

Rex Jaeschke's Blog Postings from
Tales from the Man who would be King
Volume 06 – Dec 2014 through Nov 2015

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Introduction

When I decided to start a blog, I wrote the first three installments and let them “bake” awhile before I posted them and announced the creation of the blog. I wanted to get past the romantic aspect of dreaming something up, jumping in and doing it, and then, later, finding out it wasn't sustainable. Now, more than 11 years later, looking back, not only was I able to deliver a substantive posting each month for 132 months, I have 16 of the 24 postings for the next two years already written, and ideas for the remaining eight mapped out!

On a semi-regular basis, over a home-made café-au-lait, I read an old posting, and I'm very happy to say that *I'm not embarrassed by any of them!* It surely has become a labor of love!

Over the years, a number of regular readers have suggested that I publish the postings in some sort of printed book form. Having written numerous technical books, many articles for technical journals, and a newspaper column, I am well aware of the formal publishing process, and the work involved in getting what I might consider to be a perfectly good manuscript into a shape that a publisher would accept. Regarding writing books, my financial return was probably far less than the minimum wage! Of course, I could self-publish, and, in fact, I have access to a facility to do just that at a very reasonable cost. After serious consideration and putting my ego aside, I decided that I would indeed re-publish the first 11-years-worth of installments, but in an electronic book form, PDF. And I would do so, 12 installments (that is, one year's-worth) per Volume.

To make it worth having these Volumes available for downloading instead of readers simply going to the website for installments one at a time, I've added some small value to the Volumes. Here are the enhancement and/or changes I've made:

- Did some light editing: corrected spelling mistakes, improved punctuation, and tweaked some grammatical constructs
- Corrected factual errors
- Updated outdated information
- Added an occasional bit of extra relevant information as an aside
- Added *many* more links, primarily to Wikipedia and Wiktionary
- Added a few photos. [I write installments using MS Word, which easily allows me to arrange embedded photos. However, when I export the result to my blog (which is hosted by the freely available BlogEngine.NET), the result is far from pleasing. As such, after some early experimentation, I have included very few photos.]
- Added forward pointers to relevant installments that came later

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- Regarding links to other installments, links to destinations that are in the same Volume resolve to the corresponding chapter in that Volume; otherwise, they resolve to the blog web site.

Lastly, a very big “Thank You!” to my reviewers, good friends John Tew and Tom Plum, who have been with me from the beginning. Now I say “good” friends. There is a saying, “Friends help you move, but good friends help you move bodies!” I have not yet asked either to help in such a manner, but for now, I’ll give them the benefit of the doubt.

Happy reading,

Rex Jaeschke, April 2021.

1. December 2014, "Travel: Oh, the Places I have Stayed"

Earlier this year, I was sitting in the lounge of a very nice hotel in Prague, Czech Republic, waiting for my room to be readied. I'd arrived three hours before check-in time. I'd flown overnight from the US, and despite being in Business Class, I'd had no sleep, so jetlag was taking hold. In order to keep myself awake "just one more hour," I started thinking about all the different kinds of places I'd stayed in 35 years of domestic and international travel. My notes from that led to this essay.

I've limited the places to those for which I have paid. The categories are in no particular order. FYI, my top priorities are a clean, non-smoking room, a comfortable bed, seriously hot water, heavy curtains to keep out the light, and quiet. The rest of the so-called amenities are generally wasted on me. And for the most part, when moving around on personal travel, I like to make it up as I go along.

1.1 Hotel Chains

I've stayed at more than a few of them, from the low end to the high. The higher the number of stars, the more I am repulsed, I kid you not! Give me a 1- or 2-star place any day!

When on personal travel, I've often been seen at a [Motel 6](#), a U.S. national chain that when it was started, charged \$6/night. Now I am also a fan of the [Denny's](#) restaurant chain, so when I found a Motel 6 with a Denny's in its parking lot, in Anaheim, California, not far from Disneyland, I thought I'd died and gone to Heaven! And a [Red Roof Inn](#) suits me fine as well.

Throughout this year, I've made a number of trips to Silicon Valley where I've paid \$200–250/night at a national chain, and that is far less than many charge in that neighborhood. As I work very long hours, often leaving and getting back in the dark, the facilities for which I'm paying are totally wasted. Basically, I'm only there to sleep and bathe.

1.2 Rented Rooms

Although I first learned about [Airbnb](#) some years ago [see my essay, "[My Experience with Airbnb](#)," from July 2019.], I didn't use it until late 2013. This web site allows people to rent out spare bedrooms in their apartments, houses, castles, and so forth. I've used it in Amsterdam, Netherlands; Salzburg, Austria; and Spain; and all were good experiences. After years of staying with host families, this is my new form of accommodation when on personal travel.

A few years ago, I walked the paths between the famed five towns of [Cinque Terre](#), in northwest Italy. Throughout, I was based in a private house in the village of [Vernazza](#). The landlady spoke no English and I spoke no Italian, but we got along just fine.

A fine way to experience the countryside in [Bavaria](#) and surrounds is to rent a room in a *zimmer frei* (spare room in German), which people advertise on handmade signs outside their houses and farmhouses.

I arrived in the sleepy town of Viejo on the Pacific Coast of [Costa Rica](#) to find the place I'd planned to stay to be booked out. However, the staff directed me to a house nearby that was built on stilts. If the owner, Ms. Mary, liked the look of you, you might be able to convince her to rent you the room under

the house. She did and I paid about \$7/night for three nights. The next morning, as I was waiting for the daily 1–2 inches of rain to stop, she came out and started calling, “Rex.” Now how did she know my name? It turns out that was the name of her Jack Russell dog, and when I told her that was my name, she refused to believe it. “That’s a dog’s name,” she said. To which I replied, “Woof!”

1.3 Motor homes

I’ve had three experiences: a small unit for two adults and a child in Alaska, a medium-sized unit for four adults and a child in South Dakota, and a large unit for three adults and two pre-teens in Montana and Wyoming.

Having a motor home solves three main problems: where to sleep, how to get around, and where to eat. Of course, you need to find a place to pull up for the night that isn’t illegal or dangerous. [When we were in Alaska, the law was that one could stay overnight at any place there was a state trash bin. My thought was that if we took one of those bins with us, we could put it out wherever we liked and stay there, but apparently that was not the intention.]

After a week or two in a motor home, you realize just how little you really need to live, and all the stuff you have is almost within arm’s reach of the dining table.

There are several downsides, however. First, if a van is advertised to sleep X people, two of those would be sleeping in the bed that goes over the dining table, so using that requires you to fold and unfold that bed every day. Second, the beds can be short and/or narrow. For example, I took up the whole of a so-called “double bed.” Third, the water and wastewater storage is limited, and the shower cubicle is small, especially for someone as tall as I am. During my trips, every few days, I’ve made sure to stay at a campground with a shower block.

1.4 Japanese Inns

These are called *Ryokan*, and I’ve used them quite a few times. A room can accommodate as many people as they can fit futons on the floor. None of those US-like rules of “*The Fire Marshall limits this room to two [or three] people!*” The downside is that the cost is based on a price per person, with kids paying the same as adults. None of this “*A couple is a little bit more than a single, and kids under 18 in the same room stay for free!*”

What’s the downside? As I get older and my body slows down, getting down on the floor and back up again requires some serious effort. Most rooms do not have chairs or writing tables, which makes it hard to use a laptop computer. Any table provided is probably about 12 inches high and is used to serve tea. While some tables come with cushions to sit on the floor, others come with chairs with no legs, just bases and a back. When sitting on one of these, I can find no good place to put my very long legs! All that said, I like such places and the tradition that goes along them, especially wearing (and sleeping in) the *yukata* robe and obi sash, and wearing the slippers.

1.5 Hazardous Places

As I write this, I’m just wrapping up a 2-week trip in Japan. Many accommodations include a flashlight by the bed. At first glance, it seems like an unusual accessory to have in a room, but once you think about having an earthquake, you’ll be happy to be able to find your way out of your room when the

power goes out in the middle of the night. (I've experienced two earthquakes in Japan, both at night. For one of them, I was in a hotel, but there was no evacuation. After all, it only measured 2.5!)

Several times, I've stayed on the Korean island of [Jeju](#) (sometimes called Cheju), and that area can be subject to a variety of natural disasters. My room had a balcony on which was an emergency escape kit that included a rope ladder with hooks. If one could not leave one's room via the door, one hung the ladder over the edge of the balcony and climbed down to the floor below, and then repeated the process using the next floor's ladder.

1.6 Sleeping on the Move

I've slept four nights on a cruise ship off the coast of Florida. I've also slept a couple of nights on a train. I'd like to say I've slept on a plane in Economy class, but that would be a very rare case. I have, however, had some decent sleeps in International Business and First Classes. However, only the latter beds are long and wide enough for my frame to completely fit.

1.7 My First International Experience

My first trip outside Australia just happened to be when my wife and I left Australia to live, work, and travel abroad. Our first port of call was in [Hong Kong](#) (which was still a British territory). Our Cathay Pacific flight included two nights at an up-scale hotel, complete with Colonial-style uniformed staff. After that, we were on our own, and we located a cheap, Chinese-run place. Although there might have been a front desk, all I recall was that each floor had an attendant who sat on a rickety chair at an old wooden desk, and it was his job to "watch" that floor. Each time we came back to our room, he'd welcome us and then open the adjacent fire-hose cabinet in which there were a row of hooks with keys for each room. And we'd hand him our key each time we went out. The contrast between the two places was huge, and I remember the doorman at the first hotel looking strangely at us when he put us in a taxi to go to the second place and asked us where he should direct the driver.

1.8 Roughing It

At short notice, I booked a 10-day trip to the wilds of the [Amazon Jungle](#) in northeast Peru. The first night, we stayed at a Holiday Inn; the power went out during the night. The next two nights were at a base camp where the jetsetters could stay and claim to be in the jungle, but still have ice with their drinks, kitchen staff, and electricity. After that, we each slept in the middle of a clearing under an open-sided thatched roof with a mosquito net over us on very old and soiled mattresses. All the food was cooked by the local Indians and was rather nondescript. Ablutions consisted of a bucket of cold water and a towel.

Of course, many people consider having a room without an en-suite bathroom to be "camping." I've stayed in many places with share baths and toilets, and lived to tell about it. (The most recent was last week in a ryokan in Tokyo.)

Speaking of camping, at one place we pitched our tent in rural US, we saw electrical outlets at tent sites, and wondered what they were for. The answer was obvious that evening when we saw one family with a TV and microwave oven in their tent.

Sleeping outside can be interesting, although I've never woken up to find a wild animal sniffing at my face, like some people I know. However, the night I slept outdoors at [Kakadu National Park](#) in Australia, no more than 100 yards from the creek where there were crocodiles, I confess to sleeping with one eye open. I figured that if I slept in the middle of the group, I'd probably be woken by their screams if the crocs came for a snack. On another occasion, we arrived in town quite late at night on a big holiday weekend. There was no accommodation available, so we slept in sleeping bags on the dunes by the beach. I woke to find I'd made camp over the entrance to an ant hill, and they'd all come to join me in my bag. Don't you hate that when that happens! I also spent a rough night in the Aussie Outback on a camel safari.

For my second adventure trip, I joined a group on a hiker's trip across [Patagonia](#) in Chile and Argentina. Although we slept in two-person tents (with me sharing with a retired New York City policeman), porters brought bowls of hot water to our tents each morning, and we had a chef/cook who put together some impressive meals, along with wine and cheese in the early evening. When there was luggage to be carried, that was done by cowboys with packhorses.

1.9 The Small

Almost certainly the smallest space in which I've stayed is what I call a "shoebox" hotel in Tokyo (in which I'm sitting as I write this). The total living space is about twice the size of the single bed. There was also an en-suite bathroom. It had everything I needed, and I could just about reach everything from the center. It was compact, but practical. I have no wish to stay in a Japanese [capsule hotel](#), however!

1.10 The Large

Two places come to mind, both of them suites. The first was in [Tartu](#), the university, and second largest, city of [Estonia](#). After staying with hosts for six nights, we decided to splurge, and we stayed in one of two top-tier places, the Pallas Hotel. This suite had four separate rooms, and the bedroom walls and ceiling had been painted by university art students in the style of a famous Estonian painter from the 1920's. The colors on the walls seem to drip down to the blood-red carpet, and I could imagine waking up in the night thinking that the nightmare was real! That said, it was a very nice room and hotel with very friendly staff.

The second was in the [Venetian Hotel](#) in Las Vegas. The room rate posted on the wall said US\$2,200/night, which I expect was actually charged on/near New Year's Eve. However, as part of a conference-group booking, I paid just 10% of that, \$220. There was a big-screen TV at the foot of the bed and another in the lounge. A full-size fax machine sat on a table next to the Queen Ann furniture. Of course, there was a phone on the wall of the separate toilet room.

1.11 The Low End

Prior to joining a hiking trip in Santiago, [Chile](#), I spent some days on the Pacific coast in [Valparaiso](#), the home of the Chilean Navy. There, I stayed at the Reina Victoria (Queen Victoria) Hotel on the waterfront. The price of the rooms went up by \$2 with each level, and I think I paid about \$6–8/night. As I checked in, the clerk asked me what time I'd like coffee brought to my room each morning. Using

my very basic Spanish, I requested hot tea instead, at 8 am. The clerk said that he understood, yet coffee was delivered at 7 am the next day. C'est la vie!

I also remember a rather dingy place in the [Red-Light district](#) of Amsterdam near the main railway station. And yes, you could rent it for the whole night, not just by the hour! The "lobby" was very dark and somewhere hidden and there was a large bird in a cage that screeched when someone entered. And the rough bathroom area smelled heavily of bleach. (Perhaps someone had been removing bloodstains!)

I did, however, have a perfectly decent room in Montevideo, [Uruguay](#) for \$12/night.

1.12 The High End

I've mentioned the suites earlier, and I've stayed in a number of other 4- and 5-star joints. One I actually like is the K+K in old-town Prague (whose lobby I was sitting in when I got the idea for this essay). Its breakfast area is largely made of glass and it seems to be suspended in air. Another fine property was the Priory in [Bath](#), England. There was none of this crass numbering of rooms; instead, all were named for flowers, and I was in the Marigold room, don't you know!

1.13 The Very High End

It used to be that five stars was the top of the rating system, but seven-odd years ago, I stayed in a so-called 6-star [Kempinski](#) Hotel in Geneva. Now that city is already expensive without going looking to spend more, but I was part of a very large business group staying there, and I wasn't paying! On arrival, I found a large box of chocolates on my bed, and then a small packet again each other day. The terry-toweling bath robe was so luxurious I felt a bit like a polar bear. Around the walls of the large lobby, a few feet up from the floor, was a panel of smoky grey glass behind which a gas fire burned. Every time I saw it, I immediately thought of one of my high school novels, *The Loved One*, by Evelyn Waugh, which was set in a funeral home with crematorium. I doubt that was the image the management had in mind. Breakfast was a grand buffet that cost US\$45. I just wanted a croissant, a cup of coffee, and a small pastry, so I was directed to the ala-cart menu. I ordered from that, and that cost only \$42! Despite that fact it wasn't my money I was spending, each morning after that, I walked to the main train station nearby where I ate with the locals without having to take out a second mortgage.

Although I didn't stay there, while I was in Hong Kong in 1979, I did walk through the afternoon-tea room of the fabled [Peninsular Hotel](#) (which has a fleet of Rolls Royces to ferry around its VIP customers). Let's just say that it was "over the top," but in a veddy dignified British way!

There are now 7-star properties, one of which I drove by recently in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

1.14 Locked In!

We spent several nights in [Singapore](#) in a non-descript place. It was early evening, and we planned to go out after midnight to the famous "Boogie Street" where cross-dressers, transsexuals, and others paraded around in their finery. As we were a little tired, we decided to sleep for a few hours and to set the alarm for some time after midnight. We slept, our alarm went off, we dressed, but once we got downstairs, we found a huge metal grate across the entrance, and it was locked. And although we

could hear someone snoring back in the office area, we couldn't get anyone to come and let us out. Fortunately, we also had no need to make an emergency evacuation that night.

1.15 Hostels

My first stay in a Youth Hostel was in Anchorage, Alaska, where I was traveling with my wife and small son. We had our own family room and had to do chores as part of our stay. It was a good, first experience. As part of a trip to Chile, I stayed in a hostel in the up-scale coastal town of Viña del Mar. One day as I lay on my bed reading, two guys started pulling apart the old bunk beds, taking them outside, and replacing them with new ones. As the men were quite short, I offered to help them with the upper sections, especially pushing bolts through as they assembled the new sets. As I wrote in my diary that day, it gave a whole new meaning to "having to make my own bed."

My son and I were in a huge men's dormitory in the Netherlands, while my wife was with the women. The problem with this kind of place is that there are always loud and inconsiderate people coming in very late and/or leaving very early. One person insisted on packing and repacking their gear several times using plastic bags that made a lot of noise when handled. In Milan, Italy, I actually stayed in a hostel while attending a 5-day conference. Unfortunately, it had restricted hours in that one had to be out after 9:30 am and could not get back in until around 5 pm. Many of the people staying there was itinerant workers from Peru, of all places!

The hostel in upper Manhattan, New York City, was a 400-room hotel that had been renovated. We had a family room that slept four, and a key-card lock. It really was a decent place and not at all like a typical hostel.

My first two nights in San Jose, Costa Rica, were in a room sharing with three other guys, from three different countries. We exchanged stories and travel tips and then each headed out to different parts of the country. To our surprise, without any coordination, three days later we were all back, sharing the same room. The Norwegian guy had recently been in intensive-Spanish training in the old Guatemalan city of Antigua, and he passed on the address of his accommodation and details of his language course. Although I had no interest in that at the time, a year later, I was knocking on that house door and I stayed two weeks at \$5/night, room only, and had private Spanish lessons each day for \$2/hour.

Our first week in Chicago in 1979 (after moving to the US from Australia) was spent in the YMCA. We were waiting for funds to be transferred to us, so we could rent an apartment, and as we ran out of money, we found that we couldn't afford to stay, yet we couldn't afford to leave either!

1.16 B&Bs and Pubs

I've experienced quite a few of these, especially over the 21 days I hiked the Thames Path. (See my essay from July 2011: A Walk along the River.) One regular place I stay in London has bathrooms so small that once one is inside the shower stall and starts the water, the shower curtain clings tightly to one's body in the initial seconds. In Wales, we started our visit with a B&B and later stayed one night as the only guests in a country pub whose proprietor was very happy to have us as guests. In a B&B in Dublin, on the wall was the quote from George Bernard Shaw that went something like, "Dancing is a vertical expression of a horizontal desire!" I spent two nights in a nice B&B near the beach in Bray, just

south of Dublin, which came complete with a very friendly dog. I had a series of decent B&Bs during my week in Cornwall and Devon.

1.17 Odds and Ends

I had an around-the-world plane ticket that required me to stay in at least three cities, but I only needed to stop in two. As such, I stayed a little more than 24 hours in the bridal suite of a small hotel in the town of Incheon, near Korea's international airport. The way in which the room was decorated reminded me of movies showing bordellos. It was most amusing. I was traveling solo, and the hotel didn't even provide me with a bride! Another time in Korea, on Jeju Island, I stayed in a new hotel that catered for honeymooners. I soon discovered that no matter what I asked any staff member, they always answered, "Yes."

On our first stop during a 10-day winter-time tour of County Kent in England, we arrived at the Gatehouse Hotel that is literally built into the wall at the front of the Canterbury Cathedral. When they quoted us their prices, we said we wanted something cheaper, to which they replied that they had a quaint double room up in the attic. It was more than adequate, but the entrance door was no more than four feet high. And the floor was on quite a lean with one end of each bed's legs having extensions to keep the beds level.

We stayed one night in Bombay, India, and the tourist literature said not to drink water from taps, but rather from the bottles in the hotel room. We dutifully followed this advice, but when we came back to the hotel, we saw a staff member filling those bottles from a tap!

When we landed at Heathrow in London in 1979, we visited the tourist office and asked for some place cheap. The woman looked down her nose and said, "Then it will have to be in South Kensington." It was quite a nice place, actually. At least it wasn't Earls Bloody Court!

I flew to Cancun on the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico for a two-week trip without any accommodation reservations. By the time I got to Tulum, it was dark, and I had a taxi driver help me find a cheap place to stay down near the beach. I refer to the place I settled on as the *House of Sticks* (from the "Three Little Pigs"). The walls literally were made of one-inch diameter rough, crooked sticks between which all kinds of critters could squeeze. The roof was thatched palm fronds, and from the rafters hung a new queen-size bed on thick ropes. The room was not much bigger than that bed, and came with a large fan on a tall pole. A mosquito net covered the bed. At \$30/night, it wasn't cheap, but it was an interesting experience. Oh, there was no traditional door key; instead, a padlock was used to secure a large metal bolt.

At the end of a two-week trip backpacking from Mexico City and back via Vera Cruz and the Pacific Coast, I stayed in a gothic-style, mini-castle built by a wealthy, eccentric Brit named Edward James, which was being renovated by a young American couple. They were not yet open for business, but were happy to take my money as my room had been completed.

One Christmas, we spent several days on the quaint Dutch island of Saba, just off the south coast of Saint Martin. When sailors arrived there to settle, they found no timber for construction, so they dismantled their ships and made houses from them. We stayed in one such *Saba Cottage*.

One place I've stayed at numerous times is on the southeast coast of Puerto Rico, way off the tourist track. Each room had its own kitchen, and no phone or TV. The waves crashed on the beach under the coconut trees ten yards from the window. It even came with a very nice dog, Babe. (She has since passed away, and is buried behind the building in which I stay.) Every afternoon, she'd come to visit me and lie on the cool tile floor of my room. A room by the beach and with a great dog is hard to beat!

1.18 Conclusion

My pet peeve about accommodations is the all-in-one bedcovers that are common throughout Europe and other countries. I generate a lot of body heat, and without any way to remove a layer or two of bedding, it's either too hot or too cold, never the Goldilocks "just right." Over the years, I've developed some inventive workarounds.

Despite all those stories about traveling salesmen who have broken down in a rural area and need a place to stay overnight, I've never been invited to spend the night sharing with a farmer's daughter!

2. January 2015, “Sockets, Plugs, and Cables”

Until I finished high school in December 1969 in rural Australia, to me, cables, sockets, and plugs meant electricity. My first foray into having to learn something more about cables came when I bought my first stereo system. To be sure, it was rather simple, just a set of red and white cables to connect the various components, and some insulated wire for the speakers. Fast forward 40 years, and when I look in the boxes of cables and connectors I've accumulated since—which I'm saving for that (probably non-existent) time when I just might need them—I see a lot of things verging on obsolescence. Someone is always inventing a better/faster/simpler approach.

