



EUROPE ON \$5.00 A DAY

in a Morris J-Van

*When the EU and we first met,
We were just five and
not quite twenty-four.*

*She was not quite twenty
and had lots to teach
two innocents.*

Frances and Ophelia Cowell

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Introduction what, why, when

What we did, why we did what we did and when we did it.

This trip was bound to have its difficulties, beginning with who was actually going. Alan had proposed it. A boyfriend and teacher of disabled children, he had just missed out on secondment to a school in south-eastern England and, having got excited about the prospect of a year in Europe, we decided to go anyway. We would be accompanied by my four-year-old daughter, Ophelia, who would thus celebrate her fifth birthday in London and her sixth somewhere between London and Sydney.

Ophelia would miss her first year of school, another reason to go when we did, as any delay would need to be for at least thirteen years: in other words, it would never happen. Having attended pre-school for two years, she was well capable of making up the lost kindergarten year and I reasoned that the experience of Europe would be much more instructive and enriching than another year of pre-reading.

Indeed, she was already partly equipped for the northern Winter, with her hand-me-down faux-fur overcoat with padded lining, worn in all seasons, including Sydney's 30-degree days. Now it would turn out to be really useful. Otherwise, we planned to buy cheap winter clothing in London. That was the easy part.

Less easy to resolve was the bad relationship: I had recently discovered that my *beau* was cheating on me. In retrospect, it's hard to blame him, as I was especially difficult to get on with: work had been going all wrong since a big demotion following my refusal to sleep with the head of personnel, and sabotage by my immediate supervisor, a WWII veteran, with strong antipathy to: 1) single mothers, working mothers - single or otherwise - and people studying part-time in tandem with their day jobs. I ticked all boxes, so he was making my life suitably impossible. Sailing and jetting off to the other side of the world was appealing, bad relationship notwithstanding.

Then there was the money - or lack of it. For Australians and New Zealanders with limited means, the cost of just getting to Europe was such that you had to stay at least a year to make it worth-while. That meant working for several months of that year, and budget travelling for the rest of it.

I had been able to store up recreational leave, which I cashed in when I resigned my job. We both cashed in our accumulated pensions, which at 23 and 25 years old, amounted only to a couple of thousand dollars. Following the second oil shock, the headline unemployment rate in Britain was closer to 20% than 10%, so finding work there could turn out to be very difficult. But we were undeterred.

Someone had given us an out-of-date copy of Arthur Frommer's *Europe on \$5.00 a day*. The author had in mind per person, excluding travel and accommodation costs. We decided the three of us would live on that - all inclusive. Meanwhile, with global inflation also hovering around double digits, Frommer's \$5.00 had become more like \$8.00, but we were working with \$5. The most amazing thing perhaps is that we more or less managed it.

Nearly forgot to mention the constitutional crises that Australia had suffered a year earlier: an elected government that the British sovereign's Australian representative deemed unsuitable was deposed in favour of one that was incompetent (but more monarchist). On 29 November, less than a week before our scheduled departure, the new government was forced to devalue the currency by a whopping 17.5%. Preferring not to leave things until the last minute, I had already transferred the bulk of my wealth into a French franc account and had bought a few hundred dollars' worth of USD traveller's cheques. In the days before automatic teller machines, this was important. I had been nagging Alan to buy his traveller's cheques, so was less than sympathetic to his bad humour when he was caught out. The cost of his trip had just gone up by nearly 20%.

Its easy to forget how costly a rigid and poorly-managed economy can be to ordinary citizens. A regular return flight to London for Ophelia and me would have cost more than I earned in a year, mainly because of exorbitant airport departure taxes imposed by our own government. A much cheaper, more fun, but slower alternative was ship-jet: sailing, or steaming, to Singapore, then flying to London. Packages abounded, only adding to the excitement. We would fly to Perth, bus to Fremantle, ship to Singapore and spend two nights there before boarding a charter flight to London. Instead of a few thousand, it was a few hundred dollars, all transfers and meals included.

I had quit my job and handed in the keys to my rented flat on the bank of Botany Bay, piled all my furniture and stuff into the caravan parked in the garden at Alan's parents' home where we spent our last night, December 2, 1976, before they drove us to the airport.

Shortly after take-off I realised I'd left the only jacket I owned on the bed there. I would freeze on contact in Europe.

So far, I have written from memory. From here I am assisted by an imperfectly-kept diary, a gift from a beloved aunt of Alan's, which has been sitting in amongst old photos for many decades, together with a large road-map, on which I had assiduously plotted, soon after returning to Oz, the course we had followed.



I Embarcation - 3 December, 1976

Dinner with the captain of the Kota Singapura. Ophelia loses a flag, gains a new friend and takes joint second prize for fancy dress. We all cross the equator.

It was frustrating for three excited youngsters to be diverted via Melbourne, but eventually we got to Perth, and then by bus about 50km to Fremantle, where the Kota Singapura waited, emanating, when the wind turned, the distinct, if unexpected aroma of sheep and cattle. After some eye-rubbing, our disbelief turned to astonishment to realise the bottom deck was occupied by several hundred head of cattle and the one immediately above it was full of sheep. For most of the trip, they weren't noticeable, but when the wind blew strongly enough in the same direction as the ship, well, you became aware of their presence.

Four hundred excited travellers waited too, for hours it seemed, until someone decided that we'd be easier to manage in our cabins unpacking our suitcases than on the quay complaining. A souvenir vendor circulated, from whom we bought Ophelia a little Australian flag. By cruise-ship standards, the Kota Singapura was small, accommodating, in addition to its bovine and ovine passengers, about 250 humans. The human cargo consisted of a lot of twenty-somethings heading to Europe for a big adventure, some older holiday-makers destined for South-East Asia and several dozen English-Australian families heading home to spend Christmas with family. Importantly, there were several dozen children on board.

Ophelia was cross because she had lost her flag. Someone suggested that the captain had taken it.

At the welcome cocktail reception, the organiser gave a little speech. Given his suit and tie, Ophelia assumed him to be the captain, which amused him until she demanded loudly before the assembly that he return her flag to her.

For reasons still unclear, we were assigned to the Captain's table, together with two of our fellow passengers: a very retiring and seemingly very well-bred twenty-something woman of stunningly few words, and an elderly man, who, by way of conversation, informed us that the sheep and cattle were his. I was interested and asked if he took them everywhere he went, which produced a slightly embarrassed silence. Insensitive, and feeling that I was getting the hang of the small-talk, I turned to the Captain and asked how many passengers there were on the boat. He replied that there were seven boats on the ship. He dined in his cabin after that.

Our cabin had a double bed, two single bunks and a private bathroom, which to me was quite a luxury. Ophelia insisted on sleeping in the top bunk, but when a night of turbulent seas threw her out of it and across the cabin, we convinced her to accept the bottom one.

Alan caught a cold and was grumpy for the whole six days. Ophelia is having a sensational time. The organisers had the inspiration to engage an old Chinese amah to supervise the children, who had their own play area underneath the main dining salon - and their own pool on the very top deck, between the ship's funnels.

Speaking not English, she did a fine job, from just after breakfast to after their evening meal at 18.30, when they would be handed back, exhausted, for cleaning and bedding down. Andrea and Ophelia, being about the same age, had joined forces: two slightly precocious, freckled five-year-olds, one with green eyes and the other blue-eyed, charmed everybody on board.



The day before we were to arrive in Singapore, we crossed the equator. The tradition is that anyone for whom this would be their first crossing would need to be “initiated”. The initiation ceremony entailed two of them being nominated King

Neptune and Queen Aphrodite. Seated on their deck-chair thrones, they were to throw food at each of the other participants in turn, who would then rinse themselves by jumping in the pool. When each had been so initiated, they would collectively throw the king and queen into the now-disgusting soup of tomato sauce, ice cream and heaven knew what else. Alan's humour was not improved when I was voted Queen Aphrodite and although it was his first equatorial crossing and his cold was much better, he stayed in the cabin, sulking.

That evening was the costume ball, with prizes for the best costume. The organisers had thought of everything, with lots of crepe paper to make costumes. I proposed we dress Andrea and Ophelia as little angels, in robes of white, with little wings and halos. Red, pointed tails dragging behind them identified them as Devils in Disguise. This won second prize, the first being taken out by an even cuter dribbling two-year old in a red and green Robin Hood costume.

II Foreign soil - Singapore - 10 December, 1976

Shopping, exploring, a betjak ride and a luxury hotel - with pool. A flight to London delayed seven hours. Impressions of Karachi, Istanbul and Frankfurt.

Lee Kwan Yew was serious about cleaning up Singapore and transforming it from a disease-ridden, but colourful slum to its current high-rise, sterile efficiency. Changi airport was brisk and efficient, and a bus took us to the Excelsior Hotel in Orchard Road - this was the aspirational, manicured part of Singapore. Except in films, I had never in my life seen such luxury, and never imagined I would actually stay in such a place. Quite different from the Australian country pubs we'd occasionally stopped in, where you walked the length of cold, lino-floored corridors to a bathroom with stained and cracked ceramic tiles, nineteenth century basins and faucets, claw-foot baths with worn ceramic and exploding instantaneous gas water heaters. In lieu of greasy eggs and bacon on cold toast, breakfast at the Excelsior was the most opulent buffet I could never have imagined. Yet the English returning home complained the lack of toast! Toast! Isn't that one of the things we want to get away from? What about the amazing pastries, tropical fruit, and (non-greasy) eggs cooked six different ways?

Then there were other things: storm gutters 40cm wide and 60cm deep, with little foot-bridges so you could cross them. Police that checked the length of the boys' hair - if it went below the collar, they would cut it. Yet some remnants of colonial Singapore remained, such as the quay-side shops, oddly august-looking Victorian-era administrative buildings that spoke of the wealth once generated by the colonies - and of course Raffles Hotel. We ate at an overpriced place in Albert Street called Fatty's, but later learned that the best place to eat was *Bugit* Street.

Our first mission was to buy a camera, as they, like much else, were much cheaper than at home, so we headed out. Alan insisted on a ride in a *betjak*, which I hated: the wiry little man pedalling furiously in steaming heat for a pittance. I felt overweight even though I wasn't. Alan probably weighed at least twice that of our chauffeur. I felt ashamed - from now on we would walk or take a taxi.

We had to go to Change Alley. I wanted a carved wooden statue and found a lovely Hindu dancer, but didn't really enjoy bartering. Not that it was expensive, it wasn't - and so what if it had been? The vendor probably needed the money more than I did (though the *betjak* driver needed it even more). Anyway, I'm lousy at haggling: always feel a bit ripped off. We wandered around lots more, learning what sore feet really felt like, and ate in *Bugit Street*, our first genuinely Asian meal. After a day and a bit, we felt we'd seen pretty much all there was to see in Singapore, which alas was probably true.



Our flight the following day was due to leave at 11.00, but on arriving at the airport, we gleaned that it was delayed. Each wave of new announcements began to speak of a pretty long delay and I was worried about how a small child was going to cope with boring eight hours in a crowded airport lounge followed by a seventeen-hour flight, all in the company of forty-odd boozing, smoking, loud Ozzie blokes. Young mothers develop the ability to think quickly, and I dove onto the luggage conveyer, extracted our swimsuits from our bags and herded us back to the hotel to wait it out by the swimming pool, periodically ringing the airport to see what was going on. That worked, and we were back at the airport for our departure at 18.00.

But what a flight! Rules were lax then, and, after a whole day playing in the swimming pool, Ophelia was bound to sleep, so I made a bed for her on the floor under our legs so we could spread out over her seat while she slept underneath us. Nowadays, Singapore to London is a single, non-smoking, twelve- or thirteen-hour hop. Our first leg was six hours and got us as far as Karachi. I'll never forget the smell of mass open defecation. Being girls, we had to go straight to the ladies, where I was taken aback by an old woman demanding a dollar for a single square of toilet paper. (Ophelia grabbed the paper and went into the toilet, leaving the woman speechless.) I was also taken aback by the expanse of white marble - of the whole transit lounge, but especially the ladies, where holes in the marble represented the toilets themselves. On the other hand, fifty cents bought three bottles of Coca-cola - with Arabic lettering on them.

The blokes had by now drunk and smoked themselves to near-oblivion, and fell asleep as soon as we re-boarded the flight, so we too could rest until interrupted after just seven hours by an emergency landing in Istanbul for a passenger with peritonitis. Emergency surgery - in Istanbul! How much would he have given to be able to brave it the four remaining hours to London? Or two hours to Frankfurt - where we had a scheduled stop and European Winter air filled the cabin as they opened the forward door (airbridges had not yet been thought of).

III The Shock of London - 13 December, 1976

Victoria Station hell. Coming to terms with jet-lag and London and real, third-world accommodation. A pad in trendy Chelsea and planting feet on Monopoly board addresses. Ground rules. Work.

It was early morning when we arrived at Stanstead, which then consisted of a small control tower beside a single-storeyed wooden structure of perhaps 60 square metres in a picturesque field of mist and cows. They said the ambient temperature was five degrees, but that seemed doubtful as puddles in the mud road had frozen solid. In my stylish, light, polyester top and jeans, I hurried down the stairs and across the short distance from plane to terminal and then to bus, which, after an hour or so, deposited us at Victoria Station. Rather, dumped us, as: the tour company, having fulfilled its contract, clearly wanted no more to do with us. Victoria was as chaotic, grey and forbidding then as it is now and I still hate the place. Jet-lagged, cold and confused - except Ophelia, that is, who was well-rested and warm as toast in her furry overcoat. In the early morning gloom, we had no idea how to get our bearings, so were obliged to take a taxi the mile and a half to the NAT Hotel in Cromwell Road, where we had a booking.

NAT stood for North Africa Tours. Some dubbed it Never Again Tours, but that was unfair, as in fact the services were very good, especially for the prices. NAT was owned by a group of enterprising South Africans, and welcomed antipodeans of all sorts with cheap dormitory long- and short-term accommodation, a mail holding service, a range of group tours around Britain and the Continent and regular, free, day-trips to places of interest near London. The notice board advertised flats and temporary employment. It gave you a sense of belonging, a place to come "home" to, where there would always be a roof over you head, however basic.

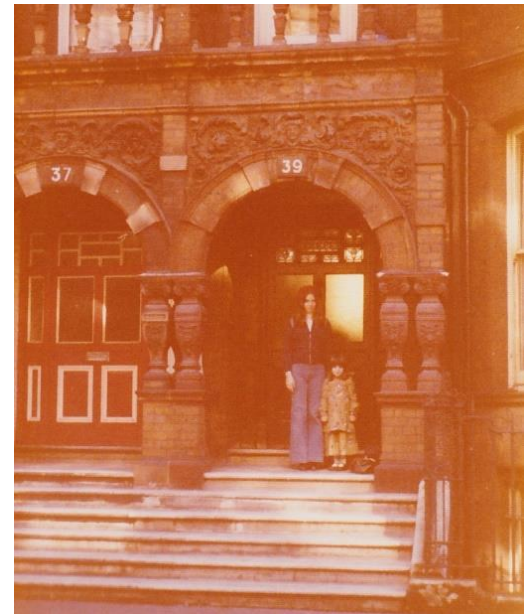
Basic was the operational word here. The hotel in London reminded me of the rented homes of poor aunts and uncles in the 1950s and the country pubs we'd stopped in in Australia, smelling perpetually of damp, with ancient plumbing fixtures, linoleum floors and rickety staircases - features I though had disappeared with my grandparents. The UK seems to have somehow missed the boom - but I still suspect that this had been a choice they'd made.

Arthur Frommer had told us we could eat cheaply at a chain of restaurants known as The Pot Restaurants. Not that cheap, but copious comfort food guaranteed to pile on the kilos. We had our first London meal at one of them around the corner from the Hotel, in Earl's Court, a cliché for and of Australians. A news-stand at the entrance to the tube there distributed "The Australasian Express". So numerous were we and New Zealanders that we merited our own weekly.

The first night was a shocker. Wide awake at 3.00, too cold to go out, we decided to listen to the radio, but were staggered to find that, unlike Australia, where radio is 24 hours a day, British radio stations shut down shortly after midnight. That was a long night, and a very late morning. The NAT hotel staff dealt with that too, and knew not to wake us up to arrange our room. But we missed breakfast.

The first task was to find a flat for three months, then some work, school for Ophelia. And buy some warm clothes!!

Alan found a single-room flat at 39 Draycott Place in Chelsea, which then was affordable. It had a small cook-top, fridge, wash-basin and a shower. Well, what counts as a shower in Britain: Australians often joke about the Brits' attitude to showering, and now I began to understand why. A moulded plastic cubicle stood against the wall beside the wash basin. The felt floor in front of it was damp and a bit mouldy, with a cheap, rubber-backed mat covering the mould. The toilet was across the hall outside our room - we shared it with another, similar room on the same floor. It would do us until late March, when we planned to leave London to tour Britain. The bonus was the Australian couple in the other ground-floor flat, who had a son, Christopher, the same age as Ophelia. That was about all we had in common with them, but we could take turns minding the children and so get out and see some of London's famed West End shows.



The first week and a bit was shopping and sight-seeing and getting used to the cold, damp and short days. We celebrated Ophelia's fifth birthday by taking her to the zoo in Regent's Park, where she made friends with an orang-utan. The ambient temperature hovered around zero, and I couldn't help thinking it a bit cruel to leave an inhabitant of the tropics in the open air. A solitary kangaroo looked so forlorn, I almost wanted to cry.

It quickly became clear that we needed to set some simple, robust, ground-rules for Ophelia. Many of the places we visited were horribly crowded, and it is too easy to mislay a small five-year-old - especially one who was eager to see everything on this huge adventure. Christmas helped, I told her that if she got separated from us, she should go and stand beside the Christmas tree, which anyway came naturally to a five-year-old. Failing that, she should find a policeman and wait with him. To her this meant anyone in uniform, and most places had some kind of security guard or uniformed guide near the entrance, so the system worked well, and we would find her chirping merrily to a charmed guard about what she'd done, where she came from, and doubtless lots of embarrassing details about our family life together. She was having a wonderful time - Pelicans, swans and squirrels in parks were, I suppose, predictable, but she was also fascinated by the mummies and ancient clocks in the British Museum and wide-eyed in wonder at Madame Tussaud's wax-works. Castles and palaces, where princesses lived, were intrinsically interesting. Guards in bear-skin hats and red jackets, just like in story-books. she made friends everywhere we went. For all of us it would be our first Christmas away from family. We weren't sad, but it did



feel strange. I've always hated roast dinners and especially plum puddings, so was more than happy to celebrate Christmas at a nondescript pancake restaurant in Soho. Now we discovered something else about this great, cosmopolitan city, beating heart of the greatest empire ever, centre of civilisation etc, etc: all public transport closes down at Christmas! Really. The city is consequently as dreary as!

New Year celebrations are logistically complicated in the freezing cold. We found ourselves in a noisy, rather pretentious "doubles" bar near Piccadilly, where they served over-priced whiskey. Sort of stuck there by the cold and determined to see the New Year in in central London, we were then more dismayed than surprised to find public transport stopped at midnight. This of course meant that taxis were impossible too: even if you found a vacant one, you'd spend an hour stuck in a traffic jam. We walked home, about five kilometres. I was over London.



Despite eye-watering levels of unemployment, with many Britons really struggling to make ends meet, finding reasonably well-paid work for us was amazingly easy. A number of agencies specialised in - and competed for- Australians and New Zealanders for temporary and casual work. There was of course no holiday or sick-pay and you still had to contribute to pension and social insurance that you would never have any right to claim on. We put it down to the work ethic of people who choose to venture away from home, but it was really more to do with British restrictive work practices and over-generous allowances accumulated over the years by, among other things, very powerful unions. Employers seemed to be happy to pay for reliability and flexibility.

A few days into the New Year, Alan was assigned part-time shift work in a factory somewhere out of town. Banditoon, our agency, ran a bus from and to Earls Court each day, which made getting there easy enough. But,

being used to the cosseted NSW Education Department, Alan found it hard. I put off working for a few days more as I'd decided that I needed to go to Paris to check on my bank account. (Before leaving Sydney, I had opened an account at the Banque Nationale de Paris (BNP), on the reasoning that it had branches in pretty much every European capital as well as one in Sydney.) That of course was the excuse, but it had more to do with getting away from London and Alan.

IV - Paris - The Real destination - 12 January, 1977

To Paris and back in a chaotic Greek bus. Real coffee and hot chocolate. Darkness in the City of Light. Saved by an English gentleman and a kind Sikh family. Central heating, double glazing and a proper bathroom. Mastering the metro and real Parisian food. Face-to-face with Notre Dame.

Under UK exchange controls, in 1977 you could take only £300 from the country at any one time, a boon for the “no frills” travel industry. By far the least frilly way to get to the Continent was to take the bus: an adult return fare to Paris could be had for £11; children travelled free of charge. That was cheap, even in those days.

Late on the morning of 12 January, in the charge of a crew of three very cheerful, young, apparently monoglot, Greek men, the bus left the Wimpy Hamburger Bar opposite Kings Cross Station on Euston Road. In it was a more or less random collection of passengers bound for Athens and various stops along the way. Its first scheduled stop, at about 7.30 that evening, was at a hotel in rue *Victor Massé* near Pigalle in Paris, to set us down.

Our preparation for the three-day trip had included a booking for two nights at the hotel in rue *Victor Massé*, some sandwiches and 200 francs in cash.

The Greeks’ preparation centred on an enormous bag of pistachios and a ghetto-blasted loaded with Greek music. By contrast, they judged that booking a slot on the Channel ferry would be a frill too far and even risked being taken as a sign of weakness: intrepid travellers would naturally relish the added adventure and excitement of holing up in sub-freezing conditions with no food or drink (the sandwiches having long since been consumed) until a bus-sized spot on a ferry could be had.

It was early evening when my first-ever experience of real espresso coffee, but alas no sustaining food, could be had at a *tabac* on the edge of Calais. The *tabac* smelled of warmth, real coffee, *chocolat chaud* and *Gauloises*, an ambiance to be conserved *à tout prix*, though disappointingly hard to find these days. Peering through the fogged-up windows of the *tabac* into the night, you perceived several centimetres of snow coating most things.

Yet the three and a half-hour trip from Calais to Paris passed quickly enough, what with Greek dancing, often with a five-year-old in tow, up and down the aisle to catchy tunes and handfuls of pistachios dispensed periodically to us (but not to the other passengers).

Among the Athens-bound passengers, was a very charming, tall very Englishman called Robin. Probably in his early thirties, he was a scholar of Greek antiquity on his way to join his parents in Athens. He sat in Ophelia’s seat and chatted while she danced up and down the aisle with the Greeks.

At a spot the Greeks deemed propitious, the bus stopped. This was the only chance we’d get: men to the left and women to the right. Outside the bus nothing was

perceptible under a dim moon except large expanses of white, fading into blackness in all directions.

By 1.30 in the morning, we had entered Paris, a bewildering labyrinth of grand boulevards and tiny, winding streets. Being night-time, it was impossible to retain any sense of direction and soon all became a sort of blur. The bus stopped again, this time at a little square at the intersection of four or so narrow streets. How and why the driver had chosen this spot was impossible to glean, but while all the streets and squares looked pretty much the same to me, he seemed convinced that no other spot would do. Our small, green wheel-less suitcase (wheelie suitcases had yet to be thought of) was set down on the narrow pavement and the Greeks made to set off again, leaving us without explanation or directions.

