

# AROUND THE WORLD IN 490 BEERS



...or how I learned to circumnavigate the globe without having to drink the local water

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## Introduction

**In 1989 I took a trip around the world.**

At the time, I was 31 years old and working for a software company in Reston, Virginia called Systems Center.

It was the kind of place that attracted bright, young, hardworking people—and management knew how to take care of them. We had access to two beach houses on the Delaware shore, generous benefits, lively parties, and in 1988, the company introduced something remarkable: a sabbatical program.

The idea was simple but bold. After five years of service, employees were required—yes, required—to take at least four consecutive weeks off to “recharge their batteries.” During that time, we’d continue to receive full pay and benefits.

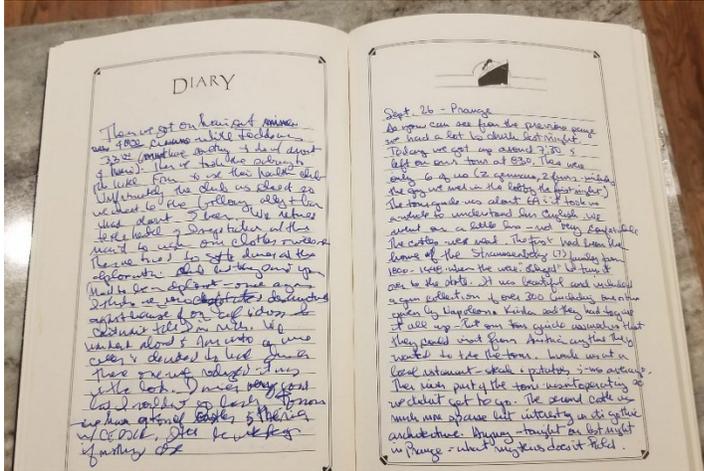
The company even said it would force employees to take the time off if they didn’t do so voluntarily. I’m not sure it ever came to that, but the message was clear: step away, do something unrelated to work, and come back refreshed.

When the program was announced, I had just crossed the five-year mark. I knew immediately I wanted to do something memorable. Four paid weeks off wasn’t something I expected to see again anytime soon—and I had another four weeks of vacation saved up. Eight weeks. Uninterrupted. The possibilities were wide open.

At first, I considered going to Australia. I started talking to a fellow employee, Todd Margo, who had also hit his five-year milestone. He liked the idea. Australia sounded adventurous, far-flung, and just exotic enough to feel like a proper sabbatical.

But the more I looked into it, the more I thought: if I’m going halfway around the world, why not keep going? Why not make it a full circumnavigation?

I ran the numbers. Surprisingly, the cost of a round-the-world trip was about the same as spending a month in Australia. At the time, airlines were offering “around the world” tickets—flexible itineraries with multiple stopovers from major air hubs, all for a fixed price.



That sealed the deal. Todd, being easygoing and game for anything, said he was in.

what followed was a journey that would shape how I saw the world—and how I saw myself in it.

The story you’re about to read is based on transcribed notes from the journal I kept

during that trip.

As history would have it, 1989 turned out to be a fascinating year to travel the globe. Political shifts, cultural awakenings, and quiet moments of personal reflection all found their way into our path.

I hope you enjoy reading about the trip as much as I enjoyed living it.

—Joe Koshuta, December 2009

# Day 1 - DC-10s, Daiquiris, and the Pacific

Day 1 - August 28, 1989

Dulles, Virginia → Chicago, Illinois → Honolulu, Hawaii (4,817 miles)

11:16 AM - Just boarded our DC-10 for Hawaii.

Aargh.

Not because of the legroom or the food, but because the DC-10 has had a rough year.

Three major accidents in 1989 alone—United Flight 232 in Sioux City, the crash in Boston, and another in Brussels.

So yes, I'm watching the wings a little more closely than usual and quietly hoping the engineers who built this particular aircraft were having a good day.



The flight from Dulles to Chicago was longer than expected. We spent a good chunk of time dodging thunderstorms, which turned our route into a scenic tour of the Midwest from 30,000 feet.

The pilot's voice came over the intercom with the kind of calm that suggests he's seen worse, but the turbulence had a few passengers gripping their armrests like they were auditioning for a disaster film.

Todd and I passed the time by collecting every magazine on the plane.

In addition to Time and Newsweek, we possess three copies of the in-flight shopping catalog, two issues of SkyMall, and something called Pacific Horizons that appears to be mostly ads for macadamia nuts and ukulele lessons.

After a short stop at O'Hare Airport we are now on the long haul—Chicago to Honolulu. The stewardesses are all wearing muumuus, which is both unexpected and oddly charming. Todd started out sitting next to me for this leg, and between the two of us, we've managed to hoard every printed item not nailed down. No beer yet. We're pacing ourselves. Waiting for the right moment.

12:48 PM - The right moment just arrived.

I cracked open my first beer of the trip.

Todd, ever the strategist, is holding out. But for me, the combination of altitude, muumuus, and the realization that we're flying over 2,000 miles of open water made it feel like the appropriate time.

The cabin isn't nearly as crowded as I feared.

I've got the window seats—23A and B—and Todd has commandeered the entire center section, seats 23C through G. Five seats to himself.

He looks like a king surveying his domain, legs stretched out, arms folded behind his head, a magazine balanced on his chest.

According to the second officer, we're cruising at 484–489 knots, first at 32,000 feet, then climbing to 36,000. The Pacific awaits.

16:24 - we've finally broken through the cloud cover, and the ocean is visible.

It's vast, blue, and quietly intimidating. This is the farthest west I've ever been.

There's something surreal about watching the Pacific from 36,000 feet, knowing that below us is nothing but water and the occasional island

that somehow managed to get discovered centuries ago by people in wooden boats.

I'm watching the movie Chances Are for the second time. It's not a great movie, but it's better than staring at the seatback in front of me.

Todd is still abstaining from beer, but I suspect his resolve is weakening. He's started glancing at my can like it's a mirage.

17:58 - Todd has officially joined the fray. First beer, then second.

The mood has lifted. I'm still bored, but we're within 90 minutes of landing. I keep glancing out the window, hoping for a glimpse of land. Anything to break the monotony of recycled air and the third act of a movie I didn't love the first time.

19:32 - We're passing the first of the Hawaiian Islands.

It's remarkable how big the Pacific is—and how precise modern aircraft navigation has become. I think about the original explorers, navigating by stars and instinct, hoping the ocean would eventually give way to land. We, on the other hand, have seatback maps and second officers who announce our altitude like it's a weather report.

The islands appear slowly, like secrets being revealed. Green ridges, volcanic slopes, and the occasional glint of a beach. It's hard to believe we're almost there.

20:25 local time - After our first night in Honolulu.

We made it. The descent was smooth, the airport efficient, and the air—warm, fragrant, and unmistakably Hawaiian. We checked into The New Otani Kaimana Beach Hotel, which sits right on the beach at the base of Diamond Head. It's not crowded, which feels like a small miracle. Our room has a view of Waikiki that looks like it was painted by someone nostalgic for postcards.

I went for a brief swim after we arrived. The water was cool, the sand soft, and the horizon endless.

It felt good to stretch, to float, to let the ocean remind me that we're not in Virginia anymore. There's something about saltwater that resets the system—like a baptism for the jet-lagged.



Later, Todd and I ventured out for dinner. We ended up at a place called Bobby McGuire's—low lighting, decent food, and the kind of ambiance that makes you order a second drink without thinking. The wait staff wore floral shirts and moved with the kind of relaxed precision that only exists in places where the weather never turns hostile.

Afterward, we returned to the hotel and settled into the lobby lounge, where the drinks were strong and the music soft enough to ignore. The bartender made us banana daiquiris that tasted like vacation in a glass—sweet, cold, and just potent enough to make you forget how long you've been awake.

The hotel itself is a quiet gem. Not flashy, not overrun with tourists — just comfortable, well-placed, and quietly elegant. It's the kind of place that makes you want to linger. And after a day of airports, turbulence, and recycled air, lingering feels like a luxury.



We sat on the balcony for a while, watching the lights of Waikiki flicker across the water.

The breeze was warm, the stars were out, and the sound of the ocean was steady and reassuring.

It's hard to believe this is only Day 1. The trip already feels like it's unfolding in chapters.

Beer count: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺 Banana Daiquiris: 🍹🍹🍹

Mood: relaxed, slightly sunburned, mildly jet-lagged Forecast: more ocean, more daiquiris, and maybe a sunrise swim.

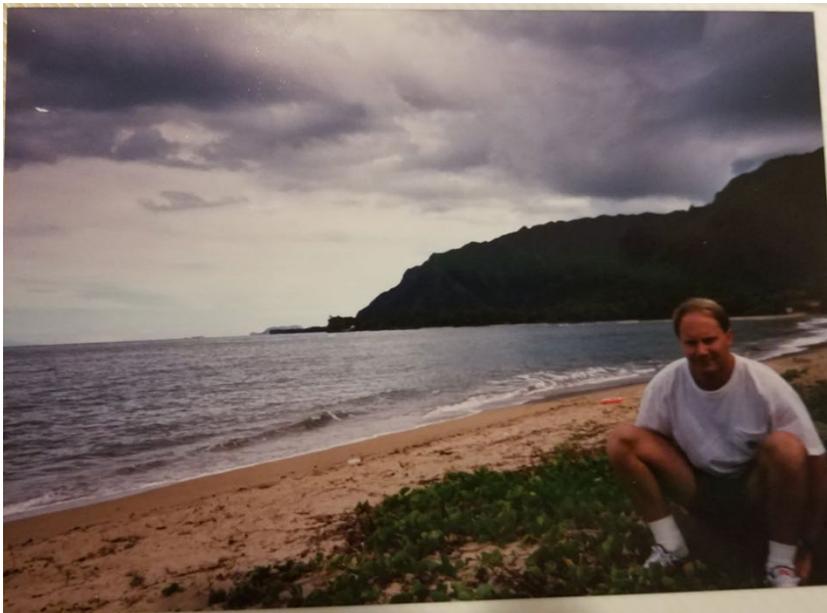
## Day 2 - Pearl Harbor, Pineapples, and a Scam

Day 2 - August 29, 1989  
Honolulu, Hawaii

18:45 - well, that didn't take long.

Tonight marked my first official rip-off of the trip. It came courtesy of Todd's recommendation, which should have been my first red flag.

On our way back to the hotel after a full day of sightseeing, he suggested we stop by a "nice local strip club."



I should've known that any sentence beginning with "nice local" and ending with "strip club" was going to end in regret.

At first, things seemed fine.

The beers were a mere \$2.25 each—a bargain, really, considering the ambiance. Dim lighting, velvet booths, and the kind

of music that sounds like it was composed entirely on a Casio keyboard.

we settled in, clinked our bottles, and congratulated ourselves on finding a deal.

That lasted about ten minutes.

Enter Alicia and Laura. They approached us with the kind of practiced charm that suggests they've done this before.

Their English was halting and heavily accented, and they "surprised" us when they said they weren't originally from Hawaii. We never would've guessed.

Their conversation was light, vaguely flirtatious, and just interesting enough to keep us from noticing the trap being set.

After our first beer, Laura leaned in and asked if I'd like to buy her and Alicia a drink. Todd, conveniently, had forgotten his money. So I agreed. Big mistake.

The drinks arrived—95% soda, 5% something that might've once been liquor—and Laura casually informed me that each drink was \$10.

I did the math. Then I did the math again. Then I thought:

I am going to kill Todd.

We're being ripped off.

I bit the bullet. Chalked it up to experience. And eventually I would get it back from Todd's Gold card.

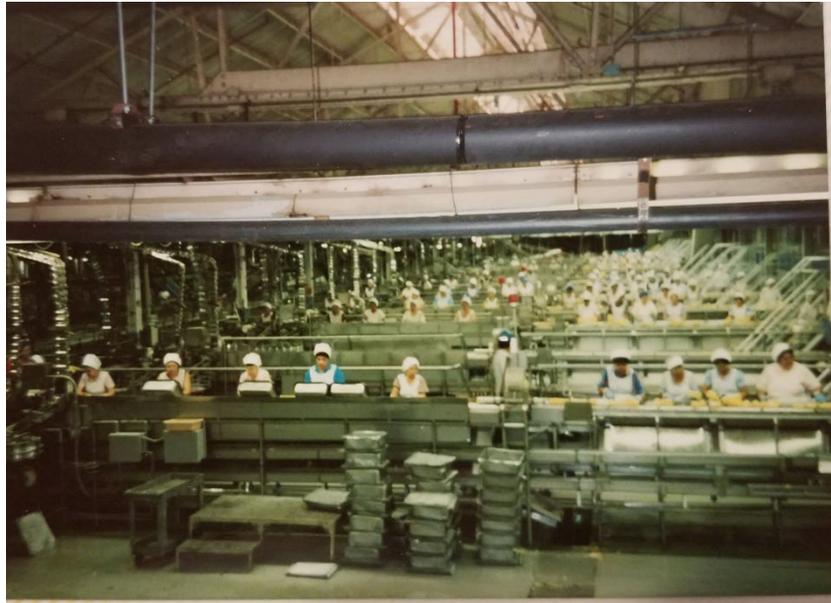
To add insult to injury, the dancers never took their clothes off while we were there.

Not even a shoe. What a disappointment. We left poorer, wiser, and slightly sticky from the cocktail syrup.

But the day hadn't started in a strip club.

It began with a drive around the island—a scenic loop that promised tropical charm and delivered a mix of beauty, kitsch, and overpriced fruit.

Our first stop was the Dole Pineapple Cannery. Five dollars for admission.



Five dollars to walk through a building that smelled faintly of sugar and industrial cleaning fluid.

It was interesting, in the way that watching a pineapple roll down a conveyor belt is interesting. But hardly worth the money. J.D. Dole may have revolutionized pineapple distribution, but he's got nothing on Henry Ford when it comes to labor efficiency.

After the cannery, we made our way to Pearl Harbor and visited the USS Arizona Memorial. That, thankfully, was worth every minute.



The memorial is quiet, solemn, and deeply moving.

You stand above the sunken battleship, looking down at the rusting hull, and realize that 2,400 people died here—less than three miles from where I'm now sitting in a hotel room sipping a banana daiquiri.

It's strange, that kind of proximity. History feels distant until you're standing in it.

At the souvenir shop, I tried to buy a small memento and accidentally overpaid. The woman behind the counter—who was blind—caught the mistake by feeling the loose change and corrected me.

I was impressed. She handled the transaction with more grace and accuracy than most sighted cashiers I've encountered. It was a quiet moment of dignity in a place already heavy with meaning.

Later that evening, back at the hotel bar, we met Clara, the bartender.

She was seven years old when Pearl Harbor was attacked. She remembers seeing the planes and the smoke. She said everyone thought it was a drill.

That detail stuck with me. The idea that something so catastrophic could begin with confusion, with disbelief. It's a reminder of how quickly normal can become history.



We talked for a while, sipping drinks and watching the surf roll in.

Clara had a calm presence, the kind that makes you feel like you're being gently guided through your own thoughts.

She didn't dwell on the past, but she didn't ignore it either. Just acknowledged it, like

a tide that comes and goes.

And now, here I am—back in the room, slightly sunburned, slightly poorer, and slightly wiser.

Beer count: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 Banana Daiquiris: 🍹🍹🍹

Mood: amused, reflective, mildly sticky Forecast: fewer scams, more swims, and maybe a pineapple that doesn't cost \$5

## Day 3 - Golf, Girls, and Gate 14A

Day 3 - August 30, 1989  
Honolulu, Hawaii



00:17 -  
Honolulu  
International  
Airport.

Todd and I are  
parked at the  
bar, waiting  
to board  
United Flight  
811 to  
Auckland.

The fluorescent lighting is harsh, the bourbon is watery, and the ice has long since surrendered.

Todd's on his second beer, wearing the satisfied grin of a man who believes he's just had a cultural awakening. I'm scribbling notes in my journal, trying to make sense of the last twelve hours.

"A mere three hours ago," I write, pausing to watch Todd's eyes glaze over with the memory, "Todd had a large Asian woman's breasts pressed against his cheeks."

I saw the whole thing unfold from my seat—prime viewing, just far enough from the stage to maintain plausible deniability.

The dancer had asked for volunteers, and Todd, emboldened by beer and bravado, rose like a man summoned by destiny.

He approached the stage with the hesitant swagger of someone who's not entirely sure what he's signed up for but is too committed to back out.

She greeted him with a smile that suggested she'd done this routine a few hundred times before.

Todd, meanwhile, looked like he'd just been handed the keys to a secret kingdom.

what followed was a brief but memorable performance involving rhythmic swaying, strategic positioning, and Todd's face disappearing into a place that would later be described-by him-as "spiritual."

The evening had begun with Todd's declaration that we needed to find "the real deal." This was in response to our previous misadventure at a Vietnamese establishment where we were charged ten dollars for watered-down drinks and the dancers never actually removed their clothes.

Todd was determined to right the wrong.

Armed with a recommendation from our hotel bartender—who seemed to know exactly what two American tourists were looking for—we made the trek out to Pearl City which was close to Honolulu International Airport.

The club we found was everything its predecessor wasn't: dimly lit, genuinely exotic, and staffed by women who understood the basic concept of their profession.

The cover charge was reasonable, the drinks weren't completely extortionate, and—for the first time since arriving in Hawaii—I felt like we were getting our money's worth.

The morning had started with considerably more wholesome pursuits. We played a round of golf at Makaha Valley Country Club, located in Waianae on the west coast of Oahu.



The course opened in 1969 and stretches out like a green carpet rolled across the Hawaiian landscape. The Pacific glittered in the distance, and the mountains provided a backdrop that made even my mediocre swing seem vaguely dignified.

“Ninety-eight dollars,” Todd muttered as we paid the greens fees, “plus two dollars for shower privileges. In Virginia, I could golf for a month on that.”

But by the time we reached the first tee, any complaints about cost had evaporated in the warm Hawaiian air. The course was immaculate, the weather perfect, and—for once—I felt like I might actually know what I was doing with a golf club.

Todd, despite his grumbling, was in his element. He attacked each hole with the enthusiasm of a man who had just discovered religion, even as his scorecard began to resemble a math problem with no solution. By the ninth hole, he was at 52 strokes and showing no signs of improvement.

“It’s the trade winds,” he declared after his ball sailed into a sand trap for the third consecutive hole. “They’re affecting my aerodynamics.”



I managed a respectable 97, which felt like a personal victory given the distractions of paradise.

Todd’s 104 was, in his words, “a moral victory considering the adverse conditions.” The shower afterward—that infamous two-dollar shower—was worth every penny after four hours under the Hawaiian sun.

Now, sitting in this sterile airport bar, watching our fellow passengers queue up for the overnight flight to Auckland, the golf course feels like a distant memory.

The woman in front of us is engaged in an increasingly heated discussion with the gate agent about seat assignments, insisting that she must have the exact same seat she occupied on her inbound flight.

“Ma’am,” the agent explains for the third time, “this is a different aircraft. The seat you’re requesting doesn’t exist on this plane.”

“But I specifically requested 14A!” she protests, waving her boarding pass like a subpoena. “I always sit in 14A!”

Todd catches my eye and shakes his head. “And we’re going to be trapped in a metal tube with these people for the next eleven hours,” he whispers.

The beer count for the day stands at nine. The banana daiquiri experiment has been temporarily abandoned until we reach more banana friendly environs. We’re both feeling the slow pull of fatigue, the kind that settles in after too much sun, too much beer, and just enough absurdity to keep things interesting.

As we prepare to board, I can’t help but feel that we’re closing one chapter and opening another. Hawaii was our warm-up act—a gentle introduction to life outside the comfortable confines of suburban Virginia. New Zealand awaits, and with it, our first real test of whether two software guys from Reston can actually handle a trip around the world.



I glance at our boarding passes.

United Flight 811.

The same flight number that made headlines back in February when a cargo door blew out at 22,000 feet, sucking nine passengers to their deaths.

Todd and I discussed this extensively after receiving our tickets, marveling that United hadn't bothered to change the flight number after such a catastrophic incident.

"What are the odds?" Todd reasoned. "Lightning doesn't strike twice, right?"

The gate agent seems unfazed by the flight number. And frankly, after numerous beers and the evening's entertainment, I'm feeling philosophical about the whole thing.

The adventure, I suspect, is just beginning.

Beer count - 

Mood - amused, reflective, slightly wary Forecast - Kiwi accents, jet lag, and a fresh round of cultural awakenings

## Day 4 - Fred, Flight 811, and Not Being Sucked Out

Day 4 - August 31, 1989

Honolulu → Auckland, New Zealand (4,400 miles)

Well, our first official day of the sabbatical is in the books, and we now find ourselves on foreign soil—alive, intact, and only mildly disoriented. United Flight 811 delivered us safely to Auckland, despite its rather infamous reputation.



For those keeping score at home, this is the same flight number that made headlines back in February when a cargo door blew off mid-air and two rows of passengers were sucked out into the stratosphere. Nine people died. United, in its infinite wisdom, decided not to change the flight number.

Todd and I discussed this at length when we learned we would be on Flight 811.

He reasoned that lightning doesn't strike twice. I reasoned that airlines should probably retire flight numbers associated with catastrophic decompression. In the end, we both agreed that philosophical detachment and a few beers would get us through.

The good news: neither of us was sucked out of the plane. The bad news: the flight was nearly full, and we were packed together like two software guys in a flying sardine can.

I was in seat 34A, Todd in 34C. That left 34B—the dreaded middle seat—open to fate.

We speculated wildly about who might land between us. A crying baby? A chatty honeymooner? A man with a mysterious rash and no concept of personal space?

Instead, we got Fred Fredding.

Fred was a gentleman I estimated to be approaching his seventieth birthday, with the kind of weathered face that spoke of a life well-lived and stories worth telling.

As it turned out, Fred had both in abundance.

"Just finished three months in the UK," he told us as the plane leveled off at cruising altitude and the flight attendants began their beverage service. His accent was a fascinating blend of British origins and New Zealand adoption – crisp consonants softened by decades in the Southern Hemisphere. "Visiting family and old haunts. Amazing how much has changed, and how much hasn't."

Sleep proved elusive for all three of us, whether due to the uncomfortable seating arrangements, the anticipation of arrival, or simply the peculiar time-warp effect of crossing multiple time zones in a metal tube.

This turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as it gave us hours to learn Fred's remarkable story.

Born in London, he had lived through the Blitz as a young man, watching his city burn and rebuild itself night after night. When he turned eighteen, he had served in the Royal Army, though he was characteristically modest about the details. "Did my bit," was all he would say about what I suspected were years of extraordinary service.

After the war, like so many of his generation, Fred had looked toward the Commonwealth for a fresh start. New Zealand called to him with promises of open spaces, opportunity, and distance from the rubble of Europe. He had made the journey by ship in those days – a three-week voyage that made our eleven-hour flight seem like a brief hop.

What amazed me most was discovering that Fred knew my corner of the world better than I had expected. He had visited Washington –

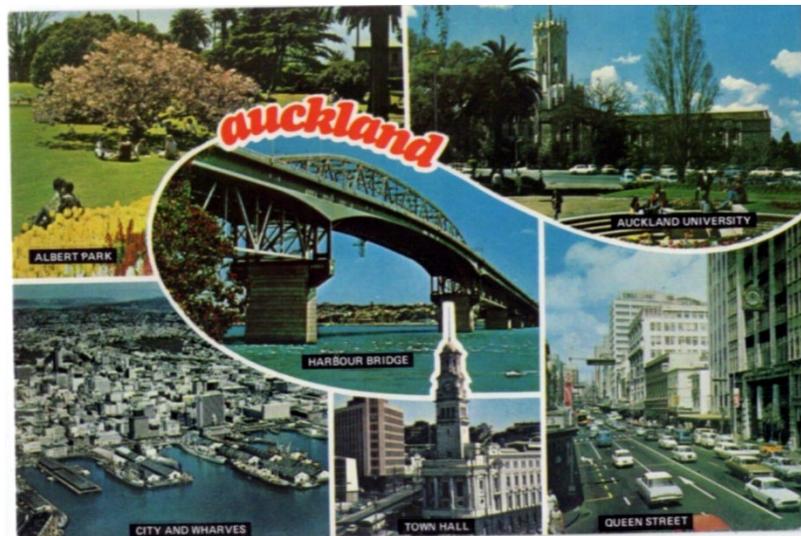
specifically Haymarket, Virginia – and Charlottesville during a trip to America some years earlier. The coincidence felt like one of those small-world moments that make travel magical, finding common ground at 35,000 feet above the Pacific Ocean.

"Beautiful country, Virginia," he said, accepting a plastic cup of airline coffee that looked like it had been brewed sometime during the Carter administration. "Reminded me a bit of England, but with more space to breathe."

By the time we began our descent into Auckland, I found myself genuinely sorry to be parting company with Fred. He represented something I was beginning to recognize as one of the great pleasures of travel – the unexpected human connection that enriches a journey in ways no guidebook can predict.

We landed in Auckland just after sunrise.

The airport was clean, efficient, and filled with signs that reminded us we were no longer in the land of free refills and drive-thru everything. Customs was painless, and the agent who stamped our passports asked if we were here for business or pleasure.



Todd replied, "sabbatical," which earned us a raised eyebrow and a nod of approval.

Outside, the air was crisp and smelled faintly of eucalyptus. The accents were different, the cars drove on the wrong side of the road, and the coffee came in cups that looked like they belonged in a dollhouse. But we were here. Really here. And that felt like something.

Fred waved goodbye at baggage claim, disappearing into the crowd with the quiet dignity of a man who's survived both war and airline food. I watched him go, oddly moved by the whole encounter.

There's something about meeting someone like Fred—someone who's lived through history and still finds time to chat with two jet-lagged Americans—that makes you feel like the world isn't such a bad place after all.

Beer count - 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺 Banana Daiquiris - 0 (Todd has declared a temporary moratorium)

Mood - grateful, groggy, quietly optimistic Forecast - sheep, accents, and the possibility of driving on the left without incident

## Day 5 - Green Land, Familiar Beer, and Exploring Auckland

Day 5 - September 1, 1989  
Auckland, New Zealand

Flying into Auckland this morning, as the coast of New Zealand emerged from the endless Pacific, the first thing that struck me was the color. Not just green—magical green.

The kind of green that looks like it's been Photoshopped by nature itself. Rolling hills, clipped pastures, and tree-lined ridges all bathed in a hue that made Virginia's summer lawns look like they'd been left out in the sun too long.

It was the kind of arrival that makes you sit up straighter in your cramped airline seat and wonder if you've landed in a Tolkien novel.

Todd, still recovering from the banana daiquiri embargo and eleven hours of recycled cabin air, muttered something about "wizard country" before falling back asleep with his mouth slightly open.

Our first impression of Auckland was that it's a city like many others—diverse, sprawling, and stitched together with neighborhoods that each seem to have their own rhythm.



There's a colonial undertone to the architecture, a kind of British echo that lingers in the stone facades and wrought iron balconies.

But it's also unmistakably Pacific-laid-back, breezy, and full of people who look like they know how to sail.

We're staying at the Sheraton Auckland Hotel & Towers, which is very, very nice. The kind of place where the lobby smells faintly of polished wood and expensive soap.

We were informed—by a bellhop with a voice like a BBC narrator—that Prince Charles and Princess Diana had hosted an event here during their 1983 Royal Tour. Todd immediately asked if the rooftop pool had been part of the festivities. The bellhop did not laugh.

The rooftop pool, incidentally, is excellent. I had it all to myself this morning, which felt like a small victory.



There's something quietly triumphant about swimming laps alone in a foreign country while the city wakes up below you.

The water was cool, the sky was clear, and for a brief moment, I felt like I had figured something out—though I'm still not sure what.

Later in the morning, we decided to explore Auckland. We started on Queen Street, which is the main drag and, as Todd pointed out, "a bit on the nose."

It's touristy in the way that all main drags are—souvenir shops, chain restaurants, and buskers playing Beatles covers with varying degrees of commitment. After about twenty minutes, I suggested we get off the beaten path.



That led us to the University of Auckland campus, which was quieter, greener, and full of students who looked like they were either late for class or philosophically opposed to punctuality.

The first few pubs we'd peeked into had seemed a bit rough around the edges. Not dangerous, just...local. The kind of places where you feel like you've walked into someone's living room uninvited.

