

Esquire

[Subscribe](#) | [Newsletter](#) | [Customer Service](#) | [Promotions](#) | [Digital Editions](#) | [Win](#)

TRY: [Matt Damon](#) // [Life of Man](#) // [Hairstyles & Cuts](#) // [Olivia Munn](#)

HOME // FEATURES // RESTLESS MAN

THE LONG WAY HOME (PART 1)

Sixty-five hours in the air, thirty-seven days, 37,000 miles, six continents, eleven countries, seventeen cities, fourteen hotels, hash, mushrooms, women, heatstroke, strep throat, a bipolar episode, eleven medications, eight and a half books, two pairs of shoes, and one very long train ride. It's a beautiful world.

[>>READ PART TWO HERE](#)

By John H. Richardson

Tweet



Get Popular Mechanics On Your iPad

NEW!

20 BOLD IDEAS
Popular Mechanics
THAT WILL CHANGE THE WORLD

DOWNLOAD IT NOW

The Magazine Is Now Interactive!

SPONSORED LINKS

SPECIAL OFFER

Esquire

THE MOST FASHIONABLE MEN IN THE WORLD

Esquire

DICAPRIO

SAVE 89%

SUBSCRIBE >>

Published in the November 2001 issue

They took away my clothes, my shoes, my watch, gave me a suitcase full of new clothes and some money, and told me to go around the world. I have to say goodbye to my family. I'm sad and nervous but in my mind I'm already gone. The minute I knew for sure I was going, the life I spent so many years trying to build became a

shadow.

Now I am on an airplane. I don't know why. I think I'm supposed to find out when I get there.

RIO DE JANEIRO, JULY 10

My cabdriver says his name is Luiz and he'll beat any price on a day tour, take me to the statue of Christ on the hill and the botanical gardens and all the major sights. I'm too groggy from the red-eye to think about it. "You like woman?"

Sure.

"You want to talk or you want easy women?"

Easy women?

"No have to talk."

I have to admit, I have always dreamed of easy women. So Luiz tells me to go to a place called Help and not to pay more than fifty dollars. Plus I should skip the hotel and move directly to an apartment in Copacabana — that way I won't get charged extra if I bring a girl to my room and I can hire one of these easy women to stay with me and even cook for me. "Go now Copacabana?"

No, to the hotel. But thanks for the tip.

Luiz apologizes for the ugliness, which looks like the approach to any other city through the rabbled outskirts. This is where the poor people live. Then we drive through a long tunnel and spill out and circle a beautiful lagoon. A few minutes later, he drops me off in front of the place they chose for me, a modest tourist pile in Ipanema. The tourist map shows me that it's one stretch of sand down from Copacabana, the two beaches folding around the city like a fan.

So I head to the beach. It's gorgeous, ringed by hills so steep and misty they look like a Chinese painting. And it doesn't take long before I actually see her, the famous girl, tall and tan and young and lovely. But I can't sit still. I'm not here even ten minutes and already I feel the pull to move on, up toward Copacabana. It's a longer walk than I thought and soon I'm sweating and that song is stuck in my head and my shoes are little ovens. An eccentric woman dances on the sand. A homeless hippie family sells handcrafted pipes on a blanket. Got to keep moving. No telling what you might be missing at the next beach, next town, next continent.

It's an illusion, of course. Copacabana is just another beach. And it's more than that, this urge to look around the bend. It's a hunger, an illness, a curse. Of course, it's why I'm here.

And it's why I'll be leaving.

Brazilians come in all colors, from black through a million tones of brown to blond. Some look Italian, some Nordic, but the women all seem to have the same plump little ass. They walk down the boardwalk with bronzed haunches pumping. By nightfall I'm reeling from erotic fever and I end up at the north end of Copacabana, where the international businessmen stay. Before long I find myself deep in a settee talking to a woman with rippling bronze-colored hair and skin to match. She's quite demure by Rio standards, wearing jeans and a black jacket, but after we've talked a bit and she notices me giving her an up-and-down, she pulls apart her lapels and arches her back to thrust forward her cleavage. "Beautiful," I say.

"They're real," she says.

Her name is Lillian. She is twenty-three. And now she's holding my hand, putting my hand on her leg.

But I don't want to be a sex tourist. Plus there's the marriage thing and the just-off-the-plane thing. So I tell her that she's beautiful but I'm tired and maybe tomorrow.

The next morning, in a fit of virtue, I go to the art museum. In the entranceway, there's a

realistic sculpture of a naked woman leaning back on a rock, and every part of her is bulging with ripeness. She looks exactly like Lillian and I feel like a fool for walking away from her.

I'm the wrong person for this trip. As a kid, I moved every four years and sometimes after two. Before I was sixteen, I'd lived in five different countries. This is what taught me about the trapdoor, the floor under your feet that seems as solid as stone one minute and then suddenly swings out on its hinge. And down you go.

So I had my fill of travel long ago. Of course I know that the trapdoor is everywhere, right under my suburban lawn too, but somehow when I'm home with my wife and kids, I feel safer. I feel like I am the person that I think I am. But getting on a plane, I hear the hinge creak and suddenly I know it's there again: Am I the person I think I am? Who would I be if I grew up here?

I call home. I'm okay talking to my wife and older daughter but when I get to Rachel — she's eleven — her little-girl voice kills me. Suddenly I feel like I'm back in myself again, pulled by her voice like a balloon on a string. "Arlo misses you," she says. Arlo is our dog.

At breakfast a man from Dallas tells me about the famous statue of Christ up on the mountain and how amazing it is. I tell him I'm less interested in the sights than in the people and the culture and he nods agreeably. "But some sights are worth seeing."

