

ADVENTURE CAPITALIST

The Ultimate Road Trip

Jim Rogers



R A N D O M H O U S E

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Investment Biker
Hot Commodities



THE
ULTIMATE
ROAD TRIP

ADVENTURE
CAPITALIST

JIM ROGERS

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*To the greatest adventure
my first child, in the hope that
she will always seek, explore,
and question, and understand
the world as it really*

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About the Author

PART ONE

1999



A
YELLOW
MERCEDES

I ENTERED THE INVESTMENT BUSINESS in 1968 with six hundred dollars in my pocket, and I left it in 1980, at the age of thirty-seven, with enough money to satisfy a lifelong yearning for adventure. As the comanager of an offshore hedge fund, analyzing the worldwide flow of capital, raw materials, goods, and information, I had invested where others did not, exploiting untapped markets around the globe, and it was a significant factor in my success. But what I wanted out of Wall Street, and ultimately out of long-term investing, was not typical of the business. I wanted to buy the freedom to taste as much of life as possible—I wanted to see the world. And I wanted to see the world that other travelers rarely see, the world that can be seen only from the ground up and truly understood only from that vantage point.

I wanted to see what I like to think of as the *real* world.

I have met people who have traveled to more countries than I, but in almost every case, it seems they have flown from one place to another. You have not really been to a country, I believe, until you have had to cross the border physically, had to find food on your own, fuel, a place to sleep, until you have experienced it close to the ground.

In the late winter of 1990, I set out on a two-year odyssey to circle the planet on a motorcycle. The 100,000-mile journey took me across six continents and through dozens of countries; it landed me in the *Guinness Book of Records* and resulted in a best-selling book of my own, *Investment Bike Around the World with Jim Rogers*. No sooner had I completed the trip and returned home to New York than I began thinking about something more. I was abetted in my quest to find it by a simple quirk of the calendar: the approaching turn of the millennium. My insatiable thirst to understand firsthand what is going on in the world, to be there, to see it for myself—to dig out the real story—was intensified by the opportunity to capitalize on a historical moment. My plan was to spend three years driving around the globe as the twentieth century came to a close, to take the world's pulse at the end of one millennium and the start of another.

The trip would be both an adventure and a part of the continuing education I had been engaged in all my life, from rural Demopolis, Alabama, where I grew up, through Yale, Oxford, and the U.S. Army, and eventually to Wall Street, where experience taught me that the “experts” were usually wrong. My travels tended to be characterized by the slaughter of sacred cows, the puncturing of various balloons, and the laying to rest of preconceptions of the world held by certain “authorities,” many of who

rarely left home. My success in the market has been predicated on viewing the world from a different perspective.

While I have never patronized a prostitute, I know that one can learn more about a country from speaking to the madam of a brothel or a black marketeer than from speaking to a government minister. There is nothing like crossing outlying borders for gaining insights into a country.

Finding promising investment opportunities was not a defined aim of the trip, but just because I am who I am, it is something that happens when I travel. As an investor, I would seek to learn about the markets in China, Africa, and South America, and I would visit promising stock exchanges whenever possible. I had made money in the past by investing in sleepy markets, such as Austria, Botswana, Peru, and others, and would no doubt stumble on some again.

If the trip killed me, I would die happy, pursuing my passion. And that was better than dying on Wall Street someday with a few extra dollars in my pocket.

The trip took me through 116 countries, many of which are rarely visited: Saudi Arabia, Myanmar, Angola, Sudan, Congo, Colombia, East Timor, and the like. The journey took me down the west coast and up the east coast of Africa, through thirty-two countries there. (My previous trip had taken me straight down the center, from Tunis to Cape Town.) It took me from Atlantic to Pacific—out of Europe across Central Asia and China—and from the Pacific back to the Atlantic, by way of Siberia. From the northeast coast of Africa I traveled across Arabia and the Indian subcontinent to Indochina, Malaysia, and Indonesia. After touring Australia and New Zealand, I made for the southern tip of South America, driving from there to Alaska before heading home to New York. No one had ever driven overland following this route. The trip took me through approximately half of the world, through thirty civil wars, covered 152,000 miles, 50,000 more than the distance of my previous trip, and resulted in another Guinness World Record.

Studies have shown that traveling around the world is people's single most popular fantasy; many people in many places around the globe approached and said, "You are living everyone's dream."

The trip began on January 1, 1999, in Reykjavík, the capital of Iceland. I did not make the trip alone. I traveled with a beautiful woman, a blue-eyed blonde from Rocky Mount, North Carolina named Paige Parker. I met Paige in 1996 during a speaking engagement at the Mint Museum in Charlotte. Paige, a fund-raiser at Queens College, had read my book on the recommendation of Bill Wireman, the college president, and come to hear me speak about my motorcycle trip. I tracked her down the next day and invited her to dinner.

"I'm thinking of going around the world again," I said to her on our first date. "I haven't told anybody yet. But I'm thinking of doing it at the turn of the millennium."

She agreed that such a trip could be illuminating.

"Do you want to go with me?" I asked.

She was momentarily dumbstruck.

"Yes," she said. "Sign me on."

Of course, we both thought it was idle banter.

Who knew?

Paige and I had been dating for a little over a year when she quit her job in Charlotte and moved to New York, taking her own apartment there in October 1997. As she began working as a director at a marketing firm and she and I began working that much more on our romance, I began seriously searching for an overland alternative to motorcycles.

