

Bistra Yakimova

**THE MAGIC OF
TRAVELING**
Follow the Locals



2017

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I have tried to recreate events, locales and conversations from my memories of them. In order to maintain their anonymity in some instances I have changed the names of individuals and places, I may have changed some identifying characteristics and details such as physical properties, occupations and places of residence.

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Preface

Traveling is our addiction. Without even noticing, in the span of few years we have transformed. From a couple who loves to travel, we have turned into adventurers who live to travel and explore. We no longer try to explain how this happened.

As soon as we set off on our first trips, even without knowing what the future held for us, we named our blog *The Magic of Traveling* (themagicoftraveling.com). For more than five years now, we've been collecting memories, helping fellow travelers, inspiring people with hunger for adventure, and trying to discover the magic of traveling.

Just like coins, traveling is two-sided. While we are on the road, we don't consider whether our experience is good or bad. However, we realized that there are good as well as bad moments along the way. Sometimes a place would charm us for no obvious reason – a place with no nature to bewilder us, with no engrossing history, or fascinating customs, or culture. Sometimes a person would motivate us to think of ways to help them, or evoke our empathy for their family, hometown, or nation. Sometimes our experiences would resemble a dream or a fantasy. Then, even the kick of the airplane's landing gear on the strip couldn't wake us up, and neither could the shocking reality.

Even in the hardest of moments there has always been something telling us 'Everything will be alright!'. And this feeling has never misled us – everything always worked out for the best! Well, of course, we have also been trying hard to

reduce the bad emotions: we never took no for an answer; we always looked for alternatives, sorted out our priorities, and came up with new (better) plans, even when the circumstances changed unfavorably. The more active we were during the trip, the more relaxed and energized we returned home. Along the way, we transformed all obstacles and misfortunes into memories that would only bring us laughter later. The Magic of Traveling may be hiding in the negative emotions that you've managed to turn into unforgettable experiences, charged with positivity.

We quickly realized that money can't buy the best experience. While others prefer to spend more and let someone else arrange their entire trip, we have always chosen to stay up a few nights but organise the trips our own way. We are excited to be in charge of the route and all the important stuff along the way.

Regardless of our participation in the planning and organization, we noticed something else. It turned out that the entire experience may be easily influenced by a tiny unexplained problem that you don't realize you've been carrying all along. Then, categories such as 'cheap' or 'expensive' lose their significance, and the bad memory becomes your worst investment, be it modest or huge. We discovered that it is your own emotions and the company that determine the experience. We used this discovery of ours and solved our problems on time.

How can you be certain that you will be left with unforgettable experiences and incredible memories? You can't be. But you can be certain of one thing – if you start your journey with the wrong attitude, nothing good will come out of it. If you let your negative feelings guide you, you will

only see the negativity around you, no matter where you are. It is of no importance whether you are at home or 15 thousand kilometers away – there will always be something wrong, something amiss, or something hindering your progress. We searched for ways to stay positive all the time. We started carefully choosing our company, sharing our problems openly, and keeping ourselves positive and open-minded towards the world. What else could we do? Is it even possible to keep your positive mood through it all?

Over time we mastered this skill and started looking on the bright side of everything. This happened quietly, gradually, and we didn't even notice. Apparently, we must have wished for it badly enough. So, we still don't have an answer to the question of what exactly can guarantee you a pleasant experiences and amazing memories; we still don't know what creates and keeps alive the magic of traveling.

Maybe it's pointless to look for a way to explain magic. Because that's what the essence of magic is – no one knows what, how, when or why it works. Only one thing is certain – if you have felt once the magic of traveling, you would never want to let it go. It becomes your way of life.



One of the main advantages of traveling is that you meet people: people from here and there; people of all sorts with all sorts of stories. It was the same for us: we met people; some of them we merely observed; with some we exchanged a word or two; with others we spent hours talking. Some of them were so inspiring that they made us fall in love with the place where we met them. Their points of view unveiled a brand new world for us. Their guidance helped us feel like locals. Their stories unleashed our imagination. They were the

ones who ignited the magic of traveling.

Maybe we had finally found one of the main ingredients of the magic of traveling? Perhaps what we needed was a few years to pass before we realized it. Maybe it was exactly on that sunny and windy day, when we were driving on the New Zealand State Highway 1, that we had the revelation: following the locals creates the next miracle. While we thought we followed our own way, we were, in fact, following the locals. That's when an idea was born: the idea to present the people and the places we have followed in a book. A book that would reveal true stories of real people living in the places where we had the fortune to meet them.

This book doesn't aim to be an itinerary, a manual or a self-improvement book. However, while telling the stories we felt similar side effects. For observing another person is enough to discover something about your own nature. Only if you really listen to the other person, can you help. Only if you are ready to follow, can you lead. Even the very first step you take in an unexpected place unlocks surprising higher levels of your perceptions.

This book aims to present popular, as well as unknown, destinations by not only listing their historical sights and nature, but also by introducing the people who are born and live there. It is the people who can tip the scales and turn your experience upside down – from 'nothing much, there are similar churches everywhere' to 'the best place in the world where I met the most incredible person'.

We chose impressive encounters with extraordinary people; we asked them questions; we added our impressions and emotions – and that is how our ambassadors of magical places in the world were born. How did we select these

people? Some of them left memories so intense that we associated them with the place and even with the country where we met them. Others were so interesting and influential that they deserve a book of their own. Still, others found us by chance. Do you remember? All magical things are beyond explanation. From now on, all we can do is share with you how we met the locals, and how we interacted with them. We can only write their stories down, present you with some memorable photographs, and enchant you with the magic of traveling.

The stories are not connected in any way. Will you find a connection between them? If something in these tales has touched you, if some of the characters have inspired you, or if you are impressed by the way things worked out in the best possible way, then we are on the right track! We will continue to recall memories, to look for and follow remarkable locals so we can discover what the magic of traveling really is!



Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

*The magic of traveling is hidden in the rhythm of thousands of beating
drums and myriads of beating hearts*

Half-empty street; lights winking flirtatiously; a few juice and popcorn stands. It's around midnight; it's hot and humid. We get out of the cab and try to count the change in the dark. Fifty reals for a half-hour ride – everything seems fine. It's unusually quiet for a Saturday night. We move along the desolate street, heading in the direction pointed by the driver with a nod. A suspicion that everything surrounding us is extraordinarily strange arises in our minds. We hear odd noises nearby. Soon, picking up our pace, we walk past a band of musicians. Each one is holding a peculiar instrument and some are singing. Sitting in fishing chairs or on cardboard boxes, they ignore our presence. At end of the street, we can already see the bright lights which brought us here to wander around this neighborhood. We take the last few steps swiftly and wait in line with the smiling people. We made it! We've reached the entrance of the party organized by the *Salguiero*

Samba school.

The big hall we enter is completely different from the street outside. It's bright and spacious, and full of kiosks, offering fast-food and *caipirinha*¹. The drum band² is sitting on a raised stage on the one side and the singers are on the other. The hall is almost full, but somehow there's just enough space for you to sway to the rhythm of the music. There are few foreigners, but they stand out – they either dance awkwardly or don't dance at all; they gulp down cocktails and have come overdressed. However, most people are locals and they are just having fun – they're dancing and talking, dressed in casual attire. What a daily routine – going to a Samba party every night!

The two lead singers announce something on the microphones and the people slowly divide in two, forming a passage just wide enough to allow a dancing couple, arm in arm, to pass through. A group of dancers emerges. They are showing off their new costumes in the narrow passage made by the crowd of impatient spectators. We sit and watch in a daze as these elegant creatures covered in countless feathers and glitter skillfully pass each other in the rhythm of this year's Samba school song³. We stay close together to make room. It turns out we are at the front row. There is a lovely girl with sparkling eyes and white clothes next to us. We

1 Caipirinha is a cocktail one shouldn't abuse with even though it's healthy because of the lime.

2 The drum band (called *bateria* in Portuguese) is a group of musicians playing percussive instruments, which are the soul of every Samba school.

3 Schools compose and perform different songs every year; the songs are consistent with the theme of the Carnival in Rio.

engage her in a conversation and expertly discuss what is happening before us. ‘She is amazing!’, ‘This one has put on too much bronzer!’, and ‘What’s this year’s theme?’ Those are some of the topics that help form our small improvised jury. Dancing is like football – it brings people together. Complete strangers find common ground in order to share the joy of dancing. The enjoyable show is over, but the disco party has just begun. Soon everyone is swaying again and enjoying the long Saturday night. We sit down for a while to catch our breath and talk to the girl we just met – Isabela (Iza).

She isn’t shy when it comes to sharing her story and soon we have learned a lot about her life. Isabela is a young woman who defines herself as ‘living on the border’. This border, however, is not a physical one between two countries. She lives in Rio de Janeiro. It isn’t the border between thrilling adrenaline adventures and boring routine, either. She literally lives on the border, on that line dividing the favela⁴ *Rosinha*⁵ from the wealthy neighborhood *Gávea*. She still lives with her father and her brothers. It remains a mystery how her father has managed to build their humble house on neutral territory between these two contrasting districts. She tells us that on one side of the road you can see the colorful ramshackle houses on the hills of the poor, while on the opposite side there are imposing concrete buildings with solid security.

After a dance and a few drinks, Iza is ready to share with us how she feels about her birthplace. She both loves and

4 Favela is the term used for the slums in Brazil.

5 Rocinha is the largest favela in Rio de Janeiro and throughout South America.

hates her neighborhood, her border and her city. Living next to the favela effectively makes you a part of it. She is happy for the chance to go to school just like all those upper-class kids, even though she has never lived in a fancy apartment building with several guards at the entrance.

She studies Social Sciences and this helps her understand better the life and the spirit of the favela. Since she was a child, she has been taught to avoid getting involved with certain kinds of people there. She knows not to wander around unfamiliar streets after dark, not to take any gifts from strangers, and most importantly – she knows that, if she hears a gunshot, she must hide as fast as possible in the nearest shed or under a table. Of course, the last one is a joke. Brazilians enjoy having a laugh; they are not afraid to make self-deprecating jokes.



‘Everybody knows where they are not supposed to go unless they want to get in trouble, so life can be pretty normal here,’ Iza admits. Despite our curiosity, we don’t want to be rude by asking whether she has witnessed a murder and,

moreover, her answer may spoil the image of the wonderful Brazilian girl with chocolate tan and tight curls. 'The fact that people here are poor doesn't necessarily make them criminals!' she explains passionately, and quickly dives into confessing that, regardless of the pervasive dirt, despite the open cesspits here and there, that's not the image of the favela she has in her mind. Many people from there try to focus on the brighter side of their neighbourhood, just like she does. They are trying to make ends meet and have some fun whenever it's possible.

We'd like to witness the real everyday life of Rio's citizens instead of visiting polished tourist attractions. That's why we are vigorously trying to learn as much as possible from Iza about her home. The legends about the favelas are beckoning us. Iza assures us that nothing bad can happen to us if we know where and with whom to go there. 'Favelas are much more secure than they used to be; now, there are hotels for foreigners there and one can book a walking tour,' our new friend says. Maybe all the stereotypes about the favelas might disappear someday.

Her words encourage us to book a tour around Rocinha. There, we are about to see with our own eyes all the contrasts she described. On the way down the hill we cannot help but notice the poverty of the narrow alley which is actually the main street. However, one also cannot stay blind to the happiness in the eyes of the kids who play in the dust. They have no toys, but armed with old rusty pots and ladles, they are playing and dancing...Samba! Loud funky rhythms come from some buildings, and girls with indifferent eyes lean against dark doorways. The fact that our cameras are of no interest to the local crime lords is somewhat of a relief. Yes,

we will be allowed to capture all the vibrant colors of this world!

While we are on the subject of colors, our eyes are drawn to an improvised art gallery on the third floor of a building that looks as if it's about fall down any moment. There are no windows, nor doors on the top floor – only a small room full of paintings and a few clothes lines with laundry. The young Carioca⁶ Iza has encouraged us to buy artworks from the youths of the favela and thus stimulate their creativity and hopefully keep them away from trouble. Among all the projects initiated by the government and NGOs for helping the community of the favela, those, aiming to develop people's talent and imagination are the most successful. 'Art helps us believe that there's a way out of this misery, and that there is a magical world out there, a world of happiness and love!' From early childhood, kids in the favela are taught to be artists, even if they are covered in mud, wearing ragged clothes, and have nothing else to eat but a single guava⁷.

Iza is grateful to the favela for introducing her to the Rocinha Samba School. Being the largest favela in the city, Rocinha provides the perfect grounds for fierce competition among the dancers of the school.

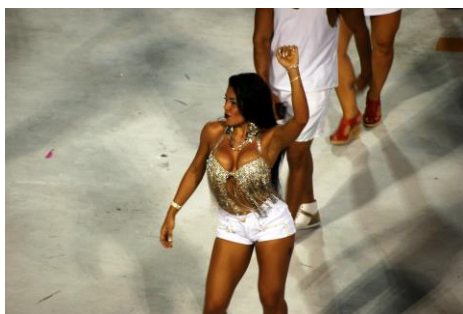


⁶ Carioca is the name for all local residents of Rio de Janeiro and its surroundings are called.

⁷ Guava is a tropical fruit, resembling avocado but colored like watermelon inside, and all kids love it.

THE MAGIC OF TRAVELING: FOLLOW THE LOCALS

Every year, dozens of kids dream of getting accepted in the school's team to dance at the carnival. To be a part of the drum band (*bateria*) of Rocinha is a great honor. It's well-known for its strong instruments and rhythms that make the crowds go wild. Unfortunately, the school of Rocinha is not in the prime league of Samba schools, but that doesn't bother Isabela. She is grateful that she has participated in the carnival for two years. 'You should see the rehearsals!' she insists.



Later, when we actually did see them, we discovered the atmosphere of the rehearsals she told us about. Even the practice outfits and unfinished scenery

offer an amazing experience. If you have never heard hundreds of drums beating in perfect harmony, or you have never seen hundreds of passionate dancers in a perfect wave of motion, then you will have a hard time imagining even a moment of the Carnival in Rio. Every beat makes your heart quake; every colorful garment catches your eye. At rehearsals, the audience is not numerous, but its emotions know no limits. Everyone is screaming and dancing



as the schools are passing along the long *Sambadrome*⁸.

Parade, spectacle, and celebration – these are the words that sum up the carnival rehearsals. Who will be the one to make the greatest noise in the alley before the parade? Who will be met with the loudest applause by the admiring crowds of spectators? Who will present their theme in the best way?



Thousands of people are engaged in the organization of a carnival, and many of them remain behind the scenes, hidden out of sight, and we'll never hear anything about them. 'Can you imagine what it is like to be a part of this event; can you imagine to be just one person in the 42nd row of dancers, to let your feet carry you and get lost in the moment when it's your school's turn to parade? These twenty or so minutes of public attention while all eyes are on us as we are dancing along the Sambadrome pass in the blink of an

⁸ Sambadrome (*Sambódromo* in Portuguese) is a 700-meters long parade street in Rio, where the carnival takes place.

eye.’ It’s clear that the leagues and rankings don’t stand in the way of the dream of any participant in the amazing spectacle. Iza’s greatest hope is to be invited as a guest of honor to dance with the senior ladies of Rocinha someday. ‘This will be a great honor; even the expenses for the costumes are paid by the sponsors.’ The older ladies are an essential part of every Samba school because they represent its soul.



Tonight, Iza hasn’t come only to dance; she has a mission: to spy on the *Salguiero* school. Salguiero is a famous school and throws parties every Saturday night, where fans and friends are invited. The school can afford these events because it’s situated in a relatively safe district and its location attracts both locals and foreigners. Iza is here to check on the dance numbers of the rival school, even though, in her words, it’s not that important anymore because the theme has already been set, the scenery and the costumes as well as the choreography have already been chosen. Her mission tonight

is to learn a new move and practice it alone when she goes back to Rocinha; or to make sure that their competitors don't have anything new to show so she can calm down a bit. She watches out for other schools' members – 'Everyone has come to snoop, even those who ranked higher than Salguiero.' When a guy approaches and tries to chat her up, she doesn't hesitate to dampen his enthusiasm. 'Everyone here is a spy; I don't want to miss something that I shouldn't.' Obviously, Iza likes being undercover and we are the perfect new friends because we are foreigners. Well, she is suspicious even of us and asks a few times whether we dance at some school, because, according to her, it has now become a trend for Europeans to apply to Samba schools. Somehow we convince her that we aren't agents of another team (we're not quite sure for how long, though) and keep on 'spying' together.



She takes us to the dressing rooms so that we can overhear some gossip. The tension is rising – we don't understand a word, and she is afraid that someone may spot her. Behind the screens, people are talking in loud voices and the conversation seems to be on the brink of a scandal. While our friend is eavesdropping carefully, and her face stays void of emotion, we are praying. We are hoping that the mini-scandal won't escalate, and we won't find ourselves in the middle of a battlefield with hair accessories, feathers, and crystals flying around or even worse –12-centimeter heels aimed at us.

Even though we got carried away with the flow of the exultant vibe of the Samba parties, we don't forget that we are in the favela with desolate streets waiting outside, and that we are secretly eavesdropping on ambitious and well-trained dancers. Our fantasies are interrupted at their height because apparently the conversation seems to be of no interest. We head back noticeably relieved – we won't have our asses kicked tonight. On the way back, we take a picture with a dancing couple, and this serves as our alibi for sneaking around the dressing rooms. We head to Iza's friends. They're jolly and completely ignorant of all the dancing espionage. Iza introduces us. 'My friends know that I'm out of my mind to think it's possible to beat Salguiero. And that's not even what I want. I just wish to become the best Samba dancer, am I asking for too much?' Of course she isn't. We are glad to meet people like her: people who are chasing their dreams.



Soon, Iza apologizes and says she has to leave us. 'I have to wake up at 8 tomorrow, I have an English class.' Yes, she gives English lessons as a private teacher to support her

education (and the wild Saturday Samba nights). On our way to the cabs, we ask her for some advice about the city. ‘You haven’t been to Rio if you haven’t tried street empanada,’⁹ the young Social Sciences student assures us. Tourists would pay for all kinds of useless things, for restaurants with dishes that cost as much as hers and her brothers’ food for a month. She urges us to try as many different empanadas as possible from the different stands, shops and kiosks. ‘They may be a little bit greasy, but we eat them all our lives, and look what our bodies look like,’ she laughs. Then, she admits that she often goes jogging along the lane by the beach.



According to her, the most fun and affordable thing to do in Rio is to go to the beach: a long strip of fine sand, concrete buildings in the background, and green hills in the distance – these are the city beaches of *Copacabana* and *Ipanema*, challenging you to compare them to the picturesque

⁹ Empanadas are crispy pastry snacks (or dinner meals), stuffed with the leftovers from lunch – chunks of meat, cheese, and vegetables.

postcards. The only surprise is that in the seemingly predestined battle of reality against photoshopped postcard images, reality is the one that actually wins! ‘In order to feel the real pulse of the city, you need to visit at least three beaches,’ is what the locals advise us. Anything can happen on the beach – people eat and drink, socialize, play, sell and buy, sleep or dance. Families come together to have a picnic. Boys and girls flirt and show off their new tattoos. Tourists contemplate the scenery while keeping a watchful eye for thieves trying to snatch their purses. On the beach, it makes



no difference if you're rich or poor, clean or filthy, happy or miserable. That's the only place where you can see all sorts of strangers united by a single soccer ball and the sunset over the 'Two Brothers' Hill (*Morro Dois Irmãos*). Football is like dancing – it brings people together.



After all, living on the border may not be that stressful. The border seems to allow you to peek into two different worlds. Maybe being on the dividing line means that you are a part of both. Maybe the thrill of Rio can be felt in hopping over mud puddles and paper litter to see a festival of music and soul, rising behind the wall. You may get burned by

the scorching sun on the beach; but you may also meet your best friend there. Maybe being born poor will make you the greatest artist. Maybe the magic of traveling is hidden in the rhythm of the thousands of beating drums, and hundreds of thousands of the beating hearts of people living on the hills and valleys of the River of January (*Rio de Janeiro*).



照前
照豊
妙月

Kyoto, Japan

*Follow the locals and get on the bullet train straight to the heart of the
rising sun*

Trains are a curious thing. In dream interpretation books you can read that rails are a symbol for a well-chosen destination. In the same time, people with a particular destination may travel together with drifters towards the same place aboard a single train. And how, being on the train, can you possibly know where you are headed? Are you going in the right direction? Is there another person in your compartment who is going to the same place but traveling in another direction?

In Japan, trains are the fastest and coziest way to reach even the remotest location. They are always on time, and they are so comfortable that you almost forget how high-priced they are and joyfully jump from one train to the next – be it the bullet train or a local line with a single person waiting per railway station. On trains between big cities and on popular railroads, you can see one type of people, while on trains to

villages and on private lines, the passengers are completely different.

The chance to observe your fellow passengers is another absolutely free service included in the train ride. Onboard the first type of trains, we often come across businessmen, wearing suits with their laptops on their laps. The second type of trains is the one, where one can see many families with kids on their way to a nature hike to take a break from their busy routine. Watching people who are so different while feeling the slight vibrations of the train, jolting on the rails, is pure pleasure, a priceless gift. Obviously, all these people are going somewhere in particular since they're aboard? But where?



We are traveling to *Kyoto*. The Japanese trains are like an atomic clock¹⁰ – always strictly on time. Is it in our nature to find it so hard to be on time, or do we just have to work on

¹⁰ The atomic clock is a very precise device, which, unfortunately, you can't wear on your wrist yet.

our discipline? This will remain a mystery. The backpacks are slowing us down; we read some signs, and it becomes clear that we'd have to sprint to catch the train. If now a talent scout from 'Ninjas and Samurais Recruitment' saw us jumping along railings, and waving maps, we'd definitely make it to the second interview. Two candidate-ninjas, wearing backpacks, are causing chaos while climbing up the last stairs before the platform. The train looks as if it's been waiting for us. We go through the first door we see. It must have been less than two minutes behind the schedule. We are relaxing, and dozing off until we notice that the train hardly stops anywhere, and the direction feels wrong. Could we have gotten on the wrong train?

The conductress comes, and stares worriedly at our tickets. She explains that we've indeed got on an entirely wrong train. In fact, we've accidentally caught *Nozomi* – the fastest bullet train that only stops at important stations; it's also the most expensive. We can't believe what happens after the conductress sees our tickets. Not only doesn't she fine us, but she also explains where we have to get off, and what train we have to catch next so that we can make up for our own mistake. This mistake (being only two minutes late) costs us extra 300 kilometers and two additional hours by train; and we are lucky that the conductress came early to our compartment... She apologizes several times for what was actually our mistake! The Japanese are humane, and they show their humanity. It's in their DNA to be kind and compassionate. They don't say much, but choose the right words; they always do the job and then thank you! We feel a little uncomfortable about the whole situation. However, we also feel grateful. That's how every conversation or meeting with a Japanese makes us feel.

Traveling by train doesn't only mean going from location A to location B. It means observing everyday routines in Japan, because trains are full of life. That's where people sleep, eat, and work. After the mishap during our journey to Kyoto, we've become more confident in our ability to catch the right train this time, that's why we're peacefully enjoying the long ride from Osaka to Tokyo. After the conductor's check helps us relax even more, we devote our time to observing the life on trains.

A young lady wearing a formal slate suit and a white collar shirt sits across us. On her knees there is a laptop. She seems very busy, and she's completely focused on what she's doing. We look around – the train is almost full of people in suits; there are a few tourists with big backpacks and wide eyes, just like us. It looks like we're caught in the rush hour. We check the time – it's around 8 p.m. and everyone is coming back from work. Their activities on the train, however, are much more interesting. More than half of the passengers are working busily on their notebooks, their cell phones or are playing games. Some are eating delicious foods out of their *bento boxes*¹¹.

Others can be seen taking a nap. What strikes us most is that the majority of people are men. That's why when we notice a business lady sitting on the opposite side, we become even more curious.

According to Japanese traditions, women shouldn't work; they are supposed to stay at home and take care of the family. Nevertheless, we're living in a modern era where

¹¹ *Bento box* – at least three-course meal of Japanese delights packed in a box with small compartments.

women have their place at the corporate round table. They are no less successful than the men in the cruel business world; they also come home late in the evening after a long working day. And we are lucky to meet a representative of the ‘fair sex’ on the train after her busy day at work has ended. But wait, her working day hasn’t finished yet! She’s sitting, and quietly tapping on her keyboard – she’s as focused as if she’s just started working. Total silence reigns over the big shared compartment. It is generally accepted that you shouldn’t make noise or talk loudly out of respect for the rest of the passengers. We are too noisy according to Japanese standards – we’re whispering, but it’s as if our voices are the only ones that can be heard in the entire train car. Even if we try to open a pack of candy very quietly, the sound in the silent car resembles a thunder. We may not be like the locals – mindful and sophisticated, but we’re really trying not to disturb them.

We’re going to call our heroine Hideko¹² since we never got her name. Hideko is sitting and staring at the display of her laptop; she doesn’t seem to be any closer to finishing her work. What could motivate you to continue working even after fifteen busy hours at the office?



The train passes quietly and smoothly through the country, leaving the endless rails behind. We’re unwilling to let our precious memories of Kyoto go; especially when we’re about to pass it by again on our way to Tokyo. We remember wandering around the city streets for fifteen hours and

¹² *Hideko* means “an excellent child” in Japanese.

admiring the countless restaurants hidden behind every corner. We stumble upon an alley with a river running in the middle, perhaps some kind of canal but a beautiful one with cherry trees hanging over and crystal clear water full of fish. We are in one of the downtown areas; we've been searching for a way into *Gion Corner* for quite a long time now – that's where the performance of the *maiko*¹³ is taking place. There's something special about this art in Kyoto. Even the local word for geisha is different – *geiko*.



The picturesque authentic streets around Gion are a paradise for *geiko* and *maiko*. They provide a distinctive traditional way to have fun and dive into the local culture and customs. Most people around us are wearing traditional kimonos. Seeing them against the background of ancient buildings and cobblestone streets reminds us of a fairytale.

¹³ Maiko is an apprentice geisha; geisha are well-trained masters of various Japanese arts.

