

Transcript of Podcast 067: If it's Tuesday, it must be Benidorm

{Intro:

MATTHEW: So, that's my story about Inter-Rail. Thanks for having me on the programme and I hope that's been of interest. Cheers for now.

}

{intro music - jaunty, bouncy}

{{Intro standard announcement:

Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a podcast looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Enby with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'why's behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello :)

I'm still recovering from my running injury. I'm certainly moving a bit more freely, but it still hurts to put too much weight on it, and I'm still walking with the Stick Of Doom, which ... I mean it's clearly a household implement and not at all elegant or practical, but it seems to be helping me a bit. I'm conscious that I'm maybe relying on it too much, but I think that's better than limping a lot and causing excess usage of it. I'm also starting to use it more within the flat rather than relying on the office chair, which while fun is also horrendously impractical, especially as for most efficiency I have to go backwards. For someone already blessed with dyspraxia, that's a fun time. I haven't broken anything yet but it's clearly only a matter of time.

Speaking of neurodiversity, some exciting and unexpected news. A couple of weeks ago I filled in a form the doctor gave me around ADHD; didn't think anything of it but the Friday after my previous InterRail podcast, I had a mail telling me I'd been referred to an ADHD specialist. **{YAY sound effect}** Well, you might think this is a 'yay' moment, but it was 23 pages of paperwork, mostly questionnaires, that had to be filled in within the next four weeks. This, right here, is gatekeeping at its finest: 'Oh, you've got ADHD and so have difficulty meeting deadlines and doing admin? Here's A Lot Of Admin and you only have a month to do it'. **{pause. Or a D'Oh sound}**. Fortunately I have friends who force me to do it.

One of the questionnaires was assessing how I was around the age of seven, which involved speaking with my uncle, who, when I raised the concept (and I was a bit concerned as to how he'd react, given *I'm* of the generation where this was only starting to be A Thing, where ADD as-was was something that was was a synonym for 'naughty and hyperactive child'. His initial response was 'yeh, I always thought of you more as autistic, you know, certainly further along that spectrum than I am'. So cheers for that. When going through it though, we realised several things; as an only child with a dominant and house-proud grandmother it was hard to answer a few of the questions because they simply didn't apply. Like, 'did my issues affect tasks and chores' well I didn't have any cos my grandmother did it all, 'did I forget things', well no cos my grandmother packed everything for me, 'did I have issues with waiting my turn' or 'interactions with other children', like dude I never had to, so it was never a problem. And, what was clear, is we didn't really know what an average 7-year-old was like. He's never had one of his own, and though his wife's youngest daughter has kids who are in that ballpark, he's obviously the grandparent who only sees them occasionally, rather than having a direct knowledge of their behaviour. The other thing that was perfectly obvious (and annoyingly awkward when it comes to questionnaires like this) is that I was seven years old in 1982. Forty years is a long-ass time to remember some of these things with any degree of clarity, so much of the time even he didn't really know. And especially for what I was like when I was at school, because obviously he wasn't there. I suppose I could ask one of my old school friends. I might just do that, just for completeness. Yes, I know more people I went to Primary School than Secondary School with, and I'm also conscious that many of my ... issues only started with the change to Secondary School. My therapist is aware, yes.

I am conscious that you, listeners, are not my therapist. I wonder how many podcasters do that?

Anyway, I've sent it off, complete with photos to my friends for accountability and proof that it's not just resting on my living room table. Alongside the steroid cream I got on my first visit to the doctors for the weird skin thing on my right leg that people have been concerned about on my running selfies for years. And by people I mean my friend Leila. So we'll see what will happen about that; obviously in the days since I sent it I've thought of several other things I could have written in, but let's face it, the questionnaires already looked like a mess of notes and written asides. Not bad for what was supposed to be a tick-box exercise.

In other housekeeping, my VA has edited and published a long-form video to YouTube that's basically an introduction to who I am. It's 8 and a half minutes long, and she naively sent it to me to check through. **[laughter]** Like, I don't watch 8 minute videos at the best of times; watching an 8 minute video of me looking gormless in front of camera is not my idea of fun. And besides, I trust her to edit that video better than I could. That's one reason why I hired her. I concede the bar on that is low. But that's why I'm going to Malta for the weekend after Easter for the Traverse video creation workshop. Not to get better, but so I can pass on tips for her. You might wonder why she's not going. You'll know the answer to that if you listened to my episode on Travel Privilege.

Speaking of privilege, and the hierarchy of people and cultures with and without it, I was recently featured on a website answering questions about Trans Joy. I am aware I'm not Trans. Shush, Victoria. However, Non-Binary identities fall under the banner at a holistic level, in the same way that strawberries and tomatoes are both ... plants. It was for someone called Caledonia Kelly, the link will be in the show-notes, but she wanted to create a site with positive affirmations about gender orientation because, well, the world is a bit pants on that score right now. So go give it a read.

On a travel bent, I've also contributed to another website recently; Sonia and Wojtek, who blog under the name of 'Happy Little Traveler', were looking for people to talk about anxiety and fear while travelling, so I was one of several people who contributed. Regular listeners will know about my issues around anxiety, especially social anxiety, and how I mitigate for my fear of the unknown with knowledge, and all that came out in my contribution. Which was a trifle long, I suspect, certainly compared to the others, but hey, I had a lot to say I guess. Again, link in shownotes, go check it out.

Right, that's enough housekeeping, on with the show.

{section separation jingle}

So, if you recall, my last proper episode was all about my Inter-Rail trip in 2000, and how times and events had changed. I want to spend this episode talking a bit about my follow-up Inter-Rail trip in 2019, which was very different in scope, duration, and overall vibe. It's actually going to cover two podcasts as it appears travelling around Europe for two months means there's a lot to say, plus it gives more time for some contributions to come in. Yes, Amanda, that's a direct subtweet to you, I hope you've enjoyed working this week in a small mining town in the literal Australian outback. I would say even I have my limits but that's almost certainly not true.

But firstly, and speaking of contributions, I want to directly follow on from my last episode by bringing in a couple of people who did Inter-Rail before I did. And when I say 'before I did' ... while not as further back in time than the years between my two trips, it's not that far off.

Firstly, let me bring in Alison, from the 'Alison in Andalusia' blog and website, She took her trip just over a decade before I did, when the world was a very different place.

