

BACKPACKING ADVENTURES: EUROPE II

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NOAH LIEBERMAN

Backpacking Adventures: Europe

Part II

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Noah Lieberman

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For those who have travel on their bucket list

(Must Read)

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About the Author

Hi, I'm Noah, the author. This is my third book, and my first about adventure. I'm passionate about sports, traveling, and studying the universe, but nothing gets me going like a good hypothetical. I play floor hockey in the winter, and baseball in the summer. I also graduated from business school in 2022.

In reality, I'm just a dude who's crazy enough to envision a new world. One where you NEVER have to pay for another book. And if the writing thing doesn't work out, I'll get a real job. But with your help, we can build this dream together. All you need to do is keep reading. You can also check me out here:

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8. Florence



I'll always remember where I stayed in Florence. It was a hostel called Monica and Friends. I'm thrilled to give Monica a shoutout in this book because her hospitality and friendliness made my stay unforgettable. Monica, the hostel owner and operator, is an exceptional person who deserves all the success in the world.

The hostel itself was decent. Josh and I shared a room with seven beds: three sets of bunk beds and one single. The space was slightly above average for a regular hostel. But Monica's warm personality made the stay exceptional.

Every morning, Monica would offer to make breakfast for all the guests as soon as they woke up. While some hostels offer a breakfast station where guests

can prepare their food, Monica would stand in the kitchen for hours, preparing eggs, toast, pancakes, sausages, and orange juice for everyone. Josh and I would try to politely decline because we felt bad making her deliver breakfast every day. But Monica wouldn't hear of it, insisting that she, "Couldn't stand to see us go hungry." She went above and beyond to ensure every guest had a pleasant stay. It felt like we were her own children during our visit.

In my experience, Monica is the best hostel owner out there. While I have stayed at hostels throughout Europe, no other host has compared to her. It's often the small things that people remember... and what I remember most about this hostel is her exceptional hospitality.

This philosophy is also an excellent business model. By catering to her guest's every need, she's keeping her satisfaction rates high. They say it's much more expensive to acquire new customers than to retain old ones, and her retention rate is probably high relative to the industry. Plus, the happier the guests, the better the reviews, which translates to more guests staying there. If I'm ever in Florence again, I'll stay at Monica's hostel. As the name suggests, I am now a friend of Monica's.

Lunch for Two

All' Antico Vinaio is one of the most famous restaurants in Florence (although it's more of a sandwich shop than a restaurant). In fact, their sandwiches are

some of the most famous in the world. The walls of their shop are adorned with pictures of celebrities who have visited the place. It was even featured on Guy Fieri's, *Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives*.

When Josh and I first visited All' Antico Vinaio, we had no idea it was a famous sandwich shop.

The setup is similar to Subway but with more Italian flare. There are two stores opposite each other, one on either side of the street. Presumably, the shop became so popular that they needed to expand and buy a second location to meet demand.

We went to All' Antico Vinaio twice, both times for lunch. After ordering, we followed the lead of other customers and sat on the curb outside to eat our sand-

wiches. That curb is also lined by pigeons, each scrapping their way for some leftovers. On our first visit, I ordered the ham and cheese sandwich, and Josh got salami. We enjoyed our lunch on the curb, while the pigeons watched us with their beady eyes.

The next day, I convinced Josh to try the ham and cheese sandwich I had the day before. He was going to order a different one, but I insisted he try it. We followed the same process as the previous day, and I savored every bite of my delicious sandwich. However, Josh's experience was quite different. He took one bite, and his face immediately twisted with disgust. He chewed it slowly, looked at me, and begrudgingly swallowed it. "That might be the grossest thing I've ev-

er tasted." he said. I was stunned since I loved the sandwich so much, so I urged him to take another bite, thinking it might have been a fluke.

It wasn't a fluke. As he continued to chew it, he couldn't stand the taste of the food. He was on the verge of giving the rest of his sandwich, about 3/4 of it, to the pigeons. I couldn't let him do that, so I took the sandwich from him and ate the rest myself. After examining the ingredients, I concluded that the cheese was the culprit. They used a flavored cream cheese that apparently didn't agree with him (I thought it was delicious).

Despite Josh's unfortunate experience, this was one of my favorite meals of the entire trip. First, I loved the sandwich, and second, watching Josh nearly throw

up after eating a good sandwich was hilarious. Plus, I ended up getting almost two sandwiches for the price of one. You can't beat that.

Music to My Ears

To a certain extent, I have always been fascinated with music production. When I was younger, around 10-12 years old, I used to create rap songs (since I didn't have a particularly great singing voice) and perform them for my friends. I'll never know if I was any good or not, since it's hard to judge your own rhythm, but it seemed like people enjoyed them. I used the moniker "Liberty" because it was similar to my last name, Lieberman. This continued throughout high school, and whenever there was a talent show or

performance, my friends always wanted "Liberty" to perform. It was all in good fun, and I was happy to see others enjoy my performances, so I developed a positive relationship with music.

While in Florence, I listened to the greatest street musician I've ever heard. I was honored to let him grace my ears with his musical presence. I don't know his name or career achievements, but his talent was undeniable. He was a performer who played in the Piazzale Michelangelo, one of Florence's most famous viewing points.

When you climb up the iconic stairs of the piazza, you can enjoy the company around you while taking in the city of Florence. Josh and I sat on those steps for a while, and just as we were thinking of

leaving, the street performer arrived. He placed his equipment on the steps and prepared to play.

His instrument of choice was the guitar, but instead of holding the guitar as most musicians do, he put it on his lap like a keyboard. Then, he plugged the amp in, got comfortable, and began playing the guitar like a piano. His fingers caressed the strings on his lap, and he touched every note with intention.

The elegance and talent of this guitarist were incredible. Not only was he playing the guitar like a piano, but his range of genres was outstanding. He played classical, pop, rock, and jazz. We must have listened to him perform on those Florentine steps for 45 minutes. We stayed until we caught the sunset in the

background of his performance. This performer deserved to be playing in front of real crowds, either in an orchestra or a band. He was talented enough to make a real impact on the music scene.

The craziest part of this experience, besides the guitar player blowing our minds, was that we almost left just before he arrived. People talk about this all the time, but being in the right place at the right time can significantly impact your experience. For instance, if we had arrived at the steps 10 minutes earlier, we wouldn't have stayed long enough to hear him play. We would have left without seeing him, and our lives would never have been touched by his music.

This concept has ramifications beyond the impact of seeing or not seeing a

street performer. It applies to everything... ALL THE TIME. You could wake up, go to work, and come home without knowing that if you had left just four minutes earlier, you would have been in a terrible car crash. On the flip side, you could buy a losing lottery ticket at 11:24 AM instead of a millionaire ticket at 11:22 AM.

This concept is called a worldline in the sciences. It refers to the alignment of your coordinates for both time and space. Basically, it's the intersection of both where and when you exist. The exact point where your location and time converge. If our worldlines change even slightly, it could have consequences that alter the course of our lives dramatically (for better OR worse). It's crazy to think

about. So, keep that in mind the next time you catch a red light, or get stuck in traffic. Arriving just a few seconds earlier, or later, could end up saving your life.

Money Rules the World

One night, while walking back to our hostel after a long day, Josh and I saw something fascinating... an occurrence that I've never seen in North America. We just passed the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, the most breathtaking cathedral in Florence. The structure is hard to miss... it's literally just a huge cathedral that stands out like a sore thumb.

A little after we walk past, we see a policeman up ahead. The cop is probably about 300 feet in front of us, walking in his uniform. Suddenly, Josh and I watch

the police officer walk toward a door connected to a residence. Quickly, without any hesitation or judgment, the police officer subtly slips something inside the mail slot of the door.

About 30 seconds later, as the cop walks ahead, we see him do the exact same thing with another mailbox. He slips something in the doorway, turns around quickly, and keeps walking briskly.

After the officer turns the corner on the following pathway, Josh and I reach the first doorway. I only look for a second, but it's clear that there is a stack of cash in the mail slot. A wad of Euros that couldn't be mistaken for anything else. As we pass by the second door, I quickly

look again and see the same thing, more money.

It isn't my place to comment on the ethics of cops placing stacks of cash inside people's homes... but this is a book of stories. So, I figured I would include the good, bad, and hilarious. To me, this falls under hilarious. The fact that this legitimately happens on the streets of Italy, where anyone can just openly see it, tells me that it must not be a well-kept secret. We all know that money rules the world, and in Florence, it also rules at least one police officer. I'm sure he's the only bad egg, though (wink wink).

Michelangelo's Buttwork

One of the things you have to do (and by "have to do," I mean everyone

says you have to do) is see Michelangelo's Statue of David. It's set up in a museum within the city, and you can visit without any pre-bought ticket. All you have to do is stand in line, and they let in more people periodically as some leave. I can't speak to the average wait time to get into the museum, as we only went once, but for us, it took forever to get in. This is our museum story:

We walk up to the main entrance and see the end of the line as it enters the building. We can't see how far back it goes, but we decide to find the beginning. To do this, we walk all the way around to the other side of the building before finding where the line starts. We're only in Florence once, so if we don't wait in the queue, we're not seeing the statue. We

get in line with hundreds of other people and start to wait our turn.

The nice thing about waiting in line for a long time is that you're not alone. There are people ahead, and behind you. In our case, two women from Canada, both college students in Ontario, are behind us. They're about 20/21 years old, similar ages to Josh and me. We start to drum up a conversation and try to find common interests.

Remarkably, the four of us talk for the entire length of the wait (approximately 2.5 hours) before we get up to the front. They are both very friendly, and we all learn about each other while waiting. The conversation flows naturally, we have lots in common, and the queue passes quicker because of them. When

people talk about meeting others when traveling and doing things together after, this situation could have been the picture for that in the dictionary.

When we finally get to the front of the line, we realize that the security guard is letting in a finite number of people per group. Most of the time, he's admitting seven or eight people. If you're the last cut, you'll wait for the next group about 10 minutes later. As we approach, Josh and I count ahead and realize we are 7th and 8th in line. If the security guard followed his patten, he would let *us* in but not our new friends.

As our group starts entering, he asks Josh how big our party is, and by thinking quick on his feet, he says four. The bouncer looks at all four of us, including

the two women, and lets us all in as the last people in the group.

After we walk in, the four of us are together as we start to see the museum. Suddenly, Josh turns to the two women and says, "Well, it was great to meet you." and abruptly walks away. While looking at Josh like he's nuts, I follow him as he walks to a different exhibit.

He completely abandoned the people we spent all morning with, and from that point on, and we never reconnected again. I'm still baffled by his decision, but in Josh's words, "I'm here to travel with you, not those other people."

We still don't agree with each other on what we should have done in that situation. My view is: We chatted for hours, got along organically, and it seemed like

we mutually wanted to stay together. It would have made sense to stay with them, at least for a little while. Josh thinks there was no point in wasting our time.

Personally, I think it was rude to abandon them. (Josh doesn't like the word "abandoned" when telling this story, but it's accurate.) Maybe I'm wrong, but I still recall it as a wasted opportunity. Part of the fun of traveling is meeting people and exploring together. Young travelers are usually in similar situations, and it's fun to connect with others seeing the world as you are.

After we lost contact with the two women from Ontario, we saw the rest of the museum, including the famous David statue.

Since we're already talking about the Statue of David, I think we should discuss the most underrated part of the masterpiece... his butt. Whenever you see pictures, you always see the front. Sometimes you see his face, and other times it's the whole body, but it's always a front shot. No one ever takes a picture from the back and posts *that* online.

Let me tell you, though. Michelangelo gave him a THICC booty. I don't know what David looked like in real life, but the statue implies he was doing squats seven times a week.

Maybe that's how David really beat Goliath? As the story goes, he hit a giant right between the eyes with a rock. That power has to come from somewhere. Af-

ter looking at the statue, I hypothesize that it came from his booty.

If you go to Florence, make sure you admire the sculpture from both the front AND the back. Because objectively speaking... that might be the most underrated butt in the art world.

Another Negotiation

In the Venice chapter, I recounted a negotiation between us and a Murano glass salesperson. We wanted to leave the store with a specific combination of snails, but she had the power to say no. We didn't have leverage in the situation, but we made out pretty well.

