

GOING EAST

George Orwell wrote in 1927: “When you are tired of London, you are tired of life.” I had been living in London for four years and had travelled all over the British Isles and Europe, with different friends and in different seasons. “Maybe it’s time I returned to Melbourne,” I thought. I’d never had the thought before but eventually, it wouldn’t go away. The only thing I missed in all this time was the AFL but here I was contemplating an Aussie summer. I could feel the heat, and smell the ocean. Most of my friends were married, had kids and dogs, mortgages ... the full catastrophe.

Years earlier, I had travelled to Morocco. Loved the people and the scenery. Loved it enough to return three more times. I had learned a few words of Arabic and could count to 20. So, if this was to be my last travel adventure, Morocco surely triggered the crazy idea which was fermenting for days. I wanted to do something a little unusual and challenging. I’d travel south through France, across the Mediterranean to Tunisia and then go east, right across North Africa to Egypt and the Red Sea. I didn’t know how I’d reach India from there but I didn’t care. I’d simply keep heading east.

“I’ll be in that!” “Far out, I’ll come with you.” “Do you want some company? You can’t do that alone!” No thanks, everyone. This was going to be a solo trip. All my previous travelling in Southern Africa and Europe had been by car or van with mates or girlfriends. In this case, I’d travel lightly and wouldn’t have to worry about safety and debating where to eat or sleep.

Two sets of clothes and the ones I was wearing. Toiletries and a pair of sandals. A sleeping bag tied to the handle of an overnight bag ended the complications. I didn’t need a map. I’d just keep on heading east. South east or north east perhaps, as long as it was easterly.

London to Paris and a midnight train to Marseilles. Ferry to Tunis and Europe was left behind. I hitched out of the city. My first lift was on a small motorbike. I hung onto my bag with one hand and held onto the driver with the other for 40 kilometres. A promising start. Things will get better. Of course, they didn’t. The first car to stop was driven by an excited Arab who insisted I meet his family and stay the night. The next day another Tunisian wanted me to meet his entire village. I was a prized novelty. They were showing me off to their friends. At this rate, I’ll take 18 months to get home! Along the coastline into southern Tunisia. The traffic has disappeared. The narrow road went east with the occasional minor road or track turning south into the Sahara. Three hours in the sun and four cars passed me. Featureless. Flat. Forlorn. That was the scenery. I was feeling slightly that way too. There was an old sign nearby. Bullet holes through it. Le Caire. Cairo. 1852 kilometres. For the first time, I thought, ‘I really must be outta my mind!’ A car stopped with four men in it. We couldn’t communicate very well but schoolboy French and sign language did it. We were going east and they drove through the night into Libya and Tripoli, the capital.

The visa stamp I got in London stated: “No Entry to Egypt at Libya Borders. Rocket installations. Border closed.” I still believed I’d find a way through so I hitched to Benghazi and then on to Tobruk and El Alamein.

Acres and acres of beautifully kept headstones. How many Australians had died here? Days earlier, I had visited the magnificent Roman ruins of Leptis Magna and there was not a single tourist. No tourists here either. But I couldn’t get into Egypt. One Libyan guard even had a nephew living in Sydney but he couldn’t help me. So, I went back (west) for 400 kilometres.

Benghazi is beautiful in a dusty, dirty and dilapidated way. Empty

buildings everywhere. Half completed construction sites on every street. Three streets back from the harbour, a large 12-floor site was boarded up. Weeds growing along the fences and gates. I went through a hole in the fence and up four flights of concrete stairs. Nothing on any floor except debris, concrete blocks and concrete stairs. No windows or doors. I dropped my bag and camped behind a large column where I could see the Mediterranean. So happy with my ‘hotel’, I stayed three nights. The continuous tension between Israel and Egypt had frightened Europeans away. And Colonel Gaddafi was frightening them as well. Arab kids were the only ones to show any interest in me and they helped guide me around. At this stage, I had been averaging two showers a week. My concrete ‘hotel’ didn’t have water, of course, but I learned to enjoy stand-up washes using bottled water. Food wasn’t exciting but little lamb kebabs and salad were plentiful. So, food was my only expense apart from the occasional room where I could shower and wash some clothes.

I spent an entire day trying to find a boat going to Egypt. If there were any, they weren’t interested in taking me. Flying wasn’t on my itinerary but I was forced to fly Libyan Air to Cairo. A straight line east.