2.1 Telephone

My first memory of a home phone was a large wooden box mounted on the wall of the hallway. It was powered by an enormous dry-cell battery. The mouthpiece was fixed to the box and the earpiece hung on the side. To make a call, one cranked the rotary handle and spoke to an operator; there was no dialer. (Unlike some areas, we did not share a party line.) Service was available during daylight hours Monday–Friday, and possibly longer if an operator was on duty and one agreed to pay “an after-hours opening fee”. Like many Commonwealth countries, in Australia, the Federal Post Office had the monopoly on phone equipment and service. No competition, so no incentive for innovation.

In the early 1970's in Australia, the idea of having multiple phone outlets in a house, and moving a phone from one outlet to another, came of age. In my house, during the day, the phone was in my study; at night, it was moved to the bedroom. There was an Australia-wide standard plug and socket. And I had progressed to a handset with a rotary dialer. [It wasn't until I moved to the US that I found letters on a phone dialer, as well as digits.]

In 1979, I moved to Chicago in the US. Not only did those decadent Americans have multiple phone jacks in each residence, but they also had one in just about every room! Back then, the jack had four pins arranged in a square. However, the phone cable ended in an RJ11 plug, so an adaptor was needed from one to the other. (The humble RJ11 plug became widely used, not just in the US, but in many other countries as well.)

I bought my first PC in December 1982. A few years later, I bought my first modem, a “speedy” 300 baud model. Eventually, I bought a portable PC, and ultimately, a laptop. I also started to take them abroad, which led to the problem of connecting to foreign phone systems. As someone once said, “Standards are great; everyone should have them.” And so, they do, but of course, many countries each had their own, different standard. For \$100, I purchased a kit of adaptors that purported to support all the main phone systems in the modern world.

Nowadays, for those of us still having a so-called landline, we have wireless handsets connected to a base station, which is connected to an RJ11 jack or to a broadband system. An increasing number of us have only a mobile phone, which operates entirely without a cable.

2.2 Power

The first house I remember living in had no electricity. We used a pressurized kerosene lantern to light the main room, a wood stove for cooking, a fireplace for heating, and a wood-chip heater for heating

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water on bath days. The next house had a 32-volt DC generating plant, but that drove only the lighting system; we had no electrical appliances to speak of. The house after that was connected to the mains, which, in Australia, is 240 volts, 60 HZ, with a 3-pin plug/socket where the top two blades are flat and slanted, and the third flat blade serves as the earth/ground.

In the 1970's I recall buying a stereo amplifier made in Asia. Although it had an Aussie plug, the auxiliary power outlets on its back used the US 2-pin socket.

When I left Australia in 1979, I started shaving with a hand razor, as I knew that taking electric appliances to different countries would be a challenge. However, fast forward to traveling with a video camera, laptop computers, mobile phones, and such, and we have a situation similar to that of connecting to the internet on various phone systems. The adaptor kit I mentioned earlier for phones also came with a number of power adaptors. I've found that there really are only three needed these days: US, UK, and European. (Although the Aussie socket is different to that of the US, I have an adaptor that allows the top blades to be swiveled to satisfy both. A few years ago, when spending time with a new colleague from South Africa, I discovered that country also had its own plug/socket style.) I used to have to carry a frequency converter, but newer equipment can detect differences in frequency as well as voltage, so only a pin adaptor is needed.

On the battery front, it seems that we really do have some international standards for the mainstream ones; however, there are still plenty of proprietary ones. A nice feature involves having a power-to-USB adaptor, so one can charge devices from any USB port (such as on laptops and now in more and more car models).

2.3 Audio

Once upon a time, it was all quite simple; there was the 6.3 mm (1/4") phone connector, which I knew as a phono jack, and that was it! This was the way in which one hooked up to an amplifier, a microphone, headphones, and electric pickups for guitars and other musical instruments. With the advent of personal audio devices, smaller versions of the phone connector were introduced, primarily to connect headphones and earbuds.

In the world of stereo, it was all quite simple: you could choose between RCA connectors, and, well, RCA connectors! The left-channel plug was white, and the right-channel plug was red. [I am happy to say that my stereo equipment still uses these, and they work just fine.]

A popular alternate audio mechanism was the DIN connector. [It got its name from the German Standard's organization *Deutsches Institut für Normung* (DIN).]

Nowadays, audio support has pretty much merged with video and computers, both of which are covered below.

2.4 TV/Video

Regarding connecting to a TV antenna, I've only ever run across two approaches: a flat ribbon cable and a coaxial cable.

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When it came time to connect output from a TV to other components, the established RCA cable set was extended by adding a third line with yellow plug for [composite video](#).

Another approach to video was [S-Video](#).

An alternate approach involved [component video](#), with red, blue, and green plugs.

Several years ago, when I made the plunge into High-Definition TV, I discovered that the lingua franca for connecting video was now [HDMI](#).

2.5 Computers

As with many technologies, in the early days, most connectors and cables were proprietary. However, two standards emerged early. For serial cables used to connect terminals, printers, and modems, there was the serial [RS232](#). For faster transmission to printers, the [Centronics parallel](#) format was used.

A high-speed protocol called [SCSI](#) was developed for large-capacity storage devices; however, this was expensive and never took hold except on high-end systems.

Connections for displays have seen a number of standards, including [VGA](#), [EGA](#), [DVI](#), and [DisplayPort](#). Although VGA is a very old technology, from my experience it's the most commonly used on projectors available in conference rooms. As such, in order to project from newer laptops, one needs a cable that converts to VGA.

For connecting devices in general, the most common approaches have been [USB](#) and [FireWire](#).

One of the early ways of networking computers used [10BaseT](#) coaxial cable with [BNC](#) connectors. Eventually, [Ethernet/RJ45](#) became ubiquitous.

2.6 Conclusion

In the late 1970's, I worked at a State Government department in Australia, which was housed in a large high-rise building. Like many such buildings, the ceiling of each floor was made of light-weight tiles that were suspended from the concrete floor above. Above this false ceiling ran all the water and sewer pipes, and the power and phone cables. From time to time, a man would show up to move or add new phone extensions. He was ably assisted by his trusty companion, a fox terrier. The dog wore a harness to which the man attached a light cord. He then put the dog up in the ceiling and then opened a hole above where he wanted the cord pulled, stuck his head up there, and called the dog toward him. Once the cord was through, the man attached the phone cable to it and pulled that through. It was a decidedly low-tech solution, but one that worked well. Of course, everyone loved the dog, which, by the way, was legally registered for the work, so his expenses were a business deduction.

I'm reminded of a story about some futuristic archaeologists who were digging at various sites. They came across an old broadband cable and discussed how advanced that civilization was. Then when they found some buried copper wires, they remarked how that was rather primitive. At one site they found no cables at all, leading one person to proclaim this to be quite a backward society. "On the contrary," responded another person, "This is evidence that they had wireless!"

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I'm sure we'll see more new kinds of cables for video and PCs in the near future as new technologies evolve.

Regarding buying cables, do shop around as prices can vary widely. Often, one can buy generic cables on-line or in hardware stores that are good enough and much cheaper than those available in specialized computer/electronics stores. And when you buy a device (such as a printer), be sure to ask if a power and/or data cable is included; it often is not. Getting a "good" price turns out not to be so good if you have to spend another \$20–30 for cables.

3. February 2015, “Travel: Memories of the Eastern Bloc”

I've visited a number of countries that were formerly part of the Soviet sphere of influence, but only after the breakup of the [Soviet Union](#).

3.1 [Russia](#)

Official Name: Russian Federation (Россия); Capital: Moscow; Language: Russian; Country Code: RU; Currency: Ruble (RUB)

In 1992, I spent two weeks in [St. Petersburg](#) delivering a series of lectures and running some workshops for a local university. My wife and 8-year-old son accompanied me (both traveling on business visas, but that's another story). We stayed in an unloved apartment building and had a translator and guide assigned to us. The Soviet Era was not long gone, and the times were interesting. On the street, I bought a T-shirt that said in Russian, “I was an agent of the KGB.” While there was a free-market system for most things, we had to line up at a government-controlled store to buy bread. We introduced our guide (who was to become a long-time friend) to the Decadent West via pizza and Black Forest cake eaten in restaurants that took only hard currency cash (English pounds, US dollars, or Deutsch marks) or credit cards.

Attendees to my series of lectures had to pay something like 25% of their monthly income, and due to extreme inefficiencies in paper production, we had a limited print run of thin handouts. The people were very eager for information about all kinds of software and hardware. For my efforts, I got paid in rubles, the total of which amounted to about US\$10. I used that to buy chocolates for the support staff.

While there, I negotiated to have two professors do a Russian translation of one of my textbooks, and I bought them a PC on which to do the work.

[See my full trip diary in September 2020: [Travel – Memories of Russia](#).

3.2 [Estonia](#)

Official Name: Republic of Estonia (Eesti Vabariik); Capital: Tallinn; Language: Estonian; Country Code: EE; Currency: Euro (EUR), formerly kroon

After attending a conference in [Lapland, Finland](#), my wife and I hopped over to Estonia for nine days, seven of which were spent with host families. It was a great experience.

[Diary] The high-speed ferry [from Helsinki] was booked out in Economy Class, so we bought Business Class tickets; quality food and drink were included, and the lounge was very comfortable. We ate heartily, and then the wind came, and it blew very hard making serious waves. Let's just say that I sat very still, eyes closed, dripping with perspiration, trying hard to hold on to my food, but to no avail. (Don't you just hate that when that happens!) I can say, however, that the Business Class toilets were very nice, and I spent quite some time there turning various shades of green.

[Diary] We drove to the large island of [Saaremaa](#). During Soviet times, this island had some sort of special military status, but it remained different from a cultural point of view. Then we drove another

90 minutes, finally pulling off the main highway at an unmarked dirt track into the forest. The first half of it was quite rough from trucks hauling logs. Eventually, we arrived at the old farm our hosts had bought the previous year. It had electricity, but that's about it. The well water was not drinkable, and there was an outhouse. It had been abandoned for seven years, and without constant attention, had deteriorated quite a bit. We organized some bedding on the floor and went to sleep quite quickly.

[Diary] *[It was a working holiday, so] We started work. Jenny and I began by cutting firewood, me with a small ax and she breaking kindling. Then host Heike and I hooked up an electric pump to the well to see how it worked. Then we had to clear some large downed-trees from the edge of a field, so the tractor could cut the grass near the fence. Meanwhile, Jenny and host Kristel painted the outhouse and small shed, and did other jobs around the place. We worked until dusk, and then cleaned up to eat. Jenny and I cooked diced pork in an Asian rice-and-vegetable mix. It all disappeared rather quickly. Then we heated water in a bucket on the single hotplate, and took care of our communal cleaning, both cooking/eating things as well as ourselves. There was no bathroom or sink, just a table, four chairs, a woodstove, and buckets for fetching water from the well. We were camping indoors!*

In the yard, there was an old, dead tree trunk, which housed a nest of large wasps. And, just for fun, another colony had a nest in the roof of the main house, so we had to pay attention when walking outside. Snakes were also mentioned, but we hadn't yet had the pleasure of meeting any.

[Diary] *Tartu is the second largest city in Estonia, with 100,000 people. It has the largest university and is the home of the Supreme Court. Like Tallinn, it had also been a member of the Hanseatic League. We decided to splash out and treat ourselves to some luxury, so we headed for the Pallas hotel where we chose a 3-room suite. The suites were painted by art students from the university in the style of a famous Estonian artist. Ours had a lot of bright red, dark blue, yellow, black and white, splashed all over the walls and ceilings. My first reaction was "I'd died and gone to Hell!" It certainly was different. The carpet was dark blue, and the bathroom had grey floor tiles and black wall tiles all the way up to the ceiling. I think this would have made a great place for a rock band to stay.*

[Diary] *[At our host's place,] We breakfasted on toasted sandwiches and tea, all taken in a bright airy little kitchen, set amongst a menagerie of appliances: a French toaster, a Swedish fridge, a Japanese microwave oven, a Dutch coffee maker, and some Russian-made gadgets.*

[Diary] *We visited a forester who lived in a government apartment, but had bought land and was renovating a large log house on that property. That day, the family and friends were picking potatoes he cultivated near the house. We arrived around 11 am and got our work orders. The forester ran the tractor with digger up a row, and we followed along with buckets, picking up the potatoes on the surface as well as those buried a little below. We then put them into bags. After two hours, we took a tea break, then emptied the bags into a shed and went back to picking. Around 3 pm, food arrived, and we settled down for a big meal of cabbage with minced meat and potatoes. The weather was glorious as was the wild strawberry tea.*

3.3 Poland

Official Name: Republic of Poland (Rzeczpospolita Polska); Capital: Warsaw; Language: Polish; Country Code: PL; Currency: Złoty (PLN)

[Diary] My friend Ewa (pronounced Eva) meet me at the Poznan train station. We drove to her country house, a 2-story cottage with a garden. We opened the doors and windows to let the fresh air in, and set up a table on the verandah where we ate bread and honey while drinking tea. It was all veddy sophisticated, wot! The cultural highlight of the day was a visit to a small village that had a very old wooden church, and that very night, it was packed for a concert of "Musica Sacra and Musica Profana," Music, Sacred and Profane.

[Diary] I brought out the pages I'd photocopied from my Jaeschke family book in Australia that traced my ancestors back to Posen Province of Prussia. The city of Posen is now called Poznan, and it is Polish. Johann Georg Jaeschke and his first wife had eight children. Some years after his wife died, he married again, but produced no further children. In 1839, because of religious differences, he took his wife and children to Hamburg where they caught the ship Catherina and sailed to Adelaide, the capital of the new state of South Australia. [It had been created in 1836 as a free state; there were no convict settlers. Subsequently, many thousands of German-Speaking Prussians from this area emigrated there where they spoke German for 100 years, until WWII made it unfashionable. My mother's family emigrated from Silesia, now southern Poland/Czech Republic.] My host did know several Jaeschke families in the area and found quite a few more listed in the greater metro area. I had visions of finding an old Jaeschke castle and estate in need of a prince or king, but then I thought if there was one, I'd probably have to pay 170-odd years of back taxes. [Be careful what you wish for, right?]

[Diary] The 3-story houses around the square were very nicely restored after WWII to their former Baroque and Renaissance styles complete with ornately painted and carved facades. The sides of the square were filled with outdoor restaurants, many of which seemed to be serving desserts. [My Polish host had told me that Poles didn't have a word for "lunch;" they ate breakfast, then late afternoon had an early supper, followed later by a late supper.] Nearby was the Church of St. Stanislaus. The interior was very ornate with marble and gilt everywhere. It surely was impressive, but for me, bordered on being "over the top."

[Diary] I didn't have long to wait before my bus came and took me all the way into the city and out again. Along the way, a woman sitting next to me started asking me questions in Polish. I replied in my best Orstralian, "Sorry Love, no hablo Polski!" My first cultural stop for the day was the church of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, a brick structure that dated back 900 years, and which was the only Maltese church in Poland. I knocked on the door to see if some of the knights could come out to play, but there was no answer. So, I walked around the grounds and headed off to my next stop.

[Diary] I managed to communicate my wishes to the rather stern-looking woman at the ticket counter, and she sold me a 2nd-Class ticket to Szczecin (pronounced "Stettin"). I sat facing forwards and saw mile after mile of forest, punctuated occasionally with some small villages and corn and cereal fields. Although I had been reliably informed that Poland did indeed have animals, during the whole 210-km trip, I saw only one horse, one cow, and a group of beehives; that was it!

[Diary] I worked on some travel planning and did some research on Wikipedia about Polish history and geography relating to the day's events. One particular search involved finding out why Australia's highest mountain, Mt. Kosciuszko, was named in honor of the Polish national hero, and hero of the American Revolutionary War, General Tadeusz Kościuszko.

3.4 The Czech Republic

Official Name: Czech Republic (Česká republika); Capital: Prague; Language: Czech; Country Code: CZ; Currency: Czech koruna (CZK)

[Diary] As we descended over the outskirts of Prague, my first impressions were that everything was very neat and tidy, from the farms to the housing developments. The airport was quite modern and very pleasant with lots of open space. ... I walked to my hotel in the sunshine, although it was cold. All the streets were paved with cobblestones, which, while quaint to look at, are not much good when one is pulling luggage with wheels.

[Diary] We drove through the countryside to Karlštejn to visit its famous castle. ... Next was Wenceslas Square, an intersection of some major thoroughfares. There was no sign of the "Good King looking out," but then it wasn't "the Feast of Stephen" either. At the southern end of the long square sat a huge building that would have looked beautiful if the black pollution layer was removed. It was the Royal Bohemian Museum, and I walked up to its entrance for a great view down the long street. Directly to its front and right was another internationally famous cultural icon, McDonalds!

[Diary] I went downstairs to the hotel's fitness room. There, I met Luci, a tall, thin, and very strong, young Czech woman who asked me to get naked and to lie on a bench. As she looked like she wasn't about to take NO for an answer, I complied, and my 60-minute Swedish, full-body massage began. She rubbed so vigorously that I feared she might ignite the oil! It had been a long while since I'd had a massage, and it felt good. Despite the physical nature of it, I almost went to sleep.

[Diary] I crossed the famous Charles Bridge, which was filled with stalls selling paintings, jewelry, and various crafts. The tourists were out in force and I chatted with a woman from Bavaria. I came across a jazz quintet that included trumpet, double bass, clarinet, and banjo. The percussion section consisted of a metal washboard with two small cymbals attached, which the man played using metal thimbles on his fingers or with a pair of egg whisks. I stood there for 15 minutes tapping my toes as the lead singer, a white Czech guy, did a pretty good imitation of Lois Armstrong singing "What a Wonderful World" and "When the Saints go Marching In." Soon after, the band packed up for the day and I made a small donation.

A light breeze blew down the river and there were some tour boats and a group of kayakers moving up and down. I walked all the way across the long bridge and a little ways on the other side before turning around. On the way home, next to the famous astronomical clock that performs several times each day, I spied a gelato stand where I had a small cone of hazelnut ice cream. It was altogether satisfactory.

[Diary] At St. Michael monastery, I joined 25 other patrons for a musical concert. I sat in the front row several arms'-length from the performers. Promptly at 18:30, the concert began, alternating between a female singer and male clarinet/saxophone player. Both were accompanied by a pianist. The theme was Broadway musicals, and without a doubt, the highlight was the sax and piano rendition of Rhapsody in Blue. It was 60 minutes of non-stop professional music. After a 30-minute break, another 1-hour concert started, but this time it was classical with a good dose of Baroque. The singer from the first performance sang quite a few numbers and she did a great job, especially with "Ave Maria" and "Amazing Grace." Three musicians played violins while the fourth played cello.

3.5 Slovakia

Official Name: Slovak Republic (Slovenská republika); Capital: Bratislava; Language: Slovak; Country Code: SK; Currency: Euro (EUR), formerly koruna

I stayed four great days/nights with a host family whose daughter I'd hosted some years earlier.

[Diary] We drove into Bratislava along the Danube and then out the other side to Devin, the site of a castle ruin that is being restored. We parked by the river, which was flowing very fast. It was extremely windy. We walked some distance to get to the castle entrance, following the path of the former barbed-wire fence that separated Slovakia from the Danube across the other side of which was Austria. We came upon a large monument that was made of some of the old, barbed wire wrapped into the shape of a heart. There was also a memorial to the 400-odd people who were shot trying to get across the river during the years of the Iron Curtain. To make it more realistic, the concrete walls of the memorial had what were supposed to look like bullet holes!

[Diary] [At the pool] There were quite a few women of more advanced years sporting bikinis. (Yes, some people should keep their clothes on!) One woman especially caught my attention. She arrived wearing rather high heels and what looked like a bikini, only it was much smaller. She had bright red hair-from-a-bottle and double gold earrings and chains. She had a serious upper-body containment problem, and I doubted her natural buoyancy vest would allow her to stay underwater very long.

3.6 Hungary

Official Name: Hungary (Magyarország); Capital: Budapest; Language: Hungarian; Country Code: HU; Currency: Forint (HUF)

I was hosted for four great days/nights by a Hungarian man and his Mexican wife.

[Diary] ... Host Julieta offered to take me out. We walked through a very large park nearby. It had scaled-down versions of a number of famous buildings around Hungary, museums, a large ice rink, a permanent circus, and a zoo. Public baths/spas are big business here in Budapest, and we stopped in at Szechenyi Baths on the edge of the park just to look at the entrance hall and all its mosaics.

We walked down to Hero's Square to pay our respects to the statues there. From there, we walked down "Embassy Row," a main street where a number of embassies were located. In front of the Russian embassy, there was a large board with photos of Yuri Gagarin, the Soviet Union's first man in space. The next day, April 12, was the 50th anniversary of his flight.

We paid our respects to Franz (Hungarian name Ferenc) Liszt's statue and his music school. We also looked in the foyer of the famed Opera House. Quite a few buildings had been very nicely renovated. One of them contained a large book store at the back of which was a large ornately decorated hall that served as a coffee and cake restaurant. It was worth the climb up the steps to look inside. We started at the top end of the famous street Vaci Utca and walked down. It has business addresses and upscale shopping with a liberal dose of restaurants.

[Diary] I rode a tram down along the Danube to St. Stephen's Basilica, an impressive building. An organ concert was about to begin, so I laid down 2,500 HUF and went in to have a look around until the

concert started. The organist played six pieces, by Albinoni, Pergolesi, Bach, Franck, and Schubert, and a mezzo-soprano accompanied him on three, including "Ave Maria." It was 45 minutes well spent.

[Diary] Near the Parliament Building there was a large open-air photo exhibition. The theme was Hungarians living abroad as minorities, and minorities living in Hungary. Most photos were of modern-day peasant life in Romania with a few taken in Serbia, Slovenia, and Ukraine. Pretty much all of the subjects were poor and living in harsh conditions. I also stopped by to look at the eternal flame burning in memory of those killed during the 1956 uprising.

[Diary] After several days of cultural activities, it was time for some light entertainment. Yes, I was off to the circus. It was housed in a permanent building, and I got a seat in Row 4 just out of reach of any ringside action. However, this was no ordinary ring-of-dirt circus; no, this ring was 2/3 water with a stage at the back running into the center. I immediately noticed the plastic sheeting provided for patrons in the first row, which made my row choice ever better!

3.7 Croatia

Official Name: Republic of Croatia (Republika Hrvatska); Capital: Zagreb; Language: Croatian; Country Code: HR; Currency: Kuna (HRK)

I vacationed along the Dalmatian Coast.

[Diary] I landed in Split. I had no idea what to expect of the countryside, but it was not at all what I expected! It was quite hot and humid with desolate rocky hills up to the Bosnian border. I'd booked an apartment via the internet and it was a 15-minute walk around the waterfront. It was in a quiet neighborhood. Unfortunately, the 2-D map I'd seen online didn't indicate the 45-degree slope or the need for oxygen on the walk up!