Following the second oil shock, the City of Light had turned most of them off at midnight, and in the gloom, neither *rue Victor Massé*, nor any hotel - nor any other street names could be seen - certainly no hotel with lights on. And of course, without a light to read them, maps aren't very useful. Neither is knowing where the hotel is, when you don't know where you are in relation to it.

About 150 metres away was a boulevard, lit like a sort of oasis. But while either I, Ophelia or our suitcase could be moved easily enough, moving all three at once was much harder. Ophelia was, and still is, a rational, calm and cheerful individual: she sat down on the curb and sobbed quietly.

Robin, a true Gentleman, was scandalised that the Greeks would leave a young woman and small child on the street of a foreign city, cold, hungry and tired, with nowhere obvious to stop. With a practical command of Greek, he insisted that the bus wait until he returned with a taxi to take us to a clean, inexpensive hotel for the night.

Politely enduring my school-girl French, the taxi-driver headed for the thirteenth arrondissement on the other side of Paris, where a delightful family of Sikhs welcomed us to their tiny, charming, hotel. They showed us to a pretty little room on the third floor, decorated with dainty, pink floral wallpaper and lace curtains, and furnished with two small beds, a table and two wooden chairs. It had a tiny bathroom, equipped with a wash-basin, shower and bidet: the lavatory was across the corridor. The tariff was 54 francs, including a breakfast of orange juice, bread and butter with (real) coffee or hot chocolate. Another sensation to be preserved for eternity is one's first taste of freshly-baked *baguette* in a cosy dining room on a cold January morning.

The Sikhs helped us find the hotel in *rue Victor Massé* and gave directions to get there: Line Six to Nation, then Line Two to Pigalle. One's first trip on the Paris Metro is another memory to treasure, especially when part of it is over-ground, so you could see the rows of Haussmann terraces, just like in the brochures. *Rue Victor Massé* turned out to be one of the (too narrow for the bus), invisible-in-the-gloom streets that gave off the square where we had stopped early that morning. The *accueil* at the hotel was no less kind than the taxi driver and the Sikhs; even declining the 67-franc payment for the missed night.

All the tourist books tell you that the most economical way to eat in Paris is to order the *plat du jour*, so we found an unassuming restaurant near the hotel and ordered one between us; Ophelia was to have the *entrée*, which turned out to be *soupe gratinée* and she adored it - and still does. But I was less lucky with the main course: *cerveaux de veau*. I knew that *veau* was veal, but I couldn't remember what *cerveaux* was. It turned out to be brains, which I found inedible. The only accompaniment was boiled potatoes, so I dined on bread and potatoes. I can't remember what the dessert was.

Overall, Paris lived up to her grand promise: the rose windows of Notre Dame seemed somehow surreal compared to the poorly reproduced tourist photos we had seen in Australia. And whenever Ophelia comes to Paris, she makes a point of re-living part of the visit by re-sampling the unforgettable hot-dogs *parisiens*, *soupe gratinée* and *chocolat chaud*.

And the bus trip back to London was, well, mostly uneventful: this lot of Greeks had spoiled the fun by booking a spot on the ferry.

But I was craving some nourishing food, so I made Alan take us to a smart restaurant off the Kings Road. Then it was time to get serious about work.

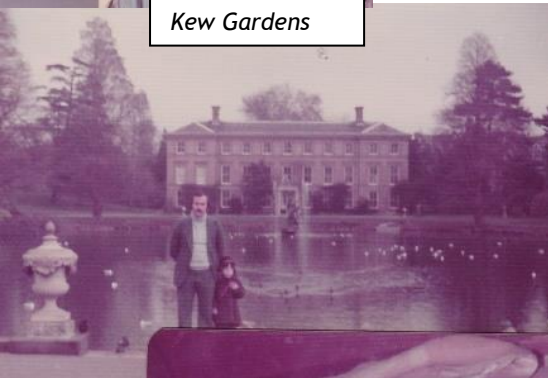
V Chelsea Days - 15 January

Hampton Court, Greenwich, Oxford, Stonehenge, Bath, Brighton and a bag of rocks.

Enjoying London at last. NAT makes sight-seeing easy. Work and the English education system. The English diet explained. The British Museum, Mme Tussaud's, the Tower of London, West-End plays starring celebrated actors and affordable concerts with Gene Pitney and Procol Harem.



Kew Gardens



During our stay in Chelsea, we lost little time in seeing all the things we'd heard so much about. They included West End shows: Jesus Christ Superstar, which I confess I thought less good than the Harry M. Miller production in Sydney with Trevor White, Jon English and Michelle Fawdon. Others were excellent, including the Rocky Horror Show, and others featuring famous actors, such as Lawrence Olivier, Alec Guinness and Susan Hampshire. We could hardly believe that a Procol Harem concert at Hammersmith cost us £2 each - including 45 minutes of encores! That just doesn't happen in Australia - indeed, we had the impression that most of the audience was made up of Australians. Alan was a Gene Pitney fan, so we saw him too in concert, but unimpressive compared to Procol Harem - and cost more than £2.

Ophelia and I were especially intrigued by the clock collection at the British Museum: we saw it twice. The austere beauty of chapel in the Tower of London, built

by Henry VIII, I think, left a lasting impression, contrasting with nouveau-baroque and Palladian Victorian architecture that seemed everywhere else. At Mme Tussaud's, I greeted a wax doorman and felt very stupid. But it really was the most convincing of all the figures, perhaps because it didn't have to live up to photo-induced expectations. We took a train to Hampton Court, where the owner of a horse called Kevin explained that those conical-shaped trees were not topiary, but actually grew in that shape. We also took a ferry to Greenwich, train to Oxford (which Ophelia saw with a box over her head) and a bus to Cambridge.



Hampton Court Palace

Another bonus was NAT, who ran free one-day bus excursions on Saturdays. This meant we could visit Stonehenge - where you could walk amongst the stones, even sit and climb on them, and Bath. At Brighton, Ophelia was fascinated by the idea of a beach with pebbles where sand should be. We all were, of course, but she thought it so remarkable that she decided to fill her little red

leather shoulder bag with them to take home to show Grandma - after showing them off to everyone else on the bus back to London.

I enrolled Ophelia in an Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) school, which although having been taken over from churches by the state, (shockingly, I thought) still subjected the children to an hour's religious (in her case Methodist) instruction each day.

Given the apparent plenitude of jobs, I could afford to be choosy about what hours I would work to fit in with Ophelia's school hours, so Banditoo proposed lunch-time work serving in

a food race, which suited me perfectly. About eight years and two university degrees later, I would refer clumsily to this experience in an attempt to join a conversation that consisted of three directors of the bank where I worked shamelessly name-dropping about their experiences in the City of London. Having blurted out that I, too had worked in a bank in Old Jewry, I then added astonishment to the evening by remarking that I didn't know the name of the bank, having served as the vegetable girl in the food-race.

After their pre-war plumbing and perpetual damp, Londoners' eating habits shouldn't have shocked or even surprised me. Chips with



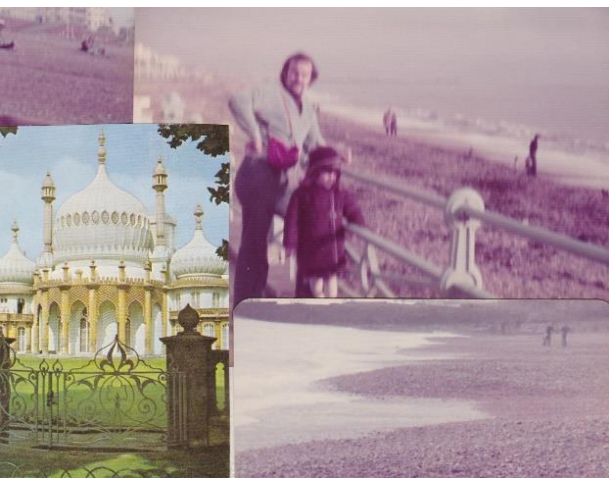
Bath



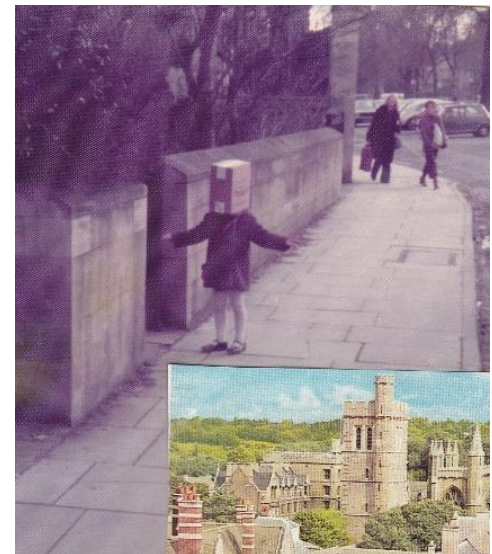
everything was axiomatic. Young ladies would choose a salad because it was “slimmin” “Yes”, I would confirm, it was “slimmin” So they would add chips and beans - pronounced “*baens*” to their salad. I would serve green beans and they would shout crossly: “No! *baens*!” That meant baked beans. Green beans were “runner beans” and, being green, not to be touched.



The chef of the cafeteria was an earnest young man, just out of catering school and full of adventurous new recipes, such as *coq au vin* and duck à l’orange. Few Londoners were similarly adventurous, but those who ordered these exotic new dishes would naturally accompany them with chips - and *baens*.



More popular were toad-in-the-hole, a ghastly concoction of a chunk of yesterday’s bread with a thumb hole poked in its centre, fried with half a sausage poking out of it. Scotch eggs, which consist of a hard-boiled egg coated in a centimetre of fatty minced meat, then rolled in flour and breadcrumbs - and deep-fried - was also popular. All accompanied by chips and *baens*, naturally.



A popular accompaniment was a baked cube of over-cooked tube pasta congealed in a mix of flour, egg and milk. Someone else served the desserts and I made a point of not looking at them. I’m glad I stayed away, having since learned that a popular number was known as spotted dick.

Oxford

VI Unto the mountains - 1 March

An all-inclusive ski tour in a real Tyrolean Gasthof and an introduction to the Great Aussie Piss Route. Ophelia learns to ski and discovers a limitless supply of chocolate - and a new way to say it. Adventure on the T-bar and Fats Domino in Innsbruck. Challenging ideas about post WWII generation Germans. We’re friends now.

Alan was keen to go skiing in Austria, although I thought that far too indulgent for us. I was wrong: it turned out to be the best thing to do. Again, NAT came to the rescue with a range of two or three-week packages that included bus and hovercraft to the ski destination, all accommodation, meals, ski hire, ski passes, ski instruction, everything. The value-for-money was such that the three-week

package was cheaper than the two-week one when you count the cost of a week in London (though not the lost work), so we opted for the three-week version.

After the bus-on-ferry adventure in January, the hovercraft was a real luxury - and an experience in itself. The boarding lounge resembles an old-style airport lounge - where you can see your "flight" come in. You walk across the tarmac, in this case a vast expanse of wet asphalt sloping gently down to the grey water. So immense is the craft that you can see it coming literally for miles. Only as it glides from the surface of the water to stop fifty metres from the terminal building do you get a sense of its size.



Atop the mind-fuddlingly large rubber cushion, several storeys high - dwarfing even the bus, the cabin seems tiny - but in fact it seats a hundred people or more as well as taking cars and busses on board. After coming to a stop, and just as you are getting used to the surprising dimensions, the cushion deflates and you board it much as you would a plane without the air-bridge. Inside is more like a plane than a boat, with air hostesses in silly hats serving snacks whether you want them or not. The ride is predictably smooth (it doesn't operate in turbulent weather) and takes an hour, compared to two hours for the ferry.

There were about thirty of us in the group, mostly Australians, New Zealanders and a couple of South Africans and mad Rhodesians. The boys had been making a fortune working on offshore oil rigs in the North Sea, while the others, like us, had been doing casual work via temping agencies. All of us were now readying ourselves for the Summer touring season - a.k.a the Great Aussie Piss Route.

We soon learned that this got under way in earnest in early July, with the fiesta of San Firmin and running of the bulls in Pamplona (which promised to be an especially propitious event, as it was to take place on the seventh day of the seventh month in 1977). The juggernaut would then migrate *en masse* through the south of France and Italy to Brindisi, where vans would be loaded onto the ferry to Corfu. There they would hunker down with quantities of retsina, beer and ouzo until it was time to head north to München for the Oktoberfest.

The first thing that struck me about the Jägerhof gasthof was how comfortable it was compared to what we had paid much more for in Britain. To begin with it was warm - like the hotels in Paris. French and Austrians - unlike Britons - harboured no moral objection to central heating or double glazing: perhaps this was due to their "weak" Catholic morality. Weak or not, it was warm and comfortable. The hand-held shower with a wall bracket was better than what I'd been used to in Australia and I resolved that the next time I had the opportunity to fit out my own bathroom (which would be in 2000), I would insist on the same configuration, even if it meant importing it from Europe. Even the door hinges were sensible, as they allow you to remove the door for painting etc without having to unscrew the hinges.

Breakfast was bread-rolls that broke into five segments like flower petals. They were freshly baked each morning and served with various jams and slices of cheese

and ham. A typical German breakfast, but altogether new to us. The coffee was good too, though it was filter, not espresso. Lunch we bought at a bar on the ski slope and dinner, also typically German, was some kind of meat, usually pork, with vegetable accompaniments served cold and slightly over-cooked. Still a big improvement on English food.

The ski slope originally booked had already lost too much of its snow, so they took us to a higher one called Kellerjoch, accessible only by chairlift. Skiing during the day in the very warm sunshine and making our own fun in the evening: games of charades, concerts put on by group members, a fancy-dress evening and a boot

party, which entailed drinking beer from a half-metre high glass in the shape of a boot. The trick is not to get beer all over your face, which is easier said than done, it turns out, especially if you observe the other rule that you must hold the boot so the toe is pointing away from you. They took us out on a couple of evenings to play skittles in a local bar and on another to a Tyrolean concert, complete with *lederhosen*-clad young men dancers. In retrospect, it is unsurprising that they were a bit hurt by our uncontrolled laughter: they looked so serious and proud of what they were doing, but the *lederhosen* too closely resembled comic outfits for us to take it in our stride. On other evenings we went to a local disco, which resembled pretty much any other disco you've ever been to.

Ophelia had a ball too: NAT had promised ski instruction for everybody, and as the only child in the group, she had her own tutor called Walter, who wore a big white handle-bar moustache and spoke not a word of English. She skied very quickly - without stocks, as little children are taught, but she was too

little to negotiate the tow-rope or the T-bar, so had to walk up the hill, which she soon tired of. She found though, that if she ingratiated herself to some of the families staying in the village, they would make their children lend her their toboggans, which she found much more fun. Also, she quickly mastered German - or at least enough German to score plenty of *schokolade*.

It turned out that everyone in that group too had a niece who she reminded them of. On the evenings when the entertainment was not five-year-old friendly, the



family who ran the *gasthof* seemed delighted to have her spend the evening with them and play with their children, after which they would put her to bed in our room. They seemed mostly to watch American television shows, whether or not that was mainly for her benefit, I'll never know, but she was never bored. As a bonus, we had fabulous weather without interruption until the very last afternoon.



While we were in London, Ophelia had become attached to a television series called *The Six-Million-Dollar Man*, the hero of which was Steve Austin. Now it happened our group included a young man from Perth called Steve. Although quite good-looking, he was rather shy and wore a moustache to try and make himself look older. In short, far from a Steve-Austin-like alpha male. Unperturbed, Ophelia proudly introduced him to everyone as Steve Austin, which both embarrassed and delighted him, I think. He adored her.



Ophelia and I were having a great time with the rest of the group and what the Tyrol had to offer. Not so Alan, who was never a dancer and was curmudgeonly about partying in the evening - not least because it entailed a lot of cooing over Ophelia and flirting with me. The other men reacted pretty predictably and soon didn't bother to hide their disdain. Most irksome for Alan, the Rhodesians, one of whom was called Patrick Kranberger, was extremely good-looking - somewhere between Lawrence Olivier and Omar Sharif, an excellent dancer and an incorrigible flirt - all the more so as it visibly annoyed Alan. He was also a very accomplished skier.

During our stay there, we were visited by a couple in a combi van with a very little boy, who had called in to say goodbye to Patrick as they set off on the overland trek to Australia. Even then, that was at best adventurous, and at worst perilous, though nothing like as perilous as a few years later.

We were all looked after by a NAT employee called Brian, bearing the title Courier. His job was to make sure all arrangements worked. Busses came when they were supposed to, ski lessons and equipment met expectations and to sort any other practical problems that might crop up. Like everyone else, he adored Ophelia and amused her by, among other things, pretending that he could eat glass. Disappearing ashtrays and glasses left her in wide-eyed wonder. One morning we woke to find that a couple of our number, arriving late back from a bar, had managed to demolish the plate-glass front door of the *gasthof*. At breakfast, Ophelia was recounting Brian's wonderful digestive powers when one at the table interjected: yes, he's really amazing - last night he ate the door. I don't remember who it was that broke the door, but Brian's job was to put it right with the *gasthof* owners.



Alan's mood was made even worse by the fact that he couldn't get the hang of skiing, kept falling and using his stocks as support to get back on his feet, which

bent the stocks until they were useless. He was left brooding- and trying to make me feel guilty about enjoying myself. He succeeded, but only a bit.

Skiing on the intermediate slope was made more interesting by the moguls, small hills of compact snow, some of them very icy and fast. They form on the slope late in the season from skiers criss-crossing the slope along the same paths. The trick is always to have your weight on the lower foot. You need to master the “stem christie” a sort of intermediate between snow-plough and step turn or hop turn. So, I mastered the stem christies and occasionally even managed a clean step-turn, but not a hop turn.

The T-bar was harder. And upside-down T, it took two people at a time, one on each side of the vertical. Sharing with Alan was a disaster, as he would sit on the horizontal bar and fall to the ground, bringing the other person down too. You couldn't tell him that you were supposed to hang on to the vertical with your free hand and let the cross-bar pull you along by the back of your legs. I refused to go on it with him - or any other beginners, preferring to wait for a German or Austrian. As a bonus, I got to practise some German.

One young German from Hamburg called Erik, if I remember, seemed also to be angling to ride the T-bar with me. During our many, short conversations, the subject of the war came up and of Australians having served in Europe. I mentioned that my father was wounded in the Mediterranean by German aircraft fire and it turned out that Eric's father had been in the Luftwaffe. A moment of silence followed: somehow our friendship was a sort of confirmation, for me anyway, that the war was past, and we should not let it stop us from being friends. I hope it had the same effect on him.

Erik invited me to a Fats Domino concert in Innsbrück. I didn't tell Alan and just disappeared, leaving Ophelia with the *gasthof* family. I had no idea who Fats Domino was: in fact, the only version I'd heard until then of Blueberry Hill was a cover by Doug Parkinson and The Questions, a very good Australian band of the early 1960s. The concert hall was not much more than half full and we had very good seats. I loved it when the audience spontaneously began shouting: Dom-in-O! Dom-in-O! Eric and his friends drove me back to the *gasthof*. No funny business, they were gentlemen.

19 March was the last full day of skiing and, so far, I had not progressed beyond the intermediate slope. The Rhodesians, Patrick and Mike, persuaded me up to the top of the red slope: advanced, but not kamikaze. The chairlift to the top was one-way, so the only way down was to ski, and stem christies would not do, neither would step turns.

It was after 16.00 and a storm was brewing, so we had to get down to the bottom soon or get lost in the dark and snow. I set off and managed a couple of clumsy hop turns, but the slope was very



Rhodesians. Patrick second from left, Mike right with dummy



fast, so I missed one and went over the edge. Mike was terrified when I disappeared, but I had managed to turn my skis enough in mid-hop to come to rest with the flat of my skis against a tree growing out of the snow-bank, so he found me resting, unbruised, on my side in soft snow. I managed hop turns for the rest of the steepest part, then could *schuss*. I was terrified, but glad I'd given it a try.

After a very boozy bus ride, we waited on the sunny shore of Dunkirk for the hovercraft, watching foreboding, grey clouds amassing on the horizon. None of us wanted to go back to Blighty. I was having doubts about spending the rest of the year with Alan, so Ophelia and I took an overnight bus to Edinburgh to see how we'd go travelling alone and staying in youth hostels

VII Escape to Edinburgh - 23 March

An experimental excursion, encounter with snuff and an electric bag-pipe. The pros and cons of single-parent touring.

I was having doubts about spending the rest of the year with Alan, so Ophelia and I took an overnight bus to Edinburgh to see how we'd go travelling alone and staying in youth hostels.

In those days, back-packs were mostly for camping trips rather than touring, so we made do with our small-ish suitcase, which presented the same problem we encountered when we were dumped off the bus in Paris: travel with both a young child and a wheel-less suitcase is just not practical. Complicating matters, youth hostels in Britain did not take bookings - although they do elsewhere in Europe, so we had to find one when we got there.

By the time we arrived in Edinburgh, we were both very tired from the trip and Ophelia couldn't trudge around with me looking for somewhere to stay, especially given how hilly Edinburgh is. Equally, I couldn't leave her alone, with or without the suitcase. Luckily, at the bus-station, we met another young woman in rather the same situation, except she had two children, so we took turns minding suitcases and children while we each found ourselves a lodging.

*Blackfriar's
Bobby*

The youth hostel was quite nice and a group of guests suggested we go with them to a restaurant nearby. It was the first time I'd seen a vegetarian restaurant, and Edinburgh was the last place I would have expected one. I remember eating fresh trout for the first time and loved it. There we met a retired Scots Guard, who invited us to a bag-pipe club afterwards, where



we saw demonstrated a home-made electric bag-pipe, concocted with an old vacuum cleaner. It was very hard not to laugh uncontrollably. They danced too.

The following day we took the train to Stirling, a very pretty town and, being much smaller than Edinburgh, we found the youth hostel easily. It was cold but fine for an evening stroll around the pretty streets. I remember talking to an Oxford professor from Perth, further north. He was surprised that I recognised his accent.

Then back to Edinburgh, where we walked around the old town and saw the statue of Blackfriar's Bobby, which intrigued Ophelia. Such a lovely, sad story. That night we took the bus back to London.

Meeting and chatting with interesting and helpful people was the great part of travelling alone with Ophelia, but in the end I had to forsake the idea of doing the whole trip like that - it would have been far too expensive and might have been dangerous.

VIII Preparing for Six-plus-one Months in a Van - 26 March

Home is an old blue Morris J (ex Post Office) Van.

Back in London, the three of us rented a room in a shared house in Fulham while we prepared for six or seven months on the road around Europe. This would entail buying some kind of vehicle we could all sleep, cook and eat in.

On the streets surrounding Australia House in Aldwych you would find at least a dozen camper vans for sale by last-year's piss-routers. Most were over-priced Combi Vans, which were very trendy in those days, having featured in films about hippy types, rock concerts and things. Being Volkswagens, they were also hopelessly fuel-inefficient - a real consideration in the wake of the second oil shock. Also, I've never trusted the suspension, which made them prone to flipping over, while the air-cooled engine was always wont to over-heat on a hill. Parts were expensive too, as the Deutschmark was very strong, powered by Germany's manufacturing might. Their only possible appeal was that they generally came fitted out with kitchens and things for camping in.

