



My name is John and I'm retired (except for some freelance translation) and like to travel alone. I take lots of photos, look for second-hand books which become part of the journey, keep a log and collect fridge magnets. I try to give my trips form and meaning with missions and quests. This is Part 5 of the **Pilgrim Chronicles**.

Calais

Europe 2013

I begin the trip with a short book, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* by Jean-Dominique Bauby, a book written after he suffered a massive stroke which left him almost completely paralyzed, in a state called locked-in syndrome which he compares to being locked in a diving bell. He wrote the entire book by blinking his left eyelid in code to a transcriber.

Departure day, September 29, 2013, is a beautiful day in Montreal. The trek will begin in Rome because it was the cheapest one-way ticket to Europe I could find. I'll stay for three days, then fly to Manchester (another cheap flight). The plan as per usual is to find some books, get some good photos and keep moving until it feels like time to come home.

Day 1 is exhausting after an overnight flight, and the city and my hotel are hot and humid. But it's nice to arrive in a familiar neighborhood, just around the corner from where I stayed two years ago, close to the central Termini Train Station. I spend the afternoon walking, down to the Coliseum and up and down the hills surrounding the Forum where I get some nice shots with dramatic, post-rain skies. I try to stay awake as long as possible to avert jet-lag.

On Day 2 Villa Borghese is basically a park with a palace in it, and I don't like palaces. I start the long walk from the Metro station to the Vatican swept along with a flood of other people going the same way, but eventually give up. I'll come back later. Basilica S. Paolo, on the other hand, is an oasis with hardly any tourists, quiet and awe-inspiring as a church is meant to be, surrounded by gardens that shut out the din of the city.

And St. Paul is actually in the house, under the altar, one side of his sarcophagus visible through a hole opened just a few years ago by archeologists. I get some nice shots in the gardens where a little boy who is part of a large group reaches up and removes a butterfly that had landed on the collar of my shirt, then sets it free. I take it as a good omen.

On Day 3 I'm on a train to the Roman suburb of Ostia-Lido, this time determined to do whatever I have to do to find the sea (two years ago I wandered about and never found it). I take care to ask for directions this time and eventually reach the coast where the beach is almost deserted and not very interesting, but I do get one good shot I know will be a keeper.

Ostia *Antica*, on the other hand, is the highlight of the trip so far. The ancient port of Rome is amazingly well-preserved, the ruins of a whole town sitting at what used to be the mouth of the Tiber. It really is beautiful and once again I find myself alone, walking, taking photos and slowly absorbing the size and scope of the site. It's very hot in the sun and it's only 25 degrees Celsius – I wouldn't want to be here in the summer. The Italian Stone Pines that you see everywhere in Rome are particularly spectacular here: impressive, majestic beings flourishing in the arid remains of this city. I'll take a shower back at the hotel and return to Vatican City. It's been a good day.





Basilica S. Paolo



Ostia-Lido



Ostia-Antica

There's hardly anyone in St. Peters Square as night descends. I get a nice shot of the Cathedral in the fading light with a whole bunch of chairs in the empty square, some of them tipped over. The moment is good: I'm able to say a few prayers and every now and then the bells chime at what seem to be just the right moment. I catch a bus beside the Tiber and I'm home in twenty minutes.

I will need to find a book first thing in Manchester tomorrow. *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* is beautifully written but extremely succinct. I wonder how the book fits into this trip. Maybe it's an example of writing from a perspective which is the exact opposite of what I'm doing right now, which is writing on the road with constantly changing surroundings, moving freely in the physical world. Bauby is writing from his imagination only, from a position of almost absolute immobility. He will die and be released from this captivity two days after the book is published. I tell myself to appreciate the incredible freedom of movement I'm enjoying at this stage of my life.



St. Peters Square



Ostia Antica







Manchester is the home of *Coronation Street*, the eternal soap opera that began sixty years ago which I've been watching faithfully for thirteen years. It's a small, self-contained TV fantasy-world with places for people to linger and cross paths, the main one being the local pub, the Rovers Return. I wish I had a local pub to hang out in, but there's no such thing in my part of the world. Over the years, we come to know the characters on *The Street* better than many real people in our lives, through trials and tribulations, love affairs, feuds, comas and surprise pop-ups of children never heard of or long-lost parents. We see characters grow up in front of our eyes (or grow old and die). There are no longer any public tours of the show's set, but the Web says you can see it from the 2nd floor of the Museum of Science and Industry, which is obviously first on my list of things to do in Manchester.

On Day 4, I notice the contrast immediately when I get off the plane: from heat and sun to rain and wind. I'm using an Internet service called Airbnb for the first time, a service that hooks travelers up with people renting out apartments or rooms in their homes. My very nice host, Wendy, picks me up at the airport and brings me to her home, the kind of terrace house so common here (and on *Coronation Street*, where we are never actually shown the second floor). Not only do I get to finally see a second floor – I'll be sleeping in one of the three bedrooms!

With advice from Wendy, I take the bus to Piccadilly Square, the center of Manchester, which is dark and wet and a bit depressing. What I will see of the UK in coming days will leave the impression of a country in decline, reinforced by its former engineering brilliance on display in the Museum of Science and Industry. I scour every corner of the museum for the alleged view of *The Street*, but it's nowhere to be seen, and so remains safely hidden in its own dimension. The museum itself is fantastic. The authentic, still-functioning steam engine in the Power Hall section of the complex is a powerful and beautiful work of art with sounds and shiny brass fixtures that evoke a lost era of genius and craftsmanship.

Outside the museum, the intricate network of canals either sadly neglected or gentrified is another reminder of past glories. I get some nice shots in the rain, only possible because there is not a breath of wind and I'm able to protect my camera with an umbrella. In the evening I find a book in *Empire Exchange*, a very strange retro shop on Piccadilly Square crammed mostly with vinyl records. The shop looks like it hasn't changed in 40 or 50 years and some of the books are so moldy that when I pick one up it begins to crumble in my hands. I settle on *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* by Chuck Barris.



