Podcast 105: Do You Remember The First Time?

{INTRO:

JEJA: 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3. Are we on yet? Okay, it seems we are.}

{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 :)

Welcome to a slightly more experimental podcast episode. I was musing about this for a while – I'm thinking of doing more 'storytelling-type' concepts, as if I were some established cultural observer speaking about their experiences on stage in front of an audience, you know the style. This isn't quite the David Sedaris style, but I'm working up to that. It's just a shame my trips involve speaking to fewer people than you might expect.

In these types of episode, I'll talk about three disparate things linked only by the vaguest of concepts – in this case it's about First Times. Not for that, though I do talk about snogging, but rather the first solo backpacking adventure, the first backpacking hostel, and, briefly, my first flight. Due to my advancing years, some information has been lost to the aethers of time and memory, but there's enough here to keep you entertained.

Housekeeping updates will be covered next time. I have quite a few of them.

{section separation jingle}

I've talked before about how I started getting an interest in the world, how the travel bug first grabbed me. All those afternoons reading world atlases and encyclopaedias, all that time spent perusing local road maps, fascinated by where the roads go, by where the borders with neighbouring authorities were, buying the A-to-Z map book for the neighbouring city just to find out what was beyond the red line. Laura would say this is an early sign of Autism, and, frankly, that's beyond the scope of this pod.

But I've not talked much about my early travel experiences. A pod later in the year will talk about childhood family holidays, but going to Scotland in the back of a fully-laden car to spend a week in a self-catering cottage with your parentals is a very different experience of travel as venturing solo across much of mainland Europe on a whim. Although arguably there are at least the same language barriers.

I've also spoken before about my having penpals in my teenage years, and I'll be doing a pod on that specifically later in the year. However, it's not a surprise to learn that many of my early travels were to meet with these penpals, friends at a distance who I often ended up opening up to in very unexpected ways – I recently posted a video to my YouTube channel where I read out extracts from some of my letters to an audience of Queers in Manchester, demonstrating that the 18-year-old straight male who was writing to them, er, may not have been quite the straight male that he thought he was.

One of the penpals whose letters to I read out at that event is Jelena, from Belgrade. I still speak with her; indeed she has appeared a couple of times on this very podcast, We've met three times, all in Belgrade, though interestingly all three were in different countries, because The Balkans is A Bit Like That. The first of these meets was in September 1994. While not my first solo travel venture, and not my first meet with a penpal in a foreign country, it was very much my first time solo on a backpacking trip through unfamiliar places where I didn't speak the language and where they probably weren't expecting solo teenage tourists.

I don't know what you know about 1994. Some of you may remember it well; for others it's as mythical and distant as 1974 is to me. For the purposes of this pod, there are only two things that you need to know. Firstly, it was five years after the collapse of communism in Central & Eastern Europe, so a whole host of countries were now accessible and the idea of being able to freely visit places like Prague and Budapest, which nowadays we take completely for granted – they're both in the European Union even – was both quite interesting and quite niche. We literally didn't know much about them beyond their history and what we were allowed to know and see during the Cold War. For a curious world traveller, it was exciting to be on the cutting edge of new frontiers.

The other thing to remember about 1994 was that Jelena lives in Belgrade, The capital of Yugoslavia. A country which, in 1994, was in the middle of a very messy civil war and which, to all intents and purposes, didn't exist in any real or practical terms. It is perhaps very on-brand that my first solo travel experience was to a country that was red-listed by the British Foreign Office and which the British government were imposing sanctions against.

I assume I had travel insurance. But then I was but a poor student who could barely afford to eat, so, you know, maybe I didn't. And that's another important factor to bring in. I was 19 years old. I was at University. This was an era where I once spent a weekend eating nothing but sugarcubes nicked from my landlady's cupboard because I had no cash and no way to get cash until the banks opened on the Monday. I'm not saying at all I was in poverty because, you know, middle-class parents, just that in the short-term, my cash liquidity was low, and I was restricted in my everyday purchases. Partly because I'm both highly independent *and* a people-pleaser, so didn't like asking my parents for money. We'll come onto that in a moment. Suffice to say it's the difference between weather and climate. From a climate point of view, everything was stable and comfortable. I just had some unpleasant weather for a couple of years, This was an era where I was spending more on mail stamps than food. Something something priorities.