There is nothing more exhilarating than driving a motorcycle. I have owned several in my life. My first rode a motorcycle across China in 1988, a trip documented by PBS as part of its *Travels* series.

titled “The Long Ride.” More than exhilaration, there is a simplicity to a bike. It is a lot easier, for example, to get a motorcycle across oceans, across deserts, or through jungles. And had Paige been enthusiastic to do so, we might have motorcycled around the globe. It was she who encouraged me to think about making the trip in a car. But I was not going to travel in just any car. It had to be a sport car. And it had to be a convertible. I wanted to put the top down and have the wind in my face.

Of course, I knew nothing about cars. Living in New York City, I had not owned one since 1968. And my ignorance was apparent to everyone when I explained that what I was looking for was a convertible two-seater with four-wheel drive and a lot of clearance off the ground, without which, I could guarantee, no car was going to make it around the world.

Everyone in turn guaranteed me that there was no such car on the market.

Every two years there is a big Four-Wheel-Drive Show in Munich, and in the spring of 1998 I attended it. I did not find the car I was looking for, but I met people there who modified cars—I had looked at many vehicles by now and figured I would use a sporty body on a Toyota chassis—and one of them told me about a fellow in California I should look up. It was typical of the quest that I had to go to Germany to find a guy in California. The guy in California told me about *another* guy in California (it was very much like trying to get into Cameroon two years later), and that is how I met Gerhard Steinle. It was Steinle and his team at Prisma Design International who would put together the one-of-a-kind Mercedes-Benz in which Paige and I eventually traveled the world.

By then my requirements had become more specific. More than a convertible, the car had to be equipped with a retractable hardtop. I did not want to run the risk of the top’s being slashed, which could prove to be a definite damper on a trip around the world. Furthermore, I decided, it had to have a diesel engine. Trucks, buses, trains, and boats around the world run on diesel fuel, and you can always get it. Gasoline, I had discovered on my previous trip, was often very difficult to find. If you could get it at all, you could not be sure it would be any good.

Steinle, a former president of Mercedes-Benz Advanced Design of North America, came up with the notion of merging the body and interior of Mercedes’ SLK roadster with the chassis and diesel engine of the company’s sport-utility vehicle, known in Europe as the G-Class, or *der Geländewagen* (G-Wagen). The rugged G-Wagen, designed originally for German military and police use, would be unavailable in the United States until three years later, when it would be introduced as the G500. The SLK, which came with a retractable hardtop as standard equipment, was built on the same wheelbase as the shorter of the two G-Class models. The chassis of the two cars were the same. To marry the two Steinle figured out, we would not have to cut or lengthen anything.

I told Steinle that I needed an extra fuel tank and a secret compartment in which to hide money. He said that because the hardtop retracted into the trunk, I was going to need a trailer, as well. He would design one to match the car. He talked me out of going with a manual transmission, explaining that Mercedes-Benz was a far better driver than I and that the company’s automatic transmission would get me out of predicaments better than I could extricate myself with a stick shift.

“I need everything ready to go by the end of the year,” I said.

Steinle, unbeknownst to me, rather than simply order the cars, called Mercedes of North America and told the people there that he had this crazy guy who wanted to do X, Y, and Z, and asked if they wanted to get involved. Apparently, they liked the story. When I next heard from Steinle, he reported to my amazement, that he had persuaded Mercedes of North America to provide the vehicles free of charge, as long as I paid for the expensive conversion.

“And of course,” Gerhard said, “they’ll be under warranty.”

“Let’s do it.”

Even in the absence of a warranty, I knew, I would find Mercedes service everywhere in the world. Even in the developing world one is never far from a dealership; every dictator and mafioso in the

world drives a Mercedes. Even in countries with no roads to speak of, Mercedes service is available—often to the exclusion of things like food—thanks to all the U.S. foreign aid, the International Monetary Fund, and World Bank money being shipped in. It is no secret that this money is aimed at nourishing only those corrupt enough to get their hands on it, while at the same time fattening the bureaucrats on both sides of the transaction who diligently work the trough. And none of them driving a Chevy.

I knew much of this from my last trip. The upcoming trip, especially as it took us through Africa, would be an eye-opening education into the workings of the latest foreign aid scam: the nongovernmental organization, or NGO. As an American taxpayer, I would be amazed to discover that a lot of the money we send to these countries goes to support Mercedes and BMW dealers and various Swiss bankers.

But more about that later.

The truth is that had we traveled in a different car, we probably never would have made it around the world; this wacky idea of a car was the perfect choice in every way. One of its more important attributes would prove to be its color. Officially Sunburst Yellow, or, as I saw it, Martian Movie Yellow, it would draw crowds everywhere we went, making us many friends in the process, and in so doing save our lives on several occasions. Showing up by surprise in a car so unusual, so weird, and at the same time so downright unthreatening, would spark immediate curiosity. The bizarre, all-terrain hybrid in explosive color was just goofy enough to throw people off balance, to warm them up long enough to get us through a particular situation before anyone had a chance to say, “Hey, we forgot to rob those people” or “Weren’t we supposed to kidnap them?”

