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Essay topic: Travel

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Finding Ourselves While Getting Lost



Travel revealed how we'd handle life's curve balls. Adversity proved our "couple's mettle".

In 1971, my boyfriend Michael and I worked at the Concord Hotel in the Borscht Belt of the Catskill Mountains, earning enough to travel in Europe for a year.

Off we went on our Air Icelandic, \$165.00, open-return, round-trip tickets. From Luxembourg, we trained to Zurich, staying in a nun-run hostel, passing as "cousins" to allow us to remain in the same room. Thank you Frommer's Europe On \$5 a Day!

Meeting Michael's Europed-out, Cousin Bart, we all camped in Grindelwald before he headed to Mt. Everest. (Bart got sick at base camp.). We took over his 1956, with

a '63 engine, McGovern sticker on the window, VW Camper that would be our turtle shell for our expedition.

A giant paper map and Frommer's guidebook served as our navigation system.

In the days before credit cards or cellphones, we communicated home via postcards and letters, picking up our mail at American Express offices. This anonymity was perfect for avoiding family influence. What would Michael do with the rest of his life? Michael's father wanted him to be an attorney. We would have starved. We were also testing the waters of our relationship.

“Smokey”, named because of her several small fires, broke down in many picturesque locations, forcing us, as we awaited parts from Germany, to meet locals and fellow travelers, and explore our environs.

One evening pulling into a campground we decided to set up Smokey's canvas tent. With no provided instructions, we were unsuccessful. After an hour-and-a-half of now heated argument and frustration, we realized it was three-sided, attaching to the open doors of the bus, not a stand-alone tent. An English couple wandered over revealing that watching us had provided the most entertainment of their caravanning experiences. They did offer to trade novels with us, a practice we'd continue to enjoy during our adventure. Our spatial skills have remained challenged!

Following the sun south, early one chilly morning, we arrived in Granada. Wearing parkas, we left Smokey and went off to explore this history-laden city. As the day lengthened, the sun warmed and we sweltered in our heavy gear. In late afternoon, deciding to return to the bus, we couldn't remember where we'd left her! Four hours

later, and even more heated, we finally reunited. We realized what a safe haven Smokey had become.

Occasionally, to enjoy a warm shower, we'd splurge on a hotel room. We luxuriated, well not quite, as there was no hot water, *Amanha*, we were promised, at Pousada Castelo Óbidos. On an evening walk in Óbidos, this walled Portuguese city, a lame dog painfully tottered by.

What about becoming a veterinarian? You're a Sagittarius. That might be a perfect profession? Maybe you could start right now and help that poor dog? Ah, youth!

Over the course of our journey, this idea took hold.

Months later, heading north, I was ready to stop traveling. Michael wanted more. An argument ensued and he rushed to get me to a train in England. We'd go our separate ways. Luckily, we got lost, missing the train. (We were both secretly happy about this.)

Instead, Michael proposed.

We'd see Scotland, return to London, sell Smokey, and go home. Smokey broke down in Scotland. A mechanic, who'd take her fishing since she couldn't be licensed in this right hand-steering country, bought her. Smokey got her wish too.

Announcing, by letter, our plans to marry, my future mother-in-law wrote back, *Well, you've HAD the honeymoon.*

By train and ferry we returned to Luxembourg, stayed in a hostel, and headed to a travel office. At the Summer Olympics in Munich, Black September, a Palestinian terrorist group, had just murdered eleven Israeli athletes. Panicked travelers were rushing to leave Europe. It would take several days to get tickets home.

Travel had matured us. Adversity had strengthened our bond. Meeting others had expanded us. Together, we were ready to take on the world.