

travel

alone and love it!

10 stories by the readers of Solo Traveler

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Travel Alone and Love It

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Contents

An introduction with gratitude.....	4
A Woman in Black Dancing.....	5
Egypt. April 1983.....	7
Divorce is just the beginning.....	9
Searching for Mr. Darcy.....	11
Lost in a Mozambique minefield.....	12
“Dammit, Jim, I’m a Tourist, Not a Local!”.....	15
Finnish’ed by Finland?.....	17
A New Perspective on Botswana.....	20
Turkish Delight.....	21
Solo Road Trip: one man, one Miata, one big country.....	23

Please note:

You will notice some British and some American spelling in this book. I chose to respect the spelling choice of the author.



An introduction with gratitude...

In August I tested the waters. “Would anyone like to collaborate on a free ebook of solo travel stories?” I raised this question on Solo Traveler, to the Solo Travel Society on Facebook and on Twitter. The response was fabulous. In addition to all the people who showed their enthusiasm for reading the stories, there were ten wonderful individuals who actually contributed theirs. It has been a real pleasure reading them and compiling the stories and photos into this eBook.

My sincere gratitude goes to:

Leyla Giray

Evelyn Hannon

Rahim Ismail

Julie Langelier

Derek Owen

Ren Robles

Sandy Salle

Michael Smith

Connie Vasquez

Tre Witkowski

A Woman in Black Dancing

Story and photos by Tre Witkowski
Tre Lost, <http://trelost.wordpress.com> Twitter:@trelost

I was annoying a vendor by pawing through all her hats looking for one that didn't have "CROATIA" written in large red letters across it – hard enough in a tourist shop and doubly hard with Croatia in the World Cup – when I was distracted by something moving that made me do a double-take. Dressed all in black wearing a headscarf was a small woman, old enough to be my grandmother, dancing – not just dancing, skanking.

Forgetting all about the hat and walking away from the now angry vendor, I watched her dance to a group of young punk musicians practicing in the empty fruit market. The musicians all laughed and gave her a hug as she finished dancing and I, having no plans in particular for my second day in Split, settled atop an abandoned vendor's table to watch the band play.

My backpack and I had arrived in Split, Croatia in the final days of a three month long solo adventure through Europe, thirty-five years after my parents had arrived in Split, Yugoslavia on their honeymoon. I had seen enough cathedrals, palaces, and museums for a lifetime, and just wanted to soak in the culture.

It didn't take long for the band and their friends to notice me. After snapping a few pictures of me, the fashionable

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A band jams in an empty fruit market.

girl taking pictures of the band, whose name I was never able to pronounce (let's call Nadia because at least its Croatian) marched up to me.

"Speak English?" She barked.

"Yes"

It was all smiles from then on as we began talking about the band, their music, her art, and my travels. She waved over a few more girls and the conversation went deeper. Sitting in the fruit market outside of Diocletian's Palace, these young women told stories of hiding as bombs dropped on their city, losing parents and, when the war

5

was over and they had grown older, learning of the atrocities their own government and army had done – all of this while the band played covers of the Ramones, the Clash, and the Sex Pistols.

As the band wrapped up and began packing, I became the center of attention as I talked about the wars my own government had recently gotten itself into, and what it was like to travel in a very anti-American climate. With the band packed up and ready to go, I was invited to join them for drinks that evening.

Later, I found myself waiting in a dilapidated part of the palace, the walls covered in graffiti – including the names



Graffiti on the Palace Walls

of the punk bands I had heard covered that afternoon. Most of these bands, some of them my favorites, had broken up long before I entered kindergarten, but to the kids there, filled with angst about their futures and their country's past, the lyrics stayed true. Nadia and her friends arrived dressed for a night out; short black shirts, DIY band shirts with heels, hair and make-up in place. I looked down at my wrinkled black



Laundry hanging to dry outside an apartment in the dilapidated walls of the Palace

t-shirt, dirty pants that I had been wearing for 5 days straight, and flip-flops I had bought in Italy. I cursed living out of a backpack and having lost my favorite red lipstick running for a train in Prague.

I followed them through the ruins of the palace where, unexpectedly, we stopped at a door in a half-destroyed wall. Through the door and down a flight of stairs was a punk/goth club like nothing I had seen before. The bartender stood behind a bar made of fallen rocks from the palace. It was lit primarily with candles and dim lamps.

The night was filled with laughter, Croatian lessons, and Croatian spirit. There was no talk of wars or governments but of music, art, and fashion – just a few 20-something girls out on the town. My parents had told me of Split, Yugoslavia, a beautiful city full of life by the sea, I had found Split, Croatia a beautiful and haunting bombed out city by the sea. Though the war had changed its walls and its people, it was still full of life.

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6

Egypt. April 1983.

Story and photos by Connie Vasquez,
Vintage Awesome <http://vintageawesome.wordpress.com>
Twitter: @LaConsuelo

As my present for college graduation in 1982, my mother presented me with a bank book for an account containing \$2,000. She told me she'd been saving so that I'd have money to go on a trip. She was thinking Paris or a European tour of some sort. I was thinking Egypt or an archeological dig in Mexico at the Mayan ruins. She thought I was nuts.

