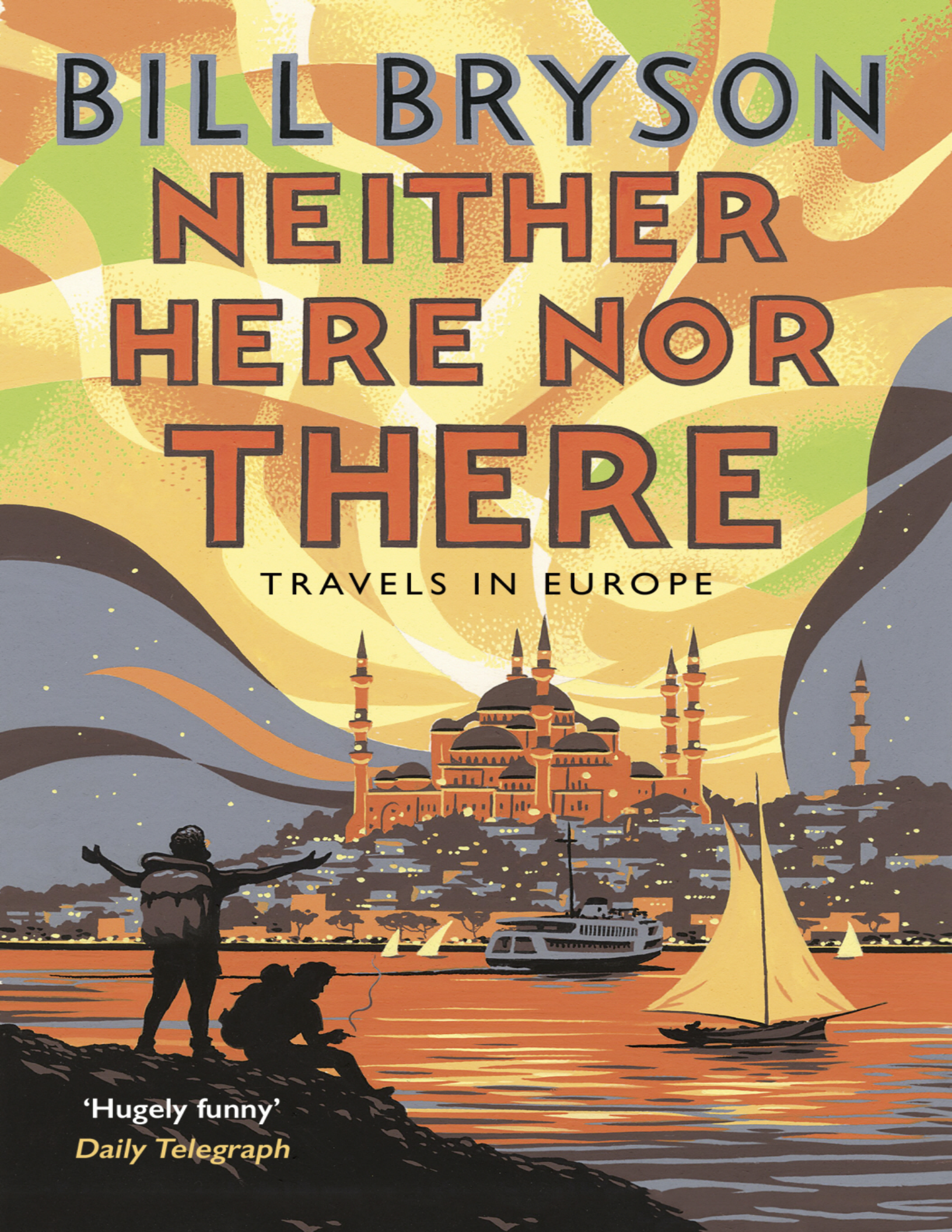
BILL BRYSON

NEITHER HERE NOR THERE

TRAVELS IN EUROPE



'Hugely funny'
Daily Telegraph

About the Book

Bill Bryson’s first travel book, *The Lost Continent*, was unanimously acclaimed as one of the funniest books for years. In *Neither Here Nor There* he brings his unique brand of humour to bear on Europe as he shoulders his backpack, keeps a tight hold on his wallet, and journeys from Hammerfest, the northernmost town on the continent, to Istanbul on the cusp of Asia. Fluent in, oh, at least one language, he retraces his travels as a student twenty years before.

Whether braving the homicidal motorists of Paris, being robbed by gypsies in Florence, attempting not to order tripe and eyeballs in a German restaurant, window-shopping in the sex shops of the Reeperbahn or disputing his hotel bill in Copenhagen, Bryson takes in the sights, dissects the culture and illuminates each place and person with his hilariously caustic observations. He even goes to Liechtenstein.

