



"It's only money"

Submitted by MILES JORDAN (Chico, California)

You know how it is when you're dining in a practically deserted hotel restaurant and there's a group of musicians at the far end of the room ready to play their hearts out for the two or three tables of hotel guests who've chosen the 'easy way out' by taking their meals on the premises. If, like me, you're the sort not given to showering tips on the entertainers, you'll have picked a table as far as possible from the band hoping that they'll be content to hustle those unfortunates who – not having noticed them waiting for the room to fill up a bit before embarking on their first selection – have unwisely allowed themselves to be seated next to the bandstand.

That was the scene in the Janos Pince Pub in the Erzebet Hotel in Budapest on our last night in the city a few years ago. "An authentic atmosphere," promised the brochure that described the charms of this 1872 hotel. "Authentic" *what* we wondered as we descended the stairs to this basement restaurant.

The "authenticity" in store for us was a "gypsy" band – five middle-aged guys patiently waiting with their instruments: a violin, accordion, clarinet, acoustic bass and piano – that lurked at the rear of the room. Wishing to avoid being a captive audience, we opted for seats near the entrance. No matter. The violinist proved remarkably mobile and, once they deemed there was a sufficiency of customers, they began to play a series of energetic songs that they belted out with real enthusiasm.

I was sitting with my back to them in an attempt to avoid eye contact and thus give them any feeble sign of encouragement that they might mistakenly interpret as a willingness to donate a forint or two to their cause. After a few numbers – and a close call or two ("Is the violinist coming this way?" I'd ask Marilee) – I began to rethink my parsimonious position re tipping the band. I felt guilty, inasmuch as I actually was enjoying their music, and realized that the other diners were probably planning to stiff them, too. A fate they certainly didn't deserve.

So, at the conclusion of one piece, I waved the violinist over. A short, stout man, in need of a shave, he closely resembled Akim Tamiroff's character in "Touch of Evil." As I fished around for a 1000 forint note (about \$5 US) I asked if they could play "Dark Eyes," a real gypsy classic. "Oh, yes," I was assured and he expertly pointed the neck of his instrument in my direction to make it easier for me to stuff my tip under its strings. Mission accomplished, he turned to his fellow musicians, called out the request and they launched into a rousing version of the song. It wasn't until sometime later that I realized that I'd mistakenly donated a 1000 **Czech Koruna** note (about \$35 US) to the cause.



“A Toilet in the World”

Submitted by PAULA VANGALIO (Santa Maria, California)

Ahhh, the toilets of the world say a lot about the advancement of a culture. The existence of porcelain toilets in China spoke volumes about their launch out of the ancient world, though their trench like shape and the fact that they were mounted in the floor was testimony to their Olympic gymnastic success. In preparation for our trip to Beijing, I purchased a “Lady J” from a camping catalogue – a device that can be slipped into one’s slightly lowered “drawers” so one can urinate as a man would, avoiding the need to squat at a level hovering just above the floor. I carried this device in a fanny pack strapped to my tummy, along with toilet tissue, wallet and sunglasses (which took the place of the first aid kit containing my surgical gloves) as we journeyed to the Great Wall of China.

Our first view of the Great Wall was awe inspiring, and the realization that we had a rather vigorous climb ahead of us prompted a trip to the ladies’ room before we began our ascent. The sleeping bag nailed across the opening should have been our first clue that the bathrooms were not as awe inspiring. The smell hit us before we saw the two stalls. The toilet (trench) was filled to the brim with all manner of human waste and the flush mechanism had definitely not been working. Brenee, my traveling companion, held her breath and entered one. I entered the other. Thank goodness I had brought the “Lady J” so I could stay as far away as possible from the fecal soup I was straddling! I unzipped my pack, lowered my trousers just below the knees, relieved myself neatly, and bent over to pull up my trousers and HEARD A “PLOP”! My wallet had fallen out of my pack and was sinking fast into the sewage below. By the time I had my pants pulled up, it had disappeared! A scream escaped my lips, which alerted Brenee that something was amiss, as well as frightening off a local lady who ran out of the bathroom. A quick mental inventory of the contents of the wallet (license, money, credit cards) made the decision to retrieve it a no-brainer. Before I could lose my nerve I plunged my hand in, clear up to my wrist, until it closed around the wallet. A quick rinse under the cold tap (no soap in sight, of course) and it was sealed in the bag with the “Lady J”.

Later, back at the hotel, the wallet was thrown away, all of its contents soaked in a solution of boiling water and Purell and hung on the line in the tub to dry. The hand was scrubbed until the skin was raw. No longer will I leave the surgical gloves behind to make room for sunglasses!



"Pilgrimage to the Motherland"

Submitted by DEB BARSHAFSKY (Augusta, Georgia)

The Ancient Greeks traveled huge distances to seek counsel at the oracle of Delphi. The Incans journeyed to the sacred city of Machu Picchu. The sick and ailing travel to Lourdes in search of divine reversal of their misfortune. The great pilgrimage of my lifetime was to Monsheim, my mother's birthplace in the heart of German wine country.

The last time we visited Germany, I suggested a road trip to the land of our roots. My mother, her brother, his wife, my cousin, and I crammed ourselves into my cousin's Mercedes, my uncle pressed the window lock button, and off we went – hermetically sealed – to the village that holds the ghosts of my mother's childhood.

I was in the back between my cousin and aunt, who slapped my thigh every 20 kilometers and sighed, "Ja, Debbie" for reasons unapparent to me. I was trying hard to remain pensive for this long-awaited emotional return to the motherland, that whole "I was born very far from where I'm supposed to be so, really, I'm on my way home" kind of frame of mind. The "Ja, Debbies" weren't helping.

When we arrived in Monsheim, my mother pointed out where structures used to be. The stables. The train station. The railway pass. Much of her town was bombed during the war. We drove past her grandparent's house, a street sign that bears her name – Schellenschlager – and the wineries she walked to and from as a child.

I caught a glimpse of the river Pfrimm as we rounded a curve. And, then, an arched stone wall, a weathered gateway to the spot where my mother's home once stood. And, as we left town, there was the orphanage where my mother lived for six years after her mother died, turned out into the world at 18 with a bible and a hosiery bag from the nuns. I saw all this from the back seat through closed windows like I was trapped on a bizarre genealogical theme ride at Disney. My uncle never stopped the car.

As we drove home in silence, I watched my mother gaze out the window and realized that what I wanted to learn about her wasn't to be found wandering the streets of her childhood home. What I hungered to know was right there in the front of that cramped, stuffy car - my mother and her gentle brother, both so proud and stoic.

My entire life, I've listened to my mother's happy stories of running barefooted across freshly cut fields of corn, eating yopa ice, pilfering apples from her neighbors' windowsills, watching her wooden duck swim down the Pfrimm. My mother was five when World War II ended and, on this day, she toed the edges of painful memories – of bombs, of loss, of heartache and fear unfathomable to me – to accompany her child on a journey of self discovery. I am of this land, I thought, as we drove home through the vineyards, but more importantly, I am of her.