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Taking the Grand Tour: Adventure of a Lifetime

By Joseph Lewandowski

My wife and I often speculated about the Grand Tour — a trip around the world. The idea seemed to arise when we were on weekend trips or vacations, when our heads were clear and calm.

Each time, however, we lacked the deep drive necessary to plan such an adventure. Other issues distracted us: finding the time, finding the money, and what we would do about our jobs. Discussing such logistical matters always flattened our enthusiasm.

Then, on a summer morning in 1997, Maggie walked abruptly into my office. Her eyes bright, but her tone serious. She blurted directly: “How about if we stop what we’re doing for a year and travel around the world?”

My eyes widened with surprise. Her question was absent of idle speculation and I knew it required an absolute answer. Any suggestion of “talking about it later,” or discussing “how to” would only serve to shatter this sweet but definitive moment. She posed a once-in-a-lifetime question that begged a once-in-a-lifetime answer. I paused for perhaps ten seconds before replying.

“I’ve always dreamed of this kind of a great adventure,” I said.

“Why not, let’s go.”

My answer stunned us both. I've not been known for quick declarations of certainty. Yet in that moment, I knew I had no other choice. We stared at each other for a few moments before I broke the silence, "I've got an appointment. I've got to go. Let's start planning tonight."

All Maggie said was, "OK," and she left the room.

That two-minute conversation set in motion an astounding chain of events that took us from the office of our banker to a language school in Spain to a Buddhist retreat in France to the Himalayas in Nepal and to a thousand places in between. For 12 months, from March 1, 1998 through Feb. 26, 1999, we traveled around the world on a journey that proved to be as much of an adventure into our souls as it did an exploration of foreign lands.

I've always wanted to . . .

Our lives had been comfortable and our careers moderately successful. We both worked out of offices in our home — I'm a freelance writer, Maggie is a conflict-resolution consultant. But while our lifestyle produced comfort, we admitted more to complacency than to satisfaction. The kids were gone, but at ages 44 and 49, we were still a long, long way from retirement. There would be no better time, there would be no worse time.

It was time, as Maggie said, "to go see things differently."

Early that July evening Maggie arrived home with a map of the world, and we began the rollicking task of preparing to be gone for 365 days. As we looked at the map the enormity of a year of travel began to sink

in: a year of hotel rooms, a year without income, a year void of traditional responsibilities.

We began making notes. The result: a six-page jumble of ideas, questions and a haphazard list. After a couple of hours of writing, we were overwhelmed — we knew we'd barely touched the surface. For six months we continually revised the list; but we weren't finished with it until the hour we left the house.

As we started telling friends about our plans, we were greeted with the same question: How do you plan something like this?

There are, of course, loads of details, most of them mundane. But before attending to those, we posed this question to ourselves: How do we want this journey to “feel”?

Our intent was not to engage in rampant sightseeing, or to visit as many countries as possible. We didn't plan to go any place too weird or where armed conflicts were in progress. Our intent was to move slowly, focus on the moment at hand, and savor a full year immersed in foreign cultures. We shunned setting rigid schedules. The inner journey was to be equal in importance to the traveling adventure.

After coming to that understanding, we began considering what we wanted to do and where we wanted to go. Most often our conversations started with, “I've always wanted to . . .” High on our agendas were outdoor activities, learning some Spanish and spiritual exploration.

Europe and beyond

Our trip started on a soulful note with a visit to a spiritual center in the tiny village of Dornburg north of Frankfurt, Germany. For a couple of hours each evening over the course of eight days, we sat with about

100 people in the presence of an Indian woman named Mother Meera. She is said to possess divine powers. No words were spoken, and the only ceremony was to come before her to look for a few moments into her dark mysterious eyes.

I made no judgment as to the presence of her divine power. Yet I learned quickly that sitting in the silence and taking long walks in the idyllic countryside provided the serenity we sorely needed at the start of our journey. The previous month had been a nerve-wracking scramble of preparation. The quiet time during the first two weeks helped us remember our purpose.

After the quiet we were ready for our the next stop: Paris. Certainly, there was no avoiding the art museums and the famous structures. Yet much more satisfying than moving with the tourist hordes was simply walking through the crazy labyrinth of streets, shopping in neighborhood markets, and observing the city that appears continually in celebration.

The south of France is renowned for its rolling countryside and friendly farmers ready to sell jugs of their own red wine. But instead of visiting vineyards, we sampled life at the Buddhist retreat of Plum Village. During the earliest days of spring we sat in blooming plum orchards; slept on hard, narrow cots; sat in meditation at dawn and dusk; and took instruction about how to revel in the present moment - the only time, Buddhists teach, that really matters.

And a few moments after leaving the retreat, we did buy some of the local red wine.

Four months in Spain

On July 29, 1998, we sat on a stone wall in the vast Plaza de Obradoiro in the city of Santiago de Compostela in Spain's far northwest corner. At 11 p.m., 15,000 people packed the square at the foot of the cathedral of St. James to celebrate the end of a festival honoring the apostle whose remains are buried beneath the magnificent church.

