

Contents

Introduction and preparations of a sort - 1976.....	2
I The Adventure starts - 3 December, 1976.....	4
II Singapore - foreign soil - 10 December, 1976.....	6
III The Shock of London - 13 December, 1976.....	7
IV - Paris - The Real destination - 12 January, 1977	10
V Chelsea Days - 15 January	12
VI Unto the mountains - 1 March.....	14
VII Escape to Edinburgh - 23 March	19
VIII Preparing for Six-plus-one Months in a Van - 26 March.....	21
IX A Month in a Van - Wales, England & Scotland - 6 April	22
London again - 22 April	25
X Six Months in a Van and some Better Weather - 6 May	26
The Netherlands - 6 May.....	26
A missed ferry from Germany - 12 May.....	27
Denmark - 12 May.....	28
Germany - 21 May.....	29
Belgium - 2 June	32
France - 6 June.....	32
Luxembourg - 13 June	35
France - 14 June	35
Spain - 25 June	37
France - 11 July	40
Italy - 15 July.....	41
France - 28 July	44
Italy - 30 July.....	45
Yugoslavia - 2 August	45
Greece - 6 August	49
Turkey - 15 August.....	50
Greece - 18 August	51
Yugoslavia - 27 August	52
Italy - 31 August.....	52
Austria - 3 September	52
Germany - 12 September	54
France - 20 September	56
XI Back to Blighty - 22 September	56
XII Sun-ward - 5 December.....	61
Hong Kong - 6 December	61

XIII	The Fedor Shalyapin - 8 December	62
	The Philippines - 10 December	63
	Back on board	63
	New Guinea - 17 December.....	64
	Back on board	65
	Australia - 22 December	65
	Epilogue.....	66

When the EU and I first met, she was not quite twenty and I was not quite twenty-four. I was the youngster and she taught me lots.

Introduction and preparations of a sort - 1976

What we did what we did, why we did what we did and when we did it.

This trip was bound to have its difficulties, beginning with who was actually travelling. A boyfriend had proposed it. A teacher of disabled children, he had just missed out on a secondment to a primary school in South-Eastern England and, having got excited about the prospect of a year in Europe, we decided to go anyway. We would be accompanied by my four-year-old daughter, Ophelia, who would thus celebrate her fifth birthday in London and her sixth somewhere between London and Sydney.

This meant that she would miss her first year of school, another reason to go ahead with the trip, as any delay would need to be for at least thirteen years: in other words, it would never happen. Having attended pre-school for two years, she was well capable of making up the lost kindergarten year and I reasoned that the experience of Europe would be much more instructive than another year of pre-reading.

All that was the easy part. The difficulties began with a bad relationship: I had recently discovered that my beau was cheating on me. In retrospect, it's hard to blame him, as I was especially difficult to get on with, for a number of reasons. Work had been going all wrong since a big demotion following my refusal to sleep with the head of personnel, and sabotage by my immediate supervisor, a WWII veteran, who objected to single mothers, working mothers, single or otherwise, as well as people pursuing university careers in tandem with their day jobs. I ticked all boxes, so he was making my life suitably impossible. Sailing and jetting off to the other side of the world was appealing.

Then there was the money - or lack of it. I had been able to store up recreational leave, which I cashed in when I resigned my job. We both cashed in our

accumulated pensions, which at 23 and 25 years old, amounted only to a couple of thousand dollars. We would both need to work in London, where, following the second oil shock, the headline unemployment rate was closer to 20% than 10%. Someone had given us an out-of-date copy of Arthur Frommer's *Europe on \$5.00 a day*. The author had in mind per person, after the cost of travel and accommodation. We decided the three of us would live on that - all inclusive. Meanwhile, with global inflation also hovering around double digits, Frommer's \$5.00 had become \$8.00. The most amazing thing perhaps is that we more or less managed it.

Nearly forgot to mention the constitutional crises that Australia had suffered a year earlier, where an elected government that the British sovereign's Australian representative deemed incompetent was deposed in favour of one that really was incompetent (and more monarchist). On 29 November, less than a week before our scheduled departure, the new government was forced to devalue the currency by a whopping 17.5%. Preferring not to leave things until the last minute, I had already transferred the bulk of my wealth into a French franc account with the Banque Nationale de Paris (BNP), on the reasoning that it had branches in pretty much every European capital as well as one in Sydney; and had bought a few hundred dollars' worth of USD traveller's cheques. In the days before automatic teller machines, this was important. I had been nagging Alan to buy his traveller's cheques, so was less than sympathetic to his bad humour when he was caught out. The cost of his trip had just gone up by 20%.

Its easy to forget how costly a rigid and poorly-managed economy can be to ordinary citizens. A regular return flight to London for Ophelia and me would have cost more than I earned in a year, mainly because of exorbitant departure taxes imposed by our own government. A much cheaper, more fun, but slower alternative was ship-jet: sailing, or steaming, to Singapore, then flying to London. Packages abounded, only adding to the excitement. We would fly to Perth, bus to Fremantle, ship to Singapore and spend two nights there before boarding a charter flight to London. Instead of a few thousand, it was a few hundred dollars, all transfers and meals included.

I had quit my job and handed in the keys to my rented flat on the bank of Botany Bay, piled all my furniture and stuff into the caravan parked in the garden at Alan's parents' home where we spent our last night, December 2, 1976, before they drove us to the airport.

Shortly after take-off I realised I'd left the only jacket I owned on the bed there. I would freeze on contact in Europe.

So far, I have written from memory, from here I am assisted by an imperfectly-kept diary, a gift from a beloved aunt of Alan's, which has been sitting in amongst old photos for over 43 years. [photo] I also assiduously plotted, on a large road-map, the course of our adventures.

| The Adventure starts - 3 December, 1976

Dinner with the captain of the Kota Singapura. Ophelia loses a flag, gains a new friend and they win second prize for fancy dress. We all cross the equator for the first time.

It was frustrating for three excited youngsters to be diverted via Melbourne, but eventually got to Perth, and then by bus to Fremantle, about 50km away, where the Kota Singapura waited, emanating, when the wind turned, the distinct, if unexpected aroma of sheep and cattle dung. After some eye-rubbing, our disbelief turned to astonishment to realise the bottom deck was occupied by several hundred head of cattle and the one immediately above it was full of sheep. For most of the trip, they weren't noticeable, but when the wind blew strongly enough in the same direction as the ship, well, they became noticeable.

Four hundred excited travellers waited too, for hours it seemed, until someone decided that we'd be easier to manage on the ship unpacking than on the quay complaining. A souvenir vendor circulated, from whom we bought Ophelia a little Australian flag. By cruise-ship standards, the Kota Singapura was small, accommodating, in addition to its bovine and ovine passengers, about 250 humans. The human cargo consisted of a lot of twenty-somethings heading to Europe for a big adventure, some older holiday-makers destined for South-East Asia and several dozen English-Australian families heading home to spend Christmas with family. Importantly, there were several dozen children on board.

Ophelia was cross because she had lost her flag. Someone suggested that the captain had taken it.

For reasons still unclear, we were assigned to the Captain's table, together with a very retiring and seemingly very well-bred woman in her late twenties of stunningly few words, and an elderly man. By way of conversation, he informed us that the sheep and cattle were his. I was interested, but conversation stopped rather than sparked when I asked if he took them everywhere he went. Insensitive, and feeling that I was getting the hang of the small-talk, I turned to the Captain and asked how many passengers there were on the boat. He responded that there were seven boats on the ship. He dined in his cabin for the rest of the trip.

Our cabin had a double bed, two single bunks and a private bathroom, which to me was quite a luxury. Ophelia insisted on sleeping in the top bunk, but after she was thrown out of it and across the cabin one night in turbulent seas, we convinced her to accept the bottom one.

At the welcome cocktail reception, the organiser gave a little speech. Given his suit and tie, Ophelia assumed he was the captain, which he thought would be amusing to confirm, until she angrily demanded that he return her flag to her.

Alan caught a cold and was grumpy for the whole six days. Especially so, when I was voted Queen Aphrodite for the equatorial crossing. Ophelia had a sensational time. The organisers had engaged an old monoglot Chinese amah did a fine job of

taking charge of the children, in a dedicated space, with their own swimming pool, from just after breakfast to after their evening meal at 18.30, when they would be handed back, exhausted, for cleaning and bedding down. Andrea and Ophelia, two slightly precocious, freckled five-year-olds, one with green eyes and the other blue-eyed charmed everybody on board and had a ball doing so.



We crossed the equator the day before arriving in Singapore and that evening was the costume ball, with prizes for the best costume. The organisers had thought of everything, with lots of crepe paper to make costumes from. I proposed we dress Andrea and Ophelia as little angels, in robes of white. With little wings and halos, and with red, pointed tails attached. Devils in Disguise. This won second prize, the

first being taken out by a dribbling two-year old in a red and green Robin Hood costume.

II Singapore - foreign soil - 10 December, 1976

Shopping, exploring, riding in a betjak and wallowing in a luxury hotel. A badly-delayed flight redeemed only by the hotel pool. Then a night-mare flight to London via Karachi, Istanbul and Frankfurt.

Lee Kwan Yew was serious about cleaning up Singapore and transforming it from a disease-ridden, but colourful slum to its current high-rise, sterile efficiency. Changi airport was brisk and efficient, and a bus took us to the Excelsior Hotel in Orchard Road - this was the aspirational, manicured part of Singapore. Except in films, I had never in my life seen such luxury, and never imagined I would actually stay in such a place. Quite different from the Australian country pubs we'd occasionally stopped in, where you walked the length of cold, lino-floored corridors to a bathroom with nineteenth century basins, claw-foot baths where the ceramic had given way to the iron underneath and exploding gas water heaters. In lieu of greasy eggs and bacon on cold toast, breakfast at the Excelsior was the most opulent buffet I could never have imagined. Yet the English returning home complained the lack of toast! Toast! Isn't that one of the things we want to get away from? What about the amazing pastries, tropical fruit, and (non-greasy) eggs cooked six different ways?



Then there were other things: storm gutters 40cm wide and 60cm deep, with little foot-bridges so you could cross them. Police that checked the length of the boys' hair - if it went below the collar, they would cut it. Yet some remnants of colonial Singapore remained, such as the quay-side shops, oddly august-looking Victorian-era administrative buildings that spoke of the wealth once generated by the colonies - and of course Raffles Hotel. We ate at an overpriced place in Albert Street called Fatty's, but later learned that the best place to eat was Bugit Street.

We had decided to buy a camera, as they, like much else, were much cheaper than at home, so we headed out. Alan insisted on a ride in a betjak, which I hated: the wiry little man pedalling furiously in steaming heat for a pittance. I felt overweight even though I wasn't. Alan probably weighed at least twice that of our chauffeur. I felt ashamed - from now on we would walk or take a taxi.

We had to go to Change Alley. I wanted a carved wooden statue and found one of a Hindu dancer, but didn't really enjoy bartering. Not that it was expensive, it wasn't - and so what if it had been? The vendor probably needed the money more than I did (though the betjak driver needed it even more). But I'm lousy at haggling: always feel a bit ripped off. But the statue was lovely. We wandered around lots more, learning what sore feet really felt like, and ate in Bugit Street, which was much more interesting than the previous evening. We felt we'd seen pretty much all there was to see in Singapore, which alas was probably true.

Our flight the following day was due to leave at 11.00, but on arriving at the airport, we gleaned that it was delayed. Each wave of new announcements began to speak of a pretty long delay and I was worried enough about how a small child was going to cope with a seventeen-hour flight after eight hours in a crowded airport lounge with forty-odd boozing, smoking Ozzie blokes. Young mothers develop the ability to think quickly, and I dove onto the luggage conveyer, extracted our swimsuits from our bags and ordered that we would go back to the hotel and wait it out by the swimming pool. Alan could ring the airport periodically to see what was going on. That worked, and we were back at the airport for our departure at 18.00.

But what a flight! Nowadays, Singapore to London is a single, twelve- or thirteen-hour hop - and non-smoking. The Ozzie blokes continued to drink and smoke on the flight, which added more ambiance than we would have liked. Our first leg was six hours and got us as far as Karachi. I'll never forget the smell of mass open defecation. Being girls, we had to go straight to the ladies, where I was taken aback by an old woman demanding a dollar for a single square of toilet paper. I was also taken aback by the expanse of white marble, with holes in it that represented the toilets themselves. On the other hand, fifty cents bought three bottles of Coca-cola.

Back on board the flight the blokes fell asleep straight away. Rules were lax then, and I made a bed for Ophelia on the floor under our legs. After a whole day playing in the swimming pool, she was bound to sleep, and we could spread out over her seat while she was on the floor. But our repose was interrupted after just seven hours by an emergency landing in Istanbul, as one of our passengers was diagnosed with peritonitis, so needed emergency surgery. In Istanbul! How much would he have given to be able to brave it the four remaining hours to London? Or even Frankfurt, for that matter, where we had a scheduled stop. I remember the rush of cold air as they opened the forward door (airbridges had not yet been thought of).

III The Shock of London - 13 December, 1976

Victoria Station hell. Coming to terms with jet-lag and London and real, third-world accommodation. A pad in trendy Chelsea and planting feet on Monopoly board addresses. Setting ground rules. Work.

It was early morning when we arrived at Stanstead, which then consisted of a wooden waiting hall of perhaps 60 square metres in a picturesque field of mist and

cows. They said the ambient temperature was five degrees, but that seemed doubtful as puddles in the mud road had frozen solid. In my stylish, light, polyester top and jeans, I hurried from plane to terminal and then to bus, which deposed us at Victoria Station. The tour company, having fulfilled its contract, clearly wanted no more to do with us, so dumped would more accurately describe it. Victoria was as chaotic and forbidding then as it is now and I still hate the place. In the early morning gloom, we had no idea how to get our bearings, so were obliged to take a taxi the mile and a half to the NAT Hotel in Cromwell Road, where we had a booking.

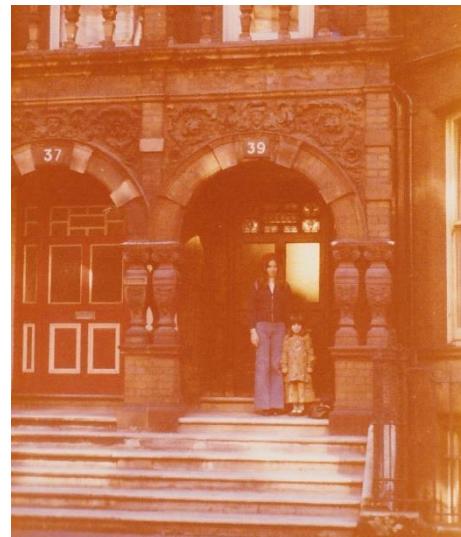
NAT stood for North Africa Tours. Some dubbed it Never Again Tours, but that was unfair, as in fact the services were very good, especially for the prices. NAT was owned by a group of enterprising South Africans, and welcomed antipodeans of all sorts. They offered cheap, dormitory accommodation, both long- and short-term, a mail holding service, a range of group tours around Britain and the Continent and regular, free, day-trips to places of interest near London. The notice board advertised flats and temporary employment. You got to know the other regulars, which gave a sense of belonging, a place to come "home" to, where there would always be a roof over our heads, however basic.

Basic was the operational word here. The hotel in London reminded me of the rented homes of poor aunts and uncles in the 1950s and the country pubs we'd stopped in in Australia, smelling perpetually of damp, with ancient plumbing fixtures, linoleum floors and rickety staircases - features I thought had disappeared with the post-war economic boom. Throughout our stay in London, we learned that the UK had sometimes missed the boom - I still suspect that this had been a deliberate choice.

Arthur Frommer had told us we could eat cheaply at a chain of restaurants known as Pot Restaurants. Not that cheap, but copious comfort food guaranteed to pile on the kilos. We had our first London meal at one of them around the corner from the Hotel, in Earl's Court, where Australians traditionally gathered. A news-stand at the entrance to the tube there distributed "The Australasian Express". So numerous were we and New Zealanders that we merited our own weekly.

The first night was a shocker. Wide awake at 3.00, too cold to go out, we decided to listen to the radio, but were staggered to find that, unlike Australia, where radio is 24 hours a day, British radio stations shut down shortly after midnight. That was a long night, and a very late morning. The NAT hotel staff dealt with that too, and knew not to wake us up to arrange our room. But we missed breakfast.

First task was to find a flat for three months, then some work, school for Ophelia. And buy some warm clothes!!



Alan found a single-room flat at 39 Draycott Place in Chelsea, which then was affordable. It had a small cook-top, fridge, wash-basin and a shower. Well what counts as a shower in Britain: Australians often joke about the Brits' attitude to showering, and now I began to understand. A moulded plastic cubicle stood against the wall beside the wash basin. The felt floor in front of it was damp and a bit mouldy, with a cheap, rubber-backed mat covering the mould. The toilet was across the hall outside our room - we shared it with another, similar room on the same floor. It would do us until late March, when we planned to leave London to tour Britain. The bonus was the Australian couple in the other ground-floor flat, who had a son, Christopher, the same age as Ophelia. That was about all we had in common with them, but we could take turns minding the children and so get out and see some of the famed West End shows.

The first week and a bit was shopping and sight-seeing and getting used to the cold, damp and short days. We celebrated Ophelia's fifth birthday by taking her to the zoo in Regent's Park, where she made friends with an orang-utan. The ambient temperature hovered around zero, and I couldn't help thinking it a bit cruel to leave an inhabitant of the tropics in the open air. A solitary kangaroo looked so forlorn, I almost wanted to cry.



It quickly became clear that we needed to set some simple, robust, ground-rules for Ophelia. Many of the places we visited were horribly crowded, and it is too easy to mislay a small five-year-old - especially one who was eager to see everything on this huge adventure. Christmas helped, I told her that if she got separated from us she should go and stand beside the Christmas tree, which anyway came naturally to a five year old. Failing that, she should find a policeman and wait with him. To her this meant anyone in uniform, and most places had some kind of security guard or uniformed guide near the

entrance, so the system worked well, and we would find her chirping merrily to a charmed guard about what she'd done since last week, where she came from, and doubtless lots of embarrassing details about our family life together. She was having a wonderful time - Pelicans, swans and squirrels in parks were, I suppose, predictable, but she was also fascinated by the mummies and ancient clocks in the British Museum and wide-eyed wonder at Madame Tussaud's wax-works.made friends everywhere we went. Castles and palaces were where princesses lived, so intrinsically interesting. Guards in bear-skin hats and red jackets, just like in story-books.

For all of us it would be our first Christmas away from family. We weren't sad, but it did feel strange. I've always hated roast dinners and especially plum puddings, so was more than happy to celebrate Christmas at a pancake restaurant in Soho. Now we discovered something else about this great, cosmopolitan city, centre of civilisation etc, etc: all public transport closes down at Christmas! They are not serious, these people, and the city is as dreary as. We had to take a taxi home after our pancakes.

New Year celebrations are logically complicated in the freezing cold. We found ourselves in a noisy, rather pretentious "doubles" bar near Piccadilly, where they served over-priced whiskey. Sort of stuck there by the cold and determined to see the New Year in in central London, we were then more dismayed than surprised to find no public transport to get home. This of course meant that taxis were impossible too: even if you found a vacant one, you'd spend an hour stuck in a traffic jam. We walked home, about five kilometres. I was itching to get out of London.

A few days into the New Year, Alan found part-time shift work in a factory, which, used to the relatively cosseted world of safe employment in the Education Department, he found hard. For a place with 17% unemployment, work was astonishingly easy to find. The pay wasn't bad either, though there was of course no holiday or sick-pay. Employers seemed to be happy to pay for reliability and flexibility. I put off working for a few days more as I'd decided that I needed to go to Paris to check on my bank account. That of course was an excuse. The reason was to get away from London and Alan.

IV - Paris - The Real destination - 12 January, 1977

To Paris and back in a chaotic Greek bus. Real coffee and hot chocolate. Darkness in the City of Light. Saved by an English gentleman and a kind Sikh family. Warm again at last, with a proper bathroom. Mastering the metro and real Parisian food. Face-to-face with Notre Dame.

Under exchange controls operating in the UK in 1977, you could take only £300 from the country at any one time, a boon for the budget, "no frills" travel industry. By far the least frilly way to get to the Continent was to take the bus: an adult return fare to Paris, for example, could be had for £11; children travelled free of charge. That was cheap, even in those days.

Late on the morning of 12 January, the bus left the Wimpy Hamburger Bar opposite Kings Cross Station on Euston Road. In it was a more or less random collection of passengers bound for Athens and various stops along the way. They were in the charge of a crew of three very cheerful, young, apparently monoglot, Greek men. Its first scheduled stop, at about 7.30 that evening, was at a hotel in rue Victor Massé near Pigalle in Paris, to set us down.

Our preparation for the three-day trip had included a booking for two nights at the hotel in rue Victor Massé, some sandwiches and 200 francs in cash. Eager to taste life beyond Australia, we were getting a real *plat du jour* - though more figuratively than literally, as it turned out.

The Greeks' preparation featured an enormous bag of pistachios and a ghetto-blaster loaded with Greek music. By contrast, they judged that booking a slot on the Channel ferry would be a frill too far and could be taken as a sign of weakness: intrepid travellers would naturally relish the added adventure and sheer unpredictability of holing up in a bus in sub-freezing conditions until a bus-sized spot on a ferry could be had.

It was early evening when warmth, hot chocolate, my first-ever experience of real espresso coffee, but alas no sustaining food, could be obtained at a tabac in Calais; the sandwiches having long since been consumed. The tabac smelled of warmth, real coffee and Gauloises, an ambiance to be conserved *à tout prix*, though disappointingly hard to find these days. Outside the tabac, several centimetres of snow coated most things.

Yet the three and a half-hour trip from Calais to Paris passed quickly enough, what with Greek dancing, often with a five-year-old in tow, up and down the aisle to catchy tunes pumped out by the ghetto-blaster and handfuls of pistachios dispensed periodically to us (but not the other passengers).

At a spot deemed by the Greeks propitious, the bus stopped. Those of us who felt the need to spend a penny were told that this was their chance: men to the left and women to the right. Outside the bus nothing was perceptible under a dim moon except large expanses of white fading into blackness in all directions.

By 1.30 in the morning we had entered Paris and the bus stopped a second time, this time at a little square at the intersection of four or so narrow streets, where the Greeks placed our small, wheel-less suitcase (wheelie suitcases had yet to be thought of) on the narrow pavement and made to continue, leaving us there without explanation or directions.

Following the second oil shock, the City of Light had turned most of them off at midnight, and in the gloom, neither rue Massé, nor any hotel could clearly be seen - certainly no hotel with lights on. And of course, without a light to read them, maps aren't very useful. Neither is knowing where the hotel is, unless you know where you are in relation to it.

About 150 metres away was a boulevard, lit like a sort of oasis. But while either I, Ophelia or our suitcase could be moved easily enough, moving all three at once was much harder. Ophelia was, and still is, a rational, calm and cheerful individual: she sat down on the curb and sobbed quietly.