Now, I'll tell you about a negotiation where I had *all* the leverage. As you will read, the approach and outcome of this

story are much different due to the difference in power. Here is the negotiation:

Florence is known for its vast production of leather. There are entire markets dedicated to the material. When you walk down the marketplaces, your nose is engulfed by the smell of fresh leather from the stands.

Store after store, all I see are leather clothes, wallets, accessories, etc. During our walk, I have no intention of spending too much money on anything. I'm interested in buying something small (since space is imperative), but nothing that would cost a fortune.

When strolling in one of the markets, Josh finds a vendor that sells attractive wallets. After light negotiations, they finally agree on a price, and Josh buys his

new wallet. We almost walked away, but the seller came down in price, so he bought the wallet. Josh still uses it to this day.

A few stands later, I see a beautiful leather travel bag. It had the three colors of Gucci on the side, with exquisite detail in the stitching. It's out of my price range, but I pick it up anyway to admire the fine craftsmanship. After I put it down, I'm about to walk away. Quickly, the vendor grabs my attention again. He says, "I have something less expensive I think you would love."

He goes to the back and brings out a beautiful leather backpack. The seller doesn't know this, but I need a new backpack anyway since I'm returning to university in the fall, and my current one is

pretty beaten up. As a tactic, I try my best to hide the fact that I *do* want this backpack. If it's the right price, I'm interested.

I ask him how much the bag is, and he says, "€90," which is about \$145 CAD at the time. There is no way that I am paying that much for a backpack, so I start walking away. So, he pulls me back into the shop and offers me a lower price.

I'm still not biting, so he takes me through the backpack's features. He shows me all the different compartments, zippers, and functions, and even tries to light the bag on fire. He's trying to prove that the bag is made of real leather.

I'm still not budging on the price, but I can see that he's going lower and lower the more time I spend there. Eventually, he takes me to a back room where they

keep extra stock. I think he did this so it would be harder for me to physically walk away.

We keep going back and forth, and he makes lower offers of €70, €60, €50, €40 for the bag, as we keep wearing each other down. At this point, I'm just wondering what this guy's margins are if he can start a bag at €90 and go down this far.

After about 45 minutes of negotiating and learning about each other's lives, he is set at €35. It seems he isn't going lower, so I give him my first offer of the day: €25. This is the FIRST TIME I offer to buy the backpack from him. We keep negotiating until we meet at €27 (\$40 CAD), and I purchase the bag.

Even though the actual negotiation process was quite brutal, it stayed friendly the whole time. I even took a picture with the salesman after the exchange was finished (pictured above).

Is it possible that I got a great deal? Yes. Is it possible that I still got ripped off? Yes. Either way, the exchange worked out for everyone because we both left feeling like winners. For me, I just got a new leather backpack from Florence that would probably cost \$200 CAD if I had bought it in North America. For him, he just sold a bag for a price that he was willing to sell it at, signifying that he made a profit.

A lesson from this negotiation is that it's necessary to recognize your leverage in each situation. There were plenty of

other shops on that street; I could have gone elsewhere to purchase a bag. By utilizing my leverage, I negotiated the price down from €90 to €27. You need to recognize when you're in a position of strength and use it to your advantage, especially when traveling. For every successful purchase, there are ten other instances where someone tries to take advantage of you.

Although, negotiating for 45 minutes with a leather salesman may seem daunting, it might be necessary to get the right price. I hate seeing people get ripped off because of their lack of knowledge, and this type of situation is where it happens. Tourists are often exploited, so be mindful of scammers. Don't be afraid to negotiate aggressively for the deal you want.

Side Tip: At that market, we also purchased some ties. Ties make great gifts for men, especially when bought in bulk. It's like grabbing a bunch of gift cards off the shelf when you're present shopping. Except, you can only get ties like these from Florence.

I love giving small gifts from different locations worldwide, such as a tie from Florence or a flask from Ireland. People always remember that unique gift you got them, which can only be bought in one specific location around the world. It's a great way to show someone you care about them.

9. Rome



Our last stop in Italy, and the place we spent the most time, was Rome. If we had more time, it would have been great to see other places in Italy, too. Milan, Naples, and Pisa, amongst others, are all on the bucket list. The country has so many spots to visit that without weeks to spare, seeing everything is impossible. But we knew that we had to spend time in Rome, one of the most iconic cities in the history of mankind.

As all tourists do when they go to Rome, we visited the Colosseum. It didn't occur to me before we left, but once we got to the iconic structure, I realized I had no idea what it looked like inside. Maybe it's just me, but I'd only ever seen pictures of the Colosseum from the outside. I

feel like that's probably not uncommon as well. Whenever you see photographs, it's always the classic shot from that one angle.

Before we go to the Colosseum, we decide it would be best to do it with a tour. This way, we can actually understand everything we are looking at.

We go to a company situated outside the Coliseum grounds to book the excursion. When they explain the tours, they show us two different options. The first is a "standard tour," and the second is a "premium tour." Both options have different prices.

As you could probably guess by this point, Josh and I opt for the "standard tour" because it is significantly less ex-

pensive. We're still getting a tour of the Colosseum anyway.

We are told to meet back in front of the tour shop at 2:45 PM, 15 minutes before our tour begins. When we get there, we notice a group of other tourists meeting outside the shop, signaling that we're in the right place.

An Italian man walks out of the shop and starts examining each person's ticket. He begins with the customer on the very left, and works his way through to us. One by one, he puts a sticker on each patron's shirt. Josh and I are standing to the very right of the group, so he gets to us last. He examines our tickets, looks at us, and gives us a different colour sticker than everyone else.

We look around the group and realize we are the only two people who didn't receive a green sticker. I turn to one of the other group members, looking confused, and she tells me that the green stickers are only for the premium tour. Seeing that we are the only ones who didn't buy the upgrade, we realize we might have made the wrong decision.

As a group, we walk to the entrance of the Colosseum. After checking our bags, we inch forward through the stone gates. When the tour begins, the guide hands out a pair of headphones to everyone except us. At this point, he loudly exclaims to the whole group in his heavy Italian accent, "If you are part of the premium tour, put on your headphones and walk with me as I take you through eve-

rything in the Colosseum. If you are part of the standard tour, you must leave the group immediately.” Suddenly, every person from the group, including the tour guide, stares bug-eyed at Josh and me and waits for us to leave.

It turns out the difference between premium and standard tour is... the actual tour itself. Basically, Josh and I just bought admission to the Colosseum. Once we were in, we were on our own. So, we looked at the group, including the tour guide leering with his condescending stare, and politely left.

There were pros and cons to seeing the Colosseum on our own, but it would have been nice to have a tour. Yes, we had the freedom to see everything at our own pace, but it loses meaning unless you're

an expert on ancient Roman history. So, if you're visiting the Colosseum, please research what you're getting on the tour.

On the bright side, I still got to see what the inside of the Colosseum looked like! My phone took an excellent panorama shot of the inner bowl. Plus, it's hard to complain when you're in the presence of architectural genius. We can't build a road today without it cracking in cold weather, yet their designs have lasted thousands of years! What they were able to achieve, with the technology available, is incredible.

Beating Expectations

Sometimes I find myself astonished by how my day unfolds compared to expectations. When you wake up in the

morning, try to predict everything you'll do that day. Imagine how your life will play out based on your supposed plans. When your head hits the pillow that night, compare what *actually* happened versus your estimation. If you do this enough times, some days you'll be shocked at where you ended up.

From my experience, this happens the most when traveling. Even if you make plans to go somewhere on a scheduled day or meet a group of people at a specific location, things can change in an instant. When you compound this with the lack of knowledge associated with unknown cities, you can find yourself in some wacky places.

During our trip to Rome, our hostel was geared toward young people. Be-

cause of this, they had planned events on different nights for social gatherings. The purpose was to either experience Roman nightlife or have fun in the hostel. Sometimes they would host karaoke nights, rooftop hangouts, or pub crawls.

A fellow traveler I was staying with had just completed a semester abroad in Rome. We met on the rooftop during our first night in the ancient city. She gave me a few suggestions, and one of her “can't miss” recommendations was to see the Trevi Fountain at 4:00 AM.

The Trevi Fountain attracts thousands of tourists every day, and is one of the most famous attractions in Rome. The funny thing is, I had already seen the fountain earlier that day. I even threw three pennies into the fountain, a tradi-

tion that, according to legend, guarantees you'll return to Rome, find the love of your life, and get married (still waiting on that one).

As we were hanging out on the hostel rooftop, a few of us decided to go out. We wanted to experience some of the nightlife. I wasn't planning on staying out too late, but as they say, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." (Don't hate me, I needed to throw that somewhere in the chapter, lol.)

We went bar hopping, and five of us, including the student living in Rome, stayed at a bar she recommended. We danced, laughed, and played cards throughout the night. We had a great time together and lost track of the hour

as the stars revealed themselves in the sky.

To get back to our hostel, we needed to walk a considerable distance. Since it was already quite late, our resident Roman told us she would lead us through the quickest route possible. According to her, the journey would take about 30 minutes.

What she didn't tell us, and I'm glad that she didn't, was that she was actually taking us to the Trevi Fountain. So, we walked aimlessly as she guided us through the Roman streets, trusting her for navigation. As we arrived at the fountain, and I noticed where she took us, I looked at my phone for the first time in hours, and it was just past 4:00 AM.

The Trevi fountain lit up at night is stunning. The sculpting curves with the water in sheer elegance. The statues glisten from the lights in combination with darkness above. Aesthetically, it's one of the most spectacular things I've ever seen.

But the main advantage of going deep into the night is solitude. When you visit during the day, crowds of people surround the fountain. Just like other main attractions, heaps of tourists have created the “normal” visit experience.

But if you see it at night, the experience changes. It feels less like a tourist attraction and more like a personal affair between you and the art. You can sit on the steps and relax like you would at a park. But instead of sitting amongst the

trees, you're blessed with one of the greatest fountains in the world. Out of all the tourist attractions we visited, this was the only one I treated as a backdrop rather than an exhibit. The Eiffel Tower may also provide this experience, but alone time with the Tower is nearly impossible. I was with my group of five... but we were alone together. It was the perfect atmosphere to end an enchanting night.

When I woke up on the day in question, I expected to visit the Trevi Fountain. But for the first time, the surprise at the end of the day wasn't the *place* I visited... but the *time* it happened. Although we saw the fountain in the afternoon, I never imagined I would rekindle my relationship with it at 4:00 AM.

This should serve as a reminder that when you're traveling, it's best to go with the flow instead of fighting the current. I *could* have been frustrated when we were taken on an unexpected detour. It did significantly delay my much-needed sleep.

But that's not what traveling is about. You have to be willing to accept the unpredictable. These situations are common while abroad, and you can only appreciate them if you're open to the world. Of course, use common sense, but try to approach life like Jim Carrey in *Yes Man* whenever possible. One of my greatest lessons from traveling is that simply saying yes makes the world much more enjoyable.

Larger Thievery

For the most part, the threat of thieves and pickpockets in Europe is overblown. It only takes one time for your wallet to be taken, but that doesn't mean you should plan your trip around the threat.

When my sister graduated high school, she and some classmates went to Spain afterward. They went to Madrid and some smaller areas but skipped Barcelona entirely. Why? Because they were afraid of pickpockets.

To me, that was a wild mistake. After exploring Europe, Barcelona became my favorite city in the world. I can't believe they missed out on the Catalanian marvel because of something so ridiculous. If

you're careful and use common sense, you should be fine.

People have different methods of avoiding theft when traveling. One idea is to use a money pouch instead of a wallet; that one is popular. I've seen many people wear them as a necklace as well. It's almost impossible to steal a money pouch if it's around your neck.

I've also seen people wear fanny packs as an alternative too. Now that fanny packs are more stylish than when I was growing up, maybe that could be the right move.

But don't ever let the fear of pickpockets deter you from going somewhere, especially in Europe. It's not as bad as people lead you to believe. Just be

careful in the biggest tourist areas, like in the Louvre, or at the Vatican.