Back at Wendy's, I'm having trouble finding reasonably priced accommodations in Liverpool, so I decide to splurge on two nights in the once prestigious Britannia Adelphi Hotel smack in the middle of town, close to the train station. I want the full post-empire, depressing British experience.

I wake up to another grey but less wet day on Day 5. After a Full English Breakfast, I head off to the ultra-modern Salford Quays district and find a smaller version of the cold and ugly Canary Wharf section of London. Turquoise glass and steel with weird shapes and projections and of course the mandatory building shaped like a sail, all trying a bit too hard to impress with no regard for beauty.

But I like the look of the strange and modern Imperial War Museum North. And the exhibits are superb and surprisingly moving, especially the 360-degree projections of testimonials on the 40-foot-high walls that occur every hour when the lights dim and everyone tries to find somewhere to sit. The European experience of the World Wars is so different from ours in North America. It seems that *everyone* was deeply affected here.

Later in the day I visit the Museum of Peoples History and I'm moved again by a wonderful panorama of genuine social history. Three great museums in this city and all of them free.

The next morning the train from Manchester to Liverpool (the first railway line in the history of the world) is crowded and slightly unpleasant but the ride is short and the Adelphi Hotel is wonderful. My large room is at the front and center of the hotel, with a great view of the long slope down to the waterfront.

The first thing I do is walk up Mount Pleasant to the Reid of Liverpool Bookstore where I have a good conversation with the owner, Gerard, and find the next book for this trip: *A Wish to Be*, by Cecil Lewis. I continue up the street to the Roman Catholic Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral where visit the crypt which is much older than the church itself. I'll come back for mass on Sunday.

Saturday, Day 7 of the trip, is a great, sunny day, spent mostly on my feet. I walk back up Mount Pleasant and then down to the waterfront, stopping at the Anglican Liverpool Cathedral and the shell of St. Luke (left unrepaired since it was bombed in World War II) which is hosting a community event on this beautiful afternoon. At the waterfront I spend an hour in the Beatles Story Museum, paying homage to the local heroes. In the evening the area around the hotel is full of revelers and I have trouble falling asleep. At 4:30 there are still people staggering about in the streets below, singing, throwing up, dodging street cleaners and hailing cabs.



Manchester



Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral



St. Luke



View from my room at the Britannia Adelphi



Merseyside, Liverpool

Sunday morning is another beauty and I take the train to Crosby Beach and Formby Point. An Antony Gormley art installation, consisting of 100 statues of men standing in the tide, is wonderful, as is the long walk on the beach. The weather is perfect and the sea is a weird but comforting chocolate-popsicle brown. The only people around are fishing, walking dogs or out for a Sunday stroll. I get lost trying to find a train station further down the coast and a friendly old couple tells me to follow them, providing thirty minutes of nice conversation on the way.

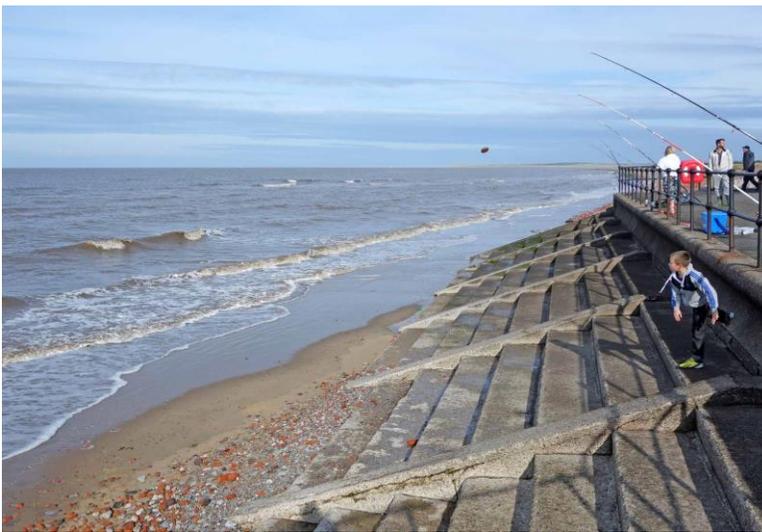
The sermon at evening mass at Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral is about faith: the mustard seed that changes the world. Fewer and fewer people seem to appreciate a way of living based on faith. And this is exactly how the Cecil Lewis book begins: "There is in our life a very great purpose and we must all serve this Great Common Purpose. In this lies the whole sense and predestination of our life."

I didn't know that the book is actually structured around the teachings of Gurdjieff, one of my favorite wise guys. The only problem I have with the mass is when the young Irish priest asks us to repeat that the Catholic Church is the one and only true church, something that doesn't happen in my home parish, the sort of racist, anti-social nonsense that has caused so much grief and suffering in the world.

Halfway through the Barris book I do some research on the Web and quickly discover that the book is actually fiction disguised as a memoir. And even it was based on truth, who cares if he was a CIA assassin – he was a producer of the tackiest games shows in the history of television, which is just as bad, if not worse.

I take an early train to Edinburgh but have a bit of trouble finding the hotel. Yet another nice elderly couple helps me find Links Gardens next to Leith Links, a former 19th-century golf course which is now a large park. I drop the luggage in my tiny room and head back to the center of town to walk the Golden Mile.

First impression is that it's a beautiful city, more upbeat than Liverpool or Manchester, and people are extremely polite. In the evening I walk back to the hotel, down Leith Walk, through a maze of side streets and across the huge park. After much web-searching and cross-referencing flights with weather, my next destination will be Amsterdam. From there I will take only trains until it's time to fly home.



Crosby Beach, Liverpool

I begin the next morning with a long walk down to the docks where the now-retired Royal Yacht Britannia has been moored for the last twenty years. It's very quiet and there's hardly anyone around so I take the tour, which is surprisingly very interesting. What impresses more than anything else is the simplicity of the furnishings and interior design. Apparently, the Queen has very good taste and she works very hard, which you can tell from the way everything is arranged. The officer and crew quarters are also interesting: a micro-world within a micro-world.

