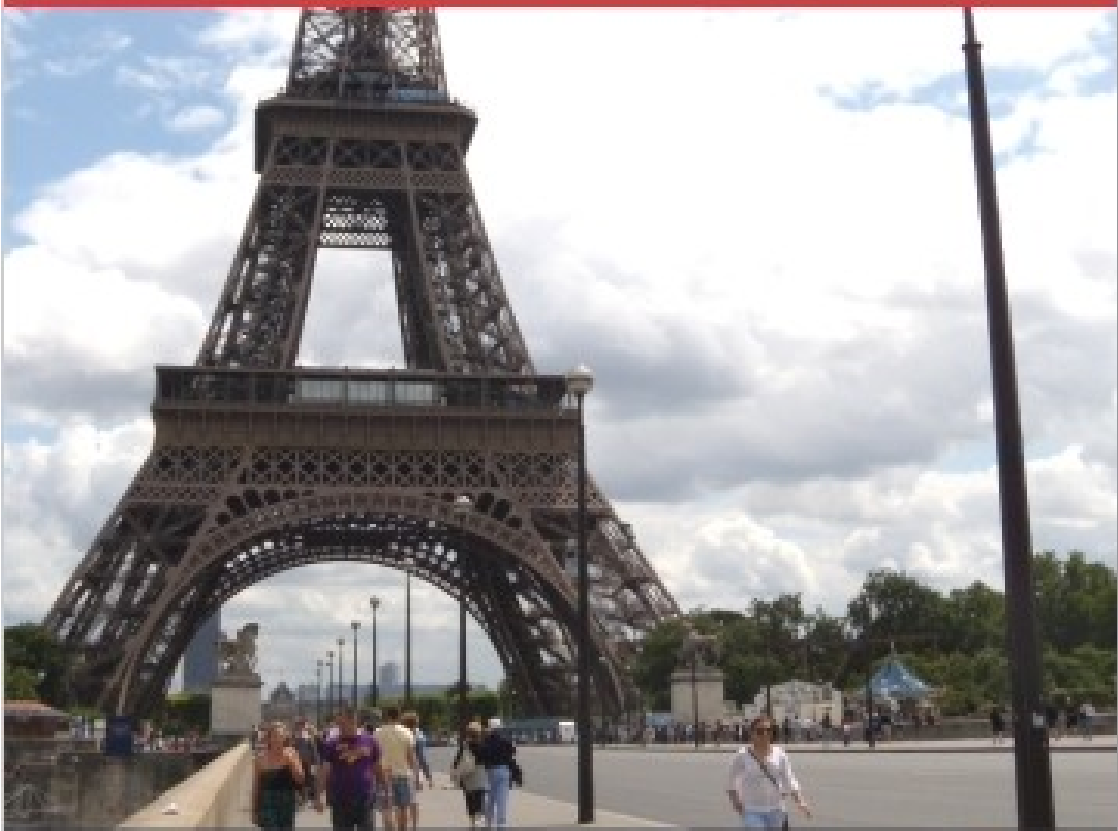




MARK HILL

Running Late

A high-speed romp around Europe



'Running Late

"Mark Hill

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RUNNING LATE: A high-speed romp around Europe

by Mark Hill

"How the hell did I end up here?" I asked myself.

When you're a 40-something man sitting all by yourself on the edge of what looks like a Dutch military surplus bunk bed in a grotty Amsterdam youth hostel feeling sad, lonely and in the immortal words of Danny Glover, "way too old for this shit" it's the sort of question you ask.

But I already knew the answer.

The nice slightly older lady with the shapely legs from HR walked into my office. "Mark," she said in a nice HR sort of way. "May we have a word?"

I knew what was coming. The worst recession in three generations was tearing the heart out of Britain and we'd already had four or five (I'd lost count) rounds of redundancies. No surprise there. As the advertising department of a massive international consumer electronics company, when the customers stopped buying, we stopped working.

We'd had the usual small first round of lay-offs. A couple of low-paid minions here and there chopped from the payroll as a hopeful sacrifice to the credit crunch gods.

Then the big one. Vast swathing cuts through all ranks and all departments. In typical corporate fashion this was accompanied by the usual management rubbish about swift, sharp surgical measures that, once made, would stand us in good stead as a lean, mean fighting force ready to weather whatever else the economy had to throw at us.

Bullshit, of course, as we soon found out. From then on, every six

weeks or so, a handful of staffers would be quietly culled from the herd. The nice slightly older lady with the shapely legs from HR would drop by for "a word" and, soon after, they'd disappear.

Nothing was ever said publicly. Names were never announced. But every so often, usually on a Friday afternoon, a small group of people would depart slightly earlier than usual, carrying slightly more personal baggage than normal and leaving their desk just a bit tidier than everyday.

So when the nice slightly older lady with the shapely legs from HR turned up, I wasn't exactly shocked.

I packed the duffel bag I'd stashed in my bottom drawer for just this occasion with my few personal belongings plus whatever office supplies I'd managed to steal over the past few months, said goodbye and promised to keep in touch with a bunch of people whose names I'd forget within weeks and, with a jaunty wave to the girls on reception, walked out the door.

It was a half-hour walk to the apartment I shared in a run-down little Surrey town. I'd only moved there for the job and was planning to find somewhere nicer. That wasn't going to happen.

But what was going to happen?

As I walked, the question ran through my mind. What now?

Finding another job wasn't an option. Nobody, but nobody, was hiring. Agencies were culling staff. Recruitment consultants weren't even returning phone calls. The freelance market was dead. The entire country had gone on a national hiring freeze.

And I wasn't even sure that I wanted to go back into advertising. When you meet people and tell them what you do, they think it's a pretty cool job. And it probably was back in the 60s or even the 80s.

Not these days.

These days a position in advertising is about as cool and creative as a job in life insurance. Once you get past the superficial phoniness of casual clothes, funky agency names and occasional after-hours drinking you find yourself in a buttoned down corporate hell that would put the average accounting firm to shame. If I was sure of one thing it was that if I never set foot inside an ad agency again it would be too soon.

But what to do in its place? I'd like to say that somewhere on that walk home the answer came to me in a vision. But it didn't. In fact, I

spent the next three months trying to figure it out. And going pretty much to pieces in the process.

Oh I started with the best of intentions. For one thing, I planned to reverse the ravages that my job had inflicted. I'd swap those low quality company cafeteria lunches for a diet of fresh wholesome fruit and veg. I'd replace some of those hours spent slumped behind a desk with brisk and vigorous exercise, preferably out-of-doors in the fresh air. I'd say goodbye to the sort of heavy drinking that had, over the years, turned my recycling bin from a civic duty to a personal embarrassment.

But I did no such thing. I slept until noon. I spent most of my days under the duvet or in front of the telly. I got eight hours sleep a day. And the same again at night time.

I lived on pizza.

I drank like a fish.

Ten or so weeks after walking out of the worst job I'd ever had I was fat, tired, depressed and unemployed. And I still had no idea what to do with the rest of my life.

Then my old friend the very lovely Stella sent me an article from the Canadian Globe and Mail newspaper. It positively gushed about a whole new breed of people who'd lost their jobs but were turning loss into opportunity by pursuing life-long dreams. People who were, according to the Globe "Unemployed? More like funemployed." People (an alarming number of whom seemed to be out-of-work advertising copywriters) who were using their un-asked-for leisure time to do volunteer work, start a business, get physically fit, or just work on a tan.

I loved it. And right away, I knew what to do.

Every year, thousands of young people pack a rucksack and go off for a few months of backpacking through Europe, staying at youth hostels and trying to get in as much travel and experience as their meagre budgets allow.

I never did.

Now, twenty-odd years later, I'd make that trip.

I already owned a backpack. I had a few quid stashed away in what little remained of Britain's banking system. And Lord knows, I had all the free time in the world.

At the time, it sounded wonderful. See Europe, a continent that

even after four years living in London was a virtual mystery to me. Meet fascinating young people from all around the world. Have wonderful, unexpected, once-in-a-lifetime experiences. I spent the next month in an almost perpetual daydream most of which involved extremely fit young backpacker girls from New Zealand gushing improbable lines like "You don't look old at all" followed by serious enquiries concerning my availability for a holiday fling.

Which is how I came to be sitting on the end of a horrid little bunk in an Amsterdam youth hostel feeling sorry for myself.

The Stayokay at Kloveniersburgwal hostel has about as much warmth and charm as an army camp. The staff are surly. The decor would put a Siberian gulag to shame. Petty rules and regulations abound. Two young Finnish lads I'd met had re-christened it the Stayokay Youth Correctional Institution, which was about right. And you've got to figure that if Finnish people find something depressing, the rest of us must be near suicidal.

As for me, I just needed a drink which, thanks to the folks at Heathrow security, I didn't have.

I'd flown in from Canada via London and reckoned that a connecting flight wouldn't require all that shoes off, did you pack these bags yourself (No! My fucking butler did it!) hassles. So I'd spent most of the flight stocking up on free in-flight booze.

In addition to what I'd managed to save from my personal consumption, I'd also swapped a gooey desert for a bottle from the teatotaling passenger next to me and deftly nicked three bottles from the drinks cart when the trolley dollies weren't looking. With five half-litre bottles of 12% ABV red wine in my carry bag, I was feeling pretty well set up.

Until I realised that Air Canada lands at Terminal 3 and British Airways takes off from Terminal 5.

"Sorry sir," said the security guy who was a lot nicer about it than he could have been. "It's over 100ml. Can't take it on."

"It's a connecting flight!"

He shook his head. "Still have to clear."

"But mate," I said, giving it one last desperate try. "It's Air Canada wine!"

The security man was not to be swayed, though he did helpfully suggest that as BA430 wasn't due to leave for over an hour, I still had

time to pop back to the main terminal and down a couple before the flight.

I declined the offer and passed through the gate feeling that in a world where an ordinary fella can't hold on to a booze stash that he has personally taken the time and effort to nick, the terrorists have already won.

I met up with the Finns and, worried that if we stuck around the Stayokay for much longer we might be asked to help out with the mailbag sewing and number plate making, we headed out for a couple of beers. That turned into quite a bit more than a couple and I kicked off what, though I didn't know it at the time, would become a recurring theme of this journey, namely me encouraging the pride of Europe's youth towards excessive drinking.

Like most backpacker hostels in Amsterdam, the Stayokay is conveniently located mere minutes from the Red Light District. As a bunch of guys out on the piss, we couldn't resist. And it didn't take us long to discover that Amsterdam has some of the ugliest hookers in the entire world.

Many of the girls are from former Dutch colonies, places where, it seems, modern skin care and dental work is yet to reach.

Others with their bottle-blond hair and winsome smiles can pass for Dutch at a distance. But up close their hard unfeeling eyes scream "former Soviet republic doing whatever it takes to survive while waiting for the EU application to clear." Their accents are a final confirmation. Dutch girls don't pronounce "It's 50 Euros honey" in quite that way.

We never did ascertain precisely what was on offer for that 50 Euros, but after some careful observation I can tell you that the longest it takes from customer going in to customer coming out is a tad under 16 minutes.

In truth, I was planning to give it a go. I'd made the decision well before the plane landed. Even set aside the money. Not out of horniness, you realise. But it would have been great for book jacket flap copy. And great flap copy was what I was after.

What I was after was something along the lines of "The new Bill Bryson. Better than Bryson. Don't miss the part where Hill gets into hilarious hijinks with the hookers in Amsterdam (which Bryson never did). Five stars! Two thumbs up! Way more stars and thumbs up than

Bryson!"

In the end, it never happened.

In truth, the whole Amsterdam Red Light District legalised hooker thing is just so tired out. It was brash and funky a couple of decades ago when I first rocked up in town and, like every naive teenager before me, went totally gaga at the idea of a city where you could get laid and stoned any time you wanted for just a few guilders and no hassle from the cops.

It was cool when I was twenty. Not so cool in my forties. And not so cool in the company of two fellas who actually are twenty and still don't want to give it a go.

Plus, they were all ugly.

By the end of the evening I not only felt a lot better about this journey but I'd learned two new Euro-facts. One: Finland isn't nearly as dull as I thought it was and I must try to visit sometime.

And two: Dutch people actually do drink Heineken. This may not seem like a revelation, but it is to me. I've always thought Heineken was to the Dutch as Foster's is to Australia, something that nobody in the country actually drinks. I figured I'd spend my time in Holland listening to people say things like "Heineken! Ha! Nobody drinks that here in Holland. We all drink VB and Four-X." But no, I'm happy to report that the average Dutchman loves the stuff.

And on that note, we staggered back to the hostel, said our goodnights and I stumbled into my bunk.

As I drifted off to sleep, I felt much better. The bunk was comfier than it looked. The hostel, truth be told, wasn't all that bad. If the Finns were typical of today's backpackers, young people didn't seem to mind spending a bit of time in the company of someone old enough to be their Dad. And just one day into the trip and I'd already gathered two important Euro-facts!

Things were certainly looking up.

I woke up early the next morning, surprisingly hangover free and after reveille, morning rations and a little close-order parade bashing, the Stayokay folks issued me a day pass and I set out to widen my perambulations a little.

Once away from the touristy centre, things took a decided turn for the better. Amsterdam began to look like a place where real people

lived real lives, did real jobs and raised real families. Even the canals looked better as the ratio of tour boats to working vessels dropped noticeably.

The charming Amsterdam architecture remained and I loved it. I especially loved all those topsy-turvy multi-story homes all bent forward at odd angles. I know they've been around for hundreds of years or so, but most of them look like a good strong wind would topple the lot.

I loved the hooks at the top for hauling up and lowering down furniture. It's a simple but brilliant idea and why it hasn't been copied elsewhere is the sort of question that is probably answered in a better book than this one.

But more than anything I loved what I could only call "suicide doors." These are ground level doors on the higher floors that open directly to the great outdoors without so much as a banister or guardrail between the room and the clear blue sky. How anyone with pets or a drinking habit could live with such a thing is beyond me. "Aw honey," I imagined the conversation going. "That's the third puppy gone this year."

Feeling much better about life, my journey and Amsterdam, I set off towards the Oosterpark. I'm not sure why. I knew nothing about it. My entire research for this journey had consisted of the occasional flick through the pages of *Lonely Planet Europe on a Shoestring*. Still it had "park" in the name and I like parks, so off I went.

Halfway along the Middenlan I stopped to make use of one of Amsterdam's free pavement pissoirs. I'd never seen such a thing before and wanted to feel terribly sophisticated and European about it, but it didn't quite work.

The pissoir is essentially a drain in the ground with a curved iron wall around it. Trouble is, the thing blocks out your private parts, but the bits above and below the strategic area are quite visible to passers-by. For one who has reached the age where a piddle can be an on-again off-again sort of thing, this arrangement causes a level of performance anxiety I could have done without.

Still, despite my failure to vacate, the Oosterpark put me in good cheer. It was just delightful. I can't tell you anything about it as all the signs were in Dutch (and, let's face it, you've probably figured out by now that this isn't going to be one of those informative books full of

knowledge and information and stuff) but my blissful ignorance just made it all the nicer.

There was so much to see. So much to make you happy.

Pretty young Dutch girls in skin-tight running shorts, none of whom had ever had occasion to say "it's 50 Euros, honey" jogged by. Groups of convivial old men sat under leafy canopies passing the time of day over games of chess. The world's largest collection of ghastly artwork dotted the grounds. Tepid cheap Sangria served in plastic cups was available for purchase. Young mothers pushed babies in strollers while others in swimming costumes played with their children in the wading pool under the admiring eyes of single dads whose presence in the park may not have been 100-percent childcare related.

I liked it hugely.

A few hours later, having had my fill of pretty young joggers and yummy mummies in swim costumes (Okay, many hours later. I do have a high tolerance for these sorts of things, but eventually you have to move on), I popped back to the Stayokay for a change of camera batteries, a bowl of gruel in the prison canteen and a quick chat with the warden concerning the status of my parole application. Jason, from some place in the USA that I didn't quite catch, was there.

Jason was the oldest hippy I'd ever met. He must have been at least ... well, really fucking old.

Jason wore tie-dye. Jason walked around in Birkenstocks. Jason had a pony-tail. Jason referred to marijuana as "wacky tobaccy." When I asked Jason to hold the door open so I could take my laundry into the dorm he replied "No problem. I got your back brother," as if we were platoon mates on jungle patrol in Vietnam.

I liked Jason. He was harmless and gentle and slightly deluded, though probably a good man. But I couldn't help feeling I'd rocked up in a parallel universe as an unpaid extra in an episode of *The Mod Squad*.

There are dozens of museums in Amsterdam of which the Rijksmuseum is the best known. According to Wikipedia, the Rijksmuseum "is dedicated to arts, crafts and history ... has a large collection of paintings [and] a substantial collection of Asian art."

So naturally I skipped it.

Come on! Large collection of paintings? Asian art? Give me a

fucking break!

When I'd set out on this journey I'd pretty much taken it for granted that I'd be hitting most of Europe's major attractions. It wasn't until I found myself approaching the Rijksmuseum that I realised just how unattractive a prospect this was going to be.

"I don't wanna!" I said to myself as the place drew closer. And if I didn't want to go to the Rijksmuseum, I certainly didn't want to spend the rest of the journey dragging my ass through dull building after dull building just because it's on the tourist trail and in the guidebook.

So I didn't. At that point I resolved not to go anywhere or do anything that I wasn't genuinely and personally interested in. No matter how important or famous, if it didn't turn my crank I wasn't going. I was over 40 years old. So if I didn't wanna, I wasn't gonna. Which is why anyone flicking through this book looking for the "Hidden Treasures of the Louvre" section will be sorely disappointed.

There was, however, a museum I really did want to see, the Scheepvaart or National Maritime Museum. It's all about the Dutch East India Company and, as I am genuinely and personally interested in all that olde worlde exploring the globe stuff, I was dead set on a visit.

I walked miles to get there, all the while following the helpful directional signs and huge city maps that the tourist board provides. And when I finally got there, it was closed.

Not only closed, but closed for the next three years. And surrounded by high walls and, I kid you not, barbed wire!

Could they not, given that the place is to be shut for at least three years, have put a little notice on those aforementioned directional signs and helpful city maps? How much effort would that take?

I stormed away muttering angrily to myself about the uselessness of tourism offices generally and Amsterdam's in particular. Time was, such organisations would provide all manner of useful information about a city's attractions cheerfully and without cost. These days, often the only stuff available is provided by private firms who deliberately leave the location of major attractions off their free maps so you'll take their guided tours.

I was completely wrong, of course. Amsterdam has a well-run tourist office conveniently located outside the central station. But at the time, thanks to my complete lack of pre-journey research, I didn't

know it.

Just as I was feeling thoroughly pissed off, a nice older man noticed me looking at my map and offered directions. As we walked and talked he apologised so often and so profusely for the unannounced closure of the museum that I began to feel bad for even mentioning it.

Like everyone in Amsterdam, the old fellow spoke perfect English with just a touch of an accent that makes men sound impossibly clever and women sound terribly, terribly sexy. As the gentleman explained, it's all due to the legendary Dutch meanness.

"When the Germans and French show American programmes on television," he said "they pay actors to dub the script into their own language. But we Dutch love any chance to save a little money. So in the Netherlands, the shows are only subtitled. Which means every Dutch person grows up watching English language TV with a Dutch translation. It's a perfect language course. And cheap, too, which makes us all very happy."

He also pointed out some local architecture and explained that, traditionally, the ground floor was for entertaining visitors, the first floor was for family living, the second floor was for senior household staff, and the top floor was for junior staff and storage. This explains why floors in Dutch houses get smaller as you move upwards. Of course, most are now converted to flats and household staff are pretty much a thing of the past. But that traditional hook at the top of most Dutch houses is still used for hauling furniture in and out.

The old fella had cheered me up no end and when we parted company, I felt much better about Amsterdam, my journey and myself. And, if you count the stuff about subtitles and the architectural info, I reckon I'd snagged two more Euro-facts.

Walking back to the hostel, I couldn't help but notice the pedestrian crosswalks. When you have to wait, they emit a slow clacking sound. When it's time to walk it shifts to an alarming machine gun-like rat-a-tat!

It was the perfect thing to put me in the right mood for my next destination.

I was headed for Arnhem.

Even if you've no interest in World War II or Operation Market Garden and have never read the book or seen the film *A Bridge Too*

Far, Arnhem is worth a visit if only to drive home the point that Holland is a clean, prosperous, well-run little country populated by decent, hard-working folk few of whom have anything to do with drugs or prostitution. It's a fact about the country that seems to get lost in the stag-night tourism that is Amsterdam.

In fact I am currently proposing to the Dutch immigration authorities a new visa requirement that every tourist be legally compelled to spend one day in any Dutch city other than Amsterdam for every joint smoked, hooker visited or sex show watched.

If they go for it, you can picture the cop now, ticket book in hand: "Okay, one blowjob. A spliff. And two hours of on-stage doggy action. That's four days in Rotterdam for you mate."

The Stayokay hostel organisation had redeemed themselves with the Arnhem hostel. It wasn't exactly close to town. In fact, it was a good hour-long brisk walk from the train station. But once I arrived, it was lovely.

The whole place was nestled comfortably in the woods, surrounded by trees and squirrels and birds and all sorts of that David Attenborough nature type crap that normally drives me bonkers. But, in this case, I really liked it. The six-bed dorms were comfy and each had a nice en-suite shower and toilet with two sinks. There was a bar, a cosy common area and a lovely front courtyard with plenty of tables and chairs to relax upon.

The only drawback, and it was a big one, was that like so many hostels these days, there was no kitchen. To me, a hostel without a kitchen is just plain absurd. Cooking your own food is the very best way to cut your travel costs without diminishing the travel experience. Even on a tight budget with loads and loads of takeaway and McDonald's in your diet, it's hard to eat for a day on less than a tenner. But a packet of pasta, a few supermarket staples and a place to cook 'em up can cut that daily food outlay to mere pennies.

As well, there's nothing better than a crowded kitchen full of backpacking cooks to bring the hostel crowd together.

I can not count the number of wonderful days and nights I spent on this journey in the company of people I'd met in a hostel kitchen over a hot burner and a few well-worn pots and pans.

I can see why hostels want to get rid of their kitchens. They're messy, need constant cleaning and don't generate any income. But it's

short-term thinking at its worst. Hostels depend on budget travellers and budget travellers don't have the cash to fork out for three restaurant squares a day. But, to me, it's a false economy. Hostel owners need to understand that getting rid of your kitchens is the first step towards getting rid of your business.

A hostel without a kitchen is a hostel without a heart.

Back in Arnhem (and at risk of turning this from a flighty little travel book into a serious five-volume history of the Second World War) let me quickly sum up the whole Bridge Too Far thing.

As everyone knows from movies and TV, the D-Day landings had worked reasonably well and, as a result, huge numbers of American, British and Commonwealth and Canadian troops had firmly established themselves on the edge of Europe. All that remained was to push inwards, smash the Jerries, crush Germany, liberate Europe, end fascism and spend your off-duty time getting laid in return for a small slab of chocolate or a nice pair of ladies' silk nylons. It was a tough job and would take some time.

The top Yank, a smart guy named General Patton understood this and planned accordingly. But an overrated British general nicknamed Monty figured he could do better. So he hatched a ludicrous plan, which he called Operation Market Garden, to drop a massive load of paratroopers all over Holland then race an entire army up a badly maintained European B-road into Germany and end the war slightly ahead of schedule.

It was a cock-eyed idea. It was obvious that one small setback and the whole thing would fall apart. It hadn't a snowball's chance in hell of working. No one in their right mind would back it.

But everyone did.

Monty was popular. Everybody wanted a quick end to the war. And nobody had the guts to stand up and say "Fuck me! This plan really sucks shit!"

Hard to believe. But if you've ever sat in a business meeting where some highly paid corporate wanker with loads of PowerPoint sells a pile of rubbish to a roomful of supposedly intelligent people, you'll know exactly what I'm talking about.

A very nice lady at the Arnhem tourist information office had provided me with a small guide to something called the Freedom Trail,

a sort of walking tour of the major sights connected with the battle.

Foolishly, I'd invited along one of my dorm-mates, a young Aussie backpacker named James.

James was perhaps the most boring man on Earth. He was on a three-month backpacking trip throughout Europe with the apparent intention of seeing all the sights and putting all the locals to sleep. I've never met a boring Aussie before. I didn't think they even made them. James was a first.

He was in the middle of some sort of grievance with his boss, the details of which he would explain at great length and in minute detail to anyone who would pretend to listen.

"When my performance review came around," he would begin, completely apropos of nothing at all, "she deliberately failed to follow the correct procedure. According to ..." this would then lead into a twenty minute discussion of Australian employment law as it pertains to minor bureaucrats. No amount of head lolling and eye glazing would stop him and he kept it up for the entire length of the trail.

The Freedom Trail didn't offer a whole lot, to be honest. Most of the sights were, like everything in Holland, spotless, well-maintained, spruced up and generally lovely. In fact, the film *A Bridge Too Far* had to be filmed in nearby Deventer because even in 1977, Arnhem had become too modernised to pass for a 1940s city.

I suppose it's too much to expect an entire city to preserve very much of a failed military operation that took place more than 60 years ago, but I couldn't help thinking that a few shattered panes of glass and the odd string of machine gun bullet holes would have been nice.

Still, at least the "Urquart House" at Zwarteweg 14 was still there. This is where Dutch Resistance member Antoon Derksen sheltered Major-General Roy Urquhart from the Nazis.

In the film, this is the bit where Sean Connery spots a few Germans out in the street and shoots them through the front window. It's a good scene, but I've always rather doubted that it happened. After all, wasn't he supposed to be hiding up in the attic? Wouldn't a British Army general know that gunshots are one of the more effective ways to attract the attention of the German army? And how do you clean a dead Nazi off the street? Worth thinking about before whipping out the old Webley Vickers 50-80, I'd guess.