We found an ad in a local rag for an old Morris J-Van that had originally served the Post Office. A pig to drive, especially in towns, its attractions were that it was much cheaper than any combi and, being diesel, both much more fuel-efficient and robust and easier to repair than petrol engines. Also, diesel was a third the price per litre of petrol, which, with twice as many kilometres to a litre than a petrol engine, made them altogether more economical. And parts would be priced in Sterling, which, given its weakness was important. Finally, it was a Morris. I had owned a couple of minis, as well as a Morris Minor, and understood their no-frills mechanics. It was little-boy blue and had GB stickers on it. The draw-backs were that you couldn't stand up in it and it didn't come equipped with a kitchen or bunks - and no light in the back; but the vendor said he would throw in his old gas camping stove, two gas bottles and some other bits and pieces, including a 1967 road map of Europe. It was a deal.



In view of the time this, erm, gem would serve as bus, hotel and restaurant, among other things, some description seems merited. First of all, it was not what you'd say stylish. In fact, you'd say "solid" which would turn out to be a much more practical quality. The driver's cabin was accessible by sliding doors on each side and the inside was one space, with no dividing structure between driver, passenger and the body of the van. We were to live in a space

that was about 150 cm wide, 230 cm long and 120 cm high. The engine sat in a cavity between and below driver and passenger, with a lid of about 40 cm by 60 cm, that lifted for easy access. Ophelia used this as a seat when she wasn't busy doing something in the back. If it doesn't sound very comfortable, that's because it wasn't: no valuable space wasted on things like cushions or padding, and, together with the commercial suspension, you knew about every bump and groove on every surface you drove on.

We bought a couple of four-litre water bottles, a plastic basin for washing in, three nylon sleeping bags, a couple of slabs of foam and some very-seventies-looking fabric, from which I made, by hand, some covers with matching curtains for the back windows, as well as bigger ones to close off the driving cabin at night. A dozen or so carpet squares covered the metal floor. As a delivery vehicle, the sides had been fitted with several horizontal wooden beams that you could hang things from and tie them to. Inspired by another setup we'd seen, we decided that they would be ideal to suspend a hammock for Ophelia to sleep in above our feet, as the floor wasn't big enough for the three of us.

The steel gas bottles each held about three litres of gas, and pretty much all camper stoves were compatible with them. When they were empty, you exchanged them for full ones at any petrol station bearing the sign Gas. Inexpensive, reliable and practical.

It was still early April, so rather than setting out straight away for the continent, we decided to tour Britain first, so that if anything were to go wrong, it would do so on familiar territory.

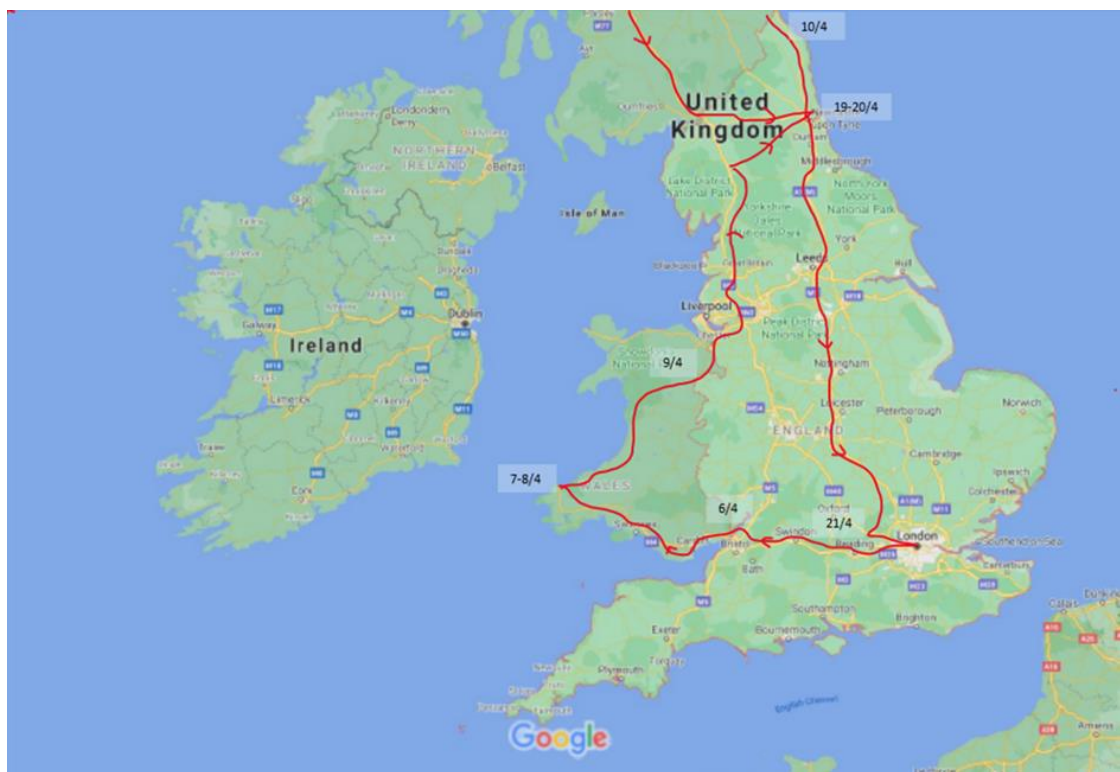


IX A Month in a Van - Wales, England & Scotland - 6 April

Cardigan, Edinburgh, Stirling, Loch Ness, John O'Groats, Carbisdale Castle, Isle of Skye, Ben Nevis, Loch Lomond, Once Brewed, Hadrian's Wall, Windsor

Lovely scenery, mostly terrible weather (and food) and country hospitality. First night of free-camping. Getting used to car troubles and navigational errors.

Now, to set out. A big sign near Earl's Court tube announced: To The West, so we followed that onto a westward motorway. Not just because that was the easiest thing to do, which it without doubt was. There were no signs pointing To The North - or if there had been, we didn't see them. We went West because we had decided on an itinerary that started with south Wales (was old South Wales anything like New South Wales?), then through the Lakes District and the west coast of Scotland, across the north coast to John O'Groats, then south again, through Edinburgh and eventually to London. That was The Plan.



It turns out that old South Wales is quite a lot like the coast of New South Wales, so you can see why James Cook named it so. On 7 January we arrived in Cardigan and booked into a bed and breakfast with purple nylon jersey sheets that made you sweat and caught on the dry skin on your feet. It had a large jacuzzi in the middle of the bedroom, which we used just for the sake of it. Ophelia loved it, though personally I prefer a good shower - which there wasn't. Breakfast in bed: traditional, stodgy, greasy English fare, but it meant we didn't need lunch. The house overlooked a stunning sandy beach and we decided to stay an extra night or even two. It turned out we had no choice, as the car battery had gone flat and it was now Good Friday.

This was the first beach we'd seen since leaving Sydney, so it was unthinkable not to go for a walk along it. It was also the coldest beach we'd ever encountered, buffeted by the Atlantic, it was much colder than Brighton had been, not least because it was now snowing. On Saturday 9 April I wrote a postcard to my brother wishing him happiness on his wedding day. Sue, his wife, hated me, though I suspect it had nothing to do with anything I'd said or done. When I had asked my brother why, having lived together for several years, they'd chosen to get married just then, He said that it was because Sue's uncle would be visiting from Denmark. Uncles trump sisters. Families are like that.

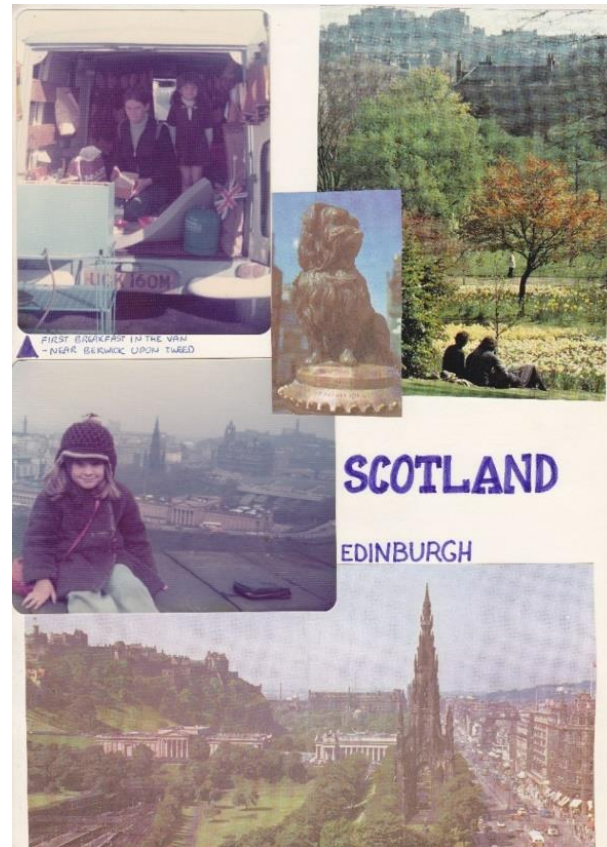
We had thought of stopping a night in the Lakes District, but couldn't find a hostel or bed and breakfast with a room free, so we headed north, then cross-country to Edinburgh. Someone had given us the name of a hostel there, but we couldn't find it, and there seemed to be no other vacancies, so we spent our first night camping.

After looking around Edinburgh, we drove to Sterling. We would have stopped a night there too, but the owner of the hostel refused to have us because we weren't married. So we looked around a bit and drove on to Perth. While the hostel we stopped in there was very nice, the town itself was uninteresting, so we continued up to Inverness.

Inverness features a lake, that looks much like other lakes, and a monster that may or may not be there, but wasn't coming out to see us that day. The town also featured a very nice, but very cold, hostel. While most Britons may disapprove of things like central heating and double-glazing, it seems the Scots find them, and much else, morally objectionable.

Exactly why we felt compelled to go to John O'Groats is still not clear - except it is the northern-most point of mainland Scotland. Despite heavy snowfalls along the way, you would hardly call it picturesque, just cold and grey. I think it's the coldest place I've ever been in my life - and the windiest! Before checking in to the hostel there, we drove to the farthest point looking out over the North Sea, where we gazed over a beautiful, unspoiled beach - clearly unspoiled because nobody could stand the cold long enough to spoil it. Well, I gazed: Alan and Ophelia went down on to the sand. The hostel was, as usual, cold and very basic, but so were all other alternatives. It was by now 14 April.

Youth hostels are, as the name implies, budget accommodation for young travellers. Being unable to book ahead, you take your luck on what's available.

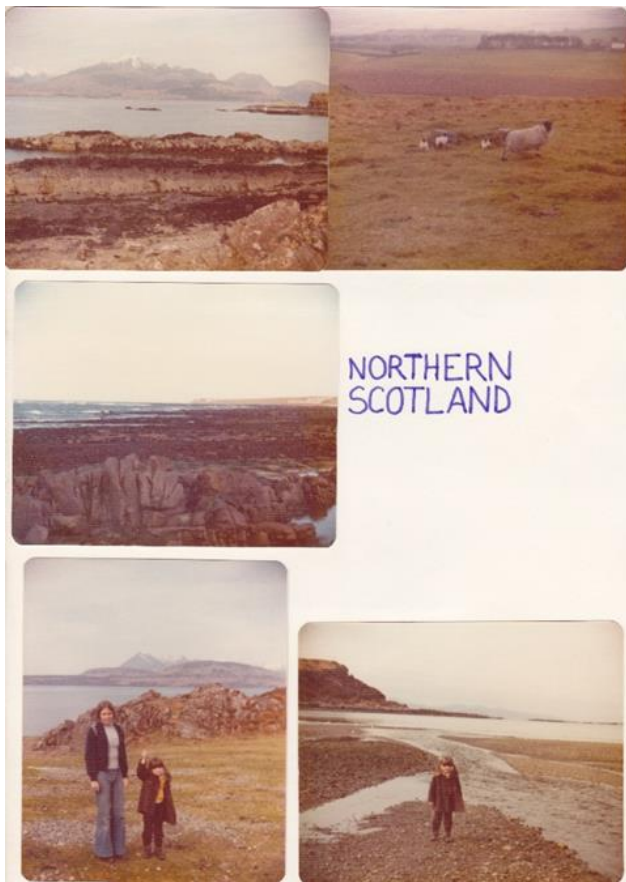


Loch Ness

They are cheaper than most, but not all, hotels, and of course you do your own cooking in large, shared kitchens.

Accommodation is typically dormitories, but if there is space a family group like ours might be able to share a room. If there is no space, then its boys' and girls' dormitories.

British hostels have one other feature you don't find elsewhere: in addition to the modest fee for your stay, you are required to do a chore. It might be sweeping a floor, dusting shelves or washing a bathroom floor. The owner/manager assigns you your task on the day you leave and when you have completed it, he returns your passport. Ophelia, being a little girl, was mostly spared.



Not in John O'Groats. Not only was Ophelia made do a chore - and not a trivial one either, but I was assigned two - one for me and one for Alan. Ophelia did her best on hers, but couldn't do it without my help. Alan sat on his widening behind and didn't even offer to help us. His days were numbered. My problem was that there were still quite a few of them left until we would return to London and then Australia.

We had hoped to get to Ullapool, on the West Coast, the next day, but our start was delayed by a hitch with the van, which we sorted out and drove along Scotland's north coast, dotted with spectacular, unspoiled beaches. Cold, but nothing compared to John O'Groats. A navigational glitch saw us headed back south-east over amazing highland country, not seeing another vehicle for long stretches, although at

one particularly isolated spot, miles from anywhere, stood a post box.

You couldn't help shaking your head at the choice of location: you would have to drive an hour from the nearest civilisation to put a letter in it, and the postal service would have to drive hours to collect it! We didn't put a postcard in it. By the end of that amazing drive, we found ourselves at Carbisdale Castle, which, being a hostel, we spent the night there. From a distance, this is one of the closest things you'll see to a fairy-tale castle, set on the side of a mountain amid lush pine-forests surrounded by imposing, snow-capped mountains. We vowed to re-visit it when the weather was warmer, as it really was a lovely spot.





Isle of Skye

Trying to regain our itinerary, from Carbisdale, we drove west, and kept going west until we got to the sea again. From the Kyle of Lochalsh, we caught the punt to the Isle of Skye. Don't know what we expected to see there, though the scenery of the west coast is especially rugged and spectacular. While not exactly warm, it was decidedly less cold than where we'd been. We'd hoped to see more of the island, but it turns out there's no diesel on the Isle of Skye, so we headed for the nearest hostel. The locals were very friendly, and seemed surprised that anyone bothered to go there, especially at that time of year. In the evening, a small group offered to take us out on their boat for some seal spotting. You had to peer hard to spot the grey seals in the grey water, but they were there, which of course thrilled Ophelia. We all caught cold.



Loch Lomond

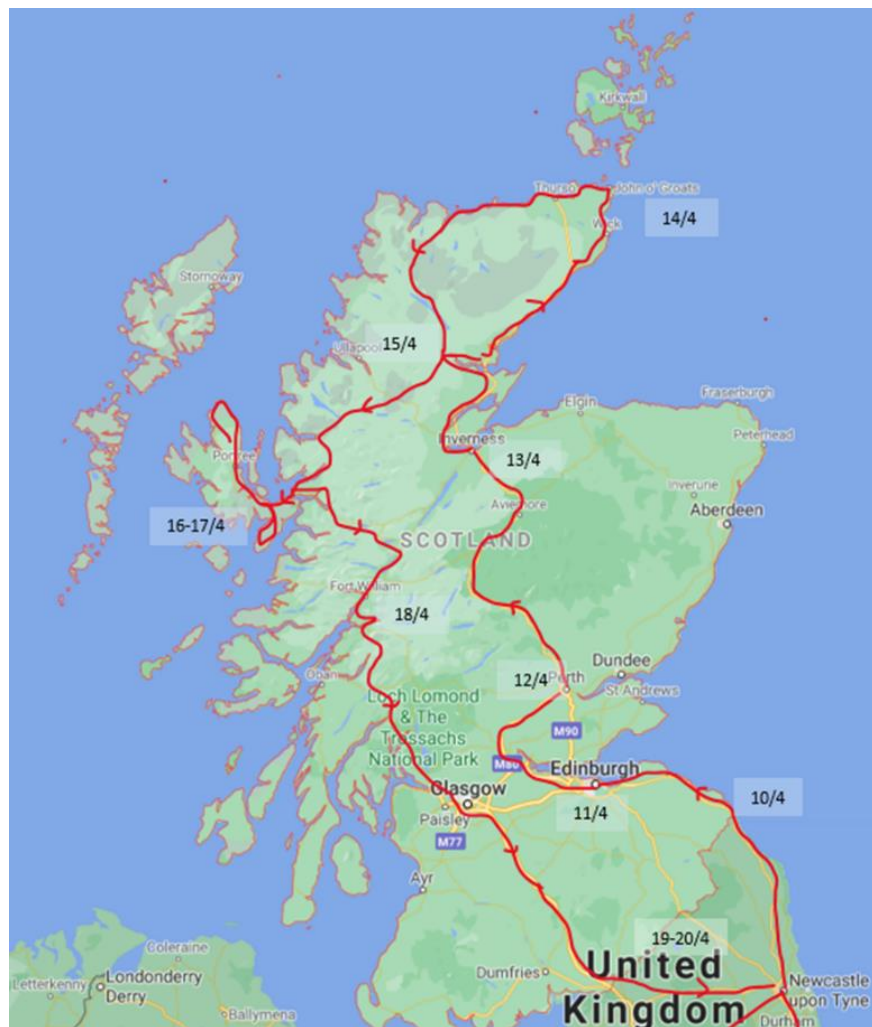
Although cold, it was otherwise very fine, and driving around the island we could now appreciate why we came, as it offers an excellent perspective of Scotland's beautiful west coast. We then took the punt back to Fort William and stopped the night there, where we met lots of hikers headed to or from Ben Nevis, Britain's tallest mountain.

We'd missed Ullapool, which was farther north, but were not too far from Loch Lomond,

which we knew from the song, but which looked little different from the other lakes we'd seen. From there to Carlisle, then to a place called Once-Brewed, where we got stuck again because the battery was flat.

When we got going, we had to go and walk along part of Hadrian's Wall and photograph Ophelia in the biting wind. Not much of a walk altogether - in fact it was a chore just to get out of the van.

By now we were keen to get back to London and hurried as far as Windsor, where we spent the night. My notes tell me the staff there were not especially welcoming. At least it was a bit warmer, though you would not say warm, as such.



London again - 22 April

Cambridge, Windsor, Eton.

*Spring eventually happens in London, Henry the basset and an attic in East Sheen.
Ophelia's first trip to the dentist for a "feeling", emergency dressmaking and
more preparations for six months on the Continent.*

Got in to London as soon as we could to find a flat for a few weeks and lodged ourselves in quite a nice attic room in East Sheen, where one of the residents was a basset hound called Henry. I decided that if you were to have a dog, a basset is the thing: Placid, quiet and cuddly, and can't jump on the furniture. Ophelia needed some dentistry and we found a very good young woman in Baker Street. Also, though she was never going to be tall, Ophelia chose this moment to put on a growth spurt and grow out of all her clothes.

I had thought clothes in Britain would be cheap, but found they weren't, and were horribly dowdy as well. Having now to be a bit careful with money, I decided to buy some fabric and hand-make her a summer dress in an OK red and white cotton print. By the time I'd finished sewing it, she had grown some more and I had to add a frill at the bottom to add length. She was thus obliged to wear it day in day out throughout the Summer.

Another prescient preparation was some reading matter. Not just for us, but more importantly, for Ophelia. While she had done some pre-reading, she could not yet read properly. Alan was a school-teacher, but at primary level, not early infants. I bought a couple of Little Golden Books but the real gem was a Dr Zeus volume, which proved a life-saver, so that, by the time we returned to Australia, she was equal to her peers at school.

The task now was to plan seriously our trip around the continent, which entailed visiting travel places to get as much information about where we should go. Also bought a new jack and battery for the van and, on someone's suggestion, went to a place called Half-Case Warehouse to stock-pile a couple of months' worth of food. Large tins of a soy-based meat substitute made by Cadburys actually looked and tasted enough like minced beef to go into bolognese with the tinned tomatoes or tomato



Cambridge



paste. We also bought tins of tuna in brine, peas, beans and mushrooms. From her time at my mother's and at the ILEA schools, Ophelia had developed a taste for baked beans, which I deplored. She insisted, so I bought several half-gallon cans of them and warned her she had to eat them. Other things we stocked up on were pretty predictable: pasta, detergent, soap and things.

Our staple food for the first half of the trip was thus mock spaghetti bolognese that, after a while, began to taste more and more like soy paste. I think we were in the south of France Ophelia by the time managed the last tin of baked beans.

We also drove up to Cambridge and took a bus trip to Windsor and Eton. Shook my head at the boys' uniforms, with top hats, white ties and tails. Are they serious?



Canterbury Cathedral

X Six Months in a Van and some Better Weather - 6 May

The ferry from Sheerness was, of course two hours late leaving Sheerness - as if England was exacting its revenge on our wanting to quit the dreary weather and stodgy food.

The Netherlands - 6 May

Amsterdam, den Haag, der Zuidersee, Scheveringen, Tulips, Afsluitdijk

Dutch welcome, walking around in circles and a canal ride. Heineken and Rembrandt. A pee beside the Zuidersee.

We set foot on the continent at the port of Vlissingen, and were greeted with much nicer weather, and just in time to find a spot to camp and set up before dark. The following day we drove to Amsterdam and parked near Centraal Station to get our bearings. There a friendly Dutchman made our acquaintance, bought us some drinks and told us what he thought we needed to know about Amsterdam. In the afternoon we drove outside the city and found a pleasant lay-by in which to camp, which turned out to be on the banks of the Zuidersee - though it was visible only the following morning when we walked to the top of the grassy *dijk* and realised that our campsite was at least a metre below the level of the water. Lay-bys like this common alongside European roads, intended for truck drivers, they are generally equipped with a source of fresh water, garbage bins and often a toilet and barbeque.

In central Amsterdam we took a canal ride, which was much less expensive than we'd feared - though it was the only thing in Amsterdam that was! Ophelia thought it was all great fun and merrily charmed the other tourists. After visiting Anna Frank's house, we wandered the streets. After doing some washing in a laundry, we drove to The Hague and spent the night near Scheveringen.

On 12 May we headed north along the coast toward Kobenhavn to meet Sue's aunt and Maw-Maw, or grandmother. Along the way we caught the end of the tulips, expansive miles of the most intense colours you've ever seen are impossible to describe: they appear almost luminous and you can see why they are named one of the wonders of the modern world. But it was quite overcast, so our photos couldn't do them justice.



Denmark - 12 May

Kobenhavn, Helsingborg (Elsinore), Roskilde

A night in a strange forest. Absent relatives. Pierrot, Columbine and dodgems at the Tivoli. Ophelia learns economics. A proper meal with dates, prunes and (someone else's) relatives.

