



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 1 of the **Pilgrim Chronicles**.

## 42 days

Krishnamurti says that freedom is in the first step. Freedom is not an emotion, a state of mind or a physical condition. Like love, it exists only as an action, based on decisions made in each moment. Nikos Kazantzakis says, "The superior virtue is not to be free but to fight for freedom."

In 2008, I set off on a 42-day trip, the first long trip in my life. I was fifty-four years old and four-weeks retired. The main objective was to erase the nine-to-five template of thirty-five years of wage slavery. Maybe I could die to my old self as the wise men say, then be reborn as a free person with no obligations to anything - a once in a lifetime opportunity, better late than never. I also planned to keep a log and take a lot of photos.

A second objective was a Project that involved connecting the dots between four big thinkers who had been part of my reading and research for a long time. What did my four wise-guys have in common? I had been reading such books, taking notes, and collecting excerpts forever. Now that I was free, I wanted to dispose of them all, to clear the way for my own thoughts. I also had a "theory of four" based on the premise that if I were to place myself between four objects and bring awareness of the existence of these four objects into myself, that, from this position, as a fifth element, I could see things I am not normally able to see.

My four mentors were: Jiddu Krishnamurti, who was declared a messiah by Theosophists in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century but gave it up to become a world teacher; the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche; the spiritual teacher George Gurdjieff; and the Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis, best known for his novel *Zorba the Greek*.

Before I left I selected and organized excerpts from their works. For Kazantzakis, I had only pieces of *Saviors of God*, a book of verses he wrote about his theory of God. I retyped the excerpts and had them printed and bound in a small notebook that I would take with me on a pilgrimage to places significant to the lives of all of these men, except for Krishnamurti, whom I had dealt with the previous spring on a visit to Ojai, California.

The plan was to go to places significant to each of these men and, with notebook in hand, actually draw connections on the spot. Gurdjieff would take me to a cemetery in Fontainebleau outside of Paris (as well as Istanbul where he lived for a while in a monastery); Nietzsche would take me to Germany; Kazantzakis would take me to his tomb in Iraklion, Crete.

I could call these guys gurus but I don't believe in gurus and neither did they. Krishnamurti would often issue grave warnings not to see him this way, making it clear that if we follow someone else's path, our souls will be lost, the whole point of life being to find our own. Eight months earlier I spent three days in a big old house in the middle of orange groves in Ojai, California, one of a few houses Krishnamurti lived in around the world and the place where he died. It seemed as if I was alone my first night in the house, then two or three other people showed up the next day, but after a brief conversation that made me feel like I was being tested on my knowledge of the Exalted One, I managed to avoid talking to these people again. I found them weird, behaving like disciples of a man who did not want disciples.

Before I left on this trip I picked up *The Book of Life*, a collection of 365 short Krishnamurti readings, one for every day of the year. I turned to the entry for my birthday to see if there was a special message for me. What I found was the first instance of Krishnamurti saying something which I know from personal experience to be untrue. He said that prayer is false because it is always only a supplication, a petition, so that the answer to a prayer is always our own projection. In my own experience, prayer is more often an offering than a supplication. And an answered prayer is both.



Ojai, California



Catching Krishnamurti in a mistake was a good starting point. These four wise men were human and imperfect, just like all of us. None spoke only the truth and none discovered the one true path, because evidently there is no one true path. Krishnamurti himself said that truth is a pathless land.

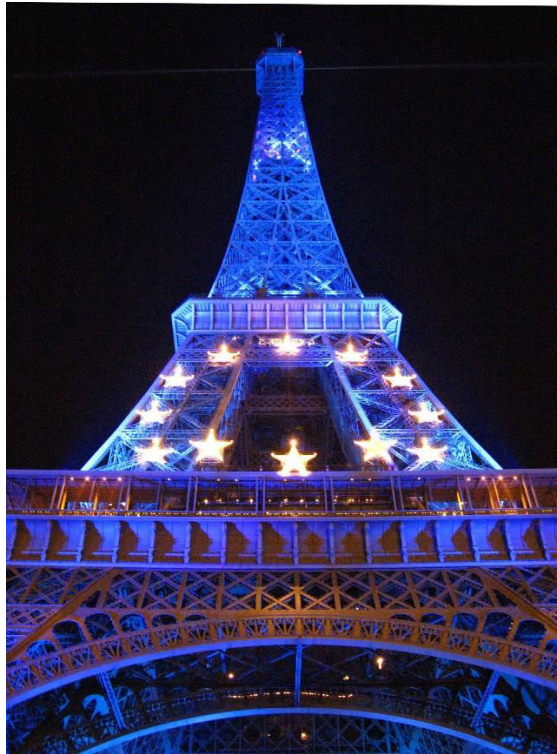
The journey begins on September 22, four weeks after my last day of work, with no clear itinerary or plans, aside from a return ticket from Paris 42 days later on November 3. The overnight flight is uneventful and, once in Paris, I take the Metro into the city and find a cheap hotel near the Gare du Nord. My first impressions of Paris are those of any large city: grimy and noisy. My neighbourhood is full of Africans, especially on Boulevard Strasbourg where they linger around the Metro station speaking to each other in voices verging on shouting. I start walking immediately, tiring myself out by the end of the Day 1.

The city seems quieter with less traffic in the morning of Day 2. You can see clearly how close France is to Africa and the consequences of past colonial relationships on the present. Walk, walk, walk... the Seine, the Concorde, Notre Dame... all of it beautiful of course. I find the apartment I've rented in the Latin Quarter for the next two weeks and it's on the seventh floor with no elevator. The walk up is excruciating, good preparation for the six weeks of walking ahead of me.

On Day 3, I get a good chunk of the tourist stuff out of the way: the Pantheon, Notre Dame, Saint-Germain-des-Prés and, last but not least, the Eiffel Tower at dusk. At the Pantheon, I see Foucault's Pendulum and the crypts of Voltaire and Rousseau. Notre Dame is huge, magnificent and wide open to the public. I also visit the Roman ruins which were discovered under the church only thirty years ago. Saint-Germain is actually the oldest church in Paris, relatively unrenovated and, again, wide open for anyone to walk into. Parisians are so casual about their antiquities and tourist sites, except for the Eiffel Tower where there are soldiers on guard with machine guns, just like in the train stations. There's a long line up at the Tower, but it has to be done. Twilight is descending on Paris on the way up and the views are magnificent.