We kept moving until we found one that felt right – overlooking the harbor, with a mix of students, retirees, and a bartender who looked like he'd seen every kind of tourist and still hadn't decided whether he liked them.

We settled in with a couple of beers and watched the harbor traffic drift by.

There's something calming about water—especially when you're jet-lagged and mildly disoriented.

Todd struck up a conversation with a man who claimed to have once played rugby with someone who'd dated someone who'd met Prince Charles. I nodded politely and ordered another round.



The beer was good. Cold, crisp, and served without pretense. We stayed for a while, soaking in the atmosphere and trying to convince ourselves that we weren't still operating on Honolulu time.

Eventually, we wandered back toward the Sheraton, taking the long way through side streets and quiet neighborhoods.

On the way, we passed a parked car with a Washington Redskins bumper sticker. No kidding.

In Auckland. Todd stopped in his tracks and stared at it like it was a message from home. "You think they know what it means?" he asked. I shrugged. "Maybe they just liked the colors."

Back at the hotel, we collapsed into our respective beds and tried to make sense of the day. Jet lag is a strange beast – it doesn't hit you all at once, but rather sneaks up in waves. One moment you're fine, the next you're wondering if it's socially acceptable to nap in a restaurant booth.

Today was mostly about acclimating. Tomorrow, we hope to get out earlier and dig a little deeper into Auckland's character. There's a museum we've heard good things about, and Todd is determined to find a place that serves "real" fish and chips. I'm just hoping for a quiet bench, a good view, and maybe another encounter with someone who's lived through history and still finds time to chat.

Beer count – 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍹🍹🍹🍹🍹 Banana Daiquiris – 0 (Todd remains in recovery)

Mood – curious, groggy, gently amused Forecast – museums, maritime metaphors, and the possibility of rugby-related exaggerations

## Day 6 - Lasagna Regrets and Bartender Wisdom

Day 6 - September 2, 1989  
Auckland, New Zealand

I think we're finally getting the hang of it.

Today began with what now qualifies as an early start—10:00 AM. Jet lag is still lingering in the background like a polite but persistent guest, but we're learning to ignore it. Todd and I decided to walk downtown, grab a bite to eat, and drop by the New Zealand travel bureau to gather intel for the next leg of our journey.

The walk was pleasant enough. Auckland has a kind of quiet charm—clean streets, friendly faces, and just enough hills to remind you that your calves still exist. The weather was cooperative, and the city felt like it was stretching into the weekend with a slow, deliberate yawn.

Lunch, however, was a disaster.

After wandering for what felt like an hour, we found ourselves standing in front of a Pizza Hut.

Not exactly the cultural immersion we'd hoped for, but hunger has a way of lowering standards. We went in, ordered lasagna—because why not—and promptly regretted it.

It was, without exaggeration, the worst lasagna either of us had ever encountered. Todd took one bite and looked at me like I'd betrayed him. I tried to power through, but the texture was somewhere between cafeteria sponge and regret.

We left in search of something to cleanse the palate. That led us down to the harbor again, where we found a balcony bar in the Ferry Building overlooking the docks.



The view was excellent—boats drifting in and out, seagulls pretending to be majestic, and the occasional tourist squinting at maps like they were written in code.

having trouble finding good pubs—places with character, not just neon signs and sticky floors.

We ordered beers and settled in. The bartender, whose name I never caught, was friendly in that effortless Kiwi way. I mentioned that we were

He nodded thoughtfully and offered to make us a list. Just like that. No hesitation. These people are very friendly.

We accepted the list with gratitude and made our way to the first recommendation: the House Bar at the Hotel DeBrett.

It was tucked into a corner of the hotel, small and dimly lit, with dark wood paneling and a beer selection that suggested someone cared. The kind of place where you can hear yourself think and the bartender doesn't rush you.

The bartender's name was Ian. He greeted us like old friends and asked what brought us in. We explained our pub quest, and he immediately offered to expand the list.

Not just Auckland—he threw in a few suggestions for Sydney as well. We ended up staying for four or five beers, talking about everything from rugby to



American politics to the proper way to pour a Guinness.



Ian had opinions, but he delivered them with charm. When we asked about nightlife, he leaned in and asked for our names.

Then he told us to head to Club Siren and inform the doorman that we were “on Ian’s list.” It felt like we’d been handed a secret password. Todd looked at me like we’d just been

knighted.

It turns out that Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols was supposed to be at Club Siren that night. Ian mentioned it casually, like he was talking about a local DJ. I knew a bit about Punk music and told Todd that I thought it might be a fun way to end the night.

But by the time we got back to the hotel, we were so wiped out that neither of us could summon the energy to go back out. The spirit was willing, but the legs were not.

Still, the day felt like a win. We had found a good pub, made a friend, and learned a valuable travel lesson: if you want to know where to go, ask a bartender.

They know the pulse of the city better than any brochure or guidebook. They’ve seen it all—tourists, locals, heartbreak, celebration—and they know where the good stuff is hidden.

Tomorrow, we’ll try to get out earlier. Maybe follow up on a few more of Ian’s recommendations. Maybe find a place that serves lasagna that doesn’t taste like betrayal. But for now, we’re back at the Sheraton, watching the city lights flicker and wondering what Johnny Rotten is doing at this very moment.

Beer count - 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺

Mood - relaxed, amused, slightly wiser Forecast - more pubs, fewer pasta mistakes, and maybe a doorman who knows our names

## Day 7 - From St. Benedict to Ella Fitzgerald

Day 7 - September 3, 1989  
Auckland, New Zealand

Last night's sleep was nothing short of glorious—10, maybe 11 hours of uninterrupted unconsciousness. The kind of sleep that resets your internal compass and makes you believe, briefly, that you're capable of waking up early and being a productive member of society.

I had a vivid set of dreams, one involving the company beach house in Dewey Beach, DE and another starring Paula Abdul, who was inexplicably teaching me choreography in a conference room. I woke up feeling oddly inspired and slightly sore.

By some miracle, I was up at 7:15 and out the door in time for morning mass at St. Benedict's Church.

The church itself was modest but dignified, perched on a quiet street with stained glass that caught the early sunlight just right.

Inside, I met Father Aquinas—a gentle, thoughtful man who turned out to be an alumnus of Catholic University in D.C. We bonded briefly over shared geography and mutual appreciation for local beer.



He and another priest invited me to stay for tea and conversation, but I had to politely decline. The 10:00 ferry to Kawau Island was calling, and Todd was already halfway through a muffin back at the dock.

The ferry, named Sea Flight, was a tri-hulled vessel that looked like something out of a Bond film—sleek, fast, and slightly overconfident.

The ride out to Kawau Island was smooth and scenic, with the kind of views that make you forget you're still wearing socks from two days ago. The water was a deep, impossible blue, and the coastline curled around us like a welcome mat.



Once on the island, Todd and I opted for the starboard trail—a winding path that hugged the edge of the island and offered glimpses of hidden coves, mossy rocks, and the occasional startled bird.

It was quiet, peaceful, and just challenging enough to make us feel like we'd earned our lunch (which, spoiler alert, we never actually ate).

On the way back to the dock, we decided to walk the perimeter of the island. This turned out to be more ambitious than anticipated. The terrain was rocky, uneven, and occasionally required us to leap over boulders like underprepared stunt doubles. Todd nearly lost a shoe to a tide pool, and I developed a newfound respect for anyone who hikes without complaining.

Back on the ferry, we struck up conversations with a handful of Aucklanders—friendly, curious, and refreshingly unpretentious. One couple offered to take us to dinner, which we politely declined, but another pair recommended Tony's on Wellesley Street for a proper steak. They spoke of it with reverence, like pilgrims describing a sacred shrine.

We took their advice and headed to Tony's that evening. The place had an old-school charm—dim lighting, leather booths, and a soundtrack that felt curated by someone's jazz-loving grandfather. Ella

Fitzgerald, Nat King Cole, Tommy Dorsey, and a guitarist whose name I never caught but whose fingers clearly had opinions.

I ordered the filet mignon, which arrived perfectly cooked and cost a mere \$12 USD.

It was one of those meals that makes you question every overpriced dinner you've ever had. Todd was equally impressed, and we spent the better part of an hour sipping beer and pretending we were more sophisticated than we actually are.



After dinner, we wandered into Club Zina, drawn by the promise of live jazz and the faint sound of a saxophone doing its best impression of heartbreak.

The club was intimate, smoky, and filled with people who looked like they knew the difference between Miles Davis and John Coltrane. We didn't, but we nodded along anyway.

The music was good—really good. A trio played with the kind of chemistry that only comes from years of shared gigs and quiet arguments. We stayed for two sets, nursing our drinks and letting the rhythm smooth out the edges of the day.

Eventually, we made our way back to the hotel, where once again the staff seemed baffled by our presence.

The front desk clerk looked at us like we'd wandered in off the street and were trying to sneak past security. I smiled and showed him our room key with the confidence of someone who's paid in full and tipped generously. He squinted, checked the ledger, and reluctantly welcomed us back.

I swear, everyone here thinks we cannot possibly afford to stay in the places we're staying. It's become a running theme—mild disbelief followed by grudging acceptance.

One day, I'll return, buy the place, and fire them all. Not out of spite, but as a kind of poetic justice. Or maybe I'll just leave a very large tip and a note that says, "We were here."

Beer count - 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺

## Day 8 – Golf with a Crown Prosecutor

Day 8 – September 4, 1989  
Auckland, New Zealand

Todd and I both rose around 9:00, which now qualifies as “early” in our evolving travel rhythm. The morning was slow and deliberate—coffee, a glance at the newspaper neither of us read, and an ascent to the hotel’s rooftop gym and swimming pool.

We swam a few laps, lifted a few weights, and then promptly undid all progress by sinking into the hot tub like two retirees with sore knees and no agenda.



**Daniel Marash** · 3rd  
I represent businessmen and criminals!!  
Hong Kong SAR · [Contact info](#)

It was in that hot tub, of all places, that we met Danny Marash—Assistant Crown Prosecutor for Hong Kong.

That’s essentially their version of a district attorney, though Danny delivered the title with the kind of casual gravitas that suggested he’d seen things.

He was in Auckland on business, which in his case meant tracking down a criminal named Flickinger. The name sounded like a Bond villain who’d lost his budget.

As we chatted, it came up that Danny was planning to golf that afternoon.

We mentioned we were hoping to find a course ourselves, though we hadn’t yet cracked the code of Auckland’s private club scene.

Without hesitation, Danny invited us to join him. Just like that. No vetting, no background checks—just three men in a hot tub making plans.

Thanks to Danny's connections we found ourselves with tee times at the Auckland Golf Club—now known as the Royal Auckland and Grange Golf Course.

It's the kind of place where the grass is trimmed with surgical precision and the clubhouse smells faintly of old money and polished wood.

Todd and I showed up in our usual casual attire—shorts, polos, and the kind of shoes that say “we tried.”

Danny, however, was waiting in the lobby in a full coat and tie, looking like he'd just stepped out of a courtroom drama.

He politely suggested we upgrade our wardrobe. “They can be very stuffy, these crown people,” he said, with the weary tone of someone who's had to explain decorum to American tourists before.

We returned to our room and did our best. I found a wrinkled button-down shirt and a pair of slacks that hadn't seen daylight since Honolulu. Todd managed something similar. We emerged looking like two men who had dressed for a wedding but weren't sure whose.

The ride to the course was another surprise. Since Danny was technically on assignment, we were chauffeured by the New Zealand police.

A proper squad car, lights off, but still official enough to make pedestrians stare.



Todd leaned back like royalty. I tried not to ask too many questions about Flickinger.



The course itself was stunning—rolling fairways, manicured greens, and the kind of silence that makes you whisper even when there's no one around.

Todd played beautifully, sinking putts with the confidence of someone who'd read the manual. I, on the other hand, displayed what I generously described as "spasms of mediocrity."

My swing was erratic, my aim philosophical, and my scorecard resembled a ransom note.

After the game, we returned to the hotel. Danny checked for messages—none about Flickinger, apparently—and the three of us decided to find a pub.

We ended up at The Queen's Head, a cozy spot with decent lighting, better beer, and a bartender who didn't flinch when Danny mentioned he was a prosecutor.

Over drinks, Danny gave us a list of things to do in Sydney. Oddly enough, he's from Melbourne, but he spoke of Sydney like a man who'd forgiven its sins.

The conversation drifted from golf to justice to jazz. Danny had opinions on all three. Todd mostly nodded. I took mental notes for future chapters.

After a few rounds, we decided to hunt down an Italian restaurant. The hotel recommended one that turned out to be a bit too tourist-trappy.



We politely declined and asked the taxi driver to take us somewhere better.

He drove us to a place called Francois. The name should have been a clue. It was technically Italian, but the French branding made everything feel slightly confused.

The pasta was decent, the wine was better, and the ambiance was somewhere between “romantic” and “waiting room.” Still, after a day of hot tubs, police escorts, and golf-induced humility, it was enough.

We returned to the hotel full, slightly buzzed, and once again met with skepticism at the front desk.

We got the side eye from the front desk clerk again as if he didn't believe we were staying there but I just smiled and showed him our key with the confidence of a man who'd just shared Jim Beam with a Crown Prosecutor. He relented.

When I buy this place and fire the staff he will be first on the list to go.

Beer count - 🍺🍺🍺🍺 Wine - 🍷🍷🍷 Jim Beam - 🍵🍵🍵

Mood - amused, slightly sunburned, legally adjacent Forecast - fewer spasms, better pasta, and maybe a Flickinger sighting

## Day 9 - McMuffins, Military Jets, and Mild Panic

Day 9 - September 5, 1989  
Auckland to Sydney (1,340 miles)

Yesterday was a good day. One of those rare travel days where everything aligns—good company, decent food, and just enough absurdity to keep things interesting.

But today, the mood has shifted slightly. Not quite anxious, but definitely alert. We're sitting in a McDonald's at Auckland Airport, sipping coffee and staring at our breakfast like it might offer answers.



It's our first McDonald's of the trip, and it feels oddly comforting. The eggs are suspiciously uniform, the hash browns taste like every hash brown I've ever had, and the coffee is hot enough to make you forget you're about to fly into a logistical nightmare. There's something reassuring about global mediocrity.

The issue, of course, is Australia.

Specifically, the domestic airline situation. All the pilots are on strike. Not the dramatic, picket-line kind of strike, but a more passive-aggressive version: they've decided to only work from 9 to 5, like everyone else.

No early flights, no red-eyes, no heroic overnight hauls. Just a quiet rebellion against being treated like glorified bus drivers.

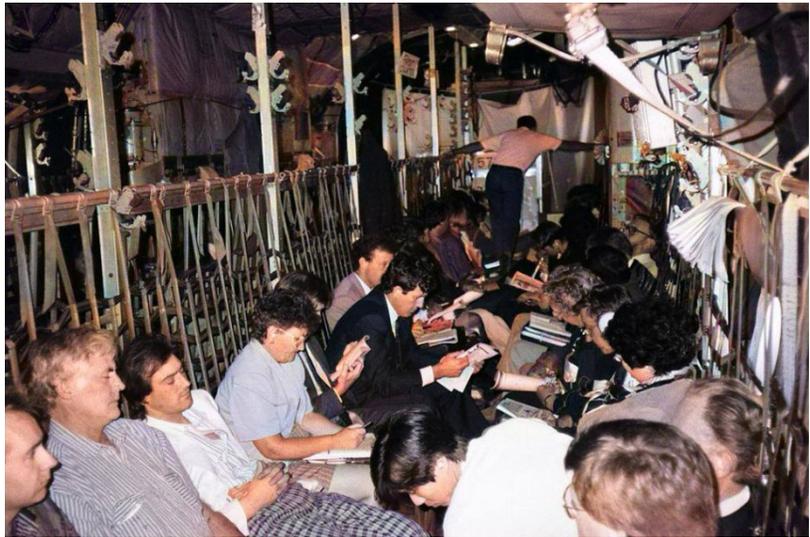
From what we've read in the papers, this started a couple of weeks ago. The pilots are frustrated—underpaid, overworked, and tired of being lumped in with the rest of the airline staff.

So they've drawn a line in the sand. And as a result, domestic air travel in Australia is a mess. Most flights are canceled, and the few that are still operating are booked solid, with waiting lists that resemble concert ticket queues.

In a twist that feels both surreal and vaguely dystopian, the Royal Australian Air Force has stepped in.

They've started ferrying passengers on some routes using military aircraft.

Not plush jets with reclining seats, mind you—these are sling-seat transports. The kind of planes where you sit sideways, strapped in like cargo, and hope the turbulence doesn't rearrange your spine.



Both Todd and I think it sounds like it might be a fun way to travel and be a bit of an adventure. Not sure if it is going to happen though.

We're supposed to head north to Cairns after Sydney, but at this point, it's anyone's guess whether we'll make it. The travel bureau back in Auckland was optimistic in that vague, noncommittal way that suggests they haven't tried booking a flight themselves. "You'll sort it out," they said, smiling like we'd just asked for directions to Narnia.

So here we are, waiting for our flight to Sydney, which—thankfully—is international and still operating under the illusion of normalcy. The airport is busy but not chaotic. People are moving with purpose, clutching boarding passes and newspapers, occasionally glancing at departure boards like they're checking stock prices.



Todd is reading about the strike again, muttering something about unions and leverage. I'm nursing my coffee and wondering if we'll end up hitchhiking across Queensland. There's a strange freedom in not knowing. It forces you to let go of the itinerary and embrace the improvisation.

We board without incident. The flight is smooth, the seats are narrow, and the in-flight meal is a mystery wrapped in foil. I don't eat it. Todd does, and immediately regrets it. We land in Sydney mid-afternoon, greeted by sunshine, mild humidity, and the unmistakable scent of jet fuel.

Customs is efficient, which feels suspicious. We collect our bags and step into the arrivals hall, where the reality of the strike hits us like a polite slap. The domestic terminal is a ghost town—flights canceled, counters unmanned, and travelers milling about like extras in a disaster film.

We ask around. The consensus is clear: getting to Cairns will be difficult, possibly impossible, unless we're willing to wait days or embrace alternative transport. Someone mentions buses. Someone else mentions hitching a ride with the Air Force. A third person suggests renting a car and driving north, which sounds romantic until you realize it's roughly 1,500 miles through the Outback.

Todd shrugs. "We'll figure it out," he says, which is both comforting and completely unhelpful.

We decide not to worry about it today. Instead, we find a bar near the hotel and settle in for a drink. The place is quiet, dimly lit, and filled with businessmen pretending not to be stressed. We order beers and toast to uncertainty.

There's something liberating about admitting you have no plan. It turns travel into a kind of performance art—improvised, unpredictable,

and occasionally brilliant. We talk about Cairns, about the reef, about whether we'll end up sleeping in a military hangar. Todd thinks it would make a good story. I agree, but only if there's beer involved.

Beer count - 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺

Mood - amused, slightly concerned, well-caffeinated Forecast - sling seats, jazz bars, and a growing appreciation for McDonald's

## Day 10 - Harbor Views, Happy Hour, and the Dewey Beach Paradox

Day 10 - September 6, 1989  
Sydney, Australia

Getting north to Cairns doesn't look like it's going to be a big problem. Knock on wood, cross fingers, toss salt over the shoulder—whatever travel superstition applies.

We've got a Qantas flight booked for Thursday morning at 8:45. If all goes according to plan (and that's a big "if" in this country's current aviation climate), we'll be sipping something tropical by noon.

But for now, we're in Sydney. And Sydney, it turns out, is a bit of a charmer.



Todd and I checked into the Chateau Commodore Sydney yesterday.

It's tucked into Potts Point, a neighborhood that feels like Georgetown if Georgetown had more palm trees and fewer senators.

The hotel is small, boutique-ish, and trying very hard to be elegant despite the fact that half of it is under renovation. The jackhammers start early, which is great if you enjoy waking up to the sound of concrete being punished.

Still, the location is solid. Potts Point is perched just enough above the city to offer views and just close enough to downtown to make walking seem like a good idea. So we did.

We decided to hoof it to Circular Quay, the central hub of Sydney's harbor district. It was a beautiful day—blue skies, warm sun, and just enough breeze to keep the sweat from becoming a situation.

The walk took about 35 or 40 minutes, depending on how you count the stops for photos, gawking, and mild confusion over street names.

Along the way, we passed the Sydney Opera House, which is every bit as impressive as the postcards suggest.



It looks like a fleet of sailboats caught mid-gesture, frozen in architectural ballet. Tourists were everywhere, taking pictures, posing awkwardly, and trying to decide whether it was worth paying for the tour or just pretending they'd been inside.

We wandered through The Rocks, Sydney's oldest neighborhood, where cobblestone streets meet pubs that have been serving beer since before Australia was a country. It's the kind of place where you half expect to see a pirate leaning against a lamppost, nursing a pint and complaining about the price of rum.

Things here are surprisingly affordable. Compared to Auckland, Sydney feels downright generous. Meals don't require a second mortgage, and beer flows freely without the sting of financial regret. We stopped by a number of pubs, and unlike our Kiwi experience, we didn't have to embark on a quest to find one that didn't smell like wet carpet and disappointment.

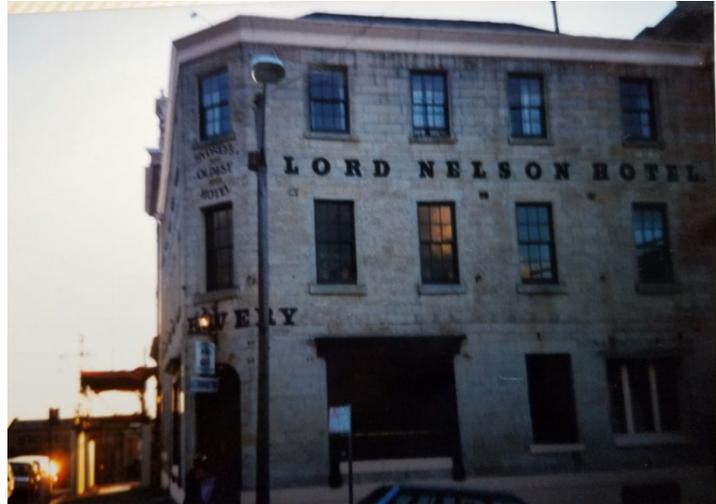
The standout was the Lord Nelson Brewery Hotel.

It's about 150 years old and proudly brews its own beer. The building has that wonderful colonial sturdiness—thick walls, low ceilings, and the kind of woodwork that makes you feel like you should be wearing a waistcoat. The beer was excellent. Malty, rich, and served with the

kind of casual pride that suggests they know it's good and don't need to make a fuss about it.

And then, in one of those moments that travel seems to specialize in, we ran into three young women from D.C.

Katie, Bonnie, and Lisa. They live about ten minutes from us back home and know each other from a beach house at Dewey.



We came halfway around the world and ended up sharing beers with people who probably shop at the same Safeway. It's the kind of coincidence that makes you wonder if the universe is just showing off.

We had a few drinks with them at the Lord Nelson, swapping stories and marveling at the absurdity of it all. Then we headed back to the hotel for happy hour, which was less "happy" and more "budget-friendly," but still appreciated.



Later, we met up with the girls again at the Hard Rock Cafe, which was loud, crowded, and filled with people who looked like they'd just discovered denim jackets. We didn't get to chat much—too many distractions, too much noise—but it was nice to see familiar faces in unfamiliar places.

Today's plan is simple: boat ride around the harbor, followed by more beer. Possibly too much beer. But when in Sydney...

The harbor is stunning. It's not just the Opera House or the bridge—it's the whole layout. Ferries dart across the water like caffeinated ducks, sailboats glide past with practiced elegance, and the shoreline is dotted with parks, cafes, and the occasional confused tourist trying to read a map upside down.

We board a ferry and settle in for the ride. The water is calm, the sun is generous, and the views are postcard-perfect. Todd leans against the railing like he's auditioning for a travel brochure. I sit back and let the city unfold around me.

We pass by neighborhoods with names that sound like they belong in a Dickens novel—Balmain, Woolloomooloo, Kirribilli. Each one has its own charm, its own rhythm. The boat hums along, and for a moment, everything feels easy.

After the ride, we find another pub. This one's tucked into a side street near Darling Harbour, with outdoor seating and a bartender who looks like he's been pouring pints for a couple of decades.

We order two beers and toast to coincidence, to travel, and to the fact that we haven't had to sit in a sling seat on a military transport plane.

Beer count - 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺

Mood - amused, sun-kissed, slightly buzzed Forecast - ferry rides, familiar strangers, and the slow unraveling of plans

## Day 11 - Zoo Fees, Champagne Views, and the Tokyo Loophole

Day 11 - September 7, 1989  
Sydney → Cairns (1,220 miles)

I'm sitting on our Qantas flight to Cairns, waiting to take off. The cabin is quiet, the air recycled, and the seat in front of me already reclined beyond what physics should allow.



This flight is technically bound for Tokyo, which means it's classified as international and therefore immune to the ongoing domestic airline pilots' strike.

Cairns just happens to be one of its stops, and by some miracle, they're letting us off there.

It's a loophole. A beautiful, bureaucratic loophole. And we're riding it all the way to the reef.

Todd thinks this is hilarious and keeps joking that we'll accidentally end up in Tokyo while our luggage goes to Cairns. Given our track record, this isn't impossible.

Yesterday was a blast. One of those days that unfolds slowly, then suddenly, like a good jazz solo.

We started with a run into the city. Nothing ambitious—just a few miles to shake off the previous night's happy hour and remind our legs that they still had a job to do. The streets were quiet, the air crisp, and the occasional pedestrian looked at us like we were either very committed or very lost.

After the run, we stopped at a deli for breakfast. Nothing fancy—eggs, toast, and coffee that tasted like it had been brewed by someone who'd once read about coffee in a book. Then we made our way down to Circular Quay for a harbor cruise.



We opted for the Sydney Explorer, run by Captain Cook Cruises. \$14 bought us a ticket and five potential stops: The Quay, the Opera House, Watson's Bay, the Zoo, and Darling Harbour. We left at 12:30 and returned at 17:15, which felt like a full day's work in leisure.

The cruise itself was lovely. The harbor is one of those places that looks good from every angle—bridges, sailboats, and buildings that seem to lean into the water like they're trying to get a better view. We stopped at the zoo for a couple of hours, which was... fine.

I was mildly disappointed. Not by the animals, but by the economics. \$13 to enter, which felt steep considering we'd already paid for the cruise. I saw a kangaroo, a koala, and a group of schoolchildren who looked more feral than the wildlife.

After the zoo, we returned to the hotel for happy hour. Again. Our bartender, Peter, was a proper sort—polished, polite, and quietly amused by everything we said.

He mentioned, casually, that Mick Jagger and Paul McCartney had stayed at the hotel. Todd immediately asked if they'd tipped well. Peter smiled and changed the subject.

Then came Reg and Betty.

Peter introduced us, and within minutes, they'd invited us up to their apartment for a view of the city at night. They lived just down the block, in one of the taller buildings in Potts Point.

Reg's father had built it in 1939, and Reg now owned it.

He was in his late 60s, slightly toasted, and an excellent host. Betty was gracious, sharp, and clearly used to smoothing over Reg's more enthusiastic moments.

The view from their apartment was stunning. The harbor glittered, the city pulsed, and for a moment, everything felt cinematic.



They offered us champagne, which we accepted because it would've been rude not to. We took pictures, swapped stories, and tried not to think about how early our flight was the next morning.

After the visit, we headed to Mimi's for dinner. It's in Kings Cross, which has a reputation for being lively, eclectic, and occasionally questionable. The food was good, not great. \$38 bought us a meal that was satisfying but not memorable. The ambiance was dim, the service polite, and the music forgettable.

We returned to the hotel bar for a nightcap and chatted with Peter and a few other guests. One couple gave us hotel recommendations for Paris, which felt optimistic considering we hadn't yet figured out how to get north in Australia. Still, it was nice to think ahead.



This morning was early. Very early. The lobby was crowded, the shuttle chaotic, and the airport a blur of lines, luggage, and people trying to pretend they weren't panicking.

But we made it. We're on the plane. And if all goes well, we'll be in Cairns by noon.

Beer count - 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺

Mood - champagne-soaked, slightly groggy, cautiously optimistic

Forecast - coral reefs, tropical humidity, and at least one logistical miracle

## Day 12 - Palm Trees, Pub Crawls, and Crocodiles

Day 12 - September 8, 1989  
Cairns, Australia

We arrived in Cairns yesterday and checked into the Ramada Reef Resort.