The thought process behind why I travelled across Europe to meet Jelena in September 1994 is lost to history. Especially as this was a girl I'd written precisely three letters to at that point, which is hardly the solidest of foundations to do such a journey on. It's easy to look at this through 2025 eyes and think 'ah yeh, internet infatuation, just hop on a plane and get lucky', but you have to remember that not only did people simply not *do* that as naturally in 1994; this wasn't an era of borderless travel and cheap flights, you really had to plan an adventure into what was then the 'relative unknown', but also, even when I thought I was a cis-het-allo male, I wasn't the sort of person to go halfway across Europe just for a snog. I mean, its not something I'd've turned down, let's be clear, but equally it wasn't my priority.

I recall asking questions of Campus Travel and STA Travel (RIP), the two travel agents in and around the University and who were used to students asking stupid questions about how best to travel across the world as cheaply as possible. Later Me would use them to book both my inter-rail trip in 2000 and my abortive journey to Italy in 2002, because even though I was no longer a student, I still travelled like one. For this particular trip, I recall firing queries about coaches to places like Budapest and Bucharest before finding a journey I was comfortable with and which kept within my budget. Not that I had a budget, because I was a student, though even so I drew the line at hitch-hiking. It turned out the most cost-effective route would be to get a Eurolines coach to Bratislava, and then when I got there, get a train to Budapest and then on to Belgrade. Which I couldn't buy in advance. Because it was 1994. Even the existence of the trains was somewhat dubious. To be fair, even in 2025 that's true of trains in Bosnia, but that's a journey still to be undertaken.

I did keep a travel diary for the trip, but looking at it now it's incredibly vague and leaves a lot of detail out, especially for the journey there. Evidently for that section I was writing in a rush, seemingly a couple of days after I arrived, so much of the detail is lost to history. Which is disappointing, given it was quite a seminal experience for me.

It started in Birmingham. One of the largest European cities you'll probably never think to visit. And frankly, why would you? The “Rough Guide To Europe” I had for my 2000 Inter-Rail Trip gave it two sentences, one of which was 'you'll probably pass through it on the way to Stratford'. One day I'll do an entire podcast on it because, of course, Everywhere Is Interesting, and the Birmingham area is very definitely interesting, if

you're into industrial history and .. look, it was where I went to University; bear in mind I applied in 1993 and one of my other options was Manchester, which in 1993 was The Place to be. Half my music culture even now has 'Madchester' influences. I have Questions for Past Me. I chose not to go because I thought it was an ugly city. I grew up in Liverpool; I might have been biased. My flatmate would agree with 1993 Me. My flatmate might also be biased, but for different reasons.

For the first day, all my travel diary says is:
14th September – Left early; to get to London early. Thought I'd have to wait for a day for the Yugoslavian visa → it took 10 minutes. Even shorter had Jelena's letter been an official one!
Stayed in a Youth Hostel overnight; Jordans, near Amersham and High Wycombe.

We'll come back to hostels later. But yes, this was in the days when more countries required visas, and personal visits to get the visas; this was the era when the Internet existed almost exclusively in Universities – indeed I don't think I sent my first ever e-mail until a few months later. I recall, a decade later, getting a visa for China in the consulate in Manchester in much the same way; turn up, spend 10 minutes negotiating a form, and then overnighting in a cheap local place in an area I'd've never considered visiting, In this latter case, in a B&B in a part of the city that advertised itself as giving 'a warm Moss Side welcome'. Anyone who knows anything about Manchester will know why I find that amusing.

The Serbian embassy in London is now in one of the posh buildings in Belgrave Square, near many of the other European embassies like Spain and Norway. In 1994, the Yugoslavian embassy, or possibly consulate given relations between the two countries were ‘a bit strained’ was a one-room office on the first floor of a building in some random part of West London (I want to say Hammersmith but I genuinely have no notes about this, and I’ll probably find it was Soho or some shizz) above a generic vanilla business. As consulates go, it wasn’t exactly the most impressive.

As to why I was staying in a Youth Hostel at the far end of the Metropolitan Line, I can only assume that it was cheap enough that I felt the cost of getting there/back from Central London outweighed the cost of staying *in* Central London. Or, indeed, in London at all. At least these days I tend to stay at furthest in Zone 4.

