

Four bags and a bus

July 11, 1996

The heat is intense and the breeze coming off the sea offers no relief, it simply blows dust and debris into swirling eddies at our feet. The open-to-the-sky bus station is a crush of jostling, sweaty travelers; noisy, idling diesel engines; and competing hawkers calling destinations.

“Fethiye, Fethiye, Fethiye!” shouts the driver as we pull our four overloaded bags to the side of the midibus.

“Göcek?” we ask. “Göcek, yes,” he confirms.

Gratefully, we turn our luggage over to the driver’s assistant and climb aboard. The bus looks almost new and a sign indicating air conditioning immediately cheers me. Underway, though, it’s clear the air conditioning is more imaginary than real and that the weak overhead vents and open bus doors will be the only source of relief. The seats in this little bus are narrow so I’m squished between Ray and the window with the computer bag and two hats at my feet. Why did I bring two hats?

It’s so hot I can’t stand anything touching me. I elbow Ray, whose five-foot, ten-inch frame suddenly seems oppressively large.

“Move over!” I plead, but he also has a bag and a hat at his feet, and nowhere to move.

“Will you just relax?” he says. I grit my teeth and try to shake some air into my sweat-soaked tee-shirt, and then I close my eyes against the bright, bright light and wonder what I’m doing on a bus in Turkey.

Pounding nails into clouds? Coming here sometimes seemed as senseless but opportunity, in the shape of a furnished apartment in a sunny coastal village, had presented itself and we couldn’t resist. I was 54 and Ray was 57 and if we’d had a banker she would no doubt have been appalled, a financial adviser agitated, a retirement counselor aghast at our precipitousness. None of those specialists stood nearby, however, and financial security was ours to risk. We examined our stress-filled lives, found them increasingly constricted and stale, and thought the risk worth taking. Secure tedium might be prudent but freedom looked like a lot more fun.

Fixating on freedom we quit our jobs, sold our 100-year-old house and four-year-old car, shared out the family heirlooms, found a haven for the cat, and jammed the rest of our belongings into a 12x20 storage unit. It was tough to leave friends and family but my parents, in their mid-eighties, graciously gave their blessing and our daughter promised to visit in December.

Turkey itself was a known and appealing quantity in this freedom vs. security equation. Our love of travel had brought us here previously—for three months in 1987 and three weeks in 1993—and we were eager to renew acquaintance with the country and with old friends.

We waved goodbye to Oregon on a cool July morning and arrived in Turkey in the middle of a summer heat wave, exhausted from the strain of packing and leaving, and the days of travel, but happy to be where we were. We had no income, but no debts; no home, but no responsibilities. Now we had only our suitcases—two bags each—a camera and a laptop computer to worry about. We had, in the jargon of the day, simplified.

The laptop computer is resting on my feet now, heavy in its black canvas case stuffed with books, spare disks, and accumulated “important” documents. I shift its weight, move the hats again, and stare out the window. The little bus bumps over the narrow, two-lane highway, its low-powered diesel engine straining as we creep up the curving hills and humming efficiently as we race down the other side. During the slow, uphill climb, the hot air congeals and presses heavily on my bare limbs. On the downhill side it’s obligingly carried away by the hot gusts that stream in through the open front door and out the open back. As we and the other passengers lurch and gasp between hot, jelling air and

sweeping blasts of hot wind, we are accompanied by the dissonant wail of Turkish pop. This is not restful music. Maybe the heat has affected it too; the notes sound melted and they're oozing from the bus speakers.

Still climbing we chug past roadside stands selling pine nuts and "bee's milk," as the attendant moves sideways down the narrow aisle offering water to drink or lemon-scented cologne to splash on our hands, face, and neck. This is all the relief we're going to get, it appears, for the cooler temperatures we had hoped to find in the mountains don't materialize, and even the pine trees languish and droop.