The resort is tucked into a patch of tropical forest, and rather than bulldozing the landscape into submission, someone had the good sense to build around it.

The architecture is all elevated walkways, open-air corridors, and a winding pool that snakes through the property like it's trying not to disturb anything.



The pool itself is built above ground, a concession to the roots of the trees, which seem to have seniority here.

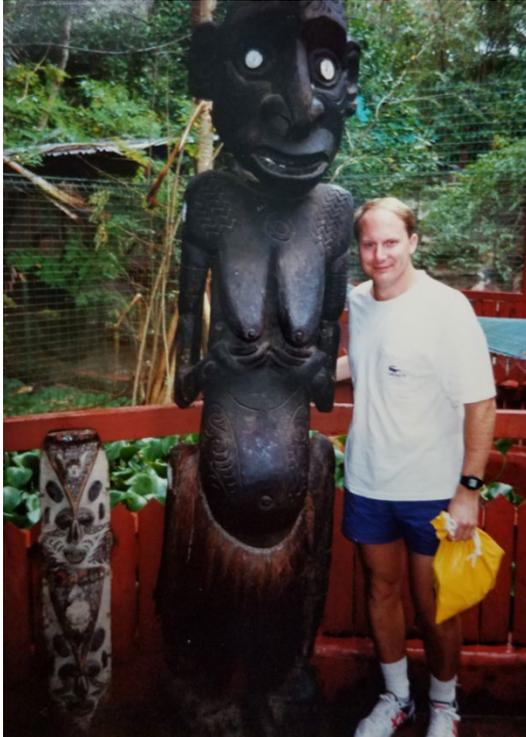
It's beautiful. Quiet. Lush. And somewhat inconvenient.

The resort is about twenty minutes from town, and the shuttle service—bless its punctual heart—stops running at 19:30. After that, you're on your own. Which means a \$20 AUD cab ride back if you dare to have dinner after sunset. Or drinks. Or a conversation that lasts longer than a salad.

Last night we went into town for dinner and drinks. Mostly drinks.

Somehow, dinner never happened.

We ran into the three girls we'd met in Sydney – Katie, Bonnie, and Lisa. They'd been on the same Qantas flight up and were staying downtown, which meant they didn't have to worry about shuttle schedules or cab fares. They were already a few drinks in when we found them, and we were happy to catch up.



At some point, Bonnie—who has the confidence of someone who's never been bitten by a bad decision—walked up to a random guy on the street and asked where we should go. He looked at us, looked at her, and said, “Follow me.”

And we did.

There's something about travel that lowers your threshold for skepticism.

At home, you'd never follow a stranger into the night based on a vague promise of entertainment. But abroad, it feels like part of the experience. Like you're collecting stories, not making choices.

He led us to a pub called Magnums. It was loud, crowded, and full of people who looked like they'd been there since Tuesday.

We had a lot of beer. The kind of beer that's cold, cheap, and indistinguishable from the last one. Around 23:00, Bonnie and Lisa peeled off, leaving Todd and me with Katie, who suddenly realized she had no idea where she was staying.

We walked her home. Or rather, we walked until something looked familiar, and then she declared victory. It was a good thing we were there – she might've ended up sleeping in a hammock or befriending a koala.

This morning started early.

Too early, considering the previous night's festivities.

We were up at 7:00 to catch the boat out to the Great Barrier Reef. \$95 each, which felt steep until you remembered you were paying to see one of the natural wonders of the world.



The weather was overcast when we left. The kind of sky that makes you question your sunscreen choices and your life decisions. The ride out was rough—choppy waves, gray horizon, and a boat full of people pretending not to be seasick.

We stopped at Green Island first.

It's a small patch of land with a few tourist attractions, including a crocodile enclosure. The crocodiles were enormous. One was 20 feet long and looked like it could eat a volkswagen. They lounged in the sun like they owned the place, which, in a way, they did.



After Green Island, we headed to the outer reef for snorkeling.

The water was clear, the coral vibrant, and the fish indifferent to our presence. It was beautiful.

For about 45 minutes, the sun broke through the clouds and everything lit up—turquoise water, shimmering scales,

and the occasional snorkeler flailing like they'd just discovered fins.

Then it was lunch. Sandwiches, fruit, and the kind of juice that tastes like it was designed by someone who hates fruit. After that, we headed back to the dock.

The three girls were on the cruise, too. We waved, exchanged a few words, and made vague plans to meet for drinks later. It's the kind of promise you make when you're still damp from the ocean and unsure if your eyebrows are sunburned.

I don't want to play down the reef. It's stunning. But it's hard to appreciate it fully on a trip like this—very commercial, very scheduled.

You're herded from one spot to another, given a mask and a time limit, and expected to be amazed on cue. It's like trying to fall in love during a speed dating event.

Still, I'm glad we went. Even if the reef felt more like a postcard than a revelation.

Beer count - 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺

Mood - sunburned, slightly hungover, mildly awed Forecast - more drinks, more cab fares, and possibly a possum sighting

## Day 13 - Barbecue, Ballads, and a Bittersweet Send-off

Day 13 - September 9, 1989  
Cairns, Australia

Today was one of those rare travel days where nothing urgent happens, and that's exactly what makes it memorable.

After the whirlwind of reef excursions, pub crawls, and late-night wanderings, Cairns finally gave us a breather.

Last night, after dinner with the girls-Katie, Bonnie, and Lisa-Todd and I retreated to the hotel.



Everyone was a little fried from the boat trip and the previous night's festivities.

The combination of saltwater, sunburn, and beer tends to wear down even the most enthusiastic traveler.

So we slept in. No alarms, no agenda. Just the soft rustle of palm fronds and the distant hum of the pool filter.



I rolled out of bed around 10:00, feeling like a human again.

Did a few winding laps in the pool, which felt more like a slow-motion meditation than exercise.

The water was cool, the air warm, and the trees overhead cast dappled shadows that danced across the surface. Afterward, I settled into a lounge chair with a book and let the morning drift by.

Todd, ever the explorer, wandered down to the beach

and ended up at a new resort called Eden Coral Coast.

He came back later with stories and a brochure, promising to tell me more “eventually,” which in Todd-speak means sometime between now and never.

After lunch—or what passed for lunch, mostly crackers and fruit—I took a nap and then tried to make sense of Rugby and Australian Rules Football.

I sat in front of the TV, squinting at the screen like it might reveal its secrets if I stared hard enough. It didn’t. The players ran, tackled, kicked, and occasionally punched each other, all while the commentators spoke in rapid-fire Aussie slang. I gave up somewhere around the third quarter and poured myself a beer.

Then, right on cue, the phone rang.

It was the girls. They’d checked out of their hotel and were killing time before their 21:40 flight.

Boredom had set in, and they decided our resort was the cure. They showed up around 16:30, still buzzing but clearly winding down.

We spent the afternoon like kids at summer camp—swimming, playing darts, ping pong, and, of course, drinking.

The pool was lively, the beer cold, and the ping pong surprisingly competitive. Bonnie had a wicked backhand. Katie kept score with the precision of a Vegas dealer. Lisa mostly cheered and heckled from the sidelines.

As the sun dipped low, the resort staff began setting up for the Australian barbecue. The girls decided to stay for it, and I'm glad they did.

For \$26.50, it was a feast—steak, chicken, prawns the size of your hand, a massive salad bar, and a few mystery dishes that turned out to be delicious.



The whole thing felt like a farewell party, even if it wasn't planned that way.

A local musician was playing guitar and singing Australian folk songs. He had a weathered voice and a gentle way of strumming that made everything sound nostalgic.

When he heard the girls were leaving, he dedicated a song to them. It was a sweet moment—unexpected and oddly touching. Travel friendships are like that: intense, fleeting, and stitched together by shared experiences rather than time.

After the girls left for the airport around 20:00, Todd and I stayed behind and ended up drinking with the guitar player. He was full of stories, most of them half-true and all of them entertaining.

At one point, he played “And the Band Played waltzing Matilda” for me.

I’d always thought it was some ancient ballad passed down through generations, but he told me it was written by Eric Bogle in the early '70s.

Seventeen years old. That surprised me. The song has the weight of history, the kind of melody that feels like it’s been echoing through the outback for a century.

We talked about music, travel, and the strange beauty of places like Cairns—where the jungle meets the sea and time seems to stretch and bend. Eventually, the beer ran out and the conversation slowed. We said goodnight and wandered back to the room.



Around 0:30, Todd got a call from Denise, his girlfriend back home.

They talked about the possibility of her joining us in Munich.

I didn’t hear much of the conversation, just the occasional laugh and the soft murmur of plans being made

across time zones. It was a reminder that while we were out here chasing sunsets and coral reefs, life back home was still ticking along.

Beer count: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 Wine: 🍷🍷

## Day 14 - Luxury, Laundry, and Lurking Death

**Day 14 - September 10, 1989  
Cairns, Australia**

Today marked a turning point in our Cairns chapter. We packed up our things, said a fond farewell to the Ramada Reef Resort, and moved into Eden Coral Coast.

It's a quieter kind of paradise, the sort that doesn't come with a \$150-a-night price tag and a shuttle schedule that ends before dinner.



The Ramada had its charm—lush landscaping, winding pool, and that whole “built around the trees” eco-aesthetic—but Todd, ever the beach-walking scout, had stumbled upon Eden a few days ago and came back with a glint in his eye and a brochure in hand.

The place was practically empty thanks to the ongoing airline pilots’ strike, which had turned most resorts into ghost towns. That meant deals. Big ones.

We’re now settled into a one-bedroom apartment for \$50 AUD a night.

That’s about a third of what we were paying at the Ramada, and we’re getting more space, more privacy, and—most importantly—a washer and dryer. No more woolite in the sink. No more hanging socks from shower rods like some kind of damp, cotton mobile. It’s the little things that make you feel human again.

The apartment itself is comfortable. Not flashy, but solid. We’ve got a kitchen, which opens up the possibility of cooking our own meals—assuming we can find a grocery store that sells more than canned beans and Vegemite.

The fridge hums reassuringly, the stove looks like it's been used once, and the cabinets are stocked with mismatched dishes that seem to whisper, "we've seen some things."



The resort also has a rectangular pool—clean, quiet, and perfect for laps.

I swam alone this morning, slicing through the water while the sun filtered through the palm trees.

No kids cannonballing, no couples sipping cocktails in the shallow end. Just me, the water, and the occasional bird call. It felt like a private retreat, the kind of place you imagine monks might train if monks wore board shorts and drank beer.

There's a clubhouse too, with a small gym. Nothing fancy—just a few weights, a bench, and a treadmill that looks like it predates the moon landing.

Still, it's the first time I've lifted anything heavier than a suitcase since we started this trip. My arms were confused but grateful.

The best part? Eden is just up the beach from the Ramada, so we can still wander down there and use their activities desk to book tours.

It's like having access to the amenities of a five-star resort without the five-star bill. We're living in the margins, and it feels oddly satisfying.

Of course, walking on the beach here isn't quite the same as back home. In Delaware, the biggest threat is stepping on a sharp shell or getting dive-bombed by a seagull with poor aim.

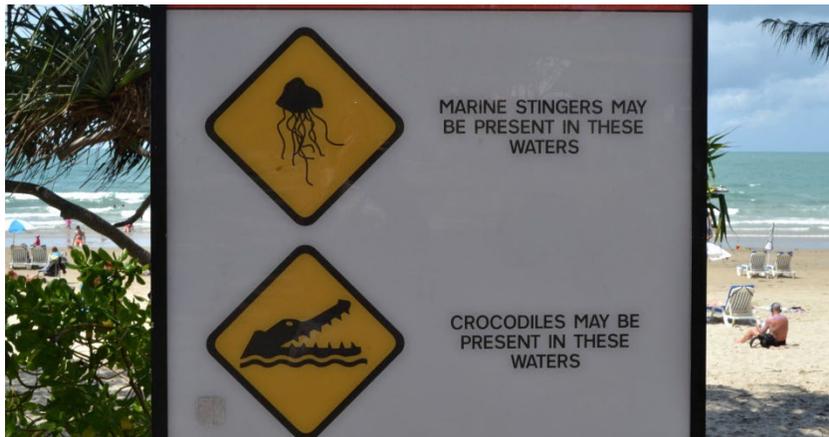
Here, the stakes are higher. Much higher.

For starters, there's the crocodile situation.



Apparently, they occasionally wash onto the beach from their pools in the nearby rainforest.

That's not a metaphor. That's a real thing. You could be strolling along, admiring the sunrise, and suddenly find yourself face-to-face with a prehistoric killing machine. It adds a certain edge to your morning walk.



Then there's the jellyfish. Not the kind that sting and leave a red mark.

No, these are the kind that can kill you.

One wrong step and it's lights out. The locals talk about them casually, like they're

just part of the scenery. "Watch out for the jellies," they say, as if they're warning you about sunburn.

So yes, we're living the life—sun, sand, surf, and the ever-present threat of sudden death. It's oddly invigorating. Makes you appreciate the simple pleasures: a cold beer, a clean shirt, a swim without incident.

Speaking of beer, today's count stands at a respectable nine.

         And we added a couple of Jim Beams to the mix.  
  Because nothing says "settling in" like whiskey in a new apartment.

Mood: Tomorrow, we might try cooking. Or we might just keep swimming and dodging death. Either way, Eden's starting to feel like home.

## Day 15 - Checks in Transit and Other Minor Miracles

Day 15 - September 11, 1989  
Cairns, Australia

Today was the kind of day that barely registers on a calendar but somehow ends up sticking in your memory. Nothing dramatic happened. No crocodiles, no coral reefs, no impromptu pub crawls. Just a slow drift through hours that felt like they were wrapped in cotton.

I woke up around 9:00, which counts as early by our current standards. The apartment was quiet, the air already warm, and the only sound was the soft hum of the ceiling fan doing its best impression of a lazy helicopter.

I made coffee—instant, of course – and settled in to watch the first half of *Out of Africa*. Meryl Streep was elegant, Robert Redford was rugged, and the cinematography made me want to buy a wide-brimmed hat and narrate my life in wistful tones.

After that, I switched over to the finals of the U.S. Open. The contrast was jarring—Kenyan savannahs one minute, neon sweatbands and grunting athletes the next.

Still, there was something comforting about watching tennis from halfway around the world. It reminded me that life back home was still ticking along, even if we were floating in our own little bubble of sun and sand.

Once the match wrapped up, I headed to the pool for a few laps.

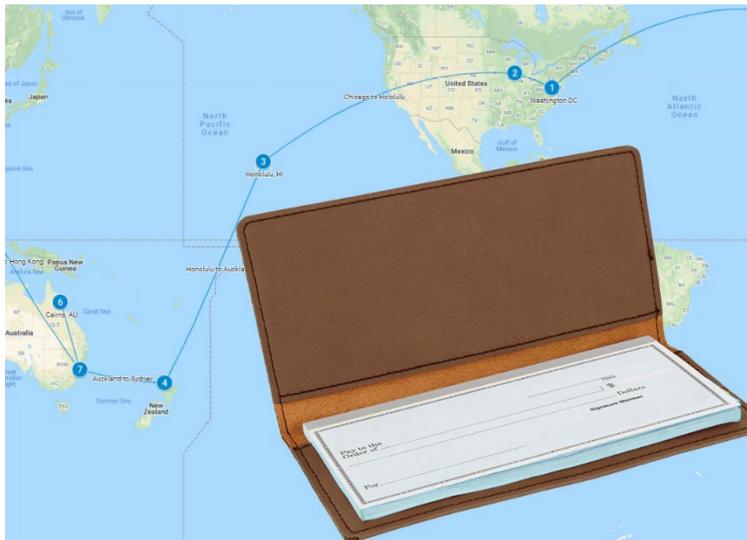
The rectangular pool at Eden Coral Coast is perfect—clean, quiet, and almost always empty.

I swam until my arms felt like they'd earned lunch, then wandered down to the beach to find Todd.



We met up and walked the shoreline for almost an hour. The beach was quieter than usual—just a few scattered sunbathers and the occasional swimmer.

We passed a couple of topless women, which, in theory, should have been a highlight. But reality rarely matches imagination. Let's just say the mystique of topless sunbathing is better preserved in French cinema than in real life.



After our walk, we stopped by the Ramada Reef Resort to check on Todd's elusive travelers checks.

For context: Todd began this trip with a backpack and an American Express Gold Card.

That's it.

A few clothes, a toothbrush, and the kind of confidence usually reserved for people who've watched too many commercials.

He assumed, quite reasonably, that the Gold Card would unlock every door. Unfortunately, he discovered in Hawaii that you can't buy travelers checks with just a credit card.

It turns out that you need a personal check. Cue Denise, his girlfriend back home, who graciously agreed to send a set of checks to chase us around the globe.

And chase us they have.

They arrived in Hawaii just as we landed in Auckland. They reached Auckland as we touched down in Sydney. They got to Sydney the day we flew to Cairns.

It's like a tragic love story told through postal delays. Every time we move, the checks arrive just behind us, like a well-meaning but perpetually late friend.

We checked again today at the Ramada. No checks. So we did the only logical thing: had a beer. 🍺

Afterward, we grabbed a cab to the grocery store. It was time to embrace the domestic side of travel. We stocked up on salad ingredients, spaghetti fixings, and breakfast supplies.

There's something oddly satisfying about buying groceries in a foreign country—trying to decode labels, guessing at unfamiliar brands, and hoping the eggs aren't stored in some mysterious non-refrigerated section.

Dinner was spaghetti, cooked by yours truly. Nothing fancy—just pasta, sauce, and a generous sprinkle of whatever



cheese-like substance we found in the dairy aisle. It tasted like victory. Or at least like not spending \$30 on resort food.

After dinner, we settled in to watch *Twins*, the cinematic masterpiece starring Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito. It's a film that defies logic, genetics, and most storytelling conventions. But it was funny, and that's all we needed.

Tomorrow is a blank slate. No plans, no pressure. We're thinking about taking the sailing catamaran out to the reef on Wednesday. It sounds peaceful—wind, water, and maybe a few less tourists than the last trip.

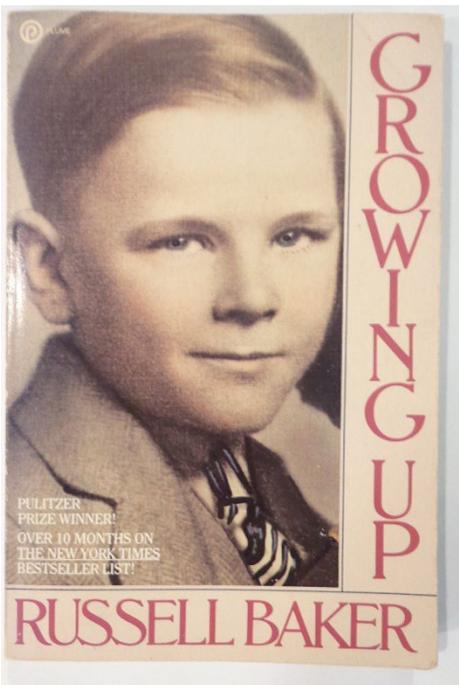
Beer count: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 Wine: 🍷🍷

Mood: And a lingering hope that Todd's checks will finally catch up.

## Day 16 - Books, Balls, and the Art of Doing Very Little

Day 16 - September 12, 1989  
Cairns, Australia

Another quiet day in Cairns, and I'm not complaining. After the whirlwind of reef trips, pub nights, and crocodile-adjacent beach walks, a little stillness feels earned.



I got up around 9:00, which seems to be my natural rhythm now. No alarms, no rush—just the soft light filtering through the curtains and the distant sound of birds doing whatever it is birds do in tropical climates.

I made a cup of coffee and settled into the couch with the book Katie lent me: *Growing Up* by Russell Baker.

It's one of those rare books that sneaks up on you. Funny, thoughtful, and quietly profound. I read forty pages without realizing it, and for the first time in a long while, I found myself wishing a book were longer.

Only 350 pages? That feels unfair. Baker's voice is so easy, so honest, that it feels like he's sitting across from you, telling stories over breakfast.

Speaking of breakfast—scrambled eggs and toast. Nothing fancy, but it tasted better than a hotel breakfast buffet.

The eggs were fluffy, the toast perfectly browned, and the whole thing made me feel like I had my life together, if only for a moment.

After breakfast, I stopped by the pool to get my laps in and hit the gym for a quick workout.

After the gym, I headed to the driving range and hit 100 golf balls. Somewhere around ball number 37, I remembered to keep my left arm straight and my eye on the ball.

It was like unlocking a cheat code. Suddenly, the shots were cleaner, straighter, and vaguely professional-looking. I felt like I'd cracked some ancient mystery. Can't wait to play a full round and see if the magic holds.

Todd left shortly after to check—once again—on the status of his elusive travelers checks. They've become a running joke at this point.

Like a subplot in a sitcom that never quite resolves. He also went to make reservations for the sailing catamaran trip tomorrow morning. Departure is at 7:00, which feels ambitious, but we'll see.

As for tonight, no plans. Maybe a beer or two. Or five. The fridge is stocked, the air is warm, and the stars here seem to show up early and stay late. It's the kind of evening where doing nothing feels like doing everything.

Beer count: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺

Mood: A quiet toast to a quiet day.

## Day 17 - Currents and Encounters

Day 17 - September 13, 1989  
Cairns, Australia

A great day in paradise, no exaggeration.

We were up at 6:00, blurry-eyed but buzzing with anticipation. The kind of early wake-up that feels justified when the destination is the Great Barrier Reef.



By 7:00, Todd and I were down at reception, waiting for the bus to take us to the Ocean Spirit—a 105-foot catamaran that looked like something out of a Bond film, minus the tuxedos and espionage.

The sky was a crisp blue, the kind that makes you forget about everything else. The sun was already

warming the pavement, and the air smelled faintly of salt and sunscreen.

The cruise out to the reef was choppy, but not unpleasant.

There's something oddly satisfying about riding the waves, even when your coffee threatens to leap out of its cup. Todd and I stood near the bow, letting the spray hit our faces, laughing like kids on a rollercoaster.

Compared to the Great Adventures trip we took earlier, Ocean Spirit Cruises felt like a breath of fresh air. The crew was friendly without being pushy, and the whole vibe was more relaxed—less like a floating sales pitch and more like a shared adventure.

Even the snorkel gear was better. No foggy masks or leaky tubes this time. Just clean, well-fitted equipment that made the whole experience smoother.

Todd and I snorkeled together for about half an hour. The reef was alive with color—coral in shades of lavender, gold, and crimson, fish darting like confetti in every direction.

Todd had some trouble breathing through the snorkel, so I helped him back to the boat. He gave me a thumbs-up and settled into a deck chair with a towel over his head like a sunbaked monk.

I went back out solo for another half hour, drifting over coral gardens and watching schools of fish move like synchronized dancers.

It was quiet, peaceful, and surreal. The kind of silence that makes you feel small in the best possible way.

Lunch was served onboard—decent, but not memorable. Some kind of chicken dish, a salad, and rolls that could've doubled as flotation devices.



Still, it did the job. After eating, I decided to jump back in, this time off the port side. Swam around for a bit, then got curious about the starboard side, which no one else seemed interested in. That should've been my first clue.

I swam out over a reef outcrop in about 40 feet of water. The visibility was good, and everything looked calm.

Then I saw it – a shark. About five feet long, resting on the bottom like it had clocked out early.

I froze. Not in fear exactly, but in that “what now?” kind of way. I swam back toward a nearby snorkeler and tried to get them to come see.



They declined with a polite but firm shake of the head.

So I went back alone. The shark was still there, moving slowly now, like it was stretching after a nap.

I returned a third time, and that’s when it turned toward me.

Not fast, not aggressive—just a slow pivot that felt like a warning.

That was enough. I turned and swam back to the boat, heart thumping like a drum solo.

I told one of the crew members about it. His response: “Hey, you got two legs still, don’t you? Don’t worry.”

Not exactly comforting, but oddly reassuring in its own way. The marine biologist onboard said sharks weren’t common at that spot, but not unheard of. Apparently, I’d just gotten lucky.

The ride back was rough. The wind had picked up, and the waves were tossing the catamaran like a toy boat in a bathtub.

A few passengers turned various shades of green and spent most of the trip clutching paper bags and staring into the horizon.

Todd and I, seasoned by now, rode it out with a few beers and some dry humor.

That’s when we met Fritzy – Francesca from Germany.

She was traveling with her grandmother and had just scuba dived for the first time.

Her eyes were wide with excitement, and she spoke about the experience like she'd just discovered a new planet.

We chatted for a while, swapping stories and laughing about the shark encounter. She thought it was thrilling. I thought it was enough excitement for one day.



Todd and I decided to stay in town that night. We washed up in the public restroom—classy, I know—after buying a razor and a bar of soap.

There's something oddly liberating about freshening up in a tiled room that smells faintly of disinfectant and lost ambition.



We went to dinner with Fritzy at the "Cock and Bull," a local spot with hearty food and a lively crowd. The place was buzzing, and the beer was cold.

We talked about travel, home, and the strange joy of meeting people in places you never expected to be.

Fritzy told us about her grandmother's adventures, and Todd shared a few of his own. I mostly listened, content to soak it all in.

Beer count: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺

Mood: A toast to sharks, strangers, and saltwater stories.

## Day 18 - Soft Light and Promises

Day 18 - September 14, 1989  
Cairns, Australia

Today was quiet, in the best way.

After the full-throttle reef adventure yesterday and the late-night dinner at the Cock and Bull, it felt good to let the day unfold slowly.

We had gone out with Fritzy—our new friend from Germany—and her grandmother, who's got the kind of gentle wisdom that makes you feel instantly at ease. The four of us shared stories over plates of hearty pub food, laughing about sharks and sea sickness and the strange joy of meeting strangers who feel like old friends.

We crashed hard when we got back.

No late-night beers, no post-dinner strolls. Just the satisfying thud of bodies hitting mattresses and the kind of sleep that only comes after saltwater and sun.

I woke up around 10:00 this morning, feeling like I'd been poured out of a bottle.

Swam for a while to shake off the grogginess, then lifted a bit in the gym.

Nothing intense—just enough to remind my muscles they still exist.



The pool was quiet, the water cool, and for a few minutes I felt like I had the whole world to myself.



In the afternoon, Fritzy and her grandmother came by for a visit.

We walked down to the beach together, beers in hand, and settled into the sand as the sun began its slow descent.

The light was golden, the kind that makes everything look like a memory before it's even over.

We talked about travel plans, favorite cities, and the little things that make a place feel like home.

Fritzy's grandmother told us about Dinkelsbühl—a medieval town in

Germany with cobblestone streets and flower boxes in every window. They made us promise to visit when we're in Germany.

I said yes without hesitation, but I am not sure we can make it on this trip. So, if we don't do it this time that's another reason to return Germany in the future. It's the kind of promise you want to keep.

The breeze picked up as the sun dipped lower, and we sat quietly for a while, watching the sky change colors. It's funny how quickly a place can feel familiar. Cairns, with its laid-back rhythm, largely tourist free venues due to the pilot's strike and warm evenings, has become a kind of temporary home. But tomorrow, we move again.

We've got an early flight back to Sydney – one of those pre-dawn wake-ups that makes you question your life choices.

From there, we head to Bangkok via Hong Kong.

Not sure how much time we'll have in Hong Kong. We land late, and the schedule is tight.

would've saved a lot of time if we could've flown straight from Cairns, but apparently that's not an option.

So it's backtracking to Sydney before forward motion.

Tonight, we're keeping it simple.

A few beers, maybe a quiet toast to the day. No big send-off, just a gentle goodbye to a place that's been good to us.

Beer count: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺

Mood: A slow day, a soft sunset, and a promise tucked into the future.

## Day 19 - Smoke Signals and Sky Delays

Day 19 - September 15, 1989  
Cairns, Australia

Our last day in Cairns began at 3:58 a.m.—a time that feels less like morning and more like a dare. The alarm went off, and for a moment I considered ignoring it entirely.



But our itinerary waits for no one, so we dragged ourselves out of bed,

packed up the last of our things, and made our way to the airport in the pre-dawn haze.

The flight to Sydney was scheduled for 5:40 a.m., and despite the early hour, the airport was already

humming with travelers and tension.

The pilot's strike has turned Australian air travel into a kind of roulette—fewer flights, longer delays, and absolutely no regard for seat assignments. It's every man for himself, and apparently, every airline for maximum chaos.