Egypt it was!

I got so much more than that bank book as a gift. Thus began my life as a solo traveler.

Didn't I want to bring a friend? Nope. I didn't want to wait for anyone to come with me, to worry about their schedule, or their apprehensions. Nor did I want the experience of any particular moment interrupted by chatter. I wanted to just be – out in the world exploring and experiencing. I didn't want to hear which traditional post-college destinations might be more appropriate. I

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wanted to go explore the world wherever I wanted, however I wanted - NOW.

I didn't do much research for my trip. All I needed was a place with filtered water and a little luxury to return to after day trips tromping about. I selected Club Med's Manial Palace in Cairo with a Nile cruise to its Bella Donna Villa in Luxor right across from the Valley of the Queens. I was hesitant to book at Club Med given its spring break

reputation in the Caribbean, but it was nothing like that at all. For a 22 year old woman who'd never been abroad, this was perfect – everything included so I could plan my budget, a central place to book excursions, guests from all over the world when I wanted to mingle. Plus, it was not your typical post-college trip; it was an exotic adventure. Having just taken two years of college French and having a general facility with languages and a good ear/accent, I figured I'd be just fine.

"People" were appalled to hear that I'd be traveling to Egypt alone. After all, a young woman traveling in a Muslim country was looking for trouble and an American traveling in the Middle East a

year and a half after Anwar Sadat was assassinated should have her head examined. I considered their concerns and booked my trip.

7

My first international trip began with my mother driving me to the Royal Air Maroc terminal at Kennedy Airport in the wee hours of the morning. I couldn't understand why I had to be at the airport at 4 am and why - if we were required to be there at that hour - was there no place open for coffee (a question I continue to ask 25 years later).

I didn't sleep the entire flight. I remember looking out the window and making out the huge bulge that is the African coast.

There were more cats at Cairo Airport than taxis the night we arrived. I was trying to figure it all out when I met another young woman at the baggage carousel who'd been on the same flight and was also staying at the Manial Palace. We collected our bags and a porter got a taxi for us.

We drove for what felt like close to an hour along a deserted, unlit highway. It was a beautiful, clear evening. The driver asked us questions and suggested places to go as we continued to drive.

My new friend leaned over and whispered, "do you think we're OK?" I figured there were two of us and one of him, so what could possibly happen! As I began to feel a little uneasy myself, the taxi dipped downhill and, as we went up the other side, out of the night suddenly loomed the pyramids as if out of nowhere. The driver stopped the car and we stepped out. There was nothing but silence, awe, magic and the sound of thousands of years. This is what I came here for.

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As a young solo traveler, I was invited to join a shopkeeper at the bazaar in Giza for my first Arabic coffee while he closed the store for an hour telling me about his life, his family and asking me about the United States.

Army guards at Aswan Airport greeted me and gave me an individual explanation about why my idea of starting each roll of film with a photo of the local airport was considered a security threat.

The return flight from Abu Simbel on the tiny EgyptAir (aka Inch'Allah Airlines – as in "If Allah wishes it" the plane will come) plane included me, a family from Brussels, the crazy Aussies from my hotel, and a man with a chicken. The chicken was in a cage, but I don't know if it boarded as luggage or if it had to have a ticket of its own. Half-way through the flight, the man began playing his guitar and singing.

For me, there was only one downside to traveling alone – not realizing that the lettuce used to make the salad on the Nile cruise was rinsed with unfiltered water. I spent a day and a half alone in my cabin, listening to the ship announcements in French not knowing how to tell anyone I was quite ill.

Twenty-six years later, I can't find all of my photos from this trip, but I realize that the solo travel experience for me embedded everything I really need in my senses and my memory.

8

Divorce is just the beginning.

Story and photos by Evelyn Hannon,
Journeywoman <http://journeywoman.com> Twitter: @journeywoman

My first solo travel exposure took place in 1982 when I was forty-two years old. It was also the most emotional journey I've ever taken but that earliest experience on my own morphed into an expertise in my middle-age that eventually became an incredible gift and asset. It was a perfect example of lemons becoming lemonade.

I fell in love with my future husband when I was fourteen; my marriage fell apart in the early Eighties when I was forty-two. That, for a bride of the Fifties, translated into twenty-eight years of one partner, one romance and many, many years of togetherness. For as long as I could remember, I moved to the demanding rhythm of my family. I knew no other music and no other dance steps. Then suddenly there was silence. That first year on my own is now a blur of tears, loneliness and mental adjustment.

Believe me, I haven't offered this melancholy information to elicit sympathetic murmurs and empathetic gestures. Yet, if you can appreciate the devastation I experienced, then you will also understand the cautious excitement that began with the purchase of my airline ticket. I was going to Europe alone, all by myself, perfectly solo. Certainly I had

travelled before. But then I was the wife of a successful businessman who accepted only the best addresses. Now I carried one small bag, one very small packet of travellers cheques and absolutely no itinerary.

The next thirty-five days were laden with intense emotion and storybook adventure. I soared in the heavens and wallowed in the depths. My love was no longer there to hold my hand. Now it was I, the single woman, who enjoyed the pleasures and coped with the pain. Land travel was by train and buses. A rented car would only spell



Cherry Blossom Festival, Osaka, Japan

unnecessary expense and solitude. Accommodation was at pensions and small hotels for the bigger the hotel, the more insular the experience.