My diary for the next day was a bit dark:

15th September – Bad Day! Ran out of money. Bank took my card. Not nice. Stuck in London.
Phoned home; problem almost solved. Uncle gave me £100; had to get to Birmingham first!
Did so. Just!!
Had a chippy tea! Then got dropped off at Digbeth Coach Station (via home). Had a lot of letters!!

Dear listener, what you can’t hear from my tale is the sheer number of exclamation marks that have been written in this entry.

The problem with being a budget backpacker is that you’re on a budget. The problem with being a 19-year-old student is the budget you’re on is considerably smaller than most other people’s. And I exceeded that budget before I’d even left the country. Or rather; I had less money in my account than I thought I had (which was already a negative number, let’s be real honest about this) and my bank took umbrage at this. You know those people who approach you in the street and go ‘listen I’m trying to get home but I don’t have any money, I need a couple of quid for the train’? Yeh, that could have been me. It wasn’t me because after pleading to my bank, they allowed me enough money to do just that, although it involved getting the cheapest ticket possible and having to wait at Northampton railway station for an hour. In the dark. With no money.

£100, by the way, according to the inflation calculator, works out at about £212 in today’s money, which in both timelines is ample to have for a trip across Central Europe for a week when you’re staying at someone else’s apartment anyway. My uncle has always been more comfortably well-off than perhaps I realised.

So anyway, that was a lot of travelling that day, and it continued the next two as well. Belgrade is a long way from Birmingham when you’re going by coach:

16th September – Spent most of it on the coach. Went through France, Belgium (Brussels in rush hour isn't too difficult), Germany, Austria, and Slovakia. Stopped off in several places along the way.

One of my favourite travel writers from my early backpacking years is someone called Peter Moore. He's an Australian who was doing 'beyond the brochure' type travels before it was cool. One of his books was 'Wrong Way Home' where he did a journey across Europe by coach, trying as much as possible to go back to Sydney overland. If I remember the story correctly, his trip started more interestingly than mine, in that he was on a very cheap Eastern European company's coach and after a mile the driver got into a crash and fled on foot. My journey was much less notable, although I do recall we did have a near miss somewhere near Waterloo Bridge. My journey *back* to London the following week was more notable, in that the brake cable failed somewhere in Austria and we ended up driving a fair few miles with one of the driver crew literally holding onto a wire until they could get it repaired in a garage near Munich at 2am.

For many years this journey, and a similar coach trip to Poland in 1996, were the only times I'd been to Germany and it looked for a while as if it might end up being the last country in Europe I could say I'd set foot in. In fact, it took over 20 years for me to visit properly for the first time. Given its size, its provenance, and the fact I learned German at school, badly, it's slightly embarrassing it took me so long.

But in 1994, the journey went ever onward:

17th September – Slovak border guards remind me of ex-communists!!
Bratislava – non-touristy. No-one speaks English. Or German.
Got stuck with a lot of Slovakian Krona!!
Train from Bratislava late. Good; it took me a while to buy my tickets!! Missed a connection in Budapest; I was quite upset about this but I found out I could get a later train, and not have to stay overnight in Budapest. Changed my money, bought two postcards, wrote letters.

I don't know how much money I changed in Slovakia, I don't imagine it was an awful lot, and it took a while to find somewhere *to* exchange it because there were very few options open. Because it was the weekend, but the suggestion here is that the ticket I need to buy for the train to Budapest wasn't terribly expensive. It only took a couple of hours and was on a train that reminded me of the dodgy regional Sprinters and Pacers that we had in the UK at the time.

Here in Bratislava though (and a lesser extent Budapest) is an example of something in general that's been low-key troubling me ever since, when I think about the way I travel, and how I feel when I travel. I was a very fresh-faced, maybe slightly naïve, 19-year-old chap, who'd never been on a trip like this before, completely on his own, no language skills, no cultural knowledge, in a place that was absolutely not used to tourists. Regular listeners to my podcast and readers of my blog will know full well there have been times in the decades since where being in a place that's 'foreign' to me on several levels have caused me to go through seven shades of social anxiety and low-key panic, and sometimes I've even gone home rather than face everyday tasks like buying train tickets. So, how did a much younger and less experienced me cope with the task?