He has a point. And I could go to beaches and bars at home. So I set out in search of Rio. Above the old part of town, there's a beautiful old monastery, shaved-head monks singing old Latin chants. Down from there into the city, wide boulevards like Paris with all the sidewalks swirling in black-and-white mosaics. The music hall is an imposing marble thing modeled on a famous French music hall. But the art museum has a guy who does stuff like Basquiat and another who does Jasper Johns and on back to the days of ruffled shirts, similar images with unfamiliar names. There are other museums with famous international painters, but those you can see anywhere. There's an aqueduct arching from one city hill to another that's pretty amazing, and when you get up high you can see bay after bay and islands and mountains with little pocket cities growing up in the good spots. I spend one happy night listening to a great bossa nova guitarist and leave convinced that there's a connection between the way bossa nova combines pulsing rhythms with the most elegant harmonic structures and the sensual but very stylish way the women dress — the war of the mind against the body is not being fought here. And another morning walking through one of the favelas, the hillside slums that have become so famous that there are companies devoted solely to giving guided slum tours. They're built of little brick houses piled on the hills in a crazy-quilt way that looks like something out of Dr. Seuss, woven through with tiny alleys barely big enough to walk a bike. The guidebook says they're dangerous, but they have restaurants and schools and post offices. I stop for a soda at a sorveteria and the lady behind the counter gives me a napkin to mop my forehead.

One afternoon, I head for a hillside suburb called Santa Teresa, an artist colony with cobbled streets and a small art museum with a charming name: the Little Farm of the Sky. But by this time I'm feeling pretty discouraged about this whole round-the-world project. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but when you think about it, what is the point of traveling from place to place? Rio is a city full of people going about their business, a city like any other. How to catch it? Can you catch it without living there? Or should you just soak up some sun and enjoy the strong dollar and note a few slight differences — they say ciao here, just like Italians — to give yourself the feeling that you've been somewhere? Oh yeah, Rio, I've been there. The national hand sign is thumbs-up, used for everything from "Thanks for letting me cut ahead" to "Ain't life great?"

Then I get lost. And I'm sweating. And my feet are getting blistered. And someone points me down an alley and the most beautiful girl in the world walks by and at the end of the alley a long staircase begins. It goes up and up the hill and then cuts off to the right and keeps going, a colorful mosaic of broken tiles and bathtubs turned into planters, beauty wrenched out of the most prosaic things. Some of the tiles have little pictures and stories on them, and there's a big one that says "I Love Rio" in Portuguese. At the bottom there's a sign saying

that this project began ten years ago when the artist came across a box of old European tiles, and people have sent him tiles from all over the world and when he mounts their tile he takes a picture and sends it to them. The staircase will be finished the day he dies.

Suddenly I'm happy to be alive, happy to be in a strange city. Staircase art! Of course! Leading me upward! And after climbing a few hundred steps I come to a wall decorated with paintings and every one of them seems to have an extremely pregnant black woman in it, and there's a newspaper article mounted on a board about a man with a gleaming black handlebar mustache who goes by the name Selar. I notice a man looking at me from a balcony. He looks familiar. Something about that handlebar mustache. Oh yeah. "Are you the painter? Do you speak English?"

He is and he does. "Where are you from?"

"New York."

"Just a minute," he says, disappearing. A moment later he appears in the doorway and as we shake hands, I tell him how much I like the staircase. Turns out he's really from Argentina and lived in Panama but moved here ten years ago. Why?

He smiles and says, "Rio" in the tone of a man who has said it all with one perfect word. His mustache has gone gray and there's a weary kindness floating in his eyes.

Then he asks what I think of his paintings.

"Great," I say.

"They all have a pregnant woman in them."

"So I see. Why do you do that?"

He ducks his head in a shy but practiced way. "It's a personal problem."

"Ah, so you have lots of children."

No, he says. It was just the one pregnant woman, many years ago in Panama. Which reminds him of why he came down to talk to me. Could I send him a tile? "The Statue of Liberty? Or the Empire State Building?" He thinks for a second, then shakes his head. "The Statue of Liberty is better." He points to a spot on the steps. "I put it right there."

I promise to send him a tile and tell him again how happy his staircase made me, this bouquet of steps leading me up to an unknown destination.

Then it's my last night and I don't want to waste it, so I call Lillian and ask if she wants to go to a samba show or nightclub or something. She says she'd rather just watch the game on TV at my hotel. Rio is fighting São Paulo for the national championship, a big deal in the land of Pelé. As they play, Lillian is talking so fast that all I really grasp is that she's definitely not rooting for Rio. People here only care about money, she says. If you have it, they love you. Without it, they look right through you. Go São Paulo!

"People who come to beautiful places come full of hunger," I say. She doesn't understand. I try again. "El Buddha dice deseo hecho muy dolor." Desire makes much pain.

This time she laughs and nods her head. Oh yes. Yes indeed.

Her mother thinks she's working as a secretary.

DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA, JULY 13

A red-eye across the Atlantic and I wake up in Johannesburg. Then another short hop to the coastal city of Durban, where I meet Trevor Mingay, whose friends call him the white Zulu because he grew up on the fringe of a rural township and speaks the language fluently. A tall and handsome man in his early thirties, he fought in Angola, knocked around for a while, and ended up working as a private investigator. For no better reason than that he's the friend of a

friend of a friend, he's agreed to spend the day showing me what a rural township is like, which I figured would get me a little closer to the real South Africa than cocktails in Cape Town.

As we drive up into the hills, Trevor is quiet to the point of being somber. Mandela was arrested right near here, he says. Up on that pine-forested hilltop, there was a terrorist camp. When he was a boy they used to hunt bushbucks together in that same forest, the blacks driving and the whites shooting. Then everybody shared the meat. They'd cut out the liver and put it on the coals quickly and eat it, a traditional thing. "That's all gone now," he says. "That will never happen again."

And this area we're passing through? When he was growing up, it was a white farm. Now the Zulu king owns it and he's let it go fallow. He won't let his own people live on it, but all the squatters want to take over white farms.

When we reach Trevor's hometown, a quaint little place nestled in the hills, he falls into a litany of what used to be: That was a fine hotel, now trashed. This used to be a jail, now filled with squatters. At this store, they once had the ring-down phones and you'd put in your call and sit waiting for the operator to call you back. It's all black now, all changed forever. Here's the Pholela Training Institute, where some of the first terrorists were trained. The terrorism — the word he always uses — started when he was fifteen.

And here's his grandfather's house. He stops at the gate. That slab of cement with the raised circle? They used it for making wagon wheels. They have a room in the national museum full of Mingay wagon wheels. Now the whole property is owned by the national lumber company.