We landed in Sydney mid-morning and had several hours to kill before our 14:45 flight to Hong Kong.

The airport lounge became our temporary home—plastic chairs, overpriced sandwiches, and a parade of announcements that all sounded vaguely apologetic.

Todd tried to nap. I tried to read. Neither of us succeeded.

Now it's 18:22, and we're still on the runway. Technically, we've boarded the plane, but we haven't moved an inch.

The cabin is packed to capacity, and I've been assigned a seat in the smoking section.

Yes, that's still a thing.

I'm surrounded by a mix of Japanese tourists and older Americans, most of whom seem blissfully unaware of the fact that secondhand smoke is not a souvenir I'm interested in collecting.

If someone lights up near me, I might have to commit a minor felony.

Not kidding.



The air is already stale, and the idea of spending the next nine hours marinating in nicotine feels like a cruel joke.

I asked the flight attendant if there was any chance of switching seats. She smiled politely and said, "We're doing our best." Translation: "You're stuck, buddy."

Cathay Pacific doesn't fly out of Cairns, which is why we had to backtrack to Sydney in the first place.

It's one of those logistical quirks that makes perfect sense to someone in an office somewhere but feels completely insane when you're living it.

We could've saved hours—maybe even a full day—if there had been a direct flight. But here we are, zigzagging across the continent before heading north.

The mood on the plane is a mix of exhaustion and quiet resignation.

People are flipping through magazines, fiddling with armrests, and pretending not to notice how long we've been sitting still.

Todd's already halfway through a beer, and I'm considering joining him. It's either that or start a mutiny.

Beer count: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺

A toast to early mornings, late departures, and the strange camaraderie of shared inconvenience.

## Day 20 - Transit Lounge Suite, Floor Level

Day 20 - September 16, 1989 (Part I)  
Hong Kong to Thailand, Bangkok (1,060 miles)

Just woke up from what might generously be called a night's rest at the Hong Kong International Airport Lounge Hotel—translation: Todd and I slept on the floor of the Transit Lounge.

No room service, no mint on the pillow, but plenty of fluorescent lighting and the occasional echo of a cleaning cart rolling by.



We arrived around 23:30 after a delayed 8.5-hour flight from Sydney, which itself followed a 5:40 a.m. departure from Cairns.

That means we'd been awake since 3:58 a.m. Cairns time and hit the floor in Hong Kong around 2:00 a.m. the next day.

Roughly 22 hours of travel, not counting the time spent waiting, boarding, and silently cursing the pilot's strike.

We'd checked our bags through to Bangkok, but kept our carry-ons close—passports, tickets, travelers checks, and the other essentials that make you feel like you're still tethered to civilization.

We briefly considered heading into the city, just to stretch our legs and see something other than duty-free perfume displays.

But the logistics of clearing customs, navigating a new city at midnight, and making it back in time for our connecting flight felt like a gamble we weren't willing to take.

So, we stayed put.

Found a quiet corner of the lounge, laid out our jackets like sleeping mats, and wrapped the straps of our bags around our ankles and the legs of nearby chairs.

Not exactly Fort Knox, but enough to make a would-be thief think twice—or at least trip over us on the way out.



To my surprise, I actually slept.

Not deeply, and not well, but enough to feel like I'd rebooted my system. The floor was hard, the air was dry, and the hum of vending machines provided a kind of ambient soundtrack.

Around 0:30, we were gently roused by a pair of airport police officers who asked to see our passports. We handed them over, got a nod of approval, and were left to resume our horizontal existence.

At 5:00, the arrivals/departures board thirty feet from my head decided to wake up.



It was one of those old-school mechanical boards—the kind that flips and flops with every update, like a typewriter having a seizure.

The sound was oddly rhythmic, but loud enough to end any hope of further sleep. I lay there watching the letters change, wondering how many people were arriving, departing, or

just like us—stuck in between.

Todd stirred next to me, groaned, and sat up like a man emerging from a crypt. We didn't say much.

There's a kind of camaraderie that forms in shared discomfort, and words felt unnecessary.

We just nodded, stretched, and started mentally preparing for the next leg: Bangkok.

Beer count: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺

No beer in the lounge, but the memory of them kept us warm.

## Day 20 - Ramshackle, Refreshing, and Carbonara

Day 20 - September 16, 1989 (Part II)

Hong Kong to Thailand, Bangkok (1,060 miles)

We arrived in Bangkok around noon, bleary-eyed and slightly crumpled from the overnight airport lounge experience in Hong Kong.

The flight was short, mercifully uneventful, and by the time we stepped into the lobby of the Ambassador Hotel, we were ready for anything resembling a bed.



The guidebook had described the Ambassador as “ramshackle and overpriced,” which felt both harsh and accurate.

The lobby had the faded glamour of a place that once hosted important people in the late '60s and never quite recovered.

The carpet was tired, the furniture mismatched, and the lighting had that yellowish tint that makes everything look vaguely sepia.



But it had a pool, and more importantly, a weight room that looked like it had been assembled from the remnants of a 1950s garage sale.

Rusted dumbbells, a bench with a suspicious wobble, and a fan that rotated with the enthusiasm of a sleepy cat.

I swam a few laps in the pool, then headed to the gym

to lift weights. It was the first gym with a bench, bar and weights since the trip started so I wanted to get a set of reps in.

There was a gym attendant who was happy to see me since I don't think the gym gets a lot of visitors.

I was twice as big as the attendant, but he was game to spot for me while I did a few incline presses. I'm not sure he would be able to do anything if I actually needed help but he seemed very pleased to at least had the opportunity.

After the gym, Todd and I headed downstairs for a beer.

The Baht, Thailand's currency, is worth about 25¢, which makes everything feel like a bargain.

We sat in the hotel bar, sipping cold beers and watching the slow rhythm of the afternoon unfold.

The staff moved with practiced ease, the ceiling fans spun lazily, and the air outside shimmered with heat.

After a few rounds, we decided to hunt down an Italian restaurant called "Pan Pan."

It was about a 40-minute walk, which wouldn't have been a problem if Bangkok hadn't decided to turn itself into a sauna.

Ninety degrees and 98% humidity—like walking through soup.



By the time we arrived, we were drenched, sticky, and slightly delirious.

But the restaurant was cool, quiet, and smelled like garlic and redemption.

I ordered the spaghetti carbonara and veal with mushrooms.

Todd went for something similar.

The food was excellent—rich, flavorful, and served with the kind of care that makes you forget you're half-melted.

The total bill for both of us came to about \$26.00, which felt like a steal.

If you ever find yourself in Bangkok and need a break from rice and spice, I highly recommend it.

On the way back, we stopped at a hole-in-the-wall bar—one of those places with flickering neon signs and a jukebox that hasn't worked since the Nixon administration.

We had a few more beers, chatted with the bartender, and then made our way back to the Ambassador, where the lobby looked exactly as it had earlier: slightly confused and dimly lit.

Beer count: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺

A toast to humidity, hidden gems, and the strange comfort of a  
“ramshackle” hotel.

## Day 21 - From Holy Redeemer to Uncle Frank: A Bangkok Cautionary Tale

Day 21 - September 17, 1989

Thailand, Bangkok

So, I am thinking.

How do I get myself into these situations?

This was quite a bizarre day.

The kind that starts with good intentions and ends with you wondering if you've narrowly escaped becoming an international criminal—or worse, a cautionary tale in someone else's travel memoir.

I woke early, around 7:30, the Bangkok sun already working overtime. The air was thick, like someone had draped a damp towel over the city.

I decided to walk to mass at Holy Redeemer Church—a modest red-roofed sanctuary tucked into the chaos of the city.



It should've taken 15 minutes, but I stretched it to 35, pacing myself like a man trying not to melt. I wanted to arrive without looking like I'd just swum there.

Mass was lovely. English-speaking, serene, and attended by a mix of locals and expats who looked equally grateful for the air conditioning.

Afterward, I lingered outside, taking a photo of the church's facade—simple, elegant, and slightly faded, like everything in Bangkok.

That's when Danny appeared.

Danny was friendly, as most Thai people are.

He had that open, easy smile that makes you feel like you've known him longer than five minutes.

When he heard I was American, he lit up.

His cousin, he explained, was preparing to move to California and New York to become a nurse, and his aunt and uncle were understandably nervous.

Would I come to their house and reassure them that the U.S. wasn't a land of crime and chaos?

Having met him in church and being a trusting sort, I agreed.

It felt like a small kindness, and besides, what could go wrong?



We took a cab—15, maybe 20 minutes—and arrived at a modest home tucked into a quiet neighborhood.

I removed my shoes at the door, offered the traditional Thai greeting, and was ushered inside.

His cousin was there, sweet and soft-spoken, and we chatted about nursing schools, American cities, and the weather. They served me a meal—hot dogs, ham, fruit, and a Coke over ice.

I hesitated. The ice and fruit had likely been washed in local water, and I'd read enough travel warnings to know this was risky.

But refusing food in someone's home felt worse than a stomach bug, so I ate and downed the Coke before the ice could have a chance to melt. Plus, I figured I'd drown any potential germs in beer later.

We made small talk for a while, and then HE arrived.

Uncle Frank.

He strode into the room like he owned it, shoes still on, eyes scanning the place like he was sizing up a poker table.

He introduced himself with a firm handshake and a grin that didn't quite reach his eyes.

Something about him felt... off. Too polished. Too eager.

Frank said he worked as a floor manager at a local casino. He perked up when I mentioned we'd be heading to London soon. "Look me up," he said. "I might be there when you are." Cue the ominous music.

Then came the card tricks.

He offered to show me a few, and not wanting to offend him, I agreed.

We climbed a few stairs to a small room with a card table, two chairs, and a stack of well-worn playing cards.

He cracked open a beer, handed me one, and began his demonstration.

It started innocently enough – basic blackjack tips, sleight-of-hand tricks. Then it veered into something else entirely.

He explained how, if he were dealing, I could always win.

Or, if he were on the casino floor, he'd signal me—arms crossed, finger extended—to let me know whether to take another card. “Don't win every hand,” he warned. “That draws attention.”

He said if I won money, it was customary to tip him. The amount was up to me, of course. All very casual. All very rehearsed.

Then he pulled out \$500 in U.S. cash.

He said a Dutch guy had won \$30,000 the night before and only tipped him \$300.

This guy, Frank said, had a gambling addiction and was coming by soon.

He wanted me to be sitting at the table with the \$500, ready to play. The plan was to rope the guy in, get him to gamble, and then—well, rip him off.



Frank wanted me to do this in Bangkok.

And in London.

He assured me I could make \$10,000 to \$15,000 in each city.

My brain did a quick two-step: “Hmm, that's interesting,” followed immediately by “what the f\*\*k is going on?”

This was serious. This wasn't a quirky travel anecdote. This was

a scam. A con. A setup.

And I was the target.

I told Frank I had to leave. I had a tour scheduled with Todd, and if I didn't show, he'd wonder where I was.

Frank wasn't pleased. He tried to convince me to stay, but eventually told Danny to call a cab.

Danny walked me out, spoke to the driver, and then asked how much money I had.

I told him I had about 100 baht (I really had 400).

He asked for it to pay the cabbie. I handed it over. He kept it. The cabbie drove me back to the hotel, and I paid him again—Danny's generosity apparently had limits.

Back at the hotel, I was rattled.

Frank knew where we were staying. I didn't want to spend another minute in Bangkok if I could help it.

Later, Todd and I had breakfast near the Oriental Hotel.

The food was decent, the coffee strong, and the air marginally less oppressive.

We took a boat trip to a temple—beautiful, serene, and completely lacking in signage. I had no idea what it was or why it mattered, but it was quiet, and that was enough.



We took a Tuk Tuk back to the hotel, weaving through traffic like a pinball.

Bangkok, I decided, reminded me of Rio de Janeiro – where I had lived from 1968-70 – chaotic, humid, sprawling, and slightly dangerous.

The river was polluted, the air thick with exhaust, and the streets a jumble of noise and motion.

I don't think I'd come back.

P.S. If I get killed tonight in my sleep by Frank and his henchmen, his phone number is 390 4881. He gave me a card in case I changed my mind.

I won't.

P.S.S. I got a telegram from Gerry Hummel, my boss, saying that Mark Weitner got married. I'm not sure if it's true, but it might be. I can't wait to talk to Corinne.

Livin' the life—heat, humidity, crowds, and the always-present threat of sudden death.

Beer count: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺

A toast to surviving Bangkok, narrowly dodging a criminal enterprise, and the restorative powers of cold beer.

## Day 22 - Beer, Sweat, and the Ghosts of R&R

Day 22 - September 18, 1989 (Part I)

Thailand, Bangkok

Waiting for our flight to Bombay. I'm sitting in the hotel lobby, stomach churning, head pounding, and wondering if this is what spiritual rebirth feels like—except with less enlightenment and more nausea.



Last night was another classic miscalculation: drank all night, forgot to eat.

Again. You'd think I'd learn, but apparently after yesterday's brush with the blackjack scam, my brain decided to prioritize beer over basic nutrition.

We wandered down a side street lined with strip joints and neon signs that flickered like they were trying to give up.

The air smelled of fried food, exhaust, and something vaguely floral—probably the perfume of the young ladies who stood in doorways, smiling with the practiced ease of people who've seen it all.

We drank. A lot. The beer was cold, the conversation warm, and the atmosphere surreal.

I tried to teach a few of the women how to shag dance—my nod to Carolina beach culture—but it didn't catch on. They gave it a go, then gave up, probably deciding that whatever I was doing wasn't worth the effort.

Plus, I wasn't going to buy them an overpriced sugar cocktail.

Fair enough.

This morning, I woke up feeling like I'd been hit by a tuk tuk.



My head was a drum, my stomach a chemistry experiment.

I dragged myself to the pool and swam a few laps, hoping the water would rinse off the regret.

Then I hit the gym again, which smelled like ammonia and despair. The weights were still rusted, the fan still lazy, and the air thick enough to chew.

Bangkok, in general, is a pretty depressing place.

It's hot – Africa hot.

The kind of heat that makes you question your life choices. If I'd known it would be like this, I might've left it off the itinerary.

The city sprawls in every direction, a tangle of wires, traffic, and humidity.

The river is a mess—brown, smelly, and full of things that probably have teeth.

But the people?

They're lovely. with the notable exception of the evil Uncle Frank, everyone's been kind, curious, and oddly familiar.

Everywhere I go, I hear it: "Hey Joe! What's up Joe? Come over here Joe!"



It's like I've become a minor celebrity in a city that doesn't know why I'm famous.

I suspect this is because I resemble one of the thousands of American soldiers who came here for R&R during the Vietnam era.

There's a certain look—sunburned, slightly dazed, and always holding a beer—that seems to trigger recognition.

It's strange, being in a place that feels both foreign and oddly familiar.

Bangkok is a city of contradictions—welcoming and overwhelming, vibrant and grimy, generous and exhausting.

Beer count: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺

A toast to shag dancing, ammonia-scented gyms, and the strange comfort of being known by name in a city that never sleeps.

## Day 22 - Aromas at Altitude and the Great Baggage Chase

Day 22 - September 18, 1989 (Part II)

35,000 ft, En-route to Bombay, India (1,867 miles)



35,000 feet above the Indian Ocean, en route to Bombay, and I'm questioning every decision that led me to this moment.

This flight is a sensory overload - a potent mix of numerous spices and body odor, all marinating in the recycled air of a 747-300.

It's not just unpleasant. It's beyond that - it's theatrical if that makes any sense. The kind of smell that makes you want to apologize to your nose.

Todd, in a moment of what he called "graciousness," gave up his seat next to me so a couple could sit together.

I now sit wedged between a man who is eating his in-flight meal with his fingers and a woman who's taken off her shoes and tucked her feet under her thigh like she's settling in for a long nap in a yoga studio.

Thanks, Todd. I owe you one.

I used to think I was tolerant. Open-minded. A citizen of the world.

But this flight, combined with the circus that was Bangkok Airport, has me reconsidering.

My patience is fraying like the hem of a well-traveled duffel bag.

Speaking of bags—mine nearly didn't make it.

When I checked it through to Frankfurt, the attendant placed the baggage tag on top of the bag.

Not attached. Just resting there like a garnish.

I watched in disbelief as it slid down the chute, the tag fluttering like a paper napkin in a breeze. I flagged someone down, who made a series of half-hearted phone calls and then assured me—reluctantly—that the bag was tagged.



It wasn't.

Later, as we waited to board, I glanced out the concourse window and saw a group of guys standing around my bag on the tarmac, looking at it like it had just washed ashore.

I grabbed a ticket agent and told him to run down there and tell them to send it to Frankfurt.

Before he could move, I managed to get the attention of the group from the window—waving like a man trying to flag down a lifeboat.

One of them came up, and I explained the situation.

He nodded, took down my information, said something reassuring, and the last I saw, they were carrying my bag toward the plane.

Whether it made it on board or not is anyone's guess. I've learned not to get too attached to luggage—or promises.

So here I sit, marinating in mystery meat air, hoping my bag is somewhere beneath me and not on a solo tour of Southeast Asia.

Beer count: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺

A toast to lost luggage, airborne spice clouds, and the slow erosion of cultural diplomacy

## Day 23 - I spent a week in Bombay one night

Day 23 - September 19, 1989

En-route to Bombay, India (1,867 miles)  
Bombay, India to Frankfurt, Germany (3,857 miles)

I don't know what time it is. I don't know what day it is. I'm not even sure what continent I'm on anymore.



Somewhere between Bangkok and Frankfurt, via Bombay, time has folded in on itself like a poorly packed suitcase.

Todd and I are once again aboard a 747, surrounded by a few hundred fellow passengers who seem to have collectively decided that personal space and orderly

movement are optional.

I used to pride myself on being open-minded-curious about other cultures, patient with unfamiliar customs.

But after 20 hours of this, I'm afraid I've lost my objectivity. And possibly my sanity.

The descent into Bombay was less a landing and more a prelude to chaos.

Before the wheels even touched the tarmac, passengers were on their feet, reaching for bags, boxes, and bundles.

It was as if the plane were sinking and everyone had decided their carry-on was a life raft.

The aisles clogged instantly, a human logjam of elbows and impatience. I half expected someone to climb over the seats.

At Bangkok Airport, there had been a sign – specific to our flight, CX751–warning of a 1,000 baht fine for oversized carry-ons.

Judging by the sheer volume of luggage people were wrestling with, I don't think anyone read it. Or cared.

Once we finally taxied to the gate and disembarked, I tried to take a photo of the ramp. Just a quick shot to document the madness.

But no–security. Apparently, capturing the image from the stairs down to the tarmac in Bombay is a threat to national stability.

I'm still not sure what they thought I was going to reveal. The angle of the stairs? The curvature of the handrail?

Or maybe it was the Libyan jet parked next to us.

We were met by a Cathay Pacific agent who promptly collected our passports and tickets.

Normally, handing over all your identification to a stranger in a foreign country would be a red flag. But we didn't have much choice. She handed us meal vouchers and directed us to a 24-hour restaurant.

The airport itself looked like something out of a war movie–dim lighting, cracked tiles, and armed guards stationed like extras in a Cold War thriller.

We were told we couldn't leave the lounge, and with rifles dotting the perimeter, we didn't argue.

Todd and I settled in and ended up drinking with a guy named Colin from Zimbabwe.

He was chatty, opinionated, and eager to share his thoughts on Africa's political landscape.

According to him, there were no simple solutions to the situation in South

Africa, and immediate majority rule would be disastrous.



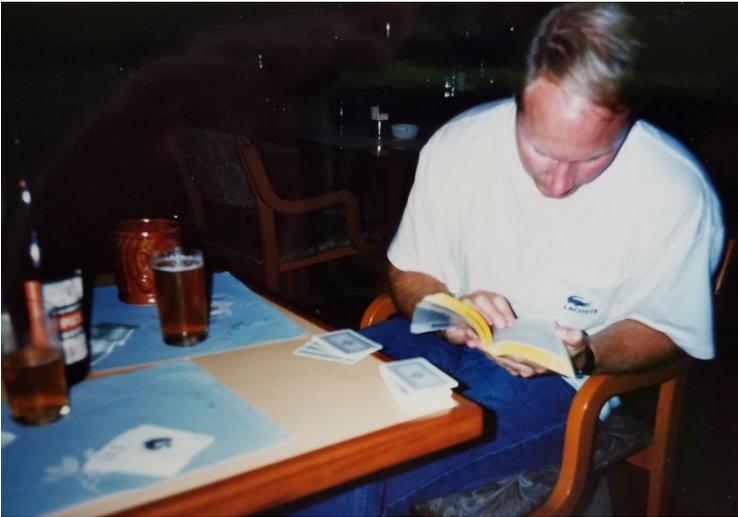
At first, it was an interesting conversation. But as Colin drank, his views became less nuanced and more... problematic.

By the end, I wasn't sure if he was offering insight or just being a racist. Either way, it was a reminder that alcohol and politics rarely mix well.

With no tickets, no passports, and no real sense of time, we stayed put.

I tried the fried chicken sandwich, which was neither fried nor convincingly chicken.

It had the texture of something that had once aspired to be poultry but lost its way.



Six hours passed like molasses.

The ticket agent finally returned 45 minutes before our flight to Frankfurt.

We were herded out to the runway, where we identified our bags—no photos allowed, of course—and boarded the plane.

Mercifully, no one was seated between us. I managed to sleep for four or five hours, curled into the shape of a question mark.

When I woke, the cabin looked like a post-party crime scene. Blankets strewn, food trays askew, and the faint smell of curry lingering like a memory.

I felt for the flight attendants. They'd survived a long-haul flight with 300 people who packed like they were fleeing a collapsing regime.

Beer count: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺

A toast to fried non-chicken, philosophical detours, and the strange purgatory of international layovers.

## Day 24 - Beer, Bricks, and the Berlin Shuffle

Day 24 - September 20, 1989

Frankfurt to West Berlin, Germany (50 miles)

well, we survived our first day in Berlin.

That alone feels like a small victory, considering the last few days have been a blur of curry-scented flights, questionable chicken sandwiches, and the occasional existential crisis at 35,000 feet.



We arrived yesterday courtesy of Pan Am, which is now our airline for the remainder of the trip.

They operate a shuttle service between Frankfurt and Berlin using smaller 727-35 aircraft—compact, efficient, and refreshingly devoid of chaos.

After the airborne stampedes of Bombay, the flight felt like a quiet sigh.

As part of our round-the-world ticket, we're allowed two side trips from Frankfurt. We chose Berlin and Prague—partly for the history, partly for the beer, and partly because they sounded like places where something interesting might happen.

So far, Berlin hasn't disappointed.

Despite the warnings, it's not as hard as people said it would be to get around without speaking the language.

What we learned early on in this trip is that the key to international survival isn't fluency—it's strategy. You only need two phrases in any country to get by:

1. How to order a beer: "Haben Sie ein Bier, bitte?"
2. How to find the bathroom: "Wo ist die Toilette, bitte?"

Once you've got those down, you're basically fluent in the language of survival.

I've successfully ordered multiple beers and, for the first time tonight, managed to order dinner without pointing or miming. It felt like a breakthrough.

Our hotel is a gem. For \$135 a night, we've got a full apartment—kitchen, living room, bedroom, and bath.



It's spacious, clean, and located right on the Kurfürstendamm at #167, which is Berlin's answer to Fifth Avenue.

The street is lined with shops, cafes, and people who look like they stepped out of a European fashion catalog.

It's a far cry from the chaos of Bangkok or the concrete sprawl of Bombay.

Todd and I even went grocery shopping today. That was an adventure.



cobblestone street.

You have to bring your own bags here, which we didn't know until we were standing at the checkout with arms full of salami, eggs, bread, and beer.

Todd had one bag. I had none. They were nice enough to give us a cardboard box so we made it work. But it felt like a scene from a silent comedy—two Americans juggling groceries down a

We walked a lot today. At least four miles, though not all of it was intentional.

We wandered through the Tiergarten, Berlin's massive central park, and then down July 17th Avenue to the Brandenburg Gate.

The city is a strange blend of old and new—elegant buildings, leafy boulevards, and then, suddenly, the Berlin wall.

It's jarring.

One minute you're strolling past centuries-old architecture, and the next you're staring at a slab of concrete that looks like it was dropped there by accident.

Twelve feet high, six feet wide, and completely out of place.

It's not just a wall—it's a rupture. A reminder that history isn't always graceful.

We didn't linger. Just stood there for a moment, took it in, and kept walking.

There's something surreal about seeing a symbol of division in the middle of a city that otherwise feels so open.



On the way back, we stopped at a couple of cafes for beer—because that's what you do in Berlin.

The beer is cold, the service is leisurely, and the people-watching is top-notch. Everyone seems to be in no particular hurry, which suits us just fine.

Dinner was at a restaurant across from our hotel called Fajtdhutte. The name sounds like something you'd shout during a snowball fight, but the food was excellent.

We had the schnitzel special—tender pork filet, flavorful, and only \$5.00 US. It came with a bowl of Gulaschsuppe which was surprisingly tasty. The service was slow, but in that European way that suggests you're supposed to enjoy the wait.

Beer count: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺

A toast to veal, vocabulary hacks, and the strange poetry of a wall that doesn't belong.

## Day 25 – Take Off Zee Glasses: A Day Behind the wall

Day 25 – September 21, 1989  
West Berlin/East Berlin, Germany

Today we went to East Berlin.

But first, we ran. Twenty minutes of running through the streets of West Berlin, dodging early risers and the occasional pigeon, trying to convince ourselves that we were still fit enough to justify the beer and schnitzel diet we've adopted. It wasn't graceful, but it was movement, and that counts for something.

After the run, we did what any sensible traveler would do: we ate lunch and had a beer.

The beer was cold, the food forgettable, and the conversation mostly revolved around which of us would be detained at the border or simply stared at with theatrical disdain.



Around 13:00, we took the U-Bahn to Checkpoint Charlie.

The name alone sounds like something out of a spy novel – it is – and the place doesn't disappoint.

The Mauermuseum—Museum Haus am Checkpoint Charlie—is crammed with artifacts, escape stories, and enough Cold War memorabilia to make you feel like you've stepped

into a John le Carré subplot.

We spent about an hour wandering through it, trying to absorb the gravity of it all while dodging tour groups and squinting at German captions.

Then came the crossing.

Checkpoint Charlie is less a gate and more a stage. The guards play their roles with grim precision. One stands in a small booth, lit from below like a villain in a noir film.

The lighting is deliberate—designed to make him look intimidating, mysterious, maybe even a little supernatural. They appear serious, but I suspect there's a quiet joy in the performance. As long as you don't do anything stupid, they seem to enjoy the theater of it.

When I handed over my passport, the guard took his time. He studied the photo, then slowly lifted his eyes to meet mine. With the gravity of a man auditioning for a role in a Cold War drama, he said, "Take off zee glasses."

I complied. He examined my face again, then looked up and, without a word, waved me through.

No stamp, no smile, just a silent nod. It was oddly satisfying—like passing a test you didn't study for.

The first thing you notice in East Berlin is the cars.



They're all the same. No BMWs, no Mercedes, no Porsches. Just Trabants—small, boxy, and uniformly beige. They look like they were designed by someone who had never seen a car but had read about them once in a Soviet manual.

A guy I met in West Berlin told me a joke: why do Trabants have heaters in the rear window?

To keep your hands warm while you're pushing them in the winter.

It's not just the cars. The people dress differently too.

In the west, fashion is a free-for-all—dyed hair, bold prints, and a noticeable absence of bras.

In the East, it's more subdued. Functional. Reserved. Like everyone's trying not to draw attention.

Things are cheaper in East Berlin, though you still pay at the museums. They know how to extract tourist money, even if the currency is nearly worthless outside the border.

We visited a museum on German history—fascinating, though most of the signage was in German. We pieced together what we could, relying on context and the occasional English caption.

The art museum was quieter, more contemplative. A welcome break from the concrete and uniformity.



We saw Russian soldiers—real ones, not actors—and took their pictures. They didn't seem to mind.

Maybe they're used to it. Maybe they're just bored. Either way, it felt surreal. Like photographing props in a play that's been running too long.

What struck me most was the architecture. Two blocks off the main drag, some buildings still bore the scars of World War II—cracked facades, bullet holes, crumbling stone.

It's astonishing.

What have they been doing for the past 50 years?

Building a wall, apparently.

The damage feels frozen in time, like a reminder that history doesn't always move forward.