Contents

NEITHER HERE NOR THERE

Travels in Europe

Bill Bryson

To Cynthia

William James describes a man who got the experience from laughing-gas; whenever he was under its influence, he knew the secret of the universe, but when he came to, he had forgotten it. At last, with immense effort, he wrote down the secret before the vision had faded. When completely recovered, he rushed to see what he had written. It was ‘A smell of petroleum prevails throughout’.

Bertrand Russell
A History of Western Philosophy

1. To the North

In winter Hammerfest is a thirty-hour ride by bus from Oslo, though why anyone would want to go there in winter is a question worth considering. It is on the edge of the world, the northernmost town in Europe, as far from London as London is from Tunis, a place of dark and brutal winters, where the sun sinks into the Arctic Ocean in November and does not rise again for ten weeks.

I wanted to see the Northern Lights. Also, I had long harboured a half-formed urge to experience what life was like in such a remote and forbidding place. Sitting at home in England with a glass of whisky and a book of maps, this had seemed a capital idea. But now as I picked my way through the grey, late-December slush of Oslo I was beginning to have my doubts.

Things had not started well. I had overslept at the hotel, missing breakfast, and had to leap into my clothes. I couldn't find a cab and had to drag my ludicrously overweighted bag eight blocks through slush to the central bus station. I had had huge difficulty persuading the staff at the Kreditkassen Bank on Karl Johans Gate to cash sufficient traveller's cheques to pay the extortionate 1,200-kroner bus fare – they simply could not be made to grasp that the William McGuire Bryson on my passport and the Bill Bryson on my traveller's cheques were both me – and now here I was arriving at the station two minutes before departure, breathless and steaming from the endless uphill exertion that is my life, and the girl at the ticket counter was telling me that she had no record of my reservation.

'This isn't happening,' I said. 'I'm still at home in England enjoying Christmas. Pass me a drop more port, will

you, darling?' Actually, I said, 'There must be some mistake. Please look again.'

The girl studied the passenger manifest. 'No, Mr Bryson, your name is not here.'

But *I* could see it, even upside-down. 'There it is, second from the bottom.'

'No,' the girl decided, 'that says Bernt Bjornson. That's a Norwegian name.'

'It doesn't say Bernt Bjornson. It says Bill Bryson. Look at the loop of the *y*, the two *ls*. Miss, please.' But she wouldn't have it. 'If I miss this bus when does the next one go?'

'Next week at the same time.'

Oh, splendid.

'Miss, believe me, it says Bill Bryson.'

'No, it doesn't.'

'Miss, look, I've come from England. I'm carrying some medicine that could save a child's life.' She didn't buy this. 'I want to see the manager.'

'He's in Stavanger.'

'Listen, I made a reservation by telephone. If I don't get on this bus I'm going to write a letter to your manager that will cast a shadow over your career prospects for the rest of this century.' This clearly did not alarm her. Then it occurred to me. 'If this Bernt Bjornson doesn't show up, can I have his seat?'

'Sure.'

Why don't I think of these things in the first place and save myself the anguish? 'Thank you,' I said, and lugged my bag outside.

The bus was a large double-decker, like an American Greyhound, but only the front half of the upstairs had seats and windows. The rest was solid aluminium, covered with a worryingly psychedelic painting of an intergalactic landscape, like the cover of a pulp science-fiction novel,

with the words EXPRESS 2000 emblazoned across the tail of a comet. For one giddy moment I thought the windowless back end might contain a kind of dormitory and that at bedtime we would be escorted back there by a stewardess who would invite us to choose a couchette. I was prepared to pay any amount of money for this option. But I was mistaken. The back end, and all the space below us, was for freight. Express 2000 was really just a long-distance lorry with passengers.

We left at exactly noon. I quickly realized that everything about the bus was designed for discomfort. I was sitting beside the heater, so that while chill draughts teased my upper extremities, my left leg grew so hot that I could hear the hairs on it crackle. The seats were designed by a dwarf seeking revenge on full-sized people; there was no other explanation. The young man in front of me put his seat so far back that his head was all but in my lap. He was reading a comic book called *Tommy og Tigern* and he had the sort of face that makes you realize God does have a sense of humour. My own seat was raked at a peculiar angle that induced immediate and lasting neckache. It had a lever on its side, which I supposed might bring it back to a more comfortable position, but I knew from long experience that if I touched it even tentatively the seat would fly back and crush the kneecaps of the sweet little old lady sitting behind me, so I left it alone. The woman beside me, who was obviously a veteran of these polar campaigns, unloaded quantities of magazines, tissues, throat lozenges, ointments, unguents and fruit pastilles into the seat pocket in front of her, then settled beneath a blanket and slept more or less continuously through the whole trip.