The Pantheon



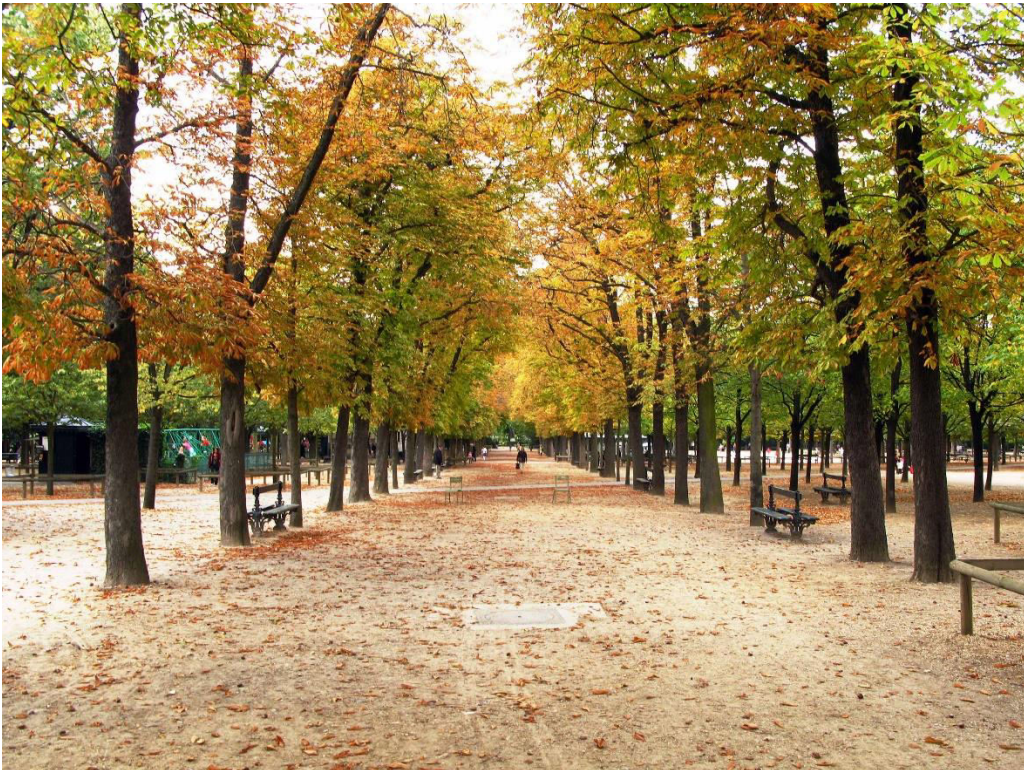
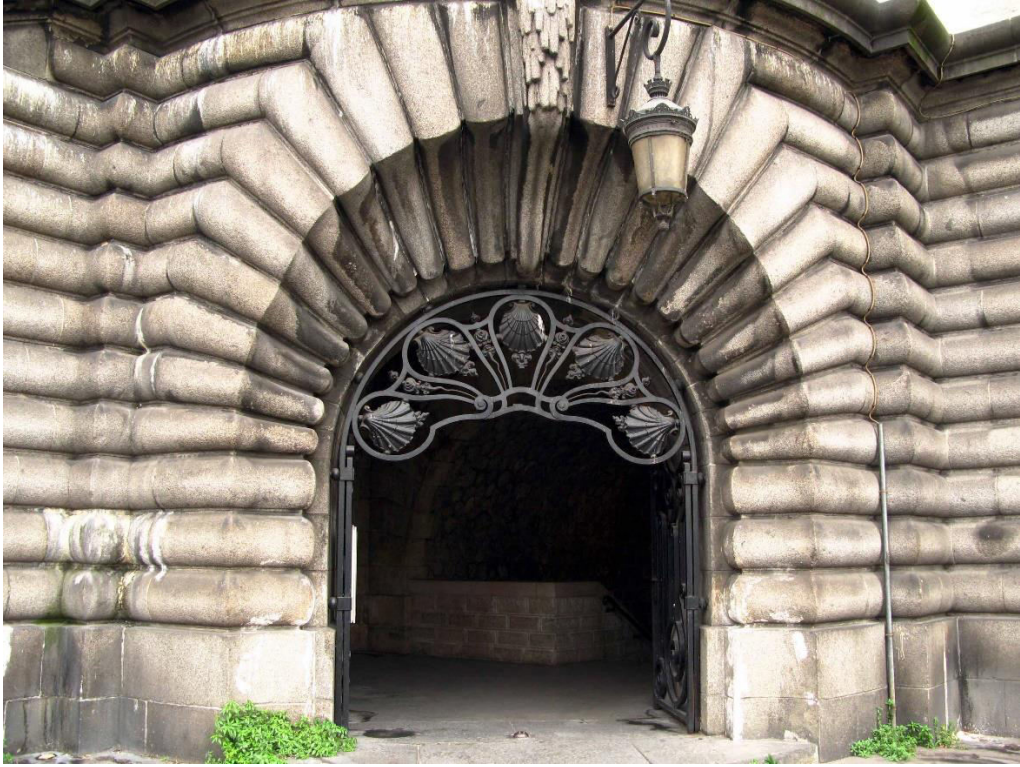
The climb up to Sacré-Coeur on Day 4 makes me even more aware of how unfit I am. Montmartre looks like a movie set, crawling with tourists, all gawking, just like me. With so many admiring eyes, how could a place not become superficial? The cathedral is beautiful. So much work and money spent building these structures, and what are they today but reminders of how we used to live when magic was still a part of our daily lives. I only get five shots on this day and think that maybe I'm tiring of postcard Paris.

I begin Day 5 at Père Lachaise cemetery, which was actually created to be a celebrity cemetery. I visit Oscar Wilde but pass on Jim Morrison. The Louvre in the afternoon is too much and too big with too many people, and I decide I really don't like palaces - the over-the-top decadence is revolting. Surrounded by pointless opulence, I understand the French Revolution better than ever, but after the violence and bloodshed it didn't seem to take long for stupidity of celebrity-worship to return. The glorification of wealth and royalty is everywhere here.

I sleep in on Day 6 and decide to have a simple, single-purpose day: I'll take the train to Fontainebleau and find Gurdjieff's grave. It ends up being the first truly great day of the trip, and I'm finally starting to feel less a tourist than a pilgrim. There are two cemeteries on the town map posted at the train station in Fontainebleau, both within reasonable walking distance but in opposite directions. I pick a direction (the right one as it happens) and proceed to walk the two or three kilometres on a perfect day with no wind, aside from a fragrant breeze every now and then that feels more like a caress. The temperature is ideal with not a cloud in the sky.

It's pleasingly quiet in the small cemetery, which is empty except for lizards, crows and one other person. It feels good not to be a tourist surrounded by other tourists. I find the grave easily enough and end up spending three hours there, reading my notes and making connections. As I sit on the edge of the large slab that covers his grave, listening to a crow squawking, I think maybe I have never experienced a more perfect environment and thank Gurdjieff for being such a wonderful host. For the first time, I understand how this trip has detached me from bad habits, creating an opportunity to step away from my old self and time-killing distractions.





Paris

Gurdjieff says that consciousness is light and “even a feeble light is enough to change completely the character of a process.” When we shine the light of consciousness on the subconscious there is a chemical reaction producing change. The concept is much like the transubstantiation of matter into spirit identified by Kazantzakis as the purpose of life.

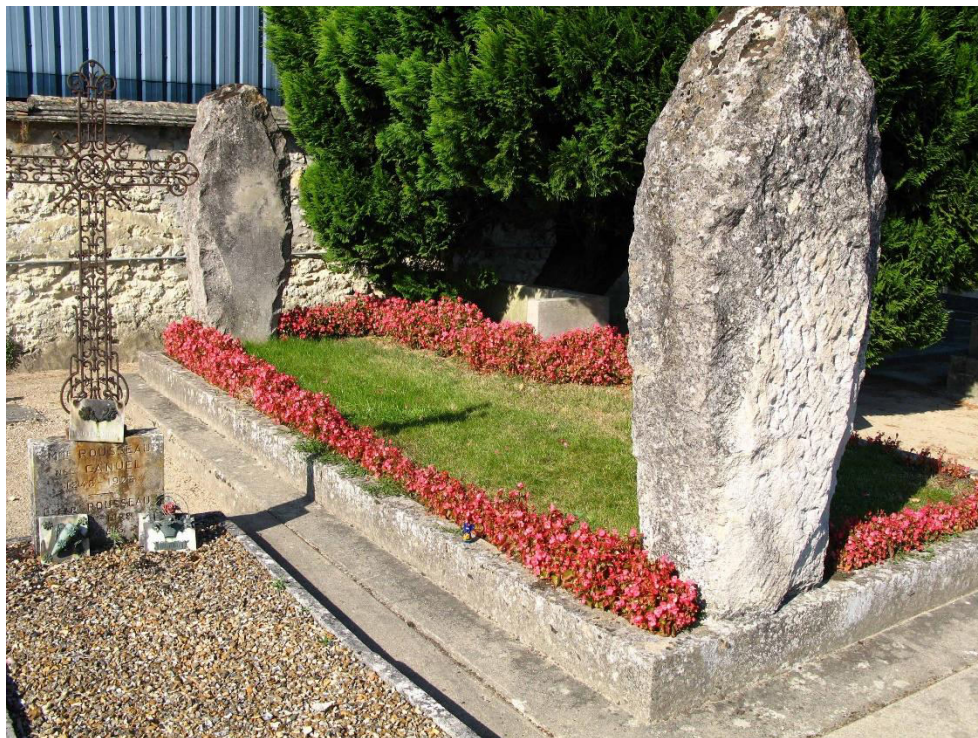
Gurdjieff says that destiny exists only for those who believe in it because only they will respond appropriately to significant events that appear to cause harm – to the reality that suffering is part of existence. This response allows destiny to flow through us – to *engage* us. He says that man consists of two parts: essence and personality. Personality is what is “not his own”, what Krishnamurti would call conditioning. Essence is what *is* his own. Fate relates only to the essence, so it’s personality that needs to take a back seat and become passive, with essence up front.

Gurdjieff says we need to wake up, which requires us to see and understand our mechanicalness, how our attachment and identification with a thousand things determines almost everything we experience in any given moment. Krishnamurti says that being awake is the only thing that matters and the things we desire never bring fulfillment. Nietzsche says that “he who possesses little is so much the less possessed,” and Kazantzakis’ God tells him to remain restless and unsatisfied, to avoid habits and complacency, the greatest sin of all being satisfaction.

Gurdjieff says what’s needed is to slow down and not waste energy or attention on disagreeable emotions, expectations of unpleasant things, bad moods, worry, unnecessary haste, nervousness and irritability, daydreaming, muscle tension, perpetual chatter, and interest in trivial things. We need to be silent when necessary, tell the truth, and overcome the fear based on the lies we tell ourselves. The work required to wake up must become the center of our lives. The only two things that need to be given up are fantasies and dwelling on past suffering, the two things that absorb most of our attention, the two hardest things to put aside.

Gurdjieff says, “The work gathering one’s forces is the conscious effort of self-remembering and the voluntary suffering living in reality, here and now.” It’s hard to look at ourselves as we actually are because the initial reaction is usually disgust. He says a man needs to live his religion; merely *thinking* it makes it only fantasy or philosophy. According to Gurdjieff, all the laws of the Cosmos can be found in an atom or any other thing we choose to study, so if I study myself, I study the Cosmos.