{Alison in Andalusia}

I went inter-railing in the summer of 1988, at the end of my first year at uni. As a student back then there were three popular ways to spend your summer holidays: you either went inter-railing, did Camp America, or worked on a kibbutz. So my friend Wendy and I chose the easy option, and spent a month travelling around Europe by train.

To be honest, we really didn't do that much planning as to where we would go or what we would do. Between us we had a copy of the 'Europe by Train' book and the Thomas Cook rail timetable, so we just mapped out a rough route, starting on the overnight ferry from Harwich to the Hook Of Holland, and ending on the hovercraft back to the UK from France.

From memory, our Inter-Rail Pass gave us the option to visit 21 European countries, plus Morocco, but rather than rush around and see very little, we took it a bit easier, still saw very little in the grand scheme of things, but visited seven countries and stayed in nine different towns or cities. Although I say seven countries, but in Switzerland we only had an hour to spend between trains, and left the station solely to take a picture of Lake Lucerne.

Looking back, it's bizarre to think about how we actually travelled then without the Internet. We'd arrive in a new destination and our first port of call would be the Tourist Information Office, so that they could find us a bed for the night. We weren't, and to be honest still aren't, hostel fans, so we stayed in cheap hotels along the way, which the tourist info staff would arrange for us. Once we knew where we were going to be sleeping, we had to find somewhere to cash in our travellers cheques, and of course because it was pre-Euros, every new country meant a new currency.

Inter-Railing definitely sparked my interest in travelling though, and in a way taught me how not to do it. I mean, when I look back at that trip, I can't believe how few photos I took. I think I only used two rolls of film in a month, whereas now I could easily take as many as that in a morning.

One thing I did take a lot of though was clothes that I mostly never wore, and things that I didn't use, whereas now I can pack pretty lightly.

I also kept a diary, but from memory it was pretty sparse and not very enlightening. It's currently in a box in my mum's attic, and I imagine the next time I read it, I'll cringe at my teenage recollections along the lines of: 'Went to Sintra for the afternoon. It was nice'. If blogging had been a thing in 1988, I would not have been very good at it.

Even though I haven't been inter-railing again, I do love to travel by train, and have been on a few epic rail journeys over the years, including the Indian Pacific from Sydney to Perth, in the cheap seats. So perhaps one day I'll recreate that trip from the summer of '88.

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I like the way her trip seemed quite similar to mine; though it was longer in duration, she still didn't see as much as modern travellers would, and had the same kind of vague description of them. She also mentioned the film cameras; if we had to do that now I can imagine half my backpack being full of rolls of film, or having to stay longer in a city just so I could wait to get the pictures back from the chemist. I mean, I could do it at the same time as my laundry, I guess. But you can forget video and posting to IG stories LOL.

Booking hotels via the Tourist Information Office, multiple currencies, travellers cheques, tho I was aware of them, I don't think I've ever used a travellers' cheque and am not entirely convinced I could easily describe the concept without looking it up. But at the time it was one of the most secure ways of obtaining foreign currency, or at least, buying goods and services in a country that used a currency that wasn't your own.

Someone else who took an Inter-Rail trip in this period, and indeed even earlier than Alison, is Matthew Woodward. You may know him as 'On The Rails', he's a very knowledgeable train buff with decades of experience, and it's an honour to have him contribute to my pod. His first Inter-Rail trip took place while I was still at Primary School, which probably makes us both feel old.

{Matthew - On The Rails}

*I actually did inter-rail twice when I was a student, first time in 1985, and second time in 1987. Inter-Rail back then was *The right of passage*, we didn't have those long-haul destinations that people have as a choice today; a*

trip around Europe for 30 days was the way to go.

Obviously it's a long time ago, in fact nearly forty years, which I find totally astonishing, where did that time go?, so my memories are a bit hazy in places. I remember though very very vividly the brown ticket that I bought at my local railway station, totally analogue, you wrote where you were going to go, wrote your destination, and someone stamped it, and that was it, and you just kept on going like that.

Preparation for the trip back then, didn't really know what I was doing. There was a book you could buy, about Inter-Railing, I think it was independently published. It told you the destinations, the how it all worked, and I used that as the planning tool. Went to my local Army Surplus shop, bought a rather tacky red rucksack with a, one of those metal frames and a hideous nylon thing, and then made the other critical purchase which was the Thomas Cook International Timetable, the details of all the key trains, where, when, how, in Europe and a bit further afield as well I think.

Final thing I remember taking with me was a cassette recorder. I wanted to make a diary of my travels and it was a great experience doing that. The really sad thing is that I can't find the tape. It's somewhere in my attic, and I'm still looking for it.

So back in '85, my first journey, that's the one I'm going to talk about, because I think, you know, it's that much more impressionable when you do something for the first time. Amongst my friends there were two ways of doing it, or two kind of tribes: the first were the sensible types. They planned a few places they want to go; arts, you know, culture, and nice paced mini holiday around Europe over a month. The second type were the madmen like me, and for me it was all about distance – how far could you go on this one little brown ticket.

I should say I went with two friends back in '85, and I think that was the right way to do it. Any more and it would have been cumbersome, but it was great having a couple of people you knew as fighter cover, you know, I remember typically getting on some of these long-distance trains, you'd send one person to the middle of the carriage to pass the rucksacks through the window and then the other two would each take an end of the carriage and bundle in, doing our best to get the seats before they all ran out, so three people was good.

The route we took back then was North, South, East, and West. Started off with a foray into West Germany, East Germany, and a trip down the corridor to Berlin to experience The Wall. Which I'm pleased I did, before it went, and from Germany we then headed South pretty quickly, through France and crossing the border to Irún into Spain, and down to Gibraltar. Gibraltar back then felt like home, it probably still does today, but it was nice to spend two days watching people behave like they did in the pub back at home, red letter boxes, and all that kind of stuff. And with that done, then we totally alienated ourselves and took the ferry across to Morocco, and down Marrakesh and Casablanca, an eye-opening experience, never been ripped-off so many times in my life and it taught me a lot, so it was kind of great to get that done early on in the trip.