A dirt road takes us through a pine forest and then we're at the crest above a vast valley, the brown hills scattered with round straw-roofed huts. Right there on that ridge, that was his father's farm. Half a mile more and we pull into one of the Zulu compounds. Dogs and chickens and little kids in the yard, a couple of men who look at us with expressionless faces — until Trevor gets out and starts speaking Zulu.

"Trevor! Sawubona!" Hello, Trevor. A black man in a plaid cap comes to shake our hands. His name is Mazeka and he and Trevor played together as kids. With both hands, he presents a plastic container full of the traditional Zulu home-brewed beer, a milky liquid like a thin porridge with brown grains floating in the bottom. Throw a little fruit or meal and some yeast in a barrel and heat it up and this is what you get. While we drink, the Zulus tease Trevor about the time he killed their rooster and his childhood obsession with a game called polalambibi, or murder the mouse — come over here, you kids. Show the man from America your arrows. Trevor used to play the game for hours and hours, four boys on one side driving the mice and a couple of others shooting. When they had enough mice, they'd pull off the skin and skewer them on a shish kebab. And here's one the kids killed a few minutes ago. Trevor takes the corpse tenderly and rubs his thumb over the soft fur, ruffles the ears, clearly caught in a memory.

This scene, I am told, is a very rare thing. Ninety-eight percent of the white people in South Africa will never even enter a rural township, much less squat in the dirt drinking home brew. But Trevor's boyhood friends all look at least a decade older than he does. Their teeth are bad, their clothes worn. They drink away the afternoon as if they have all the time in the world.

A few quarts later, we go to visit an old woman Trevor remembers from childhood. A pot of beans burns over a fire in the center of her hut and it's very cool and dark and smoky, lit only by a deep orange shaft of light coming in a small window. The old woman sits on the floor, stirring her beans. "Yebo gogo," we say. Hello grandmother. Mazeka shows me how she sweeps with reeds tied with wire and how she sleeps on a mat she made herself. He wants me to understand. They talk about how Trevor's dad had his own spear and shield and knew traditional ways of fighting and was much respected.

Outside, roosters scratch in the dirt.

When we leave, the old woman asks Trevor to send back a beer with her grandson. Trevor teases her about being an old drunk and she says she's still alive, so shut up and send the beer.

We can't leave without paying a visit to the chief. That would be rude. So we drive across the valley to his compound, a series of round huts rising up the hills in levels that denote the pecking order of the wives who live in them. The chief is a lean old man in a sweater and slacks. He seems suspicious at first but eventually agrees to join us for beer and brandy.

By now the sun is setting over the valley, shafts of light cutting across the blue-and-violet ridges and deep into the shadows of the canyons. Here and there golden squares of light begin to glow — candlelight and firelight. There's a slight haze of smoke. It feels like a moment out of ancient times, a suspended instant of eternity. Then a young Zulu man spots me and comes up smiling. Comes up very close, right in my face, smiling in a fixed way and asking the same question over and over.

Trevor appears at my elbow. He leads me into the tavern and tells me that things very nearly went pear shaped just then. Didn't he tell me to stay close? Didn't I notice how drunk that guy was?

Inside the tavern, there are chairs and a table and even a TV rigged to run on battery power. On the wall, there's a poster of Notorious B.I.G. For the next hour or so, we drink. More people pile into the hut. The chief is getting drunk and there's a feeling of tension in the room. Finally we've been polite enough and pile back into Trevor's truck to drive the chief back up the hill. I ride in the pickup bed with the chief and when we hit a deep rut, he goes tumbling and gets back up with a drunken smile. At the gate to his compound, he staggers out and goes weaving up the hill.

Trevor is disgusted. "In the old days, that would never have happened," he says. But that's the way things are going now. And yes, he admits, he's a "racialist." His white friends would never believe the Trevor I've seen today, sitting in the dirt and drinking with the Zulus. He thinks the current government is a corrupt disaster that's leading the country to ruin. "You look at Zimbabwe, what was Rhodesia — some twenty years after independence they're still trying to confiscate the land from the white farmers who are actually keeping that country running. They can't run that country without whites. But they don't give a damn. They just take the farms away."

At Mazeka's compound, we present his father with a bottle of brandy. Now this is a proper Zulu man, Trevor says. Look at how he stands, with his back so straight and that air of granite dignity. He has a body shop, a small taxi company, he works hard. And for a moment the glow of Trevor's respect is returned. The old man says the bottle pleases him very much, and the guest from America is welcome back anytime — they will set up a bed and provide someone to fuck. Just give them some advance notice.

Then one last stop to get some dagga. We stand by the road waiting and the night is glittering with stars, the Milky Way smeared across the sky in a holy glow. No one's in a hurry. Time doesn't matter. We end up passing a spliff with five or six Zulus, talking about horses and the murder of mice.

My last two days in Durban I spend with a police detective who is investigating a serial murder case. I'll never forget that wall of mutilated victims, the nights I spend nursing a vicious cold and feeling like a piece of flotsam adrift in the world. I wanted the real South Africa, but this is too real. I leave town a day early and spend the night at the Jo'burg Airport Holiday Inn, a dismal place cured in the cigarette smoke of a thousand international businessmen.

DARES SALAAM, TANZANIA, JULY 18

What a difference a day makes. On the plane to Tanzania, I sit next to a statuesque black woman with her hair pulled skull-tight into a pile of glossy dreadlocks. She's wearing tight black jeans and black heels and a lot of Coptic silver; her handbag is Nine West and her

watch a sleek Calvin Klein. Turns out her dad was a diplomat and she grew up in Ethiopia, then went to England to boarding school and trained as a lawyer. Now she works as a research analyst for an international firm in Johannesburg: Juliet Rugeiyamu, twenty-six, pleased to meet you.

I ask her if she thinks South Africa is going to the dogs. She turns her regal head, answering in a crusty British accent. "Any economist will tell you that this is the best-performing government South Africa has ever had. There was corruption under apartheid, too, but it served them. That's the thing about apartheid — it was a success. It worked. But they were in their little bubble with all the resources, and now there's competition."

