

Transcript of Podcast 068: Backpacking Europe

{Intro:

MATTHEW: So that was a great journey, I can't remember the mileage but it was probably as far as you could go. We didn't have any big problems on this trip, a few bits of minor hassle but nothing at all serious. I think we looked after ourselves, and didn't really understand risk so well back then but it worked out fine.

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{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 'whys' behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello!

Obviously I've not been doing much since my last episode. That said, I am moving quite a bit more free than I was, which is inconvenient since last Friday I had a text message from my doctor going 'can you call the surgery to arrange an appointment'. Evidently my x-rays have come back, not that I know what possible thing they could show that would make any difference to the fact I'm walking slowly and slightly limply, but that I'm using my stick for psychological rather than actual physical reasons. Maybe they've found some weird portal to another dimension in my ankle. Somehow I suspect not. Don't get me wrong; I'm still nowhere near in a position to do a Parkrun, but certainly I'm a lot more mobile than I was. The days of me zooming around my apartment on the office chair are past now. Which, if nothing else, is good for my carpets.

What updates do I have since my last episode? Oh, I was interviewed for another podcast back in January and that episode has now gone live. It was for the Distance Hiker podcast. I say 'was'; it has since changed its name to 'Humans of the Trail'. And I'm 80% sure that was partly because of me. It was a podcast specifically about hiking, but I seem to have broken it and turned it into more of an outdoorsy vibe pod where the people, rather than the trails, take centre stage. Anyway, link in shownotes, as per usual. We didn't even get to talk about everything we'd planned to, so I'll be on it again later in the year, but not until I get back from my Spring trips.

Perhaps surprisingly, and it's certainly a surprise to me, I have a vague plan for podcast episodes looking ahead to the end of the year. In that I have written down a series of topics I want to discuss and do podcasts about, and at the rate of one every two weeks, this list gets me to the first week of January 2024. Obviously I have no faith that I'll actually manage to do that, but hey, this is more planning than I've ever done before, and as you know part of my issue has been sometimes going 'aaagh I need to a podcast this week, what can I talk about that's easy'. Hopefully it'll mean I'll actually stick to releasing them on Thursday mornings. Ha.

At the time of writing this podcast, me and my VA are still none the nearer in working out how to replace our Twitter Spaces conversations. We're probably going to use YouTube but we're not quite yet in a position where we can, mainly because I don't have enough YouTube subscribers, but far be it for me to beg for people to click that subscribe button ...

Speaking of my YouTube channel, My VA has been very committed lately and since the last pod I've had two long-form videos posted to my YouTube channel. They're both about Parkrun, which .. well, obviously they're from last year, but, one is an overview of my local Parkrun course, and the other is kind of a vibe about how it feels to prepare for a Parkrun. With specific regards to the former, note that as Queens Parkrun is one of only three in the country beginning with Q (and the other two are in Belfast and the back of beyond somewhere in rural Hampshire), we get a lot of Parkrun Tourists, so any content about it is well-viewed. Unusually what I did was more of an overview of the course rather than a 'this is a vid of me running it', so I hope I really get to

explain and discuss what to look out for, what to be aware of, and also 'how to do it barefoot' which I acknowledge is a niche market but also a well-researched one. And my latter video proves that, although I think my VA wanted to market it more for the gender-non-conforming audience than the barefoot crew 5k audience, in that I was wearing a skort. A skort, btw, is what presents as shorts under a skirt, There's a chap on Instagram who has the brand of 'skorted man' and is always seen running in a skort. I like the vibe. It's funky. Others might disagree, But if gender is a social construct then who cares,

Anyway. There are a couple of other videos due to go live in the near future, but honestly I don't quite know what they are. I'll just see what magic my VA can work with the videos I give her.

A recent YouTube Short video was of me doing a running warm-up exercise at high speed, and when I posted it to Instagram I had a lot of people saying it was hilarious. And it was, Mainly because of the captions my VA provided for it, Which implies my VA is funnier than I am. I still haven't decided how I feel about that ...

This also means an idea she has for a short video is one in response to the hate comments I get. Yeh, I get hate comments, mainly on my 'what not to say to an asexual' content. I was expecting that, and I'm too removed from my own YouTube channel to really care that much, but V's idea is I do some kind of 'answer and response' type video. But she has to write it, channel her inner James Blunt, because quite frankly I'm not that witty!

For the record, I've no idea if anyone comments on my podcast episodes, mainly because podcasts don't work the same way. Everywhere you listen to a podcast has its own way of rating and commenting, and there's no real easy cheap and simple way of collating all that information. What I mean is, while the most popular way of listening to my podcast seems to be through Apple Podcasts, and Spotify is the second most, in the last three months there have been over 45 other different ways my podcast has been listened to, mainly via podcast apps, and each of those apps gives you the opportunity to rate and review. [For the record, I listen to podcasts through an app called CastBox]. I'm not going to trawl through all of them manually, and look at every single episode, to see what people have said.

That doesn't mean I don't appreciate it if you do, just ... it might take me a while to read them!

Anyway.

{section separation jingle}

In my last couple of episodes, I spoke at length about my adventures with Inter-Railing, firstly about the trip I did back in 2000, and then a quick overview of where I went in the 2019 trip. What I want to do in this episode though is talk a bit more in general about travelling Europe, mainly by train, as a concept.

My two inter-rail trips were separated by nearly two decades. In those intervening years I travelled a lot on European trains on shorter trips. It has to be said many of them in the early years were in France; I'd taken a lot of trains there because that's what happens when you pretend you're cis-het-ello and date two women there (not at the same time; not every stereotype you may have heard about the French is true, although I'm not saying one of them wouldn't have suggested it. {ooh la la} The other one absolutely would not have entertained it).

Anyway. A couple of years after that first Inter-Rail trip, in Spring 2002, and as a direct result of my relationship with Laure coming to a rather odd end, I took a mini train trip around Italy. I alluded to it a few times in my previous episode, not necessarily always positively. It was probably the wrong place at the wrong time, not the last time that happened, and I came back home a few days early due to a combination of social anxiety and bad vibes. But essentially I bought a ticket that acted like a one-country inter-rail pass, which gave me travel on all Italian trains with only needing to pay a supplement on the high-speed ones. That trip as a whole would make an interesting introspective podcast, were it not for the fact I kind of dropped most of the specifics out of my memory.