Back in the center of town, the first book I find is Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*, which I read in the distant past but remember nothing about. The second book, *Journal of a Solitude*, by May Sarton, was harder to come by after scouring two cramped and overstuffed shops. It's a memoir about ageing and aloneness written by a poet.

After hours of walking aimlessly, the sun comes out on a little square wherever I am in Edinburgh and I find myself sitting in a warm friendly community café, the Forest Café, with delicious spicy tomato soup and bread and no further plans until early tomorrow morning when I get on a bus for a tour of some Scottish towns, including St. Andrews.

This is what traveling is about: entirely in the moment, in a strange city where no one knows me and no one in the world knows where I am. My routines don't exist here, creating an opening for what Cecil Lewis calls the "little self that hears and seeks godly things" to emerge from his lair and poke around. I'll let this little man linger at the Forest Café for as long as he likes. It's gotten extremely windy outside and, despite the sunlight, a couple of people are holding umbrellas, so rain could be just up the street or around the corner (as it always seems to be here).

I walk all the way back to the hotel again, stopping at a public library on Leith Walk on the way. I ask if I can access the Web on one of their computers and an earnest, very friendly young male librarian says I need to become a member, which is easy, so I do. The membership card will be a nice keepsake. I spend an hour in the library then have a wonderful dinner in a Turkish restaurant and a quiet and early night.



Edinburgh



Edinburgh



Edinburgh

The tour bus arrives at eight in the morning and it's looking like a beautiful day for a drive in the countryside. It's going to be very windy and a bit chilly but who cares – the sun is out and it will be nice to be chauffeured about for a whole day. No thinking required: no maps, no planning, no schedules or decisions. And I won't be alone for a change. Everyone's so nice in this country, maybe this is where Canadian politeness comes from.

First stop is a spot overlooking the two magnificent Forth bridges just outside the city. I take some photos and savor my first bacon butty from a food truck. Second stop is Dunfermline, the birthplace of Andrew Carnegie who tried to make up for a lifetime of fierce capitalist exploitation by giving away all his money before he died. Unfortunately, he didn't live long enough, but this town certainly benefited.

Third stop is Anstruther, a picturesque fishing village on the North Sea. I get some nice shots in the bright crisp light and have an exceptional cappuccino in a seaside café before hopping back on the bus. The fourth and final stop is St. Andrews. Wow - and such a spectacular day (which the tour guide keeps reminding us is something extremely rare in these parts). Perfect light for photos. The drive back to Edinburgh is very relaxing. It's been a good day. I ask the driver and tour guide to let me off downtown: I want to saunter home down Leith Walk one more time.

My last morning in Edinburgh is sunny again. I decide to soak up sun before heading off to grey, wet Amsterdam. I return to Princes Street Gardens for the third time and enjoy it even more.

I'll need to be reasonable with the smoke in Amsterdam. Cecil Lewis warns against too much relaxation: relaxation is one of the main gates to the Kingdom of Heaven, but "beware of the side turnings that head nowhere," he says. I enjoy an excellent breakfast in a Turkish café just off the Golden Mile in Old Edinburgh. I never go wrong with Turkish food. I get to the airport very early only to find my flight delayed due to an air traffic controller strike in France. Fortunately, a nice, fat translation job comes through and I spend the next four hours making money.

Amsterdam is unbelievably wet and windy. Water even permeates my nylon knapsack, dampening my notebook, agenda and the Sarton book. I make a wrong decision to try to walk from my lodgings to the center of town and get lost in what looks to be a totally uninhabited area. With my feet thoroughly soaked, I finally ask for directions and catch a bus to Central Station which is a madhouse. Even in the wind and rain I have to dodge lost tourists like myself.



Anstruther, Scotland



Dumfermline, Scotland



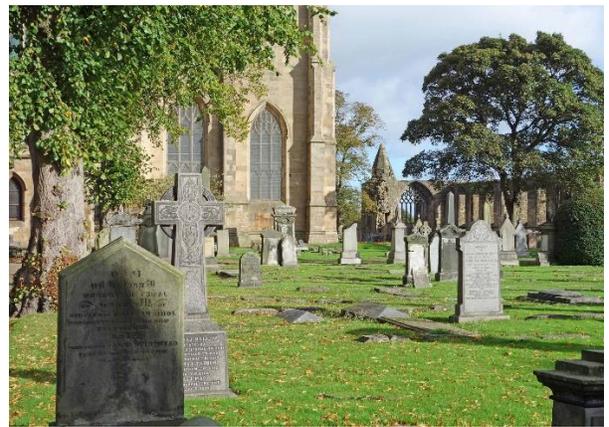
St. Andrews, Scotland



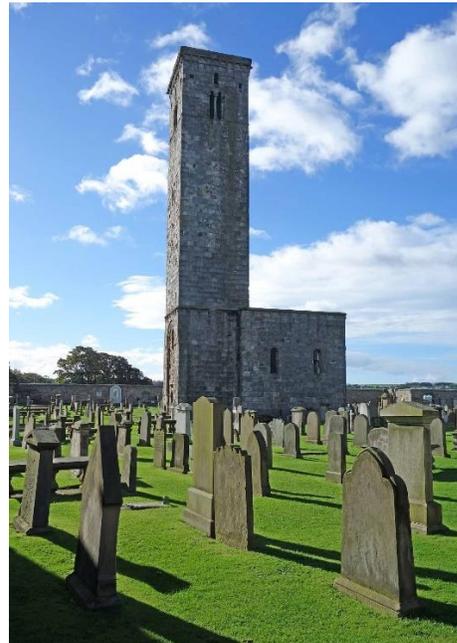
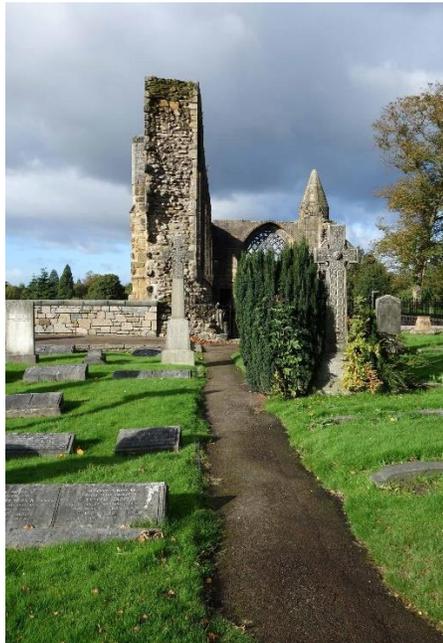
St. Andrews, Scotland