I saw parts of Belgium, England, Greece and Turkey. There was no time to be frightened and no need. I met people on the train; I

chatted in restaurants; I stopped in cafés. I was on the road for five weeks and only five evenings were spent alone.

I lived with an Australian midwife for a fortnight in Stratford, England. During that time we shared precious secrets as only two females can. I shared the last available hotel room on the island of Hydra with a young flight attendant from Panama. For three days he was a

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9

companion who discretely left the room when it was time for me to dress. It hurt to say good-bye.

I haggled in the bazaars of Istanbul. I ate mussels in Antwerp with a flight crew of Jordan's airlines. An English engineer taught me to drink bitters, and a marriage counsellor from New York writes to me still. In major cities, I stood in long lines of young people collecting their mail at American Express offices.

There were good days. There were bad days. I experienced highs and I cried alone. I was single again after so many years. The music had not stopped. The melody was simply changing.

It was during that first journey almost three decades ago that I began to understand how good solo travel can be for the heart and soul. Extending my time on the road from five weeks that first time, I have spent up to four months at a stretch away from home. I have learned to value my anonymity at foreign destinations. Free to wander at will, I seek out that which gives me pleasure. There is no need for the sort of compromise that exists in one's regular day-to-day living.

Lonely? Sometimes. But loneliness is nothing to fear. It has not broken my heart yet. Rather it affords me the time to unpack the emotional baggage I carry with me and to use the time to journey into myself. Issues become a lot clearer



Cruising in Guilin, China

when there are no other distractions. Eventually one feels renewed and then there is a real need to reach out and make contact with others -- another traveller, a shopkeeper, an official, perhaps a mother walking her baby in the park.

The result? I'm 70 now and I'm still travelling. I've heard countless wonderful stories and have had a myriad of lovely adventures to match. All because I am a woman who refuses to be timid and who has

learned, by trial and error, the benefits of solo travel. And when I am ninety and sitting in my rocking chair, I know that I will be grinning, remembering all my past adventures and exploits. And that, dear readers, makes me very, very happy!

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10

Searching for Mr. Darcy

Story and photos by Julie Langelier

It is a truth universally acknowledged that, on his or her journey, a solo traveler often discovers an entirely unexpected world. When I visited Bath, England, in the fall of last year, the world I uncovered was that of Jane Austen.



Bath, England

I'd been a fan of the author's work for many years. In fact, knowing she had lived in Bath, I was inspired upon my arrival to purchase the last book she wrote, *Persuasion*, which I hadn't yet read and which happened to be set there. Best of all, I found it in a nearby bookstore for only £1.



Women in period costume at an Austen festival.

While I was there, joining *Persuasion's* heroine Anne Elliott on her adventure to find her long lost-love, I wanted to experience all the romanticism from the era depicted in the book. I longed to walk around the Pump Room, attend the theatre, stroll through the cobblestone streets, and perhaps even, encounter a Mr. Darcy along the way, the main male protagonist from *Pride and Prejudice*.

Wandering the city of Bath with its honey-coloured buildings, and seeing its original streets and Roman baths, I felt like I was experiencing life in the late 1700s. It seemed like the place hadn't changed all that much since Jane was one of its residents. During my stay, I followed a walking tour led by a volunteer guide – a charming retired history professor – where I discovered the author's original homes. I also looked around the Fashion Museum, stood in awe of the beautiful Royal Victorian Park, and tasted the famous Sally Lunn buns.

On the last day of my visit, I walked past the renowned Abbey and suddenly found myself immersed in Austen's 18th-century Bath. To my surprise, it was the first day of the festival named after the author, and people from all around had gathered there, dressed in their period costumes, to relive the romance she so eloquently describes in her books. Ladies sat together, giggling, while gentlemen stood around in their top hats and tails. I joined the curious crowd, observing this fantastic scene unfold before me.



Julie & Mr. Darcy.

Having just had the opportunity to witness Jane Austen's world, my heart was nearly content, only short a meeting with my imaginary ideal husband, Mr. Darcy. But finally, I found him. As I entered the Jane Austen Centre, there he was. Well, it was a picture of Colin Firth, who played the character in BBC's version of *Pride and Prejudice*, but it was good enough for me!

The city of Bath became, for me, much more than a marvellous place to visit, but also one where I could indulge in secret fantasies. I realized that with a book and a vivid imagination, solo travel can transform into anything you want it to be.

Lost in a Mozambique minefield

Story and photos by Leyla Giray,
Women on the Road <http://www.women-on-the-road.com>
 Twitter: @womanontheroad

Roberto slammed on his brakes.

"We're lost," he whispered, a shudder edging into his voice. The park's roads had been cleared of landmines, but the floodplain had not. We were lost in an active minefield.

Slow panic knotted my intestines, cooling and melting simultaneously. I smelled my own terror, unprepared for the acid taste of death on my tongue. The bent metal hulks along Mozambique's roads were ample evidence of what happens to trucks when they meet a landmine.

