

CHARLIE TRAVELS - CHEAP

by Charles Shugart Jr.

I've never earned much money. I was a schoolteacher back when they earned pitiful salaries. You know, those kinds of jobs: enjoyable, demanding, and pitiful pay.

But I've traveled widely through the years; to every state in the U.S., every province and territory in Canada (except that new one in the north central that has no road leading to it). I've traveled throughout much of Mexico, sailed through the Panama Canal, been to the Caribbean, South America, South Pacific, New Zealand and Australia. I've wandered through Europe several times, and visited countries in Africa and Asia. I crossed the Khyber Pass on a bus journey between Pakistan and Turkey, took the Trans-Siberian Railroad while spending six weeks in the Soviet Union, and visited China seven times. I've observed the wildlife of the Pribilofs and Galapagos Islands.

With more than 50 countries, I've traveled a lot.

But I'm not an "adventurer." I don't scale unclimbed Himalayan peaks, or pick my way through the Amazon jungles living off the land. I'm just a serious traveler.

Aside from the marvelous experiences I've had wandering through those 50+ foreign lands, probably the one thing most characteristic has been that I'm cheap. Well, for all of them except the seven trips to China, when I was a tour director and ushered 30 older Americans at a time around that exciting country where nothing goes as planned (that's why tours to China need directors).

The term "cheap" is mostly apt. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that during my three trips around the world, and seven other independent trips abroad, I traveled with insufficient funds to go 1st class. Or even 2nd class. Therefore, by going "cattle class," I could extend my travels by a factor of ten. It was well worth the sacrifice.

To me.

Let me illustrate this principle by briefly reviewing my first trip abroad, admittedly some years ago when the dollar was strong in Europe. By selling everything I could, and withdrawing all savings, I hopped on a cross-country Greyhound Bus with \$3,000 in traveler checks. Then across the pond to Britain. Then to Belgium, where I bought a used Citroen 2 CV (2 cylinder, air-cooled engine, centrifugal clutch). 10,000 miles of wandering around found me in Greece, where I sold the car. After two months in Greece, I went by ship to Spain, wandering around there until the holes in my wallet were apparent. When I was down to my last \$100 and a return plane ticket, I flew home.

\$3,000. 5 ½ months traveling through much of Europe. Pretty good deal.

Subsequent trips abroad further refined my understandings about how to travel cheap. Money = Time. That became my mantra.

Among the cheap but borderline dumb things I did through those marvelous travel years:

3½ days sitting on the same bus while crossing the U.S. Then repeat the endless ride upon my return to the land of the greenbacks 5½ months later. That's how I learned where the expression "Numb-butt" originated.

Moving the right-front seat of my Citroen to the top of the back-left seat, placing three couch cushions on the floor, and sleeping in the car for 10,000 miles of European sightseeing, with the occasional stop at youth hostels for traditional Saturday night baths (I was traveling alone, mostly).

Upon arrival in Southampton, England by ship, walking through town and throwing my sleeping bag under a bush in the city park, thereupon spending the night. How that "Bobby" ever found me in at two in the morning, I never could figure out.

Taking a local cross-country bus from Peshawar, Pakistan, across the Khyber Pass to Kabul, Afghanistan. At a dinner break in Afghanistan, a boy rode by on an emaciated pony, and was jabbing a wound with a stick. Outraged, I grabbed the reins and yelled at him because of his purposeful cruelty. Then I realized that his father probably had a long knife and might not take kindly to a foreigner yelling at his son. So I sent him on his way.

A couple of days later, the nighttime border crossing from Afghanistan into Iran required a local cholera inoculation. Done by one of the guards, who put some salve-like stuff on my arm, pulled a pin out of the "24 pins-for-a-nickel" packet that had been bought at the local store, and punctured my skin a dozen times to get the medicine into my bloodstream. I didn't worry about cholera, but I worried about whatever infectious germs the guard might be carrying on his hands.

Having driven a used car (D.K.W. with a 2-stroke engine) through much of Europe, I'd crossed through Soviet-controlled East Germany to Berlin. On the return, as I was going through the East German checkpoint, I got into an argument with an Egyptian Army Captain and the East German guard about the merits of Israel's political position regarding its Arab neighbors. Five minutes into the argument I realized what I was doing, and immediately shut up, smiled, and continued down the long and lonely road to West Germany. What a dummy!

Leaving Tokyo and heading north toward the island of Hokkaido, I hitch-hiked to save money (what else?) After 30 minutes of no action, and wondering why all the cars and trucks were going the wrong direction, I realized that in Japan they drive down the left side of the road. So I crossed to the other side.

(I'm kidding; I already knew they did.)

But I **did** have to learn a new set of skills: hitch-hiking with my left hand. Back then, nobody hitched in Japan -- certainly not the Japanese. It was not an easy thing for me to do with any success. No car drivers picked me up. Only the occasional trucker. A little-known fact is that nobody in Japan speaks conversational English except tour guides and front desk personnel at fine hotels, even if they have studied it for eight years or more. The truckers would grunt at me in Japanese. I would grunt at them in English. Then silence would prevail until we got to the place where he wanted me to get out. I always knew when because the trucker would stop, reach over and open my door, and then grunt. I'm very sensitive to such subtleties.