However, this story is about the one time I was stupid enough to almost get robbed. It was 100% my fault, and I learned from the mistake. Here is the story:

Josh and I just finished sightseeing, and we are sitting on the steps of a building in Rome. The structure has wide steps you'd often find at a government building or museum. The surrounding landscape is beautiful, so I pull my phone out to take pictures of the area and the odd selfie.

As Josh and I are talking, I'm using my phone to try to connect to Wi-Fi. Unable to connect and tired from the day, I lie down on the steps for a few seconds. I'm afraid my phone would fall from my

pocket and crack on the marble, so I put it on the steps beside me. Accidentally, my eyes start closing, and I begin to doze off.

A couple minutes later, a man walks toward us. I'm almost asleep at this point, but Josh is watching. As the man approaches, he reaches down and picks up my phone, grasping it with his right hand.

My brother jumps up abruptly when he sees my phone being taken. He grabs the thief's wrist in the blink of an eye and squeezes it tight. When he seizes his wrist, Josh yells, "HEY!" to alert me of the situation.

At this point, I wake up, and witness this stranger holding my phone for the first time. Meanwhile, Josh is trying to stop him. The thief, who realizes he's

been caught, looks at us with a puppy dog face and starts fluttering out an apology. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. It was a mistake." He said.

Suddenly, Josh rips the phone from his hand, and the thief scurries off quickly.

This is the only time in Europe where I have ever encountered theft. And it only happened because I left my phone out for the taking. Once again, totally my fault. Don't be fearful of European pickpockets, just be aware that they exist. Use common sense, know your surroundings, and you'll be fine.

Umbrella Umbrella Umbrella

As mentioned earlier, it rained way too much during our trip. But despite the weather, we still always found enjoyment

in Europe. Even if it was almost impossible to stay outside in the rain and wind, there were always ways to make the best of those dreary days. This next story is one of those times.

One of the things that Josh and I utilized during our trip was anonymity. Since we knew we would never cross paths with most people we encountered again, we felt free to let loose and act out of character.

During our first full day in Rome, it was raining. When it starts raining in major European cities, people on the street try to sell you umbrellas. Generally, they're the same people selling all the other street items. They just change products when it rains.

While walking near our hostel, we were greeted by numerous street salesmen yelling, “UMBRELLA UMBRELLA UMBRELLA!” as we walked by. We couldn’t walk for more than a minute without being approached. Frustrated by the rain and constant peddling, we decided to have some fun. As we spotted the next one, Josh and I thought it would be funny if we acted like we had never seen an umbrella before.

The rule was simple: We must BELIEVE that we have never encountered an umbrella. This item was a completely foreign object. We didn’t know how it worked, its purpose, material composition, nothing. We must maintain this façade for the entire interaction. Don't break character, no matter what.

As we went up to the salesman, he screams, “UMBRELLA UMBRELLA UMBRELLA!” in classic fashion. I approach him with a face of bewilderment and say to him, “What is this?”

He grasps the handle on the umbrella and opens it up in one big swoosh. At this point, Josh and I are shocked.

Josh says, “Wow, that’s amazing! What does it do?”

Puzzled, the salesman gives me the umbrella and suggests I hold it to further facilitate the sale. I (not knowing what an umbrella is) grab it by the panel and start shaking it. The salesman quickly looks confused but doesn't give up on the sale.

Then, I start to get really weird with it. I put the umbrella up to my nose to smell it. I hold it to my ear to see if it

makes any noise. I even try to wear it as a hat.

Now, the vendor looks absolutely shocked. He takes one of his other umbrellas and starts acting out how to properly use it. Stunned by this new invention, Josh and I are mesmerized.

While struggling to keep his composure, my brother asks him, "But what does it do?"

The salesman clicks into what we're doing, snatches the umbrella from my hand, and walks away briskly. Meanwhile, he's mumbling what I can only assume is profanity in another language. About 20 seconds later, we see him stop about 50 feet ahead of us. He finds other tourists walking down the street and starts yelling, "UMBRELLA UMBRELLA

UMBRELLA!" Within 30 seconds, he was back in the game.

The Senegal Scammer

As we continued traveling throughout Europe, we saw different scams in different places. Generally, we saw the same cons throughout one place, and as we moved from city to city, they changed in that new area. In Rome, the most popular scam we saw was the bracelet purchase.

The operation works as follows: Someone approaches you and starts to make conversation. They ask for your name, where you're from, and try to get close to you. They're attempting to stir up a discussion to gain your trust. Once both parties are familiar with each other, the

scammer offers to put a bracelet on your wrist and claims it's free. They say something along the lines of, "Here have this bracelet, no charge, my good friend."

Before you can even say no, they put it on your wrist. Once the bracelet is on, they keep talking with you as if you're friends. Eventually, they start demanding money for the bracelet and won't leave until you give them something. At this point, they are no longer your friend.

The first time we encounter one of these scammers... I fall for the ruse. He gives me the bracelet, I actually believe it's free for some reason, and give him €2 for his efforts. He wants more, but that's all I claim to have on me. Later on, we try to avoid these scammers when we can, but the odd time we talk to them anyway.

On our way to Vatican City, we're walking down a Roman street, and one of these people approaches us. He's attempting the classic scam, asking us questions, telling us facts about him, and holding a small bag that is clearly full of bracelets. He tells us he's from Senegal, moved to Rome a couple years ago, and loves the women in Italy.

As we're approaching the Vatican, the street is jam-packed. Dozens of people are walking in our direction, making it difficult to avoid talking to him. After a couple minutes of conversation, he finally reaches into his bag and pulls out a bracelet. He grabs my arm, puts the bracelet around my wrist, and tells me it's free (shocker).

30 seconds later, the scammer, Josh, and I get to a crowded intersection. It's so busy you could effortlessly get lost in the pandemonium. In our case, if we WANT to get lost in the crowd, it's very possible. As the crosswalk signal is about to change, Josh glances over at me. He tilts his head towards the direction we had just come from, signaling that we should turn back instead of crossing the street with the scammer. I give him a quick nod of approval.

As the crosswalk opens and everyone starts to take their first step, Josh and I pretend to take one step forward. Simultaneously, we pivot 90 degrees right. As soon as we turn, we start briskly walking in the direction we came from, with the bracelet still on my wrist. Now, we're

walking in the opposite direction while the scammer is trudging along the cross-walk with dozens of people around him.

When we are too far away for him to do anything, we look back at the cross-walk and see him frantically turning his head in all directions, looking for us while being pushed along by droves of tourists.

There is nothing the scammer can do anymore. The scam is over, and we are off with his "free" bracelet. We're gone like a leaf in the wind, and Josh and I never see the man again.

I still have the bracelet in a box beside my bed. It lives with other wristbands and bracelets I've accumulated. That day, the scammees became the scammer, and I even got a bracelet out of

it. Since then, between Josh and I, I am now known as... “The Senegal Scammer.”

Silenzio

There's an interesting difference between tourists and the locals who operate attractions. When you encounter the same thing consistently, it eventually becomes mundane. That's how the employees must feel at any major attraction. Even in the most remarkable places in the world, it gets old for the workers. Meanwhile, others will pay thousands of dollars to visit these same places. For the tourist, the first time is a special experience.

During our visit to Vatican City, which is technically its own country but located in the middle of Rome, we had the

opportunity to witness some of its iconic landmarks, such as the renowned Sistine Chapel. In the chapel, you're stuffed in the famous room with hundreds of others, all vying for glimpses of the art. Meanwhile, Michelangelo's ceiling breathes life into the space. The Creation of Adam, which depicts God and Adam reaching toward each other, stands out due to its rise in modern popular culture.

However, since this *is* a tourist attraction, people tend to act beyond the rules. In one sense, I get it. The rationale is that since you'll only be there once, you might as well take advantage of the opportunity. Plus, what's the worst that could happen?

But there are rules for a reason. Just because you're a tourist doesn't mean the institution's laws don't apply to you.

With that said, Josh and I broke the rules. They have a strict "no photography" rule in the chapel. Obviously, we took pictures.

I think this is an outdated rule because what they're REALLY trying to avoid is flash photography, which could damage the art. A cell phone without a flash is fine. So, we broke the rule and took photos of the Sistine Chapel.

There's also one other rule. In order to uphold the sacredness of the institution as a holy place in Christianity, it is necessary to observe mandatory silence. Plus, they play a constant loop of *Misere-re Mei Deus* (composed by Gregorio Alle-

gri), performed exclusively at the Sistine Chapel. This means that the chapel is the only place in the world you can hear it (psssssst unless you go online).

Both rules ,no photography or talking, are broken every second. I feel bad for the person who has to enforce them, because their job is almost meaningless. I will give them credit, though. They try to enforce the rules with authority.

In fact, they employ one person to sit in the corner of the room with a microphone. His job is to not-so-pleasantly remind people of the restrictions. About every 30 seconds he'll say, "Noooooooo photos." And then 30 seconds later, "Silenzioooooo." (Italian for silence).

When we visited, the man facilitating the rules had a deep, threatening voice. It

was almost as if he had been trained to deliver these reminders in the most menacing way possible. But, as you can imagine, tourists (including myself) still break the rules. I took some pictures of the chapel and even spoke a few words. But I'll only be there once... What's the worst that could happen?

Last one for the road: We ate gelato from a different place in Italy every night. Although we tried to save money on food whenever possible, we felt gelato was a cultural experience. There should be limitations... eating ice cream more than once a day seems excessive, but if you're walking and burning calories, having a gelato budget is worth it. There's a reason why Italian food is revered worldwide.

10. Ios



This is the beginning of the next section of the book. From here on out, all the remaining stories will be about a separate vacation: my post-high school graduation trip. On this vacation, I was with eight friends I've known my entire life. In fact, one of them is a LITERAL day one friend. We were born on the same day in the same hospital. That's about as early as it gets.

We traveled to three places together and accumulated some excellent stories, so I wanted to include them in the book. We visited the Greek islands of Ios and Santorini and the Catalonian city of Barcelona. After those tales, we'll continue with some final stories from my trip with Josh. It'll all come full circle; I promise.

Until then, these stories are from my trip with these eight friends.

The first island we visited was Ios, an eccentric and unique party culture. I have never seen such dedication to ensuring its guests have fun. The island's objective, and the driver of its economy, is for young people to have a tremendous experience.

I found out about the island through word of mouth. It's not a well-guarded secret or anything, but it's not the first island people consider when visiting Greece. But if you're looking for fun, I highly recommend moving Ios to the top of your list.

From my experience, there is no better place to party. There are bars throughout the main areas of the island,

which all (generally speaking) have no cover charge. Throughout the night, everyone moves from bar to bar, experiencing each place before moving on to the next one.

You never really choose a bar to go to. Instead, you meander through all of them throughout the night. This is possible because all the clubs are within walking distance of each other, basically down a few walkways. The atmosphere is fluid, raucous, and fun.

I mentioned earlier that Venice has no cars or roads on the island and proposed an idea for a similar structure in other areas. Los is an example of that philosophy. While there are *some* roads, there are vast areas without roads or cars in sight. This is why their party environ-

ment works so well. The nightlife is in one central location that is exclusively walkable. When partygoers hop from bar to bar without a care in the world, they're not at risk of being struck by a car. The worst that can happen is they pass out in an obscure spot. I took a selfie with a friend passed out on the roof of a church (pictured above); it's one of my favorite photos.

While I recognize this infrastructure won't work everywhere, it enables unique social situations. If I'm building a city from scratch, I'm leaving some neighborhoods totally untouched by roads. It would allow citizens to use the space freely in this walking area. It could create a party scene, residential area, office jungle, etc. But at the minimum, peo-

ple would interact in a dense, socially driven environment.

My favorite part of Ios' culture is the time everything operates. The tradition is characterized best by the following phrase used on the island: "Stay up until you've seen the sun." The Greek islands have some of the most beautiful sunrises in the world, making it an enthralling way to end your night. Once you've seen the sun, you can go to bed.

As you can imagine, this changes the sleep schedule of the tourists, and the island accommodates accordingly. We would generally fall asleep around 6:00-7:00 AM, and wake up at about 3:00 PM. I don't know if there's anything weirder than eating breakfast at 3:30 PM, but we were happy to do it. It was a welcome

meal after the events of the previous night. Throughout the island, breakfast is served well into the afternoon.