We aren't in a tourist section of a street; we are in Ancient Japan. During the performance, we are enchanted by the resonant songs and the skillful artistic movements of the maiko as well as the tea ceremony. In the land of the rising sun every significant occasion is celebrated with a tea ceremony. We're falling in love with the green tea *Matcha*. It might be a little bit bitter, but it's also too healthy to be ignored. The ceremony itself is an elaborate succession of expressing gratitude and graceful movements in which everyone plays a role, and even a twitch of a finger may be a mistake. Luckily, we are mostly spectators, and we try to copy the movements of those around us who have perfected this ceremony. We're sitting on the tatami floors¹⁴, but it's really hard to get used to kneeling with all our bodyweight supported by our knees. We make ourselves a promise that we'd spend more time sitting in this position, even after we've left Japan, in order to strengthen our joints and muscles.

We wonder whether Hideko takes a walk through these streets on her off days. Maybe she is just as stumped as we are when it comes to choosing which restaurant offering foreign cuisine to go to for an unusual dinner. We have such a hard time deciding where to try the famous burning sake¹⁵. Or maybe she goes out with friends at some of the traditional restaurants, where they eat sushi together and talk loudly over a sake...That's what the party at the table next to us is doing. They're laughing, chatting and having fun while the cook beside them is setting some strangely shaped things on fire

¹⁴ Tatami is a soft Japanese mat made of rice straw.

¹⁵ Sake is a traditional Japanese alcoholic beverage consumed in moderation and respect.

and serving them hot in the plates in bizarre configurations with vegetables we don't recognize.

We just can't decide where we liked the food best. Two things are for sure, though – there will always be a surprise, and it will always be a delicious one! You will either see a new cooking technique (we boiled some meat ourselves and then made some soup in a mug on a gas-cooker), or encounter a new species of fish or a new way of serving the food. You must be willing to dive into experiments. And the best thing is that they'll surely be tasty ones. Kyoto is a big city, and it offers cuisine that fits every taste – be it the most fastidious or the most prejudiced client.

One evening, we decided to take a break from seafood. We went to a sake bar to try something strong. The bartenders advised us to taste the local beer first and then a few types of sake. We were lucky that the porcelain sake cups are small. We got the fattest possible grilled peppers and bacon as appetizers. After the wholesome dinner we quietly headed home along the canal. In the dark, we could see the neon lights of all the bars trying to attract clients; the lights, reflected in the water, and the dark green leaves of the trees, hung over the canal in the still of the night.



Does Hideko have any stamina left to have fun like we did that evening? This will remain a mystery. The past meets the present, and we're back on the train watching the young business lady who has elegantly put away her laptop in its case; now, she's taking out a file with papers. She opens it and turns over the pages, and we get frustrated that we don't understand a word of Japanese. We would give anything to read just a few words of these documents in order to learn what her occupation is and thus, to fill her life's image with some facts that are actually true. All we can see, however, is that there are many hieroglyphs, and some pages end with a signature and a stamp at the bottom. Unfortunately, this doesn't solve the riddle. Perhaps, it's something important since she inspects each paper closely going through it a couple of times, poring over every single sign. She carefully puts them away and looks through the window for a moment; then, she takes another file with more documents out of her bag. Does Hideko sign or fill in a paper? We couldn't know. Her hand is as steady as a rock – she is holding the shining

pen and drawing line after line, hieroglyph after hieroglyph. In Japan, everyone is taught calligraphy¹⁶ at school. You'd be surprised how skillful the works of fourth-graders look like.



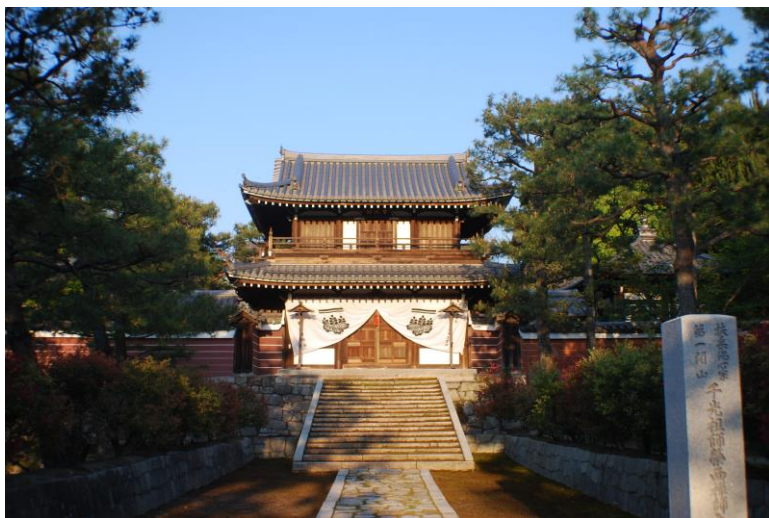
Some Asians say that Japanese is easy to learn, but we're still at the stage of perceiving it as a set of pictures. In Japan searching for the ten differences between images is no longer just an entertaining game but a way to find the place you're looking for. Yet, getting lost in a sea of hieroglyphs turned out to be mission impossible since there are always helpful people around, ready to show us the way. Once, we got so lost while trying to find one big temple that we came across an elderly lady's villa. She ceased her gardening activities to give us directions. She waved her arms back and forth, left and right, and she wouldn't stop talking to us in Japanese as if she believed that we'd understand her after all. It's good that in big cities it's so easy to find signs written in Latin letters. Despite causing the foreigners a lot of trouble, calligraphy

¹⁶ Calligraphy is the art of writing hieroglyphs in a beautiful manner observing a set of rules.

remains one of the finest arts; not only does it train your accuracy of handwriting, but it also builds a calm mind and a balanced body.



But let's go back to the train. Hideko has switched to her cell. The device starts vibrating in her hand, and she darts toward the room between the compartments, where it's allowed to make a phone call. It's not acceptable to disturb the other passengers' peace, remember? Therefore, you have to leave your seat and move the conversation elsewhere. Nevertheless, the noise of several simultaneous phone calls you'd expect to hear between the compartments is nonexistent. On the contrary – the people are making short calls in quiet voices. Hideko returns in all her polished glory – a slate suit and a white collar shirt. A few minutes later, she puts her phone neatly in the designated pocket of her bag. We are starting to wonder how these people relax in the midst of the daily grind, dominated by electronics. Hideko half-closes her eyes and stares at the darkness through the train window.

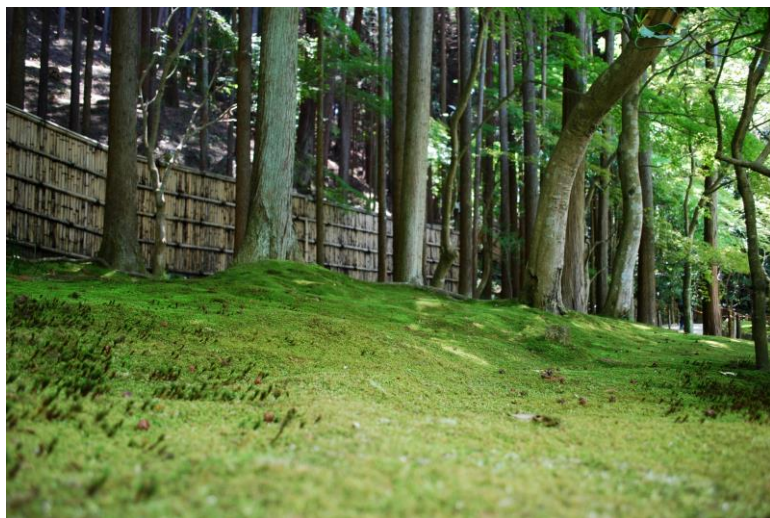


We glance at the moving dark, and our minds transport us back to Kyoto. The city is famous for its numerous temples. There's approximately one temple per thousand citizens. It's incredible for a city of this size to offer so many opportunities to see something lovely, to find peace and harmony, or to pay tribute to the divine. *The Philosopher's Walk* is a legendary paved walkway with a canal running through its middle and countless cherry trees. It is spring now, and the cherries were in bloom. Their delicate aroma intoxicated us and didn't let us go until we'd stopped and smelled each and every blossom and sat on a bench for a little while. This walkway's name comes from one of the most notable Japanese philosophers – Nishida Kitarō. He used to meditate while passing through this alley on his way to the university. Meditation is the key to achieving balance and happiness. It's also the secret of the Japanese that gives them strength to work so hard and not burn out. At least that's what we think.



We moved slowly along the walkway for reflection and meditation in Kyoto. It's about two kilometers long, starting from the temple *Ginkakuji*, also known as the *Silver pavilion*, and ending near the *Nanzenji* temple. Then, we headed back from Nanzenji to Ginkakuji. It's almost impossible to visit all the temples in Kyoto even though we would have loved to see each one of them. They all look different both from the outside and on the inside, and draw us in a mysteriously magical way.

That spring day's walk didn't only feed our positivity and give us energy for a few more days of running around the marvels of Japan; it also gave us a moment for mindfulness and reflection, reconnecting us with nature and letting us know the living things around us as well as our inner selves. However, good meditation practitioners don't need special peaceful alleys with cherries, temples and long walks; they can meditate anywhere, anytime.



It's so easy to be carried away on the cozy train – so quiet and peaceful. We are mesmerized, lost in thoughts and fantasies, in the past and the future.

‘Where are you from?’ Hideko asks us, and we’re suddenly jolted awake from our dream. We sit there petrified, and we can’t believe she’s addressing us.

‘From Bulgaria, Europe,’ we somehow manage to reply after a short pause.

‘That’s lovely, you have pretty good *yoghurt*!’ We’re once again wonderstruck by how well the Japanese know Bulgaria and its delicacies.

‘Thank you! Are you from Kyoto?’ we ask her.

‘Yes, I’m going home for the weekend,’ she replies, and her face is lit up by a gentle smile, revealing how beautiful she is.

The train slows down and prepares to stop at one of the many platforms. Hideko waves us goodbye and swiftly

vanishes from our sight in the crowd at Kyoto station. We remember that it's Friday. But even on a Friday night there's neither a trace of that leisurely weekend mood, nor the slightest whiff of holiday cheer on the train. There are only busy working people. In the land of the rising sun, there are no days off because you should do your duties with honor and thus serve and support the progress.

We've turned into real philosophers trying to draw conclusions and gain insights. Trains are a curious thing! You just observe a stranger, and you learn so many things about their life. You let your imagination run wild, and with every station you pass by, you teleport to new places, to the past or the future. You contemplate life running at full speed, and you empathize with the passengers. You celebrate their success; you suffer through their pain and hardship. And you realize the destination is clear – to success, to family, to the rising sun!





North Island, New Zealand

Follow the locals and preserve Mother Nature and her precious creations

The one who has created our magnificent nature knows how to preserve it. He has hidden the most spectacular marvels of his design from the devastating effects of human civilization; he has placed all kinds of obstacles in the way of anyone who'd want to reach them. The uninhabited areas of land remain intact the longest. The most remote places make you freeze in awe. The less people know about the place, the better chances it has to survive and thrive. If you were the creator of those natural phenomena, and you were willing to protect them, you would know that the best way to do that is to separate them from the big continents. That's how islands were born.

New Zealand is among the places located far from everything else. The North and the South Islands are very far from Europe, Asia, and America; they're far even from Australia. The small, and almost uninhabited islands scattered in the Pacific Ocean aren't any closer. Once you visit them,

you never want to leave. The possibility to reach these islands easily and cheaply, even without prior planning, seems like a far-fetched notion. Since they seem such an improbable destination, we often forget to think and dream about the way life goes on there. What's really happening on the opposite side of the globe is very different from the ideas and expectations we have about these remote places.



We're sailing north to warmer places. The *Bay of Islands* is one of the hottest places in New Zealand. In summer, the temperatures reach up to 25°C (75°F). We've come on a cool summer day with clouds and a gentle breeze. It's humid on the shore and the vegetation catches the eye with its vivid colors and shapes. The ocean is deep blue, and its flat surface beckons us to jump from the boat and swim. Unexpectedly bumping into nature in the Land of the Long White Cloud¹⁷

¹⁷ The Land of the Long White Cloud is the name of New Zealand translated literally from the Maori language – *Aotearoa*. Maori are the local indigenous people who were very skilled in

is almost impossible. Here, you're surrounded by nature; you're breathing nature, and you are living within nature. Therefore, sitting on the upper deck of the boat we are hardly surprised by the newly arrived fellow travelers.



They emerge with white bellies and white spots over their eyes. Then, they vanish in the waters. These are killer whales, though they're not a typical view for this bay during this time of the year. Despite the fact that killer whales belong to the dolphin family, these members are extremely bloodthirsty, and no one would enjoy swimming with them. That's why there aren't crowds of divers on the boat who are ready to jump and swim in open sea with these marvelous creatures. The expected pod of dozens of dolphins doesn't appear for the same reason. The glorious killer whales remind us how dangerous they are. They hide on one side of our boat, and in the blink of an eye they're appear on the other.

sailing and were the first to reach the shores and settle in New Zealand.

They rise slowly to show off their massive bodies; then, they dart toward any living thing that moves in the ocean at the speed of lightning. Every person unfortunate enough to meet them would likely turn into a snack. We make a wish to be lucky enough not to swim with killer whales without knowing that they're around us. This was our first exciting meeting with wildlife.



Seven large and numerous smaller islets and several rocks have emerged out of the deep blue ocean waters of the bay. One can take a walk on the larger ones unless they are private property, or there are special requirements for visitations as is the case with the adjacent coastal part of the Brett Peninsula with its lighthouse. This island, a towering steep cliff with lavish green pastures above, is famous for an old white lighthouse and its remoteness from civilization. You have to either undertake a heavy hike that takes hours (or even days), or the boat can leave you in the foot of the cliff, and you can climb up. Even the horse that used to serve there was so lazy, that every time it saw ships approaching, it

would hide somewhere. But that's because it knew what was in store for it – carrying heavy supplies for the lighthouse and the man who was on duty there.



New Zealanders have succeeded in controlling the population of predators in this remote area thus enabling the local bird species to live at ease and charm the ornithologists. If one day, you somehow reach this place, you can ask for accommodation in the newly built shelter. Another thing you can do is reach the two nearby rocks by swimming. They form a passage in the middle and to pass through the narrow canal, you need to either swim or sail a small boat. We pass through by boat, rocked by the waves. We've apparently left the killer whales on the other side of the peninsula since a pod of smiling dolphins passes us by, swimming side by side through the narrow water canal.

Where shall we land? Of course, the answer is: on the island with the simplest name – *Urupukapuka*. The person who invented the Maori language definitely possessed an extreme sense of simplicity of pronunciation and writing. The

island itself is a vast grazing land for New Zealanders' favorite sheep – the animals which provide for the people's living to a considerable extent.

You open a tiny door, you go on the other side of the fence, and you close a tiny door. Even the sheep feel comfortable and calm. We, humans, are left with the captivating view of real green (with no need for camera lens filters) and fresh air – a mix of wild flowers, green grass and sheep dung (a result from the digestion of the tasty fresh grass). The sky takes on a deep blue color, but it hardly casts a gloom over the golden sand of the beach and the emerald waters.

After the windy and rainy boat trip around the bay near the Pacific Ocean itself, we decided to follow our hostess' advice and visit the mineral springs. We drive on the new perfectly marked asphalt road meandering through meadows and rivers. In no time, we reach the secret mineral baths. The first surprise comes at the entrance – the price of just 4 NZD is the cheapest service we've experienced during our entire stay.



The receptionist is a petite lady with a big heart and many duties: she's a cleaning lady, a life-guard, and what's most important – a friend of all visitors. All the people around are regulars who have come to relax after work; they even address to each other by their first names. That's something we can appreciate: it means we've arrived at the right place! The smiling receptionist explains the qualities, mineral composition, temperature, and health benefits of each of the natural pools. The atmosphere is really relaxed. The water in every hole in the rocks, i.e. pools, has a distinct smell and color. Soon, we classify them as either 'pleasant' or 'not very pleasant' for a longer bath. As many as two people are bathing in one of the pools, clearly showing that this one must be in the 'pleasant' class. We go in it quietly not to disturb their blissful doze.

Jack addresses us first because our accent is unknown to him. New Zealand is a country full of immigrants from all over the world, and it's a national hobby to identify the origin of the person you're talking to by the way he or she speaks English. Jack is sincerely and genuinely delighted since we are 'his first Bulgarians'. 'I didn't expect to meet Bulgarians in these very springs!' he exclaims. 'I live about an hour away by car, but the peace and the minerals here make me come back over and over again,' he admits.

New Zealanders know how to create their happiness. They also know how to relax and take a break, how to sustain their positive attitude towards life. Jack, who has lain back in the stone seat of the cool mineral spring at 4 p.m., is a living proof of this statement. He looks sturdy and above middle-aged (even though we don't know what the middle age in New Zealand is), and he could easily be a rugby player (the

most popular sport in the country). Beneath the water we can see that he has a beer belly. It's clear evidence of the tasty meals in the country. Above the water, we see a sweet face that doesn't quite match his burly body; yet, it fits his friendly attitude perfectly.

Jack goes into details about the pools and their health benefits; he also mentions that no one remembers these facts because after all, everyone chooses where to bathe by the temperature they prefer and allows them to soak longer. Some youths, smeared in mud, pass us by giggling. There's a special pool where you rinse off the mud since the changing rooms are simple and provide a huge washbasin but no showers.

Bathing has been a social event since Antiquity. That's why the idle chat with Jack suddenly accelerates and reaches the speed of a conversation during an evening party. This sturdy baby-faced man spends quite a lot of time trying to remember where in Europe he has been years ago. He hasn't passed through Bulgaria, but he has passed through Italy with his wife and friends.

He tells us about the time they rented a big camper van, but when they brought out all their luggage, they realized that there wouldn't be any space left inside for them to sleep. Thus, they accidentally arrived at a farm in Italy, where the lady of the house not only fixed them up for the night, but also showed them some very strange vegetables, which can't be found in New Zealand. He couldn't remember their names.

'You aren't a true Kiwi ¹⁸, if you don't travel by camper

¹⁸ Kiwi is the typical nickname of New Zealanders.

vans, sleep at camping sites and motels, or if don't own a boat,' Jack explains. Even his home is built according to local tradition: it's a single-story house with thin walls made of wood. Kiwis – both birds and humans – have a subconscious desire to be as close to nature as possible. Unfortunately, the Kiwi birds, which are unique for their appearance and behavior, have poor eyesight, and can't fly. That's why it's almost impossible to encounter them roaming free in the wild. The fragile birds provide a delicious snack for the predators introduced from other lands by the humans. Kiwis





humans behind the walls. Perhaps the greatest fear of the Kiwi people in the Land of the White Cloud is that they might share the grim fate of the birds. For that reason, they are respectful and protect the environment while spending as much time as possible outdoors.

After some time spent in meditation, Jack recommends us the local farmers' markets. 'Close by, in *Paibia*, there's an open-air market today,' he shares. We listen to his advice and later on, we find ourselves before stalls heavy with juicy tomatoes, fresh and succulent cherries, homemade wines, and handmade bags, in which you can put all your groceries. Two ladies are playing the guitar, singing popular songs and winking at the passers-by in order to bring even more joy to the already cheerful buyers and sellers at the market. We stuff our bags with apricots and cucumbers and get ready for the next homemade feast with bio vegetables on the sunny porch of our white house somewhere near the dry lake of *Kerikeri*.

It's hard to make a wrong choice when it comes to wine, but we decide to try our pool companion's favorite. 'Cabernet Franc really impressed me,' he recalls more memories from his vacation in North Italy from the time when even in this wine-growing region it was unknown as a different variety of wine and people didn't distinguish it from Cabernet Sauvignon. In New Zealand, every region has its own specialty, but we don't follow the misleading path of trying the most popular varieties. We just trust our own senses and those of the locals we meet.



Relying on Jack when choosing our route for the next couple of days feels like the most natural decision we could make. 'The west coast is quite severe,' he warns us with a

smile. 'If you do have the nerves and the time to drive slowly on the winding narrow road, you won't regret it as the views are rewarding.' Thus, on the next day, we set off southwards and stop for breakfast at a village called *Rawene* which is not even marked on the map. On the edge of the still waters of the drowned valley of *Hokianga*, there's an old boat shelter turned into a café. We settle on the terrace and stare at the steamboat connecting the islet with the opposite port while we try both well-known and obscure New Zealand cakes for breakfast. There's still an argument between Australians and New Zealanders on the issue of who invented the Pavlova¹⁹ cake. We follow Jack's example and sip slowly and calmly the mild tea and cappuccino. We watch some kids playing in the muddy sand which has taken over the shore during the drought that has lowered the water level.

'You'll discover the sheer beauty of the cliffs above the Tasman Sea,' Jack has told us. Therefore, we are going to the harsh jagged seashore. We pass by the pretty village of *Opononi* that we know about from the story of the friendly dolphin. Years ago, the dolphin used to come every single day to entertain the kids from the village; he jumped, plunged, put them on his back. Every day everyone would come and wait by the water eager to see him. Unfortunately, one day, a poacher put an end to the happy dolphin games in the region. The locals loved the dolphin so much that they erected a monument in his memory and the legend about the dolphin that used to come every day and bring joy lives on.

¹⁹ Pavlova cake is a meringue-based dessert imitating a ballerina's tutu with sliced kiwifruit on top that serves as emerald decoration.







Leave behind the villages and slowly go up the unpopulated areas: the high cliffs where the Tasman Sea turns into still waters and drowned valleys. Deserted beaches with no trace of human presence glow from afar; the mouth of the river engulfs you in its broad maw and leaves you bewitched by the waters breaking into foam in all the colors of the rainbow.

Eco-trails seduce you to start a several days long hike and make you forget whether you have the right equipment, whether you're ready or not. We are looking for the end of the narrow path before us, and we see it in the distance. It is menacingly scarred by the waves leaping like fierce beasts. Even the most experienced swimmers, extreme sportsmen, or fools wouldn't dare to provoke waves like these. When facing the mighty untamed words of the sea, you are nothing but a mere worshipper.

The car is winding through the newly emerged thick forest. We can no longer see the sea, but we still hear the roar of the crashing waves vibrating in our heads. The last advice

we got from Jack was about an extraordinary tree in the prehistoric forest of kauri trees²⁰. ‘There’s no chance you’d miss it,’ he has assured us, even though at the moment we’re wondering whether in this incredibly dense and wild forest we would be able to distinguish a particular tree. A single tree that’s very, very old – *Tane Mahuta* – has survived the greediness of mankind and is now the elder in the tribe of the kauri trees. The road passes through the woods, but people here admire nature and don’t disturb it. There’s not a single broken branch or piece of waste left on the ground. Around *Tane Mahuta* ‘the security’ increases. You are supposed to rub your shoes on a special surface soaked with a solution that kills termites and other harmful insects, natural enemies of the kauri trees. You have to be clean to see the enormous king-tree with a sky-kissed crown; to hear its primordial song. That’s what makes this place so special – sacred trees, favored by history and respected even by men. We grow silent in deep admiration.

²⁰ Kauri is a New Zealand type of tree that can live up to 2000 years and grow very slowly. It provides excellent wood.



‘We have to appreciate more what we’ve been given,’ our friend from the thermal pool concluded. On leaving the baths, Jack was transformed beyond recognition – with a waist cloth and a shirt on: a traditional costume. His extravagant looks stand out while he slowly walks to the parking, leaving us with his stories about the Maori tribes, their culture and customs.



Even though he doesn’t share their origin, he deeply respects the Polynesian peoples who sailed all the way from the other end of the Pacific to come and find the islands of Eden with their abundance of birds and named them *Aotearoa*. Humid and dry, rainy and cold, hot and unstable, the climate of this land didn’t frighten them, and they settled their tribes here to live in peace or wage war on their neighbors. Despite the primitive nature of their tools, Maori warriors were very skilled and even today they still intimidate their enemies (as well as their friends) with the *haka* war dance and their tongues poking out. They were also dexterous and skilled; they used to build their houses from whatever

materials they would find and make *poi* balls. Spinning the balls stretched tightly on ropes and threads, the poi dance was born, and it's still entertaining even in the present day. However, what has been best preserved from the Maori isn't only their harmony with nature and their skill in becoming one with the wilderness and working together with it instead of fighting against it. It's their resounding and rich songs, which used to unite their families and keep their hearts warm, just like the tribal fire warmed their bodies and prepared them for hunt or war.

After two hours of conversation with our new friend Jack, we part ways, but we take his advice. It's not hard to find good company and a true friend in New Zealand. You just have to jump into the first thermal spring, greet everyone with 'Kia ora'²¹ and be yourself – people will come to you. It is unbelievable how many people feel respect for nature whose creator remains unknown. A short conversation is enough to make you think about preservation of the wild and appreciation of what you've been given. Even here, on the other side of the world, people face the same problems and the solutions can be found in the people's desire to put the environment first, before their own needs, and take good care of it.

From the mineral springs to the white clouds; from the surrounding green of the vegetation to the occasional encounters with wildlife and the casual chat with friends who know how to enjoy life – that's Aotearoa. After all, is it really

²¹ "Kia ora" means "Hi" in the Maori language and serves as a multi-purpose greeting in New Zealand.

that far?



San Pedro de Atacama, Chile

Follow the locals to find out whether you're looking for yourself in the desert or you're overcoming the desert in you

Chile is an oblong country. You can cross it in two to three hours from west to east, but the journey from the south to the north border would take you days. Being stretched over numerous parallels of latitude results in varied climates – from the frozen fjords and glaciers of *Alberto de Agostini National Park*, and the mysterious desolate lands to the mild desert climate of *Arica* and the busy ports. We have the time to discuss the shape and size of Chile because we are on the bus from the south to the north; from the seaside city of *La Serena* to the desert town of *San Pedro de Atacama*. The trip is scheduled to take 17 hours. During this time, we will cover less than one fifth of Chile's length that can be crossed by land.

The last seaside town is *Antofagasta* where we stop for a long break before we turn east to the *Atacama Desert*. At Antofagasta, we say good-bye to the Pan-American Highway

that stretches all the way from the U.S. to Argentina. A journey on this road is a goal for many and an achievement of few who have had the courage and endurance to drive thirty thousand kilometers across most countries on the two American continents – from Alaska to Argentina. At the bus station of the last seaside town, we replenish our supplies for the long ride. The food is not included in the price of the ticket for Chilean buses, and if you don't buy some from one of the stops, you'd likely remain hungry. We say good-bye to the ocean while carrying two big bottles of mineral water and a bag full of snacks. Old western movies on a small TV on the bus, something to keep you hunger at bay, and an uncomfortable position in the *semicama*²² class: that's the romantic side of a 17-hour long ride across Chile.