Among the Athens-bound passengers, was a very charming, tall Englishman called Robin, probably in his early thirties. A true Gentleman, he was scandalised that the Greeks would leave a young woman and small child on the street of a foreign city, cold, hungry and tired, with nowhere obvious to stop. A scholar of Greek antiquity with a practical command of Greek, he insisted that the bus wait until he returned with a taxi to take them to a clean, inexpensive hotel for the night. Only when he had done so, did he allow the Greeks to resume the journey to Athens.

Politely enduring the school-girl French, the taxi-driver headed for the thirteenth arrondissement, where a delightful family of Sikhs welcomed them to their tiny, charming, hotel. They showed them to a pretty little room on the third floor, decorated with dainty floral wallpaper and lace curtains, and furnished with two small beds, a table and two

wooden chairs. It had a tiny bathroom, equipped with a wash-basin, shower and bidet: the lavatory was across the corridor. The tariff was 54 francs, including a breakfast of bread and butter with (real) coffee or chocolate and orange juice. Another sensation to be preserved for eternity is one's first taste of freshly-baked baguette in a cosy dining room on a cold January morning.

The Sikhs helped us find the hotel in rue Victor Massé and gave directions to get there: Line Six to Nation, then Line Two to Pigalle. It was in one of the (too narrow for the bus) streets that gave off the square where the bus had stopped, unknowable in the post-midnight darkness.

One's first trip on the Paris Metro is another memory to treasure, especially when part of it is over-ground. The *accueil* at the hotel in rue Victor Massé was no less kind than the taxi driver or the Sikhs; even declining payment for the missed night.

Overall, Paris lived up to her grand promise: the rose windows of Notre Dame seemed somehow surreal compared to the poorly reproduced photos Australians had been accustomed to seeing. And whenever Ophelia comes to Paris, she makes a point of re-living part of the visit by re-sampling the unforgettable *hot-dogs parisiens, soupe gratinée* and *chocolat chaud*.

And the bus trip back to London was, well, mostly uneventful: this lot of Greeks had spoiled the fun by booking a spot on the ferry.

Back to London and I was craving some nourishing food, so I made Alan take us to a smart restaurant off the Kings Road. Then it was time to get serious about work.

V Chelsea Days - 15 January

Hampton Court, Greenwich, Oxford, Stonehenge, Bath, Brighton.

Enjoying London at last. NAT makes sight-seeing easy. Work and the English education system. The English diet explained. The British Museum, Mme Tussaud's, the Tower of London, West-End plays starring celebrated actors and affordable concerts with Gene Pitney and Procol Harem.

During our Chelsea period, we lost little time in seeing all the things we'd heard so much about. This included some excellent shows, Jesus Christ Superstar, which I confess I thought less good than the Harry M. Miller production in Sydney with Trevor White, Jon English and Michelle Fawdon, Rocky Horror Show, and others featuring famous actors, such as Lawrence Olivier, Alec Guinness and Susan

Hampshire. Could hardly believe that a Procol Harem concert at Hammersmith cost us £2 each - including 45 minutes of encores! That just doesn't happen in Australia- indeed, we had the impression that most of the audience was made up of



Kew Gardens



Australians. Alan was a Gene Pitney fan, so we saw him too in concert, but unimpressive compared to Procol Harem - and cost more than £2.

Saw the sights of London, easily mastered the tube and bus. Ophelia and I were especially intrigued by the clock collection at the British Museum: we saw it twice. The austere beauty of chapel in the Tower of London, built by Henry VIII, I think, left a lasting impression, contrasting with *nouveau-baroque* Victorian architecture that seemed everywhere else. At Mme Tussaud's, I greeted a wax doorman and felt very stupid. But it really was the most convincing of all the figures, probably because it didn't have to live up to photo-induced expectations. We took a train trip to Hampton Court, where one of the gardeners, accompanied by a horse called Kevin, explained that those conical-shaped trees were not topiary, but actually grew in that shape. We also took a ferry to Greenwich, train to Oxford (which Ophelia saw with a box over her head) and a bus to Cambridge.



Kew Gardens

Another bonus was NAT, who ran free one-day bus excursions on Saturdays. This meant we could visit Stonehenge - where you could walk amongst the stones, even sit and climb on them, and Bath. At Brighton, Ophelia was fascinated by the idea of a beach with pebbles where sand should be. We all were, of course, but she thought it so remarkable that she decided to fill her little red leather shoulder bag with them to take home to show Grandma. She was the star of most of these bus trips: perhaps she reminded everyone of a favourite niece. The rocks were a sensation.



Although unemployment was in the high double digits, with many Britons really struggling to make ends meet, we found work amazingly easily. A number of agencies specialised in - and competed for- Australians and New Zealanders for temporary and casual work. The rates were very attractive to us, though there was no entitlement to sick or holiday pay and you still had to contribute to pension and social insurance that you would never have any right to claim on. But attractive despite that. We put it down to the work ethic of people who choose to venture away from home, but it was really more to do with British restrictive work practices and over-generous allowances accumulated over the years by, among other things, very powerful unions.



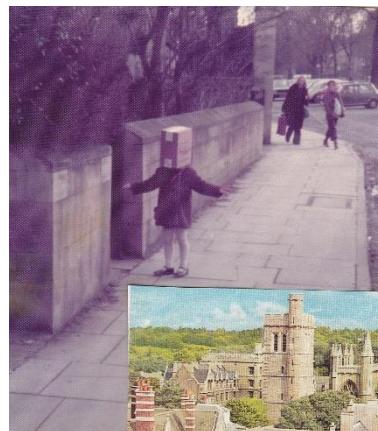
Hampton Court Palace



Bath

Alan was placed in a factory somewhere out of town. Banditoon, our agency, ran a bus from and to Earls Court each day which made getting there easy enough. Still, it was a real shock from teaching small deaf children - the only work he'd known until then. I enrolled Ophelia in an Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) school and was shocked that, although state-run, they were all religious schools, which, despite quite a cosmopolitan population, still subjected the children to an hour's religious (in her case Methodist) instruction each day.

I bought a pair of dark brown patent court shoes to attend job interviews. I was quite choosy about what hours I would work to fit in with Ophelia's school hours, so Banditoon proposed lunch-time work serving in a food race, which suited me perfectly. About eight years and two university degree later, I would refer clumsily to this experience at dinner at an expensive Sydney restaurant with three directors of the bank where I worked. In response to their shameless name-dropping of prestigious addresses in the City of London, I blurted out that I, too had worked in a bank in Old Jewry, then ruining the effect by remarking that I didn't know the name of the bank, having served as the vegetable girl in the food-race.



After their pre-war plumbing and perpetual damp, Londoners' eating habits shouldn't have shocked me. Chips with everything was axiomatic. Young ladies would choose a salad because it was "slimmin" "Yes", I would confirm, it was "slimmin" So they would add chips and beans - pronounced "baens". I would serve green beans and they would shout crossly: "No! baens!" That meant baked beans. Green beans were "runner beans" and not to be touched.



The chef was an earnest young man, just out of catering school and full of adventurous new recipes, such as *coq au vin* and *duck à l'orange*. Few Londoners were similarly adventurous, but those who ordered these exotic new dishes would accompany them with chips and baens. More popular were toad-in-the-hole, an off-putting chunk of yesterday's bread, fried with

half a sausage poking out from a hole in poked in the bread with a thumb. Scotch eggs, which consist of a hard-boiled egg coated in a centimetre of fatty minced meat, then rolled in flour and breadcrumbs - and deep-fried - was also popular. All accompanied by chips and baens, naturally. A popular accompaniment was a baked cube of over-cooked tube pasta congealed in a mix of flour, egg and milk. I made a point of not looking at the desserts. Someone else served them. I'm glad I stayed away because I later learned that a popular number was known as spotted dick.

VI Unto the mountains - 1 March

An all-inclusive ski tour in a real Tyrolean Gasthof and an introduction to the Great Aussie Piss Route. Ophelia learns to ski and discovers a limitless supply of chocolate - and a new way to say it. Adventure on the T-bar and Fats Domino in Innsbruck. Challenging ideas about post WWII generation Germans. We're friends now.

Alan was keen to go skiing in Austria, although I thought that far too indulgent for us. I was wrong: it turned out to be the best thing to do. Again, NAT came to the rescue with a range of two or three-week package that included bus and hovercraft to the ski destination, all accommodation, meals, ski hire, ski passes, ski instruction, everything. The value-for-money was such that the three-week package was cheaper than the two-week one when you count the cost of a week in London (though not the lost work), so we opted for the three-week version.

After the bus-on-ferry adventure in January, the hovercraft was a real luxury - and an experience in itself. The boarding lounge resembles an old-style airport lounge - where you can see your "flight" come in, and then you walk across the tarmac, in this case was a vast expanse of wet asphalt sloping gently down to the grey water. So immense is the craft that you can see it coming literally for miles. Only as it glides from the surface of the water to stop fifty metres from the terminal building do you get a sense of its size. Atop the mind-fuddlingly large rubber cushion, several storeys high, the cabin seems tiny - but in fact it seats a hundred people or more as well as taking cars and busses on board. After coming to a stop, and just as you are getting used to the surprising dimension, the cushion deflates and you board it much as you would a plane without the air-bridge. Inside is more like a plane than a boat, with



air hostesses in silly hats serving snacks whether you want them or not. The ride is predictably smooth (it doesn't operate in turbulent weather) and takes an hour, compared to two hours for the ferry.



There were about thirty of us in the group, mostly Australians, New Zealanders and a couple of South Africans and mad Rhodesians. The boys had been making a fortune working on the offshore oil rigs in the North Sea, while the others, like us, had been doing casual work via temping agencies, and were now readying themselves for the Summer touring season - also known as the Great Aussie Piss Route. This got under way in earnest in early July, with the fiesta of San Firmin and running of the bulls in Pamplona (which promised to be an especially propitious event, as it was to take place on the seventh day of the seventh month in 1977). The juggernaut would then migrate *en masse* through the south of France and Italy to Brindisi, where vans would be loaded onto the Ferry to Corfu. There they would hunker down with quantities of retsina, beer and ouzo until it was time to head north to München for the Oktoberfest.

The first thing that struck me about the Jägerhof gasthof was how comfortable it was compared to what we had paid much

more for in Britain. To begin with it was warm - like the hotels in Paris. Unlike Britons, neither French nor Austrians seemed to harbour any moral objection to central heating or double glazing. Perhaps this was part of the weakness of Catholic morality. Weak or not, it was warm and comfortable, and that was what mattered. The hand held shower with a wall bracket was better than what I'd been used to in Australia and I resolved that the

next time I had the opportunity to fit out my own bathroom (which would be in 2000), I would insist on the same configuration, even if it meant importing it from Europe. Even the door hinges were sensible, as they allow you to remove the door for painting etc without having to unscrew the hinges.

Breakfast was bread-rolls that broke into five segments like flower petals. They were freshly baked each morning and served with various jams and slices of cheese and ham. A typical German breakfast, but altogether new to me. The coffee was good too, though I think it was filter, not espresso. Lunch we bought at a bar on the ski slope and dinner, also typically German, was some kind of meat, usually pork, with vegetable accompaniments served cold and slightly over-cooked. Still a big improvement on English food.

The ski slope originally booked had already lost too much of its snow, so they took us to a higher one called Kellerjoch, accessible only by chairlift. Skiing during the day in the very warm sunshine and making our own fun in the evening: games of charades, concerts put on by group members, a fancy-dress evening and a boot party, which entailed drinking beer from a large glass in the shape of a boot. The trick is not to get beer all over your face, which is easier said than done, it turns out. They took us out on a couple of evenings to play skittles in a local bar and on another to a Tyrolean concert, complete with lederhosen-clad men dancers, who were vexed at our uncontrolled laughter - they looked so serious and proud of what they were doing, but the lederhosen too closely resembled little boys' outfits. On other evenings we went to a local disco.

Ophelia had a ball too: NAT had promised ski instruction for everybody, and as the only child in the group, she had her own tutor called Walter, who wore a big white handle-bar moustache and spoke not a word of English. She skied very quickly - without stocks, as little children are taught, but she was too little to negotiate the tow-rope or the T-bar, so had to walk up the hill, which she soon tired of. She found though, that if she ingratiated herself to some of the families staying in the village, they would make their children lend her their toboggans, which she found much more fun. Also, she quickly mastered German - or at least enough German to score plenty of *schokolade*.

It turned out that everyone in that group too had a niece who she reminded them of. On the evenings we went out to things that weren't interesting for her, the family who ran the gasthof seemed delighted to have her spend the evening with them and play with their children, after which they would put her to bed in our room. They seemed mostly to watch American television shows, whether or not that was mainly for her benefit, I'll never know, but she was never bored. As a bonus, we had fabulous weather without interruption until the very last afternoon.

While we were in London, Ophelia had become attached to a television series called the Six-Million-Dollar Man, the hero of which was called Steve Austin. Now it happened there was a young man from Perth called Steve. Although quite good-looking, he was rather shy and you could see he was far from an alpha male. But Ophelia insisted that he was in fact Steve Austin and paraded him around introducing him as such, which embarrassed and delighted him in about equal measure.

Ophelia and I were having a great time with the rest of the group and what the Tyrol had to offer. Not so Alan, who was never a dancer and was curmudgeonly about the partying in the evening - not least because it entailed a lot of cooing over Ophelia and flirting with me. The other men reacted pretty predictably and soon didn't bother to hide their disdain, and he of them. Most irksome for Alan the Rhodesians, one of whom was called Patrick Kranberger, was extremely good-looking - somewhere between Lawrence Olivier

and Omar Sharif, an excellent dancer and an incorrigible flirt - all the more so as it visibly annoyed Alan. He was also a very accomplished skier.



Mother and daughter combination. Francis and Ophelia (aged 5) of Sydney, try their luck on the Kellerjoch slopes.

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London LENS



It can be difficult just posing for a photo on the slopes when you're beginners. This group consisted of a mixture of Australians, New Zealanders, Rhodesians and South Africans preparing for their next ski lesson.



The charade champions showing off their first prize of a bottle of wine. The predominantly Western Australian team completed a massive 144 charades with the runners-up scoring 105.

Left to right: Geoff Fysh, Tasmania; Rod Elmer, WA; Hugh Hosking, WA; Helen Najara, NSW; Mark Murphy,

During our stay there, we were visited by a couple with a very little boy in a combi van. They were old friends of Patrick and called in to say good-bye as they set off on the over-land trek to Australia. Even then, it was at best adventurous, and at worse perilous, though nothing like it was to become a few years later. Patrick was visibly besotted with the very beautiful young woman.

We were all looked after by a NAT employee called Brian, bearing the title Courier. His job was to make sure all arrangements worked. Busses came when they were supposed to, ski lessons and equipment met expectations and to sort any other practical problems that might crop up. Like everyone else, he adored Ophelia and amused her by making out that he could eat glass. Disappearing ashtrays and glasses left her in wide-eyed wonder. One morning we woke to find that a couple of our number, arriving late back from a bar, had managed to demolish the plate-glass front door of the gasthof. At breakfast, Ophelia was recounting Brian's wonderful digestive powers when one at the table interjected: yes, he's really amazing - last night he ate the door. I don't remember who it was that broke the door, but Brian's job was to put it right with the gasthof owners.

Alan's mood was made even worse by the fact that he couldn't get the hang of skiing, kept falling and using his stocks as support to get back on his feet, which bent the stocks until they were useless, which left him brooding. And trying to make me feel guilty about enjoying the skiing, and succeeded, but only a bit.

Skiing on the intermediate slope was made more interesting by the moguls, small hills that form on the slope late in the season from skiers cross-crossing the slope along the same paths. Some of them become very icy and fast. The trick to navigating them is always to have your weight on the lower foot. You need to master the "stem christie" a sort of intermediate between snow-plough and step turn or hop turn. Stem christies were easy for me, and I occasionally managed a clean step-turn, but didn't have enough confidence to perfect the hop turn. It was enough to enjoy myself.

My difficulty was the T-bar. It was designed for two people at a time, one on each side of the T. Sharing with Alan was a disaster, as he would sit on the bar and fall to the ground, bringing the other person down too. You couldn't tell him that you were supposed to hang on to the rope with your free hand and let the bar pull you along by the back of your legs.



I refused to go on it with him - or any other beginners, as they tended to lose their balance and bring you down too. My strategy was to wait for a German or Austrian to come along and share the T-bar with them. This meant I also got to practise some German.

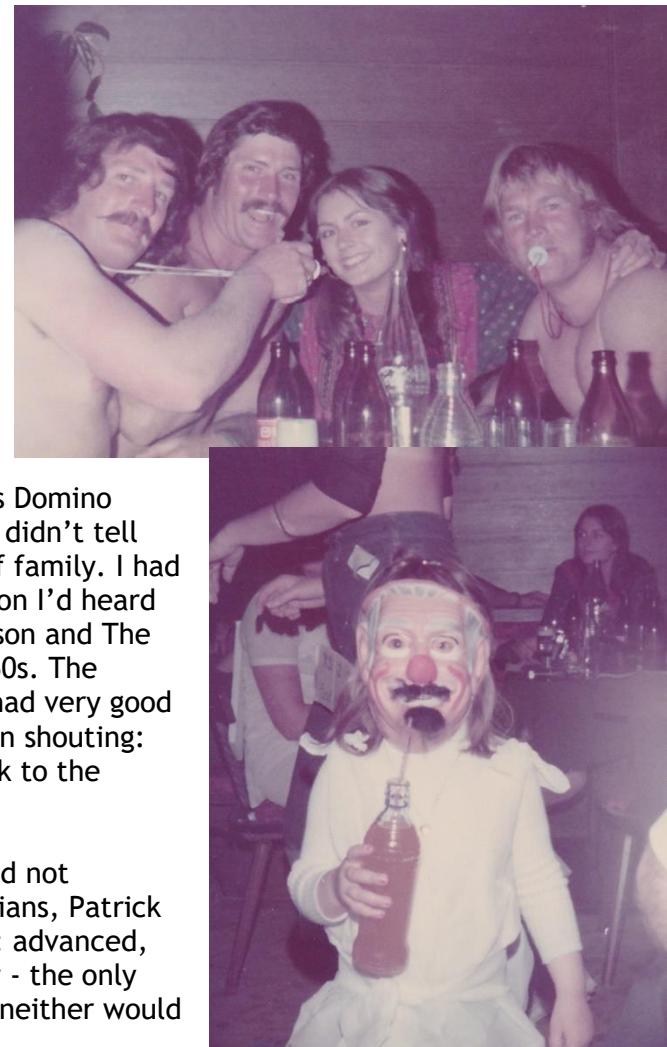
One young German from Hamburg called Erik, if I remember, seemed also to be angling to ride the T-bar with me. During one of our conversations on the chairlift, the subject of the war came up. One of us had brought up the subject of Australians having served in Europe and I mentioned that my father was wounded in the Mediterranean by German aircraft fire. It turned out that Eric's father was in the Luftwaffe. We went silent for a moment: somehow our friendship was a sort of confirmation - for me anyway - that the war was in the past, and we should not let it stop us from being friends. I hope it had the same effect on him.

Erik was very nice and one evening invited me to a Fats Domino concert in Innsbrück. I knew Alan would have a fit, so I didn't tell him, just disappeared, leaving Ophelia with the gasthof family. I had no idea who Fats Domino was and in fact the only version I'd heard until then of Blueberry Hill was a cover by Doug Parkinson and The Questions, a very good Australian band of the early 1960s. The concert hall was not much more than half full and we had very good seats. I loved it when the audience spontaneously began shouting: Dom-in-O! Dom-in-O! Eric and his friends drove me back to the gasthof. No funny business, they were such gentlemen.

19 March was the last full day of skiing and, so far, I had not progressed beyond the intermediate slope. The Rhodesians, Patrick and Mike, persuaded me up to the top of the red slope: advanced, but not kamikaze. The chairlift to the top was one-way - the only way down was to ski, and stem christies would not do, neither would step turns.

It was after 16.00 and a storm was brewing, so we had to get down to the bottom soon or get lost in the dark and snow. I set off and managed a couple of clumsy hop turns, but the slope was very fast, so I missed one and went over the edge. Mike was terrified when I disappeared, but I had managed to turn my skis enough in mid-hop to come to rest with the flat of my skis against a tree growing out of the snow-bank, so he found me resting, unbruised, on my side in soft snow. I managed hop turns for the rest of the steepest part, then could schuss. I was terrified, but glad I'd given it a try.

The bus ride back to London was very boozy. As we stood on the sunny shore of Dunkirk waiting for the hovercraft, we could see the grey clouds amassed on the horizon, signalling the British Isles. Nobody wanted to go back.



VII Escape to Edinburgh - 23 March

An experimental excursion, encounter with snuff and an electric bag-pipe. The pros and cons of single-parent touring.

I was having doubts about spending the rest of the year with Alan, so Ophelia and I took an overnight bus to Edinburgh to see how we'd go travelling alone and staying in youth hostels.

In those days, back-packs were mostly for camping trips rather than touring, so we had our small-ish suitcase, which presented the same problem we encountered when we were dumped off the bus in Paris: travel with both a young child and a wheel-less suitcase is just not practical. Complicating matters, youth hostels in Britain did not take bookings - although they do elsewhere in Europe, so we had to find one when we got there. Both of us were very tired from the trip and I couldn't make Ophelia trudge around with me looking for somewhere to stay, especially given how hilly Edinburgh is. Equally, I couldn't leave her alone, with or without the suitcase, while I did. Luckily, at the bus-station, we met another young woman in rather the same situation, except she had two children, so we took turns minding suitcases and children while we each found ourselves a lodging

The youth hostel was quite nice and a group of guests suggested we go with them to a restaurant nearby. It was the first time I'd seen a vegetarian restaurant, and Edinburgh was the last place I would have expected one. I remember eating fresh trout for the first time and loved it. There we met a retired Scots Guard, who invited us to a bag-pipe club afterwards, where we saw demonstrated a home-made electric bag-pipe, concocted with an old vacuum cleaner. It was very hard not to laugh uncontrollably.

The following day we took the train to Stirling, a very pretty town and, being much smaller than Edinburgh, we found the youth hostel easily. It was cold but fine for an evening stroll around the pretty streets. I remember talking to an Oxford professor from Perth, further north. He was surprised that I recognised his Oxford accent.

The following day, back to Edinburgh, where we walked around the old town and saw the statue of Blackfriar's Bobby, which intrigued Ophelia. Such a lovely, sad story. That night we took the bus back to London.

Meeting and chatting with interesting and helpful people was the great part of travelling alone with Ophelia, but in the end I had to forsake the idea of doing the whole trip like that - it would have been far too expensive and might have been dangerous.

Blackfriar's Bobby



VIII Preparing for Six-plus-one Months in a Van - 26 March

From Fullham digs to an old blue Post Office van, now kitted out as home.

For Australians and New Zealanders with limited means, the cost of just getting to Europe was such that you had to stay at least a year to make it worth-while. That meant working for several months of that year, and budget travelling for the rest of it.

We rented a room in a shared house in Fulham while we prepared for six or seven months on the road around Europe. This would entail buying some kind of vehicle we could all sleep, cook and eat in.