One of the more frequently asked questions one gets about traveling around the world is “How do you pack?” It is worth mentioning here that when we designed the trailer for this trip, we in effect designed it around the supplies with which we intended to fill it. We got everything we wanted to take with us, put it in a pile, and measured the pile, determining how many cubic feet of space we would need, and gave the measurement to the people who were manufacturing the trailer. Among all the things we carried, the jerry cans for extra water and fuel, the sleeping bags, the tent, and whatever else we packed into the trailer, the most important item, and the first to go into the pile, was the kit containing medical supplies. And it was big—not so big that it could not be carried aboard an airplane, but bigger than the typical household first aid kit.

To determine what went into the kit, we visited a couple of doctors, among them exotic disease specialists, and got their recommendations. We packed syringes because there are many places in the world where syringes are unavailable, or where, if available, they are recycled. We had normal stuff like bandages and disinfectants, and we also had malaria pills and antibiotics. And we had instructions on how and when to use them and what symptoms to look for, in the event that we had to act as our own doctors. It was a pretty extensive first aid kit, and we had a doctor’s letter, for what it was worth, to show those border guards who might suspect us of smuggling. I am happy to say that very little of what we carried did we ever actually need. Normally, if we needed something, we would buy it locally, if it were available, rather than invade the first aid kit, which was much more important for emergencies out in the bush.

Before setting out on the trip, I prepared an extra wallet. It contained several expired credit cards, an expired license or two, and what looked like a lot of money—a healthy portion of low-grade currency, Italian lire, Spanish pesetas, and Portuguese escudos—so that I would have something convincing to hand over calmly in the event that I was robbed.

In addition to the G-Wagen and the SLK roadster that he would combine to make the hybrid, Gerhard arranged for Mercedes to donate a second G-Wagen as well. The additional—straight-up, unmodified—SUV would carry the video cameraman and Webmaster I was seeking to recruit for the

trip.

Paige and I knew from the beginning that we wanted to document the trip. And it did not take some youngster's running up to me and saying "You need a Web site" for me to realize that there was no other way to do it. Ten years earlier, there had been many places where the only way I could communicate with New York was by postcard. But the world had since undergone a communication revolution of blinding velocity, and Paige and I were determined to participate in the revolution firsthand. We decided to maintain a multimedia Web site, with audio and video, by way of which we would provide an on-line diary of the trip and interact with those who "traveled" with us. (I was naïve as to think that this would be a snap. Though ultimately it worked, it was far more difficult and annoying than I had anticipated.)

For the last twenty-seven and thirty-one months of the trip, respectively, we were joined in our adventure by the same videographer and Webmaster, Chris Capozzoli and Fredrik Görander, who traveled in the second vehicle and helped chronicle the trip.

I ran my third consecutive New York City Marathon in the fall of 1998. Just as I finished the race, I asked Paige to be my wife. She accepted. We were not yet in a position to specify plans—who knew where we would be or where we would *want* to be at the time—but we did set a date: January 1, 2000.

Paige had quit her job in anticipation of our spending time in California with a four-wheel-drive instructor, but the company to which Gerhard Steinle subcontracted the metalwork missed several deadlines and we were unable to practice with the car before striking out. We managed to get hold of the car and load it aboard a ship bound for Iceland just in time to meet our January 1, 1999, deadline.

Paige and I had been talking about the trip virtually from the moment we met, but putting your life on hold for three years is not easy for most people. Paige's feeling was that the trip represented a challenge and an opportunity that she would forever regret passing up. Even though she had just received her first big promotion and raise—she had been on the job only a year—she nonetheless felt that after the trip, being that much more knowledgeable and well rounded a person, she would be even more employable.

Several times before we left, I gave Paige a chance to back out of the trip. As the deadline approached, I increased the pressure, encouraging her to think twice.

"You don't really know what you're getting in for," I said. "Everything that can go wrong *will* go wrong. Things that you cannot imagine, no matter how well we plan, will go wrong. Things are always going wrong. Just by the nature of the world. It's going to be very difficult, and our lives will be in danger. There will be deserts and jungles ..."

"I'm going," she said.

"There will be wars, there will be epidemics ..."

"I'm tough," she said.

"There will be blizzards ..."

"I can do it."

And with that we flew off to celebrate New Year's Eve in the Land of the Midnight Sun.

It had to be the worst blizzard that that part of Iceland had seen in thirty years, and it hit unexpectedly on the third day of our trip. Even with our faces pressed to the windshield, we could not see the front of the car. Not even the meter posts could keep me on the road. Driving along with the posts on my right, I suddenly noticed them on my left. When the meter posts finally disappeared beneath the snow, I knew we were in serious trouble.

No visibility. Deep snow. Disaster.

Driving perfectly was not good enough anymore. A slight turn to the right, and we would veer off

the mountainside; to the left, and we would drive directly into it. Avoid either, and there was always the possibility of a head-on collision with an oncoming truck.

Setting out in Iceland on our round-the-world adventure, we had not known if we would return alive—but not even at our most pessimistic had we thought we might die on our third day out.

Iceland is the westernmost country in Europe. Also, it was celebrating the one thousandth anniversary of Leif Eriksson's voyages west from there to North America. But what really drew me to choose Iceland as a starting point for the trip was a happenstance of geology. Tectonic plates beneath the Eastern and Western Hemispheres come together in Iceland; it is the only place in the world where you can actually drive from North America to Europe—geologically speaking. What better place to start the trip?