We talk all the way to Dar es Salaam, where her sister meets her. Lilian's about a foot shorter, also a lawyer, works at Pricewaterhouse. Over dinner at a local hot spot called Ryan's, the sisters discuss the men in their lives — one such dog happens to be standing at the bar — and they laugh at their own viciousness. Then the conversation moves to the reason Juliet is here, a family trip up to their home village to dispose of their father's things. He died ten years ago and they've been putting it off until now. Their mom is coming over from Saudi Arabia. Too bad their brother couldn't make it from South Carolina.

Then the band breaks into a country-western waltz, and Lilian starts singing along in a twangy American accent: With four hungry children and crops in the field, you picked a fine time to leave me, Lucille. "I love Kenny Rogers," she says. Turns out "Lucille" is a very popular song in Tanzania. Lilian's even heard it sung at weddings, which is pretty strange when you consider the lyrics.

ZANZIBAR, TANZANIA, JULY 19

Zanzibar is 95 percent Muslim, so most of the women wear scarves and tunics. Sometimes the tunics are black, sometimes white, sometimes beautifully embroidered, and often bright-colored dresses peek out from the hemlines. The black scarves make the face seem even more precious, like a frame around a painting. For the first time, I see the romance of the veil. And Stone Town is a romantic place, with ancient white buildings in a maze of tiny alleys. My hotel has high ceilings and a Moorish courtyard and a high wooden bed with a serious mosquito net, the ideal African hotel. But I'm in a foul mood again. It's probably just this lingering cold and three days of travel, but I keep up this tortured interior dialogue about this whole enterprise. What seems exotic to me is just another way of life, ordinary to the people who live it. It would take years to penetrate that life and even then you couldn't help looking at it from the outside. A tourist can't really expect to get anything but the taste of difference itself. Is that the point — the whiff of a different world? To relieve us of the burden of our own?

And this place is very much on the international-backpacker trail. Internet caf s on every corner, kids with dreadlocks and henna tattoos all over their dirty feet. Then there are the female sex tourists with their young black men. Not that I'm judging them, at least not the way the local women do when they follow them with their black eyes. But I can't help feeling responsible for them somehow. Same for the loutish businessmen, like this American guy I meet at the House of Wonders, a big old palace that earned its name because it had the first electricity and elevator in East Africa. "Lot of history," he says. He's here to buy herbs to make pesticide. And he's wearing shorts, which the guidebook says is offensive to the local people.

I hate the feeling of being part of this. "Visitors should act less like they're walking through a human zoo and more as if they are guests in a foreign land," the guidebook says.

I strike up a conversation with Abdul, a small glistening black man wearing a traditional robe and hat. He studied journalism and history in Russia, but he won't work for the local papers — you can't tell the truth with the political situation the way it is. Last election, the ruling party that's run this place for the last forty years forced the opposition monitors out of the ballot-counting room and counted for a week. And guess what, they won again. Friends of his at the paper who tried to write the truth got tortured and imprisoned. So he'd rather do historical

work, thank you — he did six months on an archeological dig with a professor from the University of Virginia and now he's some kind of assistant government historian. He's got four children and fourteen brothers and sisters and no electricity at home but he's determined to get a doctorate in archeology. He has a warm smile that crinkles his eyes. For an hour we talk about his childhood on the island of Pemba and local politics and Muslim traditions and the refugee problem in Rwanda and Burundi (the subject of his M.A. thesis) and how the local people feel about tourists. "You'll be walking along with your mother or your sisters, and you can see everything about their body," he says.

A funny thing: At his suggestion, we're having this conversation at a fancy tourist restaurant on the pier. Although he works directly across the street, he has never been here before and he's curious, a tourist in a restaurant in his own country. And I'm his trusty native guide.

I'm sitting on my high African bed, cozy inside the white mosquito netting, as the ceiling fan beats the warm air.

I wish Kathy and the kids were here.

At the far end of Zanzibar, where it's dry, people farm seaweed and coconut husks. An old woman explains how they dig a hole in the sand the size of a man and fill it with coconuts, then pile rocks over it and wait six months. When they dig up the nuts, it's easy to pull their softened and salt-cured husks apart and pound them soft and then weave them into rope, which sells for two hundred shillings a coil. These are the ropes that bind the sticks that hold the mud that forms the walls of all these houses.

At a village festival, thousands of people in bright-colored clothing mill around watching young men attack one another with banana stalks. The air fills with red dust and banana fiber, chains of women march through the crowd singing sexual taunts, and chains of men march through the crowd chanting back. Tourists take pictures and there's a cameraman from a Japanese television station, but this is very much a real ceremony, the first day of a four-day festival that draws people from all over the island. The afternoon ends with a group of old men building a ceremonial pyre of dried palm leaves, women marching around it chanting, until the wife of a government official lights it. Now the natives are taking pictures too. The women march and chant faster and faster until the flame goes up in a burst and everyone scatters in laughter.

On our way back, I stop at the beach and see some women who are dressed in jeans and Lycra. As I walk by, one of them calls out to no one, "Hello black people," as if she is saying out loud what she thinks she can read in my mind.

On to Amsterdam, where I can be a tourist with a clear conscience.

AMSTERDAM, JULY 23

They sell a T-shirt here showing a typical visitor's first day in town: ARRIVE, 12 A.M. 12:05, GO TO HASH BAR. I'm proud to say that caricature doesn't describe me — it takes me at least an hour. And the menu at the bar offers ten different kinds of hash, from Kashmir to Lebanon. I buy a couple grams of Tornado and the barmaid hands me a bong.

When I get out, I notice that some of the buildings are tilting forward. In fact, a lot of them are at skewy angles. Later I learn the whole city is built on pilings driven deep into a peat bog, which might have something to do with it. But I'm not discounting the Tornado.