The house itself looked very much like it does in the film. The attic windows looked like new build, but the rest hadn't changed much.

Peering inside, the house seemed pretty ordinary. But I have to say, the olive drab painted VW Kubelwagen parked outside lent it a nice authentic touch.

According to a small sign on the door the house is now owned or occupied by an F.C. Willemsz and a certain N. Hulshof neither of whom I chose to bother by knocking.

The tour continued through 28 more war-related sights (and, I'm sorry to say, at least 28 more highlights from James's upcoming employment tribunal application) until eventually we came to the famous bridge too far.

The bridge was mostly destroyed in the war and rebuilt later on the same foundations and to the same design so it still looks exactly as it does in the film. And I was pleased as punch to see actual machine gun scars on the concrete buttresses at each end.

I was less pleased to see massive graffiti markings along the bridge. Graffiti covers much of Europe and, from what I can tell, no one seems to care. In North America and, to a lesser extent Britain, graffiti is seen as vandalism and the authorities do what they can to fight it. Not so in Europe. Once painted, graffiti lasts forever. As a result, the entire continent is covered with the stuff, as is the Arnhem bridge.

The Battle of Arnhem Information Centre at the foot of the bridge didn't have a whole lot on offer. There are no artefacts and few photos. It claims to tell the story through the eyes of those involved -- one wall each for the British, the citizens of Arnhem, the Germans and a slightly smaller wall for the Poles. There's a video projection outlining the course of the battle which reminded me of bad PowerPoint. But the presence of a very lovely gentleman by the name of Andre Vrijhoeven made the visit more than worthwhile as he explained, probably for the millionth time though you'd never know if from his enthusiasm, how the battle actually unfolded.

I'd never really got it before. I'd read the book a few times and seen the movie over and over again such that I can recite whole pages of dialogue, but it was never clear in my mind who was where and doing what. Watching the best scenes in the film (the bits where John Frost's lightly armed paratroops hold off a vastly superior force of German tanks) I'd always assumed that the Jerries were on the other side of the bridge. In truth, they were in the town itself. Thanks to Mr Vrijhoeven's patient explanation, I finally understood what was going

on and couldn't wait to see the film one more time (except for the James Caan bits, which are rubbish).

Still I was very disappointed that there wasn't at least a small museum. I'd come all this way and was really looking forward to seeing a few artefacts from the actual battle. There is an Airborne Museum at nearby Hartenstein where Andre Vrijhoeven normally works but, like every Dutch museum I might actually be interested in, it was closed.

So I went to Belgium.

But not, as you might expect, to Brussels. I'd been to Brussels years ago and wasn't at all impressed. It's a fine city if you're being paid huge amounts of taxpayers' money to attend a European Union working group on EU-wide standardisation of bottle openers, have an unusual interest in a little statue of a small boy having a wee, or wish to sample 357 different types of beer all of which taste suspiciously like Stella Artois. I was not, so I chose Antwerp instead.

Antwerp had been sold to me as a hip, stylish happening style capital. My guidebook had even mentioned something about "fashionistas" and, while I'm not especially fashionable myself, I do enjoy observing the breed from afar. So, confidently expecting cutting-edge glamour, half-naked leggy supermodels and an all-pervading feeling of rampant Vogue-ishness, off I went by train to Antwerp.

I love train stations. Love them to death. I could happily live in a train station. I even like crappy little commuter stations, rural one-train-a-week stations and hideous mega-monstrosities like Clapham Junction. I don't like airports and I'm indifferent to churches, cathedrals and museums. But I do love train stations (and bridges, though more on that later).

Newsweek magazine once called Antwerp Central Station the fourth best rail station in the world and I have to agree with them. It was built at the turn of the century and expanded almost exactly 100 years later to accommodate today's high speed trains. Clearly it was incredible when it was built and the modernisation was done tastefully and in keeping with the original design. It is truly magnificent.

What it is not, however, is organised. It's an absolute madhouse. Nothing makes any sense. Signage is confusing. You have no idea where to go or how to get there. It's the sort of place where you stand

inside thinking "This is amazing. I must take many photographs. Now how the fuck do I get out of here?"

The hostel wasn't on my guidebook map so I sought help and guidance. Purely by accident, I eventually stumbled into the tourist information office where the world's least interested guide tossed a city map at me with some illegibly scribbled and unintelligibly mumbled instructions to take this or that metro from this platform or another which I could pay for with these or those tickets from this or that machine.

Honestly! You'd think these folks would be overjoyed to see me. Or at least be mildly curious. I was a foreign person visiting Belgium for God's sake!

"Screw it," I thought. I'll walk. I like walking. I'd packed incredibly light. My new sandals were starting to break in. And the map was free (though I would happily have swapped Antwerp's free map for the Amsterdam equivalent which costs a Euro but comes with a welcoming smile and a seemingly genuine desire to help you find your way). So I set out on foot and, from the outset, it was abundantly clear that Belgium is no Holland.

The Netherlands are, as far as I could see, cleaner, tidier, more prosperous and better kept. The people are more attractive by a margin too large to measure with ordinary instruments and cleaner, taller, more lively and generally happier.

Belgians, by contrast, seemed to be frumpy, sad little people hobbling along on cracked pavements while rusty, faded second-hand cars and poorly maintained buses whizz by. Their shops are grey and dusty. Their houses are run-down and depressing. It was like Liverpool without all the history and sense of humour. Or Birmingham without Well, it was like Birmingham.

Coming mere hours after the shiny, fresh-scrubbed, tomorrow-is-an-even-better-day loveliness that is Holland, it was, to say the least, mildly depressing.

The ever-optimistic Lonely Planet described the HI-affiliated Op Sinjoorke hostel south of Antwerp's city centre as "run-of-the-mill."

I'd hate to see the mill.

I had hardly arrived before I was pining for the Stayokay. God only knew what the Op Sinjoorke was before it became a hostel. My

guess was that it must have been some sort of rest home for psychiatric patients or a minimum security prison for middle class tax evaders and the sort of non-violent social deviants who absolutely refuse to return library books on time.

Once again there was no kitchen, which pissed me off no end. The mention of a bar perked me up momentarily, but the fact that none of the taps worked and the beer was only available in tiny bottles suggested that it wasn't exactly one of the town's hot spots.

I learned later (just as I was leaving, in fact) that the hostel was built in 1930 as the English pavilion for a world exposition and had been converted to a youth hostel in the 1950s.

Back then hostels were all about attractive and healthy young people going off to do terribly sporty physical things out-of-doors (while dodgy scoutmasters with their gnarly hands pushed suspiciously deep into their pockets looked on, I suspect) so hostels were nearly always sited outside the city in the midst of fresh air, loads of greenery and not much else.

Nowadays, hostellers want to be as close to the city as possible which is why the hostelling association is, I'm told, planning to close the Op Sinjoorke next year and open something better located. Fat lot of good that did me at the time, though. The place was a good five kilometre hike south of the city in a depressing wasteland of grey concrete apartment blocks.

And as the area was mostly Turkish Muslim, it made buying alcohol (something I very desperately needed at this point) very much of a chore. I walked for block after block down crappy shopping streets all equipped with tinny loudspeakers and all playing the same awful *Top Not-Quite-Hits of the 90s* soundtrack before discovering a tacky discount supermarket (the sort of establishment that makes Aldi and Lidl look like Waitrose) willing to sell me a cheap screw-top bottle of Italian wine-lake plonk.

Vino bottle in hand, I retired early to my bunk determined to set off tomorrow in a better frame of mind. Belgium, I thought, may not be Holland (a country that, as I'm sure you figured out by now, I really, really like) but it must have its charms. I resolved to spend the next day discovering all that Antwerp had to offer.

Which turned out to be not very much at all.

First impressions are often wrong, but I spent the day walking

pretty much all over the city, and there wasn't a whole lot to change my mind.

Antwerp is, with very few singular exceptions, a remarkably ugly, run-down sort of place. As mentioned previously, the central station is attractive. And the few notable tourist sites from the guidebook were okay in an I-guess-I'd-better-take-a-photo-of-this kind of way. But the notion that Antwerp is some sort of mega-stylistic, way-too-cool-with-hip-to-spare international fashion hot-spot is complete and utter tosh.

Wandering around the city, I couldn't help thinking that if I were a Belgian I'd spend my whole life wishing I was Dutch. As I would learn as the trip progressed, the Belgians don't actually like the Dutch very much. Nor, on the other hand, do the Dutch think much of the Belgians.

Many years ago I was I was in Guatemala climbing a volcano (now doesn't that sound like an incredibly macho Bear Grylls thing to say; truth to tell, it was a lame-as-shit guided tour). One of our group, a tall, blond, statuesque, drop-dead-gorgeous Dutch girl who (when she wasn't being fallen in love with by me) worked as a KLM air hostess, took a few minutes out of her perfect and beautiful life to explain the Dutch view towards their Flemish and Wallonian neighbours.

"The Belgians say we Dutch are cheap," she said.

"We Dutch say the Belgians are stupid," she added.

And then, with a haughty toss of her delightfully pony-tailed blond hair she said "As for me ... I would much rather be cheap than stupid."

I immediately fell even further in love and have, whenever the choice has presented itself, flown KLM ever since.

But while the Dutch are (justifiably, in my view) quite proud of their little country, the Belgians don't seem all that keen on theirs. Nor, it seems, is anyone else. Which makes meeting a Belgian on the backpacking circuit an odd experience.

All backpacker conversations begin with the same question: "Where are you from?" This is always answered by some sort of bland compliment, "Nice place," "I hear it's lovely" or something like that. Well, make that, almost always.

"Where are you from?"

"Belgium."

"Oh," And a pregnant pause.

"Mmmm," followed by raised eyebrows, a resigned little sigh, an apologetic shrug and a rapid scramble to change the subject.

It's that sort of place.

So I went to Bruges. That's what you do when you find yourself in Belgium and discover that it's, well ... Belgium. You go to Bruges.

But, this time, I wasn't alone.

Now never let it be said that I am not the sort of hard-working, go-the-extra-mile reporter who does whatever it takes to bring back the real story. So to answer the often-asked question "isn't backpacker hostelling just an endless succession of hot, steamy casual sex with random women from other countries?" I was determined to get to the bottom of things (so to speak).

And a mere seven days and just two hostels into the trip, I'd managed to do just that.

Carin, I'll call her, a schoolteacher from a small town in Holland that I won't disclose here, and I had met the night before in what passed for the hostel's TV lounge. We'd spent a few hours and most of another bottle of cheap Italian plonk chatting about this and that then stumbled outside for a "walk" which, of course, was just a lot of snogging on a garden bench. Then back to my dorm where an elderly gentlemen from Dusseldorf in the only other occupied bunk spent most of the night pretending he couldn't hear what was going on.

We really only slept together out of boredom (sex versus Belgian TV, it's not a tough call to make), but by morning we found that we rather enjoyed each other's company. Enjoyed it enough to spend a day together in Bruges, at least.

Just a short train ride away, Bruges is exactly what you expect. It's a bit fake (okay, a lot fake) but lovely to look at. You could set your camera to high-speed motor-drive, swing it around pretty much at random and every single shot would turn out postcard perfect.

Bruges is, of course, a UNESCO World Heritage Site just like, it seems to me, every single other place on Earth with the possible exception of Birmingham.

I'm not going to bore you here with the whole "Bruges was a major commercial centre until the River Zwin silted up" story because (a) I'm sure you've heard that loads of times before on travel programmes and (b) this is not one of those factual books full of factual information and facts and such. The only thing I will say (and I think this definitely qualifies as a real Euro-fact) is that if you want to make friends in Bruges you should pronounce it the Flemish way

"Brugguh" rather than the French "Brooges." It won't get you laid or a free drink or anything, but you may not quite be so badly short-changed on your lunch order and that's a good thing.

There's some attempt at giving the place an historical angle with museums and boat tours and so on, but basically and truthfully you go to Bruges to wander through its Disney-esque streets and stroll along its devilishly romantic canals saying "Oooh, isn't that lovely" over and over and over again until it's time for a genuine, authentic, traditional Belgian waffle (every one of which tastes exactly like cheap, frozen, toaster-cooked Kellogg's Eggos, but costs as much of a round of drinks in Soho) and a hot chocolate.

Which is what we did. We walked all over town, hand-in-hand. We sat on park benches, held hands and snuggled a bit. I stroked her hair. She drew little figures on my forearm with her finger. We looked, to the casual observer like every other couple in Bruges.

At the end of the day, we rode the train back to Antwerp with Carin nestled asleep in the crook of my arm and the two of us looking every inch like a normal happy couple who'd been together for years and were, perhaps, seriously considering home ownership and mortgage options.

There is an honesty in speaking a second language. "Do you have a lover," Carin asked upon waking.

"No," I said.

"I am looking for a lover," she said.

I was not to be that lover. But for a night and a day, we were happy to pretend. Which is what we did.

A fake romance in a fake town.

Then we arrived back at Antwerp's outwardly-attractive-yet-horribly-confusing central station, gave each other a quick peck on both cheeks, swapped e-mail addresses, waved a cheery "see ya around" and went our separate ways.

Carin hopped on a train home to her school-teaching job in Holland (hopefully with a significantly more than normally interesting answer to the question of "How was your weekend, Miss?") while I went off in search of a ticket to Paris.

Paris wasn't a natural destination. But there are no natural destinations. As Bill Bryson explains in *Neither Here Nor There* (the Europe travel book you should be reading instead of this one) it's not a

continent that lends itself to a natural route.

It makes sense to travel around Australia. To cross Canada. To circle the United States. To go up and down New Zealand.

But there's no logical way to travel Europe. So I ended up in a bit of a ziggy, zaggy route that wasn't terribly efficient but did help to keep more than a few railroad employees in work.

The train ticket to Paris cost me 90 Euros. At this rate, so-called budget travel could get pretty darned expensive. Still, I did manage to have a bit of fun.

On this trip, I had been mildly obsessive about travelling light. My entire rucksack containing everything I would need for three months of travel easily passed BA's requirements for carry-on baggage.

As part of my light travel programme, I'd looked for some sort of footwear option that wouldn't require socks. Over the years I've seen people travelling in all manner of sockless footwear from Tivas and Birkenstocks to flip-flops and figured I could do the same.

The pair I finally ended up buying were essentially sandals but with a little bit of a toe and some canvas mesh around the sides. They were clearly not designed to be worn with socks, and after a few slight scrapes and minor blisters they broke in nicely and were incredibly comfy, especially as I was, at that point, clocking up some pretty impressive mileage.

I generally find it easier, cheaper and loads more fun to walk than to wrestle with the complexities of local buses or the criminality of taxi drivers (By-the-way, what is it with cabbies? Everywhere you go, they're all crooks.) So in almost all respects, my sandals were a good choice. Almost.

Trouble was, they made my feet smell something awful. More than awful. More of a chemical warfare, weapons of mass destruction, United Nations inspection team, bio-hazard sort of thing.

And not only did it smell bad, but the mesh around the sides created a sort of slow-release system that allowed the odour to fester and gather beneath my feet then gently and gradually dissipate into the surrounding atmosphere in a measured dose designed for maximum discomfort.

On the three-hour train ride from Antwerp to Paris I was seated in the midst of a group of fresh-scrubbed clean-shirted Dutch businessmen who clearly noted the pungent aroma wafting through

the compartment. Fortunately, a scruffy looking elderly gentleman of African descent whose luggage appeared to consist entirely of plastic bags boarded the train at the same time as me.

As we hurtled towards Paris I made sure to crinkle my nose repeatedly and glance confusedly around from time-to-time. When the African gent departed about an hour outside Paris, I immediately dashed to the toilet and washed my feet and shoes in the basin. I returned fresh as a daisy and in an odour-free state that (only just) lasted until we reached Paris.

It wasn't the proudest moment of the trip and let me take this opportunity to apologise to the lovely people of Ghana or Nigeria or wherever the poor chap was from.

But, hey, it worked like a charm.

How can you write about Paris? Everything has been done, done and done again. And it's a bit late to be born there, live an entire life in the city as an eminent philosopher or perhaps the mayor, then give up a successful career to reflect in print upon a city you know like the back of your hand, all of which is pretty much what you'd have to do to have any chance of writing something original about Paris.

So what did I do with just a few days in the city of light? I did exactly what you would have done. I went to the Eiffel Tower. I walked along the Champs-Élysées. I took pictures of the Arc de Triomphe. I strolled around the Left Bank. I had coffee and croissants for breakfast and baguettes for lunch and pot au feu for dinner. I sat outside numerous cafes drinking even more numerous Stella Artois, some of the time smiling at the pretty girls and stunning women walking by (one of whom, I'm quite convinced, even smiled back a little) and the rest of the time pondering one of the great questions of the modern age -- namely what exactly the fuck is the plural of Stella Artois?

I walked and walked and walked. It was just swell. Paris was swell. I even felt a little swell, myself.

I loved it all.

Well, most of it.

Local law enforcement didn't impress. Early in my walk westwards along the Seine, I saw what to me looked like a perfect Paris picture. A young female police officer was directing traffic -- all whistling and waving arms and outstretched white-gloved palms while shiny

Renaults and Peugeots with madmen at the wheel zipped by in all directions at six times the posted speed limit.

Picture perfect, I thought. So I positioned myself at the opposite side of the intersection, started up my camera and zoomed in. At which point I discovered, thanks to the telephoto lens, that, close up, the lady copper wasn't really all that attractive. Not actively ugly or hideously disfigured or anything like that. Just not quite what I was looking for when I cast the shoot.

Now I don't want to suggest that all female police officers must be young and pretty to do their job (though, in all honesty, and speaking as a taxpaying citizen, it wouldn't exactly hurt). But in photographs the model is everything, so I didn't take the picture.

As I crossed the road to resume my perambulations, she stopped me, violently yelling "No photo! No photo! No photo!"

Lacking a comprehensive French phrasebook containing an entry along the lines of "Pardon mois mademoiselle but you're je n'est pas quite pretty enough to be photographed," I turned on my camera's viewer and handed it to her for a look. Still snarling "No photo! No photo!" she grabbed the camera and began scrolling through my pictures before shoving it back at me and angrily waving me on my way.

As I walked along, more bemused than bothered, I looked at the camera screen. Obviously the officer wasn't a camera buff. She'd scrolled the wrong way and, as I could clearly see, had spent most of her time looking through my tourist snaps from Amsterdam.

I hope she liked them.

I hope she goes there on her next holiday.

I hope she takes notes.

The police are quite friendly in Holland.

I continued along the river past the Louvre (which apparently is full of paintings and stuff) then on to the Champs-Elysees and up to the Arc de Triomphe which, aside from a group of gypsies laboriously copying out the begging letters that they thrust in the faces of tourists all over town, looks just as grand and magnificent as it does in the pictures.

It really is a beautiful city and, with the possible exception of my lady cop and the barmaid near my hostel who treated me like a leper, the people are not quite as rude as you think.

Most Parisians are, if not exactly gushingly outgoing, at least friendly-ish.

There were even a bunch of cops around the Eiffel Tower dishing out cheerful smiles and helpful directions. Though, it must be said, they didn't look completely natural about it. It looked like part of some sort of tourist-department-working-in-partnership-with-Paris-city-council "let's stop everyone thinking we're rude" communications initiative. I could almost smell the PowerPoint.

Still, the tourists seemed to appreciate it and, I suspect, the uniformed members of the Combined Operations Tactical Smiles and Map Reading Unit probably found a day telling fat Americans that the Eiffel Tower was the big pointy thing mere steps away to be a lot easier way to earn a crust than running around busting crims.

I really do go on about police, don't I?

Truth is, I think you can tell an awful lot about a society by looking at its police.

Canadian police are as near to incorruptible as coppers get, superficially friendly and ever so slightly dull.

American cops are armed to the teeth and paranoid to a degree that would get normal people institutionalised.

British coppers are slightly sloppy, well-meaning, but bogged down in nanny-state paperwork and not entirely sure what their role in life is.

Mexican police are the finest officers your money can buy.

And so on.

So far, the French police were conforming to my theory -- arrogant and overbearing by nature, yet quite willing to do a little smiling and grovelling if it seems to be in their self interest (Oops. Sorry to mention the war).

I was looking forward, on this journey, to seeing how well my theory held up, how closely my impression of each country's police matched the national character. Hardly the sort of tourist agenda you'll find in guide books and Sunday newspaper travel sections, but you've gotta admit it beats the shit out of endless churches and museums, now doesn't it?

The Eiffel Tower is, surprisingly, not easy to find. From movies and TV you naturally assume that it must rise prominently over the city

and therefore be a breeze to locate. Not so.

As well, in a city absolutely festooned with helpful directional signs, there are none in the immediate vicinity of the tower. I did eventually find it thanks to a kindly South African family who had come to Paris armed with a better guide book than my hopeless *Lonely Planet Europe on a Shoestring*.

Once you find it, the tower is exactly what you think it's going to be. It is neither bigger, nor smaller than you expect and is therefore, in my view, all the better for that. It is absolutely the perfect size, tall enough to be impressive yet not so big that, like Toronto's CN Tower, for example, it doesn't dwarf the city in a "fuck you" kind of way.

I would have loved to climb it and, despite being told that the estimated wait was two hours and despite the electronic signs over the ticket office reading "saturation possible" I did join the queue. But after half an hour in the line and extrapolating my wait over the length of the line-up, I calculated the wait at more like three or four hours so, after a last admiring walk around, I headed home.

My walk back along the left bank (or Rive Gauche as they say on the YSL bags) of the Seine took me past at least 5,000 significant attractions. The thing about Paris is that you pass something historic and wonderful every half-block. Even the stuff that isn't special, looks like it ought to be.

I was wandering along the Quai d'Orsay when I sighted a magnificently ancient and grandiose edifice that, I thought, must be a royal palace, a national museum, an imperial residence, or some such important thing. It turned out to be nothing more than the Paris office of Air France.

I passed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It's so grand and magnificent that you immediately understand how and why the French have such an overblown view of their stature and importance in the world. If I worked in an office like that, I'd think I was King Shit of Turd Island, too.

By the time I got back to the hostel, I'd been walking for nearly seven hours. I didn't mind; I love walking. Just as well as I didn't have much choice. The Blue Planet hostel has a strict 10am to 4pm lockout policy. The Blue Planet was not, to put it mildly, the best hostel I've ever stayed at.

I've never met a backpacker anywhere who's found a decent

hostel in Paris. They are all, it is generally agreed, overpriced crap. But arriving at the Blue Planet near the Gare de Lyon, I thought I'd managed to buck the trend. The dorm room was clean and reasonably spacious. The en-suite facilities were fine. There was a common area and free internet. Seemed pretty good.

I was wrong.

There was a strict no-alcohol policy which, while not uncommon in hostels, is generally just seen as a legal technicality. At the Blue Planet it was strictly enforced. Signs all over the place warned that violators would be expelled without warning after their first tipple. There were CCTV cameras everywhere which, even as someone coming from Britain's surveillance culture, freaked me out a little bit. The staff were surly. The breakfast consisted of three tokens that could be dropped into vending machines dispensing a selection of stale bread rolls and the sort of coffee that gives Tesco Value instant a bad name. You even had to share a single room key between four people in the dorm.

It was utter rubbish. And yet it led to one of the most magical evenings of my entire journey.

There were seven of us, a nice mix of girls and boys from a variety of countries, sitting out on the hostel patio enjoying a few drinks, some snacks, the warm pleasant evening and, most of all, each other's company when an officious member of the hostel staff came out to enforce the no-alcohol rule.

"No drinking here. No alcohol! The police will come," he said. This may or may not have been true, but he could have been nicer about it. We weren't exactly partying it up or waking the neighbours.

"Can we bring it inside?"

"No! No! Take it in the street," was his cheery response.

The prospect of drinking standing up out in the street with the local winos didn't sound terribly enticing. Fortunately, one of the German girls in our group had a better idea.

She led us away from the hostel, across the Austerlitz bridge and onto the left bank of the Seine where, it seems, a group of Parisians gather nightly along the Quai Saint-Bernard to dance.

It's not a performance or some sort of tourist thing, just a collection of ordinary people who like to get out under the stars and tango. They've organised themselves into an association (they're French, after all) called, I later learned, Paris Danses en Seine, and for more than ten years they've been coming out in their finery, setting up

a boom-box and enjoying a night of mostly tango plus a bit of salsa, swing and even, from time-to-time, a little hip-hop.

We sat around the raised and curved steps that encircle the dance floor, seven new friends, glasses in hand, under a full moon, with the world's most romantic river lapping at its banks mere steps away. Brilliantly lit tour boats slipped by. Music filled the air. Elegant couples swooped and swirled and twirled and did a hundred other things that clearly brought them great pleasure and captivated and charmed us all.

It was glorious.

One of the dancers caught my eye. She was statuesque and graceful and poised and stylishly but not overly dressed and perfectly but not excessively made up, and she danced like a dream. She was, quite frankly, dead sexy. She was also, quite clearly, a lot further past her fiftieth birthday than I am in front of mine.

I kept these thoughts to myself. The rest of our little group were all younger than me and, I thought, probably wouldn't understand, might be a little creeped out, and may never have even heard of Katherine Hepburn.

"Nice," said Jeff, a twenty-something fella from the US sitting next to me.

"Hmmm," I said. "Beautiful dancing."

"I meant ...," he said.

I looked around. "What?"

"The tall lady there," he said with a nod of his head. "For an older woman ..."

"Mmm," I said, noncommittally.

"I mean, she's probably about 40," he said.

I laughed. "Mate," I said. "I'm probably about 40. She's past fifty."