The delay had been more of an inconvenience than we had anticipated, as we were unable to exchange money on the ferry and were now low on both diesel and food. Also, it was Saturday, so there was no guarantee that we'd be able to sort out the problem the following day either, this being before the era of bank cards and automatic tellers. We needed to find a money exchange agent.

To add to the thrill, it was quite dark by the time we got off the ferry and camped beside a secondary road in the middle of a pine forest, which meant it was even darker - but it was a bit warmer than it had been the previous days.

Having no Danish marks and not much food to cook, our only solution was to eat at a restaurant meal and pay with some of our American dollars, using the change to buy more provisions and enough diesel to get us to Kobenhavn. Once there, we camped outside a youth hostel.



I had met Maw-Maw in Sydney and knew her to be a jovial woman, quite unlike her daughter and grand-daughter. It turned out that Maw-Maw and Aunt would not be there when we arrived, which meant a prolonged stay in Denmark.

Kobenhavn is quite a small city, with not a great deal to see. We walked to the harbour to take a photograph of Ophelia with the Little Mermaid - a tribute to Hans Christian Andersen's stories. A visit to the Carlsberg brewery was unavoidable, though we find the beer bland; then the unremarkable National Museum. With the rest of our change, we bought some delicacies and went to the Tivoli - a giant garden and fun park, with children's amusements and pantomime.

There we watched a performance of Pierrot, Columbine and Harlequin, which gave meaning to one of my favourite songs: The Carnival is Over. Ophelia rode on a children's version of dodgems, which she loved. This seems to be the main attraction of Kobenhavn, especially at night, when it all lights up. On 18 May we headed north toward Helsingborg, or Elsinore, to see the fabled Hamlet's Grave. It took some finding in amongst a bushy park-forest and bore the epitaph: Ophelia Kilde, which upset Ophelia somewhat.

It was becoming increasingly clear that we had a problem. Since leaving Britain - and even before we left, Ophelia had been getting herself "lost", more and more often and, we suspected, on purpose. She had learned that people, especially on the continent, were very sympathetic to a little girl crying because she'd got separated from her family, and generally responded with some kind of (usually chocolate-related) treat. At five years old, she couldn't understand how dangerous that was and clearly, punishment would have been counter-productive. We came up with the idea of giving her a privilege that could be withdrawn, and settled on the idea of pocket money. This was calculated as the local currency equivalent of one US dollar each week, which would be hers to save or spend as she pleased. At border crossings, we would exchange whatever she had accumulated at the same rate that we exchanged our money. This also gave us the opportunity to discuss with her what her money would buy in each place, as well as what she could expect in the places we were to yet to visit. The first dollars were spent, unsurprisingly, on sweets, but then she became much cannier and quite adept at practical purchasing power parity analysis, saving money for places where it would buy the most.



Now the weather was warming up and, killing more time, we drove to Roskilde and visited a museum that featured replica Viking ships. There we sat in a park to eat lunch and watched a charming display of children folk dancing before continuing to Kobenhavn, where we were due to have dinner with Maw-Maw and Aunt. That afternoon we visited the Freedom Museum and saw WWII from a slightly different angle. We also visited the Tuborg brewery and decided that Danish beer is an acquired taste. Maw-Maw and Aunt were as welcoming as I had expected, in fact a bit more so, and we were exceptionally grateful for the home-cooked meal and warmth. The main course was chicken, which we hadn't had for weeks, but the high point was the dessert of stewed dates and prunes, which kept us company all the way to Berlin. For Ophelia, it was a welcome change from baked beans.

We left early the following day and after shopping for a few provisions, got ourselves on the 14.00 ferry back to Germany.

Germany - 21 May

Lübeck, Hamburg, Berlin, Hannover, Hameln, Köln, Bonn, Die Lorelei and der Rein.

Ophelia in a German playground. Swimming pool wonder. An encounter with the BundesPolizei. East Germany as seen from the autobahn. A swim in der Wannsee. Check-Point Charlie and stale cake in East Berlin. An Allied war cemetery. Pied Piper tack without the Pied Piper. A pee from the Lorelei.

Easily found a suitable place to stop the night near Lübeck, with plenty of time to look around the little medieval city. At a playground, Ophelia, despite having encountered non-English-speaking children several times before, in Austria, the Netherlands and Denmark, now complained about it for the first time. I reasoned she must have been tired, but with some coaxing she went back and made herself known to them and seemed to enjoy herself.



East Berlin

Back in Hamburg the next day, we treated ourselves to a swim in a splendid municipal pool, indoor and well-heated - even the seating was heated. They insisted we all wear swim caps, which we had to buy from vending machines. That pool is my lasting impression of Hamburg. We free-camped beside a large statue of Bismarck, which somehow made us feel safe, though heaven knows why, though it did have a tap with fresh drinking water.

On 23 May we set out early on the autobahn to Berlin and were stopped by police at the border with East Germany, and were surprised by how, almost-aggressive they were, questioning our ownership of the van, for example. I at

first assumed they were the East German police, and I was surprised to see their shoulder badge announcing *BundesPolizei*.

East Germany seems to have changed very little since the war, which is pretty much what we'd been told. Still, it was surprising to see that even broken windows had not been repaired. The road was in poor shape and on the way, we could see military vehicles patrolling villages. The contrast on entering Berlin was striking - the city was bigger than we expected, with wide, well-kept streets and few grotty areas. Clearly the intent was a showpiece for capitalism and democracy.

We free-camped in the street of a lively area and I regretted not being able to participate in what looked like some pretty exciting night life. In the morning we took the lift to the top (22nd story) of the Europa Building, which afforded a spectacular view of both East and West. We couldn't find the *StaatsMuseum*, so went to the Museum of the Wall, with a comprehensive record of escapes from the East.

The weather was very warm, so we went to the beach on the Wannsee, a huge lake within the confines of West Berlin, surrounded by state forest, with many small beaches on its banks. That night we stayed at a campsite. Germans' idea of camping is peculiar in that it entails renting a large on-site caravan with an equally large canvas extension, typically equipped with a full-sized upright kitchen stove, complete with full-sized oven etc. The next day, 26 May, we visited East Berlin through CheckPoint Charlie, which entailed a very confusing entry procedure. It was also expensive: each one-day visa cost five deutschmarks, about a dollar US, plus we had to exchange that much again into *ostmarke*. But we couldn't miss out on the experience.

Despite some post-war development, many ruins had been left untouched and were now sprouting trees from half-crumbled walls and towers. Other half-ruined buildings had been camouflaged with new facades giving on to lifeless and a slightly foreboding street-scapes. The challenge was to find something to spend our *ostmarke* on, so little was on offer, with long queues for every type of food shop. We settled for over-priced ice cream and stale cake at a dreary café. Worse even than London.

That evening we free-camped off Unter den Linden and in the morning tried to visit the Museum of Antiquities to see Nefertiti's head, but the museum was closed, so we decided to leave Berlin for Hannover.

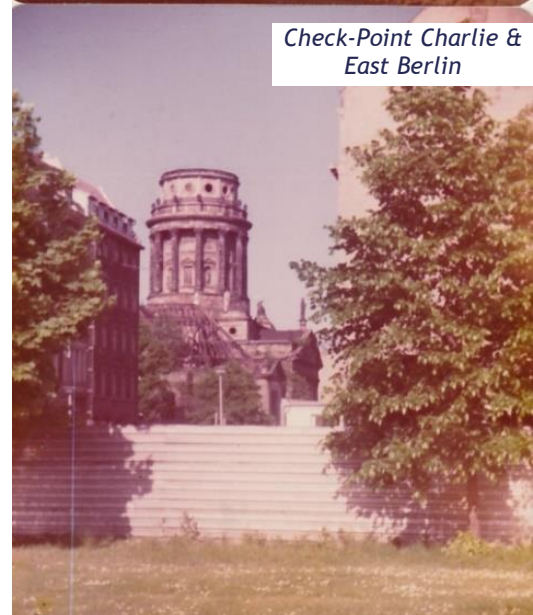
While in Berlin, I had occasion to ask for some directions of the concierge at a smart hotel and was taken aback with his urbanity, his command of English - better than I'd heard anywhere - and how impeccably he was dressed and groomed: such a contrast with what one was used to in Australia, and also in Britain. He smiled indulgently at my reaction: only once before had I encountered a man so urbane, which had been when I was 11 or 12 and accompanied my mother to see a friend of hers travelling on an Italian cruise-liner docked for a night in Sydney and the purser similarly charmed the wits out of me.

Before we left, we visited the Allies war cemeteries. What an impression that made! Perfectly manicured and maintained, with scrupulously-kept records of each soldier buried there, all housed in handsome kiosques. A measure of the respect Germans hold for those who gave their lives and the cause they fought for. Like my conversations on the ski lift, we're friends now.

On the way toward Hannover, we found the West Germans officious while the East Germans we met were polite and helpful. From the autobahn I noticed women



Check-Point Charlie & East Berlin



working fields with back-hoes and wondered at the backwardness - not just in the use of those tools, but that women were working fields. Then came the realisation that we had already left East Germany. Those women were West German!

Sometime about then, we stopped at a supermarket. We must have been in a hurry and my German was far from perfect, but still I should have been surprised to see a jar of peanut butter. Not reflecting, I loaded it into the trolley and was indeed surprised a day or so later to bite into a piece of bread spread thick with mustard.

Having stayed in a campsite again, we slept in and did some washing, which was expensive, even in the campsite. Then we drove to Hameln and camped outside the youth hostel there. The town is very pretty with lots of Pied Piper tack, but the shows get going only in June so we headed on the Köln.

Naturally visited the cathedral, looked at the remains of the medieval wall and climbed the 500 odd steps to the top, as the chairlift was too expensive - as was the Rhine cruise. We stayed again at a campsite there and the following morning headed on to Bonn. The city is quite pretty, with more medieval character than we anticipated. Stopped in a pretty grungy campsite and the following day headed along the Rhine to the Lorelei rock. The river is very pretty, even other-worldly at this spot, bounded mostly by cliffs and dotted with dozens of castles. We drove back to Köln for dinner and the following morning set off for Bruxelles.



Belgium - 2 June

Bruxelles, Waterloo, Gand, Bruges, Zeebrugge

The Mannekin Pis for real. Steps to the Waterloo lion. Searching for elusive accommodation. Ophelia masters Purchasing Power Parity.



Its still not clear why we went to Bruxelles. It seemed we had to, if only to see the Mannekin Pis for real. Arriving in late afternoon and parking near the youth hostel, we walked around the town and were surprised how grey and grotty and soul-less it is, especially compared to the places we'd been. Even the weather is grey, grotty and soul-less. My lasting impression is the smell of urine in the streets. Do they not have the means to clean it or provide public toilets?

On 4 June we drove south to Waterloo - a name we recognised. The site of the celebrated battle is marked by a conical mound, with 226 steps leading up to a giant statue of a lion. Well, we had to climb to the top, which afforded a view of the battle-field. Not much reason to stick around, so we drove to Ghent, with its charming but impossible-to-drive-on cobbled streets. Wasted a lot of fuel driving around looking for two campsites that just didn't exist, so we went on to Bruges, a very pretty, but expensive, town, where we wandered around for a while before going on to Zeebrugge for lunch. Its noted as a seaside resort, but left us wondering why. Back to Bruges to stop the night. It was not just Bruges, the whole of Belgium was insanely expensive, especially since it was such a dreary place. Ophelia was scandalised that a dollar would buy only a stupid Mars bar, when it had bought so much more in Germany! She followed our advice and held off for France.



France - 6 June

Lille, Paris, Reims.

A squat toilet and a shoe, Parisian traffic (accidents) explained. Really good food explained. Notre Dame without crowds. Making and drinking real champagne.

Our first night was in a camping ground outside Lille, where we encountered our first squat toilets. It looked like, and was, an accident waiting to happen, and Ophelia cannot be blamed for dropping her sandal in. Though hardly pleasant, fishing it out was less disgusting than it might have been. Fortunately, the weather was warming up a bit, and the shoe was dry by the time she needed to wear it again.

We arrived in Paris on the afternoon of 7 June and went to a tourist information place on the Champs-Elysees, then to the Arc de Triomphe before setting out to find the youth hostel and somewhere to camp the night.

Driving a right-hand drive vehicle on right-driving streets - and vice-versa - is bound to be a challenge. With no windows on the sides of the van, it was up to me to stick my head out of the passenger window to try and avoid collisions. But the 2CV that collected us had been travelling very briskly, especially for a car that's supposed to have the power of only two horses, and I just hadn't seen it. It now became clear why so many drivers had seemed frightened of us: they were right to be. The 2CV hit just behind the passenger-side door, but while the paint was a bit scratched, no other damage was apparent to the van: even the door still slid open and closed. The poor 2CV was less lucky: its right-side wheel sloped comically against the engine compartment, while the mud-guard lay sorrowfully on the ground beside it and a headlight went rolling a hundred metres down the street.

I was hugely apologetic, concerned that the driver been hurt. She stepped out of what was left of her cute little car and seemed amazingly insouciant. I asked her what we should do and she shrugged and said she'd call the police. Several police arrived very quickly in their smart uniforms with peaked pill-box caps. They seemed quite uninterested in what had happened, but set about redirecting traffic and sweeping away the broken glass and other debris. Then they got in their van and drove away. Very pragmatic, the French, I decided.

I then asked the woman what she would do about her car and she shrugged again and presented me with an insurance form and asked me to fill in my section of it. This amused me, as I immediately realised that the implications for us were zero. Alan's home address, as noted on his driving licence was in a suburb of Wollongong called Unanderra. Nobody in the insurance office in France - or anywhere outside Australia, would believe such a place existed, and by the time he arrived back there, all would have blown over anyway.

We had arranged for any mail to be forwarded by NAT in London to a youth hostel in Paris, so went there to find none. Then we found a reasonably-priced camping ground for the night. The northern summer was still cold and grey and we were all quite exhausted from the day's efforts. I certainly was not ready to see a man attendant come through the ladies' shower and dressing facility.

We stayed in Paris for three nights in camping grounds and visited the Eiffel Tower, the Quartier Latin and Notre Dame. Of all the medieval cathedrals we were to see, its the one not to miss. How glad am I now, to have seen it while we could! We had not gone to the top of the Eiffel Tower because it cost too much, but it was free to climb to the top of the north tower of Notre Dame, so we did that. I reasoned that it was a better deal all round, as the view from there was better - featuring, as it did, the Eiffel Tower (but not Notre Dame).



The weather might have been dreary, but the food was amazing. I remember going to a butcher and buying some veal scallops. I hardly needed to cook them, they were so creamy, and I now appreciated the art of good butchering: the French knew exactly how to cut the meat to enhance its flavour and texture. And, of course, the bread! Bought a baguette, which was still warm, but by the time we'd got back to the van it had all been eaten, so had to go back and buy another. I still go into raptures over the smell and taste of freshly-cooked French bread. I was also charmed by Parisians, who seemed almost protective of me, explaining patiently how I should cook various things, which sausages could be eaten as they were and which needed to be cooked.

But the cold was getting us - I heard that it was indeed unseasonably cold - snowing in Lisbon, someone said! So, on 10 June we decided to head into the countryside, and where else, but to Reims. There it was sunnier, and at a campground we could clean out some of the mud from inside the van. I didn't mention the baked beans.



Reims

This was the right decision for another reason, which is to compare the cathedral there with Notre Dame, and I understood then why it was so celebrated. We then did the obligatory tour of the caves at Veuve Cliquot, which inevitably finished with my first-ever taste of real champagne, which was of course unforgettable. Being grown-up about children and alcohol, they offered

Ophelia a glass too. I had advised her to sip it very slowly, which she did: a bit too slowly: The staff were of course charming, waiting for her to finish her champagne so they could usher the next tour group through. While in Reims, I took a tour around the local market and gawped stupidly at the cheeses. The merchant was keen to engage me in conversation and on learning that I was Australian he began hopping around in imitation of a kangaroo. He also offered me a taste of some cheeses. I remember a sort of brie infused with walnuts, which I very much liked at the time.

Alan and I ate delicious, perfectly butchered steak that evening and stayed three nights in Reims, visiting also the caves of Mumm, so learned even more about making champagne and drinking it.

Luxembourg - 13 June

From there to nearby Luxembourg, a very pretty town set around a picturesque gorge, but otherwise a bit boring. We booked in to a camping ground and spent the afternoon beside the pool there. Then back toward Paris, stopping another night in Reims on the way.



France - 14 June

Paris, Versailles, Poitiers, Lourdes.

Mastering la Place de l'Etoile and terrorising Parisian drivers, free-camping, football and cosmopolitan cuisine under la Tour Eiffel. Pragmatic, polite police. A world-beating traffic jam in le Bois de Boulogne. Holy water bottles in Lourdes. The magnificence of the Pyrenees and a noisy herd of goats.

The weather in Paris had not improved much, but we decided to rise to the challenge of *la Place de l'Etoile* and do a few laps of the Arc de Triomphe. We stood for a while in awe of the chaos before joining the *mélée*. It was terrifying, but after one lap, we felt we had the hang of it. Now to get off... Amazingly, we managed to extract ourselves unscathed, and I understood then the advantage of having the most terrifying vehicle there: all those sleek Citroens wisely kept their distance from the dinged-up *rosbif*.

That afternoon we chatted to a free-camper at the Eiffel Tower and learned that you could set up there as long as you observed some simple rules. So, the following day that's where we headed and stayed six nights, during which we visited the Palais et Jardins de Luxembourg, which houses the Senate, and then by metro to Montmartre to see Sacre Coeur up close. Walked back to the van, which seemed a very long way - because it was. Also saw the Mona Lisa and Venus de Milo in the Louvre - it seemed odd to us that the Mona Lisa was housed with seventeenth century French art, but I later supposed that it was because Leonardo was a close friend of François I, King of France at that time.

Living under the celebrated Tower was a special experience. The Paris police, in their crisp uniforms and little peaked, pillbox caps, were both kind and pragmatic - qualities I would come across again and again as I got to know more French people. Far from moving us along, they set some rules that, if observed, would allow us a pleasant stay in that very agreeable spot. The rules amounted to leaving our vans and cars tidily locked up between 9.00 and 18.00, when the site was open to tourists. To help, they would come around shortly after 8.30 and tap on our doors to give us time to clean ourselves up, lock up and leave. At 18.00, the atmosphere was almost party, as vans opened up, football matches took over the large square of lawn directly under the tower, people shared delicacies they had discovered and chatted over wine and cheese. Ophelia enjoyed a special status as the resident child, visiting each van and car to chat with its occupants. I particularly remember her introducing me to a Romanian couple whose French was about the same level as mine. They offered us a plate of cucumber sprinkled with salt, which made a refreshing, almost sweet hors-d'oeuvre. I still serve it sometimes: it looks very appetising alongside cherry tomatoes and goes especially well with ceviche.

We were settling in to life in Paris, well, I was. One day, on a walk to buy things with Ophelia, we needed to go to the toilet. We were in rue de Vaugirard in the sixth arrondissement, so I disingenuously wandered into the Palais de Luxembourg. I was surprised that nobody stopped us and we wandered around for quite a few minutes before a guard approached us and very politely asked if he could help. Although I knew perfectly well that it was the French Senate, I feigned ignorance,

as if I thought it a museum, and asked if we could use a toilet. With enormous charm, he guided us along an elegant gallery to a toilet, and waited at the end of the gallery to show us out. A great opportunity to see the inside of the building.

Somehow, I got it into my head that Ophelia had threadworms and bought some medicine to remedy it, explaining to her what I thought she needed to know. She consumed medicine and explanation with alacrity, possibly because it made her feel special. Whether or not she actually needed the treatment is moot, but just about everyone in Paris now knew that she had had worms in her bottom and mummy had cured her.



Drove out to Versailles and came back through the Bois de Boulogne, where we experienced a real Parisian traffic jam. Nobody can do gridlock the way they can. As soon as one lane is gummed up, they just by-pass it to create another, never mind that its for oncoming traffic or a footpath. A mounted policeman was trying to impose order. Jacques Tati couldn't have made it up - one of the funniest things I think I've ever seen - except we were stuck in it too.

The tour of the Conciergerie was only in French. The guide spoke very slowly, so I followed most of it, but Alan became very grumpy. Unfortunately, our budget did not extend to the FF5 for Sainte Chapelle, which is a shame, given how magnificent it is. I've since visited it many times for concerts

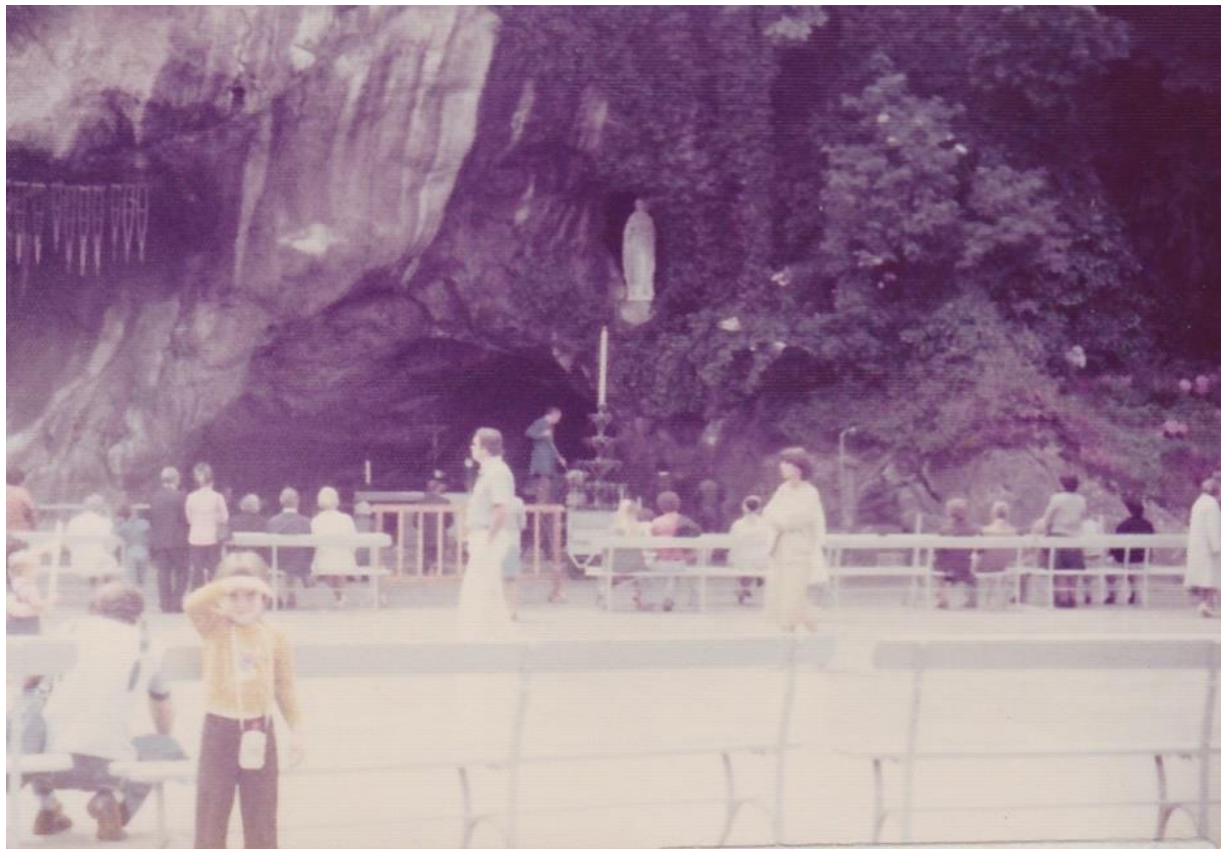
It was now 23 June and funds were beginning to run low, so we decided to head toward Spain. As we did so, clouds cleared and it warmed up. That night we got as far as Poitiers, where we camped outside a youth hostel. Ophelia was looking forward to, and saving her pocket money for Spain, as I had explained that things were cheap there, that they had beaches and she would be able to buy a bucket and spade to play in the sand.