After the museums, we followed a tip from a British student we met at Checkpoint Charlie. He recommended a restaurant in East Berlin—claimed it was the best in East Germany. The waiter confirmed it with a solemn nod, as if we'd stumbled upon a secret.

The meal was excellent. Hearty, flavorful, and served with a bottle of wine that tasted far better than it had any right to.



The whole thing cost about \$45 US, which felt like a bargain. Since you're required to exchange a set amount of money when entering East Berlin, we had some East German marks left over.

We gave them to our waiter. He was genuinely appreciative. At that time, the currency was nearly worthless in the west, but here, it still meant something.

The return trip was uneventful. No drama, no theatrical lighting. Just a quiet ride back to the familiar chaos of West Berlin.



Tomorrow, I'll head to the American Express office to get more money.

We're thinking about visiting the Reichstag or maybe heading out to the Olympic Stadium.

Something about standing in places where history happened

feels grounding. Even if the beer is still the main event.

Beer count: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 Wine count: 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

A toast to Trabants, theatrical guards, and the strange poetry of a divided city.

## Day 26 - Coasters, Beakers, and Billy Ocean

Day 26 - September 22, 1989

West Berlin, Germany

I got up and went for a run this morning. Just twenty minutes, enough to convince myself I was still a functioning adult.

The streets were quiet, the air cool, and the occasional whiff of bakery exhaust reminded me that Berlin wakes slowly but with purpose.

It's a good city for running—flat, forgiving, and full of distractions.

After the run, I stopped by the store for essentials: bread and laundry soap. The bread here is dense and serious, like it has something to prove.

The soap was less philosophical, but necessary. We were down to our last clean socks, and the hotel room was starting to smell like a suitcase.



We returned to the Reichstag, this time armed with cassette tape tours.

The exhibits are all in German, and while we've mastered "beer" and "bathroom," our historical vocabulary is lacking.

The tapes helped. It was fascinating to see how the period from 1933 to 1945 was portrayed—somber, direct, and quietly reflective. No fanfare, just facts and photographs. It made you think, which is more than I can say for most museums.

Afterwards, we headed back to the hotel—The City Castle. It must be at least 50 years old, and I think it's great.

The name suggests grandeur, but it's more like a well-worn manor with good bones. The kind of place where you can imagine cold war diplomats sipping brandy and arguing about maps.



Laundry was next. We gathered our gear and wandered down to the laundry room, where we promptly failed to understand the machines.

Fortunately, a kind woman took pity on us and walked us through the process. Turns out it wasn't that complicated—we were just overthinking it, as usual.

Back in the room, we had a few beers to celebrate our domestic triumph. Then we ventured out.



First stop: the warsteiner restaurant across the street. The beer was good, but the real draw was the waitress—charming, efficient, and just flirtatious enough to make us order a second round.

Then we stumbled upon KOJO.

It looked like a TGIF's that had been decorated by a chemistry major with a fondness for neon.

The beers were served in 800 ml laboratory beakers, which felt both ridiculous and perfect. We had to try one. It tasted like beer, but with a hint of scientific achievement.

Next up: Irish Pub im Europa-Center.

Tucked into the glass-and-steel mall right off Ku'damm, it was like stepping into another country.

Dark wood, brass fixtures, the smell of Guinness in the air. Irish staff moved fast behind the bar, pulling pints of Harp and Guinness like they'd been doing it forever.

The crowd was a mix—American soldiers on leave, students with backpacks, locals curious about this bit of Ireland in West Berlin.

Someone was strumming guitar in the corner, and for a moment it felt like Dublin had been smuggled across the Wall. Todd was on a mission to acquire a Warsteiner coaster to add to our growing collection.

We started collecting coasters in Hawaii and now try to snag one from every bar we visit.

It's become a quiet obsession—part souvenir, part sport.

Speaking of sport, we've also been working on our coaster catch technique.

Here's how it works.

You balance a stack of coasters on the edge of the bar, flick them into the air with your fingers, and try to catch them with the same hand. It's harder than it sounds. So far, my record is twelve. Todd's still chasing me.

We ended the evening at the restaurant across from the hotel. I had the schnitzel again—comfort food at this point—and Todd went for the rump steak.

His was excellent, far better than the one I had in East Berlin. By the time we sat down, we were well into the beer count and not feeling any pain.



I do remember them playing “Love Really Hurts” by Billy Ocean—the other version. It felt oddly appropriate.

Tomorrow, we head to Prague.

Beers: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 Coasters: 12 airborne, 12 caught. A good day.

## Day 27 - welcome to Prague

Day 27 - September 23, 1989

West Berlin Germany to Prague, Czechoslovakia (174 miles)

We left West Berlin's Tegel Airport about two hours late, thanks to a weather system that seemed determined to test the patience of every traveler in Europe.



The terminal was a sea of umbrellas, damp jackets, and people muttering in at least six languages. It was the kind of delay that makes you question whether air travel is really faster than walking.

By the time we landed in Prague, we were three hours behind schedule and mildly disoriented.

The crowds at the airport were enormous—at first, we assumed they'd come out to welcome Todd and me, which seemed fair given our growing coaster collection and international beer expertise.

But reality intervened: Lech Walesa was visiting Prague as part of an extended European tour.

Apparently, he's a bigger draw than two Americans with laundry soap and a knack for schnitzel.

We checked into the Ambassador - Zlata Husa Hotel, which marked the second "Ambassador" hotel of our trip.

There's something comforting about the repetition, even if the name promises more than the experience delivers.

Every room costs \$100 per night for Americans and most Europeans not affiliated with a communist regime. The pricing is delightfully indifferent to location:

Room overlooking the historic square:  
\$100

Room overlooking the dumpster and a  
stray cat: \$100

It's egalitarian in the most arbitrary  
way.

In Czechoslovakia, all travel  
arrangements—hotels, tours, rental  
cars—must be booked through Cedok, the  
official travel bureau.

This ensures that everyone receives the  
same marginally adequate experience,  
regardless of nationality or  
expectations. It's a system designed to  
flatten enthusiasm.

After settling into our room, Todd and  
I took a walk around the block.





The architecture was stunning—ornate facades, cobbled streets, and a sense of faded grandeur.

Unfortunately, we couldn't figure out how to get a beer. One place claimed they were out of beer entirely, which felt like a personal affront.

Eventually, we retreated to the hotel bar, where beer was available and served with the kind of indifference that suggests it might disappear again at any moment.

Dinner was its own adventure. The restaurant downstairs was nearly empty, but when we asked for a table, the host informed us that all tables were

reserved.

His delivery lacked conviction, and I decided to test the theory. We told him we'd wait at the bar in case something opened up.

Miraculously, a table became available within minutes. Apparently, persistence is the antidote to Communist hospitality.

We both ordered the Transylvania special, which came with Romanian wine and a side of mystery.

It was surprisingly good—hearty, flavorful, and served with the kind of flourish that suggests someone in the kitchen still cares. The wine was smooth, slightly sweet, and just strong enough to make the evening blur at the edges.

After dinner, we drifted into the lobby and met a guy from the UK, another from Finland, and two women who were unmistakably working.

The conversation was fragmented—half English, half gestures, and a generous dose of wine. We all ended up at the hotel nightclub, which felt like a cross between a Cold War disco and a diplomatic mixer.

By that time, beer was no longer an option.

We were informed that beer is sold only at selected times and places, and this was neither.

The rules around alcohol here are like a scavenger hunt designed by Kafka.

We've yet to find a Pilsner Urquell, which feels like a missed opportunity in the land that invented it.

Still, the wine kept flowing, and the night took on a pleasantly surreal tone.



We talked to the two women for a while, though none of us understood what the others were saying.

It was like trying to have a conversation underwater—lots of smiling, nodding, and the occasional burst of laughter at something no one quite grasped.

Beer count: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍷🍷🍷🍷 wine count: 🍷🍷🍷🍷

A toast to delayed flights, mysterious menus, and the quiet absurdity of a city where beer is both everywhere and nowhere.

## Day 28 - Layers of Prague (and Kielbasa on Cardboard)

Day 28 - September 24, 1989  
Prague, Czechoslovakia

woke up feeling sub-optimal.

Not quite ill, not quite well—just hovering somewhere in the liminal space between “functional” and “why bother.” The bed was fine, the room quiet enough, but something about the air or the water or the relentless cobblestones had taken a toll. Still, I rallied. There’s no rest for the mildly weary in Prague.

I made my way to mass at the Holy Trinity Church. The service was in Latin, which lent it a kind of solemn grandeur, even if I understood only parts of it.

Thankfully the order of the mass was the same so I was able to follow along and bless myself at the appropriate times.

The church itself was stunning—vaulted ceilings, gilded altars, and that faint scent of incense and old wood that clings to centuries.



I tried to find the Byzantine rite church afterward, but by the time I located it, the service had ended and the doors were closed.

A spiritual scavenger hunt with no prize.

Back at the hotel, I attempted lunch.

The service was predictably grim. The waitstaff moved with the enthusiasm of people who'd been told joy was counter-revolutionary.

I ordered something vaguely meat-shaped and received it lukewarm, accompanied by a side of indifference.

But what do you expect?

They're all damn communists.

Hospitality here seems to be a reluctant obligation, not a profession.

At 13:30 we set out to walk the city. Prague is a place best explored on foot, even if your feet protest. Not far from the hotel we reached Old Town Square, anchored by the Astronomical Clock—a medieval contraption that somehow still works, ticking away centuries with mechanical saints and skeletons.

It's the kind of thing that makes you wonder how anyone had time to invent it between plagues and invasions.



One of the most striking stops on our walk was the Old Jewish Cemetery in the Jewish Quarter.

Thousands of headstones crammed together, leaning and layered like a city of the dead.

The oldest marker dates back to 1439. Because space was limited, they buried people in layers—up to twelve deep, they say. It's haunting and oddly beautiful, a testament to endurance and the quiet dignity of memory.

We crossed the Vltava River via the Charles Bridge, built in the 15th century and still holding strong. Statues line the sides, each one watching over the foot traffic like stone sentinels.

The bridge itself is a kind of open-air museum, with vendors selling trinkets and artists sketching tourists who will never look that good again.

On the other side, we climbed the hill to Prague Castle.

The changing of the guards was a stiff, choreographed affair—equal parts ceremony and stoicism. The guards didn't blink. I watched someone try to make one laugh. They failed. They are trained well.



From there we wandered through a nearby district with streets so narrow I had to turn sideways in places.

The buildings are tiny, charming, and clearly designed for people who ate less kielbasa than I do. I definitely wouldn't have fit in Prague during the 15th century. Good thing I delayed my trip by a few centuries.

The city itself is absurdly beautiful. Every corner reveals another spire, another archway, another building that looks like it was designed by someone with a flair for drama and a surplus of stone. Even the graffiti feels poetic.



We tried to find a particular restaurant but failed.

Instead, we stumbled into a different place and ended up

having a fantastic meal for \$7.90 USD.

The beer was 80¢ a glass, cold and crisp, and the food—some kind of pork with dumplings—was surprisingly good. Last night's dinner for two cost \$20 USD.

Prague may be communist, but it's also delicious.

Money here is a game. The official exchange rate is laughable, and street exchanges are illegal.

Police will whisper "Change money" as they pass, and if you say yes, you'll be fined or arrested. It's a trap.

That's why exchanging money in the taxi makes so much sense. It's private, expected, and oddly intimate.



You chat up the driver, gauge his vibe, and then slide bills back and forth like Cold War spies. We got a rate ten times better than the official one. Too bad we didn't have more cash on hand.

The net result is that everything feels absurdly cheap. Like we've hacked the economy. There's a thrill to it—knowing your dinner,

delicious and illegal, was paid for in a quiet act of rebellion.

Tonight we found a kielbasa stand.

Glorious. Served on a piece of cardboard with a slice of bread and a smear of mustard. No plate, no pretense. Just meat, carbs, and joy. It was the kind of meal that makes you forget every bad lunch you've ever had.

Earlier we stopped by the U Fleků beer garden, which has been serving beer since 1499.

That's not a typo. 1499.

Christopher Columbus could have partied there—assuming he made it back and had a taste for Czech lager.



The place was lively, full of locals and tourists, and the beer flowed like history.

Beers consumed: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺

Mood: Improved. Prague: Still beautiful. Feet: Slightly ruined. Memory: Layered, like the cemetery.

## Day 29 - Bowling Over Diplomacy

Day 29 - September 25, 1989  
Prague, Czechoslovakia

We got up around 9:30 this morning, which counts as early in Prague when you've spent the previous night chasing kielbasa and 15th-century beer.



The air was cool, the streets quiet, and the city felt like it was still stretching its legs. We stepped out around 10:15 and promptly met a guy from Switzerland—friendly, well-dressed, and slightly baffled by the Czech breakfast options. We exchanged pleasantries, compared itineraries, and then drifted off in opposite

directions like polite ships in a fog.

After breakfast, Todd and I wandered over to the National Museum of Czechoslovakia.

It's a grand building, perched like a crown at the end of Wenceslas Square.

Inside, it's a maze of exhibits—nature, science, history—all labeled in Czech. We did our best to interpret the displays, relying on context clues and the occasional Latin root. It was fascinating, if a bit cryptic. I'm sure we learned something, though I couldn't tell you exactly what.

From there, we headed to Bílá labuť – The White Swan—a sprawling Czech department store that feels like a relic from a more ambitious Soviet-influenced era.

Somewhere between the shoe section and the housewares, we found a hair salon. My haircut cost 44 Czech crowns,

Todd's was 33. We suspect the pricing was based on hair length, or maybe charm. Either way, we emerged looking slightly more respectable, which felt like progress.



Next, we took the subway to the Utell Forum Hotel, the only hotel listed as having a health club.

We arrived with noble intentions—stretch, lift, maybe even sweat. But the health club was closed. No explanation, no apology. Just a locked door and a shrug from the front desk. So we pivoted.

The hotel had a bowling alley.



And the bowling alley had a bar.

So we bowled.

And drank.

Five beers later, we were no healthier, but considerably happier. We'd gone there with the best of intentions. Prague had other plans.

Back at our hotel, I negotiated with the maid to have our clothes washed. It was a delicate dance of gestures, broken English, and hopeful pointing. Eventually, she agreed. I handed over a bag of laundry and hoped for the best.

Dinner was its own saga.

We tried to eat at the Esplanade Club, a place that sounded fancy and looked promising. But apparently, you need to be a diplomat to dine there.

The host took one look at our casual attire and informed us, with the kind of disdain usually reserved for tax evasion, that we were not welcome. I felt discriminated against. Not for nationality, but for wearing sneakers. One day, I'll be rich enough to buy the place and fire them all.

Or at least change the dress code.

We wandered until we found a wine cellar tucked into a side street.

It was listed in our guidebook, which gave it a veneer of legitimacy. The atmosphere was cozy, the wine plentiful, and the food surprisingly good.



Still, I wouldn't go back. Something about the lighting made me feel like I was dining in a medieval interrogation chamber.

Tomorrow we've got a castle tour lined up through CEDOK—the official Czech tourist board.

If their track record holds, it'll be marginally organized and vaguely informative. But castles are castles, and I'm holding out hope for a turret or two.

Beer count: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 Wine count: 🍷🍷🍷

Mood: Lightly buzzed, mildly defiant, cautiously optimistic.

## Day 30 - Gaw-tik vs. Roh-man: A Masterclass in Arches and Hangovers

Day 30 - September 26, 1989  
Prague, Czechoslovakia

As you may have deduced from the erratic penmanship of yesterday's entry, we were not operating at peak sobriety.

The wine cellar had been generous, the bowling alley even more so, and by the time we stumbled back to the hotel, our ambitions for cultural enrichment had been replaced by a firm commitment to horizontal living.



Still, we rallied.

By some miracle—or perhaps just the cruel efficiency of a prepaid tour—we were up by 7:30 and out the door by 8:30.

The tour group was small: two Germans, two Finns (one of whom we'd met in the lobby on our first night), and us.

A tidy little international sampling, all of us bleary-eyed and clutching guidebooks like talismans against the unknown.

Our guide was a man of about 64, with a voice like gravel and a command of English that was... interpretive.

It took a few minutes to tune into his cadence, which involved long pauses, unexpected syllables, and a fondness for dramatic emphasis. He spoke with the gravity of someone who had seen empires rise and fall, and who now spent his days pointing at archways.

The bus was small and not particularly comfortable. The kind of vehicle that makes you question whether your spine is really necessary.

we bounced along country roads, past fields and villages that looked like they'd been painted in sepia. The air was crisp, the sky a polite gray, and the mood somewhere between cautious optimism and mild regret.

Our first stop was Orlík Castle, perched above the Vltava River like something out of a forgotten fairy tale.

It had been the home of the Schwarzenberg family from 1800 until 1949, when they were "obliged" to hand it over to the state.

The guide used that word—"obliged"—with a tone that suggested it was less a legal requirement and more a polite mugging.

The castle itself was stunning. Ornate rooms, sweeping views, and a hallway lined with over 300 guns.

One of them, we were told, had been gifted to the family by Napoleon.



Yes, that Napoleon. The one with the hat and the complex. It was hard not to feel a little sorry for the Schwarzenbergs, who now had to buy a ticket and stand behind a velvet rope to see their own furniture. But the guide assured us they could visit from Austria anytime they liked. Just like everyone else.

Lunch was at a local restaurant—steak and potatoes, served with the kind of enthusiasm usually reserved for tax audits. It was edible, which felt like a win. We ate quietly, the group bonded by shared discomfort and the vague hope that the river portion of the tour might offer a reprieve.

It did not. The river cruise was canceled, no explanation given. We nodded solemnly and climbed back into the bus, which now felt even smaller and less forgiving.

Our second stop was Zvíkov Castle, a more austere structure built in the late 1200s.

It lacked the opulence of Orlick but made up for it with Gothic architecture and a sense of historical gravity.



The guide was particularly animated here, launching into a passionate lecture on the difference between Gothic and Roman design.

Whenever we approached an archway, he would pause, raise his hands, and demonstrate.

If the arch was pointed, he'd press his fingers together and intone, "Gaw-tik."

If it was rounded, he'd adjust his fingers and say, "Roh-man." Slowly. Deliberately.

As if we were being initiated into a secret society of architectural taxonomy.

Naturally, I adopted this technique for the rest of the tour.

Every time we passed an arch, I'd tap Todd on the shoulder and whisper, "Gaw-tik" or "Roh-man," depending on the curvature.

I found it hilarious. Todd did not. He gave me the kind of look usually reserved for people who hum in elevators.



By late afternoon, we were back in Prague, slightly wiser and considerably more tired.

Tonight is our last night in the city, and while I'm not expecting miracles, I wouldn't mind one more mystery.

Maybe a bar that serves drinks in chalices. Or a restaurant that doesn't require diplomatic credentials.

Beer count: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺

Mood: Architecturally enlightened, physically compromised, emotionally amused

## Day 31 - The City of Ausgang

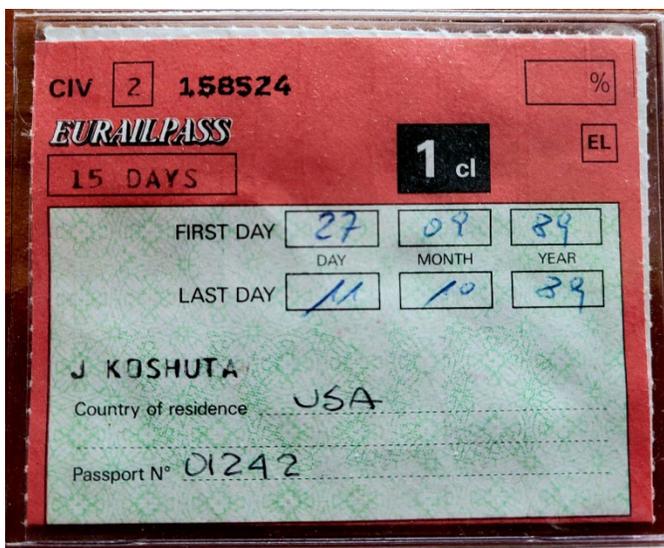
Day 31 - September 27, 1989

Prague, Czechoslovakia to Munich, West Germany (186 miles)

We left Prague an hour behind schedule, which felt about right for a city that had spent the last few days gently resisting our attempts to leave.

The train station was a blur of announcements, none of which we understood, and people moving with a purpose we didn't share.

Eventually, we boarded and began the slow roll westward, bound for Frankfurt and then Munich. The delay didn't bother us much. We'd grown used to the rhythm of European travel: part precision, part shrug.



Frankfurt greeted us with a kind of industrial efficiency. The train station was enormous, humming with the sound of boots on tile and the occasional clatter of luggage wheels.

We found the Eurail office tucked behind a row of vending machines and got our passes validated by a man who looked like he'd been doing this since the Treaty of Versailles.

He stamped our papers with a flourish that suggested he'd once dreamed of being a conductor himself.

The Eurail pass was our golden ticket—21 days of First Class travel across most of Europe. It felt like a small miracle.

We could glide from city to city in relative comfort, no reservations needed, no questions asked. All we had to do was find the right train and the right car. Easier said than done.

Our first attempt was a comedy of errors. We boarded what we thought was the right train, only to discover we were in Second Class.

The seats were fine, but we'd paid for First Class and were determined to experience the full splendor of European rail travel.



This meant walking through several cars, each one slightly more confusing than the last, until we finally stumbled into a cabin with plush seats, fewer people, and a faint smell of leather and espresso.

First Class.

We settled in, proud of ourselves for navigating the labyrinth. The train pulled out of Frankfurt with a gentle lurch, and we were off.

The countryside blurred past in shades of green and gold, dotted with villages that looked like they'd been painted by someone nostalgic for simpler times.

Now, being new to this whole train travel thing—and linguistically limited to ordering beer and locating toilets—we had one pressing question: how would we know where we were?



We'd asked a few people at the station, and they assured us it was simple. Each platform would have a large sign displaying the name of the city.

Easy.

Foolproof.

About fifteen minutes into the journey, the train slowed and stopped.

I peered out the window and saw a large sign on the platform: "Ausgang." I nodded to myself. "Ah, Ausgang. Must be a suburb of Frankfurt."

Ten minutes later, another stop. Another sign: "Ausgang." Still in Ausgang, apparently. Maybe it was a sprawling metropolis.

Fifteen minutes after that, another stop. Another "Ausgang."

At this point, I began to suspect that Ausgang was either the largest city in Germany I had never heard of or something else entirely.

I turned to the German couple sitting nearby—middle-aged, well-dressed, and clearly amused by our confusion.

“Excuse me,” I asked, trying to sound worldly despite the growing suspicion that I was not.

“What does Ausgang mean?”

The woman smiled warmly, the kind of smile reserved for children and confused foreigners.

“It means ‘Exit,’” she said, in perfect English.

I nodded slowly. “Ah. Of course. Exit.”

I am an idiot.

They laughed politely, and I joined them, because what else can you do when you’ve spent the last forty minutes believing you were touring the many districts of a fictional city named Ausgang?

We’re now wheeling our way toward Munich, the train humming beneath us like a contented cat. The seats are comfortable, the air is cool, and the beer—procured from a cart that rolls through the cabin like a mobile tavern—is cold and plentiful.

We should arrive by 16:00, assuming no further delays or detours through mythical cities. I’m looking forward to Munich, though I suspect it will have fewer signs labeled “Exit.”

Europe continues to teach us things we didn’t know we needed to learn. Like how to read train signage. Or how to laugh at ourselves before anyone else does. Or how to find joy in the small absurdities that



come with being slightly lost in a place that's trying its best to welcome you.

Tomorrow, we'll explore Munich. But tonight, we toast to Ausgang—the city that never was, and the lesson it gave us in humility and signage.



## Day 32 - Olympic Lodgings and the Surprise Girlfriend Maneuver

Day 32 - September 28, 1989  
Munich, West Germany

We arrived in Munich around 16:30, rolling in on a train that felt more like a private lounge than public transport.

For most of the trip, Todd and I had the entire compartment to ourselves—plush seats, quiet corridors, and the kind of gentle sway that makes you feel like you're being rocked to sleep by a very polite giant. We even ventured to the dining car, where we had a few beers and watched the German countryside blur past in shades of green and gray.

As we approached Munich, the skies darkened and the rain began. It wasn't dramatic—just a steady drizzle that made everything look slightly more cinematic.

We stepped off the train, grabbed a taxi, and headed to our hotel: the Munich Arabellapark Hotel, formerly part of the Olympic Village built for the 1972 Munich Games.

We learned that the building itself was rushed into partial conversion back in '72 specifically to cram in extra rooms for athletes and fans, turning a high-rise into a hasty hospitality haven.

The hotel portion had been renovated since its days of housing athletes, and it showed. Clean lines, modern furnishings, and a quiet location away from the Oktoberfest chaos.





It was comfortable, efficient, and had just enough history to make you feel like you were part of something bigger.

The Olympic grounds nearby were impressive—rolling hills fashioned from world war II ruins, a tent-like stadium roof that looked like it had been designed by someone with a flair for drama, and buildings that had been converted into

apartments and townhomes, many with balconies and terraces.

It was a strange blend of past and present, triumph and rubble.

When we checked in, the front desk handed us two messages. That's when the day took a turn.

Apparently, Corinne and her roommate Rosemary had arrived earlier in the day from the States. They were joining us for a few days before continuing on their own extended tour of Germany.

The first message informed me that Corinne and Rosemary would be staying with me at the hotel.

That was fine—unexpected, but fine.

The second message was more surprising.

It informed us that Todd would be staying with his girlfriend Denise, who had also flown over on the same flight.



This was news to both Todd and me. Apparently, Denise had planned the whole thing, and Todd hadn't been given much room to negotiate. It was

a classic ambush—well-timed, well-executed, and completely out of left field.

I'll admit, I was a little concerned.

This wasn't part of the plan. The idea of finishing the trip solo wasn't appealing, especially after weeks of shared mishaps, beer counts, and architectural debates.

Plus the remaining budget was supposed to be paid by two people.

But Todd took it in stride, and I tried to do the same.

We found Corinne and Rosemary in a cozy little bar tucked behind the hotel. By the time we arrived, they'd already made friends with the locals and were deep into animated conversations, laughing and gesturing like seasoned travelers. Denise joined us shortly after, and the group felt complete—if slightly rearranged.

Todd and Denise left around 17:00, presumably to settle into their new arrangement. The rest of us stayed at the bar, where the beer flowed freely and the mood was light. We had about five half-liter mugs each, which felt like the right amount to recalibrate the day.



Later, we ventured downtown to a small restaurant. It was charming, with warm lighting and a menu that didn't require a translator.

The food was good, the service friendly, but I wasn't in the best mood.

The "U-Bahn incident" had soured things a bit.

I won't go into detail here—some stories are better saved for when the beer count is higher—but suffice it to say that navigating Munich's

subway system while mildly buzzed and emotionally off-kilter is not recommended.

There was confusion, there was miscommunication, and there may have been a moment where I was ordered to pay 40 DM per person by an undercover U-Bahn detective.

Still, the day ended on a decent note. The rain had stopped, the city lights reflected off the wet pavement, and the beer had done its job.

Munich felt like a city that could absorb anything—Olympic history, surprise girlfriends, and even a slightly disgruntled American trying to make sense of a subway map.

Beer count: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺

Mood: Disrupted but recovering. Forecast: More beer, fewer surprises (hopefully).

## Day 33 – The Clock That Couldn't Be Found and the Pool That Forgot Its Lanes

Day 33 – September 29, 1989

Munich, West Germany

We woke early, though “early” is a flexible term when you’re nursing the aftermath of five half-liter beers and a wine or two.

The rain had already begun—steady, unrelenting, and just dreary enough to make you question your life choices. Still, we rallied.

The plan was simple: head into town, soak up some Munich charm, and meet Todd and Denise at the clock in Marienplatz.

Now, for context, the Glockenspiel at Marienplatz is not exactly subtle. It’s a towering neo-Gothic structure with animated figurines that perform twice daily for crowds of tourists wielding cameras and bratwursts.

If you’re in Munich and you can’t find the clock at Marienplatz, you may need to reconsider your relationship with maps, signage, and possibly reality.



We didn’t see Todd and Denise.

Hours later, back at the hotel, a message awaited us: “we couldn’t find the clock.”

