



Alex Shnitman

WANDERLUST

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*I may not have gone where I intended to go, but I think I have ended up
where I intended to be.*

—Douglas Adams

PREFACE

A long long time ago, in a galaxy far far away... I walked into a tour agency and booked a round-the-world flight ticket. There can hardly be a single moment more liberating for me than that: the realization that I would leave home, leave all comfort behind, and go away drifting aimlessly from one country to the next, with no goals to accomplish, no expectations to fulfill, owing nothing to anybody, not even to myself. The rush and excitement of such a moment are indescribable.

I walked out with reservations for five flights. The first would take me to New York; the second from there to Mexico City; the third would fly me to Tokyo; the fourth, to Hong Kong, and the fifth from New Delhi back home to Tel Aviv. From Hong Kong to New Delhi I intended to go overland, via China and Tibet.

Setting off from home, clutching my five tickets in my hand, there was very little I knew about the trip ahead. I knew I would return eight months later, and roughly which countries I would visit; the rest I would figure out as I go. I was right about the eight months; I was wrong about the countries, and actually even about the continents. That's the beauty of planning such a trip: you know with 100% certainty that your plans will eventually change, you just don't know which ones.

I maintained a blog throughout most of the journey, and that has provided the text that is the backbone of this book. It is copied here almost without changes. Re-reading these texts now, more than three years after having written them, they seem to me somewhat naive at times, so the kind reader will forgive me. The blog text stops somewhere in China, and resumes and stops again a couple of times after that. Alas, the details of the parts of the trip that haven't been documented are now lost. I'm left with the photographs, hopeful that they can tell the story instead.

CHAPTER 1

UNITED STATES



New York

Cultural shocks:

- Come on, the buildings aren't THAT high. They're high, but not THAT high.
- What's with the dogs? New Yorkers love having two or three dogs.* There are more people with two or three dogs than there are with one. And what's with the cats? They're nowhere to be found. Maybe all those dogs tore all the cats to pieces. Although that's not likely, with all the poodles and chihuahuas that New Yorkers tend to have.
- As far as skyscrapers go, the Empire State Building is as beautiful as they get. Too bad art deco is out of style.
- iPods are in. That's not the reason why I also got one, though! I just think it's a good MP3 player. Honest.
- You know what they call a Quarter Pounder with Cheese in New York? Well, they call it a Quarter Pounder with Cheese. When I saw one of these, I just had to get it. It's good. I don't know what they call a Whopper, I didn't go into Burger King.
- If there's a stone in Central Park that hasn't been photographed a trillion billion times, it should be put into a museum. The amount of people taking pictures there is mind-boggling. But how can I complain — I was one of them, big-time.

* Helpful readers have since explained to me that these were professional dogwalkers that I was marveling at.

I was in a great hostel. We were six people in my room: myself; a Turkish gay fellow; an American attorney who got drunk every night, crashing in the bed with all his clothes on; a funny Brazilian who was without his girlfriend for two weeks, so he was hitting on every girl on the street; a shy Israeli guy (now that's a rarity!), and some bloke from Spain. Very educating. One of the girls Ricardo tried talking to turned out to be half Jewish half Chinese. With family in Jerusalem, named Rosenbaum. What a world. That's New York for you.



In general, I haven't met in NY anybody who actually grew up and lived there. Everybody seems to be either coming from somewhere or going somewhere. That coincides with the fact that I haven't seen even one pregnant woman in NY. And children I've only seen in China Town. Probably soon we're all going to be half Chinese half something else.

I also had the pleasure of meeting two of my co-workers from Mango DSP and going to a Broadway show with them. So I can put a check on Broadway, too. It was a good show. We later went to eat at a kosher pizza establishment. It was another cultural shock, seeing the mexicans work there to the tunes of Hassidic music and calling "rrabi, rrabi" to fetch the boss.



I also met a guy whom I first met in Huaraz, Peru at the end of 2003. We went to a Korean restaurant and ate a dish called "bibim-bab". Beside the funny name, it's also tasty.

Next stop, Boston.











Boston

In Boston I stayed with relatives in a suburb called Swampscott. According to the owner, Sasha, his house is a “small” one. It has three stories; I lost count of the rooms at about six, but there’s much more. A household has two or three cars; there aren’t even sidewalks on many of the roads, because people use cars to get everywhere.

I also met Sasha’s kids, who are a funny bunch. Question for the Russian-speakers who are reading this: if someone addresses me with “ВЫ” instead of “ТЫ”, and doesn’t switch even when I ask, should I just take it as a compliment or does that mean that I’m getting old? Damn, I’m not sure I want to hear the answer to this one.

Boston is a very different city from NY. It’s much more in red-brick, old English style, especially the older neighbourhoods. And the pubs there are mostly Irish style, and called “taverns”. It’s been a while since I’ve seen that word in actual use. They serve quite a wide selection of draught beers, both here and in NY. The local beer, Budweiser, isn’t bad, although the “light” version that you sometimes get by mistake is pretty ridiculous — almost no alcohol content and the taste of lemonade. The other local beer, Samuel Adams, actually made in Boston, is terrible. When Borat speaks of fermented horse urine, he probably refers to this. Sorry, I loved Boston, but I didn’t like the beer. I did find a good Irish one, though — if you ever see Killian’s anywhere, give it a try. It’s perfect.

I went to Cambridge, to see the campuses of the world’s most renown universities — MIT and Harvard. The former



is a mass of unattractive gray concrete buildings. Even the famous dome is bare concrete. What’s wrong with these people? Harvard is a whole lot better — red-brick houses and green alleys with trees. Unfortunately, yet again, technology and science seem not to go hand in hand with aesthetics and good taste. What a pity.

Around Harvard there are some pretty amazing buildings, some of the first built on this continent by the Europeans. Ancient, by the measures of this country.

I took some music with me on CDs, because I intended to buy an MP3 player in the US and move it there. Well, I did buy an iPod, but when I reached for the CDs in my bag, I found that one of them was broken in half, and the other scratched beyond readability... What a bummer. Now Osnat

is sending me another copy.

Otherwise, it's been a pretty laid-back week; the next move is back to NY and from there directly to Mexico.



CHAPTER 2
MEXICO





Mexico City

Mexico City itself is a mix of very different things. First, there are the new glass skyscrapers. They even have their own copy of the Empire State Building, called Torre Latinoamericana, which looks almost exactly the same but is about two times shorter. Second, there are the grand churches and government buildings that the Spanish have built, some of them absolutely astonishing in their size and grandeur. And third, there are the people in the streets, in the metro, everyone selling something, reminding you that you're in the third world, after all.

I live in a hostel in an area called "Zona Rosa". It's pretty much a shithole, but it's cheap and I've been told by people here that there are much bigger shitholes for the same price. It remains to be seen whether there are better places for

this price, too. The Zona Rosa is the place where night life happens in this city, so at least it's in a good location.

Night life itself is interesting, although a bit smaller in scale than I'd expect in a city of a couple dozen millions of people. It's probably distributed between many different areas in the city. Mexicans like live music in their pubs, and so do I. The bands play a mix of Latin music and covers of Western songs. The lyrics for the songs are probably learned from hearing, so they have some quite curious goofs once in a while. A couple of examples: "we don't need no education, we don't need no loss control" (education or not, someone has been taking his economy classes too seriously), and "like a true destiny's child, we were born, born to be wild". More to come, I'm sure.

Draught beer seems to be completely absent, just as it was in almost all of South America. They have an interesting manner of serving the beer bottles though — in a bucket full of ice. That's a nice gimmick.

What's next for me I don't know yet, but quite soon I'll have to get out of here because all these big cities I'm visiting are getting to me. I need a rest in the bosom of nature.



Mexico City Pt. II

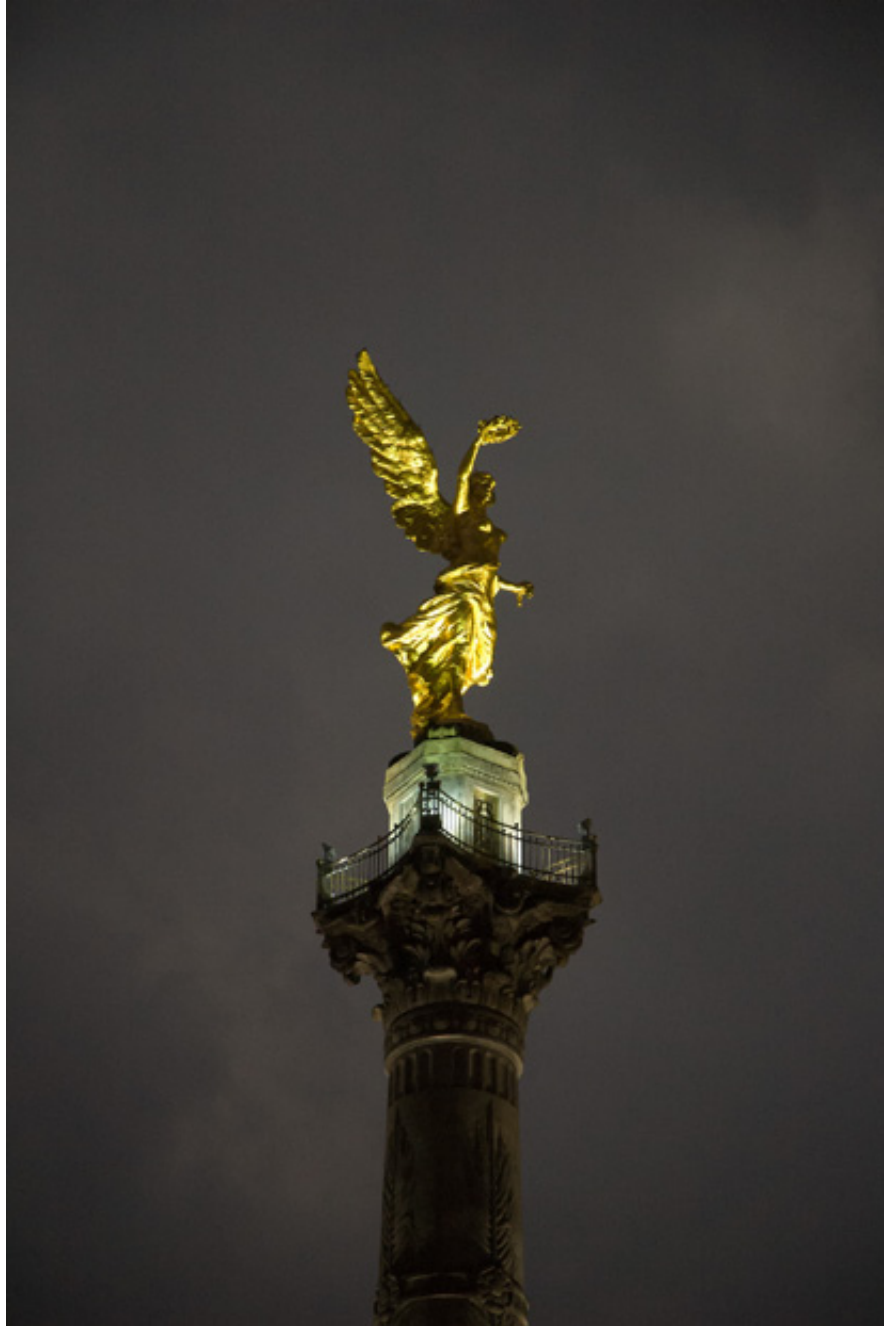
First, a couple of notes about the metro here.

- The trains run on rubber tires, like buses, and not rail. I haven't heard of such a system before. But now Wikipedia tells me that it also works like this in Paris, and in many other places.
- Apparently the most popular item for sale in the metro is music CDs. The vendors board the train with a small backpack containing a speaker and a CD player attached to it. They pass through the cars and play samples of the music — everything from Mexican pop through Mozart and Vivaldi. It's so popular that sometimes you get two of these guys in the same car, playing different music, each trying to outdo the other. You can imagine the cacophony this results in. It doesn't seem to bother them a bit. I've yet to see anyone buy anything from them, though.

Yesterday I went to a so-called “small village” called Xochimilco south of the city. In reality it's now part of the big metropolis. There I was suckered into paying about \$16 for an hour-long ride in a boat in what amounts to be Mexico's “Venice”. Along every such tourist's boat immediately appear other boats with portable kiosks, mariachi bands, and vendors of all kinds of memorabilia. It was nice, although probably too “touristic” for me, and obviously not cheap. At least I managed to bargain a third off the price of a beer bottle, which made me feel a tiny little bit better.

In the early evening there isn't much to do around here. But I came to the conclusion that when traveling, you often





get sucked into the routine of running around, seeing one place after another, never pausing to actually look around you and get a feeling for the place you're passing through. So I did just that. I went to the plaza of El Ángel and sat there on a bench for a couple of hours, contemplating life, the universe, and everything, watching the people passing by. El Ángel is a golden statue of an angel standing on top of a column in the middle of a big plaza in the busy part of

the city. At night it is illuminated brilliantly, really a sight to behold.

The people passing by were of all kinds. Couples — which here include quite a lot of guy & guy ones in addition to the more traditional kind; holding hands or embracing, feeling good. (Kinda makes you wonder how come there are so many of them if they can't even reproduce?!) An Indian mother with a trailing queue of half a dozen children. A group of youngsters carrying crosses and statuettes of Mary and Jesus. Tourists snapping pictures of El Ángel with their cell phones.

And get this: out of nowhere appears a tall young Japanese man, dressed in a freshly pressed blue captain's uniform with a long coat, polished buttons, white cap, white gloves, and a small katana dangling from his belt; holding his hand is a handsome Japanese woman, also impeccably dressed, holding a red rose in her hand. And they act just like two tourists, looking around, searching for something, as if there's absolutely nothing remarkable in their appearance. I'm just sitting there, speechless, holding my jaw in my hand, wondering to myself — has a Japanese war ship called port here in Mexico City, over two thousand meters above sea level? Or is it maybe El Ángel speaking to me from the top of his column, reminding me how our world is really full of wonders, if we ever care to notice?

Truth, indeed, can be stranger than fiction.



Mexico City Pt. III

As it happens, there is a better hostel for the same money; actually even for less money. I moved on Wednesday and haven't looked back since. At last, a place with a lively social life. Until yesterday they even had free dinners but then they decided they had been too generous. I think I might stay in Mexico City a bit longer now.

Wednesday and Thursday were dedicated to Mexican art. I went to look at the murals of Rivera, Orozco & Siquierres, as well as the house of Frida Kahlo (and her husband Rivera). I found an artist whose work I really like, he's named José Maria Velasco, but the Internet has almost no information about him. A pity, because he does some of the best black & white drawings I've ever seen.

I also went to the house of Leon Trotsky, where he lived in exile for a few years until he was murdered with an ice ax. His house is now a museum and it's visited a lot by Mexican youth. I just hope nobody gets any stupid ideas, at least not until I leave Mexico.

The political situation, as it is, is quite a mess here: there was an election for president, and one of the candidates had a narrow victory; the loser requested a recount of the ballots, and still lost; then he went to the supreme court, and lost yet again. What does a person do in such a situation? Well, in Mexico, he goes to the central plaza of the city and crowns himself as the next president, the whole world be damned. Today was the inauguration of the new president, but the other guy is still organizing protests.

At this new hotel I met Tinka and Alina from Germany,



with whom I went today to Teotihuacan, once the biggest city in the Americas, and home to the third-largest pyramid in the world. On the way we met Borja and Ernesto from Spain, who mysteriously disappeared halfway through the trip. The passion for traveling is truly international. Trotsky would have been proud.



Mexico City, in which...

...they strip you naked?!

When I woke up yesterday morning, I didn't find my clothes. Well, those which I was wearing the day before were still by the side of the bed, but the rest of them, in a plastic bag, gone. So, for the first time ever, I've been robbed. But of clothes?! Of all things? They didn't even have the decency to take the Petzl flashlight which was in my bag. Just the shirts and the jeans and the socks. What the hell?!

I went to one of the the local markets to buy new stuff. It is quite an experience: it spans about a dozen streets, and there are so many people that most of the time you can barely move. The advantage is of course the price — \$13 for a pair of jeans and \$2-\$3 for a t-shirt. I got some good stuff and I'm going to continue working on restoring my inventory tomorrow.

In the evening I went out to have the quintessential Mexican experience. On Saturday nights, at the Garibaldi Plaza in Mexico City, mariachi bands arrive to entertain the local crowds and earn some money while at it. People come from all over town to see them. The bands perform songs to order, and people buy songs for their sweethearts and their families. The fuel of the party is the *Michelada*, beer served with tomato juice and salt and drunk through a straw. It is served in litre-sized cups only.

As the evening turned into night, and the plaza filled with empty Michelada cups, the songs people ordered turned from quiet love songs into energetic dance shows. There were so many mariachi bands at the plaza that you

couldn't find a spot at which you wouldn't hear at least two of them at the same time. Some numbers included more than just playing and singing on the part of the mariachi. The most requested song, which I must have heard at least six times, was *Mariachi Loco*, Crazy Mariachi. Its lyrics are based pretty much entirely on the line *El mariachi loco quiere bailar, quiere bailar el mariachi loco* — the crazy mariachi wants to dance. And dance they did, driving the crowd crazy. Whenever this song played, the crowd just joined in. From twelve to ninety years of age, everybody dancing and singing along. It's impossible to transform the experience into words.

Even on the way to the place, I got a taste of the Mexican way of life. I was walking down the street past a shoe shop. The street was full of people, really crowded. Then they decided in the shop to put a salsa song on their speakers. In two seconds the space before the shop was clear of people, and three pairs went out to dance the most amazing salsa I've ever seen in my life. While the song was playing, they were going crazy. It was an incredible show. Then the song ended, and in a blink of an eye, the street returned to normal: people walking past the shops, no sign of what was going on here just a minute ago.

This is Mexico. I love it.

Mexico City Pt.V

Yesterday I went to see a *corrida* (bullfight). Mexico City prides itself with the biggest bullring in the world, a 55,000-seat venue. It was not full because of bad weather (midway through the show it actually started raining), so even though I bought a ticket for the second balcony, I was able to sit very close to the action. I met there a thorough fan of the game, Carlos, who explained to me all the different parts of the show and the roles of the people who participated. Mexicans must be the most amiable people in the world. He left me his full address and phone number, and said that if I ever need anything, I should call him. I'm not sure whether I would have been that welcoming if I met a tourist in Israel.

Undoubtedly, our generation is going to see the end of bullfighting. The act of killing an animal for entertainment, although not much bothering to me personally, is becoming more and more a taboo. Even now the laws against animal cruelty in Spain have to provide special exclusions for bullfighting, and in Portugal and USA they practice a castrated variation called "bloodless bullfighting". So I'm here to enjoy it while it lasts.

Some more metro tales: this morning I had to use the metro during the rush hour, and this is one experience that I will have to try not to repeat again. The train got so full that it took the driver a couple of minutes to actually succeed in having all the doors closed. Many people were left on the platform waiting for the next train. And then when I thought it couldn't get any worse, we arrived at the next station, which had been getting only fully packed trains

and the people there lost all their patience, so they just threw themselves into the open doors at full speed. Then, after the doors have closed again, and my body has reached the ultimate level of compression possible for a breathing human being, someone from the back of the train started making his way towards the doors because he wanted to get off at the next station. I thought I heard my ribs cracking, but maybe that was somebody else's.

I've been warned of such things happening in Japan, but apparently I had to have a warm-up here before the real thing. Actually, thinking about it, Mexico City is not much smaller than Tokyo. These full trains create a vicious circle: they take longer to leave the station because of the long efforts to close the doors, which leads to fewer trains running per hour, which leads to even more packed trains.

There was a funny moment in all this, though, when I saw a man at the station selling, believe it or not, a booklet called "the new traffic regulations of Mexico City". That'd be straight out of the "how could you have ever lived without it?!" page. Ten pesos. Anyone cares for a copy?





Around Mexico City

While waiting for my music package to arrive from Israel, I decided to change the setting a little bit and visit some of the places around Mexico City.

The first stop was Cuernavaca. It's 700 meters below Mexico City in altitude so the climate is a lot milder. It's also a big city, but in somehow it doesn't feel like that at all — it actually feels more like a village. While walking around the place I stumbled by pure chance upon a botanic garden situated around a narrow and deep canyon, which also turned out to be the city's couples' favorite retreat. Mexicans, in general, are not a bit shy with their public displays of affection; no problem with hugging and elaborate french-kissing in a full train, a crowded street or in front of the city's cathedral. It's a bit unsettling at first but then you get used to it.

After that I encountered a “museum of photography”; it turned out to be a one-room house with two photographs from the old days of Cuernavaca, two or three old maps of the place, and a huge visitors book with praises from people from all around the world, to which they ask you politely but insistingly to add your own record. I was kind of hard-pressed to find any words of acclaim to this “museum”, but I looked at what other people wrote, and did the same — “thanks for conserving this place so well”.

The people of Cuernavaca like going out at night. When I went for a stroll in the evening I found a lot of things happening in the city center. First there was a group of youngsters performing some kind of folk dance to the

sound of African drums. They had straps with dangling hollow nuts wrapped around their ankles, which completed the soundtrack to the dance together with the drums. On the other side of the plaza there was a show of Polynesian





dancers in traditional costumes. And later in the evening there was a concert of young-and-yet-undiscovered and old-and-forgotten singers. When one young singer invited the public to go up to the stage and dance, some homeless and apparently drunk man dressed in rags came up and performed the most bizarre dance since John Turturro's number in *O Brother, Where Art Thou*, dancing most of the time with his legs crossed, and some of the time standing on one leg with the other one wrapped around it. The public was in tears from laughter but it didn't seem to matter to him at all.

I liked Cuernavaca a lot but the hotel was expensive and I wanted to continue traveling, so the next day I went on south to Taxco. According to the book, it's supposed to

be a magical city with old houses, cobblestone streets and the atmosphere of colonial Mexico. Indeed, the city is very unusual: it's built on steep hills, and the streets there have such high inclination that it would have made more sense to have them built as steps. Since the center of the city is in fact preserved from colonial times, the streets are just a little bit wider than the average car, so there are no sidewalks, and the pedestrians intermingle freely with the WV beetle taxis, old hippie-style WV wagon combie buses, and other cars, which don't usually move much faster than the people anyway.

My own feelings for the city were mixed. First, since the houses predate electricity and plumbing, these things run on the outside, attached to the walls, and it looks terrible. Second, the city is overly touristic. It consists of tourists and locals who try to sell stuff to tourists. There isn't anything else. And there didn't seem to be any night life to speak of. So after spending there the afternoon and the next morning, I went to Toluca.

Toluca is the highest city in Mexico, situated at 2680 meters, on the mountains above Mexico City. Unfortunately, this city has nothing going for it at all. Just a big metropolis, with lots of cars and trucks, and lots of confusion. The map in my book has a very vague connection with reality; of the two marked tourist information booths, none actually exist. Another booth I found elsewhere didn't give out any kind of information. When I asked a local potato chips vendor I was talking to about night life, he started explaining to me where I can find the prostitutes. I asked more specifically about bars, but at the place he pointed me to there was nothing but closed shops.

I did find something happening in the evening, eventually — a singer in one of the plazas was doing covers of



Mexican songs. It turned out, though, that I know the lyrics better than she does; she completely messed up Mariposa Traicionera, my favorite Maná song.