The Great Aussi Piss Route was as much ritual as travel. On the streets surrounding Australia House in Aldwych you would find at least a dozen camper vans for sale by last-year's piss-routers. Most were Combi Vans, which I thought way over-priced and fuel-inefficient - a real consideration in the wake of the second oil shock. Also, I've never trusted the suspension, which made them prone to flipping over, and the air-cooled engine was always wont to over-heat on a hill. Parts were expensive too, as the Deutschmark was very strong, powered by Germany's manufacturing might. Their appeal was that they were trendy - another reason to steer clear.

We found an ad in a local rag for an old Morris J-van that had originally served as a Post Office van. A pig to drive, especially in towns, its attractions were that it was much cheaper than any combi, being diesel, it was much more reliable than petrol engines and a third the price per litre of petrol, with twice as many kilometres to a litre, so altogether more economical. Sterling was on its back, as Britain was near the point of seeking IMF assistance, which meant that any parts would be cheap. Finally, it was a Morris. I had owned a couple of minis, as well as a Morris Minor, and understood their no-frills mechanics. It was little-boy blue and had GB stickers on it. The draw-backs were that you couldn't stand up in it and it didn't come equipped with a kitchen or bunks, but the owner said he would throw in his old gas camping stove, two gas bottles and some other bits and pieces, including a 1967 road map of Europe.

The steel gas bottles each held about three litres of gas, and pretty much all camper stoves were compatible with them. When they were empty, you exchanged them for full ones at any petrol station bearing the sign Gas. Inexpensive, reliable and practical.

We bought a couple of four-litre water bottles, a plastic basin for washing in, three nylon sleeping bags, a couple of slabs of foam and some fabric, from which I made, by hand, some very-seventies-looking covers with matching curtains for the back windows, and to separate the driving cabin. A dozen or so carpet squares covered the metal floor. As a delivery vehicle, the sides had been fitted with several horizontal wooden beams that you could hang things from and tie them to. Inspired by another setup we'd seen, we decided that they would be ideal to suspend a hammock for ophelia to sleep in above our feet, as the floor wasn't big enough for three beds.

It was still early April, so rather than setting out straight away for the continent, we decided to tour the UK first, so that if anything were to go wrong, it would do so on familiar territory.

IX A Month in a Van - Wales, England & Scotland - 6 April

Cardigan, Edinburgh, Stirling, Loch Ness, John O'Groats, Carbisdale Castle, Isle of Skye, Ben Nevis, Loch Lomond, Once Brewed, Hadrian's Wall, Windsor

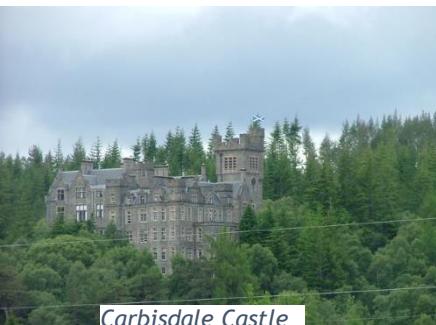
Lovely scenery, mostly terrible weather (and food) and country hospitality. First night of free-camping. Getting used to car troubles and navigational errors.

Having equipped our £1,000 van, we set out. A big sign near Earl's Court tube announced: To The West, so we followed that onto a westward motorway. Not just because that was the easiest thing to do, which it without doubt was. There were no signs pointing To The North - or if there had been, we didn't see them. We went West because we had decided on an itinerary that started with south Wales (was Old South Wales anything like New South Wales?), then through the Lakes District and the West coast of Scotland, across The North coast to John O'Groats, then south again, through Edinburgh and eventually to London. That was the Plan.



It turns out that old South Wales is quite a lot like the coast of New South Wales, so you can see why James Cook named it so. On 7 January we arrived in Cardigan and booked into a bed and breakfast with purple nylon jersey sheets that made you sweat and caught on the dry skin on your feet. It had a large jacuzzi in the middle of the room, which we experienced just for the sake of it. Ophelia loved it, though personally I prefer a good shower. Breakfast in bed: traditional, stodgy, greasy English fare, but it meant we could go without lunch. The house overlooked a stunning sandy beach and we decided we might stay an extra night or even two. It turned out we had no choice, as the car battery had gone flat and it was now Good Friday.

This was the first beach we'd seen since leaving Sydney, so it was unthinkable not go for a walk along it. It was also the coldest beach we'd ever encountered, buffeted by the Atlantic, it was much colder than Brighton had been. Partly because it was now snowing. The snow continued and we stayed. On Saturday 9 April I wrote a postcard to my brother wishing him happiness on his wedding day. Sue, his wife, hated me, though I suspect it had nothing to do with anything I'd said or done. When I had asked my brother why, though they'd already lived together for several years, they'd chosen to get married while I was away, He said that it was because Sue's uncle would be visiting from Denmark. Uncles trump sisters. Families are like that.



Carbisdale Castle

We had thought of stopping another night in the Lake District, but couldn't find a hostel or Bed and

Breakfast with a room free, so we headed north, then across country to Edinburgh. Someone had given us the name of a hostel there, but we couldn't find it, and there seemed to be no other vacancies, so we spent our first night camping.

Looked around Edinburgh and drove to Sterling. Would have stopped a night there too, but the owner of the hostel refused to have us because we weren't married.

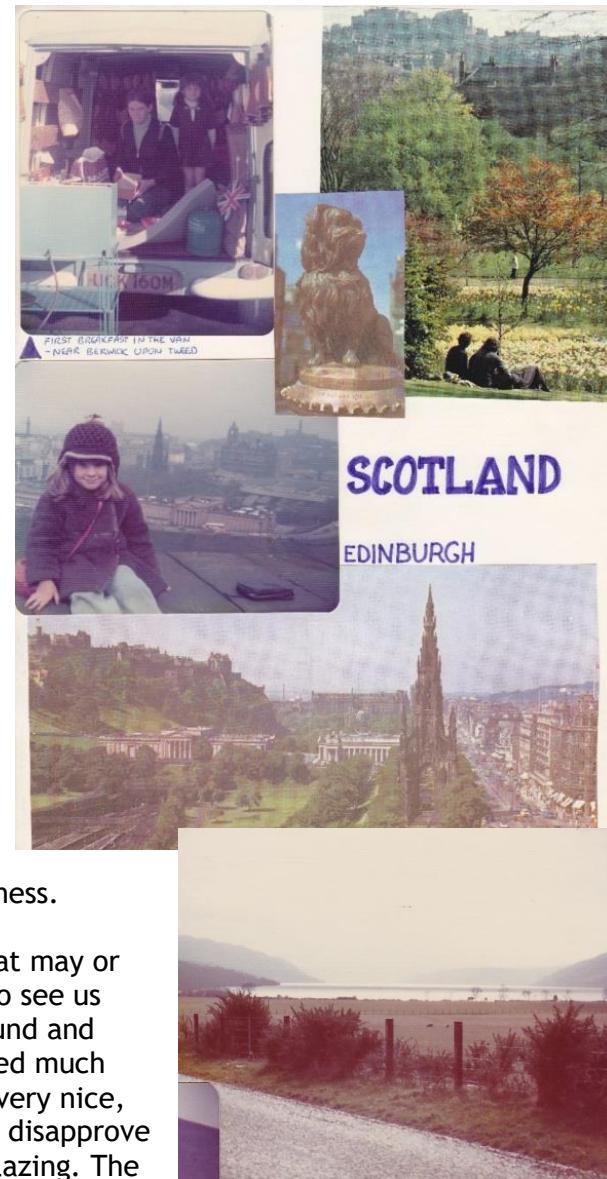
Looked around Sterling and drove on to Perth. While the hostel we stopped in there was very nice, the town itself was uninteresting, so we continued up to Inverness.

Inverness features a lake and a monster that may or may not be there, but wasn't coming out to see us that day. We were in no mood to stick around and wait. Took a photo of the lake, which looked much like other lakes. The town also featured a very nice, but very cold, hostel. Most Britons seem to disapprove of things like central heating and double-glazing. The

Scots find them morally objectionable.

Exactly why we felt compelled to go to John O'Groats is still not clear - except it is the northern-most point of mainland Scotland. Heavy snowfalls along the way, but hardly picturesque, just cold and grey. I think it's the coldest place I've ever been in my life - and the windiest! Before checking in to the hostel there, we drove to the farthest point looking out over the North Sea, where we gazed over a beautiful, unspoiled beach. Well I gazed. Alan and Ophelia went down on to the sand. I was sure I would have frozen solid had I got out of the van. The hostel was, as usual, cold and very basic, but so were all other alternatives. It was by now 14 April.

Youth hostels are, as the name implies, budget accommodation for young travellers. Being unable to book ahead, you take your luck on what's available. They are cheaper than most, but not all, hotels, and of course you do your own cooking in large, shared kitchens.



Loch Ness

Accommodation is typically dormitories, but if there is space a family group like ours might be able to share a room. If there is no space, then its boys' and girls' dormitories.



British hostels have one other feature you don't find elsewhere: in addition to the modest fee you pay for your stay, you are required to do a chore. It might be sweeping a floor, dusting shelves or washing a bathroom floor. The owner/manager assigns you your task on the day you leave and when you have completed it, he returns your passport. Ophelia, being a little girl, was mostly spared.

Not John O'Groats. Not only was Ophelia made do a chore - and not a trivial one either, but I was assigned two - one for me and one for Alan. Ophelia did her best on hers, but couldn't do it without my help. Alan sat on his widening behind and didn't even offer to help us. His days were numbered: the problem was that there were still quite a few of them left until we would return to London and then Australia.



We had hoped to get to Ullapool, on the West Coast, the next day, but our start was delayed by a hitch with the van, which we sorted out and drove along the north coast of Scotland, dotted with spectacular, unspoiled beaches (who would ever go there?). Cold, but nothing compared to John O'Groats. A navigational glitch saw us headed back south-east over amazing highland country, not seeing another vehicle for long stretches, although at one particularly isolated spot, miles from anywhere, stood a post box. You couldn't help shaking your head in dis-belief: you would have to drive an hour from the nearest civilisation to put a letter in it, and the postal service would have to drive hours to collect it! We didn't put a postcard in it. By the end of that amazing drive, we found ourselves at Carbisdale Castle, which, being a hostel, we spent the night there. From a distance, this is one of the closest things you'll see to a fairy-tale castle, set on the side of a mountain amid lush forests surrounded by imposing, snow-capped mountains. We vowed to re-visit it when the weather was warmer, as it really was a lovely spot.

Trying to regain our itinerary, from Carbisdale, we drove west, and kept going west until we got to the sea again

and from the Kyle of Lochalsh. There we caught the punt to the Isle of Skye. Don't know what we expected to see there, though the scenery of the west coast is especially rugged and spectacular, and though not exactly warm, was decidedly less cold than where we'd been. We'd hoped to drive to the north of the island, but it turns out there's no diesel on the Isle of Skye, so we headed for the nearest hostel. The locals were very friendly, and I wonder if it was a surprise that anyone bothered to go there, especially at that time of year. In the evening, a small group offered to take us out on their boat for some seal spotting. You had to peer hard to spot the grey seals in the grey water, but they were there, which of course thrilled Ophelia. We all caught cold.

Although cold, the weather was otherwise very fine, and driving around the island we could now appreciate why we came, as it offers one of the best perspectives of Scotland's beautiful west coast. We then took the punt back to Fort William and stopped the night there, where we met lots of hikers headed to or from Ben Nevis, Britain's tallest mountain.



We'd missed Ullapool, which was farther north, but were not too far from Loch Lomond, which we knew from the song, but which looked little different from the other lakes we'd seen. From there to Carlisle, then to a place called Once-Brewed, where we got stuck again because the battery was flat.

When we got going, we had to go and walk along part of Hadrian's Wall and photograph Ophelia in the biting wind. Not much of a walk altogether - in fact it was a chore just to get out of the van.

By now we were keen to get back to London and hurried as far as Windsor, where we spent the night. My notes tell me the staff there were not especially welcoming. At least it was a bit warmer, though not warm, as such.

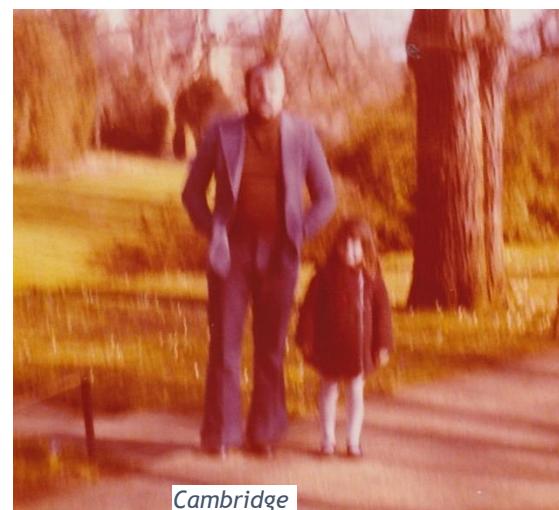
London again - 22 April

Cambridge, Windsor, Eton.

Spring does eventually happen in London, an attic in East Sheen with Henry the basset. Ophelia's first trip to the dentist for a "feeling", emergency dressmaking and more preparations for six months on the Continent.

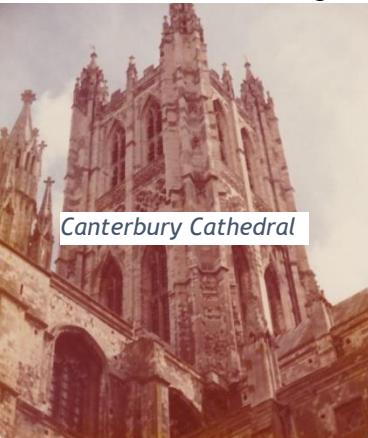
Got in to London as soon as we could to find a flat for a few weeks. Quite a nice attic room in East Sheen where one of the residents was a basset hound called Henry. I decided that if you were to have a dog, a basset is the thing. They're placid, quiet and cuddly, and can't jump on the furniture. Ophelia needed some dentistry and we found a very good young woman in Baker Street.

Also, though she was never going to be tall, Ophelia chose this moment to put on a growth spurt and grow out of all her clothes. I had thought clothes in Britain would be cheap, but found they weren't, and were horribly dowdy as well. Having now to be a bit careful with



Cambridge

money, I decided to buy some fabric and make her by hand a summer dress in an OK red and white cotton print. By the time I'd finished sewing it, she had grown some more and I had to add a frill at the bottom to add length. She was thus obliged to wear it day in day out during the Summer of our European tour.



Canterbury Cathedral

Another prescient preparation was some reading matter. Not just for us, but more importantly, for Ophelia. While she had done some pre-reading, she could not yet read properly. Alan was a school-teacher, but at primary level, not early infants. I bought a couple of Little Golden Books for her but added to them a Dr Zeus volume. This was a life-saver, and by the time we returned to Australia, she was equal to her peers at school.



The task now was to plan seriously our trip around the continent, which entailed visiting travel places to get as much information about where we should go. Also bought a new jack and battery for the van and on someone's suggestion, went to a place called Half-Case Warehouse to stock-pile a couple of months' worth of food. Large tins of a soy-based meat substitute made by Cadburys that looked and tasted enough like minced beef to go into bolognese with the tinned tomatoes. From her time at my mother's and at the ILEA schools, Ophelia had developed a taste for baked beans, which I deplored. She insisted, so I bought several half-gallon cans of them and warned her she had to eat them. She promised she would - but would come to regret that.... Poor thing...



We also drove up to Cambridge and a bus trip to Windsor and Eton. Shook my head at the boys' uniforms, with top hats, white ties and tails. Are they serious?

X Six Months in a Van and some Better Weather - 6 May

The ferry from Sheerness was, of course two hours late leaving Sheerness - as if England was exacting its revenge on our absconding from the dreary weather and stodgy food.

The Netherlands - 6 May

Amsterdam, den Haag, der Zuidersee, Scheveringen, Tulips, Afsluutdijk

Dutch welcome, walking around in circles and a canal ride. Heineken and Rembrandt. A pee beside the Zuidersee.



We set foot on the continent at the port of Vlissingen, where we were greeted with much nicer weather. We had time to find a spot to camp and set up just before dark. The following day we drove to Amsterdam and parked near Centraal Station to get our bearings. There a friendly Dutchman made our acquaintance, bought us some drinks and talked about Amsterdam. In the afternoon we drove outside the city and found a pleasant lay-by in which to camp, which turned out to be on the banks of the Zuidersee - though it was visible only the following morning when we walked to the top of the grassy dijk

and realised that our campsite was at least a metre below the level of the water. Lay-bys like this are found everywhere alongside European roads, intended for truck drivers, they are generally equipped with a source of fresh water, garbage bins and often a toilet and barbecue.

In central Amsterdam we took a canal ride, which was much less expensive than we'd feared - though it was the only thing in Amsterdam that was! Ophelia thought it was all great fun and merrily charmed the other tourists. After visiting Anna Frank's house, we wandered the streets. After doing some washing in a laundry, we drove to The Hague and spent the night near Scheveringen. Visited Madurodam, which is a sort of scale model of Amsterdam, extremely well done, with imaginative use of bonsai plants. Then back to Amsterdam for a tour of the Heineken brewery, where they treated us to beer, cheese and biscuits. After that we visited the Rijksmuseum, where Ophelia got lost and one of the guards stressed about finding her. Then ran into an old school-mate.



On 12 May we left Amsterdam and headed north along the coast toward Kobenhavn to meet Sue's aunt and Maw-Maw, or grandmother. Along the way we caught the end of the tulips, the intense colours of the expansive miles of fields are impossible to describe - almost luminous. They are named one of the wonders of the modern world, but in the overcast conditions, our photos couldn't do them justice. We crossed the Afsluitdijk, the 50-kilometer causeway and dam that keeps the North Sea from invading the IJsselmeer, several metres lower down. An amazing feat of engineering, to be sure, but more than that, it's a place that makes you feel very small and vulnerable, with the grey, angry North Sea on one side, menacing the pale blue-grey Ijsselmeer on the other. We camped the night near Groningen. As we headed north, the weather deteriorated and it was now cold and rainy, so we decided to treat ourselves some hot showers and a night in a proper, though expensive, camping area near Bremen.

A missed ferry from Germany - 12 May

The tourist office in Hamburg booked us on the 14.00 ferry from Travemünde, near Lubeck, to Denmark, but we missed it by five minutes, which meant a four and a half hour wait for the next one.





Denmark - 12 May

Kobenhavn, Helsingbourg (Elsinore), Roskilde

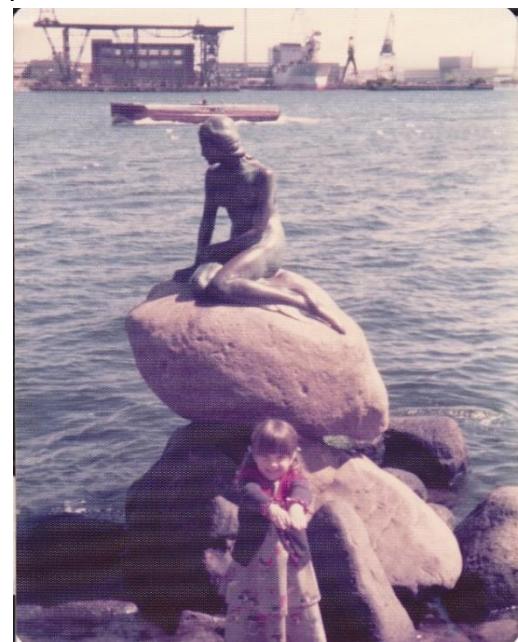
A night in a strange forest. Absent relatives. Pierrot, Columbine and dodgems at the Tivoli. Ophelia's first pocket money. A proper meal with dates, prunes and relatives.

The delay had been more of an inconvenience than we had thought, as we were unable to exchange money on the ferry and were now low on diesel too and even food - also it was Saturday, so no guarantee that we'd be able to sort out the problem the following day either, this being before the era of bank cards and automatic tellers. We needed to find a money exchange agent.

To add to the thrill, it was quite dark by the time we got off the ferry and camped beside a secondary road in the middle of a pine forest, which meant it was also very dark - but it was a bit warmer than it had been the previous days.

Having no Danish marks and not much food to cook, our only solution was to buy a restaurant meal and pay with some of the American dollars we had with us, using the change to buy more provisions and diesel to get us to Kobenhavn, where we camped outside a youth hostel.

I had met Maw-Maw before and found her a jovial woman, quite unlike her daughter and grand-daughter. It turned out that Maw-Maw and aunt would not



be there when we arrived, which meant our staying there longer than we otherwise would have.

Kobenhavn is quite a small city, with not a great deal to see. We walked to the harbour to take a photograph of Ophelia with the Little Mermaid - a tribute to Hans Christian Andersen's stories. Then visited the Carlsberg brewery, the National Museum, which left us un-moved, then bought some delicacies and went to the Tivoli - a giant garden and fun park, with children's amusements and pantomime. Watched a performance a Pierrot, Columbine and Harlequin, which gave meaning to one of my favourite songs: The Carnival is Over. Ophelia rode on a children's version of dodgems, which she loved. This seems to be the main attraction of Kobenhavn, especially at night, when it all lights up. On 18 May we headed north toward Helsingborg, or Elsinore, to see the fabled Hamlet's Grave. It took some finding in amongst a bushy park-forest and bore the epitaph: Ophelia Kilde, which upset Ophelia somewhat.

Since leaving Britain - and even before we left, Ophelia had been getting herself "lost", with increasing frequency and was becoming clear that much if not most of this was deliberate. This was because she found people, especially on the continent, very sympathetic to a little girl crying because she'd got separated from her family, and generally responded with some kind of (usually chocolate-related) treat. At five years old, she couldn't understand how dangerous that was. Punishment would have been counter-productive, so we came up with the idea of giving her a privilege that could be withdrawn, and settled on the idea of pocket money. This amounted to the local currency equivalent of one US dollar each week, which would be hers to save or spend. At border crossings, we would exchange whatever she had at the same rate that we exchanged ours. This also gave us the opportunity to discuss what her money would buy in each place, as well as what she could expect in the places we were headed to in the future. The first dollars were spent, unsurprisingly, on sweets. Then she became much cannier and quite adept at practical purchasing power parity analysis.



Now the weather was warming up and, killing more time, we drove to Roskilde and visited a museum that featured replica Viking ships. Sat in a park to eat lunch and watched a charming display of children folk dancing before continuing to Kobenhavn where we were due to have dinner with Maw-Maw and the Aunt. That afternoon we visited the Freedom Museum and saw WWII from a slightly different angle. Then we visited the Tuborg brewery. Danish beer is an acquired taste, we decided. Maw-Maw and the Aunt were as welcoming as I had expected, in fact a bit more so and we were exceptionally grateful for the home-cooked meal and warmth. Don't remember what they served for mains, but dessert was stewed dates and prunes, the effects of which made themselves known at least as far as Berlin.

We left early the following day and after shopping for a few provisions, got ourselves on the 14.00 ferry back to Germany.

Germany - 21 May

Lübeck, Hamburg, Berlin, Hannover, Hameln, Köln, Bonn, Die Lorelei and der Rein.