"Oh," he said, a little sheepishly.

Then, after a short thoughtful pause, a slight cocking of the head and raising of the eyebrows, he added, "Still"

I crossed into Germany aboard the Inter-City Express, the high-speed train that manages to make Germany's normally perfect trains seem dull and stodgy. Comparison with British trains is, well, just not possible.

At Aachen, our first stop inside the German border, three German police officers boarded and went through the train checking passports.

It made me think. It made me realise that there is a lottery in life. The draw takes place before you are born. It's the nationality lottery. Be lucky enough to be born in Britain or France or Germany or Canada or Australia and life will be pretty much okay. Get yourself born in Nigeria or Ghana or Guatemala or Bangladesh and it really doesn't matter what you do, your life is pretty much screwed.

It all comes down to passports. Basically if you have a blue or maroon passport, you're okay. Walk up to passport control in any country and hand over your Canadian or Swedish or Swiss or New Zealand passport and the nice friendly person at immigration will ask really tough questions like "how long do you wish to stay?" and "can I help you with a hotel reservation or call you a taxi."

Slide up to the same desk with a Bangladeshi or Pakistani or Ecuadorean passport and it's a completely different deal.

I have a friend from Sri Lanka. He's well educated, law-abiding, holds down an impressive and well-paid job in the UK and, in most respects, puts worthless layabouts like me to shame. But travel for him is a nightmare. "Customs see me in the queue," he once told me, "and they're already reaching for the rubber gloves."

I have two passports. I am a Canadian and I am a UK citizen. I am very lucky. Through no effort on my part, I am a winner in the lottery of life. I don't deserve it. I didn't work for it. I'm just lucky.

Fact is, the best thing you can do in life is to arrange to be born in a decent passport country.

Funnily, I liked the fact that our passports were checked. I know it violates the spirit, if not the law, of the Shengen Agreement (Google it if you're interested, this is not a fact-filled sort of book). But truth is, I kind of like people who check carefully to see who is coming into their country. It makes me think they might be careful about other things as well, things like who gets mugged and robbed and raped and killed and burgled and so on.

I liked the German cops, too (here I go with the police thing, again). The three officers on our train were polite and not in any way as officious as one expects German law enforcement to be. They even carefully re-packed and placed the only bag they searched (which, coincidentally I'm sure, belonged to the only black person in the

carriage) back onto the overhead rack from which it came. One of the officers even wished us "have a nice day" with an airy wave as they left the carriage.

And they had just the right look, too. Dutch and Belgian police look like bus company security guards (though I do love the Dutch word "Politie" as it looks so much like "polite" and I think every state ought to have polite police). French police tuck their trousers into their boots for an aggressive tactical look that is entirely negated by a complete lack of physical fitness, ill-fitting sloppy shirts and cheap shoulder badges that look like they've been sewn on by their mothers. But the Germans managed to achieve a perfect balance -- sharp, trim and professional without being needlessly intimidating.

As I said earlier, you can tell a lot about a place by its coppers.

I was starting to feel optimistic about Germany. To be honest, I wasn't too keen on the country at the beginning of this trip. I figured I'd knock off a couple of places just to say I'd been there, then skeedaddle over to somewhere more interesting. But just hours into the country, and based solely on the train, the passengers and three members of local law enforcement, my view was starting to change.

My first stop was Cologne where Germany continued to impress, unlike my guidebook which, it was becoming clear, was an absolute piece of rubbish.

I was well away from the train station and had just crossed the Hohenzollern bridge when the map in the book simply ran out. Miles away from the hostel, with no warning at all, it just stopped. And there were no notes or directions either. The only information concerning the location of the official, 150-room, 506-bed, almost brand-new youth hostel that every backpacker in town wants to find was a tiny little arrow on the edge of the map signifying that the place was someplace thataway somewhere over the Rhine and good fucking luck to you finding it 'cause you ain't getting no help from us.

Wandering aimlessly, I found myself at the local Koln-Deutz regional railway station where a wonderfully cheerful off-duty train conductor not only directed me to the hostel but actually walked me every step of the way there all the while chatting about how nice it was that, since spring had arrived, the trees were now in full bloom.

I was shocked. Where was all that German officiousness that

forms a good 60 percent of British humour and most of Jeremy Clarkson's on-screen persona? I started to feel that, if this kept up, I could come to seriously like Germany.

Amongst other things I liked the fact that most public signage is in German, English and whatever other languages the local authorities think might be handy for visitors. This was, it must be said, in sharp and refreshing contrast to the French who, even to this day, do not seem to have realised that, as the world's number one tourist destination and a major centre for international business, many of the people passing through their major transport hubs may not be entirely au fait (as they say) with the local lingo.

The hostel, when I arrived, was huge, spotless, airy, perfect in every way and totally without charm. My room had six bunks, six chairs, six lockers with exactly two identical hangars per locker. The en-suite toilet and shower with sink and heated towel dryer positively gleamed. Think about that. A heated towel dryer! In a youth hostel!

The sheets were starched to within an inch of their life. I've never seen such a thing. To me, "starched sheets" is just a metaphor for something else. You never actually see "starched sheets." But at the hostel in Cologne, I did. When I flicked them out to make up the bed, I swear the tail end broke the sound barrier. The top was actually a duvet and duvet cover. Of course, no one under the age of 80 who hasn't been in domestic service since the age of seven actually knows how to put a duvet into a cover. The rest of us just shove it in so that 90% of it goes into one corner and the rest is just thin cotton so you freeze all night. Still, it was a nice thought.

Continuing the theme, the shower was the best I would have on the entire journey. What am I saying? With the possible exception of the one in the upstairs bathroom at my sister's house in Montreal, it was the best shower I've had in my entire life. Even a good hostel can fall down on the shower. But at the Cologne-Deutz Youth Hostel the pressure was so strong, I could hardly hold the thing in one hand and was momentarily tempted to pick up a little extra travel money with a little freelance upholstery cleaning. It was that good.

Breakfast (though I didn't appreciate it at the time but would, in days and weeks to come, look back in longing and with fondness) was pretty good, too. There was a plenty of coffee and tea, a selection of sliced cooked meat and cheese, loads of that awful chocolate spread

that, for reasons unknown to civilised people, European parents seem quite happy to feed to their growing children and even, on occasion, eat themselves, various bread rolls, a range of cereals and a choice of two types of those disgusting fruit drinks found only in youth hostels and prison camps.

The place was, as I mentioned, completely soulless and I could easily fill up a few pages with all sorts of cheap jokes about the place being as perfect as a Hitler Youth barracks, but I won't. It was a masterpiece of German efficiency and, do you know what, I was starting to like German efficiency. I think the rest of the world could do with a little German efficiency. Sure, it's expensive. But so is Britain and there you get nothing for your money.

The crowd at the hostel, and at most hostels in the country it seems, was mostly composed of families or large school groups and their adult minders. For the independent foreign traveller it was a bit off-putting.

And the staff didn't help. They weren't exactly rude or anything. But I was subtly made to feel that my apparent lack of a wife and kids or a boisterous fourth form class in tow was clear indication that I must be the sort of middle-aged gentlemen who, thanks to court-enforced probationary conditions, is no longer allowed within 100 yards of any school or playground.

I understand that hostels have to cater to their market, but, as a perfectly innocent person whose only intention was to see the German nation without bankrupting myself, I did rather resent being treated like Uncle Pervy of the Rubber Plastic Mac.

Still, it was all worth it for a hot shower.

The strangest little old man checked into the room just an hour or two after me.

He introduced himself as Mr Hajimay and, while he seemed quite spry and lively, must have been at the very least well into his late fifties. He spoke almost no English nor, as near as I could figure, any other European language. It took me forever to get even the most basic details out of him and, even now, I can not tell you how long he was travelling, what he does for a living or even what part of Japan he comes from.

Incredibly, as I learned when he pointed out his journey on a

map, he'd been all over Europe. He hadn't done it in anything approaching an efficient manner and there was a huge amount of seemingly needless backing and forthing, but he had been absolutely everywhere.

How he got by with his three words of English in all these countries was a mystery to me. He did have a huge European rail timetable that seemed to cover every last train on the continent so perhaps he just figured it out on his own then just marched up to the various ticket offices with a destination and departure time.

Curiously, around 7pm, he announced that mealtime had arrived. "I hungry," he said. "I go to train station."

From his decisive tone, I got the distinct impression that Mr Hajimay considered this to be the only possible option. Hunger means train station; there are no other choices.

I imagined the poor guy travelling all over Europe eating at train stations, all the while dying for some decent rice and fish.

I could almost picture him on his first day back home: "So, Hajimay, how was Europe?"

"Great. Very beautiful. Much to see. But the food was awful."

Hajimay was the only person to share my dorm room and our inability to carry on a conversation wasn't doing my mood any good at all. I was in desperate need of a good long chat and really wanted someone to talk to.

Even at this early stage of the journey, my emotions were all over the map. I seemed to be alternating wildly between brief highs of "Oh my goodness! I can't believe I'm actually here in _____!" followed by crushing lows centred around the view that everywhere seemed pretty much the same and I was only wandering about the continent because I had nothing else to do.

On top of that, I was terribly lonely. My money was draining away like water down a sink. And, as near as I could figure from the few bits of British economic news I was exposed to, it seemed that when I did return to the UK I would probably never work again.

In truth, it was only the fact that I didn't have a home, a job or much of a social life to go back to go back to that, on those early days, kept me on the road. If, at the very beginning of my journey, I'd had a nice comfy flat, a cushy job and a cutey wife waiting for me back in London I would almost certainly have found myself on the first BA

inbound to Heathrow.

Fortunately, as we shall discover in later pages, I didn't.

In search of a night-time drink, I took a walk from the hostel to a Turkish bar area that turned out to be a hooker stroll. This wasn't much of a surprise. It really is amazing how many hostels are located next to red light districts (sex tourists on a budget take note). Something to do with the need to reconcile cheap real estate with a central location, I suppose.

After a couple of beers and numerous offers of some sort of combined all-in-one service called "blowjobsex" I headed back to the hostel to look over my *Lonely Planet* guide book and see what Cologne had to offer.

It wasn't much help. I'd chosen the *Lonely Planet* really just to add an element of gap-tour authenticity to the journey. Young Britons, as well as Aussies, Kiwis and most Canadians almost always go with the *Lonely Planet* or, in a very few cases, the *Rough Guide*.

Americans used to favour the completely rubbish *Let's Go* series. But these days, for Americans, Rick Steves is king of the rucksack trail. He publishes a series of books (plus all sorts of videos, TV shows and web stuff) under the umbrella title of *Europe Through the Back Door* which treats the continent as some sort of strange, mystical, "here there be dragons" sort of place through which only Rick Steves can safely guide you.

In truth, he's not all that bad. His information is as good or better than most; he does encourage people to get off the beaten track a little bit and, aside from a tendency to flog backpacks online, he seems like a decent enough sort of fellow. My problem with Rick Steves isn't with the man himself, it's with the way American backpackers treat him like some sort of travel god.

American backpackers "do Europe" the Rick Steves way with no deviation at all. They will not be swayed. You can offer them a million years of culture, open-to-the-public museums, unlimited free drinks plus half-price lap dances and a complimentary blowjob with every side order of chips, but if it's not in the Rick Steves book, they won't go.

Even more annoying is their habit of talking about the guy as if he were actually there, in person, on their tour. You hear them saying things like "Rick told us to skip the museum, but not miss the boat

tour" as if Steves was right there with them.

And when you ask them "who's Rick?" they look at you like you're the most out-of-it know-nothing clueless muppet they've ever met. I was a good few weeks into my tour before I discovered who Rick Steves was. For many days I thought he was just some keen backpacker who seemed to know every American I ever met.

Cologne's major attraction, according to all the guidebooks, is its cathedral. It's a Roman Catholic church and the official seat of the Archbishop of Cologne and Wikipedia is free and this book isn't so I'm not going to waste any more of your precious time on easily Googled factoids.

I can report that it is big. And dark. And, to be honest, not to my taste. Frankly, it's a grim looking monster that, architecturally speaking, adds about as much warmth and charm to the neighbourhood as an ASDA superstore.

On the other hand, it is conveniently located right next to the central station, it's free to enter and, if your camera has a spot meter and you know how to use it, you can get some nice pictures of people who probably don't believe in God but have nothing else to do but light candles.

And if you happen to have forgotten your camera don't worry. There's a photographic store built right into the side of the cathedral. And it's not just a handy little kiosk for forgetful shutterbugs stuck next to the building. No, not at all. It's a bloody great big thing in dark grey concrete with huge Nikon and Samsung banners across the front of it and plate glass windows stuffed full of photographic equipment and tacky posters offering great deals on Canon SLRs and Tamron lenses.

There's an often told story that the cathedral survived the Second World War bombing because Allied pilots used it as a navigation aid on their way to other targets. It's a good tale, but I suspect that, like most good tales, it's probably not true. I reckon the truth lies in the fact that Bomber Command did not deliberately target churches, the cathedral was easily spotted and therefore avoided by the RAF boys who were probably a lot more interested in knocking out munitions factories, troop transports and U-boat pens.

From the cathedral, I took a long walk along the Hohe strasse, the

pedestrianised main shopping street. To be there, you would have no idea that Germany was supposed to be in the grip of recession. The people were plump, happy and prosperous. The shops seemed to be doing good business. And they all seemed to be open, in sharp contrast to the huge numbers of vacant storefronts that, these days, seem to be a defining feature of British high streets. On the other hand, it was a Friday morning in the working week and, as I navigated my way through the huge crowds, couldn't help thinking "Don't you people have jobs to go to?"

Maybe that was the point.

I stopped a few times to sample the local beers which were fine in the way that all non-Bavarian German beer is fine but unremarkable and for some reason comes delivered in tiny little glasses that are really just a mouthful and a half. Still it was reasonably affordable and, after Paris, it was nice to be in a place where I could order a drink without ringing my bank manager first.

My favourite shop in Cologne has to be the Franz Kettner shop in the high street. Kettner has been proudly serving German psychopaths since 1835 and, even today, does a nice line in personal weaponry for the terminally paranoid. There's a whole range of flick knives, slingshots, electric stun guns and the like. Something for everyone, really. Well, everyone with a psychotic need to inflict harm on fellow man, anyway.

I was especially taken with something called the Perfecta Luftgewehr 45, an absolute snap at just 79 Euros. It was, in reality, an air gun copy of the real thing but I liked the name and had I been able to persuade BA to let me carry it onboard and convince the Home Office to let me bring it into the country it would have been the perfect thing to have on hand next time a clipboard-wielding representative of Dodgy Gas & Electric PLC drops by to discuss the many and various benefits of switching my energy provider. "Take my Perfecta Luftgewehr 45 asshole; I'm sticking with British Gas."

Thinking on it, that's a pretty good marketing line. So if you work for Centrica and are reading this, do feel free to use it at no cost.

Continuing along what was fast becoming a very pleasant walk, I noted the Wall Street Institute School of English where, according to the signs along the front window, you can "learn English ... and your career will take off!" As someone whose only marketable skill is a reasonable command of English I can tell you that this is patently

untruth in advertising.

I passed a place called the *Basic Hairshop* and thought how refreshingly nice it was to see a hair salon not called *A Cut Above, Clip Joint* or *Hair Today*.

And so it went. A nice walk in a nice city filled with nice people.

Aside from the cathedral which, you know, I didn't care for, there aren't many obvious attractions in Cologne. No must-see, don't miss, "gotta get a photo of that" touristy things. It's not that sort of place. What it is, is the sort of place where a whole bunch of generally decent people seem to have got together sometime way back and said "hey everybody, whaddaya say we all work together to make this little bit of the world a nice place to live." And then gone ahead and done it.

I think we need more of that.

I had a train journey planned for the next day so I stopped at an off-licence for a bottle.

Just this far into the journey, I'd already discovered that steady, careful measured drinking is the best way to make long train journeys fly by. It's better than reading, listening to music or fantasising about the fit girl two rows ahead of you in the ever so subtly undersized tank top.

Ever since Antwerp where I'd cleverly rejected a 4.30 Euro English newspaper in favour of a 4.95 Euro small bottle of whiskey, I hadn't looked back.

There are a few things to know about drinking on the train.

Avoid beer. The alcohol volume is so low that the sheer weight of carrying the stuff will break your back. And it's incredible how little shaking and juggling it takes to fizz the stuff up and how many hours of sitting in the can it takes for it to settle down.

Wine is easier but, unless you're very clever, you're likely to attract unwelcome looks from fellow passengers and rail staff.

It's generally legal to drink on trains, but you do want to get along with the locals. If you do bring wine make it expensive stuff. Drink it from a proper glass. Drink it along with fresh bread and a small but discriminating selection of fine local cheeses. If you do, you'll be okay. You may even make friends with the attractive divorcee in 37F. But that's the only way. Any glugging out of the bottle or pouring into a plastic travel mug just won't cut it.

There are two methods of train drinking that work like a charm.

Firstly, simply decant the better part of a bottle of whiskey into a plastic drinks bottle. Try to choose a coloured bottle or a bottle from some drink the approximate colour of whiskey. Failing that, use a bottle from at least four countries and three languages ago. Whatever you do, do make sure that you don't end up trying to pass off a dark amber liquid in a clear plastic bottle marked "Fresh, All-Natural Pure Clear Spring Water."

The second option is the cheap Sangria readily available all over Europe. It comes in 1.5L tetra boxes and weighs in at 7% alcohol, making each box the booze equivalent of a bottle of strong red wine. To the casual observer, the gaily coloured bunches of oranges and lemons on the label suggest fresh squeezed citrus. Once on the train where scrutiny is tighter, follow up your first few glugs with a slightly pained expression then a quizzical frown as you desperately search the box for an English translation of the ingredients list. A Gallic shrug followed by a deep mouthful should do the trick. From then on you can while away the hours getting quietly pickled secure in the knowledge that your fellow passengers are all thinking "Silly foreign twit. He doesn't even realise it's not fruit juice."

With or without alcoholic provisions, train travel is not quite what it used to be.

Trains used to be so romantic back in the days of compartments, those little rolling rooms with a sliding door and two bench seats facing each other. They were so intimate that you really had to engage with, or at least acknowledge, your fellow passengers. Back in the days before compartments gave way to today's bus-like row seating, every time I boarded a train I would imagine myself meeting an exotic black-clad femme fatale who would, naturally, catch my eye as I entered the carriage. In my fantasy world, as our train hurtles into a pitch black tunnel she thrusts a small object into my hand telling me "Take this microchip to the embassy. The lives of thousands are in your hands. Do not fail."

As we emerge headlong from the dark tunnel, the glamorous woman is nowhere to be seen. Only an open window, a blowing curtain and a waft of custom-made perfume attest to her recent presence.

As I recover my wits and I look down at the object in my hand, one question haunts me: "What fucking embassy?"

The HI hostel on the left bank of Lake Geneva is, like so many, smack dab in the middle of the local red light district, in this case an area known as Les Paquis, which must be Swiss for "fat ugly African prostitute."

I kid you not. There were hundreds of them, on every street corner. And almost without exception as hideously unattractive as it is possible to be without actually qualifying for a physical disability pension.

God only knows what is waiting at home for the Swiss businessmen who make up their clientele. I'd have to be married to a physically deformed donkey before I would even consider consorting with, never mind paying good money for, the short-term company of Geneva's whores.

Gruesome hookers excepted, Les Paquis has a lot to recommend it. Like many ethnic minority dominated areas, it was something of a cultural hotbed. In Geneva, if you want clubs and music and nightlife, Les Paquis is the place to be. I went out in the evening with James and Lance, two good-old Aussie boys sharing my dorm room at the hostel. James of Arnhem aside, there really is nothing better than walking into a hostel room, tossing your backpack on your bunk and hearing the words "G'day, Mate. Where ya from then?" in a broad 'strine accent. Hear that and you just know you're in for a good laugh.

We did have a good laugh and more than a few pints. As the evening wore on, James headed back to the hostel but Lance and I stayed on, ending up at Le Flirt, a small Brazilian club on the Rue Sismondi where I alternated my efforts between using my four words of French to try (in vain, as it turned out) to help Lance and the very busty Mara (who clearly had the hots for the young Aussie) make something happen and trying (also in vain) to pull the very do-able Bianca. I wasn't surprised that I got nowhere. But how the much younger and handsomer Lance could strike out was a mystery to me.

As the evening wound down, a totally hot babe who'd been sitting just out of our view made a grand show of kissing everyone in the bar goodnight. As she breezed out the door Mara leaned over to Lance and said "She likes you."

"Couldn't you have told me earlier," Lance moaned in response, while I thought to myself "Hmmm. Mystery solved."

I woke up the following Sunday morning feeling slightly the worse for wear, but otherwise okay. James and Lance were fast asleep and showing no signs of stirring. It is amazing how late young people can sleep. So, rather than wait around for the boys to wake up, I headed out to do a little exploring on my own.

First, I needed some money. I'd exhausted the cashback I taken when I paid for the hostel so I looked around for a bank machine. I couldn't find one anywhere. If you don't know what irony is, let me tell you: it's being in the middle of Switzerland and unable to find a bank. Fact is, Swiss banks aren't what we think of as banks. To us ordinary folks, a bank is a place where a small amount of your money goes in at the start of a month and comes out in dribs and drabs minus service charges over the next few weeks.

Not so to the Swiss. To the Swiss, a bank is a place where vast amounts of other peoples' money goes in in huge lump sums and stays there, mostly untouched accumulating vast rates of interest, pretty much forever. It's called private banking and is everywhere. Bank machines, on the other hand, are not.

Eventually I did manage to locate one of Geneva's two cashpoints and loaded up with enough francs to see me through my visit.

I really liked the idea of walking around with a pocketful of Swiss francs. In my mind, Swiss francs only ever appear in spy movies and diamond heist films. Sophisticated high-society cat burglars stash their suavely-gotten gains in Swiss francs. International *Day of the Jackal*-esque assassins refuse to be paid in anything else. The idea that little old me could wander around town buying trivial things like beer and pizza in the official currency of James Bond movies and John le Carre novels was cool beyond words.

Stashed with cash, I took a boat ride across Lake Geneva for a look at the main part of the city, the old town where rich white people work in quiet banks, eat bland food and drive uninteresting cars.

It was as dull as a Mormon wedding. The entire place was shut up tighter than a drum.

Having said all that, there is no denying the fact that Geneva is a visually lovely city. It's a bit like Bruges in the sense that a camera randomly pointed anywhere will produce a postcard-perfect photo.

I wandered aimlessly along wide, spotless, deserted boulevards and tiny, also spotless, cobblestoned back streets.

Geneva is a perfect city to get lost in. It's built on a hill next to a bloody great lake and they've conveniently installed a huge water fountain smack dab in the middle of the harbour. So no matter how lost you are you simply walk downwards until you hit the waterfront, then head towards the jet. It may take a little while to get there, but it will get you home.

Wandering through town, the picture-perfect scenery kept me interested for a while. But eventually I began to get bored. I knew I was getting bored when I came across the Restaurant des Carnivores and seriously considered dropping in and ordering vegetarian just for a bit of fun.

At one point I thought I'd discovered some action, or at least a bit of life. I heard the low hum of what seemed to be lively conversation coming from the top of an alley. I strolled up quickly and eagerly only to discover that the alley was filled to capacity with what, as near as I could figure, was the entire congregation of something called the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Geneva. I don't know what they were all talking about, but it is a measure of my desperation for human company that I seriously considered dropping in and taking part.

Walking along, I passed a McDonald's which, in contrast to the rest of Geneva, was actually open. And, like so many McDonald's in the nicer parts of Europe, managed to be discreet and understated. The outdoor signage was small and tasteful and the only yellow Ms were on the canopies covering a rather nice outdoor McPatio. McDonald's does this sort of thing a lot in the prettier bits of the continent. They tone down their normal brash in-your-face fuck-you frontage and actually make an attempt to blend in with their environment. It's rather nice coming from a business that, basically, sells shitty meat in a bun. But I couldn't help but wonder why they can't do that everywhere. Why do they build nice little restaurants in quaint little places like Geneva, but put up horrid orange and yellow monstrosities everywhere else. I don't get it. Still, architecture aside, I'm inclined to forgive McDonald's a lot as they are, without any doubt, Europe's leading provider of free toilets.

As I sat outdoors enjoying what Mickey D laughably calls a hamburger, a gaudily decorated police car cruised by. The phrase "gay police car" probably doesn't pop up all that often. But if it did, the Geneva police would qualify.

Their clothes weren't any better. Geneva police wear the oddest uniform. It's a sort of cross between Lance Armstrong's racing jersey and a casual summer number from the Captain Picard *Star Trek* Activewear Collection. It's got this odd trim running across the shoulders and seems to be made of the sort of fabric that looks space-age but probably itches like hell in the summer heat.

All-in-all, with the flamboyant cars and the bum-bandit uniforms, I wasn't sure if I was watching a visible deterrent to crime or Geneva's Pride parade.

I started imagining a scenario where a Geneva cop is running down the street chasing a baddie.

He calls out "Stop!"

And every other person in the street jumps in with "... in the name of love ... before you break my heart."

Diana Ross would be proud.

Back at the hostel, yet another well-dressed African gentleman checked into our room. This was not unusual.

Second only to its role as a banking centre, Geneva is also host to the United Nations. Many delegates from the more impoverished nations stay at the backpackers hostel. They dress up in suits and head off to conferences looking all very prosperous and important. But, come the end of the day when their western colleagues retire to their swanky business hotels for a night of hotel bar drinking and pay-on-demand TV porn, the less well-off delegates go back to the backpackers hostel and make do with a bunk bed in a shared dorm with a bunch of gap year kids.