We were in the capital, Reykjavík, on December 31, 1998, in time for one of the world's great spectacles. On New Year's Eve in Iceland, everybody puts on a fireworks display—every town, every block, every household, every family, individually, all at the same time. Imagine a city of 150,000, the sky above it one massive light show, everybody trying to outdo everybody else, and you have Reykjavík on New Year's Eve. The celebration begins with gigantic bonfires all over the city. They start at around ten o'clock. People travel from one bonfire to the next, huge mobs of people, throwing things into the fires. You can look out beyond the city and see bonfires lighting the sky over towns that are fifty kilometers away. Sometime before midnight, the fireworks begin. The sky in every town erupts. Paige and I, watching from Perlan, a revolving restaurant built atop Reykjavík's geothermal hot-water storage tanks, sat there overwhelmed.

We officially started the trip the following day, January 1, 1999, drinking champagne at Thingvellir, on the spot where the tectonic plates meet, some thirty kilometers from Reykjavík. The plates, we learned, are actually pulling apart. As a result of its seismic instability, Iceland is overactive with earthquakes, volcanoes, and hot springs. Sixty thousand years from now this island nation suspended just below the Arctic Circle is going to split in two, but in the meantime electricity here is cheap because of the island's enormous store of geothermal energy.

As far as domestic energy is concerned, Iceland is even better situated than Saudi Arabia. The Saudis will run out of oil some day, but Iceland has vast amounts of perpetual, renewable energy in geysers, natural steam, and hot water—all of it virtually free after the initial investment to capture and harness it. Everywhere you go you find outdoor pools, naturally heated. The night before we set out we were swimming, doing the backstroke, in one of those outdoor pools, with snowflakes coming down on our faces.

The first day of the trip was wonderful. We set off at daybreak, which at that time of year, that far north, does not hit until after ten A.M. We traveled the ring road that circles the country—fourteen hundred kilometers from Reykjavík to Egilsstaðir to Akureyri, then back around to Reykjavík—rough, jagged, glorious country of glaciers, geysers, fjords, ancient lava flows, waterfalls, and eruptions of steam. Our first night on the road we stayed in a farmhouse about three hundred kilometers east of the capital, heading the next morning to Egilsstaðir on the country's east coast. The second day of the trip was more of the same. Absolutely perfect. Glorious winter scenes and no traffic. We ate Arctic char dragged that day from the sea, which even topped the fresh puffin we had eaten the day before.

We could not have been happier.

And then came day three.

Leaving Egilsstaðir, we set off across a mountain pass toward the northern town of Akureyri. Conditions became treacherous almost immediately. A light snow quickly turned into a driving, blinding, heavy Icelandic blizzard. Darkness fell in the middle of the afternoon. The meter pos

disappeared, I guessed wrong one time too often, drove off the road, and we came to a sudden stop in a snowbank. ~~Jumping out of the car, thigh-deep in snow, we shoveled to clear the tires, but new snow replacing the old, rapidly outpaced us.~~ It was soon apparent that we were going nowhere.

Soaking wet and shivering, we were rescued a few hours later. A passing truck driver had notified authorities that these hopeless Americans were trapped in the snow. The police showed up, followed by a flatbed truck with a winch. They got the Mercedes up onto the road, we secured it, and we started back to town in the police car—which was when things really turned dangerous. Our driver nearly got us killed along the way. Apparently, he was the town's only policeman. While he was rescuing us, an airplane, caught in the blizzard, crashed at the local airport, and because the policeman was racing to get there, we skidded off the road a few times.

By then Paige had just about lost it.

The rescue squad came as we were about to set off, and the man in charge said, "We'll go with you this time. You're guests in our country. These are conditions you are unfamiliar with. We'll see you over the mountain."

Our arrival in the country had been big news to start with, since a country of only 270,000 people does not have much news in January. Our dawn departure three days earlier had attracted numerous tourists and had been widely covered by the local media. So naturally, our rescue was all over the press. News reports portrayed us as nutty Americans trying to drive around Iceland in January. It was not going to look good if we got killed. So when we set out across the mountain two days later, we were escorted by the rescue squad in its big-time, all-terrain, four-wheel-drive vehicle, custom made to go anywhere in Iceland in the worst conditions conceivable. There was nothing this machine could not do, nobody it could not rescue.

Until the rescue squad drove it off the mountain.

We had to rescue the rescue squad.

You can imagine the Icelandic press. The story played better than the original rescue. Here were these hapless American tourists, up against the Icelandic winter, and they had to rescue the rescue squad. And we had it all on videotape. Which naturally I shared with the media. The tape shows me shoveling snow as fast as I can, trying to save Iceland's experts.

And it shows Paige having second thoughts.

Not five days into the trip, Paige was in shock, literally—ashen-faced, quivering, panicked—showing the clinical symptoms of shock. There she was on videotape, thinking, "Even the rescue squad is a disaster." All the warnings about bandits in Russia and malaria in Africa had not prepared her for this.

I had been around the world before, and I knew that this, our first predicament, was not going to be our last.

"We were trapped in a blizzard, we survived, that's part of the adventure," I told her, exhilarated by our escape.

"We didn't save ourselves," she said. "Thank God the rescue squad came along."

"We're alive," I said. "We made it. That's part of the excitement."

"Excitement, Jim?" she said. "There I was, thinking, 'This is the guy I'm trusting my life to, and he doesn't know how to drive. What on earth am I doing?' There I was, stuck in two feet of snow wearing tennis shoes in an Arctic blizzard."

"That," I said, "is what's so much fun about going around the world."

Paige did not quite feel that way.