At Muğla the bus makes a 20-minute stop, and we stretch our legs in the shade of a building and buy another bottle of cold water. Back aboard we turn south, and with the change in direction my mood improves. This is new territory, and the new vistas are, as always, revitalizing. The architecture too has changed. The flat-roofed, white-cube houses of the Bodrum peninsula and ancient Caria have been left behind and we've arrived in ancient Lycia, a land of white bungalows and red-tiled roofs. The landscape has changed too. It's greener, there are more trees, and the terrain is steeper and more rugged. From Mùgla the road winds steeply down a mountainside, and through pine-covered slopes I glimpse the highway traversing a flat plain far below, and in the distance the Mediterranean Sea. Definitely new territory.

As we descend toward the plain the air grows damper, heavier, and hotter. Farms and villages now line the highway and our progress slows, interrupted by stops and starts as a steady stream of passengers boards and departs. With each stop the bus grows hotter and my patience shorter, though I love Turkey's slow, relaxed pace. It is, in fact, one reason we succumbed so quickly to the lure of spending a year here. Exhaustion opens the door to apprehension and my tired brain recycles its worries: our rent has been paid 12 months in advance and we're going to a place we've never been, to live in an apartment seen only in photos. Did we act too hastily? Are we being foolish? What if it turns out to be a miserable place? What if we hate it?

I look at Ray, intently watching traffic through the bus's front window. His face shows the strain of the last few weeks but he's engrossed in the sights surrounding us, obviously enjoying the flashes of life and color that flow past the windows. He's as eager a traveler as I am, certainly a more outgoing one, and I know he's looking forward to the year, and to the cheerful hospitality we've always found here.

Reassured, I watch as we roll past groves of orange and lemon trees, past farmhouses and fields and villages. Eventually the bus shifts into low gear and crawls up a last high range of hills, and as it starts down the other side we catch a glimpse of "our" village far below. Then, abruptly, we're there, climbing stiff-legged from the bus, warily taking in the bright heat, the humidity, and the unfamiliar surroundings. We collect our bags and watch as the bus—which I'm suddenly, unaccountably fond of—pulls back onto the highway. Then we turn to see Tom, our new landlord, strolling toward us.

He's tall and smiling and we're happy to see him, but the scene feels disorienting. The movie reel has slipped, or a page has been pulled from our animation sequence. For a split second everything is remarkably clear and glisteningly brilliant. Then the fog of exhaustion settles again and I hear Tom asking about our bags. Do we want a taxi? No, we can manage. With his help we gather our things for the last leg of the journey and trudge off together toward our new home.

We half-pull, half-carry the bags down a gently sloping street, turn left at a taxi stand, and plod over a flat, bumpy dirt track past a large, half-poured concrete slab, toward the white, three-story building that is our goal. The closer we get the more discouraged I feel, and by the time we reach the rough cement front steps and the unfinished hallway, with hanging rebar and gaping plaster holes, holding a smile on my face is an effort.

"This is not important," I tell myself. "It's just how things are."

Our introduction to Tom's wife, Emma, and to the apartment, passes in a blurred haze of exhaustion, trepidation, and relief at having finally arrived. Neighbor's names, oven instructions, and shopping advice all melt into the bottomless pit of what was my memory. Finally, after arranging to meet later for dinner, our hosts return to their home for the coming year, a 45-foot sailboat they are taking east toward the Pacific.

When the door closes behind them I immediately burst into tears. Recalling the extensive view from our Bodrum apartment ten years earlier—a vast, uninhibited expanse of mountains, castle, harbor, sea, and in the distance the Greek

island of Kos—I feel deeply disappointed. No one had mentioned that in Göcek we would have a view of a construction site, with its attendant noise and dust. The apartment is modern, light, and comfortably furnished, just as the photographs showed. But it is still chock full of their personal belongings. How can we ever make it feel like our home, surrounded by so many of their things? Tables are covered with knickknacks and mementos; a collection of hats and stuffed animals rests on the hall étagère, and a wall of family photographs dominates the office. When I look about and see a year of endlessly dusting someone else's treasures my tears go to flood stage.

Ray, who's as tired as I am, is now faced with a near-hysterical wife. He gives me one of those everything-will-be-all-right hugs, and says, "Relax; this place will feel like home in no time—you know it will. Right?"

"Right," I mutter reluctantly into his chest, adding, for the umpteenth time, "Do you think we're doing the right thing?"

"Absolutely," he says, adding with down-to-earth finality, "Let's unpack. I need a shower."