The hotel wouldn't let me check in until two, so I'm still wearing the dusty clothes that I wore to the festival in Zanzibar eighteen hours ago, but I am now in that very mellow body high you get from good tarry hash. So I go for a boat ride through the Amsterdam canals. All those beautiful buildings, the trees hanging over the water, the colorful houseboats — there's one just for cats! And one for ducks! What a great city! And if you get thirsty, why not stop for a nonalcoholic hemp beer at the Hemp Hotel, where an Irish girl named Kathy will tell you about the hemp sheets and the hemp curtains and hemp consciousness and her mother-in-law's mushroom shop and the book she wants to write about all the weird paranoid things

that happen to you when you're hallucinating. "The Acid Demons Will Get You," she calls it. And at the mushroom shop they're so kind, so helpful, so very knowledgeable. The Mexican is up and down and the Colombian has more hallucinations, but the Hawaiian is strongest and most like acid — half an envelope will give you a mellow four-hour trip. Take it all and you'll turn into a philosopher. After the canals there are saunas for a few bucks, so why not (after one more quick cafe stop) buy some fresh clothes and wash off the dirt of Africa? Why not spend two hours at it, alternating between the sauna and the Jacuzzi and the foot bath — heaven!

After this, things begin to deteriorate.

E-mail Home:

Hi sweetie — I got your message. I'll call you in the morning, your morning. I'm not sure what time it is for me. Pulled a red-eye last night and got redder in the Amsterdam hash bars. But tomorrow belongs to Rembrandt and van Gogh. I really do truly wish you were here. Three more weeks alone. Tonight at the live sex show I didn't get horny until I imagined that the woman was you.

But I better stop thinking about stuff like that.

The girls in the windows are only about \$35 for twenty minutes, and some of them are really pretty. I didn't tonight. But what about tomorrow?

Yeah, I know: Rembrandt.

At THE Rijksmuseum, at least half the paintings are of food. One painter named Jan Weenix specialized in dead game. There are also lots of Dutch businessmen in ruffled collars and an amazing pile of old books by someone named Jan Lievens — you can see the dust on the bindings, the stains on the pages. The fascination with humble things continues next door at the van Gogh museum, where there are so many dark-brown cottages and dark-brown shoes and dark-brown peasants eating dark-brown potatoes that it's a relief when the colors finally start to go crazy. But no women. In his entire career, unless you count a few old crones eating potatoes in the dark, Vincent van Gogh hardly painted a single woman.

Which sends me straight to the famous red-light district, a kind of van Gogh antidote. And I'm not the only one. The rest of the city is sleepy and placid but this place is jammed, tour groups and lovers and families strolling and cameras flashing and the restaurants spilling into the streets. Parents who'd be horrified at the sight of a hooker back home walk their six-year-olds down the alleys to look at the prostitutes in lingerie. Even at the live sex show, where the customers are packed into tight rows like the audience at a hot jazz bar, there's a nice old couple and a few college girls and a guy with his girlfriend, all cheerfully watching a priest in a hood take advantage of a penitent woman. They're here because sex is the heart of this city and every city, the force that through the green fuse drives the flower. Take the women out of the windows and this becomes just another placid residential neighborhood, perfect for children and old people.

Here, most of the girls are black. Across the canal, they're Asian. Down that way, blond. And look at this — an old round church and all the buildings around it honeycombed with glass doors.

Some of them are quite beautiful, somebody's wife says in a tone of surprise.

My God, look at that one. Slender, ice-blond hair, amazing breasts.

But is it wrong? Is it sexist?

After eighteen years together, my wife and I have made it through a few extramarital adventures and know that what really matters is our love and our history and our children and not what we do with our bodies on any given day. That's the theory anyway. A few days before I left, we were driving in the car with the kids in the backseat and I said, "Honey, I want a separation."

"How about five weeks?"

"That sounds about right."

And we laughed.

I love my wife very much. She's so reasonable and sane and funny and I don't deserve her.

Anita opens her door with a smile and says one hundred shillings. She definitely has the most perfect breasts I have ever seen and also a cool black tattoo like a slave bracelet around her upper arm. Love that. Up a short flight of stairs and there's a small room that looks like some kind of kid's fantasy of a private airplane, a fiberglass cubbyhole with a built-in bed. She's cheerful and efficient and works diligently at her job, the ideal sex worker, but after the initial thrill it all begins to seem a bit too clinical. "Did you smoke hash?" she asks.

I admit that I did.

"Tourists," she says, sounding more amused than vexed. "Don't you know — first you have sex, then you smoke hash?"

Live and learn.

"Usually it's the young guys — not that you're old."

"Thanks for that."

But she has a work ethic, or something. And when she's finished she chatters about her adventures with Amsterdam hash until I catch my breath.

I try to keep up with the local news, but the Dutch have cunningly foiled such efforts by speaking and writing in a mysterious code that seems like the bastard child of English and German. It isn't until I get to the airport that I hear about the bloody attack by the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka and the anti-globalization riots in Genoa. The editorials in the London Times are almost comically split — one writer says that the Tamil Tigers have a point because the "reality TV" of modern tourism rapes local cultures. "From the local officials taking backhanders to the president pocketing the tourist taxes to the Thai tart and the prepubescent boys who stroll Sri Lankan beaches patting their backsides to attract sex tourists, the world prostitutes itself before the irresistible great god dollar."

The other writer attacks the Genoa protesters for stopping progress and tells them to consider Christopher Columbus, whose explorations brought the world so much wealth and knowledge. He doesn't mention the millions of dead natives.

On to Kiev!

KIEV, UKRAINE, JULY 25

There is a relationship between the landscape and the people, figure and ground.

Amsterdam is charming and beautiful but not grand like Paris. Flat, sunny Zanzibar makes sense from the dark maze of Stone Town. The way Rio's beaches glaze those steep hills echoes the ambitious sensuality of the people. Now here I am in Kiev. Hot as a pizza oven. Even the wind is baked dry. Functional airport with a vaguely military feel, and despite the sun, all the officials have the white slabby faces and clammy skin of Soviet apparatchiks. My cabdriver is wearing tight bug-eye sunglasses that make him look like a KGB thug.