Gurdjieff grave



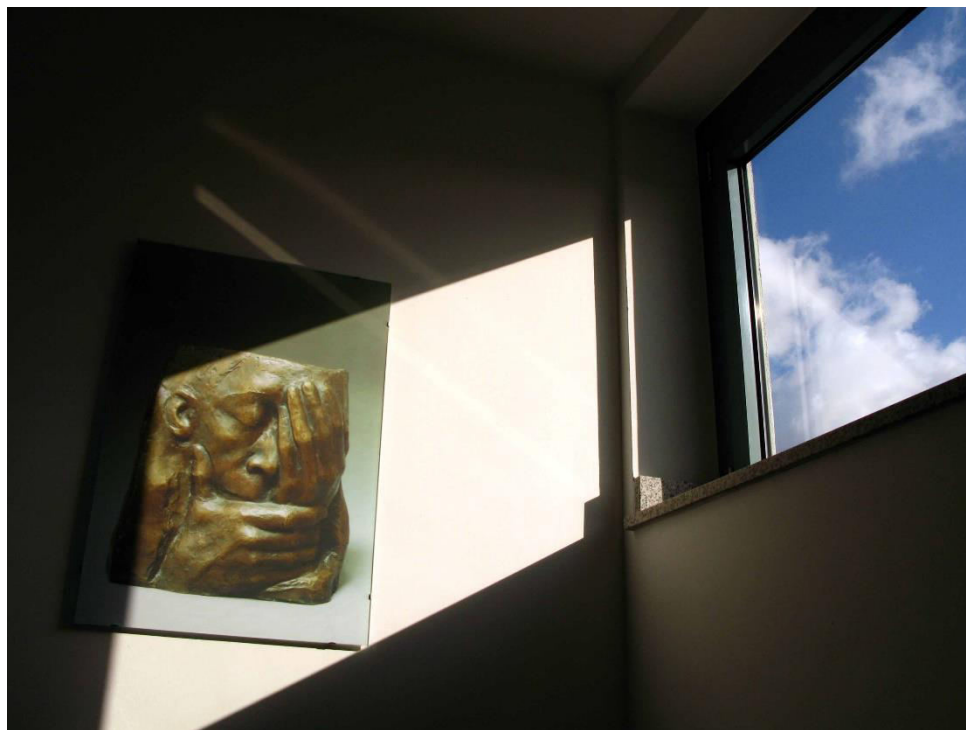
Day 7 is a bit mundane. I do some laundry and have a pleasant walk in the morning but get lost a couple of times in the afternoon and tire myself out at the Military Museum where the jingoism, uniforms and guns are dreary and revolting, and the fact that the French take so much pride in Napoleon and De Gaulle (who apparently won WWII single-handed) is a little obnoxious. But I have to admit Napoleon's tomb is impressive.

On Day 8 I'm beginning to feel some loneliness, missing home and friends. I finally make a decision about where to go next and buy a train ticket to Cologne. I'll decide from there if I want to go on to Weimer or Berlin the same day or stick around Cologne for a couple of days. On my last night in Paris I attend a gospel concert at St. Germain des Prés and have a fantastic time. I actually join in the singing, something I haven't done since I was a child.

My first impressions of Germany and Cologne on Day 9 are good. I find a nice, cheap, ultra-clean hotel steps away from the train station, the emerald-green Rhine, and the famous Cathedral. Everything in the city seems so neat and tidy, nothing fancy, so different from Paris Royale.

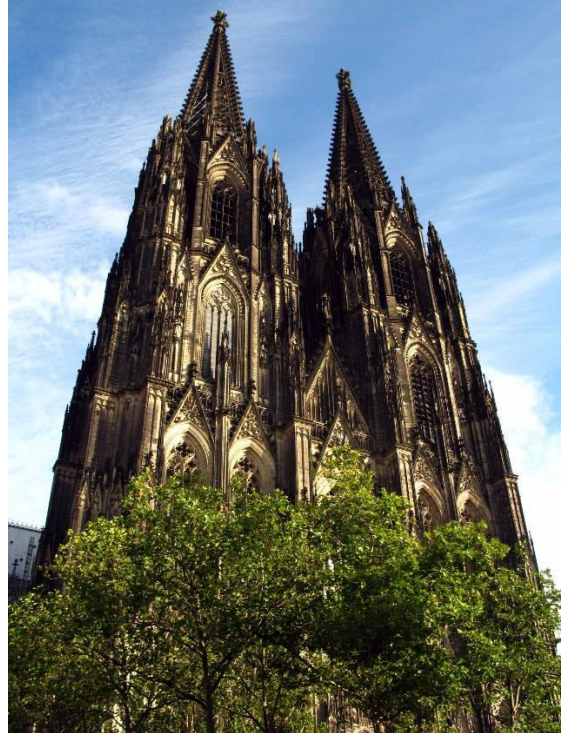
On Day 10, I'm taking a long walk around Cologne when I stumble upon the Kathe Kollwitz museum which is very moving, with powerful representations of pacifism and motherhood. In a strange coincidence, I had stopped to photograph *The Mourning Parents* in the courtyard of a building under renovation just minutes before I would discover it was a Kollwitz sculpture.

The light seems different in Northern Europe and the autumn days shorter. The sun plays hide-and-seek all morning and sits so low in the sky it rarely penetrates the narrow streets anyway. I visit the practically empty and extensive ruins of the Roman governor's residence under the town hall near the Cathedral and walk through a long narrow section of the ancient Roman sewage system, where I find myself completely alone under the streets of Cologne. Later, in the center of town, Germans ask me for directions three times, as if I'm someone who knows where he is and where he is going.



Kathe Kollwitz Museum, Cologne





Cologne





Cologne



On Day 11 I find myself on a high-speed train to Weimer where I plan to carry out the Nietzsche phase of the Project, but Weimar is a bust: it's a national holiday, there are no accommodations to be had, and nobody speaks English. I return to the station to move on to Berlin and decide to do the Nietzsche work on the train. I have a whole table to myself on the half-empty train and the green blur of the German countryside racing by is beautiful, the hushed sound of the rails and the wind relaxing and reassuring. I work well, connecting dots for one and half hours straight with the sun going down as we approach Berlin.

Nietzsche is the dark and venomous member of my quaternity, the one who appears to reject virtue and nobility in favour of free will and power. He says that life is always lived at the expense of others - that life itself is essentially exploitation and exploitation is a basic organic function. He is an important antidote to any fantasy or ideal that we can be perfect or live without sinning, without causing harm. His final proposition is that "the *actual* man represents a much higher value than the 'desirable' man of any ideal hitherto." Gurdjieff says self-awareness is blocked by our tendency to fantasize about who we are or who we should be, and "the real world is hidden to the man who is asleep by the wall of imagination."

Nietzsche says the "will's loneliest affliction" is that it is powerless to change the past, so we need to just let the past go. This is almost identical to Gurdjieff's suggestion that we are attached to our suffering more than anything else. We cling to suffering experienced in the past, using it to excuse paralysis and unhappiness in the present.

Nietzsche says we look for external authorities to tell us what we should pursue and what to do. The alternative to obeying oneself, he says, is to accept to be commanded. The worst sin is to underestimate oneself and, anyway, "the course of things makes its way independently of the approval of the great majority." Seeking approval is a waste of time.

The ultra-modern central Berlin train station seems to be set down in the middle of nowhere with no cheap hotels in sight. I call my friend Alice and somehow navigate my way to her tiny apartment where I will stay the night, she having graciously arranged to stay with a friend close by.



Berlin

Day 12 begins in a café with Alice, talking about my Project to an intelligent person who actually listens with interest. It feels like this new life is coming together pretty quickly. She tells me how to walk to the major attractions and off I go down Schonhauser Allee. I love the first big walk in a new city. It's cold and grey in the tourist sections of Berlin and just when I think that maybe I should jump on the next plane to Istanbul, the sun comes out and it simultaneously starts to rain, casting a clear golden light on the Berlin Cathedral with a wonderful rainbow directly above it.

I take some photos and walk south to the moving *Neue Wache* memorial to the victims of fascism (the centrepiece of which is a Kollwitz sculpture), the Brandenburg Gate, down the Unter den Linden which is closed to traffic with a national holiday celebration underway (and where I actually ride a Ferris wheel erected for the occasion), all the way to the Victory Column with the golden angel on top featured in Wim Wenders' film, *Wings of Desire* where a real angel sits on her shoulder overlooking the city, listening to peoples' thoughts. It's strange to see so many tourists here. How many bombs fell on this city? How many people died? Now the city center feels like a slightly-haunted amusement park, full of ghosts.