If you go to Ios, you should plan to leave the island later in the day. This way, you can have one last eventful night before you depart. Don't force yourself to catch a 9:00 AM boat when the rest of the island starts partying at midnight.

If you're *not* a party animal (which is totally fine), you can still enjoy yourself. While most tourists are partying at night, it's not mandatory.

But at the same time, the nightlife is more of an experience than a typical bar scene. Just like every place has its cultural quirks you should participate in (for example, going to a pub in Dublin or riding a bike in Amsterdam), Ios prides itself on

its nightlife. Instead of thinking about it like a party, I consider it a rite of passage of visiting the island. If you're seeking a complete experience from everywhere you travel, taking part in the nightlife is essential for Ios.

Getting Sheared

During our trip, my hair was getting infuriatingly long. I was starting to grow the classic “hockey player flow,” a reference Canadians will understand. The issue: I can't pull it off. Therefore, it needed trimming.

I've gone to the same barber my entire life, as he cuts most of my family's hair. My great-grandfather, great-uncle, grandfathers, dad, uncle, and brother used him as our barber. He's a staple in

the Lieberman family. The consequence of this relationship is that I have no idea what to ask for elsewhere. My usual barber cuts my hair without me saying anything, so I've never had to ask for specifics.

At about 7:00 PM, we are walking down the main Ios road, and spot a barber shop to our right. Since my hair is getting out of hand, my friends force me to enter the store. When we look inside, we notice there's no lineup, so I begrudgingly agree to get a haircut.

I sit in the chair and a woman holding scissors approaches. She asks me what I want, and I don't know how to respond. My friends chime in, giving their opinions on how they would like to see

my hair. So, after hearing their recommendations, she starts the haircut.

This was the first time I received a haircut with eight friends judging every snip, which was truly a weird experience. As they have a stake in the cut, the barber listens to everything and anything they say.

About halfway through the haircut, one of my friends turns to the barber and asks, "How much is he paying for the haircut?" The barber replies, "€15." My friends start whispering to each other, and I hear them laughing as I'm in the chair.

The same friend says, "We'll give you €20 if you shave one side of his head." I turn to the barber, who I have no previ-

ous relationship with, and nervously try to laugh it off... until she agrees.

I'm halfway through the haircut. One side is almost finished, and the other is barely touched; I can't just get up and leave. I quickly turn to the barber and match their offer of €20 for her to cut it regularly.

My friends huddle up again quickly, and then raise it to €25. Here's my problem: there are eight of them willing to split the cost and only one of me. It would be incredibly difficult for me to outbid them. Even if they each contribute €5, there's no way I can justify paying €40 for a haircut (around \$60 CAD at the time).

As I can't simply outbid them, I stop raising my offer. As the barber grabs the

razor to shave half my head, I realize I need a better solution.

The thing they really want to see is half my head shaved. So, I need an ending that eliminates this possibility. I tell them that if the barber does it, I'll immediately go back to the hostel and shave the other half.

This way, I would have a tight buzzcut around my whole head, and they would have paid for nothing. Once they hear this, they all withdraw their offer and let me get a normal haircut.

Although, I don't think the barber was thrilled. She almost got paid double to shave half my head. Oh well. In the end, I got my mundane haircut and was ready for another night of craziness in los.

1% Gyro

One of the most overlooked aspects of the island is the easy accessibility of gyros. A good gyro, one of the best Greek foods invented, is simply unbeatable. During our stay there, I had gyros for almost every meal. What made it better was that you could easily find a cart or stand on the walking path. They were cheap, convenient, and delicious, making them the perfect speedy meal.

As the island caters to its nightlife, these gyro stands are open until the early morning. In my experience, the busiest time for these carts is around 5:00 AM, when the partying winds down and people look for a quick bite before returning to their rooms. Consuming this kind of food, whether it's pizza, gyros, burgers, or

the like, feels like a necessity after a night of partying. Your body craves sustenance to replenish itself after burning out all its energy. As a result, everyone congregates around these stands, indulging in gyros and having a good time.

Since you frequent the same bars, coming in and out before moving on, you run into the same people throughout the night. However, in a loud, crowded club, with music blasting and people dancing, you never really get a chance to talk.

The first opportunity for genuine conversation arises during the quiet wind-down period when people leisurely devour gyros. This, coupled with watching the sunrise soon after, is the perfect way to cap off a night well spent.

I once heard someone ask, "If you weigh 99 pounds, then eat 1 pound of nachos, would that make you 1% nacho?" After pondering over it, I've concluded that it probably would.

Why is this relevant? Because by the end of my time in Ios, if the same logic applies, I was probably about 3% gyro. It may sound silly, but it's the closest I'll ever get to being Greek, so I'll take it.

The Hammer Shot

There's one bar in Ios that I HAVE to talk about. I'm trying not to dwell on drinking stories throughout this book, but this one is an exception. It's not just an ordinary bar. It's an experience, like some of the other things that made the cut for this book.

The Slammer is an average-looking bar compared to others in the area. It has a dancing room, a decent aesthetic, and affordable drinks. But what sets it apart is one distinct drink on the menu: The Hammer Shot.

The Hammer Shot is the staple drink of the bar. To be honest, I have no idea what's in it. But the type of drink is irrelevant; it's fun to order because of what happens after.

First, the bartender reaches into a drawer under the bar and pulls out a helmet. Then, they give you the helmet to wear on your head. Once you're suited up, the bartender pours your drink. You drink the shot (helmet still on) and slam the glass on the bar top when finished. Finally, the bartender grabs an object

from behind the counter and hits you on the head with it for the whole bar to see.

I got smacked with a fire extinguisher the first time, and then took a crate to the dome later. Once, I even saw the bartender get up on the countertop and kick someone in the head! One by one, I watched all of my friends order their drinks, put on a helmet, and get their heads smashed to the sound of a cheering crowd.

I doubt they sell many shots that aren't The Hammer. Plenty of bars surround the area, and you can get the same alcohol everywhere you go. The only reason to go to this one is to experience "The Hammer at the Slammer" (they even sell shirts with this phrase printed on them).

From a business standpoint, I think the idea is incredible. Considering all these bars offer similar products, finding ways to stand out is necessary. In fact, when we walked past most of them, they had a person working outside, yelling out deals to try to draw you in.

But all these deals are basically the same, and you can only go so low on your price (it's a prisoner's dilemma). The Slammer differentiates itself by serving a drink that includes getting smashed on the head with a fire extinguisher, crate, baseball bat, etc., which everyone wants to try.

It might not be the most popular place *all* the time, but it at least gets everyone in the door to buy one drink. After that, the rest is gravy. It shows the power

of differentiating yourself from the competition.

Jerseys

There's one more story of a bar in Los that also found a way to differentiate itself. However, a few other bars copied the idea, so this experience comes in multiple places. At certain bars, behind the counter, you'll see jerseys for sale hanging in the rafters.

How do you buy one of these jerseys? They offer a promotion that encourages customers to buy drinks. When we visited, the deal was "seven shots for €35." With the special, you receive a sports jersey from behind the bar.

They mostly had different basketball jerseys that were clear knockoffs of NBA

teams. But instead of having the team's logo on the front and a player's name on the back, they had their bar's logo and "Ios" on the nameplate. One of their most popular knockoffs was the Los Angeles Lakers. The jersey had the exact design and colors of the Lakers but with the bar's name and logo.

This was the only time on the trip I spent (what I would consider) "too much" money on alcohol. But I wanted the jersey, so I did it anyway. I chose a green Boston Celtics jersey with a "Traffic Bar" logo on the front. The number is #23, but I don't know the significance of that. Every jersey in the bar had #23, so perhaps it's a nod to Michael Jordan or LeBron James. Otherwise, I'm not sure.

Once again, this bar went the extra mile to provide a product/service that drew people in AND made them spend money. I would have never ordered seven shots had I not gotten the jersey.

Plus, since the jersey is unique to that bar, it's the only place you can get it. If they sold regular knockoff NBA jerseys, it wouldn't be effective. You can purchase those anywhere. Since it was a "Traffic Bar" jersey with "Ios" on the back, it made it much more enticing. Now I have a random, weird, knockoff Celtics jersey that is hilarious to wear in public.

The Morning After

I once heard that everyone remembers their first hangover. Mine came from the last night we spent in Ios. I didn't go

too crazy the previous nights because we were ramping up, so, the first time I *really* had too much to drink was on our last night in Ios.

When I woke up, I had absolutely no idea what was happening. My head was spinning, my breath was horrific, and I felt physically incapable of getting out of bed.

The worst part was that we were leaving the island at about 11:00 AM. Remember when I mentioned earlier that it's better to depart Ios later in the day? I learned this the hard way. If our boat left at 5:00 PM, I would have been in better shape to pack my stuff and leave. But since we were traveling in the morning, it was 10X harder to do everything normally.

Unfortunately, I left my packing to do in the morning. We weren't there for long, so I didn't feel it necessary to unpack much, but there were still some things. When you take a backpack, you end up living out of it most of the time, and this was no different.

Not that I wish anyone sick, but it would have been better if my friends were feeling as incapacitated. Perhaps they were, and I just reacted worse. But I forced them to wait for me as I waltzed out of my room much later than they did.

I went downstairs to meet them for breakfast and saw they had all finished (or were close to finishing) their food. I insisted they let me go without eating, so we could get to the boat quicker, but they didn't let that happen. I don't remember

what they ordered me, the whole thing is still a blur, but I remember taking a few bites and feeling sick before relentlessly turning down another bite.

After taking some Advil, getting rest on the boat, and drinking LOTS of water, I eventually started feeling better. The only positive from this story is that I learned my limit in terms of alcohol. I barely drink, so I can't see myself in *that* bad a situation again. But if I do, I'll only be able to blame myself.

Is the Balcony Open?

Before proceeding to the next chapter, I'll share one more story. I was planning on ending the chapter here, but this one is worth adding. But first, let me provide some context.

After graduation, my group of friends, along with 10 other students from high school, went to Israel to tour the country. It was a school-sanctioned graduation trip with a tour guide, driver, etc. Maybe if I write a book on traveling the Middle East, I'll include all my stories from that experience.

When it ended in Tel Aviv, our friend group of nine broke off and traveled around Europe separately. Before Europe, we started our holiday in Netanya (a 20-minute drive from Tel Aviv). One of my friends has an apartment there, so we stayed for a few days before flying to Greece.

Staying in Netanya was a welcome break for us. We had been touring non-stop for two weeks, and his apartment,

located right next to the water, was a perfect spot to relax. We went to the beach, cooked delicious food, and had a wonderful bonding holiday.

Plus, the sunset view from his apartment is spectacular. The Mediterranean Sea faces west of the city, providing the perfect view of the sun lowering over the water every night. It wasn't the BEST sunset I've ever seen (hint: that's coming next chapter), but it was still impressive.

One of the advantages of staying there was that we could do laundry. We hadn't stayed anywhere for more than a few nights, so doing laundry was difficult. Some of our accommodations didn't even have proper washing machines. Since we would be staying in the apartment soon,

we collectively decided to wait to do laundry there.

In theory, it was a good plan. There were nine of us, and we each needed to do one load. There was a washer and a dryer, so over three days, there was plenty of time for laundry.

But whenever an author starts an explanation with "in theory," something probably went wrong. And guess what? That's exactly what happened.

The first person put his clothes in the washing machine, adds detergent, and turns it on. An hour later, he went to the machine and found that his clothes had washed perfectly.

After, he puts everything in the dryer and tries to turn it on, but he can't figure it out. At first, he assumes he's doing

something wrong, so he tries again. But still, no results.

We examine the dryer and try to figure out the problem. None of us are dryer experts, but there's nothing noticeably wrong with the machine. My friend, whose family owns the apartment, calls his parents. As I watch him speak on the phone, you can see bad news is coming. Right when his facial expression sours, the outcome becomes predictable. The dryer is broken, and there's nothing we can do.

Now, we're in a bit of a pickle. Time is running out, and none of us have done laundry since we left Canada. We could go to a laundromat and pay for laundry, but there isn't one close, and we don't have a car. So, we decide we're all doing

laundry at the apartment, and we'll just air dry everything.

