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INTRODUCTION

Your own experience and someone else's – travel needs both. We want to go there ourselves, taste the food, ride the buses, crash in the hotel rooms, meet the people. We shove our guidebook into our daypack and head off to collide with those events. Then we want the other perspective – how some other traveller reacted to that appalling meal, that nightmare bus ride, that horror-story of a hotel. And did they also have that fleeting midnight encounter? Why didn't she turn up at the bar the next evening? Will she be there at the next town down the line?

I love guidebooks. I've been involved in writing plenty of them and even more have taken up residence in my daypack. There's almost always one by my bedside – research material for the next trip or a taster for somewhere further down the line. But the literature of travel, those books which document somebody else's travels, experiences, fears, hopes and inspirations are equally important for me. They're part introduction to places I'm planning to go, part inspiration for trips I may one day make, and part reminders of past trips – a different interpretation of a shared experience.

Some places simply seem to inspire great travel writing. It's no surprise that writers zero in on Italy or Australia. They're great places to travel, they attract many visitors and they provide abundant material to work with. Both feature in this collection. On the other hand, my travel bookshelves feature a surprising number of books on Afghanistan and that African nation currently known as

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the Democratic Republic of Congo (the name a hint that it's one of those places where democracy has a hard time). Both countries seem to bring out the best in travel writers and although I've made a couple of extraordinarily interesting visits to Afghanistan, I've still not set foot in the Congo. At the moment those African titles are on my shelves purely as inspiration for trips yet to come.

There are a number of tales in this collection from countries that are not exactly tourist favourites. Places more likely to feature in government travel advisories warning you off from even thinking of going there, than in travel brochures enticing you to sign up for the next departure. In fact, my experience has been that these countries are rarely as dangerous as they're made out to be. As well as Nicholas Crane's Afghan odyssey in 'Finding Shelter', Syria, Ethiopia, Central African Republic and Iraq all pop up in this book and their entry stamps have all appeared in my passport.

Travel is as much about mood and event as it is place. In our travel anthologies over the years, the recurring themes of travel have been just as important as the places our talented writers have used as their backdrops. I have a special fondness for travel out on the edge, to unlikely places and nervous destinations. My own book *Bad Lands*, which started with a trip along the former US president's much-loved – by edge-loving travellers at least – 'Axis of Evil', heads in that direction and so do some of the accounts we gathered together in *Tales from Nowhere*. I particularly liked Jason Elliot's 'A Visit to Kanasankatan', which turned out to be an edgy sort of place in a most unexpected location. On the other hand, Laura Resau's 'Secrets of the Maya' confirmed my theory that places are never as edgy as they seem at first glance. No matter where you are, Karl Taro Greenfeld's 'On the Trail' confirmed that most basic advice for modern life: back everything up.

Spend enough time on the road and it's inevitable that at some point things won't work out. Fortunately, somebody often pops

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up to sort out your problems, and that's what happens in the tales we collected in *The Kindness of Strangers*. I've had plenty of experience with this phenomenon. Looking back on my first 24 hours in Australia – after landing on a beach in Western Australia after a yacht trip down from Bali – it seemed to have been a procession of strangers performing acts of kindness. It's no wonder I've been trying to repay that karma ever since because, as James D Houston points out so succinctly in 'Everything Come Round'...it does. Simon Winchester's 'Ascension in the Moonlight' is simply wonderful, a little glimpse at those once-in-a-lifetime moments that travel sometimes nonchalantly tosses at our feet.

The travellers' tales we collected for *By the Seat of My Pants* often seemed to end with that moment where you put the palm of your hand to your head and emit a long, drawn out 'duh!'. I'm sure that was the noise Danny Wallace produced after his encounter with a friendly (if Uzi-toting) Czech con-man in 'The Sights of Prague'. Once he'd got his underpants back on, Joshua Clark no doubt made the same comment about his outback Australia car crash in 'Wangara's Cross', a tale with a poignant concluding twist.

Our travelling lives all start somewhere, and kicking off as a young, penniless backpacker is a pretty good way to do it, as the two stories from *Rites of Passage* illustrate. Karen Lee Boren's 'The Quest' is a great description of one of those backpacker hellholes that years down the track you can file away as an experience you're glad you've had, because now you never need have it again. Greg Tuleja's 'A Slight Leaning Backward' is a fine reminiscence of a magic spell in Paris, with a sad little after note.

'Getting there is half the fun' is an aphorism that I've certainly found to be true and it's never been more apposite than right now, when we're all wondering if we're flying more than the

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world can cope with. *Flightless* concentrated on travel at surface level, whether that means taking the boat, the bus, the bicycle or setting out to see how far our boots will carry us. César Soriano's little train ride from Baghdad to Basra certainly fits the pattern. He could scarcely have found a more uncomfortable way of crossing a war zone; he would also have struggled to make a more interesting trip.

Keen travellers often scratch their heads in bemusement that some of the very best travel tales are about staying in one place. If slow travel – seeing the world at a more reasonable pace – is all the go, then settling down and going absolutely nowhere has to be the ultimate expression of the trend. 'City of Djinn' from our collection *A House Somewhere* tells the tale of a most unlikely holiday home, in Old Delhi. India's one of those places that is always fun to write about, and William Dalrymple certainly has fun with this story.

Travel can go wrong – although if we survive to write about it, it can't have gone too far off track. The tales from *Lonely Planet Unpacked* include my own strange little encounter at the end of Tibet's astonishing Mt Kailash trek. Sometimes, what goes wrong is tied up with the romance we always hope to find on the road, and we explored travel romance both fine (if fleeting) and disastrous in *Brief Encounters*, exemplified here in 'Let's Go', Emily Perkins' slightly stoned visit to Prague.

Bringing together the themes we've explored in our travel anthologies over the years gives a sense of the sheer diversity of travel experiences – that 'anything could happen' thrill that keeps me hitting the road time and time again. I hope this collection inspires you in the same way, whether the trip you're dreaming of is on or off the beaten track, and whatever unexpected kindnesses, adventures or romances you find when you get there.

TONY WHEELER