We make our way into a deserted landscape – sand, rocks, and gray sky. Here and there, one can see groups of low, caravan-like buildings in bright colors; then, the desert hegemony takes over. We turn to the TV for another movie. How many times can you take a nap on a single bus ride? The last jolt wakes us up. It's already getting dark outside. The bus stops at a parking lot of some kind. Just before we fall asleep again with the thought that this is just one of the stops (we have food and water, we don't need to get off so we'd avoid everyone waiting for us if we get lost somewhere), we hear from the passengers the words 'San Pedro'. Then, a call by the assistant driver rings out in the two stories of the vehicle and leaves no doubt: we've finally reached our destination – San Pedro de Atacama.

²² *Semicama* – half-bed – long-distance buses in South America are divided in different categories, according to the comfort of lowering your seat and being able to nap or possibly – even sleep.



In the darkness, we take our backpacks out of the trunk, and we are shocked by how dusty they look. We scan our surroundings – everything is the color of dust! The bus is no longer white, and the driver is cursing and wiping the windscreen with a cloth. We drag our backpacks to the side and look around. We can hear warm voices welcoming beloved ones and new acquaintances. Whether it's an old friend or a new welcoming host, all passengers have a person who picks them from the bus station, and together they disappear into the dark. Only a few of us are left; everyone is dusting off their clothes as if this will make them more recognizable. It's only that no one comes to pick us up. We start wondering whether we're at the right town, and if we are – what made us come here at the first place? The town definitely doesn't like us, and that's why we are not welcomed here.

While we are choosing a corner to go cry into, we see the flickering of flashlights. The rays touch and scan our faces as well as those of the few other desperate remaining

passengers. A lady approaches and asks if it's us. Of course it's us! The dusty and sulky faces are now just dusty. We jump on our hostess' jeep and drive off to her house, where we'll be staying for the next few days.

San Pedro's streets aren't lit up by streetlights. The warning 'Bring a flashlight!' now makes sense. As eco-activists, we use a dynamo torch, but that's a big mistake! You don't know what to do first: squeeze the torch, watch your step, or wonder where you are. For a town with just a few streets, San Pedro offers strikingly good opportunities to get lost in the dark. We pass by barely illuminated single-story adobe houses. It's not possible to see what material they're built of, but you touch them every time you bump against their walls (because you haven't seen them), so you soon understand that they're made of clay. We are drawn near houses with stronger lights; we can now see signs, even a few streetlights. We are pleasantly surprised that some of the lonely lights even work! The air is so saturated with dust and sand particles that the light can hardly penetrate the thick curtain. The closer we get to the center, the more people we meet.

The main street comes to life around 9 p.m. and it looks like life has just started after a long period of hibernation. People and stray dogs are strolling in the dark with or without destination, following the competing smells from the restaurants. Seduced by the idea of swapping the uncomfortable half-seat half-bed of the bus for a real chair and eating some freshly prepared meal that doesn't come from a pack, we cross the doorstep of the first restaurant that looks trustworthy.

How can you guess whether a restaurant will offer a memorable experience? You can't. But when a restaurant welcomes you with smiling waiters dressed in the national colors; when the tablecloths look like they have stories to tell; when Chile's flag hangs on the barely painted wall, and llamas and alpacas (not stuffed but toys) hang from the ceiling, then you can be certain: this will be a night to remember.



It's astonishing how many fresh and tasty salads and meals we're served while we're still licking the spicy *pebre*²³. We've been so busy chewing the food and praising the cuisine that we haven't noticed a musician who has sneaked in among the tables with his guitar. It's true that there was no music a little while ago. There were just voices and cutlery rattling. Well, let the boy play and sing, and we'll go back to struggling enthusiastically with our enormous dishes.

We can't eat any more. We're stuffed full as if two more 17-hour long bus rides were ahead of us. We look around: everyone has relaxed in satisfaction in their chairs, where one can forget about the dusty darkness outside. Now all eyes are

²³ *Pebre* – a Chilean specialty condiment made of chili peppers, onion, garlic, olive oil, and tomatoes, served as an appetizer at every self-respecting restaurant; it's best and most commonly consumed with bread.

on the young artist with the large guitar²⁴ in his hands. His songs are sometimes playful, sometimes peaceful, some are passionate, and others are balladic. While we are still getting used to the fast speech of Chileans, we lend an ear to his words, and little by little we grasp the meaning of the young man's song. We were obviously too hungry to listen to him from the beginning, but now his songs are an open book to us. Pleased customers drop a coin or two as a tip while we are unveiling the meaning of the lyrics.

*I'm leaving San Pedro, and the sun's **burning** my skin.*

*I reach the **Moon**, but the wind's blowing my chin.*

*I'm falling through a rocky desert, and I find **death**.*

*I'm a **coyote** waking up staring at the sunset.*

*Dream, it's been a dream, and cold **raindrops** in the dust wake me up.*

Big drops wake me up from my nightmare's grip.

Something like that is taking shape in our minds, the more we listen to the refrain of the love ballad. Is he singing of an unfulfilled love? Or is it a very sad story told by an artist inspired by the nature around us? We don't know.

The boy takes a bow after this song for the last time and leaves the restaurant. In San Pedro, musicians go around the restaurants and the bars in the evening. We don't rise to follow him to ask what this song is about; neither do we ask him his name. We call him Pedro after the town where we met him, and we decide that the words of his song can serve

²⁴ The large guitar is actually *Guitarrón chileno* – a big string instrument.

as our clues and instructions on how to appreciate and conquer the beauty of the area. We set off on a journey in search of the meaning of the lyrics of Pedro’s song!



We wake up to another dust-covered morning. The only differences are the sun, the heat, and the ability to see our feet without squeezing a dyno torch. As a matter of fact, one of the flashlights turned out to be broken so at least one of us didn’t have to struggle with the squeezing. We take a walk under the shade to examine San Pedro in the daylight. However, the shades provided by two-meters-tall adobe buildings hardly offer shelter from the scorching sun.



Living in a desert town probably isn’t easy at all. You can hardly meet anyone outside. People peek out of the small windows and offer cold juices and ice-cream to the few passers-by. The solar radiation meter²⁵ warns us not to stay in the sun at all and use sunscreen.

The clay houses are actually in camouflage colors and don’t attract the sunbeams. We, though, are getting severely burned and need to find shelter – whether in some artificially

²⁵ The solar radiation meter (*solmaforo*) is a device indicating ultraviolet radiation that resembles a traffic-light and similarly flashes in different colors according to the level of sun radiation danger. There is no evidence that its green light for “completely safe” has ever flashed.

planted garden or in room with a fan. We need to get away just like in Pedro's song: 'I'm leaving San Pedro, and the sun is **burning** my skin.'

Somehow, we manage to get away from the town center and look around in the desert. We can see hills in the distance. It's not flat as a plate. We set out across the hills, and we arrive, just like the character from the song, in the Moon Valley (*Valle de la Luna*). At the beginning of our walk, we're welcomed by the rock formation *The Three Marys*, beautifully carved by weather and time²⁶.



The terrain we're walking on turns from rocks to sand, and our march in the desert is as interesting as it's hard. On a narrow path between a rocky dune and a sand dune, we're pushing our way in a single file, walking slowly and sinking into the sands. We look like true Bedouins with scarves,

²⁶ The Three Marys (*Tres Marias*) are a group of rocks shaped by unknown elements to resemble the graceful figures of three girls.

wrapped around our heads. We're struggling with the brisk changes in the direction of the wind and the thousands of grains of sand that stick to all areas not covered by clothes. Steep slopes alternate with scattered rocks, and we're already climbing up a narrow trail. We're about to walk along the edge of the rock to look for a view of the entire desert. We can see enthusiastic sand-boarders on the nearby dune. Sandboarding is a board sport like snowboarding, but instead of snow the practitioners use sand dunes. It is very similar except sand fills your mouth, and there's no lift to drag you up. You fight the wind and climb up for the next wild rush.



The edge we're walking on becomes narrower and windier. With every step we take, we can hear small stones breaking and falling to the abyss below. We notice it later on since we've been busy contemplating the majestic shapes of the desert; they have captured our full attention and conquered our senses. From the narrow edge with its string of small humans struggling with the wind, from the top of the hill, from the rocky trail to the kingdom of sand you can

scream into the wind whatever you wish and be certain that no one will hear you. This must be the place that caused Pedro grievance in his song: ‘I reach the **Moon**, but the wind’s blowing my chin.’

With his weather-beaten face, the character from the song has now run into his greatest problem: ‘I’m falling through a rocky desert, and I find *death*.’ And we, with our wind-blown faces, having lost a scarf but alive and well, get on the bus, which drives off at full speed in a cloud of dust to the Death Valley (*Valle de la Muerte*).



The valley bears its unfortunate name due to a translation error. The Frenchman who discovered it named it after the planet Mars because of the shapes and colors characteristic of Earth’s celestial neighbor. This, though, sounded like ‘mort’ or ‘death’, and the Spanish-speaking population transformed it into ‘muerte’ (‘death’ in Spanish). So, the song’s author didn’t associate the place with the Red planet, after all.

We find it much safer than the Moon Valley because the tall red textured rocks offer shelter from the wind. One can step proudly over the small valleys, nestled comfortably like miniature models in a museum, and overlook the imaginary running river below. As the sun comes out, or hides again, the entire valley changes colors and nuances from desert brown through yellow, from the color of curry to Martian red. Solitary rocks in the middle of nowhere challenge adventurers to climb them, to spread their arms 10 meters away from the bottom, and if they are careless – fall on the jagged slope. That's what might have happened to our protagonist: 'I'm falling through a rocky desert, and I find **death.**'

Even if you are very careful, even if you're wearing equipment appropriate for Mars, there's no guarantee that the road you're driving on won't vanish. When it rains heavily, the road made of clay and limestone is washed away and runs like a river. Many people have remained stuck in the valley along with their bicycles, jeeps, trucks or just a pair of hiking shoes. Maybe the valley deserves its name after all.

Our hero was down on his luck until something very strange happened: 'I'm a **coyote** waking up who's staring at the sunset.' After the natural disasters have tortured and killed him, he has been reborn as the dog of the prairie, the seeker of the sunset. This riddle is the hardest one until we accidentally come across the Coyote's Watchtower (*Mirador del Coyote*) – a belvedere or a place where you can enjoy some deliberately beautiful views.

Dozens of people gather every day on the coyote's platform to wait for the Sunset (with a capital 'S'); they watch the desert as she loses her beloved sun. And the more the sun





sometimes crumbly rocks lies a stone abyss. A single misstep, a slight swing and you can fall badly and roll on the sharp stones to an unknown end. The desert is merciless.

But let's not think of bad things. The protagonist of the song has fallen here, but we won't! The red sky is the last warm touch of the day. Every rock is cooling down rapidly, and we even feel cold. Then, we fling the scarf (the same one that shielded us from the sun and the sand grains sticking to our skin) over our bare shoulders and sit on the cool rocks.



The locals are waiting for the sunset while smoking tobacco or drinking some strange and strong alcoholic drink. It is offered out of boxes by opportunistic merchants, and it's poured out of bottles full of weird plants or animals. The locals aren't afraid of the abyss. Each of us wraps up in a colorful blanket. No matter if you've spent all day lying under the shade, or you've been on a hike, the day in the desert is tough regardless of your activities. The sweltering heat is exhausting. And the sunset comes not only to fill the view with every possible color and shape but also to mark the

beginning of easy breathing, lack of sweat and dust, active life, and the night.

It's hard to interpret the meaning of 'Dream, it's been a dream, and cold **raindrops** in the dust wake me up.' The Atacama Desert is the driest non-polar desert in the world. According to everyone we meet, it rains very rarely, and when it does, it scarcely waters the soil. What can be the source of those cold drops? There aren't many plants around, and even they wouldn't allow the few drops they get to escape. Isn't our protagonist just waking up from some sort of a nightmare?

All speculation ceases when we are suddenly hit by big raindrops. We look above where the sky has turned dark and menacing. Thunderous blue and gray colors are threatening the sun-loving rocks; small clouds of dust burst above the road after every rain drop that falls. Just a second later, we witness a torrential rain in the desert. We run through San Pedro looking for shelter. The streets are getting crowded with astonished faces. The road is being washed away; only the clay houses are unmoved. The plastic bags on our heads are useless – we are starting to feel cleaner and wetter. We won't be able to save our laundry from the clothesline. Even the dogs aren't used to water falling from the sky (in the form of rain) and hide under the sheds as they do when they try to escape from the scorching sunbeams. Rain in the desert, a big water drop in a dream, revival from the dust. An unexpected ending to a love story; a dreamy finale of Pedro's song; hope comes to life with every drop that hits the clay road now running like a river.

The desert brings together curious mysteries and people. Maybe we've attached greater meaning to Pedro's lyrics than

they actually had; maybe we didn't understand his song. Nevertheless, he made us pay more attention to our surroundings and encouraged us to try to guess what might have inspired his lovely song.



Nature may take a lot, but it also gives a lot. Shall we go alone with dusty foreheads across infinite lands to hunt for love, or shall we stay like coyotes and wait for the sun to set to the sound of our gentle guitars? Has music become Pedro's job because the unearthly vistas are feeding his imagination, or is it because there's no other job for him in a town that's a slave to drought and to travelers, who have come to push their limits? Interesting people are like intriguing mysteries: they don't stop singing, they never stop asking. And after the long race against our own selves, haven't we raised more questions than found answers? Won't Pedro pass his fingers through the strings and make the guitar cry its heart out asking: 'How can you know whether you're looking for yourself in the desert or overcoming the desert in you?'

I'm alone in a desert,

The desert is lonely inside of me.



Patagonia, Argentina

*Follow the locals off the beaten track and get ready for new adventures on
the thin ice*

You wake up before sunrise, you eat a cold sandwich prepared last night, and you necessarily do some exercise. At 7 a.m., you're already at the port of *Argentino Lake*. You dress warmly; you put the uniform parka on. Now you're ready for the physical challenges of the day. That's your routine for five or six days of the week. What makes you get ready for work at 7 a.m. at the freezing port of this cold lake? What makes you choose the career of a climber? Perhaps the answer lies in the pleasure of being a guide in extraordinary places and showing them to the rest of the world.



It's so hard to come out from underneath the warm quilt in the tiny room of our *El Calafate* house. The landlady has the wood stove on. We drink some hot chocolate. We put on our warmest clothes; we tie the scarves, but don't forget to take our sunglasses. We slip on our toughest hiking shoes and

drowsily get on the bus. We ride across altering green forests and bare yellow fields. The windbreaker (the man's best friend around these parts) comes in handy in a little while.

It is summer, a lovely summer in Patagonia – that's why we have to be prepared for any temperature above zero. The weather is so unpredictable because we're far south, between two oceans with winds blowing from all directions. The altitude isn't high – the *Argentino Lake's* shores lie at just 180 meters above sea level. We get off the bus at the port and immediately pull up all zippers. Where are my gloves? We're lucky not to have come here in winter. Argentinian Patagonia presents its best summer impression. It's cool at this latitude regardless of the season. What's the reason to come all the way here and shiver then? Truth is, if it were too hot, we wouldn't have come here.

Glaciers are curious formations, they can be found everywhere – in North Europe and North America, even in New Zealand, let alone Antarctica and the North Pole. They can exist in warmer climates, at 15°C in summer, for example.

In Argentina, far south in South America, where you may pass the border with Chile by mistake if you aren't careful, stunning glaciers have been formed by nature. The high Andes are like an impenetrable shield for the warm air flow from the Pacific. This flow hits the mountain range, and at a high altitude it starts snowing. The snow freezes and accumulates over time and starts sliding down the slope. Thousands of tons of ice are moving...slowly, at the speed of the grass growing. That's how the beautiful glacier called *Perito Moreno* has been formed 2,100 m above the sea level. And we can't wait to see it up close.



We pass through another national park²⁷ that can be considered lucky compared to other reserves around the world – plastic bags can’t be seen anywhere, and it’s hard to find even a single piece of trash out of the bins. And, of course, no one ever thinks of polluting Mister Glacier²⁸. Perito Moreno is one of the few expanding glaciers in Argentina. It advances towards Argentino Lake, and every few years, it even enters into the lake and takes its shape. The water may rise up to 30 meters. ‘Buying an island in this lake would hardly be a good investment’ is what we’re thinking aboard the windy boat, riding the waves of the lake. The clouds are clearing, and the sun is trying to come out. Suddenly, something bright twinkles in the landscape of the gray lake, the dark blue mountains, and the sky that hasn’t yet decided what color it would like to wear today. That’s the

²⁷ As you may guess, in Patagonia it is hard to find a place that does not belong to a national park.

²⁸ Perito Moreno wins the Most beautiful glacier in the country competition every year.

ridge of the glacier where it's sharply cut off like a wall in the middle of the lake. From time to time under the mild sunbeams, chunks (the size of a car) break away from this 70-meters high wall and crash in the water with a bang. Perito Moreno is putting on a show for us. We can't take our eyes off of the wall, anticipating the next large piece to fall.



Julieta is our guide. She is one of those people who wake up before sunrise and shows others the natural marvels six days a week. Now she's trying to tell us the story of the glaciers, but she's being interrupted by the naughty Perito Moreno who not only drops ice fragments in the water, but also cracks and mumbles during her entire lecture.

We can't decide whether to listen to Julieta, standing in front of the big map of the area, or to the rumbling of the glacier and its occasional cries. For her, the day has started four hours ago, and that's why she's already at full speed. She's explaining in the briefest possible way what, how, and why is happening since she's noticed the group's impatience.



Besides, unlike the group that hasn't yet acclimated to the cool wind and the burning sun, our guide has already pulled down the zipper of her jacket. She's heavily wrapped in polar fleeces and scarves. If you add the dark sunglasses she is wearing, we can barely see parts of her face and hair. We can't miss how athletic she is, she moves confidently and has enviable golden tan on her face. The black-haired climber leads us across a beach with black sand. We follow her, slowly approaching the glacier. The ice wall now looks even taller and more magnificent.



We ask Julieta whether she brings people to climb the glaciers every day. It turns out that she has been working at Perito Moreno only for a year. She was born in Buenos Aires, but her love and dedication to sports took her to a sports academy outside the capital. Later on, she found an opportunity to work as a mountain guide at the nearby *El Chaltén* – the climbing center in the mountain. While she trampled trails and camped at the foot of mountain tops, such as *Monte Fitzroy* (*Cerro Fitzroy*), she heard of the only company with a license to offer guided tours on glaciers. She moved to the much busier town of El Calafate, where it's crowded at least six months a year, and where you can find many friends and sleep in a real bed most nights. Indeed, El Chaltén is a village that has preserved its non-tourist image to the maximum extent. It's a wonderful place to enjoy nature for a few days. However, if you have to work and live there all the time, it could get boring, according to Julieta.





We click on the rocks with the spikes and smoothly move on to an area covered equally by ice and stones. Walking in a single file is useful behavior here, especially when we're already moving carefully on thick ice, which is prone to get thinner wherever it wants and forms holes treacherously disguised by thin ice and dust on top.

The first climb is ahead – Julieta and her colleague show us the climbing technique. Like little ducklings in rows, we march on the icy trail and wonder what is about to appear before us at its top. Some of us are groaning and moaning; others are treading in concentration and silence, but we're all periodically exclaiming 'Wow!'

Everything around us is white. In the distance, the tops of the Andes and sparkling glacial lakes rise from the fog. It's as if we're in the middle of theatrical scenery of ice, except this theatre has enough space for thousands of performers with crampons on their feet, marching obediently in lines. The first descent is harder than the climbing. Gravity is pulling us back, and everything feels so heavy. We wish we hadn't eaten those delicacies the night before. New ice, new rippled white-gray surfaces emerge on the horizon after every step we take. The sun decides to keep shining, and the gray-brown nuance that is the result of the mixing of dust, dirt and rocks, fades away. The dark and bright blue make their way over the white ice.

'Be careful here!' Julieta reminds us. She gives everyone a hand to help us overcome the obstacles. Her colleague and she cross the distance at least four times in order to make

²⁹ Crampons are those special spiked iron frames attached to the shoes that prevent you from sliding on the ice; they're something like snow (tire) chains but designed for human feet.

sure everyone is fine, and that there are no ice crevasses with the potential of swallowing us whole.



Under the scorching sun, the top ice layer starts melting; small lakes and even waterfalls have formed here and there. Having improved our climbing skills, we're walking on the edge of a small precipice – about 3 meters deep. Each of us is being helped to cross over it in order to take a picture in a huge blue ice mouth – a cave. The blue color is a result of the sunlight 'smiling' through the water. The ice hasn't turned blue yet. Where it's easy to walk, we march with confidence. From time to time, we stop to admire the view, take pictures, and joke around.

Beyond the last hill, there's a surprise for us – a reward for our enormous efforts and the completion of the icy walk. By surprise we don't mean just another surreal view straight out of a dream. The prize is an improvised bar where one can get a whiskey on the rocks (with glacier ice), icy cold water, and frozen chocolates. Two hours have passed before we knew it, but we all take well to the whiskey served with real,

natural ice.

The fiery drink doesn't burn; it just mildly warms and relaxes us. This treat is served in open air, and we drink with the climbing irons still on. What's important is that we feel like we're at a real bar. All needed supplies are brought by our guides who have carried them on their backs. Maybe because it's just not difficult enough for them to just potter about back and forth, to make trails with their hatchets and be careful not to let anyone fall into a 70-meters deep precipice.

And there are even harder and more responsible activities such as climbing with ropes along the glacier. The climbers and guides who do it can only be people who love their job. People like Julieta who walk on ice 10 hours a day. 'Cheers!' we're celebrating our small victory over the Perito Moreno glacier and our meeting with people devoted to what they really love doing.

Even though we are supervised and helped by experienced guides, accidents happen. A few meters away from the improvised bench, where we are supposed to take our climbing irons off, the ice cracks.

So close to the finish line when mind and body are unofficially taking a break from the tough challenge, the treacherous ice claims a victim. Regardless of the fact that it's well-mixed with stones and mud, from our experience we've learned that there's still a 20-centimeters thick layer of pure ice on top. The ostensibly thick ice crust turns out to be deceptive, and an unlucky foot falls into a hollow crevice just a few meters from the finishing line. The eyes of all the people in the line dilate, while those ahead are still happy that they've already passed this last obstacle. We pull out the leg quite easily – it has sunk just an inch below the surface; it is

slightly bruised and scratched. One must watch their step all the time, especially when walking on ice.



The glacier doesn't offer any nightly activities. It relaxes when not being stamped on by dozens of explorers. Nights at El Calafate (even though summer days are quite long and there's still daylight at 10 p.m.) are dedicated to relaxation for both the locals and us. We have two options to re-energize. We go to the supermarket, where we hope to find some bread for sandwiches and fresh vegetables. There are no plastic bags, and we gradually learn to bring some along. We carry groceries under our arms or put them in boxes; then, we cook on the wood stove, and we enjoy our dinner in the company of whomever we meet in the shared kitchen.

The evening is different for Julieta whose everyday life is so exhausting. She prepares her breakfast for the next day; she goes to bed while it's still bright outside (unless the day that follows is a day off). Those young fellows who aren't employed stay up until the small hours at some of the noisy

bars to discuss the exchange rate of the Blue Dollar³⁰.

For those who don't wish to cook and prefer more luxurious dinners, the restaurants welcome visitors with irresistible lamb prepared in 102 different ways and with semi-alpine-semi-prairie atmosphere. Perhaps Argentina's best known for its veal and maybe it would be too naive not to try it when you're here; maybe this really is the best place to taste this delicacy. Nevertheless, you cannot help but notice that lamb dominates the menus in the kitchens of the grassy steppes and the sheepskin rugs of Patagonia.

And, of course, the day can't have a happy ending without a glass of Malbec³¹. Moreover, wine is an effective cure for all kinds of freshly acquired pains, be it a stiff neck from the wind or a broken nail during riding. Active days with jaws dropped in amazement and calm evenings with jaws chewing the tasty meals – Argentinian Patagonia presents its idea of a summer.

Julieta has told us about her favorite places in the area during our tour in the evergreen forest by the glacier. She is a person who has moved here for a reason, and that's why we rely on her and blindly follow her advice.

³⁰ Blue Dollar – unofficial rate for US dollars dictated by the restrictions for exchange of pesos for dollars. Gone since 2016.

³¹ Malbec – an Argentinian red wine variety.



Thus, we learn about *Cerro Huyliche* – a low hill near El Calafate. That’s where the splendid views of the bright blue Patagonian lakes and mighty glaciers give way to endless steppes, desert scenery, and other kinds of extreme adventures. The wheels of our 4X4 truck spin along the curved turns of the hill. We move between the hill and an abyss. We would definitely recommend this place for an ultra-marathon or even better – a survival contest. The low clumps of grass and a stray fox³² here and there greet us on our way to the adventure center.

This center is hidden among rocks with surreal shapes scattered across the desert land and resembles a space station on the Moon. A ski lift starts from it, and one can rent all types of vehicles, do jumps and experience whatever our human addiction to the extreme has invented. We put on

³² This is a habitat of the Patagonian gray fox (*South American gray fox*), which ventures out over the grassy steppes of South America.

equipment and helmets since we're going to drive a quad bike.

We move in a single file again; we pass by canyons and stone statues carved by nature. The wind is blowing our glasses, our helmets with our heads still inside. We stop to take a picture on some rock, to fix our appearance, and the camera almost gets blown out of our hands. Sand and earth are alternating, and it's so hard to keep both the tires of our vehicle on the track and our own feet on its floor. It must be easier to drive on the Moon!

Back at the base, there's some hot tea waiting for us along with words of encouragement – the wind is lighter on the way down. We stop at the foot of the hill to see more of Nature's brilliantly carved stones in the shape of straw hats. They provide both shade and shelter from the wind. Thank you, Mother Nature!



Riding a horse across the Patagonian fields is another experience entirely. We are going to a small house in the outskirts of El Calafate. We won't escape from the wind, but this time we will be the ones to create it: we are running across the field on the backs of the horses. The flat land stretches from the lake to the end of the nearby village and from there – to the mountain tops, lost in the clouds, to the glade with the incomparably tasty local blueberries.

We feel as privileged as the wind – we're floating lightly, we're touching every single blade of grass, and a distant voice is echoing inside of us. The greatest realists in this heaven are the horses. They are smart, too, and know their way. We don't need to think of anything; we're just contemplating the

beauty around us.