With two and a half days before we leave, we know that time isn't an issue for washing. Each load only takes an hour, and we have about 60 hours left. The two issues are the time it takes to air dry, and the space available for hanging. The apartment is a decent size, but nothing crazy, so finding places to hang dry nine people's closets is going to be a problem.

After the first two people wash their clothes and hang them to dry, we quickly realize space is an issue. He has two drying racks, a balcony, and a ladder. Seven people still need to wash, and most of that space is already occupied.

Over the next two days, it becomes a constant cycle of:

"Are those pants dry yet?"

"Your underwear must be dry by now."

"Why do you need so much space to dry your socks?!"

Picture nine newly graduated high schoolers fighting over space to dry their clothes like *Lord of the Flies*. What ends up becoming "premium real estate" is the west-facing balcony. Between 11:00 AM and 7:00 PM, the sun shines on the deck, making it a prime spot for drying. There's nothing like some juicy sunlight to dry your clothes.

Fortunately, by the time we left, almost everything was dry. Although, each of us had a few pieces that were still slightly damp. I'm not exaggerating when I say that we were drying clothes until the minute we left the apartment. The first thing some of us did in Greece was

hang up our damp socks or shirts in the hostel.

As funny as it is to imagine us frantically drying our clothes on rotation, there's a lesson learned from that story. The reality of traveling is (as the kids would phrase it), "You gotta do what you gotta do."

Sometimes things go awry... in fact, it's basically inevitable. But there's an old saying about dealing with problems. It's 10% action and 90% reaction. As long as you react properly, you can almost always get yourself out of a jam. It's better to play the hand you're dealt instead of crying about the cards. And that's exactly what we did here.

11. Santorini



After leaving Ios, an island that thrives on its eccentric nightlife, we went to Santorini. In terms of Greek islands, Santorini is the complete opposite of Ios. Instead of raucous parties every night, the atmosphere is calm, relaxed, and peaceful. It's an ideal destination for a stunning romantic getaway or a beautiful destination wedding.

The island is divided into three sections - the north, middle, and south. We stayed in the southern part of the island, known as Perissa. The beauty of Perissa lies in its black sand beach, which is conveniently located right across from many of the hostel/hotel locations. This means you can leave your accommodation and be on the Aegean beach within a minute.

During our trip, one of my friends brought a GoPro camera (not sponsored, but a great camera for traveling), which proved to be a wise decision. If you're traveling near water or participating in outdoor activities, explore bringing a digital action camera.

We captured some incredible videos of us swimming in the Aegean Sea and enjoying the outdoor pool. Looking back at the pictures and videos we took during the trip, I realized the importance of capturing memories.

And if you don't bring one, take lots of photos on your phone. I'm writing this book by glancing through images from each place and remembering the stories. The unfortunate truth is that you'll never remember every place you go within a lo-

cation. Pictures (and videos are even better) do a tremendous job of jogging your memory.

I wish I took more pictures on this trip. It bothers me that I don't have as many photographs of Santorini as I should. Especially considering how easy it is to take your phone out and snap a picture. I wasn't lugging around a Polaroid camera.

And it's not because I want to post them on social media, but because photos bring you back to moments. I now preach that even if it's a negative experience, you should try to capture it, because you'll look back and laugh at it later. Plus, it will paint the entire portrait of the trip, not just highlight the roses and daisies.

My experience has changed the way I travel. With each passing adventure, I tend to take more pictures than the previous one. I'll probably capture more footage than ever before on my next journey. You don't want to forget a moment because you forgot to take pictures of it. Every memory is worth the space it takes up on your phone. And you can always buy more storage later.

Donkey Riders

One of the claims about Santorini is that it boasts some of the best sunsets in the world. There is even a particular spot on the north part of the island called Oia, where people go to witness the magnificent sunset. If you're willing to spend top

dollar on a hotel overlooking the perfect view, Oia is the place to stay.

Fortunately, we didn't need to stay in Oia to see the sunset. Buses are available to take visitors to that part of the island, so one evening, we decided to catch one and witness the sunset ourselves.

Once we got off the bus in Oia, we realized that we needed to climb several stairs and pathways to find a good position. As most travelers learn to do, we followed a group of people walking in the right direction.

As we trod up the stairs, I heard a faint rumbling of bells and clacks behind me, which gradually grew louder. The noises were similar to horses trampling on a pathway, as the sound of hooves is very recognizable. However, there was a

problem with this hypothesis. The overhead archways were too short for horses.

As the noises grew louder, I turned back and saw a hoard of 30 donkeys slowly trudging along the Greek steps, each wearing a bell. My friends and I stepped to the side of the pathway as the donkey leader directed us to move. He needed the whole walkway for them to continue. As the leader passed, he offered us the chance to buy a donkey ride up the stairs.

We didn't buy donkey rides for two reasons. First, from an ethical point of view, we didn't feel great about riding donkeys. Over half of us are over six feet tall, and the last thing we wanted was to injure a donkey while in Greece. Second, we were already almost up the hill. At

that point, it would have been a waste. However, I like to focus on the first reason while telling this story, not the second. It sounds better.

As I've learned, I shouldn't judge other cultures. I *may* have an opinion on the ethics of using donkeys... but I don't possess the cultural context needed to give a valid take. (Aside: They also dressed the donkeys with cute little saddles, bells, and accessories. That may not be relevant to the story, but now you get to imagine a donkey looking adorable.)

After the donkeys had passed, we continued our walk to the top of the hill. Near the edge of the cliff, we found a nice grass area where we could sit and watch the sunset. At first, it looked like we wouldn't see it. Clouds were blocking the

supposed magnificent view. It wasn't overcast, but two large clouds made it difficult for the sun to poke its light through. As the event came closer and closer, the clouds started to part just enough that we were given some hope. By sunset, the clouds cooperated with our plans, parted at the right time, and allowed us to gaze upon the view.

If you're going there as a couple, some hotels position themselves perfectly to catch the sunset. This makes it an ideal honeymoon spot. You can enjoy the beauty of the sun as it passes down while sipping wine with your loved one. Or you can find a random patch of grass with eight of your buddies. Either works. Just be careful not to get trampled by donkeys on your way up.

Interestingly, this sunset wasn't the best one we saw in Santorini. Perhaps it was because it was still partly cloudy, but we caught a better one later. You'll read about it later in this chapter.

Foreign Economics

I should preface this story by saying that this next problem is a time-relevant issue. Hopefully, you don't have the same issue when traveling to Greece.

During our visit, the economy wasn't in the best shape. As a result, there were some unusual situations that you wouldn't normally see. The biggest one was the fluctuating prices of everyday items. In North America, if you visit a restaurant and order the same thing twice in two

consecutive days, the cost will likely be the same for each visit.

However, in Santorini, we saw multiple restaurants that didn't list their prices on a menu. Instead, they had a chalkboard outside the restaurant. Every day, they would erase the previous prices and write new ones. These price changes were due to highly fluctuating economic factors.

I found the situation fascinating and spoke with a couple restaurant managers when I was there. But looking back on it, I didn't approach the situation well. As a brash 17-year-old, I may have come across as insensitive, and the people I talked to weren't eager to answer my questions. For them, the changing prices

were a matter of livelihood, and it scared them.

Luckily, a restaurant owner talked to me (in more detail) about the situation. He said there were two main issues. 1. They never knew their profit margins; 2. If they could attract consumers at higher prices.

If the food prices were too high, people wouldn't eat at his restaurant. He mentioned that on some days when they were forced to raise their prices, he could see a noticeable difference in the number of customers.

I noticed that restaurants were suffering the most because of price fluctuations. Small stores would adjust their prices a bit, but their margins were generally higher. Therefore, they could afford

to keep their prices more stable. Some days they would make more, and others less, but they could live with the results. Restaurants were more susceptible to the variable cost of products in their supply chain.

To be fair, prices wouldn't jump 50% in one day. But eventually, small differences add up. To me, it was more of a foreign concept than anything else. I never expected to pay €10 at a restaurant one day and then €12 the next. As the situation progressed, I assume business owners at least adjusted to it better over time. Although, there's only so much they can do in this situation. Sometimes, economics hit you like a ton of bricks.

The Best Sunset in the World

Certain things always stick out in your mind after traveling. Once everything switches from short-term to long-term memory, you start to remember places by the few impactful moments. Regardless of if they're positive or negative.

When I recall Santorini in-depth, I remember being bored. There are different types of travelers, and I would fall into the “active” category. My preference is to seek out activities, rather than hang out at the beach. Santorini is a beach holiday, not an activity vacation, so the alignment wasn't perfect.

If you're a beach person, it's a great spot! That's just not my cup of tea most of the time. However, I still feel like I loved

it because of this one experience. That's the impact a positive memory can create.

When I think about Santorini, this is the experience that stands out the most. It's one of the best times I've ever had while traveling, and it is why Santorini seems like a dream. It surpasses everything else I feel about the island. Here is the story:

On our last full day in Santorini, my friends and I embark on a catamaran boat tour around the island. Since we bought the tickets for the tour a couple of days in advance, we saw it as something to look forward to while lying on the beach and swimming in the sea. We are told it will be an 8-hour excursion, starting at 1:00 PM.

On the day of the tour, we arrive at the dock at 12:30 PM, half an hour before departure. The boat is about 25-30 feet, with a sail guiding the way. It has a booth near the stern where you can sit outside, a small indoor cabin in the middle, and nets on the surface of the front deck to lie on. It can comfortably fit about 10-12 people.

Since there were nine of us, we booked almost every ticket for that day. Except for us, there's one other couple, a driver, and an attendant. And, the other couple only bought a ticket for a three-hour trip, so the final five hours on the boat are all to ourselves.

As the boat takes off on this beautiful sunny day, the first thing that hits me is the subtle wind of the sea. Being from a

landlocked city, I don't get the boating experience very often. So, the first five minutes set the tone for an intoxicating feeling of tranquility on the water.

The tour includes two site visits, a small meal, and unlimited wine for the whole day. In the beginning, we spend time sitting on the deck enjoying wine, talking with the boat driver, and making jokes with the attendant. The other couple stays around the front of the boat, so we are basically isolated.

An hour or so into the tour, we reach our first stop, a gorgeous sand beach with a red hue and a picturesque cliff. The deep colors stand out immediately for anyone who sails past. The attendant tells us that water off the coast is a popular area for snorkeling. She says to look for

fish swimming around us while going to the island.

The boat docks, and the driver tells everyone to jump from the boat and swim to the island. The first two people jump from a ladder on the lower part of the boat. Then, the driver exclaims he wants everyone to jump from a higher point, the main deck.

He mostly gets couples on this excursion, not nine guys straight out of high school, so it's a chance for him to have fun. The remaining people, including myself, jump from the boat's main deck into the water, plunging feet first into the Aegean Sea.

A few strokes in, I put my head into the water. While it's not the best view without goggles, I can immediately tell

why people snorkel there. There are vastly different colors of fish in this one area. Blue fish, yellow fish, orange fish, all fluttering about under the water.

When we get to the island, we relax at the beach and enjoy the red sand. What makes Santorini unique are the beaches' varying colors due to volcanic activity. Some areas have the whitest sand imaginable, and others the blackest. This one is a vibrant burgundy.

When it's time to leave the coast, we swim from the island back to the boat. After everyone returns, we dry off in the sun while the catamaran takes off again.

The other couple's tour ends sometime between the first and second destination, so the boat driver stops to let

them off. Now, it's just us on the boat, and we can really settle in on all areas.

For a good chunk of the boat ride, a few of us stay near the bow, laying on the nets that line the surface of the front deck. They're right at the end of the boat with nothing underneath, so if you lay face down, you see the water directly beneath you, and receive a splash of the sea every time you encounter a wave. If you lay face up, you see the blue sky above, and feel the water hit your back.

Eventually, we arrive at the tour's second stop, but the boat driver doesn't tell us where we're going. He wants to surprise us.

The destination is Palea Kameni, a separate island off the coast of main Santorini. Because of volcanic activity hun-

dreds of years ago, there's a natural hot spring in the island's water. But the thing about this hot spring is that the water looks yellow because of natural chalk forming underneath the surface.

So, when we first arrive, it seems like he's taking us to dirty water. That *is* what it looks like in the distance. But once he explains the origin behind the water's color, it makes it much more palatable.