In the distance stood a familiar twisted palm. Hadn't we just seen it? For 20 minutes that seemed a lifetime, we drove in circles and in silence, expecting any second to be blown sky-high and fall to the ground as bits of charred flesh and twisted metal.

Finally we saw it, a faint strip of packed dirt cleared on both sides. Roberto broke into nervous laughter. I sank to my knees and threw up.

“You know, it’s all part of the job. If we always worried about land mines, we wouldn’t go anywhere, would we?” His last-minute bravado struck me as hollow as I wiped my mouth.

I had arrived in Gorongosa National Park on the first day of the big rains in a small pick-up truck, skidding madly along a mudpath as the skies poured buckets from pitch-black skies. The few bridges were long gone, swept away by warring factions who once used the park as a battleground.



Giant baobab served as Checkpoint Number One for Casa Banana, the Renamo base during the war

It was easy to imagine guerrillas crouching in wait behind tall grasses to ambush a convoy that might have looked very much like ours.

My visit to Gorongosa was part of a one-month solo backpacking swing through Mozambique as a newspaper correspondent during which I would accompany an anti-poaching patrol through the park – a tense undertaking. After all, local people didn’t want rangers eyeing them eyeing the wildlife.



I packed my gear while the rangers counted and recounted scarce bullets and cleaned the antiquated revolvers they would use to confront poachers armed with AK-47s. Of our two vehicles, one had to be pushed downhill to start.

Passing through tiny villages left behind by the war, kids came rushing out to greet us, their bellies distended by malnutrition. They were the children of conflict, of rape and abuse, their mothers eking out a living on the fringes of poverty, their fathers long gone. On a back road stood a giant baobab, a rebel checkpoint during the war.

There was no ‘post’ at the ranger post, only a cleared minefield strewn with rusted tank and truck hulks, with wooden poles stuck in the ground marking out the demined path. As the lone woman, I spread my sleeping

From top to bottom: Children of the war: Gorongosa National Park. Women collecting fuel wood in rural Mozambique. Sunrise in Gorongosa

bag some distance from the encampment on what I was told was a mine-free patch.

New recruits had joined the patrol along the way so Roberto held a welcome ceremony. He splashed palm wine onto the ground while the new recruits chanted and drank, asking the elders to protect him and the ranger station.

We woke up, not to the gunfire of poachers, but to the screeching of birds, riotously coloured and diverse, gleaming rubies and emeralds and sapphires in flight, like jewellery in motion. This romantic sunrise snapshot was slightly marred by the lack of toothpaste, water, a bathroom and coffee.

It had recently rained so footsteps were etched on the ground. I reasoned that if someone had walked this way, it must be safe. Stepping in others’ footsteps is the only way to walk in an unmarked minefield.

A few more days of searching for poachers and I’d had enough of land mines and rough living conditions. Hadn’t I read that Mozambique had some of the world’s most beautiful beaches? Perhaps I should find out for myself.

Vilanculos was a resort before the war, and would become one again afterwards. It beckoned me with its long, unbroken stretches of powdery sand that I shared with fishermen. For days on end, I lived in a windowless grass



Mother and child living on the edge of the park.

hut, with a straw mat on the floor, and a seashell I would have used as an ashtray if I still smoked. I woke up around four in the morning to the sound of waves splashing on the beach five meters from my hut. The door was a simple straw curtain I rolled up to let in the moon or sun. Before bed, I walked alone on the beach, trying to identify all the new stars in the sky. At night, I slept, because there was no electricity. My flashlight quickly ran out of batteries. Cut off from the world all I could do was move with the dawn and the dusk, and get used to my own company all over again.

I rode dhows with fishermen out to one of the Bazaruto Islands, where no other footsteps had broken the sand that day. I fished, ate lobster, and watched the tiny blue and yellow and red fish nibble at my legs under the water. I started a fire, watching a zillion stars come out one by one while the world receded.

“Dammit, Jim, I'm a Tourist, Not a Local!”

Story and photos by Ren Robles
So Not Lost! <http://sonotlost.com> Twitter: @hyperren

My first – and so far, only – solo travel experience was around Southeast Asia in April 2009. It was a three-week journey that started in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam and ended in Hong Kong. April was right in the middle of lean season for theater professionals, so I took advantage of my clear schedule to take that trip.



Ben Thanh Market in Ho Chi Minh City,

Travel in general is seen as expensive, so Southeast Asia was a good and cheap option because I didn't need to apply for any visas. Because I was traveling on a limited budget, I did a mix of budget hotels, hostels, and

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CouchSurfing (<http://www.couchsurfing.org/>) to save cash on accommodations. Despite the penny-pinching, I did what I could to enjoy the sights and sounds of the different places I visited.



In front of Angkor Wat in Cambodia

gawked at the Petronas Towers in Malaysia, ate great food at Lau Pa Sat in Singapore, toured the UNESCO World Heritage sites in Macau, and shopped 'til I dropped (with whatever cash I had left) in Hong Kong. I took lots of pictures, some of which I printed out to be displayed proudly in my room. I bought my fair share of cheap souvenir items and souvenir shirts along the way. I also met some fellow travelers and made quite a few new friends.