Anstruther, Scotland



Dumferline, Scotland



St. Andrews, Scotland

Suddenly I remember where I am! “Coffee shops”, where you can buy and smoke weed, are everywhere, so I choose one and enjoy smoking in a public place for the first time. I asked for the mildest weed available and still get more buzzed than I like. The coffee shop is crowded and noisy, with loud sixties music and a heavy haze hanging in the air.

Being in a smoky café is strange enough with smoking banned everywhere now, but when I consider what everyone here is actually smoking, I get a strong sense of how comfortable and civilized society can be and it feels very good. The Red-Light District is red, as advertised, a major tourist attraction that’s much more tacky than erotic. I’ve decided to spend the whole day buzzed, going from café to café drinking slowly and passing the time. But it’s going to be a long haul if it continues to rain, and later I will find myself burnt at the end of the day, with Amsterdam starting to look kitschy, like a sex-and-weed Las Vegas.

With the lousy weather I thought I wouldn’t take many photos here, but lo and behold when I get off the tram the next morning in the museum quarter the sun comes out and stays out for two hours, long enough to get some nice, cheesy canal shots and make my way slowly to the center of town: a beautiful walk.

I find a good English used bookstore, The Book Exchange, where the owner tries to tell me his is the last such store in Europe. We talk about used English bookstores in other European cities and I get to speak with some authority about this obscure hobby of mine. I like the conversations I have with these store owners when I travel. I feel like I’m creating a special link on the map of the world and wonder if anyone else does what I do. Sometimes, when I ask for a bookmark or business card for my collection, I feel like I may be the only one. I buy *Old Man Goya* by Julia Blackburn.

Not far from the bookstore I find Cannabis College, a non-profit organization dedicated to educating people about marijuana. The staff are friendly and informative and I gladly pay the four Euros to visit the small pot garden in the basement. I ask about the potency of the weed I bought and I’m told that you can’t trust what they say in the coffee shops, most of which serve only tourists. Smoking in the shops is legal but the weed itself is not actually regulated, so you could be smoking anything.







The next day is cold, wet, windy and extremely miserable, but I finally make a decision about my next destination and buy a train ticket to Calais on the north coast of France, with a hotel room close to the train station and the ocean. I'll spend two days in a quiet place to get my bearings, do some reading, make some sense of the trip so far, look for a travel agency and try to book the rest of the trip, including a ticket home.

I don't think I've ever been this wet in my life, and for three consecutive days. For this reason alone, I wouldn't want to live here. The seasons really are beautiful in Montreal, except for the terrible winters. I have to resist thoughts of my warm comfortable abode on days like this. I want to buy a plastic poncho but the only ones on sale are emblazoned with the three huge X's that represent the Red-Light District. Definitely not my style.

In a grungy coffee shop, toasty and only starting to warm up, it occurs to me that this is what I do: what I'm doing right now. Alone and separated by an ocean from home, family and friends, I'm forced to re-invent myself each day. What am I doing here? What do I do now? What's the storyline?

The umbrella I bought in Manchester did not live long, destroyed this morning by extremely strong winds, along with thousands of other umbrellas lying twisted and broken in the streets of Amsterdam. I would have taken a photo of the dead umbrellas, but I couldn't expose my camera to such conditions.

The two young Turkish electrical engineers I'm sharing an Airbnb flat with are refreshingly intelligent and well-mannered, especially Caen, who is very curious. He's always asking me questions, like he thinks I know a lot. The young men are going to Brussels and coincidentally we begin our journeys on the same train the next morning. It's good to have company in the first half of my six-hour ride to Calais, but it will be good to be alone again as well. I'll finish the last few chapters of the Lewis book and start the next one. An hour away from Calais streaks of blue sky appear on the horizon. Could I be so lucky?

A short walk from the train station, I settle in at a charming, inexpensive hotel with a friendly owner who gives me directions to the English Channel, which is not far away. There's hardly anyone to be seen in the holiday areas close to the sea and the ferry terminals, but the people I do see seem out of place and a little sketchy, not in a threatening way, but unsettled. Later I will learn that the small town is teeming with Africans, Syrians and other people desperate to get to the U.K., with men offering for a fee to hide them in trucks on ferries crossing the Channel. Calais has become a point of tension on the planet, with desperate people from one world trying to enter another.



Amsterdam



Calais

I hang around the empty beach waiting for the sun to come out, standing behind a deserted building, taking shelter from the wind. There are a few holes in the clouds and a band of blue between the clouds and horizon but there is nothing to be done with this light.