We made it all the way around Iceland, spending two weeks in the country. We met with President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, and Paige had more questions of him than I did, specifically on women

issues affecting Iceland. While I toured the stock exchange, she interviewed women business owners. The head of a modeling agency pointed out a fact of local demographics that we found illuminating: that despite the image Iceland has around the world for being home to numerous blonds, it actually has more brunets per capita than any of the other four Scandinavian countries. Icelanders are the descendants of Irish slaves brought by the Vikings to Scandinavia a thousand years ago. There are very few true xanthochroids on the island.

In Iceland we discovered a country in the midst of enormous change. There were young people everywhere we went. The streets, bars, and restaurants all were packed with kids. Well over half the population of Iceland is under thirty years old. People under fifty are heavily represented in positions of influence in the country. Iceland, demographically, is one of the four youngest countries in the world, and that alone will lead to the most dramatic changes in the way it is run after centuries of isolation.

Because agriculture is still heavily protected and there are high tariffs on imported foodstuffs, basic necessities are currently so expensive that many people have to work two or three jobs to maintain their living standard. But the country is becoming more urban. A majority of the population now lives in greater Reykjavík. With fewer and fewer farmers to protect, price supports are much harder for politicians to justify. Subsidizing food production on a volcanic island that is contiguous to the Arctic Circle is perceived by youthful voters as an increasingly ludicrous extravagance. Quotas governing the wild fishery are also being reexamined. Restrictions on foreign investment, especially in the energy sector, have condemned the country to little development in that very lucrative resource as well.

The same outdated thinking behind the protection of those industries is directed at safeguarding the nation's cultural heritage. Iceland was a Danish colony for hundreds of years, and it is still mandatory for all schoolchildren there to study Danish as a second language. Ponder that for a minute. Denmark is a nation of five million people, so there are maybe seven million people on earth who speak Danish. Doing so is hardly a competitive advantage in today's world, and forcing kids to study the language clearly helps hold Iceland back. Their children, you can be sure, will not learn Danish; they will learn English, Spanish, Mandarin, or Cantonese.

We would run into this again and again, everywhere in the world—in Ireland, for example, where all schoolchildren are required to learn Gaelic, or Irish as they call it now. Who in the world speaks Gaelic? Why are they not learning German or some dialect of Chinese? If there are people dying to learn Gaelic, let them do it, but making it compulsory leads to a dead end. When they are thirty-five years old, all Gaelic will get them is a job washing dishes. Irish politicians are now using Gaelic as a form of protectionism—another dead end. The novelist Roddy Doyle was teaching English in Ireland but was assessed on his Irish if he wanted to keep his job. One must speak Irish to get a job at Aon Lingus now—not very conducive to attracting talent.

The sad fact of the matter is that sometime within the next hundred years there may be only about thirty languages left in the world—and Gaelic and Danish will probably not be among the survivors. It may be horrible that Gaelic is disappearing, but the world has already lost hundreds of languages. Take Cornwall on the southwest coast of England. The last person who spoke Cornish died fifty years ago. Are we going to go back and teach everyone Cornish? There are a lot of native American languages and a lot of African languages that have disappeared. It is nothing to celebrate. But if people were sitting around still speaking them, they would be even worse off than they are.

People who fight change are fighting inevitability itself. Think of all the great cities and great civilizations throughout history. The great city of Carthage, home of Hannibal—gone. It is nothing but a memory, an excavation site. Families, tribes, corporations and nations, races, languages, entire civilizations—gone. I am not applauding it. It would be wonderful, and enriching to us all, if the Aztecs were still here. I am sure the Maya would love to be what they once were. But cutting yourself

off from the world and fighting the forces of history are not going to protect you from the fate that those civilizations suffered.

In 1962, Burma was the richest country in Asia. The army decided: We do not need the rest of the world, we are closing the door. Since then, of course, Burma, present-day Myanmar, has been a disaster in nearly every way. In 1957, Ghana was the richest country in the British Empire, richer than England itself. Promptly upon the country's achieving independence, the great liberator, Kwame Nkrumah, closed the country, saying, "What do we need the British for?" Seven years later the country was bankrupt. Two hundred years ago, Ethiopia did the same thing.

Poor Copernicus was condemned for claiming that the earth was not the center of the universe. The Catholic Church made him recant.

You can take a similar approach today—tell an Icelandic kid that he has to learn Danish—but you are not doing your country any good, and you are not going to stop the wind of change from sweeping over you. History is replete with examples of nations that paid the price for ignoring reality.

One of the more visible changes the world is undergoing right now is the end of the age of the empire builders. Over the past three hundred years, thanks to technological advances, countries tended to grow bigger and bigger. That tendency is reversing. There are about two hundred countries in the world today. Over the next three to five decades, there will be three hundred or four hundred. Many have already begun to disintegrate. The Soviet Union is now fifteen countries. Yugoslavia is now six. Czechoslovakia is now two, Ethiopia two. Somalia? Who knows? Many of us have heard of the Basque independence movement in Spain, but who realized that three other regions of the country—Catalonia, Castilla, and Navarre—also have separatist movements? And along comes East Timor. In conjunction with globalization, we are seeing tribalization. While we are dancing to Madonna, drinking Pepsi, and driving Toyotas, people are reaching out for something they can understand and control. The emergence of smaller nations from the ashes of collapsing empires may lead to wars but need not necessarily do so. If borders remain open to trade and migration, we will all be better off.

