



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 3 of the **Pilgrim Chronicles**.

Calabria

Europe 2012

Oct. 14, 2012: All I know is that I begin this trek in London, the only mission so far being to get to my father's village in Calabria, Italy, which no one in the family has visited since he emigrated 85 years ago. But even this is undetermined; maybe I'll just wander around Europe.

After an hour or two of plane sleep on an overnight flight, I'm walking through Westminster Cemetery, then along the Thames, getting some nice shots. I'm having problems with neglected teeth, problems I will later learn are caused by airplane pressure. I hope they get better, it's hard to focus on anything else with tooth pain. In the evening I buy a plane ticket for Venice for the day after tomorrow; it's too damp here.

On Day 2 I make it to Greenwich Town on a bright and sunny day. I get some nice photos but it's extremely windy. In the afternoon, I do a walking tour called *Somewhere Else London* with an ex-actor (full of theatrical anecdotes that hardly anyone appreciates) as a guide. The walk covers lots of ground, crisscrossing the brown, lumpy waters of the Thames twice. After the walk, I find a bookstore and the first book of this trip: *The Thoreau You Don't Know* by Robert Sullivan.

I walk through the Strand into familiar territory and check out the site of the London Film Festival but, not for the first time, I'm turned off by the hardcore, almost desperate, hipsterism of people my own age with ridiculous hair-dos. But in the evening, I have a very nice conversation with the Italian owner of my hotel and regret that I'm leaving tomorrow morning.

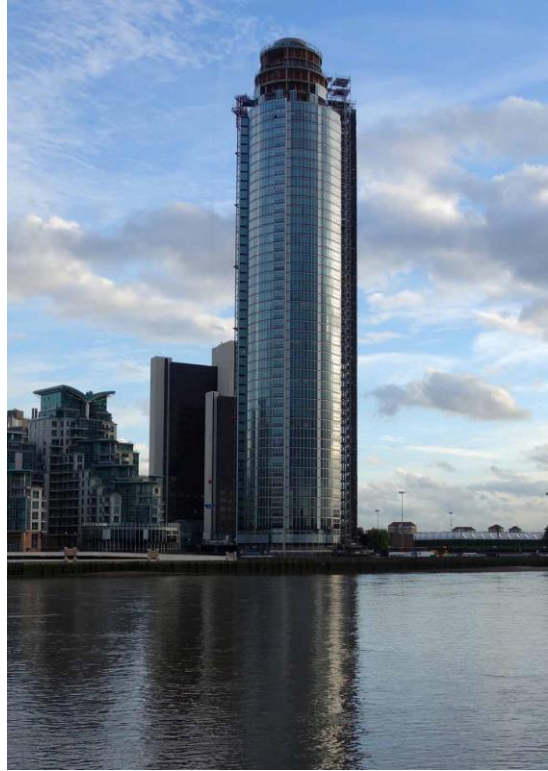
Catching the mini-bus to Gatwick Airport on Day 3 in crazy early morning rush-hour traffic is very stressful, reminding me how much bigger this city is than Montreal. It feels good to be going back to Italy, a bit like going home. The flight to Venice is fine but getting to my hotel in the suburbs is difficult, a thirty-minute ride through mostly industrial wasteland. I get off at the wrong stop and end up paying a garage owner to drive me to my hotel. I get into Venice itself after nightfall when it's too dark to see much of anything, but I'm starving and finally find food.

On Day 4 I'm feeling like I need to shake a sense of dread picked up in London. The teeth are still giving me problems, with pain in many different places, and I'm getting nowhere trying to find the charger cable for my new camera. I scour the room and empty my bags and pockets at least three times before giving up. To make matters worse, I brought the wrong backup camera: the older of my old cameras.

I fill up with free hotel breakfast so I won't need lunch. I need to stop worrying and just do what I need to do. I'll go to Rome to get a new cable for the camera, if necessary. I'll bring both cameras with me today, using the new one sparingly to conserve power. I spend the morning wandering around Venice, taking most of my shots with the old camera which feels like it's on its last legs. So many people! I'm not sure about this tourist thing anymore - maybe I should stick to more unbeaten paths.

Fixing the camera has become an obsession, taking up almost all my time, dropping into every camera store I see, asking the owners for advice. By late afternoon, I'm starving again and there's no ordinary food anywhere, even at the shopping center I find with great difficulty because the hotel clerk suggests I might find a cable at a department store.

Then I return to the hotel to discover that the restaurant beside the hotel is closed for some reason, so I have yet another Panini at a bar further down the road. If my teeth don't stop hurting so much, I might go home.



London



London



London

Day 5 starts well, the feeling of dread picked up in London dissipating. I slept well and the teeth are feeling better. I get to Venice really early and find some quiet spots to get some peopleless shots. But there's lots of hustle and bustle on the main waterways, with boats piled high with boxes making deliveries.

What a fascinating way to live, with intersections of water, and bridges, big and small, everywhere. I'm surprised to discover that the colors of the water vary so much: murky green in the side streets, a beautiful, clear jade-blue in the major canals, the opposite of the brown, lumpy Thames. In the late afternoon, I decide to take the bus back to the hotel and return when the sun goes down.

Waiting at the bus stop in front of the hotel for a bus that's already ten minutes late, I wonder if I'll make it to Venice one last time before the sun goes down. Who knows for sure about anything in this country? Did I miss the bus because it came early? Shrug – who knows? Whadyagonnado? It's the Italian way. Pessimism is the least attractive side of my people.