Ophelia develops an aversion to German. Swimming pool wonder. An encounter with the BundesPolizei. East Germany as seen from the autobahn. A swim in der Wannsee. Check-

Point Charlie and stale cake in East Berlin. Allied war cemetery. Pied Piper tack, but no Pied Piper. A pee from the Lorelei.

Easily found a suitable place to stop the night near Lübeck, with plenty of time to look around the little medieval city. Stopped at a playground for Ophelia and, despite having encountered non-English-speaking children several times before, in Austria, the Netherlands and Denmark, now complained about it for the first time. I reasoned she must have been tired and not up to it, but with some coaxing she went back and made herself known to them and seemed to enjoy herself.



Back in Hamburg the next day, we treated ourselves to a swim in a splendid municipal pool, indoor and well-heated - even the seating was heated. They insisted we all wear swim caps, which we had to buy from vending machines. That pool is my lasting impression of Hamburg. We free-camped beside a large statue of Bismarck, which somehow made us feel safe, though heaven knows why, though it did have a tap with fresh drinking water.

On 23 May we set out early on the autobahn to Berlin and were stopped by police at the border with East Germany, who were almost aggressive with us, questioning our ownership of the van. Their aggressiveness made me assume they were the East German police, and I was surprised to see their shoulder badge announcing BundesPolizei.

East Germany seems to have changed very little since the war, which is pretty much what we'd been told, but it was still surprising to see that even broken windows had not been repaired. The road was in poor shape and military vehicles patrolled the villages we saw on the way. Entering Berlin was thus very refreshing, with a striking contrast between east and west. West Berlin was bigger than we expected, with wide, well-kept streets and few grotty areas.

We free-camped in the street of a lively area and I regretted not being able to participate in what looked like some pretty lively night life. In the morning we took the lift to the top (22nd story) of the Europa Building, which afforded a spectacular view of both East and West. We couldn't find the StaatsMuseum, so went to the Museum of the Wall, with a comprehensive record of escapes from the East.

East Berlin
The weather was very warm, so we went to the beach on the Wannsee, a huge lake within the confines of West Berlin, with many small beaches on its banks and surrounded by state forest. That night we stayed at a campsite. Germans' idea of camping is peculiar in that it entails renting a large on-site caravan with a large canvas extension, typically equipped with a full-sized upright kitchen stove, complete with full-sized oven etc.

The next day, 26 May, we visited East Berlin through CheckPoint Charlie, which entailed a very confusing entry procedure. It was also expensive: each one-day visa cost five deutschmarks, about a dollar US, plus we had to exchange that much again into ostmarks. But we couldn't miss out on the experience.

Some post-war development was evident, but many ruins had been left standing and were now sprouting trees from half-crumbled walls and towers. Some half-ruined buildings had been camouflaged with new facades. The streets were lifeless and a bit foreboding. We wandered around looking for something to spend our ostmarks on, but not much was on

offer, with long queues for every type of food shop. In the end we went to a café and had very over-priced ice cream and stale cake. Worse even than London.

That evening we free-camped off Unter den Linden and in the morning tried to visit the Museum of Antiquities to see Nefertiti's head, but the museum was closed, so we decided to leave Berlin for Hannover. While in Berlin, I had occasion to ask some directions of the concierge at a smart hotel. I was taken by how smartly he was dressed and groomed, which contrasted with what one was used to in Australia, but also in Britain. He smiled indulgently at my reaction: only once before had I encountered a man so urbane, which had been when I was 11 or 12 when my mother and I boarded an Italian cruise-liner to see off a friend of hers. The snappily-dressed purser had similarly charmed the wits out of me.

Before we left, we visited the Allies war cemeteries. What an impression that made! Perfectly manicured and maintained, with large volumes of scrupulously-kept records of each soldier buried there, all housed in handsome kiosques. A measure of the respect Germans hold for those who gave their lives and the cause they fought for. Like my conversations on the ski lift, we're friends now.

On the way toward Hannover, we found the West Germans officious while the East Germans we met were polite and helpful. From the autobahn I noticed women working fields with back-hoes and wondered at how backward they were -not just in the use of those tools, but that women were working fields. Then came the realisation that we had already left East Germany. Those women were West German!

Sometime about then, we stopped at a supermarket to top up provisions. We must have been in a hurry to be on our way and my German was far from perfect. I should have been surprised to see a jar of peanut butter, but I loaded into the trolley and was indeed surprised a day or so later to bite into a piece of bread spread thick with mustard.

Having stayed in a campsite again, we slept in and did some washing, which was expensive, even in the campsite. Then we drove to Hameln and camped outside the youth hostel there. The town is very pretty with lots of Pied Piper tack, but the shows get going only in June so we headed on the Köln.

Naturally visited the cathedral, looked at the remains of the medieval wall and climbed the 500 odd steps to the top, as the chairlift was too expensive - as was the Rhine cruise. We stayed again at a campsite there and the following morning headed on to Bonn. The city is quite pretty, with more medieval character than we anticipated. Stopped in a pretty grungy campsite and the following day headed along the Rhine to the Lorelei rock. The river is very pretty, even other-worldly at this spot, bounded mostly by cliffs with dozens of castles dotted along them. We drove back to Köln for dinner and the following morning set off for Bruxelles.

Check-Point Charlie &
East Berlin



Belgium - 2 June

Bruxelles, Waterloo, Gand, Bruges, Zeebrugge

The Mannekin Pis for real. Steps to the Waterloo lion. Searching for elusive accommodation. Ophelia masters Purchasing Power Parity.

Its still not clear why we went to Bruxelles. It seemed we had to, if only to see the Mannekin Pis for real. Arriving in late afternoon and parking near the youth hostel, we walked around the town and were surprised how grey and grotty and soul-less it is, especially compared to the places we'd been. Even the weather is grey, grotty and soul-less. My lasting impression is the smell of urine in the streets. Do they not have the means to clean it or provide public toilets?

On 4 June we drove south to Waterloo - a name we recognised. The site of the celebrated battle is marked by a conical mound with steps leading up to a giant statue of a lion. Well we had to climb to the top, which afforded a view of the battle-field. Not much reason to stick around, so we drove to Ghent. That was a very frustrating experience. While the cobbled streets are very pretty, they are a nightmare to drive on, especially with commercial suspension not designed for comfort. Wasted a lot of fuel driving around looking for two campsites that just didn't exist, so we went on to Bruges, a very pretty, but expensive, town, where we wandered around for a while before going on to Zeebrugge for lunch. Its noted as a seaside resort, but left us wondering why. Back to Bruges, to stop the night. It was not just Bruges, the whole of Belgium was insanely expensive, especially since it was such a dreary place. Ophelia was scandalised that a dollar would buy only a stupid Mars bar, when it had bought so much more in Germany! She followed our advice and held off for France.

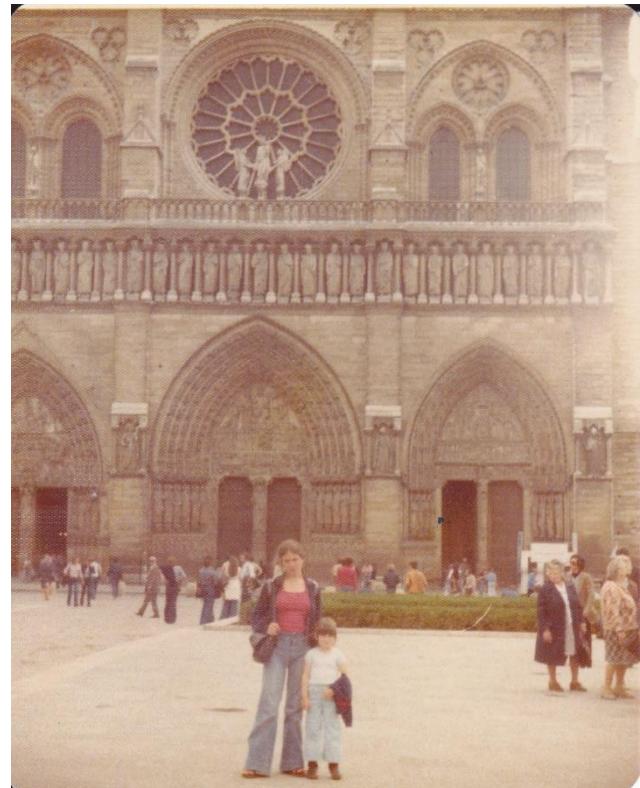
France - 6 June

Lille, Paris, Rheims.

A squat toilet and a shoe, Parisian traffic (accidents) explained. Really good food explained. Notre Dame without crowds. Making and drinking real champagne.

Our first night was in a camping ground outside Lille, where we encountered our first squat toilets. It looked like, and was, an accident waiting to happen, and Ophelia cannot be blamed for dropping her sandal in. though hardly pleasant, fishing it out was less disgusting than it might have been. Fortunately the weather was warming up a bit, and the shoe was dry by the time she needed to wear it again.

We arrived in Paris on the afternoon of 7 June and went to a tourist information place on the Champs-Elysees, then to the Arc de Triomphe before setting out to find the youth hostel and somewhere to camp the night.



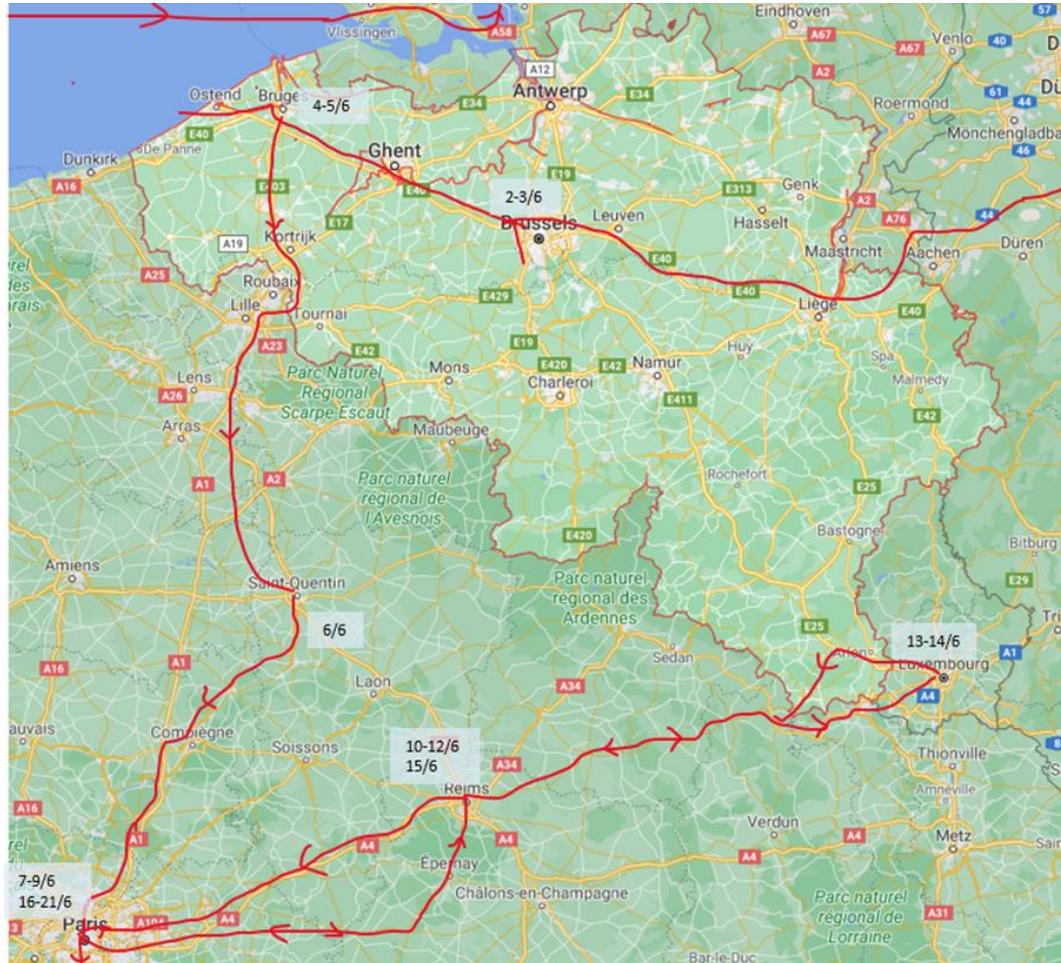
Driving a right-hand drive vehicle on right-driving streets - and vice-versa - is bound to be a challenge. With no windows on the sides of the van it was up to me to stick my head out of the passenger window and had managed to avoid any collisions. But the 2CV that collected us had been travelling very briskly, especially for a car that's supposed to have the power of only two horses, and I just hadn't seen it. It now became clear why so many drivers had seemed frightened of us - they were right to be. The 2CV hit just behind the passenger-side door, but while the paint was a bit scratched, no other damage was apparent to the van: even the door still slid open and closed. The poor 2CV was less lucky: its right-side wheel sloped comically against the engine compartment, while the mud-guard lay sorrowfully on the ground beside it and a headlight went rolling a hundred metres down the street.

I was hugely apologetic, concerned that the driver been hurt. She stepped out of what was left of her cute little car and seemed amazingly

insouciant. I asked her what we should do and she shrugged and said she'd call the police. Several police arrived very quickly in their smart uniforms with peaked pill-box caps. They seemed quite uninterested in what had happened, but set about redirecting traffic and sweeping away the broken glass and other debris. Then they got in their van and drove away. Very pragmatic, the French, I decided.

I then asked the woman what she would do about her car and she shrugged again and presented me with an insurance form and asked me to fill in my section of it. This amused me, as I immediately realised that the implications for us were zero. Alan's home address, as noted on his driving licence was in a suburb of Wollongong called Unanderra. Nobody in the insurance office in France would believe such a place existed, and by the time he arrived back there, all would have blown over anyway.

We had arranged for any mail to be forwarded by NAT in London to a youth hostel in Paris, so went there to find none. Then we found a reasonably-priced camping ground for the night. The northern summer was still cold and grey and we were all quite exhausted from the day's efforts. I certainly was not ready to see a man attendant come through the ladies' shower and dressing facility.



We stayed in Paris for three nights in camping grounds and visited the Eiffel Tower, the Quartier Latin and Notre Dame. Of all the medieval cathedrals we were to see, it's the one not to miss. How glad am I now not to have seen it while we could! We had not gone to the top of the Eiffel Tower because it cost too much, but it was free to climb to the top of the north tower of Notre Dame, so we did that. I reasoned that it was a better deal all round, as the view from there was better - featuring, as it did, the Eiffel Tower (but not Notre Dame).

The weather might have been dreary, but the food was amazing. I remember going to a butcher and buying some veal scallops. I hardly needed to cook them, they were so creamy, and I understood the art of good butchering: the French knew exactly how to cut the meat to enhance its flavour and texture. And, of course, the bread! Bought a baguette, which was still warm, but by the time we'd got back to the van it had all been eaten, so had to go back and buy another. I still go into raptures over the smell and taste of freshly-cooked French bread. I was also charmed by Parisiens, who seemed almost protective of me, explaining patiently how I should cook various things, which sausages could be eaten as they were and which needed to be cooked.

But the cold was getting us - I heard that it was indeed unseasonably cold - snowing in Lisbon, someone said! So on 10 June we decided to head out into the countryside, and where else, but to Reims! There it was sunnier, and at a campground we could clean out some of the mud from inside the van.



This was the right decision for another reason, which is to compare the cathedral there with Notre Dame, and I understood then why it was so celebrated. We then did the inevitable tour of the caves at Veuve Cliquot, which inevitably finished with my first-ever taste of real champagne, which was of course unforgettable. Being grown-up about children and alcohol, they offered Ophelia a glass too. I had advised her to sip it very slowly, which she did: a bit too slowly: The staff were of course charming, waiting for her to finish her champagne so they could let the next tour group through. While in Reims, I took a tour around the local market and gawped stupidly at a cheese shop. The merchant was keen to engage me in

conversation. On learning that I was Australian he began hopping around in imitation of a kangaroo. He also offered me a taste of some cheeses. I remember are sort of brie infused with walnuts, which I very much liked at the time.

We ate delicious, perfectly butchered steak that evening and stayed three nights in Reims, visiting also the caves of Mumm, so learned even more about making champagne and drinking it.

Luxembourg - 13 June

From there to nearby Luxembourg, a very pretty town set around a picturesque gorge, but otherwise a bit boring; so we booked in to a camping ground and spent the afternoon beside the pool there. Then back toward Paris, stopping a night at Rheims on the way.

France - 14 June

Paris, Versailles, Poitiers, Lourdes.

Mastering la Place de l'Etoile and terrorising Parisian drivers, free-camping, football and cosmopolitan cuisine under la Tour Eiffel. Pragmatic, polite police. World-beating traffic jam in le Bois de Boulogne. Filling our water bottles with holy water in Lourdes. The magnificence of the Pyrenees and a noisy goatherd.

The weather in Paris had not improved much, but we decided to rise to the challenge of Place de l'Etoile and do a few laps of the Arc de Triomphe. Had to do it. We stood for a while in awe of the chaos before joining the melee. It was terrifying, but after one lap, we felt we had the hang of it. Now to get off..... Amazingly, we managed to extract ourselves unscathed, and I understood then the advantage of having the most terrifying vehicle there: all those sleek Citroens were, wisely, giving us a wide berth.



That afternoon we chatted to a free-camper at the Eiffel Tower and learned that you could set up there as long as you observed some simple rules. We returned there the following day and stayed the remaining six nights in Paris. Visited the Palais et jardins de Luxembourg, which houses the Senate, and then by metro to Montmartre to see Sacre Coeur up close. Walked back to the van, which seemed a very long way - because it was. Also saw the Mona Lisa and Venus de Milo in the Louvre - it seemed odd to us that the Mona Lisa was housed with seventeenth century French art, but I later supposed that it was because Leonardo was a close friend of Francois I, King of France at that time.

Living under the celebrated Tower was a special experience. The Paris police, in their crisp uniforms and peaked caps, were both kind and pragmatic - qualities I would come across again

and again as I got to know more French people. Far from moving us along, they set some rules that, if observed, would allow us a pleasant stay in that very agreeable spot. The rules amounted to leaving our vans and cars tidily locked up between 9.00 and 18.00, when the site was open to tourists. To help, they would come around shortly after 8.30 and tap on our doors to give us time to clean ourselves up, lock up and leave. At 18.00, the atmosphere was almost party, as vans opened up, football matches were played on the large square of lawn directly under the tower, people shared delicacies they had discovered and chatted over wine and cheese. As the only child, Ophelia was looked after royally, visiting each van and car to chat with its occupants. I particularly remember a Romanian couple whose French was about the same level as mine, offering us a plate of cucumber sprinkled with salt, which made a refreshing, almost sweet hors-d'oeuvre. I still

serve it sometimes: it looks very appetising alongside cherry tomatoes and goes especially well with ceviche.

We were settling in to life in Paris, well, I was. One day, on a walk to buy things with Ophelia, we needed to go to the toilet. We were in rue de Vaugirard in the sixth arrondissement, so I disingenuously wandered into the Palais de Luxembourg. I was surprised that nobody stopped us and we wandered around for quite a few minutes before a guard approached us and very politely asked if he could help. Although I knew perfectly well that it was the French Senate, I feigned ignorance, as if I thought it a museum, and asked if we could use a toilet. With enormous charm, he guided us along an elegant gallery to a toilet, and waited at the end of the gallery to show us out. A great opportunity to see the inside of the building.

Somehow I got it into my head that Ophelia had threadworms and bought some medicine to remedy it, explaining to her what I thought she needed to know. She consumed medicine and explanation with alacrity, possibly because it made her feel so special. Whether or not she actually needed the treatment is moot, but just about everyone in Paris was acquainted with the fact that she had had worms in her bottom and mummy had cured her.

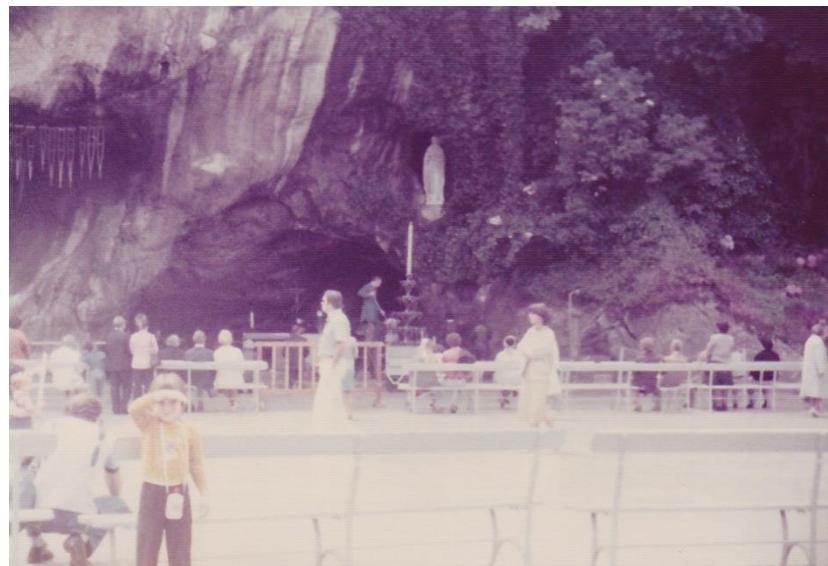
Drove out to Versailles and came back through the Bois de Boulogne where we experienced a real Parisian traffic jam. Nobody can do gridlock the way they can. As soon as one lane is stopped, they just by pass it using another, never mind that its for the other direction or a footpath. A mounted policeman was trying to impose order. Jacques Tati couldn't have made it up - one of the funniest things I think I've ever seen - except we were stuck in it too.

The tour of the Conciergerie was only in French. The guide spoke very slowly, so I followed most of it, but Alan got into a very bad humour. Unfortunately, our budget did not extend to the FF5 for Sainte Chapelle, which is a shame, given how magnificent it is. I've since visited it many times for concerts

It was now 23 June and funds were beginning to run low, so we decided to head toward Spain. As we did so, clouds cleared and it warmed up. That night we got as far as Poitiers, where we camped outside a youth hostel. Ophelia was looking forward to and saving her pocket money for Spain, as I had explained that things were cheap there, that they had beaches and she would be able to buy a bucket and spade to play in the sand.

The following evening at about 19.00 we arrived at Lourdes, just in time for the torch-light procession, which went until nearly 23.00 with lots of children singing Ave Maria. That was worth seeing, but, set in the foothills of the Pyrenees, it is an interesting place in itself: very hilly, with the spectacular mountain backdrop, but also very tacky-touristy, almost in a Change-Alley way.

I remembered seeing the film about Saint Bernadette, so sort of knew what I was looking at. Bought a plastic bottle in the shape of the Virgin Mary, with the top in the form of a blue, plastic-moulded



crown. Filled it and our two large water bottles with holy water - the Virgin Mary bottle was a present for my mother, which she kept, although she's protestant. Lots of handicapped people there hoping to be cured, though the FF27 to take mass seemed like profiteering to me. We camped beside the Sanctuary, as the (holy) water was free.