[Diary] Split's most famous attraction is the retirement palace complex of the Roman emperor Diocletian. There, I climbed the church tower, walked the narrow alleys, and saw many dozens of restaurants and shops full of mostly touristy stuff. ... I headed out for a very pleasant stroll around the waterfront. The outdoor restaurants and bars were doing a roaring trade. Wall-to-wall stalls sold diving trips and cruises, jewelry, religious artifacts, popcorn, grilled sweet corn, fried potatoes, and henna tattoos. A clown made balloon animals. Two men dressed in the full costume of Roman soldiers—complete with spears—were "on patrol." A group of local seniors sang traditional songs accompanied by a guitar.

[Diary] The trip to Hvar Town, on Hvar Island on the huge catamaran was very smooth and I was inside in air-conditioned comfort. As I disembarked, women were everywhere offering rooms for rent. I approached one and she was delighted to have me stay for two nights. Once she answered all my questions, we walked to her car and drove up to the steeper part of town to her place. She was Bosnian, married to a Croat.

[Diary] I decided to rent a scooter, and 15 minutes later was racing away on my 50-cc charger to the pretty little town of Jelsa. Next stop was the neighboring town of Vrboska, a delightful place on a long, narrow inlet, which made a perfect home for the yacht club and marina. Some 200 sleek craft were tied up and bore flags or signs from Gibraltar, France, Germany, Norway, UK, and USA. The large town of

Stari Grad was up next, but it hardly compared with the two places I'd visited earlier, so I didn't stay long. I decided to take the old road back home. Instead of having a tunnel, this one went up and over the mountain. My scooter's little rubber-band engine gallantly hauled me all the way up. The views from the top were impressive: down into steep valleys, over to the mainland, and out over numerous small islands. The weather was exactly right for riding.

[Diary] *The 6:10-pm catamaran from Split pulled in right on time and people started disembarking. A rather drunk Brit staggered off and stopped to ask me, "Where am I?" I asked him where he wanted to be. He said he'd gotten off because everyone seemed to be doing that. I told him that this stop or the next was all the same; both places had plenty of beer! Exactly five minutes after the ferry arrived, we were off to the island of Korčula, to the town of the same name.*

[Diary] *My bus headed out for Dubrovnik in light rain. The skies were heavy and quite dark. The road was narrow and followed the coast before climbing high into the mountains. The only agriculture was small patches of vineyards near towns. Winemaking seemed to be the only industry. The driver played some nice local, easy listening music.*

[Diary] *[In Dubrovnik] I walked through one of the entrances to the massive city walls. Boy were they impressive! At up to 70 feet high and 20 feet thick, my guess is they were built with nonunion labor. After a short walk I found a seat in a sunny place and settled into a long read of my novel, occasionally watching the tourists walk by and the tour boat traffic at the waterfront. When it was too dark to read, I had a small excursion around some plazas and alleyways. I came across a young man playing classical guitar, so I stopped to listen. It was a glorious evening outdoors.*

[Diary] *As I worked on my diary in my room overlooking the city walls, a sax player played some mournful tunes down on the gate bridge. However, he was interrupted by drums when a procession of soldiers dressed in ceremonial costume, complete with pikes, marched across the bridge and into the city.*

[Diary] *Inside the old city walls, it was wall-to-wall tourists (pun intended). I set out to make a complete trip around the inside of the wall, which I estimated was 1–2 miles around. As I was too cheap to pay to go out on top of the walls, I looked for back alleys that got me as close to the wall as possible. No sooner had I started that I was faced with 100+ steep steps, and I was perspiring before I was halfway up. I was going to need a vacation from this vacation! However, it got me to a great vantage point from which I could take some photos out over the orange-tile rooftops. Behind me was the small mountain from which the Serbs rained down artillery shells back in the 1990's. One can clearly see where they hit given the new, replacement roof tiles scattered among the old. Several thousand steep steps later, I'd gone full circle and was back at the bottom on the main street.*

3.8 Bosnia-Herzegovina

Official Name: Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosna i Hercegovina or Босна и Херцеговина); Capital: Sarajevo; Language: Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian; Country Code: BM; Currency: Convertible mark (Bam)

I visited with a one-day bus-tour out of Dubrovnik, Croatia.

[Diary] Bosnia and Herzegovina has a 12 km-wide stretch of land that runs down to the sea, separating the Dubrovnik province from the rest of Croatia. We crossed the border and then after a pit stop, we crossed back into Croatia. At the River Neretva we turned north passing through a former mosquito-infested swamp that the Austro-Hungarians had drained 100 years ago. Now, the area was a 1,000-acre agricultural basin where citrus (primarily mandarins), stone fruits, melons, and salad vegetables are grown. We followed the river to the Bosnian border where our passports were scanned, and a border policeman came on board to look us over.

... In Mostar a local guide lead us on a walking tour. The first stop was the Turkish House, an authentic residence of a wealthy family from the Ottoman period. After that, we stopped by one of many parks that were turned into cemeteries to bury the 5,000 dead from the 1990's war. (A main street divided the warring factions and there was heavy house-to-house fighting.) Next, we walked down steep cobblestone steps through the bazaar and there before us was the famous bridge whose destruction in the war made headlines around the world. I browsed around a few shops and galleries before crossing the bridge and sitting in the shade on a cool stonewall to write these notes. A PA system on one of the mosques sounded the call to prayers. I found a path down to the river and took some photos of the bridge from below.

3.9 East Germany

Official Name: German Democratic Republic (Deutsche Demokratische Republik); Capital: East Berlin; Language: German; Country Code: DD; Currency: DDR mark (DDM)

My first visit to this area was in September 1999, after German Reunification, so I never had the dubious pleasure of seeing the DDR in action.

3.10 Conclusion

I found the people in all these countries to be friendly, hard-working, and very happy to be rid of the Soviet yoke. However, for the younger people, they had no first-hand experience of the old system.

Bucket List: High on my list are Slovenia (with a side-trip to Trieste and Venice), the Roman ruins in the Istrian Peninsula of Croatia, as well as Zagreb, and the Plitvice Lakes National Park. And I can easily imagine renting an apartment in Dubrovnik for a month, and spending the days reading, writing, walking, talking, and eating.

4. March 2015, “A Little Bit of Royalty”

Having been born in the [Antipodes](#), I was raised a subject of Her Majesty, [Queen Elizabeth II](#). As Australia was so poor, we had to share her with quite a few other countries (which, apparently, couldn't afford their own queen either, given the manner in which she was accustomed to living!): Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Canada, Grenada, Jamaica, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, and last, and certainly least (says the irreverent Aussie), the United Kingdom. Apparently, a little bit of queen goes a long way.

From my early school days, I remember learning the following:

*William the first was the first of our kings
Not counting the Ethelreds Egberts and things
He had himself crowned and anointed and blessed
In ten-sixty - I needn't tell you the rest.*

An alternate—and seemingly more correct—fourth line is, “*At Westminster Abbey in 1066*”. Twenty-eight more lines follow, and you can find them all (including variations and related rhymes) by searching the internet for the first line.

In 2009, I had the distinct pleasure of visiting [Normandy, France](#). While touring [Caen](#), my first stop was Abbaye-aux-Hommes (Men's Abbey) and the adjoining abbey church [Saint-Etienne](#), which [William the Conqueror](#) started building in 1064. He was buried there in 1087 and at his graveside I paid my respects telling him that he wouldn't believe how the Brits had let things go since his day. And except for the Channel Islands, they didn't even own Normandy anymore! And as for their international [cricket](#) team, what can I say!

For the purposes of this essay, I consider royalty to be the monarchs, their spouses, and their [issue](#) (direct descendants). [A well-known saying goes something like this, “The primary duty of the wife of a king/prince/lord/etc. is to bear him an heir and a spare!”] Of course, not all monarchs inherited their position; some simply took it, which in many cases is what they thought God had really intended!

Now if you want to know about all those second- and third-tier courtiers, see [Burke's Peerage](#), “founded by John Burke in London in 1826, records the genealogy and heraldry of the Peerage, Baronetage, Knightage and Landed Gentry of the United Kingdom, the historical families of Ireland and the Commonwealth of Nations, the Imperial, Royal and Mediatised families of Europe and Latin America, the Presidential and distinguished families of the United States, the ruling families of Africa and the Middle East and other prominent families worldwide.”

4.1 Royalty Today

According to [Wikipedia](#), “As of July 2013, there are 26 active sovereign monarchies in the world – kings, queens, sultans, emperors, emirs and others – who rule or reign over 43 countries in all.”

Although I am most familiar with the [British royal family](#), after 35 years of international travel I've experienced a bit of life under, read about, talked to subjects of, and gotten more than a little

interested in, a number of other families. These include: [Danish Royal Family](#) (complete with an Aussie Crown Princess, [Mary](#)), [Dutch Royal Family](#), [Japanese Imperial Family](#), [Jordanian Royal Family](#), and [Thai Royal Family](#).

A few monarchies are [absolute](#), in which case, a statement from the king of “Off with his head!” may well result in that happening, really! Most are [constitutional](#). According to [Wikipedia](#), “The most recent country to transition from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy was [Bhutan](#), in 2007-8.”

4.2 Royalty's Function in Today's Society

There's no denying that despite the typically high cost of supporting a royal family — all the way down to the under-butlers, assistants to the assistant cooks, gardeners' apprentices, and the man whose puts the paste on Prince Charles' toothbrush — in many cases, there is a huge payback from related tourism. For example, required sites during one's first trip to London include the Changing of the Guard at [Buckingham Palace](#), the [Horse Guards](#) on the Mall, [Westminster Abbey](#), and [The Tower of London](#), and if you go a little bit out of the city, [Windsor Castle](#) and, my favorite by far, [Hampton Court Palace](#).

The head of a royal family is the country's Head of State, which in constitutional monarchies, is a non-political role. In times of crisis, this role can be most important. For example, it is impossible to think how Thailand might be today after all those military coups, if it hadn't been for the presence of the extremely popular and long serving [King Bhumibol](#). The Emperor of Japan has also played key roles over time especially in the ending of WWII in the Pacific. And during the bombing of London in WWII, the appearance in the streets of King [George VI](#) and Queen Elizabeth gave the people hope.

Many countries, including democracies, do not have what we Americans call—in fact demand—*Separation of Church and State*. The Head of State in a monarchy is often the head of that country's National Church. For example, in the UK it's the Church of England; in Denmark, the monarch is the supreme authority of the Church of Denmark, but not the head; in Norway, the monarch is High Protector of the Church of Norway; in Japan, the Emperor is the highest authority of the Shinto religion. Some constitutions prohibit a monarch or Crown Prince or Princess from marrying “outside the faith.” (Count the number of Catholic Queens of England of late!)

A Head of State might also be the commander-in-chief of a country's military; Norway is one example. [For a tale of how a king should *not* design a naval ship, read about the King of Sweden's [Vasa](#), a must-see if you get to Stockholm.]

If you've watched enough British TV series, you'll have seen examples of businesses that provide services to certain members of the royal family and their official residences. As such, they are entitled to announce things like, “Moat builders” or “Beheading axe makers,” “By appointment to His Majesty ...” Such approval requires a *Royal warrants of appointment*; click [here](#) to read about such for various royal families. Clearly, qualifying for such a right lends huge prestige to the supplier.

4.3 Who's the King of the Castle?

The title of a ruler varies, for example:

- Kingdom: *King* and *Queen*. The king of Persia (and Iran) was a *Shah*, his wife a *Shahbanu*. Egypt had its *Pharaoh* and *Great Royal Wife*. However, Cleopatra, who ruled in her own right, is generally called Queen.
- Empire: *Emperor* and *Empress*, although the head of the British Empire did not carry that title, per se. That said, Queen Victoria was the [Empress of India](#). Russia has its *Tsar* (Czar) and *Tsarina*. Even though Japan is no longer an empire, it still has an emperor (sometimes referred to as a *Mikado*).
- Duchy: *Duke* and *Duchess*, as in Prince Charles and his wife Camilla, the [Duke and Duchess of Cornwall](#). [Luxembourg](#) is a Grand Duchy, so has a *Grand Duke*.
- Principality: [Liechtenstein](#) has a *Prince*, as does [Monaco](#). The co-principality of [Andorra](#) has two *co-Princes*, one a Roman Catholic Bishop from Spain, the other the President of France. Arab emirates have their *emir* and *emira*. And sultanates have their *sultan* and *sultana*.

4.4 Royal Consorts

A King's wife is usually called a Queen, although the full title is sometimes [Queen Consort](#).

A Queen who rules in her own right is a [Queen Regnant](#). Her husband is typically called [Prince Consort](#), although [King Consort](#) has existed. (Examples are Victoria and Elizabeth II, and their respective husbands, Albert and Phillip.)

If for whatever reason, the wife of a King isn't called Queen, she might be [Princess Consort](#). (Since Prince Charles' marriage to Camilla, there has been lots of discussion about whether or not she could become Queen on his ascent to the British throne. As such, she might be a candidate for this title.)

4.5 Lines of Succession

Historically, and still the case in some royal families, when the head of the royal family dies or abdicates, the next in line is the oldest living son, and after all the sons, (typically) then down the line of daughters. This is called [primogeniture](#). According to Wikipedia, "The United Kingdom passed legislation to establish gender-blind succession in 2013 but delayed implementation until the 15 other countries which share the same monarch effect similar changes in their succession laws."

Japan uses strict [agnatic primogeniture](#). As the Japanese Crown Prince and Princess have only one child, a daughter, there are debates as to whether she will ever become Head of State.

4.6 Giving it All Up

Apparently, life at the top isn't all it's cracked up to be, and some rulers abdicate, either by choice or by force. In the past couple of years, a number of long-term monarchs have stepped down:

- In the Netherlands, [Queen Beatrix](#) abdicated in favor of her son, Willem-Alexander, the first Dutch king in more than 120 years. Her mother, Juliana, did likewise for her, and her

grandmother, Wilhelmina, abdicated in favor of Juliana. After her abdication, Beatrix reverted to being a mere Princess.

- In Spain, [King Juan Carlos](#) abdicated in favor of his son, Felipe VI. It seems that the former king retains the title of King.
- In Belgium, [King Albert II](#) stepped down in favor of his son Philippe. He too retains the title of King. (Albert's father, Leopold III, also abdicated.)

In the English-speaking world, probably the best known and talked about is the abdication of [Edward VIII](#) (whose names were Edward Albert Christian George Andrew Patrick David). According to [Wikipedia](#), "In 1936, a constitutional crisis in the British Empire was caused by King-Emperor Edward VIII's proposal to marry Wallis Simpson, an American socialite who was divorced from her first husband and was pursuing a divorce of her second." The crisis had much to do with Edward's being head of the Church of England, which, at that time, did not permit divorced people to remarry if their former spouses were still alive. On abdication, the once-King became His Royal Highness the [Duke of Windsor](#).

[Norodom Sihanouk](#), the King of Cambodia, abdicated twice. He finally became His Majesty, The King Father.

4.7 Dowagers

When the head of the royal household dies or abdicates, what title does their spouse have? If the departed ruler is a woman, their spouse would not have had the title King or Emperor, for example, so they retain their existing title. In the case of departing men, their spouses need to be distinguished from the wife of any in-coming male ruler.

The best-known case in the English-speaking world is Queen Elizabeth II's mother, the former Queen Elizabeth. She simply became known as "[Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother](#)." Strictly speaking, she was a [dowager Queen](#). The title [empress dowager](#) is equivalent. A living queen dowager is [Noor](#), widow of Jordan's King Hussein, and an American born in Washington DC.

4.8 Lasting Legacies

More than a few royals are remembered—some fondly and others not so—long after their passing. In some cases, thousands of years after. Here's a list of those that immediately came to my mind, in no particular order (a few of them might be considered rulers who were not royals, in some sense):

- [King Solomon \(Israel\)](#)
- [King Herod \(Judea\)](#)
- [Helen of Troy](#)
- [Queen of Sheba](#)
- [Anthony \(Rome\)](#) and [Cleopatra \(Egypt\)](#)
- [Cyrus the Great \(Persia, Babylon\)](#)
- [Darius the Great \(Persia\)](#)
- [Alexander the Great \(Macedonia\)](#)
- [Augustus Caesar](#) and [Julius Caesar \(Rome\)](#)
- [William the Conqueror \(England\)](#)
- [Hammurabi \(Babylon\)](#)

- [Napoleon](#) (France)
- [Hannibal](#) (Carthage)
- [William and Mary](#) (England)
- [King John](#) (England)
- [Richard the Lion-Hearted](#) (England)
- [Henry VIII](#) (England)
- [Mary Queen of Scots](#) (Scotland)
- [Elizabeth I](#) (England)
- [Charlemagne](#) (Carolingian Empire)
- [Louis XIV](#) (France)
- [Marie Antoinette](#) (France)
- [Victoria](#) and her [Age](#) (England)
- [Tsar Nicolas II](#) and Alexandra (Russia)
- The [Edwardian](#) and [Georgian Ages](#) (England)
- [Emperor Hirohito](#) (Japan)
- [Haile Selassie](#) (Ethiopia)

And last, but certain not least, there's THE King, Elvis Presley.

These rulers are joined by some equally famous ones from fiction:

- [Hamlet](#), [Lear](#), and [Oberon](#) from Shakespeare
- [King Arthur](#)
- The King of Siam from [The King and I](#), starring Yul Brynner.
- [Good King Wenceslas](#)
- [The Queen of Hearts](#)

More on fictional monarchs can be found [here](#).

4.9 Odds and Ends

For a very funny take on Queen Elizabeth I, see [Black Adder II](#). Likewise, for [Black Adder the Third](#), which revolves around the butler to the Prince of Wales, the Crown Prince of England.

If you are interested in reading about a couple of “royal” oddities, take a look at the following:

- The [Channel Islands](#), and how the loyal toast there is to, “The Queen, our Duke”; and
- [Hutt River Province](#), where Prince Leonard claims to rule an independent sovereign state in Australia. For more about micro nations, click [here](#).

4.10 Conclusion

Having dual citizenship, I carry two passports when I travel abroad. Being born into the British Commonwealth, I am still a subject of Her Majesty. However, I never did swear any oaths to her (at least none that I can repeat here). However, when I became a US Citizen (see my essay from [April 2010](#)), I swore the following: *I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and*

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abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen. Furthermore, should She ever grant me my well-deserved knighthood, I won't be able to use the title *Sir* within the US.

A few humorous notes: My son once told me that Marie Antoinette was misunderstood when she spoke of the starving peasants. Apparently, what she meant to say was, "Let them eat cake, with ice cream!" And from various sources, when told that "The peasants are revolting!" the reply was, "They certainly are!"

And in my usual, irreverent Aussie style, I recall how we kids sang a variation on our national anthem, which started like this: "God save our gracious cat, feed it on bread and fat, God save our cat." (Interestingly, the US has a popular song, "My Country 'Tis of Thee", which uses the same tune.

By the way, William the Conqueror's name was actually *Guillaume*. But you know how those immigration officials are! No sooner had he landed at Hastings, and they asked him his name, they said, "Thank you very much for sharing that with us, but we'll call you Bill; OK?"

Whenever I visit my dear friend Günter in his native Germany, and we sit outside in nice weather, eating and drinking, he often says, "Oh it's good to be king!" Of course, since my name, Rex, is Latin for *King*, I know just what he means.

5. April 2015, "Travel: Memories of Asia"

The countries are listed in the order in which I first visited them.

5.1 Hong Kong

Official Name: Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China; Capital: Hong Kong; Language: Chinese (mostly Cantonese), English; Country Code: HK; Currency: Hong Kong Dollar (HKD)

My first visit there was in 1979, when it was still under British rule. I was travelling with my wife, and it was the first time we'd been outside our country of birth, Australia. We had a good look around Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and a bit of the New Territories. My second visit was more than 20 years later, after control had been transferred to the Chinese.

[Diary] United Airlines was offering a great fare to Hong Kong, and since I had nothing better to do, I booked a ticket to go and get some Chinese take-away food. Flight UA829, a Boeing 747-400 (Jumbo Jet, 2 aisles and 9 seats across), departed Chicago on time at 3:05 pm about one-third full, allowing people to take over up to three seats. I had exit seat 46A. Flying time was predicted to be 15:40 hours, possibly my longest ever non-stop flight. Distance, 7,787 miles. (My previous longest flights were Washington DC to Tokyo and LA/San Francisco to Sydney.) ETA was 7:15 pm the next day.

Five hours into the flight we were over the frozen Beaufort Sea just beyond the Queen Elizabeth Islands of Canada. Although on a map it might look like one would fly west and then south to get to Hong Kong from Chicago, we flew due north, over the Arctic. Whatever it takes to save money on the fuel bill, which, these days, is very high for one of these planes. As usual, in between movies, route maps at various magnifications were shown to let us know where we were. Seeing the earth from the North Pole perspective is quite different. Somewhere around there, we crossed the International Date Line, and moved from Friday to Saturday.

[Diary] I rode the Mass Transit Railway (MTR) Tseun Wan line (red line) from Jordan station next to my hotel in Kowloon to Central on Hong Kong Island. I then walked to the [Peak Tram](#) terminal. It was quite hot and very humid. There was a long line for the tram, but the line moved quickly. The ride was very steep, and I shot video out the rear window. At the top, I walked around to some overlooks, strolled through a small shopping center, and had a milkshake at McDonalds. The views over the downtown area, across the harbor, and on the south side of the island were interesting, but somewhat clouded in a humid haze.

From there, I went back down the mountain to [Hong Kong Park](#), a wonderful addition to the city. There is a huge aviary with many exotic parrots. One walks through it on platforms raised high in the trees. The whole thing is built into the side of a hill. The gardens are magnificent, and contain a large waterfall, some large ponds, wading birds, fish, and many turtles. Next door, there is a museum of tea ware, which I perused a while, as much to get into an air-conditioned place as for the exhibits.

[Diary] I strolled along the promenade on the south bank of Kowloon, and shot some video and stills of the harbor. I also chatted with a young English couple who had just arrived after four months in Australia. I consumed ice cream while watching the continuous harbor traffic.

From there, it was on to the Star Ferry terminal and surrounding shops. Then I went north through Kowloon Park back to my hotel, stopping off to buy some emergency rations. In my room, I snacked and read the daily English newspaper.

[Diary] Since my room came with a hot water kettle, I bought a packet of noodles and ate in. At 7:30 pm, I took the MTR south one stop and walked to the promenade to see the nightly 8-pm laser light show on the high-rise buildings across the harbor on Hong Kong Island. Then it was back home via the MTR. I walked 4–5 blocks along the famed Temple Street Night Market near my hotel. There were wall-to-wall stalls selling clothing, footwear, electronics, and bootleg CDs and DVDs.

[Diary] At the ferry terminal, I met a couple from Spain who were on the same tour as me. We rode first class on the ferry, which was called Xin Xing, departing at 10:30 for Mui Wo on Lantau Island. After a 15-minute wait, the three of us, seven Dutch tourists and their Flemish guide, two Chinese ladies and another few couples boarded the air-conditioned minibus and set off.