However, despite traveling solo, I didn't meet as many other people as I would have liked. I quickly found out the one caveat to being a Southeast Asian traveling around Southeast Asia: people frequently thought that I was a local, no matter which country I was in.

The whole experience was definitely an enjoyable one. I crawled through the Cu Chi Tunnels in Vietnam, marveled at

Angkor Wat in Cambodia,

15

I noticed this little “problem” on the first day of my trip. I was taking photos of Ben Thanh Market in Ho Chi Minh City when a Japanese man asked me to take a photo of him. After doing so, he started to ask me a question... in Vietnamese. I did my best to tell him in English that I wasn't a local, but that only succeeded in making him speak to me in French instead of Vietnamese. After a long, blank stare from me, he walked away. It's safe to say that we were both probably more than a little confused.

Another occasion proved this wasn't an isolated incident. During lunchtime on a day trip I took, I approached two people who were on the same bus as me. After making our introductions (she was from the UK, he was from the USA), the lady told me that at first, she thought I was a local; the fact that I was wearing a

Vietnamese souvenir shirt made her rethink that, and I was more than happy to set the record straight.

That was when I truly realized that, to many tourists and travelers, I probably looked like a local. It also made me realize one of the drawbacks of looking like a local. Few other travelers would go out of their way to approach and talk to me, and if they did, it might just be to ask for directions, thinking I knew my way around the place. This may have greatly reduced the number of people I met on

the road. None of this diminished my experience, of course, but it would have been nice to meet more fellow travelers. Now, admittedly, I could have done the approaching instead of just waiting, but then again I'm a bit on the shy side when it comes to meeting new people.



Dwarfed by the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

There is, however, an advantage to looking like a local, although I wasn't able to capitalize on it during my trip. Before entering Wat Phnom at Phnom Penh, a lady spoke to me in Khmer. After another brief moment of confusion, I explained to her that I wasn't Cambodian. She laughed, apologized and then charged me for a ticket needed to enter the temple complex. As it turns out, according to my Lonely Planet guide, locals can enter Wat Phnom for free, but foreigners have to pay a fee. If I had known just enough Khmer, then maybe I could have gotten away with getting in free.

On that trip, I was also mistaken for a Singaporean, while shopkeepers in Macau and Hong Kong almost always greeted and assisted me in Chinese first, before my blank stares clued them in that I knew zero Chinese. It was definitely a unique experience, one that very few (if any) Europeans and Americans have during their travels around the same region. It certainly gave a special flavor to my first solo trip.

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16

Finnish'ed by Finland?

Story and photos by Derek Owen

I believe that every place in the world is, in some capacity, just like somewhere else I have visited at some other point in my life. The more that I have travelled, the more I have come to accept a simple truth about humanity. While people may speak a different language and experience life through the lens of their own unique environment, we are all the same. We love, we hate, we feel anger, sadness, empathy for others. We bleed the same colour of blood.



The only reference to my country was in Finnish.

Yet travelling to a distant unfamiliar land can bring the opposite to the fore. Visiting a foreign land can be difficult if one has limited knowledge of the culture, language or customs. It can be even more challenging if the traveler is experiencing this on their own.

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17

This was my experience in Finland last year. For someone who has travelled extensively, I had never before felt such a profound detachment from my surroundings. The smells were strange and unclassifiable, the names of the streets were long and unpronounceable, and the faces of the people on the trams looked blank and emotionless.

Some other reasons? The Finnish language I found utterly baffling – that its origin is unlike virtually any other European language surely didn't help. I also learned that there are fewer Finnish people than I expected that have any knowledge of English. My experience with the station master in the city of Tampere was testament to that.

As I arrived, the board at the station said "Jyvaskyla". Because I had no idea where "Jyvaskyla" was or why I appeared to be there, I became a bit worried. I asked the station master where I was, only to find he knew no English. I reverted to gesturing, but found that didn't work. Then I had a genius stroke. I pulled out my ticket, took the pen from his hand, pointed at the word "Tampere" on my ticket, then pointed at the ground. As he nodded in affirmation, fanciful nightmares of being lost in Central Finland came to a thankful halt. As for the whereabouts of Jyvaskyla, I discovered I had been looking at the board that listed the train's next stop.

For some reason, I found the city of Helsinki consistently disorienting. So much so that I got lost a block from my hostel on more than one occasion. And this is from a guy who can find his way around anywhere with little difficulty.

And the city transportation system? Forget it. I couldn't make hide nor hair of the tram system. Just when I thought I had a quick transfer figured out, I ended up going on a 65 minute unplanned detour of Helsinki. I decided to ride it out; with my luck, I didn't want to get even further lost than I already was. I ended up hopping off at the very same station where I had got on, and instead of going on another unplanned adventure, I wisely chose to walk home from there.

With the exception of one very inquisitive, very funny and very intoxicated fellow from central Finland I met one afternoon while returning from Estonia, I found Finns to be virtually impenetrable to my attempts to engage them on a personal level. While polite and respectful to outsiders, Finns clearly save their emotional energy for their own.