After lunch and refilling our bottles again we headed over the mountains to Spain, following a steep and windy road past ski resorts and some of the most magnificent scenery I think I've ever seen. Through forests and over rugged ridges where, being above the winter snow-line, trees gave way to extensive grassland. On one stretch of narrow road through very pretty forest, I remember wondering what on earth could be causing a loud clanging noise, until an old man, complete with hiking stick, came into view with his herd of goats with bells around their necks. We had no choice but to stop and wait until they had surrounded the van and passed on their way. Inconvenient, but unforgettable - and wouldn't have missed it for anything. I've wanted to re-trace that drive through the mountains ever since, but I imagine it will by now be a soulless motor-way.

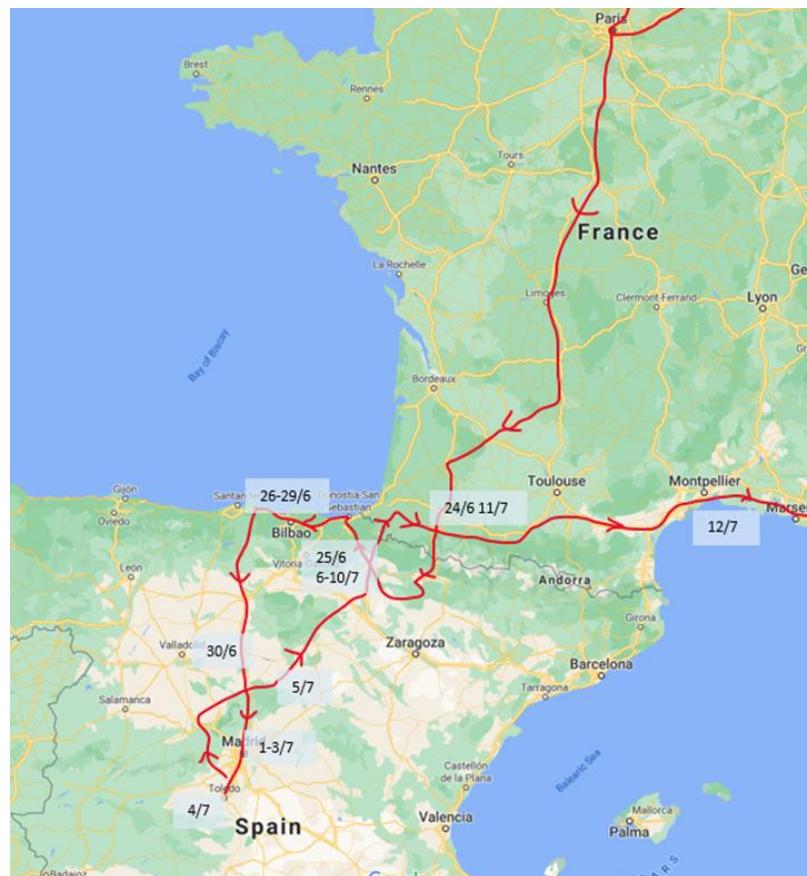
Spain - 25 June

Pamplona, San Sebastian, Bilbao, Laredo, Madrid, Toledo, Segovia, Pamplona

We knew we'd arrived in Spain when the road gave way to a track. Shower surprise in Pamplona. Ophelia finally gets her bucket and spade. At home in Laredo - four beers and an ice cream. A broken water pump and practical Spanish mechanics. Un kilo pollo and the unforgettable odour of chook guts. From El Prado to La Parc des Attractions. Bullfight horror. Astonishing Moorish architecture and the amazing Roman aqueduct. La fiesta de San Firmin and the Running of the Bulls: fireworks, chaos and some tragedy. New shoes for Ophelia.

Less than two years following the death of Franco, Spain was still establishing its democracy under King Juan-Carlos and was still a very poor country, not yet part of the then European Economic Community. Because of its poverty, and the predilection of the Spanish police for throwing tourists in gaol so as to extract bribes from them, motor insurance for Spain and Portugal was very expensive, and we could afford no more than a week of it. That was a shame, because there is so much to see in Spain that we didn't have time to see.

The other problem was that we couldn't change any money until we got to a major town. I remember asking for help from some inhabitants of a remote village in the mountains, who were quite lovely to us, spoke French and seemed glad to have contact with foreigners. The place was extraordinarily beautiful and I would have loved to stop in the mountains for a day or so. But we needed money, diesel and had let our food supply run down in



anticipation of cheaper fare in Spain. So we kept going to Pamplona, where we exchanged money and stayed a couple of nights at a campsite. By now we were desperate to have a shower too. The facilities were basic, except for one amazing feature, which was that, along with the ceiling shower rose, we were startled by a strong, vertical jet of water from the floor, aimed strategically to get you exactly where it counts.

It was by now 26 June and we headed west to San Sebastian, where we spent the afternoon on the sandy beach. From there we headed south and camped near Bilbao before continuing along the spectacular coastline to a divine little beach and village called Laredo. Getting down there from the cliff-top main road was not obvious, as the road was un-paved and very steep, but it was worth it. The beach featured a sandy lagoon perfect for Ophelia to swim and play with the bucket and spade she had so proudly bought in San Sebastian with her own money, in as well as a magnificent surf beach and a very reasonably priced camping ground, with all the facilities we needed.



As I checked us in to the camping ground, a voice boomed over my shoulder: G'day! I turned and a giant ginger-headed Australian beamed at me, exclaiming how Ophelia reminded him of his little sister. So off they went - her on his shoulders, on a tour of the village. He was traveling with two New Zealander friends in a Rover 3.0L sedan that they had won in a raffle in England. Having spent the winter working on the North Sea offshore oil rigs, they were now spending their wads of cash like sailors on the Great Aussie Piss Route.

We stayed in Laredo for four nights, where we washed our things and cleaned out the van. Unfortunately, it was too cold to swim, and it rained, so we caught up with sleep and spent a lot of time in the bar. It was a very happy few days, despite the weather. Ophelia could run around safely, and played happily with the local children, as everyone in the village knew us by now and looked after her. One afternoon,

waking from a siesta, I was alarmed for a moment not to find her in the playground or with any of the other children. Heading to the bar to enquire there, I found her perched on a barstool, altogether at home as a new round was being ordered: four beers and an ice cream.

The rain persisted, which was a shame, and we now began to wonder if the van would make it back to the top of the ridge with the road sodden. Fortunately, a rain-free night allowed us to leave on 30 June and we got up to the top of the ridge without problems. We headed toward Madrid, but about 200km before reaching the city, the engine began making menacing noises. Lifting the cover revealed a very hot, dry radiator. I asked Allan how long since he had topped up the water in the radiator and he seemed perplexed that that was something you had to do! I shouldn't have been surprised, neither should I have been surprised when he decided to resolve the problem by pouring cold water into the over-heated radiator, which of course cracked the water pump. It could have been worse: he could have broken the radiator casing, but I was still speechless at the lack of common sense. So now we limped the short distance to the top of a rise and marvelled at our luck that a service station and Renault repair shop sat a few hundred metres distant.

We coasted down to it, but I knew our problems were far from over. What was the likelihood that a replacement water pump for an English van could be procured within the next three months?? There, I had underestimated the ingenuity of the Spanish mechanic. Somehow, he conveyed to me that he could fix it, but would need to have the part sent in. They were as helpful as they could have been and were happy for us to camp there and to use their water and facilities, and the following day a new Renault water pump came from the neighbouring town. The mechanic was able to adapt it to the Morris. Now I wondered how much it would cost, but it came to Pts 5,500, or about \$80, which seemed reasonable to me for a \$40 part plus five hours of labour. If it was a fortune to him, then good for him. Another thing that intrigued me was the architecture of the workshop. It was relatively new, with a ceiling-roof, at least four metres high, formed in a series of arches made from hollow terra cotta bricks. This maintained an agreeable temperature inside the workshop, despite insufferable heat outside, and I was very happy to watch him work there, rather than with grumbly Alan in the oven-van.

That afternoon, 1 July, we continued on to Madrid and found a camping area (we had been warned against free-camping in Spain). Based on my very rudimentary French, I fancied my ability to improvise in Spanish and caused great hilarity when, at a local shop, I asked for *un kilo pollo*. The bird was dead and mostly plucked, I presume because they would use the feathers for bedding, but needed gutting. This recalled those appalling Christmas days of my childhood in an industrial suburb in the west of Sydney where my father kept chooks, the most decrepit and expendable of which would be sacrificed as a “treat” for Christmas lunch. After the horror of watching it run around the yard headless for what seemed like ages, spouting blood as it did, my father would collect the corpse and, through its anus, extract its innards. The smell is unforgettable, and I was sure I could not endure it. Alan, however, had no such experience, so I told him it would be his job and indicated a spot under a tree a hundred metres or so from the van. I could still smell it as I watched him cursing me. Well, he wanted to eat fresh meat as much as I did, and chicken was the cheapest. We could also be sure it was fresh. It turned out to be quite delicious, and I was surprised how well our very basic cooking equipment managed to bake it.

The treat for the following day was to have a proper shower and wash the dust out of our hair. All clean, we caught the metro to visit the Prado, a must, which at the time was reputed to house the best collection of art outside of the Hermitage in St Petersburg. That evening we ate at an inexpensive restaurant, which we found to be excellent. The cheap but very efficient metro is equipped carriages apparently cast-off from the Paris metro.

On our way to Madrid we had noticed a big sign announcing a Parque des Attractions, so we took Ophelia there. It was surprisingly good: we thought it better than the Tivoli in Copenhagen. I was repulsed by the bullfight we felt we must go to and was frankly glad to see a matador carried out because his leg had been badly gorged. The bull was still killed, alas. We left early and later heard that the last bull for the afternoon had been rejected by the crowd. We went back to the Parque des Attractions, but Ophelia had lost her ticket, so we had some dinner and went back to the campsite.

The following day we drove out to Toledo, with its beautiful Moorish buildings, notable among them its synagogue. Stayed the night in an over-priced campsite with no showers, although it did have a swimming pool, which was welcome in the heat. We then went to Segovia to photograph the imposing Roman aqueduct there. I think its the most amazing Roman building I've ever seen - possibly surpassing the Coliseum. From Segovia, we drove all night to get to Pamplona at about 5.00 on the morning of 6 July, the eve of the fiesta of San Firmin.

Despite the rain, the mood was festive, with fireworks and red San Firmin neck-scarves de rigueur. As well as the obligatory bull-fights, the main event is the annual Running of the Bulls on 7 July. This entails running a number of young bulls through the centre of town toward the bull-ring, with brave young men trying to out-run them. The flower of Pamplona youth was there, together with a decent quotient of kamikaze Australians. 1977 being considered a special year, the crowd was more numerous than usual, with a generous complement of Australians, some of whom we knew from the Jagerhof in March, and the guys from the beach at Laredo. Got up at 6.00 on the morning of the 7th to get good spots for the event quite close to the entrance to the bull-ring, and would have seen more, but as the bulls came running down the street, local policemen moved us back from the barricades. It turned out that there were too many people trying to get through the narrow passage to the bull-ring so some got stuck and the police were hauling people out of the bulls' path and throwing them over the barricades where we had stood. Adding to the chaos, the bulls, confused by the large crowds and general air of panic, changed direction several times. We later heard that 46 people were gored, one poor young Spanish fellow to death, and another trampled to death. Having seen the ambulance, a clapped-out station wagon with some bedding stuffed in the back, I reflected that if the bull hadn't killed him the ride to hospital in the "ambulance" certainly would have.

We heard of a free campsite outside the town, so we headed there and found more people we knew from Brussels and Paris, as well as a couple from Armidale University, where Alan and I met as students. Much sangria was consumed. It helped that everything was so cheap there. Ophelia's sandals conveniently gave up the ghost at that point too. I expected their replacement to be pretty cheap, as everything else was, and they were, if you didn't mind plastic. Leather ones were way beyond our budget.

We stayed an extra day or so in the free campsite, where there was also a lake for swimming, though the water was cold and I had come down with a cold. We had to wait until Monday when the shops would be open to stock up on food with our last pesetas.

France - 11 July

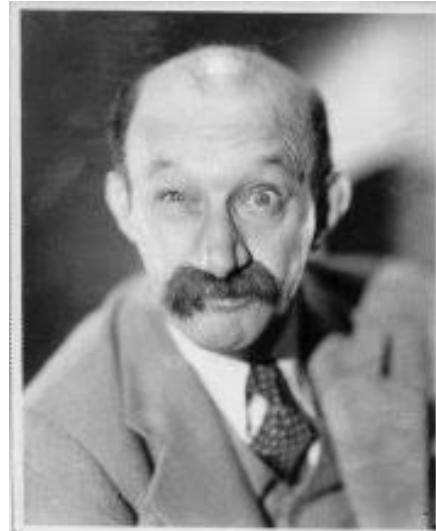
Lourdes, Marseilles, St Tropez, Monte Carlo,

Police trouble, first leaving Spain, then entering France. Interpol and mistaken identity. Gunning up the Monaco traffic and harassing a traffic policeman.

This time, we entered France by a main road to the west of the Pyrenees. Crossing the border was more complicated than we imagined it would be, mainly because we had come into Spain by a remote pass, so there were no stamps in our passports to say when or where we'd entered Spain, but also because we looked so scruffy. The Spanish police said we had crossed from Morocco, and therefore were carrying drugs. I pleaded our case, but they were unimpressed and suggested they search the van. At that I smiled, opened the back doors wide and invited them to go ahead, but of course when they saw the chaos inside, they scowled at me and told us to go. I wondered if we would have something similar on the French side, and we sort of did - except that the French were much more polite, despite our scruffiness. The young policeman calmly said that there might be a problem and would I come into the office with him. He indicated a spot where we could park the van while we sorted it out and asked Alan to stay in the van. Inside, he showed me a photo of a man he said was wanted by Interpol and pointed out the resemblance with Alan. The man in question was also Australian, and bore a strong resemblance to Alan, as he appeared in his passport photo, with his moustache. I agreed with him that Alan's having since grown a beard only added to their suspicions and assured him that it

wasn't him. He smiled and pointed out that it would simplify things if I could prove that. He was very polite and I felt would listen to any convincing evidence I could come up with. I was also very glad of the French I had retained since school, and he was indulgent with me about that too. After a few minutes, I noticed something that would convince him and asked him to come with me. Alan was brooding in the driver's seat and I asked him to open the top three buttons of his shirt. He objected, as hated exposing his torso, but I insisted. As the shirt was opened, I indicated to the policeman the man in the photo, with his open-neck shirt and sparse chest hairs - contrasting convincingly with Alan's doormat. I smiled and we both burst into fits of laughter and he wished us a happy journey. Alan was grumpier than ever by now, but of course we were free to go.

We got in to Lourdes in time for the torchlight. Drove on for most of the following day until we reached a very affordable municipal campsite and had our first swim in the Mediterranean, which we found surprisingly warm. That all meant it was 13 July by the time we drove into Marseilles. We had hoped to find a bank there to withdraw some of my money, but of course, the Bastille holiday had already started, which meant, in turn, that we had to continue to Italy and hope for an agency there. On the way we stopped at a campsite near St Tropez, and had another swim there. We couldn't pass Monaco without descending the corniches to check out the casino - from the outside, at least. Without a map, navigating the narrow streets of Monaco was always going to be a challenge - made no simpler by the complex arrangement of one-way streets that, labyrinth-like seemed forever to lead us back to the main square, where an unfortunate traffic policeman was trying to tame the holiday traffic. The first time he saw our ugly van with the giant GB sticker on it, he grimaced: I



James Finlayson

think I would have given anything to be at that moment in a sleek Alfa convertible. He waved us through just as the van stalled and we struggled to get it going again. Traffic built up behind us and he waved more furiously. Relief for everyone when, after another sequence of lights, we finally crossed the intersection and headed up the hill out of his sight. But regaining the road out of town was a challenge too far for us, and after a few minutes the poor man turned around to see us in front of him again. Again, the van stalled just at the right moment. Traffic built up...Twice more this was to happen before he finally rid Monaco of the grotesque van and these *Rosbifs*. The episode reminded - and still reminds me - of James Finlayson's reaction whenever he recognises Laurel and Hardy.



Above Monaco

Italy - 15 July

[Asti, La Spezia, Pisa, Firenze, Rome, Naples, Rome, La Spezia.](#)

Free-camping near a mountain stream and a lone Bulgarian cyclist. Up means down and vice versa in the Tower of Pisa. A real Florentine sunset. Are David's head and feet really too big? Learning to count in Italian and real Italian fruit-sellers. Walking the dog in the Olympic Village. Ophelia bends the bars and bathes in an historic fountain. Diverted by an attempted burglary only to be robbed for real. No more photos. The stove finally catches fire. Cooking on a cow-pat in the dark.



family also camped there and we decided to stay a few days. It was there that I also met a Bulgarian man, probably in his sixties, cycling around Europe by himself. He spoke some French and was very pleased to talk about his trip. He had a large road-map of Europe that he unfolded each day and plotted his progress - inspiring the map I would produce of our own trip. He said he'd already cycled 14,000 kilometres, carrying all his provisions in his ruck-sack and free-camping, as he had almost no money to spend. That meeting impressed me especially because Bulgaria was then one of the most isolated of all the communist countries in Europe - more so than Poland, Hungary, Romania or Czechoslovakia, so I wondered what he had done to merit being allowed out.

We had hoped for a wine tasting in Asti, but there seemed to be none of those, so we headed back toward the coast, on the way, we found a delightful spot near La Spezia, beside a mountain stream, the water of which was very fresh. It was ideal for free camping, was accessible by a narrow wooden suspension bridge, necessitating the removal of both rear-view mirrors to get the van across. I was terrified at the first crossing, that the van would be too heavy and we would drop the several metres into the shallow water below, but we made it. Ophelia immediately made friends with an Italian



On 18 July, we headed to Pisa, where Ophelia and I climbed the tower. If the Eiffel Tower was much bigger than you imagined from the photos, this tower is much smaller than we'd imagined. But the real surprise is how tricky it is to climb. Although it consists only of stairs, having been conceived only as a bell tower, the lean on it means that on one side, you are climbing upstairs but descending in altitude, and on the other side doing the opposite. Built entirely of beautiful white marble, with no handrails, it felt easy to slip off.

Having achieved our mission there, it was only short drive to Florence, where we found an excellent camping spot in the Piazza Michelangelo, featuring an out-size replica of the David overlooking this most photogenic of cities. Our first Florentine experience was its sunset, which is every bit as magnificent as described - only more so. We stayed three

nights, visiting the sites you're expected to visit, including the original David, which is unforgettable. It invites you to stare at it for ages trying to work out if the head is indeed too big, or is it the angle you're looking from?

On 21 July we drove on to Rome and stopped in a campsite there for the first night. At a street market nearby, I bought some fruit, which looked lovely and was very cheap - including great chunks of watermelon, which I hadn't seen since leaving Oz, and I knew Ophelia would love. I looked a wreck, having lived in the back of a van for over two months, but that didn't stop the merchants making a big fuss of me. Still struggling with Italian lire, they patiently educated me in pronouncing the numbers: *Cinquo, quindici, cinquante, cinco cento*. I felt better already. The following day, we found an excellent spot outside the youth hostel in the Olympic Village, which meant we could use the facilities there. The Olympic Village is, as you'd expect, a large expanse on the outskirts of Rome west of the Vatican. It offers a clean and relaxing contrast to the grime and congestion of Rome, especially when the weather is uncomfortably warm. We found we had room to spread out, with very few people around us, but excellent facilities to make use of. I was amused to see a woman in a Fiat Bambino driving around the village with her dog on a leash tied to a door-handle. Visited the Vatican, of course. The scale of La Piazza San Pietro is mind-boggling. In the July heat, wandering around historic famous monuments was quite exhausting, with every surface coated with grime from the intense traffic.

Navigating the streets in on old post office van where the vehicle of choice is a moped, or at most a Fiat Bambino, was a challenge, and on at least one occasion, we found ourselves literally wedged between the walls of an ever-narrowing lane-way. This led us to park the van in the wide, tree-lined street beside the Roman Forum. Pausing for a cup of tea, Ophelia got out to have a closer look at the iron fence of the Forum. It featured, instead of stone pillars at intervals to support the iron-work, an arrangement of eight vertical bars in a square did the trick. She was just little enough to squeeze between them into the square, where she crouched, reading her Little Golden Book. Getting through the bars left her filthy, but, hot and exhausted, none of us could be much bothered at that stage. A passing Canadian couple noted that she was reading in English, so asked her how she intended to get out of her "cage", to which she replied, untroubled by her black-streaked face and now very grubby little dress: "I'll bend the bars!".

Wandering a bit more in the narrow streets, we stopped to cool ourselves off beside a fountain amid many other weary tourists. It could have been the Trevi Fountain, of course, but I think it was in fact the fountain at the base of the Victor Emmanuel II monument. I remarked how filthy Ophelia was, so I picked her up and threw her in. although a bit surprised, she didn't mind being cooled off.

We then decided to drive out to the catacombs, where someone tried to break into the van. Calling the police was a big mistake, as we had no way of communicating with them. A well-intentioned New Zealand woman tried to help with some school-girl Latin, but her attempts to adapt this to modern Italian drew only blank stares. All the same, the police



told us that, having lodged a complaint, we would need to stay a few days. This posed a big problem, as we were now running very low on money, which we'd been unable to obtain in Italy, so would have to get back to France.

Seeking to make virtue of a necessity, we decided to visit Pompeii, and found a delightful beach to camp on near there. Unfortunately, while driving through Naples with the sliding doors of the van open, a young boy reached in and grabbed from the front parcel shelf, what he must have thought to be a wallet, but in fact was our camera with several rolls of undeveloped film in it. We thus lost all the photos we'd taken since Monaco. That included the priceless one of Ophelia in the pillar of vertical steel bars outside the Roman Forum.

Back in Rome on 26 July, we discovered the Pyramid that housed Rome's stray cats, which charmed me and Ophelia. That night we stopped again outside the youth hostel in the Olympic Village. The camping stove that came with the van had never been very satisfactory, with an awkward arrangement of rubber hosing to connect to the gas bottles. It was as if the stove hated us, a hypothesis that still cannot be excluded, as that evening it decided to sever the hose, letting loose uncontrolled flames inside the van. Alan burned himself quite badly turning the gas off at the bottle, but at least the van didn't catch fire. Now we had no stove to cook with.

The following day, the police told us that they'd caught the thieves, who were on drugs and would get seven years' prison. They seemed to expect us to be reassured, but never really made clear why we'd been obliged to stay in Rome to learn that, as we didn't seem to be needed as witnesses or anything. So the net effect was that it had cost us our photos and camera, and now we were desperately low on cash, and obliged to make speed toward France, where, public holidays now having exhausted themselves, we were reasonably likely to find a bank open.

We considered ourselves lucky to have got back as far as La Spezia and the lovely river-side camp spot we'd enjoyed on the way to Pisa. Arriving at 21.30, we were obliged to light a fire in the pitch black to cook some dinner. Having no fresh food, no stove and no money, dinner consisted of a can of tuna, a can of tomatoes and some pasta. We were very hungry and it was OK, but we couldn't see anything. I was surprised how easily we were able to get a fire going, given that most things around us seemed to be quite damp in the evening air. In the morning I understood the secret: we had inadvertently chosen to locate our fire on a cow pat. It burned beautifully, and I was rather glad I hadn't seen it until the morning.