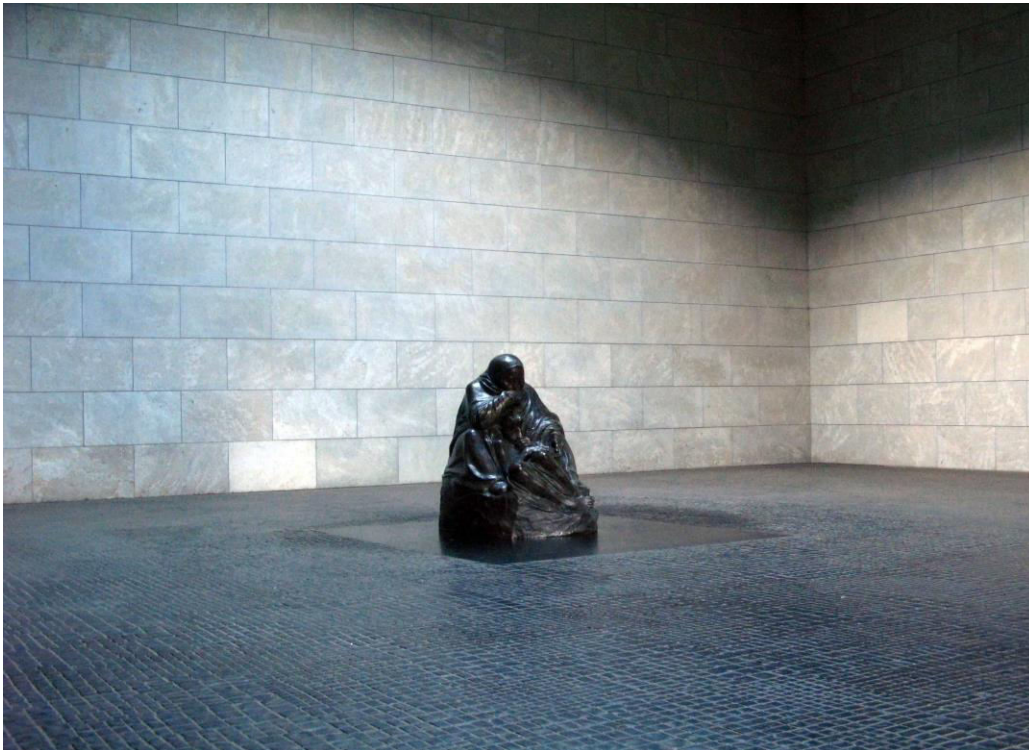
Every time I leave my friend's third-floor apartment I notice a name plaque on a second-floor door identifying the occupant as *B. John*. I take it as simple but perfect advice for my new life of independence and freedom. Nietzsche says there is no right way, only my way. Alice's flat is very, very cold and her self-constructed 'shower' is awful. But on my second cup of Turkish coffee at a local bakery-café, I'm feeling pretty warm and toasty in the morning of Day 13. I've found an apartment for the next three nights and I have a plane ticket for Istanbul!

I visit three galleries on the coldest, windiest and wettest day yet. The Helmut Newton Museum is alright, but a bit of a one-trick-pony in the end, with far too many photos of himself, and except for Weegee, all the other photographers on exhibit are famous paparazzi. Is there anything more boring than photos of celebrities?





Berlin Cathedral



Neue Wache Memorial to Victims of Fascism

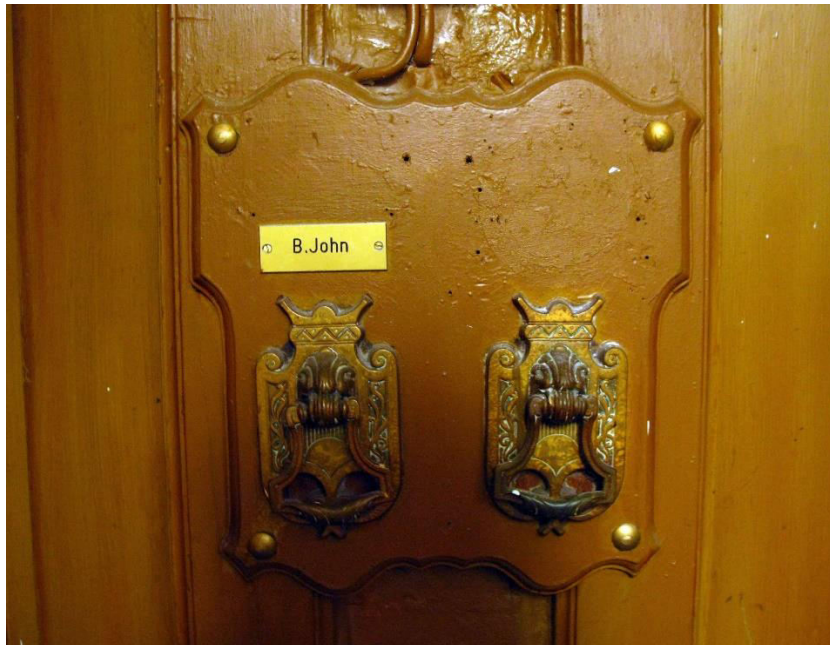
The Art Center Berlin is interesting but deserted (I actually doze for a few minutes on a bench – not the first time this will happen on this trip), and the C/O Berlin is inspiring. Leonard Freed is the featured artist in this huge photography gallery housed in an old, un-renovated post office. What I take from Freed is the reminder that patience is essential in photography. Pick your shot and wait for something interesting to happen.

I have a great three-hour conversation with Alice when I get home. She shows me some of her video art, which I don't understand but respect, and it turns out we have two things in common: leaving home at an early age and a childhood period of religious obsession triggered by biblical illustrations. I resolve to take her to dinner later in the week and establish her as a long-term friend.

Day 14 is annoying. First, I get lost on the subway burdened with luggage, trying to find my rented apartment, then I find it almost impossible to figure out how to use the washing machines at a Laundromat with German-only instructions, where nobody speaks English, and finally I get caught by a *Kontroller* (a plain-clothes person hired to catch ticket-less people in a transit system with no barriers or turnstiles). I was only taking the train for two stops and didn't want to pause to buy a ticket on the platform with the train approaching, and in walks this scruffy looking guy who shouts "Kontroller" as soon as the doors start to close. I play stupid, apologetic tourist and the man lets me off with a warning; otherwise I would have had to pay the 40-Euro fine on the spot.

The apartment is perfect and at the end of the day I meet new people - Jimmy and Anne - for the first time on this trip. Anne is German but Jimmy is half Egyptian, half Maori and they both speak English well. Jimmy tells me what he likes about Berlin and gives me tips about Istanbul, and Anne tells me what parts of her city I need to see. Jimmy echoes Alice about how Berlin is a truly international city where you can be whoever you want to be. I get drunk on cheap white wine and tequila beer, drinking with my new friends at tables set up in front of a corner shop. I'm starting to feel Berlin.





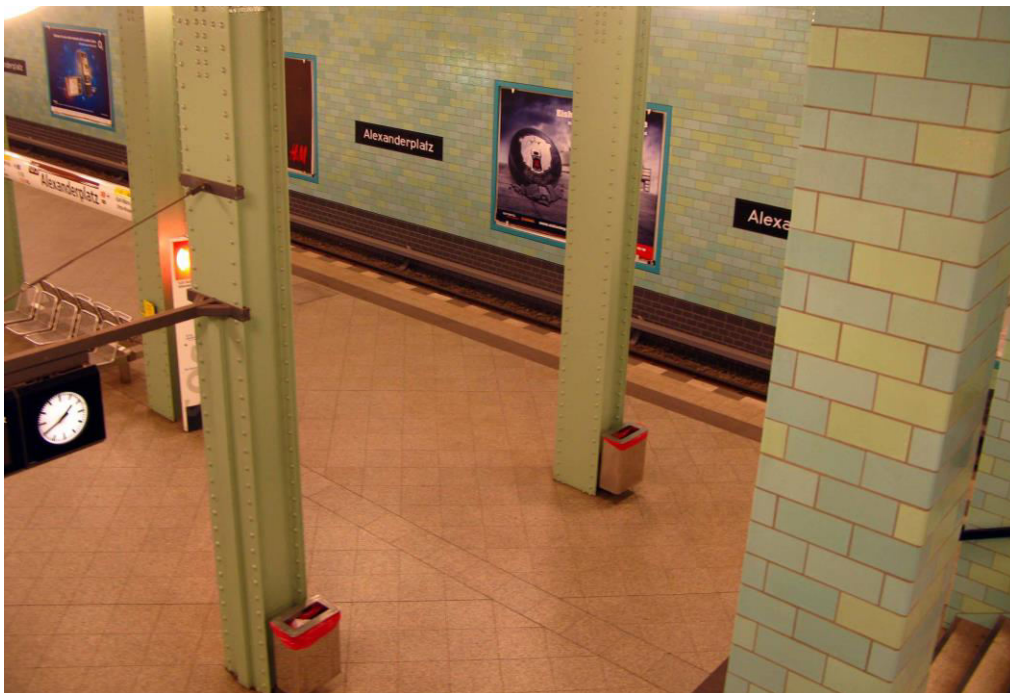
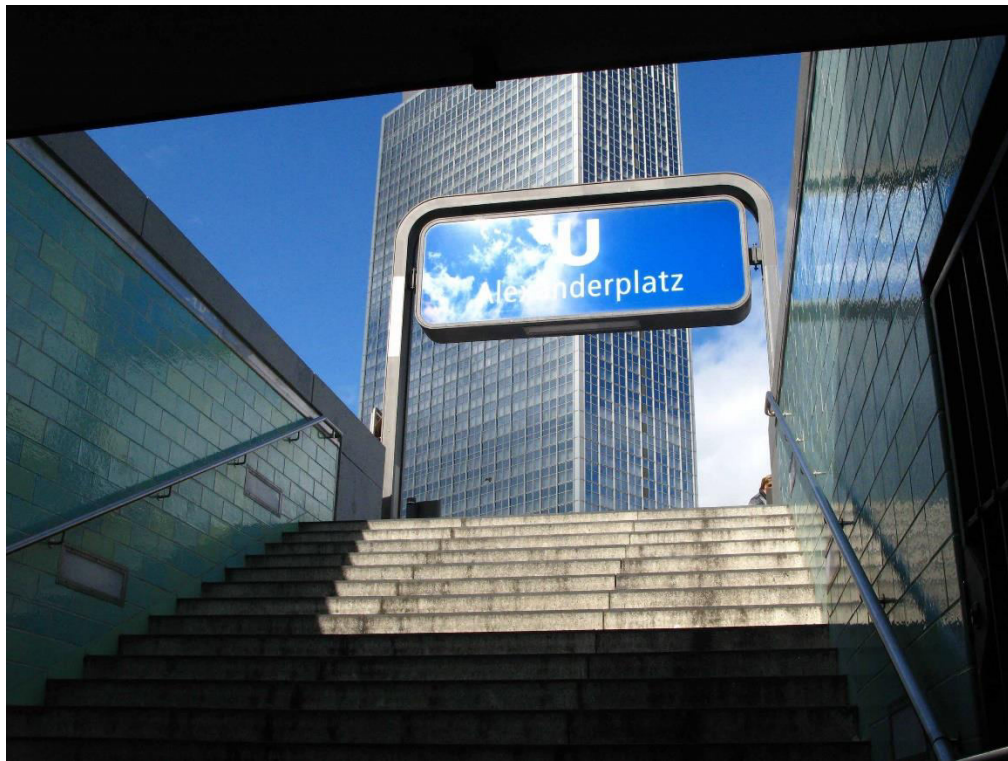
Berlin