The following evening at about 19.00 we arrived in Lourdes, just in time for the torch-light procession, which went until nearly 23.00 with lots of children singing Avé Maria. That was worth seeing, but, set in the foothills of the Pyrenees, Lourdes is an interesting place in itself, with hundreds of stalls touting tacky tourist paraphernalia, contrasting with its magnificent back-drop.

I remembered seeing the film about Saint Bernadette, so sort of knew what I was looking at. Bought a plastic bottle in the shape of the Virgin Mary, with the top in the form of a blue, plastic-moulded crown. Filled it and our two large water bottles with holy water - the Virgin Mary bottle was a present for my mother, which she kept, although she's protestant. The water assumed a distinct odour of plastic, but I don't know if that affected its holy properties. Lots of handicapped people there hoping to be cured, though the FF27 to take mass seemed like profiteering to me. We camped beside the Sanctuary, where we could fill our bottles with free (holy) water.

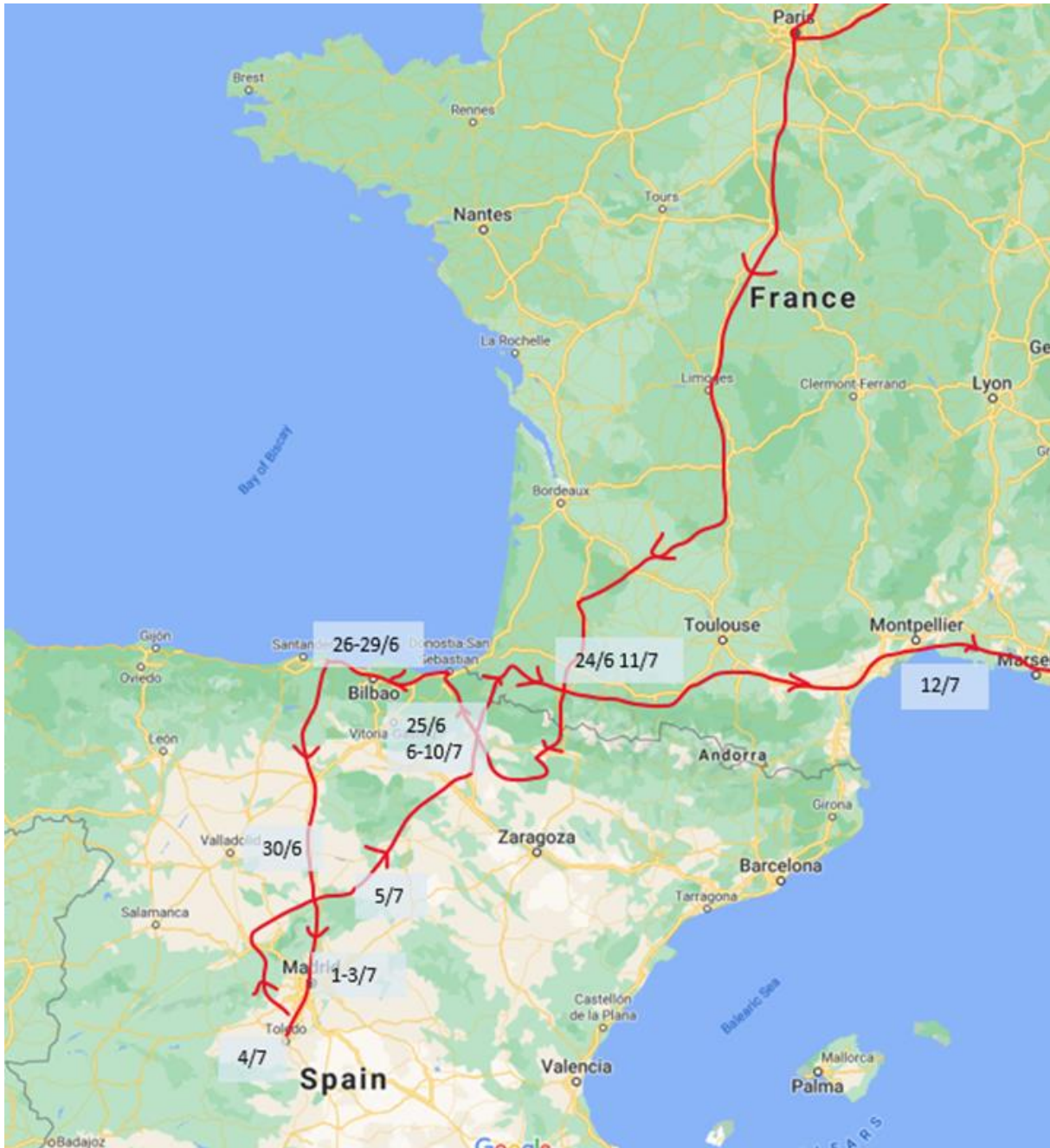
After lunch and refilling our bottles again we headed over the mountains to Spain, following a steep and windy road past ski resorts and some of the most magnificent scenery I think I've ever seen. Through forests and over rugged ridges where, being above the

winter snow-line, trees gave way to extensive grassland. On one stretch of narrow road through very pretty forest, we were overcome by loud clanging and wondered what on earth could be



causing it until a herd of goats with bells around their necks came into sight. They were herded by an old man with a hiking stick. The scene could have been from any time in the last four or five hundred years. Certainly, it harked to an era when time went much more slowly than in our normal lives. Having no choice but to adapt, we waited until the goats, and the old man, insouciantly surrounded the van and passed on their way. I've wanted to re-trace that drive through the mountains ever since, but I imagine it will by now be a soulless motor-way. It was not our last confrontation with bygone eras.

Somewhere about then, the baked beans ran out.



Spain - 25 June

Pamplona, San Sebastian, Bilbao, Laredo, Madrid, Toledo, Segovia, Pamplona

French road becomes Spanish track. Shower surprise in Pamplona. Ophelia's bucket and spade. Four beers and an ice cream in a Laredo bar. A broken water pump and practical Spanish mechanics. Un kilo pollo and the unforgettable odour of chook guts. From El Prado to La Parc des Attracciones. Bullfight horror. Astonishing Moorish architecture and the amazing Roman aqueduct. La fiesta de San Firmin and the Running of the Bulls: fireworks, chaos and tragedy. New shoes for Ophelia.

Less than two years following the death of Franco, Spain was still a very poor country establishing its democracy under King Juan-Carlos and was not yet part of the then European Economic Community. Because of its poverty, and the predilection of the Spanish police for throwing tourists in gaol so as to extract bribes from them, motor insurance, which covered the cost of getting you out of gaol in Spain and Portugal, was very expensive, and we could afford no more than a week of it. That was a shame, because we missed so much.

Our other problem was that we couldn't change the money we had until we got to a major town. I remember asking for help from some inhabitants of a remote mountain village, who were quite lovely to us, spoke French and seemed glad to have contact with foreigners. The place was extraordinarily beautiful and I would have loved to stop there for a day or so. But we needed money and diesel and had run our food supply down in anticipation of cheaper Spanish fare.

We ploughed on to Pamplona, where we exchanged money and stayed a couple of nights at a campsite. By now we were desperate to have a shower too. The facilities were basic, except for one amazing feature, which was that, along with the ceiling shower rose, we were startled by a strong, vertical jet of water from the floor, aimed strategically to get you exactly where it counts.

It was by now 26 June and we headed west to San Sebastian, where we spent the afternoon on its sandy beach - and Ophelia bought her bucket and spade. From there we headed south and camped near Bilbao before continuing along the spectacular coastline to a divine little beach and village called Laredo. The road from the cliff-top main road was a challenge, being un-paved and very steep, but it was worth it. A sandy lagoon, perfect for Ophelia to swim and play with the celebrated bucket and spade, gave on to a magnificent surf beach. In the village was a very reasonably-priced camping ground, with all the facilities we needed.



As I checked us in, a voice boomed over my shoulder: G'day! I turned and a giant ginger-headed Australian called Peter beamed at me, exclaiming how Ophelia reminded him of his little sister. So off they went - her on his shoulders, on a tour of the village. He was traveling with two New Zealander friends in a Rover 3.0l sedan that they had won in a raffle in England. Having spent the winter working on the North Sea offshore oil rigs, they were now spending freely on the Great Aussie Piss Route.

We stayed in Laredo four nights, washed our things and cleaned out the van. Rainy and too cold to swim, it was nevertheless a very happy few days, catching up with sleep and frequenting the bar. Ophelia could run around safely, and played happily with the local children, as we were soon well-known to

everyone in the village so they looked after her. One afternoon, waking from a siesta, I was alarmed for a moment to find her neither in the playground nor with any of the other children. Heading to the bar to enquire there, there she was, happily perched on a barstool as a new round was being ordered: four beers and an ice cream.

The rain persisted, which was a shame, and we now began to wonder if the van would make it up the now-mud road to the top of the ridge, but a rain-free night allowed us to leave on 30 June and get to the top of the ridge without problems.

About 200km before reaching Madrid, the engine began making menacing noises. Lifting the cover revealed a very hot, dry radiator. I asked Alan how long since he had topped up the water in the radiator and he seemed perplexed that that was something you had to do! I shouldn't have been surprised, neither should I have been surprised when he decided to resolve the problem by pouring cold water into the over-heated radiator, which of course cracked the water pump. It could have been worse: he could have broken the radiator casing, but I was still speechless at the lack of common sense. So now we limped the short distance to the top of a rise and marvelled at our luck that a service station and Renault repair shop sat a few hundred metres downhill.

We coasted down to it, but I knew our problems were far from over. What was the likelihood that a replacement water pump for an English van could be procured within the next three months?? There, I had underestimated the ingenuity of the Spanish mechanic. Somehow, he conveyed to me that he could fix it, but would need to have the part sent in. He was also able to communicate that it would take one or perhaps two days, no more. They were as helpful as they could have been and were happy for us to camp beside the service station and to use their water and facilities; and the following day a new Renault water pump came from the neighbouring town. The mechanic was able to adapt it to the Morris. Now I wondered how much it would cost, but it came to Pts 5,500, or about \$80, which seemed reasonable to me for a \$40 part plus five hours of labour. If that was a fortune to him, then good for him, I thought. Another thing that intrigued me was the architecture of the workshop. It was relatively new, with a ceiling-roof, at least four metres high, formed in a series of arches made from hollow terra cotta bricks. This maintained an agreeable temperature inside the workshop, despite insufferable heat outside, and I was very happy to watch him work there, rather than sit with grumbly Alan in the oven-van.

That afternoon, 1 July, we continued on to Madrid and found a camping area (we had been warned against free-camping in Spain). Based on my very rudimentary French, I fancied my ability to improvise in Spanish and caused great hilarity when, at a local shop, I asked for *un kilo pollo*. I think it was there that I was given some Serrano ham to taste. I had thought York ham damned good - compared to what I had been used to in Australia, but this was in another league: I was sure I'd died and gone to heaven. I bought some ham, but there was still this chicken to deal with. The bird was dead and mostly plucked, I presume because they would use the feathers for bedding; but it needed gutting. This recalled those appalling Christmas days of my childhood in an industrial suburb in the west of Sydney where my father kept chooks, the most decrepit and expendable of which would be

sacrificed as a “treat” for Christmas lunch. After the horror of watching, it run around the yard headless for what seemed like ages, spouting blood as it did, my father would collect the corpse and, through its anus, extract its innards. The smell is unforgettably vile, and I was sure I could not endure it. Alan, however, had no such experience, so I told him it would be his job and indicated a spot under a tree a hundred metres or so from the van. I could still smell it as I watched him cursing me. Well, he wanted to eat fresh meat as much as I did, and chicken was the cheapest. We could also be sure it was fresh. It turned out to be quite delicious, and I was surprised how well our very basic cooking equipment managed to bake it.

The treat for the following day was to have a proper shower and wash the dust out of our hair. All clean, we caught the metro to visit the Prado, a must, which at the time was reputed to house the best collection of art outside of the Hermitage in St Petersburg. That evening we ate at an inexpensive restaurant, which we found to be excellent. The cheap but very efficient metro is equipped carriages apparently cast-off from the Paris metro.

On our way to Madrid, we had noticed a big sign announcing a Parque des Attraccions, so we took Ophelia there. It was surprisingly good: better than the Tivoli in Copenhagen, we thought. I was repulsed by the bullfight we felt we must go to and was frankly glad to see a matador carried out because his leg had been badly gorged. The bull was still killed, alas. We left early and later heard that the last bull for the afternoon had been rejected by the crowd. We went back to the Parque des Attraccions, but Ophelia had lost her ticket, so we had some dinner and went back to the campsite.

The following day we drove about 50 km south to Toledo, with its beautiful Moorish buildings, notable among them its synagogue. Stayed the night in an over-priced campsite with no showers, although it did have a swimming pool, which was welcome in the heat. We then drove to Segovia to photograph the imposing Roman aqueduct there. I think its the most amazing Roman building I’ve ever seen - possibly surpassing the Coliseum. From Segovia, we dove all night to get to Pamplona at about 5.00 on the morning of 6 July, the eve of the fiesta of San Firmin.

Despite the rain, the mood was festive, complete with fireworks. The local men all wore white shirts and trousers with red San Firmin neck-scarves tied around their necks. As well as the obligatory bull-fights, the main event is the annual Running of the Bulls on 7 July. A number of young bulls are herded to the start of a course of narrow streets through the town, where high wooden barriers had been erected in to keep the bulls on course toward the bull-ring. Traditionally, young Basque men run ahead of them, but of course the festival attracts lots of tourists, and so kamikaze young men from all over the world (though Australia seems to be greatly over-represented) try to out-run the bulls too. 1977 being considered a special year, the crowd was more numerous than usual, and we caught up with a number of Australians we knew from the Jägerhof in Austria, and the guys from the beach at Laredo. Got up at 6.00 on the morning of the 7th to get good spots for the event. We were quite close to the entrance to the bull-ring, and would have seen more, but as the bulls came running down the street, local policemen moved us back

from the barricades. It turned out that there were too many people trying to get through the narrow passage to the bull-ring, and one had tripped and caused a pile-up that trapped all those behind them. The police were desperately hauling them out of the bulls' path and literally throwing them over the barricades where we had stood. Adding to the chaos, the bulls, confused by the large crowds and general air of panic, changed direction several times. We later heard that 46 people were gored, one poor young Spanish fellow to death, and another trampled to death. Having seen the ambulance, a clapped-out-looking station wagon with some bedding stuffed in the back, I reflected that if the bull hadn't killed him the ride to hospital in the "ambulance" certainly would have.

We heard of a free campsite outside the town, so we headed there and found more people we knew from Brussels and Paris, as well as a couple from Armidale University, where Alan and I had met as students. Much sangria was consumed, so it helped that everything was so cheap there. Ophelia's sandals conveniently gave up the ghost at that point too. I expected their replacement to be pretty cheap, as everything else was, and they were, if you didn't mind plastic. Leather ones were way beyond our budget.

We stayed an extra day or so in the free campsite, where there was also a lake for swimming, though the water was cold and I had come down with a cold. We had to wait until Monday when the shops would be open to stock up on food with our last pesetas.

France - 11 July

Lourdes, Marseilles, St Tropez, Monte Carlo,

An entertaining border crossing, police interrogation, Interpol and mistaken identity. Gumming up the Monaco traffic and harassing a traffic policeman.

This time, we entered France by a main road to the west of the Pyrenees. Crossing the border was more complicated than we imagined it would be, mainly because, having entered Spain by a remote pass, there were no stamps in our passports to say when or where we'd entered Spain, but also because we looked so scruffy. The Spanish police said we had crossed from Morocco, and therefore were carrying drugs. I pleaded our case, but they were unimpressed and suggested they search the van. At that I smiled, opened the back doors wide and invited them to go ahead, but of course when they saw the chaos inside, they scowled at me and told us to go. I wondered if we would have something similar on the French side, and we sort of did - except that the French were much more polite, despite our scruffiness.

The young policeman calmly explained that there might be a problem and would I come into the office with him. He indicated a spot where we could park the van while we sorted it out and asked Alan to stay in the van. Inside, he showed me a photo of a man he said was wanted by Interpol and pointed out the resemblance with Alan. The man in question was also Australian, and indeed looked a lot like Alan, as he appeared in his passport photo, with his moustache. I agreed with him

that Alan's having since grown a beard seemed suspicious and assured him that it wasn't him. He smiled and pointed out that it would simplify things if I could prove that. He was very polite and I felt would listen to any convincing evidence I could come up with. I was also very glad of the French I had retained since school, and he was indulgent with me about that too. After a few minutes, I noticed something that would convince him and asked him to come with me. Alan was brooding in the driver's seat and I asked him to open the top three buttons of his shirt. He objected, as hated exposing his very hairy torso, but I insisted. As the shirt was opened, I indicated to the policeman the man in the photo, with his open-neck shirt and sparse chest hairs - contrasting convincingly with Alan's doormat. I smiled and we both burst into fits of laughter and he wished us a happy journey. Alan was grumpier than ever by now and wouldn't believe my explanation, but of course we were free to go.

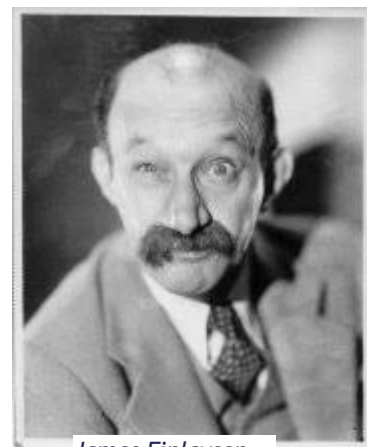


Above Monaco

We got in to Lourdes in time for the torchlight procession, then drove on for most of the following day until we reached a very affordable municipal campsite and had our first swim in the Mediterranean, which we found surprisingly warm. It was 13 July by the time we drove into Marseilles, where we had hoped to find a bank, but of course, the Bastille holiday had already started, and, being a long weekend, we had to continue to Italy and hope for an agency there.

Next stop was a campsite near St Tropez, and had another swim. We couldn't pass Monaco without descending the corniches to check out the casino - from the outside, at least. Without

a map, navigating the narrow streets of Monaco was always going to be a challenge - made no simpler by the complex arrangement of one-way streets that, labyrinth-like seemed forever to lead us back to the main square, where an unfortunate traffic policeman was trying to tame the holiday traffic. The first time he saw our ugly van with the giant GB sticker on it, he grimaced: I think I would have given anything to be at that moment in a sleek Alfa convertible. He waved us through just as the van stalled and we struggled to get it going again. Traffic built up behind us and he waved more furiously. Relief for everyone when, after another sequence of lights, we finally crossed the intersection and headed up the hill out of his sight. But regaining the road out of town was a challenge too far for us, and after a few minutes the poor man turned around and did a double-take when he saw us in front of him again. He was James Finlayson and we were Laurel and Hardy.



James Finlayson

Again, the van stalled just at the right moment. Traffic built up...Twice more this was to happen before he finally rid Monaco of the grotesque van and these *rosbifs*.



Italy - 15 July

Asti, La Spezia, Pisa, Firenze, Rome, Naples, Rome, La Spezia.

Free-camping near a mountain stream. A solo Bulgarian cyclist. Up means down and vice versa in the Tower of Pisa. A real Florentine sunset. Are David's head and feet really too big? Getting to grips with Italian currency. Navigating Rome. Roman dog-walking. Bending bars. Two robberies and an exploding stove.

We had hoped for a wine tasting in Asti, but there seemed to be none of those, so we headed back toward the coast, on the way, stopping at a delightful spot near



La Spezia, beside a mountain stream. With really fresh water, it was ideal for free camping, though getting to it entailed crossing a narrow wooden suspension bridge, so narrow we had to remove of both rear-view mirrors. At the first crossing, I was terrified that the van would be too heavy and we would drop the several metres into the shallow water below, but we made it, which is just as well, as its hard to imagine what we would have done had we no!

Ophelia immediately made friends with an Italian family already camped there and we decided to stay a few days. It was there that I also met a Bulgarian man, probably in his sixties, cycling around Europe by himself. He spoke some French and was very pleased to talk about his trip and showed me the large road-map of Europe on which he plotted his progress - inspiring the map I would produce of our own trip. He said he'd already cycled 14,000 kilometres, carrying all his provisions in his ruck-sack and free-camping, as he had almost no hard currency. That meeting impressed me especially because Bulgaria was then one of the most isolated of all the communist countries in Europe - more so than Poland, Hungary, Romania or Czechoslovakia, so I wondered what he had done to merit being allowed out.

On 18 July, we headed to Pisa, where Ophelia and I climbed the tower. If the Eiffel Tower was much bigger than you imagined from the photos, this tower is much smaller. But the real surprise is how tricky it is to climb. Built entirely of beautiful white marble, it consists only of stairs, having been conceived as a bell tower. Because it leans, you climb upstairs on one side, while descending in altitude, and on the other side doing the opposite. Quite disorienting, and with no handrails, it felt easy to slip off.

Having achieved our mission there, we drove the short distance to Florence, where we found an excellent free-camping spot in the Piazza Michelangelo, featuring an out-size replica of the David overlooking this most photogenic of cities. Our first Florentine experience was its sunset, which is every bit as magnificent as described - only more so. We stayed three nights, visiting the sites you're expected to visit, including the original David, which is unforgettable. It invites you to stare at it for ages trying to work out if the head is indeed too big, or is it the angle you're looking from?

On 21 July we drove on to Rome and stopped in a campsite there for the first night. At a street market nearby, I bought some fruit, which looked lovely and was very cheap - including great chunks of watermelon, which I hadn't seen since leaving Oz, and I knew Ophelia would love. I looked a wreck, having lived in the back of a van for over two months, but that didn't stop the fruit sellers making a

big fuss of me. Like most visitors to Italy, I was struggling with the currency. At the time, an Australian dollar was worth about £1,000. That is relatively simple, but it meant that \$10 translates to £10,000. Complicating this was that bank notes were issued by private banks, each with its own idea of what each denomination should look like, and none showed the commas to delineate thousands, so you had to count the zeros each time you used a bank note. Adding interest to all this was the near absence of coins. For amounts of less than £1,000, you were given boiled sweets - which apparently you could then use as legal tender. The implications for Ophelia's budgeting were interesting.

Still struggling with Italian lire, the fruit merchants patiently educated me in pronouncing the numbers: *Cinquo, quindici, cinquante, cinco cento*. I felt better already.