Evidently, with some trepidation admittedly, but by simply going to the desk and asking. Future Me is genuinely impressed with Past Me and has often wondered if they'd be able to do the same journey now in the same way. To be fair, I had just had a conversation with a middle-aged American businessman in the station concourse who directed me to the right window to buy the ticket at, which definitely helped, but I don't recall any over-thinking or over-hesitation on my part. The reason it took a while to buy the tickets was partly due to trying to work out when the next train *was*, and partly due to confusion as to whether my cash was legit. This latter proved more problematic in Budapest on my way back the following weekend. because I couldn't find my exchange receipt and the ticket desk wouldn't accept any Forints without it. They wanted to be sure I hadn't obtained the cash on the Black Market. At 6am on a Sunday morning. Ah, those were the days.

On my outbound journey however I had no such cash-related problems in Budapest. I did still have to have a complex and fraught conversation with a ticket clerk though - at least Bratislava only has one main railway

station; Budapest had at least three, and this was in the days with no internet. Indeed it was even before internet cafés were A Thing.

As it turns out, I arrived at the same station the later train to Belgrade left from (Keleti, which I only knew retrospectively when I went back through Budapest a couple of decades later and thought 'yeh, I vaguely remember this' – plus I recall buying a burger from a nearby McDonalds, which according to Google Maps, still exists), so that ended up being quite helpful.

I have no idea what else I did, aside from the vague 'wrote letters', given I had seven hours to kill and wasn't wanting to change too much money - because Hungarian Forints were virtually worthless and pretty much non-exchangeable outside the country so I didn't want to get stuck with too many of those either. I did have to fend off taxi drivers who wanted to take me places, and who, for some reason, were trying to speak to me in German. Nor did I want to venture too far because I didn't have a map and this was 1994 so they weren't readily available, especially not in English. I suppose, in fairness, I did have a lot of penpals to keep in touch with.

And so to the end of the journey:

18th September – left at 12.30am (on time).
Got stuck at the border for 2-3 hours!
Eventually reached Belgrade around 7,40-7,50am. Felt very tired. Was at the wrong end of the train → had to walk the whole length of the platform to get out. Jelena met me halfway. Which is pretty good since I didn't have her photograph!! (But she had mine!).
Got in, went to bed, slept. All day. Intended to get up about 5pm. Got up about 10pm!! Ah well, never mind!!

The train was one of those standard long-distance communist-era ones with dark carriages made up of an aisle on one side and compartments on the other, each with padded benches either side of the door and window so maybe six people could sit and stare at each other while pretending to read newspapers, keeping an ear open for any false words that could be used in evidence against them.

Sadly for storytelling purposes, I had the compartment to myself, so I wrote letters, looked out the window at the darkness, and generally failed to doze a bit. Overnight border crossings are always fascinating – this one being my first meant I didn't really know what to do – but it basically just involved sitting around while the border guards patrolled the train and did what they needed to do, which always feels like it takes longer than it needs. I don't recall any of them smiling. They did let me in though, which … I mean, I never imagined that they wouldn't, but then in those days I had no reason to think crossing borders could ever be problematic.

Late in the journey it became light enough to watch the world go by outside; an overcast morning and a somewhat dull and very flat landscape punctuated by parked up UN wagons. Note that Novi Sad, the largest city in northern Serbia, is only 30km from the Croatian border, so back in 1994 the train didn't go that far from an active warzone. This is one of those moments when you realise the world really does exist outside your bubble, and the first inclination my mother had of my wilder tendencies.

I don't actually recall how Jelena knew to meet me from that train. Neither of us had mobile phones, obviously, and I don't even know if I'd told her what time train I was supposed to be getting (which I didn't end up getting anyway). I don't remember having her phone number. And yes, this is very much a scenario often played out on programmes like Unsolved Mysteries or Disappeared, where someone travels across the globe to meet someone they barely knew, who turns out to be not the person they thought they were. I guess 19-year-old me was overly-trusting.

Jelena doesn't know either.

{And now we come to Ian, my very dear friend from England. We also started writing letters to each other in 1994, so I was 17, he was 19 and we exchanged only three letters before he came to visit me. So it was like the beginning of 1994 and already in September 1994, he visited me. So until then, I already had like four or five years of pen pulling history.

