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COMMENTARY: 'Lonely Planet' -Life lessons learned along the way of Turkish adventure



A camel-wrestling festival in Ephesus, Turkey was a well-attended spectacle in the late 1980s.



An attorney with Maddin Hauser, David Saperstein is a 1993 graduate of the University of Michigan Law School. At right is a photo of Saperstein in his pre-law school days.



By David M. Saperstein

I didn't intend to be hitchhiking, certainly not alone and in a country where I didn't speak the language. Yet, there I stood by the side of the road, with my thumb out, hoping that was the correct signal to hitchhike in Turkey. Car after car sped by, until finally, a small economy car stopped. I hurried to get in.

I had taken a year off before law school to study Hebrew and Arabic in Haifa. My well-worn copy of "Lonely Planet" suggested a camel-wrestling festival in Ephesus in January. "Why not?" I thought, and booked a solo trip during the semester break to Turkey and the former Yugoslavia.

Loneliness hits some people like a wave. For me, it was a steady accumulation, drip by drip.

The initial leg in Istanbul was uneventful. I stayed at a large youth hostel with plenty of other young travelers from all over the world. The loneliness started on the bus ride out of town. The stresses of finding the bus "station" and wondering whether my bag was safe paled in comparison to the cigarette smoke. I was the only one not smoking on the packed bus. Over the next 10 hours, there was nowhere to escape.

My room in Selcuk, the neighboring town to the Roman ruins in Ephesus, was a step down from my usual accommodations. Sagging mattress on a cold floor. More disappointment.

In town, the bars were packed for the festival. I ordered some raki, and retreated into my book, oblivious to the revelry. The next day was more of the same. Yes, the camels really do wrestle each other. When one camel has successfully pinned the other, eight men per camel pulled a rope to pry them apart from each other. Around the ancient amphitheater, men (after all, this was rural

Turkey) sat on their blankets and dined on the meat from their hibachi grills, roaring approvals and disappointments after each match. I sat alone, lonelier by the day.

Byzantine Skiing

My copy of "Lonely Planet" suggested my next adventure, skiing near the town of Bursa. I walked from the bus station through Bursa's famous central market without joy, enduring a headache from the stress of carrying my heavy bag on another cloudy day.

When I finally reached my guest room, I knew that the accommodations in Selcuk had been comparatively luxurious. Same sagging mattress, cold floor, and peeling paint. But, this time, instead of a toilet, there was a hole in the corner of the room.

The next day, a gondola whisked me up the mountainside. At one point, we rose above the "cloud" line, which revealed that in fact, it was not another cloudy day - the mountains were trapping smog from the coal-burning houses in enough volume to account for my headache the day before. The tram violently lurched to one side as all thirty passengers pointed excitedly to the scene below us. A pack of 10 wild boar, with a baby in the back, were charging up the single-track trail directly underneath.

From the top of the mountain overlooking the town, a shuttle bus took us ten miles to the ski resort. I went to the chairlift to buy my ticket. In some combination of Turkish and sign language, the operator asked me how many lift rides I wanted to buy. I had no idea, so I flashed my fingers to communicate 20. At the next lift, the operator unsuccessfully tried to say something to me. I didn't understand, so I stepped onto the lift. However, at the third lift, the operator showed me that I had bought twenty rides for the bunny lift at the base of the resort. I needed a separate ticket for each individual chair lift. I forked over the extra money. The

solace for wondering if I had just been taken was the spectacular alpine vista row after row of snow-capped mountains as far as the eye could see.

Hitchhiking in Turkey

After returning my rental equipment, I walked outside to the shuttle bus stop only to discover that the buses would not let me travel because I had only bought a one-way ticket. No amount of pleading helped, and I was kicked off. The parking lot would be emptying relatively soon, and it was getting dark.

It probably was no more than 15 minutes after I first stuck my thumb out, but it seemed like hours. There were two men in the front two seats of the economy car that stopped to pick me up. I opened the back door and got in. A young boy, approximately 8 years old, leaned against the far door. I told the driver one of the only words I knew in Turkish, "heykel," meaning statue. My dive room was located near the main statue in town.

The boy in the back asked, "Do you speak English?"

"Yes," I answered quickly, and breathed a sigh of relief.

The driver was the principal of a local elementary school, and the passenger was a visiting English teacher from the United States. The boy was the principal's son. As delighted as I was to speak English for the first time in several days, they seemed equally delighted to talk to me, wondering why I was travelling alone in rural Turkey. The teacher invited me to stay at his apartment, where I met the other four English teachers. They treated me to a wonderful dinner in town, and we shared stories late into the night.

The next day, I was the star guest in the English classes at the school, a live visitor from the United States. Each time I walked

into a classroom, the whole class of students stood up, and then peppered me with questions about life in America.

When I got into that car, I wondered if I would regret it. My only regret is that I didn't take up my hosts' offer to stay for a week. So, wherever you are, my hosts from Bursa, thank you. Though my visit was short, your hospitality helped make a lonely planet a little less so.

Remote Working in the Age of the Coronavirus

As we all adapt to the realities of remote work, I think back to that winter day so long ago, and how quickly our circumstances can change. We know that the darkest hour is just before dawn. I hope that the isolation that we are now experiencing will be the prelude to friendship and camaraderie in the coming weeks and months. Stay safe. And stay connected.

David Saperstein focuses his practice on the defense of non-medical professional liability claims, He can be contacted by e-mail at dsaperstein@maddinhauser.com.

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