The following day, we found an ideal spot outside the youth hostel in the Olympic Village, which meant we could use the excellent facilities there. The Olympic Village is, as you'd expect, some distance to the west of the Vatican. Set among a large expanse of parkland, it offers a clean and relaxing contrast to the grime and congestion of central Rome, especially when the weather is uncomfortably warm. There, we had room to spread out. I was amused to see a woman in a Fiat Bambino driving around the village with her dog on a leash tied to a door-handle.

Navigating Roman streets in an old post office van where the vehicle of choice is a moped, or at most a Fiat Bambino, was a challenge, and on at least one occasion, we found ourselves literally wedged between the walls of an ever-narrowing lane-way. In the July heat, wandering around historic famous monuments was quite exhausting. Our solution was to park the van in the wide, tree-lined street beside the Roman Forum. One afternoon, pausing for a cup of tea, Ophelia got out to have a closer look at the iron grille fence surrounding the Forum. A peculiarity of the grille fence was that, where you would expect to see a stone pillar supporting it at intervals, instead, eight vertical bars formed a square for the same purpose. She was just little enough to squeeze into the square, where she crouched, reading her Little Golden Book. With every Roman surface coated with grime from the intense traffic, getting through the bars of course left her filthy but, hot and exhausted, none of us could be much bothered to do much about that. A passing Canadian couple noticed that she was reading in English, so asked her how she intended to get out of her "cage". Untroubled by her black-streaked face and now very grubby little dress she declared confidently: "I'll bend the bars!".

Wandering a bit more in the narrow streets, we stopped to cool ourselves off beside a fountain amid many other weary tourists. It could have been the Trevi Fountain, of course, but I think it was in fact the fountain at the base of the Victor Emmanuel II monument. I remarked how filthy Ophelia was, so I picked her up and threw her in. although a bit surprised, she didn't mind being cooled off.

After visiting the Vatican, where the scale of La Piazza San Pietro boggled our minds, we drove out to the catacombs, where someone tried to break into the parked van. Calling the police was a big mistake, for two reasons. First, we had no way of communicating with them. A well-intentioned New Zealand woman tried to help with some school-girl Latin, but her attempts to adapt this to modern Italian drew only blank stares - and probably some hilarity after we'd gone. The second reason was that the police conveyed to us that, having lodged a complaint, we would need to stay a few days to formalise it. This posed a big problem, as we were now running very low on money, which we'd been unable to obtain in Italy, so would have to get back to France.

Seeking to make virtue of a necessity, we decided to visit Pompeii, and found a delightful beach near there to camp on. Unfortunately, while driving through Naples with the sliding doors of the van open, a young boy reached in and grabbed from the front parcel shelf, what he must have thought to be a wallet, but in fact was our camera with several rolls of undeveloped film in it. We thus lost all the photos we'd taken since Pisa. That included the priceless one of Ophelia in the pillar of vertical steel bars outside the Roman Forum.

Back in Rome on 26 July, we discovered the Pyramid that housed Rome's stray cats, which delighted me and Ophelia. That night we returned to our spot in the Olympic Village, but disasters occur in threes, they say; and, sure enough, that evening, the camping stove that came with the van, with its awkward arrangement of rubber hosing that had never been satisfactory, decided to sever the hose, letting loose uncontrolled flames inside the van. Alan burned himself quite badly turning the gas off at the bottle, but at least the van didn't catch fire. Now we had no stove to cook with.

The following day, the police told us that they'd caught the thieves, who were on drugs and would get seven years' prison. They seemed to expect us to be reassured, but never really made clear why we'd been obliged to stay in Rome to learn that, as we didn't seem to be needed as witnesses or anything. So, the net effect was that it had cost us our photos and camera, and now we were desperately low on cash, and obliged to make speed toward France, where, public holidays now having exhausted themselves, we were reasonably likely to find a bank open.

We considered ourselves lucky to have got back as far as La Spezia and the lovely river-side camp spot there. Arriving at 21.30, with no fresh food, no stove and no money, we were obliged to open and heat a can of tuna and a can of tomatoes and boil water on a fire lit in the pitch black. We were very hungry and it was OK. I had been surprised how easily we got a fire going, given the damp of the evening air. In the morning I understood: we had inadvertently built our fire on a cow pat. It burned beautifully, and I was rather glad I hadn't seen it until the morning.

This was a great opportunity to clean ourselves up after grimy Italian cities. Our baths in the mountain river were chillier than we'd liked, but the water was delightfully clean. We washed and dried clothes too, and in the afternoon headed west.

France - 28 July

Monte Carlo, Menton,

Cashed up with a new stove

Arriving at about 20.00, we ate the most expensive (and mediocre) pizza any of us had ever had, then drove back to Menton on the Italian border to free-camp. In the morning we withdrew \$800 in francs and drove on to Nice to buy the stove and some food, and free-camped again at Menton, still I think my favourite place on the French Riviera, much quieter than Nice and cheaper and less glamorous than Monte Carlo, with a lovely sandy beach. We also managed to find a much more sensible stove, more compact with two burners that screwed directly onto the neck of the gas bottle without fiddly hoses. Not dear either. But Alan can do very little with his hand, and is in a lot of pain.

While on the Riviera, we stopped in at a pay beach to use the showers. I was desperate to wash my and Ophelia's hair, but we also had a nice swim. People scowled at us using shampoo in the open-air shower, but I thought that given the amount we'd paid, all was fair. And we felt much better afterward.

Italy - 30 July

La Spezia, Parma, Venice,

A very consequential flat tyre.

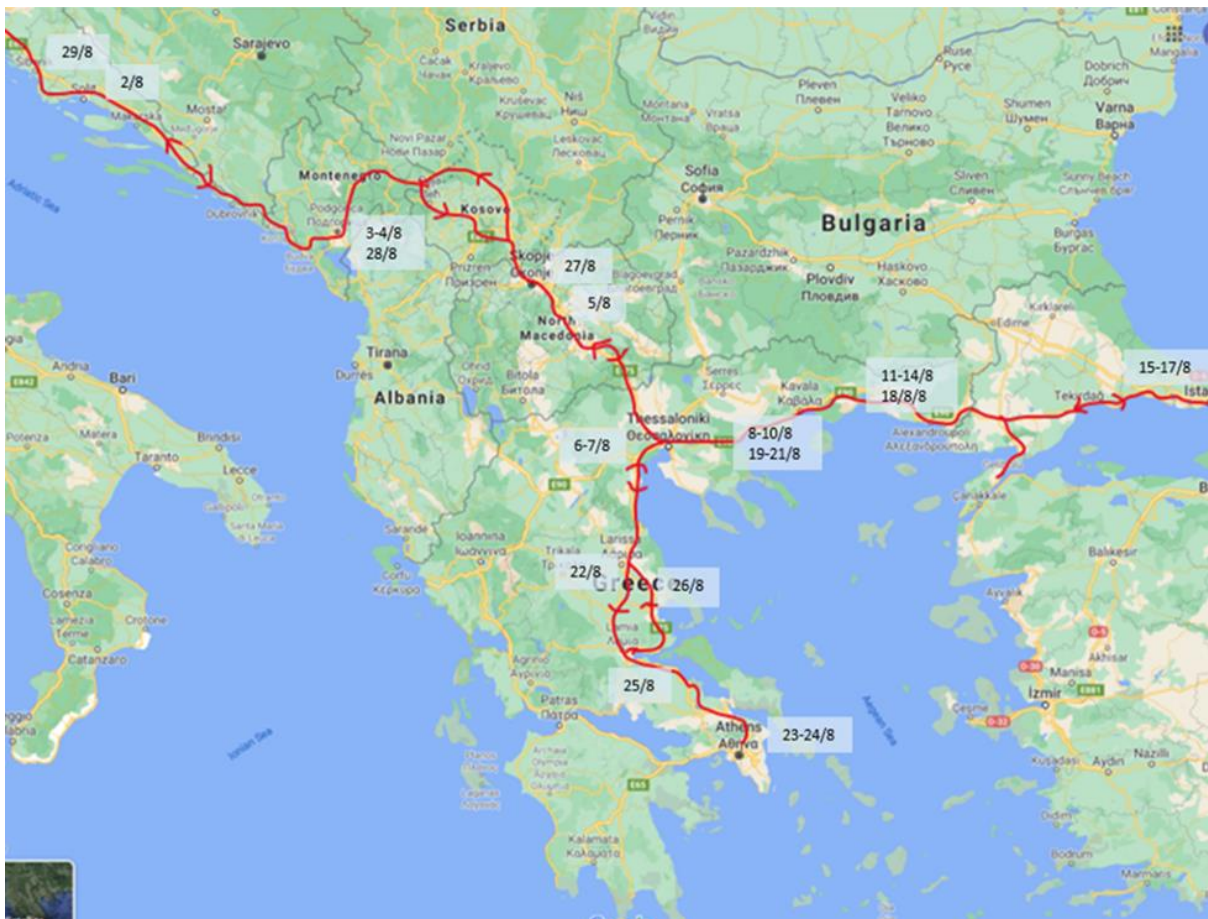
We aimed again for the river campsite near La Spezia, whence the road East took us into the foothills of the Alps. We were just far enough away from the nearest town, which was Parma, when we got a flat tyre. Having limped along to the next petrol station, a very sweet man came running toward us with a pump, inflated the tyre for us and refused our offer of payment, seeming more than happy enough with our gratitude. Then on to Venice to check into an over-priced camping area. We'd of course hoped to buy another tyre, but they wanted \$60, which we thought was blackmail. Shoes were cheap though, so we bought some pushed on through Yugoslavia toward Greece, where tyres were bound to be more reasonably-priced.

Yugoslavia - 2 August

Rijeka, Titograd, Pec, Skopje.

Unscathed amid an International Incident. A magnificent fjord with two teenage girls and two cows. Montenegrin family hospitality, home-made yoghurt and slipkovich, comparative politics, and an old-fashioned well. Mutual astonishment in Pec.

Hundreds of barren islands of pink stone dot the amazingly beautiful Dalmatian coast - I suppose like the spots on the eponymous dogs. Pink-ish rock reflects mauve in the surprisingly calm water, unlike anything I've seen before or since. Our first stop on the narrow coastal road was a camping area near Rijeka, which we reached as part of a long, slow procession of tourist traffic. It had been announced a number of times on billboards, but the entrance was poorly indicated, causing us to stop suddenly so as not to overshoot, given the impossibility of making a U-turn afterwards. The car immediately behind us stopped, but the one behind it didn't, neither did the one behind that, and so on. An international pile-up was turning into an incident and would soon develop into a brawl. In good Laurel and Hardy tradition, we pretended to be oblivious, pointing to the large, stupid GB sticker on the van and shrugging that we spoke neither French, Italian nor German. We then disappeared, leaving them to blame the English. The beach was too inviting and I think there was even a swimming pool to help put distance between us and the offending van. All reasonably priced, too, with a useful little supermarket.



It was now 3 August, and with air leaking gradually from our tyre, we continued south, turning inland just before Dubrovnik. We certainly would have gone down to visit the medieval fortress, but needed to get to Greece as quickly as possible to buy a tyre. About ten kilometres past Titograd (now Podgorika - the capital of Montenegro), we stopped to free-camp beside one of the most spectacular river gorges I've ever seen. Positively idyllic, with grassy hills atop a steep cliff descending to a fast-flowing mountain river with a back-drop of soaring mountains.

I prepared Ophelia's meal and while we then had ours, she wandered off in the grassy meadows. Two teenage girls leading two cows, each with a bell around its neck naturally attracted her and the two girls were charmed and intrigued to see a little green-eyed, freckled girl. She brought them over to the van and we established that between us we had enough rudimentary German to make sense to each other, so they asked if they could take Ophelia home with them, indicating a neat, white, two-storey farm house, surrounded by orchards and vineyards, a few hundred metres back along the road. They invited us too, for dinner, but we were about to eat ours, so I said we would come afterward.

An hour or so later, we were welcomed into a single room occupying the entire ground floor of the house, that comprised kitchen, sitting room and dining room. It all smelled of soap, as if the place had been thoroughly scrubbed, but not well rinsed - which turned out to be close to the truth. Upstairs were the bedrooms, but they didn't say how many. I imagine there were four.

The family comprised grandmother and grandfather, who I guessed to be in their 70s; mother and father, two daughters and two sons in their 20s. The old man spoke some French, but apart from that, it was the girls' German and plenty of mime that served us.

Although I had said that Ophelia had already eaten, it was clear that for them that was irrelevant. Clearly, they could not accept a guest in the house without feeding them what they considered an appropriate supper.

We were able to acquit ourselves with a big cup each of home-made real, Balkan yoghurt and I managed a piece of excellent cake: lemon cake, if I recall. But I was a bit alarmed to see hauled out from a cupboard a large jug of something and eight shot glasses. I could not tell you the names of any of the family members, but the hooch was called slipkovich, which they had made themselves (naturally) from plums they'd grown in their orchard. I tried to signal to Alan to take only tentative sips of the stuff, but he let himself be lured into downing three shots in a row.

At that point mother pulled a face and pointed to Ophelia. Not used to over-eating, she reclined on a settee in the corner of the living area, with a dazed expression on her face, clutching her stomach. She had gone an odd colour and her eyes were now rolling upward. She seemed to hiccup and burped up a quantity of half-digested soup, home-made yoghurt and cake. The women and girls sprang into action, with towels and basins of soapy water, thrilled that they were able to fuss over her even more. Normally I would have been horribly embarrassed about my child barfing in someone's home, but I quickly understood that they were now at last satisfied that she had eaten enough.

We stayed several hours with them in lively conversation. They were very interested in our capitalist system and equally keen - proud - to describe how their own worked. Tito's brand of communism was much more relaxed than most other versions. The farm was theirs and they were obliged to produce a quota of various produce for the government, and anything they produced above that they were free to keep or to sell at whatever price they could get for it. The grandparents

and parents were paid salaries to work the farm, the girls went to school during the day and worked on the farm afterwards, while working age sons took the bus each morning into Titograd, where they worked for wages in a factory. All schooling, health care and retirement was paid for by the state - a real cradle to grave security system, which they much preferred to our capitalist system, and living in such a peaceful, idyllic spot, I could understand why.

I had wondered that the large kitchen was quite well appointed and very solid-looking, with terrazzo benchtops and a big gas stove and oven, seemed not to have a sink or even running water. All became clear when, inevitably, we wanted to go to the toilet. Not a problem: then two sons signalled us to follow them outside into the darkness. Grabbing a pair of large shovels, they led us about thirty metres into the orchard behind the house, where they dug two holes and invited us to use them, while they very politely stepped back toward to house to afford us some privacy before filling in the holes afterward.

During the course of our conversation, they had learned about our tyre problem and waved arms about to assure us that they would have that fixed in no time. They insisted we bring the van into the vineyard in front of the house and stay there until the tyre could be fixed. Although a bit embarrassed to impose, I understood from Dutch and Polish people I knew in Oz that they would be offended if we declined.

In the morning, Alan wasn't feeling very well, but took the bus into Titograd with the two men and the wheel. On his return he explained that he had to leave it there to be patched and re-inflated and would go back in the afternoon to fetch it. I spent the day cleaning the van. When I asked where I could fill our water bottles, the girls pointed to a very picturesque well between the little vineyard, where we were parked, and the house - just like the fairy tales, with a stone rim and a little pitched roof over it, complete with wooden shingles. The bucket was galvanised steel, not thatched wood, but it was suspended from a hemp rope. I leaned over the little wall to check for any lost kittens. It was deep and very dark, just like in the fairy tales. You could not see the bottom.

Now it turns out that fetching water from a well is not straight-forward. You drop the bucket down and guess what? It floats. The girls were collapsing with laughter to see a grown woman who couldn't even fetch water from a well. They showed me how it was done: you had to throw the bucket down at a particular angle and with as much force as you could manage to get it to penetrate the surface and take water. I noticed that their shoulder muscles were much more developed than mine. It took a while, but I got the hang of it. I had to, as I would really have been imposing, arrogant even, to get them to do it for me. Later in the afternoon, when Alan had returned with the tyre and I was preparing our dinner, the girls came along with a big bag of beautiful tomatoes they had grown and insisted we take them when we left the following morning, they also had piled us up with fruit and other goodies.

On 5 August, we set off early, expecting to make Thessaloniki by the afternoon. No chance: it turned out that the patch of dirt road we encountered, went on for about 70 kilometres, including through an interminable tunnel. Our ancient map

had indicated it as the main route to Pec, the capital of Kosovo, the next major town, where we had hoped to find plenty of amenities. We feared for the tyre, which after all had only been patched, but made Pec in mid-afternoon.

Astonishment, rather than amenities, greeted us - both our own and that of the citizenry of Pec. Staring at us wide-eyed, sporting poop-catchers and leading adorable donkeys laden with baskets of farm produce, I wondered if we were the first non-Kosovars they had ever encountered. Far from paved roads and amenities - let alone tyre shops, my abiding recollection is of a single muddy street with a deep trench worked into it. Ours was the only motor vehicle we saw in Pec.

Beyond this time-warp, we joined a modern highway - evidently built in the ten years since our map was published and which, had we known, could have taken us from Titograd in a fraction of the time. But then we would have missed our stay at the farm - not to mention the singular experience of Pec. We luxuriated in the paved road and, although the type was again quite flat, made it to a decent camping ground just past Skopje. The capital of Macedonia was a city of high-rise apartment blocks and apparently some secondary industry.

We were just gathering ourselves after the day's ordeal when I was startled by the face of a man at my door. He had approached without a sound, which was a bit creepy, but he also looked disconcertingly like a monkey. He spoke English and I think he was American, though his accent was indistinct. He first asked if we needed any help with anything. My first impulse was to shoo him away because he frightened me. But then Alan mentioned the tyre and he said he could help get it inflated again. He then described his problem, which was that his Combie van had broken down (which, according to the rhetoric, was supposed never to happen) and needed a lift to Thessaloniki. After he'd helped with the tyre, we could hardly refuse, although I confess, I didn't like the idea at all. He couldn't help being ugly, but there was something creepy about him. He then mentioned his three friends who were to join him and Ophelia in the back of the van. That made a bit of a crowd, but Ophelia loved the company.

Greece - 6 August

Thessaloniki, Kavala, Alexandroupoulos.

The best pick-up line ever. Greek raptures. A new tyre, with coffee and cake. Kavala. Lamb, horse - or what? The Leyland anti-theft system. Home-made wine.

It was not just that we were so glad to have made it, it turns out that the Greeks in Greece are at least as warm, kinds and generous as the Greek people we knew in Oz, perhaps more so: it turns out that they are all mad Austrophiles

Dusty and crumpled, we parked in front of a lovely beach near the centre of town, in the shade of a row of pine trees reminiscent of Steyne Beach at Manly, and I went looking for provisions. Returning with some fresh vegetables, a good-looking man in pressed grey trousers, crisp white shirt and a navy-blue blazer introduced himself and, in impeccable English, invited me to dinner. He oozed charm, and

normally I would have been very flattered, but I was more astonished than anything that anyone would talk to me in my scruffy state. I smiled and said I would be delighted to accept and would it be OK for my husband and daughter to accompany us? Not missing a beat, he insisted: Of course, they will be most welcome - tomorrow evening, but this evening just me and him. I smiled and continued my way. I think it's the best pick-up line I've ever had.

After dinner, we walked along the beach front and a break-water to a light-house. A family picnicking from the back of their car stopped us, arms waving noisily, took Ophelia in their arms and loaded her and us with cakes and other goodies. It seems green-eyed, freckled little girls are rare and exotic in Greece. They were even more excited when they learned we were Australians: Do you know my brother? He lives in Melbourne!! etc. Greece was like that.

We camped on that lovely beach and in the morning, which was a Monday, went searching for a new tyre. Our search was complicated, as we needed a cross-ply tyre (to match the others), which were by then rare in Europe, thanks to much progress in tyre technology, led by Michelin. What were easy to find, though, were Holden distributors! The manager of a large tyre distributor, learning that we were Australians, invited us into his office for coffee, cakes and helpful hints for our stay. A big portrait of JFK dominated the wall behind his desk. The tyre, although much cheaper than it would have been in Italy or France, was still expensive, but somehow, with all that enthusiasm, that mattered less.

Our next destination was to be Istanbul, but a medium-sized town called Kavala, with a long, sandy beach where we could free-camp and swim in the clean water, wouldn't let us pass until we'd stopped there a few days. A favourite spot for truckers, it turned out, ensuring us lots of company. Ophelia loved it. The centre was nearby too, where we could have our empty sangria bottle filled with local wine. Apart from Greek generosity, we knew two things about Greece: lamb was especially good and cheap, and they all spoke some German. So, I set out to find some. With my very basic German, I was directed to a butcher, where I asked for *ein kilo fleisch*. At that the butcher took a scythe and, from a large carcass hanging from the ceiling, slashed a lump of meat vertically and began wrapping it in newspaper. In view of the size of the carcass, I worried that it might not be lamb after all, I pointed to it and, forgetting the German word for sheep, said "baaa". He shook his head and said "no baaa". Wrrried it might be horse, so I sort of whinnied. He shook his head and said "no" and mimicked my whinnying sound. I frowned again until, from below the counter, he held in his thumb and forefinger, the bright yellow horn of a plastic mould of a purple and white cartoon cow's head, which set us both laughing. The meat was as tough as, and I struggled to cut it across the grain with our half-blunt camping knives. But it was fresh.

It was a pleasant spot and we would have stayed longer, but we needed to get back to a major town with a bank before our funds ran out again. Kavala's hold on us became a grip when Ophelia, who often used the steering wheel to pull herself up into the van, managed to lock the ignition. This had happened a few times, but this time, when we tried to unlock it, the cheap little Leyland key broke off in the lock, which handily, was also the ignition, meaning that now we couldn't even start the car. A lock-smith confirmed that there was nothing he could do. But

necessity is, as they say, the mother of invention: I got out the little toolkit I'd bought in London and tinkered. The lock mechanism was so crappy, that I easily dismantled it with an ordinary screwdriver, exposing the mechanism. This amounted to a nylon disc with a rectangular groove in it, into which the shaft of the ignition lock fitted. It was thus a matter of finding something with a suitably-rectangular protrusion to slot into it, such as the handle of a toothbrush. You have to marvel at "security" mechanisms that can be circumvented in fifteen minutes with a cheap screwdriver and an old toothbrush.

We decided to stay another night there anyway, going on in the morning to Alexandropoulos, on the Turkish border, where we checked in to a camping area. There we topped up our money, did some washing and cleaned up again. But we decided to free-camp the second night, as the campsite was expensive. A chicken-wire fence extending several metres into the sea separated the campsite from the rest of the beach, and we found we could wade our way there and back to use the facilities. We dined with a Melbourne couple who had the luxury of tables and chairs. Some Germans joined us for another night there.

Turkey - 15 August

Istanbul, Gallipoli.

Turkish hospitality and a convivial camp-site. Stork tragedy. The beautiful Bosphorus and an unforgettable aroma of freshly caught and cooked fish. Three, no, four, camels for a daughter? The shocking desolation of Gallipoli.

Fortunately, we weren't searched as we entered Turkey and had no issues with the police there, as many people said they had. Stopping to buy some provisions for lunch and dinner, I was invited in to the home of a local family, who were intrigued at an Australian travelling with a little girl. They were keen to show off what they had grown and made, and I left with bags of fresh tomatoes and pastries and our old sangria bottle now full of excellent Turkish wine.