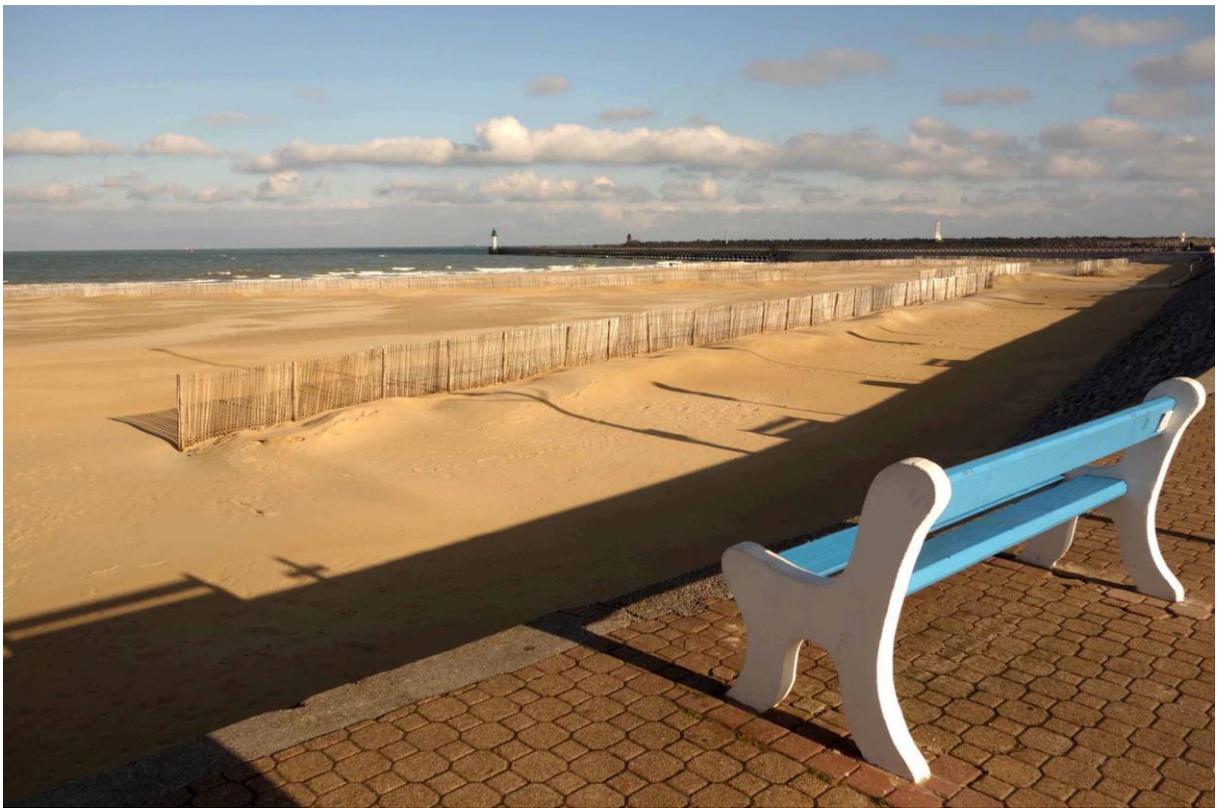
The clouds are moving quickly so I decide to wait for the light to change. I take out my book and start to read May Sarton who quotes Robert Coles on self-expression: "Not everyone can or will... give his specific fears and desires a chance to be of universal significance." I'm encouraged to keep doing what I do.

The sun comes out eventually and I get some nice shots of the deserted beach with the white cliffs of Dover barely visible across the Channel. In this grand emptiness I experience one of those pilgrim moments of unity and understanding. It's here in Calais that I will find my best images and the single photo of myself that I bring home from every trip.

Back at the hotel, all attempts at planning the rest of the trip fail. I'm finding it not so easy to regroup at this halfway point, so I decide to relax and stay an extra day to keep trying. I have dinner for the second night in a row with refugees and migrants at a Kebab shop near the beach: there really isn't much else, unless I want to spend twice as much to feel uncomfortable eating alone in a Brasserie.

I finally make a decision in the morning: I buy a train ticket to Nice which will take me from the top of France to the bottom in ten hours. Time enough to finish the Sarton book and begin the Goya. I find a laundromat in the Place D'Armes, feeling a need to get rid of all traces of the awful smell of wet shoes that I'm afraid will permeate other things. I visit the War Museum in a musty Nazi bunker in the middle of a park across the street from the Hotel de Ville. It's eerily quiet within the thick cement walls and I'm the only visitor. I saunter back to the hotel, then visit the Musée des Beaux Arts next door where, once again, I'm the only visitor, followed around by a bored security guard trying to look inconspicuous. I take a photo of myself reflected in the mirrors of an Alice in Wonderland installation.

In the evening I research my shoe problem on the Web and discover something called "Stinky Foot". Walking in soaked shoes can provoke an invasion of legions of bacteria and it is the bacteria's poop that smells so awful. After leaving them on the balcony of my hotel room for two days I decide to abandon my runners in Calais to prevent the bacteria from spreading.



Calais

I finish the Sartre book on the train the next day. She's one of those ultra-feminist lesbians burdened with a serious grudge against men. She insults one of my favorite writers, Henry Miller, who could probably be called ultra-masculine, but then constantly goes off in the opposite, ultra-feminine direction, rambling on and on (I have to skip these parts) about flowers and cats and her pet parrot. Most of what I retain from the book is quotes from other people, mostly about solitude and creativity.

She quotes Teilhard de Chardin who says that a man makes his own soul with his life's work, "and at the same time he collaborates in another work, in another opus, which infinitely transcends, while at the same time it narrowly determines, the perspectives of his individual achievement: the completing of the world." Could solitary and seemingly self-centered behavior somehow contribute to the actual substance of the world? But then she quotes Simone Weil who seems to say the opposite: "Absolute attention is prayer... We are aware of God only when we cease to be aware of ourselves." The most powerful people, she says, are those who can master their attention.

She has some nice thoughts of her own, like when she says we should regard ourselves as instruments for experiencing life and not be afraid to offend or freak people out. She sees her duty as "quietly destroying myths, even those of my own making, in order to come closer and closer to reality and to accepting reality." Confronting our own myths is the most difficult challenge.

She ends her book with the suggestion that writing seems to foretell the immediate future - that our words can sometimes presage what happens or who we become. It's a variation of *You are what you eat* that suggests *You are what you write*. I've experienced this phenomenon in my own life.

I'm not sure what waits down south. Not much sun is forecast for Nice the next three days, which sort of defeats the purpose, but who knows? As if the train ride is not long enough, we are held up at Avignon "for an indeterminate amount of time". At least it's warm and dry sitting on the platform outside the train for what turns out to be almost an hour.