This was a great opportunity to clean ourselves up after the dusty Italian cities. Our baths in the mountain river were chillier than we'd liked, but the water was delightfully clean. We washed and dried clothes too, and headed west in the afternoon.

France - 28 July

Monte Carlo, Menton,

Cashed up again and a new stove

Arriving at about 20.00, we ate the most expensive (and mediocre) pizza any of us had ever had, then drove back to Menton on the Italian border and free-camped there. In the morning we withdrew \$800 in francs and drove on to Nice to buy a stove and some food, and free-camped again at Menton, still I think my favourite place on the French Riviera, much quieter than Nice and cheaper and less glamorous than Monte Carlo, with a lovely sandy beach. We also managed to find a much more sensible stove, more compact with

two burners and which attached directly to the neck of the gas bottle without fiddly hoses. Not dear either. But Alan can do very little with his hand, and is in a lot of pain.

While we were on the Riviera, we stopped in at a pay beach to use the showers. I was desperate to wash my and Ophelia's hair, but we also had a nice swim. People scowled at us using shampoo in the open-air shower, but I thought that given the amount we'd paid, all was fair. Anyway, we felt much better afterward.

Italy - 30 July

La Spezia, Parma, Venice,

A very consequential flat tyre.

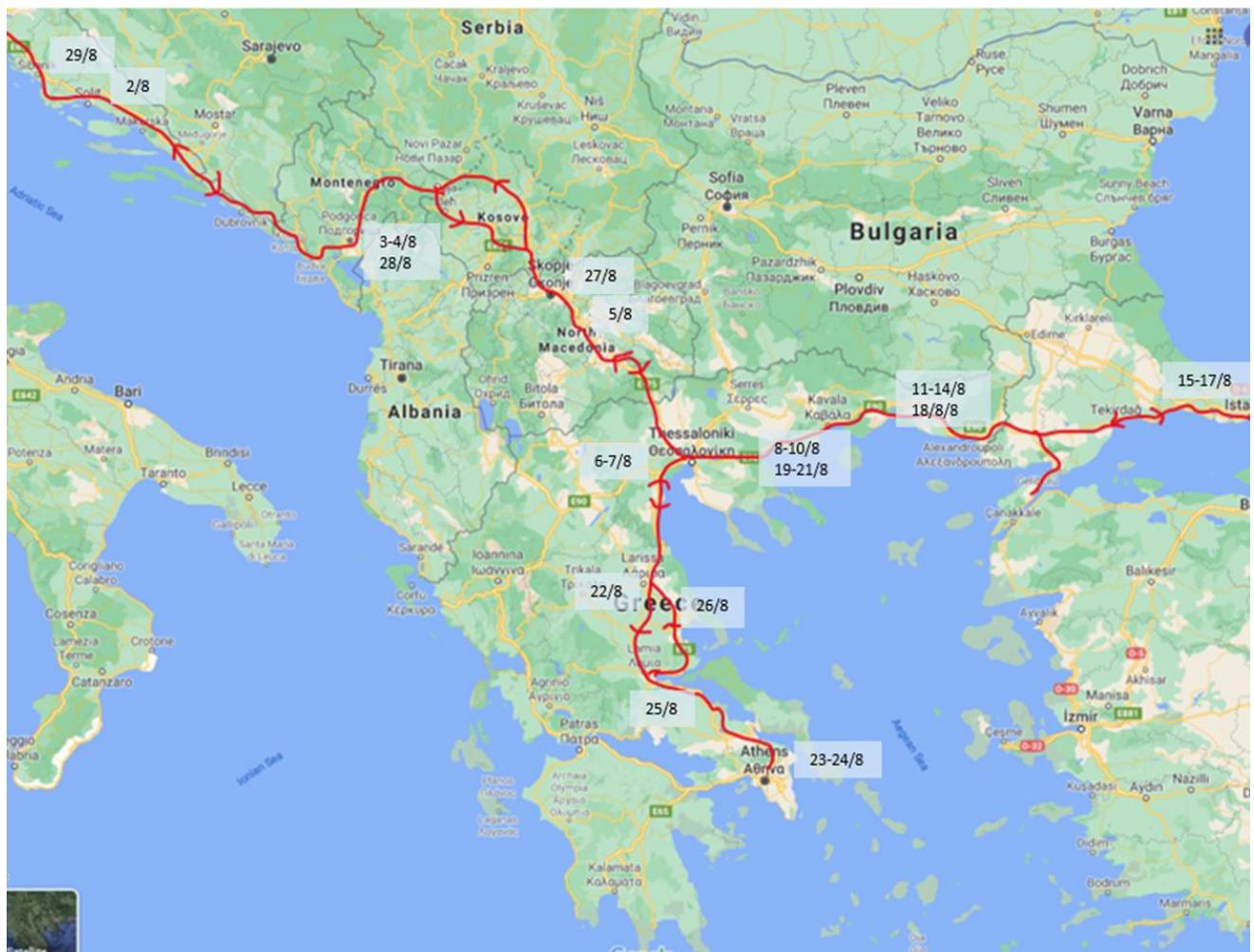
Poor Alan still had to drive and we aimed again for the river campsite near La Spezia. From there the road East took us into the foothills of the Alpes. We were just far enough away from Parma, the nearest town, when we got a flat tyre. We limped along to the next petrol station, where a very sweet man came running toward us with a pump, inflated the tyre for us and seemed more than happy enough with our gratitude. We limped on to Venice and checked into an over-priced camping area. We'd of course hoped to buy another tyre, but they wanted \$60, which we thought was blackmail. We managed to buy some cheap shoes and decided to push on through Yugoslavia toward Greece, where tyres were bound to be more reasonably-priced.

Yugoslavia - 2 August

Rijeka, Titograd, Pec, Skopje.

Unscathed at the centre of an International Incident. A magnificent fjord with two teenage girls, two cows, Montenegrin family hospitality with home-made yoghurt and slipkovich, comparative politics, and fetching water from a well. The road to Pec. Mutual astonishment in Pec.

The Dalmatian coast is amazingly beautiful and unlike any other we'd seen. Hundreds of barren islands of pink stone dot the coast - I suppose like the spots on the eponymous dogs. The pink-ish rock reflects mauve in the surprisingly calm water, giving it a particularly inviting air. Our first stop was a camping area near Rijeka, which we reached as part of a long, slow procession of tourist traffic, the road being too narrow to pass anyone. The camping area had been announced on billboards for a few kilometres, but the entrance was poorly indicated, so he had to stop suddenly to turn into it, given the impossibility of making a U-turn afterwards. This caused a bit of a pile-up behind us, although we, in good Laurel and Hardy tradition, avoided any visible damage. It was all very unfair, really, but given our other concerns, we were reluctant to let ourselves be dragged into the international brawl that was erupting behind us. I pointed to the large, stupid GB sticker and shrugged that I spoke neither French, Italian nor German. We turned into the campsite and made ourselves scarce. The beach was too inviting and I think there was even a swimming pool. All reasonably priced, too, with a little supermarket where we bought some provisions.



It was now 3 August, and with air leaking gradually out of our tyre, we continued south, turning inland just before Dubrovnik. We certainly would have gone down to visit the medieval fortress, but we needed to get to Greece as quickly as possible to buy a tyre. About ten kilometres past Titograd (now Podgorica - the capital of Montenegro), we stopped to free-camp beside one of the most spectacular river gorges I've ever seen. It was so peaceful, with grassy hills, a steep cliff descending to a fast-flowing mountain river with a back-drop of soaring mountains.

I prepared Ophelia's meal first and while we then had ours, she wandered off in the grassy meadows. Two teenage girls leading two cows, each with a bell around its neck naturally attracted her and the two girls were charmed and intrigued to see a little green-eyed, freckled girl. She brought them over to the van and we established that between us we had enough rudimentary German to make sense to each other, so they asked if they could take Ophelia home with them, indicating a neat, white, two-storey farm house, surrounded by orchards and vineyards, a few hundred metres back along the road. They invited us too, for dinner, but I pointed out we were about to eat ours, but that we would come up after we'd eaten. An hour or so later, they welcomed us into a large room that comprised kitchen, sitting room and dining room, all smelling of soap, as if the place had been scrubbed thoroughly, but not well rinsed - which turned out to be close to the truth. Upstairs were the bedrooms, but they didn't say how many. I'd guess at four.

The family comprised grandmother and grandfather, who I guessed to be in their 70s, mother and father, two daughters and two sons in their 20s. The old man spoke some French, but apart from that, it was the girls' German that served us - and plenty of mime.

Although I had said that Ophelia had already eaten, it was clear that that had not counted for them, and they could not accept a guest in the house without feeding them. On top of her dinner, she had had a big bowl of hearty soup, a big bowl of home-made yoghurt and an unknowable quantity of cake. She reclined on a settee in the corner of the living area, with a dazed expression on her face, clutching her stomach. She was not used to over-eating: this was a new experience.

We were able to acquit ourselves with a big cup each of yoghurt and I managed a piece of excellent cake - lemon cake if I recall. But I was a bit alarmed when I saw a large jug of something and eight shot glasses being hauled out from a cupboard. I could not tell you the names of any of the family members, but the hooch was called slipkovich, which they had made themselves (naturally) from plums they'd grown in their orchard. I tried to signal to Alan to take only tentative sips of the stuff, but he let himself be lured into downing three shots in a row.

At that point mother pulled a face and pointed to Ophelia, who had reclined further on the settee. She had gone an odd colour and her eyes were now rolling upward. She seemed to hiccup and a mouthful of soup - or something - emerged from her. The women leapt into emergency mode, with towels and basins of soapy water - thrilled that they were able to fuss over her even more. Normally I would have been horribly embarrassed about my child barfing in some-one's home, but I quickly understood that they were now at last satisfied that she had eaten enough.

We stayed several hours with them. They were very interested in the capitalist system we lived with and equally keen - proud - to describe how their own worked. Tito's brand of communism was much more relaxed than most other versions. The fact that we were readily invited into their home was evidence of that. The farm was theirs and they were obliged to produce a quota of various produce, which they handed to the government, and for which the grandparents, parents were paid salaries. Anything the family produced above their quota they were free to keep or to sell at whatever price they could get. The girls went to school during the day and worked on the farm afterwards. Working age men took the bus each morning into Titograd, where they worked in a factory and were paid a wage for that too. All schooling, health care and retirement was paid for by the state - a real cradle to grave security system, which they much preferred to our capitalist system, and living in such a peaceful, idyllic spot, I could understand why.

I had wondered that the kitchen, which occupied about a quarter of the down-stairs area, was quite well appointed and very solid-looking, with terrazzo benchtops and a big gas stove and oven, seemed not to have a sink or even running water. All became clear when, inevitably, we wanted to go to the toilet. Not a problem: then men launched into action signalling us to follow them outside into the darkness. Grabbing a pair of large shovels, the young men led us about thirty metres into the orchard behind the house. There they dug two holes and invited us to use them, while they very politely stepped back toward to house to afford us some privacy before filling in the holes afterward.

During the course of our conversation, they had learned about our tyre problem and waved arms about to assure us that they would have that fixed in no time. They insisted we bring the van into the vineyard in front of the house and stay there until the tyre could be fixed. Although a bit embarrassed to impose, I understood from Dutch and Polish people I had come to know in Oz that they would be offended if we declined.

In the morning, Alan took the bus into Titograd with the two men and the wheel. On his return he explained that he had to leave it there to be patched and re-inflated and go

back in the afternoon to fetch it. I spent the day cleaning the van. When I asked where I could fill our water bottles, the girls pointed to a very picturesque well between the little vineyard, where we were parked, and the house - just like the fairy tales, with a stone rim and a little pitched roof over it, tiled with wooden shingles. The bucket was not thatched wood, but galvanised steel, suspended from a hemp rope. I checked for any lost kittens, but it was deep and very dark. You could not see the bottom.

Now it turns out that fetching water from a well is not straight-forward. You drop the bucket down and guess what? It floats. The girls were collapsing with laughter to see a grown woman who couldn't even fetch water from a well. They showed me how it was done: you had to throw the bucket down at a particular angle and with as much force as you could manage to get it to penetrate the surface and take water. I noticed that their shoulder muscles were much more developed than mine. It took a while, but I got the hang of it. I had to, as I would really have been imposing, arrogant even, to get them to do it for me. Later in the afternoon, when Alan had returned with the tyre and I was preparing our dinner, the girls came along with a big bag of beautiful tomatoes they had grown and insisted we take them when we left the following morning, they also had piled us up with fruit from their vineyards and other goodies.

On 5 August, we set off early expecting to make Thessaloniki by the afternoon. No chance: it turned out that the patch of dirt road we encountered, which our map had indicated as the main route to the next major town, which was Pec, the capital of Kosovo, where we had hoped to find plenty of amenities. The dirt road went on for 70 km, including through an interminable tunnel. We feared for the tyre. We made Pec in mid-afternoon and were as astonished at what we found as its people were to see us. Staring at us wide-eyed, I wondered if we were the first non-Kosovars they had ever encountered. Sporting poop-catchers, they led adorable donkeys laden with baskets of farm produce. Far from paved roads and amenities - or tyre shops, my abiding recollection is of a muddy main street with a deep trench worked into it. Ours was the only motor vehicle we saw in Pec.

Beyond this buzzing metropolis, we joined a modern highway - evidently built in the ten years since our map was published and which, had we known, could have taken us from Titograd in a fraction of the time we had spent. But then we would have missed our stay at the farm - not to mention the singular experience of Pec. We luxuriated in the paved road and, although the type was again quite flat, made it to a decent camping ground just past Skopje. The capital of Macedonia was a city of high-rise apartment blocks and apparently some secondary industry.

We were just gathering ourselves after the day's ordeal when I was startled by the face of a man at my door, having approached without a sound. But what also startled me was his disconcerting resemblance to a monkey. He spoke English and I think he was from somewhere in America, though his accent was indistinct. He first asked if we needed any help with anything and my first impulse was to shoo him away because he frightened me. But then Alan mentioned the tyre and he said he could help get it inflated again. He then described his problem, which was that his Combie van had broken down (which, according to the rhetoric, at least, never happened) and needed a lift to Thessaloniki. After he'd helped with the tyre, we could hardly refuse, although I confess, I didn't like the idea at all. He couldn't help being ugly, but there was something creepy about him.

It was a bit crowded with four of them plus Ophelia in the back of the van, but Ophelia loved it, as they played with her on the way.

Thessaloniki, Kavala, Alexandroupoulos.

The best pick-up line ever. Greek raptures over Australia. A new tyre, with coffee and cake. The tug of Kavala. Shopping: lamb, horse - or what? The Leyland anti-theft system. More Greek hospitality and home-made wine.

It was not just that we were so glad to have made it, Greece welcomed us with as much warm, kindness and generosity as the Greek people we knew in Oz had been, except more so. it turns out that they are all mad Austrophiles

We parked in front of a lovely beach near the centre of town, in the shade of a row of pine trees reminiscent of Steyne Beach at Manly and I went looking for provisions. Returning with some fresh vegetables, a good-looking man in pressed trousers and a blazer introduced himself and, in impeccable English, invited me to dinner. He oozed charm, and normally I would have been very flattered, but I was more astonished than anything that anyone would talk to me in my scruffy state. I smiled and said I would be delighted to accept and would it be OK for my husband and daughter to accompany us? Not missing a beat, he insisted: Of course, they will be most welcome - tomorrow evening, but this evening just me and him. I smiled and continued my way. I think it's the best pick-up line I've ever had.

After dinner, we walked along the beach front and a break-water to a light-house on the edge of town. On the way, a family picnicking from the back of their car stopped us, arms waving noisily, took Ophelia in their arms and gave her cakes and other goodies and generally made a huge fuss of her. It seems green-eyed, freckled little girls are rare and exotic in Greece. They went into raptures when they learned we were Australians: Do you know my brother? He lives in Melbourne!! etc.. Greece was like that.

We camped on that lovely beach and in the morning, which was a Monday, went searching for a new tyre. Our search was complicated, as we needed a cross-ply tyre (to match the others), which were by then rare in Europe, thanks to technological progress, led by Michelin. What were easy to find, however, were Holden distributors, of all things. The manager of a large tyre distributor, learning that we were Australians, invited us into his office for coffee, cakes and helpful hints for our stay. A big portrait of JFK dominated the wall behind his desk. The tyre, although cheaper than it would have been in Italy or France was still expensive, but somehow that mattered less.

Our next destination was to be Istanbul, but a medium-sized town called Kavala, with a long, sandy beach where we could free-camp and swim in the clean water, wouldn't let us pass until we'd stopped there a few days. A favourite spot for truckers, it turned out, ensuring us lots of company. Ophelia was loving it. The centre was nearby too, where we could have our empty sangria bottle filled with wine. Apart from how generous people would be to us, we knew two things about Greece: lamb was especially good and cheap, and they all spoke some German. So I set out to find some. With my very basic German, I was directed to a butcher, where I asked for *ein kilo fleisch*. At that the butcher took a scythe and, from a carcass hanging from the ceiling, slashed a lump of meat vertically and began wrapping it in newspaper. Now, worried that it might not be lamb after all, I pointed to it and, forgetting the word for sheep, said "baaa". He shook his head and said "no baaa". Now I was worried it might be horse, so I sort of whinnied. He shook his head and said "no" and mimicked my whinnying sound. I frowned again and from below the counter he produced a plastic mould of a purple and white cartoon cow's head, dangling it

from a bright yellow horn, which set us both laughing. The meat was as tough as, and I struggled to cut it across the grain with our half-blunt camping knives. But it was fresh.

It was a pleasant spot and we would have stayed longer, but we needed to get back to a major town with a bank before our funds ran out again. Kavala's hold on us became a grip when Ophelia, who often used the steering wheel to pull herself up into the van, managed to lock the ignition. This had happened a few times, but this time, when we tried to unlock it, the cheap little Leyland key broke off in the lock, which handily, was also the ignition, meaning that now we couldn't even start the car. A lock-smith confirmed that there was nothing he could do. Necessity is, as they say, the mother of invention: I got out the little toolkit I'd bought in London and tinkered. The lock mechanism was so crappy, that I easily dismounted it with an ordinary screwdriver, exposing the mechanism. This amounted to a nylon disc with a rectangular groove in it, into which the shaft of the lock fitted. It was thus a matter of finding something with a suitably-rectangular protrusion to slot into it, such as the handle of a toothbrush. So we were on our way. You have to marvel at "security" mechanisms that can be circumvented in fifteen minutes with a cheap screwdriver and an old toothbrush.

We decided to stay another night there anyway, and in the morning, went on to Alexandroupolis, on the Turkish border and checked in to a camping area. There we did some washing and cleaned up again, but decided to free-camp the second night, as the campsite was expensive. We dined with a Melbourne couple who had the luxury of tables and chairs. A chicken-wire fence leading into the water separated the campsite from the rest of the beach, and we found we could wade our way there and back to use the facilities. We met some Germans and stayed another night there.

Turkey - **15 August**

Istanbul, Gallipoli.

Turkish hospitality and a convivial camp-site. Stork tragedy. The sights of Istanbul, the beautiful Bosphorus and an unforgettable aroma of freshly caught and cooked fish. Three, no, four, camels for a daughter? The shocking desolation of Gallipoli.

Fortunately, we weren't searched as we entered Turkey and had no issues with the police there, as many people said they had. Stopping to buy some provisions for lunch and dinner, I was invited in to the home of a local family, who were intrigued at an Australian travelling with a little girl. They were keen to show off what they had grown and made, and I left with bags of fresh tomatoes and pasties and our old sangria bottle now full of excellent Turkish wine. Everything was, of course, delicious.

We went straight in to the centre and visited the Blue Mosque before returning to a camping area for the night. I remember an almost party atmosphere with paper lanterns strung between the trees and very chatty fellow campers. A stork collided with an electricity pole and was electrocuted. Its mate sat next to it until the middle of the following day. So sad, I wanted to cry. He or she would probably never find another mate.

The following day, with another couple, took a trip on the beautiful Bosphorus. Istanbul reminded me of the nicer aspects of Singapore, but the divine smell of fresh fish being grilled on the banks of the water is unique to Istanbul, and to my mind defines this exciting city. We trudged up to the Topkapi Palace, with its wonderful view of the city and the Bosphorus. The Grand Bazaar, of course, is not optional, and had funds not been so low, I surely would have succumbed - but camels were not on the wish-list. As we headed back to the van, a man with the thickest moustache I'd ever seen stopped me and offered

three camels in exchange for the little girl. I laughed, assuming it a joke (and envisaged my parents on my return to Sydney with three camels and no daughter). As I turned to walk on, insistently he grabbed my shoulder and increased the offer to four camels. I ran to catch up with the others and suggested we get away from there quickly. I'm still not really sure if he was serious.

We started early on 18 August toward the Gallipoli peninsula. It took us ages to find the site of the landing. The locals we asked on the way seemed unaware that there was anything there, and it was only when we came across another Australian couple returning from the cemeteries that we were able to find them. What a desolate spot! Scrubby undergrowth among slender trees, every bit as foreboding as history books describe. The beach where they landed consisted of a thin strip of sand at the foot of a sheer cliff. Its surprising that any of them made it to the top, as the Turkish gunmen would have had no trouble picking them off. My first and lasting thought is the Gallipoli landing was nothing short of a war crime.

A series of fenced off areas among the scrub, each about six metres square two or three dozen headstones on it were the closest thing to graves. A plaque listed the soldiers buried in each area, but I later learned from other Australians and New Zealanders who had made the trek that they had seen on the plaques the names of uncles who were at home, alive and well. And with that the chilling realisation that these were in fact just mass graves, bodies dumped hastily into big holes in the ground before they rotted in the Summer heat. After all, what regard did Turkey have for Australia anyway?

I understand that the site has now been tidied up so that it more resembles the manicured and respectful war cemeteries in the rest of Europe, but I cannot rid myself of the suspicion that any improvement was only cosmetic, and that underneath they are still mass graves. We headed west again.

[Greece](#) - [18 August](#)

[Alexandropoulos, Kavala, Athens.](#)

Making the most of lovely beaches. The perfect souvenir of Athens, but just right to hold Little Golden Books. Real calamari and octopus on the Athens waterfront. Killing time before the Oktoberfest and coming to terms with the Greek Summer.

Dinner was on the beach at Alexandropoulos.

It was now 19 August, and we had time to kill before heading back north to join the Oktoberfest in München, confusingly held in mid-September. So we headed slowly toward Athens, stopping at the lovely beach at Kavala until the 22nd, as another Australian couple had joined us and lent Ophelia their goggles and snorkel, which she loved - although the bottom of the beach was only sand. Also, a couple of very sun-burned English truckies were there too and shared some bread and bacon with us, making it a merry little gathering.