We made a bee-line to the centre and the Blue Mosque before returning to a camping area for the night. The inside of the mosque is of course very beautiful, and all the more so for the blues and the sheer volume of space that give it a sense of priceless. The presence of dozens of tourists wandering around seemed not to bother the rows of worshippers kneeling on the floor.

Back to the campsite and an almost party atmosphere with paper lanterns strung between the trees and very chatty fellow campers. For me the party was marred by the sight of a stork that collided with an electricity pole and was electrocuted in a giant blue flash. Its mate sat next to it until the middle of the following day. So sad: he or she would probably never find another mate.

The following day, with another couple, took a trip on the beautiful Bosphorus. Istanbul reminded me of the nicer aspects of Singapore. Except for the divine smell of fresh fish being grilled on the banks of the water, which is unique to Istanbul, and to me will always define this exciting city. We trudged up to the

Topkapi Palace, with its wonderful view of the city and the Bosphorus, then the mandatory Grand Bazaar. Had funds not been so low, I surely would have succumbed.

The point of travelling, especially to exotic places, is to be surprised. Well, that was accomplished as we left the Grand Bazaar to head back to the van. A man with the thickest moustache I'd ever seen stopped me and offered three camels in exchange for the little girl. I laughed, assuming it a joke (and envisaged getting three camels on board the plane, not to mention the reaction of my parents - and Ophelia's father - on my return to Sydney with three camels and no daughter). As I turned to walk on, insistently he grabbed my shoulder and increased the offer to four camels. I ran to catch up with the others to hurry them away, keeping a firm grip on Ophelia. He may have intended only to shock me, but I wasn't taking that risk.

We started early on 18 August toward the Gallipoli peninsula. Just as well, as it took us ages to find the site of the landing. The locals seemed unaware that there was anything there, and it was only when we came across another Australian couple returning from the cemeteries that we were able to find them.

It was a shock: such a desolate spot! Scrubby undergrowth among slender trees atop a sheer cliff behind the narrow beach many metres below. Its surprising any of them made it to the top, as the Turkish gunmen would have had no trouble picking them off. A series of fenced off areas among the scrub, each about six metres square, with two or three dozen headstones on it were the closest thing we saw to graves. A plaque listed the soldiers buried in each area, but I later learned from other Australians and New Zealanders that they had seen on the plaques the names of uncles who were at home, alive and well. And with that the chilling realisation that these were in fact just mass graves, bodies dumped hastily into big holes in the ground before they rotted in the Summer heat. After all, what regard did Turkey have for Australia anyway? My first and abiding thought is that the Gallipoli landing was nothing short of a war crime.

I understand that the site has now been tidied up so that it more resembles the manicured and respectful war cemeteries in the rest of Europe, but I cannot rid myself of the suspicion that any improvement is only cosmetic, and that underneath they are still mass graves. We headed west again.

Greece - 18 August

Alexandropoulos, Kavala, Athens.

Making the most of lovely beaches. A very practical souvenir of Athens. Real calamari and octopus on the Athens waterfront. Coming to terms with the Greek Summer.

Dinner was on the beach at Alexandropoulos.

It was now 19 August, and we had time to kill before heading back north to join the *Oktoberfest* in München, confusingly held in mid-September. So, we headed slowly toward Athens, stopping at the lovely beach at Kavala until the 22nd, where another Australian couple joined us and lent Ophelia their goggles and snorkel, enabling her to delight and marvel at the uninterrupted expanse of plain sand under the water: not expecting any corals or interesting fish, she wasn't disappointed not to find them. Also, a couple of very sun-burned English truckies, replete with bread and bacon, made a merry little gathering.

Even with the doors open and driving at full speed, it was unbearably hot in the van. At one point we sought shade under some olive trees, but of course they offered no real relief. We free-camped on the way to Athens and arrived on 24 August at a beach about 30 kilometres from the city, where we free-camped. Used the showers at a pay beach before treating ourselves to a meal of octopus and calamari followed by the sound and light show on the Acropolis. Ophelia had again accumulated a decent kitty and was keen to invest in one of the souvenir shoulder-bags on sale at any of the dozens of souvenir stalls. Rather than one with an image of the Acropolis or some other monument, woven into it, she chose one with a big smiley-face. Not especially Greek, but it was just the right size to accommodate one of her Little Golden Books, and she loved it. The following day we climbed the hill to the Acropolis, where visitors could still roam through the ruins, clambering over fallen stones. From there, we drove north again along the pay road to a lay-by near a beach where we spent most of the following day.

Heading north again, we spent the night in an olive grove. We would have liked another beach stop, but the weather was turning quite cool. Our next stop was at a lay-by, off the highway in Yugoslavia.

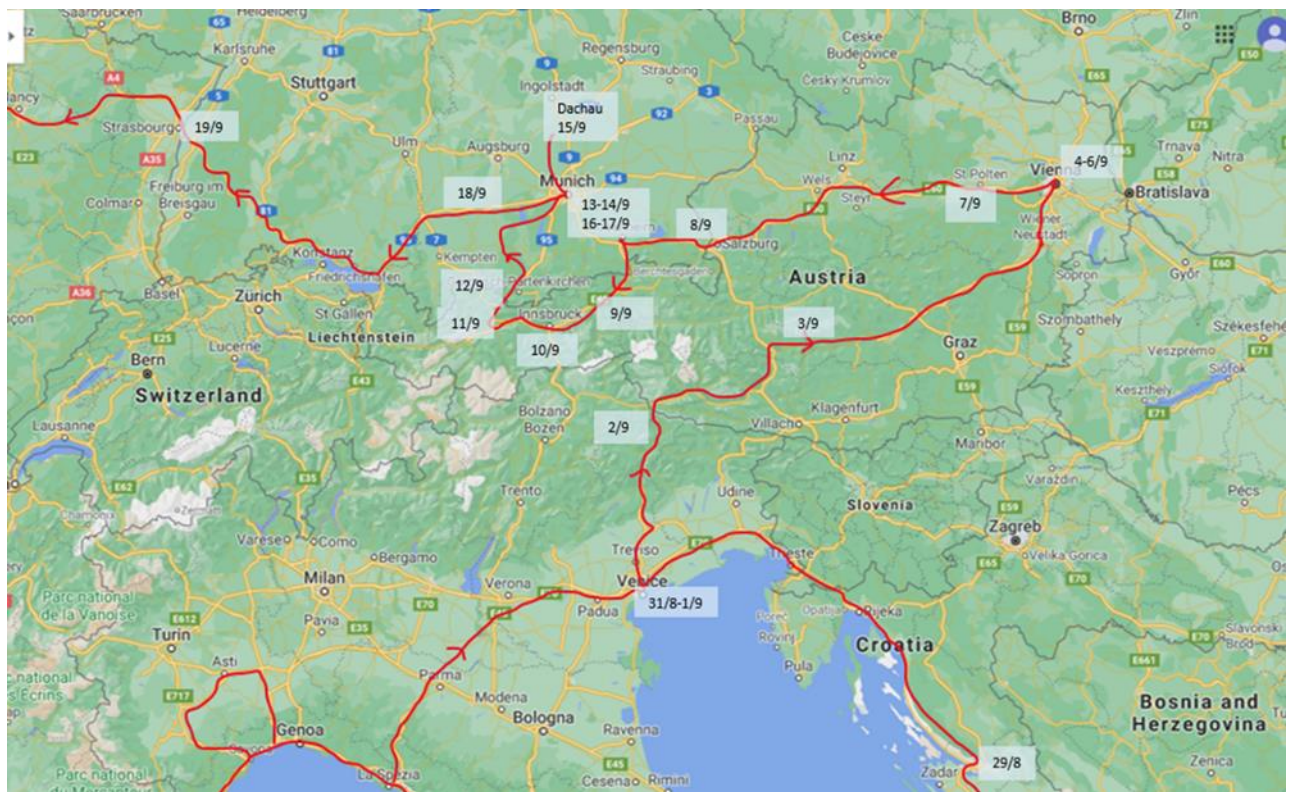
Yugoslavia - 27 August

Kotor, Siberok,

Sprint to Venice, with beach stops.

We followed pretty much the same route north through Yugoslavia as the one we'd used to come south, with the exception of a modern motorway from Skopje to Titograd, by which we avoided Pec and the 70 kilometres of dirt road. Still, we were keen to revisit the spectacular fjord and camped in the same spot where we had met the family who had adopted us. We didn't see them, and didn't go in to say hello, not wanting them to think we wanted more food. But we did meet another Australian couple there, and camped and ate with them.

Continuing north, we stopped for a swim just north of Siberok and camped nearby, again with another couple of Australian campers.



Italy - 31 August

Venice, Parma.

Venetian glass doesn't break. Real Parmesan cheese is divine.

It was 31 August by the time we reached Italy and headed on to a camping ground near Venice. On 1 September, we caught the ferry in to Venice and visited a glass factory. The tourist group jumped as one when our guide lifted one of the delicate, gilded glasses and smashed it against a marble table and agape that it hadn't broken.

Although ahead of our schedule, we decided against another day in Venice and headed toward the Austrian border. It was somehow comforting to be heading into the mountains along a windy road through forests. We had stopped at a little village on the way to buy some food. A cheese merchant gave me my first ever taste of real parmesan cheese and was delighted at my reaction to it.

Austria - 3 September

A mountain lake in the Dolomites, Vienna, Salzburg, Innsbruck, Imst.

Mountain delight and first snow. The Spanish horses, for real. Less-real wienerschnitzel.

Nobody had warned me how spectacularly beautiful the Dolomites are: the peaks are much craggier than either the Alpes or the Pyrenees. Barren but. Only the

following morning did we appreciate how insanely beautiful they are. We had free-camped in a lay-by beside a mountain lake, smooth, mirror-like, even, with a spectacular backdrop of formidably jagged peaks, now dusted with the first snow of the season. Several kilometres from any signs of civilisation and a hundred kilometres from Vienna, it was cool and the water tasted sweet. In fact, it was more than cool. Having wilted in unbearable heat only six days earlier, we were now freezing., but the excruciating beauty made up for the cold. For a main thoroughfare, it was also very quiet - with only the odd lorry rumbling past.

Into Vienna in pouring Autumn rain and, to avoid driving on more cobbled streets, picturesque as they are, we stopped at a camping ground a few kilometres from the centre. The following morning, 5 September, we took the tram into Vienna for a walk around. Although food and accommodation were dearer than in Greece and Yugoslavia, we could live quite cheaply because public services, especially things like public toilets, are plentiful and free, and the local water drinkable. We stayed two nights and saw a practice session of the Spanish Horses. In the queue for tickets, we found ourselves standing next to one of my work colleagues. Good to share experiences and exchange tips, but you have a sense of waste to have come all the way to Europe, just to talk to people you can meet any time in Oz.

We started the day on 7 September with long, hot showers and set off at about lunchtime for autobahn to Salzburg, free-camping a night on the way. On 8th we walked around in the Autumn sunshine, lack of funds preventing us from doing a tour of Salzburg castle and Mozart's house. In fact, we had already visited Salzburg during our ski holiday, when we were also taken to see the nearby house of the von Trapps, as featured in *The Sound of Music*.

That afternoon, we were caught in a five-hour traffic jam and arrived for dinner at 22.00 at a campsite about 40 kilometres from Innsbrück. Pouring rain fogged up the windows and prevented us from enjoying the mountain scenery, but by the following day it had stopped and we continued on to Innsbrück for some shopping and a hot shower. At a restaurant that evening, we ate *wienerschnitzel*, which I was sure was pork, it being much cheaper in Europe than veal. But it was great to be clean and dry and to wear some different clothes.

The following morning, we drove out of the city to a wooded spot beside a main road, where we hiked and camped among some stunning mountain scenery.

Germany - 12 September

Oberammergau, München, Dachau, Stüttgart, the Black Forest

The whizzing and whirring at the Deustchesmuseum. In the Music Room, a Bavarian-hatted Japanese charmed by Ophelia. From Dachau to BMW. Culmination of the Aussie Piss Route. A helium-filled balloon, sugar-coated hazelnuts and two Hofbräuhaus steins. Ophelia's first hangover and a new use for the Spanish bucket.

Fearing a traffic jam at the border, we made an early start toward Germany. In the event, there was no hold-up, and we were in Oberammergau for lunch. Famous only for its once-a-decade performance of *Der Passionspiel*, in celebration of its having been spared the bubonic plague that killed a third of its neighbours. Having learned about it at school, I had to visit this small, pretty, but otherwise boring, Bavarian town nestled in a fairly typical Bavarian valley. Being boring, we found it also relaxing, and easily found a peaceful spot about a kilometre and a half out of town to camp the night. I was intrigued to learn that a nearby hamlet is called Unterammergau (Under-ammergau, as opposed to Over-ammergau) and wondered if it had been spared the plague too.

It was 13 September when we drove on to München and checked in at a campsite. The *Deutschesmuseum* consumed all the following day and could easily have taken another four (by comparison, I estimate that you could do justice to the British Museum in two days). Lots and lots of interactive science and maths exhibits invite you to turn handles and press large, red buttons to make things work. Perspex casings show the inner mechanisms of even quite complex machines. There was a working, full-size model of the original Puffing Billie steam engine, complete with wooden fuselage, all mounted on rails (but no Perspex, see-through sections). A music room had the most amazing collection of antique instruments, housed in what had been the music room of a palace. Sydney's Museum of Technology on steroids. In addition to the usual cafés and restaurants, there was a lunch room, with tables and chairs where you could bring your own lunch. We followed a guided tour group and caught a bit of the commentary. A funny Japanese man with a bright green felt Bavarian hat, complete with feather, was very taken with Ophelia and kept separating from his group and playing the clown to make her laugh.

On the 15th we started early for the concentration camp at Dachau. Predictably clean and well presented, it was clear that much had been reconstructed for tourists. Free-camped outside München and the following morning visited the Olympic Village, infamous for the hostage and murder of Jewish athletes by Palestinian terrorists during the games there in 1972. Then to the BMW museum, which was predictably over-the-top.

On 17 September, we took the *U-bahn* in to central München for lunch: lively in the Autumn sunshine, with lots of pedestrian zones and street musicians, including a young woman doing a splendid rendition of *Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?* In the afternoon to the *Hofbräuhaus* and the culmination of the Aussie Piss Route.

The Temple to Beer was a monstrous tent in the fairground. Said to seat 10,000 guzzlers, it was full to overflowing, seemingly with mostly Australians. They sat on long benches at long tables, with twice as many more of them standing. All with death grips on their two-litre steins. All attended by fräuleins with arms like wrestlers wrapped around three, two litre steins, expertly, if not especially elegantly manoeuvring between tables and the heaving crowds. Like temple worshippers, waiters with arms extended heaven-wards bore platters piled high with long bread-rolls of ham or *würsten*, garnished with salad leaves. Other vendors circulated with trays of sugar-coated hazelnuts.

Yet, despite the difficulty of circulating in the mass of beery flesh, I think we met just about every Australian we'd so far met since leaving Australia.



Like many children, Ophelia liked beer, and bowing to the inevitable, I said she could have some beer, but impressed on her that she should make sure she ate something with it. Peter, the burley ginger-headed fellow we'd met at Laredo in Spain, lifted her immediately to his shoulders and made off into the heaving mass. Ophelia, by now practised in the art of being spoiled by home-sick Aussies, expertly pointed to a helium-filled balloon for sale. That suited me, as I could then see exactly where she was as they manoeuvred through the hoards.

Our mission was to collect a souvenir stein, well, two, actually. We knew that the giant bouncers at the door took exception to this kind of larceny and could be very aggressive. But steins full of beer were cheaper than empty ones from the souvenir shop. And anyway, we had a cunning plan. Alan bought one and somehow, between us, we consumed the beer in it. Ophelia was convincingly sleepy by the time she was returned to us and protested only weakly as Alan cradled her and the empty stein in his arms, past the bouncer.

By the time we made it back to the van, where we were free-camping, it became clear that she had had a bit too much beer. She said she'd been careful to eat lots, and she had, but had favoured the sugar-coated hazelnuts over the too-wholesome-by-half-looking sandwiches. She wasn't well, poor thing.

Five is a bit young to have your first Big Night Out, but worse was to come in the morning. Over the course of the trip, the bucket she had bought in Spain had served not only as a beach toy, but on occasion, as an emergency chamber pot. This had upset her horribly, and no amount of washing would mollify her. Well now it served her first hangover. It wasn't funny, especially for her, but we had to laugh. Fortunately, we had plenty of water and fresh bread on hand.

By about three in the afternoon, she started to feel a bit better, which was just as well, because we needed another stein. After a lie-in and some breakfast, we watched the procession, loud and colourful, with horse-drawn carts and lots of other rustic, beer-themed exhibits and giant pretzels half a metre wide on sale everywhere. The pretzels look nice, but I'm sure they taste awful. Peter appeared again out of nowhere and bought Ophelia a souvenir hat. We later repeated the trick with the stein, though Ophelia was not in the mood for any beer.

After another night free-camping in München, we headed west and drove through the Black Forest, which looked like it had been conceived as a fairy-tale setting. Lots of cuckoo clocks, of course, but you were almost surprised not to come across a ginger-bread house. We free-camped just before the French border.

France - 20 September

Strasbourg, Paris, Calais.

Serendipity and the Astrological Clock. Terminal car problems and the dash to Blighty - via home in Paris.

On 20 September, just before midday we crossed into Strasbourg, a very pretty town in a Black Forest kind of way, complete with half-wood buildings and cobbled streets. Alan had never heard of the astronomical clock and its daily midday procession, but I had learned about it at school. Yet, it was only as we parked the van near the centre that I realised we were in exactly the right place at exactly the right time. We managed a surprisingly good vantage point to see the celebrated clock-work performance.

I would have liked to stay there a bit longer, but we were having car problems again. Alan is one of those drivers who rides the clutch at intersections. I knew I should have stopped him from doing it, but we had so many other things to argue about, that I didn't get around to it. Now the clutch was emitting the distinctive smoke that precedes its demise and it was increasingly difficult to change gear. We needed to get back to England with as few stops as possible before it gave up.

At one o'clock the following morning we arrived "home" under the Eiffel Tower.

XI Back to Blighty- 22 September

London

Cold and damp in a bleak bed-sit. ILEA school food and friends and the mother of all playgrounds. Work at Tiddly Dols. Running Hamleys. Strikes and black-outs. More needlework. More West-end plays and NAT day-trips. Dreaming of warm and dry: jet-ship to Australia.

After checking for post at the embassy and treating ourselves to showers, we drove about 50 kilometres out of Paris and free-camped at a lay-by, then on to Calais in the early afternoon, hoping to take the hovercraft, which turned out to be booked out. The ferry was anyway much cheaper and we arrived at the NAT hotel at about 14.30 and read the post that was waiting for us there.

Friday 23 September was a busy day. Alan found us a self-contained room in a big house in Earls Court. A big step down from our Chelsea digs, but it had a concierge who was up for some child-minding and it backed on to a public school, which meant that Ophelia could make her way there and back on her own if necessary. Although the room was big, it not heated, and, as autumn set in, we became miserably aware of a broken pane in the single, large window. The room seemed cheap at first, until you grasped the fact that electricity was not included and you had to feed a metre 20p coins every so often, not least because the energy-hungry, two-ring bench-top stove was the only source of heating. By the end of our stay we

all had burns on our hands from trying to warm ourselves. As with the other London flats, the bathroom consisted of a modular shower stuck next to the sink and stove, with threadbare felt mouldy and stained with years of cooking grease and damp.

There was a double bed and a sofa that we converted to a bed for Ophelia. Threadbare blankets were supplied, so we were glad of our sleeping bags, even if they too were by then see-through.

While Alan was scouting for the flat, I rang Banditooon, who proposed work that evening, but I protested that we first needed to find somewhere to live and get Ophelia into school.

Ophelia started school and we started work a week later on 3 October - Alan in well-paid shift work at a factory, and I at a jobs-placement agency, where I earned £40 for the day, but without a lunch break. Although I'd worked as an unemployment assessor in Australia, I found the work very frustrating, as I felt I lacked the background experience that would enable me to help applicants match jobs. I remember one poor man, in his 40s or 50s, who must have felt very humiliated to be interviewed by a 23-year-old who clearly knew nothing about his work as a shipping executive. The job I was interviewing him for demanded experience in containerisation, a new technology at the time. I had read that the whole industry was moving toward it, but I had little understanding of what it entailed for someone in the pre-containerisation world, where boxes and crates were handled individually by sweaty wharfies (who often rifled them) rather than being grouped by destination and put into standard-size containers to be loaded by giant cranes. I would have liked to be able to suggest a course he could do to upgrade his skills, and I felt ashamed and frustrated that I could not offer the professional help he needed. With plenty of other work to choose from, I quit at the end of the week - wondering that I found it so easy to find work, while this poor man couldn't.

Gathering data for surveys, stopping people near Waterloo Station to get their opinions on this and that, sounded easy enough; but standing around in all weather was a challenge. I was coupled with a Scottish girl, who pleaded with me to lend her £5. I never saw her or the £5 again, so I worked that afternoon for nothing.

After more interviews, I was offered a permanent position and quite well-paid job as an accounts clerk at the posh St James Club. In brown tweed skirt and a pretty floral blouse, both of which I'd made in Australia, coupled with pretty brown patent leather court shoes bought on sale in London, how I played the part of the well-bred young woman! I surprised even myself with the yarn I spun about my father having recently been posted to London in his job as a senior executive for Qantas. But the man was so *Nice*, I'd have felt dreadful resigning a few weeks later, as knew I would, so I turned it down. Meanwhile, Banditooon had proposed a number of jobs for me. Britain may have been experiencing 17% unemployment, but you'd never know it!

On the evenings of Saturday 8 and Sunday 9 October, I worked at a smart restaurant in Mayfair. When Banditooon had proposed it, I asked what I should wear,

having nothing suitable for evenings. Their response, that the restaurant would provide my outfit, made me very nervous, but they assured me that it was a family restaurant. Despite my being very clear that I had no waitressing experience, they insisted and I accepted.

The place was called Tiddy Dols, in a laneway off Park Lane, not far from the Dorchester and the Hilton. It served “traditional English” food to mainly American tourists, who were about the only people on the planet to want to eat roast beef, steak and kidney pie, suet pudding.....

We were two Australians and a New Zealander, all from Banditown, greeting customers and taking their coats and, they being Americans, their hats, to hang them on rows of coat hangers. That, and to try and find their coats and hats as they left at the end of their meals. We also answered the phone, though we had no idea how to answer questions about opening hours or bookings. Our dresses were in the Eliza Doolittle style, dowdy brown empire-line with plain, slightly scooped neck lines and calf-length skirts. Mine smelled faintly of perspiration, but my dark brown patent leather court shoes went perfectly with it. One of the other girls had only sheep-skin lined crepe-soled boots, which looked perfectly dreadful, but I don't think anyone noticed and she didn't care.

The restaurant manager was an idiot, who clearly owed his job to the right school or some uncle. He had bought a couple of books of raffle tickets and put a ticket on each coat-hanger. That was fine, but he'd shuffled the numbers, so they were in no particular sequence or order. That meant that knowing the number on the ticket, or even its colour, offered no clue about where it might then be found. There were three busts of dead white males but no hat racks. The lights were dim.