Having a very outgoing nature, I found that this reserved and, by western standards, unengaging demeanour forced me to think about the nature of my own socialization. While I did not like being treated in such an indifferent way, I was aware that just because social norms in this country did not conform to my own, it did not mean they needed to change. It wasn't personal; they were what they were.

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18

While it is one thing to understand such things cognitively, it is another to experience them first hand. No matter how much confidence I had travelling alone, the isolation I felt in Finland made the week I spent there seem endless, and I could not wait to leave.

The ultimate irony was that I was not completely blindsided. While researching Finland, I read a Lonely Planet book that recommended travelling with a companion there to avoid the experiences I had.



Tampere's Tammerkoski Rapids

Still, I was drawn to go anyways. I had become very familiar with the many gifts of this country – whether thru music, cinema, or the sporting realm. Being from Canada, I had felt an unspoken bond existed between our countries given we are both arctic nations.

I'm still not sure why I could not reconcile any of my expectations with my own personal experiences. Perhaps this was because I struggled to find any parallels between what I know and what I found.

That doesn't mean I found no dimensions of commonality. Upon taking a ferry from Helsinki to Suomenlinna in the Gulf of Finland, I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to learn more about the Finnish psyche. While walking the cobblestone streets on the island fortress, I chanced upon a tour guide and heard him tell the story of his country. As he gave a Cole's Notes version of the region's political history over the last 600 years, I began to understand why Finns are so quiet and task oriented, taking no interest in small talk, preferring to be left alone to go about their business.

A quick summary: from the mid 1500's to 1917, Finland, by sheer fault of geography, was caught between Russia and Sweden, two major world powers with mutual dreams of empire. In the end, Finland became an ersatz Poland to satiate these kingdoms' mutually grand imperial designs.

While they experienced no blitzkriegs or concentration camps, Finland experienced a different kind of subjugation – rule from afar. Could this have been the genesis for the Finnish personality? It made sense; Finns seemed to have learned to go about their own business in as efficient and non-offensive manner as possible, so not to rouse the ire of either of their powerful neighbours. While regional instability played a larger role for Finland, as a Canadian I am well aware that we are in a similar position politically. When commenting on the relationship between our country and our American neighbours, former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau compared it to a mouse sleeping next to an elephant. While the elephant sleeps soundly,

the outcome of one unexpected move by his stablemate is clear to the mouse.

To grow and prosper as nations, Canadians and Finns have learned to peacefully co-exist with those around us. While our neighbours pay virtually no attention to us – which I'm certain the citizens of both of our countries enjoy immensely – our nations serve as valuable role models in the world. I don't doubt this may be one of the parallels that drew me to the country. That and, as I travelled in Finland, it reminded me a lot of the province of Saskatchewan: just as many lakes, just as few people, and just as cold weather.



Sailing the Gulf of Finland

A New Perspective on Botswana

Story and photos by Sandy Salle
 Hills of Africa, <http://www.hillsofafrica.com/index.html>
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Stepping off the plane in Botswana, a tsunami of excitement surged through my heart—it was the first time I had ventured alone to Africa. Although I had been there before, it felt as though everything around me was unusual. The sites, the sounds, the smells, and the people all appeared different than what I had remembered. Not different in a bad way, just different.



As a native of Zimbabwe, I've traveled all across the amazing African continent with family and friends, but never alone. Now a resident of the United States, it was time to travel back to Africa but this time, solo.

My love for Africa came with me when I moved to the United States and inspired me to help others experience the magic of Africa. I now co-own a travel company that

specializes in Africa family safaris and honeymoon safaris. In order to provide our clients with an accurate and first-hand account of different lodges and camps throughout southern Africa, I needed to venture to each and every one, and Botswana was one of my favorite places to explore by myself.

As I walked through the terminal to meet my escort, I felt a sense of empowerment rush over me. I was on my own in Africa. The funny thing about traveling alone is that everything around you appears so much larger than it was when you had company. I think the sheer feeling of being alone can make you feel infantile at times among larger groups of people.



That feeling of being small was quickly squashed as the friendly smiles of locals welcomed me and ignited a warm feeling from within. Although I

was traveling solo, I knew I wasn't alone. Surrounded by an enlightening community and cheerful travelers, I felt at home in Botswana.

As I soaked in the feeling of independence, my body shifted into gear and I was off to experience all the opportunity Botswana had to offer. As I stepped outside into the hot air,



I smiled with confidence. It was just Botswana and me right now, and an adventure of a lifetime awaited.

My escort took me to the beginning of

my Wilderness Safaris' Explorations journey, where solo travelers can pay by the traveler, not on double occupancy. If this pricing deal isn't enough to get you to come to Botswana, then the exceptional game-viewing will.

As one of the greatest places in all of Africa to view large game and other animals, Botswana is a dream come true. Although I am a firm believer in sharing your experiences in Africa with your loved ones, the beauty and inspiration you feel when you travel alone is wonderful and unique. Another plus to traveling alone is you get to do only the things you want to do!

I had the feeling of complete independence for the first time in my life. And I absolutely loved it.