From Morocco we headed back up into Europe and around France, down Italy, crossing over from Brindisi to Corfu, another little stopover in Corfu to make it feel like we'd had a bit of a holiday, I think maybe 3 or 4 days, and then the ferry onwards to Athens. Back then you could actually get a train from Greece into Turkey, so we took the train from Athens via Thessaloniki to Istanbul, and I have to say, arriving in Istanbul by train as an impressionable student was a big thing back then, really, you know, I described it on the journey as 'an afternoon in Asia', cos it just felt we'd travelled a long long way. And we had, back then, by train, that was quite a trip. I don't think that many Inter-Railers went to Istanbul, quite a lot as far as Athens, but not further East, but I might be wrong.

So Istanbul was a just amazing time, and then after running out of money we headed back to Vienna, where I was ill for a couple of days, food poisoning from a fish dish that I'd negotiated on too hard in Istanbul, and when I'd recovered we went North up to as far as Copenhagen, and back down to France and back over the Newhaven-Dieppe ferry.

So that was a great journey; I can't remember the mileage but it was probably about as far as you could go.

So do I have any regrets about the experience and the trip? No, absolutely not. You know, '85 was the primer for me doing it again in 1987, just a bit more confident and a bit more pushing in the things I wanted to do and

see, and you know my life might have been different if I hadn't have done Inter-Rail. After 20 years of wearing a suit I put it in a wardrobe and decided to become a traveller and a writer, and that's what I've done for the last decade. The only regret I've got about Inter-Rail is actually, sounds trivial now, but selling that little brown book back to British Rail who would pay you 10 pounds for the market research aspect of the journeys that you'd taken, and I really wish I'd kept it.

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I mentioned last time that while we knew of the rail timetable book, we didn't take it as it was way too bulky; rather we just relied on information at train stations. These days there's a dedicated Inter-Rail App that links in with your ticket, but even without that, timetable information is very easily accessible online. For most countries. For future reference, I still haven't been able to ascertain if the train from Banja Luka to Sarajevo in Bosnia/Herzegovina exists, never mind its frequency or regularity, but that's something to worry about later. If Becky The Owllet is listening, just pretend I never said that, okay?

What I like about his trip is his reasoning; it's basically 'I have a ticket that covers Europe, let's cover Europe', and literally making the most out of the pass as you possibly can. But Morocco's not in Europe, you may say, and we're here going '... it's on my Inter-Rail Pass, so why the heck not?!'. Value For Money? Tick.

As an aside, because Matthew mentioned it, I had a chat once with my friend Laura, who is a) a Millennial, and b) American, about what the most significant and important event that took place in our respective lifetimes was. Hers is obvious. I maintain, and will maintain until my dying day (assuming that, like, we don't make contact with alien civilisations or something), that to people like me, the fall of the Berlin Wall was more significant than 9/11. In a way for similar reasons; because everything we'd grown up with was now different. It's just that, for us, it was a positive thing, and we experienced those 12 years of hope, and to be honest it might explain why Gen-X are stereotypically so jaded and cynical. It could have been, it should have been, so much better. We experienced what could have been, and then my parent's generation fucked everyone over. Which is ironic as they're the original hippies.

Anyway. What is clear from these inter-railers is my style of travel doesn't seem to be that unusual in this context, and the flexibility of an Inter-Rail pass means you can do all manner of bizarre journeys that when you try to explain them, seem to make no sense.

And so it was with my 2019 trip. Now, you might want to get a map of Europe out for this, and raise an eyebrow at the sheer absurdity of ever-increasing circles. I saw a lot of Cologne railway station, is true.

Without reference to how long I spent in these places, and without reference to day-trips I took from them, my two months travelling saw me overnight in, in order: Strasbourg, Trier, Cologne, Brussels, Toulon, Nyon (nr Geneva), Liechtenstein, Maastricht, Bremen, Leipzig, Augsburg, Bologna, Ljubljana, Olomouc, Banska Stiavnica, Vienna, Nuremberg, Liege, Calais, London (I'll explain later), Rennes, La Rochelle, Alicante, Andorra, Toulouse, Nice, Cluj Napoca, and Bratislava. After my inter-rail ticket expired I continued to Koscice and Budapest. Immediately prior to my trip I'd also spent some time in Copenhagen and Malmo, and with hindsight probably should have got me a 3-month inter-rail pass rather than a 2-month one, but meh.

I had originally thought to go to Belgrade to visit my penpal Jelena there, but as it turns out due to maintenance and ... general wear-and-tear, there was only one line operating into Belgrade (from Ljubljana) and onward connections would have been to relatively inconvenient places. I could have hopped over to Sofia and onward to the end of Turkey, channelling my inner Matthew Woodward, but I have my eye on a different trip that way that crosses the very short and oft-forgotten border between Turkey and Azerbaijan.

But that leads me in to my first discussion topic, border crossings.

[section separation jingle - border crossings]

I mentioned in my last pod about my excitement at crossing international borders. Obviously, on an inter-rail trip around Europe, mostly within the Schengen Area, this meant that most of the borders I crossed were seamless and inconsequential.

I did make a point of actively walking across a couple though, and enjoying the freedom of movement that they provided. I've done two entire podcasts about border crossings before, albeit in the very early days of my podcast, so you might not have listened to them. At some point I might go over some of the topics on my early podcasts, But not right now.

Anyway.

The most scenic border I crossed was possibly that between Switzerland and Liechtenstein, a border I crossed twice on foot because trains don't go to Vaduz at weekends. But it's quite a border; it runs along the River Rhine and the bridge I crossed (between Buchs and Schaan) offered a fabulous view north to clear skies and huge mountains. It was pretty much exactly what you'd expect the view to look like if I said you were crossing a large river in Switzerland. On the bridge was a small plaque telling you you'd crossed a border, but otherwise there was no other indication. While neither are In the EU, they are in a customs union with each other, and both in the Schengen free movement area, making the journey delayed only by taking photographs.

Another border I took pictures of, albeit for different reasons, was that between Italy and Slovenia, at Gorizia / Nova Gorica. In my childhood, this was a Very Hard Border, being part of the Iron Curtain that divided Europe into two opposing camps, Even though Yugoslavia (RIP) wasn't a Soviet Puppet State and had more liberal travel arrangements, it still would have been An Effort to cross the border by land here.