Even with the doors open and driving at full speed it was unbearably hot in the van. At one point we sought shade under some olive trees, but of course they offered no real relief. We free-camped on the way to Athens and arrived on the 24 August at a beach about 30 kilometres from the city, where we free-camped. Used the showers at a pay beach a meal before treating ourselves to a meal of octopus and calamari followed by the sound and light show on the Acropolis. Ophelia had again accumulated a decent kitty and was keen to invest in one of the souvenir shoulder bags on sale at any of the dozens of souvenir

stalls. Rather than one with an image of the Acropolis or some other monument, woven into it, she chose one with a big smiley-face. Not especially Greek, but it was just the right size to accommodate one of her Little Golden Books, and she loved it. The following day we climbed the hill to the Acropolis, where visitors could still roam through the ruins, clambering over fallen stones. From there, we drove north again along the pay road to a lay-by near a beach where we spent most of the following day.

Heading north again, we spent the night in an olive grove. We would have liked another beach stop, but the weather was turning quite cool. Our next stop was at a lay-by, off the highway in Yugoslavia.

Yugoslavia - 27 August

Kotor, Siberok,

Bee-line to Venice, with beach stops.

Although for the most part we followed the same route north through Yugoslavia as the one we'd used to come south, we managed to avoid the 70 kilometres of dirt road and made good time along a well-paved motorway to Titograd. But we were keen to revisit the spectacular fjord and camped in the same spot where we had met the family who had been so hospitable. We didn't see them, and didn't go in to say hello, not wanting them to think we wanted more food. But we did meet another Australian couple there, and camped and ate with them.

Continuing north, we stopped for a swim north of Siberok and camped nearby, again with another couple of Australian campers.

Italy - 31 August

Venice, Parma.

Venetian sight-seeing and a glass factory. Real Parmesan cheese.

It was 31 August by the time we crossed in to Italy and headed on to Venice, and a camping ground and 1 September when we caught the ferry in to Venice and visited a glass factory, where they demonstrated the unbreakability of the gilded glassware.

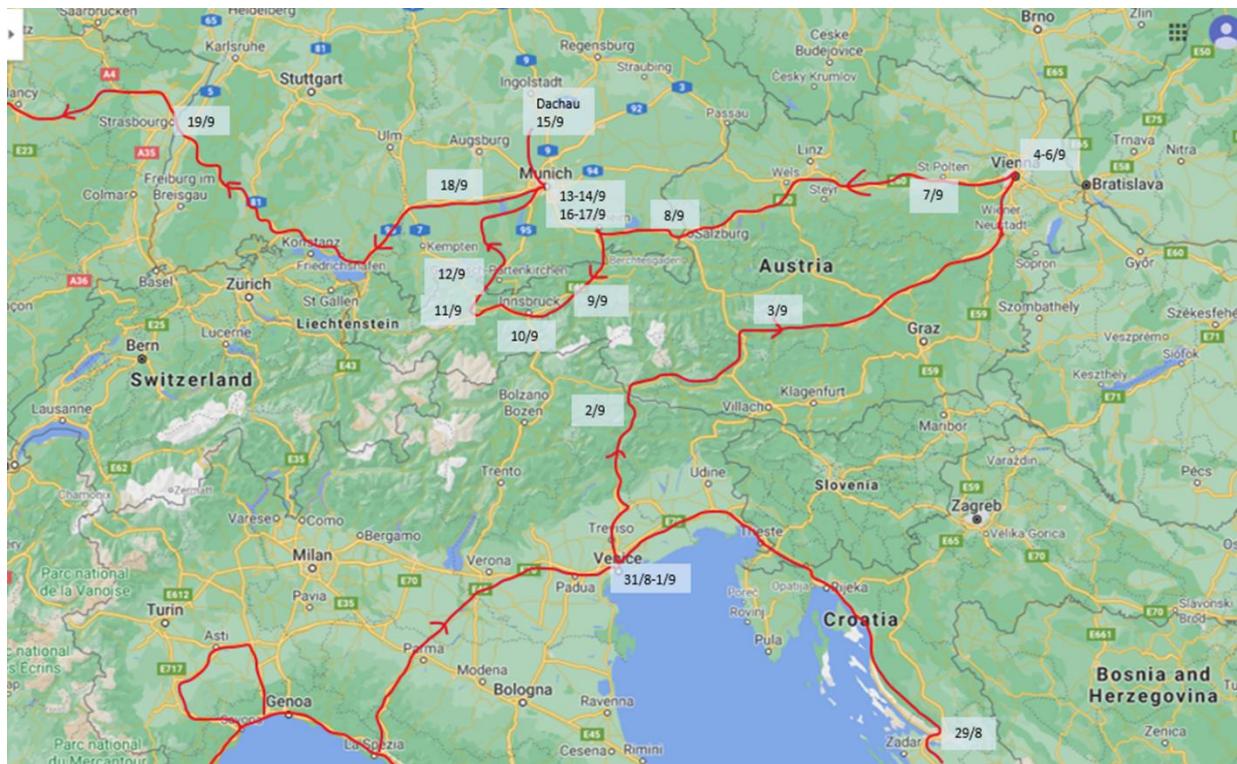
Although ahead of our schedule, we decided against another day in Venice and headed north toward the Austrian border, camping by a mountain lake in the Dolomites. It was somehow comforting to be heading up into the mountains along a windy road through forests, but nobody had warned me how spectacularly beautiful the Dolomites are. The peaks are much craggier than either the Alpes or the Pyrenees. Barren but insanely beautiful. We had stopped at a little village on the way to buy some food. A cheese merchant gave me my first ever taste of real parmesan cheese and was delighted that I loved it so much.

Austria - 3 September

A mountain lake in the Dolomites, Vienna, Salzburg, Innsbrück, Imst.

Mountain delight and first snow. The Spanish horses, for real. Less real wienerschnitzel.

Only the following morning did we appreciate the magnificence of the lake with its spectacular backdrop of jagged peaks. Several kilometres from any signs of civilisation and a hundred kilometres from Vienna, it was cool and the water tasted sweet. And it was very quiet, especially for a main pass through the mountains, with only the odd lorry rumbling past.



Having wilted in unbearable heat only six days earlier, we were now freezing. Stepping out of the van for a (very brief) pee, I noticed that the jagged peaks were now dusted with snow. The ground where I stood was covered in frost. Freezing, but excruciatingly beautiful, especially in the early morning quiet.

We drove into Vienna in pouring rain and, to avoid driving on more cobbled streets, picturesque as they are, we stopped at a camping ground. The following morning, which by now was 5 September, we took the tram into Vienna and walked around the city. Although food and accommodation were dearer than in Greece and Yugoslavia, we found we could live quite cheaply because public services, especially things like public toilets, are plentiful and free, and the local water drinkable. We stayed two nights there and saw a practice session of the Spanish Horses, as performances are sold out months in advance.

We started the day on 7 September with long, hot showers and set off at about lunchtime for Salzburg, though we stopped the night beside the autobahn on the way and went in to the city on the 8th for a walk around in the Autumn sunshine, lack of funds preventing us from doing a tour of Salzburg castle and Mozart's house. In fact, we had already visited Salzburg during our ski holiday, when we were also taken out to see the house of the von Trapps, as featured in The Sound of Music.

That afternoon, we were caught in a five-hour traffic jam and arrived for dinner at 22.00 at a campsite about 40 kilometres from Innsbrück. Pouring rain prevented us from enjoying the mountain scenery, but by the following day it had stopped and we continued on to Innsbrück for some shopping and a hot shower. At a restaurant, we ate

wienerschnitzel, which I was sure was pork, which in Europe is much cheaper than veal. But it was great to be clean and dry and to wear some different clothes.

The following morning, we drove out of the city to a wooded spot beside a main road, where we hiked and camped among some stunning mountain scenery.

Germany - 12 September

Oberammergau, München, Dacha, Stuttgart, the Black Forest

The whizzing and whirring at the Deutschesmuseum. In the Music Room, a Japanese man in a green felt Bavarian hat joins the expanding troupe of Ophelia's admirers. Dachau in contrast with BMW. The Hofbrauhaus experience, sugar-coated hazelnuts and two steins. Ophelia's first hangover and a new use for the Spanish bucket.

Fearing a traffic jam at the border, we made an early start toward Germany. There was no hold-up, and we were in Oberammergau for lunch. I had to visit this place, having learned all about it in high school as part of the German course. It is a small, pretty but otherwise boring Bavarian town nestled in a fairly typical Bavarian valley, famous only for its once-a-decade performance of Der Passionsspiel, in celebration of its having missed the bubonic plague that killed a third of the population everywhere around it. Being boring, we found it also relaxing, and easily found a peaceful spot about a kilometre and a half out of town to camp the night. I was intrigued to learn that a nearby hamlet is called Unteroberammergau (Under Oberammergau). I wondered if it had been spared the plague too.

It was 13 September when we drove on to München and checked in at a campsite. The Deutschesmuseum consumed all the following day and could easily have taken another four (by comparison, I estimate that you could do justice to the British Museum in two days). Lots and lots of interactive science and maths exhibits invite you to turn handles to make things work. Perspex casings show the inner mechanisms of even quite complex machines. There was a working example of the original Puffing Billie steam engine, complete with wooden fuselage and mounted on rails. A music room had the most amazing collection of antique instruments, housed in what had been the music room of a palace. A working example of the puffing billy, mechanisms for measuring time and navigation. Sydney's Museum of Technology on steroids. In addition to the usual cafes and restaurants, there was a lunch room, with tables and chairs where you could bring your own lunch. We followed a guided tour group and caught a bit of the commentary. A funny Japanese man with a bright green felt Bavarian hat, complete with feather, was very taken with Ophelia. He said nothing, but kept separating from the group and playing the clown to make her laugh. I decided that to see the museum properly you would need to spend five full days there.

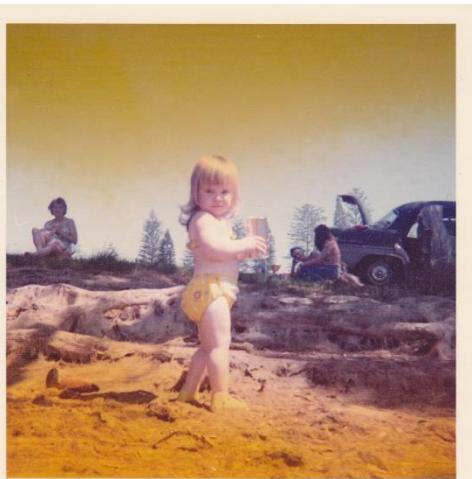
On the 15th we started early to visit the concentration camp at Dachau. The museum was predictably well done, but it was clear that much had been reconstructed for the tourists. Free-camped that night outside München and the following morning visited the Olympic Village, infamous for the hostage and murder of Jewish athletes by Palestinian terrorists during the games there in 1972. Then to the BMW museum, which was predictably over-the-top.

On 17 September, we took the U-bahn in to central München for lunch and wandered around the centre. Lively in the Autumn sunshine, with lots of pedestrian zones and street musicians, including a young woman doing a splendid rendition of Will You Still Love Me

Tomorrow? In the afternoon we ventured to the Hofbrauhaus, the culmination of the Aussie Piss Route.

The temple to beer comprised a monstrous tent in the fairground, said to seat 10,000 guzzlers. They were all there, seated on long benches at long tables, with twice as many more standing, with death grips on their two-litre steins of beer. All attended by fräuleins with arms like wrestlers, each hand clasping three, two litre steins. Expertly, if not especially elegantly, they manoeuvred between tables and standing crowds. Waiters bore platters on arms extended heaven-wards, piled high with long bread-rolls of ham or würsten garnished with salad leaves. Other vendors circulated with trays of sugar-coated hazelnuts.

Most of the faithful were Australians, and despite the difficulty of circulating in mass of beery flesh, I think we met just about all those we'd known so far since leaving Australia.



Like many children, Ophelia liked beer, and bowing to the inevitable, I impressed on her that she could have some beer, but she should make sure she ate something with it. Peter, the burley ginger-headed fellow we'd met at Laredo in Spain, lifted her immediately to his shoulders and Ophelia, by now practised in the art of being spoiled by home-sick Aussies pointed to a helium-filled balloon, which Peter of course bought her. That suited me, as I could then see exactly where she was as she and he navigated the thirsty hoards.

Our mission was to collect a souvenir stein, well, two actually. We had been warned that the giant bouncers at the door could get very aggressive and even violent if they caught you trying to make off with one. But steins full of beer were cheaper than empty ones from the souvenir shop. And anyway, we had a

cunning plan. Alan bought a stein of beer and somehow, between us, we consumed it. It was getting quite late by the time Ophelia was returned to us, which also suited. She was convincingly sleepy and protested only weakly as Alan cradled her and the empty stein in his arms, past the bouncer.

By the time we made it back to the van, where we were free-camping, it became clear that she had had a bit too much beer. She said she'd been careful to eat lots, and she had, but had favoured the sugar-coated hazelnuts over the too-wholesome-by-half-looking sandwiches. She wasn't well, poor thing.

Five is a bit young to have your first Big Night Out, but worse was to come in the morning. Over the course of the trip, the bucket she had bought in Spain had served not only as a beach toy, but on occasion, as an emergency chamber pot. This had upset her horribly: and no amount of washing seemed to mollify her. Well now it served her first hangover. It wasn't funny, especially for her, but we had to laugh. Fortunately, we had plenty of water and fresh bread.

By about three in the afternoon, she started to feel a bit better, which was just as well. because we needed another stein. After a lie-in and some breakfast, we watched the procession, with horse-drawn carts and lots of other rustic, beer-themed exhibits. Loud and colourful, with giant pretzels half a metre wide on sale everywhere. They look nice, but I'm sure they taste awful. Peter appeared again out of nowhere and bought Ophelia a souvenir hat. In the afternoon we repeated the trick with the stein, though Ophelia was not in the mood for any beer.

After another night free-camping in München, we headed west and drove through the Black Forest, which looked like it had been conceived as a fairy-tale setting. Lots of cuckoo clocks, of course, but you were almost surprised not to come across a ginger-bread house. We free-camped just before the French border.

France

- 20 September

Strasbourg, Paris, Calais.

Serendipity and the Astrological Clock. More car problems, this time really serious. The dash to Blighty. Back home n Paris.

On 20 September we crossed just before midday into Strasbourg, very pretty town in a Black Forest kind of way, complete with half-wood buildings and cobbled streets. It was only as we parked the van near the centre that I realised we were in exactly the right place at exactly the right time. Alan had never heard of the daily midday procession, but I had learned about it at school. We managed a surprisingly good vantage point to see the cathedral clock do its celebrated astronomical clock-work number,

I would have liked to stay there a bit longer, but we were having car problems again. Alan is one of those drivers who rides the clutch at intersections. I should have stopped him from doing it, but we had so many other things to argue about, that I didn't get around to it. Now the clutch was emitting the distinctive smoke that precedes its demise, and it was increasingly difficult to change gear. We needed to get back to England with as few stops, literally, as possible before it gave up.

We arrived in Paris at one o'clock the following morning to our "home" under the Eiffel Tower.

XI Back to Blighty- 22 September

London

Cold and damp in a bleak bed-sit. ILEA school food and friends and the mother of all playgrounds in Battersea. Work experiences. Tiddly Dols, running Hamleys. Strikes and black-outs. More needlework. More West-end plays and NAT day-trips. Dreaming of warm and dry: jet-ship to Australia.

After checking for post at the Embassy and treating ourselves to showers, we drove about 50 kilometres out of Paris and free-camped at a lay-by then on to Calais in the early afternoon, hoping to take the hovercraft, but it was booked out. The ferry was anyway much cheaper and arrived at the NAT hotel at about 2.30 and read the post that was waiting for us there.

Friday 23 September was a busy day. Alan found us a self-contained room in a big house in Earls Court. A big step down from our Chelsea digs, but it had a concierge who was up for some child-minding and it backed on to a public school, so Ophelia could make her way there and back on her own if necessary. The room was big, but not heated, and, as autumn set in, we became miserably aware of a broken pane in the single, large window. The room seemed cheap at first, until you grasped the fact that electricity was not included. A metre ate 20p coins every so often and the energy-hungry, two-ring bench-top

stove was the only source of heating, which meant that by the end of our stay we all had burns on our hands from trying to warm ourselves. As with the other London flats, the bathroom consisted of a modular shower stuck next to the sink and stove, with threadbare felt mouldy and stained with years of cooking grease and damp.

There was a double bed and a sofa that we converted to a bed for Ophelia. Thin blankets were supplied, so we were glad of our sleeping bags, even if they too were by then see-through!

While Alan was scouting for the flat, I had rung Banditoon, who proposed work that evening. I protested that we first needed to find somewhere to live and get Ophelia into a school.

Ophelia started school and we started work a week later on 3 October - Alan in well-paid shift work at a factory, and I at a jobs placement agency, where I earned £40 for the day, but without a lunch break. Although I'd worked as an unemployment assessor in Australia, I found the work very frustrating, as I felt I lacked the background experience that would enable me to help applicants match jobs. I remember one poor man, in his 40s or 50s, who must have felt very humiliated to be interviewed by a 23 year-old who clearly knew nothing about his work as a shipping executive. The job I was interviewing him for demanded experience in containerisation, which few people had at the time. I had read that the whole industry was moving toward containerisation, but I had little understanding of what it entailed for someone in the pre-containerisation world, where boxes and crates were handled individually by sweaty wharfies (who often rifled them) rather than being grouped by destination and put into standard-size containers to be loaded by giant cranes. I would have liked to be able to suggest a course he could do to upgrade his skills, but I felt ashamed and frustrate that I could not offer the professional help he needed and, with plenty of other work to choose from, I quit at the end of the week.

When I tried my hand at gathering data for surveys, stopping people near Waterloo Station to get their opinions on this and that. It sounded easy enough, but standing around in all weather was a challenge. I was coupled with a Scottish girl, when pleaded with me to lend her £5. I never saw her or the £5 again, so I worked that afternoon for nothing.

I interviewed for a couple of other jobs, and was offered one as an accounts clerk at the posh St James Club. That was a permanent position and quite well paid. How I played the part of the well-bred young woman. In a so-respectable, brown tweed skirt and a pretty floral blouse, both of which I'd made in Australia, coupled with a pretty pair of brown patent leather court shoes bought on sale in London, I surprised even myself with the yarn I spun about my father having recently been posted to London in his job as a senior executive for Qantas. I was offered the job, but the man was so *Nice*, I'd have felt dreadful resigning a few weeks later, as I knew I would, so I turned it down. Meanwhile, Banditoon had proposed a number of jobs for me. Britain may have been experiencing 17% unemployment, but you'd never know it!

On the evenings of Saturday 8 and Sunday 9 October, I worked at a smart restaurant in Mayfair. When Banditoon proposed it, I asked what I should wear, having nothing suitable for evenings. They made me very nervous when they said the restaurant would provide our outfits, but they assured me that it was a family restaurant. Despite my being very clear that I had no waitressing experience, they insisted and I accepted.

The place was called Tiddy Dols, in a laneway off Park Lane, not far from the Dorchester and the Hilton. It served traditional English food to mainly American tourists, who were

about the only people on the planet to eat that stodge. Roast beef, steak and kidney pie, suet pudding.....

Two Australians and a New Zealander, all from Banditoon, greeted customers and took their coats and, they being Americans, their hats, and hung them on rows of coat hangers. That was our job. That, and to try and find their coats and hats as they later left the restaurant. We also answered the phone, though we had no idea what to tell people when they asked questions about opening hours or bookings. Our dresses were in the Eliza Doolittle style, dowdy brown empire-line with calf-length skirts, plain, slightly scooped neck lines. Mine smelled faintly of perspiration, but my patent leather shoes went perfectly with it. One of the other girls had only sheep-skin lined crepe-soled boots, which looked perfectly dreadful, but I don't think anyone noticed and she didn't care.

The restaurant manager was an idiot, who clearly owed his job to the right school or some uncle. He had bought a couple of booklets of raffle tickets and put one on each coat-hanger. That was fine, but he'd shuffled the hangers, so they were in no particular sequence. Pink, blue, yellow and green mixed together. Knowing the number on the ticket offered no help about where it might then be found. Despite the mainly American clientele, there were no hat racks, but three busts of dead white males. The lights were dim.

All went well for a while. Taking coats, hanging them up and giving a ticket to each person was hardly challenging. The busts served as hat racks, though they began to look increasingly unstable as the number of hats piled up. With no way of checking them, hat reclamation was a pure honesty system, but as customers arrived in batches of at least half a dozen, we had no chance to reflect on the implications of that. We also had no chance to reflect on the consequences of the random coat-hanger numbers.

It was only when they came to collect their coats that we appreciated the chaos of the non-numbering system. Faced with three young women from the antipodes, the men were more good-humoured than they had reason to be. One charming man, on finally receiving his coat, reminded us that he also had a hat. Two of us looked dismayed at the three busts, each now sporting a dozen or so hats. He pointed and said: I think its third from the bottom on Mozart. People kept coming for their coats (being nearly all men, I remember very few women's coats) there was a certain same-ness about them. We felt like idiots. and in the melee, were increasingly stressed. The phone rang, and one of us picked up and announced: Good evening, Tiddly Dols. The American on the other end didn't grasp the nuance, but we did and together understood that it was pointless taking things seriously.

We were paid to work until 23.00, but it was closer to midnight by the time the manager gave us our wages and we could bolt to get the last tube home.

The following evening, we begged the manager to let US put the tickets on the coat hangers. He was so thick I think he suspected some kind of antipodean mutiny. We were also better prepared for the hat challenge (I think one man's hat had gone astray - but he was very good-humoured about it, not wanting to get us into trouble over it).

The evening thus went very smoothly until we asked to be paid. The manager wanted to keep us there unpaid until the last customer left. Certainly, he needed us, given his incompetence. But it meant we missed the last public transport home, and the taxi fare ate up our earnings for the evening. It was especially stupid of him, as we reported it to Banditoon, who then black-banned him.

Monday morning brought my next career challenge, as a buyer's assistant at Hamleys in Regent Street: much more in my comfort zone. I was helping a funny little man keep track of stocks of models: trains of various scales, model soldiers of various armies and battles - and scales, as well as racing cars and other obscure items. This was a specialist niche, serving dedicated, usually very fussy collectors, loyal customers who expected everything in stock, no matter how obscure. With each item identified by an alpha-numeric code, and up to date catalogues, the job was not complicated, but did demand serious attention to detail. It wasn't unlike earlier jobs I'd done as shop assistant, which usually also included inventory maintenance.

Although the job was temporary, I think I could have stayed working there indefinitely, had I wanted to. They were so pleased with my work that, first the funny little man, then his supervisor, then the Head of Buying all decided they'd take advantage of my being there to take off on holidays. So I found myself, after less than three weeks in the job, working as Head of Buying for one of the most famous shops in the world - at the start of the Christmas shopping season! Apart from pay rates that exceeded those of my two immediate superiors for what was supposed to be a junior position, I also benefitted from sizeable discounts on anything I wanted to buy there. I picked up some nice books for Ophelia as well as a Cindy doll to replace the one she had lost. But how hopeless they all were: I remember going to the stationery cupboard for a new biro as mine had run out, only to find there were none. Did I need to take charge of the stationery stocks too? Britain was in a mess, which seemed to me to have been brought on by nothing more complicated than sheer incompetence.

