



Wanna go?

My Most Memorable... (Part I)

Over the years I've had lots of great experiences, and some not-so-great ones, but for the most part things have been...well...great! Food, certainly, and views...and rooms, and rooms with views. And sounds, smells, planes, trains, cars, boats, beaches, islands, buildings, and airports worth sharing. But to make a list of *best and worst* kinda trivializes the experiences, so this is not that, but rather what I have come to think of as *most memorable (MM)*.

EATS Food is easy for everyone to relate to...we all have a "best meal" story. For me, it's Il Cavaliere in San Albino in 2004. We had been in glorious Rome for several days and were now luxuriating in our own little to-die-for villa on the border of Tuscany and Umbria, surely one of the most luscious parts of the planet. On modest little day trips we would sample the best of Siena, Assisi and such, usually grabbing a bite for lunch in a little *trattoria*, then buying wine and the makings of an evening meal at home. One day, we decided to go up the hill to the only restaurant in our little village. Decidedly not a tourist venue, we were treated rather harshly, not even having received our wine before others (locals) who had arrived after us were already tucking into their *secondi piatti*. But we persevered, and were ultimately presented with two steaming plates of pasta. Mine was *pasta primavera*, and absolutely and without a doubt the absolute best stuff I had ever had in my mouth. And not by a little, not just kinda...I mean really really head and shoulders above anything else, ever. And still. Hers, too. We never did figure out what made it so good, but we still talk about it to this day.

Honorable Mentions: *Carnitas* tacos in Xochimilco (2006), the heavenly, greasy, perfect pork lopped right off the pig and into the waiting tortillas. Crispy ginger beef in Calgary's Chinatown one evening (1994), in an anteroom of a restaurant taken over for the night by a traditional Chinese wedding. Fish & chips at the Wickaninnish on Vancouver Island (2003), with huge but light, white, flaky, and - yes! - juicy chunks of halibut. And Katsu pork curry at the little stand just outside the entrance to Ryoan-ji, Kyoto (2006).

FLIGHTS I've never flown first class (internationally), but several business class flights stand out in memory. Flying home on Qantas from Auckland after a month (solo) down under in 2006, I got my favorite 747 top deck seat - exit row, port side window, a \$7,500 lie-flat seat that I stole for only 120,000 BA frequent flyer miles. I boarded early, and was mystified as to why no one else was joining me upstairs. I thought there was a real problem with the boarding, until the plane started moving back from the jetway. It turned out that I had the entire cabin to myself for 13 glorious hours, the attendants competing to please me. When has *that* ever happened to you?

Honorable Mention: British Airways 747 upper deck (business class) from Phoenix to London (2005). We had Economy Plus seats, and jumped when the ticket agent asked if we would like to upgrade for \$600. The food (and drink) never stopped, and we had trouble getting in 8 hours of sleep in our lie-flat beds on an 11 hour flight!

QUAFFS Wine is a highly subjective, personal experience, necessarily involving one's feelings and emotions. Thus it is that all of my best wine tastings have been on location, so to speak, as I am usually highly charged while traveling. During the Chinese New Year in 2004 we were sitting in the lounge of the Intercontinental Hotel (Kowloon) in Hong Kong, munching on appetizers and waiting for the laser light show to paint the city across Victoria Harbor. In the spirit of the occasion, I ordered an \$80 bottle of Yering Station (Yarra Valley, Australia) Pinot Noir, figuring that it would drink like a \$15 bottle, what with the hotel markup and costs in Hong Kong and all, but I was completely surprised, by an experience, rather than a taste: this nectar possessed a merely pleasant nose but a sumptuous and graciously full-figured, joyful yet not pushy *joie-de-vivre* going down, as the lasers danced for us on Hong Kong's skyscrapers.

Honorable Mentions: A fetching little Bacharach red (\$34) in the dining room of an authentic castle on the Rhine (pretty decent atmosphere, yes!) in 1997, washing down a ravishing venison meal. The Sangria at *Juan y Andrea* at Playa de Illetas on Formentera (2005), with my toes in the sand. And then there's that very odd Chilean carmenere, the old-world grape that was discovered in new-world fields of Merlot after the latter succumbed to disease. On a wine train last year in the Colchagua Valley, we sampled several fine wines, including a delightfully pear-y sauvignon blanc and a nicely muscular cabernet; I sniffed the carmenere and immediately remarked (apparently to anyone within earshot) "Smells like s--t!" On tasting it, I let loose with "Tastes like dirt!" Which is to say, as anyone familiar with wine knows, that *terroir* is important...in this case, maybe a barnyard? I don't know, but I loved what we'll just call its earthiness, and haven't been able to replicate it to this day.