{marching feet}

While I did wander along the main road to take pictures and ponder over the changes at the remains of the guard posts, the most interesting part of the border is visible at Europe Square, a little walk outside the centre of Gorizia and right next to the railway station in Nova Goriza (which itself is a little way outside the town centre on the Slovenia side. It's hard to imagine now how this would have looked back in the day; the railway station would have literally opened out onto the border, and while there wasn't a huge wall here as in Berlin, there was definitely a very secure fence preventing access. These days it's a large pedestrianised square with information boards and floor plaques depicting and delineating what was here. Foot-selfies were taken. Thanks were given.

Another border I specifically visited was the Dreilanderpunkt, the tripoint between Belgium, Netherlands, and Germany, It's also the highest point in Netherlands which always amuses me when my Dutch friends visit it and their friends go 'well done, that must have been an effort. To find it, I mean'. It's a bit of a theme-park, not gonna lie, with lots of food stalls, small amusement park type rides, and that sort of thing. The tripoint itself is marked with a small stone column which is popular with locals taking pictures.

It is also popular with wasps. I had to venture a short way across a border that no longer exists, to eat my lunch in peace in what used to be Neutral Moresnet. Oh god, this is a niche meeting of several of my interests.

In brief, Moresnet was a triangular-shaped piece of land around 1½km by 5km, making an area of about 3.6 km squared; slightly less than twice the size of Monaco, or, for Antipodeans, a tenth the size of Norfolk Island. It was centred around an old Zinc mine which, after the Napoleonic Wars, both the Netherlands and Prussia wanted control of (it was right on the border of both, in the newly-defined structure of Europe). It was decided to keep it neutral and be run by both in a sort of condominium. A bit like Vanuatu but without the road chaos. At some point they'd come back to it and sort out a more permanent agreement. Anyway, they ... never did; when Belgium became independent they took over from the Dutch in the agreement, but a resolution wasn't achieved until 1914. When the Germans invaded it. Two wars later and the whole area was ceded to Belgium, tho by this time the pressing need to have a zinc mine had quite abated,

Anyway, I walked across the border into Germany and a few kilometres later ended up in Aachen, Aix-La-Chapelle, a city, like Ljubljana / Laibach, that brings to mind 'A'-Level History. And where I lost my hat in the cathedral. To be fair it's a very glorious cathedral, and you definitely need to visit, but I went in wearing a hat and decided I probably shouldn't be wearing a hat in a religious building, for ill-defined cultural reasons. So I held onto it. After about ten minutes I realised I Was No Longer Holding On To It. No idea what happened to it. I was irked, I was given that hat by someone on my Hike Across Great Britain a few months earlier, when I lost the hat I had had in Bellingham, in Northumberland, after taking it off in a pub and forgetting it

existence ...

Not all the borders I crossed were between countries in both the EU and in Schengen. As I say, I went to Switzerland, actually I went twice, once on a day trip to Basel from Strasbourg, where I spent a reasonable amount of time taking selfies next to road signs saying 'Barfußplätz' because obviously, and not buying anything because I don't care how artisanal it would be, I'm not paying £24 for a burger at a pub, and an extra £6 for chips, and once for a couple of days near Geneva and to/from Liechtenstein, which honestly half-paid for my entire inter-rail ticket, but I'll talk about that next time. What I will say is that although Switzerland isn't in the EU, it is in Schengen, so I was expecting to be stopped and have my baggage searched at least to make sure I wasn't smuggling anything interesting into the country. But no; while my arrival into Basel's main station was at a separate platform and we were guided through a building that had obviously once been a customs office, it was on my visit more of a setting for an episode of Changing Rooms, or another of those TV DIY programmes.

The only border I think that I was ever stopped at, and this was generic and not personal, was that between Spain and Andorra. This is something really odd, and makes as much logical sense as Northern Ireland being in a unique position to benefit from EU trade but not the rest of the UK. If you look on a map, you'll notice Andorra only has borders with, and is thus only accessible from, France and Spain. There are also no airports in the country. Yet, despite this, it's not a member of the EU, and nor is it a member of the Schengen area. This means not only does it have border controls (yes, despite only being able to access it from an EU state - indeed on the bus entering, we stopped for maybe 20 minutes by the side of the road in the suburbs while the police came on and poked around a bit - cars were passing all the time on the road itself next to us), but also many of the EU benefits don't apply. Like, you know, mobile phone roaming agreements. Take note of this sort of thing, it might catch you unawares.

I say not personal; no border guard checked either me or my luggage on entry, I do not have a stamp from Andorra in my passport, and on exiting the country I walked past the border post with nary a myther. This border crossing was interesting in its own way, actually, as it was exactly how you'd imagine it; a very clear blue sky, bright sunshine, and lots of snow on the mountains. Very crisp air. The road was clear, very slightly slippery but to an extent that would only concern me, and the only snag was the lack of pavements. The bus dropped me off at the top of the hill, in the village of El Pas De La Casa, which seems to exist almost entirely as a way for the French to buy tax-free goods, and my aim was to walk down to the railway station at the even smaller village of L'Hospitalet-Pres-L'Andorre, some 13km away in France. Just after the customs post I got beeped by an Andorran who, it turns out, had a girlfriend in the UK (I'm sure he said in Luton, of all places), and he took me to the larger town of Ax-Les-Thermes from where there were more trains. I'm not a hitchhiker, and this doesn't count.

{section separation jingle - small countries}

Speaking of Andorra, and I'll come back to there in a little while ... one of my long-term bucket list items is to visit the capital city of every European Country. For a given definition of 'capital' - semantically three European countries don't have one and there are many arguments about a fourth. But Inter-Rail is a fabulous way to do this with relative ease, since many of them are directly linked, making it a very easy way to hop around the region.

However, it's not always that simple. Some of these countries are relatively small, and obviously I'm the sort of person to get excited about San Marino just as much as I am about Spain. Well, probably more so, actually, Spain's not my favourite country in Europe. There are six countries with a size below 1,000 km²; excluding Malta, given it's an island and therefore even if it had trains it'd be beyond the scope of an average Inter-Railer), three of the other five don't have a public railway service (Andorra, San Marino, Vatican City) and a fourth (Liechtenstein) seems to only have a weekday commuter service. The only one of them to have a regular, frequent, standard rail service is Monaco. So I did.