After a time, and just for a bit of fun, the Aussies and I started telling these delegates that we were in town for the "Global Symposium on Organic Sustainable Agricultural Re-Fertilisation" or, in plain English, "The Bullshit Conference."

Reading this now, it sounds utterly implausible. How could anyone fall for such a line of crap. But you'd be surprised how many cheap-suited Africans bought it.

Keep that in mind next time your local MP starts blathering on about how the UN is key to world peace and global happiness.

It's not.

It's a very expensive talking show for overpaid powerpoint-pushers who really ought to jump off the public sector gravy train and

get a real job.

You can borrow bicycles for up to four hours for free from the city of Geneva and go have a look around. I liked that.

I liked the fact that, sometime in the past, in some meeting room, somewhere in the city, someone in the government said "Wouldn't it be great if people from around the world who've voluntarily and without coercion chosen to visit our town could explore and discover our community in a way that's convenient for the visitor, healthy, quiet, inexpensive and good for the environment? What can we do to make this possible?" and then a bunch of other government people said "Good idea, Bob (or Frank or Harvey or Klaus or Deiter or Doris or Helga or whatever his or her name actually was), how about we lend them some pushbikes at no cost?" And everybody else in the room raised their hands and voted "yes."

We need more stuff like that.

All of which is how I, plus James and Lance from Melbourne, Alice from Perth and Emily from Oregon in the USA spent a divinely lovely day cycling around the sublime perfection that is Lake Geneva.

We travelled for about seven or eight kilometres through the centre of town on both banks of the river then a few clicks out of the city until we found a supermarket with some picnic tables outside.

Taking the hint, we popped in, pooled our money and bought enough bread, cheese, olives, cooked meats and cold beer for a basic, yet hearty picnic lunch. Simple stuff, but entirely because of the food, the company, the surroundings and the weather, was one of my favourite meals of the entire journey.

Cycling back towards town, I pulled out my camera to record a little video to send home and also post on my blog. I rolled up next to James, stuck the lens in his general direction and said "Hey mate. Say something nice to my Mom." Which he did.

Alice, was equally helpful and recorded a message as well.

Back at the hostel in our dorm room the boys asked to have a look at the pics and video. I handed over my camera, they hit play and everything seemed fine, at first. The film of James turned out pretty well.

Not so much with Alice. I'd been hand-holding the camera, not looking through the viewfinder, just roughly pointing the lens also in

her general direction hoping to get the right image in the frame. Unfortunately, when filming Alice I'd got her general direction slightly wrong, aimed a little low and ended up with a short filmed sequence of her bosom which was, to be honest, one of Australia's most impressive exports.

To add to the embarrassment, James and Alice had developed a little hostel fling. So there was I, at least twice Alice's age, with a full minute and a half of my dorm-mate's girl's boobs on my camera. I immediately felt like the sort of creepy old man who wears plastic raincoats even on sunny days and isn't allowed near schoolyards. I couldn't hit the delete key fast enough or apologise often enough but fortunately both Lance and James saw the humour in the situation and, not for the first time on this journey, I thanked my lucky stars I'd fallen in with Aussies.

Switzerland has four official languages -- French, German, Italian and something called Romansch which seems to be generally ignored. They don't try to do all three everywhere. They just operate in the language of the region, which as someone who hails from a country that tries to force two official languages down everybody's throat, strikes me as an eminently sensible system.

Geneva, for example, is French so, in that area, the post office is called La Poste. In German regions the logo is the same but it is known as Die Post and in the Italian parts of the country it goes by the name La Posta.

Trains work the same way. The Swiss Federal Railway is called the SBB CFF FFS, an unwieldy moniker but one that nicely reflects three of the four official languages (Romansch is once again ignored as, apparently, gypsies don't take trains).

The trains themselves are programmed to know where in the country they are and communicate accordingly. As you move from a French region to a German one, the onboard LED display automatically changes the "next stop" notice from "Prochain arret" to "Naechster halt." It's clever and works quite well.

I'm not sure how far they take this concept. Do letters sent by Die Post get there quickly and efficiently? In La Poste regions, do you have to slip the mailman a few francs and offer him a glass of pastis before getting your letters? And does La Posta simply discard all postage undelivered while the mailman goes for an espresso?

And how does the concept work on trains? I can easily imagine an arrangement where, as you travel from the German-speaking north to the Italian south the schedule falls progressively to bits but the coffee gets better and better.

Wherever you are in Switzerland, soldiers are a common sight. They're all over the place. It is a widely held misconception that, as a famously neutral country, Switzerland is relatively undefended. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, it's essentially an armed camp.

There are so many soldiers in Switzerland that if the UK adopted the same ratio of military personnel to civilians, we would have more than a million men and women in uniform and under arms. The country has enough nuclear bunkers to shelter every man woman and child with enough room left over for overnight guests and people just passing through. Bridges come with built-in tank traps. Major tunnels are pre-wired with explosives. Every male citizen has to do a stint in the army and then keep a machine gun and a box of bullets locked up in his house. It is a seriously "don't fuck with me" country.

And yes, they actually do carry Swiss Army Knives, though (and here comes another genuine Euro-fact) they're green not red and don't come with a corkscrew.

After three fine days in Geneva, I hopped aboard the SBB CFF FFS train to Munich. I have to admit, I was a little shocked.

Before this trip I always thought of the Swiss as uber Germans, even more German than the Germans. So I figured that if German trains were clean, well-maintained and punctual, Swiss trains must be even more so. But that was not the case. The Swiss trains were actually sort of old and run down. They weren't dirty or shabby. Just a little past their prime.

This, as I later learned, is very typical of the Swiss. They like things to be clean and well ordered and punctual and efficient. But they don't much care for spending money. So, unlike the British who run things into the ground until they fall to pieces or the Germans who replace everything with new as soon as the shine comes off the paintwork, the Swiss take care of and carefully maintain what they have in the hope that it will last as long as possible before eventually needing replacement. This attitude probably explains why, to my great

surprise, Germany actually looks newer, cleaner and sleeker than Switzerland.

Of course, it's all relative. On any sort of world scale both countries are spotless and perfect. I was impressed, and I come from the UK and Canada, two fine nations. God only knows what Nigerians and Pakistanis think when they go there.

Leaving Switzerland and arriving in Munich I immediately picked up what was fast becoming a love affair with Germany. The tourist office was easy to find, right outside the spotlessly clean, bustling-yet-organised (natch) hauptbahnhof or central station. A hugely detailed city map was available as was a trio of smiling, helpful, knowledgeable tourist assistants.

I asked one to point out the hostel on my map. "It's not on the map," he said. "It's five kilometres from here."

"Oh, I thought I might just walk it," I said.

I'd lost a bit of weight and flattered myself with the thought that I was starting to look like the sort of fellow for whom a five kilometre hike at the end of an eight-hour train journey was but merely a snip.

"Walk it if you wish," he said, with just the slightest hint of a snigger. "I will call and ask them to prepare you breakfast."

Who says the Germans have no sense of humour?

I took the tube, or as it's called in Germany, the U-Bahn. And, my oh my, don't the Germans do this sort of thing well. For starters, I got a three-day unlimited pass for 12 Euros, an amount that will just about get you to Heathrow and back in London.

And what a lovely subway it was -- big, wide carriages with plenty of room, huge, spotless, airy stations and not a shred of litter anywhere. Even the advertising posters were nicely inserted into proper frames rather than being glued to the walls. And there wasn't that incessant barrage of nanny-state messages that makes London tube travel even more annoying than it has to be. In Germany, the stations are virtually silent. Inside the train, the driver announces the next stop and tells you when he's about to close the doors. That's it. No "mind the gap" "keep all your belongings with you" or "report all suspicious items to a member of staff."

Once you've bought your ticket, the U-Bahn operates on a semi-honour system. There are, apparently, ticket inspectors, though I

never saw one. But basically they trust you to validate your ticket and, once that's done, you simply walk in and out. There are none of those automatic barriers that won't let you in or out without producing a valid ticket.

Even the escalators are clever. At small stations they have just one. It sits dormant until you approach, at which point it starts up in whatever direction you're going. Clever.

These are thinking people.

Now I know all this ranting will bring the anoraks out of the woodwork, so let me say here and now that I understand -- sort of.

I know the London Underground is a million years old, runs thousands of miles below the Earth's crust, carries a quadrillion people a gazillion miles every day, and that Harry Beck was a genius for inventing the Tube map.

But still. Come on.

You can't ride around Munich's underground (or pretty much any subway system in continental Europe, for that matter) for long without thinking that there must be a better way, that everything about a metro doesn't have to be dark and dingy and smelly and generally depressing.

I mean, in Munich they don't even have rats!

The Munich hostel was a typical German affair -- big, modern, loads of amenities, but clearly set up as low-priced accommodation for German families on holiday and not terribly interested in the independent traveller. Even the signs were in German only.

And, once again, there was no self catering kitchen. "We don't get much demand for kitchens," the front desk manager told me when I complained. "Mostly we cater to families or school groups who take the full board."

And boy do they ever cater to families and school groups who take the full board. There were bloody screaming kids everywhere. Every place I went the little bastards were running about my feet.

I like young people, but I really can't stand kids. And I absolutely abhor groups. I don't care what they are a group of -- kids, old folks, milkmen, astronauts, deep sea divers; it doesn't matter to me. When you put a number of people into a group they immediately converge and become a single entity. The individual parts then relate only to

each other and the whole thing moves as a single mass object much like a bull in a china shop. Kids naturally form groups, which is why people like me hate them.

Germany is almost obsessively clean and well-cared for.

Coming out of my hostel I saw a man pick up a handful of litter that had been dumped on a roadside electrical box. He carried it all the way down the street, then turned left and walked half a block and deposited it in a rubbish bin before entering the tube station.

Can you imagine such a thing happening in England? I was so dumbfounded I actually followed him and took photos.

Not long after that and still feeling a bit gobsmacked by the freelance litter collector, I came across something near the Karlsplatz that, to me, seemed to personify Germany. It was a pedestrian underpass being renovated. Nothing special in that. But I looked more closely at the yet-to-be-tackled parts and it really wasn't in that bad shape. It actually had quite a few years of life left in it. But they were fixing it up anyway.

And then I realised that, in Germany, they repair things when they're starting to look a little tired. They don't, as we so often seem to do in England, wait until something has absolutely collapsed around our ankles before deciding to fix it.

They take care of problems before they happen.

Walking is easy in Munich. Streets are well marked and notable sights are well signposted. The Marienplatz was a logical start and pretty soon I ended up at the Hofbrauhaus which my guidebook described as "the ultimate cliché of Munich beer halls" so naturally I was drawn to it like a moth to a flame.

It's huge inside and seems to be divided up with different outlets serving different tables. It was a bit like a shopping mall food court, but for beer. The noise was bombastic, it was dim and cavernous and, cliché or not, I liked it immediately.

Trouble was, the minimum number of people seated at any table seemed to be two. It just wasn't a place for a guy on his own to sit down and have himself a beer. I wandered the length and breadth of the place but couldn't find a spot where I'd be spared the pitying looks of patrons and serving wenches alike. So I left.

Fortunately, just a few steps down the road a quieter brauhaus

beckoned. I stuck a tentative nose in, saw an older gent at the bar nursing a beer and reading the local paper, so feeling welcome, I breezed in. A half-litre of cool, refreshing, delicious Augustiner beer was not long in coming.

There was only the one beer on offer, which I think is a wonderful idea. I don't know how often down the pub I've struggled to get my round in -- "a Stella, two Foster's, two Carlings and a Peroni, no, sorry, make that one Carling and two Peronis," and so on and so on. How much easier it would be to breeze in with a casual "six beers, please" then settle into conversation. I like that.

I liked the fact that there was an old lady taking care of the toilet. Sure, you have to tip her 20 or 30 cents after you pee, but the toilet is spotless. Having gone for a wee in many of Britain's world-class collection of disgusting pub toilets, I'd happily pay a token amount for a clean loo.

I also love the fact that, in a Munich pub, you drink round after round until you're done, then you pay the tab. The waitress or bartender simply marks your beer mat with a line for each beer ordered. At the end of the session, you settle up and go on your way.

Can you imagine such a thing over here? By the end of the night half the patrons would be too bladdered to pay and the other half would have long since done a runner. There'd be all sorts of shenanigans with drinkers swapping their beer mats for ones marked up with fewer drinks. But in Germany, it works. If you drink five beers, you pay for five beers. That's just the way it is. They're that sort of people.

Of course, they're not above a little fiddle. The bartender told me that it is not unheard of for a German man, after a heavy night on the piss, to mark just two or three lines on a spare beer mat and take it home to show the wife.

I only stayed for one beer. As the pub was mere steps from the Marienplatz right in the heart of the tourist district, I expected to pay through the nose for my drink. What a pleasant surprise it was to be presented with a bill for just three Euros.

When I told the lovely serving fraulein that a pint of crap lager cost six Euros in Paris she simply smiled and said "Here in Bavaria everything is better. And the beer is the best."

I was really starting to like this country.

From the centre, I headed southwest of the city to the Deutsches Museum which promised to be a celebration of "German science and technology from early origins to the present day." Sadly, it was a bit of a disappointment.

There was a rather good exhibition using scale models showing the development of sea transport from wooden boats up to container ships and double-hulled supertankers. There was an American-made Luftwaffe F-104 Starfighter from the 1970s. It was the sharpest thing there and I must say that while I'm no Nazi I do love the fact that the German air force is still called the Luftwaffe.

An Me 262, the first-ever fighter jet, was on display. It looked pretty authentic in all respects but one. Unlike any every Me 262 photo I've ever seen (including the one on the display next to the jet itself), there was no swastika painted on the tail.

Later, back in the UK, I wrote to the museum and received an e-mail from one Hans Holzer, curator of aeronautics to the effect that "our Me 262 (and other aircraft like our Me 163 and Me 109) do have not a swastika. To be historically accurate, these aircraft would have a swastika on its tail. But these days here in Germany it is not allowed to publicly display the swastika." Interesting answer and one more Euro-fact to add to the tally.

Perhaps the most impressive exhibit was a centre section of an Airbus A300 cut away to show the innards of the fuselage, wing, landing gear and engine. When you see how much paid cargo sits below the passenger cabin of a modern jetliner you start to realise how those £400 transatlantic fares are possible. You also start to worry about the relative lack of security applied to air cargo.

And I don't care much for Airbus.

I'm scared witless of flying. Takeoff scares the hell out of me. Turbulence makes me fearful. And landing causes me cold sweats.

So I am very concerned about the aircraft I fly in. Which is why I will always fly in a Boeing and will always do what I can to avoid an Airbus.

Boeing is a solid company, with a long history, with a military backing, with a corporate culture created over years and years.

Airbus, on the other hand, is a bogus company. It's a fake business created by a bunch of Eurocrats. It has no history. It has no culture. It's a make-work project for the EU.

You can see the difference in the aircraft both companies produce. The Boeing 747 Jumbo Jet is a beautiful thing. It is graceful and elegant and sweet and lovely and just one look makes you want to fly in her. The Airbus A380 Superjumbo, by contrast, is an ungainly, ugly, horrid looking monstrosity that inspires no romance whatsoever.

Airbus planes are designed and built by boring office workers.
Boeing's are made by romantic people who love to fly.

There was an open section of the European Spacelab, but, to be honest, unlike the airplane, it left me cold. I like *Star Trek* a bit (especially the last series with that sexy, pouting Vulcan sub-commander) but modern real-life, so-called "space exploration" does nothing for me.

Truth is, these things are not spacecraft at all. They're just satellites with people in them. The Space Shuttle, for example, goes about 250 miles above the surface of the Earth. I've flown further for a stag do. The moon, by contrast, is some 250,000 miles away. Getting there took some doing and the moon mission guys deserve some serious respect.

Frankly, I think the NASA crowd of today have a bit of a cheek calling themselves astronauts. It's not exactly *The Right Stuff*.

Aside from the fighter jets and chopped up Airbus, a lot of the museum was, in truth, rather dull, though the huge throngs of German school-kids seemed excited.

I, on the other hand, couldn't bring myself to see the "Power Machinery" exhibit or the showcase of "Bridges and Hydraulic Engineering," "Machine Tools" or the "Welding and Soldering" exhibition. Even the aeronautical section was jammed full of engine after engine all of which looked pretty much identical to me but attracted a good bit of attention from Germany's engineers of tomorrow.

I suppose this is the difference between our two countries and the reason why the Germans will forever be in all respects superior to us in all areas save television, pop music and stand-up comedy.

According to recent polls, the vast majority of British young people aspire to be football players, glamour models or reality TV stars. The German equivalent, as near as I could tell, wants to invent the next great aero engine.

That's why Germany designs and manufactures cars, trains,

automobiles and a range of stylish and reliable household appliances while we run hedge funds and live on benefits.

Once I had my fill of engineering and hydraulics, I took a walk up to something called the English Garden which was just the sort of inner city park I love to death. It was huge with carefully tended trees, mini lakes, quaint bridges and lively waterfalls. On the vast lawn it looked as if half of Munich was out soaking up the hot sun and 30 Celsius temps.

However, on one count I was disappointed. My guidebook had promised nude sunbathing and I was rather looking forward to seeing a cross-section of Munich's female population bathing topless. But I saw not a single bare breast and, I tell you, I investigated thoroughly. It was the only disappointment of my visit.

There was some sort of election going on while I was in Munich. One of the signs carried the slogan "Kompetent fur Frauen" which meant nothing to me. But I liked the idea that "competent" is a word that appeals to the electorate.

As a voter, I loved it. Forget "Change We Can Believe In" or "New Labour, New Britain."

Just give me a little competence and I'll be happy.

I left Munich for the small city of Regensburg near the Czech border. I was initially pleased to see that the train was one of the old designs with compartments rather than aircraft-style row seating (though, sadly, I was not called upon to do anything important with microfilm).

I was also pleased to discover that the Deutsche Bahn website covers all of Europe, even those parts where the DB does not run. Want to go from Helsinki to Stockholm? Go to www.bahn.de and it will tell you!

You can't buy a ticket. But the good old D Bahn will tell you where to go and how to get there and how long it will take and my-oh-fucking-my aren't those Germans excellent.

And that, my friend, is a definite Euro-fact.

I'd elected to start breaking up the longer journeys. The Cologne-

Geneva leg and the Geneva-Munich trips were each longer than a transatlantic flight and while slightly more spacious and with a much better view, offered no in-flight movie or pretty stewardesses to make the time fly. My on-board boozing was also becoming less and less effective. So I opted to split the Munich-Prague run into a multi-stage Munich-Regensburg-Pilsen-Prague trip. As an added benefit, I was hoping to see some of the smaller places along the route.

I had been feeling that I was doing rather too much racing from big city to big city. I'd been told that Regensburg was compact and beautiful, the hostel was able to accommodate me and so, all-in-all, it seemed like a good place to rest up.

The train compartment was stifling hot when I boarded, but I was at least lucky to get a seat. Others ended up camped out in the corridor sitting on their luggage. I opened the window fully, tinkered with a ventilation lever that, as near as I could tell, was connected to nothing and tried with no success to open a nearby companionway window.

It was all in vain. We spent 20 minutes on the platform and I spent every one of them drenched in sweat wishing the minutes away until we could start moving and get some sort of a breeze.

Finally the train set off, at which point a tiny red-faced German woman, so short that her feet were well off the floor when she sat down, and her equally elderly, though slightly taller and with a face like there was a bad smell, neighbour entered the carriage.

The neighbour stood up and closed the window half way. A third woman seated next to me shrugged and explained that the bossy short thing didn't like the wind blowing her hair around. Bossy then barked out a few more commands and the other woman stood up and completely closed the window. I tried to say something but just got resigned shrugs from the rest of the compartment and a stream of angry German from Shorty. Finally, I got up in a huff and left the compartment in search of a better ventilated seat. There was none to be had, though I noted that the people in every other compartment had their windows fully open.

When I returned there was some discussion in German and, eventually, Shorty allowed the window open a crack. But for the rest of the journey the tiny little witch made a huge command performance of sitting with her coat held up as a shield between her head and the thin trickle of air coming into the train. When someone in the

companionway finally managed to get a window open, Shorty barked out a new set of orders until her neighbour got up and shut the door.

What a complete and utter officious witch. She was the worst sort of German stereotype and if I'd come across her early in the trip before I discovered how warm and open and friendly German people are, I'd likely have turned back. I'm not a violent man, but by this point I was seriously considering slipping off my socks and unleashing the full force and power of my slow-release malodorous sandals.

As it was, I simply reached over, wrapped my hands around her neck, squeezed her carotid artery hard with both thumbs and held her, fighting in vain for her last gasps of air until her tiny legs stopped twitching and her nasty little body went limp.

Okay, I didn't really do that. But I should have. And if I see her again, I will.

And thus I arrived in Regensburg where a cheerful lady at the Deutsche Bahn office gave me a free map and a warm smile, marked the location of the station and the hostel and wished me a pleasant day, thus restoring my faith in the fine and wonderful and genuine goodness of the German people.

Regensburg was, as expected, very very pretty. It's a sort of German Bruges but not so much of a Disney theme park.

I did like it, but I didn't really see the point. Munich is almost as attractive and it's a real city. Real people live there. They have real jobs, raise real families and so on.

Regensburg didn't seem real at all. There were too many upscale clothing shops. Restaurants were everywhere but there didn't seem to be a supermarket in sight. And I have never in all my life seen so many hair stylists in one place.

But it wasn't a bad place and I spent a pleasant few hours wandering its mix of wide shopping boulevards and tiny cobblestoned back alleys, stopping for the occasional cold beer and noting, with a considerable amount of regret, that I would soon be leaving Germany.

By now I think I've made it clear that I really do like Germany. I don't love it. It's not a place you love. But I liked it. A lot. A whole lot.

The Germans are, to be fair, a little serious. Their food is nothing special. And their national love affair with David Hasselhoff does take some explaining. But aside from these niggling details, they do seem

to have things pretty much right.

The place is spotless, even busy places like train stations and high streets.

Public transport is reasonably priced, clean, spacious, comfortable and generally on time (but not so on-time that you can make Jeremy Clarkson-esque German punctuality jokes about it, which I think is nice).

German companies build a wide range of well-made, high-quality, nicely-designed products that real people actually want to buy and own.

If the youngsters I met at various hostels and in the museum are any indication, German children (even the ones sharing a cheeky joint on the steps outside the Deutsches Museum aeronautical exhibit) are well-educated, thoughtful, approachable and optimistic.

The police are efficient and authoritative without being overbearing and are sharply dressed without looking like robocop.

The country just works. And our country, to be brutally honest, doesn't.

So let's copy them. Let's just take everything we have a problem with and just copy Germany.

Trains, for example. The old British Rail was by all accounts rubbish. And today there's general agreement that the current system of 6,000 different companies running 500 types of trains over a 100-year-old clapped-out set of tracks doesn't work either.

So let's just copy Germany.

And when I say copy, I don't mean have a quick look around, pick up a few tips and see if we can use them back home. I mean copy the whole thing.

Make an exact carbon copy. Buy the trains they buy. Paint them the same colour. Duplicate exactly their ownership, management and labour structure. Schedule the trains the same way they do. Use the same brand of toilet paper in the loo.

Imagine the UK Bahn -- fast, efficient, economical and comfy. Imagine a rail system that promotes its on-time performance not with station posters bragging about an XYZ% record but with trains that depart pretty much when scheduled and arrive roughly when expected. Imagine a rail system where no passenger has ever heard the phrase "we apologise for the delay due to leaves on the track."

Let's copy their cities, too. Let's keep them clean and safe and stop all that bloody littering.

And let's start educating our kids the German way -- you know with maths and science and languages and the sort of basic stuff you can actually use in life.

Maybe if we drop all that multicultural diversity in the workplace crap and focus more on real knowledge and skills we'll end up with a few more engineers and doctors and scientists and, hopefully, slightly fewer glamour models, X-Factor hopefuls, footballer's wives and *Big Brother* contestants.

And while I'm on a rant, let's finally stop it with the fucking war jokes. For Chrissakes, it was 65-odd years ago. It's ancient history. And two world wars won with (let's be honest here) a heck of a lot of Allied help, does not make us equal.

It may be all well and good to poke wartime fun at them on *Fawlty Towers* and make cheap jokes on *Top Gear*, but the fact is, we could learn a helluva lot from the Germans.

We could learn to make stuff.

And clean up after ourselves.

And read a book from time to time.

And do your fucking homework.

Of course, they could learn a few things from us, too. They could learn that a beach towel does not make a deck chair yours. That a pint of beer does not need two inches of foam on the top. And that no man over the age of 35 has any business wearing a Speedo in public.

Still, Speedos and Hoff songs aside, they've got their shit together in a way we can only dream of.

Pilsen certainly isn't the best introduction to the Czech Republic. For a nation hoping to be seen as an exciting part of the new Europe, Pilsen doesn't really help the cause.

Naturally, it's got the usual collection of churches, cobbled streets, historic old town and so on and so forth. But that's just old stuff and everybody's got that. And outside of the touristy bits, it's pretty run-down.

Pilsen's only claim to fame, and the only reason I went there, is its being the birthplace of Pilsner beer. The popular brand Pilsner Urquell is brewed here and naturally, brewery tours are on offer. Sadly, the tour isn't worth the full hour or 150 crowns it demands.

Our guide was pleasant enough, but her English just wasn't up to the job. And it wasn't really a brewery tour, more of a brewery museum with a dollop of advertising thrown in. Aside from an overlong look at an ultra-modern bottling plant and a quick peek at some copper vats, we saw virtually nothing that is actually used to brew beer today.

There was a reasonable video presentation about how beer is made. It's quite a simple process. Essentially ...