My body is craving warmth – my shoes and clothes are craving it too. The Goya book is good so far: well-written, something between a novel and a biography. The sun is finally going down, so I'll arrive at my destination in the dark. Looks like a full moon just above the horizon. Last night in Calais I fell asleep in bright moonlight with an almost full moon visible in the transom of my balcony window. When I get to Nice I'll have something light to eat, relax and get to bed early.



Nice

My first morning in Nice is irritating. I can't connect to the Internet in my hotel and I have trouble finding a connection anywhere else so early in the morning. When I finally connect at a MacDonal'd's on the Promenade des Anglais, I can't for the life of me remember what important things I needed to find on the Web, including (I realize only later) possible reasons why I can't connect in my hotel when none of the other guests seem to have a problem. Maybe it's the Goya book that's affecting my mood: full of the horrors of war and the abysmally stupid brutality of monarchs.

I decide to take the local hop-on-hop-off tour bus and sit for the complete route before getting off at the Chagall museum, which ends up being a bit of a disappointment. But the Matisse museum, housed in a beautiful villa next to Nice's Roman ruins, is wonderful. Later in the afternoon I get off the bus near the marina and walk back along the coast, getting some nice photos on the way.

I decide to spend the next day on the Train des Merveilles, which goes up into the mountains above Nice, stopping at little villages close to the Italian border. The village of Tende at the end of the line is very scenic and has actually been inhabited for 5,000 years. The day is disappointing because the light is thick, mostly grey, and awful for picture-taking. I meet a nice, older Australian couple on the train coming back and learn a lot about how other retired people travel. Back at the hotel, I decide against going to Geneva and settle on San Remo instead, a bit further east along the coast. I feel a bit like I'm languishing here on the Côte d'Azur, not sure why I'm here.

The train to San Remo should only take an hour but ends up taking much longer because when I cross the border into Italy at Ventimiglia I have to buy a new ticket to take an Italian train the last 15 minutes of the trip (or wait two hours to use the ticket I already have).

It's not the first time I notice that things are always a bit more complicated in Italy. A great cappuccino in the train station makes up for the annoyance but once I get to San Remo the directions I got from the Web are for the Old Train Station and the New Train Station ends up being almost an hour away on foot, the last five minutes up a steep hill.



Tende, France



Tende, France



Briel sur Roya, France

I'm panting and sweating in the humid heat when I finally find the hotel, but my room isn't ready, so I leave my bag and go straight back down the hill to the sea to let fresh breezes dry me out and calm me down. I walk a few kilometers in light rain along the coast and see only private beaches and marinas full of yachts. Tomorrow I will take the scenic 18-kilometer bike trail down the coast the other way to San Lorenzo. As night falls, I feel like I'm killing time, hiding from rain with a beer in the infamous Old Train Station.

Back at the hotel I finalize my plans for the rest of the trip and decide where I will sleep the next seven nights: one more here, three in Lyon and three in Paris where I will catch my return flight home. I experience a weird night of restless sleep, strange dreams and waking up to a loud crash at 2:30. The small square TV set had fallen off a cushion where I had moved it to make space for my laptop on the desk. Maybe it's mad at me for neglecting it.

In the morning, I walk down the hill for a cappuccino and chocolate croissant at the Old Train Station before coming back to the hotel to shower and finish *Old Man Goya* before heading out again. What did I get from the book? The author focuses on the artist beginning at age fifty-nine, my age exactly, so perhaps it's meant to show me how creative and productive the latter part of life can be.

The bike rental guy is a pain in the ass. He's supposed to open at nine but keeps me waiting twenty minutes while he slowly takes the bikes out of his tent one by one, then sets up his little table complete with a newspaper laid out for his enjoyment once he gets down to "work", all the while not bothering to even make eye contact with me. And after all this, he has the audacity to serve before me a young Italian man who just showed up. When I finally get his attention, it turns out he speaks not a word of French or English, astonishing considering that almost all his customers must be tourists and the French border is only 23 kilometers away.

I finally get a bike and begin the 18-kilometer ride down the coast, which the Web says is easy and relatively flat. First stop is a café for my second cappuccino and croissant of the morning (I could live on this stuff). After three or four kilometers I still haven't found any access to the sea, but every now and then I pass a carob tree and I'm transported by the scent of the tree in the fall, a scent the Web says others find repugnant.



San Remo, Italy

It's still mostly overcast. I've got a bike for nine hours and absolutely nothing else to do but slowly make my way to San Lorenzo and back, taking lots of breaks and reading Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet* as I go, giving it all my attention – absorbing this book I read so long ago but completely forget.

The first excerpt I copy into my notebook relates to the Prophet's leaving the place where he has lived for twelve years because he believes he will freeze and crystallize if he stays. "And alone without his nest shall the eagle fly across the sun."

"A seeker of silences am I," is the next excerpt I take, sitting on bench fifty feet above the emerald surf crashing on the rocks below, with not a person in sight and the scent of the sea massaging the inside of my head. The sun peeks out for the first time today but just for a moment, gone by the time I get the camera out of my bag.

The third stop actually affords access to a beach and it's looking like the sun will come out soon. I'm practically alone with Gibran beside the sea and grateful for the good company. He has much to say about marriage, ending with this about possessiveness: "And the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow." Of children, the Prophet says: "They come through you but not from you." In both cases, we need to acknowledge the other's freedom and individuality before we can realize our own.

The sun stays out for thirty minutes before it disappears again. It didn't seem like I was getting any good shots but once home I would discover otherwise. I didn't even think San Remo was fridge-magnet worthy, but my day traveling with *The Prophet* would be memorable.

