



AN INNOCENT ABROAD

Life-changing trips from 35 great writers



Edited by Don George

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Introduction

Don George



I lost my innocence in France. I went to live in Paris right after graduating from Princeton, following in the footsteps of F. Scott Fitzgerald, or so I fancied, and within two weeks I had fallen head over heels for a 22-year-old *jeune fille* from Grasse, who exuded a Provencal perfume of sunshine and *sexualité*.

A *jeune américain* unwise to the ways of the world, I spent two months panting like a puppy after this *fille fatale* before I realized that for her I was more bauble than boyfriend. But by then it didn't matter. I had found a new object for my passion – Paris itself – and this lover consummated my ardor with Monet and Molière, the Île Saint-Louis and Sacré-Cœur, and midnights wandering under the plane trees by the Seine, sometimes hand in hand with a *jeune américaine*, intoxicated by the moon and the swooning stars.

Then I lost my innocence in Greece. At the end of that Parisian summer, I rode the Orient Express through Switzerland, Italy, and Yugoslavia to Athens, where I would be teaching on a one-year fellowship at Athens College. Before classes started, I had a week free to sightsee, and on my second afternoon in the city, overheated and blinded by the stark sunlight, I took refuge in a shady bar just off Syntagma Square. No sooner had butt touched barstool than I was surrounded by three scantily clad sirens caressing my hair, arms, and thighs – and ordering and re-ordering Champagne from an attentive barkeep. I was besotted with the prospect of the night to come, until it came time to pay the tab – and the women disappeared, along with my entire reserve of emergency drachma.

But Greece repaid that lesson time and time again, with rosy-fingered dawns reading Plato on the Parthenon and bouzouki-brightened evenings sipping ouzo by the wine-dark sea, picnics with a mysterious muse named Gisela among the red poppies and white columns of Corinth, and soul-dancing connections and kindness on Crete.

Then I lost my innocence in Tanzania. It was the summer after my teaching year in Greece, and the parents of two of my students had invited me and a fellow teacher named John to visit them in Dar-es-Salaam. We were touring the Tanzanian bush when the clouds cleared and Mount Kilimanjaro suddenly gleamed on the horizon. The father impetuously asked if we wanted to climb it. John and I looked at each other. ‘Of course we do! Why not?’ We were 23 and invincible. What could possibly go wrong? Well, to start with, all I had for footwear were tennis shoes – we hadn’t planned to climb the highest mountain on the continent – but we survived, and all these years later, I’d still climb it no other way.

That year changed my life. I learned the illusions and exhilarations of love, the enticements and terrors of adventure, and the importance of charting my own course. At the end of the year, I relinquished the student's hand-me-down desire to become a tweedy professor and chose instead the perilous path of becoming a writer. I had no idea where that path would lead; I just knew that I wanted to walk it wild and wide-eyed, daring to dream.

Looking back on all this now, I realize that something profound and utterly life-changing happened that year: I embraced my innocence.

Ever since then, through 40 years and 90 countries, innocence has been my steadfast soulmate, my platform and persona, skin and shield, the rose-tinted mind/heart-set with which I encounter the world. As it is still. Over the past few days, I have started to prepare for an upcoming journey to Sweden, Estonia, Finland, Denmark, and Russia, all countries I'll be visiting for the first time. As I read about these places and imagine being in each one, innocence pulses as powerfully through me as it did on that first foray to France in 1975.

Yesterday I wrote in my journal: What will Stockholm be like? What will I discover in Copenhagen? Who will I meet in St. Petersburg? What wonders await?

An innocent abroad.

Compiling this collection has also been an adventure in innocence. I started by reaching for the stars – the writers I most revere around the globe. To my astonishment, many of these award-winners and bestsellers, despite being deluged with their own deadlines and demands, responded to my invitation with grace and enthusiasm. I then sought out up-and-coming authors whose power and passion awe me – and whose stories enthralled

me. The result is this beautiful, bountiful book you hold in your hands, 35 celebrations of innocence at large.

As I have assembled these tales, poring over each with ever-deepening gratitude and delight, I have been astonished to see a jigsaw-puzzle portrait compose itself, piece by interlocking piece, right before my eyes.

In one part of this puzzle, innocence abroad is the portal to a rite of passage. Dave Eggers discovers this in the backroom of a Bangkok brothel-cum-nightclub, and Sloane Crosley on a cliff overlooking a shark-infested Australian bay. Pico Iyer's passage unfolds as a succession of ill-fated initiations in South America, while Tim Cahill's coalesces over a series of rootless adventures in North America. And for Jan Morris, the portal is an unsolicited post-war assignment in Venice that unexpectedly transfigures her world.

In another part of the puzzle, innocence is a conduit to misadventure, as it is for Richard Ford in Morocco, when he and his wife embark on an ill-advised journey by car into the heart of hashish country, and for Simon Winchester when he and a team of fellow geologists are ice-bound by fjord-freezing storms in Greenland. Alexander McCall Smith's innocence guides him toward an unsuspecting brush with murder in Swaziland, and Fiona Kidman's to an almost deadly disaster in Vietnam. For Jane Smiley and her husband, unanticipated mishaps play a more benign role, eventually offering admission to off-the-tourist-path pleasures in France.