LODGMENTS I'm a very poor sleeper, so some of my most sublime memories are the naps taken midday on arrival in Europe, after about 24 hours of pain in the air. After one such trip to Madrid, and a 3-hour train ride, our taxi pulled up to the Alfonso XIII, a Moorish fantasyland in Seville (1999). We love historic hotels and for about \$435 we lucked into a giant his'n hers 2-bedroom corner suite, with entry foyer, formal living room and marble floors. Waking up from my nap to walk around the Alfonso's period public areas and gardens, I thought I was still dreaming.

Honorable mentions: Intercontinental Hong Kong (Kowloon, 2004) for the waterfront rooms and unequalled views of Hong Kong. St. Regis, Shanghai (2007) for the personal concierge and giant rooms. Empress, Victoria, BC Canada (1994, 2003) for the sheer beauty, tradition, and Britishness. Frangipani, Anguilla (2004) for the beachfront suite on one of my favorite beaches in the world. Les Ilets St. Jean, St Barts (2004) for our beachfront cabin on my favorite island ever. Noga Hilton, Geneva (1997) for the view of the fountain and the bottle of birthday champagne placed in the room before we made it there ourselves; Radisson SAS Polar Hotel, Svalbard Norway (2006) for its rarified location of the northernmost hotel on the planet. Wickaninnish, Vancouver Island BC Canada (2003) for the oceanfront rooms and nonstop luxe.

Next month - more Most Memorable: SIGHTS, SOUNDS, DRIVES and more.

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My Most Memorable...

(Part II)

Last month we started a conversation about what I call my “Most Memorables.” Not “Top Ten” or “Best Of;” some are great, some aren’t, but good or bad, all are definitely *memorable*. Here’s more:

SIGHTS **Zermatt** (Switzerland 2007); after arriving on a grey, cloudy day to a hotel room screw-up with no idea where the Mattherhorn was, we woke to a full-frontal view of it right outside our window, jabbing the clear blue sky, more in our room than in our face.

Honorable Mentions: The laser light show on the skyscrapers of **Hong Kong** island from the lounge of the Intercontinental Hotel in Kowloon (2004) is pretty spectacular. The view over the Gulf of Salerno from anywhere in **Positano** (2005) is definitely divine. The rock garden at Ryoan-ji in **Kyoto** (Japan 2006) is divine subtlety. And **Gibraltar’s** looming mass (and the Med beyond) from the mountain road just beyond Ronda (Spain 1999) is visual divinity.

SOUNDS Wandering around the island of **Tahiti** (2007) on a Sunday afternoon, we happened across an old stone church with a few cars in the yard and its doors wide open. We hardly ever miss a peek inside an old church, so we stopped and went in and were rewarded with the most exquisite polyphonic, *a cappella* harmonies of a mixed-sex choir. So exquisite, in fact, that I had a very emotional, spiritual-but-not-religious experience. And after a very few minutes, the intensity was too much for me and in one of my most regretted acts of late, I forced us to leave. My heart was haunted by those other-worldly sounds and I searched the island’s markets for days for a recording of that choir, to no avail, and now I’m left with only my memories to console my deficient, seeker’s psyche.

Honorable Mentions: One night in **Guanajuato** (Mexico 2003) we had arrived at a chic little B&B up the far end of one of this tunnel-city’s canyons, right across from a park with a small lake. Everything was going fine until we noticed earplugs on the nightstands, then looked out the windows to see a very ambitious event being set up in the park. I could just hear the *ranchero* music, or worse, blaring all night. Dinner at the inn’s dining room was delightful, as was our walk around the park in the early evening, notwithstanding the portents. When the *soiree* commenced well after dark, with us tucked safely away abed, imagine our surprise when the strains of the most exquisite classical music wafted through the antique French doors of our balconies overlooking the park. We rushed to throw them open, and beheld the most beguiling formal fairytale setting, complemented perfectly by the sounds. • Whilst happily attending a beer festival in **Brussels’ Grand Platz** (Belgium 2000), marveling at the fabulous architecture of the guild halls, what should confront our ears but a live rendition of the old “Son of a Preacher Man.” It wasn’t Dusty Springfield, but the band and the female singer did a good job, and I was transported to my youth - ick! - for a bit.

DRIVES Thinking Highway 1 in California? Going-to-the-Sun in Montana? The Overseas Highway to the Florida Keys? Ha - *fuhgeddaboutit!* The road from **Sorrento to Positano** (Italy 2005) is Hwy 1’s great-great-great grandfather and superior in every way: bigger views (over the Tyrrhenian Sea), higher cliffs, deeper drop-offs, and more-harrowing hairpin curves! With, of course, the prize of arriving in Positano if you survive the drive.