I stop for a beer and sandwich in a café in San Stefano where an episode of *The Simpsons* in Italian is screeching in the background, useless noise that almost spoils the moment. I eat quickly and read a few more pages. On eating and drinking, the Prophet says to the animals we eat: "Your blood and my blood is naught but the sap that feeds the tree of heaven." To the grapes: "I too am a vineyard, and my fruit shall be gathered for the wine press." To the apple: "Your seeds shall live in my body. And the buds of your tomorrow shall blossom in my heart." The Prophet reminds us that we are not only spiritually connected to everything else, we are an active component in the chain of life: one way or another, we eventually end up as food, a process sacred at some deep level.



At San Lorenzo, I turn around and start to head back. The Prophet says, “When you work with love you bind yourself to yourself, and to one another, and to God.” To work with love is “to charge all living things you fashion with a breath of your own spirit.”

Joy and sorrow, the Prophet says, are inseparable. “The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.” The Prophet says that pain is foul but necessary medicine – drink it and shut up! Another warning against the craving for constant comfort, but also against complaining and self-pity, especially relevant at this stage of my life, on the brink of decrepitude.

The Prophet warns of the danger that lurks in the home: “Comfort, and the lust for comfort, that stealthy thing that enters the house a guest and then becomes a host, and then a master.” Now that I don’t have to leave the house to work, the risks associated with comfort are real and intense; sometimes I can feel the fog of deep sleep within my four walls surrounding me and threatening to overwhelm me - take me into its lap and feed me soup and ice cream until my time is up. I search for reasons to leave the house each day when I’m not traveling.

“Much in you is not yet man, but a shapeless pygmy that walks asleep in the mist searching for its own awakening.” The pygmy is whatever exists within me that is unique, the thing that might survive my death. The pygmy holds my salvation in his hands.

I finally reach a state of exhaustion and barely make it back, walking more than riding the last kilometer because it feels like I might have broken my ass on the flimsy bicycle seat. When I return the bicycle, the annoying man very nicely doesn’t charge me as much as he could (another admonition not to judge people too quickly). I sit down for a beer in the Old Train Station and find a few last words of wisdom from the Prophet: “The soul unfolds itself, like a lotus of countless petals.” Another wise man saying that there is no one path to enlightenment, that the search is constant and endless.

“Of time you would make a stream upon whose bank you would sit and watch its flowing.” How many times have I told myself to disconnect from clocks and calendars? I don’t need them anymore. But the body doesn’t find time easy to ignore and I struggle to stay awake on my last evening in Italy.



The Old Train Station, San Remo

In the morning I have to buy a first-class ticket from Nice to Lyon (or wait three hours in Nice for a later train). It costs an extra 60 Euros but what the hell – I'll get the first-class experience for a change. Maybe it will make up for the hour of hot and humid tension on the crowded 15 km. bus ride from San Remo to Ventimiglia. The first thing I plan to do in Lyon is go to a bookstore I found on the Web which sells English books and is very close to where I will be staying. The plan is to find one more book in Lyon and one in Paris. I have Airbnb reservations in both cities: with Boris in Lyon and Rekia in Paris. Two more contacts in the world.

When I arrive in Lyon it takes a long time to find Boris's flat, which is in the center of town just off Place Bellecour, on the fifth floor, which to North Americans is the sixth floor, and with extra high ceilings is actually more like the ninth floor. By the time I get my luggage up the stairs (even though Boris comes out to help me towards the end), I'm sweating and out of breath. I find the bookstore easily and choose Isabel Allende's autobiographical *The Sum of Our Days* from the few English titles available.

A restless night of not enough sleep leaves me irritable and tired on the morning of Day 24, feeling like three weeks of this form of intense travel may be my limit. The light is intermittent again and the sun is especially annoying today, sometimes coming out for only four seconds when it takes at least six to get the camera out and frame a shot.

I visit the Musée des beaux-arts de Lyon where there is a *Joseph Cornell and the Surrealists* exhibit, which leaves me even more annoyed. I really don't like Cornell's precious little boxes and collages, and the other surrealists seem even more pretentious. Even the pieces by Man Ray, someone I admire very much, are awful: minuscule, deliberately scratched portraits of his cronies set in huge frames. Really? Maybe I'm too tired for this sort of thing today.

After more than three weeks, I'm experiencing my first negative day of the trip. I love France and sometimes think I would like to live here, but everything has a dark side and I allow myself the therapy of a good wallow in negativity. I fill three pages in my notebook with a rant against the invisible sun and all things French (including most of the Surrealists). I'm also feeling like I might have reached a limit with the photos. The city is beautiful but in many ways it looks exactly like a cleaner, smaller version of Paris. Even the banks of the Rhone look like a replica of the Seine.







I feel better in the morning with four days left on this trek. The Institut Lumière is very nice, and special for me with my background as a film librarian, but it only kills one hour. Ironic that this “birthplace of film” has just honored Quentin Tarantino with their Prix Lumière. Sometimes the French can show exceptionally bad taste, especially when it comes to embracing the cheesiest parts of American culture. I’m almost ready to give up on the sun and go shopping for running shoes when a patch of faded blue appears in the sky and I end up walking all day again, up to the beautiful Basilique Notre Dame de Fourvière, then back down. I get some very nice shots.

I feel good again the next morning and realize not for the first time that mornings are almost always good on the road: waking up to what seems like a different sort of dream, in a different part of the world, with a day of adventures to look forward to. I had a good talk with Boris last night. He’s an interesting guy. He likes having guests in his huge apartment and refuses to charge what the room is worth, which is at least twice as much as I paid.

I’m packed and waiting for the train to Paris, my second home. The feet are still sore and I’m pretty much walked-out anyway. The Allende book is turning out to be readable, if not relevant. She’s very passionate and very tribal, keeping her family as close as possible. I think I’m a little that way too. I dream about family so much when I’m away.

In Paris, just around the corner from the Père-Lachaise Cemetery, I meet my host, Rekia, then immediately set out in what has to be the greatest walking city in the world. But the evening is damp and chilly and the walk down Chemin Vert is not so interesting, taking me past dozens of those dingy Parisian wholesale clothes shops full of cardboard boxes.

The next morning, I tell myself not to think about the comforts of home and try as much as possible to enjoy Paris. My plan is to see the Sebastian Salgado exhibition at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie, then meet my friend Marie afterward.