Some horses are lazier and take every opportunity to stop by some grass and eat it with pleasure. They don't respect our orders; perhaps we are too kind. However, it takes only a glance by their owners and trainers to bring them into line. From the idle gait we change to a fast trot, and we're almost ready to gallop. We grab the reins, and we ride faster than the wind, our manes flowing.



We rode, we fed the horses, and the master-riders are inviting us for tea. Riding is a family business, and the people are very kind to invite us in their home after the exhausting entertainment. All the seats in their living room are covered with thick pelts; the big fireplace has just been kindled. During winter this heating might not be enough. Without much talking (your favorite characters a.k.a. the heroes are tired), we play a game in which you need to attach a hook hanging on a thread from the ceiling to a nail on the wall. At first, it's a little boring, and we can't get it. The more we try the better our skills become, and we start noticing what the

tricks to the game are. The comments made by the party are funny for those who are waiting and extremely annoying for the player whose turn it is. Sooner or later, everyone is focused and manages to hook the nail. After the game is over, we say 'Adiós' to our true equestrian friends and their owners, but in our minds we haven't stopped floating in the air, riding like the wind.

We're heading south to see an unexpected side of Argentina. We let ourselves be spellbound by nature and get lost in an ocean of ice, a desert of wind, or a lake of birds. Patagonia is the place that would welcome us anytime, all year long, no matter what the circumstances are. Its winds will chill us to the bone, and then it will warm us in its homey comfort. It will push us to our limits and challenge our endurance. It will give us unforgettable memories. It will teach us how to leave the beaten tracks behind and slowly discover our path across thin ice. It will treat us for our courage and reward us with its visions of beauty!



Kassandra, Chalkidiki, Greece

*The magic of traveling lies in the stolen moments between silent waves
and loud friends*

The myths and legends of Ancient Greece are world-famous. We sought the answers to historical questions in *Thessaloniki*, observed the mighty island of *Thasos* from *Kavala*, we were blinded by the sparkling white houses of the Cyclades, and we listened to Athens retelling her thousand-year old story. We went to Greece in fall, winter, and spring before we discovered how marvelous this country could be in the summer.

At first, the idea of going to the seaside of a neighboring country when you can visit your own country's beaches didn't attract us. Despite that, we started our trips with a long weekend in September; then, we went in May, and we couldn't stop returning in July, and August...the Greek Aegean shores, and especially the peninsula of *Chalkidiki*, became our only seaside destination. We would start the

engine, spend a few days at the beaches, tavernas³³, and enjoy the slight breeze at the coastal settlements; we would then return home reenergized, suntanned, and never short of money. We couldn't stop recommending Chalkidiki as a perfect alternative to the crowded concrete resorts. Despite the fact that it's located in continental Greece, the atmosphere there is in no way inferior to the exotic air of the Aegean jewels – Santorini, Rhodes, and Mykonos...



Chalkidiki consists of three fingerlike promontories: *Kassandra* – to the west, *Sithonia* – in the middle, and *Mount Athos* – to the east. We have only been to the tiny unrestricted part of Mount Athos – it's full of monasteries and the access is strictly restricted to male pilgrims only. We hope to see it by boat soon. Cruises start from Sithonia, and one can examine what's hidden on Mount Athos for a few hours

³³ Tavernas are typical Greek taverns. You can associate them with shouts of “Opa!” and the sounds of clattering forks and shattering glasses.

sailing around this secret, mysterious and sacred headland. During our several summer visits to Chalkidiki (Kassandra and Sithonia) we were fascinated by plenty of things. Nature still remains untouched there. Green coniferous forests lure you to the high mountain areas while warm beaches pull you towards the sea. Beaches suddenly emerge after a turn on the road, so, if you don't pay attention, you might miss them. From above, one can enjoy the panoramic views over villages and towns, across the turquoise expanse of the sea and the other promontories with rocky islets.



Almost all roads consist of a single lane, and this often leads to traffic jams. Fortunately, when stuck in a traffic jam, you have the chance to see even more of the beautiful scenery. The bright flowers and bushes along the road from Thessaloniki spread divine scents over the pedestrian areas and the narrow alleys of small towns and villages. It doesn't matter whether you've come with or without a plan; nature will surprise you in the best possible way. We often drive with no particular direction, and we discover a secret beach, a

nestled village, or something else we didn't even expect to find.

There are few uninhabited places in Greece. What kind of people can you meet there? You can hear a lot of Balkan speech around Chalkidiki. It's becoming less and less frequent to hear Greek. Despite the numerous tourists, the cozy atmosphere hasn't vanished. Cleanliness is omnipresent. Whether you are on the beach with just a dozen other people, or you prefer the most popular shores with hordes of tourists, the sand will always be spotless, the people will always collect their litter in a bag, and what's most important – you will always have enough personal space. And if you go for a swim, you will feel like the king/queen of the sea! We rely on food for refreshment and socializing: it's always abundant and of good quality. Seafood is fresh and tasty. The homemade wine doesn't cause headaches. Almost everywhere you'd get a dessert as a treat. Waiters speak four or five languages – be it in a modest tavern or an elegant restaurant.

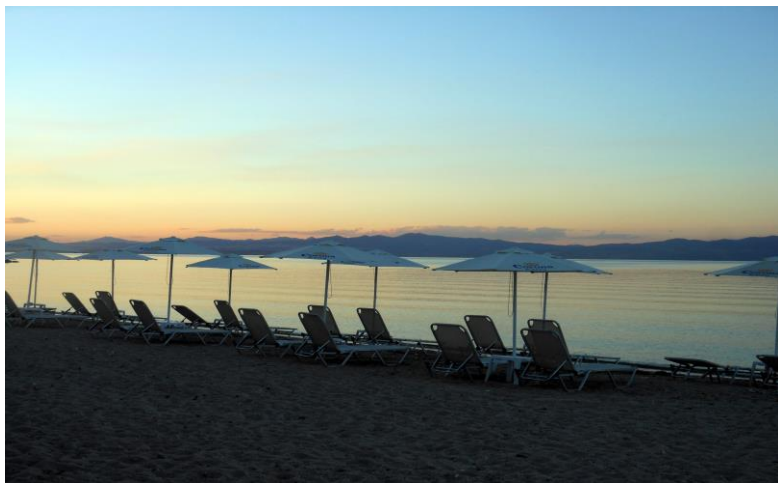


The *tavernas* are happy places – they're buzzing; your chair leans against the one of the person sitting behind you; everybody is overflowing with joy and *ouzaki*³⁴. The only place where you can enjoy some silence is the restroom. Every dinner at a taverna may become a party – either you celebrate, or the people around you rejoice over birthdays, christenings, weddings, or just life itself. When the exultant

³⁴ Ouzaki – local, anise-based, alcoholic drink served with onion rings and olives.

mood hits a high note, wild dances accompany the live music. You should be envious, Zorbas³⁵! Throwing porcelain and ceramic plates on the floor and at walls has become a rare phenomenon, a privilege for connoisseurs or for special events.

Fans of soft, balladic Greek music go to restaurants by the beach where the waves caress their feet as they bury them in the sand. The wind makes fun of their hairstyles while it tries to blow away the white tablecloths and extinguish the candles. Over the sounds of bouzouki³⁶, one can hear whispered declarations of love or melancholic memories from the past. The constantly hungry cats fawn, and the lights of near and distant restaurants and bars complete the simplistic but romantic scenery.



³⁵ Zorbas is the “father” of sirtaki (or syrtaki) – a popular Greek dance.

³⁶ Bouzouki is a soft, melodic wooden string instrument similar to mandolin.

We can go on with this idyllic description endlessly. But how this surreal utopia has been achieved, and is it really that gorgeous? Some would say that it's easy to do when you have thousands of miles of coastline or when your history and culture are so fascinating. Tourism, though, has its disadvantages – most jobs are seasonal; workers come and go and don't care what impression they leave behind. Sometimes, it can feel a little overcrowded. We meet taverns' owners who haven't changed anything over the last three years, which is good and traditional on one hand, but on the other it shows lack of improvement. The quality of the food is high, but some problems in terms of service have been left unresolved. Not every waiter is happy to see us and serve us, and some of them are not shy to demonstrate their attitude.

Some villages offer just a couple of taverns. If you don't want to drive to some other place, the choice within walking distance is quite limited. The little to no competition can cause an absence of high quality service. It's a relief, though, that even the worst in Greece is far better than what's middle-tier at some other places. The Greek customs and culture contribute to one's pleasant experience.

Our encounter with one man inspired us to tell a story about the positive effects of competition, about tourist trends, and about the desire to evolve. When we think of good attitude and service combined with high standards we can't help but envision the village called *Policbrono* on the Cassandra promontory. What brought us there? It was the quest for reasonable prices around Chalkidiki in the end of September and a picture of a lovely hotel. Our next memory is of a small village with new cozy little houses, two one-way streets, and a long lane along the shore.

We sit in the garden of the hotel's restaurant, and a smiling man comes to inform us about the evening menu. Five minutes later, we have totally changed our minds about the meals we wanted to order and decide to try some strange new dishes recommended by him. A spicy grilled octopus is on the way. We replace the standard cottage salad (which is called 'Greek salad' all over the world except in Greece) with bizarre sauces, dips and homemade bread. While we are gorging ourselves on delicacies, we completely forget to ask about the ingredients or the recipe or even to praise the cook. We can't stop salivating like Pavlov's dog³⁷ at the sight of every plate served on our or a neighboring table. To give us time to digest and get ready for the main course, our courteous waiter comes to initiate a conversation about the village and the region.

It turns out that he is the owner of the hotel. He works as a waiter in order to meet his guests in person so he can make their stay even more comfortable. The hotel is a family business. He and his wife are not just the bosses but also the busiest workers at the hotel because they help at the reception, and in the restaurant, and take care of reservations. They are humble or just too busy working so they don't have time to brag. While the owner, Paskalis, tells us enthusiastically about the origins of his best lemons and the most delicious olive oil for the dressing, we are wondering if we could get even more spoiled this weekend.

This man is not just seeking our love (the way to which is obviously through our stomachs); he impresses us with

³⁷ Pavlov's dog is long-suffering dog owned by a Russian scientist. It was used to prove the possibility of acquiring reflexes.

something more. He speaks with us, his restaurant' guests (tonight, two more tables are occupied) with true, authentic interest and genuine courtesy. He wants to help us with our plans in Greece because he has traveled a lot across the country. From time to time, he comes with a new jug full of glimmering liquid – to treat us to his young wine; or with a tray of appetizers – to let us try an especially tasty combination.

Apart from culinary delights, we wish to learn more about the story of the hotel. Every detail inside is a fine piece of workmanship, and all the rooms are incredibly practical and comfortable. Paskalis has risked a lot to build his hotel, and he hopes to accommodate more and more guests. He tells us how he used to work odd jobs when he was young only to gain experience and make a fortune. The latter didn't work out, though – he had to draw two considerable loans in order to build the hotel. Despite the hardships, he is pleased with the choices he has made. What makes him happy is the contact with the guests. His main goal is to offer them an unforgettable holiday.

He was born at the nearby town of *Afitos* on *Kassandra*, and he has spent most of his life within the triangle of *Polichrono*, *Afitos* (where he worked for many years), and *Thessaloniki* (where his family lives in winter when the tourist season is off). He has worked on cruise ships, where he learned a lot about the Greek islands, but also about many other Mediterranean islands. In his hometown he managed to learn everything about tourism and hospitality while he was working at restaurants and guesthouses. 'I was privileged to have the most beautiful workplace – *Afitos* is situated on the rocks – the Moon rises in the distance, at sea level, beneath

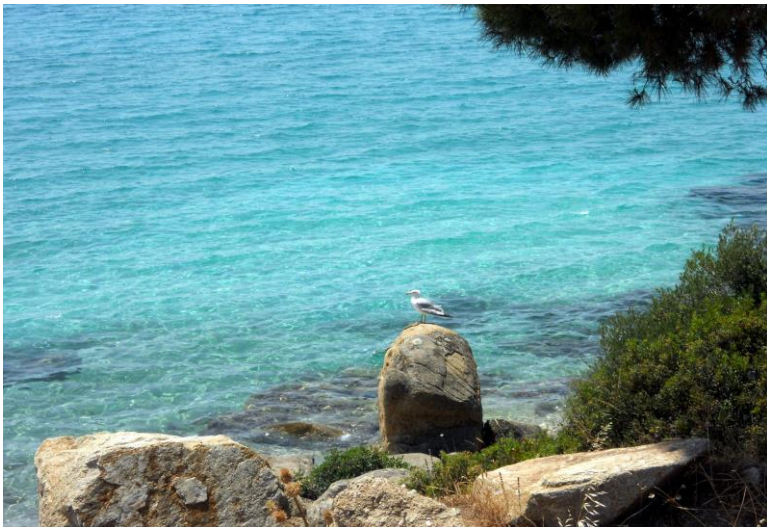
the tables of the restaurant,' he remembers. We are glad that this view has been preserved and even today one can look down at the Moon from the windy open-air restaurants on the stone seafront of Afitos.

The stone churches and hundreds of years old cobblestone streets have made this town a true magnet for tourists and the prices are rising. Our host slowly decided to give up his idea of building a hotel in the pricey Afitos and started looking for alternatives. The towns in the lowlands, even though they are easily accessible, can hardly be compared to the towering and rocky Afitos. Yet, living just a step away from the sea has its advantages, too.



After a few years of saving money and looking for a suitable place, Paskalis happened to visit his aunt at *Polichrono* – something he hadn't done for a while: since his childhood summers when he used to spend time there with his cousin. 'Polichrono was no longer the small forgotten village from my childhood memories.' The seafront is now asphalt-paved, there are sunshades on the beach, and a few taverns are

inviting clients in different languages. Smaller than Afitos as it is, Polichrono still has its charm and variety of guests – from young people looking for entertainment, to families with kids and grandkids – they all enjoy their stay here. ‘My wife’s opinion was decisive, and she literally fell in love with this place,’ Paskalis admits. Before they had time to realize it, they had already moved there, on the newly built first floor of the growing hotel. They like the tranquility of the beach even though it is narrow; they love the tasty food from the fruits and vegetables stalls; they like the way their enterprise is gradually becoming a success. ‘Now, we rarely return to Thessaloniki, not even in winter. We enjoy having our own place, even though our hotel is snuggled in the neighboring houses like everything else in Polichrono.’ It turns out that you’re more than snuggled in Thessaloniki, where it’s almost impossible to find a parking space, and the city still continues its expansion.



Nevertheless, living in the Greek countryside has one obvious flaw – you inevitably distance yourself from your

friends living in the city. This seems to be the only disadvantage. ‘We wouldn’t exchange for anything our public beach of Polichrono and the walks in nature, which is just five minutes on foot away,’ the now-permanent residents of Polichrono assure us. They often take a walk under the palm-trees on the coast or in the nearby forest. Imperceptibly, behind the overhanging cypresses, the dry olive-tree fields emerge as if an artist has painted them in oil. Entire limestone hills, planted with graceful olive-trees, are a common view not only on Chalkidiki but all over Greece.

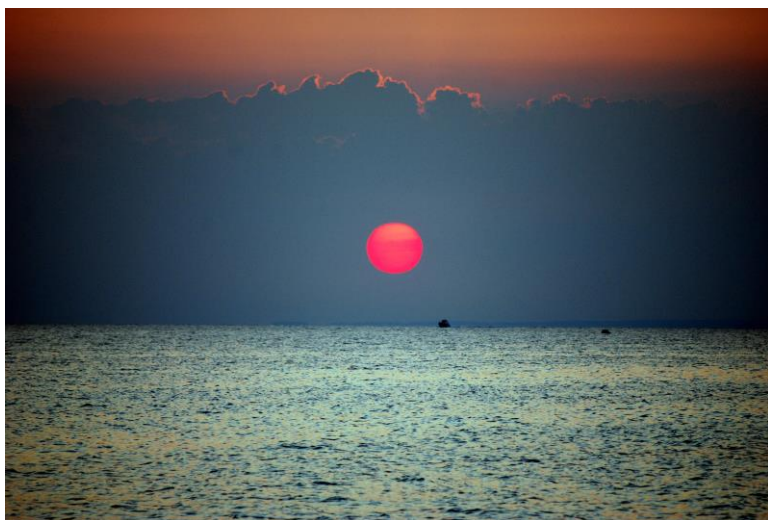
Paskalis remembers a very funny story from the times when he wasn’t picky about his jobs in order to save money. Olive harvesting, especially in September when the green variety is picked, is hard work. It can be very hot during that time of the year, and the olive leaves don’t provide sufficient shade. The workers were paid per kilo, and that year in particular – very poorly. At that time, Paskalis and some of his friends worked as olive pickers. At noon no one was supposed to be on the field so they decided to sneak in and pick some more olives secretly, just like that, to treat themselves for their hard work and to exact revenge for the low payment. As is to be expected, they had just stuffed their pockets with olives when they heard someone from afar shouting threats, calling them by name. They jumped out of their skin. What do you do when it’s obvious that you’ll get caught, and your pockets full of olives prove your crime? You start destroying the evidence! And what’s the fastest way to destroy food? By eating it! Paskalis and company decided to put some freshly picked olives in their mouths. The problem, however, is that freshly picked olives aren’t ready for consumption. To acquire the taste we are familiar with, they are washed, salted, and marinated. Of course, ‘the thieves’

knew this very well, but they stuffed themselves with the bitter raw olives by instinct. ‘This kept us going for a few years – we haven’t eaten or stolen olives ever since!’ Paskalis laughs, reliving his memories. This story is the reason we changed our host’s name since he is still embarrassed about the theft and doesn’t want it to ruin his current reputation.

The story about this funny incident marks the end of our dinner. The next morning, our hosts are up and ready very early with maps they have drawn with detailed instructions on how to get to the secret beach of *Chrouson*. Five kilometers to the south and three turns later, we are instructed to look around for an old battered sign on the right; a few meters after it, we turn left on a dirt road. Then, we take the second turn past the olive-trees and we are there. It sounds like the perfect opportunity to get lost. Only this time, it’s not our navigation skills, but our car that has planned to betray us. Is this just dust from the road, or is something smoking under the hood? Are the strange sounds coming from hungry seagulls, or is our vehicle trying to warn us about some failure? Knocking and rattling but with no strange fumes, we reach the last turns of the lonely dirt roads. We don’t worry that we may end up at the wrong beach. It’s hard to find a beach in Greece that doesn’t take your breath away. While counting the nuances of blue in the sea from the vast almost uninhabited beach, which is all ours this morning, we are starting to wonder whether we should extend our vacation with another day – it’s a very tempting thought. So are the glossy olives on the trees, but some things should be picked when they’re ripe.

A dirt road, a rain that has just begun, a small beach, a remote town and stolen moments in the many-sided Greece:

all of these things make you dream of your next journey there. As much as we think that we know this country, as many places that we have visited – there are always lovely surprises hiding behind every olive branch, under every stone, and in every conversation. From the times of Ancient Greece to our day, so much time has passed that we could never put our hands on our hearts and claim that we have come to know enough. We are sure that we will hear yet again the crashing waves or the loud shouts of ‘Opa’. Instead of daydreaming about our next journey to Chalkidiki, we’d better not think about it too much and just find ourselves there in the spur of the moment.





Mwechemba, Kenya

*Follow the locals and live 'Hakuna matata' – do your best, and
everything will be alright*

We were on the road for a few days, traveling north of Mombasa by a safari jeep. The safari tour of the Kenyan nature reserves turned out to be a memorable, yet very exhausting experience. After a week spent with the Big Five (lion, elephant, leopard, African buffalo, and rhino) and with many more colorful inhabitants of the savannah, we definitely needed a few days away from dust to fix our windblown hairstyles. Where could we stay clean and with neatly combed hair? In the water! And Kenya is privileged to have an extraordinary coastline – a meeting place of the Indian Ocean and the African tectonic plate. Mombasa is a booming metropolis on the Kenyan coastline, but we preferred staying elsewhere since we had heard rumors about the lovely out-of-town beaches and distant villages and resorts. That's why we were passing through the buzz of Mombasa by jeep; too many people and things were already there even without our

presence.



This major commercial port is not for the faint-hearted. The sidewalks are piled with all kinds of goods for sale, and there's hardly any space left for buyers or casual visitors to pass. All animals that don't live at reserves gather on the streets and boulevards of Mombasa, and all the vehicles from the surrounding area can be found there. Motor-driven or not, everything from buses to mobile stands is moving in a chaotic trajectory toward its destination. It's around noon, and the sun is scorching hot. We have closed all windows and locked the doors of the jeep because we are afraid we'd be approached again at the next traffic lights by another vendor trying to sell or hand us something that's not only unnecessary and unwanted, but also scary.

Fortunately, we're already leaving the city. Now we are waiting in a traffic jam to get onboard a ferry, which is a particularly useless alternative to building a 100-meters long bridge; bit by bit the craziness has vanished. We pass through several villages busy with commercial activity, but then we

quickly find ourselves in the deep countryside where we encounter...nothingness. A plain gas station is the place where our hosts from the long-awaited village of *Mwechemba* meet us. We immediately find out that just by crossing the road we pass from the nothingness to a lush forest, and that we have been just 200 meters away from our home for the next few days.



Our common room is situated in the middle of the village, directly on the sandy soil and is surrounded by trees. It's far enough from the main road so just the occasional sound of a passing vehicle can be heard; it's also very close to all other houses and bedrooms in the small village. A lively young man climbs on the nearby palm tree, and, in the blink of an eye, we are served the juice of young coconuts while we are being instructed where the cashew trees are. 'In a village with no fences or walls, we shall feel as free as the wild zebras in the vast reserve,' we say to ourselves and meet our hosts' family.



Half of the family members are Christians while the other half are Muslim. Everyone is free to choose their religion, and that's true for the entire village. Besides being loyal to their god, they are also devoted to their guests. That's why each member of our hosts' household doesn't only have duties to the family alone but also plays a role in the caring for the guests. The sons show the visitors around and tell them about the life here; the mom and the aunt take care of the cleaning and cooking; the father and the uncle have built several additional *banda*³⁸ and are in charge of for supplies.

They all rush around to assure us a great time, and we can see their eyes light up with joy whenever they see us happy and pleased. The duties are well allocated, and there's always an opportunity for someone to prove themselves by skillfully balancing several tasks at once. The uncle, Amani³⁹,

³⁸ *Banda* is the name of the local single-story house where we sleep while we are here.

³⁹ *Amani* – in Swahili his name means trust, safety.

is a living proof of that: the harder he works the humbler he gets.



Every morning Amani helps with the breakfast. At dawn, under the living-room's sunshade encircled by flowers, we are treated to fresh pineapple with finely sliced bread and butter, both arranged beautifully. He heats water for tea on the fireplace. He is certain that it is never a good idea to miss the tea. Mornings can be defined as the coolest part of the day if the weather around here can be called anything else but hot. As the day continues, we are getting hotter and hotter, and even the shade of the palm trees doesn't help.

When we are at home, we usually drink water to cool down during the day. Amani has another favorite drink, but he can't afford it all the time – it's Fanta! He is like a kid in a candy store when he takes a sip of the bubbling orange beverage. He carefully seals the bottle cap after a few sips: 'There will be some left for tomorrow,' he says and hides the

bottle somewhere in the shade. We are left with the raw coconuts, freshly picked from the garden (it's all a garden around us), so we suck juice from them, and we know that there won't be any left for tomorrow because they taste like pure drops of heaven.



We're walking under the shades toward the nearby beach – *Timi*. A forest and the sand, monkeys hanging here and there, create a memorable scene, and we start feeling cool breeze blowing gently – we are on the right track. Despite having passed the age of fifty, the uncle is skillfully pushing his way through hanging branches and protruding spiky bushes. He is wearing a tattered shirt, which

used to be gray, and fisherman's pants that are too large for him. Unlike us, he goes to the beach on business. He gets in the warm crystal clear water and ties something to a branch. He moves inwards until the water reaches his waist. He casts the handmade fishing rod and waits. One can catch peculiar but tasty fish in the tropical waters. Some guests are very interested in fishing, and that's why the next morning they set off before sunrise to the northern part of the beach where they are going to borrow an old wooden boat and go fishing. 'We are going before sunrise to avoid the scorching heat,' all amateur fishermen agree with Amani and are excited about their potentially rich catch. We are left with the view of a few lonely fishermen in the distance while we jump around the

old corals or sit under huge palm trees watching as the emerald waters of the Indian Ocean kiss the snow-white sand of the Kenyan coast.



If you walk along the beach being guided by the locals, crossing fields of fallen pine needles and cones, you will inevitably come across a natural phenomenon. A rock cavity, a natural jacuzzi in the shape of Africa – it's worth walking barefoot on needles and pinecones to see it. Those who are more courageous would go down to the bottom of the cavity or jump straight into the water. We are on our break from a safari, and we don't want any unnecessary excitement so we revel in the refreshing feeling of walking barefoot regardless of the accidental need to pick out a needle or two from our feet. We enjoy walking barefoot here, but we hardly do this every day. The locals, however, don't have a choice and have to walk barefoot every single day since they don't have shoes.



The uncle lights the kerosene lamps every night.

Electricity is a luxury and is only used for charging phones and cameras. Interestingly enough, after walking, swimming, and fishing, he isn't tired at all. He is hanging around the fireplace, helping with the cooking and telling stories.

A little while later, we've gotten in the bed of our round adobe banda with its thatch. We hear only the mosquitoes outside our net and the casual visitors such as the small bat that enters quickly, makes a few rounds, and flies back out. In the blink of an eye, we've already had enough sleep, and the sun has risen. Amani has been awake for a long time; he is cleaning, checking the fireplace, bringing in the fishing gear. Before we set off, we play with our young friends from the village – we skip, exchange clothes, roll about in the sand.



Today, we are going to the beach by another path. It's not across the forest, the bushes, and the branches – it passes by the river. Amani has called two boats to accommodate his eight guests, one for his nephews, and one for himself. At the improvised port in the middle of a glade, we witness the life of the people who travel every day. A special raft is moving

THE MAGIC OF TRAVELING: FOLLOW THE LOCALS

quickly to and fro: from one river bank to the other and back. A young boy rows with a wooden oar; he waits for two or three people to get onboard and helps them throw in their luggage. On the other bank, he helps them get off without wetting themselves in the river, and they thank him by tipping him respectfully. Those on the other side get on, they're transferred, and they get off – and this goes on until there are no more people to be taken across the river. The raft is floating from one side to the other, and we are waiting for our boats that are going to get us downstream to the mouth of the river and the northern part of the white *Timi* beach.