That was the entirety of their explanation. No apology, no elaboration. Just a statement that placed them in a very exclusive

category—possibly the only tourists in recorded history to fail the Marienplatz Clock Quest.

We were amused, confused, and mildly concerned.



With our rendezvous foiled, Corinne, Rosemary, and I pivoted to Plan B: the Munich City Museum.

It was a solid choice—warm, dry, and filled with enough historical oddities to distract us from our collective hangovers.

The museum offered a glimpse into Munich's

layered past, from medieval relics to post-war artifacts, all curated with that uniquely German blend of precision and melancholy.

Afterward, we attempted to find lunch.

This sounds simple.

It was not.

The rain had intensified, our moods had dipped, and every restaurant we passed seemed either closed, full, or mysteriously unwelcoming.

Eventually, we settled for something vaguely edible, though I couldn't tell you what it was. The memory is fogged by damp socks and a lingering headache.

By 15:00, we retreated to the hotel.

The girls collapsed into naps, and I, in a burst of misplaced ambition, decided to go swimming at the Olympic Pool—the Schwimmhalle.

This wasn't just any pool. This was the pool where Mark Spitz won seven gold medals in 1972, his mustache defying both gravity and convention.



The Schwimmhalle was impressive: sleek, cavernous, and echoing with the sounds of determined splashing. But the locker room threw me.

It was co-ed.

Not in a progressive, spa-like way, but in a “your head and feet are visible while you change” kind of way.

There were stalls, yes, but they offered only partial privacy. I felt like a giraffe trying to discreetly change pants.

The pool itself was Olympic-sized and beautiful—but oddly chaotic.

No lap lanes.

No structure. Just a free-for-all of swimmers moving in unpredictable patterns.

I spent most of my laps dodging elbows and trying not to collide with elderly Germans doing backstroke.

It was, frankly, the least German thing I've experienced in Germany.



After my swim, the skies remained overcast, the city cloaked in a soft gray that felt appropriate for what came next.

I made my way to Connollystraße 31.

It's not a tourist destination. There are no signs pointing you there, no guided tours. Just a quiet apartment building with a plaque outside. But for me, it was one of the most meaningful stops on this trip.

Connollystraße 31 was the residence of the Israeli Olympic Team during the 1972 Munich Games.

It's also where the Black September terrorist group carried out their attack—killing two athletes and taking nine others hostage.

The botched rescue attempt at the airport ended in tragedy. All eleven Israeli athletes and coaches were killed.

I remember watching it unfold on live television. I was fourteen at the time, and the images stuck.

The grainy footage, the confusion, and finally, Jim McKay's solemn words: "They're all gone."

It was the first time I understood that the world could be brutal, even during something as hopeful as the Olympics.



Standing outside the building, I said a quiet prayer.

The plaque listed the names, but it was easy to miss. If you didn't know what had happened there, you'd walk right by. That felt wrong. These men deserved more than anonymity. They deserved memory.

Back at the hotel, the mood had shifted. The girls were rested, the rain had lightened, and we decided to head back into town for dinner.

We ended up at the Ratskeller München, tucked beneath the New Town Hall at Marienplatz—yes, the very place Todd and Denise couldn't locate.



The Ratskeller was everything you want in a German restaurant: vaulted ceilings, warm lighting, and food that makes you forget the weather.

I had a dish I couldn't pronounce but would gladly eat again. Rich, savory, and paired with wine that softened the edges of the day. It was, without question, the best meal I've had

on this trip.

We lingered over dinner, letting the wine do its work.

The sadness of Connollystraße 31 still hung in the air, but it was tempered by the comfort of good food, shared stories, and the quiet resilience of travel. Munich had offered both chaos and grace today. And somehow, that felt just right.

Beers: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍷🍷 Wine: 🍷🍷 Mood: reflective, full, slightly damp Forecast: more wine, fewer missed clocks

## Day 34 - Soggy Drunk and the Mudslide Waltz

Day 34 - September 30, 1989  
Munich, West Germany

Oktoberfest Day! The exclamation points practically wrote themselves.

I woke early, determined to start the day with a bit of dignity before descending into the beer-soaked madness that awaited.

The Schwimmhalle was mercifully less crowded than the day before, and I managed a decent swim without having to dodge rogue backstrokers or freestyle anarchists.

The water was cool, the air smelled faintly of chlorine and ambition, and for a brief moment, I felt like I was restoring balance to my system.

Then I stepped outside and was reminded that Munich had not yet forgiven us for yesterday's revelry.

It was still raining—soft, steady, and just persistent enough to make umbrellas feel like a losing battle.

But the girls and I were undeterred. We headed downtown once again, determined to see the famous Glockenspiel at Marienplatz. The dancing clock, the pride of Munich, the one landmark that even the most directionally challenged tourist could find.

Except, apparently, Todd and Denise.

We'd arranged to meet them there, again. And again, they failed to show.



Later, they left a message at the hotel saying they couldn't make it because they had decided to visit an art museum and lost track of time and by the time they got to the Marienplatz we were not there.

At this point, I began to suspect they were avoiding us—or perhaps trapped in some alternate dimension where Marienplatz was a myth and all clocks were invisible.



No matter. With or without them, we were going to Oktoberfest.

But first, we admired the Glockenspiel's mechanical ballet, grabbed some sauerbraten from a street vendor (tender, tangy, and served with a side of drizzle), and made our way to the Deutsches Museum.

It was vast, well-curated, and filled with enough scientific wonders to make you feel smarter just by walking through the doors.

But after a couple of hours, Corinne and Rosemary hit their limit.

The rain, the hangover residue, and the sheer volume of information had worn them down.

We needed beer.

We found a cozy little bistro tucked into a side street, the kind of place where the lighting is warm, the tables are close together, and the bartender looks like he's seen every kind of tourist disaster imaginable.

We ordered a round—just a beer or two, purely medicinal—and reasoned that showing up to Oktoberfest sober would be a tactical error.

We were right.

Before leaving, we asked the bartender how to find the right U-Bahn stop for Oktoberfest.

He gave us the most German answer possible: "Just follow the crowd." So we did.



When the crowd stood up, we stood up. When they surged toward the exit, we surged too. It was like being swept along by a river of anticipation and lederhosen.

And then we arrived.

Oktoberfest was not a festival. It was a phenomenon.

A sprawling, chaotic, joyous explosion of beer, music, and humanity. Never in my life had I seen so many people drinking beer in one place.



The tents loomed like cathedrals of celebration, each one echoing with laughter, clinking mugs, and the occasional off-key rendition of "Ein Prosit."

We made our way to the Hofbräuhaus tent—the most famous of the twelve, and arguably the most raucous. It holds about 1,000 guests, though it felt like twice that.

We circled the crowd twice before finding seats at one of the communal picnic tables, squeezed between a group of Australians and a trio of Germans who looked like they'd been drinking since sunrise.

Then we started drinking – again.

The beers were 7.10 Deutsche Marks—about \$3.65—for half a liter.

Not bad, considering the  
ambiance included live music,  
international camaraderie,  
and a man named Ulrich who  
kept yelling “You are soggy  
drunk!”

We’re still not entirely sure  
that’s what he was saying,  
but it caught on.

Soon, the entire table was  
chanting it like a battle  
cry. “You are soggy drunk!”  
echoed through the tent, punctuated by laughter and the occasional  
beer shower.



Corinne and Rosemary met a rotating cast of characters—Rome, Monaco, Germany, and possibly someone claiming to be from Liechtenstein.

The band played the same ten songs on repeat, each one tailored to a different nationality.

“It’s a Long Way to Tipperary” for the Brits, “Waltzing Matilda” for the Aussies, “Yankee Doodle Dandy” for us Americans, and “Ein Prosit” for everyone, every ten minutes, like clockwork.



I wore my University of Virginia sweatshirt, and was surprised by how many people recognized it. "Wahoo!" they shouted. "Wahoo-wah!"

It was oddly comforting to hear echoes of home in the middle of Bavarian bedlam.

After four hours and four half-liters, I decided it was time to retreat.

Corinne and I left her roommate Rosemary in the capable hands of some friendly strangers and wandered toward the carnival rides that ring the beer tents.

We rode the bumper cars, which felt like a metaphor for the day—chaotic, loud, and slightly dangerous. Then, in a moment of questionable judgment, we decided to try the roller coaster.

On the way there, fate intervened.

As we crossed a dimly lit parking lot, Corinne stepped into a pothole the size of Luxembourg and began to fall backward into a puddle of mud.

I reached out to catch her, gallantly, but physics had other plans.

She pulled me down with her, and the whole thing unfolded in slow motion—arms flailing, camera clutched in one hand, dignity slipping away.

I landed nose-first attempting to protect the camera that I was carrying in my right hand.

Corinne was covered in mud from the back, and I was coated down the entire right side of my body, including my face.

It was not a subtle look.



Since it was dark, I hid in the bushes while Corinne flagged down a taxi. When the driver stopped, I emerged like a swamp creature and climbed into the back seat.

We asked him to drop us off in the hotel garage to avoid the lobby.

I don't think he ever saw how muddy we were—or the state of his cab afterward.

Apologies, Mr. Taxi Driver.

Back in the room, I had no choice but to shower in my clothes. The mud was everywhere, and stripping down would have only spread the damage.

It was absurd, messy, and completely unforgettable.

Oktoberfest had delivered.

Beers: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺

Mud: full coverage Mood: soggy, euphoric, slightly concussed Forecast: bruises, laughter, and maybe a new camera

# Day 35 - Farewell, a History Lesson, and a Train Full of Strangers

Day 35 - October 1, 1989

Munich, West Germany to Rome, Italy (433 miles)



As I write this, we're somewhere between Munich and Rome, hurtling through the night on the 23:30 train.

The term "first class" is being used here in the loosest possible sense.

There's only one first class car, and the sleeping compartments are full.

Overflowing, really. The car is packed with twice as many people as it should hold, most of whom seem to have wandered in without tickets, luggage, or any clear understanding of train etiquette.

The conductors, for their part, were utterly useless for the first hour and a half.

They sat in a nearly empty compartment, sipping something warm and ignoring the growing chaos around them.

Todd, never one to suffer quietly, eventually barged in and demanded they do something—anything—to help us find seats.

They responded by throwing him out. Not metaphorically. Literally.

So we did what any seasoned traveler would do: we lay down in the corridor.

Bags as pillows, jackets as blankets, and the rhythmic clatter of the train as our lullaby.

It was not romantic. It was not comfortable. It was, however, memorable.



Around 1:00 a.m., a new set of conductors came on duty.

These ones had a pulse. They began checking tickets, ejecting squatters, and restoring some semblance of order.

Eventually, Todd and I were ushered into a proper first class compartment. It wasn't luxurious, but it had seats. At that point, seats felt like salvation.

Looking back, we probably should've made reservations.

But really—one first class car on a night train from Munich to Rome? During Oktoberfest?

That's like offering one bathroom at a beer festival. Someone didn't think this through.

Earlier in the day, things were far more civilized. I started with a swim at the Schwimmhalle, my now-familiar ritual.

The water was cool, the lanes mercifully clear, and for a brief moment, I felt like I was reclaiming my body from the previous night's beer tally.

The sun had finally returned to Munich, and with it came the crowds. The city was buzzing—ten times as many people as the day before, all

wandering, shopping, and admiring the architecture with that wide-eyed tourist look.

Corinne, Rosemary, and I grabbed a bite downtown, soaking in the rare warmth and watching the city come alive.

Then, at long last, we reunited with Todd and Denise.

I'll admit, I'd started to worry.

If Todd had decided to extend his romantic detour indefinitely, I'd be left to navigate the rest of the trip solo.

Not ideal. But he was back—recharged, re-engaged, and ready to pick up where we left off. Minus the Oktoberfest escapades, which he missed entirely. His loss.

Corinne and Rosemary had rented a car for their continued journey through Germany and Switzerland. With their departure looming, we decided to spend the afternoon doing something more reflective.



We drove out to Dachau.

The memorial at the site of the former concentration camp is quiet.

Eerily quiet. There's a stillness there that feels deliberate, as if the land itself is holding its breath.

Some of the barracks and buildings have been reconstructed, serving as exhibits. But most of the camp was leveled after liberation. What remains is enough.

According to the displays, Dachau operated for twelve years, beginning in 1933. Over 200,000 prisoners passed through its gates. More than

41,000 died—of hunger, illness, torture, and murder. The numbers are staggering. The reality, even more so.

It's hard to describe the feeling of standing in a place like that.

The air feels heavier. silence feels louder. You walk slowly, not out of reverence, but because your body instinctively slows down.

It's impossible to understand how such cruelty was allowed to flourish. How ordinary people became instruments of horror.



The  
of

I don't pretend to grasp it. I just stood there, quietly, and tried to honor the memory of those who suffered.

At 16:00, I said goodbye to Corinne and Rosemary. They were off to meet one of Rosemary's friends and continue their journey.

It was a bittersweet farewell. We'd shared laughter, beer, and a fair amount of mud. Their absence would be felt.

Todd and I took a cab to the airport so Denise could change her reservation and fly home.

Then, in a nod to routine, we returned to the Rathskeller for dinner. Familiar food, familiar beer, and the comforting rhythm of a place that had become our Munich anchor.

we had a few beers—naturally—and began planning our welcome home party. It felt premature, but also necessary.



A way to remind ourselves that this trip, for all its twists and turns, was finite.

That soon we'd be back in the land of reliable plumbing and predictable train schedules.

And then we boarded this damn train.

Rome awaits. We're hoping to meet up with Gene and M'Liz when we arrive. They should be getting in sometime tonight.

We're also planning to connect with Craig Morrison, our friend and priest who's studying near-Eastern languages at the Vatican. If all goes well, tomorrow will be a reunion of sorts.

For the first time on this trip, we don't have a hotel reservation. It's a gamble, but Rome is big. There must be something available. Somewhere.

Beers: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺

Mood: tired, reflective, mildly bruised Forecast: Roman ruins, Vatican intrigue, and hopefully a bed

## Day 36 - No Flying Babies, Just Déjà Vu

Day 36 - October 2, 1989

Rome, Italy

Rome has turned out to be a pleasant surprise.

I say that with the full awareness that Rome is supposed to be a pleasant surprise—ancient ruins, espresso, fountains, and the occasional Vespa narrowly missing your kneecaps.

But after the chaos of the midnight train and the lingering Oktoberfest haze, I wasn't sure what kind of welcome we'd get.

We arrived at the train station bleary-eyed and skeptical.

Within minutes, we were approached by a representative of something called "Free Travel Reservations." The name alone sounded like a scam.



We'd heard all the stories—especially the one about the "gypsies" who throw a baby at you, and while you instinctively catch the child, they slice your fanny pack and disappear with your passport, wallet, and dignity.

Fortunately, neither Todd nor I was wearing a fanny pack. And no airborne infants appeared.

The man turned out to be legitimate.

He wouldn't accept a tip, spoke decent English, and found us a hotel called—somewhat inexplicably—Hotel Miami.

Located on Via Nazionale, it was \$100 a night and, as we would soon discover, worth every lira.

When we asked for directions, he simply pointed to a hunched-over porter who had loaded our bags onto a large wheelbarrow-style cart and said, "Follow him."

So we did.

For fifteen minutes. Through cobbled streets, past cafes and mopeds, we trailed this determined figure like characters in a silent film. Two American tourists, backpacks slung, following a man who looked like he'd been pushing carts since the Renaissance.



The hotel was tucked into the top floor of a centuries-old building.



To enter, we passed through a normal-sized wooden door cut into a massive, castle-like wooden gate that led to a courtyard. From there, we climbed a flight of stairs and found ourselves in a maze of rooms surrounding a modest reception desk. The staff spoke English—a rare and welcome bonus—and the location was perfect.

Ironically, this was the first Sunday of the entire trip that I didn't make it to church.

By the time we arrived, all the masses had ended. I figured Rome would forgive me. After all, we'd be visiting enough churches and cathedrals in the coming days to make up for it.

We spent the afternoon walking.

The Coliseum, the Forum, the Victor Emmanuel Memorial—Rome's greatest hits. The city is a living museum, and every corner feels like it's waiting to be photographed or painted or written about.

At the Victor Emmanuel Memorial, something strange happened.

As we descended the steps, I was hit with a wave of déjà vu so strong it stopped me mid-stride.

I remembered walking down those exact steps 26 years ago, when I was a kid living in Rome with my family. The memory was vivid—sunlight, stone, the sound of my parents' voices. It was like time folded in on itself.



Very cool. Very unexpected.

The people we met throughout the day were warm and welcoming, even if the service was slow.

Rome doesn't rush. It meanders. It gestures. It pours wine and forgets your order and then remembers it with a flourish. You learn to adapt.

In the evening, we stopped by Gene and M'Liz's hotel and left a message to meet them at 11:00 tomorrow.



Before that, we swung by the train station to make a reservation for the next leg of our journey. We ended up paying more than expected for a private sleeping car to Nice—but after the Munich-to-Rome corridor-floor fiasco, it felt like a necessary indulgence.

Dinner was at a charming little restaurant recommended by the Danish desk clerk at our hotel.

He had the kind of calm confidence that made you trust his taste in food. The meal was excellent—simple, flavorful, and served with just enough ceremony to remind you that you were in Italy.

I tried to call Craig Morrison, our Carmelite priest friend studying near-Eastern languages at the Vatican.

No luck.

We couldn't get an outside line.

Rome may be eternal, but its phone systems are stuck somewhere between 1954 and wishful thinking.

Beer count: 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺

Mood: relaxed, nostalgic, mildly amused Forecast: more ruins, more wine, and hopefully a working phone.

## Day 37 - Michelangelo, Monks, and the Gas Pedal Gospel

Day 37 - October 3, 1989

Rome, Italy

I started the day with a run. That sounds noble, doesn't it?

Like I woke up in Rome and thought, "Let's greet the Eternal City with a burst of athleticism."

In truth, it was more of a survival exercise. Running in Rome is not for the faint of heart or slow of reflex. The sidewalks are uneven, the intersections lawless, and the drivers—well, let's just say they operate on a different spiritual plane.

There's a saying that the only controls in an Italian car are the gas pedal and the horn.

After dodging three Fiats, two Vespas, and one delivery truck that seemed to be driven by a caffeinated ghost, I'm inclined to agree.

I spent half the run navigating cobblestones and the other half praying that my obituary wouldn't include the phrase "flattened near the Pantheon."

Back at the hotel, Todd and I gathered our laundry and made the pilgrimage to a place near the train station that the front desk had recommended.

It wasn't glamorous, but the prospect of clean clothes felt like a luxury. There's something deeply satisfying about handing over a bag of travel-worn shirts and socks and knowing they'll come back smelling like detergent instead of train station.

After the laundry drop-off, we met up with Gene and M'Liz at their hotel—the Bernini Bristol, which sounds like a brand of luxury fountain pens but is actually a very swanky place with marble floors and doormen who look like they moonlight as opera singers.

From there, we set off for the Vatican Museum.

Now, I've seen a lot of museums on this trip. Some were dusty, some were confusing, and one in Munich had an entire room dedicated to spoons.

But the Vatican Museum? That's a whole different category.

It's not just a museum—it's a vault of civilization. The scale is staggering. According to the brochure we picked up, the collection contains around 70,000 items, though only 20,000 are on display at any given time. That's still enough to make your neck sore from looking up.

The Sistine Chapel was the highlight, of course. Michelangelo's ceiling is one of those things you've seen a thousand times in books and postcards, but standing beneath it is something else entirely.



The colors, the movement, the sheer audacity of painting the entire thing while lying on his back—it's hard not to be impressed.

That guy Michelangelo could really paint.

I know that's not a groundbreaking observation, but it's worth saying out

Loud when you're staring at "The Creation of Adam" and realizing that the finger-touch moment has become a global shorthand for divine connection.

After the museum, we grabbed lunch and made our way to the monastery where Craig Morrison is staying.

Craig is a family friend and a Carmelite priest who's been in Rome for about eight weeks, studying near-Eastern languages.

His goal is to eventually help translate ancient texts—ideally ones that bring us closer to the original sources of biblical events.

It's a noble pursuit, and one that requires a deep understanding of languages most people can't even pronounce.



Getting into the monastery was a bit of a comedy.

The security guard was asleep in the doorway, and it took a few tries to wake him up and convince him that we weren't selling encyclopedias. Eventually, he managed to rouse himself and let Craig know we were there.

Craig came down with a smile and ushered us into the monastery's conference room, which looked like it hadn't changed much since the Council of Trent.

He offered us drinks—water, soda, or beer.

We chose beer.

It felt like the right thing to do. There's something delightfully subversive about sipping a cold one in a monastery while discussing ancient languages and Vatican politics.

We chatted for a while, swapping stories from the trip and catching Craig up on our various misadventures.

Then he offered to give us a tour of the Vatican.

He warned us that he'd only been there eight weeks and didn't know everything, but honestly, he knew more than any of us and had the added benefit of speaking with the quiet authority of someone who's read footnotes in Latin.

The tour was fantastic.

Craig took us through St. Peter's Basilica, pointing out paintings, sculptures, and architectural details with the kind of reverence that makes you slow down and actually look.

My favorite piece was the Pietà—Michelangelo again.

There's something about that sculpture that stops you in your tracks.

The tenderness, the sorrow, the way Mary holds Jesus with both grief and grace—it's one of those works that makes you forget to breathe for a moment.



Craig's appreciation for the history of the Vatican was contagious. He spoke not just as a scholar but as someone genuinely moved by the layers of meaning embedded in the art and architecture.

It was one of the most memorable parts of the trip so far—not just because of what we saw, but because of how we saw it.

After the tour, we parted ways with Craig and made plans to meet Gene and M'Liz again tomorrow to catch the sights we missed today.



Todd and I wandered back to a little bar we'd discovered the day before and had a few beers to toast the day.

Then we headed to dinner at another spot recommended by our Danish desk clerk, who's quickly becoming our unofficial Roman concierge.

Dinner was excellent—simple, hearty, and served with just

enough flair to remind you that you're in Italy.

A full meal for \$14 per person felt like a steal, especially considering the view and the wine.

Tomorrow promises more churches, more ruins, and probably more laundry.

But today was about art, friendship, and the quiet joy of seeing something familiar through someone else's eyes.

Beers - 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 wine - 🍷🍷

Steps taken - approximately 12,000, most of them uphill spiritual insights - several, some involving Michelangelo, some involving beer

## Day 38 - Pizza, Pantheon, and the Chianti Express

Day 38 - October 4, 1989

Rome, Italy to Monte Carlo, Monaco (287 miles)

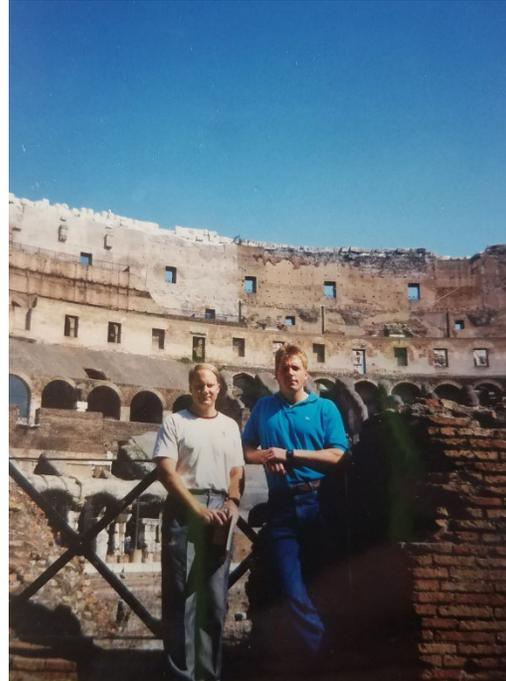
Midnight Train to Monte Carlo.

Our last day in Rome was a fitting send-off—equal parts majestic, chaotic, overpriced, and unforgettable.

We met up with Gene and M'Liz around 11:00, and with the sun finally cooperating, we headed straight for the Coliseum.

This time, it was open.

No locked gates, no mysterious closures, just a massive, crumbling amphitheater waiting to be admired.



We wandered through the arches, snapped photos like proper tourists, and tried to imagine the roar of the crowd two thousand years ago.

It's hard to picture gladiators when you're surrounded by fanny packs and Nikon lenses, but the bones of history are still there.



From the Coliseum, we strolled through the ruins of the Forum.

It was, as I noted, “very old and ruined.”

Columns leaning like tired sentinels, bits of marble scattered like breadcrumbs from a long-forgotten feast.

You don’t walk through the Forum so much as you drift—half in awe, half wondering how many sandals have tread the same path.

Then came lunch. And the scam.

We told the waiter we wanted pizza. Simple. Casual. Italian.

He nodded, smiled, and returned with four full-size pies. No menu. No warning. Just a parade of crust and cheese that could have fed a small army.

We could’ve made do with one or two, but apparently he thought we were hosting a banquet.

The bill reflected his enthusiasm. We paid, grumbled, and chalked it up to the Roman experience. If you don’t get ripped off at least once, were you even in Italy?

After lunch, we visited the Pantheon—still one of the most impressive buildings I’ve ever seen. The dome defies logic, and the oculus at the top feels like a portal to something divine.

Then we climbed Capitoline Hill, one of the Seven Hills of Rome, and took in the view. The city sprawled beneath us, ancient and modern, chaotic and serene.

By this point, I was starting to feel the early grip of a cold.

My head was stuffed up, breathing was a chore, and every step felt like it required a minor pep talk. Still, we pressed on toward the Spanish Steps.

At the top, we turned the corner and spotted a BMW 735 with Virginia license plates. In Rome. Go figure. It was like a postcard from home, parked in the middle of a Fellini film.

With a couple of hours to kill, we settled into an outdoor café and had a few beers.

The sun was warm, the people-watching was excellent, and the prices were predictably steep. But it was worth it. There's something about sipping a cold beer in Rome that makes you forget the exchange rate.

Gene lent Todd a sweater—an act of kindness that felt like a hug from home—and we met Craig around 19:20 at the Bernini Bristol.

He'd tried to arrive at 19:00 but couldn't get off the bus the first time it circled the piazza.

Too crowded. So he rode it around again, like a monk on a carousel, and finally disembarked.

We asked the doorman for a dinner recommendation, but Craig vetoed it on account of price.

Instead, he suggested a place about 25 minutes away. It turned out to be a 15-minute walk, and a beautiful one at that.



The air was crisp, the streets alive, and the city glowing in that golden hour that Rome seems to specialize in.

We ended up at Piazza Navona, which somehow we'd missed until now.

It's massive, elegant, and at night, absolutely stunning.

Bernini's fountain in the center sparkled under the lamplight, and the whole square felt like a stage set for a romantic comedy.

Dinner was perfect.

Each of us had pasta and salad, and we split four bottles of wine.

Craig talked about his passion for translating ancient scripture, and we listened, fascinated. He spoke about the importance of near-Eastern languages, the search for older texts, and the dream of bringing clarity to stories that have shaped the world. It was one of those conversations that makes you feel smarter just for being in the room.



arrived around 23:00.

The total bill? \$48 for all.

After the pizza debacle, it felt like karmic balance.

After dinner, Gene and M'Liz helped us carry our bags to the train station.

Our train to Monte Carlo departed at 23:30, and we

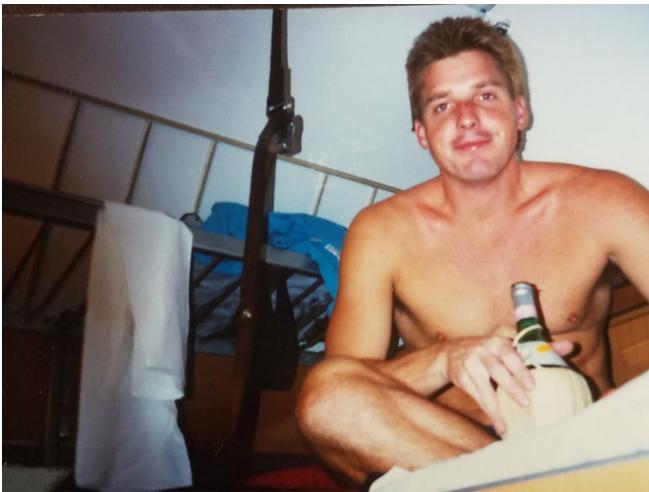
This time, we had a sleeping car. No corridor floors. No conductor standoffs. Just bunks, blankets, and the promise of a smoother ride.

Gene offered to grab us some water and snacks. I asked for bread and sodas. He returned with crackers—close enough.