Meanwhile, Ophelia was enrolled at an Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) school. All of the schools in this system it seems had been run by one church or another until the government took them over. I had suitably low expectations and I wasn't disappointed. A weird system that resulted in a patchwork of mediocrity. Better schools existed if you could afford them or knew someone, but when I enquired, they looked at me as if I had two heads, and I decided that the standard was probably not special anyway if it depended on who you knew and how much money you had. For the time she would be there, school was mainly to keep her amused while we were at work, and I hoped, to make some friends.

In fact, the whole school system was deeply unimpressive: while I was at that jobs place I had occasion to find out about the secondary system. Most people seemed not to get past their O-levels and considered that an achievement. That corresponded to our School Certificate, but with a much narrower curriculum. A-levels, taken after twelve years of school. It required only three subjects, as opposed to five or six. Their argument was that it allowed more depth in each subject, but that wasn't obvious from casual conversations with people.

The main attraction of this school was its proximity to the flat we were in - we could see into the school yard from our broken window and, had we had an appetite to climb the fence, could have got to it that way. But it meant Ophelia didn't have to cross any streets to get there and back, so if Alan or I were unable to pick her up, she could come home alone and sit with the concierge until we got home. Like all ILEA schools, an hour a day of Christian instruction was mandatory, even for non-Christians, and like all ILEA schools, it served a hot lunch. At the end of her first week I asked what she had had for lunch that day. Beetroot and gravy, it turned out. Her friends were Jose, Mukti and big, fat Josephine. I wondered how they and their parents liked the daily Methodist instruction.

Although they would get much worse in 1978, they were already pretty bad in late 1977. Even with a Labour government in power (Callaghan had made an idiot of himself by

comparing himself to Moses) industrial relations were catastrophic. It seemed that all essential workers were on strike: nurses, firemen, electricity workers. Buildings were burning down for want of firemen and each morning we had to listen to the radio to find out when our area would be blacked out for want of electricity. Leaving Hamleys at 18.00, and with no street lamps or moon or stars in the perpetually overcast sky, it was so black that we formed a human chain to walk down Kingly, then Warwick, then Glasshouse streets to Piccadilly tube. We could hear running footsteps from time to time, usually indicating a grabbed handbag. It was quite eerie. Luckily the tube, or the Piccadilly Lane, at least, had an independent power source.

During that time, Alan and I saw a number of West End shows and we all did some more day trips on the NAT bus. But the weather was getting very cold. There were days when it was so cold in our bed-sit that the three of us sat in bed together with our clothes on and overcoats heaped over the top of the blankets. Ophelia's and my hair were filthy, but I couldn't bring myself to wash it in the freezing water. To warm up, and when there was no electricity, we would take Ophelia to Battersea Park, about three kilometres down Earls Court Road. It featured the mother of all playgrounds. Parents weren't allowed and the children had to climb in to it, thereby assuring that they were old enough to play unsupervised by parents. Ophelia managed and loved it. The walk warmed us up and ensured Ophelia would sleep well. Otherwise, we warmed ourselves with hot chocolate.

I worked at Hamleys until 26 November, when I quit to prepare for Ophelia's and my trip home. Alan did not want to be home for Christmas, and I could understand why. I can also understand why he might have wanted a few weeks by himself in London. But, having deprived Ophelia of a normal childhood for a whole year, I decided it best to be back home so she could be spoiled by family at Christmas. I was also damned sick of London and hankering for some warm weather.

The insane taxes still made flights in and out of Australia ruinously expensive, so some kind of jet-ship was de rigueur. Unsurprisingly, there was a wide choice and, perhaps more surprisingly, I had left myself plenty of budget so we weren't confined to the cheapest and could treat ourselves a bit, not least to some nice new clothes to go home in.

One of the jet-ship choices entailed a flight to Singapore and a cruise to Perth. I was interested, assuming that the ship would continue to Sydney, a trip that I'd heard was very beautiful. The English travel agent said, no, it was overland. I assumed the train to Sydney, which also had excellent reviews. But, no, it was by bus. I told him he was mad and walked out.

I settled on a flight to Hong Kong leaving on 5 December, with refuelling stops at Frankfurt, Delhi and Bangkok, with two days in Hong Kong, followed by a two-week cruise to Sydney with overnight stops at Manilla and Port Moresby. The flight left from Heathrow too, then somewhat more comfortable than Stanstead, and easier to get to.

Probably because of the dire economic situation, there were sales everywhere, and we picked up some very pretty things. Ophelia got a very smart faux-fur overcoat that looked lovely on her, as well as some jumpers and jeans. I bought a beige velvet blazer for myself and a navy blue one for Alan.

But we were going into Summer, and most of the clothes were for cooler weather. Our swimsuits were in ruins. There wouldn't be time to buy them in Hong Kong, as we would be there less than two days, which I wanted to use to pick up a camera and some Legos for Ophelia, both of which would be very expensive in Australia. I also was keen to see

something of Hong Kong and eat some decent Asian food. So I got out the needle and thread and made each a bikini and Ophelia a dress from fabric left over.

XII Sun-ward - 5 December

Frankfurt, Delhi, Bangkok, Hong Kong

Acute depression reading 1984. Real warmth and light in Bangkok.

We flew out of Heathrow at 10.55 on a scheduled BA flight with plenty of reading material, which I'd procured at Hamley's: on-board entertainment in those days generally consisting of a single film shown on the single screen with optional earphones. I had chosen to read Orwell's 1984. Too close a resemblance to the dystopia of 1977 London! Expensive, poor quality food, coffee that was mostly chicory essence (real coffee having become too expensive for the balance of payments and was near-impossible to get).

After Frankfurt and Delhi, where it was already night time, our descent into Bangkok was like waking up from a nightmare. The early morning sun glistened on the paddy fields. Even in the plane, you could feel the warmth after the bleakness of London.

Hong Kong - 6 December

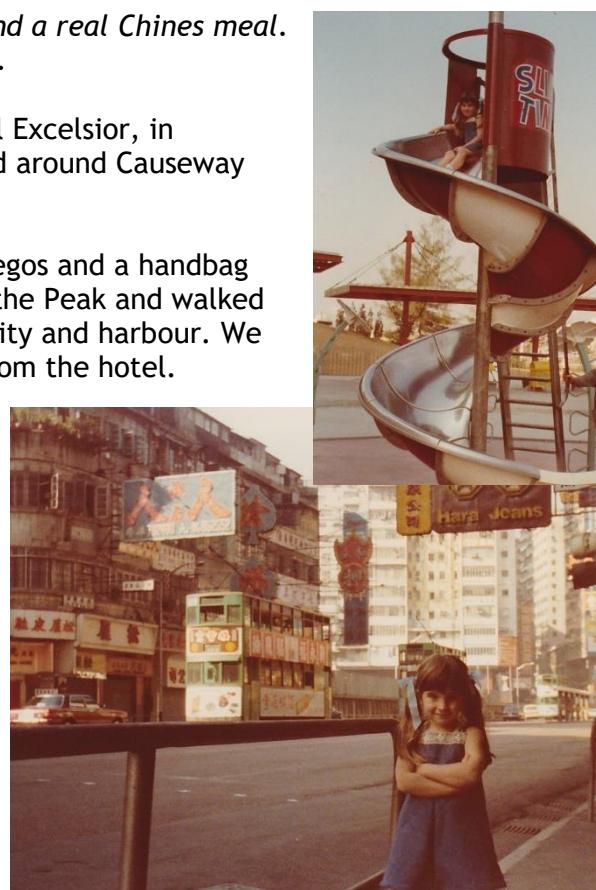
*Warm and dry in a luxury hotel, with shopping and a real Chines meal.
The Star Ferry and Kowloon.*

The package included transfer by bus to the hotel Excelsior, in Causeway Bay. Arriving in the evening, we walked around Causeway Bay and back to the hotel for dinner in our room.

The following morning, we bought the camera, Legos and a handbag for me. In the afternoon we took the tram up to the Peak and walked back down, which gives a very good view of the city and harbour. We had dinner that evening at a restaurant not far from the hotel.

It was our first Chinese meal in over a year, so I ordered three courses: dumpling soup followed by a main course with prawns in it and some fried rice. The restaurant staff were bemused to see a young European woman alone with a little girl and decided to have a game. The food we ordered was exactly what we wanted, but there was enough easily for five or six people! Anyway, it was delicious and not very expensive.

The cruise was due to depart in the evening, which gave us the best part of the day in Hong Kong. We took the Star Ferry to Kowloon and looked around there. Ophelia charmed everyone she met, and scored some more toys. We were both having a great time: we were clean and warm and, after the bleakness of London, able to enjoy the novelty and excitement of Hong Kong!

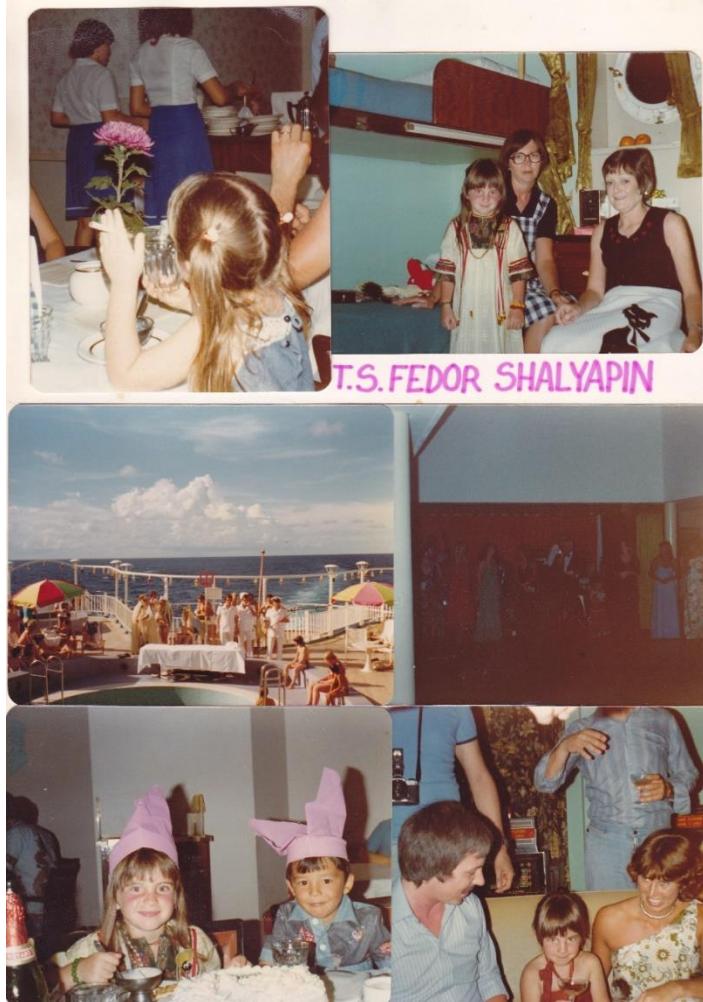


XIII The Fedor Shalyapin - 8 December

Manila, Port Moresby.

A Hell of a cruise! Twenty-seven girls for every guy. A patronising pommy cruise director and a ham singer-entertainer. Glamorous Granny, Ladies' evening, Gentlemen's evening. Ophelia is the real Ms Shalyapin and turns six.

Having very much enjoyed the cruise from Fremantle to Singapore, we had both been looking forward to this one. But the early signs aboard the Fedor Shalyapin didn't bode well. With about 400 passengers, the ship was about twice the size of the Kota Singapura. Half of the passengers were retired couples on the homeward leg of their cruise. There were five children in all. The rest were, like me, early twenty-somethings doing the jet-ship from Europe. Seven men and 190 women. The crew and catering staff were Russian and spoke almost no English. There was only one pool and it had no water in it. My budget did not extend to a cabin to ourselves, but we shared a very nice upper deck cabin with two other young women, one of whom was called Bernice. We sailed out of Hong Kong on the evening of 8 December.



T.S. FEDOR SHALYAPIN

Ophelia soon made friends with pretty much all the adults on board - the children being either too old or too young for her with no children's programme organised, they mostly kept to their parents.

The entertainment manager was mediocre enough to imagine he could keep us all happy with a pathetic disco with rubbish music, and it was not until after about 2.00, when our entertainment manager went to bed that we could take control of the disco, things could liven up.

The real entertainment was in the social dynamics: seven young men were rubbing their hands at the thought of having 190 young women to themselves. My guess is that the women, having seen how European men behave, found them vulgar and dreary and I frankly doubt that any one of them "scored" during the whole two weeks. certainly, since that trip to Europe, I have never showed any interest in an Australian man. The girls seemed to decide collectively to treat the seven with disdain. This was helped by an American, married to an Australian journalist who had been in Hong Kong for three years and were now returning to settle in Australia. She was about as cynical about men as you could be and had a very mischievous sense of humour, very directly-spoken, and livened up the dynamics no end.

A tour in a Jeepney with smiling children everywhere. A dubious win at the Casino.

We arrived in Manila on the morning of 10 December and spent the day there. Unlike Hong Kong and Singapore, people are desperately poor, yet amazingly charming - and beautiful, especially the children. We hired Jeepneys with drivers, who took us on sight-seeing tours around the island. It is all gorgeous and vibrant, with lots of interesting trinkets on sale at street stalls. I bought us coral necklaces, among other things. The topography was also amazing: we stood on the rim of an extinct volcano, the crater of which formed a spectacular lake, an island-volcano emerging from the centre. The volcano was itself on a small island, so it was a mountain within a lake on a mountain in a sea. In the evening we visited the casino, where I won at roulette. But it wasn't much of a win because they wouldn't change my pesos back to dollars, and I think I still have the 22 pesos somewhere.

Back on board

A dire singer called Edwin Duff joined the cruise in Manilla. Another mediocre, pom with chronically mis-placed confidence in himself.

The dour captain's cocktail party at least had some novelty value, but the Russian folk dances, complete with Cossacks, we were treated to by the catering staff after dinner really was excellent.

Away from the pool, which at least by now had water in it, there was pretty much nothing to do, yet how glad I was that I didn't have to take part in the equatorial crossing. In fact, given that we were pretty much all Australians, I wondered who would take part. Yet it did break the boredom for an hour or so. "Ladies Evening" that evening was to be avoided at all costs.

Charlie, probably the least uninteresting of the seven, gave us all an astronomy lesson by the pool in the evening. I decided to see what the library had to offer, and the answer was, not much. But it did feature a portrait of Boris Godunov, a famous Tatar ruler and tsar of Russia of the sixteenth century, with an opera named after him. So I now understood where Boris Badenov, the name of the perennial Russian spy in Rocky & Bullwinkle came from.

One evening's entertainment was a Glamorous Granny quest. Most of the "grannies" on board avoided it, as you would expect; but one of the seven borrowed some clothes from a granny and entered himself, which rescued the evening. We were then treated to a disco by the pool. I don't know how we kept going.

We had dance lessons, and were thankful to the good-natured grannies for lending us their husbands (who, unlike everyone else, were having a wonderful time!) That evening was "Gentlemen's evening". Spare us!

In retrospect, it was only a matter of time, but I was still gobsmacked at the lack of sensitivity. Now we were all being harangued into competing for the title of Miss Shalyapin. Of 190 possible entrants, a total of four reluctantly agreed to participate. I was under pressure: There's no age limit, you know Frances. What that was supposed to mean, I can't say, but I nodded and said I understood and would think about it, saying only that he would have to make it the Ms Shalyapin Quest if he wanted me in it, as I had already been married. He still didn't get it.



The quest, on 16 December, was to entail contestants parading twice, first in swimsuits, then in evening dress. In a bid to persuade me, in addition to the “no age limit”, I was told that I wouldn’t have to do the swimsuit tour (what was he getting at?). Certainly I had put on weight over the past year, because of stodgy, unnourishing food in London and general lack of exercise everywhere, but I still didn’t look that bad in a bikini. I told him I would enter in both sections.

In fact, I had already thought about it and consulted with everyone concerned - except the entertainment manager, who had tacitly given his consent, so needed no consultation, and being an idiot, didn’t deserve any. It was my turn to save the evening. All were keen on my plan. One of the girls had a knee-length, wrap-around skirt she’d bought in India and was happy to lend me for the show. Everyone agreed that Ophelia looked gorgeous in her hand-made bikini, her dark brown, waist-length hair sun-bleached to honey blonde at the ends. The four circled the dance floor, one by one, each carrying a card with their number on it. Ophelia, already well-known to everyone on board, was number five, marched on confidently to wild applause. She was thrilled, sure that she’d won.

A group of us then had great fun preparing her for the second round. The skirt, wrapped around, just under her arms, reached exactly to the floor. I secured it by tying the sash as a halter neck, with the bow at the back. We could have left her hair out, but I was keen that she look grown up. It was easily long and thick enough to tie on the top of her head, curling the ends under and securing them in a neat, but impressive bun. Some lipstick completed the coiffure, as her eyelashes were naturally dark and thick enough to do without mascara. Never one for pretty dresses, she was unaccustomed to this kind of dress up, but so confident from the first round, was very pleased with it all. And so the applause of the second round confirmed her win, as we all knew it would.

The only person who wasn’t pleased was the entertainment manager, who chose to ignore her entirely, declaring one of the other entrants the winner and opening a bottle of (very good) sparkling Georgian wine, serving a glass to each of the four. Ophelia sat alongside of them, looking at me pleadingly. I asked where her glass was, and he objected that she was too young, but I insisted that was beside the point, so he grudgingly gave her one. Photos were snapped, but it wasn’t over yet.

Ophelia was very hurt and the rest of us scandalised that she had not been declared the winner and the others were offered prizes, but not her. I let this be known among the other passengers, who were quite ready to mutiny over it. Grudgingly, he opened up the gift shop and told her choose anything she wanted. Consistent with everything else on that cruise, the choice wasn’t great. She chose a cheap, plastic baby doll in a nappy, not even a pretty dress. I think its arms had fallen off by the time we got to Sydney. It is still not clear why it was acceptable for the young, moustached bloke to go on as a glamorous granny, and not for a five-year-old to enter a beauty quest.

New Guinea - 17 December

The official welcome. The unofficial welcome - party time, well, at least until midnight.

We were woken next morning by the Port Moresby Constabulary Band. Their evident joy at seeing us this matched our enthusiasm for getting off that ship! Its hard to know what we expected of Port Moresby, but it should have been no surprise that there are virtually no women there, it being a career ladder for European - read: Australian, public servants and

bank clerks doing time in exchange for rich salary supplements and enhanced promotion prospects. Normally a pretty dull place, the arrival of a ship with 190 unattached young women livened Port Moresby up more than somewhat on 17 December, 1977. They regarded the New Guinea natives with disdain, accusing them all of being alcoholics, though it seemed to me pots calling kettles black. Anyway, that was their explanation for the dearth of alcohol after midnight. They took us on tours of Port Moresby and the surrounding countryside, affording us some very disappointing souvenir hunting, and ended up at a party at a squash club until we mustered the resolve to reembark for the three-day cruise to Sydney.

Back on board



Ophelia's sixth birthday was marked by a stream of gift-bearing well-wishers. Not a soul aboard could escape the fact of her birthday, and now, for the first time in over a year, we had a luggage problem. It turned out that it was also the birthday of one of the other children, though this was remarked only because it coincided with Ophelia's. We dined with his family and were showered with wine and chocolate and lots of adoring Russian fuss. Ophelia had a ball and went to bed only at midnight.

The 19th was quiet until the evening, when a fancy-dress ball had been planned, but the real highlight was the collective - unanimous booing of Edwin Duff, who nobody could bear to see or listen to again. The disco was a bit better too.

Our last-but-one night aboard was the Captain's dinner, which we all enjoyed - probably because it was organised by the Russians and not that awful pom. But we were keen to get to bed early so as to be awake as we came within sight of the coast of NSW. But the day's cruising the length of NSW was marred by grey sky and drizzle. With not much by way of photo ops. Worse was to come in the evening, as, like a B-grade ham-actor's death scene, Edwin Duff reappeared.

We had long talked about how we would all keep each other awake that night to be on deck as we passed through the Heads early the following morning. Its said to be quite a spectacular sight. And none of us wanted to spend a minute longer than we needed on board that ship.

Australia - 22 December

Coming to grips with coming "home".

Unfortunately, Sydney greeted us coolly with grey sky and drizzle, but no matter. For a long time, Ophelia had been keen to get home, and was very glad finally to see her grandparents and tell them all her stories and show them her souvenirs. For my part, beyond getting off that ship, I had to decide what I would now do with my life where we would live and how I would support us.

We docked in Pyrmont, Wharf 23, and I could see my parents there waiting, my mother waving a soft toy Siamese cat that had been a favourite of Ophelia's since she was a baby and had become so grotty that I'd hoped never to see it again, an abrupt reminder that I

had changed, Ophelia had changed. But I needed to grasp the implications that everyone around me were the same.

Epilogue

What does it mean when the direction you take in life is at odds with, or even repudiates your relationship with your immediate family? The question acquires more urgency when that relationship is primary not just to you and them, who are all adults in charge of their own decisions, but for the practical, moral and emotional future of a six-year-old?

In a world that is itself changing rapidly, anyone eschewing change is inevitably retreating. So, in an important sense, they are the ones widening the chasm, though of course they do not see it that way. In practical terms it limits the amount of support they can offer, and detracts from the utility of that which they do offer, further straining the relationship.

But, although much of 1977 had been in reality a hard slog, moments of delight punctuating mostly self-induced hardships, neither Ophelia nor I have the slightest regret in having done it. Both together and separately we had learned more than anyone could have imagined before we embarked on it.

She learned valuable lessons about the world outside Australia, that there are infinite variations on living a civilised and happy life: not better, not worse, just different. She understood different ways of communicating, even if she understood little of the foreign languages themselves that she encountered. Different types of money, food, clothing, climates, games. She also developed an appreciation of where she stood in amongst it all and how she could get along with other people, no matter how different they were.

I saw how Europe really is, what it has to offer, and what it doesn't. Of course, we would have liked to have had more money, but then it would have been a different trip. Stopping in hotels would have deprived us of all those chance meetings while free camping. Being able to buy a new tyre as soon as we needed it would have deprived us of those wonderful few days with the family in Montenegro. Not being chronically short of cash I would never have met that amazing Bulgarian cyclist near La Spezia or the Italians who taught me to count in Italian, or the Greek butcher with his purple and yellow plastic cow's head.

But the trip was not what you would call fun. Yet, since returning to Australia, I had harboured the ambition to go back, in a sense to get it right this time. Build a life there. In London if necessary. Why not? After all, things must have improved since the dark days of the late 1970s.

But I worried that the hardships had spoiled the travel bug in Ophelia. So how glad then was I that, at ten, she was eager to accept an invitation to spend time with the family of a school friend of hers in Yugoslavia. Since then she has never, to my knowledge, turned down a realistic opportunity to travel.

Perhaps most reassuring for me was that she said she had derived so much from that trip that she sincerely wished to be able to offer her own children something similar.

Alan and I met up again on his return in January. He had accepted a teaching post in Darwin and we talked about our joining him and completing my education at a community college there. We even went there, but somehow, I knew it would never happen. We met again in May, 1978, by which time I was continuing my degree at NSW University. Ophelia and I had changed, but Alan had changed much less. We've had no contact since then.