At the improvised port or stop of the public transport on water, a group of kids is playing soccer. Once again, this game has proven its ability to unite people of different races, nations, and languages. They are kicking around the rag ball, and while some are demonstrating notable skill, others are just showing their great passion. The real performance begins when



an excessively strong kick results in the ball falling in the river. The tiniest and fastest swimmer jumps in the water, but he doesn't forget to take his clothes off so that they don't get wet. He tries to catch the ball since the current is carrying it away fast; then, he throws it to someone on the shore. The most important thing is to get dressed as quickly as possible once you emerge from the water because one can die of embarrassment standing buck naked before these strange foreigners.

The river carries us along its turns, and the uncle points at the lavish forests and two solitary cottages in their midst. 'Someday, I will build houses here, in these trees.' The trees are tall, with broad crowns, and would certainly provide the perfect shelter for people who've come here to escape from civilization and reality. We cross our fingers for Amani to save enough money for the building materials as soon as possible and find decent workers because he admits: 'Most workers come from Mombasa and expect us to pay them per hour; then, they hang around doing nothing under the shade.' We discuss the specifics of construction around these lands, the new tendencies in laziness, and the joy of the potential guests at the houses.

It's mutually beneficial for both the locals and the foreign tourists to share a small part of the country's lifestyle and culture. Amani is the most delighted by the conversations with foreigners in English. He is self-taught, and he insists on communicating with the guests of his dreamy tree houses on his own.

Before we can orient ourselves, we have already reached the river mouth, and even without any verbal command, it's clear that we have to jump off the boats. We are knee-deep in

the sparkling blue waters, and we move towards the sandy part of the outfall very slowly, being loyal to the ‘This is Africa’⁴⁰ style.

After another ‘hard’ day on the beach, we decide to find some local land transport to the village. There’s only one vehicle that can pass through the forests and the narrow trails without any trouble – the motorbike. While we are feasting our eyes on the last sunbeams, we wonder whether we’d have to sleep on the beach. No vehicles pass by the road where we are waiting. We are too tired to walk, and we don’t know what to do. The uncle, who has probably guessed we’re in trouble, makes some phone calls and arranges for our transportation.

A thin young man arrives, riding a dusty bike. A few seconds later, the driver and the two of us are on the bike, while Amani is waving at us from a second motorbike behind us. We occupy about 80% of the space, and the driver laughs at us and tries to keep himself as close to the front as possible. First, we move along some of the remnants of an asphalt road among the blossoming bushes. The salty breeze caresses our hair. Then, the road shrinks, starts winding, and gets sandy. Despite that, we speed and whiz past the outskirts of the village; we maneuver around trees, buildings, and curious kids. Every branch is threatening to clip our ears; every turn is trying to upturn us. We pray not to be thrown off at every bump on the road, and we instinctively close our eyes at every pothole, kids and animals popping up from all

⁴⁰ *This is Africa* – *TIA* – is a byword phrase describing the way life goes around here – calmly and happily with no unnecessary stress and with no consideration of any possible consequences of one’s actions.

sides. It may sound extreme (and it really is), but this trip is actually very safe and most importantly – it’s a lot of fun! We arrive at the common room with no casualties or damages. Our concept of roads and transportation has changed fundamentally. ‘The road is where you choose to pass.’

Just in a few minutes we are clean and tidy, and lined up at the open-air common room where we enjoy the song of the crickets in absolute stillness. ‘I’ll bring two more lamps!’ and Amani rushes to get them so we can see the sandy track between the common room and our bedroom.

The dinner tonight is a real treat. The regular meal, consisting of potatoes, beans, and vegetables, is



complemented by an octopus. It’s a baby octopus caught by the uncle and the enthusiastic amateur fishermen who threw their handmade fishing rods from the board of the shabby wooden boat.

The usual lively conversations at dinner have taken a break tonight. It’s extraordinarily quiet, and one can only hear the sound of the crickets and chewing, mixed well with the smell of kerosene and deep fried octopus. This blessed evening silence is evidence of a long tiring day.

In the morning, we meet with our big family – the kids from the village – to say goodbye. We hope not to spoil their teeth with the candies that are today’s attraction.



‘If you have candies, you’ll have buddies,’ – everyone in

Mwechemema is fond of sugar. While we play with the children, Amani dresses up for photos. We take pictures in all possible poses and configurations: in front of the house, in the yard, in front of the fireplace, with the pet-monkey, without the monkey, in front of the kitchen, in the sun, under the shadow. We agree on how to send them the pictures, and it's time to part ways. It's not farewell because we know that someday we will return here to these lovely people living at the peaceful small village, inland from the plain gas station and just 30 minutes by foot from the white beach of Tiwi.



People like Amani have many faces and occupations – builders, cooks, guides, fishermen, teachers, and lamplighters. It's not that important which of these jobs are done well and which aren't because all of these activities, combined with his desire to assure that his guests have the time of their lives, is what creates the real magic. 'You do what you have to when

you have a purpose,’ – we can see an improvement in his English just in the last couple of days, and that’s just the modest contribution of guests like us. And we know that we will be back not only because we want to sink back in the calmness of local life; not only because we want to live simply and far from the complications of technological progress; and not only because we like being surrounded by the big family in a village with no fences, locks, or walls. We will return to experience living in a treehouse by the river that runs to the white beach.



Goodbye, peacefulness and lovely people; hello, busy traffic to the city! We are rocking on a *matatu*⁴¹; rhythmical African music is playing loud, and we are packed like sardines, enjoying the sharp brakes.

We don’t stop to pick people up; that’s done on the move, only with a little slowing down. We stop only to avoid some pedestrian, street newspaper vendor, another vehicle, or a pothole that’s too big. It’s so stuffed with bags, purses, and happily swaying people that there’s no space to take your camera out. A disco on a matatu! From the blue-white stillness, we’ve moved on to the erratic chaos. We’re drifting in it like a wooden raft in a whirlpool. We are enjoying the craziness because the next realm of tranquility is just half a day away. We soon notice a giraffe waving at us from the side

⁴¹ *Matatu* – minibuses or vans that pick up as many passengers as needed.

of the road to welcome us at our next stop. We dive back to the carefree life. We smile widely at everyone we meet on the road, and everything works out perfectly. Hakuna matata!⁴²

⁴² *Hakuna matata* means “no worries” in Swahili.



The Golden Triangle, India

*The magic of traveling is to strengthen your character and build
endurance far from the comfort of home*

It's a well-known fact that over a billion people live in India. We had to reach Delhi to feel these billion human beings. If you think that a billion people can't pass through you, try riding the subway in Delhi. If you think that your voice can be heard anywhere, try withstanding the swarms of people going in the opposite of your direction. If something on the map seems to be just five minutes away, be prepared to spend an hour getting there, and take a bottle of water with you.

It's not just your body you're going to test here; you're going to test your character, too. And while silence and tranquility reign in the shrines, just beyond their fences, chaos and clamor rule. Despite the amounts of positivity and patience you possess, in under five minutes you might fall victim to your own naivety. India is a test for the character.

Do these billion people care about your intentions or

fate? They almost certainly don't. Is there at least one person who does care? You can be sure of that. And you shall find them very easily. This person would either be a dealer, trying to sell you something, or a person who's a link in the chain of a dealer who's already sold you something. If there's someone who has learned to benefit from the chaos, it's the Indians. For us, Europeans, used to regulations and order, the habits in India and the Indian way of life seem absurd; yet, these habits are in the center of the spiral of motion and life. Everything works out because chaos rules and no one tries to dethrone it. The sooner you get used to chaos, the happier you'll be. The sooner you master chaos, the more successful you'll be.



Our driver is waiting for us and nods with circular motions at every question we ask or every time we exclaim. We didn't hear his name properly, but it sounded like Rashmi. He's just a link in the chain of services we are using. He is going to take us from Delhi to Agra and Jaipur and then back to Delhi. We were expecting an ordinary drive of a few hundred kilometers. How naïve of us! It doesn't matter that we've been around the world and have seen much, we are still unprepared. In India, there's only one place to use the map – in the toilet. You fold it up and put it in your left hand since it is known that the right one is used to touch your food. So, even if we had the stupidity to trust the map when deciding that a hundred kilometer drive is a piece of cake, at least we had the presence of mind not to rent a car and try driving on our own.

Rashmi skillfully maneuvers through the main streets of Delhi; he even manages to show us some sights – *Lotus*

Temple, Swaminarayan Akshardham... All of this splendor is sometimes seasoned with thick fog. We have to get very close to see some of the sights emerging through the November mist. We are lucky, the weather is warm enough to wear short-sleeved shirts, and, at the same time, it's cool enough so we don't have to check whether the air-conditioning in the car works.



In the blink of an eye, we've left the metropolis of Delhi. We're driving on a dusty country road, thankfully asphalt-paved. Even as we are passing by ruined buildings in a village, the surroundings sharply change to a luxurious neighborhood with glass skyscrapers. The weird juxtapositions don't stop there. Working as a driver for ten hours a day in India makes you rich enough to afford a couple of domestic helpers. In this country, the gap between two extremes can be crossed in a flash. Rashmi tries to explain every strange thing we see, especially if we ask him. Most things are clear. We let cows pass (who are way fatter than the people); pedestrians take care of themselves. We avoid head-on collisions, but that's a

hard thing to do when a truck suddenly starts driving backwards on the highway. ‘Incredible India, sir!’ our driver exclaims, obviously trying to explain the unexplainable behavior of the drivers. From now on, everything that cannot be explained is crowned with the phrase ‘*Incredible India, sir!*’ even though we’re two ladies and a man in the car on the way to Agra. Of course, we don’t mean to judge; English isn’t our mother tongue either.

By the way, we just passed a wedding. Now, there’s some procession. It’s remarkable how beautiful girls, dressed in colorful saris and with all their finest gold jewelry on, walk on the filthy muddy streets against the background of dust and fog. You’d ask what the difference is between a *sari* and a *kurta*. There’s an essential distinction: sari is a long, large piece of fabric wrapped around the body worn with a t-shirt underneath. Kurta is a tunic with trousers. We’ve clarified the fashion terms, but there is a difference in the fabric and the decorations of both types of traditional costume, which denote whether it’s made for working in the garden or getting married. The quality of the garment can demonstrate which caste⁴³ the person belongs to.

Step on the gas, hit the brakes, sharp turn to the left, straight to right – that’s a brief description of the driving dynamics in India. We haven’t crashed yet; we haven’t even scratched the car – Rashmi is like the *Formula 1* champion of India. We stop at a roadside diner to have a snack – it’s nothing fancy, just a snack bar for the crazy ones on the road.

⁴³ Castes are the social classes that demonstrate the religious and ethnic inequality.

We eat some strange stuff, vegetable *pakor*⁴⁴ or something like that. May your stomach be strong enough! And all of this is happening just a few days after we were dipping eight types of bread in twenty-four types of sauce and ordered sauce number 17 with signs from afar because it was not as hot as the others and reminded us of the taste of mustard with tahini and lemon grass. You can rate every meal in India on a scale from ‘Never again!’ to ‘I would eat this every single day!’ What is absolutely certain is that you would never forget the feelings you get after every bite you eat in this amazing country. Is it due to the unusual way of preservation of the herbs⁴⁵, or is it because Indians bless the food, it remains unclear, but it is so tasty!

Before long, we’ve arrived at the small village (inhabited by only 2 million people) of Agra. Yes, one can feel the air and the space. We are waiting in line to enter the famous *Taj Mahal*. It’s almost 40 times more expensive and almost 40 times faster for foreigners to enter the mausoleum. That’s fair. Even though it’s already crammed, the temple’s garden provides peace and makes your jaw drop. There’s something special in every stone there. Every single detail is in the right place and perfectly does its job to diffract the light and create

⁴⁴ Pakoras are vegetables deep fried in a pleasant unostentatious way.

⁴⁵ This “unusual” preservation method can be described like this: on a sidewalk that used to be paved at least 20 years ago, now one can see holes dug in the ground. They are covered with rags and filled with different piles of herbs and spices. They are always touched with bare hands – left and right – while they’re being packed in a plastic bag that is used for a sixth time.



take a nap in the car. After all, he's just a driver, not a qualified guide. The one with qualification is obviously a part of another chain of services and is here to make a deal; he's trying to combine our guided tour with some other tourists, accidentally attracted as clients in his spare time, between the full-stop of one sentence and the capital letter of the next one. Fortunately, Taj Mahal is not a sight that could be ruined by a bad guided tour. We rest on the lawn, say good-bye to the river with its romantic story and go back to Rashmi who's ready for new heroic driving deeds.

Apparently, he's quite miserable because of what has happened with his unprofessional colleague, and he is scared out of his wits when he hears that we haven't left a tip. India still exists on tips. Prices don't matter at all! What matters is the tip that's left. Sometimes, we wonder if hired workers are paid any wages. Rashmi doesn't eat, he doesn't drink, and he sleeps in the car – he has no expenses. The first time we saw him buy something, cookies for his family because they were their favorites, was after we gave him a tip. He got his first tip when he seemed close to a nervous breakdown when he heard that we gave no tip to the other guide. He wouldn't have been able to sleep, his face fell, and he was constantly weighing his words to avoid offending us in any way. We felt we've made him worry for no reason, and that he could spend all night trying to figure out what he has done wrong. We had an occasion to celebrate, too – one of us had a birthday that day.

We arrive in Jaipur at night. Our hotel offers only vegetarian food, and this applies for drinks, too. We heard of a bar nearby, but we give up even before we've crossed the first street. At least we try – we cross the parking where

Rashmi is sleeping blissfully in the car, and we find ourselves on a street that resembles scenery from a western movie. Tumbleweeds of organic and mineral origin are rolling over the empty streets; dust is swirling in mini-tornados and stray dogs are howling. The conclusion is that a birthday can be celebrated without going to a bar.



The pink city of Jaipur is much brighter, and it's lovely. Ancient forts and orange buildings are smiling; the mood is like the weather: warm and sunny. Elephants are doddering up to the city walls, carrying lazy tourists sitting on red thrones; the mountains in the distance reflect in the nearby lake; playful music is heard all around. A smiling Indian is playing a wind instrument sitting in a lotus position (don't try this at home without training). A musical king cobra is coiling out of a box and swaying to the folk rhythm. 'Incredible India, sir!' we overhear our spirited driver's comment.

In order to save us some money from an elephant ride, he has taken us to the uppermost part in the heart of the stronghold. We climb over rounded rocks and go through low gates. Peculiar shapes are carved in the roofs, and one can see a small piece of the scenery through them. It's crowded and spacious at the same time. We sit on the stairs to meditate for a while. We are just like residents of an ashram⁴⁶. However, we are soon recognized and engaged in a

⁴⁶ Ashram – secluded religious facilities that offer yoga, or religious training, or just a place to find yourself.



Bollywood⁴⁷ stars. We must be so beautiful and exotic that the locals overcome their fear and insecurity and address us, or we really look like movie stars, and we get the attention we deserve. Or, maybe the sunbeams are lighting up our faces in such a way that every cinema-fan can see our potential to take part in the next blockbuster produced by the Indian movie industry. Someday, in some Indian movie, some Eastern European faces will appear. We promise!



On the way up, we stop at *Fatehpur Sikri* – a fortress on the edge of a hill. It’s similar to the Great Wall of China. A little climbing, a little traveling by a *tuk-tuk*⁴⁸, and we’ve entered the shrine-fort, and we’re staring at the stars carved in the ceiling through which soft daylight sneaks in. Green gardens stand out in contrast to the red walls.

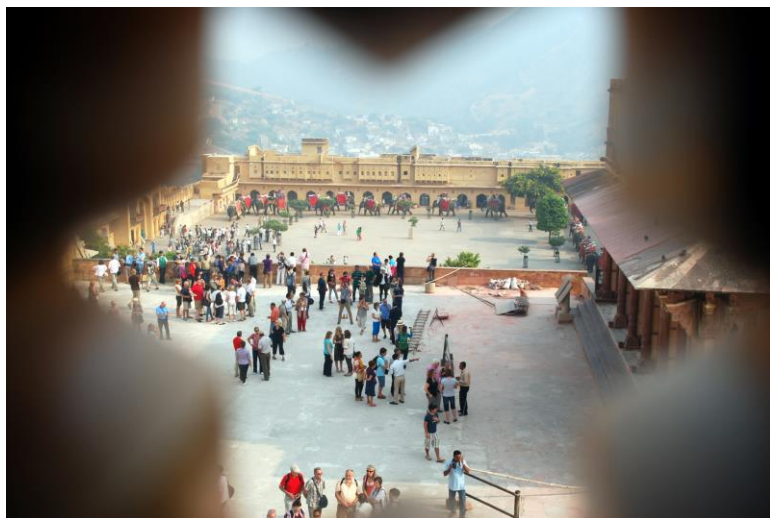
In India, everything is either a shrine or a fort, and sometimes, in the best-case scenario, it’s both. It’s another place where we are barefoot out of respect for the religion and the Indians. We step on the tiles, the grass, and the marble – always linked to the core of the earth. Dozens of

⁴⁷ Every self-respecting actor longs for the stage of Bollywood.

⁴⁸ Tuk-tuk or *autorikshaw* – a motor vehicle with approximately three wheels, a hood made of nylon or whatever material there has been available. It has the magical ability to make the people inside look huge.

feet are stepping silently, and there's no trace left of the noisy Jaipur. There are no anxious people. Everyone is dressed casually; the dying light of the sun reminds us that it's late afternoon.

It's getting cooler now. A dealer of marble elephant figurines approaches us with a smile. As always, all items are 'made by local craftsmen by the sweat of their brows', but all curves and ornaments look machine-made. One little elephant, two little elephants, three little elephants – each one is prettier than the last, but the deal is not worth it. Five dollars for a figurine of an elephant made of something that is supposed to be marble.



The wind is blowing gently, and the vendor turns his eyes to our scarves. We are in harmony – we wear the same pattern and design. Ashamed or not, the man asks, 'Do you want to trade a scarf for an elephant figurine?' The scarf costs 3 Bulgarian lev⁴⁹ at the Chinese market in Sofia. The figurine

⁴⁹ 3 Bulgarian lev was equal to about 1.66 American dollars.

allegedly costs 5 dollars and is also made in China for sale somewhere between Jaipur and Delhi (maybe the craftsmen were all sweaty, but their craftsmanship looks suspiciously similar to machine-made). We have a deal! With a scarf less and an elephant figurine more, we leave the towering fort before the stars, carved in the ceiling, get illuminated by the light of the real celestial bodies. *Incredible India, sir!*



And here we are at last, trapped in some small square on the map, at a market between the *Red Fort* and a subway station of the busy Delhi. On the map, it looks like a tiny little square, no more than 100x100 meters. In reality, it's the worst kind of a maze, the toughest challenge.

It's a labyrinth of ruined sidewalks, merciless vendors of all kinds of goods except for the only life-giving liquid we long for – water. Dusty road, a million vehicles, and the worst thing: no one who cares about anything beyond their inner (maybe neat and peaceful) world. Are we tough enough? We doubt it.

We pass by the rag bowls full of spices in all kind of peculiar colors. They're once again displayed on the ground, and the women vendors stand right next to the stinky garbage pile. These must be the world's most sweetly scented spices! Maybe that's how it should be – herbs come from earth, so why wouldn't they be sold on the ground? A thin rug separates them from the dirt or the dusty asphalt (no one can say for sure what the pavement underneath used to be).



We pass by stands, offering anything you can think of – from twenty-sixth-hand socks to shiny jewelry. Here, one can buy anything but water! ‘Water is for the weak,’ we think. We look at the map pitifully – it’s still the same tiny square, and there’s still no trace of this harsh labyrinth’s exit.

It looks as if we will have to cross the street. Let’s remind you that crossing the street is an extreme sport in India. We practice it without being asked whether we want to. At least, the road is narrow – it holds only 4 rickshaws, 2

motorbikes, 1 tricycle, 8 pedestrians, and a hen, all side by side. But where on earth did the guy with the bicycle come from? The crash is inevitable. You can neither run (there's no space for that) nor stop (you must be crazy, someone would run you over in a blink). Then, we'll fight! God bless those two hands that held the wild bicycle and saved our feet from being run over and let us complete our crossing with parched throats.

We are alive! We might be able to catch some form of transportation to the subway station – even though it's just 20 meters away, we can't survive a centimeter more in this lunacy! In such moments, there are only cycle rickshaws passing by. It's fine; the driver will pedal, we just need to catch it. We're so tired that we don't even bargain. Or the price is really good – it doesn't matter. We get on, but the rickshaw doesn't move. What a hill! Not only have we almost fought for this rickshaw, but now there's a chance it wouldn't be able to take us through the 20 meters we have rented it for. We somehow reached the subway.

We don't remember how. We don't remember how we got to the hotel, or whether we ate, or what we had for dinner, either. We've survived the reality of India, and that's the only thing that matters. India – where hundreds of hectares of sacred places could be all yours, India – where a single square can accommodate a billion people, India – the place that builds your character every time you cross the street and trains your spirit with every sight and with every breathtaking view that challenges your common sense.

Incredible India, sir!





Colca Canyon, Peru

Follow the locals and relax, because you'll always be in good hands

It's still dark when we leave the sleeping town of *Arequipa*. We are half-asleep and breathing heavily the thin air. With a bottle of water in our hands we set off for the turns and high roads of Peru towards the region of *Colca Valley*. We're breathing heavily, and the engine indicates that it's hard for it to...run.

Arequipa is located fairly low – at an altitude of about 2,380 meters. If you, however, arrive by plane from Lima, which is situated at sea level, these over two thousand meters may actually prove difficult to adapt to. Last night, two elderly ladies were inhaling compressed oxygen from a bottle. We tried to eat lighter food, drink more liquids (non-alcoholic beverages) and walk slowly. When we climbed the stairs we crawled. We had a gentle acclimatization experience: no heavy headaches or crises. All locals around these high lands have the unconscious urge to help visitors with first signs of altitude sickness. The best way is not to think about whether

you'd be sick or not. You may also try the local *soroche* pills that are taken prophylactically and have an undeniable effect, even though it is suspected that they only work because you believe in their effect. We say 'good-bye' to Arequipa and head for the barren mountains and volcanos that surround it. We leave the big city, the home of the picturesque monastery of *Santa Catalina* in order to unravel the mysteries around the *Misti* volcano.



Before dawn we've already passed through some peculiar suburbs. Short, unfinished buildings of bricks, sheet irons, and all kinds of materials at hand almost blend in with the color of earth and its dirt. 'Are these farm buildings?' someone on the bus asks. 'These are the suburbs of Arequipa,' the lady speaker replies with a cough. She looks like a woman who's too tired of her everyday routine, and who's used to replying indifferently to the wide-eyed passengers and their strange questions. She puts down the microphone with minimum effort and briskly takes a sip from her bottle of Coca-Cola while leaving us to think about the

suburbs and all those people forced to live in the ramshackle buildings. The opportunities provided by the big city are so attractive that many people are ready to live in squalor only for the sake of having access to a job. The sad buildings send us off on the winding road upwards, and only the majestic view of volcanos and mountains in the distance can bring beauty back to the landscape and erase the oppressive feeling of misery and poverty in the outlying districts of the country.

The dry scenery echoes in our parched throats. Dry air at high altitude means that soon we're going to stop and stock with liquids and coca leaves. The lack of any intoxicating effect of these leaves causes disappointment for those with western expectations; yet, they bring joy to everyone else who can safely benefit from the advantages of this plant. Coca leaves are among the few natural medicines for stomach issues, altitude sickness, and the monotonous life in which everyone around here is stuck. At the roadside shop, a kind lady fills ceramic cups with hot water for us and puts in half a pouch of coca leaves. 'You're in good hands, drink coca tea and everything will be fine,' she smiles at every thirsty guest in the line. We drink our tea on improvised tables under the sun while jagged eroded rocks remind us of their presence by scattering volcanic ashes.

The bus is taking turns and ascending, and the engine continues to protest. We pass 3,000 meters altitude, and our only encounters on the road are with the jumping wild vicuñas⁵⁰. Near the occasional clusters of bushes and blades of grass, flocks of the animals pop up and let their young

⁵⁰ *Vicuña* – species of wild camelid mammal, inhabiting the high rocky peaks of the Andes.

cross the road first. They play by the lakes and don't care about the noise coming from the road, busy with their games and everyday life. Sometimes we see flocks of llamas and alpacas⁵¹, domesticated species used to the comfort of the barn; yet, in this wilderness they're just as lonely. They cope with altitude well; in fact, they can feel comfortable only at this height. They run, jump and pose for photos. The big whirring vehicles are rare, and they only manage to scare the youngest babies in the herds. The animals move elegantly through the dry grasses and cross the tracks of worn down tires on the unsafeguarded road.



We aren't born for such heights and approaching the highest point on the road – 4,910 meters above sea level – we tentatively take a step from the bus to the hot sunburned

⁵¹ *Llamas* and *alpacas* – domesticated camelid mammals, inhabiting the high rocky peaks of the Andes.

rocks.

The snowy peaks of the volcanos greet us, and we slowly take a step in time with every breath we take as we approach a small clear lake. There is a sign painted on a rock providing accurate information about the altitude. Peace and solitude! No one can hurry even if they want to. It's as if nature itself suggests we enjoy it leisurely.

Slowly, under no pressure, we build our cairn made of stones of different shapes and sizes (we don't ask why this is done; we just follow the example of those who've been here before us). Dozens of piles of stones are the only permanent residents at 5,000 meters, and only they can enjoy the company of the volcanos, the sun, and the small lake. We leave this view behind, while settling comfortably on the bus and fastening the seatbelts.