Then Todd decided we needed beer. He ran back to the station and bumped into Gene and M'Liz, who were also trying to procure beer. No luck. The station had shut down its beer supply for the night.

But Todd doesn't give up easily.

He returned with two liters of Chianti.



We climbed into our bunks, cracked open the bottles, and spent the night sipping wine and reading as the train sped along the Italian coast.

The rhythm of the tracks, the hum of the engine, and the soft clink of plastic cups made for a strangely perfect end to our Roman chapter.

Beer - 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 Wine - 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

Mood - nostalgic, tipsy, slightly congested Forecast - Monte Carlo glitz, more pasta, and maybe a pharmacy



## Day 39 – Monte Carlo: Missed Stops, Modest Wins, and Mediterranean Beer Math

Day 39 – October 5, 1989  
Monte Carlo, Monaco

We rolled into France right on schedule, which felt like a small miracle given our track record with trains.

The Mediterranean shimmered outside the window, and I was lying on my bunk watching the coastline drift past when I spotted a cluster of elegant buildings clinging to the cliffs.



“That looks like Monte Carlo,” I said.

It was.

Unfortunately, we didn’t have our Eurail passes or travel documents in hand.

We’d handed them off to the conductor the night before so he could handle any border formalities while we slept. By the time he returned them, the train had already passed through Monaco and was barreling toward Nice.

So we did what any seasoned traveler would do: we got off in Nice, regrouped, and caught another train back to Monte Carlo.

It was a minor detour, but one that felt oddly appropriate. You don’t just arrive in Monaco—you circle it first, like a satellite waiting for permission to land.



Our hotel, the Beach Plaza is the only hotel in Monte Carlo with a private beach.

That sounds glamorous, and it is—until you realize that everything in Monte Carlo is glamorous.

The hotel is sleek, modern, and perched right on the water. The facilities are excellent,

the staff polished, and the price of beer somewhere between “ouch” and “are you serious?”

At \$4-5 a bottle, we made the executive decision to cut back on food.

Priorities.

After the train shuffle, I was feeling wiped out, so we spent the afternoon lounging.

The room was comfortable, the view spectacular, and the silence oddly luxurious. Monte Carlo doesn't shout—it whispers in silk.

Later, we took the bus to the American Express office to make reservations for Lucerne and Amsterdam.

In Lucerne, we'll be staying at Chateau Gütsch, which sounds like something out of a fairy tale. I'm picturing turrets, fog, and maybe a fireplace that crackles on cue.

Amsterdam is still a mystery, but we'll figure it out when we get there.



In the evening, we suited up—well, as much as two guys living out of backpacks can—and headed to the Grand Casino.

This is the place. The one you see in movies. The one where tuxedos mingle with diamonds and martinis are stirred with a wink.

We were excited. We were ready.

We were... not allowed into the fancy parts.

Turns out, you need money, connections, or a tuxedo that doesn't smell faintly of train upholstery to get into the James Bond sections. We were directed to the more modest game tables, which felt like the casino equivalent of being seated near the kitchen.

Still, Todd was undeterred.

He's been reading a book on blackjack strategy for the entire trip, and this was his moment.

He played with focus, discipline, and just enough flair to make it interesting. He won more than he lost, which in Monte Carlo is practically a miracle.



The research paid off.

We had a couple of beers at the Grand Casino—expensive, of course—and then wandered down the hill to the Lowes Hotel and Casino. This one felt more familiar. Less Bond, more Vegas. Neon lights, slot machines, and a lounge that smelled faintly of ambition and disappointment.

I played the slots and won about \$10, which was just enough to afford a beer in the lounge. It's a strange kind of economy—gamble to drink, drink to forget the gamble.



After our modest victory, we wandered the streets looking for food. Monte Carlo is beautiful at night—quiet, clean, and lit like a jewelry box.

Eventually, we found a small Italian restaurant overlooking the beach. It was cozy, unpretentious, and exactly what we needed.

We ended up sharing a table with a few Swiss guys and a young woman from Australia who was working in Monaco as a nanny.

They were friendly, curious, and full of stories. The Swiss guys were on a short holiday, and the Australian girl had been living here for a few months.

She talked about the families she worked for, the quirks of the local culture, and the strange blend of wealth and isolation that defines life in Monte Carlo.

It was one of those dinners that sneaks up on you—simple food, good company, and the kind of conversation that makes you forget how tired you are. We lingered longer than planned, sipping wine and watching the waves roll in.

Tomorrow, we'll explore Monte Carlo properly. Though, to be honest, I suspect it won't take long. The city is compact, curated, and designed to impress quickly. Still, I'm looking forward to seeing the palace,

the harbor, and maybe catching a glimpse of someone who actually belongs in the fancy part of the casino.

Beers -           wine -  

Mood - amused, mildly broke, slightly sunburned Forecast - yachts, espresso, and maybe a nap on the private beach

## Day 40 – Couchettes, Cruise Ships, and the \$13 Beer

Day 40 – October 6, 1989  
Monte Carlo, Monaco

We woke up at 10:00 today, which felt like sleeping in, though in Monte Carlo time it's probably considered "early brunch." The sun was out, the air was crisp, and the city looked like it had been polished overnight.

We decided to take a walk through the principality—no agenda, just a slow meander through one of the most absurdly beautiful places on the planet.

First stop: the train station. Tomorrow is Todd's birthday, and we needed to make reservations for our next leg.

No private car available, unfortunately, but we managed to snag a first-class couchette for four. With any luck, we'll be the only ones in the compartment and can pretend it's private.

If not, we'll make friends or fake sleep. Either way, it's a step up from the corridor floor fiasco on the Munich-to-Rome train.

From the station, we walked to the Oceanographic Museum and Aquarium.



It's perched dramatically on a cliff, like something out of a Bond film, and dates back to 1910. The building itself is a marvel—stone

arches, sweeping views, and the kind of architectural confidence that says, “Yes, we know we’re fabulous.”



Inside, the exhibits were a mix of marine biology and nautical nostalgia. Tanks filled with exotic fish, models of ships, antique diving gear, and jewelry made from sea creatures that probably didn’t sign off on the arrangement.

There were skeletons, weapons, and enough coral to make you question your bathroom décor choices. It

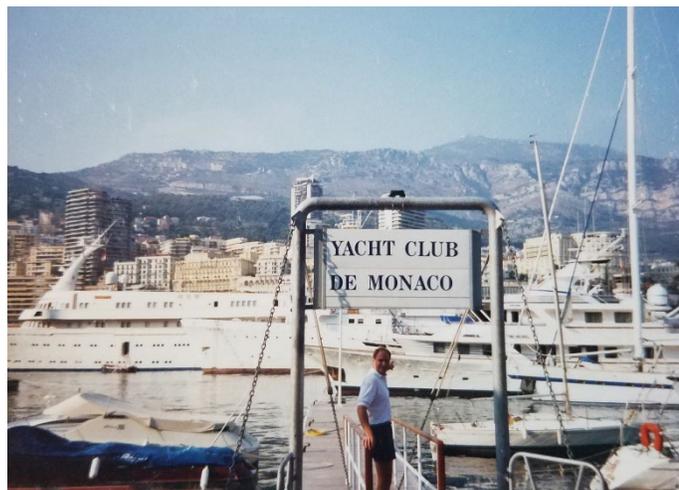
was a bit pricey, but interesting enough to justify the ticket.

The view from the museum was spectacular. Monte Carlo sprawled below us—red-tiled rooftops, winding streets, and the harbor dotted with yachts that looked like they belonged to oil barons or retired tennis champions.

A cruise ship was anchored nearby, and we made a note to watch it set sail later.

There’s something oddly satisfying about watching a floating city drift away.

After the museum, our priorities shifted. It was time to find beer.



We wandered toward the yacht club, figuring that where there are yachts, there must be alcohol. We found a place offering .5 liter beers for \$13 – a steal by Monte Carlo standards.

We each had three, which felt both indulgent and financially reckless. While sipping, we struck up a conversation with a few folks from the cruise ship. They were shocked by the prices.

We nodded sympathetically, but also – duh. You're in Monte Carlo.

The sidewalks are made of marble and the pigeons probably have bank accounts.

Later, we asked the bartender for a dinner recommendation.

We wanted something local, something not designed to fleece tourists. He gave us a few names, and we found one about four blocks away from the main drag. It looked promising—dim lighting, no English menus, and a clientele that seemed more interested in food than photo ops.



We were right. The meal was excellent. I had steak with frites, and it was cooked perfectly—crispy edges, tender center, and just enough seasoning to make you pause between bites.

The bill came to \$20, which in Monte Carlo is practically a giveaway.

We toasted the find and patted ourselves on the back for remembering that bartenders know everything.

On the walk back to the hotel, we stumbled upon a vending machine.

Not just any vending machine – a vending machine that sold beer.

Three cans for a fraction of what we'd paid earlier. I wish we'd found it sooner, but that's travel. Timing is everything, and sometimes the best discoveries come after dinner.

I'm drinking one now as I write this.

The promenade where we found the machine runs along the beach, and the sunset walk back to the hotel was one of those quiet, perfect moments. The sky turned lavender, the waves whispered against the shore, and for a few minutes, everything felt exactly right.



Tonight, we're taking it easy. No casinos, no midnight trains, no philosophical debates about sea creature jewelry.

Just a quiet night, a few beers, and the hope of getting a solid eight hours of sleep – something we haven't managed in a while.

Tomorrow is Todd's birthday, and we'll be back on the rails. More cities, more stories, and probably more overpriced drinks. But for now, Monte Carlo has given us a day of beauty, laughter, and just enough absurdity to keep things interesting.

Beers – 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺

Mood – relaxed, amused, slightly sun-kissed Forecast – birthday trains, Swiss castles, and maybe another vending machine miracle

## Day 41 – Beach Beers and the Shoe Carafe Express

Day 41 – October 7, 1989

Monte Carlo, Monaco to Lucerne, Switzerland (235 miles)

Our final day in Monte Carlo unfolded like a postcard someone forgot to mail. The weather was perfect—75 degrees, sunny, and just breezy enough to make you feel like you were starring in a European shampoo commercial. We decided to spend the day doing what Monte Carlo does best: lounging.



I negotiated a 13:00 checkout with the hotel so we could squeeze in one last shower before hitting the rails.

At 9:30, I made my way down to the beach and swam my laps in the pool. It was cold. Not “refreshing” cold. More like “glacial runoff” cold. Still, it woke me up and gave me a sense of

accomplishment that would justify the beers to come.

After the swim, I laid out on a lounge chair and let the sun do its work. Todd joined me around 11:00, just in time to catch the best rays and the slow parade of beachgoers. It was his birthday, and we agreed that the best way to celebrate was to do absolutely nothing – except drink beer and stare at the sea.

At 13:00, freshly showered and checked out, we resumed our beach positions and cracked open the first round. The beers were cold, the breeze was warm, and the topless beach phenomenon – so hyped in



travel lore—turned out to be more subdued than expected. Not exactly the cultural awakening we'd been promised, but we weren't complaining.

We stayed on the beach until 17:00, slowly roasting and sipping, watching the day unfold like a lazy film reel.

Eventually, we remembered we had a train to catch and decided to stock up on provisions. We hit the grocery store and loaded up on salami, ham, bread, and two bottles of wine. All of it went into Todd's backpack, which was now functioning as a mobile deli.



Back at the hotel, we had a few more beers to round out the afternoon.

Then we caught the 19:30 local train to Nice, where we transferred to our overnight train to Geneva.

The plan had been to share a couchette compartment, toast Todd's birthday in style, and drift off to sleep with the Alps on the horizon.

Reality had other plans.

We were assigned berths in separate cars.

Todd ended up in a compartment with a baby who, from all reports, had been auditioning for a role in a horror film.

The crying was relentless. So, after stowing his bags Todd came by my compartment and we decided it was time to continue celebrating his birthday.

Meanwhile, I had settled into my own berth and began the ritual of unpacking our mobile feast.

I started working the cork out of my wine bottle with a pen cap when the guy across from me—also named Todd—offered a corkscrew.



Todd The Second turned out to be the Colorado manager for the Special Olympics, and he was full of stories, warmth, and practical tools.

As the train swayed and rattled, we faced a new challenge: how to keep our wine bottles upright.

Enter the Asics high-top basketball shoe.

Turns out, it's the perfect cradle for a bottle of wine. Stable, snug, and surprisingly ergonomic. I may have stumbled upon a new product line—The Shoe Carafe.

Coming soon to a wine shop near you.



We passed the bottle back and forth, lifting it from the shoe like knights drawing swords.

It was ridiculous and perfect. I even bought Todd (my Todd) a birthday pie at the grocery store, but he didn't seem as thrilled as I'd hoped. Maybe it was the crying baby. Or maybe pie just doesn't travel well in a backpack full of cured meats.

We sat up talking until around 23:00, swapping stories, sipping wine, and watching the night roll past the window. The train hummed along the coast, the stars blinked overhead, and the birthday celebration—while unconventional – felt just right.

Now, as I write this, we're about 15 minutes outside of Geneva. I think. The geography is fuzzy, the wine is gone, and the train is still rocking gently like a lullaby played on steel rails.

Tomorrow, we'll arrive in Lucerne and check into Chateau Gütsch – a place that sounds like it should come with a moat and a drawbridge. I'm hoping for turrets. Or at least a breakfast buffet with a view.



Beers – 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 wine – 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

Mood – sun-kissed, slightly tipsy, creatively inspired Forecast – Swiss castles, mountain air, and maybe a corkscrew of our own

## Day 42 - Turrets, Trains, and 36 Beers: A Lucerne Love Letter

Day 42 - October 8, 1989  
Lucerne, Switzerland



This place is great.

We arrived in Lucerne around noon and checked into the Hotel Château Gütsch, perched high above the city like something out of a storybook.

The moment I stepped through the doors, I fell in love with it.

Not the kind of fleeting travel infatuation that fades with checkout—but the kind that makes you think, “Someday, I’ll come back here with my wife. Preferably on our honeymoon.”

The hotel sits atop Gütsch Hill, which is where it gets its name.

According to the history tucked into our room folder (and confirmed by a plaque near the lobby), the original building was an inn built in 1859. It became a hotel in 1879, only to be heavily damaged by a fire in 1888. It was rebuilt in 1901 in the castle style that still stands today—turrets, stonework, and sweeping views of Lucerne and Lake Lucerne below.

During world war II, the hotel served as a refuge for displaced people—and, surprisingly, prisoners of war.

That detail caught me off guard. It’s hard to imagine this peaceful hilltop retreat once housing the chaos of wartime.

Even Queen Victoria stayed here for a month in 1868 while on vacation. I can see why. It's the kind of place that makes you want to linger.

After checking in, we crashed for a while. The train ride had been long, and the wine-fueled birthday celebration the night before had left us pleasantly drained.

Around 16:00, we wandered down to the hotel restaurant for a light meal – just soup and salad, enough to reset the system.

Then came one of the hotel's more charming features: the Gütsch-Bahn.

It's a private cog railway that runs up and down the hill, connecting the hotel to the edge of town. The cars are small—only six people per ride—but they're efficient and oddly delightful.

Riding it feels like stepping into a Wes Anderson film. If we'd walked or taken a taxi, it would've taken much longer and involved far more effort. This was better. Quieter. More cinematic.

At the bottom of the hill, we found a local bar boasting over 36 types of beer. That's not a typo. Thirty-six.

We tried a few—strictly for research purposes—and then wandered into another bar that felt like a Pennsylvania corner pub. Dim lighting, wood paneling, and the kind of quiet camaraderie that makes you feel like you've been a regular for years.

Eventually, we made our way back up the hill for our 20:30 dinner reservation at the hotel.





The hallway leading to the dining room is guarded by a full suit of armor, which feels both theatrical and oddly comforting. The dining room itself is a dream—dark wooden beams, a roaring fireplace, and the kind of ambiance that makes you speak in hushed tones without realizing it.

Dinner was tremendous. I had beef stroganoff—rich, creamy, and perfectly seasoned. Todd went with perch, which arrived delicately plated and cooked to perfection. We lingered over the meal, sipping wine and watching the fire crackle. It felt like we'd stepped out of time.

Our rooms are in the tower of the hotel, which is what we had been hoping for.

For the first time on this trip, we don't have to share a room. We each have our own space, our own bed, our own little slice of castle life. And we got two single rooms for the price of a double. A rare win in the world of travel math.



My room is everything I didn't know I needed. I'm sleeping in a turret.

A turret.

There's a heater in the middle of the room, cable TV on the wall, and a view that makes you want to write poetry—or at least a very long postcard.

I have a beer in hand, and I am happy.

There's something about this place that settles the soul.

Maybe it's the altitude. Maybe it's the architecture. Maybe it's the quiet dignity of a hotel that's seen centuries of guests and still manages to feel personal. Whatever it is, it works.

Beers - 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 wine - 🍷🍷🍷🍷

Mood - castle-bound, content, slightly enchanted Forecast - alpine air, turret dreams, and maybe a few more beers.

## Day 43 - Covered Bridges and Culinary Stalling: A Lucerne Send-Off

Day 43 - October 9, 1989  
Lucerne, Switzerland to Amsterdam, Netherlands (393 miles)

We're on our way to Amsterdam now, somewhere northbound on a train that may or may not be pointed in the right direction. But earlier today, we were still in Lucerne, and it was hard to leave.

Lucerne has a quiet magic to it - mountains in the distance, a lake that seems to change color with the hour, and buildings that look like they were sketched by someone nostalgic for the Middle Ages. It's the kind of place that makes you want to stay longer, even if you don't have a reason.

Todd and I decided to take a walking tour of the town before our departure. No guide, no map—just a slow wander through cobbled streets and alpine air.

Our first stop was the Franciscan Church of St. Maria in der Au, built around 1270.

Morning mass was underway when we arrived, so I stayed through the end. It wasn't in English, but the rhythm of the service was familiar enough to follow. The incense, the murmured prayers, the quiet reverence—it felt grounding.

After mass, we continued our walk. Lucerne sits about 1,400 feet above sea level, nestled on the shores of Lake Lucerne, which stretches roughly 19 miles.



The lake is framed by mountains – Mt. Pilatus and Mt. Rigi among them– and dotted with paddle steamers that look like they’ve been plucked from a sepia-toned postcard.

Some of them are over 75 years old, still sporting their original fittings. You can hop on and off at various points around the lake, including stops for hiking trails and scenic overlooks. We didn’t have time to take a boat tour, but it’s now firmly on the list for “next time.”



Our next stop was the Kapellbrücke–the Chapel Bridge.

It’s a covered wooden bridge that spans the Reuss River, which feeds into Lake Lucerne.

Built in 1365, it was originally part of the city’s fortifications.

Today, it connects the old town on the right bank with the newer part of town on the left.

It’s nearly 700 feet long and lined with paintings under the roof beams, each one depicting scenes from Lucerne’s history.

walking across it feels like stepping into a living museum.

After our stroll, we returned to the Château Gütsch to collect our bags. The hotel had been a dream – turrets, fireplaces, and the kind of quiet elegance that makes you whisper in the hallways.

We took a taxi to the train station, arriving a little later than planned.

Cue the sprint.

We ran through the station, dodging tourists and luggage, and boarded the train just in time.



We didn't get a sleeping car this time—those were booked solid—but we did manage to reserve seats. So, no repeat of the Rome corridor floor debacle. That said, we haven't actually made it to our seats yet.

In our haste, we boarded the first first-class car we saw.

It turned out to be the dining car.

And now, we're trying to stretch this meal into a six-hour experience so we don't have to relocate.



The dining car is quiet, spacious, and—most importantly—comfortable.

Our assigned seats are somewhere in a less glamorous part of the train, and we're not eager to find them.

So far, we've ordered snacks and drinks. We keep telling the attendant we're still deciding on dinner.

It's a delicate dance—enough ordering to justify our presence, but not so much that we blow the budget. I'm currently nursing a beer and pretending to study the menu like it's a sacred text.

Todd is doing the same. We've both become experts in the art of culinary stalling.

Every few minutes, one of us sighs and says, "I just can't decide..."

The attendant nods politely, probably aware of our game, but willing to play along.



It's not just about avoiding our seats. It's about savoring the transition. Leaving Lucerne feels like stepping out of a dream, and we're not quite ready to wake up. The dining car, with its soft lighting and gentle clatter, offers a buffer—a place to linger between chapters.

Soon, we'll be in Amsterdam. A new city, a new rhythm. But for now, we're somewhere in between, sipping beer, watching the countryside blur past, and trying to make a single meal last as long as possible.

Beers - 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺

Mood - wistful, strategic, slightly hungry Forecast - Dutch canals, stroopwafels, and maybe a real dinner

## Day 44 - Lost in Amsterdam: Torture Museums, Trolleys, and Ten Beers Later

Day 44 - October 10, 1989  
Amsterdam, Netherlands

Last night, we managed to stretch our stay in the dining car until about 21:00, which felt like a small victory. We nursed drinks, feigned indecision over dinner, and watched the countryside roll past like a slow-moving postcard.

Eventually, we had to disembark and change trains in Ausgang—wait, no, it was actually Düsseldorf. Old habits die hard.



The leg from Düsseldorf to Amsterdam was uneventful. No corridor sleeping, no shoe-based wine holders, no philosophical debates with strangers named Todd.

Just a quiet ride into the Netherlands and a taxi that made up for the calm with a burst of adrenaline.

Our driver seemed determined to set a land speed record while simultaneously ignoring every known traffic law.

We swerved, accelerated, and narrowly avoided at least two cyclists and one confused pedestrian. By the time we reached the Best Western, we were wide awake and slightly shaken.

After checking in, we decided to go out for drinks. The desk clerk recommended a place that turned out to be expensive and far too intimate—dim lighting, hushed voices, and the kind of ambiance that makes you whisper even when ordering a beer.

We bailed and found another spot that felt more our speed. We drank until about 12:30 AM, swapping stories and watching the locals navigate their own night.



This morning, we woke to rain. Not a dramatic downpour—just a steady drizzle that made everything look slightly blurred. It let up a bit, so we decided to walk toward town.

The original plan was to take the trolley, but somewhere between the hotel and the stop, we got lost.

Amsterdam's streets are charming but confusing, especially when you're trying to follow directions from a map that folds like origami.

We ended up at an Italian restaurant for lunch. It wasn't what we'd planned, but the pasta was warm, the wine was decent, and the staff didn't seem to mind our damp jackets.

After lunch, we set out in search of a museum we'd seen advertised on a light post—"A History of Torture Devices."



It sounded morbidly fascinating, and we were intrigued. Unfortunately, we had the wrong street. No museum. No torture. Just more walking.

We did manage to make reservations for the hydrofoil to Dover on Wednesday, which felt like a productive moment in an otherwise meandering day.

Then we turned our attention to the Anne Frank House.

All the museums were closed because it was Sunday, and as it turned out, today was also Yom Kippur. The Anne Frank House was closed in observance. It was a quiet, sobering moment in a day otherwise marked by missteps and missed connections.

We got lost again—this time trying to find the Heineken beer factory. We eventually located it, but it was closed. Argh.

The day was starting to feel like a scavenger hunt designed by someone with a twisted sense of humor.

So we pivoted.

We decided to drink our way back to the hotel.

We stopped in about five bars, including the one from last night.

Each one had its own vibe—some cozy, some loud, some filled with locals who looked like they'd been sitting in the same spot since breakfast.

In one bar, we met a group from New Jersey—several guys and one girl.

One of the guys was wearing a University of Virginia sweatshirt, just like mine. I asked if he'd gone there. He hadn't. Just liked the logo.

I nodded politely and sipped my beer.

Now we're getting ready for dinner. The plan is to find something local and not too touristy. We want to try some Dutch food—something hearty, something unfamiliar, something that doesn't come with a side of marinara.



Amsterdam has been a bit of a maze so far—closed museums, wrong streets, and trolleys that seem to operate on whim rather than schedule.

But it's also been charming, unpredictable, and full of small surprises. The canals, the crooked buildings, the quiet corners where you can sit and watch the world go by—it's a city that rewards wandering, even if you don't always end up where you meant to.

Beers - 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺

Mood - damp, amused, slightly disoriented Forecast - Dutch cuisine, hydrofoils, and maybe a museum that's actually open

## Day 45 - Canals, Canvases, and the Torture Museum: A Proper Amsterdam Day

Day 45 - October 11, 1989

Amsterdam, Netherlands

Today was great.

We woke up late—around 10:00—which felt like a luxury after the past few days of train schedules, museum closures, and the general chaos of European travel. After a slow start, we cashed some traveler's checks to get more local currency and hopped a train into town.

Our plan was simple: museums, canals, and maybe a few beers.

We started by buying tickets for the Museum Boat—a brilliant concept that combines canal cruising with hop-on-hop-off access to five major cultural sites around Amsterdam. It's part water taxi, part floating classroom, and it turned out to be one of the best decisions we've made in this city.

Our first stop was the Anne Frank House.

It's tucked away on a quiet canal street, unassuming and peaceful. The exhibit was powerful—more than I expected, and somehow more personal than my visit to Dachau.

There's something about seeing the actual rooms, the narrow staircase, the handwritten pages, that makes the story feel immediate.

To think that someone could be hidden away in such a beautiful place, only to be torn from it and sent to Auschwitz, is heartbreaking.



The contrast between the serenity of the canal and the horror of what followed is hard to shake.

Apparently, it's the third most visited tourist site in the Netherlands. I can see why.



Next, we cruised over to the Van Gogh Museum. It's a sleek, modern building filled with color, texture, and the unmistakable energy of a man who saw the world differently.

I'll be honest—I don't connect with Van Gogh the way others do.

His style is distinctive, yes, and I do appreciate his Sunflowers, Starry Night and

some of his self portraits including the one with the bandaged ear – seriously dude a romantic letter might have been more effective.

But I lean more toward Realism and Abstract. Expressionism feels like a fever dream I haven't quite learned to interpret.

Sue me.

Still, the museum was well-curated, and the people on the boat were great—chatty, curious, and full of recommendations.

The Museum Boat itself deserves a shoutout. It's a relaxed, scenic way to explore the city, and I'd recommend it to anyone who wants to see Amsterdam without wearing out their shoes.

Our next stop was the elusive “Torture Devices Through the Ages” exhibit—the one we’d tried to find a few days ago and failed.

This time, we had the right address. It’s a traveling exhibit that moves from city to city across Europe, and it was surprisingly educational.

Grim, yes, but fascinating. The ingenuity of human cruelty is disturbing, but the historical context adds depth. It’s not just about the devices—it’s about the systems that justified them.



After that, we visited the National Maritime Museum (Het Scheepvaartmuseum). It’s housed in a former naval storehouse built in 1656, right on the water.

The building itself is impressive—massive, symmetrical, and steeped in history. The collection includes paintings, ship models, navigational instruments, weapons, and maps that chart the rise and reach of Dutch maritime power.

It’s the kind of museum that makes you want to buy a captain’s hat and start referring to yourself as “commodore.”



By late afternoon, we were museumed out. We left the boat and decided to drink our way back to the hotel.

It’s becoming a bit of a tradition—walking, sipping, and letting the city unfold around us. Amsterdam is perfect for this. The bars are cozy, the beer is cold, and the streets are just confusing enough to make every turn feel like an adventure.

Todd got pretty sloppy toward the end of our trek. Nothing dramatic—just a slow slide into slurred speech and philosophical tangents.

After a brief nap back at the hotel, he rallied, and we headed out for dinner. We found a great spot—local, unfussy, and full of flavor. The kind of place where the menu is handwritten and the wine is poured without measuring.

Tomorrow, we take the hydrofoil across the English Channel to London.

Another country, another rhythm. But today was Amsterdam at its best—canals, culture, and just enough chaos to keep things interesting.

Beers - 

Mood - reflective, relaxed, slightly buzzed Forecast - English accents, pub food, and maybe a nap on the boat

## Day 46 - Art, Armor, and the Elusive Pot Pie

Day 46 - October 13, 1989  
London, England

London greeted us with its usual mix of grandeur and grit. After arriving, our first stop was the American Express office—because no matter how romantic the idea of wandering Europe may be, it still requires cash. Once we were financially rearmed, we headed to the National Gallery.

I'd visited the Gallery back in 1986, during the brief window when I won two of the 5200 free round-trip tickets that British Airways was giving away as part of promotion to encourage air travel to Britain from the US in the wake of recent terrorist attacks.