In the black sky, a dazzling and deafening display of fireworks exploded above the cathedral. The display seemed a fitting end to our stay in Spain.

We'd arrived in early April, intent on a long visit. For three weeks we toured the pastoral Pyrenees Mountains and the Basque country in the north, strolled Barcelona's wide thoroughfares and lounged on the beaches of the Mediterranean coast.

Then it was time to get, well, serious. In Salamanca we enrolled in language school for a month of Spanish lessons. The school arranged for us to live with a family of three and two other students in a four-bedroom 900-square-foot apartment. Our classmates, mainly young Europeans, picked up Spanish with ease while we struggled to coax our middle-aged brains into action.

While language school was tough, we reveled in the walking-lifestyle of Spain. Every day we strolled through the compact city (population 150,000) along cobblestone streets and in the shadows of buildings and cathedrals constructed 200 years or more ago.

By the end of the month our Spanish enabled us to carry on very basic conversations - a great aid as we traveled through the interior and the sensuous south of Andalusia.

In late June we arrived in the isolated fishing village of Muros in the northwest province of Galicia. It appeared to us a perfect place to practice our Spanish, and after three days of searching we found a bay-front apartment a few miles from town. For nearly six weeks we embraced the village life, dined mainly on fresh fish, made new friends, and relaxed on the nearby beach where clothing was entirely optional.

Sad we were that day at the end of July when we boarded the bus to depart Muros. The next night in Santiago, surrounded for the last time by the raucous and beautiful Spaniards, emotion riveted me to the wall as the celebration swirled around us. I possessed no defenses to fend off a well of tears. I said to Maggie, "It seems like Spain's way of saying, 'Adios, thanks for coming.'"

Road weary

The next day we boarded a train and got off 30 hours later in southeast France. For three weeks we hiked in the Alps near Grenoble and Chamonix, and indulged in all things French.

As the weather began to cool, we took ferry boats across the Adriatic and Aegean seas and wandered for eight weeks through Greece and Turkey. In both countries we stood awestruck among the splendor apparent in the ruins of the Greeks and Romans. And in both countries we watched old men and old women carrying loads of sticks on their backs, and we wondered how far civilization really has come in 2,000 years.

Autumn is the best time for hiking in the Himalayas, so we arranged our itinerary to arrive in Nepal in early October. For nearly a month we walked the trail that circles the vast Annapurna mountain range,

reaching the geographical zenith of our travels at 17,700 feet on the pass known as Thorung La. But while the Himalayas are magnificent, it was being with the people who live in those high places that made the experience so intriguing.

After the trek, we flew to Varanasi, India, the holy Hindu city next to the wide, muddy Ganges River. It is here that Hindus bring their dead for cremation. Day and night, in a continual procession, men carry to the river the bodies of relatives which are wrapped in brightly-colored paper and cloth. The bodies are placed on logs which are lighted with the special flame that burns in the nearby temple. That flame has been burning continuously for more than 3,000 years.

While the bodies burn, thousands come to the river each day at sunrise to pray, to bathe, even to wash their clothes. Away from the river, the narrow streets teem with people, vendors, bicycle rickshaws and taxis, acrid smoke, wandering pigs and cows, and filth.

The astounding scenes along the Ganges, the general disorder of India and our weariness from eight months of travel combined to cast doubt on our decision to travel to the subcontinent. India presents a daily test, an assault on the senses, and a total departure from most things Western. Learning to remain calm in the chaos provided, perhaps, our most important spiritual lesson.

Five weeks later, Christmas Day in Calcutta arrived clear and cool. It was our last full day in India. We wandered among the crowds in the central park, watched men play cricket, and marveled at the stunning women in their vivid saris. As night fell, people packed the streets around the central market. We moved comfortably with the crowd and stopped to bargain with vendors for silk scarves. Later, while drinking

sweet milk tea at a street stall, I spoke words that I never thought I'd say: "I want to come back to India someday."

The next day we arrived in Thailand, and gagged in the polluted, sprawling concrete mass of hustler-filled Bangkok. After a few days we moved to the northern hill country, only to find it overrun with sleazy local tour operators and European tourists. We managed to redeem this segment with a 10-day silent retreat at a meditation center. Then a week on a stunning beach on the island of Ko Chang.

Our final stop, Bali in Indonesia, is an internationally known tourist destination. Fortunately, the Balinese cling fiercely to their Hindu roots while allowing outsiders glimpses of their exotic culture.

Nothing to compare

In all the countries, the natural beauty was astounding and the historic relics intriguing. But most fascinating was to be drenched by the foreign cultures, and to spend so much time with people from other lands.

Parisians sit down in cafes to drink their coffee, none of this running out with a paper cup. The Spanish close their businesses in the afternoon to take time for family and food and rest. The people who live in the mountains of northern Nepal have so little, but they find so much to smile about.