As we're swimming from the boat to the hot spring, the water is just as cold as any part of the sea. But once we get close, the water's temperature shifts in a flash, from cold to warm. The farther we go, the more it feels like we're swimming in a hot tub.

After approaching the island, we find ourselves floating in hot, murky, yellow

water. Then, one of us finds some solid chalk in the water. I was so preoccupied with the temperature; I didn't even notice the rocks covered with yellow chalk markings around me.

Most markings displayed names, countries, or anything that could leave a presence on the Greek stones. Of course, there's also the occasional "69," "420," and some profanity as well (I'll let you use your imagination).

As I see everyone writing on the rocks, I try to find some chalk myself. Using my feet, I find a small piece of chalk in the water and swim to an unmarked stone. I start by writing "Noah" and "Canada," as most people would. But I also want a little creativity with my chalk.

So, as a big *Game of Thrones* fan, I paid tribute to the MOST iconic character on the show, Hodor. *Spoiler alert* We went on our trip about a year after Hodor emotionally sacrificed his life in the “Hold the Door” scene. As a big Hodor fan, I wrote “RIP Hodor” on one of the rocks to honor the giant with a heart of gold. *End of Spoiler*

Exiting the hot spring isn't quite as much fun. You know when you visit a hotel pool, and someone dares you to jump immediately from the hot tub to the main water? This is kind of like that.

Except, the Aegean Sea is much colder than the average pool. So, we swim back to the boat as fast as possible. We want to avoid swimming in freezing temperatures for longer than necessary.

This hot spring is one of my most fascinating encounters with the natural world. Every so often, in different domains of the Earth, you experience a phenomenon that seems like it shouldn't exist. Like what you're seeing or feeling shouldn't work that way. Even if you know the science, logic, and reasoning behind it, the natural world finds ways to appear better than reality.

For me, this hot spring classifies as one of those moments. The sudden change in water temperature, from the mundane cold to a blistering hot tub, in the middle of the Aegean Sea, feels completely absurd.

When we return to the boat, we dry off and sit in our bathing suits around the deck. As the water flows around us, we

talk, eat, and laugh on what seems like the perfect day. While we're cruising, one of my friends asks the captain if he can drive the boat. A little surprised, the driver ponders the query before finally agreeing.

My friend sits in the captain's chair, gets a quick lesson from the driver, and controls the wheel while we cheer him on. Then, the captain lets more of us drive the boat, each taking turns to maneuver the vessel.

While sitting on the deck, I suddenly feel the boat take a sharp turn. My wine spills, the boat wobbles, and I hold on for dear life. One of my buddies got a little overexcited at the wheel. With a look of concern on the captain's face, he takes back control of the ship. He quickly real-

izes that MAYBE it isn't the best idea to let high school grads (who have no idea what they're doing) drive the boat. But we still laugh it off.

When it came to the planning for this trip, the company was very precise. They plan these tours so the customer will be on the boat, and facing the right direction, for sunset. Afterward, you sail back to the dock. This is why the tour starts at 1:00 PM, and not earlier. It's a selling point that the patron sees the gorgeous sunset from the catamaran.

As the day is fleeting, and our boat tour is nearing its conclusion, the sun is quickly lowering near the sea's horizon. Luckily for us, everything lines up perfectly. There isn't a cloud in the sky, the

weather is perfect, and the waves have calmed down to a soothing rhythm.

As you can probably imagine, nine friends that have known each other forever aren't usually quiet. There's always something to talk about or a joke to be made. But in this moment, as the big red sun slowly sets over the horizon, it's silent.

We appreciate the intense beauty of nature, and allow our senses to indulge in the scenic phenomenon. Our eyes are graced by the light of the setting sun, and our ears and noses are treated to the sounds and smells of the sea. THIS is the best sunset I've ever seen in my life.

After it's over, we return to the dock. We say our goodbyes to the boat driver and the attendant, and thank them for a

wonderful day. Later, we find some dinner at a local restaurant, and finish our night by settling on the black sand beach outside our hostel. When we wake up the next day, it's off to Barcelona.

12. Barcelona



Explaining why something is your favorite can be a challenge. Sometimes the adjectives aren't apparent. But one thing I'm sure about is that Barcelona is my favorite city in the world.

Even though I want to give a more precise explanation than using words like "vibe" or "energy," it seems wrong in this case. It's almost as if the city's atmosphere powers the engine behind my attraction to it.

I love walking when traveling, and Barcelona's streets were the most enjoyable. The combination of the grid-lines, architecture, and coastlines stand out in my mind. The walking was more enjoyable there than anywhere else. Josh and I were reaching almost 30,000 steps per day in Barcelona.

The city's architecture, in particular, is unparalleled, with Antoni Gaudí as the mastermind behind its iconic landscape. As a result, some of the city's significant structures, such as the Sagrada Família, Park Güell, Casa Milà, and Casa Batlló, reflect his unique style. If you appreciate beautiful architecture, Barcelona should be on your must-visit list.

I often found myself capturing pictures and videos of the city to preserve its atmosphere. Day or night, walking through Barcelona's streets made me feel like I was a part of the city. I didn't experience that sensation everywhere, and it was undoubtedly the strongest in Barcelona. I highly recommend walking through as much of the city as possible if you ever have the chance to visit.

I'll now supply some context for the rest of the chapter. I will split my account of Barcelona into two sections, as I visited the city on the two separate trips discussed in the book.

The first section will cover content from the post-graduation trip with my friends, while the second will focus on backpacking with Josh. I'll headline the start of each part in **bold** writing.

Trip With Friends

The Birth of Goror

When you find a restaurant you love, it's easy to keep going back to it. Even if you want to try new places, returning to the same spot can feel like comfort food after a while.

In the Paris chapter, I mentioned that Josh and I frequented Merci Jérôme. Similarly, during my trip to Barcelona with my friends, we found our own "Merci Jérôme" at two locations.

The first was an empanada chain named "Las Muns" - a perfect spot for a quick bite during the day. There were plenty of locations all over the city, which made it incredibly convenient. My go-to order was the ham and cheese empanada.

The other restaurant is “100 Montaditos.” Montaditos are a type of food that resemble small sub-style sandwiches. If you order a few sandwiches together, it collectively turns into a meal. This place is called “100 Montaditos” because its menu features 100 different sandwiches. Each item is very inexpensive, ranging from €1 - €3. This makes it the perfect spot for a quick bite OR an entire meal.

When you go to the counter, you hand them a paper with written numbers corresponding to menu items, similar to a Chinese restaurant. Once you've selected your sandwiches, you give them your name, and they call you to pick up your food.

When I reach the front of the line, one of my friends nudges me to give a different name than my own. He says to pick something funny. Without much time to think, I panic and blurt out the first name that comes to mind - "Hodor."

The worker looks at me with a baffled face and asks me to repeat myself. Once again, I say, "Hodor" but with more authority. The employee still has no idea what I'm saying, but at this point, I can't back down. I'm committed to being Hodor.

The third time, I legitimately yell, "HODOR!" with little to no volume control. Other people in the restaurant start staring (including my friend group) as I shout a *Game of Thrones* character at an

employee. Finally, the worker writes down a name on his machine.

A few minutes later, my friends and I start receiving our food. Knowing I'm next, I stand up and look into the kitchen. Eventually, I see my order make its way up to the counter. One of the cooks places my food at the edge, looks at the receipt, and is speechless.

Finally, he yells, "Goror?"

As I attempt to contain my laughter, I look at him and proceed to the counter.

He then yells again, "Goror" although this time as a statement and less of a question. I grab my food as he looks at me with bewilderment. He says, "Your name is Goror?!"

I respond, "No, actually. My name is Hodor."

The cook slowly walks back to the kitchen, utterly confused. I look at the receipt attached to the food tray, and lo and behold, it says “Goror”. For the rest of the trip, I was known as Goror.

Wristbands

If you had known me between the ages of 16 and 20, you would have seen I was obsessed with wristbands. I had a collection of them from various locations around the world. Some were acquired from meaningful experiences, while others were based on principles I believed in.

My only rule was that they had to be obtained organically, which meant I couldn't buy them myself. If I acquired them without money, I could wear them

as a reminder of that experience or principle. For instance, I used to wear a wristband that reads, "Drugs Drag You Down." It was given to me at an anti-drug rally in high school. This next story is about how I acquired a new wristband:

As I mentioned earlier, some of my best memories are from strolling around cities. One of my friends and I were walking down a narrow alley in Barcelona en route to a walking tour. Suddenly, we were stopped by a woman who noticed my wristbands. She eagerly pulled us towards the entrance of her small store, where a colorful wheel with various prizes stood outside. "Spin the Wheel!" she exclaimed.

My friend spun first and landed on a peg that awarded him a coupon for her

shop, which he would never use. I went next, and the wheel landed on one of the smaller sections, indicating a more valuable prize! The peg read, "Free wristband" which worked out perfectly. The woman at the shop excitedly grabbed a wristband from a bowl behind her and placed it on my wrist.

Unfortunately, we had to leave right after to make it to the walking tour on time. So, we said goodbye to the shop owner and continued down the alley (I don't think the shop owners were thrilled that we left without even entering their store). But hey, she's the one who pulled us there.

This is how I acquired my Barcelona wristband. It's sitting with other wristbands I've collected worldwide in a box

on my nightstand. And it will continue to serve as a memory from my trip.

Perceiving Time

If you're seeking a wilder nightlife experience, Barcelona is an excellent option. During our stay there, we visited two clubs on separate nights. The first club we went to was a reggae/EDM venue with bright lights, booming music, and a "potent" aroma.

When I say "potent," I'm referring to a smell commonly associated with reggae music and skunks. The entire club was hazy, with visible traces of smoke throughout the room.

The dance floor was enormous. It was packed with people shoulder to shoulder, all vying for space while groov-

ing to the music. Immediately upon entering, I was enthralled by the sounds, smoke, and crowd. I couldn't even locate the bar.

I ventured into the bathroom at one point to gather myself, but it was even hazier than the club itself. The stench was so overwhelming that I had to leave quickly to catch my breath. The smoke was too powerful. I wandered back to the main area and spent most of the night on the dance floor. Don't get me wrong, the dancing in the middle of the club was enjoyable. But it was an entirely different club experience.

The second night we went out was far more memorable. We persuaded one of the workers at the hostel to escort us

to the best club in Barcelona, and he didn't disappoint.

We walked for what seemed like an eternity before finally arriving at a beachside club called "Opium Barcelona" (which has sister clubs worldwide). This place was, and still is, the wildest club I've ever entered. If you're into partying and dancing, it's the ultimate destination. The club is massive, with a restaurant, outdoor leisure area, and a massive dance floor that erupts every night. We spent a considerable amount of time inside Opium.

Unfortunately, I lost track of my friends about five minutes after entering the club and saw them sparingly throughout the night. At around 2:00 AM, I began canvassing the entire club in

search of my compadres. When I couldn't find them, I left the club to check if they were on the beach. To my surprise, I found them all there. It turned out that we had all lost each other that night.

One by one, we all had the same idea to head for the beach to search for the group. Between 1:00 and 2:00 AM, we all exited the club, stumbling upon each other without any prior planning. I was the second-to-last person to leave, and when we reunited, we spent some time recovering together on the beach.

When we all regrouped, and our hostel escort could breathe a sigh of relief because none of us collapsed in the club, we started to go back to the hostel. Three of my friends took a cab, while the other six of us walked with our guide. That

walk to the hostel, which had felt like an eternity on our way to the club, was one of the most enjoyable strolls I've ever taken.

After a night of dancing, meandering through the streets of Barcelona after dark was incredible. Not only did we have a great conversation filled with reflections and laughter, but we also stopped at the Arc de Triomf, where we forced our guide to let us stop and chill for a while.

Eventually, we made it to the hostel, with the walk taking roughly 45 minutes. On the way there, that 45 minutes felt like hours, but on the way back, it felt like 10 minutes. It just goes to show how the quality of the experience can warp our perception of how much time has passed. The good parts always seem to fly by,

while the bad ones appear to drag on forever, all within a fleeting moment.