We bounced through a snowy half-light, out through the sprawling suburbs of Oslo and into the countryside. The scattered villages and farmhouses looked trim and prosperous in the endless dusk. Every house had Christmas

lights burning cheerily in the windows. I quickly settled into that not unpleasant state of mindlessness that tends to overcome me on long journeys, my head lolling loosely on my shoulders in the manner of someone who has lost all control of his neck muscles and doesn't really mind.

My trip had begun. I was about to see Europe again.

The first time I came to Europe was in 1972, skinny, shy, alone. In those days the only cheap flights were from New York to Luxembourg, with a refuelling stop en route at Keflavik Airport at Reykjavik. The aeroplanes were old and engagingly past their prime – oxygen masks would sometimes drop unbidden from their overheated storage compartments and dangle there until a stewardess with a hammer and a mouthful of nails came along to put things right, and the door of the lavatory tended to swing open on you if you didn't hold it shut with a foot, which brought a certain dimension of challenge to anything else you planned to do in there – and they were achingly slow. It took a week and a half to reach Keflavik, a small grey airport in the middle of a flat grey nowhere, and another week and a half to bounce on through the skies to Luxembourg.

Everyone on the plane was a hippie, except the crew and two herring-factory executives in first class. It was rather like being on a Greyhound bus on the way to a folk-singers' convention. People were forever pulling out guitars and mandolins and bottles of Thunderbird wine and forging relationships with their seatmates that were clearly going to lead to lots of energetic sex on a succession of Mediterranean beaches.

In the long, exciting weeks preceding the flight I had sustained myself, I confess, with a series of bedroom-ceiling fantasies that generally involved finding myself seated next to a panting young beauty being sent by her father against her wishes to the Lausanne Institute for

Nymphomaniacal Disorders, who would turn to me somewhere over mid-Atlantic and say, ‘Forgive me, but would it be all right if I sat on your face for a while?’ In the event, my seatmate turned out to be an acned stringbean with Buddy Holly glasses and a line-up of ball-point pens clipped into a protective plastic case in his shirt pocket. The plastic case said GRUBER’S TRU-VALU HARDWARE, FLAGELLATION, OKLAHOMA. IF WE DON’T GOT IT, YOU DON’T NEED IT, or something like that. He had boils on his neck which looked like bullet wounds that had never quite healed and smelled oppressively of Vicks VapoRub.

He spent most of the flight reading holy scripture, moving both sets of fingertips across each line of text as he read and voicing the words just loud enough for me to hear them as a fervid whisper in my right ear. I feared the worst. I don’t know why religious zealots have this compulsion to try to convert everyone who passes before them – I don’t go around trying to make them into St Louis Cardinals fans, for Christ’s sake – and yet they never fail to try.

Nowadays when accosted I explain to them that anyone wearing white socks with Hush Puppies and a badge saying HI! I’M GUS! probably couldn’t talk me into getting out of a burning car, much less into making a lifelong commitment to a deity, and ask them to send someone more intelligent and with a better dress sense next time, but back then I was too meek to do anything but listen politely and utter non-committal ‘Hmmmm’s’ to their suggestions that Jesus could turn my life around. Somewhere over the Atlantic, as I was sitting taking stock of my 200 cubic centimetres of personal space, as one does on a long plane flight, I spied a coin under the seat in front of me, and with protracted difficulty leaned forward and snagged it. When I sat up, I saw my seatmate was at last looking at me with that ominous glow.

‘Have you found Jesus?’ he said suddenly.

‘Uh, no, it’s a quarter,’ I answered and quickly settled down and pretended for the next six hours to be asleep, ignoring his whispered entreaties to let Christ build a bunkhouse in my heart.

In fact, I was secretly watching out of the window for Europe. I still remember that first sight. The plane dropped out of the clouds and there below me was this sudden magical tableau of small green fields and steepled villages spread across an undulating landscape, like a shaken-out quilt just settling back onto a bed. I had flown a lot in America and had never seen much of anything from an aeroplane window but endless golden fields on farms the size of Belgium, meandering rivers and pencil lines of black highway as straight as taut wire. It always looked vast and mostly empty. You felt that if you squinted hard enough you could see all the way to Los Angeles, even when you were over Kansas. But here the landscape had the ordered perfection of a model-railway layout. It was all so green and minutely cultivated, so compact, so tidy, so fetching, so … European. I was smitten. I still am.