I've also been across Europe by train to visit penpals, including trains from Bratislava to Budapest, and there to Belgrade, at the time the capital of Yugoslavia, on an overnight train, to visit a very recent penpal there, and by recent I mean '3 letters'. I'm not normally that impulsive. It felt like the right thing to do. I was right; the penpal

in question has even contributed to some of my podcasts so it wasn't a complete disaster. But, Yugoslavia. I can see your eyebrows raised from here. This was in 1994, which, if you know your recent history, was at exactly the time that Yugoslavia was, er, in the process of unaliving, shall we say, and this includes an awful lot of its citizens. I've never been to an active warzone, which might surprise a few of you, but I could certainly see some of the admin from the train window - mainly endless carparks of UN lorries.

I mean that's unless you count Palestine. And I don't consider it to be an active warzone. I've never been to Gaza, despite what V thinks. I had the gun pointed at me by the UN soldier in Hebron, in the West Bank. Whole world of difference. Opposite side of Israel, for a start - it's almost 80km between the two. There are entire countries you could fit between the two. Several times. It's fine.

Anyway. Trains.

Apart from those, er, yeh I've taken a good few trains in passing trips to places like Belgium, Slovenia, and of course Eastern Europe. And in February/March 2018, at the height of a polar weather vortex known in the UK as 'The Beast From The East', I had a bumble around Central Europe, including an overnight train from Budapest to Warsaw.

My experience of overnight trains in general is a wee bit odd as they're just like standard long-distance European trains with a long corridor on one side of the carriage and small 'segments' coming off the other side, maybe 6 seats to a section in two rows of three opposite each other; each section has a lockable door and a curtain, and the only difference between the day and night trips is the night trains tend to be slower, but also what I've found is that few people take them, there are few reservations and more often than not, even if they're reserved no-one turns up, so you end up being able to sprawl across all three seats and lie down, ensuring you get a better sleep than you expected. And certainly a better sleep than you would on a MegaBus.

That weather was quite cold, by the way; it was -17C in Gdansk. I had to zip my fleece up.

So anyway, in September 2019 I set off on that second Inter-Rail trip. Now, I'm conscious of the fact I didn't give much background to my trip in my last episode. So, aside from my liking for trains, and to hit a couple of low-key 'bucket list' type concepts, there were two main reasons why I chose to do this, and then. The first was because I figured this was an ideal time to go, personally: I had the time, I had the money, and I had the opportunity - when would be the next time those three things would align so perfectly? The second reason was Brexit; I figured I ought to explore as much of the EU as I could before it became potentially more expensive and tricky to do so (not just in terms of visas etc, but also in terms of all the things we take for granted, like physical crossings of EU borders, like mobile phone roaming agreements, like reciprocal health agreements; at the time we didn't know what the status would be for Brits as effectively third-party citizens rather than EU citizens. As an aside, I'm not sure we still know).

I didn't really have a plan or anything with regard to where I went, just that there were a number of routes we'd decided against in 2000 and I'd not managed to visit since, including towns such as Erfurt, Cluj Napoca, and Maastricht. I realise none of those three stand out as super-important places for an inter-railer to visit, but they had been places we rejected all those years ago and I'd always meant to plan to, well, not return to, but you know what I mean.

Rather than being zoned, like in 2000, the inter-rail options were about duration; mostly 'x days in y', but I went for a ticket that gave me unlimited travel for two months, I could have bought a similar for one or three months; I figured one was 'too short' but three might have been 'overkill'. As it happens, since I started the journey with a week-long trip with my friend Lix to Denmark and Sweden, before my inter-rail ticket started, with hindsight I'd've probably been better off making a decision sooner and buying the three-month one.

As an aside about terminology, I refer to it as Inter-Rail, but a Eurail Pass also exists. I'm not 100% certain if there's any fundamental difference between them, other than who can buy the ticket (Inter-Rail seems to be for those within the area covered by the ticket, while the Eurail pass is that bought by people outwith the Inter-Rail coverage area). The coverage area, by the way, is generally summed up as 'Europe west of the former Soviet Union'. This caused me slight hassle when I was planning my 2019 adventure as it prevented me from easily changing trains briefly (without admin) in Ukraine between Hungary and Romania, and is why I've still never been to the Hungarian city of Debrecen, because obviously that's exactly the sort of backpacker hotspot that

Inter-Rail is crying out for.

Someone who has travelled on a Eurail Pass, but who doesn't know the difference either, is Amanda Kendle, of the Thoughtful Travel Podcast. Here she talks a little about why she chose to buy the pass, and bits about how she felt while she was travelling on it.

{Amanda

Okay, so, Eurail next. It was longer ago than I thought but that's Covid, hang on, I've got to take a drink. That's a cup of tea, not anything else, cos it's 11:48am.

So, my most recent Eurail pass trip was about 6 or 7 years ago, again with my son who must have been, 6 or 7 at the time I guess. So I had planned some time in Germany and Switzerland to visit various relatives and friends and to go to a couple of places, including the German Legoland actually, because of my son. Anyway so we needed to do a fair few things across Germany and Switzerland, so across a fairly wide geography, but there was definitely no point in flying, or I thought there's no point in flying, and also of course the environmental factors - I'd rather take the train than fly. And I think my son was just the right age so we could have hired a car, have done that in other similar trips, but I find it much easier at that age, well at any age really, to keep him happy on a train, you know you're not strapped in, you can move about more, I'm not driving, I can do stuff too, so trains seems like the best thing to do. And then, just because of the nature of how many legs of travel we needed to do, and some of them quite long, Eurail, a euro pass, seemed to be the best option.

I had, from memory, I think we had one we could use for 5 trips within a certain period of time. I can't remember, maybe within 2 or 3 weeks or a month, I don't know the details any more, it's lost to history, but in the end, I figured out it was cheaper to do that than to pay for all individual tickets, and also gave us quite a lot of flexibility and, I don't know if I miscalculated or not, I can't remember any more, but I know in the end I threw in a day trip to France because I had this extra trip left. I think for some reason we'd used one less than planned, I can't remember the details, but it was kind of a bonus cos my son had never been to France, so we got to, you know, he's been there for a day so far. We will be going back.