So the concept was not strange to me, some of them visited me, I even visited some of them, that's why it was the most normal thing to me that he visited me, like it was sort of, okay, so that's normal. I absolutely had no strange thoughts, neither did my parents. Now, when you even today, when you put it in this perspective, I guess if you have a 17 year old daughter and she announces that her 19 year old old friend from England would be visiting like, I suppose, I don't know, I'm not a parent myself, but I reckon that parents would be kind of, okay, are you sure what you're doing? You know, the internet is full of freaks and psychos and all that. A guy coming to visit you from across the world who you have never met before after having exchanged only three handwritten letters. I do realize right now, like it might sound odd for somebody who is not, who has not had any pen pulling history, but I have and my parents knew about it and they supported me.

I also visited myself alone before Ian visited me that summer. Earlier that summer, I went to Romania to visit my Romanian pen friend. That was the first time I have met her and I stayed with her family for two weeks and I went there all by myself. So my parents were obviously not shocked by the fact and neither was I.

I was so excited, like, oh, great. I've got a pen friend visiting. Yay, how exciting. I always enjoyed my pen friends visiting me. So for me, it was totally great news and something super exciting, something to look forward to. And I didn't find it anything strange. I didn't wonder why or how that could be a bit weird or anything of the sort. So I think it also went pretty well. It was very interesting.

I don't think I've ever had a man visiting me before. So Ian was my first male pen friend who visited me. And yeah, we've visited around the town. We didn't go anywhere out of Belgrade. We met a couple of my friends. I think it went well. Maybe Ian is the one who should say, how did it go? How did he feel? Did he enjoy it or not? Well, the fact that we are still friends today after 31 years, I guess he didn't think of me as a horrible host, I hope.}

We didn't snog, though one of her friends was cute.

{section separation jingle}

Me: Hello :) It's time for a mid-episode break. Half time. Seventh Innings Stretch. That sort of thing. Put the kettle on. Grab a snack. Get comfortable. I'm just here to remind you ways in which you can get in touch and help this podcast out. You probably know this already, but in case you don't:

The best way of supporting this podcast is to join my Patreon; for as little as a pint of beer at Wetherspoons every month, you can get a shoutout on this podcast, get occasional exclusive content, and other benefits. This podcast is going places, and wouldn't you want to say you were there before it was cool! The Patreon link can be found at patreon.com/traveltalesbeyondbrochurepod and it's also in the shownotes.

The second best way is to appear on the pod yourself; if you sign up to my newsletter you'll be able to see what episodes are being planned, and see which you'd like to contribute a voice recording for. It's also a great way to keep in contact if and when the soch meeds undergo a lingering heat death. Newsletters should come out in the first week of each month, and sign-ups can be found at barefoot-backpacker.us14.list-manage.com/subscribe.

Now, on with the show}

{section separation jingle}

As you know, I brand myself as The Barefoot Backpacker. The main reason is alliterative; always choose a name that's easy to remember. But one of the secondary reasons is to do with budget travel. I travel in general much more cheaply than my background and demographic suggests, to the extent my friends look at my travels and go 'Nel, why are you doing this to yourself?'. My flatmate pretty much socially-banned me from taking the overnight Megabus from Glasgow to London because she felt I could afford to have more self-respect. It was £14, as opposed to £70 for the train and that again for a cheap hotel; how much is my self-respect worth? Although if you've ever taken a 9 hour overnight Megabus (or Flixbus) for £14 or equivalent, be sure you fully know she has a point. Uncomfortable seats, broken toilets, and a complete

disregard for tachographs

But I do it partly to save money on accommodation, which, in Europe at least, might well be a higher cost in the travel budget than even travel, and for worldwide travel is very definitely the second highest cost. In the backpacking world, one of the cheapest ways of saving money on accommodation is staying backpacker hostels; riding that compromise between cost and comfort, between convenience and self-respect.

Surprisingly I came to backpacker hostels very late in my travel experiences. I'm an only child and never went to sleepovers as a teen, so I'm not used to, nor ever felt comfortable with, sharing a room with people. My therapist is aware. So the idea of backpacker hostels, of sleeping in a room with An Indeterminate Number Of People is quite anathema to me.

But still, sometimes, budget travel overrides personal preferences.