I had brought with me a yellow backpack so enormous that when I went through customs I half expected to be asked, ‘Anything to declare? Cigarettes? Alcohol? Dead horse?’, and spent the day teetering beneath it through the ancient streets of Luxembourg City in a kind of vivid daze – an unfamiliar mixture of excitement and exhaustion and intense optical stimulation. Everything seemed so vivid and acutely focused and new. I felt like someone stepping out of doors for the first time. It was all so different: the language, the money, the cars, the number plates on the cars, the bread, the food, the newspapers, the parks, the people. I had never seen a zebra-crossing before, never seen a tram, never seen an unsliced loaf of bread (never even considered it an option), never seen anyone wearing a beret who expected to be taken seriously, never seen people go to a different shop for each item of dinner or

provide their own shopping bags, never seen feathered pheasants and unskinned rabbits hanging in a butcher's window or a pig's head smiling on a platter, never seen a packet of Gitanes or the Michelin man. And the people – why, they were Luxembourgers. I don't know why this amazed me so, but it did. I kept thinking, That man over there, he's a Luxembourger. And so is that girl. They don't know anything about the New York Yankees, they don't know the theme tune to *The Mickey Mouse Club*, they are from another world. It was just wonderful.

In the afternoon, I bumped into my acned seatmate on the Pont Adolphe, high above the gorge that cuts through the city. He was trudging back towards the centre beneath an outsized backpack of his own. I greeted him as a friend – after all, of the 300 million people in Europe he was the only one I knew – but he had none of my fevered excitement.

'Have you got a room?' he asked gloomily.

'No.'

'Well, I can't find one anywhere. I've been looking all over. Every place is full.'

'Really?' I said, worry stealing over me like a shadow. This was potentially serious. I had never been in a position where I had to arrange for my own bed for the night – I had assumed that I would present myself at a small hotel when it suited me and that everything would be all right after that.

'Fucking city, fucking Luxembourg,' my friend said, with unexpected forthrightness, and trudged off.

I presented myself at a series of semi-squalid hotels around the central station, but they were all full. I wandered further afield, trying other hotels along the way, but without success, and in a not very long time – for Luxembourg City is as compact as it is charming – found myself on a highway out of town. Not sure how to deal with this unfolding crisis, I decided on an impulse to hitchhike

into Belgium. It was a bigger country; things might be better there. I stood for an hour and forty minutes beside the highway with my thumb out, watching with little stabs of despair as cars shot past and the sun tracked its way to the horizon. I was about to abandon this plan as well – and do what? I didn't know – when a battered Citroën 2CV pulled over.

I lugged my rucksack over to find a young couple arguing in the front seat. For a moment I thought they weren't stopping for me at all, that the man was just pulling over to slap the woman around, as I knew Europeans were wont to do from watching Jean-Paul Belmondo movies on public television, but then the woman got out, fixed me with a fiery look and allowed me to clamber into the back, where I sat with my knees around my ears amid stacks of shoeboxes.

The driver was very friendly. He spoke good English and shouted at me over the lawnmower roar of the engine that he worked as a travelling shoe salesman and his wife was a clerk in a Luxembourg bank and that they lived just over the border in Arlon. He kept turning round to rearrange things on the back seat to give me more space, throwing shoeboxes at the back windowsill, which I would have preferred him not to do because more often than not they clonked me on the head, and at the same time he was driving with one hand at seventy miles an hour in heavy traffic.

Every few seconds his wife would shriek as the back of a lorry loomed up and filled the windscreen, and he would attend to the road for perhaps two and a half seconds before returning his attention to my comfort. She constantly berated him for his driving but he acted as if this were some engaging quirk of hers, and kept throwing me mugging, conspiratorial, deeply Gallic looks, as if her squeaky bitching were a private joke between the two of us.

I have seldom been more certain that I was about to die. The man drove as if we were in an arcade game. The highway was a three-lane affair – something else I had never seen before – with one lane going east, one lane going west and a shared middle lane for overtaking from either direction. My new friend did not appear to grasp the system. He would zip into the middle lane and seem genuinely astonished to find a forty-ton truck bearing down on us like something out of a Road Runner cartoon. He would veer out of the way at the last possible instant and then hang out of the window shouting abuse at the passing driver, before being shrieked back to the next crisis by me and his wife. I later learned that Luxembourg has the highest highway fatality rate in Europe, which does not surprise me in the smallest degree.

It took half an hour to reach Arlon, a dreary industrial town. Everything about it looked grey and dusty, even the people. The man insisted that I come to their flat for dinner. Both the wife and I protested – I politely, she with undisguised loathing – but he dismissed our demurrals as yet more engaging quirks of ours and before I knew it I was being bundled up a dark staircase and shown into the tiniest and barest of flats. They had just two rooms – a cupboard-sized kitchen and an everything-else-room containing a table, two chairs, a bed and a portable record player with just two albums, one by Gene Pitney and the other by an English colliery brass band. He asked me which I would like to hear. I told him to choose.