But anyway. Most of those Eurail trips were on Deutsche Bahn. I've never had any big problems at all with Deutsche Bahn even though some people complain about them, and the longer journeys were just delightful. You know it's just quiet and smooth and lovely to travel longer distances on a train, and I remember on one leg, longish leg that we had, I think we had an upgrade or something cos we were able to order food to be delivered to our seats which was delightful, kind of like, the best of flying but on a train.

And the other thing I liked about, well not Eurail specifically I suppose but train travel in general is we'd arrive in the centre of the town or city, and I think we were always within walking distance of our accommodation that way. Obviously we'd planned it as well. And that just made life really easy.

So that was my Eurail experience.

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I have travelled by train in Australia, but neither journeys really fall under the banner of this kind of train travel. I've taken the commuter train from Brisbane to Nambour on the Sunshine Coast, which is, I'll grant you, one heck of a long commuter service - it's 104km and takes 2 and half hours, which is a little excessive but I'm glad it's there, it makes it very convenient to visit my friends there. The other journey I've taken was on the Indian Pacific train from Perth to Adelaide, that was about 41 hours and two overnights in a big chair, mostly going through what can best be described as 'nowhere' - the Nullarbor Plain is an interesting concept but not one I need to repeat. Too many flies.

Anyway. As I say, for my 2019 InterRail trip I didn't have what you might call a planned route, and if you plotted the route as I described it in my last episode, you might have raised an eyebrow at the inefficiency and complexity of it. I think I passed along the Cologne-Liege corridor about four times, for instance. Look, it's a very important route to access Northern Europe. Despite this I still never ventured into Cologne Cathedral. Obviously. It just was never convenient, okay? Because I usually had my backpack with me and didn't spend that long there on any of my train-changing stopovers. The longest single journey I did on that adventure was, I

mean technically I started at Nice, in the south of France, but I had enough time between changes in Pisa to take pictures of instagrammers, and in Florence to find a useful craft beer bar and burger joint close to the railway station, which despite being quite full managed to find a place to slide both me and my backpack in. It was near the kitchen exit. I got bumped a bit. (It was fine), but from there it was only changing in railway stations (Bologna and Vienna) to Cluj Napoca in Romania. And the Bologna change was only because the routing itself had been altered by the rail company - the inter-rail app had said it was direct to Vienna. I left Nice mid-morning, I left Bologna a shade after midnight I think, and I reached Cluj Napoca sometime after 9pm. Slightly excessive, even by my standards.

But to be honest that's the great thing about having an Inter-Rail ticket or equivalent; you're kind of not restricted about where to go. This suits my travel style; as you know by now I tend to do things at the last minute, as befits a raging ball of chaos, but in any case it'd be a bit weird to plan out in specific detail an entire two month itinerary to the day. Although I concede not many people venture too far the other way; I had a night in Liechtenstein and hadn't planned onward travel so I posted a poll to Twitter saying 'should I go North to Germany or South to Italy tomorrow'. Listener, when I woke up the next morning, the poll was exactly 50-50. That's what you get for crowdsourcing. I went north, for better weather.

{Section Separation Jingle - Accommodation}

There's a stereotype about backpackers. That we are the sort of people to travel on a budget, and therefore stay in the cheapest, slummiest, accommodation we can find. And to be fair, if you're spending two months train-hopping around Europe, unless you're some kind of rich middle-class middle-england teen on a 'Gap Yah' before doing a Business Studies degree at LSE or a Classics degree at Oxbridge, let's be real, you're gonna need to, because Europe Is Not South-East-Asia. And not many people can afford to spend upwards of £35/day on accommodation alone for two months solid.

On his Inter-Rail trip back in 1985, Matthew Woodward certainly lived up to this stereotype.

{Matthew Woodward}

We slept absolutely anywhere and everywhere; in Athens I slept on the station platform, there was a whole community of Inter-Railers sleeping on the station platform. In Corfu I slept in a hedge on a mini-roundabout near the ferryport for a couple of nights; no-one seemed to find us there. And in Istanbul on a rooftop that you had to access via an outside ladder. Which was rat-infested, so that wasn't so good. But it was cheap.

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I ... am not quite that hardcore, though yes I've certainly spent nights in some very less than salubrious accommodation. The one in a small town on the Ghana-Burkina Faso border with the cockroach the size of my middle finger in the toilet room certainly qualifies, but the price of that was less than the price of the beer I'm currently drinking as I type this paragraph. I have overnights outside Victoria Coach Station once, coming back from a concert at Wembley Stadium (Bon Jovi, in case you're interested; not my choice, I was persuaded to go by an ex-girlfriend and apparently I'm a people-pleaser) and of course I've had many overnights in airports or on buses with two-hour stops between connections. Several times at Leeds, of all places. The most recent of this was coming back from Czechia last year where I figured the cheapest way back home was to take a late coach from Prague to Wroclaw, arriving like 4am, and then walking to the airport for a mid-morning flight. This had me lurking in the bus station in Wroclaw for an hour basically to kill time. There is nothing to do in Wroclaw bus station at 4am. They even closed the toilets, which was most annoying as my digestive system wasn't doing well that journey. You might well ask 'why didn't you get public transport to the airport' and firstly that would have meant waiting longer and in both the bus station and the airport, and secondly my contactless debit card had lost the contactless ability and I wasn't going to draw out any Zloty I wasn't going to need other than the bus ticket.

Normal people would have taken the hit on flying back from Prague. I'm just particular.

But yes, when I travel, I do tend to stay in as budget accommodation as I can get away with, with limits; I like there to be a bed, four walls, a roof, and no rats. Call me a snob if you like. I can take it. So, obviously, this largely means hostels. And as someone slightly older than the average backpacker, this makes me feel a little

awkward. I'll be doing a ... I would say 'Twitter Spaces' on the topic of 'backpacking as an older person' very shortly, but at the time of typing up this podcast episode I don't know if it'll be on Twitter Spaces or some other medium. YouTube Live, maybe, Who knows.