On one several-month-long trip to Europe, driving yet another used car (VW Beetle), a fellow traveler and I were toodling down the Dalmatian Coast of Yugoslavia. Because that country's youth hostels were scary places indeed, we didn't use them. We'd drive until after dark. Then, on the outskirts of a village, we'd look for a building under construction, but with a roof. Parking around back, we'd flop our sleeping bags on the cement flooring and spend the night.

Montenegro, in the south of Yugoslavia, was known for its rugged people and the rugged mountains where they lived. One day, soon after dark, as my Brit companion (male, alas) and I drove through a rural village, my old VW was rained upon by a bunch of small rocks, thrown by some fun-loving local boys. Immediately and thoroughly angered by this, I skidded to a stop, grabbed my jack handle and set off in pursuit of them. The Brit grabbed his big knife and raced after me. 50 yards down the road I stopped short. Turning to my gas-sharing companion, I said, "What the hell would we do if we **caught** them?" So we hustled back to the car and continued down the highway.

In Greece during one trip, and car-less, I hitched from Athens to the city of Corinth, on the Peloponnese Peninsula. Walking, hitch-hiking, sleeping in deserted buildings (on two occasions friendly Greeks invited me to stay in their homes), and buying the cheapest food I could find, I spent a glorious week exploring the ancient excitements and enjoying the friendly people of the northern part of the peninsula.

I spent a grand total of \$7.

Seven days. Seven dollars.

I once took the Orient Express from Istanbul to Austria. At that time in history, though, it wasn't the romantic train experience one hears about in books and films. It was a work train, taking Turks to Germany where they could do the crappy jobs that the Germans didn't want to do. Turks are wonderful people, but these borderline unemployable, horny testosterone-filled yet unmarried men, crammed shoulder to shoulder in the sit-up-all-night compartments because they're cheaper than sleepers, were a scary bunch. Bad enough if I'd been alone and squished in there among them. But I was traveling with an attractive female companion (actually, much more than a companion, she was a long-time lady friend). Guaranteed, we didn't close our eyes for a minute.

Nothing happened that night. Whew!

Once, on the large Greek island of Crete, I was hitching from the port city of Heraklion to the village of Knossos, where the Minoan Palace ruins were located. Also there was a travel friend from some months earlier. He was staying in the village, and I was giving him a surprise visit. The small pickup that picked me up had a cab full of workers, so I threw my rucksack in the back bed and hopped in. Zipping down the highway I realized that the truck was used to carry soap chips, and soap chip "dust" was everywhere, swirling around in the air turbulence. I sneezed for the 45 minutes it took to get to the village. Thanking the driver, I asked a local about the location of the home where my friend was renting a room. Americans stood out among the locals everywhere in Greece except Athens). Responding to my knock, Carl opened the door, and with a look of total surprise, said: "Charlie!"

I sneezed into his face.

On one trip around the world, my lady friend (the same one mentioned earlier) and I stopped first in Hawaii. I'd never been there, and we met a local who volunteered to loan us his 50cc Honda motorbike so that we could tour Oahu. Two people and their bags on a 50cc motorbike: you don't realize how much of the highway is uphill until you try that. We were gone three days and spent \$4.50 for gasoline, so it wasn't such a bad deal. And traveling at a speed of 20 MPH, you see enough that you don't have to stop all the time to look at the scenery.

Like all cheap travelers, I've had to make sacrifices along the way. On my one trip to East Africa, I flew in to Nairobi, Kenya. Finding a cheap but "reliable" local company, I took a ten-day safari to four of the country's national parks. All-expenses paid. Off we went in a Nissan van with a homemade "pop-top" for animal viewing. There were six of us plus the driver/guide and a cook. The cook was very good with bacon, eggs and toast, so we ate bacon, eggs and toast for breakfast, lunch and dinner for ten straight days. We made our camps in remote sites that offered, as amenities, small, deep holes in the dirt (those were the squat "toilets"). We had no chairs or tables. The tent they issued me kept the water out except when it rained. Talk about a wholly holey piece of old canvas. We slept on the dirt, wondering about the friendliness of local snakes.

But we had plenty of good viewing of all the animals and birds I'd hoped for, except rhinoceroses. Poachers were well along in their efforts to kill them all for their horns. Aphrodisiacs for Asian men.

On one memorable safari occasion, we were watching a mating pair of lions. We were stopped, engine off, windows open (the lions had other things on their minds). The top was popped up so that we could stand as we looked and photographed.

An hour later, fully sated with the sightseeing and photo opportunities we'd had, we drove away, passing another identical Nissan van that was approaching the same two animals. It was an Abercrombie and Fitch escorted tour.

Their safari had cost each of them \$4,000.

Mine had cost \$400.

Being cheap isn't all bad.