He put on Gene Pitney, vanished into the kitchen, where his wife pelted him with whispers, and reappeared looking sheepish and bearing two tumblers and two large brown bottles of beer. ‘Now this will be very nice,’ he promised and poured me a glass of what turned out to be very warm lager. ‘Oom,’ I said, trying to sound appreciative. I wiped some froth from my lip and wondered if I could survive a dive out of an upstairs window. We sat drinking our beer

and smiling at each other. I tried to think what the beer put me in mind of and finally decided it was a very large urine sample, possibly from a circus animal. ‘Good, yes?’ asked the Belgian.

‘Oom,’ I said again, but didn’t lift it to my lips.

I had never been away from home before. I was on a strange continent where they didn’t speak my language. I had just travelled 4,000 miles in a chest freezer with wings, I had not slept for thirty hours, or washed for twenty-nine, and here I was in a tiny, spartan apartment in an unknown town in Belgium about to eat dinner with two very strange people.

Madame Strange appeared with three plates, each bearing two fried eggs and nothing else, which she placed in front of us with a certain ringing vehemence. She and I sat at the table. Her husband perched on the edge of the bed. ‘Beer and eggs,’ I said. ‘Interesting combination.’

Dinner lasted four seconds. ‘Oom,’ I said, wiping the yolk from my mouth and patting my stomach. ‘That was really excellent. Thank you very much. Well, I must be going.’ Madame Strange fixed me with a look that went well beyond hate, but Monsieur Strange leapt to his feet and held me affectionately by the shoulders. ‘No, no, you must listen to the other side of the album and have some more beer.’ He adjusted the record and we listened in silence and with small sips of beer. Afterwards he took me in his car to the centre of town, to a small hotel that may once have been grand but was now full of bare light bulbs and run by a man in an undershirt. The man led me on a long trek up flights of stairs and down hallways before abandoning me at a large bare-floored room that contained within its shadowy vastness a chair with a thin towel on its back, a chipped sink, an absurdly grand armoire and an enormous oak bed that had the warp and whiff of 150 years of urgent sex ground into it.

I dropped my pack and tumbled onto the bed, still in my shoes, then realized that the light switch to the twenty-watt bulb hovering somewhere in the murk overhead was on the other side of the room, but I was too weary to get up and turn it off, too weary to do anything but wonder briefly whether my religious-zealot acquaintance was still roomless in Luxembourg and now shivering miserably in a doorway or on a park bench, wearing an extra sweater and stuffing his jeans with pages from the *Luxembourger Zeitung* to keep out the cold.

'Hope so,' I said, and snuggled down for an eleven-hour sleep.

I spent a few days tramping through the wooded hills of the Ardennes. The backpack took some getting used to. Each morning when I donned it I would stagger around for a minute in the manner of someone who has been hit on the head with a mallet, but it made me feel incredibly fit. It was like taking a wardrobe on holiday. I don't know that I have ever felt so content or alive as in those three or four days in the south of Belgium. I was twenty years old and at large in a perfect world. The weather was kind and the countryside green and fetching and dotted with small farms where geese and chickens loitered along roadsides that seldom saw a passing car.

Every hour or two I would wander into some drowsing village where two old men in berets would be sitting outside a café with glasses of Bols and would silently watch me approach and pass, responding to my cheery 'Bonjour!' with the tiniest of nods, and in the evenings when I had found a room in a small hotel and went to the local café to read a book and drink beer I would get those same tiny nods again from a dozen people, which I in my enthusiasm took as a sign of respect and acceptance. I believe I may even have failed to notice them edging away when, emboldened by seven or eight glasses of Jupiler pils or the

memorably named Donkle Beer, I would lean towards one of them and say in a quiet but friendly voice, ‘Je m’appelle Guillaume. J’habite Des Moines.’

And so the summer went. I wandered for four months across the continent, through Britain and Ireland, through Scandinavia, Germany, Switzerland, Austria and Italy, lost in a private astonishment. It was as happy a summer as I have ever spent. I enjoyed it so much that I came home, tipped the contents of my rucksack into an incinerator, and returned the next summer with a high-school acquaintance named Stephen Katz, which I quickly realized was a serious mistake.

Katz was the sort of person who would lie in a darkened hotel room while you were trying to sleep and talk for hours in graphic, sometimes luridly perverted, detail about what he would like to do to various high-school nymphettes, given his druthers and some of theirs, or announce his farts by saying, ‘Here comes a good one. You ready?’ and then grade them for volume, duration and odorosity, as he called it. The best thing that could be said about travelling abroad with Katz was that it spared the rest of America from having to spend the summer with him.