After about ten hours and countless phone calls, emails, conversations and one very complex journey to a shopping center, I'm giving up on finding a replacement for the charger. I bought the camera just before I left, and it was just out on the market - too new for shops to have replacement cables in stock and apparently no other cables are compatible. I'll make it a project to be more selective and take as few photos as possible, pretending there's film in the camera, like in the old days. Let's say there are two hundred shots left before the power runs out – six rolls of film.

The sun is going down when the bus finally arrives after forty-five minutes, which means that even the second bus is late (or early or whatever). Things will only get more Italian as I travel south. My last impression of Venice is that they should be nicer to tourists, e.g., they should have the land and water bus drivers announce the approaching stop. This alone would reduce so much tension. I'm very glad I came here. Everyone should see Venice at least once. Streets of water with beautiful buildings and bridges – who dreamed this up? It's more than a beautiful place, it's a beautiful idea.

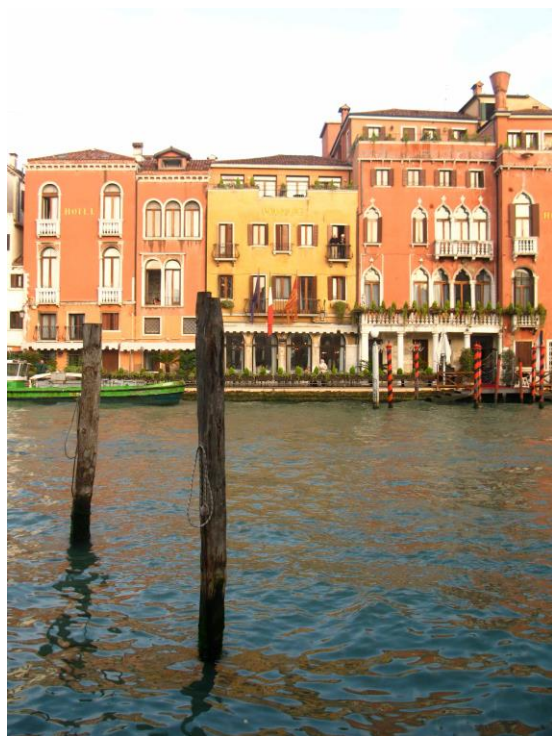
Such a busy day and yet I did so much writing. I don't think I've ever written so much in one day on the road. A phrase from the Thoreau book about *writers being people who actually write* (just as photographers are people who actually take photos) has struck a chord. On the bus back to my hotel in the suburbs I see a towering cruise ship lit up like a carnival under a crescent moon, and hookers on the dark side of the highway with lawn chairs to sit and wait.



Venice



Venice



Venice

In the morning of Day 6 I'm on a plane to Reggio di Calabria. This part of the trip – a pilgrimage to an ancestral village - will seem like a dream.

What made me do it? I had the door open and was about to leave this morning when for some reason I glanced back into my hotel room and decided to look behind the small single bed jammed into a niche up against a wall, the only place in this tiny room I hadn't scoured repeatedly for the lost cable. And there it was, on the floor behind the bed, like an apparition from another dimension. It felt strange and exhilarating to hold it in my hand.

As soon as I step onto the tarmac in Calabria, there's the magnificent volcano Etna looming and smoking across the Strait of Messina, bathed in orange sunset. My father used to tell me stories of roaming bandits and the volcano he could see from his village on a clear day. I resolve to go there after I visit San Giorgio Morgeto.

First impression of Reggio Calabria is that it's a bit like Havana with the heat and smells of sea, car exhaust and something sweet (which I will later learn is jasmine). It's very clean but has the thin layer of grime of a city that doesn't see much rain.

When I get to the car rental desk, there are no small cars or automatics available, leaving me with a big, almost SUV-sized car and a manual transmission which I haven't driven in years. "Pay attention," says the rental guy with a smirk when I ask him if there is anything I should know about driving in Reggio.

The GPS that came with the car takes me straight onto a highway where I nervously stall on the entrance ramp. Then it takes me to the center of town where driving is a nightmare, with traffic and cars parked everywhere, obstructing already narrow streets. I find a parking space and walk to the Night and Day B&B, which is maybe the most luxurious accommodations I've ever had (for just 50 Euros), an oasis in the madness of downtown Reggio traffic. I drop off my luggage and step back out where I take a deep breath of wonderful air and walk the few streets down to the sea.

There are pizzerias everywhere, not much else. I find a place with a couple of tables outside because it's crazy-hot in the restaurants. The pizza is different but very good, covered in delicious arugula. Food is going to be a problem here. I need to find a supermarket unless I want to subsist on pizza, Paninis and pastries. And people don't speak English here, as so many do in Venice or Rome.



Reggio di Calabria

On Day 7 the drive up to San Giorgio Morgeto is intense with detours, narrow, almost impassable roads and blinding tunnels. But I make it up and park the car in a lot at the foot of the town and enter the first café I see where I'm served by a young woman who speaks very good English. She looks familiar, she even has my sister's and grandmother's name. She explains why the town looks deserted: it's Sunday, which means Catholic Mass followed by the big family dinner. Everyone will be indoors.

I start to climb the steep streets and stairs of this hilltop village of 3300 souls. The thick quiet of narrow passages, haphazard stairways and heavy locked doors looming in strange places is only occasionally broken by a rooster crowing, dog barking, child or mother screaming, or goat making whatever sounds goats make, all echoing within the stone and cement walls of the labyrinth. A photo looking down onto the geometric shapes of brown, red and orange roofs will be my favorite of the entire trip. I climb until I reach the small forest that surrounds the ruins of the medieval castle that overlooks the town.

