

## **Why I Hate Traveling...and Thoreau**

*February 15, 2012*

People who know me for more than five minutes know that I'm a traveler. What most people don't know is that deep down I despise traveling. I'm a control freak and fiercely independent: I don't want anyone or anything but me to control my life. Traveling is anathema to that concept; hop on a 21-hour bus from Vietnam to Laos and you'll quickly figure that out. On the road, the effects of chance are amplified a hundredfold. And so, naturally, I hate it.

In May of 2004, I gave up a girlfriend, a growing bank account, and a fairly secure existence to spend six weeks abroad in Europe, my first time east of Utah. I was driven there both because I didn't want to teach my students about the world if I hadn't experienced it myself, and because of a Thoreau-inspired desire to live a life free of regret and "quiet desperation." One week into that trip, however, I found myself at a train station in Madrid, my daypack—along with my passport, ATM card, and everything of value—freshly stolen, and the song "Here Without You" playing overhead. I was broke in a country where I didn't know the language, helpless and shattered and lonelier than I'd ever been before. I regretted ever leaving home, and tried my best to make it back as soon as possible. And the story could have ended there.

Chance works in funny ways, though. Luckily, I wasn't able to change my flight, and so the only way I could survive the next five weeks was to move forward. I wandered the streets of Madrid that night until I found a strip of grass on the side of the road, laid out my sleeping bag, and fell asleep. I don't remember my dreams that night, but I do know I woke up soothed...and ready to start picking up the pieces. And that's where the real story begins.

Within a few hours, I had money and a passport in my hands again, thanks to an emergency transfer from my bank. Because I was delayed a day, chance had me board a train to Barcelona and run into friends I had met in Lisbon. Chance had me hop on a train from Pisa to Florence and meet Chad, a hilariously sardonic Canadian. Chance had us see a flyer for a cheap campground overlooking the city, and put us in the commons area at 2 pm to meet Marianne, one of the most passionately beautiful girls I'd ever seen.

The rest of the trip wasn't easy: bound to one meal a day and the occasional night on a bench, I was forced to steal toilet paper from McDonald's bathrooms and food from plates before they were cleared. And the effects of losing ten percent of my body weight have stayed with me: I can't stand the smell of the soap I used during the trip; I still don't feel hunger anywhere near as strongly as I did before; I now like chocolate, which stems from purchasing ample amounts of it because of its low cost per calorie.

In between those adventures were the small moments that really stood out: relating my life story to an old French woman with nothing but a passport, a map, and two French pronouns. Watching a frail Pope John Paull II mumble words of prayer to the captivated audience below. Seeing the birth of my cousin in Munich and clinging to that image when I visited a concentration camp the next day. Gazing at sunsets over the Sierras, the Berlin Wall, the Alps, Edinburgh. And most important, meeting and making instant connections with people who were adventurous, ascetic, passionate, open-minded, and thoughtful enough to live out of their backpacks.

When I arrived back home, my wanderlust was inflamed. In short, I was an addict.

In the eight years since, I've been to thirty-four countries and five continents. I've trekked through the jungles of Laos, across a glacier in Patagonia, up a volcano in the Congo. I've swum in the emerald-green waters of Halong Bay, swung across the Dios de Madre River in the Peruvian rain forest, fallen through the ice into a river in Bergen. I've spent a summer studying in Oxford, another volunteering in Kenya, and have now made a home for myself in Spain, with a full-time job, a growing circle of friends, and even a Spanish girlfriend.

When I talk about revolutions with my students, I can relate what the Egyptian taxi driver said to me a month after Mubarak resigned. When we discuss poverty, I can describe the dirt-splotched boy in Cuzco who checked for change in the phone booths on his way to school, or the refugees in Nakuru who made soccer balls out of trash. When we examine human nature, I can recount the old men playing dominoes on the sidewalk in Argentina, the Vietnamese girl clinging to her father during a funeral procession, the family singing by the railroad tracks in Thailand.

And no matter where I go in the world, chances are I'll already have a friend waiting there with open arms.

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A week after the theft, I found myself in the Piazza Michelangelo, next to Chad, Marianne, and a few other newfound friends, watching the sun slide down the hills of Tuscany and cast its dying rays over Florence. Brunelleschi's Duomo towered over the man-carved landscape as endless, cheap bottles of red wine were passed between us. The moment was perfect—worth a dozen daypacks—and it was then and there that I first realized I would always be a traveler; that's when I caught a glimpse of what has always turned out to be true in my travels: that as much as I hate giving up the reins to chance, chance has, in the end, always brought me to the right place at the right time to meet the perfect people.

Marianne helped drive home that point hours later, as our lips touched for the first time in the darkness above the city.

Take that, Thoreau.