He soon became background noise, a person across the table who greeted each new plate of food with ‘What is *this* shit?’, a hyperactive stranger who talked about boners all the time and unaccountably accompanied me wherever I went, and after a while I more or less tuned him out and spent a summer that was almost as enjoyable, and in a sense as solitary, as the one before.

Since that time, I had spent almost the whole of my adulthood, fifteen of the last seventeen years, living in England, on the fringe of this glorious continent, and seen almost none of it. A four-day visit to Copenhagen, three trips to Brussels, a brief swing through the Netherlands –

this was all I had to show for my fifteen years as a European. It was time to put things right.

I decided at the outset to start at the North Cape, the northernmost point of the European mainland, and to make my way south to Istanbul, taking in along the way as many of the places Katz and I had visited as I could manage. My intention had been to begin the trip in the spring, but just before Christmas I made a phone call to the University of Tromsø, the northernmost university in the world and hotbed of Northern Lights research, to find out when the best time would be to see this celestial light show. The phone line was so bad that I could barely hear the kindly professor I spoke to – he appeared to be talking to me from the midst of a roaring blizzard; I imagined a door banging open and swirling snow blowing into his frail and lonely hut somewhere out in the wilds – but I did catch enough to gather that the only reliable time to come was now, in the depths of winter, before the sun rose again in late January. This was a very good year for Northern Lights, as it happened – something to do with intense solar activity – but you needed a clear sky to see them, and in northern Norway this could never be guaranteed.

'You should plan to come for at least a month,' he shouted at me.

'A month?' I said with genuine alarm.

'At least.'

A month. A month in the coldest, darkest, bleakest, remotest place in Europe. Everyone I told this to thought it was most amusing. And now here I was heading north on a bouncing bus, inescapably committed.

* * *

Not long after leaving Oslo I became aware with a sense of unease that no one on the bus was smoking. I couldn't see any NO SMOKING signs, but I wasn't going to be the first

person to light up and then have everyone clucking at me in Norwegian. I was pretty certain that the man in the seat across the aisle was a smoker – he looked suitably out of sorts – and even more sure that the young man ahead of me must be. I have yet to meet a grown-up reader of comic books who does not also have an affection for tobacco and tattoos. I consulted the Express 2000 leaflet that came with each seat and read with horror the words ‘tilsammen 2,000 km non-stop i 30 timer’.

Now I don’t know Norwegian from alphabet soup, but even I could translate that. Two thousand kilometres! Non-stop! Thirty hours without a cigarette! Suddenly all the discomfort came flooding back. My neck ached, my left leg sizzled like bacon in a skillet, the young man ahead of me had his head closer to my crotch than any man had ever had before, I had less space to call my own than if I had climbed into my suitcase and mailed myself to Hammerfest, and now I was going to go thirty hours without an infusion of nicotine. This was just too much.

Fortunately it wasn’t quite as desperate as that. At the Swedish border, some two hours after leaving Oslo, the bus stopped at a customs post in the woods, and while the driver went into the hut to sort out the paperwork most of the passengers, including me and the two I’d forecast, clattered down the steps and stood stamping our feet in the cold snow and smoking cigarettes by the fistful. Who could tell when we would get this chance again? Actually, after I returned to the bus and earned the undying enmity of the lady beside me by stepping on her foot for the second time in five minutes, I discovered from further careful study of the Express 2000 leaflet that three rest stops appeared to be built into the itinerary.

The first of these came in the evening at a roadside cafeteria in Skellefteå, Sweden. It was a strange place. On the wall at the start of the food line was an outsized menu and beside each item was a red button, which when pushed

alerted the people in the kitchen to start preparing that dish. Having done this, you slid your empty tray along to the check-out, pausing to select a drink, and then waited with the cashier for twenty minutes until your food was brought out. Rather defeats the purpose of a cafeteria, don't you think? As I was the last in the line and the line was going nowhere, I went outside and smoked many cigarettes in the bitter cold and then returned. The line was only fractionally depleted, but I took a tray and regarded the menu. I had no idea what any of the foods were and as I have a dread of ever inadvertently ordering liver, which I so much detest that I am going to have to leave you here for a minute and go throw up in the wastebasket from just thinking about it, I elected to choose nothing (though I thought hard about pressing *all* the buttons just to see what would happen).