Member #1

For one year, my brother Josh unknowingly held a membership to a Barcelona dispensary. Here's the story:

During our travels, my friends and I look for new places to visit. Everyone does the tourist stuff, but we want something more unique. We talk to our hostel concierge, who recommends visiting a small, fun coffeeshop.

In Europe, the term “coffeeshop” takes on a completely different meaning than in North America. It typically denotes a spot where marijuana can be purchased and casually consumed. As I mentioned about the “Drugs Drag You Down”

wristband, such locations were not exactly my priorities. But I was content to simply relax with my friends in the lounge.

To get into this coffeeshop, you need an official membership. This means you have to give your name, ID, etc. If approved, I would receive an official membership card. As a post-grad tourist, I'm only 17, whereas the coffeeshop had a minimum age requirement of 18.

To prepare for situations like this, I brought Josh's old driver's license in case I needed to be admitted somewhere 18+. I figured I looked enough like his old picture for it to be a feasible plan.

Once inside the coffeeshop, we meet in a lobby with an attendant stationed at a desk. Our guide initiates the conversa-

tion by explaining that we are staying at his hostel and are hoping to become members. The attendant proceeds to grill each of us with numerous questions. Questions about our backgrounds, intentions, everything. When it is my turn, I pass his test. He grants me full access under the guise of Josh Lieberman and gives me a membership card.

As an official member, the attendant gave me a plastic card that displayed the front door of the coffeeshop on one side, and a barcode on the other. This card served as my entry pass. Interestingly, it was completely blank with no discernable indicators that it was intended for use in a coffeeshop. It didn't even have the name of the business. Therefore, it was

completely indiscernible from any other membership card.

Several months later, I was rummaging through my wallet, sifting through gift cards to check their balances. As I did so, my membership card for the coffeeshop tumbled out, and Josh caught sight of it for the first time.

Curious, he asked about the card. I quickly returned the card to my wallet and told him it was merely a gift card I was given in Europe. To this day, I have never disclosed the true origin of that card to him. We haven't spoken about it since. The first time he'll find out about his Barcelonian coffeeshop membership will be when he reads this book (LOL). Oh well, what are you going to do?

Peer Pressure

Unpopular opinion: Sometimes, a little bit of peer pressure is a good thing. That statement obviously comes with some caveats. But, under the right circumstances, it can be helpful. This experience taught me the benefits of peer pressure.

I've previously stated that walking is an excellent way to explore new places. However, there's a world of difference between strolling through a city and hiking to its peak. During my time in Barcelona, my friends wanted to trek to a vantage point overlooking the city.

The climb would require a few hours of strenuous activity, and the weather was oppressively hot. As someone who's not fond of hiking, my initial response

was to suggest an alternative activity. Nevertheless, since enough of my friends wanted to do it, I felt compelled to go along.

We made our way to the starting point of the hike. Here we met a tour guide who specialized in organizing such expeditions. She advised us to bring not *one*, but *two* large bottles of water. She also emphasized keeping them cold in any way possible. I bought two 1.5L plastic water bottles and mentally prepared myself for the hike.

To describe the hike as difficult would be an understatement. It was a grueling, uphill climb that seemed endless, with the scorching sun beating down on us relentlessly.

I wish I could say I enjoyed the hike, but that would be a lie. It sucked. My calves hurt, my throat itched, and I was sweating profusely. I spent the entire time calculating how much water I could drink without running out. I dispersed my water consumption by time intervals, then eagerly gulped every drop as the hike progressed.

However, like most hiking tales, this one had an "it was all worth it in the end" moment. When we finally reached the summit, we were rewarded with a panoramic view of Barcelona, completed by the Mediterranean Sea as an awe-inspiring backdrop.

We could see all the significant buildings and attractions, and the city's intricacies were laid bare before us.

Moreover, there was a ledge that was perfect for admiring the view. We all sat together with a sense of appreciation for ourselves and the city. I can only imagine how stunning it would be to sit there at sunrise, with the Mediterranean Sea gleaming in the distance.

While I believe the hike was worth it in the end, I wonder if that's just something hikers tell themselves. Is the grind really worth it?

A stunning view of one of Europe's greatest cities is fantastic. But when people see a mediocre shot of nature at the end, is the outcome REALLY worth the grueling trek? If you're a devoted hiker who loves the process, then perhaps. Otherwise, I struggle to see the appeal.

Now that you know my stance on hiking, you can understand why I was hesitant. Sometimes, you need a little nudge to embark on an adventure. A "kick in the pants," as one of my elementary teachers would say. Looking back, I would have been very disappointed if they hadn't pressured me into going. I would have missed out on something incredible.

However, I want to be crystal clear that I do not condone peer pressure when it comes to harmful activities like drugs, alcohol, gambling, smoking, and so on. But if you're feeling unsure about participating in a fun and safe activity, a little pressure can help.

Plus, if you know how to pick your friends, they'll only pressure you into

things you *should* be doing. But as a fallback, always trust your instincts and do what feels right for you.

Vacation Goggles

Since Barcelona was my final destination on this trip, I had the pleasure of navigating the airport alone. My friends continued their travels in Amsterdam for a few more days, but I had to be home sooner for an event. So, the airport was all mine.

To my surprise, I navigated it better than expected. I was 17, having never been in an airport alone, accompanied by a terrible sense of direction. Despite this, I eventually made it home after winding my way through.

In my experience, the last day of a trip is always a mixed bag. It tends to be emotional, both positively AND negatively. On one hand, you're excited to go back home; to see your loved ones, enjoy a home-cooked meal, and sleep in your own bed.

On the other hand, the adventurer inside you wants to keep exploring. You've tasted freedom, and now the mundane is slowly approaching. When you're away long enough, you acclimatize to the traveler's lifestyle, and it can be disheartening to switch to normal life.

As my trip came to a close, I was somewhat ready to depart. Even though I didn't necessarily long for home, I felt it was time. I had seen everything I wanted to see and experienced what I sought. If

you reach that point of contentedness, it enables the feeling of happiness to return.

Besides, the goal of this trip wasn't to see Europe's iconic landmarks; we only did that in Barcelona. So, I got the trip I enthusiastically signed up for, and felt satisfied with the results. In my opinion, nothing wrong with that.

But the good thing is that this feeling is usually accompanied by the "leave them wanting more" expression. You don't want to return because you feel like you can keep going. You're not finished experiencing the world, its wonders, its beauties. And the passion for travel continues. But guess what? That internal fire to explore will motivate you to book another plane ticket.

Trip With Josh

Soccer at its Finest

Now that I have finished discussing my post-grad vacation with my friends, and those stories can be put to rest, it's time to conclude my trip with Josh. Since I visited Barcelona just a couple of years before, I already did most of the touristy things the first time around. However, there were a few things we didn't have time for, and I got to experience them during my second visit.

I was determined to take a tour of Camp Nou Stadium, the home of Barcelona FC. Luckily, we managed to book a tour on one of our final days in the city. Being a big fan of exploring the inner workings of sports stadiums, visiting one

of the most renowned soccer (futbol) stadiums in the world was a top priority. Moreover, we went when Argentine superstar Lionel Messi was playing for Barcelona FC. His face was plastered EVERYWHERE we looked.

Over the years, Barca FC has achieved tremendous success. Consequently, during the tour, we had the opportunity to see their opulent trophy room. For any soccer fan, it would be incredible to witness the impressive trophy collection housed in this museum-like exhibit.

UEFA Champions League trophies, Ballon d'Or awards, this sanctuary held it all. Apart from walking through the tunnel, climbing the steps, and stepping onto the field, this was the most remarkable

part of the tour. Although I've visited a few other stadiums before, Camp Nou was truly spectacular.

As a sports enthusiast, I find it fascinating to observe how different complexes are designed to cater to the teams in their respective locations. I believe that the construction and maintenance of a stadium can reflect the culture of the people who reside there.

For instance, SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles epitomizes the essence of LA with its extravagant and flashy nature. It screams "celebrity." On the other hand, Fenway Park in Boston is steeped in historical significance. They strive to preserve as much of the original site as possible while renovating the concealed areas of the park. Boston truly values its his-

tory, and Fenway Park perfectly exemplifies this sentiment.

Having said that, I consider stadium tours to be an underappreciated tourist attraction. Unless you are a devoted sports fan, it may not be the first place that comes to mind when exploring a city.

However, stadiums are more than just venues for sports; they are the lifeblood of a community where tens of thousands of people gather to unite. If you want to gain insight into a city and its inhabitants, visiting its largest stadium or arena is a must.

(Aside: I'd love to do a road trip through the United States to see different stadiums. For example, spending one summer seeing an MLB game at every ballpark. I would probably start in Seattle

and go from west to east. And rent an RV and live it in the whole time. Especially in baseball, since every stadium is so unique, it would be the experience of a lifetime! It would also make a fantastic book... just saying.)

Walking and Walking

I mentioned earlier that walking around a city is the best way to truly experience it. It doesn't matter which city you're in; strolling the streets provides valuable perspective compared to simply driving by. This story serves as a testament to that belief:

During my time in Rome, I made four new friends with whom I stayed in touch via Snapchat, Instagram, and other social media platforms. It turned out that two of

them, who were already traveling together, planned to be in Barcelona at the same time as us.

So, on my last night in Barcelona, I made arrangements to meet up with them. In typical Noah fashion, I decided to walk to their location, a restaurant about 20 minutes away. I embarked on the journey alone, relying on a screenshot of the Google Maps route for guidance. Upon reaching the restaurant, I realized they weren't there.

As it turned out, the restaurant had multiple locations across the city. Without Wi-Fi, I couldn't communicate with them to determine which one. In hindsight, I could have turned on my roaming data, but it seemed like a waste of money.

Plus, now I had an excuse to walk even further.

Undeterred, I proceeded to the second restaurant location. This walk took me approximately 30 minutes and led me through different neighborhoods I hadn't encountered on either trip to Barcelona. However, as it fits the theme, I reached the restaurant and discovered they weren't there, either. At this point, between walking and navigating, I had been gone for about an hour and hadn't found them.

Like a persistent trooper, I mustered my spirits and continued my seemingly aimless journey. Finally, after another 45 minutes, I arrived at the third restaurant location and spotted my newfound friends. The moment I saw their faces

was glorious. Not because I was overwhelmingly excited to see them, but because it meant I could stop walking alone in a foreign city after nearly two hours. We celebrated my arrival and finally began our evening together.

After spending the night chatting away, listening to music, and enjoying some sangria, we eventually decided to head back to our respective hostels.

Along the way, we passed by the Arc de Triomphe, and once again, I was blessed with a nighttime stroll past the stunning architecture. We were reunited two years after our first dance in the moonlight. We couldn't resist taking pictures beside it, even going so far as to have a full-fledged photoshoot.

As we continued walking through Barcelona, our paths eventually diverged as our hostels were in different directions. With heartfelt goodbyes and an optimistic "see you later," I found myself alone once again, ready to wander through the beautiful streets of Catalonia.

This late-night walk held emotional significance. Several factors contributed to this sentiment. Firstly, as it was the last night of my trip, it provided a chance to reflect on how fortunate I was to be there.

It allowed me to cherish the fleeting moments remaining in Europe while enjoying the perfect weather of a clear, warm night. Secondly, after bidding farewell to my friends, the route from that point to the hostel was relatively

straightforward. It involved a long walk down a major street, with two slight turns near the end. This simplicity allowed me to indulge in introspection rather than allocating mental capacity to navigation.

I understand it "may not be smart" to wander around European cities alone at 2:00 AM. But boy, is it exhilarating. When you've had an incredible time in one place, those final memories fuse with the essence of an unforgettable walk.

At various points, I would pause on the sidewalk, taking in the captivating sights of the city. The intersections, traffic lights, and Spanish signs held me spell-bound. This time, I made sure to capture enough pictures. I aimed my camera down the middle of the street, at the

crosswalks, and at the streetlights, hoping to preserve the pure enjoyment of that night (with a few selfies, of course).

In moments of pure bliss, I urge you to capture a photograph. Whenever you revisit the photo, it can transport you back to that wonderful memory. It doesn't have to be a picture of iconic landmarks like the Eiffel Tower or the London Eye; sometimes, simple streets can work their magic.