At the hotel, you have to surrender your passport for "registration" or risk a \$300 fine, a pleasant welcoming gesture. The lobby is cavernous and empty. The shop has no snacks or candy. The welcome pamphlet is full of enticing suggestions: "Well, well, well! What do your eyes say? They clearly say that after sauna, massage and the pleasing swimming pool our guest is A.O.K. Now there is no trace of fatigue whatsoever and our guest is irresistible and very dangerous." There are glossy pictures of the pool and the exercise room and the bars, all filled with beautiful women, but the pool is closed and the masseur is missing and there isn't a single customer in the basement casino. The strip bar is empty too. And there's no air-

conditioning in my incredibly hot room. And the minibar key doesn't open the minibar. I call the hotel operator at the very logical and easy-to-remember number, 32-02, and she says they'll send someone up with a key right away.

Nobody comes. After a while, I start to wonder if there's anything in the minibar. It could be empty. Or it could be stocked full of ice-cold sodas and salty nuts that I will never be able to taste because of the absurd and whimsical disappearance — or nonexistence, or simple malicious withholding — of a key.

Yep, I'm in the former Soviet Union. Home of Gogol, Bulgakov, Pasternak. But Bulgakov said that Malopodvalnaya Street is the most fantastic street in the world, and he was a guy who knew something about the fantastic, so let's go for a walk and — whoa! Look at this place! Khreshchatyk Street! A grand boulevard sweeping into the most elegant veronica, broad sidewalks and esplanades lined by massive ornate buildings and outdoor caf  s to rival Paris. Beneath the grime, even the central department store has a grand marble staircase with a railing that would look good under the glove of a countess. And the sidewalks are filled with the most stylish people, young men with long hair and women in the tightest and shortest dresses imaginable. And this must be said, because it comes as such a surprise: The Ukraine girls really do leave the West behind. They dress like they want you to throw them down on the pavement and start humping them, not later this evening or even five minutes from now but right this instant. They wear fabrics so sheer that I am able to report that bras are optional and thong underwear is very popular.

And look, across the street, dressed as an army officer, isn't that my minibar key?

Elena Ustinskaya is a cheerful young woman who works for a travel agency in the hotel. As we leave for a tour of the city, she tells me her agency rents rooms there for less than the hotel charges. Rooms elsewhere in Kiev? No, in the hotel we just left. "That's bizarre," I say. "So the life here is," she says, with the satisfaction of having struck the nail true.

First stop, a famous monastery overlooking the Dnieper River. It's a stunning place with lots of golden domes and elaborate religious paintings everywhere. Occupied by monks for a thousand years, it's considered the heart of the Russian Orthodox Church. Clinton came here. The pope wanted to visit but there was some kind of anti-Catholic fuss. As we climb the bell tower, we pass a monk who looks just like Alyosha Karamazov, a saintly Jesus boy with long hair and a soft beard. "Don't let them hear you speak English," Elena says. "They don't like foreigners." Which reminds me of all that Russian exceptionalism, the embattled sense of inferiority and superiority that I read about in so many old novels. And here it is still.

There are several museums on the monastery grounds, but we're told the rules have changed at the icon museum; we can't go in alone, so we have to join a tour, which means it will take forty-five minutes and no wandering away from the guide. So we go over to the museum of miniatures, which Elena says is fantastic. "The rose is in the hair. The flea has the horseshoe. There is a portrait on the grape seed."

Alas, the exhibit isn't open today. Maybe tomorrow.

"Every time I come here, something comes wrong," Elena says. "It's impossible."

"It seems arbitrary," I say, repeating the word a few times to be sure she understands me.

"It's arbitrary, yes. Every time I come here, I am surprised."

We start heading toward downtown, walking through lovely streets and parks that look like New York City near Riverside Drive, elegant row houses and views of the river through trees. Passing one luxurious apartment building, she tells me the former prime minister lived there until he went to America and paid \$6 million cash to buy Eddie Murphy's house. But that's the way it is here. "Everybody is poor, but they drive Mercedes."

In fact, there goes one right now. Followed by a BMW too. "You see?"

And see how the streets are all torn up for repairs? The mayor's son has a paving company.

And here's the Mariinsky Palace, another magnificent old structure with a freshly paved plaza. Too bad it's not open. But then Elena couldn't take me in anyway. "Only one tour guide is allowed inside."

Why?

"Impossible," she says.

We reach a monumental steel arch built to honor the

bond between Ukrainians and Russians. Young people call it the Monument to the Dead Cyclist, but the old people get nostalgic for the days of Soviet triumphalism. Lots of them still miss Stalin. There's an old saying: What you fear, you love.

And here's yet another construction tangle. "Impossible," Elena says. And when I tell her that I'm scheduled to spend three days on the Trans-Siberian Railway, she's shocked. It's hot and the windows don't open and the conductor turns the air-conditioning on only when it's cool outside. "Impossible. I could not spend even one night," she says.

"Impossible?"

"Impossible. Later, you will remember what I have said."

The next time we reach a construction tangle, I beat her to the word. "Impossible." Then we stop at a shoe store because these hiking boots have got to go, even if the only shoes that fit me are those negative-heel Reeboks that look like something a hobbit would wear. Naturally my credit card won't go through: Impossible. And she just laughs until I realize there's a kind of pleasure in this. A line from Dostoyevsky comes back: A man can take pleasure even in a toothache.

Moscow, July 27

Moscow looks dusty and worn, a grander version of some dull South American capital. Red Square is impressive and so vast it makes you feel like a very small insect, which may be the point. A couple of hours pass before I figure out why it all seems so gray and dismal — there are no trees. Patches of them here and there but none along the avenues. Maybe they seemed like a bourgeois indulgence. But here's a lovely sidewalk café, and here's a grocery store stocked with everything a decadent Westerner would want for a long train ride, and my cell phone is finally working, so I can call my wife and kids while walking down the Arbat. I love you! I miss you! I miss Arlo! Now back to the hotel for a sauna, where I drink Perrier from a crystal glass just ten blocks from the Kremlin my cold-war father fought his entire professional life.

And later, maybe a massage.

THE TRANS-SIBERIAN RAILWAY

Two in the morning, I'm standing on the platform waiting for the train doors to open, the city is asleep, and I'm a world away from home. My latest blisters are raw open sores. Thank God I can sit for a few days.

When the doors open, the steward seems puzzled by my ticket, holding up four fingers and asking something in Russian. I nod and say yes, that's right. Since there were no first-class compartments left and the tickets were cheap, a travel agent suggested buying all four bunks in a second-class carriage. The steward shrugs and lets me on the train.