Instead I selected a bottle of Pepsi and some little pastries, but when I arrived at the check-out the cashier told me that my Norwegian money was no good, that I needed Swedish money. This surprised me. I had always thought the Nordic peoples were all pals and freely exchanged their money, as they do between Belgium and Luxembourg. Under the cashier's heartless gaze I replaced the cakes and Pepsi and took instead a free glass of iced water and went to a table. Fumbling in my jacket pocket, I discovered a Dan-Air biscuit left over from the flight from England and dined on that.

When we returned to the bus, sated on our lamb cutlets and vegetables and/or biscuit and iced water, the driver extinguished the interior lights and we had no choice but to try to sleep. It was endlessly uncomfortable. I finally discovered, after trying every possibility, that the best position was to lie down on the seat more or less upside-down with my legs dangling above me. In this manner, I fell into a deep, and surprisingly restful, sleep. Ten minutes later, Norwegian coins began slipping one by one from my

pocket and dropping onto the floor behind me, where (one supposes) they were furtively scooped up by the little old lady sitting there. And so the night passed.

We were woken early for another rest stop, this one in Where The Fuck, Finland. Actually it was called Muonio and it was the most desolate place I had ever seen: a filling station and lean-to café in the middle of a tundra plain. The good news was that the café accepted Norwegian currency; the bad news was that it had nothing that anyone outside a famine zone would want to eat. The driver and his mate were given heaped and steaming platters of eggs, potatoes and ham, but there appeared to be nothing like that on offer for the rest of us. I took a bottle of mineral water and slice of crispbread with a piece of last year's cheese on it, for which I was charged an astonishing twenty-five kroner, and retired to a corner booth. Afterwards, while the driver and his mate lingered over coffees and suppressed contented burps, the other passengers and I milled around in the shop part of the complex, looking at fan belts and snow shovels, and stood in the perishing cold out by the bus and smoked more fistfuls of cigarettes.

We hit the road again at seven-thirty. Only another whole day of this, I thought cheerfully. The landscape was inexpressibly bleak, just mile after tedious mile of snowy waste and scraggly birch forest. Reindeer grazed along the roadside and often on it itself, coming out to lick the salt scattered on the ice. We passed through a couple of Lapp villages, looking frigid and lifeless. There were no Christmas lights in the windows here. In the distance, the sun just peeked over the low hills, lingered uncertainly, and then sank back. It was the last I would see of it for three weeks.

Just after five o'clock we crossed a long, lonely toll bridge on to the island of Kvaløya, home of Hammerfest. We were now as far north as you can get in the world by

public transport. Hammerfest is almost unimaginably remote – 1,000 miles north of the Shetlands, 800 miles beyond the Faroes, 150 miles north even of my lonely professor friend at the northernmost university in the world at Tromsø. I was closer now to the North Pole than to London. The thought of it roused me and I pressed my nose to the cold glass.

We approached Hammerfest from above, on a winding coast road, and when at last it pivoted into view it looked simply wonderful – a fairyland of golden lights stretching up into the hills and around an expansive bay. I had pictured it in my mind as a village – a few houses around a small harbour, a church perhaps, a general store, a bar if I was lucky – but this was a little city. A golden little city. Things were looking up.

2. Hammerfest

I took a room in the Håja Hotel near the quay. The room was small but comfortable, with a telephone, a small colour television and its own bathroom. I was highly pleased and full of those little pulses of excitement that come with finding yourself in a new place. I dumped my things, briefly investigated the amenities and went out to look at Hammerfest.

It seemed an agreeable enough town in a thank-you-God-for-not-making-me-live-here sort of way. The hotel was in a dark neighbourhood of shipping offices and warehouses. There were also a couple of banks, a very large police station, and a post office with a row of telephone kiosks in front. In each of these, I noticed as I passed, the telephone books had been set alight by some desperate thrill seeker and now hung charred from their chains.

I walked up to the main street, Strandgatan, which ran for about 300 yards along the harbour, lined on the inland side by an assortment of businesses – a bakery, a bookstore, a cinema (closed), a café called Kokken's – and on the harbour side by the town hall, a few more shops and the dark hulking mass of a Birds Eye–Findus fish-processing plant. Christmas lights were strung at intervals across the street, but all the shops were shut and there wasn't a sign of life anywhere, apart from an occasional cab speeding past as if on an urgent mission.

It was cold out, but nothing like as cold as I had expected. This pleased me because I had very nearly bought a ridiculous Russian-style fur hat – the kind with ear flaps – for 400 kroner in Oslo. Much as I hate to stand out

in a crowd, I have this terrible occasional compulsion to make myself an unwitting source of merriment for the world and I had come close to scaling new heights with a Russian hat. Now, clearly, that would be unnecessary.