Sometimes innocence takes the form of a teacher, as it does for 19-year-old Ann Patchett on an eye-opening European odyssey, Mary Karr in the eco-wilds of Central America, Kerre McIvor in the equally uncharted wilderness of Cuban conmen, and Stanley Stewart in the Italian capital, where he came of age on his first

trip abroad, and where he has now returned for the birth of his first child. And for Torre DeRoche, coming home after a globe-girdling journey, innocence presents an old, familiar place in a new, unfamiliar light.

And finally, innocence can sometimes be a force for connection, as it is for David Baldacci on a visit to his ancestral homeland in Italy, to Suzanne Joinson when she's forced to spend an unscheduled weekend in Yemen, for Anthony Sattin when he's exploring Morocco's Atlas Mountains on what he's determined will be his last writing assignment, for John Berendt when he befriends a widow with a determined dream in Venice, and for Marina Lewycka when circumstances force her to rely on the kindness of strangers in Yaroslavl.

These stories and all the other treasured tales in this collection, so vastly varied in setting, style, and subject, all ultimately illuminate one common truth: However it manifests itself when we travel, innocence can be a life-changing catalyst for discovery, connection, and transformation on the road.



Mark Twain discovered this truth in the course of writing *The Innocents Abroad*, that wise and witty account whose title our own humble collection echoes and honors. In describing the misadventures and marvels of his 1860s expedition by boat and train to Europe and the Holy Land, Twain penned one of my favorite quotes: 'Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness,' he wrote. 'Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.'

That sentiment is one of the core messages of this collection as well: Innocence abroad expands our hearts and our minds,

opens us to the splendors of serendipity, builds bridges between peoples and cultures, and lays paving stones on the path to global peace and understanding.

But now, as I contemplate the pieces in this book and in my own life's puzzle, I've realized another truth that I'd never completely understood before: Innocence and worldliness intertwine, in an intricate synthesis that enables each to thrive.

When I left Princeton for Paris, I believed that innocence was something you lost once, never to be regained. But then I lost it again, and again, and again, as I have continued to do, across six continents, over the ensuing decades. Now I understand that innocence is inexhaustible: The more we lose, the more we gain. Each loss, whether through ignorance or idealism, misassumption or misinformation, burnishes and broadens our understanding of how much more remains.

That's the truth these puzzles have finally pictured for me: As long as we continue to venture into unfamiliar situations, to open our hearts and minds to foreign ways, as long as we are able to keep losing our innocence abroad, that innocence will never end – and our appreciation of the world, our embrace of this unembraceable whole, will extend, and extend, and extend.

Caffe Strada, Berkeley

June 2014

Over the Edge

Gloane Crosley



This is the part where I jump off a cliff into choppy, shark-infested waters. It's the middle of the Australian winter and I am barefoot, wearing a wetsuit with neon stripes down the side. I have never been to Australia before and did not grow up in a surfing community. This is my first time in a wetsuit. As I crouch down against the evening wind, readying myself to spring off this pointy rock and into a part of the Sydney Harbor called 'Shark Bay,' I feel like a superhero, surveying her lands from atop a stone gargoyle. This is an unusual feeling. My traveling superpowers are generally limited to making trains arrive by losing my boarding pass and being impervious to caffeine before 7 a.m.

I'm not supposed to be here. I know this because about 40 feet inland from the cliff is a sign that reads 'Warning: Serious Injuries Have Occurred to Persons Jumping From Cliff Edge.'

The Place I'll Never Forget

Tim Cahill



The desert was located in, well, OK, I don't recall precisely where it was, but definitely somewhere in the United States. Certainly it was in a state west of Wisconsin, where I grew up and was, at the time, going to school, a junior in college and entirely innocent of America on the far side of the Mississippi. It was spring break and a couple of pals and I had decided, on the spur of the moment, that we should drive to California. It was going to be a long trip and we couldn't sleep a lot because we wanted to be back when classes started and, more to the point, we didn't have any money to waste on motels. Occasionally I caught an hour's worth of shut eye while someone else drove, but sleeping wasn't easy with three hulking jocks in a VW Beetle.

So I was, I suspect, deep into one of those sleep-deprived modes in which unexpected emotions assault the senses. What I recall most clearly on that drive was this, uh...place. Instead of the green

The First Time I Had So Many First Times

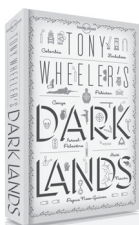
Pico Iyer



The beauty of any first time is that it leads to a thousand others: The first glance eases one towards the first meeting, and then, perhaps, the first kiss and the first love and so much else (the first divorce?). Every 'first time' opens a door upon a long corridor, down which you walk with the sensation, from experience now, that any other door might fly open at any moment, leading onto another corridor.

The first time I truly got to savor the world was when I was seventeen and, suddenly, almost free from high school, I began to put the different parts of my inheritance, as someone always a little bit abroad – a confirmed traveler for life – together. In the summer of 1974, my parents decided I should spend three months traveling around India, getting to know the cousins and uncles and grandparents, the ancestry, that I'd never had a chance to encounter before (except briefly, at the age of two).

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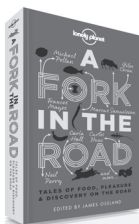
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