I also witnessed a quite curious ceremony: the lowering of the national flag. Every Thursday evening they assemble pupils from schools from all over the city in the central plaza for the big ceremony of lowering the national flag. It is quickly strung back up early next morning. I thought that maybe raising the national flag would better fit a ceremony, but then, I'm not Mexican, so what do I know.

I got out of Toluca first thing in the morning, and now I'm back in Mexico City. The package isn't here yet and I'm running out of things to do. The hostel I used to stay in was full, so they directed me to another place a few blocks from there. Here I found out that on Tuesday there was a fight here, and police had to be brought in; on Wednesday there was another fight, this time ending with one guy getting stabbed eight times in the chest by a drunk roommate. He went to the hospital and, incredibly, returned to this hostel yesterday. I think he left today. While the police was investigating the stabbing they found out that the bar in the hostel operated without a license for selling alcohol, so now the bar doesn't function, but the administration is calming everybody down, reassuring that they will get the license in the next couple of days. I can't wait.

Other than that, everything is jolly good and the spirits are up.



Mexico City Pt. Whatever

First, some new details about the knifing: the guy was slashed, not stabbed, and it was in the face, hand and some other parts. The slashing guy got arrested, paid a \$2,000 bribe to the police, and released the next day.

The license to sell alcohol came very quickly and on on Saturday evening there was the great bar reopening party. The bartender is a totally demented Mexican fellow who shouts random things into the air every once in a while and keeps dancing behind the bar non-stop. All the hostel's population was there; Australians, Italians, Spanish, Australians, Germans, Dutch, Belgians, British, Australians, Canadians, people from Denmark, New Zealand, Australia. At some point the bartender got up onto the bar with a tequila bottle and, like a bird feeding its chicks, poured tequila down into everybody's open mouths. Then other people got up on the bar to dance. The next day, as expected, the corridors were full of people walking around holding their heads in their hands and moaning quietly. Some Ozzies have this strange rule, "if you did the crime, you must do the time", so they don't take pills against headaches. Beats me.

The next day the bartender was very determined to repeat the success, and did the tequila trick even more than once, but the people weren't up for it. So after six or seven beers we all just went to sleep.

After these two days, and after realizing that I must be spending on beer more than I'm spending on any other single thing this week, I took my stuff and went to the bus

station. So I'm writing this from a place far far away from Mexico City. But this will be the topic of another post...



Jalisco & Nayarit States

After checking that the package still hadn't arrived last Monday, I hopped on the bus to Guadalajara. (A somewhat uneasy name for Hebrew speakers. But it can get worse, I assure you. How was I supposed to tell my Russian-speaking friends & family where I was while passing through the province of Jujuy, Argentina?)

After confirming that Guadalajara is, as expected, "Yet Another Big City", I set off the next morning further north to San Blas, not only because there's a Maná song about it (although that admittedly was a strong factor), but also because I heard that it's a cool place. At some point in history it was a very important fort and trading point for the Spaniards, but now it's a small place with a very developed tourism industry, particularly catering to pensioners from the USA arriving with their trailers and RVs. So I did not stay in the town itself, but went to a quiet beach called Los Cocos, not far away.

The beach is many kilometers long, dotted with private houses, camping grounds, trailer parks, inexpensive lodgings and small but expensive hotels. It is, as the guidebook says, virtually deserted, except at weekends; I first perceived it to be a good thing, but getting hungry, I had to rethink — the closest point to get food for a fair price turned out to be a small fishermen village called Aticama, a 25 minute walk from where I was staying.

I thought I came there to rest, but it so turned out that I arrived just in time for the coronation ceremony of the beauty queen of the San Blas municipality right there

in Aticama, so there was—what else—a big party going on. A band of musicians first traveled all along the beach, playing as they go, and inviting everybody to follow them to the village with song and dance. Then was the coronation. First they crowned the queen and the princess of the *tercera edad*, literally "third age", the Spanish term for the elderly. Two grandmothers got their 15 minutes of fame sitting there on the stage, wearing crowns, while their extended families (and families there *are* extended) were cheering up for them from the crowd. Following that was the elaborate coronation ceremony of the beauty queen and her princess, and then a party until the afternoon of the next day.

I saw there a most curious thing: they actually taught a horse to dance. At first I thought it was drunk or something, but then I was explained that it's actually trained, reacting to





the movements of the rider, who makes it kind of trot while staying at the same spot, and sometimes move sideways like a crab.

After having a good time in Los Cocos and running out of money, I started to make my way back to Mexico City, which took a whole day plus the following night. I made a short stop in a town called Tequila; the name is not in vain -- the couple dozen distilleries around the town produce 75% of Mexico's and thus the world's supply of tequila. Providing tours of the distilleries is the second best business in the town after the distilleries themselves, and I complacently chimed in with my 50 pesos, to be taught all about the process of making tequila, and of course taste the different kinds and appreciate the differences.

Somewhere along the way I got sick pretty bad, and now I'm trying to recuperate here in Mexico City; maybe not the best choice, given the fact that breathing the air here is more or less equivalent to taping your mouth to the exhaust pipe of an old WV beetle, but at least a good place to be if I eventually need to see a doctor.

A water bottle I bought in San Blas had a label on it which said: *El aire puro es vida ;Planta un árbol!* — "Pure air is life, Plant a tree!" How true.

Sick Mexico City

After all I had to call a doctor. They called one for me from the front desk. When I told him I'm from Israel, he started speaking to me in Hebrew. Imagine my surprise. It turned out he's Jewish, born in Mexico, and he learned Hebrew in a Jewish school when he was a kid. He lives in an area called Polanco, which is described in the books as the upscale district of Mexico City where all the fancy shops and restaurants are. Indeed walking there feels quite like Europe. From locals and from this doctor, Shmuel, I found out that Polanco is actually the Jewish district of Mexico City. What a surprise.

So finally, the days of not being able to sleep at nights or eat during the days are coming to an end, thanks to a hefty and a pretty expensive package of medicines. During this time I got to know the hostel's library so well that I'm serving as the librarian to newly arriving guests. Obviously I've been a one-man tourist information kiosk for Mexico City for a while now. If that's not a sign that it's time to get out, I don't know what is. The library, by the way, is quite unique, containing volumes such as the following: Greek Phrase Book; Vietnam — Festivals & Events, 2003-2004; TV Key Movie Reviews & Ratings, 1961 edition; Holy Bible — The Revised Standard Edition. I'm glad they have finally revised it after all these years.

I'm leaving Mexico City to Puebla to spend Christmas there with a bunch of people. Details later.

Christmas & Birthday

Finally, goodbye Mexico City! This was long, long overdue. Having decided to give up on the package, I left Mexico City at last. It was a genuine pleasure to get to know it so well, and it is very exciting to finally leave it and go on with the trip.

I teamed up with three other gringos fed up with Mexico City to celebrate Christmas, my first ever, in Puebla. Amber from Australia managed in her 21 years to have visited probably more places than most people can name on a map; Stewart, a Scottish guy who looks exactly like Kevin Bacon, just finished law school; Johanna, a grouchy but outrageously funny Finnish girl, studies in the University of Lapland (yes, such a thing does actually exist).

We figured that since Christmas is usually a family



celebration, we will not find a lot of action outside, so we should just get a couple of bottles of something strong and make our own party in the hostel room. Nevertheless a couple of hours later we were out, armed with a bottle of a cocktail that could have been Cuba Libre had it not contained half a bottle of Bacardi and just about half a cup of Coca Cola. Pretty soon we were talking to some locals having hot dogs at a lonely stand on the plaza. We were determined to find something to do in this city. Half an hour later we were riding in their car, 3 people in the front seats and 5 in the back, in search of a nightclub that would be open on Christmas Eve. It proved to be quite difficult, as expected. Eventually we spotted an open place, and although we all thought we're going in together, they actually unloaded us from the car and drove away.

We entered the place and found ourselves, to our horror, inside an upscale restaurant full of well-dressed and well-groomed Mexican families having their quiet Christmas Eve dinners with their children. There was music playing and some people dancing somewhere in the corner, but it wasn't quite the nightclub we expected. The four of us, dressed in typical backpacker attire of battered old jeans, worn-out shoes and fleece coats, exhaling alcohol fumes, were asking ourselves — are the waiters smiling at us

because they're nervous, or because they're happy to see us? The deliberations, though, didn't take a lot of time. What the hell! We just went in to dance.

The next few hours are somewhat blurry: I remember beers being ordered all the time; I remember our miserable and insanely amusing attempts to keep pace with a synchronized dance; most of all I remember everybody, both us and the locals, genuinely having fun. Stewart danced with a cute local girl right until she told him she's 14 years old. Her father then said that she's actually 12, but he seemed pretty pleased seeing them dancing, and her mother must have taken at least a dozen photos of them together. He later told us that his older daughter lives in Canada now and he'd

really like his daughters to leave Mexico and have a better life elsewhere. Stewart, frankly, was not amused.

During the last hour of the party me & Amber were talking to this family, swapping our life stories, and eventually getting invited to their house in a small town near Veracruz. The mother is a very energetic and appealing woman with a hint of youthful mischief in her eyes; we liked her a lot right away.

The next day was spent recovering (we all went to a restaurant and ordered big fat T-bone steaks), and a couple of days later we left Puebla; Stewart and Johanna returned to Mexico City, and me and Amber went on to Veracruz to find out whether we can visit this family, as well as to celebrate my birthday. Visiting the family unfortunately did not work out -- they had apparently stayed in Puebla longer than planned. So we just stayed in Veracruz for a few days. On my birthday there was a band playing Cuban salsa music in the plaza next to our hotel and dozens of couples dancing. Amber tried to teach me some salsa, and I think I even actually managed to do it right a couple of times. Then a tequila bottle went down a bit quicker than expected between the two of us, up on the hotel's roof, overlooking the city. Honestly it was quite an unusual and happy birthday.

So this 28th of December I turned 28. Am I supposed to be going through some kind of mid-life crisis right now? I know some people think that I definitely should (hi Mom! :-), but all I want for now is to keep traveling. Thankfully, this is not something I need to worry about for the next 6 months.

In a couple of hours I'm going to be on a 17-hour bus ride to Cancun from which, if all goes right, I'll be heading to Cuba right after New Year's Eve.



Isla Mujeres

The 17-hour bus ride to Cancun took 22 hours — breaking the previous record of 20, it became the longest single bus ride I’ve taken so far.

Cancun, part of a region called “Riviera Maya”, is a long peninsula running parallel to the coastline, which has been developed as a lucrative resort area. It is really a piece of USA on Mexican soil. Walking around the five-star hotels and fast food restaurants, you quickly forget which country you’re actually in. I got so confused that I went into a McDonald’s and had a burger.

The backpackers obviously don’t stay in Cancun but go to Isla Mujeres, an island just a few kilometers off Cancun. Isla Mujeres is everything Cancun is not: the city’s municipal laws forbid building higher than three floors, and American chain restaurants & shops are not given licenses here. The result is a small laid-back Caribbean town, in which time runs slowly and the *mañana* culture rules — why do today what can be easily put off till tomorrow?

It is, still, incredibly touristic. The island’s dock unloads hundreds of fresh visitors into the city every day, and the locals spend most of their time sitting on the stairs in front of their street-side shops, gawking at the constant stream of beige-capped, camera-brandishing white people. The waiters in the restaurants are clearly trained way too much in matters of service, and do their work with an unusual amount of pomp and ceremony; everything is performed slowly, while bowing and displaying a large fake smile. This whole parade is very amusing, and in the universally easygoing atmosphere, it somehow doesn’t get in the way at all. Many bars are in a constant state of happy-hour, selling two beers for the price of one throughout the day and night. The town’s beach is a postcard that came to life: white sands, turquoise water, coconut trees and dark-skinned beauties handing out fruits. OK, no dark-skinned beauties with fruits really; it’s mostly snow-white European tourists trying to get a tan in the January sun.



The hostel I'm staying in is a pretty large property on the beachfront; as usual, there's a bar inside, which is the owners' way of making up for the cheap cost of the rooms, and then some. In the first few days I was sharing a room with five English punks in their late teens to early twenties, who were constantly busy keeping themselves out of sobriety by every means imaginable, which are surprisingly plentiful on this small island. Despite the differences we got along well.

I rented a scooter for a day and went outside the main town to explore the rest of the island. At its south-eastern tip are the ruins of the Mayan temple for which the island was named: it's the only known Mayan shrine for a female goddess. Very little remains of it at this point; the main attraction now seems to be a park



with sculptures and a plaque which informs the random wandering tourist that he's standing at the easternmost point of Mexico, and if he comes there again early next morning, he can later tell all his friends that he was the first person in Mexico to see the sun rising that day.

Another interesting place on the island is the hacienda that a slave trader named Fermin Mundaca built upon his retirement in the mid-19th century. The story goes that he built it for an 18-year-old girl that he fell in love with, and some of the arches in the estate have her nickname, *La Trigueña*, carved on them. She, however, rejected him and married a young local islander; as she was giving birth to one child after another, Mundaca slowly turned insane and died. His epitaph, which he carved himself, reads: "*Como*





eres, yo fuí; como soy, tu serás — “As you are, I was; as I am, you will be”. Cruel; but not surprising for a man who made a living importing Africans to work and die on sugarcane plantations in Cuba.

The property contains a small zoo, kept up to this day, which includes a few monkeys, some alligators, a lonely deer and a family of hogs; iguanas roam the place freely, as they do throughout the island. Having only seen them in cages before, I was surprised at how fast they can actually run when a tourist chases them with a camera.

Since this concludes the list of interesting sites on the island, the rest of the time I just spent wandering around the city intimidating everybody with my excessively big camera, converting pesos into drinkable substances and drinking them, and laying on the beach soaking up the sun. Sunday afternoon I’m on a flight to Havana, Cuba. No charas from Afghanistan today but a cigar I can arrange. I’m accepting orders; you all know my email.



CHAPTER 3
CUBA



Havana

The journey back in time that is Cuba begins at the Mexican airport while boarding the old Soviet plane now in the service of Cubana Airways, with all its Russian labels still intact. The flight is quite enjoyable for people who like surprises. During taxiing and take-off steam was streaming from under the seats and filling the plane up to waist level. Water was dripping from the ventilation outlets overhead. During the flight one of the engines (probably the third one in the tail of the plane) was starting and stopping sporadically. Nevertheless, after an hour we landed at the Aeropuerto Internacional José Martí, La Habana.

Havana: the city about which one can say “has seen better times”, and it would be at the very least a gross understatement. The cliché “mixture of old and new” doesn’t apply in Havana; here it’s a mixture of old and older still. The

grandeur of the past is everywhere: in the elaborate massive colonial facades, now with vanishing paint and crumbling plaster; inside apartments, which too often look like antique shops; and of course the cars — Havana’s most famous feature, legacy of a generation of rich American vacationers half a century back, the monstrous American beauties that miraculously cruise the streets up to this day. Some of them look their age, and some seem to have just left the factory — an unbelievable feat considering how little resources Cubans have in what is probably the last truly Communist country in the world.

I spent three days in Havana, most of the time busy trying to overcome the initial shock. It is not a place for the faint of heart. The wide-eyed gawking tourist is immediately surrounded by seemingly friendly Cubans suggesting him







to rent a room in their aunts' houses, buy cigars which their cousin who works in a factory stole from there, go to a restaurant / bar (paying for their food / drink of course), or simply give them a peso. In the first day it was actually quite handy, because I quickly found a place to stay and eat; on the next day I had to say "no, gracias" way too often. Adopting a quick down-to-business assertive look helped bringing the disruptions to a minimum. The sad fact about street hustling is that the average salary in Cuba being less than fifteen dollars a month, it is often a more lucrative occupation than working as a doctor or a lawyer; as a result, with the advent of tourism in Cuba, many people left their jobs and went out to work the streets. Some of them work harder to justify a handout than others: bands of musicians roam around restaurants during the day and bars at night, playing songs for tips. Two of the most popular numbers are Compay Segundo's "Chan Chan" and the ubiquitous Cuban ballad "Comandante Che Guevara".

My impression is that Havana, as well as Cuba in general, have been romanticized excessively both by the media (the movie "Buena Vista Social Club", Cuba guidebooks), and by people who have been here a while ago. The result is that those who come here, including myself and other travelers I've met, go through a stage of disillusionment: Cuba is not comprised solely of smiling people playing music and reciting poetry outside their houses all day. You realize, while walking there, that the center of Havana is much more miserable than magical; the old cars still run not because their owners like them so much, but because they will probably never ever have a chance to get anything better. The situation is not worse here than in some of the other third-world countries I've been to; it's the expectations — the dreamy image of Cuba that I had conjured up in my mind does not line up with reality.

Despite that, and in some ways even because of that, I'm still very happy to have come here: it is the last chance

to see the *different* Cuba, dissimilar to any other place in the world, and witness an era which, even before having actually ended, is already becoming history.



Santiago

After three days in Havana I took a night bus to Santiago de Cuba on the other side of the island. In the house in which I was staying I met two German guys who were going back home after a three-week stay in Cuba, and for ten dollars I bought from them their surplus baggage: half a bottle of Havana Club Añejo and the Lonely Planet guidebook for Cuba. The former will have to wait for some really sad day (I'm not a big fan of rum), but the latter is worth its weight in gold. After leafing through it for a couple of hours I confirmed what I've been thinking ever since the first couple of days in Havana, that two weeks are not enough to really get to know and understand Cuba, so I went to the Cubana Airways office and extended my stay by another nine days. It's incredible how much difference a guidebook makes: I realized I'll have to spend at least a few more days in Havana to make up on everything I missed the first time.

Santiago is a hectic busy town during the day, and a music powerhouse at night. The birthplace of many of today's Cuban music styles and musicians, the Santiagueros' love for music is obvious from the moment you step out into the street — you hear it playing out of every window; many houses have



their front doors open and you can see people simply dancing away in their own living rooms.

Besides peoples' private homes there are public music houses in which professional and amateur bands play daily, most often in more than one shift. Casa de la Musica and Casa de la Trova exist practically in every Cuban city, and Santiago has yet another place, called Casa de las Tradiciones. It is indeed a more traditional place, less polished and commercialized than the other casas: dimly lit rooms filled with smoke, old wooden tables and chairs, and lots of Cubans grouped around bottles of rum, talking loudly and listening to the band playing even louder. I sat at the side at first but in less than two minutes I was invited to one of the tables, which also happened to have a bottle of Matusalem Añejo, aged 15 years, the best rum in the house. For my taste,



not better than a medium-range tequila, but after all we're in Cuba, right? So down went the bottle and then came another one, and of course they wouldn't let you leave a place like that without an address and telephone number scribbled on a piece of paper. No matter that I was leaving the next morning, probably not to spend another night in Santiago for at least a few years...

Leaving Santiago turned out to be a tough mission. The tickets to the bus ran out and I was left with four other people outside the bus station trying to find an alternative way to reach Baracoa. Cubans are aces in solving problems and after a while a few young enterprising fellows found for us a huge old American dinosaur of a car that would take us

there. We climbed in and set off. However what ensued was the oh-so-familiar "city tour": start the car, make a couple of rounds, return to the same place, turn off the car. Rinse and repeat. Inquiring about the reason, I couldn't believe my ears: the driver of the car was not its owner, and the actual owner didn't allow for the car to go to Baracoa, because he intended to do other work with it that day! Why were we still in the car merrily circling the city? I never got an answer to that question.

We couldn't find another vehicle to take us to Baracoa, so our only other option was to go to Guantánamo, about one third of the way, and try our luck there. An uneventful one-and-a-half-hour jeep journey to Guantánamo ended at the entrance to the city, and there we learned an interesting fact: private people are not allowed to carry tourists in their cars in Cuba, and there's a police checkpoint right nearby. Maybe that's why it was so hard to find a direct ride to Baracoa.



Not to worry; when there's a problem, there's a solution. One of the most popular ways to get around in Cuba is by trucks equipped (a bit of a stretch here) to carry people, and there were trucks leaving for Baracoa from the other side of the city. To get to that point, we hopped as passengers on five motorcycles. (If this all sounds like a bad action movie in which the protagonist flees the bad guy rapidly switching from one unlikely type of transport to another, this is exactly how it felt.) The ten-minute motocross race that was our ride, sitting on the back of the bike with the heavy mochila on the shoulders across roads full of holes and bumps, has certainly shortened my life by at least as much as the cigarette right afterwards. The important thing was that we finally got to the last leg of our trip to Baracoa. We shared the truck ride with about 50 Cubans and a pig, which, as we found out, also had to pay its fare. After three and a half hours in the truck, and only two hours behind the bus, we finally arrived in Baracoa.





Baracoa & Santiago back again

Baracoa, a small isolated town on the Atlantic coast of eastern Cuba, was the first settlement the Spaniards had founded on the island, and for a brief period, it was the capital. Amazingly, so isolated it actually is that there wasn't even a road going to Baracoa until 1964. The town is a time capsule even within Cuba. A mix of colonial and Tim Burton-esque tilted wooden houses, never higher than two stories, makes you forget you're in a city of 42,000 people. The cars in the city belong almost exclusively to visitors; locals get around by bicycle or bici-taxi, old motorcycles with sidecars, and horse-drawn carts.

In Baracoa one encounters such forgotten wonders as three generations of a family sitting together in their living room and singing songs, or a housewife shouting over the fence to her neighbor that she's making a cake and needs some eggs. Other wonders include a pizzeria which ran out of cheese but is still open and selling "pizza" (I didn't order), or an electronics store in which 20% of the shelf space is occupied by products and the other 80% by dust. Ah, fond memories. But more on that on a different occasion.

The smaller the city, the easier it is to get past the *jineteros*, the ones trying to make a buck on you, through to



the real Cubans; it made my stay in Baracoa that much more interesting. Still, after two failed attempts in three days to get out of the city and see some attractions around it (each time for a different reason), I left back to Santiago in order to continue the trip. Fate had it that I would stay another night in Santiago after all, and what a special person did I meet.

An Israeli girl I talked to on the bus told me she stayed in Santiago with a family in which the mother was a teacher of Russian for 20 years before came the ill fate which befell the USSR and obviously more than just touched Cuba. Named Yoyi (short for Eulogia), she came to the bus station with her husband and son just to say hello to the Israeli girl, who wasn't even staying in Santiago that night. Instead I spent the night with them, speaking with Yoyi mostly in Russian in which she is still quite fluent. (She did have a few hilarious blunders, such as answering a question with "of konechno!")

Hearing her life story and her impressions from the time she spent in the Soviet Union was extremely interesting, and her and her son's recount of the excruciating week they went through when they hosted a five-strong band of nouveau riche Russians on a vacation to Cuba, consuming a 12-bottle case of rum per day, left me with an aching belly. The happy end was that being drunk to stupor, they got confused when paying the final bill and left her some 200 euro extra, about a year's worth of salary in Cuba. When she pointed it out to them, they just shrugged, took out whatever other bills they had in their pockets and handed them to her. That offset the rubble that they had left of the house and Yoyi now has only nice things to say about them.

Yoyi and her family are definitely the most amazing and amiable people I've met in Cuba so far, and it was a



great pity that I had to leave the next morning. I'm now in Bayamo, a historic place on its own right with even more historic places in the immediate vicinity. To be continued.

Bayamo

Bayamo, the cradle of two revolutions, is now a sleepy quiet town, retaining none of its rebellious spirit of days past. The first Cuban War of Independence started here when Carlos Manuel Céspedes freed his slaves and called for an uprising against the Spanish crown; almost a century later, Fidel Castro and his compatriots landed on the coast south of here and spent two years in the jungle of nearby Sierra Maestra unrolling a guerrilla war against the dictator Batista.