Beyond the high street, the road curved around the bay, leading out to a narrow headland, and after a half a mile or so it presented a fetching view back to the town, sheltering in a cleft of black mountains, as if in the palm of a giant hand. The bay itself was black and impenetrable; only the whooshing sound of water hinted at what was out there. But the town itself was wonderfully bright and snug-looking, a haven of warmth and light in the endless Arctic night.

Satisfied with this initial reconnaissance, I trudged back to the hotel, where I had a light but astonishingly expensive dinner and climbed gratefully into bed.

In the night I was woken by a storm. I crept to the window and peered out. Snow was blowing wildly, and the wind howled. Lightning lit the sky. I had never seen lightning in a snowstorm. Murmuring, 'Oh, sweet Jesus, where am I?', I climbed back into bed and buried myself deep in the covers. I don't know what time I woke, but I dozed and tossed for perhaps an hour in the dark until it occurred to me that it never was going to get light. I got up and looked out of the window. The storm was still raging. In the police-station car park below, two squad cars marked POLITI were buried in drifts almost to their roofs.

After breakfast, I ventured out into the gale. The streets were still deserted, snow piled in the doorways. The wind was playing havoc with the town. Street lights flickered and swayed, throwing spastic shadows across the snow. The Christmas decorations rattled. A cardboard box sailed across the road ahead of me and was wafted high out over the harbour. It was intensely cold. On the exposed road out to the headland I began to wish again that I had bought the Russian hat. The wind was unrelenting: it drove before it

tiny particles of ice that seared my cheeks and made me gasp. I had a scarf with me, which I tied around my face bandit-style and trudged on, leaning heavily into the wind.

Ahead of me out of the swirling snow appeared a figure. He was wearing a Russian hat, I was interested to note. As he drew nearer, I pulled my scarf down to make some cheering greeting – 'Bit fresh out, what?' or something – but he passed by without even looking at me. A hundred yards further on I passed two more people, a man and his wife tramping stolidly into town, and they too passed as if I were invisible. Strange people, I thought.

The headland proved unrewarding, just a jumble of warehouses and small ship-repair yards, loomed over by groaning cranes. I was about to turn back when I noticed a sign pointing the way to something called the Meridianstøtten and decided to investigate. This took me down a lane on the seaward side of the headland. Here, wholly exposed to the pounding sea, the wind was even more ferocious. Twice it all but picked me up and carried me forward several yards. Only the toetips of my boots maintained contact with the ground. I discovered that by holding out my arms I could sail along on the flats of my feet, propelled entirely by the wind. It was the most wonderful fun. Irish windsurfing, I dubbed it. I had a great time until an unexpected burst whipped my feet from under me. I cracked my head on the ice so hard that I suddenly recalled where I put the coal-shed key the summer before. The pain of it, and the thought that another gust might heft me into the sea like the cardboard box I had seen earlier, made me abandon the sport, and I proceeded to the Meridianstøtten with prudence.

The Meridianstøtten was an obelisk on a small elevation in the middle of a graveyard of warehouses. I later learned that it was a memorial erected to celebrate the completion in 1840, on this very spot, of the first scientific measurement of the earth's circumference. (Hammerfest's

other historical distinction is that it was the first town in Europe to have electric street lights.) I clambered up to the obelisk with difficulty, but the snow was blowing so thickly that I couldn't read the inscription, and I returned to town thinking I would come back again another day. I never did.

In the evening I dined in the hotel's restaurant and bar, and afterwards sat nursing Mack beers at fifty øre a sip, thinking that surely things would liven up in a minute. It was New Year's Eve, after all. But the bar was like a funeral parlour with a beverage service. A pair of mild-looking men in reindeer sweaters sat with beers, staring silently into space. After a time I realized there was another customer, alone in a dark corner. Only the glow of his cigarette revealed him in the gloom. When the waiter came to take my plate away, I asked him what there was to do for fun in Hammerfest. He thought for a moment and said, 'Have you tried setting fire to the telephone directories by the post office?'

Actually he didn't say that, because just as he was about to speak, the lone figure in the corner addressed some slurred remark to him, which I gathered was something along the lines of 'Hey, you dismal, slope-headed slab of reindeer shit, what does it take to get some service around here?' because the waiter dropped my plate back onto the table with a suddenness that made the silverware jump and went straight to the man and began furiously dragging him by his arm and shoulder from his seat and then pushing him with enormous difficulty to the door, where he finally heaved him out into the snow. When the waiter returned, looking flushed and disconcerted, I said brightly, 'I hope you don't show all your customers out like that!' but he was in no mood for pleasantries and retired sulkily to the bar, so I was unable to determine just what there was to do in Hammerfest to pass the time, other than set telephone books alight, insult the waiter and weep.