Turkish Delight

Story and photos by Rahim Ismail
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Istanbul is by far the jewel of Turkey, if not the Near East – not sure if I'd go so far as to say that it is a cross between Asia and Europe though – not quite sure what Europhiles mean when they say that anyway, but it felt more 'Modern' than many European cities I've been to. But without a doubt there is an exoticism which seems to follow you everywhere.

If architecture is your pleasure, Istanbul is paradise. Probably one of the most recognizable mosques, The Blue Mosque, rises out along the shores of the Bosphorus, with the architectural prototype for nearly all of the Ottoman mosques, the Aya Sofia, looming beside it.

The Aya Sofia, originally a Byzantine Church later converted to a mosque, is now a Museum. If you're lucky, you might be able to convince the guards to let you in for a private prayer on Friday mornings. I had the chance to attend Namaaz at the Blue Mosque, but I'm not sure how you're supposed to pray – the entire time I was looking around at the blue tiles (hence the name), lighting, design, etc. And I wasn't the only one distracted – it was funny that people were taking pictures with their camera phones during the



The Blue Mosque

ceremonies – only a matter of time until people start streaming the Namaaz.

My favourite site? The Topkapi Palace - the seat of the Ottoman Empire for centuries. You can feel the magnificence of the once mighty rulers with the opulence and grandeur. The beauty of the site is not a secret though, with Bollywood actresses taking photo shoots and hordes of Turkish school groups intermixed with Asian tour groups milling about in every room. I wasn't sure what to think about the Room of Sacred Relics. Some reviews claim the items are fakes, while others note sources to the contrary. Among the items are the staff that Moses used, a footprint belonging to Prophet Muhammad, and a sword belonging to Prophet David.

The Harem rooms were where the full weight of the Ottoman palace hits you. There is an additional entrance fee, but it is definitely worth it – you can imagine the various tales of intrigue and cunning which you read about in tales of the eastern harem rooms (true or fabricated) as you walk through the cobbled rooms which feel far removed from the city bustling about outside.

But to truly enjoy Istanbul, you have to soak it in. Browse through the Grand Bazaar that is more of a mall with the illy coffee stands and jewellery stores dotted throughout. Wander the maze like streets, sit at cafes and smoke narghil, visit a Hammam (incredible experience), and eat loads of Turkish sweets that are way too tempting. I spent an afternoon at the cafe across from the Blue Mosque drinking apple tea (yeah, a bit of a tourist sucker spend, but it is good!) and reading my book.



Turkish sweets

The most overrated thing to do in Istanbul is the Boat cruise up the Bosphorus – well, more

specifically, the ‘ferry ride’ up. While the views are amazing, and you see some interesting historical buildings, in general you see town after town all of which look similar. It takes you to Kavagi, which has a castle at the top of some hill but it’s basically a tourist trap town and you’re stuck there for 2 hours til the next ferry returns to Istanbul. I ended up taking random buses to make my way back.

An alternative is to arrange individual boat trips because the view in the Golden Horn is worth it. I recommend trying a fish sandwich from one of the street vendors at the launch point and, if you find it, an amazing yoghurt covered in powdered sugar.

What about the nightlife? Well the nightlife around the SultanAhmet area where the monument and sites are, are cheesy tourist joints. If you really want to experience the nightlife, head to the Ortakoy area and check out Reina. Dress well and expect to rub shoulders with Istanbul’s well-to-do, rolling up in their Ferraris and Porsches.

Overall, Istanbul was incredible. I felt transported to a different world – modern yet still a very unique culture. Most places I’ve been to either feel very unique in culture but lack in modernity, or are so advanced in trying to be ‘modern’ that their unique culture seems to have been washed away. Istanbul has the best of both worlds. Unique and modern. If I had spent more time there, I’m sure I would have tried to figure out how to stay permanently.

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Solo Road Trip: one man, one Miata, one big country

Story and photos by Michael Smith

Jerry Bruckheimer and Michael Bay – the hip-joined luminaries of epic Hollywood moments – couldn’t have arranged for a frozen instant of tear-jerking Americana more moving than the one just delivered through a stone-scarred Miata windshield.

Envisioned weeks earlier in my home city of Toronto, brought to fruition on the Arizona-Utah border, and spurred by the larger-than-life strains of composer Hans Zimmer’s Days of Thunder score, I charged up a hill in third gear, crested with a satisfying backhand into fourth – and suddenly forgot about fifth and sixth as the awesome



Westbound on the QEW leaving Toronto.

buttes and mesas of Monument Valley unfolded ahead.

Having already seen

23

America’s best during the previous three weeks, the magnificent views afforded from US 163 – sights associated with freedom, John Ford and the endless frontier – still managed to humble and wow like none before.

Zimmer segued into Santana and the melancholic riffs of Europa filled the air as I cruised dusty 163. A Ford pickup loomed close in the rearview, unwilling to pass despite light traffic and miles of unbroken opportunity. This was my perfect moment – my reverie, my meditation, my climax. The very last thing I needed was a bully F-150 on my six.

Seeing an upcoming flareout in the narrow shoulder, I pulled off to let him pass. His third gear kickdown registered just as my steering lightened. I quickly lost speed, easing to a tire-spinning halt on the soft shoulder-cum-sand dune.

With the rear end submerged in sand, nary another soul in sight and zero bars of mobile service, I trudged off in search of help. This was an adventure. I was smiling.