Honorable Mentions: Woman likes nice drives - from the relative comfort of the passenger seat, of course - so I agreed to drive the **North Cape of Corsica** (2007) to please her. For awhile it seemed like a snap, with not much traffic. Which was good, because the road narrowed just as the terrain got wild. Rounding the north terminus and heading back south, I was living a nightmare I could not wake up from: a steady stream of oncoming tour buses, trucks, tourists and bicycles coming at us, with 2,000’ dropoffs to the side...at least they were on *her* side! But the views - *omigod, the views...!* • **Mallorca** (Spain 2005) earns two separate mentions, one for the drive from Pollença to Cabo Formentor. For awhile, nearly-naked girls on the perfect beaches compete with the road for your eyes; later your eyes unite to fight other motorists and the terrain to stay on the road and off the sheer cliffs and out of the sea. The reward is the view from the lighthouse, perched thousands of feet above the sea on a cape of solid rock. Just as terrifying is the north coast road in the mountains high above the sea. It’s no wonder they drive itty-bitty minicars there, ’cuz any normal car wouldn’t fit. Tourist buses clog the asphalt, and we were one of hundreds of cars stopped for a time while a bus negotiated around a hairpin turn already clogged with cars with nowhere to go. The payoff is views... and famous little spots like Soller, Deia and Valldemosa. God Bless if you possess the *cojones* to try either drive. • As you might guess, the **Swiss Alps** (2007) also possess some incredible road opportunities: we liked the Nufenenpass on our drive between Zermatt and Lugano, but throw a dart at a map of the Swiss Alps and you will love that drive. I guarantee it.

EXPERIENCES The mosque (*mezquita*) in **Cordoba** (Spain 1999) is, as all Moorish architecture, simple, serenely pleasing and elegant. After the Moors were expelled completely in 1491, a Catholic church was built literally in, on and over the existing *mezquita*. At the time of our visit, I was growing weary of Spanish Catholic churches and was pleasantly impressed by Moorish constructions. Anyway, I lost myself in the wonder of it all - the peace and harmony of the mosque, struggling to retain its grace under the morbid weight of the florid Christian modifications. At one point my soul was flooded with pseudo-memories and I suffered a deep shiver...or primal shudder. Dizzy, I had to sit to regain my composure. Nothing like it has ever happened to me, before or since.

Honorable Mentions: I don’t lionize many humans, but from boyhood Vice Admiral Horatio Lord Nelson has been my hero. While passing through **Portsmouth**, England in 1997, we boarded the HMS Victory, Nelson’s flagship at the glorious and decisive Battle of Trafalgar; I stood at the very site belowdecks that Nelson was taken to after being shot by a French sniper, and where he died. I was overwhelmed and overcome with emotion; my lip quivered, I teared up, and we had to leave. • Walking through the old sections of ancient European cities is a favorite of ours, and once in 1998 we were exploring **Geneva’s vieille ville** on foot. Turning a corner we ran into a small square with a candle lit for each of the victims of the Swissair crash off Nova Scotia just the month before. We both felt the huge and somber impact of this simple and elegant little memorial. • I really liked swimming with the dolphins in **Key Largo** (Florida, 2002)! They’re so smart and personable, I don’t understand why they haven’t taken over the world, or at least Congress. • And of course, no guy’s life would be complete without transiting the **Panama Canal** by boat (Crystal Harmony 2004). **Wanna go?**

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Wanna go?

My Most Memorable... (Part III) ODDS'N ENDS

— Rock Earle

Most of my activities on the road turn out - or at least are remembered - better than the same at home, if for no other reason than adrenalin and the thrill of the unfamiliar. MAS-SAGE, on the other hand, is one that for me has never quite lived up to expectation, perhaps because I keep a regular appointment at home and know what I like and rarely get it on the road. For example, in the chic Bavarian resort town Baden -Baden (1998), the table had no face rest, forcing us into painful contortions; what were these people thinking? I thought all the harsh Teutons were in the north! On the other hand, I like a hard massage and the really nice blind masseur in Shanghai (2007) gave me what I wanted, almost killing me with an hour on each side. He tried real hard to communicate in fractured English...usually that would distract from the pleasure, but in this case, the distraction from the pain was wonderful. The Danube (2005) and Yangtze (2007) river boats (both masseurs) were both workmanlike, neither memorable. In Beijing (2004) in the posh basement spa of the 5-star hotel, we got his'n hers massages in adjacent rooms. The masseuses, obviously friends, chattered away at/with each other through the open doors - very distracting - and the massage was done through a sheet or towel, with no skin contact and no oil...all in all, quite odd and not very pleasant. The example that stands out in the positive was just recently in Papallacta (Ecuador 2008). Our host had made arrangements at a spa with volcanic hot springs, and the three of us (all men) did the three-course 2? hour regime, starting with hydrotherapy (30 minutes left alone in a whirlpool tub: so-so), then a mud wrap (completely alien to all three of us, being guys, but not unpleasant) and ending with a "relaxation" massage, done in darkened, private rooms. My masseuse was quite capable and clearly experienced. With a great table with a face hole, soothing music, warm towels and aromatic oils, she exerted almost the exactly proper level of force for me. I was pleasantly surprised, and rate this one as an 8.5 on a scale of 1 to 10...my first "road massage" rating higher than over 5.0!