Evidence of the trend is visible in Europe but is even more apparent beyond it, in Africa and especially in Asia. It is in Asia, the crucible of some of the world's oldest civilizations, that many of the more immediate changes of the new millennium are taking place. And Paige and I were eager to get there.

**YOUNG
TURKS**

WE SPENT A MONTH crossing Europe, starting in the United Kingdom and driving southeast to the Black Sea. Waiting for the car in Edinburgh, less than two weeks into our trip, Paige, having survived an Icelandic blizzard, came down with a horrible case of food poisoning after eating at a five-star restaurant. On the road for a full three years, touring the more remote, primitive regions of the planet eating what we could find along the way, Paige would suffer serious food poisoning a total of three times. In each case her falling ill would result from eating at a five-star restaurant.

From Scotland, we drove to Northern Ireland. And I very much liked what I found there. The pubs were mobbed, and talking to the kids was encouraging as well as informative. They do not have all the hang-ups about Protestants and Catholics that are typical of their elders. The Easter Uprising means nothing to them. And when they look ahead, to the future, these kids look to Europe—not London or Dublin—for inspiration.

The changes I saw coming in Northern Ireland were more than merely conjectural. A lot of people are currently investing there. Prosperity, against the efforts of certain entrenched interests, appears to be breaking out. Foreign investors believe in the peace that is promised by the present cease-fire. The throwbacks of Sinn Fein, who are invested in war, are swimming against the current. Companies are moving into the country with jobs, and it is employment, not war, for which everybody is mobilizing.



Ireland is the only country in the European Union not suffering a fertility crisis

Convinced that peace was on the horizon, I said to Paige, “Let’s buy some land.”

Successful investing means getting in early, when things are cheap, when everything is distressed, when everyone is demoralized. On the theory that a rising tide lifts all ships—that even if you are not very smart you are going to do well, if only in spite of yourself—I looked into real estate in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately (for me, not the Irish) I was not the first one to think of doing so. To make a killing, you really need to get in during a time of despair. In Ireland there is little despair.

The Republic of Ireland itself is a European Tiger. It is booming (although it is in debt). Since the onset of the potato famine in the middle of the nineteenth century, Irish have been leaving the country or have been until now. Now, after 150 years of emigration, Ireland is suddenly playing host to a significant influx of immigrants. The Irish themselves are returning, and foreigners are moving in—Europeans, Americans, multinational companies—they are all building factories in Ireland. Also, thanks to a change in the tax laws, there is a computer boom under way.

One thing I learned from traveling around the world is that when you pull into a large, unfamiliar city, traveling overland, the best and easiest thing to do is to get a taxi to lead you to your hotel. Dublin was the first such city into which we drove. Paige, who was driving, insisted that to find our hotel, no taxi driver was necessary. She could follow the map. We turned down one street ... it was a dead end. Another ... it was a one-way street.

“It doesn’t say one way on the map,” Paige explained.

We drove in circles. And we fought.

“A taxi driver will know exactly where the hotel is,” I argued.

“A taxi is a waste of money and time.”

“It will save us time,” I said.

Finally, after two hours, she relented. We got a taxi. And we followed it. From then on—when we got to London, when we got to Berlin—it was Paige who said, “Let’s get a taxi.”

In England we stocked up on supplies—sleeping bags, camping equipment, guidebooks, maps. It was the last time for a long time we would be able to get some of this stuff, our last shot at a decent selection of printed material written in English. One of my former students, John Durrell, gave us a going-away dinner of fine English lamb washed down with Château Margaux in the very room at the Reform Club where Jules Verne's Phileas Fogg began and ended his fictional journey in *Around the World in Eighty Days*. In Frankfurt, I visited a few financial folks. I toured the stock exchange, talked to a lot of people, and what I heard was far too much optimism and “New Economy” hype to merit an investment. Driving through Austria, we hit a second blizzard—the worst to hit the area in many decades, we were told, which was the only kind we seemed destined to hit—and made it through the mountains just before they closed the roads.

Having not yet driven beyond the geographical confines of the European Union, we had not yet really crossed a border. When we reached Hungary on February 11, crossing behind the old Iron Curtain into what was once known as the Eastern Bloc, Paige got her first taste of a real-world border crossing. The border guards were not as polite as the preacher of her Baptist church in North Carolina. These were guys with submachine guns. They did not say, “Yeah, we remember you, Paige. You were Miss Junior Miss” or anything remotely like that. And Paige was indignant at the treatment she received.

Budapest, once a center of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, is a glorious, beautiful city, a city essentially frozen in time. Nobody has built anything significant in a century, and all the old structures still stand. The entire city could serve as a museum. Little has changed in a hundred years; the country has been nothing but broke. They lost the First World War, they lost the Second, and then the Communists moved in after that. Budapest is the physical expression of a historical moment—the high-water mark of a great, rich culture, gone. The Austro-Hungarian Empire has disappeared; the Habsburgs in powdered wigs and white gloves no longer dance to the strains of Mozart rising over the Danube.

Our plan had been to go from Hungary to Turkey by way of Romania and Bulgaria. But the weather was horrible, the terrain was mountainous, and the second-rate roads would be hazardous. It was the dead of February, and we were no strangers now to the impact of sudden blizzards. Our only alternative was to go through Yugoslavia, the two most prominent features of which were a well-paved motorway, a toll road, running north to south, which we found encouraging, and a recent outbreak of war, running in the same general direction, which we did not. We decided to take our chances.