My cabin is very hot and the window comes down only halfway, but once the train starts moving a nice breeze comes in and I climb into the top bunk and it's great, so relaxing, and I am so goddamn tired. The steward brings bedsheets but they're too small to cover the thin mattress, so I use both of them on the bottom. I'm just about to climb in when there's a knock on the door. The steward wants to see my ticket. Is it right? All four beds just for me?

Now I feel bad. Walking to the bathroom, I see my fellow passengers sitting around their little

tables or lying on their bunks, the cabins stuffed with luggage and people. And here I am, the rich American. But now the train is chugging along and clacking its constant rhythm and there's a cool breeze on my face. I fall asleep but then it gets colder and I wake up long enough to switch to the lower opposite bunk. And then I don't wake up for a long time.

Eighteen hours out of Moscow. Birches and wheat fields forever and all the houses like dollhouses, tiny things with carved eaves and shutters, each with a small vegetable plot. When there are enough houses together they look like African villages or Appalachian shantytowns. It feels like I've slipped back in time five hundred years. And it keeps going on and on like that, as if the whole world has slipped back with me.

I've never slept so much. It's the steady rocking and the OK OK OK OK of steel wheels on steel rails and there's something mesmerizing in the magic square of window that gently flickers with tones of green and brown, somewhere between a caveman's fire and a television. It has enough variety to be entertaining but not so much complexity that it actually requires attention. But the most relaxing thing of all is this constant forward motion. Why? Why is motion so relaxing? In The Songlines, Bruce Chatwin wonders if it's because man was nomadic to begin with and all human babies were naturally rocked by the motion of their mothers' eternal march. All I know is that in motion I feel justified — wherever the hell I'm going, I'm doing everything that can be done at this point to get there. So there's nothing to do but relax. And man, am I relaxed. I've fallen asleep three times today and it's all of 8:30 at night and I think I'm ready for another little snooze.

Twelve hours later, I wake up. Coffee, bread, yogurt. Life is good. In fact, it's perfection, sitting here by the window with my instant cappuccino. So much more pleasing than a plane or a car. The ideal way to travel.

Now if only I could figure out why they keep locking the bathroom.

At first I don't even notice it, the change in my internal weather. Maybe the books are the first sign. I've been reading this new genre of backpacker novels coming out of England. They all have the same theme: groovy young Brit goes to the Third World, experiences disgust and revulsion, switches over to guilt at backpacker loutishness and cultural imperialism, and finally returns to London a little wiser and a lot more smug. Like it's all somehow better if you reduce the world to a learning experience instead of a playground. But what's the alternative? Becoming Lawrence of Arabia and making a fetish out of how close you are to the local people? And take your next trip to exotic England, where the customs are so entertainingly peculiar?

So I toss the backpacker novels and switch to some Dostoyevsky short stories — one desperate, pathetic, deluded loser after another. Just the thing to cheer up a lonely traveler.

And maybe a little more of this Amsterdam hash.

I don't want to talk to anybody. I still feel guilty about the four bunks. They're all leaving their doors open but I close mine. There's even a group with a guitar and I picture myself learning some Russian song and sharing the bottle of vodka I bought in Moscow for just this purpose. But it's too noisy and nobody speaks English and I keep hearing my wife on the phone, the sudden concern in her voice when I told her about the vodka. "You're not going to drink, are you?" No way. Not me. Not after so many years of sobriety. Why risk it? Better to just close the door and take another nap.

I've noticed that the couple in the cabin next door also bought four tickets, so maybe I'm not such a rapacious American oinker after all. And the second-shift steward has stopped treating me like a child because I don't speak Russian. She even showed me where they hide the garbage. And hey, there's another toilet down here! It's satisfying to come into a strange place and figure it out. Learning the rules, charting the landscape. Maybe that's the real point of travel, a kind of inoculation against the general aimlessness of life. And for me it has greater resonance because of my traveling childhood, which turned the ordinary challenge of mapping the strange into some kind of key to my emotional survival — which is why, when I finally came so close to drowning in my own helplessness, I decided I had to change or die

and latched on to that phrase by Rinzai: "Just make yourself master of every situation and wherever you stand is the true place." But it sure would be nice to just be normal and take travel as something light and happy instead of this boring drama of identity and the wounds of the past.

When someone knocks on the door, I jump.

By the third day, everybody's zoned out in their compartments, lying on their pallets and staring out the windows. Even the steward slumps in his cubbyhole with his feet up, dreaming. So maybe my impulse to isolation isn't so weird. It's the white noise, the forward motion, the colors flickering in the window screen. An eternity of birch trees.

When we stop in the stations, the steward puts muzaky American pop songs on the cabin loudspeakers, the Eagles and Babyface and so much disco that the sound of that synthetic beat leaks into my dreams like a stain.

I'm not eating. In three days I've had two boxes of noodles, a loaf of peasant bread, and a few yogurts. Which means I haven't had to sit down on the toilet yet, a definite plus. Can I make it another day?

It's the morning of the fourth day and the trip is supposed to be three nights, and I'm worried about missing my stop, since all the signs are in Cyrillic. So I point to my watch and say "Irkutsk" a few times and the second-shift steward figures out what I want and shakes her head. "Tomorrow," she says.

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow."

Irkutsk, Siberia, August 1

A river, nice buildings, the feet aren't too bad, and my belt cinches a notch tighter. According to my watch and the schedule bolted to the wall of the train, it's only 2:37 in the afternoon — plenty of time to explore a new city. But first check into the Hotel Baikal, and no surprise that it used to be part of the Intourist chain of Soviet government hotels, because it's just like the one in Kiev, a massive pile with a lobby like a mausoleum. People slump in the lobby chairs as if they've always been there and will always be there, and three or four young men stand at a desk that says "Security" with that familiar shrouded vacancy, a combination of funeral-home attendant and secret-police flunky. My room has the ugliest brown sofa and carpet in the universe and I can't call home for five hours because of the time difference and the refrigerator shoved under the desk makes it impossible to actually use the desk and the refrigerator is unplugged and empty anyway and I can't call home for five hours and the incredibly narrow bed is so long the door to the bathroom won't close — which is going to be a problem if the toilet doesn't stop dripping like that.