THE LOO Anyone who travels a lot will have many examples of unpleasant toilet episodes, and I could write a book full of lurid experiences. But I'll take the high road here, and mention only two of the most pleasant. Harrods is big, like its own principality smack in the middle of London (1999), and for the pittance of one Pound (Sterling), you can rent your own private little cubicle there...almost like being home, but not...a salubrious and serene sanctuary for me, once when I was most in need. This conversation is all about Japan (2006) though, a society that values refinement to excess, including but certainly not limited to personal hygiene and sanitation. Their toilets are engineered to produce an all-encompassing, quality experience, with computerized settings for flush, wash, dry, warm, cool, tell the time and weather and bring you your loafers, too! Japan is a mad scientist's wonderland laboratory...those guys think of everything.

PURCHASES One of the great pleasures of traveling is memories. In fact, I've always said "Planning a trip is the most fun,

remembering it is next, and the travel itself is just plain hard work and the worst part of it all." Mementos serve to remind, and the offerings span the universe of possibilities, including that most ubiquitous of curios, the refrigerator magnet. A particular delight of mine is reaching into my cabinet of coffee mugs to select in which venue to have my morning coffee, so early-on I started buying coffee mugs. Which was fine until the cabinet got full. So I switched to wine bottle stoppers until they overflowed their fancy display box...there are so many now that I don't recognize all of them...I think they procreate while I'm asleep. Then came the posters. Preferably artsy little things, publicizing some artsy little local art event, but eventually including big posters from museums if I liked their subjects, and sometimes original art of various media. And, of course, I ran out of walls - not to mention money, from the cost of framing. So I bought a bigger new house. Now those walls are 100% covered, too...my own personal poster Hell.

Then there were the little antiquities, notably animistic roof tiles from Chinese imperial buildings at the antiques section of a tourist store (Beijing, 2004). I thought they were soooo valuable and rare and bought them and shipped them home right then and there, replete with insurance at great cost and was smug about my finds. Until we saw them everywhere in shops in Hong Kong, and flea markets, too...probably all fakes, my expensive ones included. I think my most cherished purchase was wine glasses at the factory in Waterford (Ireland (2002). I use them perhaps once a year, but there they sit in my china cabinet, a proud reminder of my luck and pluck on that great green island. My single worst purchase of all time is a leather jacket, custom-made in Buenos Aires (Argentina, 2008). We had arrived there for a few days at the end of a two-week group tour that started in Santiago, Chile, crossing the Andes by lake at Bariloche. Everyone on the trip was saying that BA was the place to buy custom leather goods, and we followed the horde to a nice store close to the hotel. I wanted a jacket and chose a nice suede and insisted on a two-button style. Knowing that 2 buttons was not the current style, I communicated clearly, in writing, and had them initial that description. They insisted they could have it done for a fitting in 24 hours, so I gave them a sizable deposit. Of course, 24 hours came and went and the fitting ended up happening the next day, on a Sunday, our last day in BA. And, of course, it was a 3-button style. The girl who brought it to the hotel was embarrassed and flustered and got right on her cell phone and ran back to the factory, her parting words being "we'll fix it and you can have it before you leave." I'm waaaay skeptical - cynical? - and I just figured I'd lost my deposit - whatever - no big deal. A few minutes later she called, apologizing that there was no way to fix it on Sunday afternoon, *of course*, and could we "make a deal" for the existing rag? I didn't want the thing, and an argument ensued. Ultimately, fearing I would lose my deposit and have nothing **and** look foolish, I agreed to pay about half of the initial price, carried the "thing" home, where it hangs, limp, lonely and unloved in my closet. In retrospect, I should have willingly ceded my deposit just so I wouldn't have to suffer the mockery of it all, every time I enter my closet.

Next month: In the Footsteps of Darwin - The Galapagos Islands

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