The place of the latter events is now a well-oiled money generating machine. In the valley below the Comandancia La Plata, as Fidel's camp is known, is a tourist center with an expensive hotel called Villa Santo Domingo. To get there people usually take a taxi from Bayamo. I spent a whole day at the main square in Bayamo talking to every passing tourist trying to get companions to share the cost, and although I met some quite interesting people, I found out that I'd have to make it alone.

I tried to do parts of the way by hitchhiking. Despite the low amount of cars in Cuba (1/40th that of the US per unit of population!), it is a popular method of travel; so popular, in fact, that the government employs special workers, called *amarillos* because of their yellow uniform, who stand at major junctions and form the hitchhiking crowds into queues according to their destination, as well as do the job of stopping the passing cars. In small places the hitchhikers, the amarillos and the drivers all know each other; the couple of hours I waited for a ride were at least interesting. The ride, however, never came; I had to take a taxi after all.



Jeeps take the tourists from Villa Santo Domingo up the mountain on the steepest paved road in Cuba, and perhaps even the world — the inclination in some parts reaches a whopping 40 degrees. From there a short walk leads to the camp. The forest itself is an impenetrable mass of trees and vegetation. A collection of surprisingly well-built wooden cabins scattered around and connected by winding paths and stairs, the camp now looks like a fun place to spend a summer; in the time of Fidel and Che, between extracting teeth without anaesthesia and eating raw horse meat (the Lonely Planet claims that has actually happened once), it probably seemed a lot less attractive. Revolution was a tough business back in the day.

The mandatory guide explained with great pride the function of every building, leading eventually to the house of the Comandante himself, well preserved, complete with the original refrigerator wounded by a bullet in its side. By that house we encountered a group of Cuban students apparently on a trip from school, singing revolutionary songs and in between shouting pro-Fidel slogans — yet another egg in the basket of utterly surreal Cuban experiences that each one of us will carry with him back home.

Trinidad



From Bayamo I headed directly to Trinidad. This small and well-preserved colonial town boasts what is arguably the best Casa de la Musica in Cuba. Indeed, the location is magnificent — a wide staircase outside in the open air, with a broad flat space at the bottom for the musicians and dancers; it gets absolutely packed every night of the week. The salsa dancers here are in a league of their own. The mojitos, too, are the best I've had in Cuba. The most phenomenal thing was the fact that on the first night there, by an incredible coincidence, I met practically all the travelers and even some of the locals that I had met elsewhere in Cuba up to that point. An unexpected grand reunion of sorts. It was a chatty and fast-paced night.

I learned later that after I had already meandered half-consciously back home at 2 AM, the police entered the place and arrested all the Cuban guys who were together with tourist girls. Turns out it is prohibited for locals to make friends with tourists. Trying to cut back on the annoying jineteros, the law states that only persons licensed to work in tourism may spend time with tourists. The hapless young lovers spent the night in the police station separated from their newfound girlfriends, only to hook up with them back again the next day, this time acting more cautiously and disappearing together early in the evening.

In the morning, a tad hungover, we went to see the waterfalls and swim in the pools of Topes de Collantes just outside the city. The car that brought us there was an excellent example of Cuban ingenuity: a tiny ancient Peugeot chassis fitted with a powerful Nissan engine, it zoomed through the road like a mad fly. The doors periodically opened on their own and the driver helpfully leaned over to close them, without stopping the car, almost sending us to the ditch a couple of times. It felt like being in a cartoon. (I'm having a very cinematic experience here in Cuba.)

The park itself is nothing spectacular; the only thing that sets it apart from any other you've been to elsewhere in the world is the bar at the entrance, which serves beers and standard prices without any gouging. Socialism does have its benefits after all.

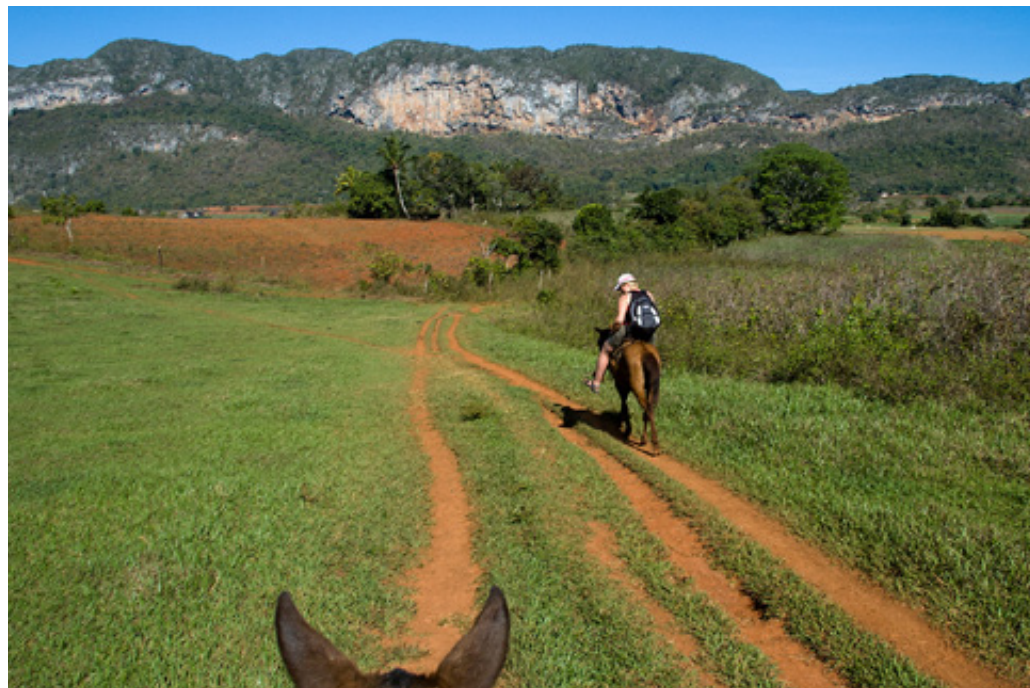


Viñales & goodbye Cuba...

The next stop, Viñales, is a two-street town quite popular with tourists, located at the west side of the island. It resides in a misty green valley dotted by massive jutting limestone cliffs and lined with carefully groomed tobacco plantations. In this region Cuba's (and the world's?) best tobacco is produced.

Forgetting once again all my previous horseback riding experiences, I went on a four-hour ride in the valley with some friends. How can anyone possibly enjoy it is completely beyond me; riding a horse must be the most uncomfortable method of travel ever devised by man, except for maybe being dragged by one. In any case, putting aside the ride itself, the trip was interesting. We stopped at a tobacco farmer's house and got the lowdown on the process of making the legendary Cuban cigar. The farmers roll their own cigars criollo-style in a simple process without using a press like the cigar factories. I asked him to teach me to do it and eventually rolled my own cannon-shaped *tabaco*, as they are simply called here. It was, without doubt, the best cigar I've smoked in Cuba!

Other stops included a visit to a cave with a river and a pool in which we had a swim, and the most rewarding stop, the last one, returning the horses to the stable at last and walking back home trying to come to terms with the aching muscles and other suffering body parts. Never again, I'm saying to myself. Never again; not until a few years pass and someone cheerfully suggests "let's go on a horse ride!" Damn. Maybe I should get a tattoo on my hand, Memento-style: DO NOT RIDE HORSES.





forgetting where he was, he repeated his lines word for word like a broken record. All the cigars are made by hand, of course, by sorters, mixers and rollers who take a 9-month course before starting their job. The dexterity of their hands and the finesse of their product is simply unbelievable.

And on Monday, after three weeks and one day in Cuba, I took the flight on the trusty old Yak-42 back to Mexico. So Cuba, where people talk fast, the food is salty, the beer is strong, and the music even stronger: it's been a pleasure. *Hasta luego.*



On Friday I returned to Havana, and visited some of the spots I missed the first time around. The most memorable was the cigar factory — Partagás, the oldest in Cuba, in which the world's premium brands are made. Our amusing guide apparently didn't really speak English and sometimes,



Cuba: Addendum

The complete guide to everyday Cuban Spanish, courtesy of Lonely Planet:

- conseguir -- *get, obtain*
- resolver -- *resolve*
- el último -- *the last; used in ¿quien es último? -- who's the last in line?*

Certainly one of the most intriguing aspects of visiting Cuba for me was my own journey back in time, unearthing my scant memories of life in the Soviet Union. Cuba brought up in a flash so many long-forgotten images. The motivational slogans painted everywhere — “Happy 49th Anniversary of the Revolution”, “Long Live Fidel”, “49 Years of Defending Socialism”, “The Socialist System is Untouchable”; massive portraits of past and present party leaders and their famous sayings. Long queues and the worst service in the Western hemisphere. Empty shelves in shops and lack of US-made products: the seller in a pizza shop let out a hearty laugh when I naively asked for a Coca-Cola.

The most striking memory is the the people's approach

to life. In Cuba life is defined by the term *lucha* — fight, struggle. The struggle is to survive with a salary of fifteen dollars when a pair of boots costs five — from each according to his abilities, maybe, but to each according to his needs, not by far. So each one mobilizes all his abilities and figures out ways to top off his income. The woman who works in a restaurant siphons off some of the cooking oil and sells it to her neighbor, whose husband works in a cigar factory and sells some cigars on the side; everyone has his own secret ways of hacking out a living. Those who have any kind of interaction with tourists, legally or illegally, definitely have the easiest deal: tourists rarely tip less than a dollar, so it's easy to quadruple a salary just off the tips.

The other aspect of the people's attitude is their perspective on the country's politics. When the subject comes up in a street conversation, Cubans lift their finger to the lips, take a look behind their shoulder, and say “shh, I don't really like talking about it”. And yet, while they would hang a portrait of Fidel in their house, speak of him with great pride, and sigh deeply while talking about his illness, not a single one would deny later in the conversation that the system has obviously failed, and that great changes lie ahead when the inevitable happens.

At least part of the reason for the Cubans' mixed





feelings towards Fidel must come from the fact that never mind the economic or political situation, Fidel will always remain the hero of Cuban nationalism: after hundreds of years of Spanish rule and dozens of years of unabated US intervention, he was the first to actually make the Cubans feel Cuban and free from outside interference. Especially today, what he did and how he did it evokes sheer fascination: his campaign was not directed by him from the comforts of a villa in Beirut, like some of today's "freedom fighters"; his guerrilla war in the jungle was the real deal, the stuff books and movies are made of.

At least one thing Cubans have going for them: as my host in Havana explained to me, whatever happens, there's not going to be a civil war, because Cubans don't like wars — what they like is their rum, music and women. At least two of which are duly justified (as I said, I'm not a big fan of rum). With this attitude I think Cuba, or at least the Cubans, will be just fine.



CHAPTER 4

MEXICO (BACK AGAIN)



Off the beaten path

Returning to Mexico after three weeks of socialism was like a breath of fresh air: stores full of all imaginable goods, Coca-Cola sold freely, locals using the same services that you are. Totally shocking at first. I started this part of the journey in Playa del Carmen, a fishermen village in the not so distant past that now has more tourists than locals and more McDonald's branches than taco stands — the familiar story. The only actually useful American feature there was the Wal-Mart just outside the hostel: stock up on everything from t-shirts to beers, all in one place. Truly, a great invention.

From the Playa I went south to Tulum, home to some unimpressive and hopelessly overcrowded Mayan ruins, a windy beach and a very enjoyable hostel named “The Weary Traveler”. There's really nothing in Tulum to make a traveler weary, except maybe for this hostel, in which going to bed early is not the norm and you end up staying late drinking beer and talking to people. It's too easy to get stuck in such a place: two Israeli chefs on a vacation in Mexico had already been there for two weeks when I arrived. And with two resident chefs in the hostel, going away becomes understandably harder.

I resisted the temptation this time because I met another traveler also fed up with touristic places, and together we decided to flee the asphalt and the crumpled cities and escape to the quiet lagoons at the north. We took a deep breath of tourism first, spending a day in Xel-Ha, a beautiful natural lagoon that has been brutally domesticated and turned into a lucrative resort with all the amenities — surrounded by

walkways and water access points, outfitted with bridges over the streams and winding paths through the mangroves, and furnished with toilets, restaurants, shops and of course a massive ticket office at the entrance which reflects the hefty price one has to pay now in order to see this piece of, well, what once used to be “nature”.



On the next day we started our journey to the northern coast. We first stopped at Cobá, a Mayan ruin that for some reason is not as popular with tourists as some of the other ones, although in my opinion it's at least as impressive. A group of pyramids and other buildings scattered through the forest, connected by shaded paths through the woods, much of it remains overgrown and yet undiscovered: there

are many mounds covered by thick vegetation which show rows of stones exposed in the bush like open wounds, revealing their man-made nature. This makes the site even more interesting, because one can actually see how ancient ruins look like before they are revealed and cleaned and prepared for tourist consumption.

From Cobá we made a run for Isla Holbox up north. Hopping from one bus to another, we were passing through places which can be best described as “nowhere”; it felt amazingly refreshing being the only tourist in town. It’s such a pity that the majority of travelers stick to Lonely Planet’s “highlights” and never find out what a village looks like if it doesn’t have a backpackers’ hostel in it. It’s very hard to find travel companions for this kind of adventure. I’ve been lucky to have met Nicole in Tulum; I hope I’ll keep having luck later in the way.

By evening we arrived at Holbox. It’s an island so far almost untouched by package tourism, but it is slowly beginning the process of becoming yet another Cancun; at the moment its 2,000-strong population consists mostly of Italian immigrants. No paved streets, no cars — only golf



carts driven by kids and adults alike. It is the only place in Mexico I’ve seen so far in which you can get a decent cup of coffee. An Italian couple has built a new well-equipped camping site there which provides tents and hammocks and quiet evenings, and we took full advantage of that for a couple of days, cooking food, playing cards and relaxing.

From Holbox we went to Rio Lagartos, a village situated next to a national park which is home to one of the biggest pink flamingo nesting grounds in the world. Although not really off the tourist map, it was empty of tourists when we arrived. It was raining and we went into the first posada we saw. The owners wanted an ample sum for the room, but after some chatting, we were invited to beers and the price went down to a reasonable level. Negotiating for the boat ride to the reserve was even easier: the fare plummeted to below 50% almost all by itself. Did I mention how delightful it is being the only tourist around?

The boat ride was a fascinating three hours: besides enormous flocks of pink flamingos, the park is home to hundreds of other species of birds, as well as some other animals such as crocodiles.

From Rio Lagartos we took a bus to Tizimín, and that was the end of our journey together. We both hopped back onto the beaten path; I continued to Valladolid in order to visit the ruins of Chichén Itzá, and Nicole went on to Mérida.



Mérida & Palenque

Chichén Itzá is one of the most touristic sites in the Yucatan peninsula, and for a good reason. The site is very impressive. Dominated by a massive and impeccably restored pyramid, it includes an observatory, a large colonnade, a multitude of meticulously decorated temples, and a stadium for the Mayan version of basketball. I got to there in time for the opening at 8 AM and had a few hours before the tourist buses arrived and the place filled with a cacophony of English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, and even Japanese speech. Viewing such a site in tranquility makes all the difference.

From Chichén Itzá I continued to Mérida. Not much to tell, yet another city. One distinctive feature worth noting is the central square which in the evening fills with birds so much that it's hardly possible to hear anything over their collective singing. Of course, with thousands of birds in one place, the possibility of one of them shitting at any given time is 100%, so walking through the square becomes a "Méridan roulette"; it's common to see a Meridano standing aside with a napkin and wiping some part of his clothes. They say it's for luck, right? Maybe that's why people keep filling the square every evening despite the crossfire.

I'll never cease to be amazed by the Mexicans' zeal to dance and have fun. It was raining cats and dogs on Sunday, but in Mérida every Sunday there's a band playing and couples dancing in the main square, and they won't let petty things like rain ruin their parade. Some with umbrellas, some with random plastic sheets pulled over their heads, some just out in the rain — dancing and the world be damned. It's especially charming to see the older people — elderly stubby grandmothers smiling their toothless smiles and dancing, holding their baskets from the market firmly in their hands...



After visiting a couple of villages around Mérida I headed south to Palenque, starting to make my way to Guatemala. The original plan of making it to Panama by the end of March will obviously not come to fruition; at this point I just hope to have enough time get to know Guatemala well. So there's plenty left for the next trip.

Between Palenque the town and Palenque the ruins

exists a very special place called El Panchan. Mayan for "Heaven on Earth", it's a collection of thatched roof huts and small houses that provide accommodation, food, entertainment and even Internet right in the middle of the jungle. The integration with the surroundings is so perfect that you never see more than a couple of houses from any single point. It all began when an archaeologist named Don Moisés bought the land and decided to raise a family there; now his children run the various businesses on the divided plots. The accommodation is cheap; the food — expensive but good; in any case, the feeling of sitting in the jungle and typing these lines is priceless.

I saw the Palenque ruins today, which I'm not even going to describe because it is becoming too tedious. Suffice to say that so far it only gets better from place to place. I'm looking forward to Guatemala's famed Tikal. In the meantime I'll just head down to the bar for a few beers. Later...







San Cristóbal de las Casas

I stayed another day in El Panchan, went to see the Agua Azul rapids, and left for San Cristóbal. The difference between the Chiapas province and the rest of Mexico becomes especially clear here. In fact, if it wasn't for the ubiquitous tacos on the streets, it'd be hard to tell it's the same country: the indigenous population of Chiapas shares very little characteristics with the Mexicans at large.

San Cristóbal is rated by the guidebooks and many visitors as the most beautiful city in Mexico, but I find it hard to say that it is in any way exceptional.

I went on a guided tour to two unusual indigenous villages near San Cristóbal. The first, San Juan Chamula, practices a curious mix of Christianity and ancient Mayan paganism. When the Spaniards came and baptized the Mayans, the latter did not abandon their old beliefs, but merged them with the new religion forced upon them: Christian saints took the jobs of the various Mayan gods, churches replaced the temples of old and the cross they didn't even have to adopt — it had been a religious symbol for them since time immemorial, symbolizing a tree and all the different aspects associated with it. In most Mayan communities pure Catholicism eventually edged out most of the rest of the Mayan customs, but not in Chamula, which keeps the old traditions stronger than ever.

Their church is like none I've ever seen before. There's no priest; no weddings, funerals or mass. The surreal main hall is devoid of pews; fresh pine needles cover the floor and families arrive with arrays of candles which they stick to



the floor tiles. The number, color and arrangement of the candles reflect the praying person's wishes. Some prayers are performed by sacrificing a chicken, whose head is twisted for a quick bloodless death by the church's altar. The church is also the place where ceremonial Mayan medicine is practiced, utilizing the sacrificed chickens, eggs, various plants and Coca-Cola: they believe that burping cleanses the body of evil spirits!

We came to Chamula in time for the festival of corn planting. The parades are very colorful, and involve men

dressed in funny cone-shaped hats with colorful ribbons attached to them running in the streets with flags, and other men lighting large amounts of firecrackers. The ceremonies are overseen by spiritual leaders who volunteer for the job for the period of one year, taking on themselves the financing of the whole celebration. Photography, sadly, is strictly prohibited, and the restriction is enforced, believe it or not, by criminals doing their community service as law enforcement. They are identified by special black sticks that they carry on their back.

For the one-year period of their reign, each leader rents a house and dedicates it to a Christian saint. A shrine is built in the house, and a bunch of candles and incense burners are kept alight throughout the day and night. The shrine is adorned with any kind of ornament that they can get their hands on, including large amounts of Christmas decorations such as blinking garlands and beeping toys playing Jingle Bells. In general, Chamula leaves impressions that range from the incredible to the bizarre, and some of the details that the guide provides are quite hard to believe.

In the second village, Zinacantán, we visited the house of a local family. It was interesting, but at no point was it even a little bit authentic: imagine 20 camera-wielding westerners barging into their small courtyard, wandering around taking pictures, while the family members provide a photogenic show of their daily activities, such as weaving cloth and baking tortillas. Quite a charade. It's always a dilemma whether to go on a tour like that or not: with the tour I feel ridiculous, but without it I would probably have never had the chance to get a glimpse into an indigenous house. At least the tortillas were good, and the home-made alcohol, called *pox* (pronounced *posh*), surprisingly drinkable.



Zapatistas

The state of Chiapas, in which San Cristóbal is located, is the poorest in Mexico, and has the highest percentage of indigenous population. And although the rest of the Mexicans are mostly mestizos, they still often look at their indigenous brothers as inferior, both on the personal and the global political levels. In 1994, when the Mayans of Chiapas had had enough of their lands being stolen and public money unevenly distributed, they organized into an armed guerrilla group called EZLN (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, Zapatista Army of National Liberation) and marched on San Cristóbal, demanding an autonomy. The government came down on them with a heavy hand and the uprising was quickly suppressed.

Not having achieved success in armed conflict, they now continue their struggle peacefully in the form of political



protest, as well as by trying to provide an alternative to the government where it fails to deliver solutions: with the help of volunteers, donations and European aid they've set up municipal offices in the main cities which people can turn to instead of the inefficient government ones, and they build and man clinics and schools for the indigenous population in the small villages.

Zapatista presence is heavily noticed in Chiapas today: a popular sign at the entrance to many villages reads "You're in Zapatista territory in revolt; here the people command and the government obeys." Since abandoning their arms, at least for the time being, the Zapatistas have been given a break by the government, although the movement is still considered illegal.

I met a Canadian girl named Jahan who is working on an art project about the plight of various indigenous groups in the Americas, and together we went to one of the centers of the Zapatistas in Oventic, a small village up in the mountains, in order to talk to these people, ask questions, and take photos.

The near-impenetrable fog that persisted that day provided an excellent backdrop for a trip to the headquarters of an underground organization. The guards at the entrance wear masks that cover all the face except the eyes, and so do all the others who interact with the visitors in the compound. After a brief passport check we were let in and led to the “auditorium”, which is basically a large wooden shack with a few benches, and presented to the couple whom we would interview.

They were two simple indigenous peasants, masked, with a pretty basic knowledge of Spanish but a lot of will to get



their ideas across. They gave us an overview of the history of the Zapatista movement, its goals and achievements so far; unfortunately the more profound questions such as trying to compare the Zapatistas to other revolutionary organizations elsewhere remained out of reach. They took great pride in having opened a clinic and a high school in their village, and told us about the work they do in talking to Mexican and international visitors and promoting their cause. It was fascinating hearing even just the basic stuff from the people actually in it, and feeling, at least for a moment, as part of the resistance.

The fog definitely made for some excellent photo-ops. After having a photo session of the couple and the compound for Jahan’s project and my own amusement, we left the Zapatistas and returned back to San Cristóbal.



The Lacandon Jungle

Time had come to leave Mexico for Guatemala, and I went on a two-day tour to the area of the Lacandon jungle right next to the border.

We spent the first day in the ruins of Yaxchilan and Bonampak. Overlooked by most tourists, the former because of its inaccessibility and the latter due to its small size, they both have their own unique charm. The way to Yaxchilan involves a bus ride to the border city of Frontera Corozal, followed by an hour-long boat ride along Rio Usumacinta, which separates Mexico from Guatemala. The spread-out site, with its half-overgrown pyramids and spacious plazas dotted by ancient ceiba trees, unfolds itself slowly, engulfing you in the serenity of the jungle and making you completely forget the passage of time.