Ha! Ha! Gotcha! I bet you thought you were in for three or four pages on beer brewing. Truth is, it all went in one ear and out the other. I've been on dozens of brewery tours in cities all over the world and I still can't tell you what a barley or a malt is.

And let's face it, if you're a home-brew anorak, you already know how it's done. And if you're not, you're highly unlikely to say to yourself "Boy oh boy, Mark sure makes beer-making sound easy. I think I'll give it a go." So let's spare you 1,000 words of boredom and chemistry and get back to the tour.

We went down into the (no longer used) old cellars, drank some (no longer sold) unfiltered pilsner from old-fashioned (but long since made obsolete), oak barrels.

The truth is that Pilsner Urquell is a perfectly fine, mass-market lager made in huge quantities at massive factories using the latest high technology. There's nothing wrong with that, but it makes for a rubbish tour.

Perhaps the most truthful moment of the whole tour came when we were taken upstairs to see some of the newer copper vats. Off to one side sat three chubby middle-aged men staring at computer screens.

"What are they doing?" asked a member of our group.

Deadpan, and without a trace of irony, our guide replied "they're brewing beer."

The beer tour wasn't the only rip-off in Pilsen. My hostel manager kindly let me pay in Euros at the going rate of 25 crowns to the Euro then "accidentally" tapped in 24 crowns on his calculator. And the young lady in the skin-tight jeans at the currency exchange tried to pass off my £55 as £35 until I called her on it.

Clearly, I wasn't in Germany any more.

It wasn't all bad. Along with Christian and Eivend a pair of nice young backpackers from Norway I'd run into on the brewery tour, I spent a wonderful beer-soaked night at Pilsen's coolest night spot, the Archa Cocktail Music Bar where young Lukas and more seasoned Pavel did a creditable imitation of Tom Cruise and Bryan Brown out of the film *Cocktail*.

Tipping isn't customary at the Archa, but it's perfectly acceptable to buy the bartenders a drink. But unlike pubs at home where the staff keep bought drinks for later, the Archa staff drink as they go. Fortified by a steady stream of vodka shots purchased, well, by me, mostly, Lukas and Pavel's bar performance actually grew better and better. What started off as an amusing bit of long-pouring became, by the end of the night, a virtuoso performance of bottle spinning and glass tossing that, to be truthful, would put Tom and Bryan to shame.

As an added bonus, I was delighted to meet two lovely young ladies who had seen my television advert with the guy who blows up the microwave and needs a short-term loan from a dodgy financial services company. They loved the ad and while I didn't get laid or anything, for a few minutes I basked in the fame.

Christian and Eivend and I said our goodnights and, before heading off to our different hostels, swapped e-mail addresses and promised to try and get together somewhere along the backpacker trail. We never would, of course, but it felt good to be asked.

Felt good, that is, until I remembered that scene in an episode of *Friends* where Tom Selleck thinks he's still young and active enough to hang out with Chandler and Joey until they accidentally tell him that he's "really cool, not like *our* Dad."

Sort of took the bloom off the evening.

Next morning I woke up to discover that, when consumed in vast quantities, Pilsner Urquell leaves one feeling surprisingly good and hangover free the next morning.

I'd also had time to give the whole "cool or Dad-like" thing some deeper thought. The way I figured it, the young fellas had had plenty of opportunity to head off on their own without making offence. In fact, without me on the team, they could probably have pulled a couple of the birds in the bar. And it wasn't as if I'd been buying more than my share of the beer, so they sure weren't hanging around for

free booze. All of which meant that, while I probably wasn't cool, I certainly wasn't Dad-like either. So, like Tom in *Friends*, I ended up feeling pretty okay.

Of course, unlike Tom, I would never get to spend two seasons banging Courtney Cox. So it wasn't all roses and lilies.

The train to Prague didn't do anything more to enhance the Czech Republic's modernising reputation. It was a clapped out old communist-era junker. You could still see the old CSD logo stamped on the rubbish box. But at under six Euros for a two-hour ride, it was a bargain.

The Czech countryside was nothing to write home about. I'd never seen so many rusted out bits of ancient farm machinery, dumped cars and strange things made entirely of corrugated steel. But things started to perk up as we approached Prague.

Prague is one of the very few places on this journey that I'd visited before. I was there in the early '90s, a few years after the commies got booted and shortly after the country quietly and peacefully split in two.

From the start, I could see that the old girl had had some work done. The dingy old rail station was either all-new or completely done over. And the city, if not completely transformed, at least had a facelift.

It looked almost like what the Czechs imagine their country to be -- a modern, bustling, thriving, European city. Compared to my first visit, the taxis, while still a rip-off, were modern and clean. Some of the cops looked almost like the sort of people who might, from time to time, fight crime and possibly, if they didn't have anything else going on, help people. And the ordinary citizens seemed to have lost that ground-down vaguely criminal demeanour that they used to possess (and still do in places like Pilsen).

My hostel turned out to be a nice surprise and a complete contrast to my previous experience. When I'd arrived at 3am on an early summer's day in 1993 I'd rented a room in an apartment block from a sleazy tout named Pavel who spent most of his time trying to change money and sell me women.

This time, thanks to a recommendation from my normally useless but in this case rather helpful *Lonely Planet* guidebook, I ended up at a place called Miss Sophie's which, despite its dubious sounding name,

isn't actually a brothel.

Just ten minutes walk from the central station, it was the most upscale hostel I would encounter on the entire journey. The rooms were huge, bright, spotless and airy. The ensuite bathroom facilities were modern and elegant. It even had a kitchen.

A charming, helpful attractive young woman checked me into my room and gave me, at no cost, the most useful city map I've ever been given at a hostel. Most hostels make do with some sort of local freebie map. Miss Sophie's map was custom-made and packed with useful local info. All the major sites, hidden treasures, green spaces, day trips from Prague, public transit details, tips on taking cabs, tipping, staying generally safe and loads more was on the map. There was even a list of handy phonetical Czech phrases so I can heartily say "Dje-koo-yi Miss Sophie", though to be honest I can no longer remember what that means.

The trouble with Prague is that it's simply far too touristy. It's full of lovely buildings, but every single one is surrounded by tour group after tour group. I truly believe that if you were to walk through Prague holding a coloured umbrella above your shoulder you would, like some sort of Pied Piper of Tourism, attract a huge following which you could then, just for a bit of a laugh and a chuckle, lead into a deep river and onto certain death.

Of course Paris has loads of tourists, and London and Rome and ... well, lots of other places. But unlike those real cities that, amongst their many and varied activities, attract a lot of visitors, in Prague there's no feeling that there's a real city there. There's nothing in the entire place that doesn't appear to depend on tourism. It feels like one of those "authentic tribal villages" in the Amazon rain forest where, after the camera-toting westerners leave, the "authentic tribal villagers" hop on a mini-bus back to their flats in the city.

You get the feeling that if the tourists left they'd just shut the city down and go back home.

The following day, in the company of a pleasant young dorm-mate named Amanda from Saskatchewan, Canada, I went to see the city's premier attraction and number one postcard subject, the Prague Castle.

Well, it's big. I'll give it that. But not much else. It was ghastly.

For one thing, they've filled it to the brim with horrid little shops and kiosks selling all manner of crappy tourist tat. And the "soldiers" patrolling the place were just absurd. They were clearly recruited from a modelling agency then dressed in uniforms more suited to hen-night male strippers than military guards. If someone had told me that the trousers and jackets were held together with quick-release velcro for a real Full Monty effect, I would not have been at all surprised.

Leaving the castle, Amanda and I walked back along the river when we spotted a fascinatingly odd building just at the foot of the Jirasek Bridge. Modern and curious, it somehow managed to fit in perfectly with Prague's generally much older architecture. I snapped a few pics and decided to find out what it was.

Walking in, a bored security guard took one look at us and handed over a brochure, pointing to part of it and muttering "English, English." Clearly, the poor fellow must spend his entire minimum wage day dealing with a succession of tourists who are, like me captivated with the place.

It turned out to be something called the "Dancing Building" so named because it represents a dancing couple. Designed by American architect Frank O. Gehry and Prague's Vlado Milunic it is currently owned by the ING Real Estate Company and is available to hire for "various types of presentations, small conferences, meetings and events." Gentlemen, please have your PowerPoint ready.

Still, brochure aside, the Dancing Building was the one high point of my visit to Prague.

I have to say that despite my complaints, I did have a good time in Prague. The hostel was great. I fell in with a good crowd and spent most nights out in congenial company with plenty of decent beer. But that was it. I really didn't warm to the city. I'd been there. I'd done that. But I couldn't even be arsed to buy the t-shirt.

I suppose it had a lot to do with the fact that I'd been there in 1993 and I really expected the Czechs to have come a bit further since then. But they hadn't.

The cars were a bit newer, the police had pressed their uniforms, and they'd replaced some of the trams, but that was about it. The train system was still using the old commie rolling stock. Outside of Prague things were pretty dingy and depressing. And everyone I encountered seemed hell-bent on ripping me off.

They'd had sixteen years to get their act together and, frankly,

they weren't even close.

I travelled to Krakow on a sweltering Czech train that looked nothing at all like the sleek and speedy modern rolling stock featured on the company's website. My train had been upgraded somewhat, but still bore signs of its communist past. The toilet instructions (toilet instructions? who needs toilet instructions?) were even written in Russian.

I was very keen on visiting Poland. Krakow was a bit out of my way, but I felt it was worth the effort. With something like 700,000 Poles in Britain I'd met a few and generally found them to be rather all right. They seemed to take real jobs and work hard at them in sharp contrast to the Russians and some other east Europeans, whose only interest in coming to our country seems to be a desire to pursue careers as Mafia gangsters, benefit cheats or prostitutes.

As we hurtled away from Prague, any sense of westernism dropped off hugely. The men's clothing deteriorated from fake Italian down to horrid track bottoms and shell suits for men and, for women, those awful sort-of-like-but-not-quite-designer Iron Curtain jeans that eastern European women always seem to wear (though, it must be said, most of them do fill them out rather nicely).

I was a little nervous arriving in Krakow. The Secret Garden hostel I'd booked for my first night had some sort of a problem with the website and had e-mailed me to say they couldn't accommodate my request for four beds in one night. I replied that I actually only wanted one bed for four nights. But on arrival I wasn't sure if I'd have a bunk.

I need not have worried. The nice folks at the Secret Garden had inadvertently run out of dorm beds and so, without my even asking, offered me a single room at the dorm price.

After weeks on the road living in crowded dorms, it was sheer bliss. The bed was large and comfy. There was plenty of space to spread my stuff all over the room and generally make a slob of myself. The shower was hot and powerful and almost up to German hostel standards. The staff were friendly and even the internet computers worked properly which was a rare blessing.

Internet access had been the bane of my existence since day one. Before the journey, I'd rejected carrying a laptop on the grounds that it would be heavy, a temptation to thieves and generally more trouble

than it would be worth. Internet access is as common as pay phones used to be, I thought, and makes much more sense for the light traveller. During the first few days of my journey, I'd shaken my head in silent contempt at the sight of people hauling notebooks and netbooks out of their bags and bugging the hostel staff for the wireless login codes. Not any more, though.

The problem is that in prosperous regions there really are no internet cafes. Ubiquitous home broadband and readily available free wireless at cafes, bars and Mickey D's has killed the demand.

In more deprived areas, internet cafes abound, but my goodness they are dire. If you've ever wondered what happened to that old cut-price desktop PC running Windows 93 and a pirated copy of MS Office that you tossed in the rubbish sometime back in early 1998, I can tell you there's a very good chance it's currently sitting on a desk in some run-down internet cafe on a grimy backstreet somewhere in the heartland of Europe.

And the keyboards were even worse than the computers. I can not count how many different keyboards I encountered on my journey. There were Turkish, Arabic, Cyrillic, hundreds of variations on English and more than a few where it didn't matter what type it was because all the letters had long since been worn off. In fact, it was only on this journey when I first came across a completely bare keyboard that I discovered that I can actually touch-type.

The very worst, though, was the internet available at an otherwise charming hostel I stayed at in Nice, France. They'd installed English language versions of Windows then hooked them up with French AZERTY keyboards. It was surreal and the only way to use it was to ignore all the letters and try to type as if on a normal UK keyboard. It took some practice but, with effort, could be done.

All of this explains why, in internet cafes across the continent, one hears, over and over again in a wide variety of international accents, the plaintive cry "I need to e-mail! How do I get an at sign?"

The answer, and I'm definitely calling this a Euro-fact, is that you type the word "at" into Google then cut-and-paste the resulting @.

Sadly the Secret Garden and its bank of perfectly functioning computers were only able to put me up for one night so, acting on their advice, I shifted to the quirky '70s Hostel around the corner.

Why anybody would be sufficiently nostalgic about the 1970s to

name their business after it was quite beyond me.

I grew up in the '70s and it was horrible. The music was rubbish. The clothes were horrible. Cars rusted in months. The economy was in the toilet. *Starsky and Hutch* were on TV. And everybody was just dirty. Really dirty. I'm not kidding. Teenagers would buy a pair of jeans in 1973 and not wash them until the '80s. It was awful.

People make fun of the 1980s, but let me tell you, they were a breath of fresh air when they arrived. Duran Duran and Tears For Fears may have been a bit naff song-wise, but at least they took a shower before shooting an album cover.

Run by a personable young fellow named Maciek, the '70s Hostel had just one 8-bed dorm plus a private room. It was so small that the kitchen, bathroom, dining area and TV lounge were all jammed together within Maciek's view from reception making the whole experience a bit like being a slightly untrustworthy guest in someone's house. I always felt the need to chat or explain where I was going or what I was doing. What I couldn't do was just kick back and relax.

None of us were given a key to the hostel because there was always someone on reception. We just buzzed the door and, as long as we said something in English, they'd let us in. So just for fun, I started using random English phrases to gain entry. "Fish and chips," "Oi mate, there's a queue," "Liverpool for the Cup," that sort of thing. Having invented my little game, it became a point of pride not to repeat myself. And thus it was that, finding myself reduced to "every little helps" and "try something new today" the fun sort of went out of it and I started spending more and more of my time in some of the many bars and cafes that dot the city of Krakow.

On my first night I ended up at a small place called the Wasza Klasa Cafe Pub in the Kazimierz area where my hostel was located. Kazimierz is the old Jewish quarter, but is now best known for its nightlife. Anna, the proprietor, was having a birthday so I had, inadvertently, sort of crashed a private party. But the friendly crowd pulled me into the fun, gave me a glass of champagne and even roped me into the sing-a-long. They didn't even toss me out when I sang Happy Birthday which, given the awfulness of my singing voice, is really saying something about Polish hospitality.

I spent most of the evening falling under the spell of Brigida, a charming university lecturer who spoke perfect English, laughed at my

jokes and looked like a younger, cuter, fitter Ellen Degeneres.

Sadly, as it turned out, a quirky smile and sharp sense of humour weren't the only thing Brigida shared with Ellen, so there was only so far that relationship could go.

Still, it was a fine evening.

Krakow is easily walked, so I did. I ended up at the Wawel Castle, a mish-mash of pretty much every possible architectural style, but attractive nonetheless, pleasantly leafy and relatively uncrowded.

There was a ticket office at the castle but I couldn't figure out what the tickets could be for since everything seemed to be open and free. So I didn't bother. Besides, throughout this journey, I rarely spent money on admission to anything without thinking that the cash could have been better spent on a cold beer and a nice sit down.

There's a saying amongst very tight-budgeted backpackers called "go to, not in." I was certainly not at that point. I would happily pay for something if I was genuinely interested and often did. But I didn't feel the need to spend money and line up for something just because it was there, it was famous and it was in all the guidebooks.

So, as mentioned earlier, I skipped the Louvre in Paris because art bores me senseless. I skipped the long lines to the Anne Frank house in Amsterdam because, to be honest, I've long since heard everything I need to about the Holocaust and while it was sad and terrible and awful, my knowing any more about it isn't go to help anybody. I skipped a lot of things and my journey was, to be frank, a lot better for it.

Wandering through town and feeling a little peckish, I popped into something called a "bar mleczny" one of a handful of old-style communist era cafeterias that have somehow survived the headlong rush to westernisation.

Bar mleczny (or bar mlecznys or bars mleczny or who the fuck knows what the plural of bar mleczny is) make no concessions to English speakers or tourists. The menu is in Polish and too far away from the serving area for effective pointing. And my miming hand gestures were pretty much useless when it came to food.

Actually all miming is useless. Miming as a way of communicating with locals is basically a travel myth. It's all well and good for trains but not much else. Many a travel programme features a Michael Palin

wannabe host doing some sort of "choo choo, clackety clack" thing in front of a group of bemused locals who then kindly oblige the film crew by pointing in the vague direction of the rail station. It's great telly and might occasionally get you on the 12:42 express to Shitsville. But for anything else, it's a complete waste of effort. Miming is rubbish.

So instead I resorted to the time-honoured tradition of tossing out louder and louder English words in the hope that something would stick.

The kitchen staff responded in kind and somehow in the multi-lingual crossfire, the word "soup" was uttered. Latching on to it I cried "Soup! Yes, soup!" I tried a few more words until "meat" raised a flicker of recognition with one of the cooks. "Beef, pork, chicken?" he asked in a barrage of unexpected English. I answered back with "Yes yes yes" and a lot of smiling and thumbs upping. He translated for the old ladies serving and I was given a tray with a bowl of not-half-bad potato and ham broth, a plate of tasty potatoes, some rather good beetroot mash and a piece of grey, tasteless meat-based stuff that put paid to any thoughts that communism had its good moments. It was okay.

As I left I passed by a cute little Italian place and noted that for just one zloty more I could have had lasagne.

Krakow was gradually creeping up on me. It's not a spectacular place but it's a nice size and is pleasantly comfy. Downtown is plenty touristy, but it doesn't assault you like it does in Prague. The centre is quaint and pretty but just a block or two outside the spiffed-up central city you can see that Poland has a way to go before it starts to approach western levels of prosperity. There's a good bit of crumbling about the buildings. The trams are freshly painted but are clearly old-style communist era rolling stock. And the cars on the road tell even more of the story. If you've ever wondered what happens to the old runabout when Klaus from Dusseldorf trades in his Golf or Gavin in sales and marketing dumps his Ford Mondeo for a silver 3-series diesel Beemer, the answer is parked on the streets of Krakow.

The people of Krakow are fast becoming western-style friendly, though the well-known Polish surliness is still easily found. The pretty young blonde girl I encountered at the stationery shop exuded such an air of boredom and contempt you would have thought she'd somehow been condemned to spend her afternoon helping a middle-aged foreign

man buy envelopes. But these sort are rapidly becoming the exception rather than the norm. The girl at the photography store across the road was all charm and smiles (and prettier, to boot).

I liked the city even more once I got out of the main centre, though a few public toilets would have been nice. It was twenty minutes since my last pint of Poland's wonderful Zyweic beer (pronounced zha-vee-ets, and that's a Euro-fact for you) and I needed a pee. There were a few bars around but, like drinking establishments everywhere, they generally frown on people who just want to use the loo. That's when I hit upon a brainwave of such magnitude as to, all on its own, justify the cover price of this book.

Currently, bars and pubs that sell beer provide toilets. Trouble is, the need for a toilet usually kicks in around twenty minutes after you've left the bar. So I'm proposing a system whereby bars agree to let patrons of other bars use their facilities. In turn, their own customers can use other toilets further along. All the bars could hand out paper chits to departing patrons redeemable for a free tinkle at a participating establishment.

I've even got a name for it -- The Piss It On Scheme.

Politicians and bar owners please take note.

I had 400 Czech crowns taking up space in my pocket and reckoned I might as well swap them for zlotys. After my experience in the Czech Republic where one exchange clerk had tried to pinch £20 off me and another had tried to offer me 18 crowns to the Euro despite a posted rate of 24.5, I was fully expecting a fleecing. But a few zlotys were better than nothing and 400 crowns isn't much so I just popped into the nearest "Kantor" or foreign exchange booth.

I slid two notes over and got 60 zlotys back. Probably worth twice that, I thought, but something's better than nothing.

Later, online and just to pass the time, I checked the official exchange rate, the rate massive international banks and mega-millionaires get when they swap huge sums of money. For 400 crowns, it was 64 zlotys. I got 60.

Which meant that for exchanging a tiny amount of money, in cash, in the middle of a tourist high street, I had been charged slightly less than £1.

It's these little things that make all the difference between the

good and decent people of Poland and their avaricious neighbours to the southwest.

Czechs take note. We rich westerners will come over once to see your old castles and shit. But if you spend all your time and intellectual energy thinking up new and exciting ways to rip us off, you're unlikely to see a lot of repeat business.

We'll go to Poland instead.

Feeling good and wandering about semi-aimlessly, I found Krakow to be one of my favourite things -- an eminently walkable city.

I happened upon a lovely little semi-enclosed market on the Długa Street. It was obviously a local marketplace as there were plenty of ordinary practical clothes for sale but nary a souvenir t-shirt in sight. But the market was well worth a visit just for the titillating sight of small groups of attractive women trying on bras. They were trying them on top of their blouses, it must be said, but it was titillating all the same.

The main, more touristy, market square was ringed with lovely old buildings many of which had their beautiful facades covered with huge and horrible advertising banners. I don't mind ads (I am, in my other life, rather well paid to write them) and they have their place. But their place is not hanging like a slap in the face down the front of a city's most beautiful and historic buildings.

It's just not right.

If you agree with me, want to do something about it, and your car insurance happens to be up for renewal, may I suggest that, in the interests of Krakow beautification, you avoid the Aviva company.

I'd been guided around Krakow by a free map produced and offered at no cost in hostels all through eastern Europe by an outfit called City Spy. It was fabulous and far more useful than my expensive, semi-useless *Lonely Planet* guide book. It was clear, well laid out and contained just enough detail to be helpful, but not so much as to be confusing.

The text, seemingly translated from the original Polish by some sort of primitive language machine, was delightfully irreverent. I particularly enjoyed the suggestion that public transport was not necessary because "it's a nice day and you are young, fit, drunk and beautiful." I was none of those things except, perhaps, drunk, but as a

writer I appreciated the charming flow of the words and the sentiment behind them. In the same vein, a list of notable sights was described as "some tourist shit compiled by Madame Magda." I loved it.

City Spy produces maps for other European cities and I resolved to track them all down. With luck I'd be able to dump my guidebook and go City Spy all the way. So I spent my last day roaming about Krakow from hostel to hostel trying to collect as many City Spy maps as possible.

Tim Cahill says travel is better if you have a purpose and he's right. In my quest for maps, I discovered a good few interesting areas of town including a string of charming and friendly little bars along the Miodowa in Kazimierz. And on top of all that, I'd scored free maps for Vienna, Barcelona and Budapest, too.

Just as well, because Vienna was my next stop.

The first thing that hits you about Vienna is that it looks like it used to be part of the Eastern Bloc. The trams are well-maintained but old and frumpy and a lot more Hungary-esque than Holland-looking. And inside they sport the sort of tubular steel and wood seats that haven't been seen in the western world for generations. Many of the business logos dotted about the city have that old-style Yugoslavian ad agency look that you normally only see in history books or on the side of Czech and Polish trains. The only modern logos you see are from major international brands and they look like they've been shipped in from the west and bolted onto the facade of buildings formerly occupied by the pre-cold-war State Department Of This, That And The Other or the former National Federal People's Bureau Of Something Else Equally Important and Communistic.

It's an odd sort of aesthetic.

You have to keep reminding yourself that Austria, appearances to the contrary, was never a communist country.

Of course it must also be noted that while the Austrians weren't communists during the Cold War, during the war before that they were pretty keen Nazis. More keen than the Germans in a lot of ways. But let's not dwell on that, shall we, and let's move on to modern Vienna.

The main shopping street, the Mariahilferstrasse, is nice enough in a generic, middle class sort of way. But I loved the name. I've got to say that I would happily kill puppy dogs and murder small children in

return for the chance to live on a "strasse." Put me in a run-down hovel on the Crimeriddenbenefitcheatkurbcrawlerseverywheredrugdealersoneverycornerstrasse and I'd be perfectly happy. The neighbourhood wouldn't be all that great, but letters home to my Mom would carry a certain stylish European cachet.

The various buildings and shops on the Mariahilferstrasse and in the area around it are certainly grand and beautiful which was good to see, especially considering how often, in this world, you only seem to get grand.

I continued down the Mariahilferstrasse which conveniently leads to the Hofburg area which is absolutely chock-a-block with massively grand and beautiful edifices as befit a major world superpower. As well as the Hofburg Palace, there's the Imperial Library, the treasury, more museums to count on two hands and even, smack dab in the middle of a city of nearly two million people, a royal horse stables.

I should have been impressed. I should have been blown away. I should have been moved to book three more nights at the hostel and buy a bigger camera memory card in order to explore and capture just a tiny part of all that magnificence. But I wasn't and I didn't.

I liked it. It was fine. But, somehow, I just couldn't seem to get into the place.

I'd expected Vienna to be nice, picturesque, but essentially bland and that's exactly what it was. Neither better, nor worse than expected.

I'm no tourism expert, but the marketing tagline "Vienna: Pretty Much the Way You Figured" did spring to mind. I'm not sure how well it would pull in the punters but, should it find favour with city officials, they may feel free to use it at no cost.

On the good side, there was very little Mozart and not a lot of pastry. I had read in other books that Vienna could be a virtual Disneyland of cloying Mozart and over-priced baked goods and was relieved to see that wasn't the case. I'm not sure why. Maybe the fact that everyone now knows that *Amadeus* was filmed in Prague has encouraged the Viennese to tone it down a bit.

I didn't know why I didn't go mad for the city. I still don't. I suspect it has something to do with the fact that it's been a very, very (okay, really, really fucking) long time since Austria was any sort of a

major world power. I couldn't help looking at all those fine buildings and wondering what they could ever be for.