I always thought my first 'proper' backpacker hostel experience was in Slovenia. I say 'proper', since I stayed in a couple of Youth Hostels in my younger days, two on trips with the school cross-country team (in Ambleside and Bala) and one in Denham, in obscure Buckinghamshire, the night before my trip across Europe to Belgrade mentioned earlier. I don't count those as they were both YHA hostels, designed, despite their name, more for hikers around the UK and therefore always skewed to an older clientele, rather than the typical 'backpacker hostel' that most people associate with the term.

This trip to Slovenia was, in fact, a quick trip to the former Yugoslavia that included, interestingly, my third trip to visit my penpal Jelena in Belgrade – my second was around 2001 and wasn't really significant save the flight being the first thing I ever bought on a credit card. This trip was a flight to Trieste in Italy, a bus to Ljubljana, a coach to Belgrade, an overnight coach to Mostar, then a bus to Sarajevo. You'd think there are easier ways to get around the former Yugoslavia, but Bosnia in particular isn't an easy country to travel in. Mountains don't help transportation.

Backpacker hostels had never really been on my radar. My seminal backpacking trip to SE Asia consisted mainly of B&Bs, in part because they weren't substantially more expensive but mostly because the idea of sharing a room was anathema to me. I'm a very private individual. I pay more for privacy. Not a private bathroom; I don't mind being in a cubicle because it's patently obvious what I'm doing there. I just don't like knowing people could watch me sleep. But 2012 Me was still coming out of a debt repayment plan and was still wary of spending money and Slovenia was still more expensive than Laos, so I thought I'd bite the bullet and do some hostelling. Besides, I was a proto-barefoot backpacker, that's what I should be doing, right?

I did a search on Hostelworld, and found what seemed to be a funky place. My criteria for hostels were, and are, pretty simple: I don't want a party place. Future Me ended up in a couple accidentally and it was A Bad Thing, so Past Me was right to have been wary, even if they didn't know. But I came across one called Sax Hostel, which seemed pretty funky and cool.

My review at the time of the Sax Hostel (7-10 November 2012) according to my Hostelworld review was: *Quirky! Small (so not a place for party animals!) and comfortable, quiet neighbourhood, excellent bar with a nice mix of backpackers and locals. Nice Jazz theme (even down to the vinyl records on the toilet wall!). Friendly staff, excellent bathroom. At the opposite end of the city to the bus/train stations but it's a very safe and pretty walk, even at night.*

What I can tell you about my hostel in Ljubljana is that it was the first in a small series of vibes and feelings where I realised travelling just … felt 'right', you know? It was kind of weird, in the sense I'd never been in that environment before, but I certainly didn't feel anywhere near as repelled by it as I thought I would. It wasn't a big dorm; I think it was 6-bed but it could well have been 4-bed, and I was on a top bunk. I recall sitting on the side with my legs dangling, and taking selfies. If only OnlyFans had been A Thing in 2012; I'd've made a killing, I definitely slept comfortably, and didn't feel as angsty as I thought I would. I remember just thinking … yeh, I was content.

I had the same feeling a few months later, on my last night backpacking around The Levant, where I was lying, again in an upper bunk in a hostel, and thinking to myself that this was exactly what I wanted to do

with my life. It's no surprise therefore to learn that it was only a few months later that I took a sabbatical from my job and spent the best part of a year travelling around the world.

However.

When I was researching this podcast, I realised in fact that this seminal experience … wasn't. I had in fact stayed in hostels before, I just hadn't remembered them.

Earlier in 2012, I'd visited Belgium for the first time. Though everywhere I stayed in Belgium itself had been guesthouses and B&Bs (one of which would have deserved its own blog past had travel blogging been A Thing in 20212, and one day I'll do a pod about being ahead of the curve on that score, and why I'm incredibly jealous of a blogger called Adventurous Kate), my first night was in a hostel near Kings Cross in London because I had a really early Eurostar the next morning and evidently Premier Inns had been too expensive.

My Hostelworld review was:
Clink 78, London, 30 May 2012
Needed somewhere cheap and close to St Pancras for an early morning train - this fitted the bill perfectly! Lively, atmospheric, interesting - the only downside (partly because it was so full and partly because it was summertime I guess) was that the dorm was too warm (no aircon or fresh air flowing), so felt a bit stuffy.