The key is to connect the image with your emotions. So that each time you glance at it, your soul is carried back to that cherished moment. I still rely on pictures from the streets of Catalonia to evoke the serenity I felt that night. With a sense of closure, I aimlessly made my way back home, allowing my mind to

wander as I reflected on an exceptional trip. Brimming with memories that will endure a lifetime.

Finally, I arrived at the doors of my hostel, marking the end of my journey. I would spend one more night there before catching my return flight home. However, just when I thought my memories had reached their conclusion, there was still one more tale to come... and that brings us to the final story in this book.

Airport "Security"

As expected, direct flights from Barcelona to Winnipeg weren't available. Therefore, our flight itinerary consisted of the following connections:

Barcelona > Amsterdam

Amsterdam > Minneapolis

Minneapolis > Winnipeg

To travel from Barcelona to Amsterdam, we opted for a flight with KLM Airlines (not sponsored, but they consistently provided excellent service). Upon boarding the relatively small aircraft, Josh and I noticed the sparse passenger count. With rows of unoccupied seats, we each claimed an entire row across from one another.

During the flight, one of the flight attendants struck up a conversation with Josh and me. Since he didn't have many passengers to attend to, he spent some time chatting with us to pass the time. We shared stories of our European adventures, and he recounted experiences as a

flight attendant. He regaled us with tales from various countries. It was a delightful conversation, and eventually, he excused himself to tend to his duties elsewhere on the plane.

As the plane prepared for landing, the flight attendant approached us once again, this time carrying a brown paper bag. He handed me the bag and, looking at Josh and me, mentioned that it was a gift for our long journey back to Canada.

Intrigued, I peered inside and discovered the following. Two packs of nuts, two pieces of bread, and two cans of Heineken beer. We expressed our gratitude, exchanged hugs, and watched as he left towards the front of the aircraft as the wheels touched down.

On our subsequent flight from Amsterdam to Minneapolis, Josh and I enjoyed the snacks provided by the flight attendant. We savored the nuts and bread during the lengthy journey. But since it was an international flight, complimentary alcoholic beverages were available upon request. Hence, we decided to save the cans of Heineken for later. Eventually, we reached Minneapolis around 8:00 PM.

With our flight to Winnipeg scheduled for 10:00 PM, we had ample time to spare. As customary before boarding a flight, Josh and I underwent the necessary airport security procedures. We joined the line of travelers and approached the conveyor belt. Following protocol, we removed our shoes, unloaded our backpacks, and placed all personal

items in the designated bin. As my backpack went through the conveyor belt, I noticed a TSA employee pulling it aside separately. She handed me the bag and (with a touch of sarcasm) asked if there were any liquids inside. I forgot that two full cans of Heineken would never make it past TSA.

Glancing at another employee by the body scanner, he said, "You have two options. You can either discard both cans in the garbage behind you... or you could chug them."

Instantly, everyone in the vicinity fixed their gaze upon the unfolding situation. There I stood, at airport security, holding two full beers in my hands, as a TSA employee essentially dared me to drink them. I looked at the people around

me, then back at Josh. Extending my left hand, I offered him one can and quipped (because it was the perfect opportunity), "Hold my beer."

With the can in my right hand, I popped open the tab and started drinking. Suddenly, the TSA employees erupted into a chorus of "CHUG! CHUG! CHUG!" The other passengers going through security soon caught wind of the spectacle and joined in the chant. As I made my way through about half of the beer, the cheers from the crowd grew louder, urging me to finish the task at hand.

Finally, I felt the last drops of the beer touch my tongue and smoothly slide down my throat, allowing me to remove the can from my lips. The crowd erupted in applause and laughter as I placed the

empty can into the recycling bin behind me.

Since it was evident that there were two beers for me to consume, a few individuals began pointing toward the second can. I glanced at Josh as he stood there with his hand outstretched, ready to pass me the next one. I subsequently accepted it in my right hand, opened the tab, lifted the can towards the crowd in a gesture of cheers, and started drinking.

The second Heineken followed a similar pattern to the first. The crowd, including the TSA employees, resumed chanting. Meanwhile, my nervously excited brother urged me to finish as quick as possible. Once I sensed the final trickle of beer down my throat, I raised the empty

can high in the air and basked in the roaring cheers of the crowd.

As the clapping gradually subsided, I placed the empty can into the recycling bin and rejoined for a security check. This time, as I passed through, I was greeted with high fives and congratulatory remarks from the TSA employees. Josh and I smoothly cleared security without further issues and were granted access to our flight back to Winnipeg.

My favorite aspect of this story is that none of the TSA employees thought to inquire about my age before encouraging me to chug two Heinekens. Given that we were in Minneapolis, USA, where the legal drinking age is 21, they probably should have checked. I was only 19 at the time, and looked even younger. There-

fore, not only did the TSA embolden someone to hammer two beers, but they did so with a passenger who couldn't legally drink alcohol in their country. *Murica'* at its finest.

13. Conclusion



I 'm not sure if I actually like conclusion chapters or not. Sometimes it's good to end it and let the reader make their own conclusions, but I think it's necessary for this book. Because in a book full of stories, it's good to have something that ties it all together. Plus, I heard that people like closure, so here you go. Cheers to not being left hangi...

I wrote this book primarily for two reasons. First, entertainment. I think it's fun to entertain people and hopefully provide a laugh or two if I can. I'm already writing books, and if I have stories that people will find funny or practical, why not compile them for others to enjoy? I always liked listening to other people's travel stories, so this was a good

way of giving the people what I think they'll want to read.

Second, the point of this book is to encourage others to travel. My intention is that while you were reading this book, you were inspired to visit some of the places I have described. If I can encourage you or others to see more of the world, it would make this venture a success.

Honestly, I wrote some of these stories with the intention of making the reader jealous (apologies). If it *did* make you envious at all, good. I'm glad it made you jealous. If you haven't traveled enough, I want you to feel like you're missing out... because you are missing out. Go out and explore where you've always wanted to go. Cruise around the

world, hike the Himalayas, walk the Amalfi Coast. Whatever you've dreamed of, do it.

My grandmother, who I love with all my heart, told me for years that someday she wanted to make it to Australia. At this point in her life, it's looking almost impossible as she and my grandfather age. She still wishes she had gone, and that adventure will always live as an unscratched item on her bucket list. I don't want others to make the same mistake of thinking they can always do it later. Because later... can often mean never.

I'm certainly not done traveling, and I'll do my best to prioritize it as I wander through life. Like my grandmother, there are endless stories of people wishing they had traveled sooner. So, if you're looking

for a big sign in neon lights telling you to live out your dream of traveling, here it is...

GO TRAVEL.

Whenever I talk about this subject with other people, one of the first questions they usually ask is, "Why do you find it so important to travel?" Well, there are a few reasons why I think it's essential.

First, the world is vast. In terms of people, food, culture, language, emotions, nature, and everything else, it's immeasurably different in different places. Once you experience this disparity in one area versus another, it opens your mind to the possibility of other options. And once

again, I'm a less experienced traveler than many others, but that doesn't mean I can't grasp the importance of learning our differences. And you can do the same!

For example, Winnipeg hosts a massive annual multicultural festival that showcases dozens of different cultures over two weeks. Throughout the festival, you visit each country's pavilion, hosted in community centers, gyms, theatres, event centers, etc. around the city.

It showcases their food, cultural display, clothing, and an engaging show. As you hop from pavilion to pavilion throughout the festival, you learn new things about different cultures worldwide. The festival is called Folklorama, and the best part is that it's all run by volunteers.

I was fortunate enough to serve as an ambassador, both for my own culture and for all of Folklorama. This allowed me the opportunity to visit every pavilion.

What stuck with me the most, as I learned about almost every culture, were the similarities among the people. They may look or sound different, and often they'll wear unique clothes, but the values across cultures are similar. The reasons why their traditions are practiced, at their core, aren't very different. Everyone values health, family, and being kind. It's only how they express those values that you find the differences.

But as I kept talking to representatives from various countries, they all said the same thing. YOU NEED TO SEE IT FOR

YOURSELF. Learning is excellent, especially from people who used to live there, but you'll never get it until you go.

That's one of the main reasons why I think travel is so important. To truly understand how things work in other places, you need to witness it firsthand. And when you learn the ways of dissimilar people, you can use that knowledge to enhance your own life at home.

Second, we've been gifted a tremendous opportunity that wasn't available even a few centuries ago. For millions of years, the species that inhabited the Earth couldn't travel from one continent to another. Due to recent technological advances, we can see regions of the world that our ancestors only dreamed of. And not only can we see them, but there are

entire industries that satisfy the travel demand. There hasn't been an easier time in the history of the Earth for its inhabitants to visit every nook and cranny on this gorgeous blue rock.

We owe it to our predecessors to see parts of the world that they never could. And experience the wonders of our planet that make each place so unique. To all the conquerors and explorers that came before us, who had to risk their lives to go where we can easily visit today, I give them a nod of gratitude.

Due to their insatiable curiosity and courage to dream, we may wander on this beautiful planet. I will be eternally grateful for that sacrifice. If they saw our capabilities and discovered that some choose not to travel, they would be

ashamed of our ineptitude to live a full life.

Third, I believe in spending money on the things that matter. Let's do an exercise. When you look back at the end of your life, which could be tomorrow or in 100 years, what will you remember? The brand-new phone you bought right after it came out, or the spontaneous backpacking trip through Vietnam?

You don't need a grand philosophy lesson to know what you'll be proud of later in life. If you have the chance to travel, I'm confident you won't regret it.

I know it can be expensive, so I'm not suggesting cashing out your life savings, but that shouldn't be an excuse. There are always opportunities to travel inexpensively. When Josh and I were in

Europe, half of our lunches were €1 hamburgers from McDonald's. We never stayed at the fanciest hotels or dined at the finest restaurants. But, as relatively broke university students, we still managed to travel around Europe.

A mentor once told me that you'll always be able to make more money as life progresses. If you save and invest, you should be able to travel and worry about money later. Cash comes and goes, but opportunities pass.

This was some of the best advice I have ever received, and it's true. There will always be more opportunities to make money. Don't let financial fears stop you from seeing the places you desire. Just be smart with how you spend while traveling, and make a budget for yourself.

If you stick to it, you'll always find a way through.

To close this point, I want to ask you a question. What would you do if you found out you only had six months to live? Would you keep working at your job? Would you stay in school? What would you do?

In this situation, I would make every effort to do two things. 1. See as much of the world as I could. 2. Spend the remaining time with my family. To me, if those two things stick out, it's because I value them the most.

Life doesn't give us a deadline for when we must pursue our dreams, so we always push them down the road. But, instead of kicking the can farther away, I say we pull them closer. You can always

make more money later, but you never know when you'll be able to see that one place you've always wanted. Let's grab life by the horns and start exploring.

I also wanted to address why I wrote this book in the form of stories. The main reason is that stories provide relatability behind lessons. You could tell me a tale of your wildest night or your darkest moment, and I would be engaged to listen the whole time. Then, I can create my own lessons from your experiences.

This is why I believe that storytelling is an underrated skill. Whether you're applying for a job, making a speech, or trying to separate yourself from the crowd, people will always want to hear a good story. It's an instinctive trait that makes good storytellers likable. Stories

pique our curiosity and hold our attention. This is why we love TV, movies, and fiction books. Telling a good story can be an excellent way of driving home the point you're trying to make. I try to practice my storytelling skills whenever I can.

Tyrion Lannister once said, "There's nothing in the world more powerful than a good story. Nothing can stop it. No enemy can defeat it." Stories are what live on well after we're gone. And while the details can get scrambled, as they always do over time, the main lessons remain. And I believe, to the best of my knowledge, that the best stories usually come from traveling.

So, to keep you engaged, I decided that stories would be the best way to en-

courage you to travel. It also allowed me to throw in the odd lesson here or there.

As always, thank you again for reading my book. This has been *Backpacking Adventures: Europe* by yours truly. I can't thank you enough for your support, and I appreciate every millisecond you spent of your valuable time. I hope you had some good laughs, learned a thing or two, and reveled in my best stories from overseas. Now, it's your turn. Book your next flight and let your own stories fall into place. I PROMISE you that it's worth it.

A special thanks to my travel partners:

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