There's not a soul in sight. I sit on the steps just below the castle and wonder what my ancestors were doing on this spot a thousand years ago. Are there knights or nobles in my family tree? I'll never know but I have to admit this place looks very familiar. On a clear day you can see Mount Etna, my father said. It's a beautifully bright and warm day but not clear enough to see so far. I try to absorb the smell and air of this place. A very good smell and fresh mountain air.

Occasionally I do see a person and try to ask for directions but directions to where? I enter one of the tiny churches and see two little girls playing quietly in the pews. I'm lost and virtually alone in this ancient place but through open windows and doors with beaded curtains sounds of parents yelling at their children bounce around the silence. At the Fontana Bellissima, I see a cyclist filling a water bottle (apparently the town is known for its water) and I do the same. The water is wonderful, the best I've ever tasted. It's probably in my DNA.

As I approach my car I see a sign pointing to the cemetery which is on the outskirts of town, where most Italian cemeteries are located. Small snakes are slithering across the road. Snakes and lizards and goats and roosters: the town is teeming with animal life. Once past the gates, it's apparent that the cemetery is full of namesakes and most of the markers have small portraits of the people interred. Before the battery in my camera dies, I have a chance to take a few photos, one of an uncle I never laid eyes on, for later identification.



San Giorgio Morgeto



San Giorgio Morgeto



San Giorgio Morgeto

I make it back down to Reggio in one piece, at least half of the way coasting with the car in neutral. After an hour of searching for alternatives in crowded Sunday night downtown Reggio, I give up and sit down to another massive pizza. It's very good. Maybe this is the way to go: one massive pizza a day. It was a great day. I went up the mountain, I drank the water of my ancestors from the Fontana Bellissima in the piazza, and a circle is completed. And I got some good shots. I'll come back again one day when there are actually people around and I've arranged a place to stay.

I don't know where to go next. I decide to stay here two extra days, without the car, just to wander around on foot and get a real feel for a city my father probably knew very well.

It's strange to see Southern Italian men greet each other with kisses. I saw one with his arm around another but none holding hands as they do in Greece or Turkey. It's odd that this kind of public affection between men is condoned in cultures that seem homophobic on the surface. Something similar is described in the Thoreau book about how it was permissible and even common for men to share the same bed in pre-Civil War U.S., a time when there wasn't even a word for homosexuality

On Day 8, after much confusion and circling due to incredibly poor signage, I finally buy my ticket and queue up for the ferry to Sicily. I say queue up, but there are only two other cars because I've mistakenly ended up on the ferry that truckers use. It takes a long time to get to the volcano, through heavy traffic in Messina, onto a highway followed by a long, circuitous drive up the side of the volcano through vineyards, orchards and even a small town. The GPS takes me on all sorts of weird and wonderful detours, finally onto a dirt road, lost on one of the world's largest active volcanos, at which point I decide to ignore the gadget and follow the cryptic signs instead.

Once I get to the first landing it seems that I am one of only a handful of tourists which means that no excursions are available and I am left only with the ski-lift to take me up to a slightly higher level. I feel completely alone moving up the side of the volcano in windless, heavy silence, broken only by the mechanical noise of the lift and the loud clang when it passes a pole, followed by the creaking of the cabin swinging back and forth in empty space for a few moments.



Mount Etna, Sicily

I wander around a bit at the top, take some photos and then walk back down through an alien, half-burnt landscape with deep black lava flows and the white, skeletal remains of trees. All and all a slightly disappointing experience, with the peak of the volcano hidden behind clouds (or smoke) and not much to do.

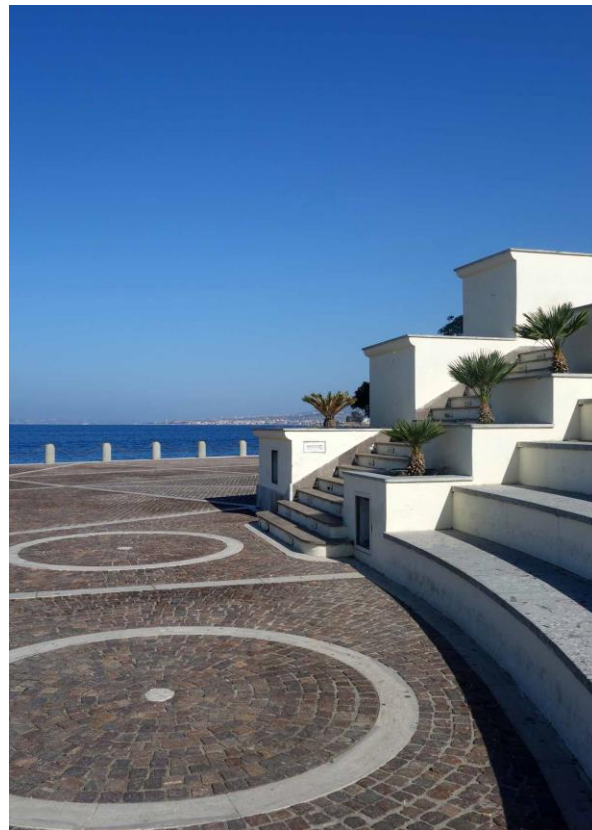
I head back down, this time following signs to the highway, which works well until I hit yet another detour and once again I'm plunged by the GPS into confusion, back roads, and finally a very sketchy neighborhood in Catania where at one point I find myself stuck behind a pickup truck with two pit bulls attacking each other in the back of the truck. I quietly wait for it to move, careful not to make eye contact with the dogs or anyone else in the congested street.