But. Yeh. I tend to have stayed mostly in hostels when doing backpacking trips. My Inter-Rail trip especially was mostly hostels. I'm prepared to pay a couple of quid more for a smaller dorm, and in many places this actually served me well as I ended up in a 4-bed dorm on my own for my entire stay (this happened in Leipzig and Andorra for sure; I think I also had that pleasure in Ljubljana). In Nice I shared an 8-bed dorm with only one other person, and that for only one night, while in Olomouc I had a full 4-bed dorm but the room itself was about as big as my current flat in Glasgow, so I'm prepared to accept that.

In a couple of places on my inter-rail trip I did splash out on a private room in a hostel; notably in Alicante because I'd just taken an overnight bus from Toulouse to Madrid and I knew I was going to be so very tired. But in a few places; Trier and Banska Stiavnica spring to mind, I actually booked into a hotel. I think this was purely for practical reasons, because I was staying only for one night and it was easier (or relatively cheaper) in those places to do that than book a hostel. I don't know; I don't remember my thought process.

In previous trips I've done that too - in my Central Europe cold-weather adventure in early March 2018 I booked a private room in a hostel in Wroclaw, in Poland, because I'd just done an overnight Flixbus from Gdansk and I was only staying one night before an early morning flight back home, so I knew my sleep that day would be off-kilter. It doesn't happen often though, because private rooms in hostels tend to be quite overpriced compared with, say, budget hotel rooms. Though it does depend on the location - in the UK we have a couple of decent budget hotel chains (though prices can vary enormously), and one of which, Premier Inn, is so noted for the quality of its bedding that you can actually buy their mattresses. Genuinely. So you too can have as good a night's sleep as you would in a Premier Inn. Theoretically.

Now, sometimes I do alternatives, depending on where I am, availability, cost, and how long I'm spending in a place; the longer I'm going to be somewhere the less likely I am to hostel it, oddly. You'd've thought it'd've been the other way around, but it makes more sense to feel like I can spread out more if I'm going to be stable for a few days, So, often I'll look at AirBnb. And by AirBnB I mean 'rooms in houses', and not 'exclusive use'. Glorified couchsurfing, basically; staying in the spare rooms of people who already live there. There's a lot of hate towards AirBnB but this way, I think, shouldn't be vilified in quite the same way. People do not buy a house in towns purely to live in them with the hope of obtaining income from occasional passing barefoot backpackers. 'You need to take your shoes off when inside' had said the lovely lady I stayed with in Rennes in her standard introductions. I wore socks specifically so as not to irk her even more than being a non-francophone in a flat with a monolingual francophone. I can 'get by' in French for the most part, Laura may disagree, But then Laura wasn't on this trip.

The first accommodation I had on the entire trip was also a French 'spare room' AirBnB, and true to form, I booked it on my way there. I was on a train to Strasbourg and I figured I probably ought to book some accommodation there, and fortunately I had an immediate response. From a couple who a) were very new to the concept of AirBnb, and b) it turns out already followed me on Twitter, which is ... a little weird, but hey ho. Anyway, I spent three nights there and while it was only a small room it served my needs perfectly well.

I also had a spare room type AirBnB in my one night in Calais, a city that, while Interesting, probably only needs one night. My host, another monolingual Francophone, in an unassuming terraced house close to the lesser-known of Calais' three railway stations (Les Fontinettes) did at least unusually keep to the second B of AirBnB; it was a stupendously huge French-style breakfast with enough bread, cheese, and charcuterie to see me through the rest of the day, Honestly it could probably have seen me through the rest of the week.

Now, there have been a handful of times where I've used an AirBnb for exclusive-use; examples of this on my Inter-Rail trip were Brussels and Toulon near the start, and Bratislava, Koscice, and Budapest at the end. This was because at these points I was travelling with a friend rather than on my own, and Lix has more expensive and exclusive tastes than I do. We'll come back to them later.

The last accommodation I'm going to highlight was in the German city of Augsburg. It's not a place I knew a lot about, other than I'd come across their football team in one of my sessions on the Championship Manager computer game back in Days Of Laure. But I was inn Leipzig plotting my next port of call, and one of my

Travel Twitter friends sent me a message saying 'hey, do you have any plans to pass through Augsburg because it'd be cool to meet up'. My response was something along the lines of 'I had no plans, so yes, I can do that'. It was nice to meet someone I'd only previously known through online ... words, and she took me on a whistle-stop trip around a town I'd never considered visiting. Remember, one advantage of something like an Inter-Rail ticket is that you have the flexibility to go anywhere, anywhen, so why not take advantage of that and visit somewhere less raved about, simply because you can. Anyway, I stayed in the spare room of her flat, not for very long as we stayed out later than I'd anticipated, drinking Radler on the balcony of one her friend's flats, and I wanted to catch an early train to Munich so could get to Bologna in good time, but it's not like I couldn't catch up on sleep.

As an aside, she's also one of the many people I know online who have never seen me wear footwear. And she got me to pose in front a long-closed cafe called 'barefoot' just for an impromptu photoshoot. I have cool friends.

I could talk about the AirBnB I stayed in with Lix, in the spare room of a dating couple in Malmo, in Sweden, who had a passion for conspiracy theories and denied the entire existence of enbies. But that was the week before my Inter-Rail pass started, and I have my limits. And anyway, spoiler alert, Lix will mention it later.

{Section Separation Jingle - Food & Drink}

Now, the thing with travelling from place to place at speed is that you can't buy in a load of stuff and cook for yourself that often - partly because you might be staying in hostels and not have the space, but mainly because if you're only staying somewhere for 3 nights, it's not really convenient to buy in a 500g bag of pasta, for example, or a whole chicken to cook.

This means that it's highly likely you'll be eating out a lot. Since, as you know, I'm quite partial to the odd pint of beer or two. Or three. Or five. V occasionally worries about my alcohol consumption but Laura says it's fine so I'm choosing to believe her than V; all I will say is that I was drinking an average of 3 pints a night on my inter-rail trip and not long after I got back, I ran low on money, moved to Sheffield, and basically stopped drinking beer. Then I got a headache that lasted for four days, Remember listeners, I am not a role model. But anyway, since you know I'm partial to the regular beer, it means I have a tendency to eat at pubs, or pub-like places. This was especially true on my trips across the USA in November 2017 and April 2018 when I'd often have lunch and a couple of pints in a place having just arrived in town from a greyhound bus.