The first stop was a nice beach, where we spent 15 minutes. (Like most beaches there, it had a shark net around the swimming area.) The second stop was the Po Lin monastery and huge Tian Tan Buddha statue. We consumed an “interesting” vegetarian lunch, and spent two hours there. The final stop was the fishing village of Tai O, where houses are built on stilts over the water. It was rather rundown and much more like what I think of with respect to a Chinese village. Many stalls sold live and dried fish, drinks, and tourist junk. The ice cream and cream soda were definitely the best things in town. The hour there was more than enough.

[Diary] I went to the old Murray House building that has been pulled apart, stone by stone, transported down here from the city, and reassembled. Unfortunately, the instructions for how to do this were poorly recorded, and it took three years to figure out how to put it back together. And then they had six large columns spare, so they stuck them out front in a row.

5.2 Macao

Official Name: Macao Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China; Capital: Macau; Language: Chinese (various dialects), Portuguese, Macanese; Country Code: MO; Currency: Macanese pataca (MOP)

I spent a day there in 1979 while visiting Hong Kong. At the time, Macao was still a Portuguese colony. (Since then, control has reverted to the Chinese.) About the only thing I remember from that underwhelming day was that such day trips were all about “casinos and shopping,” neither of which interested me or my wife. Frankly, we went because “it was there” and this was the start of our first trip abroad. I definitely remember one, quite unsettling aspect, however. On arrival, we had to leave our passports with the immigration office, and then collect them when we caught the ferry back to Hong Kong that evening. Although I'd only recently gotten my first passport, being separated from it in an unknown place didn't seem like a good idea.

5.3 Singapore

Official Name: Republic of Singapore; Capital: Singapore; Language: English, Malay, Mandarin Chinese, Tamil; Country Code: SG; Currency: Singapore dollar (SGD)

My first visit there was in 1979, as a tourist. My second was a business trip more than 25 years later, by which time it was even more modernized; it had also lost some of its charm. Being right on the equator, the weather stays rather constant. (Can you say, "Bloody HUMID?")

My wife and I took several bus tours around parts of the island and over into southern Malaysia. One highlight was a delightful ride in a trishaw, a cart pulled by a wiry man on a bicycle. As he pointed out interesting places and things, he added emphasis by appending "No bullshit!" to each of his statements. He asked if we were on our honeymoon, and we replied that we'd been married three years. Then he asked how many children we had. When my wife replied, "None," he looked me up and down several times and then said to my wife, "He no good!" We told him we'd heard that a good place to eat was the Satay Club, and could he drop us there. Now the name had conjured up in our minds a fancy place possibly with a dress code, but when he dropped us at a public park, we learned it was an open-air place filled with grandfather-and-grandson pairs running BBQs. For a small amount of money, we feasted on satays with hot peanut sauce, salad, and drinks. It was quite a fancy picnic.

[Diary] From my home in Northern Virginia to my hotel room in Singapore, it had taken 36½ hours, which, as best as I can recall, was the longest I'd taken to get anywhere in one trip. I don't recommend it. [I'd gone via Sydney, Australia.]

I unpacked and had a wonderfully hot shower. I thought that, perhaps, I'd have to burn the clothes I'd traveled in, but, instead, simply "stood them up in the corner." I connected to the outside world to find that my email had managed to follow me all the way to Singapore; surprise!

I got a map from the front desk, got some shopping and meal advice, and walked out into the very humid evening. Within 100 yards, I'd been propositioned at least 10 times by all kinds of young women wanting to "escort" me. I didn't stop to find out exactly what that meant, however.

In one building, I encountered more than a few exotic-looking "ladies" with very low necklines and very short hemlines. As I rode an elevator with several of them, I got a look up close—it was hard not to—and I decided that, in all probability, at least some of them were not of the female species.

5.4 Malaysia

Official Name: Malaysia; Capital: Kuala Lumpur; Language: Malaysian, English; Country Code: MY; Currency: Ringgit (MYR)

In 1979, I spent five days in and around the capital, in Malacca to the south, and on Penang Island to the north. Movies were very cheap and we saw one each day. For the premier of *Superman*, the shows were all sold out, so we bought tickets from a scalper. Even then the cost, at least by our standards, was still cheap. One interesting thing was that most people in attendance did not speak English; instead, they were reading one of the three sets of subtitles that covered the bottom half of the

screen, while talking to each other. That made it hard for those few of us native-English speakers to hear the audio.

5.5 Thailand

Official Name: Kingdom of Thailand; Capital: Bangkok; Language: Thai; Country Code: TH; Currency: Baht (THB)

It was June 1979, and it was a surprise to find the Bangkok airport “occupied” by armed troops. However, over the years, there have been regular “forced” changes of government. In any event, it had no adverse impact on our visit.

A highlight of our visit was a boat tour around Bangkok's extensive canal system. At Pattaya Beach (a popular place for R&R for Allied soldiers during the Vietnam War), I tried my hand at parasailing. We spent an interesting day visiting Kanchanaburi, site of the infamous WWII prison camps and the Bridge over the River Kwai.

5.6 India

Official Name: Republic of India; Capital: New Delhi; Language: Hindi, English; Country Code: IN; Currency: Indian rupee (INR)

We arrived in Bombay in June 1979 with the romantic idea of getting a rail pass and spending some weeks traveling the countryside. Instead, we spent much of the one day there trying to find a flight out. We were ticketed next for Athens, Greece, but as we couldn't get a flight there for days, we opted to bypass that city and go to Rome, Italy, instead. [Thirty five years later, I still haven't been to Greece.]

5.7 Japan

See the separate essay from August 2014, Travel – Memories of Japan.

5.8 South Korea

Official Name: Republic of Korea; Capital: Seoul; Language: Korean; Country Code: KR; Currency: South Korean won (KRW)

I've had four trips there, three to the southern island of Jeju (sometimes written Cheju), and one to Busan.

[Diary] I was off on a 14-day trip around the world (take that, Phileas Fogg), taking in Milan, Italy, and then Jeju, Korea. Frankly, it would have been preferable to go west rather than east, but, unfortunately, that wasn't an option. There was one good bit of news, however; I was seated in Business Class all the way.

Now, for a trip like this one must prepare in advance. In my case, I had a 6-day "practice" trip, going west, to Yokohama, Japan, 13 hours non-stop each way. I got back from that little jaunt six days before this new trip started. So just when I'd nearly recovered from that big time change, I was heading off in the opposite direction for another.

... I arrived at my hotel as the sun started to set. Check-in was smooth, and I made my way to my room. The new building had cavernous lobbies, lots of large paintings and sculptures, marble everywhere, and absolutely no-one in sight. It looked rather like a sanitarium for very wealthy people. You know, the sort of place one goes when one is a bit run down from too many dinner parties and polo events.

[Diary] If there is one thing I've learned from travel in Asia, is, "Never trust a toilet that plugs into an electrical outlet!" So, I disabled that (and its seat heater). However, to activate the room's lights, I needed to insert my room key into a slot on the wall. Yet each time I did that, my toilet's electronics re-booted! Can you say, "Over-engineered?" There was also an assortment of emergency gear, including a harness one could strap on and be lowered down the side of the building, but I never did figure out where one went to actually open a window large enough to climb out.

[Diary] Breakfast was included in the room rate and I was at the restaurant just before opening time, at 7 am. It was buffet style with the usual Asian and Western offerings along with a chef cooking custom eggs and omelets. While the Asians dug into their soups, fish, and salad, I looked at the cereal, sausage, and bacon. One thing that caught my eye as something to avoid, were the dark-black slices of preserved duck eggs. I'd have to be very hungry and eating in the dark before I'd put some of that in my mouth!

[Diary] At 6:30 pm, the social event started with a cocktail reception. At 7 o'clock, we moved into the banquet room, which was set up with circular tables each set for seven people. I sat with an American colleague of Chinese descent, and delegates from Ireland and Japan, among others. The meal involved 10 small courses of Korean food, which we ate with chopsticks. A spoon was also provided. So, just what does one get at a 10-course Korean banquet? 1. Abalone porridge; 2. Rice noodles and vegetables with sesame oil; 3. Poached baby abalone, green lettuce, soy vinaigrette; 4. Pan-fried fish and vegetable with egg batter; 5. Steamed king prawn; 6. Korean traditional buckwheat rolls with seafood and vegetables; 7. Grilled USA beef short ribs; 8. Sea weed and sea urchin roe soup; 9. Steamed rice and condiments; and 10. Rice punch and fresh fruit.

The entertainment part came in two stages, the first piece of which was a musical performance by a group in traditional dress playing traditional instruments plus a piano. Most of their music was modern, however. A woman "sang" a song that sounded pretty much to me like screeching, and at the end, I clapped because it was over!

5.9 China

Official Name: People's Republic of China; Capital: Beijing (formerly known as Peking); Language: Chinese (various dialects) and others; Country Code: CN; Currency: Renminbi (or yuan) (CNY)

I've had one visit to the mainland, in December; it was bloody freezing outdoors!

[Diary] I went outside the Beijing Airport (PEK) to the taxi line where it was below freezing. I drew a young guy who apparently wanted to drive in the Indianapolis 500, and he showed me his "skills" on the way to my hotel. Throughout the 30-minute ride, I doubt we stayed in the same lane more than 15 seconds (I kid you not), and he was tailgating cars at 120 kph! To make it interesting, I couldn't find the piece of my seatbelt to clip my harness in. I found it best not to look at the road ahead and to sit back and think happy thoughts, like, "Was my will up to date?"

[Diary] A local colleague and his wife arrived and we drove by the Olympic village, through Tiananmen Square, and then to a large shopping district where we walked through local markets, department stores, and the county's biggest bookstore. Along the way, we stopped off for lunch at—surprise—a Chinese restaurant. Then it was on to a large supermarket to lay in a few supplies for my kitchen.

[Diary] Our tour bus parked down a small mountain from the Great Wall. To get near the top we each sat in a sled-like device and were pulled up 20 people at a time, through a tunnel and then out in the vicious cold wind. At the end, we were right next to the base of a section of wall, where the really serious work began. The goal was to hike/climb to the top-most point, which didn't seem all that far away. And, horizontally speaking, it wasn't. But the vertical climb was a different matter, especially as we not only had to go up, but over each rise, we seemed to go way down again. I decided to concentrate on the walk rather than take pictures and video, and to do those on the way back. The wall is one heck of a structure and was built over a 2,000+-year period. Although it was supposed to keep out the Mongol hordes, I kept asking myself why the Mongols would want to attack over those mountains anyway even if no wall existed. (I think it was built simply as a way to keep unemployment down!) Although the whole walk was very steep, I did okay on the sections that had steps. At least they were level and I could rest occasionally. However, some parts were just flat stones at a steep angle, and coming down on those was difficult. The surrounding countryside was harsh, almost semi-desert. I had dressed warmly with a knitted cap and windproof hood over that, plus gloves. However, each time I took my gloves off to take pictures or video, my hands got cold very quickly.

[Diary] Another local friend and colleague arrived at my hotel with a car and driver. We drove to Tiananmen Square, the world largest square. It was built after the Chinese Revolution and occupies the space between the main South gate of the city and the main North gate, just on the edge of the Forbidden City. The driver dropped us in front of the People's Congress building. We crossed the street and went through a security checkpoint into the square where we went to Chairman Mao's mausoleum, but it was closed on Mondays. Don't you just hate that when that happens! We walked all around the square and looked at the elaborate gates and the buildings that housed them. On the north side, we went through three sets of city gates and their accompanying plazas. In one plaza, we watched groups of soldiers engaged in some marching drills.

After lunch, we drove to the Olympic Park where the driver dropped us near the main Bird's Nest stadium. We got admission tickets and went inside for a look around. The 80,000 seat stadium was functional as well as a piece of art. During the games, an athletic track went around the ground while the inside space served as a soccer field, among other things. However, now, it was covered in man-made snow, which was being produced by a number of machines. A large crew was setting up for a Snow Festival. After a short walk around the plaza, we headed to the Water Cube, a large cube-shaped building that housed the water sports. It contains a large swimming area with wave pool, and many people were swimming there. The public can also use the practice pool, and a number of people were swimming laps. The main pool is only used for competitions and is next to the diving pool.

[Diary] First stop was the Summer Palace, a place where emperors "escaped" the Forbidden City from spring to late summer. It consisted of some 600 acres three quarters being a man-made lake the soil and mud from which had been used to build a very large hill. The lake was frozen over and the wind started to blow. I looked around a few buildings, but when I heard music and singing, I made my way

up a hill to locate the source. I found a very enthusiastic group of pensioners and others singing from songbooks. A choir performed and a number of musicians played wind instruments and drums. I captured a whole song on video. An elderly man approached me and asked me where I was from, shook my hand vigorously, and welcomed me to China and Beijing.

After lunch, we drove to the Forbidden City where the extended families of 20+ royal dynasties lived for some hundreds of years, during which time it was off-limits to all others. A series of very large and elaborate gates lead to the inner sanctums. There are more than 8,000 rooms! I shot some video, but each gate or door led to an even bigger and fancier set of rooms and courtyards that it really was too much. Very quickly, I had overdosed. It certainly was impressive, however. It has only been open to the public for 20+ years.

Then, it was on to the Temple of Heaven, a place that was visited twice each year by the emperor who took part in major ceremonies to pray for a good harvest and on the winter solstice to pray for a good next season. Nearby was a teahouse, and we dropped in for a tea ceremony. The hostess explained the process and prepared five different teas for us to taste. I particularly liked the lychee and rose petal tea. The staff tried hard to sell us all kinds of tea and tea-related utensils, but the prices were quite high.

[Diary] *I scanned through some articles in the China Daily, and came across the following text in relation to American diplomacy: "Historians know well that the US has never been half as idealistic as it likes to see itself; ... The spirit invoked by the Statue of Liberty, embracing the poor and huddled masses, still shines brighter than all the lights in New York City, but somewhere during the transition from an ordinary nation to an overextended military power, the US lost touch with its better angels and set itself on the road to being the new Rome." Hmm, some food for thought. "Bloody Communist propaganda", you say? But no, it was written by one Phillip J. Cunningham, a visiting fellow at Cornell University, New York.*

5.10 Conclusion

For the most part, I've enjoyed my time in Asia. I've found the people to be very industrious and friendly. One important lesson I learned there during my very first trip is that not all red sauces are ketchup!

Bucket List: A couple of destinations intrigue me: Ankor Wat, Cambodia and the tiny country of Bhutan.

6. May 2015, “What is Normal - Part 8: Public Holidays”

A public holiday is a day designated to celebrate a specific event, such as a country's independence, a patriot's birthday, or a major religious occasion. If a public holiday falls on a weekend, it might be celebrated on the nearest weekday. And if it falls on a weekday, it usually means that workers have that day off, with pay. People working on a public holiday generally get extra pay for doing so.

Public holidays can occur on the same day each year, be fixed to a certain day of a given week, or on a day tied to an alternate calendar (such as one following the phases of the moon, rather than the sun). (In the US, the Presidential [Inauguration Day](#) is celebrated once every four years.)

Countries made up of states, provinces, and other such subdivisions often have both national and state-specific public holidays. For example, in the US, [Martin Luther King, Jr. Day](#) is a federal holiday. However, not all US states recognize that day, and even in those that do, there is no requirement that private companies give their employees the day off. My birth state, South Australia, has [Proclamation Day](#) to celebrate the establishment of government there as a British province, in 1836. (My father-in-law, John Hill, was named after his ancestor, a crew member on the HMS Buffalo on which Governor Hindmarsh arrived.) Texas celebrates its independence from Mexico on [Texas Independence Day](#). [South Australia and Texas are “sister states,” both having been created in 1836, although Texas did not join the US until some years later.]

In the UK and parts of the British Commonwealth, a public holiday is known as a [bank holiday](#).

For a list of public holidays by country, click [here](#).

For more discussion on holidays in general, see my July 2012 essay, [Are You Getting Enough Vacation?](#)

6.1 [New Year's Day](#)

As its name suggests, New Year's Day is the first day of the new year. And while most westerners immediately think of January 1st, people in other cultures use non-[Gregorian](#) calendars, or other methods to determine their holidays. Many places—such as [Sydney, Australia](#)—celebrate with fireworks at the stroke of midnight. In the US, New York City has the famous “[dropping of the ball](#)” in Times Square. Vienna, Austria, is famous for its [New Year's Concert](#).

[Chinese New Year](#) is the first day of the [lunar calendar](#), and typically occurs between January 20 and February 20.

The short-form name of the Vietnamese New Year (which is also lunar-calendar based), is Tết. According to Wikipedia, “The [Tet Offensive](#) was one of the largest military campaigns of the Vietnam War, launched on January 30, 1968 by forces of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese People's Army of Vietnam against the forces of South Vietnam, the United States, and their allies. It was a campaign of surprise attacks against military and civilian commands and control centers throughout South Vietnam. The name of the offensive comes from the Tết holiday, the Vietnamese New Year, when the first major attacks took place.”

Koreans get time off at the start of both solar and lunar new years. I ask you, “Is that fair?”

Many Muslims use the Hijri [Islamic calendar](#), which is also a lunar calendar

The Jewish New Year, [Rosh Hashanah](#), occurs in September or October.

The Russian New Year, [Novy God](#), used to be September 1, until Tsar Peter I decreed something else.

6.2 [National or Independence Days](#)

Some countries gained their independence by force while others were granted independence. The US celebrates in a big way every July 4th.

Australians celebrate [Australia Day](#) on January 26 to commemorate the arrival of the First Fleet of British Ships in 1788; however, the country actually became independent on January 1, 1901.

Each July 14, the French National Day, Bastille Day, commemorates the beginning of the French Revolution with the [Storming of the Bastille](#).

While [Cinco de Mayo](#) (literally, “the fifth of May” in Spanish) is widely celebrated, it is not any country's Independence Day despite claims to the contrary.

The Celebration of the unification of East and West Germany process occurs on [German Unity Day](#), on October 3.

6.3 [Religious Holidays](#)

For Christians, the two biggest holidays are Christmas and Easter. [Christmas](#) celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ, and usually occurs on [December 25](#). According to Wikipedia, “While the month and date of Jesus' birth are unknown, by the early-to-mid 4th century, the Western Christian Church had placed Christmas on December 25, a date later adopted in the East, although some churches celebrate on the December 25 of the older Julian calendar, which, in the Gregorian calendar, currently corresponds to January 7, the day after the Western Christian Church celebrates the Epiphany.” Others celebrate on January 6 or 19.

In Australia, we Aussie kids got presents from [Father Christmas](#); American kids have [Santa Claus](#) (or “Santa” for short); to my Dutch friends, [Sinterklaas](#) delivers presents December 5; while others get a visit from [Saint Nicolas](#).

Australia's development of its own unique National culture really came to the fore in the 1970s with the advent of the Aussie greeting-card industry. Prior to that, Aussie [Christmas cards](#) depicted winter scenes from England, which is rather silly when you consider that Down Under, it's summer! Thanks to Aussie ingenuity, Santa can now be seen sitting in a deck chair, in his swimming trunks, at the beach with a six-pack of beer (as God intended).

To read more than you ever wanted to know about Christmas trees, click [here](#).

Another memory from my Aussie youth was the calendar entry marked [Boxing Day](#), on December 26. I never knew what that meant until a few years ago when I decided to research it. Way back when, the lord of the manor would distribute a “Christmas box” to certain servants and tradesmen.

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Easter celebrates the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. According to Wikipedia, “Easter is a moveable feast, meaning it is not fixed in relation to the civil calendar. The First Council of Nicaea (325) established the date of Easter as the first Sunday after the Paschal Full Moon, the full moon that occurs on or soonest after 21 March (taken to be the date of the equinox).”

In Australia (as with other countries as well), Easter is a 4-day long weekend. Good Friday and Easter Sunday are church-going days; Saturday is the time to take a breather, historically with seriously reduced shopping hours; and Monday is a huge sporting day. Unfortunately, that holiday also sets the highest highway death toll for a weekend. The first year I lived in the US, my wife and I were busy making plans for what we were going to do with our up-coming Easter long weekend. Imagine our surprise when we found that great Christian country had no Easter public holiday at all!

Now as for the Easter Bunny, it's not clear to me what role he played in the resurrection.

It is interesting to note that some major Christian religious holidays occur right about the same time as some pagan predecessors. In order to convert their subjects, they found it useful to preserve certain feast days, but to give them a new meaning, sneaky devils!

Eid al-Fitr, the Feast of Breaking the Fast, is celebrated by Muslims to mark the end of Ramadan, the month-long period of fasting.

Jews celebrate a number of days, including Pesach (Passover) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement).

When I was taking Spanish lessons in Antigua, Guatemala, a major celebration there was *Todos Santos* (All Saints Day), on November 1. I managed to get to the town of Chichicastenango where I witnessed the grand parade in which a religious statue was carried through the streets. Several years later, I was in Vera Cruz, Mexico, for *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead), for the same holiday. We cleaned up the cemetery around the graves of departed relatives before shooting off fireworks. You've likely heard of Halloween (All Hallows' Eve or All Saints' Eve) celebrated on October 31.

6.4 Thanksgiving

It's probably a toss-up as to which US holiday is bigger, Independence Day or Thanksgiving. Americans celebrate Thanksgiving on the fourth Thursday in November to honor the giving of thanks by the Pilgrims after they establish their settlement in New England in 1621.

The theme of Thanksgiving is to “go home to be with family.” As such, it's the busiest travel period of the year, and if major snowfalls occur, chaos erupts. Many people take a floating holiday on the Friday following, so they can have a 4-day weekend.

In my 35+ years of living in the US, I've had more than a few Americans ask me how we celebrate Thanksgiving in Australia. Each time I've had to remind them the Pilgrims didn't quite make it to Australia; duh! That said I do have memories of attending Harvest Thanksgiving services at my local Lutheran Church. The altar and surrounds were decorated with fresh produce and homemade food and drink.

Canada's Thanksgiving predates America's, and has to do with giving thanks for surviving a long sea journey from England through the perils of storms and icebergs. It is now celebrated on the second Monday in October, and is tied to the close of the harvest season.

Rumor has it that the Brits celebrate their Thanksgiving on July 4 (US Independence Day), when they finally got rid of those troublesome colonies!

6.5 Labor Day

According to Wikipedia, "Labour Day (Labor Day in the United States) is an annual holiday to celebrate the achievements of workers. Labour Day has its origins in the labour union movement, specifically the eight-hour day movement, which advocated eight hours for work, eight hours for recreation, and eight hours for rest. For many countries, Labour Day is synonymous with, or linked with, International Workers' Day, which occurs on 1 May. For other countries, Labour Day is celebrated on a different date, often one with special significance for the labour movement in that country. In Canada and the United States, it is celebrated on the first Monday of September and considered the official end of the summer holiday for most of the respective countries, as public school and university students return to school that week or the following week."