But I don't want to complain. I hate travelers who complain. What I want to do is get the hell out of this holding pen and into the city — look how beautiful it is from the window, the wide Angara River and the bridge angling down to the other bank.

And it is beautiful. There is such a lovely promenade along the riverbank and it's a balmy night and the people of Irkutsk stroll up and down carrying large bottles of beer. They sit on the wall, they linger on steps. Some hippies play guitar for change. It turns out that Irkutsk is a college town and also a kind of gateway into and out of Russia from the east, so there are many young people and also German and Dutch tourists heading east and Japanese and Koreans heading for Moscow. Apparently it's been this way for centuries, a little cosmopolitan hub at the southern corner of Siberia.

As I get closer to the heart of the promenade, there's music coming from loudspeakers on the light poles. Welcome to the Hotel California! Everywhere there are people talking, laughing, drinking, smoking. A woman asks me the time and I say what I always say: "I'm sorry, I don't speak your language." She breaks into a huge smile. "But I speak yours!" And we shake hands and exchange names and then awkwardly shrug and say goodbye.

Dimly, I register that something is off. I'm not sure what exactly, but it seems a bit odd that all the shops are closed so early in the day. Even the restaurants are empty.

Then it occurs to me that I'm almost exactly on the opposite side of the globe, as far from home as I'm likely to get without a spaceship. And somehow that flips some kind of switch and since I can't call home and I've run out of hash it seems like a very good idea to have a beer and buy a pack of cigarettes. It's been six years since I had a drink and eleven years since I smoked a cigarette but what does that mean here on the opposite side of the world? Anyway, it's time and past time to raise the stakes in this little pleasure tour.

Beer tastes exactly like it used to taste, as if I'd just put down my last glass. The cigarette, on the other hand, tastes like shit. But I finish it anyway, and light another.

The next morning I wake up just a little hungover and go down to get some breakfast. But they're serving lunch. Breakfast is over.

At 7:30 in the morning, breakfast is over? How can that be?

The lady points to the clock. It's 1:30 in the afternoon.

Okay, so we went through a few time zones. So the schedule bolted to the wall of the train was in Moscow time. Why is that so upsetting? Yesterday I opened my own personal Pandora's Box and that doesn't seem to bother me hardly at all and yet here's this minor thing, this tiny disorientation in my sense of time and it's like my mind slipped on ice. What am I going to do all day? What am I going to do in Irkutsk for four fucking days?

Well, there are these mushrooms I bought in Amsterdam. I haven't done any kind of hallucinogen in fifteen years, but I remember the days when I swore I'd take them every decade just to shake things up. But the last time, the trees seemed to be reaching for me.

I eat half the mushrooms. Up and down the promenade I go. An hour later, I eat the other half. It's a little trippy but not bad. I can handle it. Thank God for these cigarettes, which give you a reason to breathe. The waves on the river ripple like Hokusai and I cross a causeway to a little island in the middle of the river and it is so beautiful — trees, paths, beer gardens on the shore. There's a father walking with his young daughter, bending slightly to one side so she can grab his finger. I remember doing that with my daughters and tender feelings flood through me, more so when I realize the girl is limping and see how thin her little legs are.

There's some kind of children's hospital around here. I see kids in casts and wheelchairs on the causeway.

I never did call home last night.

Ten hours later, it's still a white Siberian night, the cold midnight sun wrapped in a thin gauze of misty clouds that are absolutely surreal, and I'm relieved because the high wasn't scary or even particularly philosophical except in the sense that I feel pretty sure I don't need to do this anymore.

My feet are phasing through deep dull pain to sudden stabbing jolts. Must sit. I consider the hotel bars, which for some reason are on the second, fourth, and eighth floors. There's also a "beauty saloon" but I pass on that and end up in the inevitable basement strip bar eating caviar and applying a few medicinal gin and tonics to my pain and my buzz. Since I'm the only person here, the strippers dance just for me, right at my table, climbing up on the chairs and slinking around me like I'm some kind of Siberian gangster they've been ordered to please.

But the booze is catching up with me. Time to go upstairs.

Two minutes after I get to my room, the phone rings. It's a man's voice.

"Want massage?"

"Excuse me?"

"Sex. One hundred dollars."

"Sex?"

"Fifty dollars."

I'm drunk. I'm stoned. I'm stunned. After Amsterdam I decided I didn't need to despoil any more native women — aside from all the other considerations, the thought that they're doing it just for the money kills the whole thing for me.

"Okay," I say.

Five minutes later, there's a knock on my door. It's one of the security guys with a young woman. Brunette, nice looking, modest skirt and jacket. The guy asks for money and I count fifteen hundred rubles into his hand while he stands there in the hall. Then I close the door and she goes into the shower and after a minute, I follow. She has large breasts, a slightly fleshy body, a sweet face. She starts to wash me, covering my chest with soft little kisses. It's funny how some whores are so sweet and others so hard. Are guys like me the road they walk from one to the other?

But I'm too drunk to do much and after a while she smiles and asks if I want to know her name. I tell her I do and she tells me what it is and I repeat it, and she begins to cover me with those soft kisses. She hugs me and I hug her back. It's as if she knows what I really need is tenderness. Later I'll be ashamed of this, ashamed especially to write it down, but this is how it is right now in the Siberian midnight, on the opposite side of the world. But tomorrow things will change. Tomorrow I'll start making my way home.

A couple of minutes later, there's another soft knock on the door.

John H. Richardson's round-the-world journey concludes [here](#), as he continues on to Mongolia, Hong Kong, and Tasmania.

Tweet

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

A Whole Lot More *Esquire*

THE MEN

Chris Hemsworth Interview

FREE NEWSLETTER



Esquire eNews: Sign up for our Free newsletter and get the latest in politics, food, and entertainment (oh, and some lovely ladies too!).

Enter Your Email Address

SUBMIT

SHOW MORE



[Subscribe To Esquire](#) / [Privacy Policy](#) / [Your California Privacy Rights](#) / [Terms Of Use](#)

©2013 Hearst Communications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.