This of course means I try to have local beer, which wasn't a problem in the USA, as you know if you heard a podcast episode from a couple of years ago I did about beer. I'd walk into a bar and they'd have even up to a hundred beers all sourced from within a couple of counties. I didn't always have this luck on my trips across Europe; in Rennes for instance I found a craft beer bar that was selling beer from ... Italy, Greece, and the UK. Northern Monk brewery gets everywhere. A second pub the next night sourced a lot more local. It was also a lot busier. I don't think the two were connected but you never know.

In Andorra I bought local beer from a supermarket and drank it back at the hostel. Now, one of the local breweries there has a ... brand. They're called 'Mari-Juana'. {pause} Yes, you're correct. Their beer is brewed with hemp seeds, and this is their USP. As an aside, I find the smell of hops very similar to the smell of cannabis. Be wary if I ever do homebrew and offer you some. But in this particular case, I'd say unfortunately they seem to have concentrated too much on what makes them different, and not enough on their beers - I had three and they were all quite bland.

I do try to have a beer from every country I visit; I missed out on Liechtenstein as though the hostel sold them, I wouldn't have had time to drink it before I had to head out, and I knew by the time I returned, the bar section of the hostel (which was basically the reception desk) would have been closed. So possibly a reason to go back to Liechtenstein. If ever a reason was needed.

Obviously some places I'm going to make a beeline for. I made a point of overnighing in Nuremberg, not just because it's an interesting, historical, and quite picturesque city - though I was only there for one day and the sites of both the Nuremberg Rallies and the Nuremberg Trials would have required too much of my daylight time to venture to and I was only there one night because of course I was - but also because it has a brewery named for the local monks who brewed the beer here. And of course if there's a brewery and associated

brewtap called 'barfusser', I'm going to make a point of drinking there.

I don't just drink beer though; in Olomouc for instance the hostel I was in served a variety of local spirits, including a couple that tasted like the forests they source the ingredients from. And, as mentioned earlier, there was a small amount of wine drunk on my Inter-Rail adventure; I'm not so knowledgeable about wine so I leave discussion of that to the experts. Or at least those who know what they're doing.

With regard to food, I'd love to say that I ate locally and tried the regional cuisine, but let's be honest, I barely remember food. As I say, I eat in pubs a lot and there's not a lot you can do with a burger to make it more ... local. And I can't tell the difference between beef and ostrich anyway. I had a crocodile burger in the Australian bar in Birmingham once. You can make your own jokes.

I do recall having locally-styled food in both Banska Stiavnica in Slovakia and Cluj Napoca in Romania, the latter in a restaurant specifically recommended by the lady who ran the free walking tour I went on. But all I remember is it being a slab of meat, beef probably, in a sauce. This is, as you may have realised, another reason why I'm not a travel blogger.

What I do recall were a couple of interesting *restaurants* and bars where I ate and drank en-route. This includes a place in Brussels which was really full but where they slid us (I was travelling with Lix at this point) at a small table next to the toilets but the ambience and vibe of the place was awesome, and if memory serves the food was divine. Also in Brussels with Lix we went to a traditional 1920s jazz bar, exactly the sort of place that I'd be really interested to visit but not alone. We had fancy cocktails on the mezzanine level while a genuine jazz band played on the stage below us. And again with Lix, because regardless of anything else they definitely know how to have a notable evening, we went to a cocktail bar in Budapest where the menu was basically - you tell us what you like and we'll custom-make something to your needs. It was a tad expensive and we only had one each, but it was definitely worth going to. Then we went to a craft beer bar where you served yourself with beer taps on the walls and the cost was calculated to the millilitre. Which is a fascinating way to have a lot of very small amounts of beer.

Lix herself gives more information here which I'd forgotten. One of us is not a travel blogger.

{Lix -

- 1) that one beer that was black, 10% alcohol by volume, and tasted vaguely like chocolate Bailey's. It was delicious and I think this was in Copenhagen, but if it wasn't, the pub we went to in Copenhagen was also great.
- 2) Violet liqueur at the Baudelaire in Bratislava, which is a really cute cafe that had a lot of drinks like, inspired by authors, and I loved that obviously, cos I'm a bit of a snob and that was great.
- 3) All the herbal liqueurs in Slovakia and Hungary. what an embarrassment of riches they have. I love herbs and things in liquor, and it was just great for me; I can't remember any of the names but it was just great.
- 4) Happy hour espresso Martinis in Oxford. Just {chefs kiss}
- 5) A customized espresso Martini in, I believe, Budapest. If you can't tell, I really like espresso Martinis.
- 6) The Black Russian in Brussels, not so much because of the drink, which was pretty mid, but because piano bars are my dream hangout spot and it was a weekday and the entire top floor was mostly empty and it was **THE** best, the best place to hang out. L'archiduc, I hope you're still in business, baby.

In Vienna where we were for a day, well most of the day, I had Bulleit Bourbon for the first time which was incredible, but what really stands out here was **THE** Bloody Mary they made me which was bananas, it was like breakfast for dinner, I think they had bacon on it, it was just so good and it just went down so well.

And now we're going to move on to food, so, first of all, and this is kind of like **THE** best thing we had on the whole trip. Prosciutto-wrapped lamb with a wild mushroom sauce. This was in Koscice and it was, be still my beating heart. Fuck me, what a meal, it was just wonderful.

Bibimbap at a really small pan-asian restaurant in Oxford. I had never had bibimbap before, and I fell head over heels in love immediately. It was ridiculously good.

Number three was the seafood platter we had in Marseilles. I love seafood and it's so expensive and I was just thrilled to have an entire platter, it was so good, it was just ... I think it was, the seasoning was mainly like garlic and basil and it was incredible.

We had some really good meals in Slovakia and Hungary, they were very hearty meals. I had venison at a very popular restaurant in Bratislava that was really good, and the restaurants that we went to in Budapest really surprised me just by being very pretty, very nice, just good food. Tho I'm not really into potato pancakes, that's not really my thing.