Monaco is also not my favourite country in Europe. I will say I only had a few hours there on a short day trip from Nice (it's literally 'right there'), and it rained pretty much the whole time. There isn't a whole lot to really *do*, apart from gawp at the tourists outside the famous casino building (like they'd let the likes of me in to that sort of place!), and take a loop walk around the streets that one weekend a year make up the F1 motor

racing circuit. **{F1 Sound}** The yachts in the harbour are as grand as you'd expect. The city itself, whisper it quietly, but it's mostly quite ugly. And I suspect if I'd had to live there, I'd go to Nice rather a lot. It's also a very hilly place; the railway station is built underground at the top of the hill, a steep climb from the harbour.

Note that Monaco, being a city-state, is one of those countries which semantically and technically doesn't have a capital. Monte Carlo is a 'quarter', not a separate administrative entity, in the same way St James, as the local council ward that contains the UK's Houses of Parliament, is a part of Westminster.

San Marino, in the North-East of Italy, was somewhere I tried to visit on my abortive trip back in 2002. I'd overnighed in the seaside town of Rimini but social anxiety (a fear of having to ask for tickets in a foreign language made me chicken out). So, seventeen years later I wanted to make sure this wouldn't happen again. And it wouldn't, because not only was all the information about the journey available online, there were many posters and signs around the railway station at Rimini telling you how to do it.

San Marino is an odd place. It claims to be the oldest independent state in the world, founded by a Christian refugee in 301 AD who set up a monastery here in the impenetrable hills. I'm not quite sure how even the Roman Empire didn't notice or care about it, never mind any of the many subsequent invaders, so I'm taking that with a pinch of salt. It's about 10km from Rimini, mostly flat, but then within the borders the land rises some 700m. While there's settlements scattered around the country, most people go to the town itself, a series of steep cobbled streets surrounded by stone walls and old buildings. Many of the buildings are gun shops. Seriously, this place is The Place to go in Europe if you need a rifle or gun.

Andorra is similarly accessible only by bus, due to its location in the mountains. I got there by bus from Barcelona railway station, once again ensuring the only reason I visited Barcelona was to change transport. It's also the only reason I've visited Venice; I have similarly changed trains there twice - once on this trip between Bologna and Gorizia, and once on my 2002 trip on my way to Rimini, oddly, from Trieste.

What can I say about Andorra? It's not very big, but it's also bigger than you'd imagine. I wasn't staying in the capital, rather I was halfway along pretty much the only road in the country, in a hostel recommended to me by HostelGeeks on Instagram (Hostel Tartier, I still follow them on IG as it happens, lovely little place, though they're better catered for the snow sport market than for random solo barefoot backpackers. And indeed, while I arrived in the rain, overnight on my first night we had a nice flurry of snow that ended up being a foot or two deep.

It is a place you'd go for either skiing or for the scenery; I'd imagine there'd be some great hikes in the mountains in June. As it was, I was there in early November and just passing through, so my one full day in the place was spent walking around its capital - Andorra La Vella (it means 'Andorra The Town', as opposed to, well, Andorra The Country, and if that seems odd and unimaginative, consider the capital cities of Mexico, Guatemala, and Luxembourg). Again there wasn't a lot to *do* really there, but it's a decent enough place to stock up on provisions, some of the buildings are quite odd (the parliament building, if I recall correctly, is somewhat modernist), and the views are good. I'll talk about the beer later, that's a whole different kettle of, well, not just hops.

Similar in location to Andorra, but much more accessible, especially on weekdays, and with less of the admin, is Liechtenstein. I entered and left on foot from the Swiss town of Buchs, on a bridge across the Rhine. I was staying in a youth hostel a couple of km upriver, and the walk along is very pretty indeed - almost like a canal with a dyke running alongside, with fantastic views across the Alps. It really is as picturesque as you'd imagine.

Given the size of the country, the main settlements kind of merge into one. I'm not quite sure where the border between the districts of, for example, Schaan and Vaduz was, or even where the hostel and the football stadium were, but I certainly passed by the governmental buildings (the parliament building looks like a triangle) and the castle high on the hill. It's a pretty expensive place, which is why I was staying in the youth hostel and why I ate there; fairly functional and not very exciting but equally, edible and affordable. I'm not saying budget.

I did not visit Vatican City on this trip, but I was there on my Italy trip in 2002 when I nearly got arrested in St Peter's Square for swearing at a policeman. We won't talk about that, but he was being a jobsworthy twat so

deserved it.

{section separation jingle - sports}

I was in Liechtenstein for two reasons; one, because of my ambition from back in the 90s to visit the capital cities of every European country, and two, because of a bucket list to watch an International football (soccer) match between two countries' teams who didn't have a cat-in-hell's chance of actually winning anything. And it just so happened Liechtenstein were playing Armenia, at home, at just the right time, so I ... the stadium (RheinPark, literally on the banks of the river and possibly therefore the nearest national stadium to an international border, not that that would be hard in Liechtenstein given it's about 4 miles wide at its widest point and 2 of those miles are mountains) was only about a third full (and mostly with Armenians, who knew there were was such a large Armenian diaspora in nearby Switzerland). The match finished 1-1 and the chap who scored for Liechtenstein (Yanik Frick) was the son of the chap I used to buy a lot on Championship Manager (Mario Frick) back in the days when I did my original inter-rail trip. Apt.

Football wasn't the only sport I watched on the trip, although my other experience I didn't plan ahead for. I was in the Czech city of Olomouc for three nights and was browsing around 'things to do'. Turns out on one of the nights I was there, the local ice-hockey team were playing a local derby against Vitkovice, based in nearby Ostrava, and as you all know I'm rather fond of ice-hockey so I popped on over.

No-one questioned why I was there; almost if it was perfectly natural for an alien to come wandering by and watch some ice-hockey. The website icehockey24 dot com tells me I was one of 4,481 people in that stadium, which means twice as many people watched Olomouc lose 4-3 In overtime as watched the Liechtenstein-Armenia football match. Make of that what you will.

Speaking of sport, back in Switzerland I went to the Olympic Museum, which is quite an extensive place set in some quite luscious grounds overlooking Lake Geneva and with a series of modern art sculptures outside that take some glancing at to recognise, The museum itself contains over 10,000 items, and is roughly divided into three sections. Firstly you take a tour through Olympic history, from the original Greek games to the modern Olympic movement. There's a small section with information and stats about all the modern editions of the games, including the Winter Olympics and the Paralympics. Then there's a whole series of displays around objects related to the Games, including famous athlete's equipment, signed memorabilia, and overviews of competitors. Lastly there's an interactive section where you can compare yourself to Olympic athletes and take part in certain events to see how you stack up.