Day 15 begins with Egyptian tea at Jimmy's Massage Emporium not far from my apartment. The Emporium is on the ground floor of a big Soviet-style building which he says was quite elegant back in the day. Then it's over to Alexanderplatz where I catch the 100 bus which Anne says is the most scenic route in the system. I end up spending the day wandering around the city on public transit followed by another night drinking with Jimmy and some Turkish friends of his. He's a fascinating man, one of a kind. He says he inherited herbal health secrets from both the Egyptian and Maori sides of his family and had set up shop in many cities before coming here, the most recent being Copenhagen.

My own apartment is very close to the main intersection of what used to be East Berlin, with imposing Soviet buildings on each corner and the last remaining stretch of The Wall (called the Eastside Gallery because it's covered with images) about a twenty-minute walk away. My immediate neighbourhood is full of well-mannered young punks, families and lots and lots of dogs. You see dogs everywhere here: on the subway, in stores, bars and restaurants. I think what I will remember most about Berlin is beer and dogs.

I'm tired on Day 16 and fed up already with drinking. The day is mostly uneventful but I have a very nice Indian dinner with Alice in the evening. I have to vacate my comfortable apartment tomorrow morning, which means one more night in Alice's wacky flat in the north end of the city before I catch my flight to Istanbul.

Day 17 begins with coffee on Karl Marx Strasse with Bobo, a tiny blue plastic mouse I had kept in my jacket pocket for years and now carry with me only when I travel. I decide to purchase another day pass and ride the buses and trains all day. The first stop is a palace, which is boring, then back to the café on the other side of the city to hopefully rescue Bobo because he's disappeared and I think I must have left him on the table this morning. It's quite a relief to find him, in spite of the strange look I get from the guy behind the counter when I ask if he's seen my little blue friend. It's been another thoroughly grey day in Berlin.



Alexanderplatz, Berlin

I spend Day 18, my last day in Berlin, slowly retracing the interesting walk I took the first day down Shonhauser Allee to the main tourist attractions. On the way back, I buy a couple of bottles of wine for Alice and find a new notebook, a small black one with graph-line paper, just like the ones Helmut Newton used which I saw in his museum. Alice doesn't make it home before I have to leave to catch a late flight which gets me to Istanbul at 2:30 a.m., with just two hours of plane sleep to keep me going.

When I finally get to my hotel in the Sultanahmet district after a few delays and a long bus ride from the airport, the room isn't ready so I spend the early hours on the rooftop terrace of this tiny hotel waiting for the sun to rise with Greg, a Polish university librarian/photographer I met on the bus from the airport. It's a beautiful, clear night and the views of the nearby Hagia Sophia on one side and Blue Mosque on the other are breathtaking. I can't believe I'm here in this magical place, a city I've always inexplicably felt deep nostalgia for, with only the cawing of gulls echoing in the pre-dawn silence. When the sun finally comes up I meet the friendly owner of this hole-in-wall hotel and we are quickly on a first-name basis.

I do a lot of walking on Day 19, down to the Golden Horn, through the Bazaar and onto a ferry across the Bosphorus to Asia, dropping keys to an ancient love-nest into the water on the way, something I had planned to do after clearing out my desk at work. In the morning of day 20 I check my email and lo and behold there's a message from the old love I haven't heard from in at least a year, giver of the keys that now lay at the bottom of the Golden Horn, sent at just about the time I was dropping them into the water. I take it as proof of the resonance of ritual.

I spend a couple of hours in Hagia Sophia, the 1500-year-old church/mosque that is now a museum, getting in for free because a tour leader from a cruise ship mistakes me for part of her herd and hands me a pass. This is easily the most impressive church I've ever seen. Later, I walk down the hill, across the Galata Bridge, up to the Galata Tower and then into the popular Beyoglu district. So many people, so much to see, so many photos my camera's battery dies.





Istanbul



On Day 21, I find myself halfway through my journey, tired and just about fed up with being a tourist. I've not felt more exploited than today, especially at Topkapi Palace where there's really not much to see, aside from shiny trinkets and jewels. As in Berlin, I find myself living on street food, and the fresh pomegranate juice they sell everywhere here is invigorating and addictive.

I dreamt of my abandoned workplace last night, but in the dream my office had a window and looked much better than in real life. The dream tells me that whatever I think I recall about my former life should not be colored by sentimentality or memories of what never was. No matter how lonely or uneventful life gets on the road or at home, I have to remain conscious and appreciative of the fact that a free and independent life is what I have been given to replace the old life. Krishnamurti says that depending on another for happiness is slavery and only the mind that is completely alone is creative. In the evening I attend a whirling dervish performance in the old Orient Express train station, which is a bit disappointing – a tourist-oriented affair put on by students. Tourist traps are hard to avoid.

I'm feeling good in the morning of Day 22. I love the Turkish breakfast of olives, boiled eggs and mystery meat provided each morning in the hotel's restaurant on the first floor. I especially love the Turkish tea available everywhere in this crowded city. I edit photos on my computer in the morning and post some online, thinking this could be a pleasant part of my travelling routine, giving me something sedentary to do and keeping me in touch with people back home. There have been some difficulties on the trip so far but I need to acknowledge how lucky I've been (no major mishaps) and count my blessings. The most difficult adjustment has been the disruption of habits, but if it makes me a better person, so be it.

In fact, the opportunity to discard time-killing, mind-numbing habits is probably the best thing about traveling. Krishnamurti says that when the mind renews itself without forming new patterns (habits), it becomes capable of infinite understanding. He says that beauty and meaning are in everything but can only be seen with a clean mind and heart, a mind and heart no longer striving to become somebody but simply living the reality (and appreciating the beauty) of each moment as honestly as possible.



Istanbul





Istanbul





Istanbul

I'm feeling good again on Day 23, even though I didn't sleep very well with far too many dreams. I have breakfast in the hotel with a retired Australian math teacher who does lots of travelling and it's good to have a real conversation after so much solitude. I'm feeling fit as well. Is it all the walking? Is it less food? Less coffee? Maybe due to the fact that I have overeaten just once in the last three weeks. This more Spartan way of living could be the key to leading a leaner life in more ways than one.

The Museum of Archaeology is the best yet, inexpensive and overflowing with great stuff. There are so many Roman ruins scattered about this city, there are even a couple of grimy and neglected statues in the museum toilet. I find a quiet spot and doze for a few minutes in a comfortable chair.