We descend sharply. Bit by bit, the green settles around – low grasses and mosses, and even some yellow flowers here

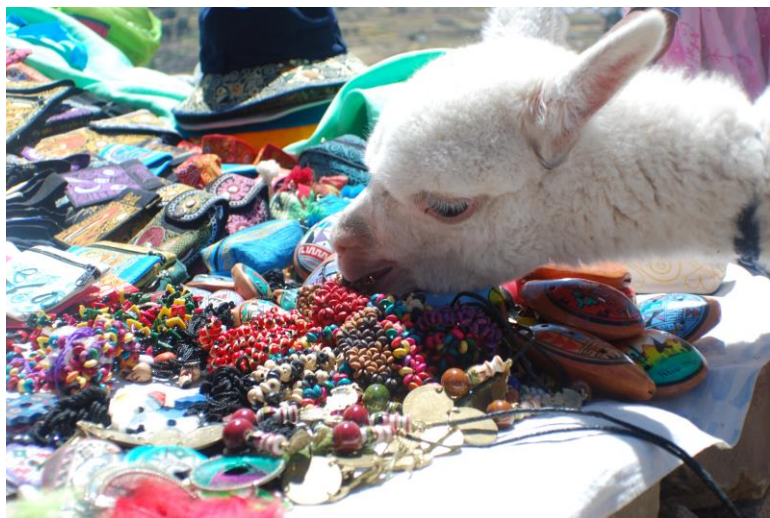
and there. While following this winding road, we notice something colorful shining in the middle of the dark green and brown hues of the world around us. All kinds of vibrantly colored goods, each brighter than the last, are arranged on stone piles. Dark Peruvian girls with voluminous skirts, traditional white hats, and long, black braided hair invite us to buy a blanket, gloves, a purse, or a hat. A small baby alpaca, no more than 40 centimeters tall, is settled between an embroidered shirt and the flowing pink skirt of one of the saleswomen. A nursing-bottle with milk to feed the baby can be counted among the colorful goods she offers. The baby is pleased, happy and already posing for photos. The moment you stop watching it, it moves to the apparently delicious necklaces, earrings, and pendants. They say that a piece of jewelry licked by a llama brings fortune. We'll see.



The stands, the saleswomen, and the baby alpaca are all standing on the edge of a steep precipice, a few dozens of sharp turns away from the village of *Chivay* on the bottom of the abyss. ‘Eat some coca candy, and you’ll have energy for

the whole day,' the most successful seller tries to persuade us. These women stay there until sunset while there's still someone who may stop when they see them and eventually buy something. 'We often return to the village on foot, and since the car broke down, we've been climbing up here on foot carrying everything on our backs,' the women from the village share proudly; they're trained to walk on the steep slopes and avoid the vehicles hurrying on the road. 'A coca candy can fix anything,' is their motto.

Meanwhile, distracted by the conversation, we miss the fact that the baby has finished the bottle of milk and has already eaten two or three necklaces.



Across the pronouncedly divided land plots, planted with different crops or in different stage of ripening, we head for the cultivated rural areas. The village of *Yanque* doesn't suspect that we're coming: a group of men is building a stone house, kids are playing games they've invented on the dusty road, the llama herds with red ribbons on their ears are grazing peacefully. The height of the stone walls reminds us

of majestic mountains. Everyone minds their own business and avoids bothering the others. A villa in the middle of the village draws our attention with its two floors and extraordinary colors: brick red, dirty blue and melancholic orange. That's exactly where we're headed.

The proprietress invites us to relax in the hammocks in the yard while she finds someone willing to take us on a tour around the nearby canyon. 'You won't stay hungry here,' she promises, 'we produce all ingredients on our own.' It's hard to say no, and you must be crazy to do so if you've seen how delicious the food looks, decorated with green leaves and colorful blossoms while it spreads the aroma of spices. There are more than 300 varieties of potatoes in this country and all of them are tasty: cooked with beans, onions, and steamed vegetables and eaten with the irreplaceable battered glass of pisco⁵².

'Eat well and the altitude won't bother you,' our hostess insists. Once again, we feel well-fed and hungry as wolves at the same time. As gluttony prevails, the hostess tells us how she didn't hesitate for a single moment when leaving Arequipa with its variety of jobs and opportunities to come to the countryside instead where she can breathe easily and live at her own pace. She cultivates vegetables and potatoes in her yard and likes embroidering Peruvian patterns on all kinds of fabrics.

Just after the feast ended, a short and nimble man from the village leads us on a walk. We quickly reach the river and the small canyon above. Even at its bottom, the locals have found a way to cultivate the land. Every blade of grass or

⁵² Pisco is the local strong alcoholic drink similar to brandy.

every flower has a name and a story. From time to time the agile mountaineer picks a weed and explains why we shouldn't eat this particular plant. He picks up speed on the steep slope like a wild mountain goat, and we can't decide whether to follow him or watch the terraced gardens and admire the gardening skills of the locals.



The nimble man slows down and tells us about the holes in the rocks where birds are nestling. We cross the first bridge above a narrow crevice of the river; it's scary, and, at the same time, you feel challenged to climb to the strange holes in the rocks. These holes were once used for storing corn, potatoes, and quinoa⁵³ where they were protected by the perfect ventilation and low temperatures. The old Peruvians invented this method. We pass through corn fields that have started to turn yellow, among thorny bushes and groups of field workers. 'Take a bite, you'll like it,' our guide offers us a freshly picked cactus fruit. It feels as if the people from

⁵³ If you don't know what quinoa is, go find out right now!

Yanque have conspired to feed us until they make us fat. We can't refuse the plant that's as sweet as honey and as liquid as juice. We come to the conclusion that this won't be the last time we eat cactus. The trouble with cactuses is to find one that isn't poisonous. The tints of some cactus parasites are used for dying fabrics and making lipstick. To avoid puzzling over what's edible and what's not, we have our local guide who has been taught to distinguish between a poisonous thistle and a tasty cactus even before he learned to write. He has also conquered six thousand meters high mounts several times and this light walk at 3,400 meters above sea level is like a child's play to him.

We have picked our speed as we follow the paths. Refreshed by the cactus, we reach several stone chapels and fences. It's like we've fallen in an ancient and distant neighborhood of the village. We look through stone windows and across the yellow clumps of herbs we notice a group of alpacas and llamas grazing on stalks and obviously thinking 'We are perfectly fine'. For a moment, we imagine them advising us: 'Graze on coca stalks, warm your wool in the sun, and keep yourself wrapped in it at night', but we see how the cunning llamas open their mouths only to spit at you and then laugh at your naivety. We'll have to wash ourselves. And that's exactly when our nimble guide takes us to the thermal springs in the middle of the valley.

Stone tubs, mineral waters with a view of the river – those are conditions suitable for the locals, with no pretenses for the tourists. We are soaking in the hot springs, watching two donkeys, sweetly chomping on thistles as the sun sets beyond the valley. We forget about fatigue and rare air; we forget even about the sly llamas. This whole walk in the

wilderness with all the amazing creations of the rural economy and the warm welcoming of the mountain ends with an unexpected climax – hot mineral pools no one knows about!

In the dark, we don't see the precipice under the rope bridge we cross. We sway to the rhythm of our own steps, and our eyes are searching for the flickering of the first houses of Yanque.

We go back to the only vibrantly colored villa. Along the way we notice that the scenery has changed – builders are drinking pisco, kids can be heard from the illuminated houses and the herds of llamas stay hidden in the pitch-black night. It's time to be left alone with our plentiful dinner before we snuggle in our embroidered blankets and enjoy our small accomplishments – a high-speed trek at 3,400 meters altitude and a bath.

And as far as the natural jewels in the area go, *Colca Canyon* is the most popular one. Many people come to Peru to see the condors⁵⁴, soaring over one of the deepest canyons in the world. The view lifts their spirits, and one can get lost in admiration of the spread wings of these birds that look as if they've emerged out of fairy tale.

Our hosts refuse to let us go before we've had our breakfast – have we mentioned that the people from Yanque are very fond of nutritious food? Fresh fruits, which are plentiful in Peru, and special pancakes accompany us along with the sunrise above the mighty Andes. The road beyond the village quickly starts winding and gets bumpy. Of course,

⁵⁴ Condors are impressive birds that have escaped from a fairy tale in order to spread their great wings over the canyons.

the driver has many years of experience in off-road adventures, and he reassures us while chewing coca leaves: ‘Don’t look to the right. I pass these potholes every day.’ Despite his words, we can’t stop ourselves from looking at the growing precipice leading to the abyss of the canyon. ‘A pack of coca leaves and you’re in good hands.’ The only creatures that don’t seem petrified or stricken with respect by this abyss are the proud condors spreading their wings in the skies, going all the way to the sun. At the speed of sound, they whiz above our heads and alight on the opposite side of the abyss.

A few miles down the road, this show is replaced by another. We find ourselves in a small unknown village, in a square called *Plaza de Armas*⁵⁵. A group of dancers twirls rapidly



around a fountain that probably hasn’t functioned since it was built. Voluminous skirts are spinning unendingly in harmony with red caps with fringed brims against the scenery of the firmly standing bare hills and conquistador *casons*⁵⁶.

The snow-white cathedral supplies the background to numerous stands with colorful goods. Here, eagles have replaced the baby alpacas. You don’t get to feed them, but you can offer them an arm, and they proudly stand on it,

⁵⁵ *Plaza de Armas* is the name of every main square around these lands. It means parade or ceremonial square.

⁵⁶ *Casons* are posh houses from the age of the Spanish conquistadors who came to conquer the vast continent.

looking determined as if they're posing for photos. Perhaps the village earns its living thanks to the dance performance, the souvenir trade and the photos with eagles. All guests think: 'We've reached the place where everything will be alright.' And the sound of '*En mi pueblito bailando*' ('I'm dancing in my village') is echoing in the dry thin air.



Spread your wings and soar above the gray suburbs. Take a deep breath, and dive into the high lake. Tie your vibrantly colored scarf, and don't forget your embroidered bag with a pack of coca leaves. One step at a time, slowly climb up in the Andes, and take a look at Peru from above. Listen to the locals, and never stay hungry. Feed a llama or get spat on. Follow good people's advice, and always place yourself in good hands!



Kintamani and Legian, Bali

The magic of traveling is in leaving a piece of your soul wherever you go

Bali is one of the places always present in those popular lists, such as ‘*Places to visit on a very special occasion*’. And that’s not accidental – all sources describe a paradise island in the exotic remote Indonesia; a place where movies have been shot and a place you’d hardly ever want to leave. And it’s all true! What makes this island so special? What distinguishes it from the other heavenly islands around? It’s its people and culture. On one hand, being the only small Hinduist island in the middle of the largest Muslim country means that you’ve been isolated for years from the rest of the world. And since it has lost its connection with India a long time ago, the religion of Bali is a unique branch of Hinduism with its own peculiar traditions and appearance that is now widely recognizable.

One hears stories about ancient history of conquest and liberation, royal marriages between different religions and good fortune and luck. The people living there must have

been cut off, isolated, too. That's why they've kept their genuine charm, the honesty of their relationships, and the joy with which they greet every new day. They are hardly angry with the Australian surfer who accidentally found himself on the beaches of Bali when searching for the perfect wave. Looking for the ideal holiday, this explorer brought thousands of people to the island of Bali.



Despite the fast rates at which the enormous hotel complexes are built, there are still many intact places with spiritual atmosphere 8 degrees south of the equator, somewhere within the 5,500 square kilometers of land. For instance, it's still possible to relax in a frangipani⁵⁷ garden with a blossom of this symbolic plant in your hair and be greeted by a benevolent hotel manager, who may advise you to combine a tour of the island with some physical activity. And thus, while we sit in the middle of the jungle of *Ubud* by the

⁵⁷ Frangipani is the national Balinese flower that's famous for its strong fragrance.

swift currents of the river, we're already preparing mentally for our bicycle adventure the next day.



Our small group of cyclists is welcomed by the smiling guide Made. The bikes are waiting for us arranged in a small truck that is going to drive behind us up a hill – we're ready for a 30-kilometer descent. It may look like a piece of cake, but the terrain is rough and mostly consists of dirt roads, a few bridges, villages, and palm forests; the asphalt-paved road will only be a small part of the ride.



We are in the volcanic mountain⁵⁸ region of *Kintamani*. On the way, Made explained to us the system of naming babies in Bali. Every first child is called Wayan, the second is called Made, the third – Nyoman and the fourth – Ketut. Then, the cycle is repeated, and the fifth child is named Wayan again. The kids' gender doesn't matter; what's

⁵⁸ Bali is a volcanic island.

important is the order of their birth. At school, this may cause real chaos, and that's why there are official names people use when dealing with institutions.

So, our biking guide Made could be the second, the sixth, the tenth, or one of the next children. He tells us that he's the second child, and he has six brothers and sisters. He is glad that he has grown up in a big family, which has been rare in Bali for the last few years. 'Not everybody can afford to pay for school,' explains Made.

Life is growing more expensive every day. To get a prestigious and well-paid job, one has to be a university graduate, and the education is entirely paid by the parents. Nevertheless, Made enjoys his job as a guide and the cycling tours.



And there's a good reason for that. From the grand caldera⁵⁹ of *Batur Mountain* through the endless rice fields and

⁵⁹ Caldera is a formation with the shape of a cauldron, formed by a landslide of volcanic craters.

hidden villages full of loud kids – all of it is Made's office. He has never bought a formal suit in his life. Instead, he wears a helmet, shorts, tennis-shoes, and a kit of spare bicycle tools. Helping cyclists, stuck in some brook, is his daily routine. The smiling and amazed faces of the tourists awed by the splendor of Bali are his reward and make him adore his job, even though he spends his whole day on the bike. 'There are much harder jobs than that,' he expresses his sympathy for the workers in the fields we pass by. Dozens of people, mostly elderly folk, are bent over the rice beds. The only shelter from the scorching sun is their rice hats; they're also the only protection from pouring rain that can replace the burning sunbeams in seconds.

We leave our bikes on the side of the road and enter the field. Made helps us talk to the workers while they're harvesting the rice. 'They'd love some help in shaking off the rice,' he translates, and we wipe our sweaty foreheads and get ready to start. However, this turns out to be a joke made by the rice harvesters. They know that we've come here on a bike tour, and we are in Bali to relax. I mean, the foreign volunteers hardly stay long on the field. Made puts something in the hand of an old lady. Later, we learn that she asked him for a grand⁶⁰ for ice-cream. Agricultural work is hard; especially in this case when in the best possible scenario the painstaking work earns you only the rice ration for your family. This grain is Bali's main source of food. A bowl of rice gives you energy for the whole day, and if you add fresh fruits that grow on the trees all around, then the food for 'the

⁶⁰ One grand at that time (2012) was about 10 cents.

poor' actually turn out to be the richest.

All other food are delicacies afforded by the majority of Balinese people only on special occasions, holidays, or if they have a very important guest.

We didn't notice when we left behind the rice fields and the view of lonely mountain peaks and sacred lakes. We've entered a village. First, we pass by an elementary school – humble single-story buildings with a large green yard and many pupils running and jumping around in neat school uniforms. An entire class of second-graders surrounds us and asks Made if they can take pictures with us.



Many little feet run toward us in their lovely uniforms. It turns out that their English is advanced – they've been studying the language since they were little kids, and this effort is paying off now – we ask each other about our names, how we are, and we smile and inspire each other.

Little Desi is the most talkative of the class (she introduced herself with her formal name). She takes a

notebook out from her small backpack and shows us some crayon drawings. Her schoolmates wonder whether to smile for the photos or hide from embarrassment when we offer them a bike ride (they're very modest and shy kids). The next class starts soon, and their teacher calls them from the yard while Desi wishes us a nice trip. We wave goodbye from our bikes and watch them march with their cute little backpacks to their classroom.

We go back to our tour and head to the main shrine of the village. We skillfully go round the piles of rice left to dry straight on the pavement. In their yards, the locals pay no mind to our presence, and everyone does their everyday work – wood-carving, cleaning the yard, or carrying goods and food. We can see the local crafts and daily routine for free without the polishing for tourists.

We're pushing the pedals of the bikes when we suddenly arrive at the house where we're about to have lunch. We are really surprised when we learn that this is Made's home. The guide is taking us to his own house to treat us!



‘For us, it’s a great pleasure to have guests,’ he admits. ‘While I was outside with you, guys, my wife prepared everything.’ They serve us *nasi goreng*⁶¹, noodles, vegetables and sprouts grilled on a stick, special sauces prepared with secret spices, and even grilled chicken. The food is so abundant that even after we’ve overeaten, we leave at least half of it to be eaten later

⁶¹ Nasi goreng is a traditional dish of fried rice.

by the family.

We talk about their rare days off and how they usually spend them. During holidays, everyone heads for the shrines as different rituals are performed at different times according to the custom. Made and his family go to the coast several times a year to participate in processions of the big temples such as *Tanah Lot*. ‘During high and low tide, the shrine has two different faces,’ Made tells us. ‘We love walking on the stone holes when the water is low, or watching how the sun sets behind the horizon.’



We listen to his stories while we sit on the ground in his home by a low table in the open-air dining room. After lunch, Made takes us around the house where different families live in separate rooms. His brothers and he have stayed at their parents’ house while their sisters moved when they got married.

There’s always a shrine in the yard of every Balinese home where the offerings to the gods are presented daily.

They consist of trays made of dry banana leaves, piled with food, flowers, some money, and lit candles. The shrine in the yard serves for the daily rituals but, according to our host, nothing compares to the beauty and splendor of the big shrines, crowded with worshippers in traditional garments and their offerings to the gods.

One can only hope to witness these mystical processions on the streets and in the temples.



Wood carving on doors and the peculiar roofs of the shrines made of black palm fibers are characteristic elements of the local architectural style. It's important for Made to save money to send his daughter to university. That's why he hasn't spent money on artful wood carvings for his doors since this craftsmanship is considered fine art and is quite expensive. Nevertheless, his yard feels like a palace to us – everything here makes us feel like living in a fairy tale where every piece fits in its place and enhances the feeling of magic. We wish the entire hardworking family good luck and fill in the guestbook enthusiastically.

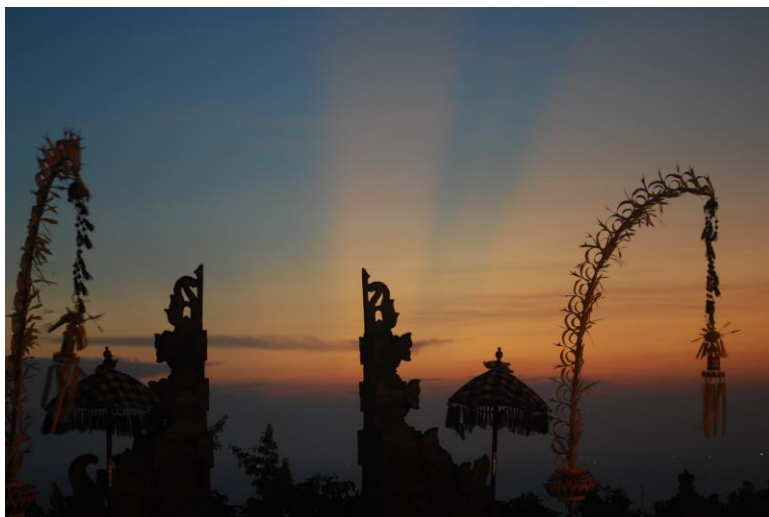
Less than fifty kilometers away, we've replaced the bikes for a scooter, and we've reached the world-famous beaches of Bali. Motion and life are a constant there: the beaches are either full of surfers, hungry for the perfect waves, or of joyful enthusiasts looking for exotic shells. The rhythm of life is tranquil and slow, almost to the point of stopping. However, if you look around more closely, you'll notice that

everyone is pottering about. Masseurs are rubbing tired backs with special oils; kids are building sand castles; sarongs⁶² are fluttering in the wind on the mobile stands. We try to speak the local language Bahasa Indonesia with the help of ten phrases provided on the back of our guide-book. We address a little girl who has sneaked up to us on the beach. ‘What’s your name?’ we stutter. We hear some name pronounced timidly, but we can’t continue our conversation. We don’t have the translation of ‘My name is so-and-so,’ or ‘It’s nice to meet you’. In a little while, the kid gets bored by our company and our perpetual questions about her name and leaves us. We stay on the beach until 5-6 p.m. to see how everyone stops their activities and stands still, waiting for the sunset. When the sun begins to set, everyone leaves their task and settles comfortably. We see the sun off with our feet buried in the sand, enjoying another different and extraordinary sunset. The sunsets of Bali are a notion that needs no explanation or interpretation.

We sit on the *Legian* beach with a beer in our hand served in a cloth thermos. We are at the west side of the island, and the sun sets in the sea. A suntanned guy approaches us; he carries a sack with rolls of drawings. The typical clothes he wears, a T-shirt, shorts and flip-flops, reveal his young age; yet, he seems exhausted and walks with difficulty. ‘Hi, may I sit next to you to rest?’ Why not, we won’t mind some company. ‘Where are you from?’ the vendor asks. ‘Your soccer is good.’ he declares after we’ve clarified the exact location of Bulgaria and that it’s not in Africa. Balinese people are crazy about soccer. They know all

⁶² Sarong – a light, flowy scarf, a piece of fabric with multiple uses.

teams and all players; they follow all championships and rankings. In addition to the latest news about the upcoming World Cup, we discuss everyday topics with Ketut who settled next to us. He says that after a hot day on the beach spent selling pieces of art, it's the best thing in the world to wake up at 3 a.m. to watch the Champions League.



Ketut is another supporter of the most comfortable and popular way of transportation – the scooter. He uses his to get home from the beach because he lives inland. For the less fortunate locals, the cheapest accommodation is in the overcrowded capital of *Denpasar*. He shares that in the evening his friends wait for him to return, and they eat and drink together with the money they've earned that day. That's how the Balinese youth lives. Today, he has sold enough drawings and considers taking a day off from the beach tomorrow. Bright sun during the whole day dries even the young people's skin. We highly appreciate the lack of any attempt to sell us anything and his authentic interest in us. The working hours are for work, and now it's time to relax

with friends, even if you have met them less than five minutes ago.

Ketut tells us that even for the locals the art of dancing is a true miracle and they often go to *kecak* (pronounced 'kechak') dancing and ceremonies⁶³ in order to immerse themselves in the spirit of tradition and get lost in hypnotic melodies.



As strange as it is, it's very easy to find and own a motorbike or scooter on Bali, to refuel with cheap gas sold in plastic bottles at all roadside stands and stores, and go to the next beautiful place where your eyes would be enchanted by the magic of natural and man-made marvels, created hundreds of years ago. It's just as easy for foreigners, and you don't need to be a local to enjoy this privilege. And while the wild rhythms of kecak and the noble sacred animals attract

⁶³ Kecak ceremonies are performances that involve acting, dancing, and retelling of the Sanskrit story about Ramayana.

both worshippers and unsuspecting passers-by, the secret ceremonies, performed late at night on the beach, are open only for those who participate in them, or to those who have accidentally heard about them and are hiding somewhere in the frangipani bushes offering the perfect hiding place to watch the spectacle quietly. But how have they heard about these ceremonies in the first place? We have to admit once again that it is thanks to the small talk with the honest people of Bali who are sincerely willing to help and make your holiday unforgettable. Because ‘You are here for your honeymoon, aren’t you?’ is the question we’re asked all the time, and it’s a perfectly normal reason for visiting this heavenly island.

Ketut is surprised to hear that we’ve come here just because we’ve heard that it’s very beautiful and the customs and atmosphere are unique, and there’s nothing like it in the whole world – it’s exactly there, 8 degrees south of the equator. What we haven’t heard, however, is how special and authentic the people are; people like Ketut and Made who represent peace, balance, and optimism, even if they have to work hard to be rewarded by the gods with happiness and prosperity.

We are lucky that we didn’t wait for a special occasion to visit Bali. Millions of people go there and take a piece of this land with them back to their home. That’s why, every day, we celebrate our decision to immerse ourselves in this sacred and cherished island. We leave a piece of our souls there and put some of Bali’s authenticity and atmosphere in our suitcases as a souvenir.



Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic

Follow the locals and focus on happiness anywhere, anytime

Philosophers and chefs have been looking for the answer of one of the greatest questions of all-time: ‘What’s the recipe for happiness?’ In fact, most of us, Homo sapiens, either consciously or unconsciously, are looking for the recipe for happiness through most of our lives. And while chefs mix ingredients and philosophers draw logical conclusions, travelers just travel in order to find happiness in different corners of the world. If they are lucky enough, the travelers have the chance to contemplate happiness in its many shapes as it appears in different nations and cultures. Happiness has its unique meaning depending on your experience, your life, and the sights you’ve seen so far. It’s unlikely that two different people would share the same notion of happiness. It has its unique definition for each of us and, at the same time, one can notice some similarities shared by groups of people.





Let's take the local people from the Dominican Republic, for example. Is there a common feature in their understanding of happiness? In this country, we didn't have to ask for explanations. Even though it's true that every man would define happiness in a different way, one cannot neglect the presence of some basic common elements and ingredients of this sensation we all long for. We haven't asked any direct questions even once; questions like: 'Are you happy?' or 'What does happiness mean to you?' But every encounter we've had with a man or a woman from the Dominican Republic pushed us towards the same conclusions.



Happiness is making your way in the tourist business. In a destination such as the Dominican Republic, where all-inclusive tourism is thriving, it's very hard for the small local businesses to survive. Wealthy foreigners are stimulated to avoid buying anything outside their hotels. Tours are resold with outrageous surplus charges in return for a promise that everything would be alright. It is believed that when you pay enough money, you buy yourself security. Few people dare to go out in the street to initiate a conversation with a local, and it's almost unheard of to ask about the actual price of these tours.



In the small town of *Sosúa*, there are several small tourist agencies by our hotel: with hand-drawn posters and smiling guides inviting us for a tour. There's no reason to fear these potential 'thieves'. With our basic knowledge of Spanish and

fluent English, we ask numerous questions and compare prices. A smiling lady wins our attention by inviting us to her office where she starts planning routes and describing marvels. It's clear that she loves her job. Essentially, all agencies offer the same tours – the route and the stops are the same, even private tours have equal prices and conditions. We don't know whether they realize it or not, but the local agencies should compete with each other because all of them are after the same type of customers – those who have ventured outside the walls of their secure but highly priced fortresses.

And so, Maria, while carefully signing vouchers and drawing maps, has already won us with her enthusiasm. It's just 11 a.m. and this is her second deal. We ask her how many work hours she has daily. 'From 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. or even later if there are still people passing by.' Her work schedule depends on clients and their willingness to search the streets looking for travel agencies. 'In the evening, we gather with friends either on the beach or at one of our houses.' So, that's how they relax after their almost 12-hours long work day. Someone brings a bottle of rum to the party. We think it's too expensive to drink rum every evening, but Maria assures us of its affordable price. 'We buy it either directly from the factory at a wholesale price, or from the regular supermarkets.' It's always better to talk to a local to find out where to do your shopping. Thereby, even before our voucher is filled with her lovely handwriting, we already know where to go to buy some famous Dominican rum at a reasonable Dominican price. At the unpretentious local store, we find locally grown cocoa and even some tasty snacks.