In the US, this is a national holiday on the first Monday of September, while in Australia it is celebrated on different days in different states and territories.

6.6 Midsummer Day

According to Wikipedia, this day, "also known as St John's Day, is the period of time centered upon the summer solstice, and more specifically the Northern European celebrations that accompany the actual solstice or take place on a day between June 21 and June 25 and the preceding evening. The exact dates vary between different cultures."

While this day is celebrated in numerous countries, I've personally witnessed it in two: Denmark and Finland. Copenhagen is home to the famous Tivoli Gardens, and I was in town on business and had my wife and young son with me. On Saint John's Day, we went to the gardens for an evening of entertainment, and to see the burning of a huge witch. As the fire raged, my son asked where the witch went after she was burned, to which I replied, in English, "She comes back as your mother-in-law." Those Danes nearby who understood English smiled on hearing that.

I was visiting Finnish friends in Helsinki, and for the holiday weekend, we drove to their lakeside cabin, complete with sauna, as God intended; after all, this was Finland! There the day is called *Juhannus Day* after John the Baptist. In the evening, we made our way through the ever-present dark clouds of mosquitoes to the local village where we ate great food while being entertained by singers of folk songs. The culmination was the burning of a large witch on a platform out in the lake.

Apparently, it is not necessary to actually burn a witch. All along the coast and lakesides around Scandinavia, ordinary bonfires can be seen burning on this night.

Nowadays, the closest we have in the US to a festival with a witch burning is Burning Man. [I might just add this to my own bucket list.]

6.7 Miscellaneous Days

The UK and member countries of the British Commonwealth celebrate the Queen's Birthday; however, they don't always do it on the same date, or on the Queen's actual birthday. Some years ago, at the last minute, I bought a cheap 3-day weekend airfare from Washington DC to Ottawa, Canada's capital. On arrival, I discovered it was Victoria Day, named for the birthday of that foxy babe Queen Victoria. It now designates the reigning sovereign, whoever that may be. Ottawa is a fine city to visit at any time of the year, but a reason to go there in May is to witness the spectacular Canadian Tulip Festival when more than a million tulip bulbs are blooming in a small area with half a million pedestrians going around to see them. As to how this festival got started, let's just say it has something to do with the Crown Princess Juliana of the Netherlands being there during WWII, and leave it for you to read about that offline.

A major public holiday in Australia (and New Zealand) is Anzac Day, April 25, when the country remembers its people who died fighting or who served in wars. This day has its roots in the tragedy of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) soldiers at Gallipoli in Turkey during WWI. Many towns start the day with a dawn church service at a war memorial often referred to as a *Cross of Sacrifice*. The big military holiday in the US is Memorial Day, celebrated on the last Monday in May, while Armistice Day is widely observed on "the 11th day of the 11th month" in countries involved in WWI.

6.8 Conclusion

Back in the old days, the peasants slaved away in harsh conditions for long hours each day, usually for at least six days a week. In order to allow them to let off some steam, the landed gentry and church gave the workers a day off and a celebration now and then. As best as I can tell, in the Western world, that is still pretty much the reason behind most public holidays.

7. June 2015, “Travel: Memories of Mexico and Central America”

The countries are listed in the order in which I first visited them.

7.1 Mexico

Official Name: United Mexican States; Capital: Mexico City; Language: Spanish; Country Code: MX; Currency: peso (MXP)

My first foray into Mexico was a day trip to Tijuana from San Diego, California. I parked my rental car at the border and walked across into a town full of shops and restaurants. I made the obligatory visit to a liquor store to see the dead worms in the bottles of tequila. I spent an interesting evening watching jai alai, an indoor game played by two or four players.

From a trip to the capital and to the Caribbean-coast state of Vera Cruz in 1994:

My first impression of Mexico City was its pollution. As my plane descended, we flew through thick, brown/yellow clouds. At the airport, I phoned a young woman who was a member of a hosting organization to which I belonged. She was most generous and told me to “stay right there” while she drove across the city to pick me up, to find me a hotel, and to take me there. The next day, she and a friend picked me up and took me on a city tour.

After a few days in the capital, I headed southeast to the state of Puebla to see some of its earthen step pyramids. From there, it was on to the Caribbean coast and the state of Vera Cruz. Six weeks earlier, I'd written letters in English and Spanish to six different hosts in Mexico. I got no replies and those I contacted once in-country said they hadn't received them. Of all of them, there was one family with which I really wanted to stay, and that actually happened. They were a young couple with two kids, who ran the family dairy farm. When I phoned from their local village, they said they would be delighted to have me stay, and if I could wait a couple of hours, they'd come to get me. I stayed with them for three days. There was one situation, however, that made me feel quite uncomfortable. As I was a visitor from the US, the husband seemed to hold me personally responsible for political actions being taken by the California state government with respect to refusing to provide education to the children of illegal immigrants.

Throughout my travels, I'd heard about a quirky place to visit in the jungle to the north and west, so I decided to take a look. I took a bus to the town of Xilitla (where the letter x is pronounced as an h). If one was very wealthy, fed up with English society, heard voices in one's head telling one to get away from it all, one could do like Edward James, and go to a remote jungle in Mexico and build huge, surreal sculptures and a gothic-style mansion. A young American couple has recently taken over his house, and were in the process of renovating it as a hotel. Although they were not yet open for business, some rooms were ready, and they were happy to rent me one for a couple of nights

From a trip to the Yucatan in 2007:

[Diary] At 6 pm, my bus pulled into the bus station at Tulum. I chatted with a young couple from Berlin, and we agreed to share a taxi to the hotel area on the beach some distance from downtown. The driver was very friendly and spoke basic English, which he had learned in Texas. The place where the Germans

were staying had no single rooms available, so I had the driver take me to some other places nearby. I soon found a room and checked-in for two nights. Check-in consisted of my writing my name and nationality in a ruled schoolbook, and paying cash for my stay. Then I got a tour of the share toilets and shower rooms out under the trees. I was also given a strong padlock and key to lock-up my room.

On seeing my room, my first reaction was that it was the house of sticks, straight from "The Three Little Pigs." The walls of the room were literally large round sticks, going from floor to ceiling. The breeze came right on between them, as did the humidity. (Hopefully, the Big Bad Wolf wouldn't come huffing and puffing!) A double bed was fixed to one wall and was suspended from the roof on new strong ropes. It had a big mosquito net, a pillow, and a bottom sheet only. Also provided was an electric fan on a stand. The room cost 300 pesos (\$30) per night. Not cheap considering what I got, but it wasn't very far from the ruins I'd come to see, and it was right on the beach. It was also really quite quaint. The waves crashed all day and night outside my window and off the small restaurant patio.

[Diary] *I woke feeling refreshed. It was then I discovered that the electricity was off. On inquiry, I was told it was on from 6 pm to 6 am only. I also found that the hot water came from solar panels, so the shower might be lukewarm at best. But that's okay as I'm on vacation and it's warm out.*

Mid-morning, I packed my daypack with the essentials: water, leftover breakfast, first-aid kit, toilet paper, novel, and Spanish vocabulary book, among other things. Then I applied a liberal dose of suntan cream, and put on a light long-sleeved shirt and floppy hat. Then I headed out to walk to the main attraction.

The Tulum ruin comprises a wall on the north, west, and south sides, with the sea being the natural barrier to the east. The interior part was at least twice as long as it was wide, and was very nicely preserved with lots of cordoned-off areas to protect the ruins themselves. In fact, tourists can't walk on or in any ruins. There were quite a few iguanas sunning themselves on rocks, in the grass, and on the ruins. Some were quite large. The coastline there is very rugged with well-worn cliffs. There was one small horseshoe-shaped beach, although that was closed. A steep set of wooden stairs allowed visitors to get down to another small strip of beach, so I went down to have a look. Well what can I say; there were all shapes and sizes of human-like creatures sunbathing and swimming, quite a few of whom should never have been allowed out in public dressed as they were. There was plenty of shade and seats or rocks on which to sit, so after I walked all around, I sat and people-watched for quite some time. Since I had nowhere to go, I went nowhere. Mission Accomplished!

[Diary] *At the bus station, I negotiated the purchase of a round-trip ticket to [Coba](#). Although the walk to the ruin site was two kms in and two more back, it was all in the shade. However, I perspired a lot. The Mayan city held 50,000 people at its peak, and was spread out around several lakes. There were quite a few near-complete buildings and then there was the main pyramid. Its steps went all the way to the temple on top at an angle of 45 degrees. I climbed it in three stages with breaks along the way ... during which I put my heart back in my chest. At the top, there was a small room, which was very cool and dark. The view went for miles with only the top of a much smaller temple to be seen in the vicinity.*

I spent 2½ hours seeing the site, and then happily slumped in the shade with a tall bottle of cold grapefruit soda. I looked over the touristy trash in the souvenir stalls, and left with nothing but a postcard.

[Diary] We pulled into the new bus station in the middle of Valladolid, and I struck up a conversation with a woman from Quebec City, Canada. She recommended the hotel El Mason del Marques, which was only a few blocks away facing the large park in the center of town. It had a very nice looking restaurant and swimming pool, air-conditioned rooms, and even TV. A bank and post office were nearby. Oh, did I mention the book exchange? I asked if I could see a room, and a bellman took me on a tour. Bellman, you say, what kind of budget hotel has a bellman? While it was much more upscale from my previous very humble abode, it cost only 550 pesos (\$55) per night, and I didn't have to haul my valuables with me when I went to the toilet or shower as the rooms had en-suites.

Here's what my guidebook had to say about the town. "Valladolid combines distinguished colonial architecture with the easygoing atmosphere of a Yucatan market town. Whitewashed arcades and 17th-century houses surround the main plaza, and among the town's many fine churches is a fine Franciscan monastery. Right in the middle of the town is a huge cenote (sink hole), which once provided all Valladolid's water, and nearby at Dzitnip are some of the Yucatan's most spectacular cenotes for swimming." While the essence of this likely is true, it conjured up a far more romantic picture than what I'd seen so far.

[Diary] The hotel restaurant was under a verandah, in a square wrapped around an open courtyard garden. A large cascading fountain splashed in the center, and some flowering plants, trees, and vines added contrasting colors to the cream and white plastered walls that lined the courtyard. The walls were lined with large paintings, large ornately carved furniture, clay pots, big brass light fixtures, including a big chandelier. From my table, I could see out the huge wooden double front doors to the plaza across the street. There, the craft markets had been in full swing for several hours. And if all that wasn't enough, the sound of Spanish guitars was piped in to soothe me as I ate my toast and honey. All this and more for a \$5 breakfast! I could get used to this.

[Diary] Chichen Itza is by far the best known of the Mayan cities, and its main pyramid is recognized around the world. I started with some of the lesser buildings and temples. The observatory was impressive, and the Maya had an excellent understanding of the seasons. Their calendar was very accurate. They studied Venus and the sun, and like numerous other peoples around the world, constructed buildings aligned with the sun on equinoxes.

The main pyramid has been closed to tourists for some years, since one fell from the top. It was in a very good state of repair, and some people were working on it during my visit. There were several cenotes, the main one of which was open to the sky. The Maya played a ball game, and here was the largest arena in the Americas. On occasion, the losing team, or at least its captain, was executed. There was a large temple with two long sets of columns going off in different directions. Many of the columns were covered in elaborate carvings. A prominent figure carved all over the site was a serpent's head. At 6:30 pm, I returned to the ruins to see the light show.

[Diary] I rode a bus back to Cancun where I boarded the high-speed catamaran to la Isla Mujeres, "The Women's Island," a couple of miles off the coast. I soon found a hotel.

[Diary] Late morning, I ventured out from my air-conditioned cocoon. It was hot and more than a little humid, so I kept to the shade as much as possible. I went north along the waterfront. Some fishermen were stacking nets into a small boat, the dive and boat tours people were busy, and people were lazing

in the sun on the beach. Once I got to the north coast, the hotels went a bit up-scale, with nicer beaches and deckchair and umbrella rentals. I came across a topless bathing area with more than a few women airing their differences. Over on the east coast, which is open to the Caribbean Sea, the waves were much stronger, and large parts of the beaches had been washed away. Some reclamation was underway. On the way back to my room, I paused for a treat, frozen mango juice covering vanilla ice cream.

7.2 Costa Rica

Official Name: Republic of Costa Rica; Capital: San Jose; Language: Spanish; Country Code: CR;
Currency: colon (CRC)

I was impressed with the idea of a country that had no army, navy, or air force, which certainly keeps defense spending low! So, in 1992, I decided to go visit. I stayed one night in a youth hostel in San Jose, and shared a room with three guys from various countries, one of whom was Norwegian. (He'd just come from Spanish-language training in Guatemala, and passed along information about the place he'd stayed and the woman from whom he'd had private lessons. See §7.3 below.) The next morning, we all headed off in different directions, and by some fantastic coincidence, three days later, we were all back sharing the same room.

I started out my tour by riding a bus to Puerto Limon on the Caribbean coast. From there I went south not far from the Panamanian border to a town I'd read about in a [Lonely Planet](#) guide. Although the hotel I'd heard about was booked, they referred me to Ms. Mary nearby who sometimes rented a room to tourists. I stayed with her a couple of nights. She had a dog called Rex, and she wouldn't believe me when I told her that was also my name. Even after I showed her my passport, she kept on saying that Rex was a dog's name!

Next stop was [La Fortuna](#) where I wanted to see the [Arenal Volcano](#) erupt. While it did rumble several times each day, and actually erupted on a daily basis, the rain and fog kept me from seeing anything. Fortunately, on the last evening, the skies cleared, and I went with a group to sit downwind of it and watch the fiery rocks shoot into the air and to feel the fine sand blast on my face.

I ended the trip with a 2-night stay with a retired journalist who lived in the heart of San Jose.

From a family trip in 2004:

[Diary] *In San Jose, we boarded an express bus to the [Monteverde Cloud Forest](#) off to the north east. The bus was more comfortable than when I had traveled this country by bus 12 years ago, but legroom was still minimal. After five hours through the countryside with frequent stops, we arrived in Santa Elene, just as light rain began to fall. As we got off the bus, a young mother, Marlina, was soliciting customers for her hotel, "Cabinas el Pueblo." She seemed to be an interesting character, so we set off with her to check it out. Our room had two bunk beds and a double bed, with en-suite bathroom, all for about US\$25/night. Marlina directed us to her mother's "soda" (a small restaurant), where we had a delicious dinner of local food.*

[Diary] *A bus picked us up for our evening expedition. We joined our guide, and set off into the forest. We saw tarantulas, sleeping birds, two porcupines up in a tree (they really are tree porcupines that live*

in hollows high up), a raccoon, butterflies, and some frogs. We even got to see the Southern Cross although we were not in the southern hemisphere. The hike took two hours.

[Diary] *We were booked for a day of Eco-tourism in the cloud forest. From 8:30–10:30 am, my son, Scott, and I took 13 zip-line trips across the ravines. We were rigged up with safety helmets and harnesses, which were attached to each wire. The longest wire was 400–500 feet, and with the thick clouds in the forest, we often couldn't see our landing spot until we raced close to it. I braked too hard several times, and had to pull myself in by hand the last 30 feet. (Don't you just hate that when that happens!) After lunch, we enjoyed the huge indoor butterfly garden dome, insect displays, and a hummingbird garden.*

[Diary] *Originally, we had planned to take the long bus ride to Arenal, but decided it was worth the extra cost to more than halve the trip time via an alternate means. At 8 am, a Jeep arrived to take us down the winding mountain roads to a lake. At 9:30, we began the boat ride across Lake Arenal. Our next accommodation had been arranged by Marlana, and so we were met and taken by Jeep to La Fortuna, the town at the base of the active Arenal Volcano. We checked into the "Pura Vida" (Good Life) B&B where we spent a quiet afternoon.*

[Diary] *There was still no sign of the volcano as it was covered in clouds. We took a taxi to the Arenal waterfalls. Our driver was quite a character, and agreed to pick us up later and then take us around the area. Scott and I walked down the narrow steps to the base of the falls. After half an hour there, we climbed back to the top. (When I did this 12 years ago, I rode from the town on horseback, and there were no tourist facilities or steps down.)*

In the evening, we went to the "Baldi Termae" outdoor hot springs for an evening soak. (They are heated by the volcano, and most were way too hot for us to enter.) Despite almost constant rain, this was quite an experience. There was talk of being able to see a volcanic eruption, but we didn't see any activity.

[Diary] *Back in the capital, our hotel was a beautifully restored coffee plantation house in the university district, out of the downtown area. From there, we took a local bus to an old city that had been the capital many years ago. We enjoyed wandering around the city and through the markets and stalls in the city square, as well as the never-completed big church that was ruined by an earthquake.*

7.3 Guatemala

Official Name: Republic of Guatemala; Capital: Guatemala City; Language: Spanish; Country Code: GT; Currency: quetzal (GTQ)

As I wrote in §7.2 above, I was in Costa Rica in 1992, where a Norwegian had recommended a place in Guatemala to stay and learn Spanish. While I took down the particulars, going to Guatemala was not on my radar at that time. However, 12 months later, there I was in the old capital, Antigua, knocking on the lady's door. I stayed for two weeks paying \$5/night for my Spartan room without meals. I also took private Spanish lessons at \$2/hour. The woman worked, but each afternoon when she came home, we'd drink coffee out in the garden, and I'd tell her what grammar I'd been working on that morning with my books. Then depending on our moods, we had a lesson from one to three hours. It was all very civilized and beat the boring language classes I'd attended in the past. Each morning, I'd visit my local

bakery for a breakfast of empanadas and café con leche, and to practice my Spanish on the unsuspecting owner.

The weekend between those two weeks was *Todo Santos* (All Saints Day, after Halloween), and I rode a bus out to the famous town of Chichicastenango to see the big religious procession. I stayed overnight at Panajachel.

After two weeks of Spanish immersion and covering all 14 tenses, and then promptly forgetting all but the two I'd arrived with, I flew on a light plane up to Flores from where I toured the Mayan ruins at Tikal.

7.4 Conclusion

I've always found Latin Americans to be very friendly and helpful, and more than willing to tolerate my bad Spanish. I do enjoy much of their simple style of food, and I'd be happy to visit new places or to revisit some places in this region.

8. July 2015, “Confessions of a Canine Companion”

Okay, let's get it out there right up front; I'm a dog lover! However, there definitely are some breeds I avoid. Some years ago, I read an interesting article that claimed, “Children are for people who can't have dogs!” Now I've cited that quote many times, but when most people hear it they actually think the direct opposite; that is, having a pet is a consolation prize for not having a child. So when I meet someone walking a well-behaved and friendly dog, I share that quote. One woman replied, “I have some of each.” And when I asked, “Which do you prefer?”, she replied, “Some days the dogs, other days the kids.” C'est la vie!

Friends of mine bought a house from a family that had two cats: IC (*Inside Cat*) and OC (*Outside Cat*). Now IC was used to the family, so it moved out with them, whereas OC was used to the house and surrounds, and he stayed with the new owners. OC and I became friends, so much so that I made him an *Honorary Dog*, so we could hang out together.

While I do discuss my time as a canine companion, for the most part, this essay is about my experiences with various kinds of animals, both friendly and wild. Note that for my formative years, I lived in a rural part of South Australia. For the past 35 years, I've lived in Northern Virginia, USA.

8.1 Farm and Working Animals

My earliest memories of being around animals was at age 4. We had milk cows, pigs, and a henhouse. Nearby was a patch of lucerne (US: alfalfa) that was grown to feed these animals. A tall building housed a pigeon loft, and I remember someone opening the door high up to let the birds out to feed. That door was closed again at night. I'm pretty sure that we kept them for food, as I recall eating pigeon meat in soup.

At age 7, we moved to a 4,000-acre farm. At any time, we probably had 500–1,500 sheep, and these needed regular attention, especially in summer when blowflies would strike them by laying eggs in wet and manure-stained skin around their rear end. For this reason, lambs had their tails cut off quite short within days of birth. And apart from annual shearing for the wool, sheep were crutched, which involved clipping the wool from around their hindquarters. I remember helping with the shearing, sweeping up the fleeces from the floor, packing them into large bales, and filling and emptying yards of sheep using our sheep dog Ringa, a male Border Collie. The shearing stand was an engine driven by petrol (US: gasoline) that powered two stations, one per shearer. Mom delivered morning and afternoon tea to the shed, and everyone drank hot tea even in the hot weather! It was backbreaking work with a good shearer shearing 200 sheep per day at a rate of £10 (\$20) per 100 sheep, which was good money in the '60s. The wool was sorted on a large table and then pressed in a bale using a mechanical ratchet with long metal handles.

Another sheep-related activity was treatment with chemicals to get rid of critters on their skin. Traditionally, this was done by running them through and down into a sheep dip, a deep channel filled with chemical-laced water through which they had to swim. This was known as *dipping*, and the sheep dogs were usually thrown in as well. Later, the same affect was achieved using spray guns mounted over, under, and around a pen of sheep.

At times, we had 4–8 cows that we milked by hand each morning and night. I only milked in the afternoons and, as my cow, Peggy, stood still pretty much anywhere without having to be tethered, I milked her out in the yard. I recall our having an engine-powered milking machine at some stage. Now after the morning milking, the cows were let out to graze all day in pasture, so each afternoon I had to fetch them with the dog. That often involved walking a couple of miles. Once the cows were milked, the cream had to be removed by a separator, a hand-turned machine made by Alfa-Laval that was very intricate. After each use it had to be completely broken down and sterilized, and that task took as long as the separating itself. We used the milk in the house and any excess was fed to the pigs.

Another chore I recall having was feeding the *chooks* (Aussie slang for hens) and collecting their eggs. From time to time, we raised new broods of chickens—that arrived on the train as day-olds in a cardboard box with air holes— under a heated device called a *brooder*. Hens that got behind in their laying duties finished up in the cooking pot.

Near the henhouse, there was a pen with a small cement-lined pond in which we sometimes kept ducks.

At various times, we had one or more farm cats, which lived in the outbuildings where they had to fend for themselves. Occasionally, we fed them a saucer of milk.

Each time I've seen an episode of the popular TV series All Creatures Great and Small, I've been amused at how the farmers call in a vet for all kinds of domestic-animal situations. As best as I can recall, in all the years we had animals and birds, not once was calling in a vet or taking an animal to a vet ever considered an option. Farmers simply expected to care for their livestock themselves.

At age 12, we moved again, to a place where we had more than 200 pigs at any time, many of which we bred. My job after school each weekday was to feed them buckets of crushed grain. I also had to clean the cement water troughs. All the sties had straw roofs and dirt floors, and in the summer, it got quite hot. At the hottest, we had sprinklers in some of the pens to help the pigs cool down. I found pigs to be very intelligent and I liked working with them. [To this day, when I'm at a farm or livestock show, I always reach into the pigpen and give one a scratch on the ears, head, and back, just to hear that contented grunt.]