After two short hours we took the boat back and went on to Bonampak. Its claim to fame is the intricate wall paintings found amazingly preserved on the walls of a central building in the city. Still in full color after more than a millennium, they describe the ascension of a leader to the throne and the associated ceremonies, invariably including a human sacrifice of captured enemy soldiers.

We spent the night in Lacanjá, a small village of the Lacandon people in the eponymous jungle. The campsite is located on a small cleared plot surrounded by thick vegetation and crossed by a river. People, dogs, chickens, ducks and even one white rabbit all intermingle freely; birds fill the trees during the day and fireflies flash everywhere at night; howler monkeys can be heard all around. No cars, no

noise, just you and the wilderness — it feels like paradise. The group I was with, six Italians speaking only their own language, was busily chatting, and I spent the evening swinging in a hammock by the river and reading a book.

The next day we went for a nice and easy walk in the jungle. A few minor Mayan ruins and a couple of waterfalls later we were back at the camp, the Italians left, and I remained alone with my Lacandon hosts, ready to cross the border to Guatemala the next morning. In the evening the next group of tourists arrived, this time including two Canadian fellows with whom I could finally converse. We became best friends very quickly — by pure chance I had a small tequila bottle in my backpack, and it so happened that they did, too; we passed the better part of the night chatting about every topic from Mexican girls to world politics, only going to sleep when the morning had already crept dangerously close.

The next day they went into the jungle, and I crossed the border to Guatemala, finally ending the Mexican chapter of my trip.





CHAPTER 5
GUATEMALA



Flores & Tikal

Goodbye, Mexico; hello, Guatemala! I crossed the border over Rio Usumacinta through the most relaxed border crossing I've ever seen. No soldier or policeman in sight on either side of the border; the immigration offices are hidden away and could have been easily missed if the bus driver didn't tell us where to go. At the Guatemalan office

they invented an illegal tax of \$5 which every incoming tourist is charged; the guidebook suggests asking for a receipt in order to avoid paying it, but these guys are already one step ahead and they've learned to produce some kind of an official-looking paper to make you have to pay anyway.





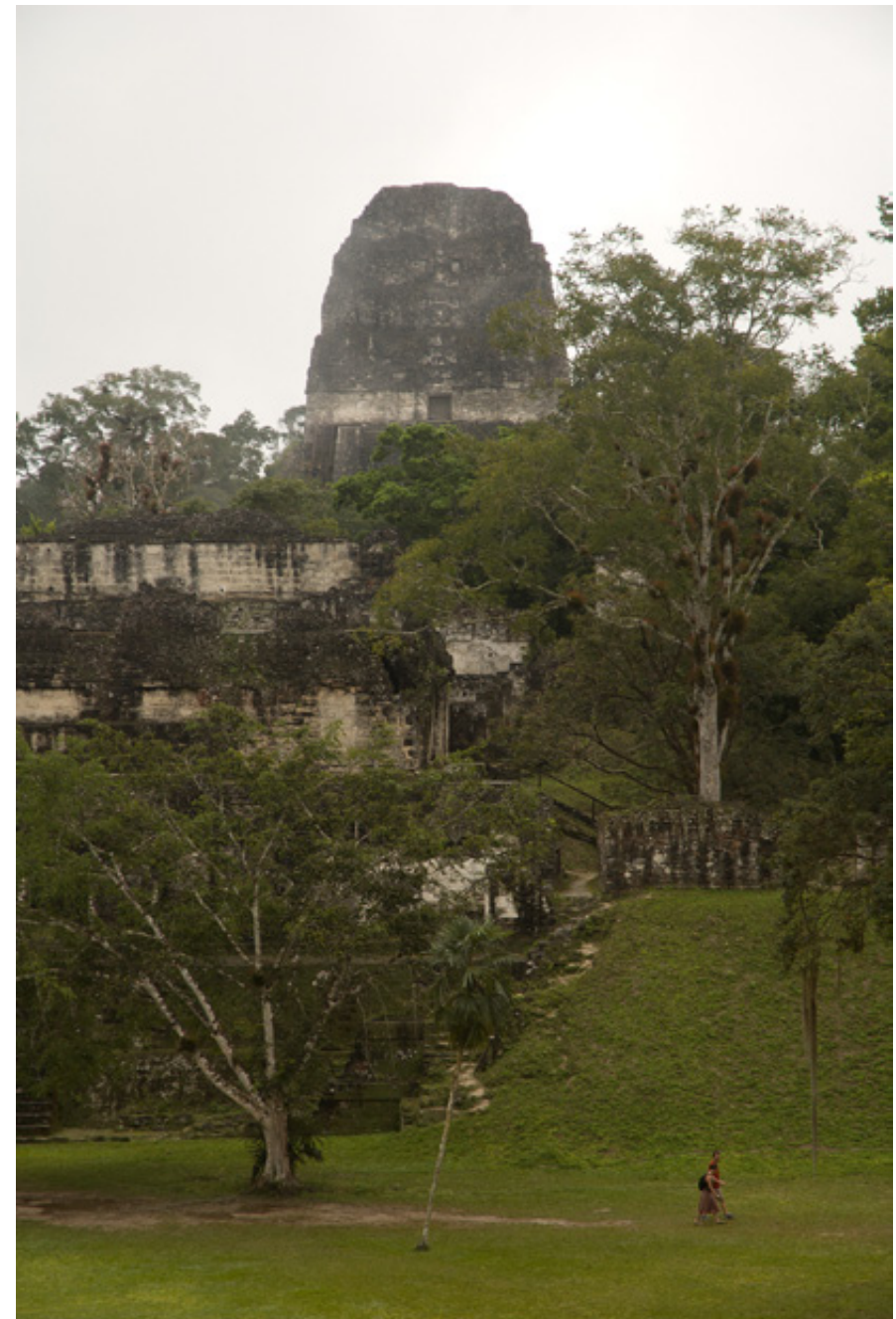
it's amazing to watch the jungle as it is waking up from its sleep, the birds starting to sing, and the animals leaving their refuges in search of their breakfast.

Tikal has certainly lived up to all the expectations, but at the same time I'm glad that it is the last Mayan ruin that I'm visiting.

From the border I headed to Flores, which is a small town on an island in Lago Petén Itzá, and the base for trips to the most famous of all Mayan ruins, Tikal, as well as to other destinations in the Petén jungle up north. Among the relatively high-class hotels of Flores there's one little hostel, always full to the extent that people sleep on sofas in the living room, which caters to the budget-minded crowd, meaning people who save a few dollars on accommodation in order to spend them and a few more on beer in the evening. My type of crowd.

I went to Tikal on a special "sunrise tour": we left the hostel at 3:30 AM in order to be up on the highest pyramid in the site in time to watch the sunrise. We picked our way through the jungle in complete darkness, the beams of our flashlights illuminating our path, and sometimes revealing huge walls of stone — millennia-old pyramids standing solemnly in the forest, oblivious to generation after a generation of visitors coming to appreciate the amazing city that the Mayans have built here. The view of these pyramids in the dark is absolutely breath-taking.

Unfortunately, the sunrise didn't happen — the surrounding rain forest produces such thick fog in the morning that the sun comes up completely invisibly behind it. But still, sitting on top of the pyramid above the canopy,



El Zotz

I returned to the hostel with a taste for more. Going all the way south after a one-day visit of Tikal and leaving all this jungle behind seemed like the wrong thing to do. Fortunately I wasn't the only one thinking that — I found out that a Dutch girl named Robin had been looking for companions for a three-day jungle trip north to El Zotz. I teamed up with her and a German fellow, Fabian, and we set off the next day.

The tour included two horses which carried all the equipment, so it was not a very challenging trek, but when our guide showed us in the beginning of the first day a barely visible hill on the horizon and said that there's going to be our camp tonight, we were somewhat alarmed. Nevertheless, after five hours of intensive walking we were there. That walk

on the first day was along a dirt road (in a very literal sense in places) used by park rangers and the occasional villager going into the jungle to collect herbs or hunt.

We stayed for the first night in the refuge used by the rangers. Near the camp there is a cave which is home to an enormous colony of bats, and we went there at sunset to watch their massive exodus for the night's hunt. Even on the way there we were surrounded by them, shrieking and flying all around us, sometimes missing our noses by just a few inches. At about 6:30, when the daylight abates and gives way to night, they all exit the cave together. It only lasts a couple of minutes, but during that time tens of thousands of them leave the cave, and it's a sight to behold: the sky becomes almost invisible and their wing flapping fills the air with a sound akin to strong rainfall.

The howler monkeys gave us an early wake-up, and we went to the ruins of El Zotz for another attempt at seeing the sunrise from the top of a pyramid. It ended up being just like the first one, with the fog raining on our parade. The ruins themselves are completely unexplored and covered by thick jungle, making it a totally different experience from most other places, giving a taste of the adventure of an explorer finding it for the first time. We hiked a bit around it, visited an "air volcano" — a hole in the ground that constantly blows out warm air, and returned to the camp for lunch.

After a siesta in the hammocks we went on a three-hour walk to the camp site for the next night. This time the path was narrower, the jungle thicker, and the animals less



shy: apart from many kinds of colorful birds we saw foxes, wild turkeys, spider monkeys, and the guide even showed



us fresh footprints of a jaguar, which is notoriously rare to encounter eye-to-eye.

There was no cave with bats near the camping this time, and consequently the mosquitoes had a ball. Our guide lit a pile of dry leaves and it helped a bit, but with all due respect to mother nature, the purely chemical mosquito repellent worked best. After supper we started a campfire going and sat by it for a few hours, practicing our Spanish together with the guide (for whom it is also a second language — after Mayan), talking about humans and souls and beliefs and gods... But since we were up since 5 AM that day, the spiritual experience ended early and we all went to sleep.

Due to all the walking we slept like babies, and even the ever-present howler monkeys' screams just intertwined into my dreams and didn't wake me up. The next day we walked five hours on a path that ended in Tikal . It was even a tighter trail than the previous day; we literally had to make our way through the vegetation and the integration with the jungle was complete.

At one point we were surrounded by a group of spider monkeys on the treetops above us. Our guide started imitating their sounds, which are similar to long and loud kisses. He told us that the imitations make the monkeys angry. Attempting to make us leave, they started to break off branches and throwing them down at us. After enjoying the show for a few minutes we left them and got on with our hike.

We arrived at Tikal at noon, and had a few hours to enjoy the site, for the second time for me, before taking the bus back to Flores.



Finka Ixobel

Guatemala, a country which very few people hear of outside travellers' circles, is a backpackers' paradise. Cheap, friendly, and easy to get around in, it's not a surprise that it has become a hub for people visiting Central America. With a much less developed tourism industry than, say, Mexico, it is frequented a lot less by suitcase-carrying middle-aged Europeans than by bearded hippies with dreadlocks on their heads and guitars slung over their shoulders. Even so, don't let the looks fool you: the modern hippie does not leave home without his MP3 player, and it is not unheard of to see a laptop among his other belongings.

I spent three days in Finka Ixobel, a large farm owned by an American lady. It's mostly self-sufficient, growing vegetables and chickens for the guests' consumption, and even having its own small bakery for the bread and the pies. There is a number of such finkas in Guatemala, and they try to provide their guests a complete experience: a variety of options for accommodation, food of every kind, a bar, and organized activities in the surrounding nature. Payment is based on a trust system: guests are free to take anything they want from the kitchen — drinks, snacks and even meals, maintaining a record of all they consume in a special book, and paying before leaving the farm.

Finka Ixobel offers a variety of tours, and after screening out some options like horseback riding, I went on a trip to a cave with an underground river. I was somewhat unlucky with my companions — an Israeli pair in the where-does-our-relationship-go stage, bickering and fighting all the way, but the cave was amazing: 20 meters high in some points,

with huge stalactite formations hanging scarily from the ceiling, and with a special bonus of a waterfall with a pool near the end. It is possible to jump from a height of 4 meters into the pool, and the fear factor is multiplied by the fact that the huge space is impossible to light up and you're basically jumping into pitch black darkness. The guide politely explained that if the girl does not want to jump, she can get to the bottom using a rope; the not-so-hidden assumption about male & female roles made her especially mad, and indeed by the time we left the waterfall, the only one who hadn't had the guts to jump was her boyfriend.

After spending another day in the finka lying in the hammock and talking to a couple of Russian-Israeli guys (who bought a bottle of rum as they arrived at the finka, before even checking into their room), I left for Rio Dulce near the eastern tip of Guatemala.



Rio Dulce & Livingston

Backpacking, as opposed to other modes of traveling, is not only about the places you're actually visiting. In fact sometimes the place itself does not even make any difference: given a good hostel and good people, even the most boring town becomes a memorable spot and a highlight of the trip. I've had some quite unusual hostel experiences in the last few days.

Rio Dulce is home to an invitingly-named hostel called, simply, "Backpackers Hostel". Expecting a backpacker hub with people from all over the globe and lots of traveler vibe, I came there on a bus from Finka Ixobel with Aleeza from Canada, and we unloaded our bags in the huge dormitory room, capacity of 20 people, the biggest I've seen so far. It's beautifully situated on a riverside dock, next to a restaurant and a bar. Peculiarly, the hostel's owner is a local orphanage, which operates the place in order to fund its activities.

The night was sleepless, and not because of the



backpackers. In fact, we found ourselves practically the only backpackers in attendance. Come evening the bar filled with Guatemalans, and they partied relentlessly until 3 AM, at which point the bar closed and its inebriated patrons spilled onto the dock, keeping having loud conversations and general fun at our expense almost until the sunrise. If that's not enough, somebody got the idea that exploding firecrackers is a very amusing thing to do in the middle of the night, and any possibility of getting some sleep was completely eliminated.

We got up the next day, two zombies with blue rings around the eyes, and decided not to give in and go have some fun. We went on a day trip to El Paraiso, a very special place where hot springs send scalding water beautifully cascading into a river with a cool pool below. In the evening



we celebrated Purim backpacker-style: bought a tequila bottle and played cards all evening with a couple of less-than-bright Austrian fellows who unfortunately shared our bottle and thus never let us fulfill the Haman-Mordechai commandment.

The second night in “Backpackers Hostel” was easier, maybe because of the liquor, or because the Guatemalans thankfully never heard of Purim. In the afternoon we took a boat down the river to Livingston, a community of black slave descendants on the Caribbean coast. The town has an unmistakably Caribbean atmosphere, family life being lived out on the porches facing the street, and there’s a wonderful brand new hostel called “Casa de la Iguana”, opened just ten weeks ago by a seasoned traveler named Rusty. His contagious tranquility immediately infects everybody who enters the place, and although the town itself does not have a lot to offer, many people come there for a day and end up staying three or five just because his hostel is such a fun place to hang out. (I myself came for a night and stayed two.)

Now my time in Central America is running out, and the rest of the journey here will have to be a bit more rushed. I’m back in Rio Dulce and tomorrow going west to Semuc Champey, gradually starting in the direction of the Mexico City airport and Japan.

Semuc Champey

Such is the fate of lazy travelers like myself: I left Rio Dulce late, and by the time I got to El Estor, the last connecting bus to the next town had already left. So I got stuck in this weird little place which nobody really ever gets stuck in. Tourists with Footprint guides are seen here once in a while on day trips because this book describes El Estor as “enjoying one of the most beautiful vistas in Guatemala”, but once again, it is being recklessly overzealous. Frankly I’ve had it with this guidebook. Or should I say, misguidebook.

El Estor deserves a spot in this travel diary at least for being the place of the cheapest dinner I’ve had (\$1.30) and the cheapest deck of cards I’ve bought (50 cents!). At night the only activity in town was a concert in the main square called “Cristo Vive” — Christ Lives. When the chorus was singing the namesake song, in the middle of the actual verse “Cristo vive” the power was suddenly cut off; instead of taking it as a sign from heaven, or at least being a little bit amused, they got busy right away reconnecting the power and continuing the song where they left off, testament to the indestructible power of their faith.

The next day I took the bus to Cahabón. Taking 4.5 hours to cover a distance of maybe 120 km., it serves a whole string of remote Guatemalan villages. It passes only once a day, and all the village’s population lines up along the road to see it coming and wave farewell as it leaves. Villagers of all ages go on and off the bus throughout its route, taking with them anything from a dozen baskets of corn for the market, through copious amounts of beer to be consumed on the bus (and later returned back to mother earth right off



the bus's doorstep), and at one point a double bed, no kidding, was hauled onto the roof. One pinched tire and a lot of patient smiles later, we arrived at Cahabón, from where a taxi took us to Lanquín.

Semuc Champey, 15 minutes from Lanquín on the rooftop of a minibus, is a series of crystal-clear blue pools connected by small waterfalls on the bottom of a canyon. In order to enjoy the best view one has to climb about 500 stairs up one of the walls of the canyon; upon coming back down it makes the consequent dip in the pools feel like a deserved refreshment.

I left the next day to Antigua. If the “Cristo vive” business was just amusing, the musical experience on this minibus was outright bizarre. On some Christian radio station they put a song with the following lyrics (quoted as is): “Shema Israel Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad, Baruch Shem Kvod Malchuto Leolam Vaed”. My mystified look met those of two American tourists on the minibus, who turned out to be Jewish. Is it me who should be taking hints now? The driver of the minibus wasn't THAT bad. I do catch myself looking over my shoulder more often now for some reason.



The Pacaya Volcano



Since the Pacaya volcano climb is easily the most out-of-this-world experience I've ever had in my life, I feel that it deserves its own post.

The bus that brought us to the village of San Francisco in the foothills of Pacaya was an old U.S. school bus, repainted in bright colors and chrome. These buses are the main mode of transportation in Guatemala, and the new owners show a lot of talent in designing their new looks — like Swatch watches, no two buses are painted the same.

We walked for an hour up the mountain on a relaxed shaded trail, and it brought us to the edge of the main cone of Pacaya, an active and constantly erupting volcano. We came out onto an endless field of black porous rock, laid out in crazy shapes resembling old wrinkled skin. After a couple of minutes of walking through this terrain we started feeling heat coming up from the ground; a little bit higher we saw its source — in the fissures between the wrinkles, right next to where we were walking, were pockets of red hot lava!



We realized that we're stepping on a solidified crust of lava, and beneath us the mountain is very much alive. From this point the walk became much more interesting: balancing on narrow paths, jumping from rock to rock over sinister red eyes in the ground, sweating from the geological heat and freezing from the icy winds, it felt like being on another planet. The higher we went the hotter it became. It is not possible to reach the crater, but we went up to a place where open streams of lava flow down the slope. I could not believe my eyes — I was standing next to a red river of rock,

squirting out of a hole in the ground and leisurely smoothing along right next to my feet. It is probably one of the most remote experiences possible this side of space travel.



To mark the occasion I lit a cigarette from the lava stream. I could not make myself leave this Martian landscape, and I couldn't help thinking how such a place would be handled in another country. There's no way, ever, that such a trip would be possible anywhere in the developed world: in fact, such a volcano would be fenced at a radius of a couple of miles if we were in the US or Europe. My shoe soles show just how dangerous this place is — even the black rock which I stepped on was hot enough to melt the plastic in places and leave its stamp on it for remembrance.

We met the sunset on the mountain and climbed back down in pitch black darkness.



San Pedro de Atitlan

I spent my last days in Guatemala (boy, does that sound sad!) in the town of San Pedro on Lago Atitlan. The lake is magnificently set, surrounded by misty volcanoes and small villages lying on the shore; motor boats plow the waters all day, providing many of these villages their main link to civilization.

San Pedro is a relaxed place where mushrooms of the

most interesting kinds grow just beyond the end of the street and space cookies, believe it or not, are on the restaurant menu. Obviously these conditions attract a lot of Israelis, and Hebrew is heard on the streets about as much as any other language (such as Spanish or English). There's an Israeli restaurant. The owner sadly died a few months ago, apparently of a cocaine overdose, and left the business with his wife and small kid; other than that it's a reasonably upbeat



place. There are other restaurants owned by gringos who came to San Pedro and never left. As a result, the food in San Pedro is great, but frankly, I thought the vibe was not there. Maybe I was just feeling the end of the Central American leg of this journey coming. I was counting the days.

Today I left for Panajachel, the lake's "capital" city, in order to take the shuttle back to Mexico early tomorrow. The boat that brought me here carried the perplexing name "Titanic"; I'm happy to report that we did not hit any icebergs.



Mexico City For The Last Time

Returning to Mexico City felt almost like coming back home. It was exciting to meet all the familiar people — my favorite taco stands, the family restaurants, the madman bartender at the hostel. Everything was the same as I left it three months ago. I settled at the hostel and began the preparations for Japan.

Unfortunately not all was well. My Visa stopped working in ATMs, the China & Japan guidebooks which I ordered from Amazon to the address of a local Beit Chabad hadn't arrived, and since troubles always come in threes, I knew there was more coming my way.

I arrived on a Sunday, so everything was closed. On

Monday everything was closed again; in frustration I asked a policeman on the street for the reason and he said it was a holiday, I don't remember its name, something to do with petroleum. Another day gone. The two following days I spent frantically wheeling around the city in search of a store that would have the China & Japan Lonely Planets. The excellent metro made it easy, and seriously, at this point Jerusalem is probably the only place in the world that I know better than Mexico City. I went absolutely everywhere, visited every bookshop big and small, and walked out empty-handed every time. The Japan book is nowhere to be found. I did get the China one but it's only going to be dead weight for the next two weeks.

At two stores they told me that they had a copy until just about two weeks ago when somebody bought it. So there's apparently a maniac Japanophile running around here emptying all the shops of their Japan guidebooks. Whether this misfortune is considered part of the second trouble or if it completes the threesome I don't know; at least it gave me ample time to read *The Complete Short Stories of Mark Twain* which I picked up at a second-hand bookshop in Guatemala, and that was great fun.

I figured that it would make sense to end the Central American journey where it began, so I spent my last evening on this continent at the plaza of El Angelito, my golden guardian and friend of four months. I still can't believe I'm leaving this place. The second half of the journey is definitely going to be very different from the first. With mixed feelings, I'm looking forward to it.





CHAPTER 6
JAPAN



Tokyo

From the first steps down the street in Tokyo I realized that it will take me a while to figure out this place. Coming from Guatemala to Japan is like coming from... well, Guatemala to Japan. Really, there can hardly be a bigger culture gap anywhere in the world. From Southern openness and frankness to Northern strictness and reservedness, from laid-back *mañana* culture to infinite punctuality, from family Guatemalan cuisine to miso soup and sushi — it is impossible to imagine a bigger culture shock.

Walking past the restaurants, I was a bit nervous about the prospect of ordering anything there. Fortunately, half an hour after I checked into the hostel, removed my shoes, unpacked the backpack on the tatami mat and kicked up my feet up in the lounge, I was putting my shoes back on and going out with to the Roppongi district of Tokyo for food and drinks with some other *gaijin* (foreigners) from the hostel. The hard-working Japanese need a release from the pressures of their work, and they find it in pubs and karaoke bars, where they can unwind freely; the unwritten law dictates that what happens there stays there, and nothing of it is ever mentioned later at work, not even as a tease. My Visa was still not working and I had \$100 in my pocket, the only money I had left. I figured that should be enough for a night out in Tokyo.