Happiness is in partying with your friends on the beach

every night. That's why Maria doesn't miss a single evening out with hers. In Sosúa, it's not hard to find your friends – 'We have a special place on the beach.' No matter what happens during the day, everyone gathers there at the appointed time, and the one who's in charge that day brings rum. We don't ask about dinner – it's not important. Appetite is suppressed by the heat. A single coconut a day gives you enough energy until the next morning. And while tourists overeat and queue in front of modern bars and discos, locals chat and spend their limited free time together at the beach.



And what could you do on the beach during the day? No matter how broke you might be, you can always find a solution. For instance, you may cut a fresh coconut from some tree and sell it to a thirsty tourist for two dollars. Then you'd have two bucks in your pocket and the incredibly firm belief that you would never stay hungry. That's a simple but effective business model we learn from a resourceful old man on the beach. We promise ourselves not to steal his idea; and, as a matter of fact, even if someone dares to do that, he'd

hardly be as charming as this fellow and as capable of attracting customers of all ages and nations.



Happiness is the wind in your hair. A day has passed. We showed Maria's voucher to an off-road truck driver – our transportation across the inland hills of the Dominican Republic. Maria promised us 'a many splendid views' and 'endless fun' and this has raised our expectations. The truck passes by green meadows and cloud-capped peaks, pineapple and coffee farms, villages with no more than 2-3 houses but full of kids, playing on the road waiting for something interesting to happen. Candies are flying from the rear part of the truck – with one hand, we're holding tight trying not to fall off on the dirt road; we're fumbling for candies and sweets in our bags with the other. The attraction of the day – that's us! The kids seem to enjoy our smiles more than the flying candies and toys. Kids all over the world are the same – they want love and attention. And they don't care whom they get it from.

The truck stops noisily by a coffee plantation. We take part in the manual grinding of the bitter beans in a large mortar with a long pestle. There's always been a prejudice that the quality of the coffee depends on its place of origin, how it's stored and processed. That day, we learn something new – that the most important part of the process is...singing! Sing to the coffee while you're grinding it – that's what makes the bitter elixir so delicious! A few of us line up; we hold the pestle together, we spin around the mortar and sing '*Dame del cafecito...*' ('Give me some of the coffee...').

After a few mouthfuls of hot coffee and many songs, we are back on the truck. We pass by several villages and the



road starts
meandering...Where
are we going? We're
headed towards
Damajagua – a system of
27 waterfalls hidden in
the lush jungle – a true
trial for the body and

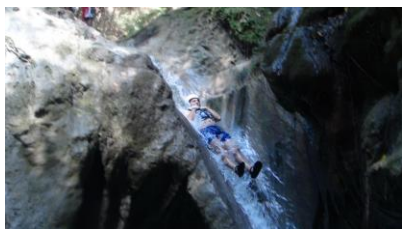
entertainment for every real adventurer. The road makes those who have had too much *Cuba libre*⁶⁴ regret it. It might have helped them to not feel the turns and potholes of dried mud, but climbing up the walls of a waterfall is hard. The rocks are slippery, and the water runs against you.

The skillful climbers assist the tired enthusiasts. Who said that the road to happiness was carpeted with flowers? The road up the waterfall is actually paved with obstacles. The water is flowing against you as if it doesn't want to let you see what's at top of the falls. The rocks never miss a chance to trick you, and it's only thanks to the firm hand of the climber next to you that you don't experience a close encounter with the offending rock and a flight downwards along the stream of water. To go against the stream, against gravity – is that the road to happiness? Deep thoughts tend to seize



⁶⁴ Cuba libre is a traditional cocktail – rum with Coke and lemon.

your mind when your body is busy surviving.



On the way back we all forget about weariness when the only thing we do is jump from one waterfall to the next. To relax on the way back, to laugh at

the exact same places where you just wanted to burst into tears... We look funny jumping around, our faces, even though they're frozen, are happy. We reach the moment when we say to ourselves 'It was worth it!'

Disheveled and wet, we end the day being jostled around in the truck that's groaning and moaning. We deeply sympathize with it – god only knows what it's been through! It's beyond our imagination what hidden remote places it has passed through. Maybe it has also been driven against the stream and gravity.



We are seen off by colorful lizards lying in the sun, long meadows with dried fences, and majestic mountain tops struggling against the winds in the distance. Maria was right about everything – about the fun and about the scenery.

Happiness can be found in the alternatives for those who seek extreme experiences that aren't physically challenging. Some alternatives are public secrets – everybody knows about them, but no one really talks about it. We're just an hour away on the asphalt-paved road and half an hour by boat from the

Island of Paradise (*Isla Paradiso*) – a sand dune no more than 100 square meters large elevated in the middle of the sea.



You shouldn't carry anything – just your bathing suit and a snorkel because there's not much space for your stuff. Smiling boatmen turn on an old cassette player, mix some cocktails, and give you a fan made of seaweed. From now on you're on your own. You can stay in the water for hours – just you and the abundant life of the underwater world. For hours, you watch the hundreds of species of fish and gingerly bend over the edge of the submarine abyss (about 20 meters deep) that's visited by divers with equipment. It's a remote island, but you're not alone on it – it's a dream come true. From above, this islet lies in the middle of calm waters; there is enough space on the beach for everyone, and you're welcomed by a few wooden boats surrounded by curious fish. In the distance, you can see the mountains on the opposite shore, and that's the only image that prevents you from thinking that you're stranded in the middle of nowhere. Whether you find the experience scary is a matter of taste and

point of view. We hope that these silent waters won't ever rise a meter or two and make this heavenly place a submerged memory. Happiness is in sunbathing on your ten square meters of sand and talking to thousands of fish.



Happiness is in sharing, and the Dominicans are generous people. An interesting way of socializing and sharing is the public transport in the form of *transporte*. Maria assured us that this way will be the cheapest and the most entertaining. A *transporte* is a car with a special sign, indicating its first and last stop. It would take anyone on the road as long as there's space inside. It usually accommodates 7-8 people besides the driver. It's an ordinary five-seat car, of course. With almost no Spanish and a lot of math, we agree on a fare that's suitable for people who are half-tourists and half-locals. At least the two of us aren't settled in a seat for one person.

A trip by *transporte* from Sosúa to the regional capital of Puerto Plata can take up to 30 minutes. While traveling you have the opportunity to hear the recent news, exchange gossip of local and national importance and also learn where you can find an exchange bureau with reasonable rates. We forget about expensive tourist taxis; *transportes* are our only way of traveling in the city. We share the rides with strangers who become our friends in less than 30 minutes. There's no timetable for *transportes*; we wait on the main road, and they pass by at their leisure. Somehow we reach an agreement with the driver to leave us at our destination in Puerto Plata from where we can go explore on our own the seaside town with a fortress from the 16th century. Well, it's not exactly like that...We find companions on the streets – they give us

directions to the Amber Museum or offer themselves as guides. These Dominicans really love sharing!

Happiness is in rising above yourself and above everything else. With a little luck we share a moto-transporte up the hill from where we're going to take the lift to Jesus Christ's statue. That's not even something recommended by Maria; it's just the perfect time (we now feel half-locals), and we make our decision as any other independent person in the middle of a lovely friendly town would do. With the lift, we slowly move up the mist-wrapped hill of *Isabel de Torres*. The statue of Jesus is on top, overlooking the city.

At one point, the mist clears and we can see that we've arrived in the heart of a jungle – a natural park. There are lakes, lagoons, caves, bridges, and lush vegetation on the nearby hills. Tropical heat permeates despite the missing sunrays. We quickly realize that the mist has brought us to some parallel universe that's been reserved only for us (we don't see other people anyway), and we just try not to get lost.



We reach big holes full of water (intact lagoons) among the palm trees and lianas; we walk down paths of wooden stairs, ending unexpectedly with thick entwined branches and plants. Somehow (to our surprise), we manage not to get lost and find our way back to the area of the statue to wait for the mist to clear. And that moment comes! The little white houses of Puerto Plata, brilliantly lit up by the sun, and the blue sea with its tempting emerald beaches, emerge from under the clouds.

It was only yesterday when we were pushing our way through deep puddles and fine sand with the loud quad bike; today, we're looking from above at the beach, at the hot tub made of volcanic rocks, at the hidden waterfalls, and at the almost invisible heavenly dunes in the middle of the ocean.

Every whiff of wind makes us feel more at ease, and we don't notice an hour passing while we've been silently watching in the same direction. Just before we leave, we see many people wearing T-shirts from a competition '100 Kilometers on the Caribbean: Dominican Republic'. We believe that the ones who have completed this marathon are those who have reached enlightenment.

However, we continue to wonder what happiness means to Maria. Happiness can be hidden in some good rum, an old cigar, or in wild dancing under the moonlight.

Good rum requires high-quality sugar cane and special production methods. It might not be as strong as the rum in Cuba, but here you can drink more. The old cigar has a long story – tobacco is tended to in the fields on the hills; it's dried in an old house under a wooden shed and carefully stuffed and shaped in a thick cigar. And before it's lit, there's a strict ritual to be followed: the experience is created through the

combination of ritual and aroma.

Merengue and Bachata have their Dominican origins and are widely popular far beyond the Caribbean region. There's a story all Dominicans know. It's about a night of wild dancing to the sounds of a newly formed band; and there's always some accidental passer-by lured into joining the passionate dancers. Just a few chords, just a few steps, and no one can resist the wild rhythm of the dance. Cocktails are just additions – it's nice to have them, but they aren't a necessity. Can dancing merengue on the beach with a glass of rum in your hand help shake off the working day? Does following colorful traditions contribute to happiness?

At this place, we recall the story Maria told us about overcoming her problems. 'Not everything is rum and bachata on the beach,' she told us. 'We have to make ends meet with little money,' she added in a thoughtful voice. 'Yet, no one thinks making money is the purpose of life.' To her, one of the worst things to happen to someone is getting sick. Doctors always take a lot of money and medicine is not always affordable. 'When I'm sick, I go out before sunrise; I stare at the sky, and take deep breaths of the salty air.' And that's her recipe for good health. 'With good health, friends, and the sun I am happy!'



Happiness is dealing with the present, facing challenges, and focusing on the positive side of life. Happiness is being impulsive, living only in the present moment, and always striving to do your best. It's making peace with the past; never thinking about the consequences you can't control, and always being in harmony with the joyful and sunny surroundings. Happiness is becoming part of the

THE MAGIC OF TRAVELING: FOLLOW THE LOCALS

environment in which you want to live. Welcome to the Dominican Republic – the land of happiness!



Shangri-La, China

*Follow the locals and be yourself in the land of millions, look for a
soulmate on a planet of billions*

It's highly improbable that anybody would believe that all of China can be explored within a single human life. In a country of its size and population, it would take a lot of time even if one only searches for the differences between all the provinces, cities, villages, and their inhabitants. The word 'scale' is the first association that comes to mind after a few weeks in the country of Mandarin⁶⁵. It isn't hard to get lost in an alley in cities with millions of people or in the wilderness of the *Gobi Desert*. In search of typical features common for all Chinese, it's hard to meet someone who defies most stereotypes for a Chinese citizen or for a citizen in general. Someone who creates a new way of entertainment and interprets the job of a tourist guide in a new exotic way. Usually, people like those find you, if it is meant to be.

⁶⁵ Mandarin – the most spoken language in the world, the native language of more than 885 million people.

First encounter: we stop on a winding road to take a look at the *Yangtze River*. The driver's knowledge of English is limited, but he's still better at it than we are at Chinese. Somehow, we perfectly understand each other on the topic of the location of the bathroom and about how long we're going to stay and contemplate the meanders of the river in the valley. While the river sends our minds in a romantic direction, and we consider the beautiful landscapes it has seen, the conditions in the bathroom shock us – obviously this place is not supposed to be visited by tourists. On one hand, we are happy that we've found ourselves in such an unusual place where only locals go. On the other hand, we have to hold our bladder to the next stop, which, considering the size of this country and the need of the locals to use all their limbs to communicate, may not be very soon.

Fortunately, we stop just a few minutes later – that's where the new guide for the next two days gets in the van. We notice shabby booths across the road and rush towards them. A young man in red and black checked shirt, jeans, and a shoulder bag shouts at us to stop. He explains that we have to be more careful when crossing the road because it is dangerous. While he himself crosses, he pauses in the middle of the road to finish his sentence, and a car squeals to a stop just a few meters before hitting him. 'This one will be fun,' we say to ourselves. We descend on a winding trail. The people who pass us by are obviously too lazy to climb because they are carried on a special cart supported by two sturdy fellows. Junji has already retold us the story several times from different points of view. He admires the beauty of nature even more than we do as if it's his first time here. In truth, he's been working as a guide for six years, and he's been here hundreds of times.





Enchanted by the canyon and the dance of the water, we take photo after photo while he turns his attention to us – he explains how beautiful we are and how lovely the shapes of our bodies are. He admires everything that surrounds him – the nature and us. Compliments are something nice; you express gratitude and enjoy them. Still, when the same person repeats them dozens of times within the span of a few minutes, it becomes a little bit weird...weird and suspicious. Is he too courteous, or has he come to the conclusion that we don't want to hear the story about the tigers in love again and again? Or...is he flirting with us? In our group, consisting of two women and a man, there's a burst of overt envy. Who has won the heart of the swarthy handsome man with broad smile and white teeth?

For a few hours, he assures us that he's looking for the one true love. He insists on finding an intelligent and, hopefully, young woman with good knowledge of English; one, who is as beautiful as a Bulgarian and who wants to marry him. We give up trying to convince him that we won't play matchmakers. We just have fun with his antics and hope not to reach a place where we will have to rely only on his knowledge. So far he has demonstrated more skills in flirting than in being a tour guide.



We take the road toward his hometown – *Shangri-La City*, also called *Zhongdian*; however, the latter is not used as a name because it's too difficult to pronounce. And, indeed, the place is known as the Chinese Shangri-La, and it's very close to the Tibetan autonomous prefecture. One can't see the standard overpopulated China around these lands. Only 130,000 people live in the entire district, and one can feel, see, and hear the spaciousness. There are barren hills as far as the eye can see. The gray-brown scenery's monotony is broken by shrines with shiny golden stupas⁶⁶ and colorful flags covered in ancient prayers⁶⁷. The mystical colorful rows of the scorched lands make us hope even more sincerely that at least

⁶⁶ Stupa – a religious object from Buddhism in the shape of a reversed bell with a handle.

⁶⁷ These rags (*prayer flags*) are also called *Lung ta* (*wind horse*) and are actually colorful pieces of fabric arranged horizontally; one of their features is that it's hard to stop watching them.

in his hometown, Junji will know his way around better, and he will have more stories to tell.



With or without stories, the interesting experiences are around every corner. After the natural marvels and the picturesque religious sceneries, there's a small surprise ahead of us. We have a little accident on the road in the last village.

An old fellow, pretty shabby and obviously drunk, throws himself under our van, and even our skillful driver can't avoid the hit. We hear a thump and step out find the smiling grandpa



sitting on the ground. During the next few minutes, we are witnesses or, more precisely – spectators to some kind of theatrical performance. A performance that's going to cost our driver 1000 yuans (we calculate that this must be his monthly salary). We still can't understand how the victim of

the crash could get off some truck, cross a four lane road and slip almost under the tires of the van of our unsuspecting party.

Through the window, we watch the argument for money because it turns out that this is some kind of a business scam, most likely a well-rehearsed performance. The old man, who is smiling out of his mind and alternates between wallowing on the ground and resting, is soon joined by a Buddhist monk, a worker from the village, and two women, one of whom has an axe in her hand. The quarrel gets more violent, but fortunately the axe stays out of it. Police don't act in this show; there isn't a single policeman in sight. We stay inside the van and wonder which mighty force could help settle such an argument. In this case, the force is called money. When the performers are paid for their act, we are back on the road. All the actors, led by the monk and accompanied by the axe, scatter. Junji explains: 'We've had a small accident!' It's not as if we haven't noticed... After this brief and plausible statement, at least we don't doubt the realistic nature of this event; it has not been some innovative tasteless tourist attraction. And how could he know that we're veterans who have seen all kinds of frauds and performances? Well, this one is definitely a new addition to our collection, and we wouldn't have acquired it if we hadn't traveled with a small van down a country road to the town of Zhongdian in *Yunnan* province in the People's Republic of China.



Most guides in China are people with a profound knowledge of the place where they're taking you – the district, the culture, and the history. They are like living encyclopedias, and sometimes it's hard to assimilate so much

information, let alone remember it all. Here, time is measured by centuries, not years. The names of famous people who have changed history are countless and just as hard to pronounce. There are several curious events during each century, and the rulers are the subjects of various legends.

Every Chinese is ready to amaze you with another interesting story about the rise and fall of empires and emperors. In Shangri-La, we have a guide who belongs to a new generation: a guide, who is not only determined to find his true love, but who's also extremely naïve and benevolent. He's becoming a little more than we can process in a single day.

We hope for a silent evening in the small town of Zhongdian – a peaceful walk around the historical center to breathe some cold air on the cool May streets and enjoy a cup of tea and a dinner we've chosen on our own.

And that's just what is going to happen, but not before our caring guide has come several times to our hotel room to check on us; to bring our passports; to confirm the time we'll set off tomorrow; just to see if we feel OK. He clearly wants our company, despite the fact that we're his clients. We can't let the jealousy over his attention ruin our friendship, and that's why the three of us desperately try to convince Junji to go home and rest. We have to say: 'Bye, see you tomorrow!' no less than fourteen times before we're left alone to take a break and conquer the town on our own...



The new day brings more fun. The young fellow Junji takes us to a local market where we're supposed to buy breakfast. It's very kind of him – he's not just nice, but

slightly swarthy and athletic, exactly the Tibetan type; he climbs up the stairs and is not afraid to look for new friends. Well, you see, we've officially become his matchmakers. 'Try the dumplings with mushrooms!' we hear Junji's cheerful voice over the stands. We, for our part, are trying to find some fresh fruit, lost in the middle of the astonishing variety of so many shapes and colors we're unfamiliar with. At Junji's consistent insistence to buy us dumplings⁶⁸, we agree to try them. The combination of cooked mushrooms in dough made according to an unknown local recipe in a basin outside, by an unknown chef at the market, is definitely a brand new taste for us. Never mind, we compensate with bananas and pomelos⁶⁹. We make our way out of the narrow market streets, leaving behind the endless vendors shouting over clouds of steam, the odd mechanisms for noodle-making (spaghetti are a stolen idea of the original Asian noodles), and pigs squealing at the fate that awaits them.

After enjoying the romantic side of early shopping, it's time for the sacred atmosphere of the Tibetan shrine *Songzanlin*. Its golden roofs, reflected in the lake in front of the temple complex, can be seen from afar.

⁶⁸ Dumplings can be baked, boiled, fried or steamed dough products with filling of vegetables and meat. In China, they're often stuffed with quite unexpected ingredients.

⁶⁹ Pomelo is the national fruit of China. It combines the best features of the grapefruit, orange, and the entire fruit family.



We convince Junji to walk on foot around the lake so that we'd have more time to admire it from a distance and breathe some fresh air. He doesn't miss the chance to take a few pictures with us. We often become an attraction in China; many people come to take photos with us. However, it's the first time we pay a guide who wants to take pictures with us as a keepsake...several times. But, as we've mentioned already, this guy is breaking so many stereotypes.

We walk by thousands of Buddhist prayer flags hanging around the lake with the reflections and the lonely island, the access to which is granted only to certain honored monks who can sail there on special days. The gates of the shrine are decorated with the brightest colors one can imagine for such a sacred and ancient place.



By the main yard with its various buildings for praying, there are steep stairs – you can ascend towards the sky. ‘Let’s race up the stairs!’ our guide suggests and rushes upwards like a wild goat. We don’t have time to explain that with our health we don’t want and can afford a race up the stairs at an altitude of about 3,000 meters, especially when we have a few more days ahead of us to explore China. We catch up to him slowly at our own pace, and we’re met by the excited look of an eight-year-old kid on Junji’s face. ‘But why didn’t you run?’ the little fellow grumbles. We sigh and proceed toward the hall where the guests are being blessed by the monks. The shrine vibrates with a voice saying a prayer. A loud and mighty chant comes from the loudspeakers, floats in the air while humble worshippers pass by the colorful walls.

After the blessing and our self-scheduled walk (Junji was devoted to organizing a sports day for us) around the sacred complex, we move on to the picturesque *Pudacuo Scenic Area*. Anyhow, there’s nothing about the history or the culture of the place that we can learn from Junji, and it’s better to give

nature the chance to amaze us. We stroll down a wooden eco-trail, winding around lakes, woods, and Tibetan villages. Seclusion, contact with nature, and air that is so fresh it feels as if it's the first time we breathe in China⁷⁰.

Our guide is also enjoying a break from his crazy ideas of racing and taking photos. Is it the fresh air or the whiff of running horses, or is it the glints of sunlight among branches – we aren't sure, but something in Junji breaks. Suddenly, he starts explaining, giving a talk, telling us stories. Unfortunately, the topic of the lecture is 'What's a nature park?' The answer to this question can't be interpreted in different ways by different cultures and peoples. The conclusion is that a nature park in China means exactly the same thing it does in Bulgaria, Europe, and perhaps in all the countries in the world. Can you believe it!



⁷⁰ In big cities you can quite often see signs warning you that “going out is extremely dangerous” or the little less upsetting “low quality air”.

After our thirst for knowledge has been quenched, we need to satiate our hunger, too. Chinese food has an extraordinary and distinctive taste all over the world. We've already had the chance to try Chinese food in China, in different provinces and in versions for both tourists and locals.

In the spirit of seclusion and meditation, on our last evening here, we choose to go to a restaurant on our own; there, we're planning to try Tibetan-European cuisine without the company of our charming and unique guide. He, however, managed to disappoint us with his fruitless attempt to offer some extracurricular (apart from the tour) activity – to take us to traditional dancing show with a dinner. We can't be mad at such a wonderful person, but we just want a little time in peace.

Our table is by the window. We drink tea and soup while watching the shop for thermal underwear and thick jackets across the restaurant. The most radiant face in China suddenly emerges outside our window, and a few seconds later, he's already apologizing from the bottom of his heart for...everything. We prefer to believe that he hasn't looked for us everywhere or stalked us, but instead it's just a coincidence that has brought us together.



‘Wooing tourism’ gets its definition, and its first official member of honor – he’s at the table by the window over there: the table that’s so boring and lonely without Junji; the table that would be nothing more than every other table in China if he weren’t there.

Parting is always hard. The thought that you are saying goodbye to a certain person, place or life stage can be sad. Looking ahead, we slowly make our way to the security checks at the airport. After two days and emotions of all kinds mixed together, we have to part with Junji. He holds tightly the slip of paper with the phone number we’ve given him. His flirty charm has disappeared; a sincere smile covers up the slightly sad slant of his eyes. From the millions of guides in China, he’s the only one who has come to see us off at the airport, and he’s the only one feeling sad because we’re leaving, even if he tries to hide it. We give up looking for a lady for this guy because people like him shouldn’t search, they should be discovered.



A place with ancient history and population of billions can offer countless opportunities and experiences. Ultimately, it's China that's considered a land of large scale in every possible way, isn't it? Did we expect to meet such a tour guide and such an attentive suitor? No. Among the million guides working in the People's Republic of China, we could not expect anything like that. One in a million, that's how our encounter with this extraordinary person can be described among the barren Tibetan hills, where bells toll and prayers dance. One in a million.



Brussels, Belgium

*The magic of traveling will remind you of the ingredients of a childhood
full of joy and curiosity*

Going somewhere without any expectations is an unmistakable sign that you're about to experience something unforgettable. Nowadays, in our globalized, interconnected world, through which tons of information are running every second, it's really hard to go anywhere with no or low expectations. You'd have heard or read at least a scrap of information about a place. You even form expectations subconsciously. And while guidebooks and vivid stories told by other travelers can motivate you to start your journey immediately, it is bad news or comments by envious people that can make you give up. Even if you've managed to rise above the negativity and have boldly arrived at your destination, high expectations can still ruin the whole experience. But why should we force ourselves to lower our expectations or get stuck in an information eclipse? Is this the only way to really enjoy our experiences abroad?

Coping with the level of your expectations is just one side of the solution, the other is being flexible – to be able to let go of certain expectations and create new ones. And if you recall your memories, small pieces will stand out. Those are the pieces that will show how and when you broke loose from the burden of certain expectations and rapidly created others, or you just had a lot of fun. We take a look at Europe, and we think of Belgium – a land that occupies just a small part of the imaginary map of the world. A country, where faultfinders don't see anything impressive, but where those with flexible expectations can be surprised and charmed.



Our flexible expectations send us to an unpopular residential area of Brussels in our first hours there. We pass by Gothic cathedrals and roofs of crimson tiles, antique houses overgrown with climbing plants. We enter an empty train station; it turns out to be a desolate indoor market. All places are vacant on this workday, and this gives us the

opportunity to admire them privately. They might not be the popular pictures in the books, but the gray shades have a charm of their own. We're already at a more central area; we walk past a few other pedestrians on the sidewalks. We are flexible, but also a little absent-minded while on the streets of Brussels – we are walking without a map and sometimes even without any clear destination. We've lost our way!

It's just starting to rain, and we're looking around to find a warm café. The weather is not on our side, and it's impossible to orient ourselves by the sun. (Even if there was sun, we wouldn't know how to do that.) We happen to see a tram stop, and we find shelter under its roof. When it's hot, you can escape the heat and hide in the cool underground subway; however, even open-air stops can provide shelter from the rain (and perhaps cold weather).

We are no longer lost because somehow we've stumbled upon the right stop from where our host would take us. We stay dry under the roof and spread out the city map to check if our current location coincides with the place where we're supposed to be. 'May I help you?' we hear a man addressing us. He startles us out of our daze over the countless colorful lines on the map.

'Are you David?' we ask him with undisguised hope on our faces. We hope that this is the man whom we have an appointment with. Our hope doesn't last long; we wither like flowers despite the fact that we're soaked in rainwater. It turns out that this guy isn't David, and we aren't at the right stop. We take out a scrubby wet piece of paper on which we've wisely written the name of the stop we are supposed to meet our host. To our horror we've made a mistake! The kind stranger calms us – we're just one stop away from the right

place.