8.2 Wildlife, Game, and Hunting

A huge property neighboring our farm provided a great habitat for wildlife, and whenever these animals could get through or over the fence separating that property from ours, they did. After all, we had juicy cereal crops to eat! The two large kinds of animals that did this were kangaroos and emus.

As emus are diurnal, they are rarely seen out at night. Often, they moved in large groups and with their large size and very strong legs, they could knock down a large swath of cereal crop as they waded through a paddock. Of course, chasing them through a crop made the damage even worse. When we could get up close to them by chasing them in an open paddock in a ute, short for utility vehicle (US: coupe utility, such as the Chevrolet El Camino), we killed them with a 12-gauge shotgun. Back home, we fed them raw to the pigs, which loved them. However, due to the presence of parasites in and on the meat, we had to remove the bones and feathers from the pigsties within a few days.

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While kangaroos were sometimes seen during the day, they seemed to be more common at night. Most years, rabbits were also plentiful, and I earned non-trivial pocket money by trapping them. Occasionally, we saw a hare or a fox.

Hunting was done at night, from the back of a ute, with a spotlight powered from the ute's 12-volt battery. This was known as *spotlighting*. It was best done on nights without a moon. The idea was to drive around looking for kangaroos, rabbits, hares, or foxes. If a kangaroo was spotted and it sat still and it was no more than a hundred yards or so away, the ute was stopped and the shooter used a high-powered rifle. Oftentimes it was a .303 army-surplus gun that could be bought quite cheaply (for less cost than a box of bullets, actually). [In previous times, people used to have one of a number of breeds of hunting dogs, which chased down kangaroos.] Foxes were chased and shot with a shotgun, which required us to get quite close; likewise for hares. In the case of rabbits, when they stopped, a shooter used a .22 rifle and shot into the ground very near the rabbit's head. This would temporarily deafen the rabbit so that a runner in the dark could come in from the side to grab the rabbit and wring its neck. By not shooting the rabbit directly, there was no damage to the carcass, which was essential if it was to be eaten or sold. The rule was that once a shooter had shot, they never shot again unless the runner called them to do so. That way, the runner was not in danger of being shot (which could easily happen when a trigger-happy guest was invited to join the hunting party). I very much appreciated this rule, as I was most often the runner.

Chasing a fox or hare involved very quick changes of direction, and driving fast in loops and circles. My Dad, who drove the ute, had the uncanny ability to know where he was in the paddock even on the darkest night, as it was important to know where the fast-moving ute was in relation to fences and rabbit burrows.

When we killed kangaroos, we took them home where we cooked them in one or more oil drums around which was burned a fire of mallee-tree stumps. The pigs loved the resulting kangaroo soup/stew. Occasionally, we ate a kangaroo steak, which was fried in a pan along with bay leaves. [At that time, kangaroo meat was declared unfit for human consumption, and when hunted for sale, was used in pet food. Many years later, it was offered for sale to humans in butcher shops.]

Occasionally, we'd see a wedge-tail eagle, and even one of their nests. They had a huge wingspan and were capable of carrying off a newborn lamb, as were foxes.

There was no shortage of birds, the most common being crows, magpies, and galahs, the latter being a large pink and grey parrot. [Apparently, at one time, someone considered them rather stupid, and the term *galah* entered the vernacular in that context, as in, "He's a bloody galah!"] Because they could be taught to talk, it was not uncommon to find galahs as pets. Another, but more beautiful, cockatoo was the Major Mitchell. Except in certain years (possibly wet ones), these were far less common.

I remember one year that we had a budgie [short for budgerigar (US: parakeet)] plague. And although budgies sold in pet shops came in a variety of colors, these wild ones were always green and yellow.

Birds in the area nested in open or closed nests made in trees, or in the hollows of tree branches and trunks. The Murray Magpie made an open mud nest on a tree branch, and it was not unusual to see emu feathers embedded in the mud. Birds from the kingfisher family lived in burrows, usually near

bodies of water. One particular member of that family is the kookaburra, also known as the *laughing jackass*. [If you watch old movies set in the jungle, you will often hear kookaburra calls despite the fact that those birds don't live in such places. It just makes for an impressive noise.]

A rare bird was the Mallee fowl, which made a nest on the ground and buried its eggs. I don't believe I ever saw such a bird in the wild, but I did see several nests, which had grown very large over many years of use.

8.3 Pets

Although we had a dog and some cats when I was a farm boy, they were working animals who liked some occasional personal attention on the side. At that time, many people kept caged birds and Mom had a budgie, which we taught to say a few words.

It wasn't until I lived in the US and my son, Scott, was about four that we talked about getting a pet. Neighbors had recently gotten a corn snake, and Scott liked holding that, but when he proposed getting one himself, his mother stated something like, "Over my dead body!" As a result, he was heard complaining to our next-door neighbor, Joe, "The problem with Mothers is they won't let you have a snake!"

Eventually, when we went to the pet shop to look at birds, this particular green and yellow budgie escaped and flew around the shop. My son thought the bird had spirit, so decided to buy that one and to call him *Frisky*. Once Frisky got used to us handling him, we let him fly around the house, and only caged him at nights. One day, we stood his cage outdoors—with him in it—to take in some sunshine and fresh air. Unfortunately, a cat took interest in him and knocked over the cage, causing one of the wire doors to slide open. Just after I heard the crash, I looked up to see Frisky perched on the edge of the door ready to fly out. We left the open cage outside should he find his way home, but even though we saw him flying around outside later that day, he never did return.

After a break from pets, once again I took my son to the pet store telling him that he could have any sort of animal that would fit in the birdcage we currently had. We came home with two mice, which he called Alice and Jasmine. The idea was that with two females, they could groom and amuse each other, and there wouldn't be any babies. Using wood, I build some stairs and several levels in the cage, and all was well, but only for a short while, when babies appeared. Apparently, one of the females was pregnant when we bought her. Fortunately, the pet shop agreed to take the babies, so we were back to our original plan. Every now and then, we'd take them out of the cage and let them run around, mostly inside mazes we built with blocks on a table. However, as they got older, they slowed way down and could no longer get up the stairs in their cage. Eventually, they developed growths and died, but not before my son had asked my wife to check with the veterinary clinic to see if anything could be done. "Yes," the exotic animal specialist told her, "We could perform surgery at a cost of \$125, but their normal lifespan was short anyway." They both died soon after.

Some years later, we got a blue and white budgie, but as it liked to bite people, we gave it away, along with the cage.

8.4 My Dog-Walking Experience

Several years ago, I moved out to the countryside to a house less than a mile from the county [animal shelter](#). As I was thinking about some volunteer possibilities, I visited the shelter. I was very impressed, and during my extensive travels abroad, have stayed in a number of accommodations that were nowhere near as nice as those animals had, I kid you not! So, I submitted an application and signed up for an orientation session. That included an overview of the animal control process, the goals of the shelter, and a discussion of animals having to be destroyed under certain circumstances.

Being a long-time dog lover, I signed up to become a *canine companion*, and after a short time with a supervisor, I was on my own. I agreed to spend at least two hours per week walking and socializing with dogs. One goal was to get some regular exercise, but I also had a romantic idea of spending time with interesting dogs, which, unfortunately, turned out to not often be the case. The (fairly obvious) reason most dogs are in a shelter is that they are unwanted, and very often undisciplined and unloved as a result. As such, most dogs I walked had no attractive personality, the thing I most wanted. Occasionally, I'd walk one that showed some promise.

Once, a dog so wonderful arrived that I loved spending time with it, so much so that the staff suggested I adopt it. I proposed that I do that but keep it at the shelter, so when I was traveling, there would be someone to feed and walk it. Apparently, that wasn't an option, although I was all for it! Soon after, that dog was adopted, but after a few weeks, it was back again. When I inquired as to why, I was told, "The family had two cats, and they didn't get along with the dog." To me, the solution was obvious, keep the dog and get rid of the cats!

I dutifully walked dogs for two hours each week I was in town, and did extra to make up for those weeks I was away. I have to say that walking in the cold, rain, ice and snow, especially up steep and slippery paths, didn't help my enthusiasm, and after six months, I stopped.

8.5 Book, Cartoon, and Comic Strip Animals

My first recollection of storybook animals was in a large book containing many stories about [Yogi Bear](#) and his pal Boo Boo. [Fifty-five years later, I still have that book.] I also had a steady supply of Disney comics starring [Donald Duck](#) and his many friends and relatives. However, I must say that there were a lot of nieces and nephews, and uncles and aunts, but no actual parents!

When it came to reading to my son, my favorite characters were the [Berenstain Bears](#). However, I often quizzed him as to why Mother Bear always seemed to wear the same old dress. And where did the bears get money?

We were also great fans of [Winnie the Pooh](#) and [Paddington Bear](#). In the latter case, many years ago, I took the family to London, England, where we went to Paddington Station. There was a very large Paddington bear in a glass case, along with his suitcase that had a label saying "From Darkest Peru" with a note from Aunt Lucy. [Since that station's renovation, there is no longer a permanent Paddington Bear exhibit, but traces of him can still be found.]

Now another very popular character—but my least favorite—is [Curious George](#). In almost every story, this monkey made a mess, broke something, or otherwise got into more than a little bit of trouble, yet

every time the *Man in the Yellow Hat* forgave him without there being any consequences to bad behavior.

Through a kids' book club, we bought a series of *Bugg Books*, about many different insects that lived in the land of *Morethansmall*. The stories told and lessons learned were very well done, but the thing I found most interesting was that each book contained two stories. One story went up to the middle of the book. Then you simply went to the back of the book, turned it upside down, and started reading the second story to the middle. There were two front covers and no back ones!

When it comes to animals in print cartoons, [Fred Bassett](#) was probably the first I came across. Later, [Footrot Flats](#) entertained me, as did [Garfield](#) and Odie when I came to the US.

And when it comes to animated animals, [Wiley Coyote](#) and [Foghorn Leghorn](#) have gotten my attention, as did [Tom and Jerry](#).

By far the most intelligent cartoon animal I can recall is the dog Gromit from [Wallace and Gromit](#). Creator Nick Park also did a great job with the full-length movie [Chicken Run](#).

8.6 TV and Screen Animals

Some of the first animals I saw on black and white TV included [Lassie](#) and [Rin Tin Tin](#). (Did I mention that I was a dog lover?) I also enjoyed [Mr. Ed](#) the talking horse and [Francis the Talking Mule](#). Later came Australia's own [Skippy the Bush Kangaroo](#), followed by [Flipper](#) the dolphin and Fred the cockatoo from the TV series [Baretta](#).

8.7 Conclusion

Having been raised in rural Australia, where kangaroos and emus were commonplace and not so interesting, once I moved to the US, I became fascinated with deer and squirrels, as they seemed rather exotic. It all depends on one's idea of [normal](#).

Although I was a canine companion at the county animal shelter, my secret desire was to become a *critter cuddler*; that is, to take care of small animals like gerbils, rats, snakes, and such.

Over time, I've completely lost interest in seeing caged animals or birds, especially in commercial chicken and pig farms. And I'm even unhappy when I see pet birds or zoo animals in small cages, especially those pacing up and back all day. It seems to me that such critters really must suffer from mental health problems.

9. August 2015, "Signs of Life: Part 1"

From time to time during my travels, I come across signs that I find interesting for one reason or another. Sometimes, they contain clever writing, are humorous, or remind me of some place or event. Here are some from a recent trip to London and Yorkshire in England.



A restaurant.

According to its [website](#), "The restaurant features many quirks – eagles, clocks all set to 8 o'clock and film sets in the toilets – don't be afraid to ask!"



A sandwich shop.

According to Wikipedia, the upper crust is, "The upper class in modern societies; the social class composed of the wealthiest members of society, who also wield the greatest political power. Apparently, it's also "the name of a pizza chain in Boston, and a chain of European baguette (sandwich) restaurants".



This was in the window of a fish and chip shop.

I thought it odd to use the word *species* when taking about the available choices of cooked fish. Ordinarily, this term is used in the context of biological classification.

And just in case you were wondering what *panga* is, [click here](#).



Now which couples do you know fit this description?



Presumably, the use of *suck* in this advertisement for a breakfast drink on the side of a public bus is not only about sucking through a straw, but also the slang term that Wiktionary describes as, “To be inferior or objectionable: a general term of disparagement, sometimes used with *at* to indicate a particular area of deficiency.”

From my own experience living Down Under, until the great social awakening there in the 70's, I think it is fair to say that Aussies did think of themselves as being second-

class. However, nowadays, they are far superior to the Poms at cricket!

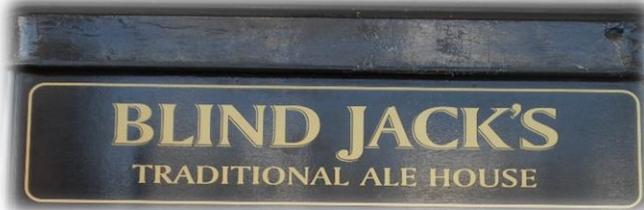


One of many like signs I saw painted on the *sidewalk* (or should I say, *footpath*).

BTW, *bin* is short for *dustbin*, the British equivalent of an American *garbage can* or *trash can*.



A pizza place. A clever take-off of *bits and pieces*.



From a pub.

According to Wikipedia, "John Metcalf (1717–1810), also known as *Blind Jack of Knaresborough* or *Blind Jack Metcalf*, was the first professional road builder to emerge

during the Industrial Revolution. And he was indeed blind.



A clever name for a real estate and property management company.



A restaurant.

The term *Cosa Nostra* generally refers to the Sicilian Mafia. As such, I couldn't help but think that, here, one could eat the fishes before sleeping with the fishes!



But who's counting?



A restaurant.

According to their [website](#), "Our main offering is [sic] small homemade grazing dishes which are ideal for sharing or for having alone if you don't do sharing. The main thing that people enjoy is sampling lots of different dishes in one sitting. We often find that people will order something they wouldn't normally because it is served in our unique grazing style."



An antiques shop.

I've heard of a [den of iniquity](#), but apparently, this is something else. Or perhaps the antiques are stolen!



Sign at a street market stall.

It seems like a fair request, although it doesn't say anything about the dog's owner taking a whizz.

A lingerie shop.



I immediately thought of the old song from the musical Carousel, "June Is Bustin' Out All Over", although I believe that in that context June was the name of a month rather than somebody's girl!



Magic carpet ride, anyone?

10. September 2015, "Travel: Memories of Austria"

Official Name: Republic of [Austria](#); Capital: [Vienna](#) (Wien); Language: German; Country Code: AT; Currency: euro (EUR) [formerly schilling (ATS)]

10.1 Vienna in 2011

[Diary] Helmut and Annelies had very generously offered to host me for all four days of my stay even though the usual arrangement with the hosting group [Servas International](#) is for two. We drove out of the city to their country cottage, a 20-year-old large log cabin. It was a little bit of Heaven! We unloaded the groceries and did a few jobs in the garden before retiring to the terrace in the sun for Chinese tea followed by a large mid-afternoon meal. As the sun moved, so did we, taking the table with us. We finished off with a large bowl of wonderful strawberries.

[Diary] I slept like a baby, for 13 hours solid; YES! I woke at 10 am actually feeling rested. My hosts were sitting at the eating area in the garden out in the sun finishing their brunch. It was another glorious day. As I was a long time in my room, they had been discussing how one might handle the situation when a guest dies in their bed. We joked about that, and I suggested that they could keep my luggage and, after funeral expenses were covered, they could have the contents of my wallet.

After eating, Helmut led me on a hike. Very quickly, the trail got quite steep and narrow; however, it was well maintained. The area has some spectacular limestone peaks and is well known for climbing. I counted about 30 men and women either on ropes going up, or waiting to ascend the near vertical sides. Many of them were from the Czech Republic. I stopped regularly to put my heart back in my chest. At the top, we had a clear view over a large valley containing several villages and one large town with a big church. The trees were starting to bud, and new leaves were only a few weeks away. We came to a mountain rescue center next door to which was a 2-story restaurant and hostel. The place was crowded with climbers and hikers filling all the outside tables and consuming vast quantities of pasta, meat, sauerkraut, and beer. From there on, the path was a wide and gentle way down to our village.

[Diary] (Back in Vienna) Just before noon, friend Peter arrived to be my tour guide for the afternoon. We started our cultural tour at [Schloss Schönbrunn](#), the former summer residence of the Habsburgs. We bought a ticket to tour 40 rooms, and I can say with great certainty that they were "over the top." I'm not a fan of gold and there was gilt everywhere. An audio guide was included, so we could hear all the details of daily life. Napoleon took over the place when he occupied the city, and I went into the room he had used as a bedroom. There are extensive gardens, and some flowers were just starting to bloom. I was most impressed with the indoor gardens at the [Palm House](#), a huge steel and glass structure filled with trees, shrubs, and flowers. Surprisingly, many of them were native to Australia.

Next up was the [Naschmarkt](#), a longtime outdoor area with covered stalls selling all kinds of flowers, fruit, vegetables, meat, spices, and such with restaurants every 50 paces. We dropped in to [Karlskirche](#) as well as a Maltese Church, which appeared to be a result of the exploits of the Knights of Malta.

We finished up at the [Hofburg Palace](#), a sprawling complex of buildings and grounds. The [Vienna Boys Choir](#) performs there, the Lipizzaner horses perform there, the President and Chancellor have their

offices there, and there are numerous museums and the national library. The statues and carvings on the outside walls and gates surely are impressive.

[Diary] Peter and I headed out for another day of “playing tourist.” It was very sunny and although a few raindrops fell later on, it was pleasant out. We started out at the Hundertwasserhaus, “a fairytale-like building with onion spires, green roof [as in trees and gardens growing on it], and a multicolored façade is one of the city’s most frequently visited landmarks. It was designed by flamboyant Austrian artist Fruedensreich Hundertwasser as a playful take on usually dull council (social) housing. Today almost 200 people live in 50 apartments.” Apparently, nothing is square, and the floors undulate, and bright colors and patterns are used in paint and tile. A separate museum showcases samples of the main building as well as art and information about that place and others designed elsewhere by the same artist. I bought a large book of photos of the artist’s work.

Next, we rode several trams to Belvedere. From the tourist brochure, “Prince Eugen of Savoy, the most celebrated of the Habsburg generals due to his defeat of the Turks in 1683, commissioned the two Belvedere Palaces (Upper and Lower) with the money he received as a reward for his victories during the Spanish Succession.” They were built in Baroque style and have extensive gardens. We toured the upper palace, which has three floors of paintings with many works by Gustav Klimt including the famous “The Kiss.” Among the notable paintings, there was one van Gogh, one Munch, and several Monets and Manets. I liked one large painting that was huge and depicted a scene in the amusement park nearby, and two of trees and nature that looked remarkably like photographs. On May 15, 1955, Austria declared its neutrality at a meeting of the four powers that had occupied it after WWII. This ceremony took place in the Marble Hall and the balcony outside. Present and signing the documents were John Foster Dulles (US, for whom my home airport, Dulles, is named), Harold Macmillan (UK), Vyacheslav Molotov (USSR), and Antoine Pinay (France).

Our final activity was a visit to the world-famous Spanish Riding School. The horses were originally brought from Spain, hence the name. And then later, many came from a stud in Lipica (spelled “Lipizza” in Italian), in modern-day Slovenia, hence the name Lipizzaner. The guided tour took an hour and we started in the winter in-door arena. It can seat 1,000 with most standing, and the public can buy tickets to watch training each weekday. On weekends, the horses perform. The horses arrive at the age of four and are trained for eight years. They perform until age 25 or so, and go back to the stud to retire. There are 72 horses and 18 riders currently in residence. There are two chief riders, 10 riders, three assistant riders, and three novices. It’s a tough job to get a spot. Applicants must have EU citizenship, be between 17 and 20 years old, and have a certain size and height. Since 2008, women can also apply. We looked over the outdoor arena, which is surrounded by a covered automatic horse-walking machine that can “push” horses around at various speeds. We went to the stables to see the horses and to learn how they are named. Only stallions are chosen. Those allergic to hay (surprise!) have wood shavings as bedding. Their feed is determined by their rider and vet and depends on their age and the type of training they are undergoing. Lastly, we visited the tack room. Black training saddles are used for everyday work and white ones are used for performances. They are custom-made for each horse and no saddle blankets are used. A rider has four reins, three in the left hand and one in the right, and they control the horse by finger movements rather than the whole hand.

10.2 Salzburg and surrounds in 2014

[Diary] I found the platform for my train from Prague to Salzburg. The good news was that the First-Class carriage was at the very end of the train, nearest to me. There were nine 6-person compartments, and even though it was a Saturday, I'd paid to reserve a seat. However, I'd forgotten to ask for a forward-looking seat, and got one looking backward, against the window. By the time we pulled out the station at 09:36, three whole minutes late, two other people had seen fit to sit in MY compartment.

We went due south through an industrial area and numerous high-rise apartment buildings. Then the countryside opened up and it was all rolling hills of green cereal crops, some bales of hay, and green fields topped with white flowers. In the distance, I saw a couple of yellow flowering fields of rapeseed. Mid-morning, I had an unnecessary snack, and as I was eating my Lay's potato chips (a very popular brand in the US) I started reading the back of the packet. The bag was packed in Poland, and the labeling on the back came in a multitude of languages: Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Czech, Slovakian, Hungarian, Polish, and English.

Jetlag was still with me after a whole week, but I managed to stay awake and read several newspapers and do some puzzles. However, around noon, I stretched out across three seats and put my head back on my pillow. I thought I didn't sleep much, as the PA system kept on making announcements in Czech, English, and German. However, when I finally decided to sit up, two hours had passed, and I'd crossed into Austria. At that point, the announcements came in English then German, as God intended! I had only 20 minutes to go to Linz.

We were several minutes late arriving, and I had only eight minutes to change trains and platforms. My new platform was only two away, and as I topped the escalator to the platform, the end of the train, and my First-Class carriage, was right there, which saved me a walk down the long InterCity train that had started in Vienna and was going to Salzburg.

It was a sunny day out, much better than when I'd started. The ride to Salzburg took an hour and 20 minutes, and was uneventful. Once again, I sat backwards. I'd last passed through the Salzburg area 18 years ago. The train station looked quite new, and was very big and busy. I took a while to get my bearings, and finally found the tourist office where I got a city map and a 24-hour bus pass. Outside, I had only a 2-minute wait until the Number 6 bus arrived, and we headed south along the river, then over a bridge into the old town, then back again. I followed my progress on the map and my bus stop came just where it was supposed to be. I crossed the street to a block of apartments and pressed an intercom button, and the front door was unlocked. A 68-year man and his very friendly dog were there to meet me.