London, a city I love, has slightly more magnificent buildings than it today deserves, but the ratio of grandeur to reality is somewhat within reason. London is not the centre of the world, but it's still pretty darned important. Vienna, by contrast, has more fancy palaces than London and, let's face it, doesn't even come close to earning a mention on the perfume bottles.

On the other hand, maybe it was me. To be honest, I'd been racing around Europe like a mad fool on some sort of a self-induced *If Today Is Tuesday, This Must Be Belgium* sort of thing. Maybe I was just all castled and palaced and wide tree-lined boulevarded out.

Which made me worry even more. If Vienna didn't click with me, that wouldn't be much to be concerned about. But if my love of travelling had run out of steam, what was I going to do with the rest of this journey?

On my second day and still no closer to an answer, I took a long walk out to the fairground at Prater Park, famous for its brief appearance in the James Bond flick *The Living Daylights*.

Fairgrounds decay at an alarming rate and this one was barely holding its own. And its clown mascot with its evil eyes and devil mouth was the creepiest thing I'd seen for a long time.

I couldn't wait to get out of the place. But the walk did wonders for my spirits and by the time I got close to the city centre I felt loads better.

Walking back into town along one of Vienna's huge ring roads, I even started to warm to the place a little. Maybe it was just the knowledge that I was soon be leaving. Or the fact that I was no longer looking at sights with the eyes of a tourist, but just walking along a street like a normal person. Whatever the reason, everything just felt that much better. The people seemed more attractive. Friendly cops gave out the same tourist directions over and over again with unflagging enthusiasm. The architecture, even the stuff that never makes it onto the postcards, looked beautiful.

As an added bonus, I accidentally found myself walking past what turned out to be the offices of the Slovakia tourist authority. I popped in and spoke to a very helpful lady who definitely looked as if I was one of her few visitors that day. She set me up with a free map, some

tourist info and travel directions, which was brilliant as Bratislava was my next destination. I was leaving the following day.

I'd heard pretty much nothing but bad things about Slovakia. The general consensus of opinion seemed to be that when Czechoslovakia broke up the Czechs got everything good and the Slovaks were left with a load of rubbish and now the country is stuck in the middle of a terminal decline.

Its capital Bratislava didn't fare much better in the court of popular opinion.

All sorts of people, even those who had never been near the place, assured me that it was small, boring, and there was nothing to see. After weeks of travel, the idea of going somewhere with nothing to see held a certain appeal.

There's one major sight, a huge castle, but it's about as authentic as Mickey's Magic Kingdom. It was burned down in the beginning of the 19th century and what survived was left to fall into ruin for 150 years until it was rebuilt almost from scratch starting in the 1950s.

And get this, they're still building it!

They call it "reconstruction" something which I always thought involved teams of corduroy-wearing, brush-wielding archaeologists painstakingly fitting together old bricks and stones.

Not in Slovakia. Slovak "reconstruction" involves teams of sweaty builders, massive bags of concrete and cement mixers working together to build entire structures in the approximate style of something that may or may not have existed in some indeterminate point in history but probably didn't but let's build it anyway.

There was a huge sign up outside the building site with one drawing marked "before reconstruction" and another alongside marked "after reconstruction." The contrast was roughly equivalent to those signs back home that show you what the farmer's field looked like when the development company bought it and what it's going to look like once they finish building the premium office park and luxury condominium flats with ground floor retail.

It was, in short, as phoney as fuck.

Still, fake castle aside, I did like the place. And I'm glad I went. According to adverts on the side of buses, Bratislava is the "little big

city." That's perhaps a bit of a stretch, but "nice little city" would certainly do it.

In fact, nice really sums up the place. The historic Old Town has the usual cobblestones and old buildings and so on. But they're nice cobblestones and nice old buildings and there are nice little cafes and nice patio bars where nice people will serve you a nice cold beer for about a Euro.

There are even water fountains dotted about the place. No city gives you water fountains anymore. In my youth, they were everywhere. But today they've mostly disappeared. So much so that those in Bratislava attracted some odd looks. I saw one fellow, clearly from his outfit a tourist, walk by, do a double take, return to the fountain and spend a full five minutes examining it from all angles before walking off still bemused.

And the women in Bratislava were just stunning. I don't know whether they put some sort of chemical in the water or breed them with giraffes or what, but I have never seen so many women for whom the phrase "leggy supermodel" must have been coined. At one point I really thought there must be some sort of local version of London Fashion Week going on, but then I noticed that they were clearly just ordinary women doing their shopping or waiting for a bus or any one of the thousands of things ordinary women do.

I really wanted to scream "Go to London! Have a modelling career." But I didn't and, as a result, the leggy supermodelly girls of Bratislava continued to serve coffee, sit behind supermarket tills and work part-time at the mobile phone store.

At €22 a night, the Patio Hostel was a bit of a cheat but the crowd was good and I'd made a few friends. When the manager came around touting the beer crawl (a feature of just about every privately run hostel) and everyone rushed to sign up, I put aside my aversion to such things and put my name down.

I knew it would be rubbish and it was. We were dragged from one place to another like a herd of alcoholic cattle. As the tour was free, the guide clearly made his money on a kickback from beer sales. Which meant that to maximise his earnings he had to get us in each place, get our beer served and drunk as fast as possible before hauling us off to the next one.

At the third bar, I'd had just about enough. "Listen guys," I said to

the two fellas whose names I don't recall sitting with me. "This crawl is a load of shit. Whaddaya say we just let them go and we'll hang out here."

They loved the idea and we let the herd go. And as soon as they did, everything changed. The barmaid changed the music from a horrid mix tape of cheesy western pop songs back to the Slovak stuff that had obviously been playing just moments before we walked in. The small group of locals who'd been huddled together at the side of the bar went back to their seats and tables.

The backpackers had gone. The money had been made. Now life could return to normal.

And normal in a Bratislava bar seems to be pretty darned welcoming. The three of us had been ignored by the locals when we were part of the crawl. But now that we were just three blokes from out of town, they wasted no time in drawing us into the group.

We spent the rest of the evening downing shots of borovicka a popular Slovak firewater. The locals managed to handle their liquor pretty well, but how the three of us got back to the hostel that night will forever be a mystery.

At the Bratislava train station, there were clear signs that Slovakia faces some tough economic times. Young men in cheap trousers, white shirts and shiny polyester ties flitted about trying to sell something or other without much success. Two attractive young women spent a good half hour selling an old lady a box of what appeared to be two small bars of beauty soap. When she did finally buy, she paid entirely in tiny coins.

But at least they were selling to fellow Slovaks. No one tried to sell me anything. In my entire time in the city no one pestered me to buy drugs or women or guided tours or crappy little souvenirs. I liked that.

All-in-all, I wish the Slovaks well. In fact, let me take this opportunity to suggest that next time you see a "Made in Slovakia" label (a rarity, I grant you) on a product, consider buying it. You'll be helping out a nice little country.

And on that note, I left for Budapest.

Budapest, as everyone knows (and by repeating it here qualifies as a Euro-fact), is really two cities, Buda and Pest divided by the

Danube.

Two cities with a mighty river in between means just one thing - bridges.

And I love bridges.

Most people travel around looking at churches and museums, but not me. To me, unless you're religious (and who is these days) churches are pretty much useless. And museums are just full of old stuff in glass cases that will never again be used for anything. But a bridge is always useful.

A bridge may be beautiful. A bridge may be an architectural marvel. An engineering masterpiece. A design classic. A piece of history. A monument to something or someone. Or something else.

But whatever a bridge is or is not, the fact remains that a bridge exists because there's some guy at one side of the river who wants to get to the other side of the river. And he can do it because of the bridge.

That's why I love bridges.

The Chain Bridge is the big attraction in Budapest and I liked it. It reminded me of the Hammersmith Bridge in London in the sense that I felt that I could, if had the time, materials and inclination, copy it piece-by-piece and build an exact replica in my back garden.

But while I liked the Chain Bridge, I loved the white-painted Erzsébet Bridge slightly further south. It's over 100 years older than the Chain Bridge and doesn't have any of that olde worlde look and feel. What it does have is a sort of sleek, functional modernity that I usually don't like at all. Sleek, modernity usually looks cold and heartless and makes you wonder how long it takes to assemble once you get it out of the flat pack.

Not so the Erzsébet Bridge. It's got none of that. What it does have is grace, an effortless beauty that comes from being exactly what it is and doing exactly what it does in a perfect form-following-function sort of way that just so happens to produce an elegant form.

It's like a stunningly beautiful woman who knows she's stunningly beautiful and knows that everyone else knows she's stunningly beautiful and simply does not care. Because she's got better things to do.

If I lived in Budapest I would deliberately take a job and an apartment on different sides of the city just so I could cross the

Erzsébet Bridge at the beginning and the end of every working day.

Unlike Krakow and Bratislava, Budapest is no city for walkers. It's massive and sprawling and everything seems to be miles and miles from everywhere else.

I walked along the Vaci Utká, the main tourist drag. Even the guide books recommend against it, and that's saying something. It's little more than shops selling tourist tat and restaurants peddling crummy, overpriced food and I only stuck around long enough to have a quiet chuckle at a young fellow flogging guided tours wearing an *I Love New York* t-shirt, which struck me as amusingly counterproductive.

Walking past souvenir shop after souvenir shop I recalled a conversation I'd had back in Paris with a delightful Kiwi girl named Kate who was staying at my hostel and joined me on one of my walks.

"Remind me to take some souvenirs," she said as we walked along.

"Take souvenirs?" I said. "Like shoplift?"

"No, no," she said, and explained that she couldn't afford to buy souvenirs. So she simply photographed them and sent them home by e-mail.

I thought it was sweet.

It was a long climb up to the Citadel, the massive fortress that sits strategically on a huge hill just out from the banks of the river, but I'm glad I did it. For one thing, I felt much more virtuous than the lazy slobs on tour buses whizzing past me on their way to the top. And it was good exercise, too.

In fact, this whole trip was turning out to be a gentle, but effective, fitness programme. My previous job had left me fatter and more unfit than at any time in my life. This journey was beginning to reverse some of that. Walking uphill along the twisty and turny roads leading to the Citadel, feeling my lungs and limbs and muscles doing what they were designed for and doing it well.

The views from the Citadel are well worth the climb. The Citadel itself is okay in the normal big-castle, here's some history and a bunch of architecture, stuff. But it's the views that make it great. So often, places touted as having great views turn out to disappoint, but not in

this case.

Once at the top, I took a few photos most of which centred around the vast and majestic (though not, it must be mentioned, blue) Danube. And having done so, I walked back down.

Along the way I saw teams of three-card-monte scammers working hard to fleece tourists of a few Euros. It didn't seem to be going very well and I was tempted to tip the ringleader the nod that it's not a good idea to have all your accomplices the same age as you, all with the same portly body type as you and all dressed in the same brand of golf shirt as you. But, as I had another long walk in front of me, I didn't.

My next long walk took me out to the City Park, which wasn't very interesting and the Transport Museum which should have been because I love all that sort of stuff but also wasn't.

I love anything to do with planes, trains and automobiles, but the museum was a bit of a disappointment.

At the City Park I dropped into the Millennium Castle. As you've probably figured out by now, I'm not a huge fan of castles but this one was right in front of me, looked like it might have some pleasant, park-like grounds and had something to do with someone called "Mr Anonymous" which sounded intriguing.

The grounds did turn out to be as pleasant as expected, but Mr Anonymous was just a 12th century historian whose works have, as I later discovered during the 12 minutes of research I did for this book, been almost completely discredited.

There's an old folk tale that touching Anonymous's pen brings good luck. So not surprisingly, there's a statue of him on the grounds. And guess what? The pen has been touched so often by visitors that it's been worn smooth and gleams in bronze!

What a load of rubbish.

Every second city in Europe seems to have one of these rub-the-brass things and I must say that I believe not a single one of them. It is so obvious to me that a nice story plus an electric sander and a bit of buffing and polishing can turn pretty much any statue into a major tourist attraction.

I can't imagine any city fathers or tourist bureau officials passing up that sort of opportunity.

In Budapest I stayed at the Hostel Apicolone run by Katrine, a Swiss lady of a certain age who operated the place in July and August. For the rest of the year it served as her son's apartment while he studied at a local university.

It was halfway between a large apartment and a small hostel. It was clean and functional inside and wholly unprepossessing from the street. But as one of many apartments in a five-story building built around a sunlit courtyard it was a delight. Every day, before leaving and upon returning, I would stand in the middle of the courtyard and have a good long gaze at the deep yellow brickwork, intricate iron balcony rails and carefully tended window frames.

I wondered why more apartment blocks weren't built this way. Inward facing courtyards and balconies are so much more human than our western system of running an elevator up the middle of a building made up entirely of outward-facing flats. They're so much more convivial. They make an apartment building less like a warehouse for bodies and more like a small community. But we don't do that because our model is ever so slightly more efficient. No wonder we don't know our neighbours; we've all got our backs to each other.

At the hostel I shared a room with Ian and Hamish, two good-natured brothers from Scotland.

Hamish, the elder, was a high school music teacher while younger brother Ian worked as a farm labourer.

Carrying pretentious literature is common amongst backpackers. Hostels are full of pony-tailed poseurs walking around pretending to be riveted to the pages of *Crime and Punishment*. So as both Scottish boys had seemed very down-to-earth, I was a bit surprised to see Ian with a copy of Plato's *Republic*.

"Something deep to impress girls on trains," I suggested.

"Ach, no," Ian answered. "It's a good one, this. Have you read it?"

"No. What's it about?"

"Justice, mostly," Ian said. "It's surprisingly relevant, even today."

Ian hadn't struck me as much of a reader, or a philosopher for that matter. "Is it fairly easy to read?" I asked.

"Ach no," he said. "It's a tough go. You really feel you've done something when you've finished a chapter and understood it."

I couldn't help but be impressed.

"You should give it a read," Ian said. "Try and get it second hand,

but it's worth it even if you have to pay full price."

"I may just do that," I said, lying through my teeth.

"Hell, I'm no philosopher," he said. "If I can understand it, a clever fellow like you'll have no trouble."

Personally, I wasn't so sure.

"He's got a few others out," Ian added, in a tone that suggested Plato may still be actively publishing. "I might give 'em a go."

It was for these unexpected small moments of insight that I had set off on this journey. I do drone on like a grumpy old man about everything being rubbish and the whole world going to hell in a handcart. But when you meet a barely educated Scottish farmhand reading Plato for the sheer pleasure of it, you start to think that humanity may be all right after all.

The MAV (Hungarian State Railways) train from Budapest to Pecs was, a bit like me, well past its prime and a little shop-worn. But it was, unlike me, clean and well-maintained and cost almost nothing. I rather liked it. There were even smoking compartments which, while of no use to me, did lend the thing a charming old-world flavour.

The Hungarian countryside, or at least that part of it that glided past my train window, was surprisingly neat and well-tended. This was in sharp contrast to other parts of eastern Europe, especially the Czech Republic where buildings (and pretty much everything else outside of touristy Prague) are crumbling, farms are hideously ugly and everywhere else seems to be littered with all manner of rotting and rusting bits of manufacturing and transportation.

Good on you, Hungary, I thought. Bring on Pecs.

Pecs (pronounced "peysh" and that's another Euro-fact for the count), when I arrived, was bidding to be European City of Culture 2010. At time of writing they had won, but had to share with two other cities (Essen and Istanbul) so it wasn't a total victory.

Personally, I think European City of Culture is a bit naff (okay, a lot naff). Liverpool, my birthplace and a city I love to death, won it in 2008 and I was hugely disappointed. Does the city that gave us popular music and self-deprecating comedy and much more really need to be competing for this, I thought. Liverpool has so much real culture it really didn't need such a rubbish honour. It's a bit like Kate

Moss going up for *Britain's Next Top Model*. Even if you win, it diminishes you.

But Pecs seemed to love that sort of stuff. On top of the City of Culture thing, they also had their very own UNESCO World Heritage Site (doesn't everybody; I really think you must be able to buy these things by mail order). And it was twinned with, get this, 17 different cities!

As cities go, Pecs is definitely the local bike.

A nice little slut, though. Lots of historic stuff and well-maintained old buildings and parks and fountains and (surprise surprise) cobblestoned streets. But that's about it.

At the hostel I met Peter, a young Hungarian from a small town near Budapest. He was on a cycling holiday of his own country.

Peter, like half the population of eastern Europe, it seems, spent most of his time in the UK working at what he described as "rubbish jobs -- pizza delivery, things like that" where he could save three or four hundred pounds a month, which apparently goes a long way in Hungary.

When I asked him about the communist era he, at just 29 years old, had little memory of it. "But I will tell you," he said, "if you ask people today, eight out of ten will tell you that they prefer the communist times."

"Really," I said, genuinely surprised.

"Today it is very hard to make money. Even if you have a good job in Hungary, it's hard to take home more than £500 after tax."

"But what about democracy and the vote and freedom and charting your own destiny and building a future for your children and a sense of community and society and we're all in this together going forward and all that stuff?" I asked, not that I think much of any of those things.

"In the communist era, people didn't worry about their job. There wasn't all this competition and worrying about career," he told me. "If you were a worker, even the top boss would only earn two or three times you. People were much closer to each other. Everybody will tell you this."

I suspect they would.

Peter had some other curious theories. "How do you like

Hungarian women," he asked.

"Many of them are very attractive," I said.

This was true. True of most Eastern European women, in fact.

Hungarians are nice looking.

Polish girls are very pretty.

Slovaks are tall, drop-dead gorgeous and all leg.

Sarajevan women are as beautiful as the Slovaks (which, as I have mentioned previously, is really saying something) and as stylish as the French.

Czech girls are sexy, though in a hard-eyed, keep-a-close-eye-on-your-wallet sort of way.

Croats look like really fit Italians.

And on it goes.

Having said all that, I did notice that the looks seemed to run out around the age of thirty. In the west you see women looking stunning well into their forties and beyond (recall my night by the river in Paris). But not in the east. I suspect this has something to do with the fact that most older eastern Europeans grew up in less prosperous times and may be suffering the effects of poor nutrition in youth.

Peter couldn't explain that, but he did have some odd notions about why his countrywomen were so attractive.

"Hungarian women are genetically engineered for beauty," he said. "All the women in the Carpathian Basin have been produced by hundreds of years of cultures coming to this area."

This sounded reasonable. I wasn't about to argue. But Peter had more.

"This is why your English women are not attractive," he said. "It is a matter of genetics and history."

"Whoa! Peter," I said. "Hang about."

"No, no," he said, genuinely unaware of having caused offence. "You see natural selection is working."

"English males have been selecting these types of girls for hundreds of years," he droned on like some sort of modern day, oddly-accented Charles Darwin in cycling shorts. "So natural selection is producing the unattractive female that the English male desires."

I didn't know what to say. His theory that English birds are ugly and it's all the lads' fault was clearly a load of old rubbish. Half an hour on the streets and Tube and the coffee shops and workplaces of central London would put paid to that theory. But I couldn't be arsed to argue

with him.

He wasn't malicious, just misguided. So I left him alone and changed the subject.

But I've got to say, if at that point it had been up to me, I would have happily given him his communism back.

The lumbering old train from Pecs to Sarajevo took a full day so I had plenty of time to think. And as I did, I realised that it had been an awfully long time since I worried about my life, my job and my future. In fact, a strange sort of happiness and contentment had snuck up on me.

Not a surprise, really. At the beginning of the tour I'd set myself a time and financial budget. "I'll spend 6 months or £10,000, whichever comes first," I told myself and promised I'd "not start to worry until that runs out" and so far they had not (actually, they never would; the journey came in at about half my initial budget).

There would be no point in worrying anyway. It's impossible to apply for a job or attend an interview or send out a bunch of CVs when you're hunkered down on a clapped out train in the middle of Bosnia. You just have to go with the flow and worry about life later.

It was all very liberating and I liked it a lot.

All I knew about Sarajevo came from wartime pictures on my TV day after day back in the '90s and, frankly, it had bored me senseless. When all this was going on, I was firmly onside with P.J. O'Rourke that "the unspellables are attacking the unpronounceables" so who the fuck cares.

But in Sarajevo I signed up for a tour guided by a personable young fellow named Mohammed who explained what the war was all about. By the end of the tour, I wished I'd cared a little more at the time.

Not to get into a history lesson here and feel free to skip over the next couple of pages if you don't care what happens when a bunch of perfectly nice normal people get seriously fucked over by a bunch of assholes playing geo-politics, but this is what happened.

Communism fell apart. Yugoslavia, one of the communist countries, did too. When it fell to bits, everybody rushed around trying to set up their own bit as a separate country. The Bosnians had their bit. The Croats got a chunk. The Serbs had their part. Sarajevo was a

bit of a mixed bag, part Serb, part Muslim, part all sorts of things. But the Serbs wanted it. And they wanted it Serbian.

So they surrounded it. And laid siege. Which was a lot easier than you might think.

The Serbs were a majority in the armed forces of Yugoslavia. So when it looked like the country was about to break up, they took all the tanks and planes and big guns and ammo and stuff and whisked them away. They called it a military training exercise, but nobody was fooled. So by the time of the siege, the Serbs had loads of heavy weapons while the Sarajevans had little more than light rifles.

On top of all that, Sarajevo is surrounded by hills, which made life easier for the Serbs. They just took all their big tanks and heavy guns and lined them up in the hills pointing down into the city and spent the next four years using them to pick off unarmed civilians who were just trying to go about their daily lives.

So the United Nations came in, as they always do. And what a high quality organisation the UN turned out to be. First of all they declared an arms embargo. What a brilliant UN-style idea that was. Arms are bad, so let's embargo them. Trouble was, the Serbs owned the entire Yugoslav army with all its tanks and artillery and big guns and such while the people of Sarajevo had a few rifles and some bullets. So the UN embargo just kept a massive imbalance in place.

Go blue!

But the UN wasn't finished making things worse. In a bid to look useful (and let's face it, looking useful was the entire point; the UN is really nothing more than a massive PR exercise), they occupied the airport, which just so happened to be the only point of connection between the people of Sarajevo and the Bosnian free territory.

So what they ended up with was the city of Sarajevo surrounded by Serbs except for one little bit that should have been connected to their comrades in the free territory but was in fact blocked by a huge number of useless blue helmeted UN soldiers.

The UN did allow humanitarian aid into the city. Nothing like a little humanitarian aid to make all those highly-paid international bureaucrats feel good about themselves. But the aid was rubbish. There were '60s era American rations and expired medicine from the EU. Perhaps the worst was tinned Italian meat that, at the height of the war, even the dogs and cats wouldn't eat, though the people had to. It was so bad that, after the war, the city raised a three foot high

monument shaped like a huge can of meat complete with an EU logo and the sarky words "The Monument to the International Community from the Grateful Citizens of Sarajevo."

To get ammunition and other supplies in the Sarajevans built a tunnel under the airport to connect the city with the Bosnian free territory. The UN troops knew about it but turned a blind eye (further proof that troops on the ground always know a lot more about getting things done than office-bound bureaucrats back at head office). The Serbs knew about it and shelled the family house that marked the tunnel entrance, but were unable to shut it down.

Over the course of the war, just enough essential supplies were ferried in through the tunnel to keep the people alive and just enough weapons were transported to keep the Serbs at bay.

The Serbs tried to invade the city but were unable to because 90,000 Bosnians had joined the army and, even though the Bosnian Army had only light weapons, they could, in an urban environment, defend against more powerful forces. So the Serbs stayed up the hills picking off civilians. Which, cowardly bastards that they were, they did with gusto.

Snipers' Alley is the main road running past the Holiday Inn made famous from the news broadcasts of the time.

People had to walk 8km to the Sarajevo Brewery which has groundwater springs which in peacetime make an excellent beer, but in war was one of the only decent sources of water. As people walked along the road, the Serb snipers would pick them off. Some of the Sarajevans would shelter behind UN vehicles. Others would shelter behind city trams. While the trams made it harder for the Serbs to see them, the thin metal which, when hit by a speeding bullet produced shards of shrapnel, actually made it more dangerous. Today, the main road is named after Marshall Tito who was described by our guide Mohammed as "a positive figure in our history."

Once again, I had come across this view that the communist era was not only not bad, but may have been pretty good. For someone coming from the west where it seems to be a given that the fall of communism was a good thing, all this came as a bit of a surprise.

Though I suppose it shouldn't have. Given a choice between a drab life under communism or a hail of Serb bullets, I think I know where I'd go.

Of course there's more to life than war so I took a good look around the city itself and rather liked it. Sarajevo old town is cobblestoned, twisty and very touristy. It's full of little shops selling all sorts of traditional things, plus a lot of tourist tat. To be honest, it wasn't my favourite part of the town.

The city centre, on the other hand, is hugely stylish. Everyone comes out at night in their finery and parades up and down the main drag.

Kylie, a pleasant young accountant from Australia I'd met on the tour, and I spent a good while drinking Sarajevska beer and watching the fashionistas of Sarajevo walk by. Knowing what I'd learned about the history of the city, I was pleased as punch to see them having a good time.

On my final morning, I walked alone down Snipers' Alley towards the bus station. It was early enough that I had the road pretty much to myself. It was eerie. I could well imagine what it must have been like to run down this road every day or so, hoping not to be shot by one of the cowardly Serbian bastards up in the hills.

Leaving Sarajevo, I wasn't headed towards Serbia. I was going in the other direction. Which was a good thing. Because after what I'd seen and learned in Sarajevo, there was no way in hell those people were getting a single Euro of my money. I would, at that point, have travelled miles out of my way, busted my budget to shreds and endured all manner of travel hardship to avoid spending a single penny in Serbia.