Three rules: no interstates, no top, no cares
I had departed Toronto nineteen days earlier with three simple rules: no interstates, no top, no cares. Combing through countless guidebooks and hundreds of forum posts, I assembled the perfect route – one that would

snake me through the country’s best twisties, across landscapes mainstream and iconic, under suns angry and tender and to places friendly and hostile. I was to plumb the Appalachians, the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Great Smokies, the Sonora, the Mohave and the Rockies in my Mazda Miata.

A car better suited to the task does not exist. To paraphrase John Denver, the Miata fills up your senses like a night in



Posing in Death Valley near the Stovepipe Wells dunes.

the forest. It melts time in a way that more isolating cars – closed cars, numb cars, heavy cars – cannot mimic. Simultaneously jarring you awake and calming your nerves with a magical blend of vibrations, tactility, adept wind management and humble 4-cylinder buzz, it becomes an appendage – the most natural and capable suit of armour ever worn by knight or plebe.

The Tail of the Dragon

That organic personality became apparent during the first of several attacks on a section of U.S. 129 in North Carolina and Tennessee famously known as the Tail of the Dragon. The Miata – previously possessed of a fun-but-twitchy over steering personality in round-town driving – dug its heels into the banked curves and caught fire, inspiring a sort of overconfidence last felt during the waning years of homerom and hall passes. Even for an experienced

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24

amateur, the Dragon was akin to acid-spiked punch at a teetotaler's party.

Unfortunately, after seven miles of pure joy, the fun stopped.

I couldn't have smelled guiltier. A cloud of singed brakes and melted Toyo tires hung heavy around the suddenly-halted Miata as a Blount County, Tennessee Sheriff's deputy approached. I'd been caught with my whole arm in the cookie jar. Powering into his radar's sights, engine whipping at upwards of 6,000 rpm and rear tires starved for traction, I was expecting something far worse than a 42-in-a-30 warning. This was impossible – and impossibly lucky.

Texas, Arizona and California

Driving pleasure only increased as the weather warmed. Following thousands of miles of Texas flats, Arizona peace and California crowds, the map turned crook as I began a tour of the Sunshine State's epic assortment of serpentine B-roads. After clinging to the coast for several hours heading north from San Francisco, I cut inland through the redwood forests and pressed south via gold rush country. At no point was the driving anything less than incredible, the days filled with bolster-crushing bends and grin-making



Grand Canyon from the South Rim -- Bright Angel

lunges. When conditions allow, the MX-5's perfectly spaced pedals, riflebolt-crisp gearchange and telepathic steering blur the line between dream and truth, ordinary drivers transformed into skilled practitioners of refined violence.

The Miata attracted some memorable speeding buddies in Northern California, most notably an early Chrysler minivan intent on leading the way through an interesting set of ridge roads. Pushing the limits of a limited performance envelope, the short-wheelbase Magic Wagon lifted its beam-axle-suspended inside rear wheel as I casually kept pace. When the old van's turn signal finally glowed, a knowing look

washing across my face – the look of a junkie about to get his fix. I hung back and grabbed third as my friend made his turn, rolling into the meat of the 2.0L four's powerband and pulling forward with a rush of satisfaction. I was free to heel-toe my way through the mountains until the next obstruction – and the next blissful exercise in delayed gratification.

Death Valley offers an unexpected garden of driving delights

Yardstick-straight desert flats beg for speedometer winding while a combination of long sweepers and medium-tight

third-gear corners await those who press further into the national park's arid expanse.

I angled my left-hand mirror downwards and leaned on the windowsill to watch the rear suspension articulate its gunmetal burden over the undulating pavement, compressing in dips and drooping when jumped. Stopping momentarily to run around in the Stovepipe Wells sand dunes, I punctuated the driving bliss with a hands-on taste of the desert's visceral heat.

Beyond the bucket seat

Great as the driving was – and it was quite great – a real trip involves more than steering and stopping.

I pulled over and swam in the Merced river, almost getting caught by the current and thrown over a natural dam. I hiked for a day in Yosemite National Park, covering 15 miles and reaching the peak of Cloud's Rest. I stood on mountain summits and cliff faces feeling like a Dark Age peasant crossing the threshold of a great cathedral. Hiking miles into the Grand Canyon, I disregarded ranger warnings and ascended in one quarter the rated time. I hopped on a moving freight train and rode like a hobo, laughing and tumbling my way back to solid ground. Drifting to the summit of Pike's Peak, I hiked the mountain and saw clear to New Mexico. I walked Route 66 in the pitch black, staring upwards at the endless night and celebrating spontaneity.

After all of it, I fell into my bucket seat and flattened more hills. I lived the road.

The kindness of strangers

So, nineteen days after leaving Toronto, I stood before my beached car on a lonely stretch of US 168. Top up, bag packed and I was walking. Some miles down the road, a lucky encounter with a truck full of locals set free the captive Miata from its sandy perch. I keyed the car to life, rolled a few feet to check for strange noises, then took off like the nomad I was: singing that tough inline-four to its 7,000 rpm limit and rowing uncertainly into a Monument Valley sunset.