Cairo was different. I’d never been in a war zone before unless you count Belfast and Londonderry. Cairo was on high alert but Ulster had felt more dangerous and explosive. Sand-bagged defences on every corner with heavy artillery aimed towards Israel. No tourists. I spent a day in the famous Egyptian museum. Shared it with perhaps seven visitors. Even the Pyramids were deserted.

Once again, going directly east to Suez was impossible so I bussed it to Alexandria and jumped on a boat to Cyprus, then east on yet another boat to Beirut. Half of the city had been destroyed by shelling but the other half was thriving. I loved it. No wonder it is called the ‘Paris of the East’. I hitched over the mountains to Damascus. One of my lifts was in a battered old Toyota. Six large bullet holes along one side. My side. My driving companions were highly amused as I took photos of the car. I was forced to go around Israel as every Arab country would have barred me when they saw the Israeli stamps. Hitching was easy as I’m willing to act like a fool whenever a car approached. The Arabs would stare to see if I was demented or a clown. South from Damascus to Jordan and then east across serious deserts into Iraq and Baghdad. No signs of war here. And the Tigris river is magnificent; almost an equal to the Nile. Almost. Nightly sunset walks along the banks with cooking fires (catch of the day) and lamps. A million palm trees. I’m slowly becoming an Arab.

A Kuwaiti engineer stopped for me. He is fluent in English. He has a mighty laugh and his name is Mohammed Ali. He plays The Doors’ “Light My Fire” on rotation for hours as we drive south-east to Basra and then on to Kuwait City. More desert. Oil wells. A new city on the coast. My modus operandi, when I arrive in a new town, is to leave my bag with the owner of a coffee house so I can wander around unimpeded. The first thing I search out is somewhere safe to sleep. The beach is wider than Bondi and it’s deserted except for a flotilla of boats and ships which have been hauled up on the sand where they sit forlornly on timber props. I sleep under one of them. Kuwait City is less than a kilometre away. No-one seems to live here. New buildings. Beautiful cars. No people. I was the only visitor when I saw the sign for blood donors at the new hospital. They gave me a cup of tea and \$180.

I slept so well under my boat the first night but on the second morning, I woke after hearing noises and movement all around me. Six am, half-light. “Has trouble come to find me?” I can’t fight and I can’t run. I peer out and there are five little kids squatting just metres

away. Wide eyes. Big grins. I try “good morning” in Arabic but they all run off giggling and squealing with delight. There’s no crime in Kuwait.

Since the Arabs were great sailors and explorers, the designs of some ships haven’t altered in centuries. It didn’t take me long to find one going across the Arabian Gulf to Iran. The crew of six slept and cooked on the deck. At the stern, there was a long plank protruding five metres with a safety rope to guide you on the walk above the swell. A bucket sat on the plank. Go to the toilet. Face into the wind. Drop the bucket into the sea then haul it up on the rope and wash your bum. Then wash your hands. To finish, walk back along the plank to the safety of the pitching deck. I waited for the applause but no-one even noticed.

The most outstanding single memory in all my travelling is lying on the deck of this flying two-masted Arab dhow and watching the Arabian stars and the sails and ropes and spray. Ali Baba and Sinbad, I’m right with you. After two nights and a day, we slowly sailed into the Tigris/Euphrates river to berth at Khorramshahr, a thriving port town in Iran. A small room. A shower. Bliss. I didn’t want to leave Khorramshahr. Just saying the word makes me feel good. A bus took me east or north-east towards Teheran. Four chickens in a cage sat on the seat beside me.

More buses – some had more animals on board than people.

They had the window seat but we agreed to swap. Iran is a big country but I’m impatient to reach the capital. More buses – some had more animals on board than people. I tried to talk to the animals but they couldn’t understand English either.

I’d spent around six weeks travelling so far. Am I at the halfway point on the road home? No idea, but it’s starting to get very cold and the mountains are already white with October snow. It’s weird to see so many Europeans but this is the hippy trail. Europe, Istanbul, Teheran to India. For weeks people have asked me where I am from and where I am going, but that has stopped now. I’m no longer a novelty.

A week prior to leaving London, I had transferred some money to a bank in Teheran and another in Calcutta. I was low on funds by this stage but I found the bank and my money was there. A train (the first since Paris) took me east and then I hitched a truck ride to the border. At 10pm, I walked across 100 metres of no-man’s-land and I was in Afghanistan. Lamps. Horses. Tribesmen. Hovering black mountains. The next few days were a blur but it was cool, man! I drank lots of tea yet I felt drugged most of the time. What were they putting in the tea? Everyone I met seemed stoned. Halfway to the capital, Kabul, I stayed in a small village for a night. Only four or five streets. I even had a bed on the floor. Into a tea house for some food and tea. Some German guy offered me a pipe then he left. I felt very strange. Blame the tea! Out in the street, it’s a movie scene. Severe dust storm. Shrieking winds. Panicked horses. Camels. Dogs. People. Chaos. I can’t find my room. Can’t even find my street! Not for the first time, I think, I’m out of my mind. Blame the tea!