}

As mentioned earlier though, my style of travel, and indeed inter-railing as a concept, don't lend themselves well to self-cooking unless you're purposely going to be settling in a 'base' and taking train trips out for the day to places around. Which I guess is easy to do in Europe, with its decent enough train service and short distances, but it's not ideal. On my trips, if I've wanted to cook on-site and I know I'm only going to be there a couple of days, I tend to buy do-it-yourself sandwiches with snack food - a baguette or two, some small pack of cheese or sausage, chocolate, etc. Or, if I want something hot, it's going to be something like dried noodles - whatever the local supermarket's version of pot noodle is - or small packets of couscous, something easily carried or suitable for just one person. I eat when I travel similarly to how I eat when I hike, just with more beer, apparently. Because no-one wants to be up all night in a tent needing to wee every 2 hours, then having to hike through the grasslands while feeling you could fall asleep at every step. That way, danger lies, mainly in the form of tripping over pebbles or boulders.

Nothing like that happened on my trips around Europe, but things can go wrong.

{Section Separation Jingle - Things that went wrong}

Things going wrong, or at least not going to plan, for a given definition of plan, is something that's obviously going to happen, especially if you're going to be travelling for a couple of months. I had trouble getting out of Toulouse heading East because at the time, the main (only) railway line had had a ... if I remember correctly it was a flood causing a landslide blocking the track between Beziers and Montpellier, and the rail replacement bus services were far less frequent. I eventually got to my destination that day, Nice, about four hours later than I'd planned, having caught a Flixbus for most of the way.

At least they were options. At the start of November I was visiting Mont-Saint-Michel in Normandy and got back to the small railway station nearby only to find, about fifteen minutes after the train had been due to arrive, that they'd all been cancelled for ... unspecified reasons. I'd already watched one coach back to Rennes depart because I was waiting for the railway shuttle, and it turns out (after conversations in broken French at the nearby bakery) the only way back was to return to Mont-Saint-Michel and wait a further hour for the next one. This involved hitch-hiking Or at least accidental hitch-hiking - I was walking the few km back up the road and a group of students stopped for me and picked me up.

If you listened to my last episode you'll remember that wasn't the only time I hitch-hiked, but the descent out of Andorra wasn't an example of something that had gone wrong, just something that was humongously convenient!

As an aside, I did accidentally miss a rail strike in Italy by one day; on the day I left Bologna for Slovenia, all the display boards in the station were warning passengers of it.

The other bus trip I did was more because of convenience; it was an overnight journey from Toulouse to Madrid, and that because there are no trains that do that journey. Regular service stops in a small village in the Pyrenees, at the bottom of the mountain road to Andorra; to do the journey by train involves a huge detour either via Bordeaux and Hendaye, or Perpignan and Barcelona. Both of which I did last time, thank you very much.

Things going wrong isn't just limited to actual travel. For example, I should probably should go back to Olomouc. It was a town that Travel Twitter suggested was a nice place to go, and indeed it very much is - it's one of those typical Central European city centres with cobbled streets, old buildings, and incredibly ornate fountains. In the central square of the city is a large astronomical clock, second only to the famous one in Prague. I didn't get to see it though, as it was all covered in scaffolding.

The other minor issue I had was in Liechtenstein, of all places. For some reason I had trouble with my electrics; I don't know if that was something about the country or about the hostel, but none of my plugs or adaptors fitted into the sockets. I ended up running on extreme battery mode until I could get charged up on the train back through Switzerland the next day, I wasn't expecting that to be a problem anywhere in Europe to be honest.

Lix made a list of things that she felt went 'wrong' while they were travelling with me. None of them were my fault. Honest.

{Lix -

Nel asked me to mention a few things that went wrong on our trip, and left to my own devices I go off on massive tangents, so I'm going to do a top 5, for my sanity.

So first off I have to give an honorary mention to their uncle's cat who disliked me on sight for some reason.

}

You kept poking him in the nose!!

{Lix -

Number 5 is the time we flew from Copenhagen into Luton... which would be enough, but they also managed to lose Nel's backpack for three days.

}

As an aside, I'd forgotten that had happened until Lix mentioned it for this pod. As it's not strictly relevant to the pod topic, I'll not go into details, but it was inconvenient, and had knock-on effects. Mmm Luton Airport.

{Lix -

Number 4 is redacted and I won't think they would agree but it involves somebody I won't mention.

Number 3: my search for a beach where we could do a shoot in my swimsuit was a bust. I kept trying to get to places that were hard to access, and the weather never cooperated. The worst instance of this was the time we went to Portishead and the beach was so rocky I couldn't walk on it, and it took me a good half hour to get off it. It was absolutely awful.

Number 2: When we were going from Brussels to Nice, Nel used the eurorail, and I booked a relatively cheap flight out of an airport that wasn't the main airport in Brussels. The day of, I couldn't get to that airport. There was supposed to be a bus to take me there, but it wasn't showing, and I kept looking up online and I couldn't figure out any other way to get to the airport, so I had to book a different flight from the normal airport, and it was just very stressful.

Number 1, drum-roll please: {drum roll} the AirBnb that advertised as two rooms... but in fact one of those rooms was occupied by the couple who lived there. One of whom was a raging transphobe. That was not great. Nel wasn't out as non-binary at the time but I very much was, and while I have no interest in top surgery, hearing someone talk about so-called mutilation in the same ten minutes they talked about how cool it would be to upload our brains into robots was really quite something. It put me in a state of quiet rage for a bit after we'd even left.

Luckily, he also thought I was incredibly annoying and posh for daring to ask for some storage space, so, as Shane Madej would put it, I did meet some of the most insufferable people... but they also met me.

In hindsight, being at a train station with no way to get to the airport and no data on my phone, because I'm irresponsible and insist on travelling without a phone number, was technically "worse" than the transphobe AirBnb, but y'all, I fucking hated that guy, and to top it all off Sweden doesn't sell hard liquor or even wine in

supermarkets. Zero out of zero. Pretty place though.

}

You'll notice a couple of those involve aeroplanes and a couple involve other people. There's advantages to backpacking on trains on your own and staying in hostels, for sure.