Yugoslavia presented the first border at which we were charged extra fees. Having traveled extensively, I knew that when one was charged extra money, there would usually be extra forms to fill out. I was paying little attention—the fees were minimal, I was expecting them—though they did take Paige by surprise. Another border, another lesson. But Paige was not the only one who discovered something that day.

In payment of the fees in question, the border guards refused to take dinars.

This caught my attention.

We were crossing the border into Yugoslavia, and the border guards would not accept Yugoslav money—they would not accept their own currency.

Curious to see what would happen next, we headed down the motorway, a government toll road manned by the military. We did not want to stop. And then it happened again. The toll taker, a Yugoslav soldier, would not take dinars, either—dinars we had purchased with dollars expressly for this purpose. They would accept dollars, deutsche marks, and Austrian schillings, but not their own currency. Now I knew the country was really in trouble. In most places around the world, the currency is like a thermometer. It may not tell you what is going on, but it tells you that *something* is going on.

and you know a country is falling apart when even the government will not accept its own currency.

By the time night fell, we were in Niš, headquarters of the Serbian Army's southern command, not much farther from Kosovo than we were from the Bulgarian border. Of course, the hotel would not accept the local currency either. Or credit cards. The proprietors knew, and I knew, that with the U.S. sanctions that were in place, they were not going to get paid. So we had to pay for everything in cash. But not their cash. We spent some of our dinars on fuel, wasted some on incidentals, and dumped the remainder on the black market as we crossed into Bulgaria.

That night, we were awakened by what I knew to be small-arms fire.

"What's that?" asked Paige, almost talking in her sleep.

I lied. Being of the opinion, this early in the trip, that I may have a hysteric on my hands, I said, "Oh, they're moving furniture downstairs."

"Oh, okay," said Paige, and went back to sleep.

I suppose I could have said, "Automatic weapons, darling. Sounds like a very small firefight ..."

I realized we really had to get out of there.

We left, heading into Bulgaria through scenic countryside. Paige drove, and I, as was my habit, drifted off to sleep. When I awoke, Paige painted me a word picture of the dramatic change in scenery that had revealed itself as we approached the Bulgarian capital, Sofia. The roadside was lined with prostitutes, she said. The young women, parading there, raised their skirts as drivers passed, advertising their wares. Until I saw it for myself, a dozen times in a dozen other places, I did not believe her.

A few days after we left Yugoslavia, in an expression of far greater dissatisfaction with things than any we might have offered, the United States started bombing the country.

As the gateway to Asia, Turkey was the place where I thought I might get my first good look at the future, observing some of the more dramatic economic and cultural changes overtaking the world. Expecting positive things to be happening there, I was keen to meet people and ask questions. Istanbul, in northwest Turkey, overlooking the Sea of Marmara, is one of the world's truly exotic cities: Istanbul I had been there a couple of times before, most recently on my motorcycle trip, and I was eager to share it with Paige. In whatever era, whether as Byzantium, Constantinople, or present-day Istanbul, the ancient city on the Bosphorus has always been fascinating.

We drove into Istanbul on the day Abdullah Öcalan, the Kurdish rebel leader sought by the Turkish government, was captured in Sudan. Tanks and armored personnel carriers patrolled the streets, and jumpy Turkish soldiers, automatic weapons at the ready, stood everywhere, prepared to respond to almost certain demonstrations on the part of the nation's Kurds, who represent 20 percent of Turkey's population.

Turkey is where Europe and Asia cleave—in both, mutually opposed, meanings of the word. The Bosphorus is where the continents geographically split and culturally embrace, and nowhere is the result more evident than in Istanbul. Once the ancient Greek city of Byzantium, it is the site on which the Roman Emperor Constantine, in A.D. 330, built his empire's eastern capital, naming Constantinople. With the fall of Rome, the city continued as the capital of the Byzantine Empire. It was the major center of eastern Christianity until it fell to the Turks and their Ottoman Empire in 1453. It was officially renamed Istanbul in 1930, two years before Turkey joined the League of Nations.

In our stay in Istanbul, we met numerous people who clearly took their identity from the West and considered themselves Europeans. In this same cosmopolitan city, the largest in Turkey, we watched people sacrifice goats on the side of the road. We dined one night with three successful businessmen, rich, well-educated Turks, and their wives. One of the men was at pains to explain that he and his wife

being Europeans, had nothing in common with those people we had seen on the roadside, people I clearly identified with Asia.

“We’re not evil, wily Turks, or whatever your image of us is in the West,” his wife added somewhat defensively.

We had first met this couple in the United States through Murat Köprülü, an American friend of Turkish heritage. When we were introduced in New York, I suggested we all go uptown for a unique American experience and took the visiting Turkish couple to a Harlem nightclub, where we danced to big band music. Our dinner in Istanbul was their way of returning the favor. In lieu of an orchestra, the Turkish nightclub featured belly dancers, the first of whom seemed particularly attracted to me. She directed all of her attention my way, dancing right in front of me, for what seemed like a very long time. What I had not noticed, of course, was that every other patron had slipped money into her skirt as she danced by. She finally danced away, no doubt resigned to the fact that I was a cheapskate. An easily understandable faux pas on my part—she was the first belly dancer I had seen up close—and I was forgiven with a smile when, once I realized what was happening, I stood up, crossed the floor, and did as tradition demanded. (This experience would only half prepare me for the belly dancer we would run into in Baku on the Caspian Sea.)

