel. To do this, I'd still have to earn enough from my index funds so I wouldn't outlive my money. Thanks to the bull market of the Obama and Trump years, this goal has been achieved. I'm now sailing along with interest, dividends and capital gains covering all my travel expenses. I can travel as long as I want to. Retiring early and being financially secure is a blessing. It's a situation I wish for everyone who reads this book.



One more word about money: Although travel today is more expensive than it was in the 80's, managing one's money is much easier. Electronic banking, credit cards and global access to ATM's make it easy to get funds whenever and wherever they're needed. There's no need to carry much cash. Just remember to keep your ATM card with you always.

Passports

My second bit of travel advice is simple: Take good care of your passport.

Keep your passport renewed and up-to-date. Always be ready for an opportunity to go someplace exciting. You never know when someone might invite you to Paris. It's easier and faster to renew a passport before it expires than to go through the hassle of applying for a new passport.

One of the most inconvenient things that can happen when you're far from home is to lose your passport. If you lose your passport, it's much easier to get a new passport at your nearest consulate if you have a photocopy of the passport you've just lost. Make photocopies of your passport and keep them separate from your actual passport.

Having a few photocopies of your passport can be handy. When applying for a visa, you'll need a photocopy of your passport. If you've already got one, it saves you the trouble of having to find a photocopier. Many hotels will ask to see your passport when you check in. Some hotels will ask to make a photocopy. I never let my passport out of my sight. Unless there's a photocopier right at the front desk, I give the hotel clerk one of my photocopies so he doesn't have to take my passport into some other room.

Losing my passport used to be what I feared more than anything else. Now that I have two passports, I no longer have nightmares about losing my passport. Still, I keep my two passports in separate locations, one in my pocket and the other in my pack. Photocopies of each passport are stashed in other locations, such as my wallet.

Given my travel style, it's possible that I could lose both passports, all my photocopies and everything else. My plane could crash. My ferry might sink. I could have the good luck (as a seismologist) to be in the epicenter of a magnitude 9.0 earthquake. Assuming I survive, I could find myself with nothing. To ensure

against this possibility, I upload scanned copies of my passports, my credit and ATM cards, important IDs, licenses and travel documents to a password protected space in the Cloud. This way, if I lose absolutely everything, I'll find an Internet café, download copies of what was lost and start my recovery.

Although I can replace everything in my pack for about $500, the most valuable things I carry are my photographs. These are also uploaded regularly to the Cloud as well as to a 128gb thumb drive.

Health

What's the worst thing that can happen to you when you're traveling?

A. Bad weather
B. Being robbed
C. Losing your passport
D. Flight or hotel reservations cancelled
E. None of the above

The answer is E. The most important thing when traveling is your good health. Getting sick or injured far from home is miserable. Finding medical care in an unfamiliar place can be a challenge. If there's a language barrier, your problems are compounded. A medical evacuation may be impossible or extremely expensive. When you're sick in a wonderful, beautiful place, nothing is wonderful or beautiful.

Although I've never been seriously injured while traveling – knock on wood – my worst travel experiences have involved getting sick. I've had a few sinus infections that left me coughing and sneezing with a sore throat. I've been knocked into bed with a flu-like fever more than once. There's often not much that anyone can do for a cold or for the flu. When illness comes, I try to find a clean, quiet hotel where I can get bed rest, fluids and chicken soup – or its equivalent.

Stomach illnesses affect so many travelers that there's popular slang for these gastrointestinal complaints: Montezuma's revenge, the Aztec two-step, Delhi belly, the Nile runs, holiday tummy, etc. Happily, I rarely have stomach illnesses when traveling. Why? Because I avoid taking antibiotics. This is how I preserve the helpful bacteria that I've introduced into my system through years of travel. Today, I have a happy, healthy and varied intestinal microbiome which includes bugs from Central America, South America, Southern Asia, China, Indonesia and all of Africa.

Occasionally, a new microbe finds its way into my digestive system. We all know the feeling of what happens next. First, there's an uncomfortable feeling in one's gut. Then, there's a quick trip to the toilet. In my case, what typically happens is that the new microbes take about six hours to make friends with my existing population. After a few more hours of an unsettled stomach and maybe the runs, I'm 100% fine again. From that point forward, I can safely eat street food in the country I'm in because I've now got in my stomach what everyone else who lives there has in their stomachs.

Although I'm careful about what I eat, I'm not afraid to taste a delicious smelling skewer of unidentified meat on a barbecue beside the highway in Uganda. I can order the soup from a street kitchen in Shanghai. I can enjoy the parade of flavors served on a banana leaf in Gujurat, India. I can huddle in a cave in the Andes for a bowl of llama stew. I can brush my teeth with tap water in any country in the world.