Also in Switzerland I realised I could visit CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research. The acronym is French, because nearly all European acronyms are. I didn't know you could take tours of this place, I assumed it was all protected by nanobots in case of escaping Hawking Radiation, but apparently not. This is, after all, where the Large Hadron Collider is centred, amongst other things. There's two parts to the visit; a wander through a small museum with information boards about what CERN does and a brief overview of high-level physics, and then poking around in the older buildings that used to be used for actual experiments. You're taken on a guided tour of this bit, because they don't let just anyone in to see this stuff, and you certainly don't get to see anything that you can break, but you get to see the Synchrocyclotron, CERN's first particle accelerator, first operational in 1957. But not push any buttons on it. They don't want random balls of chaotic barefoot backpacker energy messing with anything.

They don't actually like barefoot backpackers at all; their FAQ says you can't wear anything with an open toe. I had to go to the supermarket in Toulon a couple of days beforehand and buy some cheap knock-off converse just for the occasion. I still have them; I think I've worn them about ten times, mostly because of snow. And Jury Service.

{section separation jingle - old things}

One of the reasons to travel around Europe is to visit All The Old Things. Let's face it, aside from Turkey and what is commonly known as the Middle East, there aren't many places with a variety of historical sites across millennia in such a small area. And while certainly Iraq is on my list of places to visit, you can't get there on an Inter-Rail ticket. This is not the main reason I haven't been yet. Although it would make it easier if I could.

Anyway, on my 2019 trip I passed by many old towns and ancient sites, some by accident, some by design. The vast majority are very easy to get to by train, Mont Saint Michel, as you have already heard, is Not One Of These, but I'm still glad I visited. I don't know how much you know about it, but it's pretty much a castle, on a rock, on a tidal island, accessible these days by causeway, just off the north coast of France. There's not a lot to do there, and obviously it's full of tourists, but some places are popular for a reason, and if you like very pretty old buildings set in remarkable locations, then it should be on your hit-list. The buses drop you off on the edge of the mainland, at the car parks, and then you can either get a shuttle bus or walk along the causeway to the rock, the latter obviously gives you a good vista or it against the flat sea and sandbanks.

Northern France is also home to the oldest site I saw on my trip - the huge area of ancient stones at Carnac. You've heard of Stonehenge and Callanish; sites with stone circles set in fields, with other remains of ancient peoples scattered around a radius of several kilometres? Carnac is ... less 'structured', for sure, but considerably bigger. Its main drag is a series of rows of stone monoliths and dolmens stretching out for a good kilometre, but that's just one of several sites where stones are just ... standing. There's a visitor centre with displays and information to make sense of it a bit, but ultimately we don't know who built them, when, or why; all we know is they're from around the 4th millennium before the birth of Jesus, so are probably contemporaneous with places like the Knap of Howar and the Standing Stones of Stenness on Orkney, and slightly older than Callanish and Stonehenge. There's estimated to be about 3,000 of them on the several sites, but there's no way I was going to count them.

The thing with a place like this is that it's really interesting to see, but remember that's all it is - lots and lots of stones. If you like ancient monuments, cool. I happen to, but I know other people might get bored after about 10 minutes. Carnac is in Brittany, the far north-west of France and in a similar place to the ancient area known as Armorica, and if the idea of a place of ancient Gauls with a menhir fetish in a small village in Armorica sounds familiar, be aware that yes, that was a huge influence on my humour and writing style, so obviously I'm going to make a beeline to a place like that.

Speaking of Romans, as I said earlier my trip took me through Rimini, where I overnighed in my trip of 2002. This time I paid more attention, and I had time after coming down from San Marino to take a wander through the city. What's interesting is how little of it I remembered, though that might be because of how much of that trip I've conveniently forgotten.

It's not that large a city, and to be honest the majority of visitors are Italians visiting the seaside. Or San Marino, I guess, but obviously being a city in Italy founded 268 years before The Common Era, there's going to be a lot more to it than sea and sand. Mainly Roman ruins, obviously, including a huge archway that's pretty good for its age, a similarly-respected bridge, and many ruins of buildings scattered around, just fenced off in little restrictive parks by the side of the road. I went to Rimini for practical reasons, but to be honest any of the towns up this way will serve you well if you want your take of historical monuments.

I'd gone to Rimini as a day-trip from Bologna, a city I'd spent an hour in on on my 2002 trip, changing trains, and all I remember from it were columns. Well as it turns out, Bologna has a lot of columns. It's the most well-known aspect of the city, I think, apart from bolognese, which is a meat-based sauce generally never served with spaghetti, for the record. By columns, what I actually mean are arcades and porticos. Many of the streets in the centre have pavements which are covered with a stone roof and lined with columns, making not just a pretty wandering but also one both dry and safe-from-traffic. The most famous is the stretch from the centre uphill to the Santuario de San Luca, St Luke's Basilica, which tradition states has 666 stone columns along its route, apparently to protect the icon of the Madonna (not that one) as it was being transported there. I didn't count them; they are numbered but the numbering isn't always sequential. The Basilica itself can be visited tho it does have limited opening times. It's an old church (late 17th Century) and that's about it. The view from it over the city is kind of limited a bit by trees.

The city also has its fair share of roomy piazzas, old buildings, churches, and four huge towers dating from either side of the 12th Century, one of which was notable mainly because it provided me with an easy reference point to find a nearby decent craft beer bar.

Another place I passed through in my 2002 trip was Pisa, and weirdly I probably spent longer there than I

did this trip. Both times I was there to change trains, although this time it was part of a longer onward journey to Romania whereas last time it was on my way back home from Florence. Pisa is, of course, famous for what seems to amount to an architectural blunder - one of those situations where an epic fail becomes an epic success. If only I could manifest the same energy.