{Section Separation Jingle - how does I feel doing it as an older person?}

Stereotypically, backpackers and inter-railers are somewhat younger than me. Indeed, typically, they're of the age I was when I first did an Inter-Rail trip, 23 years ago. Like, there are people I chat to online in the Travel-Twitterosphere who were NOT BORN when I did my first inter-rail adventure in 2000. Obviously you know how that makes me feel. But as you know I'm absolutely not the sort of person who'll say 'ah but travel was better in my day', no it wasn't, stop confusing nostalgia with efficiency. It'd be awesome to travel around Europe today as a 24-year-old. Well, it'd be awesome to travel around Europe today as a 24-year-old European, but we'll let that bit slide for the moment as that otherwise would open out into a whole world of admin and racist border policies. Yes, Dave & Karen in Kirkby-in-Ashfield, it *is* trickier, slower, and more expensive to visit Europe now than it used to be. Now you know how it feels to be 'othered', just like you and the other 70% of people in your town felt about everybody else who wasn't White British when you voted Brexit in 2016. You either believe in free movement or you run the risk of having your dogma used against you.

But this is not a soapbox and I don't want splinters.

So yes, when people think of Inter-Rail they will automatically think of young people who have the time and ability to travel for ages without a job or real life getting in the way. I'm not sure about this as it relies on a certain amount of unearned wealth, but I suspect that's a topic for a future podcast. All I will say is working for an international corporation for 20 years gives you a good financial setting for a trip exactly like this, and I made sure IU took full advantage of it.

Now, as you already know, I had a tendency to stay in hostels; I talked about a couple of the ones I stayed in earlier, This is because they're cheap and Europe is not, and even I have my limits. But you might ask, how would a 44-year-old cope surrounded by young people? The answer is, surprisingly well.

There's a number of aspects here. My friend V, her of the Twitter Space podcasts, has two thoughts around this, which we will go into more in a future ... whatever we decide to do instead of Twitter Spaces. But essentially, one is 'when you get middle-aged surely you don't want to be sleeping on cheap bedding', and the other is 'don't you feel awkward surrounded by youngsters? Wouldn't you prefer a place to yourself?'. The answer to the second point is, objectively yes, but my social anxiety had prevented me from staying in hostels unless absolutely necessary - my abortive adventure to Italy in 2002 had involved two and it can't be denied that might have been a part of why I felt uncomfortable. But needs must, and also, I'd like to say the average hostel has improved in quality over the last 20 years.

And to be fair, the other point about the intervening time is it's much easier to get a feel for how good hostels are. Sites like Hostelworld have sprung up, giving not just an easy way to book hostels but also where you can see information about them. Sites like Hostelgeeks allow you to assess which hostels are suitable for your needs, and which hostels to avoid if you're not a party animal, These make it very easy to find somewhere exactly suitable to your needs. And even at the age of 24 I wasn't the sort of person to play beer pong.

It might surprise you to know I have played beer pong. It was in a hostel in San Francisco in late 2017. But I was feeling very sociable and uber-chill on that adventure.

The other thing to note is hostels are no longer rough-and-ready cheap places to crash for a night and move on. Some of them can be quite boutique, and in any case, they mostly have decent beds - and they all know if they don't, they'll get slated for it on the likes of Hostelworld. You can't cut corners these days with your facilities or your product, because People Will Shout. And while I, personally, tend to travel Beyond The Brochure, on something like an Inter-Rail Trip, the likelihood is many of your nights will be spent in places where there are A Lot Of Hostels, and if you're only rated 7.9 on Hostelworld and there's 14 hostels rated higher, you ain't gonna be in business long.

But.

Some hostels have an age limit. This is fine. I understand that perfectly. Why the feck would anyone want to share a dorm room with someone old enough to be their parent. But the beauty of hostels is, a) there are often so many hostels anyway this isn't a problem, but also b) the likelihood is any hostel with an upper age limit is likely to be the sort of hostel I wouldn't want to stay in anyway as it's likely it'll focus of the kind of part atmosphere I'd be trying to avoid. At no point in my Inter-Rail trip in 2019 did I find any problems with the hostels I was in, because of my age. I think in part because I researched my accommodation well enough to rule out any hostel with that vibe.

It's not just about where to stay though; there's other things to bear in mind. As someone double the age of many a backpacker, questions have to be asked about 'do I have the energy do this? Can my body physically cope with long journeys and lack of sleep?'. The answer appears to be yes, though I don't know how much of this is because my body is used to all manner of strange things being done to it {guffaw} not like that, well, yes, sometimes quite like that, but in this particular case I meant things like - I used to often pull all-nighters and function on little sleep, for no reason other than I ... was busy chatting to people online, or writing stories, or playing computer games, and I didn't feel tired. I'm not sure I could do it as easily now, certainly not 'at will', but it's interesting to note that I have, and do, usually because of travel - I rarely sleep on anything other than a train so flying to New Zealand was an interesting experience fuelled mainly by Emirates' in-seat entertainment system, while a trip last year to London to visit Laura involved an overnight MegaBus (having been up all the previous day) then 30,000 steps walking around London before getting to the hotel (in that well-connected and close suburb of * checks notes * Harrow), the bus trip being powered by podcasts and the Londonism fuelled less by an adrenaline rush of needing to stay awake and more by a weird sense of bowel control. The only downside of all-night travel that I've found as an older person is it does very little good to your digestive system and meant I daren't not fart for about 6 hours. You don't need to know that.

I suppose people don't expect older people to be doing this kind of travel too, because it's less likely people like me have the time to. And that's very true; we're all supposed to be married, two kids, job in middle-management at an office or something like that. Obviously for my longer trips I'm between jobs, but even when I'm being paid to do something more traditional than a podcast, I tend to take longer holidays from work and really wouldn't know what to do with an occasional day off. I say more traditional, but my skillset is one that can be done remotely and even while travelling (I'm a data analyst, serving either remote offices, or websites), but I've never done the whole nomad life thing, mainly, it must be said, for neurodiversity reasons. I doubt my brain could focus, in all honesty. But I know others are better at that than I am, so there's no reason why these days that can't stop there being more inter-railing older people.