I learned the basics of the Japanese restaurant culture quickly and we went on to a bar. In that bar they had baskets hanging from the walls full of the weirdest snacks in the world, mostly different forms, shapes, colors, sizes and textures of jelly, each small bit individually packaged in



colorful plastic wraps. That was my first encounter with the Japanese “plastic culture”, this time very literally. Japanese love plastic and use a lots of it for wrapping everything. I’m not normally a Greenpeace-save-the-planet type of person,



but there's got to be a sane limit for everything. These guys are overdoing it by a long shot.

We moved to another bar later, and between all the beers, talking to people and the clock spinning like crazy, me and a German guy found out that the bar is closing, the rest of the people are gone, and it's 3 AM, which means that there's no metro to go back home. I also found out that I only had about \$20 left. A taxi would run a \$100 at least.

The only option was to keep the night going. So there we were, wandering around night-time Tokyo without money to get home, looking for something to do with ourselves. We walked for about an hour back to the Roppongi metro station and decided to hang around there until the metro





opens in the morning.

And then appears some guy, hands us a flyer, and explains us all kinds of things in Japanese, from which we only understood the word “party”. We look at each other, shrugging — “what the heck!”, and walk to the address noted on the flyer. No sign of any kind outside. We try



using the elevator; it doesn't work. Finally we remember the stairs. We go down to level -3 as instructed, and what do you know — there's a wild party going on in that basement! An underground party in every sense of the word. Obviously we were the only foreigners around. That was exactly what we were looking for. We spent the rest of the night there and



returned home around 7 AM.

That was my first night in Tokyo. This city couldn't have been introduced better.

When I woke up at 2 PM I found out that I had about \$4 in my pocket. So a night out in Tokyo set me back \$100 and I probably could have spent more if I had the money. Now I didn't have enough for food and it was Saturday so the banks were closed. Fortunately I had emergency traveler checks, and I used my last coins to get on the metro to the exchange station. I was lucky, the place was open and I was saved from starvation.

While on the subject: food in Japan is the best I've had anywhere so far. Most of it anyway. One night I was in the mood for something weird, and I ordered a completely random thing from the menu; I got what I later found out to be fermented beans — they look like regular ones except they are covered with a sticky sauce that has the texture of rubber glue, creating a constant "spider web" between the three points that are your mouth, the chopsticks and the bowl. Trying to remove the web with the fingers only extends it to four points. Hardly a pleasant experience. On the other hand, other seemingly weird stuff such as pouring a raw egg



over rice with meat turned out to be delicious.

Figuring out how to eat all this stuff is also not always trivial. Even if sometimes it seems like it is. The first time I went to a restaurant, I got rice with curry and a miso soup; with great courage I took the chopsticks in my hand and ate the rice, finishing the soup with the provided spoon. I was very proud of myself. Only later did I learn that the Japanese do it exactly the other way around — they eat the curry rice with the spoon, and the soup, believe it or not, with the chopsticks: these are used to pick up bits and pieces from the bowl, and the liquid is had by simply sipping from the bowl itself. Other rice, not curry, is eaten with chopsticks. How the hell was I supposed to know that?!

Custom and tradition play an unbelievable role in Japanese daily life. Everything you heard is true, and then some. That is the other meaning of the Japanese "plastic culture": there are lots of smiles, lots of nods and bows, lots of thanks and sorries, and everything, to the last bit, is fake. People don't ever mean what they say, show what they think, or respond the way they feel. It's quite hard to deal with, especially after Latin America. Japan is a fun country to visit, but I wouldn't live here for all the riches of the world.



Kyoto

I left Tokyo on Monday after two short days and took the *shinkansen*, the bullet train, to Kyoto. It completes the distance of 525 km. in just over two and a half hours, shooting in and out of tunnels at 250 km/h and passing 400-meter long trains coming from the other direction in mere seconds — quite an engineering achievement, especially considering that the system is now more than 40 years old (and without a single accident on record).

In Kyoto I started looking for accommodation. I hadn't booked anything because I never had to do it before, but this time it proved to be a mistake: everything was fully packed. After an hour of desperate phone-calling and a countless amount of wasted 10 yen coins I was left with little choice but sleep in the park. I took the shinkansen again and went back to Tokyo. Two and a half hours later, after enjoying again the same smudged views from the window, I was back where I started, having traveled 1050 kilometers that day and having gotten absolutely nowhere.

I was lucky in Tokyo that night: the owner of the hostel where I stayed was just finishing building a new one in Kyoto, and it had one completed room in which I could stay. I got on the same familiar train the next morning and arrived as guest number 2 at the brand new “Bakpak Hostel” in Kyoto. So packed was this city that I didn't even get to be the first guest of a half-finished hostel.

Kyoto was the capital of Japan for more than a millennium, and although these days it's a bustling modern Western city, it's home to a large number of temples and

gardens, and it still retains the serene neighborhoods where at night the lanterns are lit in front of the teahouses and geishas at the doors welcome and farewell their clients. In fact, due to the dwindling number of geishas in Japan, seeing them becomes more and more of a rarity, and the Lonely Planet now describes the new sport of “geisha-spotting”, the indulgence of many a local tourist: walk around the Gion neighborhood and see how many geishas you can find. It even lists favorite spots!

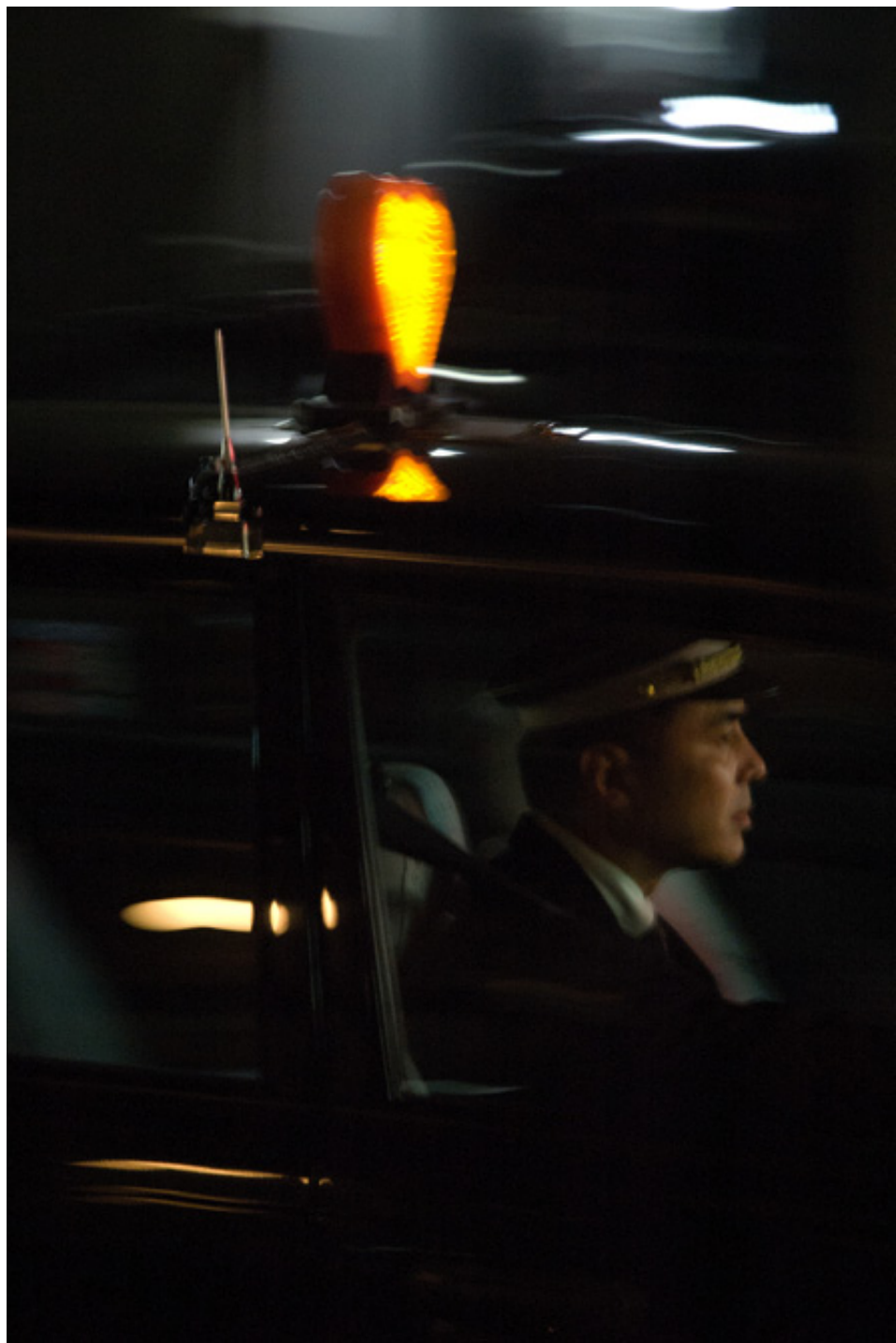


It is probably Kyoto where most of the famous Japan postcards are shot (save for the “floating torii”, more on that later). I spent three days walking around the temples, together with thousands of Japanese tourists, for it was the beginning

of the sakura season: cherry trees started their blossom and the Japanese crowded the parks to delight themselves in *hanami*, which is the Japanese word for “enjoying the cherry blossom”. For better or worse, it was only the beginning; I didn’t get to see it there in full bloom, but I also didn’t get to be crushed by stampeding Japanese mobs, and God knows there are enough Japanese to crush my little self when they all decide that they have to take that one photo.



These postcard-perfect temples on the outskirts are only part of the picture; countless others are spread all over the city, giving the impression that the modern buildings and roads were simply built around them. Even in the busiest



streets in the center, in the covered arcades with designer clothes shops and fancy restaurants, you periodically stumble into a beautiful shrine; people routinely stop there, throw coins into the box, beat the gong, join their hands in prayer, and then continue their shopping.

The evenings I spent in the company of an American guy who had been crazy about Japan for years until he came here, and he was an invaluable dispenser of information on all things Japan, but especially on sake. We found a nice little tucked-away sake bar and spent two evenings there tasting the various different kinds of this drink, comparing, discussing, and ordering some more. The place had its walls lined with different sake bottles, so there was no shortage of the stuff. The famous warm sake is very good, but it should be noted that higher-grade kinds are never served warm: high temperature is intended to mask the nasty flavors, and good sake is delicious, with no flavors that need masking.

I spent Saturday on a day trip to Nara, the first capital of Japan, and on Sunday I left for another historic place — Hiroshima.



Nara





Hiroshima

I don't suppose I need to introduce Hiroshima. That fateful day, 6th of August 1945, put it forever in the history books, and it has been on my list of must-see places on this trip since day one.

I started the day in Hiroshima with an attraction it's slightly less known for, but only slightly — the “floating” torii, one of the most recognizable images of Japan, the bright-orange shrine gate standing solemnly in the waters of Japan's Inland Sea. It's located off the shore of the Miyajima island, reachable from Hiroshima by a tram ride and then by ferry. Unfortunately its fame made it into a shameless tourist trap, with group after group of Japanese tourists arriving to have their photo taken with it. The only creatures actually enjoying this spectacle these days are the resident deer; they got accustomed to tourists feeding them and now mingle freely with the people all day begging for food, or snatching it from them on occasion. I learned a lot about deer that day — I had no idea how broad their culinary range was until I saw one of them munching peacefully on a fashion magazine.



I spent the rest of the day in Hiroshima Peace Park area. Located near the epicenter of the explosion is a building once known as the Industrial Promotion Hall, and now known as the A-Bomb Dome: since the bomb exploded almost directly above it, many of its vertical walls survived, and it has been preserved as a Unesco World Heritage Site, the only building remaining in its original post-bombing state. Of course the Japanese would never miss a photo-op, and the grotesque



“me smiling with the A-Bomb Dome in the background” shot is yet another must-have. I was just standing there, looking at the peeling walls and mounds of broken bricks around them, speaking volumes about the human suffering this place has seen, and sending shivers down my spine thinking how many of these bombs still remain loaded onto missiles all set up and ready for a button press, one decision, a split of a second...



Next to the dome is the expansive Peace Park, containing numerous memorials and a museum. The latter exhibits many photographs and artifacts from the bombing, such as clothes of victims, seared roof tiles, twisted bridge girders, and even a part of a bank's entrance staircase on

which a shadow of a woman was imprinted when the bomb exploded and sent a heat wave which evaporated her on the spot and turned the stone around her white. The museum is very large, I'd say too large — I got very tired by the end and had to skip certain parts.

At the exit there's a guest book, and next to it are binders with facsimiles and translations of the entries of famous people from around the world who have visited the museum. It was quite curious to flip through it. The most extraordinary entries were those of Japanese prime ministers: most consisted of three words, such as “Peace. Understanding. Remembrance”, written with a brush in beautiful calligraphy. Certainly a world apart from some of the more uninspiring entries of other celebrities. Our own Shimon Peres was also there. His entry includes the line “Our hearts is with the victims”. Sigh... My heart are with Shimon Peres.



Kawaguchiko & Tokyo



Badly needing a break from cities & temples, I went for two days to Kawaguchiko, a town on the shore of Lake Kawaguchiko right under Mount Fuji. In the right season it is the base for climbing Fuji, but it's too early now, the mountain is covered with snow and it's freezing cold — on the night I arrived it was actually snowing in Kawaguchiko itself. Right now there's not much to do there except walk around the lake, breathe in the cool fresh air, and get caught up in a minor snow blizzard on the way back to the hostel — more or less my idea of a good time.

On the second day I treated myself with a visit to an *onsen* (hot spring) — a very popular pastime here. Japan is blessed with a lot of geothermal activity, and the Japanese love their onsen, where they can relax after a day of work and be

free of the the pressures of their social life — without clothes, everybody is equal. The onsen I visited was arranged as a traditional Japanese bath, in which water cascades through a series of pools one below the other, resulting in a different temperature in each one of them to suit the preferences of different bathers. The complex also included a sauna, and on the second floor, a jacuzzi with full view of the city; incidentally the city also has a full view of your naked self as you come in and leave. Out of curiosity I asked whether the women section of the bath had a similar structure but was dismayed to find out that it didn't. The Japanese have an odd



sense of humor.

I spent the two last days in Tokyo indulging in shopping (never thought I could enjoy it so much) and making up on some things that I had missed. One of these was a fugu dinner — the notorious poisonous pufferfish which nowadays requires a special license to cook and serve, after leaving many Japanese dead through the history and being outlawed in certain districts for most of the last 400 years. These days hopeful fugu chefs undergo rigorous training and examination before being granted the lucrative license. I actually got to talk to the chef in the restaurant before ordering because I had a question about the menu and he was the only one who spoke English; after getting the impression that he's a dependable person and doesn't seem to harbor any sentiments against me I went ahead and ordered.

Fugu is served in many different ways, and the one I had was quite peculiar. The tables in the restaurant all have their own little stoves, and the cooking of the fish is left more or less as an exercise for the diner, although for foreigners unfamiliar with the procedure a detailed explanation in English is provided. Basically the pieces come on a plate with vegetables and tofu; it is all placed in a bowl with water and boiled, then picked out of the bowl with chopsticks, dipped in a special sauce and eaten. The remaining water is then



used to make “Japanese risotto” which is rice with egg and some more of the same sauce. After hearing from so many sources that fugu meat is actually bland, I was pleasantly surprised to find it very tasty.



I also got to see the full scale of mass-hanami here in Tokyo, wherein unbelievable amounts of Japanese flood the parks with picnic baskets in their hands in order to sit below the cherry tree and have their lunch and beers. I saved my “enjoying of the enjoying of the cherry blossom” (I guess that'd be *hanamimi*?) for the weekend in order to get the biggest crowds, and I wasn't disappointed.

Thus ends the short Japanese chapter. Hong Kong awaits tomorrow...





CHAPTER 7
CHINA



Hong Kong

I arrived at the Narita International Airport of Tokyo with great expectations. Ahead was a short flight to Hong Kong where I was supposed to meet my co-worker, Tanya, and travel with her for a month across China to Beijing. Our flights were supposed to arrive almost at the same time, and we agreed to meet at the Irish pub at the airport after passing passport control and receiving our luggage. As Murphy laws go, I never had a flight delayed in my life, but now that someone was actually waiting for me, the flight was delayed for two hours due to change of aircraft. Tanya was already in the air and I could not communicate the news to her; my only hope was that she would still be walking after two solitary hours in the pub.

I found her sleepily sipping her third pint. We were all that much more happy to see each other — myself because I

was anxious, and she probably because of all the booze. After having my first Guinness in six months we went upstairs for some coffee. The cafe had a blackboard with a “thought of the day” which that day said the following: “Miracles sometimes occur, but one has to work terribly hard for them. —Chaim Weizmann”. Feeling a fresh shot of energy and a proper bit of national pride we set out to work our own miracle — figuring out the ways of Hong Kong travel, making our way from the airport to the city and finding accommodation for the night.

The first thing we found out was that traffic is left-handed. The second was that buses don’t give change for ticket purchases. The plus was that our Mandarin phrasebook could wait; English is still spoken widely in this country, and we quickly found our way to the city center. Hong Kong is a city that works in three dimensions: a street address always includes a floor number because there are hardly any buildings lower than 20 floors in the center, and one building may be home to businesses, private apartments and hostels all mixed together. Our hostel, owned by a friendly chap named Jacky Chan (what a better way to start a trip in Hong Kong!), spanned the 7th and 9th floors. The view from the window, a small space between buildings lined by endless strips of windows, didn’t have a top or a bottom. Still, it was one of those places which have a nice ambiance in them, and we were glad to begin our adventure.

We went out and hit the street. Huge neon signs, beautiful new cars, fashionably dressed people — definitely a soft landing in China. If it can be called China at all. Besides the language, there’s nothing Chinese about Hong Kong. We





had an excellent evening in an Aussie jazz bar that night. The band was local but they were playing world-famous jazz hits and the singer was stunning. Tanya was singing along the whole time and the girl later told her that she made her nervous and afraid to mess up the lyrics.

The next day we went to the Chinese embassy to get me a visa to China but it turned out to be a holiday and the embassy was closed. I had a slight feeling of déjà-vu but there was nothing we could do. It was open the next day, but we weren't the only ones in on that fact: the place was mobbed. We waited for our turn from 10 AM till 2:30 PM, after which we browsed around some shops, bought me a laptop, went up with the tram to Victoria Peak and spent the night in a club, having the first and last few hours of fun on Tanya's birthday.

On Wednesday we took the train across to Guangzhou in mainland China.



Guangzhou

Arriving in Guangzhou we got the first taste of the real Chinese experience: virtually nobody speaks any English, all the signs are in Chinese only and we need to buy our continuation train tickets — we didn't intend to stay there but continue directly to Guilin. It took us a while to absorb the fact that civilization was behind us, and we got our stuff together and went ahead with our phrasebook firmly in hand. Unfortunately we found out that there were no tickets for that day. We bought them for the next day and went out to find a place to sleep.

Navigating the city at night with no English street names and almost nobody outside to ask was not trivial, but we found our way to the city's youth hostel, and were not disappointed — it was one of the best hostels I've seen on this trip, with large airy rooms, sparkling bathrooms and friendly staff. It's located in a fancy area of Guangzhou called Shamian Island that is full of colonial buildings and Western couples pushing strollers with Chinese babies — they arrive here in order to adopt them, and are required to stay for one month in Guangzhou to demonstrate their parenting skills and have them approved before they are allowed to return back home with their new acquisition.

The next morning we decided to use the time until our night train to see a bit of the city and crossed from Shamian into the city itself. The contrast between the fancy Shamian and the forlorn rest of Guangzhou is beyond words. We walked off the bridge right into the municipal market, and all the world's misery was there: maimed beggars crawling on the street crying for pity, homeless people, old couples



begging for change; the people were very rough, endlessly smoking, shouting, bumping into each other and spitting loudly and everywhere. It was hard to stomach. The wonders of Chinese cuisine were also on display: every imaginable animal could be found both alive in aquariums and terrariums and dried in plastic bags. Mice, snakes, lizards,

marine life forms probably yet undiscovered by science — in China everything goes into the plate. Tanya was in such shock that she could barely speak that day, a hardly conceivable condition to anybody who has ever met her.

Guangzhou is not a nice place. Shamian is an island in more ways than one. We went to some beautiful places that day, climbed a pagoda, saw a couple of impressive temples; still, the lingering taste of Guangzhou is that of the first impression: a poor city of poor people dragging themselves through the hardships of their lives. We were glad to be on the train to Guilin that night — a 13-hour ride that changed the setting completely and eventually allowed us to see the beautiful face of China.



Guilin

From Guangzhou we took a night train to Guilin, pushing further northwest into China. The train station in Guangzhou was a fascinating demonstration of the way things work in China: thousands upon thousands of Chinese pushing to get into the terminal, forming lines and then disregarding them completely, eventually squeezing in through small gates where helpless policemen are reduced to watching that nobody dies or gets seriously hurt in the stampede, having completely given up the idea of maintaining any kind of public order. Inside the terminal the mayhem



continues, with huge waiting rooms packed with sitting, standing, squatting and lying people and countless bags and boxes. If you ever wondered how a nation of a billion and a half manages to keep things in order, the answer is that it doesn't. We arrived an hour before our train's departure and made it on board just 10 minutes before it left. On the train things calmed down significantly; the sleeper cars are filled to capacity, but not beyond. At 10 PM the lights went out and the chattering died down and gave way to the rhythmic beat of the wheels on the track. The train went to sleep. It

woke up quite early, around 6 AM, and the people kept up their conversations until 10 when the train finally arrived at its destination — Guilin.

We passed two days in Guilin walking around its parks which are quite extensive and interesting; at some point in history most of them belonged to emperors and other nobility. The mostly flat landscape of Guilin is punctured by strutting narrow and high rock formations; the emperors built themselves nice retreats on their tops, and now they're open for everyone's enjoyment. Other attractions



included visiting a huge cave with enormous stalactites & stalagmites in different shapes floodlit with multiple colors, an otherworldly sight; watching a Russian businessman being shown China's great culture and nature by his Russian-speaking Chinese colleagues; following Robert Frost's advice regarding paths less traveled and going on a

self-invented mini-trek through the mountains, eventually reaching a beautiful viewpoint over Guilin on top of one of them; and visiting the Guilin zoo where we saw, for the first time, a panda. The panda is undoubtedly the cutest animal on Earth. Watching it chew on its bamboo sticks and roll on its back as if just for the amusement of the tourists cannot leave anyone indifferent.

In the food department Guilin was a treat, too; we had one dinner at a buffet restaurant, where you order a steak and the rest is free as much as you can eat — everything



from salads through scallops and including dessert. For the other dinner we had some Chinese food — myself, a catfish, and Tanya had some cooked meat with bamboo. Not only pandas eat bamboo here. It's actually quite tasty.

The next destination after Guilin was Yangshuo, and



we made most of the way by boat along the Li river. We started with a taxi ride to a village where the boats start their journey; on the way we passed many villages and fields of what seems to be the dominant local produce, strawberry (which quite expectedly went on forever). At the dock we found a group of Chinese youngsters, the boat captains, sitting bored and smoking. We were apparently the only tourists to ride that day. We started the cruise but a few minutes later a cell phone call turned the boat back. A German tourist had arrived and was joining us. We welcomed him on board — he introduced himself as Bunt but among us we nicknamed him Fritz on account of his origin. Then another boat pulled along. A storm of screams and shouts followed, evidently the normal mode of communication among the Chinese, after which our Fritz was asked to move to the other boat. This apparently wasn't the first time he was shuffled from one boat to another, and he got

angry — the one thing you don't ever do on these trips. What happened to him later we don't know, but as he stormed out of the boat he forgot his guidebook inside. We promptly christened it the Fritzbook and decided to take it with us to Yangshuo in case we meet him there. It's a week later now and we still haven't seen him. Maybe he returned to Fritzland.