For those of you who are unsure, the famous Leaning Tower of Pisa isn't supposed to lean. It was built throughout the entire 13th Century (and much of the 14th, to be honest) and the original architect is ... in dispute, not that it matters cos all parties are long dead by now. It's a bell tower to serve the nearby cathedral, and it leans because the ground is not firm enough to support its weight, or at least when built its foundations weren't strong enough to support its weight based on the ground conditions. It has been stabilised recently with a lean at just under 4 degrees, having previously reached around 5½ degrees. I don't know how far a building has to lean in order to be stable, but these days since its lean is what makes it notable; while we have the capability of making it properly erect these days **{fnarr fnarr}**, evidently tourism is more important than structural integrity. We have actively rewarded ineptitude just because it's old, and I don't know how I feel about that. Anyway it was dark when I got there and I spent half my time taking photos of tourists taking photos of it. Influencers in the wild. Obviously I didn't go in it. I didn't in 2002 either. My memories of that visit were of a protest march through the centre of town. No idea what that was for; at the time I just wanted to go home.

I have a weird vibe with Italy. I really don't connect with the country and yet it might well be my third or fourth most visited country, after France and the USA. I'm going back in May; after Cyprus, me and Laura are visiting Milan and Lake Como. {pause} Lake. Como. {pause} I feel so middle-class. Maybe I'll visit the nearby town of Bellagio, the namesake of which (in Las Vegas) is the the most expensive building I've ever had a wee in. That's one of those weird and niche statistics that will probably never be beaten; even with diarrhoea in Dubai I managed to find a museum toilet. That's a tale for another podcast. That will probably never be written. **{ew}**

Another old place I passed through was Trier. It's one of those facets of history that I never quite can get to keep in my head that the Romans controlled part of what is now Germany. Not a great deal of Germany; the mysterious yet highly significant Battle of the Teutoburg Forest put paid to that, but they did cross the Rhine and they did have some large towns on the Gothic frontier. One such is Trier, or as the Romans knew it, Augusta Treverorum. While seen in the UK as a bit of a cheesy male forename, 'Trevor' here refers to the Germanic tribe of the Treveri, whose name seems to have a reference to a 'flowing river' (in this case, the Moselle). Given the history and culture, this means that an important genre of French wine was created by a tribe of Trevors. **{Clever Trevor}**. But anyway.

Trier has a number of important Roman ruins, including three bathhouses, an old Roman citadel, and an amphitheatre. Most of the sites are, in fairness, not much more than slightly raised foundations, so like ruins everywhere you get a sense of a place rather than an actual experience, although part of a 2nd Century Roman bridge over the river has been reincorporated into a more modern structure. One day I might do a podcast on 'ruins we have all known and loved'. Might do. Probably won't. Anyway, Trier's main Roman draw is the Porta Nigra, the Black Gate (it is made of quite a dark stone, especially when seen in contrast to most other Roman ruins. Built at the end of the 2nd Century, the website Wikivoyage tells me it's the largest still standing Roman gate North of the Alps. Which is quite a large area, to be honest, tho I never know if that phrase is literal or it it just means 'not in Italy', like, does it include Spain? I may be overthinking this.

If you like your history a bit more modern, Trier has a museum in the house that Karl Marx was born in. Nice lad, if a bit too prone to arguing with authority figures in his youth. Well, I guess he'll grow out of that oh.

I overnighed in Trier. I didn't overnigh in the French town of Agen; rather I passed through it on the way to catching an overnight bus from Toulouse. It's one of those 'I had some time to kill, so why not kill it here' places. I'm very glad I did to be honest; it was a nice little city with a cathedral, a couple of interesting ruins, and a large open space near a skate park with a huge aqueduct - the pont-canal d'Agen. It's just under 540m long, has 23 arches, is built from relatively local stone, and dates from 1849. It's on the famous Canal du Midi, well an extension thereof (the Canal des Deux Mers), which provides a navigable waterway from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic via the Garonne River.

Another French city I briefly passed through while changing trains but which would be worth a longer visit is Nancy, in the NE of France. I didn't know a lot about it so I was unprepared for the sheer number and vista of

old buildings there, especially around the central Place Stanislas, which is UNESCO listed. There's also a couple of large parks, including the large and square Parc de la Pépinière (which means 'Nurseries', presumably plant nurseries). Definitely a place I need to return to.

Back in Germany, I had the same vibe on a day-trip from Leipzig; itself a city worth a few days with its religious buildings - including both the home of J S 'Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor' and yes you will know it if you hear it' Bach and the church where the first demonstrations in 1989 happened whose resonance quickly led to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the world as we knew it, but we felt fine, at the time. It's also full of museums; there was one I made a beeline for that documented life in communist East Germany and went into a whole level of detail about how it all ended (spoiler: largely chaotically, including one absolute huge miscommunication of intent and policy that made the end somewhat more sudden than you might have expected). But again, a tale for another pod. As an aside though, it's remarkable to think that when Matthew and especially Alison made their Inter-Rail trips, the idea that barely two summers later you'd've been able to include Leipzig on your pass would have been thought laughable.

Anyway, day trip from Leipzig to Erfurt and Weimar, the latter being the most notable German City from my 'A'-Level History days (it was where the post-WWI constitution was signed, and why that period is known as the Weimar Republic), but it's also a city of culture and architecture. The former has a lovely little old town area, several old cathedrals (preserved and in ruins, including the obviously-photographed barfüßerkirche, now a war memorial cos it's in ruins due to, er, us), a handful of museums, and definitely worth a visit. Also in the neighbourhood is Buchenwald, another ... I'm gonna call it a 'war memorial' which is equally worth a visit, but for, shall we say, Other Reason. That, too, is a tale for another podcast. One created by someone else.

But this is one of the nice things about Inter-Rail; you get to spend time, however brief, in places you hadn't previously considered, that may not even be that much off the beaten track, but because they're not major cities you might overlook them.

My trip also revealed just how popular ornate fountains are in Europe, Central Europe especially. Aachen, Bremen, Olomouc, Kosice ... the list is endless. And by 'ornate' I mean, mediaeval, intricately carved, and almost certainly with a huge amount of religious symbolism.

{section separation jingle - the seaside}

Most of the places I've mentioned have been inland, but of course Europe is surrounded by the sea. Having an inter-rail ticket means I can really make the most of that. Or as much as you can in the Autumn.

The bulk of my seaside experience was in Toulon, in the south of France. For reasons I'll come onto in the next pod, I wasn't alone for this section of the journey. Rather, I has my friend Lix in tow. They've appeared once on this pod, in an episode about alcohol, which is very on-brand as much of my time with them was spent drinking alcohol and watching Netflix. Or drinking alcohol and musing at the insides of cute restaurants. Or drinking alcohol and ... you get the idea. Not that I wasn't drinking alcohol regardless, but their tastes are more expensive than mine.