Eventually, I see a sign for the highway and find myself at an abandoned toll booth with windows so scratched and dirty even if there were an attendant I doubt I would be able to see him. I wait a minute, then advance when the car behind me honks, at which point an extremely loud alarm goes off and I have to back up. A woman holding a Panini appears with a ticket stub looking annoyed that I interrupted her meal.

After a tense drive through rush hour traffic in Messina, I finally have pasta instead of pizza in a small café on the docks while waiting for the ferry. But it's almost inedible, tasting days old and only slightly re-heated in a microwave. Once I'm on the boat I breathe a deep sigh of relief on the upper deck and sit down to watch Reggio get closer and closer, happy to have survived another day of driving in Southern Italy.

On Day 9 I surrender and have yet another pizza for lunch. I have to admit it's very good, with lots of greens and anchovies. Aspirin is expensive here and available only over the counter. But it works on the teeth immediately so it's worth it. I'll walk the Lungomare, a pedestrian walkway beside the sea, later in the day when it's not so hot.

There's no room for me to stay an extra two days at the Night and Day B&B because there's a big concert in town and rooms are hard to come by, but the son of the extremely nice owners calls around and finds another hotel for me. He tells me that Reggio is the safest city in the world (as far as petty crime is concerned). Major crime of course is another matter, this being one of the centers of Mafia power, which is probably why it's so safe. The city is beautiful and so is the Lungomare Falcomata, which has been called the most beautiful kilometer in Italy. If I lived here I would walk it back and forth every day, with a stop for a coffee and dolce on the way.



Reggio di Calabria

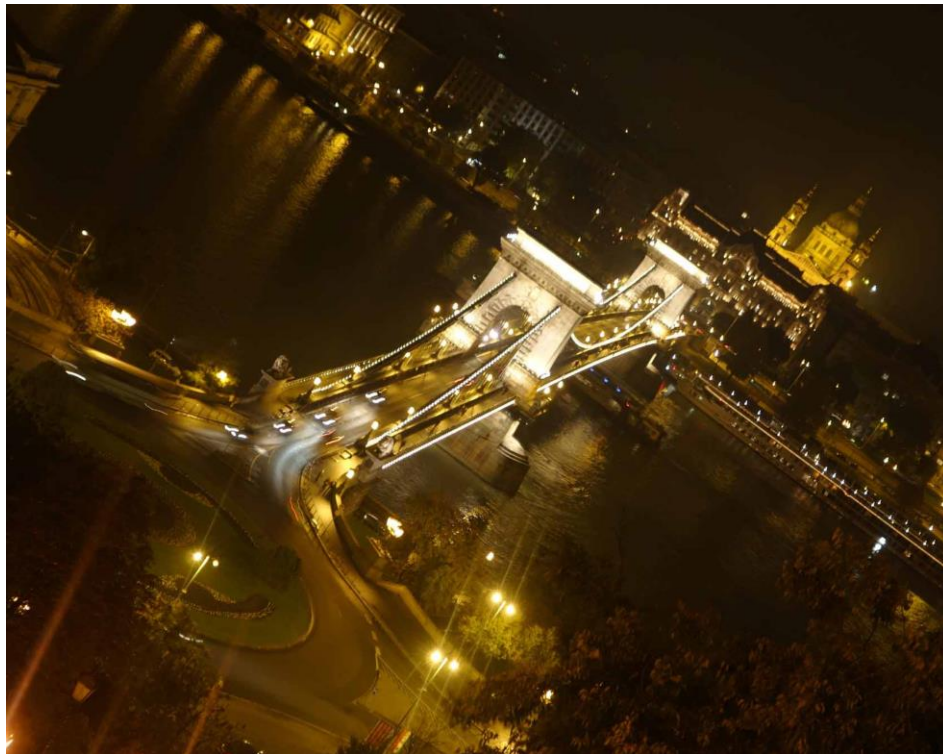
On Day 10, arranging the next destination is impossible with no reliable Internet access and dodgy air travel websites that crap out on me after I go through the whole process of filling in all the required information. I search for a travel agency and find a couple but of course it's two in the afternoon and everything (even the supermarket) is closed for siesta until five or six or whenever the urge to re-open occurs.

But all these time-consuming problems are actually not so bad because there's not much else to do here except hang around and absorb local life. I look for the Palazzo Campanella, which is supposed to be displaying the famous local Greek bronze statues, but can't find it, even with the help of a group of incomprehensible local women on a park bench pointing in different directions.

I step into a McDonalds near the train station for the Wi-Fi and to kill some time in an atmosphere of familiarity. I tell myself if all else fails, I'll just take the train to Rome tomorrow, but I finally stumble upon an open agency where a very nice woman helps me find a reasonable plane ticket. It turns out that Alitalia has a regular flight to Budapest, so Budapest it is. Before I leave the hotel for dinner I book a room for three nights and relax for the evening, happy to know where I'll be sleeping tomorrow. I'm looking forward to something completely different.

It's Day 11 and summer is over – back to fall weather in Budapest today. Budapest at first glance is very different. It looks European but with an Oriental twist. The people seem a bit glum but I can live with glum. The hotel is in a great neighborhood. The beer is good and so is my first meal in a nice restaurant, but the problem with eating in a nice restaurant is that it makes me feel self-consciously alone. People talking and laughing and enjoying themselves and here I am, waiting for food that is taking far too long to come because of course no one is in a hurry – they've come here not just for food but for a night out.