I'd known about the accommodation website www.airBnB.com for some years, but didn't use it until August 2013 when I stayed three nights in Amsterdam. That first experience was so good I thought I'd try it again. Anyone with a room to rent short-term, and who can comply with the rules, can join. I found this place on-line within minutes and paid about US\$60/night. The resident was at a wedding reception, but had arranged for his father to meet me. He got me oriented and then we sat and talked for 30 minutes, which was just an excuse for me to pat his dog, which was so smart it understood German! The apartment was quite large, had large windows over a small park, and a fresh breeze wafted through. After I unpacked a few things, I set up my computer, was connected to the outside

world, and started working on this diary.

I snacked on my emergency rations and then went online to see if there was a supermarket in the area. There was, and at 19:00, I went out to get some essentials at a Sparmarkt. I found some herb-flavored cream cheese, ham, slices of dark bread full of grains and nuts, some candy, two liters of whole milk, a liter of juice, and a ham and cheese croissant. The young woman cashier was pleasant and patient with my German. Back home, I checked the milk to make sure it wasn't bad. The testing took several glasses.

[Diary] *Around 13:30, I ventured out to meet the day. It was quite warm with a gentle breeze. I walked to the bus stop and several minutes later a Number 6 arrived. I rode it three stops and then walked to the river to cross on a large pedestrian bridge. Both railings were chain-wire mesh, and they were covered with padlocks with lovers' names attached, something I'd seen in a number of countries. On the other side of the river, there was a very long row of stalls along a river walk. They were selling all sorts of crafts, clothing, and food. I soon heard a distinctive noise, an Australian Aboriginal didgeridoo. A man was playing it along with a percussion instrument. Further down, there was a booth selling jewelry made from Australian opals.*

From there I wandered the back streets and alleys of the Old Town, sticking my head in churches, courtyards, and shops as the mood took me. In an attempt to improve my Kulcha-quotient, I paid €7 to go into the Salzburg Museum. It contained a mixture of art, ceramics, photos, and film, and covered history, architecture, and World War I when this area was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

I stopped to take the occasional photo and to people-watch. It was a gorgeous day to be out, and every hundred meters there was another outdoor eating-place. I went back across the river and headed home through a park containing some abstract sculptures. I'd only been out three hours, but that was enough. Besides, I had to leave something for the next visit!

At 18:00, I headed out to a restaurant across the street whose menu I'd perused the night before. A pleasant young waitress seated me in the sunshine in the Biergarten, and after my attempts at German, she asked if I'd like an English menu. I took both, and switched to the English one whenever I needed something translated. I ordered the chicken cordon blue, which came with parsley-covered boiled potatoes and some berry sauce along with a mixed salad. I washed that down with a glass of apricot juice. It was a lot of food, so I took my time. A big-screen TV was showing a World Cup soccer game. Once again, I had no room for apple strudel, bugger! I read some chapters of my novel and worked on this diary. Diners came and went, and a small boy at the next table worked on filling his pockets with gravel.

[Diary] *After five hours of solid sleep, I was wide-awake. Unfortunately, I started thinking about a number of things, including some new topics for essays on my monthly blog. I got so much good information in my head that I got up and started typing on my laptop. I went back to bed at 06:30. The good news was that I slept soundly until 12:15. After a small breakfast complete with a custom mug of Milch-café, I headed out to play tourist. It was quite hot out, so I kept in the shade as much as possible, which included a walk through a nice park. In 15 minutes, I was across the river in the old town and winding my way through back alleys in search of the funicular railway that went up to the famous*

castle of the Salzburg Prince-Bishops.

I paid €11:50 for a return ticket, admission to the castle, an audio tour, and several museum admissions. Although I saved some energy and perspiration by riding the tram up, once inside the castle and its grounds, I still had many stairs some of which were quite steep for an old man. I—and most tourists with whom I spoke—gave the organizers a failing grade for the lack of signs, especially for the tours included in our ticket. The view from the top was very nice. You could see so far it took two people to look! Two hours there was more than enough, and as I rode the tram back down, I chatted with a Canadian couple. They were travelling with a group on a boat down the river. More than 100 Aussies were on their boat, and as I walked around the castle and town, I heard their accents.

I walked along the river a good ways in the shade before crossing over and entering the grounds of the summer castle and its Mirabell Gardens. Flowers of all shapes and sizes abounded along with manicured lawns and large fountains with statues. From there it was quite a hike back home. Once I got my shoes off and splashed some cold water on my face, I was ready for a large glass of ice-cold milk. It sure tasted good and represented one of life's simple pleasures.

Around 19:00, I went out to eat, although I didn't feel too hungry. The outdoor beer garden was closed for some unknown reason, so I sat indoors on a very hard seat worthy of being a church pew! I ordered the veal schnitzel and declined the accompanying salad. When the meal came, it was enormous; certainly, enough for two, and, unfortunately, a salad came too. It sure is hard to get good help these days! I ate half and packed the rest for 'Ron ('later on;' that is). I read a few chapters of my novel, but so many diners arrived with some smoking that they drove me out.

[Diary] *It was Travel Day, although I didn't have far to go. I'd set my alarm for 09:30 and after a night of broken sleep, I was none too eager to get up. However, after a hot bath, things improved, and after my breakfast, it was even better. I packed my gear and got my final email fix just as my host got back from grocery shopping. We chatted a while and then I departed soon after 11:30. It had rained heavily that morning, but was clearing up as I walked to the bus stop. After only a few minutes, my bus arrived, and I managed to convince the driver to sell me a ticket to the main train station. All of the city buses ran on electricity, so there were many overhead wires. It took 20 minutes to get to the station, and then I had to find out where the 120 bus to Mattsee departed from. I finally asked a bus-company employee who pointed me in the right direction. However, my bus had just left, and I had a 30-minute wait for the next one.*

The bus trip was comfortable and pleasant with quite a few passengers. We had many stops and passed through a number of large towns and small villages on the 25-km drive. The end of the line was near my destination, Mattsee, the town in which my friend, Renate, lived. She had given me directions to her house, and as I got off at the town shop, I asked another passenger to confirm, and she sent me in the wrong direction. However, a young woman at a restaurant came to my rescue and gave me a map of the town. Soon after, I was knocking on Renate's front door.

We had met in the summer of 1989 when she was our second guest through the American Host Program. European teachers and librarians who were fluent in English came to the US for 30 days where they stayed with each host family for 10 or 15 days to experience American culture first-hand. My family and I visited her and her mother in Mattsee in 1992, and my brother-in-law, Colin, and I

visited again in 1996. However, although we'd kept in phone and email contact over the years, we hadn't seen each other in 18 years. When I saw her, she looked the same to me, and she was enjoying her retirement from teaching.

The weather improved as the day wore on, and she proposed we head up into the surrounding mountains for a nice walk through the fields and forests. It certainly was a little piece of Paradise. At the top, we climbed a wooden tower and looked out over the valley. We came home by a different path that brought us along the lake and yacht club where Renate keeps her boat and teaches children how to sail. We caught up with a lot of each other's news along the way, and so we didn't notice we were exercising. We walked at least six kilometers.

We had some pastries and drinks for a late afternoon tea after which Renate had an engagement for 90 minutes. I pulled up a chair in the sun in the garden, and finished my novel. Having less than my sleep quota the night before, that caught up with me and I fell asleep sitting up in the chair. We sat down to a late supper around 20:15 when we had hausgemacht (homemade) soup with semolina dumpling-like things. By then it was 22:00 and I was thinking about sleep. Lights out soon after.

[Diary] I woke once during the night, but got back to sleep soon after. However, when I woke at 08:00, I didn't feel much rested. A bath got my circulation going and at 09:00, we sat down to breakfast outdoors. The sun was streaming down, and all was right in this little corner of the world. I savored fresh bread rolls with ham and hausgemacht orange marmalade.

By 10:00, we were packed and on the road to our next adventure, hiking at the top of a mountain. After a short drive, we reached the parking lot of the cable car that would take us to the top of Der Untersberg. We had 30 minutes to wait for the next car, so we sat outdoors in the sunshine drinking milk coffee, which was served with a piece of chocolate; very civilized! As the car ascended the steep slope, the clouds came in and visibility was quite limited when we got off. We walked over the rocks and some loose gravel, and the wind came up a bit. Occasionally, the clouds cleared, and we could see way down to the valley below. We went all the way to the top of the mountain, but couldn't see through the fog. On the walk back at the cable car station, it rained lightly, but got heavier as we went inside. We looked at the restaurant menu to see if they had any hausgemacht soup, which they did. Renate had the Goulashsuppe and I had the Würstsuppe with noodles. Mine was "just like Grandma used to make," and, with some bread, it was just the right amount of food. By the time we got back to our car, the sun was out; however, light rain continued to fall. The locals call this "liquid sun."

By the time we got back home it was 16:30, time for afternoon tea. We consumed some pastries whose used-by date was 15 minutes later, and Renate made me her style of Milch-café. Afterwards, we walked a short way to a new car museum created by the grandson of the creator of the Porsche car brand. All the old cars are registered and are driven on a regular basis. Some are available to rent. Back home, I set up my laptop in Renate's office and started working on this diary while listening to an album by Andrea Bocelli.

We had a late supper of Wurst with salad and talked until late. Lights out by 22:30.

[Diary] By 09:00, we were heading out of town for a 75-minute drive to the south. We spent a long day in the National Park along the Großglockner Hochalpenstrasse some 7,000 feet up. We drove the

45 kms of the winding mountain road. There was quite a bit of traffic especially motorcycles. Entrance to the park for the day cost €43! The views were spectacular. The deep glacial valleys were braced on each side by green pastures and mountainsides right up to the snow line. There was quite a bit of snow left from the winter, and it's possible to have snowfall in the summer as well. We parked at the end of the road where we met Renate's friend, Johanna. The remnants of a glacier were below us. We visited some exhibitions and then had a nice lunch. We'd planned a hike there, but that route would not open until July 1, so we drove a short way back to a small restaurant set down a steep slope from a parking area. We hiked a kilometer or so down and across a lush, green field among some grazing cows, where we jumped across a raging stream that came down from a waterfall further up the mountain. A marmot (US: groundhog) was guarding his burrow nearby and watched as we passed. Back at the restaurant, I had a bowl of soup while the ladies had apple strudel and coffee. It was all very civilized.

[Diary] It was another glorious day outside, so we put on our walking shoes and headed out through the neighborhood and to the lake where we toured the very nice swimming club and playground. (Rumor has it that Big Kid Rex was seen riding one of the kiddie rocking horses.) From there, we dropped by the boat-rental place, and then on to the sailing club, of which Renate is a member. It's a very nice facility, and Renate proudly showed off her refurbished sailboat, which is made of brightly varnished mahogany. We walked into town and sat in the sun while sipping coffee and chatting. It was all hard work, but someone has to do it, right?

At noon, after we took photos of each other in the garden by Renate's house, we said our "Goodbyes." Now friends help you move, good friends help you move bodies, and great friends pick up with you where they left off, even if that was 18 years ago. Renate is a great friend!

It was another Travel Day, another city in another country. I walked the few hundred yards to the bus stop. Three young women were already waiting. Compared to them, I looked boringly normal. The first was dressed as a Goth and was busy with her music player. The second was wearing a top that she had thrown on as she left the house, and she nearly missed! Inside one upper arm, she had a large amount of tattooed text. The third was also dressed completely in black, and she had a large tattoo on her shoulder. Half her head was shaved, and the other half had long hair that was dyed bright red. She had a small ring through her bottom lip. I couldn't decide which of the three I should take home to meet Mother!

The bus arrived at least 10 minutes late, and quite a few students boarded, and by the time I got on, it was quite full. I sat down next to a girl, who immediately decided I fit the profile of suspicious-old-mother-had-warned-her-about, and she escaped to safety on the other side of the aisle. Several stops later, a large group of students boarded with lots of luggage; apparently, they were headed out on a trip.

When I walked into the Salzburg Hauptbahnhof, the train to München was just leaving. Don't you just hate that when that happens? I went to buy a ticket, but found it a bit confusing. There was a long line at the ticket for the Austrian train company and a very short one for Germany's Deutsche Bahn. After I asked for help, I was directed to the DB line where I chatted with two American women. I bought a First-Class ticket with a reserved seat, and was directed to the First-Class Lounge next door. There I had a drink and some nuts, and chatted with a family from Oregon.

At 12:50, I headed for Gleis (Track) 1 where my train awaited, and a conductor pointed me towards Wagen 262, Sitzplatz 76. Well don't you know there was a couple in MY compartment and the man was sitting in MY seat! We greeted each other in German and after a few sentences, I knew they weren't native speakers, so I asked where they were from. Melbourne, bloody Australia. Fair suck of the sauce bottle, Cyril! Which roughly translated from Orstralyan means, Strewth! or Stone the Flamin' Crows, Bruce! (Is that clear? Probably not. Okay, in plain English, Unbelievable!)

As we bounced along in the glorious sunshine through lush, green pastures, it was boringly beautiful. I cleaned out my collection of papers, used tickets, and the other flotsam and jetsam of travel, and worked on my diary while eating delicious, fresh cherries from Renate's neighbor's garden. I chatted with the Aussies off and on. They were on their annual 6-week tour of Europe, and he was a professional musician who was performing along the way.

10.3 Conclusion

Bucket List: Although I don't have any "must see" places, I'd be happy to be back in Vienna, or to visit my friend Renate anytime.

11. October 2015, “What is Normal - Part 9: An American in Australia”

[I started making notes for this essay one week into a 7-week trip to my country of birth, Australia. It had been more than eight years since my previous visit, and I was quickly reminded of many differences between the US and Australia. I decided to make a list of some of them, and to share that with you here, along with some commentary.]

In my June 2010 essay, “[Australia and the U.S. - A Contrast](#)”, I looked at Politics and Government, Law Enforcement, Taxation, and Education. This time, I'll cover a number of other areas, especially those I noticed during my recent trip.

To put my comments in context, I spent the first 16 years of my life in the [Riverland](#) area of South Australia (SA), which has a Mediterranean climate and irrigated fruit growing and dryland farming. I then lived for 10 years in the state capital, [Adelaide](#), which is between a range of 3,000-foot mountains and the coast. In the US, I lived a year in the Midwest city of [Chicago](#) followed by 35 more in the greater [Washington DC](#) area inland from the Mid-Atlantic coast.

Although I lived 25 years Down Under, I spent almost all of that time in one state, and then only in one country area and the state capital. As such, some general claims I make or seem to imply may well not be true in other Australian areas or states. Alternatively, they might have changed since I left 36 years ago.

11.1 Transportation

Probably the first thing one notices is that everyone is driving on the other side of the road (and the car). Fortunately, the clutch, brake, and accelerator pedals are in the same order. Each time I went out with one or more passengers, I asked them to remind me to “keep to the left.” This is quite easy when one is following other traffic, but when left alone, one can easily revert to one's “natural” side. One challenge I've always faced is to keep to the correct side when turning left into a divided highway. Then each time I left someone's house late at night, as I was saying “Goodbye,” I inevitably unlocked the front passenger-side door, but soon noticed there was no steering wheel there, so went around to the other side.

One day, as I was driving up a steep hill, in the left lane, I found myself thinking, “What if some American or European tourist is coming up the other side in the wrong (that is, right-hand) lane?” I thought about that at length. At some point, you just have to trust that other people are playing by the rules.

The first few days in SA, each time I wanted to turn, the windshield wipers came on instead of the indicators. Don't you just hate that when that happens! (To be fair, that's not related to left- or right-hand driving; rather, cars built in different countries simply equip them that way.)

When I got my driving license, the written and practical tests were done by the local police (which are all state police). Now, like the US, these tests are handled by the state department of motor vehicles.

In SA, a driver can get a Learner's Permit at age 16 by passing a written test, and must have an Learner Driver L-Plate on their car to alert other drivers. Once they pass the practical test, they must have a Provisional Driver P-Plate for two years.

In SA, the open-road speed limit is 110 kph (68 mph), which given the general condition of the roads, I think is way too fast. To the chagrin of many drivers following me, for the most part, I stayed around 60 mph. The road conditions are not helped by the discontinuation of most freight rail-lines, resulting in the hauling of cargo by road, in increasingly bigger and heavier trucks, with many pulling trailers.

Unlike in the US, I don't think I saw any yellow lines on the highways, only white, and there seemed to be two different ways of indicating one was not to overtake another vehicle on a given section of roadway.

As Australia is representative of the western marketplace, it has long been a test ground for products from Asia, including motor vehicles. As a result, one can see models there that are not available in other countries. (Japan and Australia both drive on the left.)

A minor detail is the color of turning-indicator lights (AU: blinkers), as Australia requires them to be yellow. This seems not to be a requirement in the US.

Australia currently produces its own models of automobiles, via General Motors Holden (GMH) and Ford Australia. (For more than 35 years, Chrysler Australia did likewise.) One of the most distinctive styles is that of a utility vehicle, or *ute*, for short. Utes are really sedans with the back half replaced by a low cargo-carrying area, but they don't look at all like a typically US pick-up truck. In recent years, 4-door versions have also been built.

Prior to airline deregulation some 30 years ago, there were two domestic airlines, TAA and Ansett, the first being government-run, the second, private. They flew to the same places, at about the same times, for the same prices. With deregulation, there is more competition, but few people fly to small cities or towns. [Qantas](#), the national airline, is now the biggest domestic carrier as well.

11.2 Weights and Measures

In 1972, Australia changed from the Imperial System of weights and measures to Metric. At the time, I worked in a chemistry lab, so was quite familiar with the Metric system, but only for relatively small measurements. (See my March 2013 essay, "[What is Normal - Part 6: Weights and Measures](#)".)

For someone used to the Imperial System (or the US version thereof), this involves new challenges. Weights are now in *kilograms* (or *kilos*, for short) rather than *pounds*, and *tonnes* rather than *tons*. Of course, *feet*, *inches*, *yards*, and *miles* all become *meters* and *kilometers*, and *pints*, *quarts*, and *gallons* become *liters*.

Now while one can easily make the transition from *miles per hour* to *kilometers per hour*, fuel consumption is another matter. Specifically, *miles per gallon* goes to *liters per 100 km*, which has the two measures swapped over. And instead of inflating the tires to some number of *pounds per square inch*, one has to deal with *kilopascals per square cm*.

Moving from the Fahrenheit temperature scale to Celsius is another challenge. Back when I was a lad, everyone knew a 100-degree F day was “bloody hot,” but now they insist on its being 38 degrees C. Of course, cooking in an oven requires being able to translate between the systems.

And what's all this *hectare* and *square-meter* business? *Acres* used to be good enough!

Paper sizes are different, as are hole-punch positions, and envelope sizes.

When the Metric System was introduced in Australia, I distinctly remember companies having a 10-year transition period before they had to convert, and after which it was illegal to import products using non-Metric measurements. This seemed reasonable, in order that the populace “get with the program” as soon as possible. However, during my recent trips, more than 40 years after the conversion, I was quite surprised to find real estate ads in many newspapers using *acres*, and birth announcements showing baby weights in *pounds* and lengths in *inches*.

11.3 Food and Drink

Growing up in SA, the early meal of the day was *breakfast*. Around midday, we ate *dinner*, and in the evening, we ate *tea*. However, if we ate out in a nice restaurant, the evening meal became *dinner*. Snacks mid-morning and mid-afternoon were called *morning tea* and *afternoon tea*, respectively, while a late-night snack was *supper*. In the US, we have *breakfast*, *lunch*, and *supper*, but an evening meal at a nice restaurant is *dinner*.

While a major US fast food is a hamburger or hot dog, Down Under, it's a meat pie, *pasty*, or sausage roll, with or without tomato sauce. In some areas, Cornish pasties are available, and in the past 20+ years, pies and pasties have been offered in various, and increasingly exotic flavors, including with kangaroo meat.

US pastries are often heavy on chocolate, icing, and sugar while Australia has many different kinds of *buns*, in the English tradition. (Can you say *buttered finger bun*?) Sweet muffins are now appearing in Australia.

In SA, a very popular drink is iced coffee, made entirely with milk rather than water, as in the US.

While Americans eat lots of English muffin, a sort-of similar thing Down Under is a *crumpet*.

In SA, custard is very popular, and can be bought ready-made in cartons. Apricots are also popular. Butcher shops are everywhere, and lamb is readily available. One can get a fried egg on a hamburger, and beetroot on a steak sandwich. Fish and chip shops are common, and pineapple on pizza is not considered weird. Various US ethnic things like bagels, rye bread, and Mexican food aren't generally available. Culturally, people don't eat out for breakfast, and they eat with both knife and fork rather than cutting food, putting the knife down and eating with the fork after changing hands. A very popular source of food is a “counter” meal served at a pub or sporting club. The American idea of taking uneaten food home in a “doggy bag/doggy basket” is catching on. The term *diner* (as a cheap place to eat) isn't used.

A very popular Aussie alcoholic drink is bitters, brown lime, and lemonade (the latter being lemon squash).

11.4 Housing

In general, in SA houses are smaller, and sometimes considerably so. Second stories are rare, and basements are non-existent. Many have garages while carports are popular. Older homes do not have a dining room separate from an in-kitchen eating area, or any en-suite bathrooms. There are not separate formal lounge and family rooms. The one toilet is often in a room by itself, not in the bathroom. So, the American phrase *going to the bathroom* seems odd to many Aussies. Most houses I've visited have separate hot and cold-water taps at each sink, with good old-fashioned plugs. There are nowhere near as many electric outlets as in the US, and there often is only one wall jack for a landline phone. Although it can get quite hot, in the southern half of the country the humidity used not to be so high. However, with world weather patterns changing, ducted heating and air conditioning is more popular in new houses. Many older houses (and even some newer ones) have galvanized-iron roofs, and now, outside walls as well. A far bigger percentage of houses are made of brick, in which case, they can support a roof of terra cotta tiles.

11.5 Culture

To be sure, in SA, many working couples have laborsaving devices, but they are not as committed to them as in the US. However, I did see more dishwashers this last trip. Except in the few big cities, hardly anyone lives in a multistoried building, and most people live in single-family houses, with a yard, and a rotary clothesline on which to hang their laundry.

Aussies pretty much are a big middleclass bunch. Yes, there are a few very wealthy ones, but it's impossible to be poor. There really are so many social programs, and medical care is available to all.

Aussies still have greengrocers, butcher shops, and newsagents.

Regarding the worldwide coffee craze, while Aussies do drink coffee, many love their hot tea, even in the hottest of weather when Aussies actually consider it a better thirst quencher than a cold drink. Regarding coffee, before the instant variety came to Australia, we made a cup by putting a teaspoonful of Bickford's coffee and chicory essence from a large, tall, black bottle, into a cup and pouring boiling water on that. Until I first ate at a fine restaurant, I'd never experienced percolated coffee. By the way, most hotel and motels rooms have an electric kettle and tea/coffee-making facilities, as God intended!