{wine and glasses}

I'll talk about *that* next time as well.

But one of their desires was to spend time at the sea, and have a photo-shoot there, because they're very much a ... they're a nixie as opposed to my dryad nature so while I grew up by the sea it's a bit of an alien world. Anyway, as it turns out we didn't manage to get to many decent beaches; there was a small one on the edge of Toulon as well as one in Marseille. Still, we saw the sea a lot, and it was pretty good weather down there too, which helped.

That part of France is, of course, very close to Monaco, as mentioned earlier, and later on in the trip I did spend a couple of nights in nearby Nice. My overriding feel of the whole region is that it's probably nicer if you have the money to appreciate it. It's nice in Nice, as the Strangers once said, and now I'm wondering just how far I can push that vibe. I didn't do it with Nancy. Obviously.

Actually, most of the seaside I went to was in France. I'm not quite sure why this was, but I guess a country that shape and that size in that location is going to make it easy to visit appealing shorelines. That said, while the weather in Toulon and Nice was ... [consults a thesaurus] pleasant, you already know it rained in Monaco. This was much more typical.

I overnighed in Calais, not somewhere really noted in the UK as anything other than a place to pass through on the way to somewhere else or, in the old days, as an easy place to visit a French supermarket to stock up on some cheap booze. However, it's a place I've even done a short to-camera video piece on in my 'Everywhere is Interesting' series. No idea if it's gone live yet because I'm not the one in control of my YouTube account. But anyway.

It's been known as a seaside resort since the 19th Century, and has a large beach and a notable lighthouse. Newly-installed on my visit (as in literally the day before!), near the shoreline, and the centrepiece of a revamp of the whole seafront area, is a dragon. It's not a small thing either - it reaches 15m in height, over 15m in length, and has a wingspan of 25m. It literally breathes fire, smoke, and water, and it *moves*^{*}; up to 4 kph.

It's one of the more recent designs by François Delarozière and his La Machine company which make large mechanical animals; they're noted for La Princesse, a 15m spider that walked through Liverpool in the 2008 European Capital of Culture celebrations and later was seen in other cities around the world.

Anyway, it rained the whole time I was there, quite torrentially in patches.

It also rained in La Rochelle. Very hard.

If you remember my last episode, you'll note that La Rochelle is historically quite an important place for me, personally, as it's the nearest large urban centre to where my first fiancée lived, Laure, the woman I travelled around on my previous inter-rail trip with. It's a place I know well, but not for a long time. You might ask how it felt to visit after so long. Well, I got wet. And lost.

It's actually a pleasant enough town, set by the harbourside where there are a couple of old buildings and structures, and a weird modern art globe of all the Francophone countries, It's just ... I don't know, it's just one of those places full of middle-class British tourists, and it was ever thus even back in 2000, so ... By the way I didn't bump into Laure. As far as I know she's in a relationship and has two kids and a host of chickens somewhere near Paris these days,

Just south of La Rochelle, and connected by the train, is the town of Chatelallion-Plage. Plage in French means beach, and the town has quite a long expanse of it. It's very cool, and exactly the sort of place you'd go if you wanted a day at a small seaside town to chill and build sandcastles and paddle in the sea and generally pretend you're about seven years old. It's the hometown of my friend Leila, the one who married a Scotsman and now whinges about the weather in Edinburgh. On this trip though the rain was too hard so I didn't go there. Take That, Leila.

{seashore sounds}

I did get to spend time on a French beach in good weather though, oddly enough a tad further North. I had a few very calming and grounded moments on the beach at Carnac, before exploring the standing stones. There weren't many people around, and not much noise, so it was a great moment to just chill, close my eyes, and stand on the sand and the edge of the tides, appreciating the world for what it is.

All that said, my trip did have me visit one genuine seaside resort. And we're talking beach, we're talking sunshine, we're talking high-rise hotels, cheesy entertainment, we're talking pubs and clubs, stag and hen nights, we're talking somewhere whose very name causes a reaction to most Brits; the nature of that reaction is quite variable.

And I only went on a day-trip, only spent a few hours there. But a few hours is quite enough to get a feel for the place, oh yes.

Benidorm isn't on the Spanish rail network. It's accessible by a tram from the nearby city of Alicante, which itself is definitely worth the visit. It's a city with old streets, a large harbour, and an interesting castle on a hill with a small museum and very impressive views over the region.

The town of Benidorm is ... now it's actually two places. Old-town Benidorm feels quite communal, with narrow streets and locals' shops, and Spanish children running everywhere. The rest of the town, however ... I mean not gonna lie, the beach is huge, with a long promenade alongside giving easy access at any point. From a distance, even the high-rise hotel blocks just off the promenade seem in keeping.

I was there on a Tuesday in November and even so it was rammed with drunk Brits. I dread to think what it'd be like on a Saturday afternoon in July. I popped in to an entertainment venue, kind of like a cabaret club, and indeed the one often used in episodes of the 2010s TV comedy drama named after the town, where you had one washed-up crooner (English) singing (in English) to the massed throng (who were English), who sang back. At one point he even did Sweet Caroline, obviously. I had a Guinness. This was not a place for artisanal Spanish craft beers.

I low-key think I'd like to stay in a resort place like this, for a couple of nights, just for the craic, you know? Like, it's so very much not my scene, but equally it's culturally interesting and also sometimes I have to push myself out of my middle-class privilege and visit places that are genuinely populist. I spent two nights in Skegness during the pandemic restrictions and didn't hate it, though that itself was also in an October so probably didn't show the place in its ... I'm going to say 'best light;' but that might be the wrong phrase.

{end pod jingle}

I guess on that note I should call time on this pod. It's getting a bit long. Next time I'm continuing this theme, sorry if you're bored of it, but I'm going to take a more holistic look at Inter-Rail itself, looking at topics like accommodation, admin, and Things That Can Go Wrong, rather than destinations and things to see. And yes, Things Did Go Slightly Awry on my trip. But I survived, clearly. Until then, remember to pack a raincoat on your travels, and if you're feeling off colour, keep on getting better.

{Outro voiceover:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.

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Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}