And the Travel Blog I wrote at the time said:
Was staying in a backpacker hostel (because it was £21/night, and 10 minutes from St Pancras Station!); I'd stayed in it before a couple of years ago when I went to the USA. It's called 'Clink78' and so for instance the TV/common room is decked out a bit like a courtroom, with identified spaces for 'Press', 'Defendant', 'Judge' etc, and some of the rooms are structured a bit like cells. I didn't do a lot in the evening though – mainly sat outside reading the travel guidebook and doing a spot of planning. My only problem with the place was it was too hot inside – no air-conditioning, few open windows, and lots of people. Managed to sleep anyway!

The Hostelworld review there says I'd stayed there before, I have no record of that visit – I seem to have not done a travel diary for it on LiveJournal, which was on-brand for me at the time, so I don't even know when it was.

But in fact, I know my first hostels were one night in Riga at the end of the Trans-Siberian trip in May 2006, and one night in a 10-bed dorm on 103rd Street in New York, I don't remember why I was there - it was probably a trip to Michigan that I came back to NYC from by greyhound. All I recall is I booked it through STA travel rather than online directly so it must have been an early trip. Again, I have no record of this in my LiveJournal entries, or at least I can't find one, which suggests Past Me wasn't as good at travel journalling as he thought. Men, eh? Can't live with them, can't live as them.

The only things I do recall about that hostel is that I was in a 10-bed dorm with only one other person, and 103rd street is a fecking long way to walk to. Each block isn't terribly big, but 103 is a big number. You'd've thought I'd've taken a subway. You're once again underestimating Past Me's social anxiety and inability to do things they didn't understand or know how they worked.

I did have a relatively okay bagel on the way there though. Somewhere around 63rd street.

{section separation jingle}

I'm a big fan of promoting fellow content creators and podcasters. If you've got a podcast or vlog trailer you'd like to hear featured in this spot, drop it to me and get yourself heard across the world.

Today I'd like to promote "Deck of Many Aces"; a podcast of an actual-play role-playing adventure (think Dungeons & Dragons), made by fellow Asexuals, Aromantics, and AroAces. I met one of them at the Asexual group in Manchester, where they mentioned it in passing, and it's kept me amused on many a long walk,

{ADVERT: Deck of Many Aces

All: {wah wah pistol sounds}

Voiceover: We're here, from AROACE. I'm Bastet. I'll be running your operation to investigate the unusual occurrences that have been happening everywhere recently.

Various characters:
** Stay out of Antaburgh.*
** Stuck in time-loop.*
** I guess it's a ghost-plumbing situation.*
** Bastet has got us out of a lot of problems, but I don't think she can get us out of this one.*
** It wasn't all the bodies, there were two bodies.*
** Everyone else just got disappeared.*
** I went missing for a while, and I lost my brother. I don't know where he is.*
** Oh, that's my mother. Oh dear / That the same mother that you keep describing as tyrannical and horrible?*
** Have to practice ritual fight with brother.*
** Ellie, can I make an insight check on myself in real life?*

Voiceover: Deck of Many Aces is an actual play podcast made by actual asexuals and aromantics.
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END ADVERT}

My flatmate is scared of flying. Like, phobia-scared. In the same way I react to wasps. No, actually, more virulent to how I react to wasps, with the added proviso that if I see a wasp, I can walk away, well, give the impression that I've actually teleported. I am that scared of wasps.

Now, when she tells people this, they tend to default to 'well, all you need to do is fly more, and get used to it, you'll get there'. Ah, we all love a bit of well-meaning mansplaining. This is a woman who has tracked every single flight she's taken, which is over 200. This is a woman who has lived in five different continents, and she'll be on a podcast towards the end of the year talking about that specifically. This is a woman whose way of coping with the anxiety of being an a citizen of the world is very much rooted in the concept of "knowledge is power", watching pilot and fight-crew TikTok, reading about every single aircrash, and learning what every single movement and noise in the cabin means. She also insists on window seats so she can look out and reassure herself that yes, we are still in the air, and yes, everything is working correctly.

And, just for good measure, three pints of beer.

I mention all this because she often asks me, entirely rhetorically I may add, 'how are you not scared?'. Now, let me be absolutely clear – I don't like flying. I have likened it before to being wrongfully arrested. You're in an enclosed space with very limited freedom of movement, only a small amount of things you can actually do, surrounded buy people you don't know. You know you're going to get out of it, but you can't be quite guaranteed when.