We set out again and cruised for two hours through breathtaking scenery of near-vertical cliffs and hundred-meter rock thumbs puncturing the skyline all the way to the horizon, sharing the river with local fishermen, women washing clothes, and the occasional tourist bamboo boat. The trip was serenity itself, and we didn't want it to end. Eventually it did though, and we finished our journey to Yangshuo first on a tuk-tuk and then a local bus which, as it often happens, was filled to 150% of its capacity.







Yangshuo

We arrived in Yangshuo in the afternoon, threw our backpacks in the dorm of the local youth hostel and went out to explore the town. It is large and not very attractive by itself except for two places — the local park and one “foreigner street” full of hostels, restaurants and bars which are very lively and fun. There are many available activities around Yangshuo, and we intended to stay there for two or three days to have a rest from cities and spend some time in the nature.

We settled down in one of the restaurants in the evening, sitting outside facing the sidewalk and enjoying watching the people. It is always a favorite activity for any tourist, observing others just like him walking into shops and trying their best at bargaining, checking out restaurant menus and discussing their tastes, and generally behaving touristy and sometimes funny. An Israeli couple in their sixties or seventies walked by our restaurant at some point. They were checking out the menu, commenting on the prices of the dishes before even considering their content — the number one sign of Israeliness. After some discussions they decided that the prices were bearable and came in; when they heard us speaking Hebrew they walked to our table and joined us.

They ordered only one meal and shared



it, explaining that they do so in order to save money. They implored us to do the same. My protests that I need at least one whole meal to fill up fell on deaf ears — they couldn't understand why we're being so wasteful and stupid as to spend our money on food. That was the first sign that these guys should be taken with a grain (or a pound) of salt, but we didn't see it yet then.

We kept talking. Our new friends had traveled all around the world and were not very modest about it, to put it mildly. Every sentence started with "you better listen to me, I'm an experienced traveler, I've been everywhere." Learning that we were going to spend one month in China, they built a whole itinerary for us that covered all the important points in their opinion. They planned our time on an hour-to-hour basis; only later did we learn that some of their plans were simply undoable because of train and bus schedules which they didn't even take into consideration. Our final cue came with an immortal phrase which has been with us ever since that memorable evening: talking about sightseeing and temples, he said — "Pagodas? That's not exciting. Seen one, seen them all." I still wonder what is it exactly that he's traveling for. Except for saving money of course.

We left them to finish their (one) meal and (one) beer and went to the hostel to sleep. The dormitory room was windowless and damp as a cellar; clothes left to dry only became wetter. We also found out that Tanya's bed was actually a pair of crates glued together, and a small gap ran the length of the bed in the middle. The only advantage of the dorm was meeting people, and we did meet two nice guys in our room — Scott from Australia and Glenn from Jamaica. Or so he told us. He actually had Asian features. When I asked him where in Jamaica, he started saying something about a small chintown 30 km. northwest of Kingston, but



couldn't hold his laugh. He was actually from Singapore, conducting a small social experiment about what places he could say he was from and have people believe him. He had already been from Swaziland, Madagascar and many other exotic countries; we suggested Kazakhstan, and he readily adopted this new homeland and used every opportunity to polish his Kazakhstani accent until we left a few days later.

On the next day we went on a bike trip through the countryside around Yangshuo. A local woman named Melody took us for a whole day on narrow trails between rice fields and inside small villages. We visited a local school where the small kids amused themselves by swarming around us, asking us to take their photos and then show them on the screen of the digital camera. She then promised





to take us to her home in her village and invite us for a meal. Unfortunately when we got there she found that she had lost the key and had to wait for her husband. She fetched some pomelos from a neighbour and we sat on the ground next to her house and ate them, meanwhile talking about life in the village, her children and their future.

It was a very intriguing conversation. Melody doesn't have any education; she speaks very good English which she

picked up just from working with tourists. She has two kids, but can only afford sending the older daughter to college, so her son won't go. The things we found the most hard to grasp were about her village: after a day of reveling in the beautiful scenery and savoring the fresh air of the countryside, and comparing it to the dirty, ugly and polluted cities that we had seen in China, we were baffled to hear that she hates her village and the mountains, and would love to move to a city because she thinks everybody in the city is rich. The fact is that she had never been to any major city in her life — the farthest she ever went was Guilin, a couple of hours away. To be fair, the poverty of life in the village is startling — their mud-brick houses stand mostly empty, save for some basic crumbling furniture and the mandatory portrait of Chairman Mao; the keys that Melody lost were for a padlock on her barn-like door. Regardless, the grass has never been greener on the other side than back at that moment in the Yangshuo mountains.

We stopped at a mountain called the Moon Hill, where Melody kept an eye on our bikes while we climbed the stairs to the top from which an amazing view of the whole valley unfolded beneath us. It is a place often visited by tourists, as evidenced by the many old ladies who greeted us at the entrance with baskets full of water bottles and other drinks; even though we had enough of our own water, they wouldn't relent and eventually walked all the way up the mountain with us trying to sell their bottles. It is what they do every day, all day — climb up and down the mountain with a bagful of drinks. We were too lazy to carry an extra bottle in the backpack on the bike. See where civilization has gotten us.

For the journey back we loaded our bikes and ourselves onto a bamboo raft and made our way down the river through





tranquil waters, small waterfalls and countless kiosk-boats trying to sell us beer, and failing that, trying to convince us to buy one for the pilot. If it wasn't for the waterfalls he had to maneuver through, we might have done that. After two hours on the raft we mounted our bikes again and made the rest of the way to Yangshuo on roads. Thankfully bike travel is very popular in China and the roads have wide shoulders designed especially for that, so we didn't have to take part in the insane Russian Roulette game that is Chinese traffic.

We returned already in the dark and it was too late to switch hostels. We went out with Scott and Glenn to an Aussie pub. It seemed to be shaping up as yet another unremarkable evening until we found Scott trying to chat up a Chinese girl named Lucy, and we became good friends with her. Named Liang Jing (or just Jing Jing) in Chinese, she took the Western name Lucy for the same reason most other Chinese girls call themselves either Lucy or Suzy: these names appear in their English textbooks. Lucy works as a Chinese teacher for foreign students, and speaks excellent English. We had a great evening, Lucy was charming to everybody (although paying less attention to Scott than he probably had hoped), and as we left we decided to meet at the same spot the next evening.







Yangshuo Pt. II

We spent another night in the hostel and in the morning moved to another place. After two nights in the damp dorm we felt we could “splurge” a little bit (in these parts \$6 a night is a splurge) and got us a nice spacious room with air conditioning and a balcony on the top floor of another hostel called Bamboo House. The view was all-encompassing: dilapidated old houses right below us and a magnificent horizon of misty mountains far far away. Tanya spent the morning in the bank and I stayed in the room. It was a warm sunny morning.

In the early afternoon the weather changed suddenly. In ten minutes, clouds covered the sky and strong winds started blowing the village apart. It was actually a tornado plowing its way through Yangshuo. People's hats were flying, merchandise was blown out of storefronts and everybody was running for cover. Parts of the ubiquitous makeshift plastic roofs were lifted in the air and crashed onto the street where Tanya was walking back to the hostel. Even roof tiles were being thrown around. It was all very sudden and strange, and quite a bit concerning since I didn't know where Tanya was at the time, but then the winds stopped as abruptly as they started. It was still foggy and rainy. We decided not to give up the rest of the day anyway and went out to take a walk around Yangshuo.

Any landscape, and especially a mountainous one, looks so different and so picturesque in the rain. We walked out of Yangshuo in a valley along a river, and at some point decided to take a trail up the mountain into the forest. We did not have a map or a compass and had no idea where we

were going, but it looked so inviting that we went in anyway. The trail took us through thick vegetation, open grass, overgrown ponds and planted fields; it was a magnificent walk. Unfortunately even in that remote place the evidence of previous visitors was very conspicuous: discarded plastic bags, cigarette boxes, bottles, cans appeared on the trail once in a while; we passed through an abandoned picnic spot and it was simply choked with garbage. The Chinese have so much nature that they feel nothing about contaminating it, and it's a great shame. Still, despite their best efforts, the dripping, misty forest enchanted us and stole away the hours without us paying any attention.

When it started to get dark we realized we have to go back. That was not trivial since we had no clue where we



were. We had to give up the idea of returning on a different path pretty quickly because we were both unsure of even the general direction of Yangshuo. We had to trace our path back. At this point all this trash sadly served a purpose. A plastic bag after a cigarette box after a candy wrapper, we remembered how we came in and found our way back to the valley and the river.

At night we went to the Aussie bar again, met Lucy and the guys and decided to go the next day the five of us together to a place not too far away called Longji, which is an old village high in the mountains where the farmers, for lack of any flat land in the area, developed a system of growing rice on terraces. It takes two buses to get there; the first one would be back to Guilin, and the second to Longji itself.

Lucy took great care of us, got us on all the right buses



and even bargained discounts for the prices of the tickets. (\$0.50 counts, too, when the ticket is \$2.20!) The local buses on which we went were quite an experience. The spitting habits of the Chinese deserve an article on their own, and I'm not going to go into any details here; suffice is to say that on the bus they do it just as elaborately, loudly and frequently as anywhere else. In the best case it goes out the window onto whatever happened to be there at that unfortunate moment; if not there, they spit on the floor of the bus. Cigarettes are smoked in the bus continuously and put out on the poor suffering floor, too; this all mixes with seed shells and other garbage to create an ugly mess like the world has never seen.

In Guilin I went with Tanya to the train station to buy train tickets for the next day. The train station is not the most sanitary place in the world, but what I saw that day amazed me still. This is the place to mention that little kids in China don't use diapers. The Chinese ingenuity invented a simpler solution: the kids' trousers are cut in the middle, all the way from the front to the behind, so when the kid is



squatting, he can go freely without wetting his pants. They go anywhere — outside on the street, in public squares, or even on the bus. So that day we found out that they also go inside train stations: the kid squats on the floor, goes number one and number two and then gets up and walks away. The mother just holds his hand and smiles apologetically to the people around her — “kids, you know...”

The second bus was supposed to take us to Longji, but was stopped on the way due to a blocked road up ahead. We were at a roadside kiosk-restaurant selling such items as smoked lizards and bats. We bought some beers and waited for a while, but eventually it became obvious that Longji was not going to happen that day. Some guy approached us and suggested taking the five of us there in his small car; when asked how we were supposed to fit in, he pointed to Lucy and motioned at the baggage compartment. This was not our idea of fun. We took our beers and started walking down the road in hope of finding some alternative entertainment.

It was a winding road through the mountains above

a river. Between the road and the river there were terraces where farmers were working the fields. It was amazing to see the way they actually did it. They did not use tractors or animals; plowing was performed by two people, one dragging the plow and the other pressing it into the ground. We asked their permission to go down to the river through their fields. It was not easily accessible but eventually Tanya and Glenn found a way. The river provided enough entertainment by just being there: we passed a great afternoon sending pebbles skipping on the water, throwing rocks in the water and getting each other wet and generally behaving silly. Lucy got into the mood and started posing for the camera on the rocks next to the river, soon joined by Tanya; I got my fifteen minutes of fame feeling like a fashion photographer.

On the way back we stopped at a restaurant in Guilin to sample the famous “Guilin goose”. It was the first time we had a meal the proper Chinese way — nobody orders anything just for himself; all the plates are ordered collectively and then shared between the dining companions. The tables in many restaurants are especially equipped for this with a wide rotating glass platform in the middle of the table covering most of its surface, on which all the ordered dishes are placed. Whenever you want something, you rotate the platform until it comes to you and put some in your plate. Since the only utensils used for eating are chopsticks, all the food always comes sliced to small bite-size pieces; poultry is cut with the bones intact in order to make it more interesting to eat (that’s Lucy’s explanation). Guilin goose is eaten wrapped together with vegetables and sauce inside small tortilla-like pancakes; the ingredients are served separately and the whole concoction is constructed and then eaten with a pair of chopsticks, which is quite a challenge.

Chinese have a strange custom of going into restaurants



boiled chicken just like any other — always tasty, but never special); the high point of the meal came with the Yao tea. Yao is one of many racial minorities living around China; Lucy is Yao. Their tea consists of fried green tea leaves in a salty soup-like substance which includes, among others, rice. Not my usual cup of tea, so to speak, but it was very curious.

We said our goodbyes, Lucy put us again on the bus to Guilin and we set off to take the train to Kunming, our next destination.

and getting drunk. And it's not only limited to men. In that restaurant in Guilin, a huge place with dozens of tables catering mostly to middle-class Chinese families, we witnessed an immaculately dressed woman reaching the state of being unable to walk. She was carried to the bathroom to let her get rid of her dinner and then escorted out by kind-hearted family members. I'm still struggling to understand this culture. I would probably be less surprised to see this happen in, say, Moscow. Can we say "communist brotherhood" here?

The next day came the time to leave Yangshuo. We decided to have a farewell dinner and Lucy took us to a nice local restaurant in which we again ordered a local specialty — the Yangshuo chicken. It was a bit of a disappointment (a



Kunming & Dali

We took a night train from Guilin to Kunming. Night trains are the most popular means to cover long distances here in China, as they offer the best convenience to price ratio: sleeping is comfortable, and it's possible to stretch and walk and even prepare an insta-noodles meal. Meeting other people on the train always provides some entertainment. This time we met two English blokes, one named Ken and the other Buzz. We changed his name to the more aristocratic "Barrington", although there was really nothing aristocratic about him. He was in a compartment with two Chinese middle-aged women, and he busied himself with trying to practice his Chinese by reading them words from the dictionary. When we offered him our Mandarin phrasebook, his efforts went up a notch and now he was happily dictating whole sentences from the "love and relationships" chapter (eliciting much less hostile responses than I'd anticipated). At some point he got tired and asked one of the women to just read the whole chapter by herself. She devoured the book from cover to cover and seemed to be genuinely amused.

We got off in Kunming in the morning and decided not to stay there but leave the same night to Dali. There are night trains that go there but after a long and exhausting research we found that there were no more tickets left. Our only other option was to take a sleeper bus. We left our backpacks at the luggage storage and went off to look for that bus.

Where the Lonely Planet put the bus station on the map was in fact nothing. Policemen, shop owners, train station officials — nobody was able to tell us where to find it. Finally we wandered into some bus parking lot. An army officer who



was guarding it saw us and went in our direction waving his hands and asking us to leave. We showed him yet again the Chinese characters for "sleeper bus station" and he told us to follow him. He led us to another parking lot, introduced us to some other Chinese man, and walked away. Again the same story: we show him what we want, and he motions

“follow me”. This time we reached what actually appeared to be a sleeper bus station. We told him we wanted to go on the 11:00 PM bus; she said no problem, and the ticket office printed our tickets. They said 8:30 PM. Hearing our protests he just took them, whipped out a pen, erased the 8:30 and wrote down 11:00. Dumbfounded, but reassured by him yet again that it is OK, we left the station.

Kunming is a modern metropolis with broad streets, high-rise buildings and brand-name shopping malls, some of them even offering valet parking. It was the first time we came across the high-class population of China. The prices in the brand stores were about the same as in Israel or Europe, and these shops actually had buyers. The social divide in China is simply staggering. That’s not at all what you expect to see when you’re visiting what is supposed to be a communist country.

We had lunch in a restaurant called Mama-Fu, and witnessed a pretty unusual Chinese custom: once every hour or two, all the waitresses go out of the restaurant onto the street, stand in a straight line one next to the other, and their manager stands before them and shouts all kinds of things which they repeat after him — very much like an army drill. We were later told that it is exactly what it looks like, an exercise designed to boost team morale and motivation among the waitresses. We also had the strangest dessert that day: a layer of crushed ice and on it some berries and sweet beans. It was sold, for some reason, in a bakery. Sweet beans are a staple of Chinese cuisine: everything from cookies to cakes comes with sweet bean paste as a filling.

In Kunming we came face-to-face for the first time with China’s Muslim minority: this city is a central point for the Chinese Muslims, which are concentrated mainly in the south of the country. They have numerous mosques here, of which we saw one — large, beautiful, and surrounded by parked SUVs and long black sparkling sedans. Islam is apparently not the religion of the poor here in China.

We decided to come a bit early to the bus station, but ended up running and barely making it at 11:00 PM. The bus was there, and people were already inside for what seemed like a long time. We were relieved that we weren’t sold phony tickets after all, and climbed in. The bunks were arranged in three rows along the length of the bus, and on two levels — upper and lower. They were so small there was no way I could stretch my legs; their width was maybe





50 cm. We folded ourselves into those bunks somehow and started looking expectantly at the driver: it was time to go. 11:30 came and we weren't moving. 12:00. Still standing. The people were watching a Kung-Fu movie on the bus's TV and seemed like they couldn't care less. We finally left the station at 12:30. We made a few more stops on the way, none of them shorter than an hour. The whole trip took about 8 hours, only about half of which we were actually moving. I have the feeling that this was actually the 8:30 bus, as the tickets originally said, and it was just standing in the station the whole time until we came in. This bizarre bus ride still escapes my understanding.



We arrived in Dali early in the morning and started looking for a place to stay. A lady approached and volunteered to take us to the guesthouse we were looking for. We readily agreed and started walking. After a while it became obvious that we were way off. What actually happened was that she took us to her own guesthouse instead. It was a Chinese-only place; in the courtyard there were a few old ladies in traditional clothes busy practicing a dance. Their dress, curiously, was not a show for tourists, but their everyday clothing; that was the first time we saw this in China. It seemed a pretty nice place, and Tanya was not feeling well, so we decided to stay. We needed a good sleep after this "sleeper-bus" ride, especially Tanya who had been directly under an air conditioning vent in the bus and



hardly got any sleep at all. We stayed in the room for most of the day, finally venturing out only in the evening.

Dali was not recommended to us by the Israeli pair in Yangshuo. They said back then — “Dali? You can skip it safely. There’s nothing to look at but clouds.” Yet even after one hour it became obvious that this was one of the most beautiful towns we had seen in China. It’s small and retains much of its historical appearance. The center of the city, enclosed in walls, contains pedestrian cobblestone streets lined with shops, cafes and restaurants. Some streets are landscaped with canals and small waterfalls. Full of foreigners, especially on Dali’s own “foreigner street”, it feels a bit fake, but it is beautiful and very appealing nevertheless. We spent the whole evening just walking inside and outside the city walls. One of the plazas in the city contains a huge bronze statue of a soldier; when we got close, before we could even pull out our cameras, a uniformed security guard came running to us and asked us to leave. We decided to come the next day; the same thing happened. Chinese people were passing freely. What kind of a secret installation that was I still do not know.

On the next day we looked for some activity outside the city, and decided to go on a boat trip on the Erhai Hu lake about half an hour from Dali. We tried to explain our plans to the girl in the guesthouse’s reception; with no English it took a little while, but eventually we were understood, and immediately made an offer we couldn’t refuse: the girl’s mom would take us to the dock and get us discounted tickets. We didn’t think much of it first, but when we received the tickets at the dock, their printed price was about 150% of what we actually paid! For a change, we weren’t being fooled with. The guy at the counter pointed at our tickets and put a finger to his lips: don’t tell anyone what you actually paid. We duly



kept our little secret.

The boat went on a circular route around the lake, making a few stops where we got off and went to see temples and pagodas. At the third and last temple there was also a food market (of course never without some local specialty — this time, frogs fried whole on coals) and particularly obnoxious ladies who all but forced us to go into their teahouse. I practically lost my temper with them that day. Besides us on the boat there were a few other Western and Chinese tourists, as well as a group of Chinese whom I can't really categorise: they would've been tourists, except they never got off the boat and spent the whole time playing cards, never even glancing out the window. It's hard to understand why they went on the boat at all. Chinese card games, by the way, are characterized by the way cards are put on the

table: they are not laid down, but thrown with the maximal force that the player can deliver. In China, the louder you do something, the better.

To return to Dali we decided not to take the bus but instead walk our way through the fields. It was a sunny afternoon and the weather was perfect for a stroll. We walked through farmlands being worked the hard manual way, cutting harvest with machetes and arranging it in bundles; Tanya taught me the names of many plants and flowers, and we exchanged “nihao” with many passing farmers. Back in Dali we wanted to go to have dinner, but instead stumbled into a traditional Bai dance performance. A group of women in traditional costumes first performed on a raised platform, and then descended onto the ground and danced right in front of the public, attracting little kids from the audience to mingle with them and causing no end of embarrassment for their parents.

The next morning we took a bus to Lijiang. It was again the counter girl's mom who took us there, although this time we didn't get any discount.







Lijiang

In Lijiang we landed in a place called Mama Naxi; Naxi is the name of the local minority people, and our Mama was one of them. Mama is a slim and energetic woman, and she runs one of the most popular hostels in Lijiang. We didn't like the place at first: it was crowded, noisy and the people didn't seem to be nice. We decided to give it a chance for one night. Much of the crowd turned out to be Israeli, and for the first time in my travels, I met somebody from my home town! There was a guy from Maale Adumim, from a street right next to where I grew up. Meeting people from Jerusalem is rare enough (only happened to me once); meeting someone from Maale Adumim was simply unbelievable.

If that makes you think the world is small, an even more incredible story happened at Mama Naxi's that day. There was a Japanese fellow there named Hiro. We were talking to him, I was exchanging impressions about Japan, when he suddenly shifted his attention to somebody else; there was another Japanese guy there and they started talking animatedly. Hiro later told us that this guy is from his hometown in Japan somewhere near Mt. Fuji, and this is actually the third time they meet: the first was in New York seven years ago, the second somewhere in India, and now here in Lijiang — and each time by pure chance. What are the odds of that happening?

We met a wonderful Israeli couple named Tal and Ravid and went out to see Lijiang with them. Lijiang is a tourist town no less than Dali, and the center, too, is restored with narrow pedestrian streets. It was packed with local and foreign tourists running around and taking photos of

each other. In these places every day is a holiday, and at the main plaza there was a group of grandmothers performing traditional dances, which Tal joined to everyone's great amusement.



Chinese have an obsession of having their photos taken with foreigners. Anywhere you go where there are Chinese tour groups, they ask you to pose with them for photos, and it's always very amusing. That day we probably found our way into at least a hundred different Chinese photo albums. We stopped for lunch at a restaurant called Sakura, and we were sitting inside at a table next to a large window looking out to the street. Every two minutes someone would stand next to the window and have his picture taken with us. We



cooperated dutifully, waving the V sign with the fingers as the Chinese always do on photos. The high moment came when a group of girls dressed in traditional costumes, the ones who usually stand on streets and pose for tourists' photos for money, came to take their photo with us. They were the ones in costumes, and we were the attraction. It was unbelievable. We later thought of getting back at them and asking for some money the way they usually do, but it



was too late.

When we came back to the hostel we found out that there's a dinner in the hostel every day, and our Mama wouldn't take no for an answer: she sat us all down next to a table and filled it with food. We did our best and invited everyone to help us out, but she just kept bringing more plates to the table, even though we asked her nicely to stop. She only ceased when we finally gave up, stopped helplessly nibbling at our food and sat back unable to move.

