

BY THE SEAT OF MY PANTS

**HUMOROUS TALES OF TRAVEL
AND MISADVENTURE**

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INTRODUCTION

Travel is funny. Not always, of course, and often it's funnier in retrospect, but you can be pretty sure that just about any journey is going to offer some moments of unadulterated hilarity or at least unanticipated irony. And usually at your own expense. That's just the way of the road.

In thirty years of wandering the globe, I've learned that the one thing I can reliably expect when I travel is that something unexpected will happen. And when it does, I'll be forced to call on all my grace, sensitivity, courage and wisdom. And when they don't respond, I'll be forced to call on my sense of humour.

That's why my #1 rule of the road is this: if you don't pack your sense of humour with your sunscreen, sooner or later you'll get burned.

By the Seat of My Pants springs from this notion. These thirty-one tales of on-the-road adventures and encounters encompass the full comic spectrum, from the wryly ironic to the laugh-out-loudably absurd. While the stories vary widely in setting, subject and tone, they all remind us that some of travel's greatest treasures are those unexpected, unimaginable situations that make us laugh – at the world and at ourselves.

That's one reason for this book. Here's the second. Thirty years ago, on a soaring spring day on the Princeton University campus, I made a momentous decision. I decided to forego the familiar paths most of my graduating friends were taking – grad school, med school, law school, jobs in long-established firms –

and follow a different track: I would live in Paris for the summer on a work-abroad internship, move to Athens for the academic year on a teaching fellowship, and then... I had no idea.

I had absolutely no idea what I would do next. I just knew that something deep and irresistible was impelling me to go to Paris and Athens, and that if I ignored this urge, I would regret it for ever. The rest, I trusted, would take care of itself. So the week after graduation I packed up my life and set off for Europe, without any friends to meet me, with no place to stay and no coherent overall plan. I was making a grand leap into the unknown – flying by the seat of my pants.

That was the beginning of my life as a traveller, and the beginning of my resolution to trust the pants-seat and make the leap – a resolution that has conferred innumerable and life-changing gifts over the ensuing thirty years.

Flying by the seat of your pants is a quintessential part of the traveller's act and art. You'll be cruising along with everything seeming to be working out just fine, when suddenly reality tilts and teeters and you're confronted with something entirely unexpected – a flat tyre, a missed train, a mystifying meal, a kindly but incomprehensible villager, an unmapped fork in the path. Time to put on the pants.

The tales in this book illustrate this principle and the wide variety of forms it can take. Sometimes the need arises in the middle of an otherwise uneventful trip, as Jan Morris discovers on her first trip aboard a *vaporetto* voyage in Venice, and Michelle Richmond learns in a hotel room at the end of the world in Ushuaia, Argentina. Sometimes entire trips can go horribly wrong, as on Pico Iyer's wide-eyed, white-knuckle, four-wheel whirl through Ethiopia, Chris Cox's decidedly not-as-advertised boat to Angkor Wat, and Danny Wallace's assignment in Prague with an Uzi-toting kidnapper-cum-tour guide.

Sometimes travel thrusts us into unexpected encounters with locals. Jeff Greenwald peers into dusty Indian depths in a confrontation with a luggage *wallah* in Calcutta's airport, Edwin Tucker gets much more than he bargained for when he unwittingly trades his last pen for a shepherd's lamb in Tibet, Laura Resau befriends a Mexican village boy and receives an unforgettable lesson in traditional bathing rites from his mother, and Deborah Steg is treated to an award-worthy dinner performance by an unctuous new *ami* in Cannes, in southern France.

At other times our travelling companions are the challenge, whether it's Tim Cahill's exasperatingly annoyance-proof caving partner in Thailand, Judy Tierney's wrangler-wannabe boyfriend on a boot-shopping spree in Texas, Sean Condon's exhaustingly enthusiastic uncle in Vermont or the family from hell that Karl Taro Greenfeld lands among when his girlfriend introduces him to idyllic Ibiza. At other times we put on the pants of the fool ourselves, as Bill Fink discovers on a spontaneous expedition to climb Mount Fuji in Japan, Doug Lansky understands inside an exit-less Dutch toilet and Jeff Vize realises as a crowd-pleasing pedestrian in Bangladesh.

Finally, on some journeys it's the destination itself that dissembles, as the alluring marble marvels of Italy's Apuan Alps do for David Downie and a reputed Buddhist Shangri-La near the India-Tibet border does for Rolf Potts. Amanda Jones's youthful escape to the United States becomes a nightmare when she discovers that her promised apartment isn't available and she is suddenly homeless in San Francisco. Holly Erickson's dream job as a live-in cook in a London apartment takes a tilt when she breezes in to find that the garden kitchen is literally so.

Ah, the rewards of the road!

When I first set out to compile this anthology, I knew from my own experiences and thirty years of conversations with friends

and fellow travellers that the theme was resonant – but I had no idea we would end up with this rich repository of tales. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to the numerous writers with whom I have worked in the past, who agreed to share their favourite on-the-road bumbles, bumps and bounces. And I owe a second debt to all the writers who responded to the competition we sponsored on www.lonelyplanet.com, which elicited – much to our amazement and delight – more than six hundred submissions. Wonderfully, and fittingly, the compilation that resulted brings together stories from some of the world's best-known travellers and storytellers side-by-side with works by writers who have never been published before.

Compiling this collection has been its own glorious seat-of-the-pants journey, but now that it is nearly over, I can look back and discern four fundamental and interwoven lessons revealed along the way.

The first is that the world offers an inexhaustible supply of surprises. We may think we know what's around the next corner, but we never do. And this is precisely why travel continues to excite and delight.

The second lesson is that whatever surprises the world throws our way, we can cope with them gracefully and generously, as long as we maintain our sense of humour, which is compass and counsellor all in one.

The third lesson hearkens back to Plato, who famously wrote that necessity is the mother of invention. The tales in this collection amply illuminate the traveller's corollary: adversity is the mother of invention. Travel thrusts us into all manner of unexpected situations, with all kinds of unimagined people, and in so doing, it challenges and stretches – and teaches – us in unexpected and unimagined ways. Adversity offers us irreplaceable lessons in humility, flexibility, open-mindedness, open-heartedness, resilience and resourcefulness. In this sense, our seat-of-the-pants adventures ultimately teach us not just about the people and

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places of the world that we didn't know existed – but about the unknown, unexplored corners of ourselves.

And the fourth lesson springboards from this truth back to the principle I have followed countless times since that soaring spring day on the Princeton campus thirty years ago: trust your instinct. If you're faced with a sticky situation or a daunting divide, listen to the small, still voice deep inside you– it will tell you what to do, which way to go.

Don't be afraid to fly by the seat of your pants. Just enjoy the ride.

Don George

San Francisco, May 2005