I find it boring, but it doesn't scare me. Mainly because I trust in the laws of probability; there's only a handful of incidents even, never mind fatal crashes, every year, compared to an estimated 100,000 flights in the world every day. IATA stats from 2022 say that, out of 28 million flights that year across the world, there were 43 accidents and 158 fatalities. And in general, you'd expect the majority of the incidents take place in places and on airlines I'm less likely to be present at.

I've not tracked how many flights I've taken, but it's definitely in the low hundreds; whether it's more or less than Laura is something I'm not prepared to calculate, but I imagine it's not far short. But I've only been worried for my safety a couple of times; once on a short-haul flight to Amsterdam that very much jerked up and down before landing, once on a domestic flight from East Midlands to Glasgow, of all places, that had similar vibes, and once on an international flight into Manchester during a Named Storm when then last 8 minutes everything went very silent and calm in the cabin. It was so bad that even Laura was silent. And with

good reason; other IATA data suggests 53% of all air crashes between 2005 and 2023 occurred during landing, and a further 8.3% occur on Approach, making the end of the flight being more likely to be, well, also the premature end of the flight.

But this is about firsts. The first flight I ever took was just after by 11th birthday, when my uncle took me to Denmark (also the first foreign country I ever visited). It was from Manchester to Copenhagen, so not a long flight (a shade under two hours) but also an international flight so something quite special for an 11-year-old in 1986.

I'll be honest, I don't recall a lot about the flight. I do remember it was with British Airways, in the days when BA were a decent airline. I remember having an aisle seat on the way out. I remember the aircrew giving me a BA-branded colouring book and pens to keep me occupied during the journey. I don't remember it being a bad flight, on the grounds that had I had a remarkably bad experience, I would have remembered more about it, My uncle, who had flown inter-continental a few times by that point through his work, can't remember anything about it either, which suggests it was quite a nondescript and average flight. I'm also pretty sure I had an aisle seat – or at least I didn't have a window seat – and I was on the right hand side of the aisle, if you're facing forward, On a 3-seats-either-side plane, which I assume it was, it would have been seat D. All I can remember about the return flight is that I didn't get the same level of attention from the cabin crew and felt slightly disappointed about it. See, I've always been needy.

I also don't remember being particularly excited by it. Maybe back in the mid-1980s, flying wasn't quite as … 'liminal' as it is now, being a bit more ordinary, a bit more like catching a train. I do remember having a special passport because of my age. It was white, it was four pages long, it was made of paper, and it had a validity of a year. My subsequent foreign jaunt was a year and a half later on a school trip to France, by coach, and I have no recollection of my passport for that trip.

I don't even recall what my second trip that involved a flight would have been. When I dated Laure in the mid-late 90s, I tended to go by Eurostar, though I know I have flown to La Rochelle airport at least once. I'm sure it wasn't my flight to meet my penpal in Finland in 1999, surely it couldn't have been that big a gap, but who knows.

You would have thought something so seminal would have resonated more in my mind. I can only conclude that although 11-year-old me was fascinated with maps and encyclopaedias and borders and what was 'beyond the red lines', they never envisaged a situation where they would have visited over half the world in their life. I wonder what they would have thought if they'd've been able to know. That said, 11-year-old me lived in a world where a considerable proportion of it was 'off-limits' with absolutely no indication this would change; the new Soviet Premier was this chap called Gorbachev and he was saying nice things but honestly, we'd heard that kind of thing before and it wouldn't be long before another 'freeze' and he'd turn into another Brezhnev, and we'd be worried about nukes landing on Stanlow Oil Refinery. The Berlin Wall, the symbol of the world's political situation, probably wouldn't fall in my lifetime, and I'd never get to visit even Leningrad or Budapest, never mind Frunze, which would remain just a weird name on a map of a part of the world I'd be fascinated with but mainly because it was so unknown and so out of reach.

I have still never visited Leningrad.

{end pod jingle}

Well that's about all for this pod. Tune in next time for another adventure beyond the brochure. Until then, , 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, tell your friends that I rocked your socks. If you wear socks when listening to my pod; that's your call not mine. And don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.

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Show-notes are available on my website: barefoot-backpacker.com.

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