My room at the Hotel Corvin is a bit Soviet, with four small beds and furniture that literally falls apart at the touch, but there are lots of food options in the city and a huge pharmacy on the corner. It feels good to be north again where living seems more functional, more cosmopolitan.



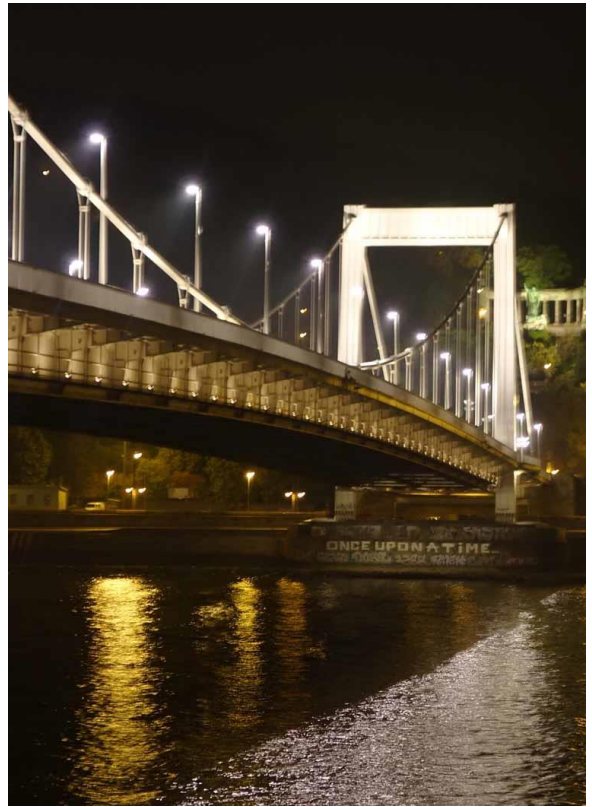
Budapest

Budapest is cold, damp and grey in the morning of Day 12, but very walkable and the coffee is great, something I'm beginning to realize is probably true everywhere in Europe. I visit the City Museum in the remains of the old palace in the Buda hills which overlook Pest and the Danube and, except for a wandering herd of ten-year-olds I occasionally cross paths with, it's deserted. Once again, I find myself alone in a beautiful, historical place. I walk down the hills over the bridge into Pest and on to Revolutionary Square in front of the impressive parliament buildings where those who fell in the 1956 anti-Soviet revolution are commemorated. I keep walking for the rest of the day and have another early night.

More grayness and wetness on Day 13: so damp and dark I'm exhausted at the end of the day, the kind of tired I don't think I've ever felt, and I'm sure it's from walking so much in this weather. The city is interesting, the food is good and there's lots of beauty, but the weather is awful for the kind of photos I take and the amount of walking I do. Prague, my next stop, will apparently be even colder. There are too many people lined up at the Terror Museum (commemorating the hated but nostalgic old Soviet days) this morning, so what's left to do? Wander the streets some more I suppose.

Finally, more to get warm than anything else, I buy a ticket for the hop-on-hop-off bus and stay seated for the entire tour before hopping off for the first time. Not a bad idea, these buses - not a bad introduction to a city. In the evening, I pick up the second book I will read on this trip, pinching it from books left behind in the lobby of the hotel. The Book is *The Bridge on the Drina*, by Ivo Andric, a novel about the long, conflicted history of a bridge in the Balkans which I started to read twenty years ago but put aside. It seems like the perfect book now.

The long train ride to Prague on Day 14 is made pleasant by two nice couples in my compartment, one American, one Czech, both my age. First impression of the city is that it's interesting and attractive with good public transportation and good street food. My room at the Hotel Dalimil is very nice and the breakfast buffet in the morning will be fantastic.



Budapest

It's freezing cold on Day 15, with patches of snow on the ground. I'm sitting in a café-bakery waiting for the sun to come out, so I can take some photos of the nearby Charles River and the bridge. I like Prague very much so far: the people seem nice and relaxed and the city is beautiful, less shabby than Budapest. Today I'll find a travel agent and try to organize the rest of the trip, at least the return flight home. Tomorrow, I'll bring my book because I'm going to need to take many breaks from the cold. Thoughts of my warm apartment in Montreal intrude.

Travelling is a self-imposed exile from life at home, from comforts and routine. Why do I do it? It's about seeing the world with the curiosity and wide-open eyes of the pilgrim. Sullivan, the author of the Thoreau book, says Ralph Waldo Emerson is "best known... for his insistence on an individual's self-reliance... a reliance on the activation of one's own soul, an interior awareness of the world's divinity and the divinity inside one." The activation button is much more accessible on the road.

I decide to brave the cold and cross the bridge and walk up to the castle. It doesn't look like the sun intends to show itself anytime soon. The forecast says tomorrow will be a dreadful day with rain and 20 km winds. The sun may make an appearance on Wednesday.

I don't make it up the hill to the castle but instead wander around Old Prague and stumble upon the Kafka museum which is excellent, and where once again I am alone for almost the entire time. Much emphasis is placed on his Jewishness. Kafka struggled with his identity and was part of a circle of writers who chose to write in German in a tri-lingual (Czech, Jewish and German), tri-cultural city. I'm surprised by the Jewish presence here as in Budapest: so many reminders and references, all of them punctuated by the Holocaust which still casts a heavy shadow over Central Europe. In the afternoon, I visit Kafka's grave, a beautiful spot in a Jewish cemetery far from the old town center.