We thank him and continue along the sidewalk. Of course, it begins to rain harder. Walking at a quick pace is so nice. It stimulates the heart; it improves the circulation of blood, and shapes a slender figure. Walking in the rain is like having blinders on – you stick your eyes to the ground hoping to protect at least a part of your body from becoming wet and pray to reach your destination as soon as possible. We arrive at the right stop, and it happens to be one with no roof. There's no one here, the tram has just passed. About fifty meters away, a man is walking away slowly. Our watch shows that we're almost 20 minutes late. By instinct, we run to the man. He hears our calls and turns round with a smile. 'Perhaps you're waiting for David?' Of course we're waiting for him. We start explaining ourselves as if we're high-school students who haven't done their homework. We explain how we've been at the wrong stop all along and how we walked on foot here and how, in general, we are very punctual... 'If we hurry up and catch this tram, we'll soon be somewhere warm and dry, drinking tea.' These words can't bring another reaction but happy smiles on our frozen faces. We catch the first tram and on the way, we get to know our host.



We arrive at a modern residential building close to an old abandoned factory that looks much newer and more functional than many factories all over the world. The high iron gates open, and we notice a brand new futuristic elevator at the lobby.



We don't know what to expect next after we've witnessed this combination until we pass by the indoor gardens on each floor of the apartment building. We imagine we're about to see some extravagant luxurious flats in vintage style. David even encourages our fantasy by explaining that it's quite expensive to live in this building, and everyone here is renting.

When we cross the threshold of his flat, however, we see something completely different from what we expected. It's a fresh, bright, and contemporary apartment. We go past a battered electric kettle, and David explains how he put carelessly milk in it to warm. However, he doesn't look absent-minded at all. Although we've just met him at 5 p.m. at the stop, our host looks like a busy working person, tired, and constantly missing his deadlines.

He mentions that he works at an architectural bureau. There's no need to tell us that – his apartment speaks for itself. In the enclosed old-fashioned brick building with antique gates and gardens on each floor passed by a brand new elevator, there's his special secret apartment, which is as spacious as a cathedral's dome, as bright as a summer beach, and as fresh as a sea breeze in the middle of April. The white and the green are dancing in harmony on the walls, on the floor, and all over the furniture. The windows look like portholes taken from futuristic ships; the stands and the racks attract attention more than the clothes and accessories put on them. Yes, the interior speaks for itself and reveals the occupation and the passion of its owner.

We ask David if green is a common color in interior design. 'The vegetation and the green outside just isn't enough for me,' he delicately ridicules the bad weather

outside. This takes our conversation to parks and gardens, where and what you can do there if the weather is nice. Such opportunities are rare, though.

Thus, he remembers his childhood when he would ask to play outside, but either the weather would be windy and cold or his parents would be too busy to take him out. And, as a matter of fact, due to weather that's always a cause for complaint in Belgium. Maybe there are many kids who turn to architectural design in order to focus on something they can influence and change. However, we agree that nothing can replace playing outside with your friends. And even if each of us has grown in a different place, our first memories are always from parks, gardens, playing in the sand, playing with leaves or whatever we find on the ground (every mother's greatest horror). We finish our tea, and we're ready to ignore the bad weather and focus on the creation of new memories from new places and new acquaintances. And who wouldn't be happy to remember their childhood and feel like a little kid again? Who wouldn't abandon expectations of taking pictures of baroque and Gothic buildings and drinking dark beer in favor of smearing chocolate waffle all over his face and jumping in the puddles? We decide to break the stereotypes and embark on a journey to a happy Belgian childhood.



The next day is much sunnier and smiling, and David shows us his favorite memory of nice weather and vegetation

under the open sky. This is the Arch of the 50th Anniversary (*Arcades du Cinquantenaire*), a monument in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of Belgium's independence. Under the imposing arch with a chariot and four horses ridden by a bold woman, there are lovely green areas with regally arranged flowers.

Running there is forbidden, but it is allowed in the nearby forest. The greatest joy would be to lie on a blanket under the sun in the garden and watch the frenzied horses pulling the quadriga⁷¹ and their lady cart-driver. David's sense of aesthetics originates from these regular shapes and fine details. When he grew up and he was no longer interested in stomping on the flowers, he used to spend a lot of time in the nearby Museum of History and Art (*Musées royaux d'art et d'histoire*). 'Solid architecture, plenty of history, sun and soft grass fields' – David still comes to the same place when he wants to clear his head and refresh his thoughts or just have a break.

⁷¹ Quadriga – a chariot drawn by four horses.



The architect's second favorite place is the *Atomium*, which offers many things to do when the weather is bad as it usually is. When his parents were too busy, they used to take him here on Saturdays. It turns out that this family activity had an educational purpose – to open the floodgates of his curiosity.



The Atomium is a composition of nine steel spheres joint together in such a way that they form a model of a unit cell of an iron crystal magnified 165 billion times. This scale allows you to freely walk around the spheres and the tunnels that connect them. So, in Brussels the weather may not let you play outside in the gardens or in the sand, but this beautiful creation gives you the chance to watch the city from above, as if you're on a helicopter; to

descend through strange tunnels with loud music and crazy lights, and even to take a nap in small molecules – they’ve been adapted for rooms with sleeping bags (only if you’re under 150 cm tall). Fun chemistry and physics resulted in the boy’s interest in all kinds of gadgets and functional household items. Apart from being a playground for the kids of Brussels, perhaps the main goal of the Atomium is to amaze the tourists and guests of the city.

When David grew up more, the park called *Mini-Europe* was built close to the Atomium. Our inner children just can’t pass by the miniature models of castles, villages, airports, and monasteries.

The park at the foot of the Atomium entertains kids of all ages with its miniatures at a scale of 1:25. What a better way to get to know Europe’s geography? Eighty cities welcome you along with 350 buildings, and the list expands annually.

While marveling at the moving miniature railways and windmills, we reach the final game where everyone can check what they’ve learned. The quiz includes interactive questions and answers about the history, geography, and culture of the continent and promises prizes for the best players. Not only is Mini-Europe a fun activity for kids and grown-ups, but it’s also offers an eagle’s eye view over world renowned architectural marvels and great achievements of the technological progress. And, according to David, it’s also the perfect place to get inspired and spend some free time when you’re already a grown-up architect.



No matter how immersed we are in our role of children and how little we care about what we're 'supposed' to do when in Belgium, there's something too delicious to be skipped – *the waffles*. Made with a lot of cream, chocolate spread, and fruits, and offered with a smile, no matter the length of the queue line, the famous desserts are a must-try. Is there a child who doesn't like sweets? It's like you haven't eaten a waffle in Brussels if you don't smear it all over your face and have at least two stains on your clothes. Just like any curious children, we walk down a busy alley among many tiny restaurants with just two tables and a few chairs each, with blankets for the guests and window sills overflowing with flower pots. For grown-up kids, they offer fresh seafood and special deals of very tasty mussels and a glass of wine. When you've found your way out of the alley, no matter whether you've had a meal or not, you inevitably smell of Belgian cuisine. So, stained with chocolate and smelling like seafood, you can move on to drinking beer – something that will take you a lot of time if you observe the tradition of these lands.

And this is a pleasure you need to wait for until you're of age.

After we've satisfied our culinary senses, we trot down the cobblestone streets of downtown Brussels and arrive at the central square *Grand Place*. We are used to seeing pictures of its vast carpet of flowers, surrounded by the eyes of thousands of worshippers seeking aesthetic pleasure. In winter there is a Christmas tree surrounded by enchanted families. But even empty and gray under the rain and the clouds, the square is a busy place, even though most people are taking shelter in the nearby bars and shops. We are surrounded by a few centuries-old buildings that have been restored – the *City Hall* and the royal family facilities (*Maison du Roi*). They would have captured our and David's attention for hours if we hadn't been so tired of running, jumping, and eating waffles. Only the nearby beer houses can seduce us now with their warm heaters and countless brands of beer. We are warm, dry, and relaxed. Every new sip of the various samplers⁷² makes us feel more and more in contrast to the heavy neoclassical style and the greasy French fries in a funnel (another food stereotype in Belgium). We sit, leaning against our chairs, and the massive thing before us is the wooden shelf with beer glasses with unusual design. While trapped in this daze that we are about to turn into doze, just as all good children



⁷² During the beer tasting, you get small glasses with interesting shapes and try different kinds of beer.

would do, we don't feel the evening spreading over the narrow alleys. The old lights come on and shine in harmony, and it's like they illuminate the stage where the drizzle is going to perform its spectacle.



This atmosphere happens to be the scenery of an incredible free theatre – a reality show called ‘The Baptism of Freshmen’. David points a finger at two young guys who are walking down the street as if they're stepping on glass. ‘That's a game in the middle of the city played by students from different universities,’ he tells us. The freshmen must show their respect for the seniors at their university by taking part in special games with obstacles and tasks. Of course, the weather may not be too kind and can make their experience quite unpleasant, just as it's happening now before our eyes. The two fellows enter a café nearby, and we overhear a question in inarticulate French: ‘Do you have oranges?’ In a while, the two freshmen walk out triumphantly with the oranges and almost forget the rain that falls even harder. Another couple of students with a hand-drawn map in their hands pop out from behind the corner stepping silently. The first two freshmen notice them and dart down a narrow alley. This is obviously a team competition. We rub our hands to warm them under the heater, and the newly arrived students shiver with cold in their shirts and ask the passers-by about something.

‘These games have become quite rough these days,’ our host notes. ‘They haven't completed a task, and now they'll

have to go on without their coats.’ Rough or not, the game seems fun for the participants and for everyone involved directly or indirectly in it. The sounds coming from the crowd that has gathered make it evident that something big is going on – the two guys with the map are performing some national Dutch songs, according to David. People offer them tips, others – their jackets, pretending to be unaware that this is a part of their task in the game. The entire show vanishes along with the pouring rain and our soaked freshmen. On our way home, we pass through the central square that has just been washed. Several young fellows with ancient-looking mantles and plastic swords are ordaining our soaked guys. After all, everyone is happy. ‘It’s a funny memory, even though I had to drink water from the Peeing Boy (*Manneken Pis*),’ David recalls and shares that one of his challenges was to drink from the famous fountain, which is both hard and forbidden.



Does it matter whether we’re in our childhood, adolescence, youth, or old age? Does it matter where we are when it comes to our ability to perceive a new city like kids? To blend with the

memories of an ordinary boy, to draw antique buildings with him, and splash in the big puddles together...To forget all expectations and stay open-minded towards new adventures through our eyes and through the eyes of strangers we’ve accidentally met... To lower our expectations or to replace them with completely new ones and go beyond them...To enjoy the special moments when we accept openly the world around us and get into minor mischief, or when we immerse ourselves in a curious and playful childhood...



A VENDRE
TE KOOP
IMMEUBLE MOREA
GEBOUW
BUREAU
GERARD
02.513.77.00



Palmar, Mauritius

*The magic of traveling is to walk in the locals' shoes and wear their
smiles on your face*

‘Can I bring you something refreshing to drink?’ we hear a voice behind the sunbed of the gorgeous lady reclining next to us on the beach of *Palmar*. It’s hard for her to turn to the other side – she’s been lying for two hours with her neck bent, hidden under the shade of a tall palm tree. Her legs are twisted in a strange position under the scarf in the shadow in such a way that her feet rest on the warm sand. She clearly aims to avoid being sunburned and getting cold at the same time. She stirs her head slowly, and locks of her hair fall elegantly to the side of the cushion.

In the sea in front of us, a group of enthusiastic fellows are rowing with long paddles, standing upright on narrow boards (*standup paddleboarding*), while kids are jumping up and down in the shallows and counting the fish. A young family gets on a transparent kayak, and an artist is painting the colors of the bay using a set of about 40 blue-green pencils.

In the dreamy turquoise waters, old wooden boats that have no memory of their age are swaying, lying at anchor in the shallow waters; tawny fishermen are rolling up their sleeves and getting ready to sail toward the deep to the edge of the coral terrace.



The beautiful girl turns her head in the direction of the voice. Her delicate movement releases a scent of fragrant sunscreen spray and fruit cocktails in the air. The wind carries the mouthwatering smell of grilled fresh fish and the lovely sound of whispering palm trees. The girl's hat gets blown off from her head and effortlessly lands in the skillful hands of the expecting waiter.

The girl raises her head and realizes that the voice comes from a smiling young boy in a white uniform; he has been calmly standing and waiting for her answer all this time. 'No, thanks, I have everything I need here,' she replies and looks at the tall palm tree above with her dreamy eyes, just before she pulls the edge of her hat over her face after it's been kindly returned to her by the waiter.

A long time ago, the beaches of Mauritius played another role. Except for being a place where one can admire the beauty of nature and the simplicity of life, they used to be the spot where slaves gathered in the evening. In their spare time, at sunset, they would come out on the cooling sand where they were would move to the rhythm of the playful *Sega* dance. At first, the accompaniment consisted of just tambourines and triangles, complemented by other percussion instruments⁷³. Around the hissing flames of the blazing fire, the slaves would dance vigorously, without taking their feet off the sand. In contrast, all other body parts were swinging quite energetically and the colorful rags the slaves wore danced with the wind. The rhythm of music and the songs in Creole⁷⁴ set the slaves free from the stress of the heavy workdays and served as their way to protest against the social injustice.

Lying on the beach, we imagine how this historical performance takes place before our eyes, as if we have gone back in time hundreds of years. The passionate tunes, the great fire, the floating worn-out clothes, the echo of the instruments in the ocean waves, the sparkle in the slaves' eyes – this all seems to us exotic, impressive, and awe-inspiring, but also romantic in a way. We imagine the freedom you feel when your feet are rooted in the sand, the fire caresses your skin, and only the wild rhythm controls you. Later that evening, we attend a *Sega* performance of instrumental music and dances where young artists of different origins present amazing choreographies and their own compositions of *Sega*

⁷³ Such as *rattle*, *moutia*, *hand drum*, etc.

⁷⁴ Creole is based on the French language that's spoken on Mauritius. It's influenced by English, African, and Asian languages.

songs. Authentic joy radiates from them, and it's so infectious that the audience doesn't stop clapping, and everyone has imperceptibly begun to sway easily to the captivating rhythm. That's the last drop that makes our cup run over – we decide to follow the culture and the history and turn ourselves into Sega dancers, like the locals do. From now on, we set out on our journey to get to know the island and meanwhile, we accomplish some tasks dedicated to our newly embraced mission.



The traditional clothes for dancing Sega are brightly colored, floaty and decorated with floral patterns. We can't find anything suitable in our luggage, that's why we decide to go shopping. Renting clothes is out of the question because this concept is foreign to those in charge of the show program at the hotel where we're staying. But we don't give up easily. We are close to the village of *Belle Mare*, and we heard that there are shops there. We rent two bikes since according to the map it's just a few kilometers away.

Down the narrow road, the drivers pass by us carefully while we are distracted by the fields of onions and other crops. It's obviously the season of onions, and there's a team of workers working in a field. They wear big hats and warmly respond to our calls and greetings from the road. We feel like kings of the road with our bicycles – all cars make way for us, and the views distract our attention from the heat.

We arrive at Belle Mare where it's unusually quiet and peaceful. It's like we've accidentally arrived here during the week after a big holiday. We notice a few concrete two-story buildings – tailoring workshops of many world-famous brands. Textile is one of the major industries on the island.



High quality fabrics and clothes aren't hard to find. We, however, aren't looking for replicas of garments from the last fashion week in the Western hemisphere; what we're searching for the typical Mauritian costumes. Even though this seems like an easy task, it might turn out to be quite hard.

We pass by a few souvenir shops full of all kinds of knick-knacks – engraved knives, colorful magnets, miniature wooden models of famous ships, etc. We find the right clothes in two of the stores, but there is almost no variety, and the prices run high just at the sight of two lunatics who are feverishly determined to find Sega costumes. Sometimes, we throw our bikes on the sidewalk just to enter sweaty and smiling and ask the question that entertains all ladies who sell at the shops. It becomes clear that we won't find the clothes we've come for in Belle Mare. That's why we step on the pedals towards the pine wood just next to the beach of the village with its alleys for walks. We might have not completed our mission, but we can at least enjoy the beauty around us. We want to check whether it's as gorgeous there as in nearby Palmar. It is! On our way back, we come across a hatter selling hats and caps of all types and fashion styles. We try on a few, but we don't find our hats among them, and we go back to the fields.

The cane fields on Mauritius are more than the islands' inhabitants. At any moment there is a chance that you might turn in any direction and stumble upon a sugar cane field. It's the same with us – after we've conquered a hill by bike, we stop to rest in a field next to the road. The crops are in their early green stage, some are much taller than us. They form impenetrable walls and endless waves of green.



We stop in the middle of a dirt road laid between two sugar cane fields. The whisper of the canes gets louder with every whiff of the wind. At the end of the road, there's an abandoned chimney left from a rum factory. The hundreds of round and square chimneys of the factories for sugar cane processing are silent witnesses of the significance and value of the sweet plant. The English and the French were the first to become aware of its qualities and used all of its parts to produce fuel, sugar, rum, pellets; thus, they established Mauritius as the island of the sugar cane. Today, the gray chimneys are the only dark scar left from the sad history of wars and devastation on what once were lonely shores by the Indian Ocean. What else can we do but take a nap and daydream in the long hair of the mother of sugar? We agree with Mark Twain's words: 'Mauritius was made first, and then heaven; and that heaven was copied after Mauritius.'

Dreams are a wonderful thing, but we've got work to do. We'll need a bigger market, and that's why we head out of the countryside, to the capital *Port Louis*. Every village that we

pass is an island of peace, positivity, and religion. On Mauritius, the four major religions – Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism – and their movements, coexist happily. At the center of one of the villages, next to the humble houses, there's a colorful shrine, and smiling people are cleaning in front of it.



We reach *Ganga Talao* – a lake hidden in the lap of the mountain. Poured in a volcano crater, the lake and the shrines by it are the most sacred place for the Hindus on Mauritius.

Every year, pilgrims arrive on bare feet by the roads to pay their respects to the deities. The bright statues of different reincarnations reflect in the cloudy lake and hundreds of worshippers perform rituals over the water; they bring offerings and pray for rich harvest. Despite being absorbed in their own thoughts and preoccupied with their activities, the servants of the shrine don't forget to give us a blessing – for health, happiness, and more. They paint a sacred sign with red dye on our foreheads and see us off with a smile. The mountains on Mauritius hide silent, respectful, and respectable people who live a humble life in harmony with nature.

After these spiritual meetings with nature and religion, we enter Port Louis. This is not just a city but a constantly expanding metropolis. Even overlooking from the high *Citadel Fort Adelaide*, we still can't see more than two quarters of it.



The wind is aggressive, and even the mountain range cannot shield us from it. It seems it is trying to push us as quickly as possible toward the indoor market. We quickly come down from the stone citadel and head for the lower area where hundreds of people are going around the Central Market of the city. We start from the fruit and vegetable stands. At the local marketplace, each stand has its own personal advertiser who immediately sticks to us and starts informing us about the best offers. Unbelievable shapes and scents, textures and colors are spread out over the shabby stalls, and the vendors don't give up until you are at least five meters past their shops. In the area with spices, the situation becomes even more scented. Who hasn't heard of sugar and cinnamon from Mauritius? Who hasn't cooked with



curry and cardamom? We can't make our way through the wicker baskets being offered to us by protruding hands and through the spicy fragrances billowing from the depths of the market. We aren't hungry at all, but our mouths water⁷⁵. Nevertheless, we've come to the market for another reason – the fabrics and clothes department.

We're marching down narrow paths risking to get so entangled that we remain in the market for days. The scents gradually fade and make room for bright colors. There's such a wide



choice that it'll be hard to decide. Captivated by the colorful stands, both of us have neglected the risk of getting lost in the market labyrinth. While one of us is walking through overburdened stalls, and dealers are trying to put irresistible Mauritian fabrics before his eyes, the other has been lured by the tempting scents of spices. Turmeric, coriander, and curry have combined their strength on a mission to conquer his nose and subdue him with their fragrance.

Tangled in different mazes – the one of colors and the one of scents, the future dance heroes are risking losing each other for a long time and failing to complete the most important task they have – finding costumes. Their wandering turns into attempts to remember in which hall they've seen the other last and recall any significant things they noticed on the way.

Fortune is on their side – not long after that, they meet

⁷⁵ Do you remember Pavlov's dog?

in front of a shop offering colorful fabrics and floaty clothes. This meeting place is no coincidence. For us, it means that we've arrived at the right spot. After a lot of exhausting bargaining and some fittings, we choose our costumes for the special beach dance. The vendor even visits a friend of his to find a shirt that matches the skirt. They ask us if these clothes are meant as gifts. Absolutely not! 'They're for us, we're going to use them here because we want to be like you,' and this honest confession gets us another discount!

Now, when we have costumes, let's proceed to the place where we're going to play the role of locals. Two reasons make us love the fact that the beaches on Mauritius are public. The first one is that you can walk, lounge, and swim freely through landscapes of unmatched beauty, and you'll definitely meet different and interesting people. The second reason is that no one can stop you from using a part of the beach as your film set as long as you don't bother anyone. The best part is that you don't have to pay anyone a single rupee⁷⁶. So, the setting for our Sega dance is settled – on the beach over there, by some of the thatch umbrellas, meters away from the old wooden boats that are almost complete wrecks. We choose the tranquility of the afternoon in order to enjoy a vast private space and sun that shines toward the sea. We don't have time to look for adherent musicians, that's why we find some records with suitable music online. We select a dynamic Sega song; we study in detail the videos we took at the evening show a few days ago. We put on our new floaty, bright-red costumes with white flower pattern and

⁷⁶ Mauritian rupee – the currency of Mauritius, represented by colorful banknotes, of course.

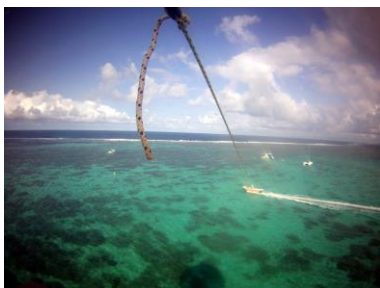
head towards our film set on the beach with a bag full of filming equipment.



Our equipment consists of: a video and a photo cameras, a phone (serving as a sound system), as well as two scarves because suddenly clouds appear. The weather around these parts of the world can be very tricky, and that doesn't bother us normally, but now we want to use self-shutter and materials at hand to shoot a traditional dance. At the last moment, we 'steal' a piece of bright joy – a beautiful yellow blossom from the nearby bush to put in our hair.

We start the shooting tentatively. The lack of sunlight bodes a heavy rain, just as it happened yesterday. One moment, we were burning up in the heat, flying with the paraglider, the next we landed on the boat, and a pouring rain fell down on us. Today, we're convinced that the photo-shoot will be phenomenal, but the equipment might get damaged, and we might freeze. Every ray of light that has made its way to us is inevitably followed by a fervent run to turn on the camera and adopt an astounding pose with the hope that in

the end, we would have created something beautiful. The sun doesn't last long – it obviously has its own agenda for today, and that's why, in order to get warm, we decide to dance a little. We turn the record from the phone on; it



blends with the wind and the sound of the ocean. We begin to improvise to our own rhythm and dance with the wind. The tiny steps are hard in the damp sand, especially when every gust of wind is trying to get you undressed.

At first it's just the two of us on the deserted beach, and the lonely boats are our only spectators, but suddenly a man appears and approaches. He intentionally stays out of the frame even after we've stopped dancing. He begins to applaud. Then, what follows is praise in Creole or French and finally, in English. 'Unbelievable! You are Segga dancers!' he exclaims. We invite him to join us, but he is busy – he says he's a chef at the nearby hotel, and he is out to collect seafood from the rocks in the shallows during the low tide. The reefs by the shore hide all kinds of incredible tasty surprises. 'I didn't expect foreigners to dance on the beach, not with the rain coming,' he hunches his shoulders against the cold wind. 'Are you organizing a party? If you are, can I call some friends?' he asks, but we explain that we're just beginners at this type of entertainment, and we haven't advanced enough to arrange mass celebrations on unknown beaches. He wishes us luck and a lovely time on Mauritius (we are obviously already having a great time) and heads for the rocks.

THE MAGIC OF TRAVELING: FOLLOW THE LOCALS

At that moment, we break loose from anxiety and the bad weather that has been trying to sabotage our plans. We open the floodgates of our inner freedom and convince ourselves that the dance is not just another flight of fancy of some crazy foreigners. We entertain ourselves, the chef, and the old wooden boats. We don't need anything; we have everything – here and now.



Follow the locals and follow tradition. Let the wind set your direction, the flames warm your soul, and the rhythm of steps on the sand set your heart on fire. Surprise a man out of his daily routine, ask an unusual question, and have crazy thoughts. Lie carefree on the sand or find your god in the mountain. Walk in the others' shoes and live through their fortunate or sad moments. Show that beauty and kindness are not defined by borderlines, religions or nationalities. Be yourself in the context of the place the road has led you to; listen to the locals' voice. Live the magic of traveling!





Afterword

The magic of traveling hides in the places that stimulate our senses – in the rhythm of the drums and in the beating of the hearts; in the bullet train speeding to the rising sun; in the lovely nature and its children.

Hear the rhythm of Rio!

Get on the train to Japan!

Meet nature's masterpieces in New Zealand!

If you follow the locals, you'll remember your childhood; you'll steal moments, and you'll travel in your own world and beyond alone or surrounded by friends.

Find your inner child in Belgium!

Steal moments alone and with friends in Greece!

Explore your inner world in Chile!

The only way to feel the magic of traveling is to be calm and do your best; to leave parts of your heart and soul just in exchange for the pieces you take from everyone; to believe in people's kindness and make happiness your mission.

Give your all in Kenya and find peace!

Leave a piece of yourself in the paradise of Bali!

Be in the good hands of Peru!

Feel happiness in the Dominican Republic!

By following the locals, you'll mature: you'll grow stronger both physically and psychologically; you'll get off the beaten track and discover something new; you'll feel the

smiles of strangers as if they're yours; you'll find soulmates on the way.

Get tougher in India!

Prepare for the unexpected in Argentina!

Find a soulmate in China!

Laugh together with the smiling locals in Mauritius!