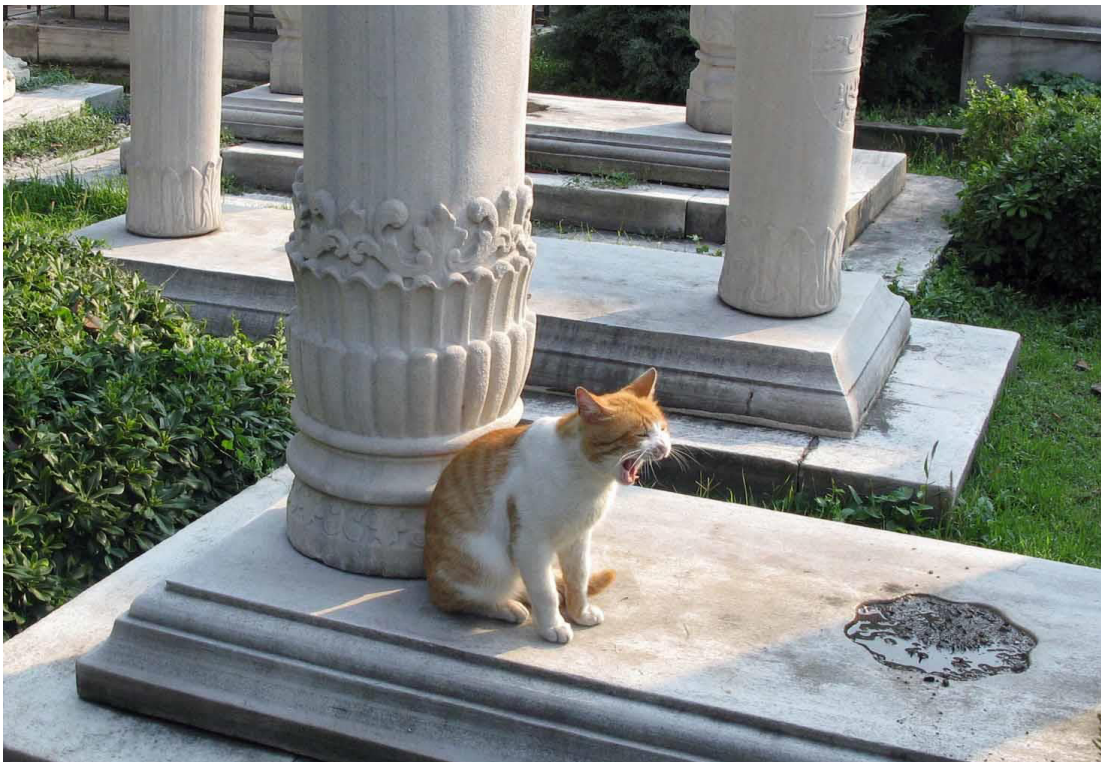
In the afternoon, I step into a travel agency and book a flight to Athens and a hotel for three nights. From there I will take a ferry to Chania in Crete and then make my way along the coast to Heraklion where I'll finish the connect-the-dots part of the Project at the tomb of Kazantzakis. In the evening, I find a nice restaurant in the Press Museum on the main street of Sultanahmet and treat myself to a proper meal, which isn't especially good, but the beer and the ambience are nice. When I return to Montreal, I'll make an effort avoid slipping back into bad habits. I need to write every day and work on the photos every day. So easy to make resolutions far from home.

Why am I here? The question is forgettable at home but impossible to ignore when traveling alone, far from home with no obligations or purpose. I resolve to take this sense of urgency home with me. I will absorb the Kazantzakis method of prayer\* more deeply and make my daily mission more real. In the prayer, Nikos depicts God as a general, himself as a soldier. God tells him to stop asking so many questions about directions or outcomes because soldiers never question. A soldier doesn't need to know where he's going, or why.

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\* "My prayer is not the whimpering of a beggar nor a confession of love. Nor is it the trivial reckoning of a small tradesman: Give me and I shall give you. My prayer is the report of a soldier to his general: This is what I did today, this is how I fought to save the entire battle in my own sector, these are the obstacles I found, this is how I plan to fight tomorrow."





Istanbul





Istanbul





Istanbul

On Day 24 I make the mistake of entering a small shoe store near the Grand Bazaar. After five horrible minutes, I have to literally flee when the owner turns to talk to another customer. There was no other way to escape; he would actually physically restrain me from leaving by holding my arm whenever I tried. Never again: the Grand Bazaar is very colourful but I'm not a shopper and I'm tired of telling merchants I really don't want to buy a rug. I book my flight back to Paris where I will spend one last night before returning home. I'm not sure what to do with the next couple of days in Istanbul. I wander aimlessly, taking the tram almost to the end of the line and then back to find the monastery where Gurdjieff lived for a time, but it's closed for renovations.

On Day 25 I discover the Istanbul Modern Museum and, after so many antiquities, find it refreshing to look at new things in a modern setting with the open eyes of a traveler. The building is just a converted warehouse but the location is beautiful, overlooking the Bosphorus on this perfect but slightly hazy day. I'm deeply moved by a video installation in the basement of the museum, Johanna Billing's *Magical World*. Why are the art galleries I visit on this trip having this effect on me, when "wonders of the world" simply impress? My last evening in Istanbul is spent on a boat watching the sun set over the Golden Horn. A good day. A *Magical World* day.

The flight to Athens on Day 26 is short and I find my hotel easily enough, four subway stops away from the city center, Syntagma Square, and close to a tourist train that brings me straight to the Acropolis. It's all as beautiful as expected, but I'm very tired and go to bed early with stomach trouble. Nice bed, nice room, but in a dreary neighbourhood and it's very humid. Athens is grimmer and more claustrophobic than any of the other cities I've visited so far. As in Paris, there are too many motorcycles which, aside from the incessant noise, stink up the city. I'm a bit tired of big cities anyway, and looking forward to Crete.





Istanbul cats



The Parthenon, Athens

I sleep nine hours, waking up once from a nasty, vivid dream, then three more hours after I return from the National Archaeological Museum on Day 27, still experiencing stomach trouble. After my three-hour nap, I have a nice gyro in Omonia Square. Then I get off at the Monastiraki subway station and do the fantastic walk across the Acropolis for the second day in a row. On the way up I meet Nadia, a youngish Russian lady, and after visiting the Parthenon, we spend a few hours leisurely walking back to our hotels, which happen to be on the same street. The conversation is strained and confusing because she doesn't speak very much English, but it's still nice to be with someone, to sit down and have a hot chocolate, not alone for a change. I could have arranged to meet her again, but I don't. I guess I prefer to be alone.

After another night of troublesome sleep with a troublesome stomach, I'm feeling better in the morning of Day 28 but still a bit annoyed by Athens. I can't find a place to get a simple coffee and croissant in this over-crowded neighbourhood. There are lots of unfriendly-looking bars full of unfriendly-looking men, but nothing clean and simple. The travel agent who sells me an overnight ferry ticket to Crete couldn't be less courteous, looking like a man who hasn't smiled in years. Athenians, in general, seem unhappy; I'm looking forward to finding some rustic serenity in Crete.

I climb halfway up the Hill of Lycabettus, the highest point in Athens, then take the funicular the rest of the way. It's blindingly bright at the top, too bright and hazy for decent photos. It seems to be an obligation of the tourist to visit the top of the city, to experience the whole organism in a glance, an all-you-can-see buffet. I try to remember what I used to do for a living; it seems like such a long time ago. This part of the trip's mission, to wipe out the nine-to-five template of my former life, seems to be working fine.

Day 29, my last day in Athens, is complicated by strikes. A subway strike is supposed to start at 5 p.m. but only on the red and blue lines; the blue line that goes to the port of Piraeus will stop only at 9 p.m., but the ferries are on strike too, so my boat which was supposed to leave at 9 will supposedly leave at midnight, but then again it depends on who you talk to about all these things because facts seem to be flexible in this country.





Athens



It's the clearest day so far in otherwise hazy Athens, with just a bit of wind. I spend one more morning in the Acropolis area then get hopelessly lost in a sketchy neighbourhood before finally stumbling upon a subway station. I arrive at Piraeus at 6:30 only to discover that boarding will begin at 10, which leaves me hanging around the docks for more than three hours.

The ship is beautiful, more like a cruise ship than a ferry. For future reference, I note that most people are sleeping on chairs, sofas and even the floor. Much more comfortable than spending the night with two strangers in a cramped cabin. I wake up early to watch the sun rise from the deck as we approach Crete, my final destination, on Day 30. I feel like I've been travelling for months. How strange it will be to be home again, among people I know, people who know me. Will I be different?

Chania is very beautiful, quiet and serene in the off-season with narrow, winding streets and my hotel in the Old Town just steps away from the sea. Yesterday, on my last day in Athens, I felt like my sinuses and lungs were coated with car exhaust and grime; here in Chania, because the surf is so volatile, I feel like they are coated with fresh sea air. Couldn't be more different.

The trip seems to have taken on a slightly mystical aspect since leaving Athens. In the afternoon I find a fossilized stone on the beach, which I first thought had the shape of the island of Crete, but when I look at it again seems more like a stout boat (not unlike the ferry that brought me here), which reminds me of a Kazantzakis metaphor that was very important to me a few years ago: "Without hope, but with bravery, it is your duty to set your prow calmly toward the abyss." The metaphor is about living with little or no expectation, embracing the unpredictability and chaos of living in the moment.

On Day 31 the camera, the light... the whole world seems just right since I found the sea-stone yesterday. Maybe it's me: the way I am in my magical world these days. I treat myself to a 'Full English Breakfast' at the Back Door Restaurant, perfectly located right next to the water in the old Venetian harbour. It's very quiet except for the occasional, unnatural roar of American fighter jets taking off from a nearby naval base.



Chania, Crete

As requested, I contact the cousin of a friend who picks me up in his ancient rattletrap car and takes me to his home for a wonderful dinner with far too much food, intoxicating golden Cretan wine, and exhausting attempts to communicate with him and his wife through their fifteen-year-old daughter who speaks a smattering of English. Lovely people with a real *joie de vivre*. Nico is a great guy, a union man like myself. I'm pretty drunk when he drives me home in the early hours of the morning.

