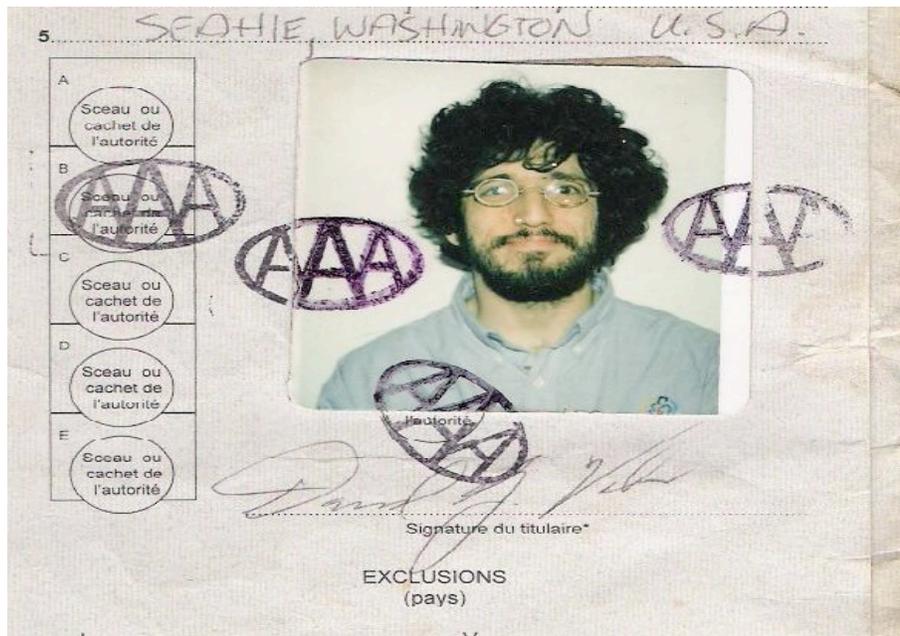


CHAPTER ONE

First, You Panic

"Life is what happens while we are making other plans."
--Betty Talmadge, American Meat Broker



No, this isn't a picture of a terrorist or even a mug shot of a criminal. It's an international driving permit picture taken a few days before departure and just hours before a friend mentioned three small words: "Body cavity search." I got a shave and a haircut shortly thereafter.

I still remember the day the airplane ticket came.

I confidently strode into the travel agent's office with checkbook in hand and emerged with a wad of airplane tickets and \$2,000 less in my checking account. I know I should have been excited, but I was scared shitless.

"Ohmygod, what have I done? I must be crazy. I must be nuts. What the hell was I thinking?" I said, over and over out loud, as I stared at tickets to such far-off destinations as Auckland, New Zealand; Sydney, Australia; Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam; and Denpasar, Bali.

"Why did you book me into Bali?" I asked my travel agent.

"Because you wanted to go to Indonesia," she said surprisingly matter-of-factly to such a stupid question.

That's how utterly clueless I was. I'd heard of Bali before, but had no idea where it was. I just knew I wanted to go to Indonesia and never bothered to do the research.

The only other thing I knew for sure was that time was running out and I needed to hit the road before I missed my last opportunity. It was January, my younger sister was getting married in November, I was going to catch back up with my girlfriend at the wedding, go meet her family, propose and live happily ever after. There was just the small matter of this trip that I'd always wanted to take, one final big adventure before strapping myself to the treadmill of adulthood and the world of work.

I saw the trip as my own version of Outward Bound, the adventure course that teaches people how to survive in the wilderness and then drops them off in the middle of nowhere to see if they can survive by their wits, their willingness to eat (preferably non-poisonous) berries, and their ability to kill large animals with their bare hands. (Which is why many Outward Bounders go on to become vegetarians.) Since I've never been real fond of camping, I figured the next best thing would be to drop myself in countries where I didn't speak the language—including Australia and New Zealand—and see if I could find my way around, eat, locate bathrooms and book a place to sleep each night even if I didn't know the local words for restaurant, bathroom and hotel.

This is how I discovered that the international symbols we all see every day are a godsend, and that worldwide acceptance of Esperanto is long overdue.

There was more to the trip than just a big adventure, though. The writer in me felt that I needed to go out and see the world. The journalist in me wanted to see all the places that had been in the news in my formative years including Saigon, Hanoi, Tiananmen Square and even Hong Kong, which was to be handed over to China about a year after the end of my trip. As a third generation American, I also planned to visit the Eastern European countries my family came from, walk the streets they walked and if I was lucky run across a relative who survived the Holocaust.

If time permitted, I also wanted to volunteer to work on a kibbutz in Israel. The only way to do that, though, was to commit to working on one of the agricultural communes for two months.

There was one other catch. I only had \$11,000 and once it was gone, the trip was over. Considering that's what most people spend on two months in Europe, I knew I had my work cut out for me. My years as a freelance writer had taught me how to pinch a penny until it screamed and many of the Southeast Asian and European countries were among the least expensive in the world, but it was still going to be a stretch.

I went out with a goofy sense of humor and a willingness to handle anything the world could throw at me. That was until I got chased by prostitutes who thought I was a virgin, got caught in a shakedown over a bagful of free cosmetics and received one of the shortest "Dear John" letters in history. But those are all stories for other chapters.