That trip had been more whirlwind than contemplative, but this time something felt different. Maybe I've matured. Maybe I've learned to appreciate art. Or maybe I just had a better breakfast. Either way, I enjoyed it more.

One of my favorites—the Leonardo da Vinci cartoon—had been moved downstairs. I found out why: in 1987, someone walked in and fired a shotgun at it.

Yes, a shotgun. At da Vinci. Apparently, this man woke up and thought, "You know what would really make today special?

Blowing away a Renaissance masterpiece." The cartoon survived, but the absurdity of the act still lingers.



After the Gallery, we wandered down Fleet Street, which still carries the ghost of its journalistic past.



We stopped in at Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese, a pub that's been serving pints since the 1600s.

I liked it immediately – dark wood, low ceilings, and the kind of ambiance that makes you whisper even when you're just ordering a beer. Todd, however, wasn't impressed. Possibly the beer. Possibly the lighting. Possibly the centuries of history pressing in from the walls.

We found another pub for lunch. I thought I ordered a pot pie. I received beef stew. It was fine, but it lacked the flaky crust and pastry drama I'd been hoping for. Still, it filled the gap and gave us the energy to

tackle our next stop: St. Paul's Cathedral.

St. Paul's is one of those places that makes you feel small in the best way. The original church on the site dates back to 604 AD, and the current structure—designed by Sir Christopher Wren—was completed in the late 1600s.

At 365 feet tall, it was the tallest building in London until 1963.

It's hosted funerals for Winston Churchill, Admiral Nelson, and countless others whose names echo through British history.

Inside, we found the memorial to American servicemen stationed in the UK during World War II. It's behind glass, a book listing names.





I kept wanting to turn the pages, hoping to find my Uncle Mickey–Michael Koshuta. I didn't, but the gesture of remembrance was powerful.

Then came the climb: 528 steps to the Golden Gallery at the top.

Three years ago, this climb nearly did me in. This time, I felt stronger. Maybe it's the beer

conditioning. Maybe it's the travel adrenaline.

Or maybe it's the trick we discovered–walking close to the center of the spiral staircase, which seems to shave off a few degrees of effort.

From St. Paul's, we made our way to the Tower of London. We joined a tour led by a Yeoman Warden, who announced he'd be conducting it in five languages.

Impressive, we thought. Then he listed them: British, American, Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand.

Rim shot.

The tour was excellent–informative, funny, and full of details that made the Tower feel less like a fortress and more like a living museum.

We saw the Royal Jewels. No line. No fuss. Just a quiet walk through centuries of opulence.



After the Tower, we took a boat ride up the Thames. The river was calm, the skyline dramatic, and the whole experience felt like a scene



from a movie where nothing explodes. We returned to the hotel to grab coats and headed out for dinner.

This time, I did get my pot pie. At a place called Porters. It was everything I'd hoped for—flaky crust, rich filling, and the kind of warmth that makes you forget about stew mishaps.

After dinner, we hit another pub. More beer, more conversation, and a few unexpected guests: two American “princesses” (self-appointed, I suspect) and a guy from Sydney who seemed amused by everything we said. It was one of those nights where the conversation flows easily, and the accents bounce around like tennis balls.

At closing time, we decided we needed more food. The plan was to find the TGI Fridays we'd heard was nearby. So we wandered through Soho, which was lively, chaotic, and entirely the wrong direction. Turns out TGIF was in Covent Garden. We were nowhere near it.

Eventually, we discovered it was two blocks from our hotel. We arrived at 12:01. Closed.

Same story at Pizza Hut and every other restaurant we tried. London may be a city of culture and history, but it draws a hard line at midnight snacks.

Beers - 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺

Mood - cultured, amused, slightly hungry Forecast - more museums, fewer missed meals, and maybe a pub with pie on the first try

## Day 47 – Bombs, Bog Men, and Barstools: A London Museum Crawl

Day 47 – October 14, 1989  
London, England

Today was really a blast – pun intended, given our first stop.

We started the morning with a complimentary breakfast at the hotel, which was surprisingly good. Eggs, toast, coffee that didn't taste like it had been filtered through a sock—an auspicious start.

Then we caught the Tube to Lambeth North station and walked to the Imperial War Museum.

The museum is housed in a building that once served as a psychiatric hospital, which adds a certain gravity to the experience.



You enter through a courtyard flanked by two massive 15-inch naval guns—one from HMS Ramillies, the other from HMS Resolution. They're not just decorative. They're a reminder that this museum doesn't shy away from the scale of conflict.

Inside, the galleries are filled with aircraft, flying bombs, and suspended machines of war that loom overhead like metallic ghosts.

It's immersive, sobering, and oddly beautiful in its own way.



We immediately signed up for the museum's new interactive exhibit: the "Blitz Experience." It's designed to simulate what it felt like to shelter in a London Underground station during an air raid. Only 20 people are allowed in at a time, which adds to the intimacy—and the tension.

You enter by walking down a recreated street, bombed out and littered with debris. Then you descend into the "subway" station.

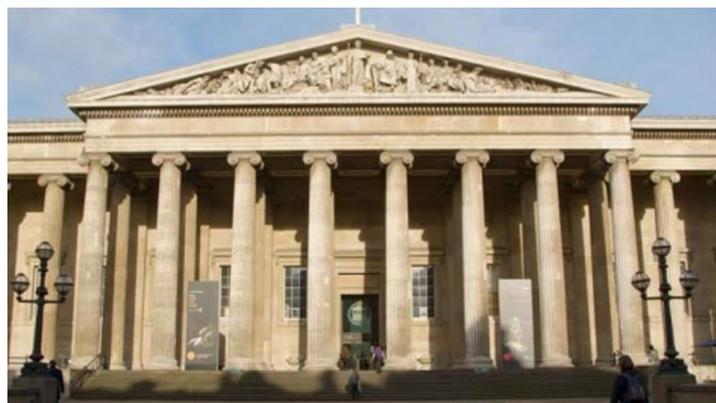
The sirens begin. The lights dim. The sound of bombs grows louder, closer, until the floor begins to shake. It's not just noise—it's vibration, pressure, atmosphere. I found it pretty realistic. Todd, ever the critic, said he was expecting more. But one woman in our group had lived through the Blitz as a child. She said it was too realistic. That's all the review I needed.

We spent about three hours exploring the rest of the museum, and honestly, we could've stayed longer. The exhibits are vast – uniforms from every branch and era, letters, weapons, maps, and artifacts that feel like they still carry the weight of history.

One standout was Neville Chamberlain's letter of agreement with Hitler from Munich, the infamous "peace in our time" document. Seeing it in person is like staring at a moment when the world held its breath—and got it wrong.

From there, we headed to the British Museum. It's a different kind of grandeur—less about conflict, more about curiosity.

Established in 1753, it's one of the oldest public



museums in the world, and the building itself feels like a temple to knowledge.



We started in the Mummy Room, which houses over 120 mummies and coffins—one of the largest collections outside Egypt. The air smells faintly of dust and preservation, and the silence is reverent.

These aren't just artifacts. They're people, wrapped in linen and mystery.

Then we saw the Rosetta Stone. Dated to 196 BC, it's the key that unlocked ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. The stone contains the same text in three scripts: Ancient Greek, Demotic, and hieroglyphic.

By comparing the Greek with the hieroglyphs, scholars were able to crack the code. It's one of those objects that changed the course of understanding—and it's just sitting there, behind glass, waiting to be admired.

And then came the Lindow Man.

Discovered in a peat bog in Cheshire, his body was astonishingly well-preserved. Scientists believe he lived around 2 BC.

His last meal? Charred bread. His death? Blunt force trauma to the head and a slit throat. It's grim, fascinating, and oddly moving. You stand there, looking at this man from two thousand years ago, and wonder who he was, what he believed, and why he met such a violent end.



After the museum, we stopped at a neighborhood pub for a few beers.

Our first pint was in honor of the Lindow Man. A toast to the poor chap—may he rest in peace, and may his story continue to intrigue.

Then, in a moment of cultural regression, we went to TGI Fridays.



Yes, the one in Leicester Square. It was just like home—same menu, same décor, same slightly overenthusiastic waitstaff with flair. The main bar was raised instead of sunken, which threw me off for a moment.

I ordered mushrooms, chicken, and more mushrooms. It tasted exactly like it does in the States, right down to the prices—except they

were in British Pounds, which meant everything cost 50% more.

They didn't serve pints, oddly enough. So we settled for Heinekens and tried not to do the math.

After dinner, we returned to the bar and chatted with a few locals.

One woman was married to an American and seemed delighted to meet fellow transatlantic wanderers. The pub closed at 23:00, so we headed back to the hotel, had a nightcap, and called it a day.



London continues to surprise. It's a city of layers—history, humor, and the occasional late-night disappointment when you realize your favorite restaurant closes just before you arrive. But today was a good one. Museums, mummies, and a proper pot pie. What more could you ask for?

Beers - 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺

## Day 48 - Guards, Grills, and Glenn Miller: A Greenwich Kind of Day

Day 48 - October 15, 1989

London, England



We started the day with a bit of pageantry - the Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace. It's one of those things that never really changes, and that's part of the appeal.

We took up a position at the same gate where Corinne and I had stood three years ago, and the view was nearly identical. The guards marched, the band played,

and the Bobbies did their best to wrangle the crowd with a mix of stern looks and dry humor. Watching them manage tourists is almost as entertaining as the ceremony itself.

After the last trumpet faded, we walked to Westminster Pier and boarded a boat bound for Greenwich.

The Thames was calm, the sky cooperative, and the ride offered a fresh perspective on the city-bridges, buildings, and the occasional riverside jogger who looked like they'd taken a wrong turn out of a Dickens novel.

Onboard, we met a man named Bob Watson.



He was retired, formerly the owner of an advertising agency in New York City, and now spent his time traveling. He had the kind of easy charm that comes from having lived through a few chapters of history. We figured he was close to 70, based on the fact that he'd served as an officer in the Pacific during World War II.



He casually mentioned that he'd been in Nagasaki two weeks after the bomb was dropped.

"Figured two weeks was enough time to make it safe," he said with a shrug. That kind of understatement sticks with you.

In Greenwich, we visited the Cutty Sark and the National Maritime Museum.

The museum opened in 1937 and is packed with maritime treasures—paintings, maps, ship models, and seafaring instruments that span centuries. It's the kind of place where you can lose track of time, drifting from one exhibit to the next, imagining life aboard a clipper ship or navigating by stars.

The Cutty Sark itself is still on display in a dry dock outside the museum. Built in 1869, it was one of the last Tea Clippers, designed for speed and elegance.

It served in various roles until 1954, when it was retired to Greenwich. I'd seen it three years ago, and it hasn't changed—but that's part of its charm. It's a ship frozen in time, a reminder of an era when sails ruled the seas.

On the way back, Bob shared a bit of financial news: the stock market had dropped over 100 points on Friday. "That can't be a good thing," he said, and we nodded in agreement, though none of us had any idea what it meant for our travel budgets.

He also talked about sailing on the Queen Elizabeth and the QE2. His advice? If you ever find yourself on the QE2, eat in the Princess Grill—not the Queen’s Grill. Noted.

Back in London, we made a detour to the Cabinet War Rooms, now part of the Imperial War Museum.

Tucked beneath the New Public Offices building in Whitehall, the War Rooms served as the British government’s command center from 1939 through the end of the war.



To protect it from the Blitz, a five-foot-thick concrete slab was poured above the complex in 1940. After the war, the rooms were sealed off and remained closed to the public until they reopened five years ago.



The facility includes the Map Room, the Cabinet Room, and a series of offices that feel like they were abandoned mid-conversation. A total of 115 Cabinet meetings were held there during the war.

Walking through the rooms, you can almost hear the echoes of Churchill’s voice, the scratch of pens on paper, the tension of decisions that shaped the world. I found the tour fascinating—equal parts history and atmosphere.

In the gift shop, I picked up a Glenn Miller record for Corinne. Something about wartime music felt appropriate after walking through Churchill's bunker. Then we made our way to the Sherlock Holmes Pub for a few beers.

It's becoming a bit of a ritual. I bought a plaster mask of Sherlock Holmes for either Anne or Linda – haven't decided who gets it yet. It's the kind of gift that's either charming or slightly creepy, depending on how you display it.

Dinner was at a Mexican restaurant called Café Pacifico. We had to wait about forty minutes, which felt like a gamble, but the food turned out to be surprisingly good—especially considering we were in London, where Mexican cuisine isn't exactly a national specialty.



On the way to dinner, we stopped at a cozy pub near Covent Garden. It had a warm, family vibe, and the owner looked uncannily like Uncle Barney. When a few patrons started singing, they were politely told to stop—apparently the pub wasn't licensed for entertainment. It was one of those moments that felt both absurd and perfectly British.

We ended the night with full stomachs, a few souvenirs, and the kind of quiet satisfaction that comes from a day well spent. London continues to deliver—history, humor, and just enough eccentricity to keep things interesting.

Beers - 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺

Mood - content, curious, slightly nostalgic Forecast - more London, more museums, and maybe a pub that allows singing

## Day 49 - Somewhere Over the Atlantic: Reflections from 30,000 Feet

Day 49 - October 16, 1989  
London, England to Dulles, Virginia, USA (3,663 miles)



Somewhere over the Atlantic, suspended between continents and time zones, I'm writing what will likely be the final entry in this journal.

The hum of the engines is steady, the cabin lights are dimmed, and the complimentary beer is flowing—because of

course it is.

If there's one consistent theme in this travelogue, it's that beer has been both companion and compass.

Let me catch up on yesterday and today, though I realize I already covered the Changing of the Guard in my last entry. Still, it's worth noting that seeing it again—standing at the same gate Corinne and I stood at three years ago—felt like a gentle nod to continuity.

The Bobbies were still doing their crowd control ballet, the guards still marched with precision, and the tourists still craned their necks for a glimpse of ceremony. It was neat. Familiar. Comforting.

This morning began quietly. I woke around 8:40, took a shower, and set out in search of a Catholic church. Not as easy as you'd think in London.

Fortunately, I found Corpus Christi Catholic Church on Maiden Lane, just a short walk from the hotel.

Built in 1873, it's a modest, beautiful space tucked into the city's rhythm.

The 9:30 Mass was sparsely attended—only about 25 people. The priest mentioned the parish's financial struggles and asked for help during the second collection.

I gave them all the extra money I had. It felt right. A small gesture to close out a trip that's given me so much.

After Mass, Todd and I grabbed our bags and took a cab to Heathrow. £28 for the ride, which felt steep until you factor in the emotional weight of leaving.

Security was tight, as expected, and check-in took about an hour. But once we were through, the flight itself has been uneventful.



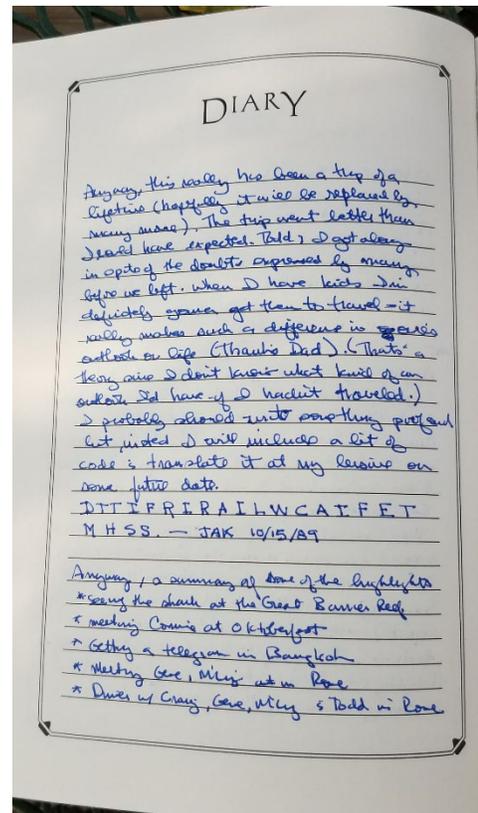


Of course, I can't say for sure what kind of outlook I'd have if I hadn't grown up moving between countries. Maybe I'd be just as curious. Maybe not. But I do know that this trip reaffirmed something I've always suspected: the world is better when you're in motion.

I suppose this is the part where I should write something profound. A closing thought. A distilled truth. But instead, I'll leave a bit of code:

D T T I F R I R A I L W C A I F E T M H S S  
S - JAK 10/15/89

I'll translate it someday (see Epilogue#2). Or maybe I won't. Maybe it's meant to stay cryptic—a private wink to a journey that defies easy summary.

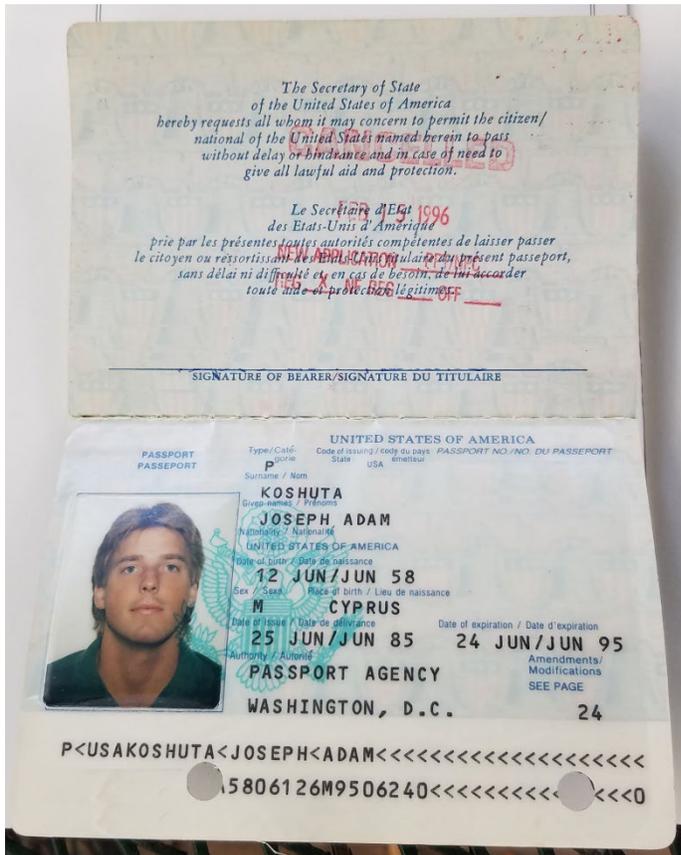


still, a few highlights deserve to be named:

- Seeing the shark at the Great Barrier Reef
- Meeting Reg and Betty in Sydney
- Meeting Katie, Bonnie, and Lisa in Sydney
- Talking to bartenders Ian, Peter, and Natalie
- Receiving the telegram about Mark Weitner in Bangkok
- Standing beneath the Sistine Chapel
- Meeting Gene Riechers and M'Liz Scotton Riechers in Rome
- Dinner with Craig, Gene, M'Liz, and Todd in Rome
- Meeting Corinne at Oktoberfest
- Falling in the mud with Corinne at Oktoberfest

Each moment stitched into the fabric of this trip. Each person a thread. Each place a patch. Together, they form something I'll carry with me long after the passport stamps fade.

In total, we traveled more than 30,000 miles.



We visited 17 countries.

We met hundreds of people.

We stood in cathedrals, castles, pubs, and train stations. We saw art, history, heartbreak, and hilarity.

We got lost. We got found. We got beer.

And through it all, we somehow maintained a pace of consuming at least 10 beers a day. I never expected that.

But it just goes to show what a person can do with the proper amount of dedication and perseverance.

So I'm thinking...

Next year...

Beers - 🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺🍺

Mood - grateful, reflective, slightly buzzed Forecast - homecomings, laundry, and maybe a new map on the wall

## Epilogue Part 1: Life Is Funny Sometimes

When I was planning my Trip Around the World, I genuinely believed it might be my only chance to visit some of the places we had mapped out.

I treated each stop like a once-in-a-lifetime moment—lingering a little longer at train stations, taking photos of things I couldn't quite identify, and jotting down notes in the margins of guidebooks I never intended to read again.

Well, as fate would have it, I ended up visiting a number of those same places less than six months later.



Not as a wide-eyed traveler this time, but as a member of a corporate due diligence team—armed with spreadsheets, expense accounts, and a slightly more tailored wardrobe.

Here's how that happened.

The company I worked for had recently acquired a network management software suite from another firm.

My job was to help determine whether the international distributors we'd inherited were worth keeping or if we should find new ones.

So, less than six weeks after finishing my once-in-a-lifetime trip—on New Year's Eve 1989—I found myself back on a Lufthansa 747 headed to Frankfurt.

The irony wasn't lost on me. I had just toasted the end of my global adventure, and now I was flying back into it, this time with a company-issued itinerary and a per diem that didn't require counting coins.

From Frankfurt, we moved on to Monte Carlo, Paris, and London.

Only this time, I was flying Business or First Class and staying in accommodations that didn't involve shared bathrooms or questionable plumbing.



There was still beer drinking, of course, but it was mostly confined to evenings or during business dinners—no more backpacker pubs with sticky floors and mystery meat platters.

Monte Carlo was the first real shock. The guy we were scheduled to meet arranged for a private helicopter to pick us up in Nice and fly us directly to the heliport in Monte Carlo.

Quite a difference from the crowded train Todd and I had taken just months earlier, where we stood shoulder to shoulder with tourists and locals alike, clutching our bags and hoping we hadn't missed our stop.



He was desperate to keep his distribution rights, and it showed. He put us up at the Hôtel de Paris Monte-Carlo—the finest hotel in Monaco, perched right next to the Casino de Monte-Carlo.

The kind of place where the staff doesn't just greet you—they anticipate you. Where the towels are thicker than your winter coat and the breakfast buffet includes items you can't pronounce.

He and his assistant took us to dinner at one of the nicest restaurants in Monte Carlo.

It was the kind of meal where the wine list came in a leather-bound book and the waiter described each dish like it was a character in a novel.

It was obvious he was trying too hard. Just the fact that he was stationed in Monte Carlo raised our suspicions. Most of the other distributors were based in places like Brussels or London—cities with actual business infrastructure, not just yachts and baccarat tables.



Eventually, his paperwork didn't support the financial records we reviewed, and he was terminated. But I do have to thank him for showing us how the elite—if not borderline criminal—live. It was like stepping into a Bond film, only with fewer explosions and more spreadsheets.

In London, we discovered the Royal Horseguards Hotel and One Whitehall Place. It was elegant without being ostentatious, and I would return to stay there numerous times on future trips.

The staff remembered your name, your breakfast order, and even which side of the bed you preferred. It was the kind of place that made you feel important without making you feel watched.



Two months after returning from Europe, I was asked to join the due diligence team that would meet with distributors in Japan, Asia, and Australia.

So, in March—less than six months after returning from my Trip Around the World—I boarded another 747, this time one from ANA, for a non-stop flight to Tokyo.

I got a window seat in the upper deck, which was spacious and quiet. The kind of seat where you could stretch your legs without apologizing and where the flight attendant called you “sir” without irony.

We spent a week in Tokyo meeting with local distributors and exploring the city. Ellen Kirsh, the company’s Chief Legal Officer, was our senior team member. She had a way of making every meeting feel like a courtroom drama—precise, deliberate, and slightly intimidating.

Some of us stayed at the Hotel New Otani Tokyo, where I ate the most expensive dinner of my life at the Tour d'Argent Tokyo restaurant.



The bill was so high I briefly considered framing it.

Ellen had set up camp at the famous Hotel Okura Tokyo, where we held most of our meetings. I managed to get access to the health club and swimming pool, which felt like a small victory in a week dominated by legal briefs and software demos.

After Tokyo, we headed to Manila—arriving just after yet another coup attempt.



The city was tense but functioning. We met at the Hyatt outside of Manila, just to be safe.

The distributor there was a character. He told us he also represented Ford Trucks and a number of seafood companies. A bit of an odd combination, but who were we to judge?

Then he asked for clarification about the amount of money he was supposed to remit back to us in the U.S.

Under the existing deal, he got to keep 30%, and he was to send 70% back. He wanted to know whether that meant 70% of the list price or 70% of what he charged the client.

We were confused.

The list price was what we thought he was charging. Then he explained that, in order to close the deal, he sometimes had to mark up the price by an extra amount that would be returned to the purchaser for agreeing to the deal.

For a moment, I was puzzled. Then my boss leaned over and whispered in my ear, "...that would be for the bribe."

I learned a lot on that trip.

After Manila, we went to Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta.

In Kuala Lumpur, we stayed at the Hilton—a sleek, modern high-rise with views of the city and a breakfast buffet that could feed a small army.



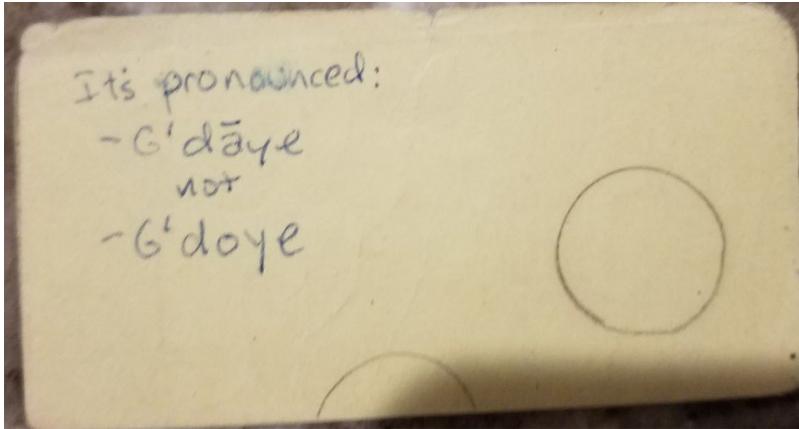
In Jakarta, we stayed at a hotel inside a walled compound protected by armed guards. A tale of two cities, indeed.

We finished up the trip back in Sydney, where the company that had developed the software was located.

Our hosts were generous and enthusiastic, eager to show us the local scene. They took us to places Todd and I hadn't discovered on our own. We even had shrimp on the barbie—though I suspect they only did it because they knew we were American and thought we'd expect it.

I remember sitting in a pub at The Rocks next to a local who explained the proper way to greet someone in Australia when saying "Good Day."

He said Americans got it all wrong by saying “G’doye” when it should be pronounced “G’dāye.”



For some reason, I was so taken by this lesson that I wrote it down on a sticky note and have carried it in my wallet for the past 30 years. I have no idea why. Maybe it was the beer. Maybe it was the moment. Maybe it was the feeling that I was learning something real.

So—within six months of completing my once-in-a-lifetime trip, I flew more than 32,000 additional miles (the equivalent of going around the world again!) and returned to Europe, Australia, and Asia, revisiting many of the same cities I thought I’d never see again.

Life is funny sometimes.

It doesn’t always give you what you expect, but it occasionally gives you what you didn’t know you needed.

A second look.

A better seat.

A sticky note reminder that even the smallest lessons can last a lifetime.

## Epilogue Part 2: Things Work Out

July 6, 2025

Thirty-five years ago today, I married my best friend.

It took us a while to get there—we dated for almost six years.

But in every relationship, there comes a moment when you ask yourself: Is this the one?

For me, that moment came during my Trip Around the World in 1989.

Just before I departed on that epic 49-day adventure, Corinne said, “Hey, how about I meet you somewhere along the way?”

I said, “Sure. But we’ve got a fixed itinerary—so you’ll have to meet us at one of our scheduled stops.”

On Day 34, we arrived at our hotel in Munich.

At check-in, the front desk handed us a note:

“We’re in the pub down the street, and I’m staying with you.”

Todd—my traveling partner—was staying with his girlfriend Denise, who had booked the same flight as Corinne once she learned Corinne was coming.

For the next two days, Corinne and I explored Munich together.

We even visited the Oktoberfest fairgrounds—where, on the way back to our hotel, we tumbled into a mud puddle.

After she flew home, Todd and I continued our journey.



On the final day, I made this cryptic entry in my travel journal:

“I probably should write something profound. But instead, I’ll include a bit of code and translate it at my leisure on some future date:

DTTIFRIRAILWCATIFETMHSS -  
JAK 10/15/89.”

Well—36 years later, it’s time to reveal the code:

During This Trip I Finally  
Realized I Really Am In Love  
With Corinne And That I  
Fully Expect To Marry Her  
Sometime Soon - JAK  
10/15/89.

And indeed, I did.

Thirty-five years ago today.