Every day served up a sensual feast; and every day was a test.

There were down times. Sometimes we longed for American conveniences. Occasionally I drifted into emotional panic about the money. But in those unsettling moments I asked myself: "So how would it feel if you called off this adventure right now?"

My spirit always moved swiftly to provide the answer: “That would not be possible. Nothing can compare with this.”

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Details: How we did it

Around-the-World Budgeting

Budgeting for an around-the-world trip is not a scientific process. Guidebooks provide a range of costs on various items, so we used those as a basis. We figured lodging - the biggest expense - would be between \$20 and \$40 per night (no three stars). Then we tried to estimate the expenses of daily life — food, transportation, entertainment, etc. Our research also showed that Asia would be substantially less expensive than Europe.

We decided on a budget of \$85 per day — not including airfare. Not exactly a backpacking budget, but neither was it lavish. We recorded every penny and tracked expenses daily.

Our final tally for on-the-ground expenses, including language school, visas and trinkets, was \$27,937 - about \$77 per day. Our airline tickets cost an additional \$5,706.

Our average daily expenses for each country:

- Germany: \$115
- France: \$96
- Spain: \$83
- Greece: \$90
- Turkey: \$84 (one additional person)
- Nepal: \$50
- India: \$40

- Thailand: \$52
- Island of Bali (Indonesia): \$46

Our grand total for the year, including the at-home expenses of insurance, property management fees, child support, taxes, etc., was \$42,776.

We also obtained a \$20,000 line-of-credit from our bank, just in case. We didn't need to use it.

Flying Around the World

Major airlines sell around-the-world tickets. Airlines usually charge based on miles and require at least three destination flights. Our itinerary included a total of seven destination flights. Each airline has its own rules, and rules change frequently.

Airlines also offer continent-to-continent plans and circle-the-Pacific fares. Consolidators offer point-to-point tickets.

Plan by building an itinerary first. Then talk to a travel agent or airline about which carrier best covers the plan.

Check out this website which appears to offer great around-the-world fares, www.airbrokers.com. We discovered it after we returned.

Six Steps for Planning Your Grand Tour

1. Make the decision to go first, then start working on the details.
2. Say to yourself, "I've always wanted to . . ." Then really listen to yourself. Whether you want to travel, or live in one country for a few months or a year, everything is possible.

3. Dissect your life and organize all of your major paper work items — insurance papers, wills, titles, stock certificates, bank records, etc. Put them into a folder and turn it over to someone you trust.

4. Eliminate credit card and other short term debt.

5. If you own a home and you don't want to sell it, talk to a property management firm about setting up an “executive rental” or other lease arrangement.

6. Find a trusted friend who will take care of bills and transfer money between your accounts. Keep the bookkeeping system simple and instructions to leave the accounts amply supplied.

What about your job

As independent consultants, we were able to put our businesses on hold. However, we met plenty of other Americans and Europeans who had quit jobs — and were happy they did! We also met two Americans who had obtained long-term unpaid leaves of absence from major companies — General Motors and Oracle.

Any decision is based on priorities. This adventure was an investment in ourselves and more important to us than jobs. We knew that one year without income would not devastate us financially; and we never doubted that we could restart our careers.

Peter Lynch, the superstar of Fidelity Investments, took a hiatus from the business world several years back. When asked why he did it, he said (paraphrased): “When I’m on my death bed I know I won’t say, ‘Darn, I wish I’d spent more time at the office.’”

Packing for an Around-the-World trip

The key is to pack as light as possible - something we didn't do. We attempted to pack for the whole year - big mistake. We carried two rolling duffels and two medium-sized backpacks. Halfway we dumped one of the duffels and one of the packs, and picked up a full size backpack. Many non-essentials - shirts, pants, sweaters, books - were left along the way.

Clothes are sold everywhere in the world and buying to match weather conditions makes sense.

Next time (one must dream!) we'll carry only backpacks.

Readjusting

I was completely taken by how differently most of the people in the world live compared with us in the United States. From Europe to Asia, it's my opinion that most cultures take more time to enjoy simple pleasures - eating leisurely meals, strolling, talking with family and friends, stopping at neighborhood cafes for a glass of wine or a cup of coffee. Money does not appear to be the major priority of life.

For a personal experience of what I'm talking about, take an evening stroll along the shaded paseo in central Granada, Spain, sometime!

The attitude seems to be helped by the compactness of cities and towns - most people around the world live in apartments. That allows walking to be the major form of transportation and very pleasurable.

However, and this will sound contrary, I probably couldn't live in a tiny apartment in a crowded European city. While I love the compact cities and the village atmosphere, I prefer my quiet house and residing an ample distance from the neighbors. I guess it's my "American" showing.

The major adjustments for me were: becoming dependent on a car again; re-entering the work-a-day world governed by predictable schedules, deadlines and paperwork; and getting swept up by the “dotcom” pace that drives America.