Fortunately, I didn't have to. Croatia was a mere bus ride away.

The bus drivers have a little scam going where they charge a Euro for every bag put in the hold. Fortunately, my packing light meant I could carry on my bag and save the bribe.

There really is some lovely countryside in Bosnia-Herzegovina. It's quite surprising and I spent more time than I expected just staring out the window admiring the view. But eventually nature, as it always does, began to pall so I reached into my bag for the books I'd managed to snag from a few hostels along the way.

When travelling, books are the thing I miss most. So when I find them in hostels, I grab what I can, read, then leave them further down

the road for others. The randomness of all this means I end up reading stuff I might never have touched back home.

So it was that I managed to pick up a piece of syrupy rubbish (and I say this as someone who read *Bridget Jones's Diary* twice) by someone named Freya North plus a copy of Len Deighton's *Bomber*. I was saving *Bomber* for later, so I made do with the tortured romantic shenanigans of Ms. North's cardboard characters Arlo Savidge and Petra Flint.

It was hard going, I must tell you. Sample dialogue: "I've been living a lie. I've never told anyone this. No one knows. No one knows. Just you. My lovely lovely you."

Really. The last time I had that much sugar in my diet it was Halloween. Still, maybe I'll nick a few lines next time I'm out on the pull.

Who knows? Maybe women really do want to be called "my lovely lovely you."

Fortunately I didn't have to spend too long in the extra-sweet world of Ms North. Irish people are easy to meet and it wasn't long before I eased deep into banter with Dermot, Anthony and Mareid, three mates and computer programmers from Dublin. By the time we'd rolled into Dubrovnik we'd all become temporary best mates and planned a good night out on "the craick" as they called it.

My new Irish pals had already lined up their accommodation. I, on the other hand, had arrived with nothing booked. So we arranged to meet up later while they set out to check in and I went off in search of a room.

The station is full of wizened old crones touting for rooms. As a fairly experienced haggler, I reckoned it wouldn't be long before I scored myself a decent bed at a good price. The crones started out at €30 a night which was, I reckoned, absurd.

So I pulled out all the market trader stops. "I don't want to buy it, I just want to sleep there!" I said more than once. I demanded a lower and lower price before making a counter-offer. I walked away towards the ticket office, as if to suggest that should I not get a good deal I'd be quite happy to hop the next bus out of town.

After all my efforts, I paid €30 a night for my room.

I almost wish I hadn't. Were it not for a great night out with Dermot, Anthony and Mareid plus another Irish lass who we managed

to drag into our drunken little group, I would happily have given Dubrovnik a miss.

It's a tiny little walled city full of hundreds of years of boring history none of which I could be bothered to write down or bore you with here. Today, it's the sort of place that gives overcrowded tourist traps a bad name.

Massive cruise ships drop off huge numbers of overweight sightseers in groups of about fifty, each of which is dragged from site to site by a bored tour guide dressed in phoney white maritime uniforms with fake rank badges on the shoulder.

You know you're in tourist hell when you see a group led by a guide holding aloft a paddle marked "Royal Caribbean Group 9". All you can think is "Oh fuck! There's at least 8 more groups of them."

So, not liking Dubrovnik., I Split.

Ha Ha. Get it? Split - the second-largest city in Croatia. Split - moved on.

Okay, Split puns are terrible. They make those awful "Prague: Czech it Out" gags sounds like real humour.

Still, cheesy puns aside, Split was much better than Dubrovnik. It certainly had loads of tourists, but it's just about big enough to handle them. I actually quite liked the place.

It's all cosy little alleyways that lead here there and everywhere. Coffee shops and beer gardens abound. The city centre is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, as is everywhere else in the world, and there's a cathedral built by some Roman guy whose name you can look up in the *Lonely Planet* if you really give a shit which I know you don't.

What I loved most off all was the Riva, a gloriously modern waterfront promenade. Lined with palm trees, festooned with outdoor beer and coffee patios and lapped by the sort of blue waters normally seen on shampoo adverts, it was perfect for wandering, drinking and indulging in my favourite outdoor sport of people watching. At night, it was even better.

When I wasn't wandering the promenade, I spent most of my time at the Bifora cafe bar where, thanks to my making a regular addition of 5K to my tab, I soon became recognised and even had a "usual."

Customer service, it must be said, is not a priority in Croatia.

Aside from the cafe waiter being tipped, most everyone treated me with complete indifference. The woman on the till at the supermarket may have been dealing with a machine and the girl at the ferry ticket office oozed the sort of indifference you normally have to travel to Paris to experience. And in some of the bars when the sun goes down and the manager goes home the price lists disappear and, for foreigners, the waiter adds 5K to each drink. This goes straight into his pocket and the only defence is to ask the price first and insist on getting a receipt. This by-the-way constitutes a genuine travel tip and Euro-fact which, I think you'll agree, all by itself fully justifies the cost of this book.

Still, I liked the place.

What I didn't like so much was Al's Place, the slightly shabby little hostel I stayed at, run by (surprise, surprise) Al, a middle-aged expat from the UK. There are Als all over the world. Guys who cash in a small pension or a modest house and set out into the less developed world in an attempt to turn a not-quite-enough retirement pot into some sort of a living.

Al of Split was, to be honest, a little creepy. He made a big deal of the fact that he'd put me in a dorm with three very hot young girls from New Zealand and Australia. There was a lot of nudge nudge wink winking going on during my check-in which, as someone determined not to be seen as the creepy old man of the hostel, rather put me off.

Even his so-called local knowledge was little more than an endless recitation of how likely we were to be ripped off unless we followed Al's advice to the letter.

And when I checked out and discovered that Al wouldn't let me park my bags in the hostel while I spent my last day in Split (something any decent hostel is happy to do) it further added to my less than favourable impression of the place.

Needlessly hugging my backpack (thanks Al) I spent the last day in Split exploring with Mike, an Aussie heading home after two years in London working for Barclays bank. He was, a bit like me, someone who had made a good bit out of the boom times but had sense enough to do something else once the crazy world ended.

We walked out of town then along the river then climbed high above the city for some incredible views which I will not describe here

because, as every reader of travel books knows, views look great but read like rubbish.

We found a fountain that gushed the sort of water I'd pay good money for if it came in a plastic bottle with a picture of an iceberg on it then climbed down the hill and along the waterfront to the beach.

Split doesn't have the best beaches. They're small and pebbly (though I prefer pebbles to sand; sand gets everywhere), but still rather nice. We sat out on a patio, nursing cold beers, until a couple of the "nudge nudge wink wink" girls from Al's hostel came by. We flirted a bit (Mike more successfully than me, it must be said) then headed back to town.

All-in-all, a good day.

Thanks to Al's policy of throwing people out at 11 combined with the hill climbing and a dousing in the beach, I was a horrible combination of sea salt and sweat by 8pm when I board the Blue Lines ferry to Ancona. It was nothing like what I was expecting.

I had paid 485 Croatian Kuna for a deck passage and was expecting it to be a load of fun. I hopped aboard with a spring in my step confidently expecting a lively upper deck backpacker scene. I was really looking forward to crashing out with a bunch of travellers, maybe passing around a bottle or two, sharing various bits of accumulated food and listening to some guy playing the guitar (he'll suck, but we won't mind).

No such luck. The upper deck was small, cold and hard and pretty much deserted. I headed below decks where anyone who had managed to snag a seat had done so and was now fast asleep. The rest were crashed out on the rough carpet. It was like sleeping on a bus with the added possibility of drowning.

I grabbed a spot half under and half next to an already occupied seat. No one was passing around a bottle so I took a few hefty glugs from mine and settled down to try and sleep.

Eventually, morning arrived. We were in Italy.

Ruthless Italian efficiency hits you the moment you land on her shores. If you've ever wondered why Ferraris break down and Alitalia runs at a constant loss, you need only arrive by ferry at the port of Ancona.

For the entire pedestrian contingent of the ferry, Italian border

security had assigned precisely one officer. The car-bound passengers had another officer. The queue for pedestrians crossed the line for cars causing all manner of traffic problems and near-death experiences.

At the terminal I asked a uniformed official for directions to the train station. "Walk one kilometre," he said. Well over 1km later, I came across a couple of backpackers who told me "it's about one kilometre along the road." I trudged further and further arriving at a small bus station where I was told (you guessed it) "it's one kilometre walking."

How far is a bloody kilometre anyway?

In fact, I need not have bothered asking directions. It turns out that there were signs all along the route pointing to the train station. But the logo was so unlike any train outside of Mickey Mouse's Magic Kingdom (and certainly unlike any piece of Trenitalia rolling stock I've ever seen) that I was pretty much at the station by the time I figured out what the signs meant.

I finally arrived at the station after about a hour of brisk walking under what must have been at least a 40 degree sun, bought a ticket and, with a few hours to pass before departure, looked around for something to eat and, most importantly, a lot to drink.

Ancona is a grotty little port town and a hot spot for illegal immigration. There's even a dedicated political asylum office at the ferry terminal. In town there are dodgy looking groups of Africans hanging about doing not much of anything. I was, to be honest, a little scared and if that sounds racist then you go walking around Ancona all by yourself with a wad of money stuffed in your shorts and a nice shiny Nikon camera in your bag.

They didn't speak much English at the kebab shop across the road, but a little pointing at the menu did the trick. As for drink, every waiter in the world knows the word "beer." And whatever you say after the third beer, he interprets to mean "toilet."

You could go into any restaurant anywhere in the world, order and drink three beers, then turn to the waiter and say "rubber ducky" or "cylinder head gasket sealer" or "economic theory of marginal utility" or any such thing and he'd just smile and point to the loo. Which is pretty much what happened.

Well lubricated and dripping in kebab sauce, I headed back to the station to catch my train. It was now a good 24 hours since I'd had a

shower, a change of clothes, or even a quick wash in a sink. It was a good thing for my fellow passengers that I had a seat to myself on the train to Rome.

On the other hand, I can't help thinking maybe that's *why* I had a seat to myself on the train to Rome.

Once aboard, ruthless Italian efficiency continued. The train was optimistically called Eurostar but that's where any resemblance ended. At 50-odd miles an hour it was quick, but hardly in TGV territory. There was no dining car or buffet car. The bathrooms offered a working toilet, paper, water, soap and hand towels, but you had to visit five separate WCs to get all five items. All-in-all, I think the folks who run that sleek powerful train that runs under the Channel might have a few concerns about who is using their name.

All that inefficiency and sloppiness shouldn't have been a surprise. It's what every Italian I'd met on the journey had told me to expect. I just didn't expect it to be so full on.

And so I rolled my way into Rome.

At Roma Termini, the main train station, the full scope of Italian organisation and design was, once more, in full view.

The signs marked "Information" with the small "i" (the internationally recognised symbol for tourist info) actually point towards the departures board.

Or most of them do. About one in five will actually send you in the opposite direction.

The actual tourist office is sporadically signposted with a yellow symbol I'd never seen anywhere before. Following these signposts will lead you to the post office. Which is closed. Permanently.

To find the actual tourist office, walk a few metres past the abandoned post office. Make two right turns and it's just past the car rental agency on your left.

There are no signs to tell you this.

Once out of the tourist office, the fun continues when you try to find the Metro. There are signs all over the station pointing to the A line. Some of them actually point to the A line.

Most don't.

There's even a spot at Roma Termini where you can stand equidistant between two signs. One says to go slightly left for the A line. The other instructs you to make a sharp right.

Neither one will lead you to the A line.

Having visited both countries, it is a never-ending source of wonder to me that the Germans and the Italians were allies in the Second World War.

As my mind wanders, I can just imagine some sort of German / Italian combined operation.

"We're under attack!" cries the senior German officer as the enemy approaches. "Where are the Italian tanks?"

"Is broken," shrugs his Italian counterpart. "Tomorrow Luigi will come. Relax capitano. 'Av a coffee."

"But the Tommies are approaching," the German says. "They'll be here in minutes."

"Donta worry. There is plenty of coffee."

Eventually, after a tube ride to Ottavio station and a 20 minute walk, I arrived at Rome's official YHA hostel. A further 30 minutes passed while the desk clerk dealt with a crowd of exactly one guest and precisely one phone call. I actually had time to nip downstairs to the cafeteria, order and drink a bottle of Heineken and return upstairs 10 minutes before the desk clerk was ready to see me.

When it finally arrived, check-in was interminable. There was all sort of computer clicking on an ancient old machine that seemed to be running a prototype version of MS-DOS, some number punching on a pocket calculator so old the keys had Roman numerals on them (okay, they didn't, but I had to get that old groaner in somewhere, now didn't I?) and reams of paper spitting out from an early prototype printer. Some of the printing was sliced in two with a ruler, folded into amusing shapes and slipped into ancient looking plastic folders and filed in a drawer. The rest of the papers (and boy were there lots of them) were all stapled together and handed to me for immediate binning.

And there was problem with my reservation. I'd booked for four days, but needed to cancel the last day.

"You need 24 hours notice," the desk clerk said.

"But it's 3 days until the day I want to cancel," I said. "That's 72 hours."

"You are here now, cancelling," he said. "Now. Not 24 hours."

I was about to launch into a long and involved argument as to why the 24-hour rule should apply to the day in question when I

stopped. Mark, I thought to myself. You're in Italy. Logic doesn't apply here. Just go with the flow.

So I did.

"Is a problem," I said with a lopsided grin and massive shrug of my shoulders. "Big problem. Maybe, my friend, you can help me?"

"Mmmm."

"Maybe ... something you can do?"

"Okay," he said. "I cancel last day."

"Thank you. Thank you. Gracie."

"Room 28, bed 8," he said once all this was done.

"Do you have a key for me?"

"No, no," he said, jovially. "Door is open."

It was, but there was no bed 8. Or maybe there was. It was hard to tell as not one of the beds had a number on it. The lockers were numbered, but there was no 8. I took a random bed and locker number 12 and thought to myself "Marky, you're certainly not in Germany any more."

The next day I took a long walk through the sights of Rome with Vesa and Oskari two nice young Finnish lads celebrating the end of their compulsory military service with a little European Inter-railing.

They had visited Canada previously and were still taken with the Canadian colloquial phrase "fucking the dog" and used it on every possible occasion.

We started at the Vatican which was just a 20 minute walk from the hostel, then onto Castel San Angelo, Piazza Navona (which sounds like something from Tesco's that takes 12 minutes in a hot oven if you like crispy crust, but actually isn't), the Pantheon, and Trevi Fountain which I absolutely loved. In fact, Trevi Fountain may just be my favourite spot in Rome, if not in all of Europe. I liked it so much I even did the cheesy tossing the coins over your shoulder bit (Hey, when in Rome do as the tourists do, I say) though, being the mean bugger that I am, was careful to use a handful of worthless Polish zlotys.

We drank from fountains and filled our water bottles from them as someone had told us that all Roman fountain water is safe to drink and we believed them. True or not it was delicious.

Rome is of course a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This was becoming tedious. UNESCO must hand those things out like Halloween candy; you get one just for knocking on the door.

Wandering through Rome, the ongoing theme of Italian inefficiency once again reared its head when we stopped for a cheap lunch at McDonalds near the Pantheon. The toilet wouldn't flush, the door wouldn't latch and the hand dryer blew cold air, but that was just the beginning.

After eating and in dire need of a cup of real coffee (more on that later) I joined the line behind an Italian family who really didn't seem to grasp the concept of fast food. After long and involved discussions with the manager about the nature of the food, its manner of cooking and whatever else (I really don't know as she was, natch, speaking Italian) the mother finally placed the first part of her order.

She waited silently while her own food was cooked, bagged and delivered before launching into a lengthy discussion with her daughter. After what seemed like hours of "But Maria, you had chicken yesterday" or whatnot, she had another lengthy chat with the manager and ordered some more. Then another long wait followed by the same again with her son. This was followed by another long chat with the manager who left for five minutes to take a phone call before returning to take her order.

I wasn't impressed but the American in front of me was definitely not loving it. The poor chap was practically tearing his hair out, and he didn't have a lot of it to pull. When he finally got to the counter, he delivered an entire order for two in less than three seconds (twomacs-quartercheese-twolargefries-sideofnuggets-largecoke-mediumsevenup-smalldietcoke-stawberrysundae-caramelsundae-hotfudgesundae-hotapplepie-to-go) and handed over his money with such anger that the manager produced the food in only twice the time it would take in any other McD's in the entire world.

Finally, I reached the counter.

"Just a coffee, please."

"No coffee."

"What? It is broken?"

"No sir," he said. "In Italy, in McDonalds, we don't serve coffee."

I never did find out if this was true, but it wouldn't surprise me. I've travelled enough not to expect massive North American style cups of coffee and can understand that most Europeans prefer a smaller cup of stronger java rather than a bucket full of tepid brown water.

But the Italians just go too far. I've been served coffee in Italy

that was, absolutely literally, a thimble-full. No amount of concentration can cover the fact that this isn't a cup of coffee at all. You simply can not pack a cup's worth of caffeine in such a small container.

My theory is that, despite what they tell you, Italians don't actually like coffee. They like meeting for coffee. They like chatting volubly over coffee. But I suspect that deep down, in their heart of hearts, they don't really like the stuff.

As we continued our Roman wanderings, there was one famous sight that eluded me. All through Rome, I'd been trying to find that famous square with the fountain that appears in all the classic movies. You know the place, where, in every movie ever made, the hero and heroine rush through the square causing a thousand pigeons to take flight in a mad Hitchcockian beating of wings.

I never did find it, partly because I only had a couple of days to explore Rome and partly because it turned out to be St Mark's Square, which is actually in Venice.

I do hope you're not reading this book for the travel tips.

Along the way I and the Finnish lads played a little game of Chat the Babes. We scored one point for every girl we got into conversation with and invited to join our little tour group plus an additional two points if she actually said yes.

In a horribly low scoring game, I barely won with a final points tally of 1-0-0.

Still, given that Vesa and Oskari's ages together didn't add up to mine, I felt a little proud.

Like most big cities, Rome has signs in tourist areas warning of the dangers of pickpockets. Pickpockets love these signs because, upon seeing them, most people touch their wallet to make sure it's there, letting the thief know exactly where their valuables are located.

In most places, the pickpockets on warning signs are drawn to look quite sinister. On Rome's warning signs, they look kinda cute. Daniel, a young backpacker from Australia, described them as looking like Ronald McDonald's pal The Hamburglar.

Rome's fun with crime theme doesn't stop with cute crims on posters.

The Roma Metro has a series of huge TV screens showing a mix of adverts and public service messages. One shows a friendly looking pickpocket deftly nicking the passport from an unsuspecting but prosperous looking gent. Later, when he checks his victim's documents, under "occupation" the passport states "serial killer." At this point the prosperous gent reappears, grins menacingly and throttles the pickpocket to death.

I'm not sure what effect this sort of advertising has on Rome's petty criminals, but I rode the Metro unscathed, so I won't complain.

Speaking of law enforcement, Italy has twice the number of cops per capita than the UK (that, dear reader, is a genuine, true, accurate Euro-fact which I personally researched and looked up and Googled and whatnot). From personal observation, I can happily report that every single Italian police officer is dedicated in the public interest to, at all times, looking as good as possible.

Their peaked caps are a thing to behold. They swoop up magnificently adding a good eight inches of height to the officer and providing the perfect backdrop to Europe's most impressively designed selection of cap badges.

And every officer seems to add his or her own little touch to the uniform. In fact, *uniform* is quite the wrong word as every one is slightly different.

Look at any group of Italian cops and notice that each has slightly different badge or belt buckle or shoulder marking. It's as if they're a bunch of *America's Next Top Model* contestants let loose in the wardrobe department with instructions to "pick out an outfit and make it your own."

They could do with a little more effort with the guns, though. All Italian police are armed, but those old-style Sgt Preston of the Mounties leather flap holsters really have to go. They may be packing serious heat, but the whole look screams "nice man-bag Luigi."

The Colosseum was certainly worth the €12 entry fee although there is some sort of scammy deal going on between the Colosseum and the tour operators whereby everyone (even the Colosseum staff) pressure you to pay €4 for a guided tour in order to skip the huge lines for tickets. The touts outside use "buy our tour and avoid the hour-long queue" as their main selling point.

In fact, the queue was nowhere near an hour. We had our tickets

in about 15 minutes.

Inside, it really is pretty much everything you expect. They say it's in great decline due to pollution, six million visitors a year and a nearby subway line shaking its foundations, not to mention decades of people nicking the stones to build houses and fences. All that may be true, but I kind of liked the fact that so much of it had crumbled away. It made the whole thing somehow more real.

There is some sort of restoration plan currently underway, but I hope it doesn't go too far. There's a fine line between restoring and rebuilding and I'd hate to think of the Colosseum turning into another Bratislava Castle.

Still, I don't see that happening. From what I managed to see of Italian efficiency, the restoration project likely won't ever get off the ground.

I took a train to Genoa, another wonderful Trenitalia experience.

I should have been frustrated and annoyed, but I wasn't. By now, I was starting to get into the Italian groove. It had been weeks since my last encounter with the wonderful Deutsche Bahn and I no longer expected trains to run efficiently, comfortably or even on time. It was like being back in Britain.

I did love the public address announcements that came across whenever the train was late (which was pretty much always). In other countries, train delay announcements are always delivered in a sombre, terribly sorry, not sure how that happened, won't happen again, abjectly apologetic tone of voice. Not so in Italy.

Italian train announcements positively revel in their lateness.

"The train! Is a ten-a minutes late! Trenitalia! Apologises! For the delay!"

Not only are the announcements full of enthusiasm for the lack of punctuality, they're also hugely inaccurate. On my ride to Genoa, every stop was led with a lateness announcement. But the degree of lateness was, in itself, completely wrong. The PA would announce that we were five minutes late. Then we'd travel ten minutes to the next stop and be told that the train was 30 minutes late. Then another five minutes travel and we were suddenly seven minutes late. And so it continued until we arrived in Genoa, ten minutes late, or half an hour, or six weeks.

I never did figure it out.

I never did warm to Genoa.

It's a port city which is something I normally like. Ports have a certain rough-around-the-edges feel that normally appeals to me. In such a place I like to stuff my cash into the sole of my shoe, drop a bit of "mugger money" into my pocket and wander around looking for trouble.

In Genoa, I just couldn't be bothered.

The city is built on massive hills and they've constructed a number of elevators deep in the mountains. You walk in, then the elevator rides along a track until it's deep inside the rock. Then it propels you up or down through the inside of the mountain to your eventual destination. It was great fun at the time, though a bit scary and there were times when I sort of understood what those 33 Chilean miners went through.

And the hostel was rubbish. First of all, it was miles out of town in an isolated area miles from even the smallest convenience store, never mind a pub or coffee shop.

I took one look at the place and immediately reduced my booking from three nights to two.

All-in-all, Genoa seemed to reflect my view of Italy which was one of terrible disappointment.

I wanted to love Italy. I really did. I've seen *Under a Tuscan Sun*. I've read Elizabeth David and Norman Lewis. I've watched Jamie Oliver and Rick Stein go on and on and on about fresh pasta and sun-ripened tomatoes and massive handfuls of fresh basil and huge glasses of rustic red wine.

But somehow, despite the impressive sights of Rome, Italy was the country that least inspired me to explore further.

I think it all has something to do with the fact that people are always going on and on about Italy. By the time you arrive, there's no way it can live up to the hype. I've met all sorts of people who love the place and can't understand why I didn't warm to it.

"Where did you go?" they always ask.

"I landed on the coast and travelled up to Rome and on to Genoa."

"Well," they say. "You haven't seen the real Italy. There's a little village in someplace that you should go to. It's up in the wherever

across from the whatnot . You can only get there by donkey on a Friday in September or late January. That's the real Italy. You haven't tried hard enough. You're just a tourist."

Well fuck you and the horse you rode in on! Personally, I think if you go to country and see its ancient capital city and another major centre, then that should be enough to decide if you wish to explore further. And, based on Rome and Genoa, I didn't.

I hope I am wrong. I hope that the wonderful Italy of my imagination exists. And I will, at some point in the future, give it another chance. I will go back in the hope of finding the Italy of Jamie and Rick and Elizabeth and that bloody Tuscan sun.

I hope it all works out. But on this journey, Italy did not deliver. So I went back to France.

Nice should be horrible. But it's not.

It's crowded with tourists who flock there in the summer for the sun and the beach. It ought to be a horrid tourist trap and, in truth, it probably is. But I loved it.

I loved the wide boulevard running through the city centre towards the waterfront. I loved the restaurants that looked and smelled and felt great but weren't. I loved the scent of coffee in the morning. In all, I loved the Frenchness of the place.

In fact, after just a few days in the country, I was starting to like the French. Not enough to invade Normandy, throw the Jerries out and give them their country back even though they'd spent five years basically collaborating with the Nazis. Nothing like that.

But I was liking their attitude towards life. I was liking their view that everyone, not just the hugely rich and successful, should enjoy a decent quality of life. I was liking the fact that a minimum wage worker in a fast food joint was entitled to the same level of respect and decent treatment as a six-figure-salary manager of a huge conglomerate.

And the ubiquitous, forty-something, impossibly leggy, cigarette-smoking Frenchwomen in closely tailored A-line skirts and four-inch fuck-me pumps didn't hurt either, if I'm totally honest.

In Nice I met the loveliest young woman I have probably ever come across. Caroline was her name, from someplace near Melbourne, Australia.

She wasn't gorgeous or sexy or anything like that. But she was pretty and pleasant and sweet and kind and gentle and lovely and just the type of girl who makes you want to dedicate the rest of your days making sure that nothing bad ever happens to her.