Day 16 is a busy last day in Prague. I finally make it up to the castle in the morning, then end up in Old Prague again, actually getting some nice photos, the weather better than predicted. I buy a ticket for a tour of the Old Town Hall which includes a visit to the remnants of medieval dwellings underneath the edifice and a visit to the top of the tower with beautiful views of the city and the geometric patterns of the streets and rooftops below.



Prague



Prague



Prague

I feel a need to book a return flight home, to know when this trip will end. I talk to three travel agents with no luck. I go back to the Web myself and finally find a flight home from Paris on Nov. 6, which will make this trip twenty-three days. Good enough. From here, I'll make my way slowly west by train: first stop Munich, second stop Strasbourg.

All trips are transformative and over breakfast on Day 17, I'm wondering how this trip has changed me, aside from the fact that I'm feeling older. Yesterday a man in his early thirties insisted I take his seat on the tram. If I spoke Czech I might have used some humor to decline but I gave in and sat my tired bones down. Teeth problems and the slow erosion of strength and endurance, demonstrated each morning in Prague with the five-minute walk up the steep hill from hotel to tram, make it impossible to ignore the inevitable.

The train to Munich turns out to be a bus! The extremely sour young woman who sold me the ticket yesterday must have known that not telling me this would likely cause me to miss the bus. There I stood, waiting for my train to appear on the departures board with only minutes to spare when I was saved by chance at the last minute by a wandering porter who led me upstairs onto the street where my bus was about to leave.

I emerge five hours later into the madness of Munich's Central Station. There are throngs of people rushing about inside and outside the station, but I find the Hotel Schweiz easily in a Turkish neighborhood on nearby Goethestrasse and, after a quick walk along the river and a good Chinese buffet dinner, I return to the station to buy a ticket for Strasbourg in two days. Tomorrow is a holiday here so the scene in the station is even more hectic in the evening. I'm told people travel more in Europe. It makes sense, everything is so close compared to distances between cities in North America and people generally get more vacation here. I take a number and wait more than thirty minutes to get my ticket.

The *Bridge on the Drina* has got hold of me. It's beautifully written, almost transcendent in the way it treats a 300-year span of time in relation to a beautiful immovable object, in this case a bridge. I have a very difficult night with so much pain in one tooth when I lay down, I have to find a way to sleep propped up on my tiny bed in the corner of my cell (this room could hardly be smaller, but I like its extreme simplicity). If this keeps up I will have to find a dentist very soon.



Munich, English Gardens

In the morning of the Day 18, I consider taking the Dachau tour bus but change my mind. It's a bit too weird to make what feels almost like a tourist attraction out of a former concentration camp. I only have one full day here and I don't want to make Dachau my only memory of Munich, so I choose the hop-on-hop-off bus and make myself comfortable. I stay seated at all six stops, then get off to return to my hotel room for a few minutes. By the time I get back on the bus, the pain in my teeth and now my right ear is worse than ever, almost unbearable.

I get off at Odeonplatz, the imperial center of the Old Town, and step into the imposing 17th century Theatine Church of St. Cajetan. November 1 is a high holiday and high mass in this very Catholic city is in full swing when I enter, with many people accompanying the priest in a Latin-sung mass. I sit down and try to immerse in the ritual. Soon communion is being served and I get in line and kneel at the altar (as I see some people doing) instead of standing when it's my turn, close my eyes, open my mouth and a young priest places the host on my tongue. By the time I return to the back of the church, the pain has subsided enough for me to completely relax and savor how sweet life is without a chronic ache.

It's raining a bit when I come out and there's a chilly wind but I can see a band of blue sky on the horizon, so I step into a café to warm up and wait a while with a cappuccino and croissant. Even though I didn't consciously ask for it, I thank God for relief from the pain, promising nothing in return but yet another pledge to work harder to give things back to this world. It's noon on November 1, 2012, and the bells are ringing in the Odeonplatz in Munich. A perfect moment.

I walk to the English Gardens, a huge park in the center of Munich, and soon enough the sun comes out. The Gardens are beautiful and exhausting. I tour the entire park before I sit down for the first time in two hours, telling myself to remember to sit more often. My feet are fine on this trip but the knees are a bit sore. After mass, the tooth and ear pain would return momentarily though not nearly so strong, and right now sitting on this bench I have no pain whatsoever for the first time in I can't remember how long. I don't expect miracles. I'll get old and I'll die. Everybody does.

On the train to Strasbourg on Day 19, the teeth are better but sore in a different place now. The ear is fine and now it's an open sore on my right palm (an eczema flare-up from gripping the steering wheel too tight in Italy) that concerns me. When I get to Strasbourg a very sympathetic pharmacist next door to the classic Hotel Nid de Cigognes (I splurged) which faces the train station tells me the wound is infected and gives me cream, gauze and tape.



Munich

Strasbourg is fairy-tale beautiful, even in the rain, but it's windy and I don't feel like being cold. I spot an interesting movie theater and lo and behold a film I really wanted to see is about to begin! Warner Herzog's *Into the Abyss*, about capital punishment in the U.S., is disappointing, its subject matter unoriginal, but the line spoken by the "Death Captain" at the end of the film makes up for it. "Live the dash", he says, the dash being that little thing on a tombstone between the birth date and the death date. This man had coordinated the execution of about 120 people before he had a breakdown and is now trying to lead a life dedicated to living, not death. "Living the dash" is living mindfully, and living mindfully probably precludes killing people for a living.