That night was the eve of Israel's Independence Day, and we couldn't just remain in the hostel and go to sleep. We decided to go out and toast to Israel's independence. The city, as it turned out, was celebrating. All the pubs and restaurants were crammed with Chinese tourists getting unashamedly drunk. I'm not sure what they were celebrating, but they were definitely serious about it: their tables looked like a beer bottle collector's dream, and their behavior was appropriate.



Or rather, quite a bit inappropriate. They were sitting on the railings of the restaurants' balconies and cheering each other across the street. After a long search for a free table we returned to Sakura and toasted to the Independence Day with the most Israeli drink that we could find in these parts — a shot of Absolut.

The next day we went to a nice local park called Dragon Park. Didn't find any dragons, but found traditional dances,

winding alleys and quiet corners; also amused ourselves by watching European tourists walking in and, in horror, shooting out of the park's public toilet — in traditional Chinese style, the cabins have no doors and their walls are about 1 meter high. We went into a local restaurant for dinner where they didn't speak any English so we had to go to the kitchen and point at stuff to place an order; I pointed at something completely randomly and we got rubbery pieces of some part of some animal (probably intestines?) cooked in chili. We finished our dinner heroically and returned to the hostel in order to get ready for the next day — we were leaving for a two-day trek in the Tiger Leaping Gorge.



Tiger Leaping Gorge

We went on the minibus to the Tiger Leaping Gorge with Suzan & Wilco from Holland, Iain from Australia and some random Korean guy who didn't speak. The ride was chatty and cheery with lots of get-to-know you talk; Iain turned out to be a doctor of hydrology(!), Suzan an anthropologist, and Wilco a computers guy. Tanya and Suzan became instant friends and soulmates, and very quickly we arrived at the village where we would begin our trek.

In that village a petite energetic British woman runs a small shop / restaurant and provides information to travelers. Since the trail is not really marked, we were glad



to receive from her photocopied maps of the route and hear her explanations. Those ranged from the mundane to the utterly mysterious: follow the school wall and turn left; at the junction take the lower trail; when you see the sunrise don't go up but keep going. We were also told about the local mule drivers who will try to send us the wrong way only to follow us with their mules and offer their services when we finally get exhausted. Slightly bewildered but armed with a newly fueled sense of adventure we set off on the trail.

It became obvious pretty quickly that while we were all nodding knowingly while she was talking, each one of us was relying on the others to actually remember the information, and now we didn't really have a clue which trail we should in fact be walking on. A French Canadian couple we encountered on the way pointed at one going upwards; the mule drivers insisted that we should keep going straight, but we knew not to listen. Up we went, only to find that that trail led to a village and then back down to the main route, where we returned, angry, and met the mule drivers smiling their "told-you-so" smiles and—what do you know—the French Canadians walking peacefully. We did not spare our words in any the five languages that we could talk between us.

Further on we met many more people on the trail. Anna





from New York and Ollie from somewhere in Germany joined us and walked with us for most of the way. The trail followed the side of the mountain along an enormous canyon—some say, the deepest in the world—with even higher mountains on the other side capped with perennial snow. Down in the valley below us were villages with terraced fields and houses with roof corners twisted upwards in the traditional Chinese way. It all looked like an illustration to a fairytale; all that was missing was a fire-breathing dragon

coming down on the village and the farmers meeting it with pitchforks and scythes. The view was mesmerizing. The hopeful mule drivers never left us, following us closely behind looking for any signs of fatigue in our faces. But we were strong: we had just started, and there was no way we would let those scheming mule drivers wear us out.

The trail went up and down; it split a countless number of times, but we didn't need the British lady's advices





anymore — there was only one canyon and no room for mistake anyway. We did see the sunrise though: it turned out to be a little hut named “Sunrise” that was selling foodstuff. The trail was virtually lined with these huts, as well as with guesthouses where one can stop for a meal and stay for a night — this trek can be broken into as many days as one wishes, anywhere from two to seven. In the afternoon we stopped for lunch at one of these places. We needed to pack calories for the “Bends”, the hardest part of the trek according to other travelers’ descriptions — a serpentine trail that climbs up to the highest mountain pass that we would need to cross.



After the lunch and a little break we were ready for the Bends. We started walking; the trail was level at first. Suzan was a bit nervous about the whole mountain pass concept so she had one of the mule drivers walk next to her ready to give her a lift if it proved to be too difficult. The trail started going up and bending a little, but it was not nearly



as tough as the Bends were described to us, so we assumed that we weren’t there yet. The trail kept ascending; Suzan kept walking. This became the topic of our conversation: are these the real Bends or are they still ahead of us? I thought that the previous travelers probably exaggerated a bit and these were in fact the Bends. Suzan’s opinion swayed here and there until she finally decided that these *were* the Bends and mounted her mule. After a little while we reached the mountain pass. That was it. From there it was mostly a descent.

Our stop for the night was to be a guesthouse with the puzzling name “The Tea Horse”. It turned out to be a nice wooden building with some gray concrete blocks beside it. We got our rooms in these blocks. The shared Chinese-style toilets could be located from anywhere on the property by following your nose. This was no way to rest after a long day of walking. Tanya and Suzan found out that the wooden building had much more expensive rooms but with en-suite Western facilities, and we decided to share one such room between the four of us.

The evening was all ours to unwind after all the walking and the slightly disappointing but still fairly demanding Bends. We ordered so much food that when it arrived we couldn’t imagine how we would finish it all. Of course we

still did. Then the table was cleared and filled up with beer bottles; the rest of the evening we just chatted about world politics, the only topic that is readily available for such a heterogeneous group of people, and after a few hours and more than a few beers everybody retired to their rooms.



The next day Tanya woke up not feeling very well. The night was cold, the blanket was small and she ended up catching a cold. There wasn't much we could do — we had one day of walking ahead of us and the next night we would already sleep in a proper room in a hostel. After a quick breakfast we left the guesthouse and pressed on with our trek. The trail on the second day was not hard; we were getting closer to the river at the bottom of the canyon where the road passes which would take us back to Lijiang. It was a shorter walk than on the first day, and we reached the final point of the trail in the early afternoon.

In order to get back to Lijiang we had to call our hostel,

Mama Naxi, and arrange transport. This was a formidable task. Mama Naxi only spoke a few words of English, and even then she never just spoke, but always screamed them mixed with Chinese and in random order. It was always with the best intentions, but that was of no help — even when talking face-to-face, understanding her was never easy. Understanding her on the phone proved to be next to impossible. I spent ten full minutes on the phone with her just trying to discern where and when the car would be waiting for us; explaining that we just ordered food and would need the car a bit later was a hopeless task. I threw the phone down in frustration. What a day! Tanya by that time had crashed completely. She was cold, feeling bad and barely moving. We ate our dinner quickly, loaded Tanya and ourselves into the car and left for Lijiang.

In the car Tanya fell asleep. Once in a while she would wake up, shivering, and ask if we were there yet. After half an hour her lips started turning white. I'd never seen anything like that before in my life. This was not funny





anymore. I had no idea what was happening to her, or what I should do. I thought of taking her to the hospital, but she had no medical insurance, and I wasn't sure that a hospital in a remote Chinese town would be the best place for her anyway. After what seemed like an eternity we arrived at Mama Naxi's and I put her in bed in the room. She was shaking like mad; I covered her with two blankets, gave her two of her Ibuprofen pills and sat by her side waiting for the effect to take hold.

She was sleeping most of the time, waking up once in a while, looking at me with two wide hollow eyes. It was dreadful. She was telling me that she just saw a bad man entering the room and trying to attack her, and would not heed my explanations that there was nobody else there but the two of us. She was hallucinating full-time. It was the most horrible fever that I had ever seen. I was praying for the pills to just start working already, but what I didn't realize was that while she was under two blankets her temperature would never drop. Fortunately Suzan and Wilco came to visit and Suzan convinced me that she needs to be cooled down. We

replaced the blankets with a sheet and put a wet towel to her forehead. After a little while she started becoming herself again. Suzan brought us some fruits, juice and a thermometer. Tanya's pills were finally working and she felt so good she wanted to go outside. Fortunately we were able to talk her out of that idea.

Later Tal and Ravid came to visit, too, and we had lots of laughs about the whole situation and Tanya's hallucinations. But it was far from over yet. Tanya was only feeling well temporarily thanks to the pills; we had flight tickets to Chengdu for the next morning and we couldn't cancel them without losing half of their value which would run into hundreds of dollars. I thought that it would still be a better idea than flying in her condition, but she wouldn't hear of it. We decided that she would take more pills before the flight and hopefully it'd pass fine. When the medicine wore off the fever came back in full force. All I could do was keep replacing her wet towels and hope for the best. In the morning we packed our stuff and took a taxi to the airport.

Chengdu





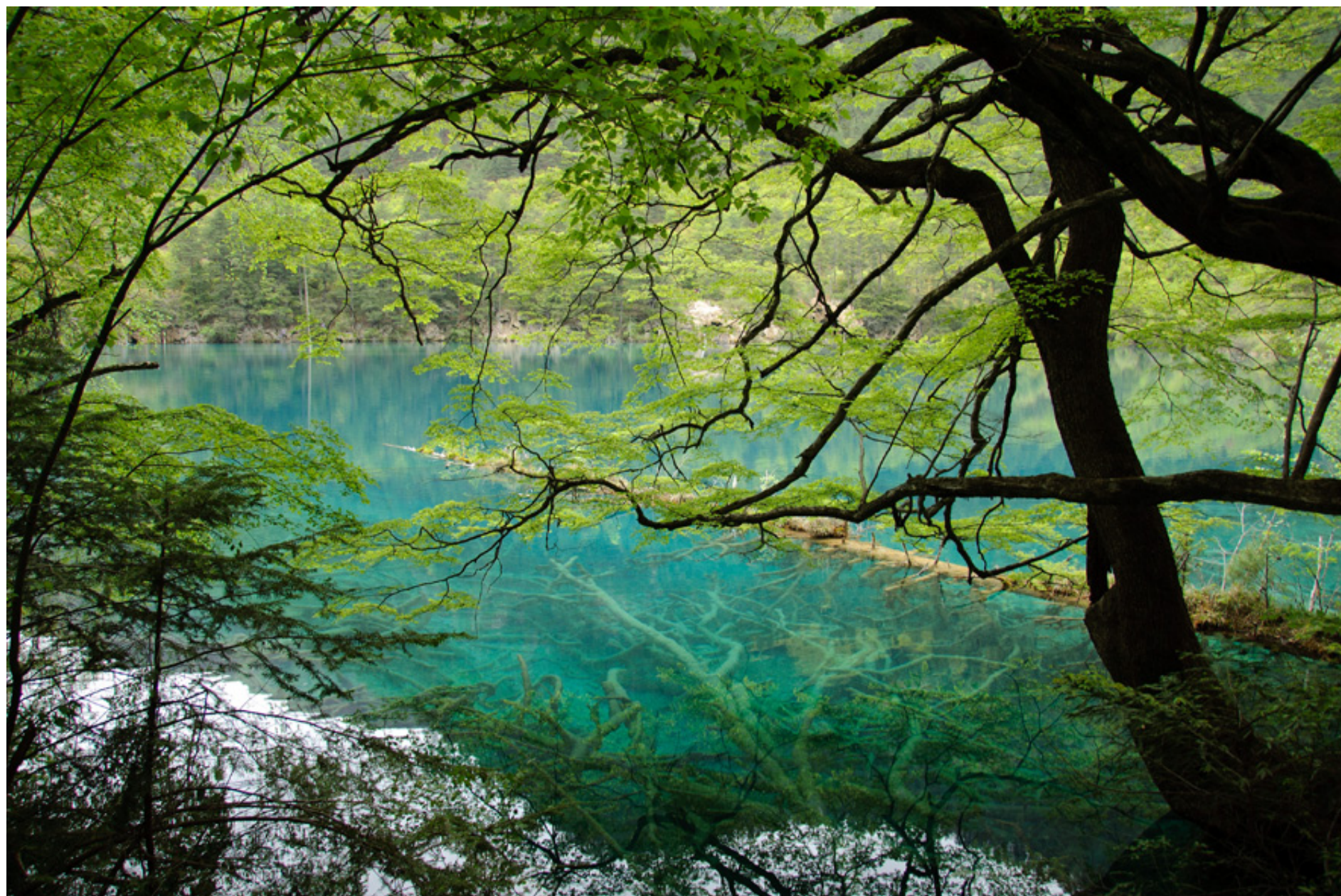




Jiujaigou

















Songpan





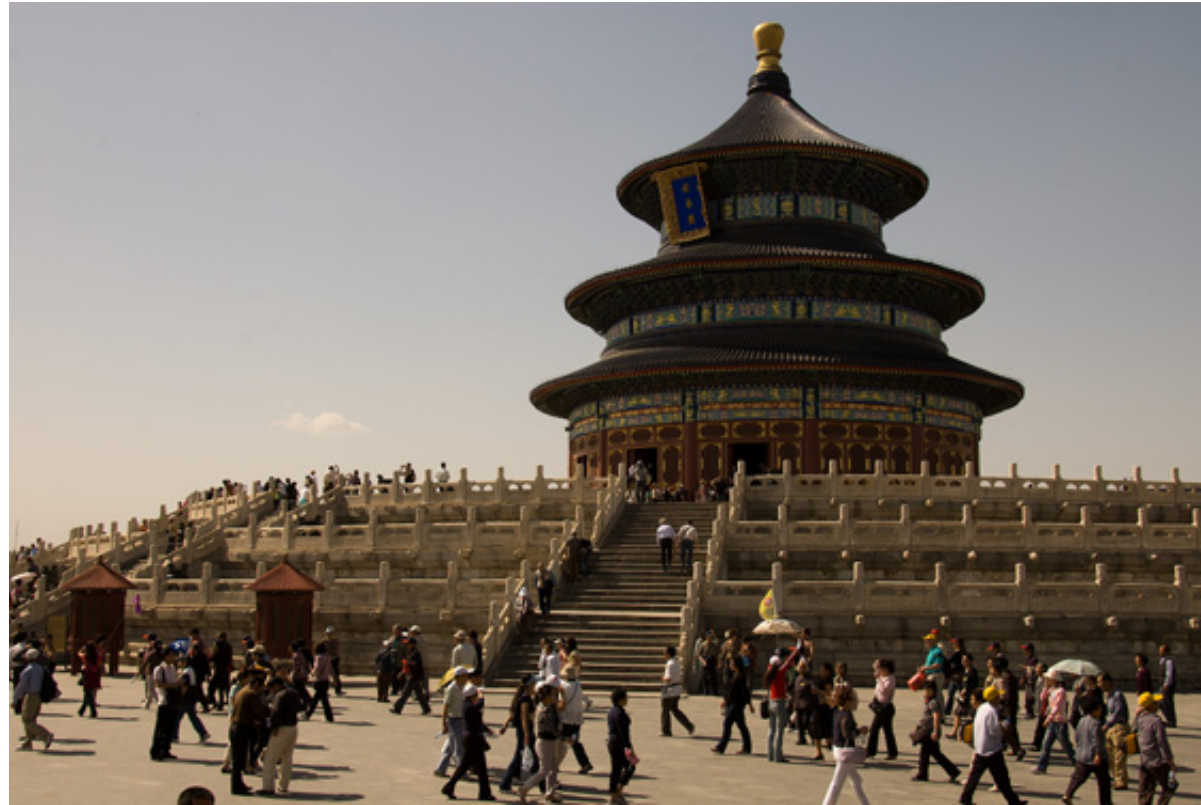


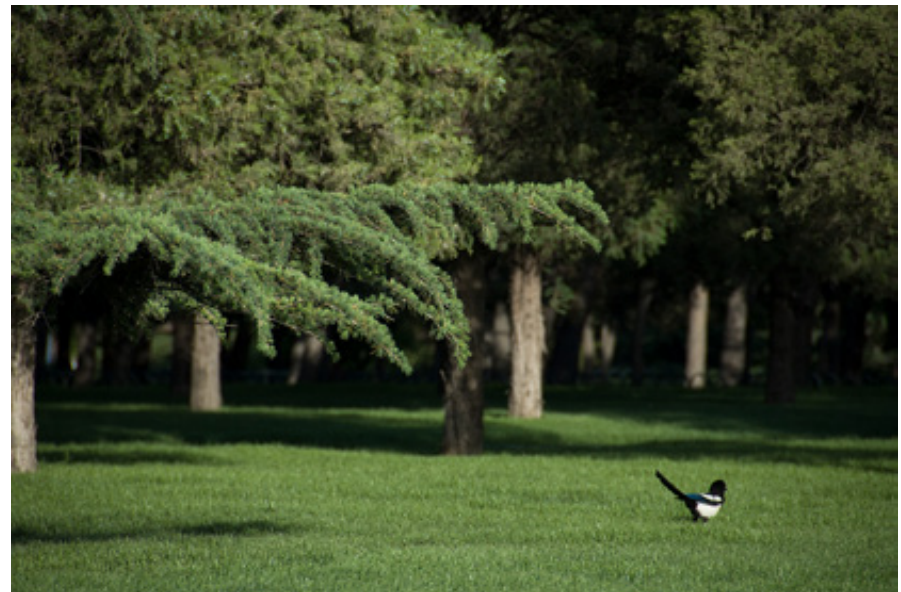


Beijing









The Great Wall





Beijing Pt. II

After putting Tanya on the plane to Israel, I returned back to the hostel. The experience of traveling together for a month made me completely forget what it's like to travel alone. Beijing was happening outside but the only thing that I wanted to do was to stay in the hostel and relax after the whirlwind month of intensive travel that we had been through with Tanya. I had to cover almost a month-long hole in the blog but my mind wasn't really in it. I had four days until I'd get back my passport from the Chinese visa extension office, and during that time I ended up doing pretty much nothing at all.

For the previous couple of weeks I had been toying with the idea of changing my plans for the rest of the trip. The original plan was to go to Tibet, from there to cross to Nepal

and fly back home from India, but after spending a month in China I longed for a serious change of scenery. The countless hours (or days?) that we spent in trains made me realize how much I love train travel, and I figured that this would be my chance to go on the ultimate train ride, the one to end all train rides — the Trans-Siberian Railway, the longest in the world, all the way from Beijing to Moscow. I'd heard a lot about this journey, and knew that I'd have to do it some day, but now I was in Beijing already, so it was an excellent opportunity. For a while I couldn't make up my mind whether to change my plans or not. Then we met two guys in Songpan who gave us some news about Tibet: apparently a couple of Americans burned a Tibetan flag there as a protest in favor of Tibet's independence, infuriating the Chinese government which responded by tightening up the Tibetan permit regulations and making travel to Tibet much more difficult, limited and expensive. If I was waiting for a sign that would help me decide, this was it. Tibet would wait for the next time. I was changing my plans and going to Moscow.

In Beijing we went with Tanya to the Russian embassy in hope of finding information about visa requirements and procedure. While we were looking for it we met a German guy who was just coming from there: he found the embassy closed, and couldn't find out why. We decided to go back together. We chatted up the guard at the entrance gate, got some of the information we needed and then asked him why the embassy was closed. He looked at us wide-eyed and asked if we knew what the date was. Of course. May 9th, Victory Day over Nazi Germany — a national holiday in Russia.



How could we forget? We turned to our German friend who was looking at us expectantly: “So, what did you find?” We didn’t know exactly how to tell him, but eventually we told. His face turned grim. “This is one hell of a story to tell the guys back home: I went to the Russian embassy to get a visa, but couldn’t get it because they were busy celebrating their victory over us that day.” One hell of a story indeed.

I later found out that I couldn’t get a Russian visa in Beijing at all. The embassy, the biggest one in the world (incidentally the second biggest is the Chinese embassy in Moscow), deals only with Chinese nationals. In order to get a visa I’d have to go to Shanghai. But before that, I had to take care of another bureaucratic issue — my passport ran out of free pages, so I had to get a new one. The Israeli consulate in Beijing, to my complete amazement, volunteered to do it in just one day! Compare that to the seven days it takes the Chinese to simply extend their visa. Indeed, the next day I got a brand new passport; having been made in China, it obviously had to be crappy quality, with the lamination looking like it’s going to fall apart any moment. Still, it was a valid document, and the same evening I got on the night train to Shanghai.



Shanghai

Shanghai is like no other city in China: many cities here look modern and developed, but none even close to Shanghai. An assortment of skyscrapers creates a skyline not entirely unlike that of New York, especially when viewed from across



the river: this is Pudong, the newly developed area of the city, home to China's tallest and the world's fourth tallest building, the amazingly beautiful Jin Mao tower. Right next to it the World Financial Center is being built, getting ready to tower even above Jin Mao, although its final projected height is a closely guarded secret. The most familiar icon of Shanghai is the Oriental Pearl, a television tower in the shape of a hypodermic needle, described in the Lonely Planet as "a piece of uninspiring architecture" to which I disagree completely. Shanghai is brightly polished and beautiful; even





its “old city” is a flawlessly finished restoration wrapped in glitz like a candy ready for the tourists to consume.

One unique attraction in Shanghai is the Maglev train line between the city and the airport, which is currently the fastest commercially operating train in the world, clocking 431 km/h at top speed. The line is short, only 30 km., and it takes the train 8 minutes to complete the journey — three minutes to accelerate, two minutes at top speed and three more minutes to brake. During its projected lifetime this line, which cost over \$1.3 billion to build, is not going to recoup even just the costs of its construction, to say nothing of its operating expenses. It is at least as much a tourist attraction as it is a practical way to reach the airport, and that couldn't have been made more conspicuous than by selling discounted round-trip tickets for those who are not interested in the train's destination at all. The ticket price of \$12 both ways is certainly no match to the thrill of riding the fastest moving vehicle on Earth that is available to the general public!

Another peculiar train ride goes in a tunnel beneath the river connecting Pudong to The Bund on the other bank. It is called “The Bund Sightseeing Tunnel”; curious about how a tunnel could possibly be related to sightseeing, I went in. I was envisaging images being projected on the tunnel walls simulating a river ride or perhaps some other scenic journey. The sightseeing, as it happened, worked like this: a voice in the cabin would announce something like “Waves of the Ocean!”, or “Wild Forest!”, or “Rapid Waterfalls!”, and then a bunch of lasers of different colors would move and flash and dance around the windows of the cabin for a little while; then the next announcement would come, and there would be another bunch of lasers. Connecting the announcements to the actual laser shows required immense analytical abilities

which I apparently did not possess. This was certainly one of the most bizarre and surreal “sightseeing” journeys I’ve ever made. From that moment on I’d stick to the metro.

I spent a week in Shanghai navigating the intricate bureaucracy that is getting a Russian visa: first one must receive an “invitation” from a family or a business in Russia, which nowadays is simply purchased on the Internet for \$30; then one must get to the embassy during their scant opening hours (less than 10 hours a week), and then put on a serious face when talking about the visa cost — they basically invent prices depending on mood. Iain, the Australian friend from the Tiger Leaping Gorge related to me how he asked the clerk about the price, and the clerk thought for a minute, said “\$200”, and then asked if the price is OK. Mind you, this is an embassy, not a market, so you wouldn’t really expect this kind of question, but obviously you have no choice but agree if you want to get your visa at all. I got off with \$125. On the same day that I got the visa I hopped on the train back to Beijing.