It was Nuri Colakoglu, our host, during the course of the evening, who informed me that there were three Turkish corporations that were the largest of their kind in Europe. I have to admit I was stunned. One was a manufacturer of white goods, or household appliances; another made ceramic goods. The third, Sabanci, a manufacturer of tire cord fabric and industrial nylon, was the largest company of its kind in the world. For Turkey to have one, much less three, European industry leaders was startling. I had to confess that I was guilty of harboring that same outdated image of Turkey that the man’s wife was so defensive about.

You do not accomplish something like that in a week or two. It takes brains, the accumulation of capital, and a sound educational system. Something was going on in Turkey, and I decided to look into investing there.

Later Paige and I had dinner with Axel Arendt and his wife, Uta. Axel, the director of Mercedes-Benz Turkey, told me that Mercedes was manufacturing buses there.

“You can get Mercedes quality in Turkey?” I asked.

“Absolutely,” he replied. “The same quality we get in Germany.”

Quality as high as in Germany. I made him repeat it. Again, I admit, I was stunned.

“And we get the same quality much, much cheaper,” he said. “We’re adding capacity here.”

I was speaking with an executive from Mercedes-Benz, with its worldwide reputation for very expensive, extremely high quality, precision engineering. And he was telling me that the same high quality that comes out of Germany is now coming out of Turkey. Cheaper.

My enthusiasm for investing continued to grow, until, I suppose you could say, etymology intervened. Passing through Germany, we had ordered a car cover to be made for the G-Wagen. It had not been ready by the time we left, so I had it sent to me in Turkey. It arrived at the airport in Istanbul delivered by DHL.

“Have it sent over here to the hotel,” I said.

“We can’t just bring it to you,” said the caller from the courier service. “You have to come to the airport to get it.”

And that is when the derivation of the word “Byzantine” departed the realm of the merely semantic. Redeeming the car cover at Turkish Customs was an intricate mosaic of official procedure. I was forced to spend several hours visiting several offices, purchasing more than a dozen stamps, and buying \$75 worth of permits for a tarp that cost no more than \$150, as though I were importing it for sale. I went from office to office, filling out countless forms, all for a piece of rubberized cloth,

custom-made car cover that was of no use to anyone but me, that I was taking out of the country. The next day, as luck would have it, my battered laptop arrived from New York. And back to the airport I went. This time I had to see twenty-two separate officials, some of them three and four times ... more stamps, more forms, back and forth ... and obtain several dozen documents. After two days in a row dealing with Turkish bureaucracy, I thought twice about investing in Turkey.

Still I could not ignore the strong indicators of economic progress. With the fall of communism and the opening up of the old Central Asian republics, Turkey is in a unique position to exploit the vast new market emerging on its eastern border, far better situated than any western European country to do so. As part of the Ottoman Empire, Central Asia was once controlled by Turkey. Their language, religion, history, and cultures are similar. In Turkmenistan, I would discover that the Mercedes dealer was a young Turk—indeed in both meanings of the word, having gone there to exploit the new economic frontier. From the Black Sea to Tashkent, as we traveled east through the land of the old Islamic caliphates, we would find Turks everywhere we went, filling the vacuum created by the fall of the Soviet Union and the withdrawal of the Russians.

For decades Turkey has been trying to become part of the European Union. And as much as Turkey needs that to happen, Europe needs it more. The population of many European countries is aging in dramatic fashion. In Italy, for example, the following November, we would walk into restaurants and look around, and we would see no kids. Everybody was over fifty. The Italians have one of the lowest birthrates in the world. The same is true of much of the European Union.

A demographic time bomb is ticking all over Europe. If you are thinking of building a factory in Europe—in Germany or Spain, for example—think again. In five years you are going to suffer massive pension costs—social security, call it what you will—because the populace is so old. The government is not going to throw the country's old people out onto the street; the government is going to tax its companies, its workers, or both. And with only one or two workers for every retiree, costs are going to skyrocket.

Turkey, by contrast, is young, with seventy million people. It is almost as big as Germany in population-wise. Turks know how to manufacture efficiently, competently, and cheaply, and the European Union desperately needs them. Europe has to have its manufacturing done somewhere. And someone has to pay those pensions. Within the European Union there is free mobility of labor. If Turkey becomes a member, all the young Turks unable to find work at home can go to work for Siemens—pay taxes, donate to the pension fund, and support the aging Germans.

The younger the population of a country, the more open to change it is. A young population embraces change the way an older population reveres the past. One is not necessarily better than the other—and there is nothing particularly revealing in pointing any of this out—unless, of course, you are thinking of the future or thinking of investing.

It is one of the reasons I am so optimistic about Iran, a country where I do have small investments and one I was eager to visit on this trip. Iran is a young country. Right now Iranians are having as many children as possible. Forget about the mullahs. The majority of the population is happy to ignore what some seventy-eight-year-old guy tells them to do. I cannot think of a nation in history where masses of young people have stood up and said, "We like it the way it is. We like it the way it *used* to be even better than the way it is now. Let's go back to the old days."

One reason America became a wealthy country was because it kept constantly adding new markets. We called them states. People went west, filled up a given region, and we added that territory to the Union. That is just adding new markets. The United States became a bigger and bigger market all the time. Companies that were manufacturing horseless carriages or stagecoaches or cars, or whatever they happened to be making, were constantly selling to a bigger market. That is what Europe has done, of course. The European Union remained strong as it continued adding markets. It started off as s

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