All went well for a while. Taking coats, hanging them up and giving a ticket to each person was hardly challenging. The busts served as hat racks, though they began to look increasingly unstable as the number of hats piled up. With no way of checking them, hat reclamation was a pure honesty system, but as customers arrived in batches of at least half a dozen, we had no chance to reflect on that, let alone to devise a more workable system.

In due course, predictable chaos. Having arrived *en masse*, diners now seemed to want to leave all at once. Mostly men, if I remember, there was a certain sameness about their coats. We felt like idiots. But, with three young antipodean women, the men were more good-humoured than they had reason to be. One charming man, on finally receiving his coat, reminded us that he also had a hat. Two of us looked dismayed at the three busts, each now sporting a dozen or so hats. He pointed and said: I think its third from the bottom on Mozart. But in the *mélée*, we were increasingly stressed. The phone rang, and one of us picked up and announced: Good evening, Tiddy Dols. The American on the other end didn't grasp the nuance, but we did: pointless taking things seriously from then on.

We were paid to work until 23.00, but it was closer to midnight by the time the manager gave us our wages and we could bolt to get the last tube home.

The following evening, we begged the manager to let us put the tickets on the coat hangers. He was so thick, I think he suspected some kind of post-colonial mutiny afoot. We were also better prepared for the hat challenge (I think the previous evening one man's hat had gone astray but he was very good-humoured about it, not wanting to get us into trouble).

Sunday evening thus went very smoothly until we asked to be paid. The manager wanted to keep us there unpaid until the last customer left. Certainly, he needed us, given his incompetence. But it meant we missed the last public transport home, and the taxi fare ate up our earnings for the evening. It was especially stupid of him, as we reported it to Banditooon, who then black-listed him.

Monday morning brought my next career challenge, as a buyer's assistant at Hamleys in Regent Street, much more in my comfort zone. There, I was helping a funny little man keep track of stocks of models: trains of various scales, racing cars and model soldiers from various armies and battles. This was a specialist niche, serving dedicated, usually very fussy collectors: loyal customers who expected everything to be in stock, no matter how obscure. With each item identified by an alpha-numeric code and up to date catalogues, the job was not complicated, but did demand serious attention to detail. But being rather like earlier jobs I'd done as shop assistant, which usually also included inventory maintenance, I picked it up very quickly.

Although the job was temporary, I think I could have stayed working there indefinitely, had I wanted to. They were so pleased with my work that, first the funny little man, then his supervisor, then the Head of Buying all decided they'd take advantage of my being there to take off on holiday, leaving me, after less than three weeks, as Head of Buying for one of the most famous shops in the world - and at the start of the Christmas shopping season! Apart from pay rates that exceeded those of my two immediate superiors for what was supposed to be a junior position, I also benefitted from sizeable discounts on anything I bought there, so I loaded up on some nice books for Ophelia and a Cindy doll to replace the one she had lost. But how hopeless they all were! I remember going to the stationery cupboard for a new biro, only to find there were none. Did I need to take charge of the stationery stocks too? Britain was in a mess, which could have been brought on by nothing more complicated than simple incompetence.

Meanwhile, Ophelia was enrolled at an Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) school. All of the schools in this system it seems had been church schools, that had since been taken over by the government. A weird system that resulted in a patchwork of mediocrity! I had suitably low expectations and I wasn't disappointed. Of course, better schools existed if you could afford them or knew the right people, but when I enquired, they looked at me as if I had two heads. I decided that, if it depended on who you knew and how much money you had, the standard was probably not special, and anyway, for the time she would be there, school was mainly to keep her amused while we were at work, and I hoped, to make some friends.

While I was at that jobs place, I had become familiar with the secondary system and was deeply unimpressed. Most people seemed to consider it an achievement to

get their O-levels, corresponding to our School Certificate, but with a much narrower curriculum. A-levels, taken after twelve years of school, demanded only three subjects, as opposed to our five or six. Their argument was that it allowed more depth in each subject, but that wasn't obvious from casual conversations with its graduates.

Like all ILEA schools, an hour a day of Christian instruction was mandatory, even for non-Christians, and like all ILEA schools, it served a hot lunch. At the end of her first week, I asked what she had had for lunch that day. Beetroot and gravy, it turned out. Her friends were Jose, Mukti and big, fat Josephine. I wondered how they and their parents liked the daily Methodist instruction.

The main attraction of this school was its proximity to the flat, from the broken window of which we could see into the school yard. Indeed, had we an appetite to climb the fence, we could have got to it that way. Importantly, Ophelia didn't have to cross any streets to get there and back, so if Alan or I were unable to pick her up, she could come home alone and sit with the concierge until we got home.

Although they would get much worse in 1978, things were already pretty bad in late 1977. Even with a Labour government in power (Callaghan had made an idiot of himself by comparing himself to Moses), industrial relations were catastrophic. It seemed that all essential workers were on strike: nurses, firemen, electricity workers. Buildings were burning down for want of firemen and each morning we had to listen to the radio to find out when our area would be blacked out for want of electricity. Leaving Hamleys at 18.00, with no street lamps or moon or stars in the perpetually overcast sky, it was so black that we formed a human chain to walk down Kingly, then Warwick, then Glasshouse streets, to Piccadilly tube. We could hear running footsteps from time to time, usually indicating a grabbed handbag. It was quite eerie. Luckily the tube, or the Piccadilly Lane, at least, had an independent power source. I don't think all tube lines did, however.

During that time, Alan and I saw a number of West End shows and we all did some more day trips on the NAT bus. But the weather was getting very cold. There were days when it was so cold in our bed-sit that the three of us sat in bed together with our clothes on and overcoats heaped over the top of the blankets. Ophelia's and my hair were filthy, but I couldn't bring myself to wash it in the freezing water. To warm up, and when there was no electricity, we would take Ophelia to Battersea Park, about three kilometres down Earls Court Road, along the Chelsea Embankment and across the Albert Bridge. Its attraction was the mother of all playgrounds. Parents weren't allowed and the children had to climb in to it, thereby assuring that they were old enough to play unsupervised. Ophelia managed and loved it. The walk warmed us up and ensured Ophelia would sleep well. Otherwise, we warmed ourselves with hot chocolate.

I quit Hamleys on 26 November to prepare for Ophelia's and my trip home. Alan did not want to be home for Christmas, and I could understand why. I can also understand why he might have wanted a few weeks by himself in London. But, having deprived Ophelia of a normal childhood for a whole year, I wanted her to be spoiled by family at Christmas. I was also damned sick of London and hankering for some warm weather.

The insane taxes still made flights in and out of Australia ruinously expensive, so some kind of jet-ship was *de rigueur*. Unsurprisingly, there was a wide choice and, perhaps more surprisingly, I had left myself plenty of discretionary cash to treat ourselves a bit, not least to some nice new clothes to go home in.

One of the jet-ship choices entailed a flight to Singapore and a cruise to Perth. I was interested, assuming that the ship would continue to Sydney, a trip that I'd heard was very beautiful. The English travel agent said, no, it was overland. I assumed the train to Sydney, which also had excellent reviews. But, no, it was by bus. I told him he was mad and walked out.

I settled on a flight to Hong Kong leaving on 5 December, with refuelling stops at Frankfurt, Delhi and Bangkok and two days in Hong Kong followed by a two-week cruise to Sydney with overnight stops at Manilla and Port Moresby. The flight left from Heathrow too, then somewhat more comfortable than Stanstead, and much easier to get to.

Probably because of the dire economic situation, there were sales everywhere, and we picked up some very pretty things. From Harrods, Ophelia got a very smart *faux-fur* overcoat that looked lovely on her, as well as some jumpers and jeans. I bought a beige velvet blazer for myself and a navy blue one for Alan.

But we were going into Summer, and most of the clothes were for cooler weather. Our swimsuits were in ruins. There wouldn't be time to buy new ones in Hong Kong, as we would be there less than two days, which I wanted to use to buy a camera and some Legos for Ophelia, both of which would be very expensive in Australia. I also was keen to see something of Hong Kong and eat some decent Asian food. So, I got out the needle and thread and made us each a bikini and Ophelia a dress from fabric left over.

XII Sun-ward - 5 December

Frankfurt, Delhi, Bangkok, Hong Kong

1984-induced acute depression. Warmth and sunshine in Bangkok.

We flew out of Heathrow at 10.55 on a scheduled BA flight with plenty of reading material, procured from Hamley's: in-flight entertainment in those days generally consisting of a single film shown on the single screen with optional earphones. I had chosen Orwell's 1984, but it was too close a resemblance to the dystopia of 1977 London: expensive, poor quality food, coffee that was mostly chicory essence (real coffee having become too expensive for the balance of payments and was near-impossible to get). I felt like slashing my wrists!

After Frankfurt and Delhi, where it was already night time, our descent into Bangkok was like waking up from a nightmare. The early morning sun glistened on terraced paddy fields. Just the sight of it made you feel warm!

Hong Kong - 6 December

Warm and dry in a luxury hotel, a new camera and a real Chinese meal. The Star Ferry and Kowloon.

The package included transfer by bus to the hotel Excelsior, in Causeway Bay. Arriving in the evening, we walked around Causeway Bay and back to the hotel for dinner in our room.

The following morning, we bought the camera, Legos and a handbag for me. In the afternoon we took the tram up to the Peak and walked back down, which gives a very good view of the city and harbour. Dinner was at a restaurant near the hotel.

It was our first Chinese meal in over a year, so I ordered three courses: dumpling soup followed by a main course with prawns in it and some fried rice. The restaurant staff were bemused to see a young European woman

alone with a little girl and decided to have a game. The food we ordered was exactly what we wanted, but there was enough easily for five or six people! Anyway, it was delicious and not very expensive.

The cruise was not due to depart until the evening, so we took the Star Ferry to Kowloon, where Ophelia charmed everyone she met and scored some more toys. Clean and warm and, after the bleakness of London, we were both loving the novelty and excitement of Hong Kong!



Street stalls in HK.
Spot the souvenir of Athens



XIII The Fedor Shalyapin - 8 December

Manila, Port Moresby.

A Hell of a cruise! Twenty-seven girls for every guy. A patronising pommy cruise director and a ham singer-entertainer. Glamorous Granny, Ladies' evening, Gentlemens' evening. Ms Shalyapin. Ophelia turns six.

Our expectations for this cruise had been elevated by our experience of our cruise to Singapore a year earlier, so we were almost bound to be disappointed by the Fedor Shalyapin. With about 400 passengers, the ship was about twice the size of the Kota Singapura, which course could have been a good thing, especially as the other passengers were of course generally very good-humoured - after all, they were there to enjoy themselves too. Half of them were retired couples on the homeward leg of their Asia cruise. The rest were, like me, early twenty-somethings doing the jet-ship from Europe: seven men and 190 women. There were five children in all and no children's activities. For such a big ship, it was

surprising that by there was only one pool, and, as we left port, it had no water in it. The crew and catering staff were Russian and spoke almost no English. My budget did not extend to a cabin to ourselves, but we shared a very nice upper deck cabin with two other young women, one of whom was called Bernice. We sailed out of Hong Kong on the evening of 8 December.

Ophelia soon made friends with pretty much all the adults on board. The children, being either too old or too young for her, and all rather shy, mostly stayed close to their parents.

A spivvy English entertainment manager was the main problem: mediocre enough to imagine he could keep us all happy with a worn-out programme and a pathetic disco with rubbish music. Evenings livened up a bit after about 2.00, when he went to bed and we could take control of the disco.

But the real entertainment was in the social dynamics: seven young men were rubbing their hands at the thought of having 190 young women to themselves. The women were pretty much all good fun and enjoyed each other's company. My guess is that, having seen how European men behave, they found the Australians vulgar and dreary and I frankly doubt that any of the guys "scored" during the whole two weeks. The girls seemed to decide collectively to treat the seven with disdain or at best to lampoon them. This was helped by an American, married to an Australian journalist who had been in Hong Kong for three years and now retuning to settle in Australia. She was about as cynical about men as you could be and, with her very mischievous sense of humour, livened up the dynamics no end.

The Philippines - 10 December

Smiling children, a tour in a Jeepney and a dubious win at roulette.

We arrived in Manila on the morning of 10 December for a day. Unlike Hong Kong and Singapore, people are desperately poor, yet amazingly charming - and beautiful, especially the children. We hired Jeepneys with drivers, who took us on sight-seeing tours around the island. It is all gorgeous and vibrant, with lots of interesting trinkets on sale at street stalls. I bought us coral necklaces, among other things. The topography was also amazing: we stood on the rim of an extinct volcano, the crater of which formed a spectacular lake with an island-volcano emerging from the centre. The volcano was itself on a small island, so it was a mountain within a lake on a mountain in a sea. In the evening we visited the casino, where I won at roulette. Symbolic only, as they wouldn't change my pesos back to dollars. I think I still have the 22 pesos somewhere.

Back on board

A dire singer called Edwin Duff joined the cruise in Manilla. Another mediocre pom with chronically mis-placed confidence in himself.

The dour captain's cocktail party at least had some novelty value, but the Russian folk dances, complete with Cossacks, we were treated to by the catering staff after dinner really was a high point. With their gorgeous costumes and the beautiful music they played themselves, you knew they were enjoying themselves too, which gave the evening a sense of spontaneity. This was something we could not have seen anywhere else.



Away from the pool, which at least by now had water in it, there was pretty much nothing to do, yet how glad I was that I didn't have to take part in the equatorial crossing. In fact, given that we were pretty much all Australians, I wondered who would take part. Yet it did break the boredom for an hour or so. "Ladies Evening" that evening was to be avoided at all costs. I think some of the older women might have gone, but I don't think any of the younger ones did.

Charlie, probably the least uninteresting of the seven, gave us all an astronomy lesson by the pool one evening. Not sure what I had been expecting, I decided to see what the library had to offer: perhaps some little-known Russian literature or perhaps atlases, but I was disappointed, except for a portrait of Boris Godunov, a famous Tatar ruler and tsar of Russia of the sixteenth century, even with an opera named after him. So, I now understood where the name Boris Badenov, the perennial Russian spy-villain in Rocky & Bullwinkle, came from.



One evening's entertainment was a Glamorous Granny quest. Most of the "grannies" on board avoided it, as you would expect; but one of The Seven borrowed some clothes from a granny and entered himself, which went down quite well with those who had attended. We were then treated to a disco by the pool. I don't know how we kept going.



We had dance lessons, and were thankful to the good-natured grannies for lending us their husbands (who, unlike everyone else, were having a wonderful time!) That evening was "Gentlemen's evening". Save us!

In retrospect, it was only a matter of time, but I was still gobsmacked at the lack of sensitivity. Now we were all being harangued into competing for the title of Miss Shalyapin. Of 190 possible entrants, a total of four reluctantly agreed to participate. I was under pressure: There's no age limit, you know Frances. What that was supposed to mean, I can't say, but I nodded and said I understood and would think about it, saying only that he would have to make it the Ms Shalyapin Quest if he wanted me in it, as I had already been married. He still didn't get it.

The quest, on 16 December, was to entail contestants parading twice, first in swimsuits, then in evening dress. In a bid to persuade me, to the "no age limit", was now added an assurance that I wouldn't have to do the swimsuit tour. I wondered what he was getting at: certainly, I had put on weight over the past year, because of stodgy, unnourishing food in London and general lack of exercise everywhere, but I still didn't look that bad in a bikini. I told him I would enter in both sections.

In fact, I had already thought about it and consulted everyone concerned and all were keen - except the entertainment manager, who had tacitly given his consent, so needed no consultation - and, in my view demonstrated attitudes that were beneath my contempt. It was my turn to save the evening.

The four circled the dance floor in their swimsuits, each carrying a card with their number on it. Ophelia, already well-known to everyone on board, was number five and marched on confidently, gorgeous in her hand-made bikini, her dark brown, waist-length hair sun-bleached to honey blonde at the ends. She was thrilled, certain from the outburst of applause, that she'd won.

A group of us then had great fun preparing her for the second round. One of the girls was happy to lend me a knee-length, wrap-around skirt she'd bought in India. Wrapped just under her arms, it reached exactly to the floor. I secured it by tying the sash as a halter neck, with the bow at the back. We could have left her hair out, but I was keen that she look grown up. It was easily long and thick enough to tie on the top of her head, curling the ends under and securing them in a neat, but impressive bun. Some lipstick completed the coiffure, as her eyelashes were naturally dark and thick enough to do without mascara. Never one for pretty dresses, she was unaccustomed to this kind of dress up, but so confident from the first round, was very pleased with it all. And so, nobody was surprised that the applause of the second round confirmed her win.

The only person who wasn't pleased was the entertainment manager. He chose to ignore her entirely, declaring one of the other entrants the winner and opening a bottle of (very good) sparkling Georgian wine, serving a glass to each of the four. Ophelia sat alongside, looking at me pleadingly. I asked where her glass was, and he objected that she was too young, but I insisted that was beside the point, so he grudgingly gave her one. Photos were snapped, but it wasn't over yet.

Ophelia was very hurt. The four contestants were scandalised that she had not been declared the winner and not awarded a prize, even though they had been. When informed of this travesty, the older passengers seemed quite ready to mutiny over it. Grudgingly, the manager opened up the gift shop and told her choose anything she wanted, but it was too little, too late and his ratings among the passengers dropped to about zero, I'd reckon. Consistent with everything else on that cruise, there wasn't much to choose from and she ended up with a cheap,



plastic baby doll in a nappy, not even a pretty dress. I think its arms had fallen off by the time we got to Sydney. It is still not clear to me why it was acceptable for the young, moustached bloke to go on as a glamorous granny, and not for a five-year-old to enter a beauty quest.

New Guinea - 17 December

The official welcome. The unofficial welcome - party time, well, at least until midnight.

Normally a pretty dull place, on 17 December, 1977, the arrival of a ship with 190 unattached young women livened Port Moresby up more than somewhat. The event sent the Port Moresby Constabulary Band to be there, on the quay, playing their hardest as the ship docked and we wondered what the noise was that had woken us so early. But their evident joy at seeing us matched our enthusiasm for getting off the ship!



Its hard to know what we expected of Port Moresby, but it should have been no surprise that there are virtually no women there, it being a career ladder for European - read: Australian - public servants and bank clerks doing time in exchange for rich salary supplements and enhanced promotion prospects back home. They regarded the New Guinea natives with disdain, accusing them all of being alcoholics, though that seemed to me pots calling kettles black. Anyway, that was their explanation for the dearth of alcohol after midnight, though there might have been another reason. Though they were hardly more inspiring than The Seven, we were eager for a change of scenery and happy to accept their offers of tours of Port Moresby and the surrounding countryside. We all ended up at a party at a squash club until we mustered the resolve to reembark for the three-day cruise to Sydney.

Back on board - again

Not a soul on board could escape the fact of her birthday, so Ophelia's sixth was marked by a stream of gift-bearing well-wishers. Now, for the first time in over a year, we had a luggage problem. It turned out that it was also the birthday of one of the other children, though this was remarked only because it coincided with Ophelia's. We dined with his family and were showered with wine and chocolate and lots of adoring Russian fuss. Ophelia had a ball and went to bed only at midnight.

The 19th was quiet until the evening, when a fancy-dress ball had been planned, but the real highlight was the collective, unanimous booning of Edwin Duff, who nobody could bear to see or listen to again. The disco was a bit better too.

Our last-but-one night aboard was the Captain's dinner, which we all enjoyed, probably because it was organised by the Russians and not that awful pom. But we were keen to get to bed early so as to be awake as we came within sight of the coast of NSW. But the day's cruising the length of NSW was marred by grey sky and drizzle, with not much by way of photo ops. Worse was to come in the evening, as, like a B-grade ham-actor's interminable death scene, Edwin Duff turned up yet again!

We had long talked about how we would all keep each other awake that night to be on deck as we passed through the Heads early the following morning. Its said to be quite a spectacular sight. And none of us wanted to spend a minute longer than we needed on board that ship.

Australia - 22 December

Coming to grips with coming "home".

Unfortunately, Sydney greeted us coolly with grey sky and drizzle, but no matter.

For a long time, Ophelia had been keen to get home, and was very glad finally to see her grandparents and tell them all her stories and show them her souvenirs. Beyond the immediate aim of getting off that ship, my next challenge was to decide what I would now do with my life, where we would live and how I was to support us.

We docked in Pyrmont, Wharf 23, and I could see my parents there waiting, my mother waving a soft toy Siamese cat that had been a favourite of Ophelia's since she was a baby and had become so grotty that I'd hoped never to see it again. This was the first of many shocks for me: an abrupt reminder that I had changed, Ophelia had changed, but everyone around me had stayed the same. This took some coming to terms with.

Epilogue

What does it mean when the direction you take in life is at odds with, or even repudiates your relationship with your immediate family? The question acquires more urgency when that relationship is primary not just to you and them, who are all adults in charge of their own decisions, but for the practical, moral and emotional future of a six-year-old?

Much of 1977 had been in reality a hard slog. Yet moments of delight punctuated those, mostly self-induced hardships. But both together and separately Ophelia and I had learned more from that year away from Australia than anyone could have imagined before we embarked on it. Even better: neither Ophelia nor I have the slightest regret in having done it.

She learned valuable lessons about the world outside Australia, that there are infinite variations on living a civilised and happy life: not better, not worse, just

different. She understood different ways of communicating, even if she understood little of the foreign languages themselves that she encountered. Different types of money, food, clothing, climates, games; she also developed an appreciation of where she stood amongst it all and how she could get along with other people, no matter how different they were.

I saw how Europe really is, what it has to offer, and what it doesn't. Of course, we would have liked to have had more money, but then it would have been a different trip. Staying in hotels would have deprived us of all those chance meetings while free camping. Not being chronically short of cash I would never have met that amazing Bulgarian cyclist near La Spezia. Had we eaten mostly at restaurants I would not have met those Parisians keen to instruct me in cooking sausages, tasting cheese in Reims, parmesan in Parma and Iberian ham, not to mention the Italians who taught me to count in Italian, the Greek butcher with his purple and yellow plastic cow's head, and certainly not those delightful Turkish people who were so generous to us. Being able to buy a new tyre when we needed it would have deprived us of those wonderful few days with the family in Montenegro. I surely would have missed out on possibly the best pick-up line ever!

Despite these unforgettable and priceless episodes, the trip was not altogether what you would call fun. But that did not stop me wanting to return there one day: in a sense to get it right this time. In more propitious circumstances. Build a life there. In London if necessary. Why not? After all, things must improve since the dark days of the late 1970s.

But I worried that the privations and the seemingly endless string of minor crises had spoiled the travel bug in Ophelia. So, how glad was I that, at ten, she was eager to accept an invitation to spend time with the family of a school friend of hers in Yugoslavia. Since then, she has never, to my knowledge, turned down a realistic opportunity to travel. She even rediscovered her taste for baked beans - though I remain suspicious of soy-based meat substitutes.

Perhaps most reassuring for me was that she said she had derived so much from that trip that she sincerely wished to be able to offer her own children something similar.

Alan and I met up again on his return in January. He had accepted a teaching post in Darwin and we talked about our joining him and completing my education at a community college there. We even went there. But somehow, I knew it would never happen. We met again in May, 1978, by which time I was continuing my degree at NSW University. Ophelia and I had changed, but Alan had changed much less. We've had no contact since then.