I have dinner at a fast food joint where, of all things, I order pizza! Seems like ages since I've had one, time as warped and drawn out as it is on the road. London seems like last year and it's been less than three weeks.

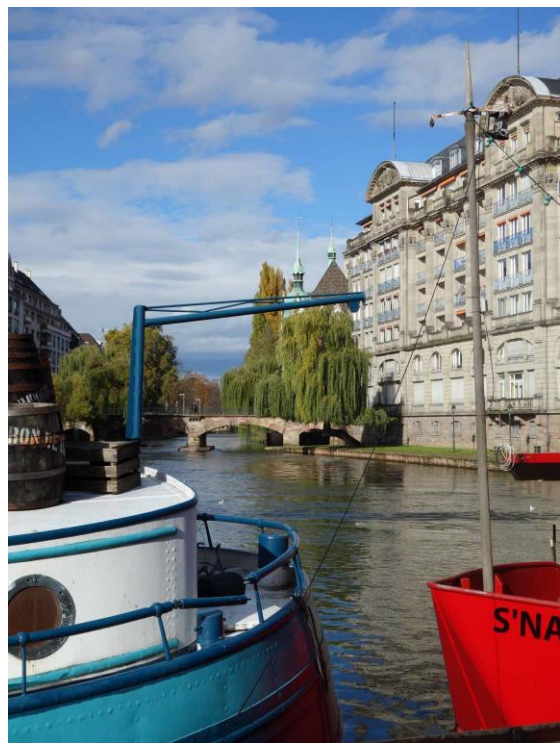
I get lucky at the train station in the morning of Day 20 and snatch the last ticket on a morning train to Paris tomorrow. I'll be there before noon. I get lucky with the light too: beautiful clouds and shifting, crystal clear light – my favorite. The sun comes out as I'm walking up the 300 steps to the top of Notre Dame de Strasbourg.

I walk along the River Ill all the way to the European Parliament. This time I remember to take a break along the way and when I sit down I notice a wooden rosary jammed between two slats on the seat of the bench. Just like the story in the *Bridge on the Drina* where a young man finds a gold florin wedged into a crack on the bench at the summit of the bridge. In the story the florin, left probably by a gambler, ends up turning the young man himself into a wandering gambler, a wasted life.

What does this rosary mean for me? I'm not sure if I should take it. What if the owner comes looking for it? As I waiver with the rosary in my hand, I drop my precious new camera and it bounces three or four times off the pavement, making a sickening scraping noise. It seems to look and work all right when I pick it up but it's still disturbing. What's the connection? I decide to take the rosary. If it was lost, it wouldn't have been jammed into the tiny space so securely. And I decide to interpret the fallen camera as a reminder of the true source of beauty: not in my eye, not in the camera, not in the rivers and bridges and skies that I photograph. It's in none of these things but all of these things when we see them infused with God.



Strasbourg



Strasbourg



Strasbourg

The walk along the river is gorgeous and I take so many photos I have to return to the hotel to recharge my camera's battery. When I hit the streets again it's blustery and the sky is full of dark clouds. I get a few more shots, including a nice one of the Gare Strasbourg under dramatic, ominous skies. I walk back towards the Cathedral to sit in warm quiet for a while. I decide to eat in my room for a change and pick up some ham, cheese, a baguette, a half-bottle of white wine and some grapes and bananas. Dinner and breakfast for less than nine Euros. I'll edit the photos, update the log, do some reading and go to bed. Paris tomorrow! I'll get to socialize with a friend for the first time in three weeks and be in a foreign city that feels like a second home. Previous forecasts of horrible weather have changed: there might actually be some sun in Paris. A nice way to end the trip.

The train to Paris on Day 21 is packed almost to excess. The TGV high-speed train is not the perfect experience it's made out to be, but it is fast. I arrive at Gare de l'Est in a neighborhood I know very well. The Hotel Nord et Champagne is across the street from the Marché Saint Quentin which I visited on my first day ever in Paris four years ago. I think I'm going to enjoy these last two days, regardless of the weather. I feel like I've already photographed everything in this city, so I can take a break from the camera and the need to capture images.

I find myself killing time twice in Macdonalds, once waiting for my room to be ready (which prevents me from making 12:30 mass at the American Church) and again waiting to meet my friend at 3:00 at the Bonne Nouvelles Metro station. There's intermittent sun outside and it's not so cold but there's a chilly, blustery wind that makes it difficult to relax or focus. If I weren't waiting for my friend I would just keep walking.

The Drina book is taking a strange turn, seeming to suggest that the efforts of individual men and even societies don't actually amount to anything - that something as impressive as the Bridge will come to exist if God wills it, regardless of what men believe about their own powers to create. There's a kind of fatalism here, mixed in with faith. The hand is better, the treatment is working, and the teeth are much, much better.



Gare Strasbourg



Gare de l'Est, Paris

I end up going to the fantastic Musée des Arts et Métiers for coffee with my friend who, like me, loves museum cafés. She then takes me for a long walk through the Marais district, leaving me at Notre Dame. It's cold, too late for mass and I'm hungry, so I catch a bus back to the hotel and look for a restaurant. I spot a Pakistani place that offers an inexpensive plat-du-jour and just before I enter a young man standing on the sidewalk mutters something which I assume to be a request for money. I shrug, not knowing what to say and not wanting to engage him because there are just so many itinerant people asking for help here, but once inside the restaurant I see how basic the food is and how boisterous, informal and foreign the regulars are and decide that company would be nice so I open the door, get his attention and invite him to join me.