I have no word to say on the 'married with children' thing, obviously, only that as you already heard, Amanda did Eurail with her young son, and I've certainly known other people to do similar, like my friend Bea who road-tripped the USA with two single-aged children for ... a couple of months I think. Travel with the family has been a podcast episode on my radar to do for a few years now, and I haven't because, well, I obviously don't have a lot of input to make on my side on that, but we'll see.

As for 'being surrounded by youngsters', well, weirdly it never really feels that way, but I guess I just tend to eat and drink out, as I say, plus even in Europe I've a tendency to not go to the same places everyone else does. I don't just mean 'there are fewer backpackers in Cluj Napoca than Barcelona' but also I'll tend to pick out the less backpackery hostels and places to eat and go anyway. Mind you, I very much have a 'Great Aunt' aura, that sort of 'now kids, Nel's visiting today, and they're a bit strange, don't encourage them' and then I turn up to my friends' houses bearing boxes of candy, video of random streets in Bangladesh, and stories of adventure that make my friends' eyes roll. 'I am not a role model' is a disclaimer.

And, to anyone that says 'surely you should be saving up for retirement' *{farts}*.

{Section Separation Jingle - Budget}

Which of course leads us nicely onto budgeting.

I'd love to say I had a budget for every time I go travelling, regardless of the method and location of my travels. However, as I'm sure you're all aware by now, this is not the case. I do have my limits, and I do have a sense of

what's 'expensive', especially with regard to accommodation, and I'm also aware that my definition *of* expensive is 'somewhat different' to that of many of the people I know on Travel Twitter. It irks me to spend more than about £60/night on a hotel. It irks me to pay more than £30/night on a dorm bed. That I even stay in dorms in hostels is also testament to my definitions of 'budgeting'.

And yet I spend over £8 on cans of craft beer. I guess it's all about priorities.

Obviously the longer the journey, and the routing you take, will affect your budget. Spending two months on an inter-rail trip that includes a few nights in places like Switzerland is obviously very different from travelling around Central Europe for a week making use of overnight trains and buses.

Speaking of Switzerland, I stayed a couple of nights in a hostel in a small town just north of Geneva. In that hostel was a leaflet with an overview on how much trains cost in that country. I calculated that three trips across the country, say from Geneva to St Gallen and back, would actually pay for my Inter-Rail ticket. My *entire*, two-month, pan-European, Inter-Rail ticket.

So if I have only one piece of advice for anyone looking to buy an Inter-Rail ticket but is irking at the cost - make sure you travel through Switzerland a couple of times. Then you don't need to worry about the cost-effectiveness of exploring Romania or wherever.

I think ultimately, I travel until my money runs out, and I don't worry about the intervening times. Anxiety makes me worry this is going to happen all the time, Impulsivity makes me not care and Future Me can worry about that. Don't do this. It only needs to chaos. But at least I've never beg-packed. That can get in the sea right there; on the very rare occasions I've ran out of money, I've immediately come home. And I don't set out on a trip knowing that's going to happen, because that would be horrendously bad practice. This is why I've never been to Norway. I wouldn't enjoy having to penny-pinch to that level. I kind of vaguely know what's an acceptable amount for me to spend on a trip at any given point, and while I don't budget overall, I kind of know if something I'm doing feels like a splurge or not. And I'm more inclined to Not Do The Thing even if I can afford it, just in case.

Honestly, I probably need to travel with someone on these trips, who'd look after that side of things for me.

{Section Separation Jingle - Travelling solo v travelling with someone else}

You already know part of my 2019 trip was travelling with my friend Lix, and they were the far more expensive parts, including an AirBnb in someone's ceiling room that touched on £100/night (it wad a lovely room though, very airy, even if I couldn't quite stand up in part of the bathroom), a couple of bars and restaurants that were Not Cheap, and the wine they made me buy each night in Toulon was way off the budget that I didn't have. Still, I know for next time ...

Lix gives their viewpoint about the trip here, and they're fully aware of that aspect of our travels together.

{Lix -

Travelling with Nel: easy, really the most laid-back travel I've ever done. cons: they don't make plans often, while I try to buy tickets for planes and trains as early as possible to get good prices, and a couple of times, because of their aversion to reservations, we couldn't find any interesting place to eat that wasn't full.

But I will own up to my personal way of upping the cost of our trip: I can't handle hostels, it's too many people. I need a place to go back to that isn't crowded, and preferably with a couch and perhaps even a kitchen – our AirBnb in Kopicé was fucking awesome, it was so big, but of course that was a small town. On top of that, one of my highest priorities when I travel is food, and I dragged Nel to quite a few restaurants that they would never have gone on their own, as well as a couple of cute cocktail bars.

Of course, they dragged me to a lot of pubs, they dragged me on a bit of a beer tour of Europe, so they can't complain too much. ;)

There were also many excellent things where we met in the middle; they love walking and hiking and things, and I have no lung capacity to speak of but will happily walk five hours around a city just to get to know it. So

doing that in so places was wonderful, though the standout for me was Oxford, because it's possibly my favourite city in the world, I hadn't been since 2008, and I got to grab Nel's hand and basically skip through town, hitting all the streets I still remembered, and it was just lovely.

}

Apparently they're happy to travel again with me. I suspect if and when we do, it'll be a very different kind of trip. Probably more one for those listening via Full Swap Radio.

Otherly, I have done general backpacking trips with other people before, as you know, including the road trip around Ireland with Anne-Laure (subject of a previous podcast, and someone who's also not a cheap companion), and several adventures I've had with Laura including France (budget hotels) and Philippines (which is a relatively budget-minded country anyway so that was all right). It's still quite alien to the way I travel in general, but I am getting more used to it, plus it's nice to have someone organise things like budgets. Here I'm thinking specifically of Anne-Laure who kept and detailed every receipt to make sure we were paying the same overall cost, though note we didn't *have* a budget for that trip, it was more making sure neither of us was overspending on the rental car (her) or the hotels (me).

One day I might just get used to it.

{end pod jingle}

Well, that just about wraps up not just this episode, but also discussions about rail journeys across Europe. Just as with my London pods, one idea for one episode has turned into three. Anyway, join me next time for a more usual one-off insight into a travel 'Beyond The Brochure'. Until then, you can travel with me if you like; it'll certainly be an interesting experience. 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.}