I wouldn't have made it through West Africa if I hadn't been protected by an army of gut bacteria. From Senegal to Côte d'Ivoire, hygiene was limited. The only food available was found at markets beside the highway. Although it might've been grilled, it was served on a stick or on a plate that may not have been handled with clean hands.

Street food by the highway in Uganda

Even with a healthy microbiome, it's important to be careful about what you eat. The farther you are from home, the stranger the foods can be. Everything you put into your body affects you: Alcohol, drugs, sugar, meat, fruits, vegetables, bread and grains. Think about what you want to do to yourself and choose wisely. As my friend Diane always says "Be disciplined about what you eat at every meal -- not just at most meals. Regular, healthy meals are essential to being regular and healthy."

As for serious injuries, perhaps I've been lucky. But it's not just luck. It's a matter of awareness. I've climbed steep cliffs in Ethiopia without ropes. I've gone swimming alone in heavy surf here in Kosrae. I've ridden in tuk-tuks in India. In all these cases, I've stayed aware and at least one step away from injury.

Finally, here's health advice I received from Peace Corps volunteers in central Africa where malaria is common. Many tourists come to Africa armed with malaria pills. No matter which type of malaria medication you ingest, these medicines are not intended to be taken for extended periods of time. If you take these medicines for more than a month, there can be serious side

effects. Furthermore, most anti-malarial medicines merely suppress the symptoms. You'll still get malaria if bitten by the wrong mosquito.

The best way to avoid malaria is to avoid getting bitten. Wear long lightweight pants and a long-sleeved shirt. Light colors are best. Wear socks in the evenings – even though they're not fashionable when worn with sandals or flip-flops. Use DEET for extra protection. At night, sleep under a mosquito net.

If you show any symptoms of malaria, get treatment right away. You'll find that local clinics will be more familiar with malaria than your doctor back home. Also, the cost of the medicine you'll need will be much less than it was back home. And finally, the medicine you buy will be appropriate for the type of malaria that you've encountered. There are several strains of malaria. That's why you want the medicine that's sold locally. Although I'm not a doctor, this Peace Corps advice about malaria makes sense to me.

Although Kosrae is warm and tropical and we have a few small mosquitoes in the evenings, there's no malaria here. Yay! There's also no Covid-19 here either, of course. Historically, the geographic isolation of the Pacific islands has meant that few western diseases ever come here. Pacific islanders have developed little or no natural resistance to western illnesses. This was made mortally obvious during the influenza pandemic of 1918-1919 when Samoa lost 22% of its population in two months. Remembering what happened in 1918, several Pacific island nations imposed strict travel bans in March 2020. That's why Micronesia, Palau, Nauru, Kiribati, Tuvalu and Tonga have had no cases of Covid-19 .

Living in Kosrae's virus-free environment for the past year has been a pleasure. There's also no pollen or air pollution here. I can't recall any of my co-workers, students or friends complaining of having a cold or the flu. I haven't coughed or sneezed once in the past year. I can't remember being this healthy in any other year of my life. Being healthy has made it easy to enjoy this beautiful place.

32 – Go Now!

In 1966, my friend Doug was one of Kosrae's first Peace Corps volunteers. His journey from New Hampshire to Kosrae took a month. Boeing 707's and DC-4's flew him as far as Chuuk. From there, he and his wife took a series of inter-island freighters and WWII landing craft. On the ships, they slept on deck. Stopping at islands along the way, they stayed in people's homes, helped with local work projects, slept on woven mats and received heart-warming hospitality. On arrival in Kosrae, there was no dock to accommodate their small freighter. Canoes ferried them to shore with their bags. English was not widely spoken. Doug communicated using the Kosraean he'd studied to prepare for his Peace Corps assignment. After speeches and a hearty meal, another canoe took Doug and his wife across the harbor where they were met by a Datsun pickup to drive the final four kilometers of dirt road. They lived in a two room house similar to their neighbors. Pandanus mats on the floor served as their beds. There were no chairs, so they sat on the floor, backs to the wall. A recycled cable spool was their table. They cooked on a kerosene stove. Rainwater was their source of water. There was an outhouse in the back. Thirty meters away, the sea rolled against the reef, making constant, soothing background music.

In contrast, my journey to Kosrae was effortless and my life here has been luxurious. I booked my ticket on united.com using frequent flyer miles. A Boeing 737-800 whisked me here from Pohnpei in 75 minutes. I rode a Toyota Mark X on a paved road from the airport to a resort with Wi-Fi, A/C, hot and cold running water, and a bed with crisp, clean sheets. For the past year, I've lived in an apartment with a full electric kitchen, a laundry room, Internet and indoor plumbing. 80% of the population speaks English. Most of Kosrae has 3G cellular service. The only thing that hasn't changed since 1966 is the constant, soothing sound of the surf on the reef.