The last few days in Beijing I spent shopping. I never thought that it’d come to this but there I was, walking between the aisles of the Silk Market looking for stuff



to buy. Beijing's Silk Market is the Mecca of fake brand merchandise; the funny thing about it is that while just a few years ago it was a network of alleys lined with stands, now the Chinese authorities decided to upgrade it and moved it to a newly-built building, shopping-mall-style complete with escalators. An official shopping mall dedicated to fake brands — this is how you know you're in China. And these guys fake everything. From the obvious clothing brands all the way to fake iPods, you name it, they have it. Bargaining starts at about four or five times the expected final price; if you cannot agree on a price and try to walk away they will drag you back by your hand. This whole experience is very unique and very draining; after an hour or two all I frankly wanted was to be left alone and go home.

On the last day, the yield of that shopping effort went into a box together with some other stuff I was carrying that I didn't use, and the box went in the mail on a long journey home, while I went on an even longer journey to a home I once had when I was a kid — the Moscow-bound Trans-Siberian, or more correctly Trans-Mongolian train, with the first stop at Ulaan Bator.



CHAPTER 8
MONGOLIA



Train to Ulaan Bator



The train carriages were unmistakably of Russian origin. I was surprised that after all this time small details like door knobs and emergency stop handles looked familiar. Hot water was provided in *samovars* heated by coals. The Russian language, too, made its first appearance here: the signs on the train were bilingual in Russian and Chinese, and the Mongolian passengers were trying to talk Russian to the Chinese train attendants — 70 years of Soviet influence have not completely gone out the window. I shared a compartment with a Mongolian woman and an American couple from Texas, named Chrissy and Bill Trotter, who were on a year-long trip around the world. They started in South America, continued to Africa, then went on to India, South-East Asia, China and now were heading to Moscow

and from there to Georgia where they'd end their trip.

Our ride started in the early morning and we slept through most of the day. Late at night we reached the Chinese-Mongolian border, where the track gauge changes to the wider Russian standard and the wheels of the carriages had to be replaced for the train to be able to continue into Mongolia. It was a curious operation and fortunately we were able to stay on board and watch it happening. The train was pulled into a hangar where a double track is installed that is able to support wheels of both gauges. The carriages were separated from one another and special hydraulic cranes installed at the side of the track lifted them into the air. The wheel bases, which remained standing on the track, were rolled to the side, and new ones were brought under the carriages from the other end. The carriages were then lowered onto the new wheel bases, and the train exited from the other side of the hangar where the track continues with the new gauge.

Officials first on the Chinese side and then on the Mongolian side went through the train, collected the passports and later gave them back to us stamped with exit and entry stamps. We used the breaks to buy a few cans of beer at the station's shop, and spent the evening drinking it and discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The next day in the morning we arrived at Ulaan Bator.



Ulaan Bator & Terelj

Ulaan Bator, the capital of Mongolia (not the least by virtue of being, basically, the only big city in the whole country), is a smorgasbord of buildings from all periods of history. Soviet-era apartment blocks mix with new fancy office buildings, and *gers*—the traditional felt yurts—are all over the place. The city is not particularly attractive, and this time the Lonely Planet hit the nail on the head. I actually had the opportunity to say that to the author himself — I went to have lunch with Mike Kohn, the American fellow who wrote the Lonely Planet for Mongolia. He was traveling around the country working on the next edition, and some people in my hostel met him on the Chinese border and introduced us in Ulaan Bator. I told him I was going to Terelj, a national park just outside the capital; he said that that area wasn't covered very well in his book, so he gave me whatever information he had and asked for updates. As it happens, Mongolia was the country I stayed the least amount of time in (just three days), and it's the only one where I ended up contributing information to the Lonely Planet.

The way to Terelj, only 80 km., took two hours on an old and tired Korean bus. I stayed with a family for two days, living with them in their *ger*, the traditional Mongolian felt yurt. Three generations of the family live in there, cooking, eating and sleeping together. Unfortunately not even one of them spoke English, so I could not learn anything about their life that I didn't see with my eyes, but even just that was a lot. The *ger* is laid with carpets from within, and has a stove in the middle that is used for heating and cooking. The furniture is very rustic, much of it probably Soviet; there are









only three beds, one of them given to me as a guest, so some of the family members slept on the floor. Two permanent fixtures in the ger are a small-screen TV that is always on, and the ubiquitous cell phone — the village doesn't have land lines, but cell phones work everywhere.

They got an idea of my healthy appetite after the first dinner and since then I was fed enormous meals consisting

mostly of various forms of noodles and mutton. The food is not as bad as most descriptions would make you believe, but it indeed doesn't offer much in the way of variety. In between three meals a day I found some time to hike around the park and lose myself in the endless valleys and the forests that cover the hills. This tiny nation of just 2.8 million people has an enormous territory; Mongolia, in fact, is the country with the lowest population density in the world. Once nomads, now they're mostly settled, growing cattle and goats for subsistence. Other business includes cashmere processing. Other than that it's not an industrialized nation, and it's hard to account for the disproportionate amount of SUVs and other nice rides that so visibly fill the streets of Ulaan Bator.

I returned to Ulaan Bator on the same bus, together with a bunch of Mongolian villagers all dressed up and prepped for their visit of the big city. They may wear old and worn-out stuff in the village, but each one has one or two sets of nice clothes for the city, and the women put on copious amounts of make-up for that occasion. Mongolians, as opposed to the Chinese for example, are very image-conscious. In Ulaan Bator I boarded the train again for the next leg of the journey which would bring me into Russia, stopping in Irkutsk for a visit to Lake Baikal.



CHAPTER 9

RUSSIA



Train to Irkutsk

Chrissy and Bill turned out to be on the same train. Also in our carriage was a big group of Australians, New Zealanders and Europeans who were going together on an organized tour. The rest of the beds were filled with Mongolians and Russians with huge bags and boxes. Immediately as the train left the station a big commotion started. First the train attendant passed through all the compartments and gave every person two huge rolls of salami. Then a Mongolian man put a pair of shoes under each bed. Others followed with blankets, thermoses, clothes, more shoes, and just about any imaginable kind of merchandise. We were nearing the Russian border, and these people were illegal importers trying to avoid paying customs for their wares. By the time we reached the border our compartment looked like a well-



stocked home ready to face a long winter.

The Mongolian side was a breeze. The Russians — that's a whole different story. The customs checking was very thorough and took hours; people were made to unpack all their bags and show every item to the agents. One man from the tour group bought a traditional Mongolian bow; since it's technically a weapon, and importation of weapons is not allowed, they wanted to take it away. He got to keep his souvenir only thanks to the fact that his arrows didn't have sharp points. Some people had to take their baggage out for weighing. I was fairly lucky: after looking at me and my passport, the agent just asked if I had any drugs or weapons, and after hearing my sincere answer, she let me go. After the agents left the train our compartment was quickly cleaned of all the extra baggage and I had to give back my two salamis,

even though I did try convincing the attendant that I had already eaten them.

The Trans-Siberian train is called the “vodka train” among travelers. We tried to buy a bottle of vodka at one of the stations, but they didn’t have any, neither in the kiosk on the platform nor in kiosks outside the station. A Russian kiosk without vodka — that seemed inconceivable. Only later did we find out that due to many incidents of people getting drunk and falling on the tracks in front of trains they prohibited selling vodka near train stations in certain regions, so people go on the train prepared. We, the poor foreigners unaware of local customs, had to do with beer. It still worked out pretty well. Eight of us crammed ourselves into Chrissy and Bill’s compartment and spent the better part of the night there getting doused in Russian beer and playing silly games that involved, among others, sticking Stick-It notes on our foreheads, to the great amusement of the train’s local population.

When we pretty much ready to call it a night, a Russian fellow from the next compartment came in, and asked why we weren’t drinking vodka. When we explained, he said that you just need to talk to the right people, walked out and promptly returned with a newspaper-wrapped bundle. Apparently he *was* the right people. Since our new friend Andrei didn’t speak any English, he talked in Russian and I provided a simultaneous translation, just like in dubbed movies. Some of his already slurred speech proved quite a challenge to translate faithfully — Russian is a rich language, especially in some departments. We drank to our friendship, then to Russia, then to our own countries, and had many more coming but the bottle was over all too quickly. Everybody retired to their compartments and went to sleep.



Irkutsk & Lake Baikal

We arrived in Irkutsk pretty early in the morning, and I went to the hostel, which actually turned out to be just a simple Soviet-era apartment with two rooms fitted with bunk beds. The entrance was from the back of the building and the only signage was a sprayed “HOSTEL” next to the entrance. I left my stuff and went out to see the city.

The fact of being in Russia again was hard to swallow. I couldn't get my mind around it. Everybody was speaking Russian and flashes of familiar things appeared all the time — the city trams which changed little (or rather, haven't changed at all) in the last 30 years; streets named after Lenin and Karl Marx; old ladies on street corners selling cold *kvas* from barrels; finally, a lone survivor of the post-Communist cleanups — a massive statue of Lenin on a high pedestal in

a central square in the city, still boldly pointing the nation the way forward to progress. These days his extended hand points towards a large advertisement billboard; all this together with cell phones, short blouses and black cars with tinted windows creates a new reality that will definitely take me some time to get used to. I walked for a couple of hours without taking even one photo because I was too busy being in shock and couldn't free my mind to it at all.

The weather, too, was a big surprise. When buying a new coat in China, complete with two layers of fleece inside ready for the coldest conditions, I was thinking of my upcoming journey to Siberia. On the way there all I could imagine was bears digging in the snow on the streets. The reality couldn't be further from that. The sun was shining, the temperature was 30 °C, the long-legged Russian blondes were seemingly in a who-has-the-shortest-skirt competition, and they were all winning. This was not exactly the same Russia that I had remembered.

After taking in as much of New Russia as I could in one day I returned to the hostel and packed my bag for Listvyanka, a settlement on the shore of Lake Baikal where I'd be going the next day.

Just five years ago Listvyanka used to be a small forgotten village. Then the explosion of global and domestic tourism suddenly brought in a lot of development and caught it a bit off



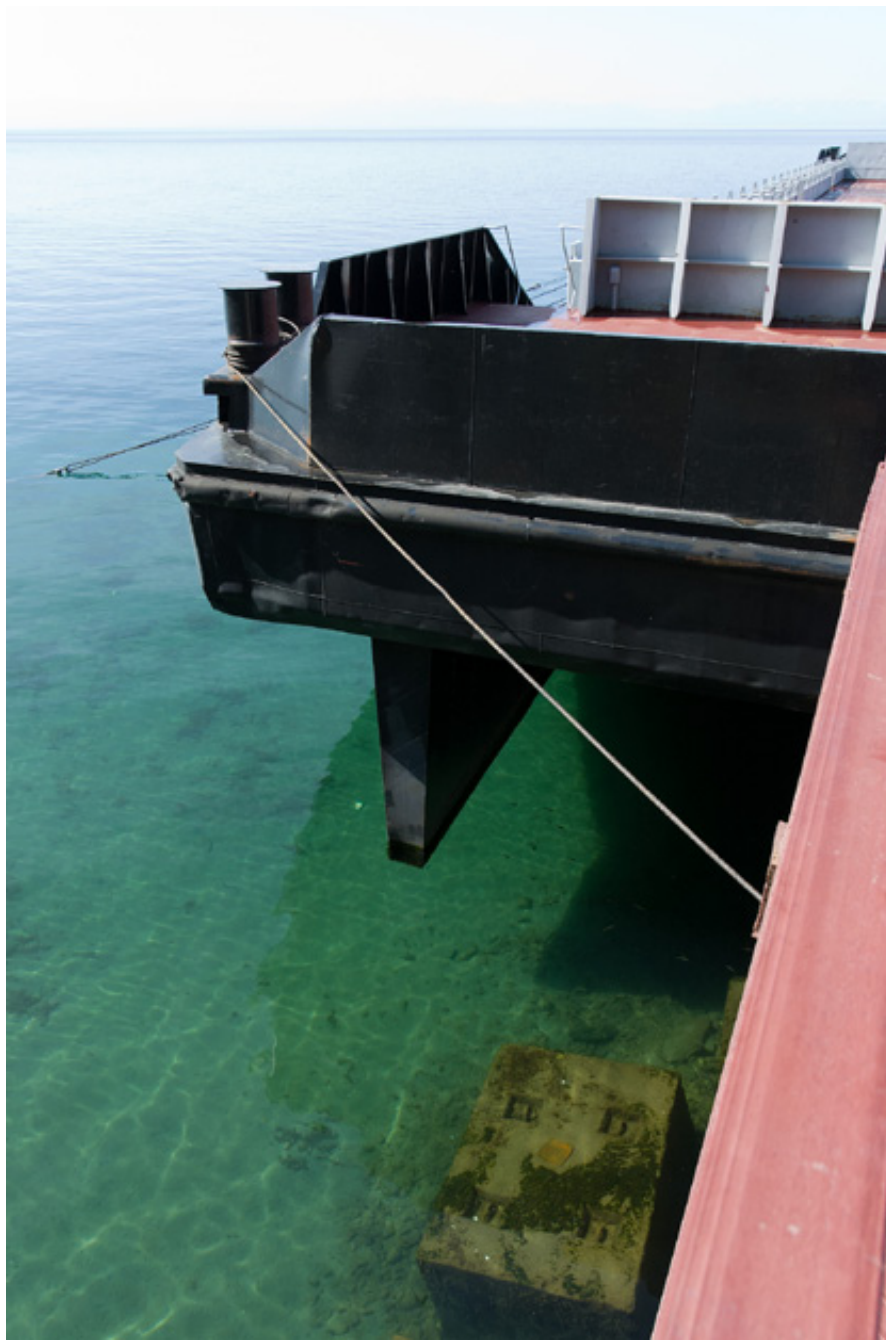


guard. Although there are already quite a few fancy hotels in town, there's still no running water or sewer infrastructure; households with means have their own drillings and pumps, and those without still walk with buckets to the lake shore every morning. Fortunately the water in the lake is exceptionally pure and actually drinkable as-is; the visibility is so good that it makes your head spin when you look down from a pier into the water. Baikal, the deepest lake in the world and holding 1/5th of the world's unfrozen fresh water



supply, is a unique ecosystem with hundreds of animal and plant species that are found nowhere else on the planet. The most famous ones are the *omul* fish and the *nerpa* seal, the only freshwater seal in the world. Omul can be found in every restaurant and kitchen in Listvyanka; the nerpa is a protected animal and two very miserable specimens are on display in the Baikal Museum in a spacious but eerily empty aquarium.

I stayed in a hostel run by a friendly pair called Sergei and Inna, being their only guest during my stay. There's not much to do in Listvyanka except just be there and enjoy the lake view, the fresh air and the excellent Siberian food compliments of Inna's kitchen. This village is popular with nouveau-riche Russians driving down there with their SUVs, and even though the high season hadn't started yet, some were already there picnicking on the beach. A few dared to swim, even though the water temperature in this lake never rises above 10-15 °C. This, undoubtedly, was the alcohol talking. There's also a defunct Soviet-era shipyard with some very photogenic old rusting ships. That pretty much sums up Listvyanka. Two days were just enough; I returned to Irkutsk and boarded the train again for the final leg of the Trans-Siberian journey, 77 hours and almost 5,000 km. long, crossing five time zones and two continents, all the way to Moscow.





Train to Moscow

Chrissy and Bill, unsurprisingly, were here again. Besides them there weren't many people at all. Since the train ticket to Moscow in the second-class compartment is about twice the price of a direct flight, most of the passengers are railway employees who travel for free, or travelers like ourselves that are in it for the experience. This time the train had four quite unusual guests who were going from Irkutsk to Krasnoyarsk — these were drivers in the Pekin-Paris rally whose cars broke down and they were getting their cars fixed and rejoining their friends halfway down the road. The original Pekin-Paris rally took place in 1907; this year a centennial rerun was organized, allowing only antique cars in the race in order to recreate the original atmosphere. About half of those suffered mechanical damage on the rough stretches that pass for roads in Mongolia; one third of them with damages such as broken crankshafts had to go off the road. Fixing these cars is not easy, given that factory parts for most of them ceased to be produced well before their current middle-aged owners were even born; many wanted to quit the race, but due to their high number the organizers put a lot of pressure on them to keep going. With a lot of ingenuity some of them managed to mend and weld their cars back together, and our friends were trucking theirs to Krasnoyarsk to a friend's workshop where they would try to do the same.

Life on the train, especially when it goes half-empty, is not very varied; nevertheless the three days have gone by very quickly. I thought that this time would be enough to get me tired of train travel but upon arriving to Moscow I realized



that I could have stayed another three days on board very easily. The view outside is like a Discovery channel movie: villages, cities, forests, rivers replacing each other on the wide screen of the glass window, to the soundtrack — in its most literal meaning — of the wheels rhythmically beating on the track, the most relaxing sound the world has ever known. Even with our busy schedule of card playing and beer drinking there was still a lot of time left for just gazing out the window and seeing Russian rural life in action. Little kids waved at us on the way to school in the morning, and then other kids in another village waved again on the way back home from school. Passing freight trains roared by quite often; the Trans-Sib is the main artery of this huge country and enormous amounts of cargo pass on it every day, filling endless 60-car trains that use four locomotives to pull the load. The whole track is electrified now, and the locomotives pick up their current from an overhead wire; it is amazing to think how water flowing through a dam on one of Siberia's huge rivers is actually moving our train along the track pushing it from Irkutsk to Moscow — how mind-boggling is this simple concept that we're all used to just take for granted!

Time runs fast on the train. That, after you decide what time it is. What you set your clock to is completely up to you. The train's timetables and the clocks in the carriages are always on Moscow time; the restaurant car operates on local time. Bill tried to keep updating his watch to local time but that proved difficult because we couldn't always tell where we were. I just moved my clock five hours backwards on the second day and started adjusting myself to Moscow's time zone. This is the only place in the world where you actually get a jet lag without ever going on a jet. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the sun doesn't set until about 9:30 PM and there's still light outside after 11 (local time), so the usual perception of time goes completely astray.

In the food department the journey was quite bearable; the restaurant car served decent traditional Russian meals, and some basic things like bread and cheese could be bought in kiosks on the platforms. Therein actually lied a big disappointment: the guidebooks and other travelers' accounts speak a lot about *babushkas* (grandmothers) behind stalls on the platforms selling all kinds of village produce and ready food from their kitchens, and that is supposed to be a big part of the experience of this train journey; we didn't encounter any of those, as the platforms were always empty. I thought that maybe it's not yet the *babushka* season; maybe they're still in their winter hibernation — who knows. But the sad truth turned out to be that they were kicked out by the authorities who are trying to “clean up” the platforms and the railway's image; undoubtedly the managers of the restaurant cars had at least something to do with it. Near the end of the journey one *babushka* appeared with big bags in her hands selling wrapped meals of chicken, meat and potatoes. They were excellent and we were very glad for this illegal *babushka* that saved our journey. Fortunately for me, in Moscow I would have my very own private *babushka*,

and that's a thousand times better than all the world's other *babushkas* combined.

In the afternoon of the second day we reached an important milestone, again in a very literal sense — this specific stone marks the border between Asia and Europe. The guidebook says that an obelisk has been built on that spot, and then goes to great lengths to explain that this is not just a random place chosen to bring in tourist revenue, but the actual border confirmed by geologists studying tectonic plate movements. We were very anxious to see it. It was going to appear on the southern side of the train where the other track passes; although that day seemed to be light on oncoming traffic, we were just talking about how annoying it would be if a passing train appeared together with the obelisk, when Crissy shouted “There it is!” And what do you know — a short train, perhaps only five carriages long, passed us exactly at that time; after two seconds when it was gone, the obelisk was already out of view. Our angry screams brought some inquiring looks into the compartment. But it was all right. Who cares about a stupid little obelisk? We were in Europe. With triumphant looks — Chrissy and Bill had just entered the sixth and last continent of their trip — we lifted our beers and cheered to a small world, so small that you open your can in one continent and throw it away in another.

After a three-day-long journey, our train finally rolled into Moscow. My grandfather, whom I haven't seen for 8 years, met me on the platform. I recognized him right away. Together we left the train station, went to another one right next to it that serves destinations around Moscow, and took a train to our *dacha*, the summer house outside the city where I spent many summers as a kid.

Kratovo

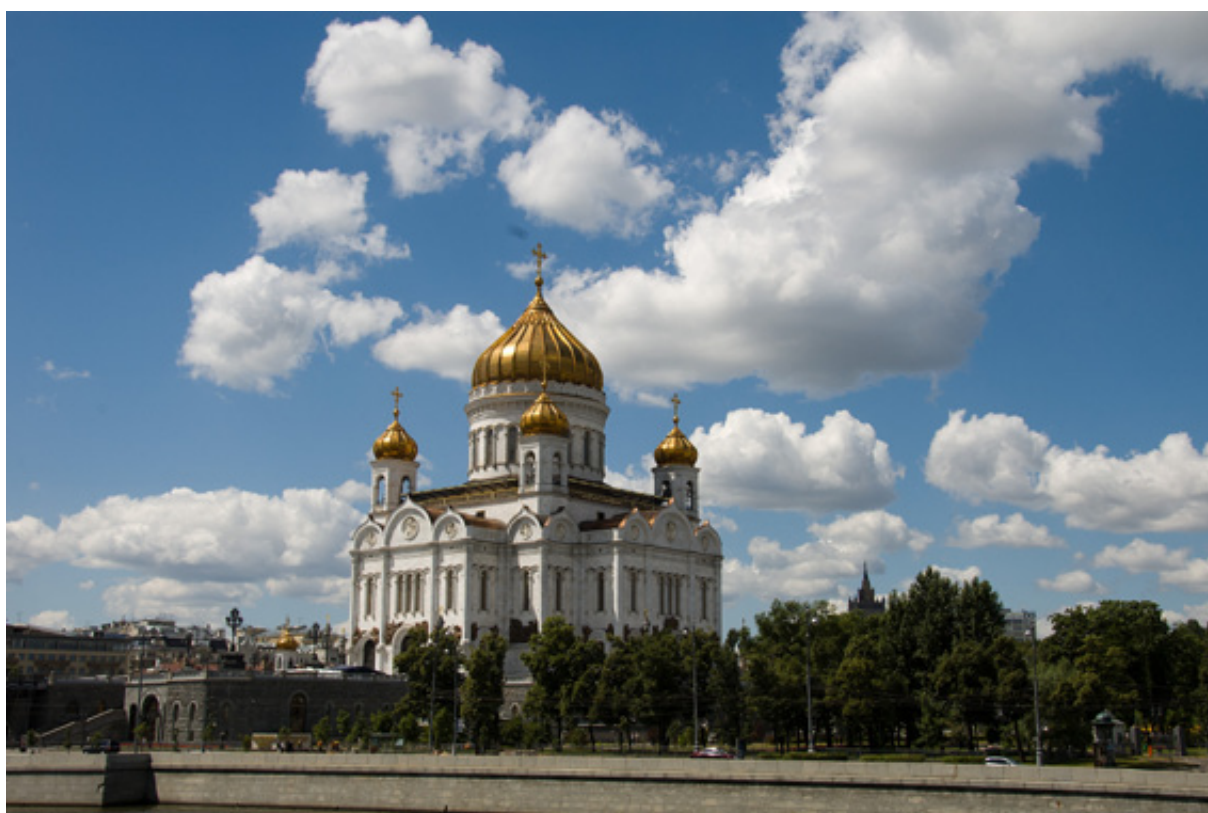








Moscow













St. Petersburg

















*I hug this world
and I kiss this sky*