On Day 32 I plan the rest of the trip: two days further down the coast in Rethymno, then three days in Iraklion followed by one last night in Paris. I'm still feeling overstuffed from last night and would really like to get back to my solitude, but Nico calls and I spend an interesting day first at the hilltop Tomb of Eliftherios Venizelos, with a breathtaking view of Chania at sunset, then at a Solidarity Center not far from the Old Town, where I end up drinking more Cretan wine and meeting people from all over the world. The only person I'm able to properly communicate with is a young French-speaking Algerian who tells me that Greece is not particularly welcoming to immigrants.

Day 33 begins with laundry followed by a very long walk back up to the Tomb of Venizelos. The walk starts well with beautiful coastline and the occasional bench to take a break to read with the soothing sounds of the surf crashing and swirling in front of me. But it turns out to be much further away than I thought and when I do finally get to the top of the hill, the view and the impending sunset are less interesting than last night.

I decide to walk down a different way and get hopelessly lost, ending up on the wrong side of a deserted coastline with access to the Old Town blocked by a massive clump of fenced-off buildings. I start to walk quickly back up the long steep hill with darkness descending and no one or thing in sight, except for the odd motorcycle and the incessant barking of dogs echoing in the hills. Are they wild dogs? Most probably like the packs of strays one sees all over town. The hair stands up on the back of my neck and I climb even faster: I don't want to encounter a pack of hungry dogs in pitch black darkness.





Chania, Crete

By the time I finally make my way back up to street lights and civilization I'm sweating and out of breath. I stop at a corner store where a lady in her late thirties or early forties sells me a Fanta and invites me to sit down, her kindness restoring me. She talks about herself: she's unmarried and still living with her parents behind the store and they'll be home soon, and do I want to stay for supper? She's very nice and old-world wifey in the way she attends to me, and it's tempting, but I sense a trap. She's probably desperate to find a husband. I politely decline and she gives me directions to the part of the coast I can follow back to the Old Town. It's hard to stay awake when I get back to the hotel; fear has taken a lot out of me.

I'm feeling tired in the morning of Day 34, with no plan for the day. I do some translation work after an excellent omelette breakfast and then wander out of the Old Town to scope out the bus station in a completely different, more modern and populated neighbourhood. Tomorrow I move again, by bus, to Rethymno, a smaller Venetian-style town halfway along the coast to Iraklion. It's cool and windy later in the afternoon as I walk along the coast and find a bench at a beach on which to read a book I picked up in Athens: Gunter Grass' autobiographical *Peeling the Onion*. I peel a layer off my own onion for a moment and see myself as a reader and a writer. It feels right. Add to this translation and photography and my life would seem complete.

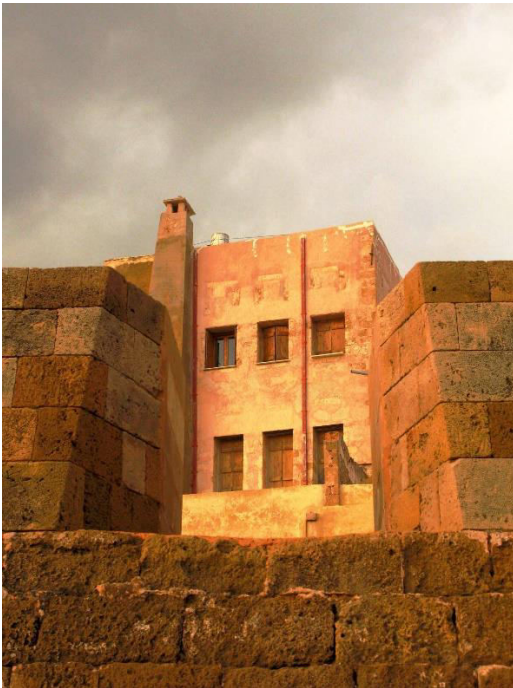
I meet two guys, slightly older than me, in a Starbucks café. One is from Australia, the other from Brooklyn, and we decide to have dinner together. The Australian is a computer freelancer who can work anywhere and who's been living in Chania for six months; the American is retired and wandering the planet alone, like myself, only he travels for six months at a time, giving up his studio apartment in Brooklyn and putting all his belongings in storage. He says, with few belongings, it's easy to find another studio apartment and reassemble his life when he returns (mainly to be close to his grandchildren). The meal is wonderful and it's fun to spend the evening with genuine, interesting people. I find myself for a few moments wishing I was more social.





Chania, Crete





Chania, Crete



Chania, Crete

On Day 35, I arrive in Rethymno to discover that my hotel is in the middle of a very busy town, and not very close to the beach, which is not much to speak of anyway. The Old Fort is interesting but there's nothing else to do here. This is by far the cleanest, most modern looking Greek town I've seen yet, except for the Old Town near the Venetian harbour which is a smaller version of the Old Town in Chania.

Day 36 is a national holiday here with kids parading in the morning, then carousing and making noise all afternoon, the older ones on scooters, the younger ones with fireworks. The droning of religious services pours out of the church on the corner all day. I had troublesome dreams all night, dreams that seem to reflect insecurity about my life back home. Does it still exist? What if I can never get back? What if it's all just an illusion that will disappear if I stay away too long? I'm bored already with this town. I spend the afternoon reading, translating and editing photos. In the evening, I take myself out to dinner in the Old Town.

The morning of Day 37 is slow and quiet until I catch my bus to Iraklion. The ride is short and my hotel in the capital is grim, but wonderful light pours through the floor-to-ceiling windows and I move a small writing table directly in front of the balcony, giving me a view over cluttered rooftops. My first impressions of Iraklion are that it's not as tense as Athens, people move slower, and it's not quite as noisy and dusty, at least not the Old Town. Nearby Four Lions Square in the center of town seems like a good place to hang out, maybe even to write.

This is it: this is where the Project should come together before I head home. But it looks like this will be the most confusing city yet. There is no linearity to the layout whatsoever and, for the first time in Greece, all of the street signs are in Greek alphabet only, making them completely inscrutable. I get hopelessly lost on my first attempt to find Kazantzakis's tomb, and dinner at a Chinese restaurant is barely edible. I decide to stay close to home this week, except for the tomb and a day trip to Knossos.

Another night full of strange dreams, many related to family again. In the morning, I take a bus to Knossos, site of the ancient Mycenaean Palace of Minos, which is impressive but it's very hot with hardly any shade for relief. The most interesting parts of the site have been "reconstructed", something that is frowned upon these days. I'll visit Kazantzakis's tomb tomorrow, on Halloween. I spend the rest of Day 38 working on photos and wandering the streets of Iraklion.





Iraklion, Crete



Knossos, Crete

I have trouble falling asleep and wake up on Day 39 at five o'clock, unable to get back to sleep, mainly due to crazy thoughts about a woman back home, about how I should be more direct in taking what I want – what is offered. It's part of accepting things as they are and loving the ones you're with. I resolve to B. John and to cultivate my friends more when I get home.

Of course I get lost almost immediately on my way to the Tomb. There are no signs and I can't find my map so I use my recently unreliable sense of direction and keep walking uphill because I know the Tomb is on top of the old city wall at the highest point of the city. I reach a huge section of the wall, climb on and follow it to the highest point where I find something that looks like it could be a grave with a huge wooden cross, only there are no markings and nothing else to indicate what it is. But when I open my notebook, the lost map falls out of its hiding place and confirms that I've reached my destination.

I'm alone on what is not only the highest but probably also the quietest spot in the city. I am so alone, I can unselfconsciously take off my shirt, which is the only way I can comfortably do my work with no shade and a very hot sun. I take off my shoes as well, sit on one of the huge slabs of stone covering the grave, and begin to review my notes on the three other Mentors before proceeding to the main event.

Kazantzakis is the only one who mentions God. He says that we have to find him, adjust our rhythms as much as possible to him, and then return to the world of appearances and try to live accordingly. Transubstantiation is the result of our striving to act with God-consciousness. And when we manage to participate in this process of transubstantiating matter into spirit, we are, in a sense, immortal because we are part of the eternal growth of the Cosmos.

He describes God's brain as "a tangled skein of light and darkness which he strives to unravel in the labyrinth of the flesh." Thus, we are soldiers of a God who needs us as much as we need him. In fact, Nikos says, he needs us more. "It is not God who will save us – it is we who will save God." It is as if there is an abysmal nothingness in the Cosmos threatening to devour God, who created us to give form and meaning (spirit) to matter in order to defeat this nothingness.





Iraklion, Crete



The first duty of the Soldier of God is to see and accept his limitations in this world. The second duty is to push these boundaries as much as possible. Once the soldier is able to see the boundaries clearly, he can reject them and understand that he is in fact connected to everything. There are in reality no boundaries. Krishnamurti says that once I see my own stupidity, it vanishes. Once I see my anger or hopelessness, they disappear.

The third and final duty is to conquer the last temptation, which is hope. Hope is based on thoughts or dreams of an imaginary future. Nikos says the mind is capable of dealing only with appearances, and the five senses stand between us and the essence of all things. Here, his thoughts are very close to Gurdjieff's 'fourth way' and one of Krishnamurti's lovely metaphors which describes human behaviour much like an Oreo cookie with expectation acting as filling between perception and action. He says our normal way of functioning is threefold: we perceive something, make some sort of conclusion based on expectation, then act. If we can remove the middle part – the expectation – we can avoid mechanical (meaningless) action.