The principle religion Down Under is sport, pretty much of any kind. If you live in/near Sydney or Brisbane, *football* means *rugby*. For the other states, it's Australian Rules football. Nationally, there's *soccer*. These are winter sports, along with netball. The primary summer sports are cricket, tennis, and watersports. *Hockey* means *field hockey* while *ice hockey* means, well *hockey on ice* (which given the geographical position of the country, not surprisingly, is not well known). Basketball is a huge sport and baseball is becoming more popular. Lawn bowls used to be a retired-persons game, but now more and more young people play.

Aussies have a long history of gambling, and there's an old saying that two Aussies would bet on a fly crawling up a wall. When I lived in SA, the state government ran a statewide agency called the Totalizer

Agency Board (TAB), which had outlets in pretty much every town over a few thousand residents. These provided places to bet on horse and greyhound racing, and later on English and European football. They still exist, and now they cover other sports as well. Most states have at least one casino. Probably one of the worst impacts on the pocket of the blue-collar worker was the wholesale introduction of poker machines some 20 years ago. They proved to be just another way for working-class people to throw away their money. Just about every pub and small sporting club has them, and often the proceeds from them are used to underwrite the cheap meals served.

11.6 Miscellaneous Stuff

In Australia, the electricity supply is 240 volts, 50Hz; power outlets have switches; light switches go down for on and up for off; and light bulbs fit into their sockets using a bayonet connector. In the US, the electricity supply is 110 volts, 60Hz, power outlets do not have switches, light switches go down for off and up for on, and light bulbs screw into their sockets.

When television came to Australia (much later than in the US), a channel 5A existed on all channel dials. [The channel based near my hometown has that designation.] For color TV, Australia chose the PAL analog system versus the US's NTSC. With digital TV, the same standards are used; however, the DVD region codes for the two countries are different, so one cannot play pre-recorded videos on the other's machines.

The Australian dollar (AUD) has 100 cents, and coins come in 5, 10, 20, 50 cents, and \$1 and \$2. (The 1-cent and 2-cent coins have been discontinued.) The US still has a 1-cent coin, but no 2-cent, and has a 25-cent (quarter) instead of a 20. It has both the traditional \$1 banknote and a more recently introduced \$1 coin; as such, the coin versions are far less used. Each Aussie banknote has a different color and increasing denominations get longer and wider. US banknotes are predominately green, but other colors are being added with new editions.

11.7 Language, Spelling, and Vocabulary

George Bernard Shaw wrote, "England and America are two countries separated by a common language." And given that Aussie English is rooted (but not identical) to British English, the same applies between Australia and the US.

Back in 1979, as I was preparing to move to the US from Australia, my travel agent gave me an Aussie-English-to-American-English "translation" guide consisting of more than 500 words. Here are some of them, the Aussie term first, followed by the equivalent American term in parentheses:

- footpath (sidewalk)
- serviette (napkin)
- railway sleepers (railway ties)
- clothes pegs (clothes pins)
- kindergarten (preschool)
- cool drink (soda, pop)
- lemonade (Sprite, 7-Up)
- budgerigar (parakeet)

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- tap (faucet)
- petrol (gasoline)
- diesel or distillate (diesel)
- gas (LPG – natural gas)
- windscreen (windshield)
- car boot (hood)
- mudguard (fender)
- blinker (indicator)
- manual gears (stick shift)
- bum bag (fanny pack)
- sultana (golden raisin)
- anticlockwise (counterclockwise)
- chemist shop (pharmacy); however, the American version is taking over
- peanut paste (peanut butter)
- tomato sauce (ketchup); however, the American version is taking over
- icing (frosting)
- scone (biscuit) (Aussies pronounce it as 'scon')
- sweet biscuit (cookie)
- savory biscuit (cracker)
- jelly (gelatin, or the brand name *Jello*)
- jam (jam, jelly, conserve)
- beetroot (beets)
- spirits (liquor)
- pub (bar)
- power point (electrical outlet)
- xx-dollar note (xx-dollar bill)

There are numerous differences in spelling and pronunciation. For example,

- litre (litre) and metre (meter)
- colour (color), labour (labor), flavour (flavor), and so on
- aluminium (aluminum)
- tyre (tire)
- newspaper [I hear Aussies (and Brits) say the n like the Spanish ñ while the Americans say it simply as n.]
- Double letters and digits such as “oo” and 33 are spoken “double-o” and double-3 (oo and 33)

11.8 Conclusion

As I travel, I often think that everything is the same yet, on closer inspection, everything is different, and that's certainly the case with the US and Australia. As I finish writing this, it's 7 weeks after my return from Down Under, but now I'm in England for 3 weeks. Not surprisingly, there are lots of similarities and differences here as well, and to some extent, I'm using a whole other vocabulary. It's a whole other normal!

12. November 2015, "Signs of Life: Part 2"

From time to time during my travels, I come across signs that I find interesting for one reason or another. Sometimes, they contain clever writing, are humorous, or remind me of some place or event. Here are some more from a recent trip to London and Yorkshire in England.



The name of a laundromat.

Give it a whirl is a common English idiom that usually means "to try something," but is used here as a

pun since an automatic washing machine whirls around while washing clothing." [Whirlpool Corporation is a long-time US maker of home appliances, including those for doing laundry.]



A bar and bistro.

So why is it called that name?

Probably because *Shirtless Pig* was already taken!



A water dish for dogs.

If you look very carefully at the top of the puppies' heads, you can see a coin slot. The money donated goes to training guide dogs for the blind.



A clothing shop.

As soon as I saw it, I immediate thought, "Hall and Oates, before they got rid of the middle C and became rock stars".



A storefront in Harrogate.

We all expect a lot of Heaven, but this list is a pretty good start.



A hotel from the movie Chocolat? Nice try, but no. A hotel made of chocolate? No. A hotel for lovers of chocolate? Wrong again. A store that sells chocolate? Yes.



A type of pedestrian crossing.

To be specific, it's a Pelican crossing having speed humps on either side of it.

Apparently, it is not related to a zebra crossing, which is a pedestrian crossing for members of The Beatles only (and, of course, zebras).

*If you can't say anything
nice about anyone*

*Come sit by me and we can
make fun of them together.*

From a T-shirt.

Based on a quote attributed to Alice Roosevelt Longworth, the only daughter of Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th President of the United States.



From a T-shirt, probably not authorized by Apple.

Very clever!



A shop for knitted garments.

My guess is the name is meant to rhyme with the popular idiom sitting pretty, meaning being *more than okay*.

Note the child's bicycle out front that has been completely knitted over.



A laundry and dry cleaners.



A tea and cake shop.

What is widely known is Marie Antionette's saying, "Let them [the peasants] eat cake!" However, what is not so well known is that after a pause, she added, "With ice cream, perhaps?"



This pub seemed a bit *out of place* in Yorkshire.



The famous saying when using the London Underground (Tube).



Nothing more to add really!



It is sooo hard to get good help these days! Why, I've had three different butlers myself since the start of the year!

Annex A. Cumulative Index for Volumes 1–11

A.1 Postings in Reverse Chronological Order

Here are the essays posted thus far, with the most recent listed first:

A.1.1 Volume 11

- #132 November 2020: [Signs of Life: Part 22](#) — Switzerland
- #131 October 2020: [School Days: Part 2](#)
- #130 September 2020: [Travel – Memories of Russia](#)
- #129 August 2020: [Signs of Life: Part 21](#) — the Northern Neck of Virginia, USA
- #128 July 2020: [School Days: Part 1](#)
- #127 June 2020: [Travel – Memories of Chile](#)
- #126 May 2020: [Signs of Life: Part 20](#) — Edinburgh, Scotland; London, England; Beijing, China; and more
- #125 April 2020: [The REALLY BIG Picture](#)
- #124 March 2020: [Travel – Memories of the US Desert Southwest](#)
- #123 February 2020: [Signs of Life: Part 19](#) — Edinburgh, Scotland
- #122 January 2020: [Football, Aussie Style](#)
- #121 December 2019: [Travel – Memories of Yorkshire](#)

A.1.2 Volume 10

- #120 November 2019: [Signs of Life: Part 18](#) — Japan
- #119 October 2019: [Washington D.C.](#)
- #118 September 2019: [Travel – Memories of New Mexico](#)
- #117 August 2019: [Signs of Life: Part 17](#) — Texas and Utah
- #116 July 2019: [My Experience with Airbnb](#)
- #115 June 2019: [Travel – From Adelaide to Washington DC](#)
- #114 May 2019: [Signs of Life: Part 16](#) — St. Croix
- #113 April 2019: [Law Enforcement in the US](#)
- #112 March 2019: [Travel – Memories of Abu Dhabi, UAE](#)
- #111 February 2019: [Signs of Life: Part 15](#) — Norway
- #110 January 2019: [My Time in Maine](#)
- #109 December 2018: [Travel – Memories of Prague, Salzburg, and-Munchen](#)

A.1.3 Volume 9

- #108 November 2018: [Signs of Life: Part 14](#) — Croatia, Slovenia, and Italy.
- #107 October 2018: [Living in Chicago](#)
- #106 September 2018: [Travel – Memories of Puerto Rico](#)
- #105 August 2018: [Signs of Life: Part 13](#) — Croatia.
- #104 July 2018: [A Little Bit of Religion](#)
- #103 June 2018: [Travel – Memories of Sacramento, Tahoe, Reno, & Napa Valley](#)
- #102 May 2018: [Signs of Life: Part 12](#) — Vienna, Austria, and Seoul, Korea.

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- #101 April 2018: [These United States](#)
- #100 March 2018: [Travel – Memories of The Dalmatian Coast](#)
- #99 February 2018: [Signs of Life: Part 11](#) — US states of Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana, and Korea and Japan
- #98 January 2018: [Having a Plan B](#)
- #97 December 2017: [Travel – Memories of The Hill Country, Texas, Y'all](#)

A.1.4 Volume 8

- #96 November 2017: [Signs of Life: Part 10](#) — Hawaii
- #95 October 2017: [English – Part 7: Adverbs](#)
- #94 September 2017: [Travel – Memories of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao](#)
- #93 August 2017: [Signs of Life: Part 9](#) — Barcelona, Spain
- #92 July 2017: [What is Normal – Part 10. Automobiles and Driving](#)
- #91 June 2017: [Travel – Memories of Jordan](#)
- #90 May 2017: [Signs of Life: Part 8](#) — France, Finland, California, Croatia, England, Korea, and Washington State
- #89 April 2017: [Oh, the Things that I have Eaten](#)
- #88 March 2017: [Travel – Memories of Southeast England](#)
- #87 February 2017: [Signs of Life: Part 7](#) — Italy, Jordan, and France
- #86 January 2017: [Travel – Airports](#)
- #85 December 2016: [Travel – Memories of Cornwall and Devon](#)

A.1.5 Volume 7

- #84 November 2016: [Signs of Life: Part 6](#) — Various countries
- #83 October 2016: [A Little Bit of Astronomy: The Moon](#)
- #82 September 2016: [Travel – Memories of Poland](#)
- #81 August 2016: [Signs of Life: Part 5](#) — Various countries
- #80 July 2016: [It's all Greek to Me](#)
- #79 June 2016: [Travel – Memories of South America](#)
- #78 May 2016: [Signs of Life: Part 4](#) — Australia
- #77 April 2016: [English – Part 6: Verbs](#)
- #76 March 2016: [Travel – Memories of Switzerland](#)
- #75 February 2016: [Signs of Life: Part 3](#) — London and Yorkshire
- #74 January 2016: [Accidents and Incidents](#)
- #73 December 2015: [Travel – Memories of Germany](#)

A.1.6 Volume 6

- #72 November 2015: [Signs of Life: Part 2](#) — London and Yorkshire
- #71 October 2015: [What is Normal – Part 9. An American in Australia](#)
- #70 September 2015: [Travel – Memories of Austria](#)
- #69 August 2015: [Signs of Life: Part 1](#) — London and Yorkshire
- #68 July 2015: [Confessions of a Canine Companion](#)
- #67 June 2015: [Travel – Memories of Mexico and Central America](#)

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- #66 May 2015: [What is Normal – Part 8: Public Holidays](#)
- #65 April 2015: [Travel – Memories of Asia](#)
- #64 March 2015: [A Little Bit of Royalty](#)
- #63 February 2015: [Travel – Memories of the Eastern Bloc](#)
- #62 January 2015: [Sockets, Plugs, and Cables](#)
- #61 December 2014: [Travel – Oh the Places I have Stayed](#)

A.1.7 Volume 5

- #60 November 2014: [English – Part 5: Adjectives](#)
- #59 October 2014: [Travel – Memories of the Benelux Countries](#)
- #58 September 2014: [Abbreviations and Acronyms](#)
- #57 August 2014: [Travel – Memories of Japan](#)
- #56 July 2014: [Technology, Revisited](#)
- #55 June 2014: [Travel – Memories of Australia](#)
- #54 May 2014: [What is Normal – Part 7: What's in a Name?](#)
- #53 April 2014: [Travel – Memories of Ireland and the UK](#)
- #52 March 2014: [A Little Bit of Mathematics](#)
- #51 February 2014: [Travel – Memories of Scandinavia](#)
- #50 January 2014: [The Cost of Bad Weather and Natural Disasters](#)
- #49 December 2013: [Travel – Memories of Italy](#)

A.1.8 Volume 4

- #48 November 2013: [English – Part 4: Pronouns](#)
- #47 October 2013: [Last Writes](#) — Leaving an audit trail for your executor and/or loved ones
- #46 September 2013: [A Little Bit of Kulcha – Part 4](#) — Gardens, Theme Parks, Parliament Houses and Capitals, National Parks and Historic Places, and some Odds and Ends
- #45 August 2013: [A Little Bit of Kulcha – Part 3](#) — Museums and Art Galleries, Libraries, and Aquariums
- #44 July 2013: [English – Part 3: Nouns](#)
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- #42 May 2013: [A Little Bit of Kulcha – Part 1](#) — Ancient Civilizations and Old Sites, and Religious Places and Artifacts
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- #40 March 2013: [What is Normal – Part 6: Weights and Measures](#)
- #39 February 2013: [The Big Move](#) — preparing and selling a house, finding another one, and moving.
- #38 January 2013: [Starting your Own Non-Profit](#)
- #37 December 2012: [Symbols and Marks](#)

A.1.9 Volume 3

- #36 November 2012: [English – Part 2: Pronunciation](#)

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- #35 October 2012: [A Little Bit More American Civics](#) — The Congress, Presidential Succession, The Supreme Court, and the Flag
- #34 September 2012: [A Little Bit of American Civics](#) — The Constitution, Presidency, Vice Presidency, and Cabinet
- #33 August 2012: [What is Normal – Part 5: Numbers and Counting Systems](#)
- #32 July 2012: [Are You Getting Enough Vacation?](#)
- #31 June 2012: [English – Part 1: A Potpourri](#)
- #30 May 2012: [Shooting and Editing Home Video](#)
- #29 April 2012: [Electronic Mail Etiquette](#) — Some of my pet peeves and observations about people who use email
- #28 March 2012: [How Committees Work](#) — My take on 40 years of committee participation, and how successful committees can and should work.
- #27 February 2012: [Living in Utopia](#) — Life in a planned American city.
- #26 January 2012: [Travel – Packing and Preparing](#)
- #25 December 2011: [Making Good-Looking Documents](#) — Some tips on how to take advantage of a word processing program.

A.1.10 Volume 2

- #24 November 2011: [A Little Foreign Language Goes a Long Way](#) — The advantages of having some basic foreign language skills when traveling.
- #23 October 2011: [Starting Your Own Business](#)
- #22 September 2011: [What is Normal – Part 4: Dates and Times](#)
- #21 August 2011: [Teaching English as a Second Language](#)
- #20 July 2011: [A Walk along the River](#) — A look back at my 187-mile hike along the Thames Path in England.
- #19 June 2011: [Just Me and MiniMe: Traveling with Technology](#)
- #18 May 2011: [Planning for Success](#)
- #17 April 2011: [Travel – FAQs](#)
- #16 March 2011: [What is Normal – Part 3: Money](#)
- #15 February 2011: [Talk is Cheap. Write it Down](#) — I explore what I perceive to be the four stages of turning a dream into reality and why many people don't have what it takes to go beyond the first one or two stages.
- #14 January 2011: [Waiting My Turn](#) — A look back at all those times I'd stood in line or taken a number and waited my turn.
- #13 December 2010: [Technology, Unplugged – Part 2](#) — I discuss automobiles, still and video cameras, the written word, a digital data preservation strategy, and my right-hand gadget.

A.1.11 Volume 1

- #12 November 2010: [Technology, Unplugged – Part 1](#) — I discuss the telephone, television, the internet, and recorded music.
- #11 October 2010: [Books by My Bed](#) — My love of books.
- #10 September 2010: [Making Allowances](#) — My experiences in setting up an allowance for my son.

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- #9 August 2010: [Confessions of an Obama Volunteer](#) — My involvement in the 2008 US Presidential election.
- #8 July 2010: [What is Normal? – Part 2: Writing Systems](#)
- #7 June 2010: [Australia and the U.S. – A Contrast](#) — A comparison of the following: politics and government, law enforcement, taxation, education, and changing light bulbs.
- #6 May 2010: [Travel – Fly Me to the Moon](#) — My flight log after 40 years of air travel.
- #5 April 2010: [The Road to US Citizenship](#)
- #4 March 2010: [What is Normal? – Part 1: Getting Started](#)
- #3 February 2010: [Where's My Damn Gold Watch?](#) — A look back at my first 40 years in the workforce.
- #2 January 2010: [Travel – Home Stays](#)
- #1 December 2009: [Hi Ho, Hi Ho, it's Off to Blog We Go](#) — The introduction to my blog.

A.2 Series: Travel

- #130 September 2020: [Travel – Memories of Russia](#)
- #127 June 2020: [Travel – Memories of Chile](#)
- #124 March 2020: [Travel – Memories of the US Desert Southwest](#)
- #121 December 2019: [Travel – Memories of Yorkshire](#)
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- #6 May 2010: [Travel – Fly Me to the Moon](#) — My flight log after 40 years of air travel.
- #2 January 2010: [Travel – Home Stays](#)

A.3 Series: What is Normal

- #92 July 2017: [What is Normal – Part 10. Automobiles and Driving](#)
- #71 October 2015: [What is Normal – Part 9. An American in Australia](#)
- #66 May 2015: [What is Normal – Part 8: Public Holidays](#)
- #54 May 2014: [What is Normal – Part 7: What's in a Name?](#)
- #40 March 2013: [What is Normal – Part 6: Weights and Measures](#)
- #33 August 2012: [What is Normal – Part 5: Numbers and Counting Systems](#)
- #22 September 2011: [What is Normal – Part 4: Dates and Times](#)
- #16 March 2011: [What is Normal – Part 3: Money](#)
- #8 July 2010: [What is Normal? – Part 2: Writing Systems](#)
- #4 March 2010: [What is Normal? – Part 1: Getting Started](#)

A.4 Series: English

- #95 October 2017: [English – Part 7: Adverbs](#)
- #77 April 2016: [English – Part 6: Verbs](#)
- #60 November 2014: [English – Part 5: Adjectives](#)
- #48 November 2013: [English – Part 4: Pronouns](#)
- #44 July 2013: [English – Part 3: Nouns](#)
- #36 November 2012: [English – Part 2: Pronunciation](#)
- #31 June 2012: [English – Part 1: A Potpourri](#)

A.5 Series: A Little Bit of ...

- #104 July 2018: [A Little Bit of Religion](#)
- #83 October 2016: [A Little Bit of Astronomy: The Moon](#)
- #64 March 2015: [A Little Bit of Royalty](#)
- #52 March 2014: [A Little Bit of Mathematics](#)
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- #34 September 2012: [A Little Bit of American Civics](#) — The Constitution, Presidency, Vice Presidency, and Cabinet

A.6 Series: Autobiographic Essays

- #131 October 2020: [School Days: Part 2](#)
- #128 July 2020: [School Days: Part 1](#)
- #122 January 2020: [Football, Aussie Style](#)
- #110 January 2019: [My Time in Maine](#)
- #107 October 2018: [Living in Chicago](#)
- #89 April 2017: [Oh, the Things that I have Eaten](#)
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- #27 February 2012: [Living in Utopia](#) — Life in a planned American city.
- #14 January 2011: [Waiting My Turn](#) — A look back at all those times I'd stood in line or taken a number and waited my turn.
- #13 December 2010: [Technology, Unplugged – Part 2](#) — I discuss automobiles, still and video cameras, the written word, a digital data preservation strategy, and my right-hand gadget.
- #12 November 2010: [Technology, Unplugged – Part 1](#) — I discuss the telephone, television, the internet, and recorded music.
- #11 October 2010: [Books by My Bed](#) — My love of books.
- #10 September 2010: [Making Allowances](#) — My experiences in setting up an allowance for my son.
- #9 August 2010: [Confessions of an Obama Volunteer](#) — My involvement in the 2008 US Presidential election.
- #5 April 2010: [The Road to US Citizenship](#)
- #3 February 2010: [Where's My Damn Gold Watch?](#) — A look back at my first 40 years in the workforce.

A.7 Series: Signs of Life

- #129 August 2020: [Signs of Life: Part 21](#) — the Northern Neck of Virginia, USA
- #126 May 2020: [Signs of Life: Part 20](#) — Edinburgh, Scotland; London, England; Beijing, China; and more
- #123 February 2020: [Signs of Life: Part 19](#) — Edinburgh, Scotland
- #120 November 2019: [Signs of Life: Part 18](#) — Japan

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- #114 May 2019: [Signs of Life: Part 16](#) — St. Croix
- #111 February 2019: [Signs of Life: Part 15](#) — Norway
- #108 November 2018: [Signs of Life: Part 14](#) — Croatia, Slovenia, and Italy.
- #105 August 2018: [Signs of Life: Part 13](#) — Croatia.
- #102 May 2018: [Signs of Life: Part 12](#) — Vienna, Austria, and Seoul, Korea.
- #99 February 2018: [Signs of Life: Part 11](#) — US states of Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana, and Korea and Japan
- #96 November 2017: [Signs of Life: Part 10](#) — Hawaii
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- #90 May 2017: [Signs of Life: Part 8](#) — France, Finland, California, Croatia, England, Korea, and Washington State
- #87 February 2017: [Signs of Life: Part 7](#) — Italy, Jordan, and France
- #84 November 2016: [Signs of Life: Part 6](#) — Various countries
- #81 August 2016: [Signs of Life: Part 5](#) — Various countries
- #78 May 2016: [Signs of Life: Part 4](#) — Australia
- #75 February 2016: [Signs of Life: Part 3](#) — London and Yorkshire
- #72 November 2015: [Signs of Life: Part 2](#) — London and Yorkshire
- #69 August 2015: [Signs of Life: Part 1](#) — London and Yorkshire