“Everything goes very slowly here,” says this far-out American hippy. “Just take your time, man.” He was washing some tomatoes beside the road in this mountain village. Took 15 minutes to wash four tomatoes. It was good advice and I left him to it. I often wonder if he is still there.

Not sure how but I did reach Kabul. My passport was close to expiry so I stayed here to update it. I didn’t want to leave. Days flew. Kites flew. This was the first of the magical mystery towns of the hippies: Kabul, Kathmandu, Kashmir and Kuta.

The further east I travelled, the more crowded it became. Another bus through the Hindu Kush and the Khyber Pass. Into Pakistan. Ramadan ended as I reached Lahore. Could it get anymore crowded? Took a train into India but couldn’t get a seat. The crowd was insane but after almost

getting into a fight, I found a spot. I slept in the overhead luggage rack. Yet another room with a view as we rolled east into New Delhi.

Two weeks later, I went north into Nepal and Kathmandu. After four months of slow travelling, it was already December. Numbing cold. I’d bought a karakul wool coat in Afghanistan and it saved my life. I found a room for four nights. No running water. A small mattress on the floor. It was overlooking a busy street. A room plus a view again. The power went off and on at random as there was limited supply. I hadn’t had a decent wash in three days so I requested a bucket of hot water from ‘room service’. Waited three hours. Finally, I stood beside the bucket for ‘a head-to-toes stand-up wash’ with soap and towel handy. All the dirt ran down but the water was barely warm and they’d charged me \$2. The next morning, I learned that the wood for the fire to warm the water had come from four kilometres away. A girl had walked to get it. I couldn’t stand the thought of someone carting firewood for my water so I never requested it again. To this day, I’m full of gratitude when hot water comes out of my shower. Kathmandu became my home for a short while. Saw my first Buddhist nun (a chick monk!). Each night I would sit in a little temple, anywhere in the city, and ring a bell or use finger chimes and chant. I chanted until I became enchanted. Mystical heaven with the Himalayas watching on for free.

Not so surprising, I went east (or south-east) again to Calcutta. Very low on money yet again but found the bank where I had transferred my money. They had no record. Down to a few dollars. I couldn’t bear the thought of trying to sleep in the filth of the streets so I sought out the Salvation Army Hostel. Very clean. Very crowded with travellers. I had to wait three days for money to arrive so I could book a flight to Melbourne. Couldn’t get to sleep the first night in the hostel even after a warm shower. My mattress was rumbling and rustling. The bed was gyrating with bed bugs. I slept on the floor.

Three days later and still no money. I sold my little Super-8mm movie camera so I could eat. Many Indians and dozens of others along the way asked if I was a rock star. I said, “Yes! Of course!” and signed my autograph. In Calcutta, when they asked, I said, “Yes! Have you heard of Johnny and The Bed Bugs?” Most of them ‘knew’ the band ...

I sent a postcard from Kathmandu which read, “Sorry Mum and Dad, but I won’t make it home for Christmas. See you in mid-January.” The card arrived on December 18. I took my last flight east to south-east to Melbourne. A suburban train went east (of course!) and I walked the last two kilometres with my little bag to the back door of our home at 6.15pm on Christmas Eve. Exactly as I had planned when I left London.

“What’s for tea, Mum?” The shock of seeing me standing there almost killed my mother, which wasn’t in the plan. A few tears, then buckets of tears. So I was home! Now after two marriages and two kids and a few catastrophes of my own, I’m learning Spanish. Next year I’ll start walking in Santiago, Chile and head north without a map. Eventually I’ll reach Peru, Central America and Mexico. Maybe even California. 

AUTHOR JOHN WILSON

After working in media in Melbourne, he “gave up the serious stuff” to drift around the world. “Apart from two marriages and two kids, I’ve achieved virtually nothing,” he says, laughing. He’s done over 40 different kinds of work from factory hand to videographer. “I managed some rock bands in London but their egos were gigantic,” he says. “At one time I owned three houses then found myself possessing zilch yet I’ve never been happier. I’m grateful for having happy genes and my kids love me.”



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