He's a very polite man who speaks French well and he's good company. His name is Ibrahim and he's just come from Barcelona looking for work and has been living in the street for two weeks. He's Senegalese and we talk about Senegal and Senegalese food. I finish my meal, give him some cash and wish him good luck before heading back to the hotel and another early night. Tomorrow I'll do my best to enjoy the last day of this trip, to enjoy my one full day in the most marvelous city in the world.

So many dreams during the night, one of Ibrahim who I encounter in a big house with other homeless people where he and another man decided to rob me. In the dream, he was acting without anger or hostility, simply because he had no choice, so I suppose it's an acknowledgment that people from desperately poor countries actually have a moral right to take from us well-fed people if given the chance.

It's Day 22, my last full day on the road and the sun is shining in Paris this morning. I catch the 38 bus and I'm on my way. The stomach is full, no need to eat till it gets dark, and I feel fit to walk ten miles. But the sun doesn't stay out long. Five minutes after I get off the bus, it slips behind the clouds as I'm taking a photo of Notre Dame. I stand on the Petit Pont waiting for ten minutes for it to return but it refuses so I give up and continue walking, down Boulevard St. Michel to the Jardin Luxembourg, stopping to look for two English bookstores I visited last year in the Latin Quarter. They're both closed, both supposed to open at eleven. I feel a slight need to pee and sit down for a coffee in a fairly large café which turns out not to have a toilet. What is it with toilets in Europe? A constant concern of the tourist.



Paris

At the San Francisco Bookstore I find two fine and relevant books almost immediately: *The Year of Magical Thinking*, by Joan Didion, a book about death, and *Paris*, by Julian Green, a book of short pieces by a photographer/writer about a place I know and love. I take the metro to Les Halles and get lost in the labyrinthine underground shopping complex. I finally surface to more rain and don't really know where I am but who cares. It's nice to be lost in Paris on St. Denis, a busy pedestrian promenade I've never seen before. There are lots of sex shops on the street, smoothly intermingled with all sorts of other ordinary shops and cafés and restaurants. Further on, when the street becomes a bit less attractive and open to traffic there are older women standing in doorways, first Caucasian and then Asian, obviously offering sexual services in broad daylight, but not in a way that's harsh or garish, blending almost unnoticeably with the busy everyday life of the street. I return to the hotel where I close my eyes and nap for about twenty or thirty minutes and feel so much better afterward I realize this is something I should try to do every day when traveling.

My last evening begins as a beautiful, fresh night with a clear sky. I take the elevated and scenic Metro Line 6 to Bercy in the east end and treat myself to dinner and a beer in a bistro followed by a film at the Cinémathèque Française, one of my favorite places in the world. I love the ultra-modern area around the Cinémathèque with Bercy Park and Stadium on one side and the Bibliothèque Nationale on the opposite side of the Seine, connected by the Passerelle Simone de Beauvoir. A different Paris but still absolutely Paris, absolutely world class.

An excellent meal and a good glass of beer! I didn't even really want to come to Paris but these have been two very good days. I see a Japanese film with French subtitles, *La Danse des souvenirs*, a documentary in which the filmmaker interviews a photographer, Nishii Kazuo, as he lies dying in the last two weeks of his life. Kazuo says he takes photographs to prove that he exists. Naomi Kawase, the filmmaker, says she makes films because it makes her feel alive.

Kazuo says life is a *bridge* from one reality to another and that everything that happens on the bridge doesn't have to make sense, the purpose being only to get from one side to the other. The photographer, he says, has the ability to find other worlds. Kazuo has crucifixes hanging from his ceiling and says those who don't believe in other worlds shouldn't even try to be artists.

Finally, it's time to go home. It's a nice, quiet, slow-moving, perfectly sunny morning in Paris and I savor my last hours in this wonderful city, wandering around the Gare de l'Est and environs, then slowly making my way with luggage in tow to Denfert-Rochereau to catch the Orly Bus to the airport. As usual, I get to

the airport far too early and find myself with three hours to kill. But it's worth it. I haven't had a single stressful moment yet and I didn't even have to line up to check in my luggage or pass through security. I love this part of traveling (coming home) and I want to enjoy the long, drawn-out process.

On the plane, I watch a brilliant documentary about the painter Edward Hopper, another artist who talks about light, about how he paints sunlight and the only reason he paints forms is that sunlight itself cannot be painted. During the fifties, when Abstract Expressionism was all the rage and figurative artists were banned from art galleries in New York, Hopper and some other artists published a statement defending the depiction of reality in painting. In a sense, Hopper is saying the same thing as Nishii Kazuo: there is more to art than sheer creativity or virtuosity - the true artist strives to present alternate realities.

And then, finally, I'm home. This is the best part of a trip: coming back and realizing that I actually have a home and thoroughly enjoying every moment of unpacking and putting my life back together. I always think that maybe I should relax and wait for the next day to unpack, do laundry, etc., but it's so much fun, why wait?

Not only do I have a home, I have projects as well. I forgot about the Dream Room Project. Just before I left I spent a little time each day for three or four weeks covering the walls of my bedroom and a new bulletin board with images. Seeing it again is a shock, as if someone else did it while I was gone. I move around the room and realize that the room is me – these are the things that reflect who I am and what I do. I'm impressed by what a little bit of creative work can accomplish and resolve to keep it up. Every day for the rest of my life I will do something creative, as I do on the road. I promise.

And then the best part of coming home: the fridge magnets! I slowly unpack them, clear some space on the door of the fridge and let them find their spots. Here is the proof that I have been to other worlds, and now I'm back.