I won’t call my ex-girlfriend, who’s living here now, until later in the day. She’s an old Ex now, with no residual obligations to consider. I decide to walk to the exhibition which takes me through the upscale Le Marais district where I sit down with the gentry and pay seven Euros for a cappuccino and a lousy pain-au-raisin at the only bakery-café I can find. At least the cappuccino is good.



There's already a small line-up at the exhibition when I arrive thirty minutes before it's scheduled to open. I don't feel like standing so I leave and return when the doors are open, and it now looks to be a two-hour wait. I give up on overcrowded museums in this city. I begin to wander aimlessly and end up on the Left Bank at the Institut du Monde Arabe where the view of the Seine and Notre Dame from the roof is spectacular but, like so much else in this city, I've already been here and taken photos.

I return to the museum at one o'clock to meet my friend but give up waiting after forty-five minutes. I have no phone, so I can't call her to find out why she's a no-show. I cross back into the Left Bank to wander aimlessly in the Latin Quarter, vaguely searching for the San Francisco Book Co. where I never fail to find a book, eventually stumbling across the store and leaving with *The Alchemist* by Paul Coelho.

Sunday with the Ex begins with 8:30 mass at Notre Dame and ends twelve hours later after a bottle of wine and a paella dinner bought at a street market. She looks great, dressed to accentuate her best assets, but if she's trying to provoke interest, I don't give it much thought – I'm too tired. But god bless her, I still enjoy her company. For the first time in twenty-eight days, I don't take a single photo. Tomorrow will be the last day of this trek. I'll finish the last few pages of the Allende book and begin *The Alchemist*.

On my last full day of wandering, I wake up feeling great with a mission to buy socks in the Tour Montparnasse, meet up with Marie at Metro Odeon, and then maybe see a film in the evening.

With the first part of my mission accomplished, I'm left with just enough time to walk to my appointment with Marie. She's as awkward as ever and a bit difficult to speak to today, and I realize that the problem is that she is even more of an introvert than I am, leaving me with the burden to decide what to talk about, what to do and where to go, something I'm not used to.

We end up at the Grande Mosquée de Paris which is a bit dingy and disappointing (under renovation like so many places in the off-season), and the other places we visit seem all too familiar, like everything else in this city. I think my eyes were full five days ago and nothing else can get in at this point. On the way home in the Metro I zone out for a few minutes and entirely forget where I am - I could be anywhere.



Paris

In the evening it's cool and damp again and I walk and walk and walk, looking for a movie theater I found online and someplace reasonable to eat. But the film I want to see won't begin for another hour and a half and I really don't feel like waiting. I end up eating fast food, then heading home, exhausted. In the morning I'm up and out of the house early, at the airport with almost four hours to spare.

Coming home after a long trip is usually much fun. I'm always surprised that my apartment still exists, exactly as I left it. I revel in the warmth and comfort of my own place, after sleeping in so many strange beds, foraging for strange foods and constantly wondering where I am and where I'm going next.

But this time is different: when I open the door to my home I feel like I have just been to the corner store, that I just stepped out for a few minutes and haven't been gone for thirty days traipsing around a continent an ocean away.

What happened? When I zoned out in the Metro in Paris did I catch a glimpse behind the curtain revealing the secret that everywhere is the same? I always try to bring the open eyes of the traveler home: to live each day with intensity, urgency, efficiency and purpose. Maybe it's just Paris: maybe, because I've been there so often it was inevitable that I would one day see the city with "home-eyes". But wouldn't this be true of any other place after a while, making travel essentially a gimmick, a device to alleviate boredom and complacency? I don't think so. People and places *are* different; what's lacking is the power of my own attention and imagination to appreciate these differences and let them influence the way I think and live.

Two days later, I lose what I consider to be the best photos: the ones I took in Calais. I lose them apparently in the process of transferring them from my travel laptop to a USB stick. I spend days searching for them, using special software to sift through the trash on my computer – my trash. I didn't even know this was technically possible (and so easy) and I'm shocked to see the contents of my trash, how much time is killed with silly diversions on the Web. How much of my attention is wasted and abused. Attention that could be directed at so many wonderful things. Absolute attention, as Simone Weil says, is prayer. Finally, I salvage a photo of the sea taken in Calais which I will later enlarge and frame.

If the point is to bring travel-eyes home, maybe seeing other parts of the world with home-eyes as I did in Paris is a blessing, suggesting the reverse is possible. The struggle to wake up from our trance is a daily, unending struggle that follows us everywhere we go. As Krishnamurti says, there is no sanctuary, no

arrival at a destination of perfect and continuous mindfulness. But the seeking and striving is certainly the most important thing we can do.

Gurdjieff says two hundred conscious men could save the world and Cecil Lewis adds that striving for a higher level of consciousness is not just a personal quest: "Human beings collectively act as a sort of protest or comment to the Almighty which continually monitors and serves to readjust the larger plan. God has need of us as much as we have need of Him."

The Lewis book is appearing to be the most relevant of the seven I brought back from Europe. Even the title seems perfect, especially the subtitle: *A Wish to Be: A Voyage of Self-Discovery*. I had asked Gerard, the friendly owner of the Reid of Liverpool bookstore, for a souvenir bookmark or business card to add to my collection, but he didn't have any so, along with the coordinates of the shop, he wrote the following on a post-it which he stuck in the book: "Good Luck. Lots."

I'll take this sincere wish as the official outcome of the trip and tell myself to keep searching, to begin each day with gratitude and a sense of mission based on faith because, as Gurdjieff says, "Faith alone brings the intensity necessary for self-consciousness."

I've come home with the notion of a morning prayer of gratitude and a resolve to appreciate the gift of another day with a commitment to live the day well. I just have to think of Jean-Dominique Bauby trapped in his diving bell under the sea; this thought alone should make the miracle of a functioning body and mind obvious, and the pledge to live well easier to fulfill.