She invited me to join her and a group of her countrymen for a day trip to Monaco. Frankly, I was hopelessly smitten and it was the one time in my journey that I actually felt old. Had I been in my 20s, I would have happily followed her to the Arctic Circle or the Moon or Jupiter or wherever. As it was Monaco was closer, so off we went.

There was me from Canada plus Carrie, Tess, Laney, and Steve, all from Oz. It was a good group.

Monaco is far less sophisticated than you would expect. There are lots of ugly powerboats and plenty of flash sports cars, but it's all very tacky and tasteless and nouveau riche as if all the cast of *Dragons' Den* had turned up for the same weekend. There's plenty of cheap tourist crap too -- temporary tattoos, crappy jewellery and such.

Having neither the interest in nor the budget for such things, we spent the day hanging out on the beach drinking beer, catching rays and waiting for night to fall.

Mid-afternoon we took a long walk up the hill to the castle. The guards at the palace were hilarious. Clearly just hunky-buff fashion models hired to look good in the uniform, they made the guys at Prague Castle look like a crack squad from the special forces.

There were a few plaques dotted about dedicated to the memory of the late Princess Grace of Monaco and I made a strong effort to forget the fact that, in truth, Grace Kelly was a huge slag who slept her way through most of Hollywood before landing a real prince. Still, anyone who looks like Gwyneth Paltrow is okay in my books, so I'll forgive her.

Finally, night fell. It was August 23rd, the night of Monaco's entry into a France-wide fireworks competition. I'm not much into fireworks but it was a great show. It was, if fireworks can be so described, almost art.

I took loads of photos, a bit of video and on the train back to Nice spent the rest of the night wishing I had met Carrie when I was twenty years younger.

Or Grace Kelly.

Or Gwyneth Paltrow.

Or ... my god, I was feeling old.

I needed to break my journey to Barcelona and was unable to get a hostel at Aix-en-Provence, Montpellier or Marseilles so I settled for two nights in Nimes.

The hostel was hard to find, as was the tourist office. There were two signs both within 500m of the office, but absolutely no signs from the train station.

It was hopelessly confusing, but, for some reason, I didn't mind.

By this point I found myself once again liking France a lot more than I expected to.

We're not supposed to like the French. They're supposed to be arrogant and proud and rude. But they're not, exactly.

Okay, they are, sort of.

It's just that they've got a very nice country which they enjoy. You're welcome to visit, but please don't try to change the place. France will always be France and they like it that way.

Of course, the French generally don't speak English. But it's not out of spite or rudeness. They just don't need to. So I found myself trying a little bit of French here and there and, contrary to what you might expect, they didn't seem to mind a combined language of my own invention.

"Bonjour hello une billet one ticket merci thank you s'il vous plait please por favour danke".

Worked like a charm and some of them didn't even wince when I spoke.

At the hostel a group of young people studying to be primary school teachers were on some sort of a training field trip. The process involved half of them dressing up and pretending to be kids. In England that would be the start of all sorts of hijinks, but the young people took it all terribly seriously. They acted out the student part, then acted out the teacher parts all with the seriousness and intensity of Sir Larry giving his Hamlet at the RSC.

It wasn't terribly fascinating, but I did appreciate their dedication. I do like the English habit of taking the piss, but a bit of French earnestness wouldn't go amiss from time to time either.

I also met Robert, my first (and hopefully last) gay stalker. But

more on that later.

On the train to Barcelona I met a pretty Spanish girl returning from France. She told me she'd been in a 3-year long-distance relationship with a French boy and had finally agreed to move to Montpellier and live with him. After two weeks together, he'd tossed her out and she was now forced to head home.

Hearing that story, I was quite sad. But she seemed to take it quite well. And then it struck me. This was the difference between being young and being old. It's not about how you look; it's about how you think.

When you're young and you get an ache or a pain you think "it'll go away." When a relationship fails, you think "someone else will come along." When a job falls apart, you think "there's plenty of other places to work."

But there comes a time in life when you stop thinking that way. Everything seems like the last thing. The slightest twinge is a life-threatening illness. You get made redundant and think you'll never work again. Your relationship breaks up and you say to yourself "nobody will ever love me again."

And at that point, I resolved to think young. Not in a stupid way. Not in a middle aged man trying to look young way. I certainly wasn't about to start dressing like a teenager, listening to rap music or using 'like' in every sentence.

But I did resolve to take life as it comes. To roll with the punches. To remind myself that something always comes up. To assure myself that there's always a new thing, a new love, a new job, a new direction.

By the time we arrived in Barcelona I still looked like the old Mark, but deep down, hidden from view, a younger heart was beating.

And a good thing, too. Because I needed all my go-with-the-flow, take-life-as-it-comes attitude to deal with the fact that the Barcelona hostel was probably the most dire I'd encountered on the journey so far.

The room wasn't much larger than my clothes closet. There wasn't a window. There was little or no air circulation and the place stank of old socks.

And Robert the gay stalker was there.

"Mark!" he said when we 'accidentally' ran into each other in the hostel lobby, in the manner of old friends reunited. "How wonderful to see you."

"Yeah. Yeah, whatever," I answered.

"You said you were coming to Barcelona," he said. "So I came here also. I have some time."

I mumbled some rubbish about hanging out together and quickly made my exit before Robert's drooling became too much to bear.

"Really," I thought to myself, "I am way, way too old for this shit."

La Rambla is the main drag in Barcelona. It's nice, in a cheesy touristy sort of way.

What isn't so nice are those so-called living statues that you see every few feet. These are people who dress up in costume and paint themselves like Napoleon or Julius Caesar or Brad Pitt or whoever then stand rock-still waiting for people to give them money.

I hate them. And I hate what they do.

It's busking for the talentless.

At least real buskers sing a bit or dance a little or play *Moon River* badly on a recorder. But these wankers don't even do that.

But more than the so-called "artists", I particularly can't stand the people who toss them a coin or two then act all amazed when the "statue" moves a little to say thank you. They seem to think they've really accomplished something.

"Oh my goodness!" they say. "He's moving!"

Big fucking deal. He's not actually a real statue. He's a person. And for two Euros he's waved his hand. What's the big deal?

But despite all that, I liked La Rambla. I liked wandering along the wide boulevard, stopping now and then to gaze at a human statue, making eye contact, tossing my head to one side and smiling a little until he or she figured he had a sucker on the hook, then walking away without giving the fucker a single cent!

I really liked that.

And I really liked the Bouqueria Market. I'd seen it on various Rick Stein and Jamie Oliver programmes and figured it must be pretty much fake as fuck. I reckoned it must be like London's Borough Market which is more of a TV backdrop and tourist attraction than a real place to buy real veggies. But, unless I've been hugely and cleverly duped,

the Bouqueria is much more.

It's basically a fish market with seafood at the centre and the expanding rings around it filled with vendors selling all manner of fresh and wonderful produce.

If I lived in Barcelona (and I could do a helluva lot worse) I'd shop there every day. I'd buy huge bagfuls of fresh fish and recently butchered meat and locally grown veggies and heaven only knows what else. But I don't live there, so I buy cheap crap at Tesco's. Still, one can only dream.

What I did buy, throughout the day, were the fresh fruit blended smoothies that not only tasted great but provided the perfect cure for the hangover I'd acquired the night before.

Not exactly Rick Stein, but it worked for me.

Valencia was surprisingly charming and pretty. It also explained why Spain, and most of Europe, is bankrupt.

There used to be a river running through Valencia. It was called the Turia and in 1957 it flooded the city causing massive damage. As a result, the river was diverted away from the city and the old riverbed was planted over with grass, trees and other natural growing stuff (this is boring, historical stuff, but it's good to know and, I think, counts as a genuine Euro-fact). Today it's a huge sunken park running pretty much the length of the city. You can walk it, as I did, and what a wonderful walk it was.

Every few hundred feet there was something new. Different vegetation. A bridge. A fountain or waterfall. Always something new and interesting.

It was delightful and I loved it to death.

At the end of the park I arrived at the City of Arts and Science. It's a very modern collection of futuristic looking buildings housing a museum, a planetarium and (of course) an IMAX cinema.

Despite the fact that it looked like a sort of cheesy painted backdrop to a William Shatner-era episode of *Star Trek*, I rather liked it.

The main building looked like some sort of shark or other sea predator. Another part appeared to be some sort of flying hedgehog. And the whole thing was covered in enough shiny tiles to keep George Michael in gents' toilets for the rest of his life.

The problem wasn't the look of the place. That was fine. The

trouble was that it just reeked of taxpayers money wasted. It was obviously some huge public sector boondoggle that despite all its claims about "urban renewal" and "tourist infrastructure" and "cultural capital" will never in a million years recover even a fraction of what it cost.

The world is full of these things, massive underused architectural showpieces that don't make a fraction of what they cost. London is wasting a fortune on some more of them right now. They call it the Olympic Park and there are all sorts of plans for it being used post-2012, none of which will ever come to fruition.

Like every Olympic park before it, London's will spend the remainder of its days looking around for a role to play, to justify its existence until finally crumbling into rubble.

The City of Arts and Science has never hosted the Olympics. But in all other respects it may as well be an Olympic Village.

The Turia Park, on the other hand, will provide generations of people with a quiet, serene, aesthetically wonderful place to pass a pleasant day.

Perhaps there is a lesson in this.

Perhaps, next time some politician or bureaucrat stands up with a plan to host the Olympics or build some sort of arts-culture-science-world-class-international-centre-palladium-convention-venue, we ought to stand up and say "forget it, build a nice park instead."

Just a thought.

The Oasis Hostel in Seville cost €21 per night. And it had a pool!
On the roof!

How cool was that?

And how un-cool was I?

Mine was a mixed dorm, me plus two Aussie fellas whose names I can't recall so I'll call them Bob and Harry and a girl from Switzerland I'll call Catherine.

We were all in the room getting ready for the day. I was making some sort of silly comments about the twisty, windy laneways and roadways of Seville and how easy it would be to get lost and why it was a good idea never to leave the hostel without a pocketful of breadcrumbs. It wasn't terribly clever, but Catherine laughed like it was the funniest thing since Michael McIntyre played the Hammersmith Apollo.

"We're taking the walking tour," she said when my stupid comedy act had mercifully come to an end. "Come with us."

I made some sort of excuse. I don't like tours of any sort. In my experience, they tend to be full of history and other boring rubbish.

Catherine took my hand. "Come with us."

Okay.

The tour was a bust. Our guide raced us around the city with one eye on her watch and another on the legitimate, licensed tour guides who seemed hell-bent on putting her out of business.

I spent most of the tour walking ten feet back from the group, side-by-side with Catherine who seemed to have attached herself to me.

At one point, our guide did a little bit of tell-us-about-yourselfs, let's-all-get-to-know-each-other stuff. After going from person to person, she looked at Catherine and me directly.

"And where are you from," she said, addressing us as a couple.

"Oh, no," I stammered. "We're not together."

The guide and the group seemed surprised. I was just confused. And a little flattered. All these people thought me and this pretty Swiss girl could be a couple. Way to go Marky!

The tour ground to a halt and the Aussie fellas suggested we all find somewhere for lunch. We sat down at one of the thousands of open-air eateries that dot Seville.

Lunch was confusing. The two Aussies were young, handsome and, in that Aussie way, light-hearted and fun to be around. Yet Catherine hung on my every word and addressed all her conversation my way.

I didn't get it.

Catherine left for the toilet.

"So," Bob or Harry said. "You and her. What's the story?"

"There is no story," I said.

"Really? She's You oughta"

"I know," I said. "But I don't really know what's going on."

I really didn't.

I am, admittedly, pretty dense when it comes to women. On the few occasions when a woman has shown an interest, it has always come as a complete shock to me.

I have, on more than one occasion, had friends say about a woman who, I thought, was not quite aware that I was even alive, say something like "you should ask her out, she likes you."

My reaction has always been some variation on the word "huh?".

So I am, women-wise, a bit dense.

On the other hand, I was out and about in sunny Spain with a beautiful Swiss girl who, according to the unbiased opinion of two young Australians, was "totally into you, mate."

No wonder my head was spinning.

We all split the bill and left the restaurant.

"See you later," Catherine said to the Aussies.

She opened her guidebook and looked to me. "Shall we go to the Alcazar?"

"Okay."

So we did.

The Alcazar is some sort of big palace or castle or fortress or whatnot and apparently in fourteen hundred or fifteen hundred or sixteen hundred or some time last week Christopher Columbus visited or lived there or built it or cleaned the toilets or some such thing.

I really don't know.

I do know that it's got some lovely gardens and fountains and palm trees and is just a wonderful place to wander around with a pretty Swiss girl. Which is what we did.

We walked amongst the foliage.

We took our shoes off and hopped into the fountain.

We stuck our neck above headless statues and pretended to be ancient people made of marble.

We took silly photos of each other doing silly things.

In short, we acted like every romantic couple in every romantic movie ever made in the entire world.

Eventually, I had to do something. If I don't, I thought to myself, she'll think I'm the biggest loser in the world. She'll be insulted. Here's a pretty girl, sending out all manner of signals (according to my two Aussie judges). If you don't do anything, she'll feel bad and you'll look like a schmuck.

So, as we walked along, I took her hand in mine.

A hand that Catherine, with a swiftness that would make a python green with envy, snatched back.

I just didn't get it.

I still don't.

I spent the night drowning my sorrows in €1 shots at the hostel bar and left the next day for Portugal.

That's the great thing about travel. You can always move on.

I'd been to Lagos before. A few times. I really liked Portugal and it was one of the few places on this journey that I was already familiar with.

I like the fact that Portugal seems to straddle the divide between the first world and the third world. It's advanced enough that you have some sort of confidence in its basic infrastructure.

You reckon that if you're knocked down in the street by a bus you'll be taken to a decent hospital and attended to by decent doctors who might actually save your life.

But it's not so advanced that it's turned into the sort of bland, cookie-cutter world that seems to be the norm in the so-called "developed world."

There are very few McDonald's in Portugal. There are even fewer Starbucks. KFC is pretty much non-existent.

The vast majority of shops and restaurants are single operations run, usually, by a family and staffed by locals.

I like that.

I checked into the YHA hostel in Lagos.

Pete was there.

Pete was there the last time I stayed in Lagos.

Pete will probably be there next time I stay in Lagos.

Pete is probably in the Lagos YHA right now.

Pete is a big fella in his late 30s from someplace in the UK I didn't catch. He's got some sort of freelance, IT support type work that he can do from pretty much anywhere with WiFi and a mobile phone connection so he spends most of his time flitting about the world, writing a travel blog and trying to break in as a sort of travel guide/consultant/writer.

Pete had brought a barbecue and some charcoal and spent the day letting everyone know that he'd be firing it up later that evening and anyone who felt like buying and cooking some food and hanging out in the hostel courtyard was most welcome to do so.

Which we all did.

We wandered into town stopping only for a couple of pints at the Three Monkeys bar and bought a selection of freshly butchered meat from a local small supermarket.

Pre-cut, shrink-wrapped, pre-weighed and pre-priced meat isn't really done in Portugal so we just pointed at what looked good, used a few improvised hand gestures to indicate roughly how much we wanted and watched in impressed amusement as the hearty butcher women behind the counter used their massive and deadly cleavers to turn slabs of meat into dainty and easily-barbecued pieces.

It was heavenly.

If only Tesco was such fun.

Evening came. The sun set. Pete had his barbecue going full roar.

I'd bought some veg and tomatoes and a few of us set out to make a sort of communal, help-yourself, goes-with-anything pasta. There was plenty of pasta. That's the thing about backpackers hostels; there's always pasta about. I don't know who buys it or where it comes from but I assure you that you can wander into any hostel at any time of the week or year and, somewhere in the kitchen, there will be a collection of pasta.

Meat got cooked. Pasta got eaten. Bottles of beer and wine got opened.

At some point, a guitar appeared in Pete's hands and he was persuaded to play a tune or two. Which he did and which we all enjoyed.

It was a lovely evening, all thanks to good old Pete.

Trouble was, I'd had exactly the same evening last time I stayed at the Lagos hostel.

Then good old Pete just happened to have his barbecue.

And good old Pete just happened to have his guitar.

And good old Pete just happened to be persuaded to play a tune or two.

And it was a lovely evening, all thanks to good old Pete.

It really was déjà vu all over again.

Cascais was a fishing village and is now a weekend or mini-break getaway for Lisboaeta.

Lisboeta! I bet you don't know what that means, do ya? It's a

demonym. I bet you don't know what a demonym is, do ya? A demonym what you call people from a place. So people from London are Londoners. People from Toronto are Torontonians. People from Manchester are Mancunians. People from Liverpool are Liverpudlians. People from Sydney are Sydneysiders. And so on and so forth.

People from Lisbon are Lisboeta.

And that is definitely a Euro-fact. So let's add that to the list.

It was early afternoon by the time I arrived at the hostel in Cascais.

"I need to buy a beach towel," I asked the pleasant woman checking me in. "Is there a shop." She suggested a huge mega-mart, not terribly far from the town centre.

"I need a few things myself," said a young girl with a broad American accent standing next to me waiting to check in. "We could go together, if you like."

"Sure."

Kirsten was her name and as we walked through the mega-monster-super-store looking for a beach towel for me and a sun dress for her I have never seen so many shop assistants appear in such a short period of time.

"May I help you?"

"Do you require assistance?"

"Can I do anything to help you?"

It was a level of personal service not seen in the retail world since the 1950s and it was all directed at Kirsten.

Little wonder. She was as fit as a fiddle.

She was also half my age which was why the hundreds of horny young Portuguese sales clerks climbing out of the woodwork to inquire if "I can do anything to help you" assumed I was her father.

"They think I'm your dad," I said.

"I know," Kirsten chuckled. "It's hilarious."

"Let's mess with their head."

"kay."

And we did. Kirsten flirted with one eye cast over her shoulder. I glared paternally at every male who approached. It was great fun.

Next day I was poolside (yes, only €20 a night and the hostel had a pool; another reason to consider hostelling on your next holiday) and

Kirsten came down wrapped in a towel.

"Beach?" she said.

"Yeah."

Cascais has three beaches all of which are fairly small and not terribly impressive. But if you just want a nice sandy place to lie in the sun, catch a few rays and, if you're feel really energetic, have a little cavort about the water, they're perfectly fine.

We put down our towels. I padded back into town to collect a beer for me and some sort of chocolate covered ice cream for Kirsten. We lay out on the sand collecting sun and making our way towards some sort of skin cancer.

Then the boys turned up.

There were dozens of them. All young. All tanned. All athletic. They had a football which they played up and down along the beach. Eventually (and by eventually, I mean about seven seconds) they set eyes on Kirsten.

From that moment on there was a never-ending parade of horny young Portuguese boys parading themselves in front of our patch of beach.

I didn't know what to think. I had no responsibility for Kirsten and, given our age difference, no romantic or sexual interest. But as the cream of Portuguese testosterone made its appearance mere inches from my newly-purchased beach towel, I realised what it must be like to be a father and how horrible that must be.

Here I was lying just 20 inches from a girl who, as far as the wide world was concerned, could very well be my offspring, and there were dozens of brazen young boys quite willing to do just about anything to snatch her away.

Thank God I've never had kids, I thought.

On my final day in Cascais, Kirsten and I headed out for lunch at a small, nearby restaurant suggested to us by the hostel owner.

Lunch was excellent. The Portuguese really know their fish and we enjoyed it to the full.

The bill came on a plate with a receipt and business card.

We split the tab and made our exit. As we did, the waiter approached. "Here is the card from the restaurant," he said, handing Kirsten a card. Kirsten took the card and stuck it in her back pocket. We walked outside.

"You do know that his phone number is on that card," I said.

"Huh? What?"

"Check it out," I said.

And sure enough, just above the name of the restaurant were the words, written in blue biro, "Tony - 077 XXXXXXXXXXXX"

"How did you know that?" Kirsten asked.

If I'd answered honestly I would have said "have you looked in a mirror lately?" or "have you checked out your ass in those shorts?" But I didn't. I mumbled some lame crap about "he seemed to like you" and we went on our way.

Thank Heaven for childlessness, I thought to myself. How the fuck do parents handle this kinda stuff?

Porto is where they make port. Port is like wine, but thicker and stronger. It's a bit sweet and heavy for my liking, but I do so like all that association with the old Nelson's Navy days with officers and men toasting the King with port before sailing into battle and kicking the shit out of the Frogs and the Dagoes.

I wandered through Porto in the company of Laura and Sarah, two delightful and charming young women from the Australian island state of Tasmania or, as they call it, Tazzy.

We did the usual port cave stuff which was all well and good. But, and this made my day, we crossed the Dom Luis bridge.

As I have mentioned previously, I do love bridges. And if there is a bridge to love, it is the Dom Luis. It was built over a century ago and spans the Douro River. It was designed by the same people who came up with San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge and is wonderfully brilliant and, like all great bridges makes me wonder when and how and why we stopped building amazing and wonderful and magnificent things like bridges and, instead, started making stupid little music players and moronic game stations and pointless tablet computers and cruddy little mobile phones.

What happened to us?

Where did we go wrong?

When did we all get together and say "enough of greatness, enough of brilliance, let's just make a load of shitty little bits of plastic crap?"

How and why did we become so small?

And so I headed to Lisbon, my final destination on this journey. On my way from the airport, I ended up at a fairly run-down working person's diner. As I tucked into a not particularly interesting steak sandwich and small beer, I fell into conversation with a couple of young girls at the table next to me.

Nicki, the most voluble of the two, was an American on some sort of high school exchange programme. Apparently, she was spending a year in Portugal while some Portuguese equivalent was spending 12 months in the USA. I couldn't figure out who was getting the better of the bargain.

We chatted about this and that and mostly about what was worth seeing and not worth seeing in Lisbon. And then, as the girls had to leave, we said our goodbyes and I thought nothing further of the matter.

Full of lunch, I headed up the road to the hostel.

They weren't ready to check me in, so I dumped my pack and went out for a walk. A few yards from the hostel I came to a small park overlooking the harbour. I walked in, had a look at the view and turned to leave. As I did, a voice cried out "Hi! How are you?"

I wandered over and said "hello again" to Nicki who introduced me to her group of friends. They were, to put it mildly, a mixed bag. There were a couple of young fellas in dreadlocks riffing on bongo drums. There were a few old guys who looked like the sort of old guys who are younger than they look but are wearing the ravages of a hard life. Nicki's friend from the café was there, but was too busy snogging some boy to say hello.

Somebody sidled up with a 1-litre bottle of Sagres lager and a plastic cup, which I accepted.

Everyone was very nice, so I stuck around.

Over the next three days I lived a sort of double life. By day, I hung out in the park with this diverse group of street people. I drank beer, lay in the sun, chattered a bit about nothing at all and listened to the bongos. At night I said farewell to my park-mates and hopped over to the hostel where a hot shower and clean bed linen were waiting.

From time-to-time some of the hostel crowd would catch sight of me living with the homeless and gasp and wave. Later on, I'd meet up with them and become, for one of the few times in my life, terribly cool.

On the last day, I headed out to the park just as a communal joint was on its last few drags. I'm not a smoker, but as I was at the end of my journey and I felt like a fully fledged member of Lisbon's street scene, I thought I'd give it a go.

"I'd like to do a bit of hash," I told Nicki.

"Okay. I'll get you some."

"How much is it?" I asked. I had no idea.

"No, no. Don't worry. I can get some."

After much persuasion, I was allowed to pay for the hash and for a mere five Euros was given a quantity of fine Moroccan hashish that, I am reliably informed, would have cost me about £25 on the streets of London.

Somebody rolled it all up and we passed the cigs around. I tried my best, but the stuff really didn't have much effect on me. Despite a good bit of smoking, I was still doing what I had been doing, just sitting in the hot Lisbon sun, chilling out and catching a few rays.

"This stuff is nothing," I thought to myself. "I've had martinis with more punch than this."

A young fellow I knew from the hostel walked by and waved. I waved back. "What's up," he said, walking over.

"Not much," I said. "Just hangin' out."

"Mate," he said. "You are so fucking stoned!"

Next day, the tour was over. British Airways flight 507 to Heathrow was waiting. I had a few hours to kill so I dumped my pack at the hostel and set out for a bite of breakfast.

It was funny. When I started this journey, I was paranoid about my pack. I never let it out of my sight. I never left a hostel without locking it up.

Now, months later, I didn't care.

As far as I was concerned, my pack was little more than a crummy old bag full of not very interesting clothes. It was convenient to have, but nothing more. If someone wanted to steal it, that was their problem, not mine.

I wasn't bothered.

In fact, with the journey nearly over, I noticed that I'd become a lot less bothered about most things.

If a hostel was full, I just found another. If a train was late, I

treated myself to a nice lunch and waited for the next one. If the weather turned nasty, I got wet and waited for the sun to come out and dry me off.

I liked it. I liked being the sort of guy who isn't bothered about things. It was a nice change. And it was a nice result to the journey.

It wasn't a big result. It wasn't an *Eat Pray Love* sort of result where Elizabeth Gilbert goes travelling and comes back two dress sizes bigger and married to a Spaniard.

It was a small result. But a good one.

I was still basically the same guy I was when I left. I liked the same sort of books. I listened to the same sort of music. I was still unmarried and had awful taste in clothes.

But while I was basically the same guy, I think I came out a little better.

I was a little bit mellower. I was slightly more relaxed. I wasn't quite such an annoying know-it-all. I'd acquired a bit of give-and-take. I wasn't quite so judgemental. I was me, just a bit better.

No great life-changing revolution. No eating praying loving, just a little bit of personal growth.

And I was happy with that.

On the other hand, a bit of extra fashion sense would have been nice.

- THE END -

To see a small selection of photographs from the tour, visit <http://runninglate.weebly.com/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For more about Mark, visit www.markhillonline.com.

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Some names and a few minor identifying details have been changed.

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