According to Gurdjieff, man has three centers from which he functions: mind, body and heart. But we are not actually equipped to coordinate these three opposing centers simultaneously, which means that one of them is usually in control to the disadvantage of the others. The person who masters the fourth way somehow is able to function from a position above and independent of these three centers. This freedom of action and thought is what he calls objective consciousness.

Nikos says much the same thing, using different words. He exhorts us to abandon hope (dreams about better but non-existent states, created by our *mind*), overcome fear (paralysis created by *emotion*), and see the world around us without the filter of our senses (the world as experienced by the *body*).

Krishnamurti focuses almost exclusively on freedom from the mind, freedom from the tyranny of the thought-machine. Nietzsche focuses on freedom from sentimentality (emotions) and the constraints of virtue. He doesn't say we should do evil things, only that we should do what we will, which if we are thinking clearly, should not be evil.



Iraklion, Crete

Just as I'm getting into my work, I hear a bunch of people coming up the path and quickly put my shirt back on. A pack of screaming ten-year-olds accompanied by a couple of teachers have come to visit the grave. I move down the hill a bit to wait for them to leave. Once they are gone, I resume my work only to be interrupted again a short while later by a couple of classes of seven or eight-year-olds who aren't as noisy at first (they are actually quite sweet), but after some sort of ceremony involving the laying of pomegranates on the grave, start to be rowdy as well. But they leave soon enough and I'm able to finish my work. Before I leave I decide to consult the I Ching<sup>†</sup> on the grave.

Later, at an internet café, I learn that Nikos always kept fruit on his writing desk - always pomegranates when they were in season - and that the epitaph on his grave is *I hope for nothing, I fear for nothing, I am free*. I also verify which I Ching hexagrams I was given on the grave and it turns out that the first hexagram is the same as the second hexagram I was given before the trip began, whose advice was to not marry the yielding woman, and the second hexagram is similar to the first whose message was basically that this is a time of great power but arrogance and impudence are to be avoided.

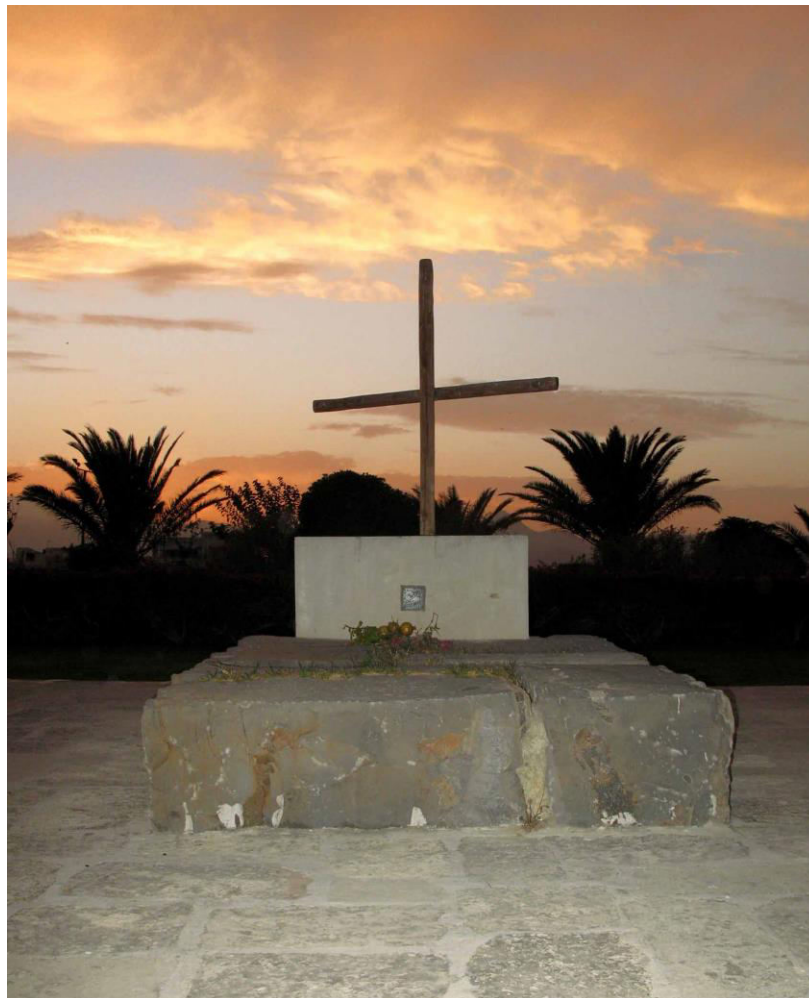
When I leave the café, with the intention of walking along the harbour to the bus station to see if there is a bus to the village of Mrytia where the Kazantzakis museum is located, the National Museum of Crete just happens to be the first thing I see, and it just happens to be featuring a Kazantzakis exhibit, which just happens to focus on the writer as an incessant traveler, and which just happens to have one of his writing desks as the centerpiece of the exhibit. And, lo and behold, there are pomegranates on the desk. So many synchronicities. I fall sound asleep on a bench in the garden of the museum.

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<sup>†</sup> The *I Ching*, also known as the *Book of Changes*, is an ancient Chinese divination text. One the methods used to consult the oracle requires the tossing of three coins six times. Each toss results in one line of a six-line hexagram. There are 64 hexagrams in all.



Heraklion in 1925. Furthermore, the same place freed him of the tantalizing questions and sense of emptiness created in him by the lack of meaning in the contemporary world. On seeing the bull-leaping fresco at the palace of Knossos, Kazantzakis conceived of a particular stance towards life which he himself named the "Cre-tan glance": to stand without fear or hope opposite the abyss, the void and death itself.



Kazantzakis grave, Iraklion, Crete

Saturday, November 1 is day 40. The trip is almost over. I resign myself to working on a translation, the Project, or other activities that will keep me out of the sun, because I don't want a burn on the bridge of my nose to get worse. I change my mind after I finish the translation and take a walk down to the ocean and out as far as the harbor wall goes. Later, I sit down at a café and finally relent on the coffee front (stop ordering Americano) and ask for what all the locals seem to prefer, something called a *frappe*. The drink is cold but excellent, cheaper if not the same price as their 'filter coffee' only it's so large, if you sip it slowly you get to sit in a very nice café with good music for as long as you want. Very important travel lesson learned: drink the local beverage, there's a reason why everyone does.

I decide to return to the grave and find it easily this time. I'm alone atop the old wall except for a young couple picnicking and playing backgammon. I decide to stay long enough to see the sun set. There's not a whisper of a breeze and the world is silent and still at this height. Most of the sky is overcast, except for where the sun is approaching the tops of the mountains in the west.

I decide to number the pages in the four-part wise-guys notebook to make cross-referencing easier. I'm wondering if the numbering will have any significance and just as I number the first page of the fourth and last section - the Kazantzakis section - the sun peeks out from between the clouds behind me and shines on the hilltop and the grave, a wonderful light set against the dark grey of the eastern sky.

The number of the first page of the Kazantzakis section is fifty-four. Since this is my age, I pretend it means I will live as long as the last page number of the Notebook, which turns out to be seventy-nine. Not bad, I can do a lot in twenty-five years. I get a nice photo of the sunset-lit grave and leave the hilltop with a sense that the Project is complete. I have all the information I need; now I just have to stitch it together.

It takes almost all of Day 41 to get back to Paris with stopovers in Athens and Milan. Once there, I take the wrong exit at the Gare du Nord (there must be 10 exits) and end up in an unfamiliar neighborhood. It takes about an hour of frustration to find the hotel I stayed in on the first day of my trek, and when I return to my room after stepping out for dinner, I see three small bugs scurrying when I turn on the light. I confront the

receptionist and he gives me a new room on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, which looks all right, but I still sleep with the lights on.

Finally, the last day arrives and I find myself at the airport almost four hours early because, for some unknown reason the flight will depart at 11:30 instead of 10:30. I find a quiet spot in the terminal to write my last entry in the tattered notebook that's kept me company for 42 days. I search my bag four or five times but both of my pens have gone missing, so I have to buy a new one, which the salesgirl in the little airport shop lets me have even though my remaining change falls five cents short. The flight is good and when I get home, both of the lost pens have returned to my flight bag. Where were they?

Did I succeed in connecting the dots? I believe the only thing I established is that all four of these wise men agree that there is no one explanation, no one path, no one truth, and that anyone who believes that there is, risks losing his soul. It was a very personal exercise and whether or not it succeeded will remain a mystery. It does feel like it was a good start to this new life.

Gurdjieff and Krishnamurti both say that only changing ourselves can change the world, because the only real influence we have is over the people and things we come in contact with. Kazantzakis says it another way when he talks about our duty and salvation: "Every man has his own circle composed of trees, animals, men, ideas, and he is duty bound to save this circle. If he does not save it, he cannot be saved." And, finally, Nietzsche says that "of all the treasure pits, one's own is the last to be dug." It was a good trip.