Although Kosrae is still relatively untouched and unspoiled, it's not as primitive and natural as it was fifty years ago. Like so many other quiet, remote places on Earth, "progress" has changed Kosrae. People drive where they used to walk. Motor boats have replaced canoes. Homes are made of concrete blocks with metal roofs instead of bamboo and thatch. Instead of growing and catching their meals, Kosraeans eat packaged foods imported from America. The water in the harbor isn't crystal clear any more. Kosrae's reefs aren't as full of fish as they once were.

So far, Kosrae has avoided being ruined by over-development. In 1998, Kosrae said no to foreign investors who wanted to anchor twenty houseboats in the lagoon to be rented as eco-lodges. Kosrae responded by toughening its rules on marine protected areas. More recently, Kosrae rejected a proposal to cut down a forest to build a golf course. Although several Kosraeans would have been paid handsomely for access to their land, the majority said "no thanks." During the past year, I've helped update Kosrae's Land Use Plan. New provisions will hopefully ensure that Kosrae's ecosystems will be as healthy in the future as they are today. But I can't be sure that all I've done will last. The undeveloped parts of the world are under constant financial pressures to convert untouched environments into profit-making businesses.

In my lifetime, the world's population has grown from 2.7 billion to 7.9 billion. Although I love people and have many good friends, our planet is getting crowded. Almost every problem humanity faces today results from overcrowding, competition for resources, and environmental damage. Kosraeans know about climate change and are making plans to adapt to sea level rise. The rest of the world will soon have to deal with climate problems, too. Mitigating and adapting to these problems are going to change our planet.

I don't know what our planet will be like fifty years from now. Certainly, it will be a different place. I'm hopeful it will be better in some ways. Although 2020 was a good year to relax in Kosrae, there's a lot of the world I haven't seen. I intend to see as much of

the world as I can before it changes. If you can, see it now before it all changes – or perhaps disappears. What we have today is wonderful and beautiful.

Are you planning to work hard for several years, save up money and then take a grand vacation or adventure? Our planet is changing fast. Don't put off traveling any longer than necessary. Although the pandemic has created obstacles to travel which are probably here to stay, if you want to see the world, don't wait too long. A lot of what's here now may not be here in another decade or two.

The other reason why it's imperative to travel now is simple: We're not getting any younger. I'm glad I climbed Mount Kilimanjaro ten years ago. I don't know if I could do it now.

I have a lot to be thankful for. I'm thankful for the health, the freedom and the money to see as much of the world as I have. I'm thankful for my U.S. passport, which allows me to travel to 187 countries and territories without a travel visa, or with a visa on arrival. I'm thankful for starting my travels when the world was healthy and at peace. I've been to places that are no longer safe to visit. I'm thankful for having seen many unspoiled, natural environments before they disappeared.

My intent in writing this book is to encourage people to experience the world the way I have. Let go of a few creature comforts. Leave your web-surfing and on-line conferences behind. Go places and meet people. The world is full of experiences and opportunities to benefit yourself and others. Although I'm not a fan of outright tourism, I wish more people would leave home and see the world, hopefully in a sustainable and productive way. Some of humanity's problems might be solved if we all had friends in other countries. Some of our environmental issues might be solved if we knew more about them. If you have the health, the freedom and the money to travel, go. Go now!

If you can't travel or if travel has no appeal to you, I hope at least that I've encouraged you to get out of your comfort zone, to do

something new, and to challenge yourself in ways that you're perhaps afraid to try. None of us will live forever. Our only regrets will be not doing something we wished we had done. Doing new things is how we change and grow. Start now!

Whether luck or divine intervention marooned me in Kosrae, I've loved discovering new things, doing worthwhile work and making lasting friendships here. I've learned a lot about a tiny island that most of the world knows nothing about. I've formed bonds with many Kosraeans. Despite Kosrae's lack of fame – or perhaps because of it – I was curious to find out what makes Kosrae forgotten. After more than a year on this forgotten island, I'll never forget this place.

Kosrae Island, Micronesia

"Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime." – Mark Twain

About the Author

Nick Zoa, PhD is a seismologist with a travel addiction. Through his careers as a teacher, programmer and consultant, Nick has worked in 34 countries and visited 124 others. His book *Go Now!* is an honest and entertaining collection of stories about faraway places with strange sounding names, seasoned with advice for anyone seeking to explore and know the planet we all share.

Nick's writing draws from forty years of experience with geology, technology, history and languages. Originally from Nashville and educated at Berkeley, he is homeless by choice and lives as a gypsy scholar. His next book will be released when he achieves his goal of visiting every country in the world.

Nick's email address is nick@zoa.com. Nick's blog about being marooned in Kosrae can be found at 2021.zoa.com. For more travel stories and photos from his travels, please visit travel.zoa.com.

Don’t take anything you *might* need.