

Chapter Twelve

Sex and the Single Traveler Or Notes From a Guy Who Isn't Getting Any

"A gruesome scene,
It happened so fast,
Next week, they remove the cast..."
--"Watch Your Footwork" from Walt Disney's "World's Happiest Millionaire."



Love me, touch me, hold me...or not

When I heard two women had talked a man into joining them in the kissing contest at my hostel's Valentine's Day Dance, I was excited. After all, it was the realization of almost every heterosexual guy's fantasy and I thought just watching it would be exciting, but I was wrong.

Instead, it was just plain revolting.

I'm not sure why. Maybe it was because the men were dressed like women and the women dressed like men, perhaps it was because I was far away from a girlfriend I left behind to go on this trip, or it could have been because I had been hanging out in hostels too long.

That's one of the hazards of hostelling. Staying at cheap lodging does bring you closer to the action on the streets than a luxury hotel, but backpacker hotels have the disadvantage of being their own subcultures. In much the same way that it's possible to go to luxury inns all over the world and not really see the places you're visiting, it's also possible to get so caught up with the backpacker lifestyle that you never experience local culture.

At least, that's what happened to me when I stayed at Enfield House during my first stop in Melbourne. From the moment I caught the late night shuttle from the Greyhound bus station until my third day, I was sucked into the vortex of the backpacker's universe, to the exclusion of all else. I did spend a few hours of day two wandering the streets of St. Kilda, a seaside resort neighborhood, but I never strayed more than a few blocks from home. I did stumble across a bakery that served emu tarts (which taste like a gamy, dark meat version of chicken pot pie), but then scrambled back to Enfield so I would have plenty of time to dress for the its annual Valentine's Day dance.

And I do mean dress. As in a nice, green polka dot number that went down to my knees. The reason was simple, really. Dressing in drag was required for entry.

Although I've never been feared making a fool of myself, I didn't really plan to attend the dance until I found myself in a Salvation Army "Opportunity Shop" -- the Australian equivalent of a charity thrift store -- to buy a dress. It was no easy task because Australian dress sizes are different there than American sizes. Men's sizes also differ so it didn't help when the employees told me that a certain woman's size was similar to, say, a man's size 20 because I didn't know what that size meant.

I drew the line at shoes and a purse. I believed that my new blue and grey L.L. Beane hiking boots were the perfect complement to the dress, and the color combination brought out the highlights in my leg hair and beard just fine, thank you. At least one of the women in the hostel was so distressed by my inability to accessorize that she insisted I use her party purse. It was just my color.

As odd and frightening as it sounds, many of the men in drag looked far more attractive than the women who weren't cross-dressing. In fact, one guy had done such a good job of putting on make-up, finding a well-fitted dress, and accessorizing that some of the less sober males were hitting on him. If I hadn't known better, I might have asked him out myself. He was just that damn good.



Dude looks like a lady...and lady looks like a dude

I wasn't looking to pick up someone at the dance, but I did get an offer. Two women whom I met on the Magic Bus offered to buy my dress. If I hadn't been planning to save it and send it to my girlfriend, I would have jumped at the chance. The only problem was I didn't know my girlfriend's size or how to ask her on the phone without saying, "Hey, would you like to wear a dress that I wore to a dance?"

Still, it was nice to know I was able to wear the frock to enough of an advantage that I could have sold it.

Maybe I missed my calling in life. Perhaps I should have been a super-model.

Elle MacPherson, eat your heart out!

I may have been too attractive, however. On my way out, a man standing on the sidewalk put his hand on my somewhat sunken chest, grabbed my nipples and yelled, "Hey, your chest is flat!" Even the women at the party felt the need to tell me I was flat chested. Now I know how women feel when they talk about objectification. This would have been the perfect come-uppance had I been one of those guys who judges women on their breast size; but, ironically, I'm not. I've never been able to figure out this fixation with size. I don't know about anyone else, but when I go out with a woman I date all of her, not just her breasts.

I've even done my best not to judge people based on their sexual preferences, which may be a good thing considering what happened the following day. After spending hours wandering, I returned to my dorm room to get something from my backpack, only to discover two guys "sleeping together." (For the life of me, I'll never know why people say that when no one's really sleeping.) Doing my utmost to make the best of a strange situation, I said hi, got what I needed, then walked out calmly as if nothing out of the ordinary were going on even though they had chosen to do this in the middle of the day in a room that sleeps 10. Although my girlfriend was half a world away, I wasn't jealous. Nor did I resent their right to do what they were doing. I just had a problem with their choice of location. After all, that's what couple rooms are for.

With all the people I was meeting every day, I didn't feel lonely. In fact, I didn't really miss my girlfriend most days. She was in the middle of her last semester of college and looking for a job back in Seattle, so she wouldn't have had much time for me had I stayed home. The only times I felt real pangs of longing were during our telephone conversations, which were less frequent, due to the difference in time zones and the difficulty in coordinating schedules. The conversations weren't bad, but the aftermath was brutal. The longer the trip grew, the more likely I was to fall into an emotional tailspin and drop into depression after the conversations ended.

She was the only person I regretted calling from the road. While my family and I may not have seen eye-to-eye during my long distance calls from the far corners of the earth, I never let what they said bother me, even if they occasionally questioned my judgement. It was easy to shrug off any wise remarks because they were thousands of miles away. Calls to friends always made me feel better when they were over, even when I was homesick and the person on the other end of the line wasn't happy with me because I hadn't written them. But that wasn't the case with the woman I left behind. The more I called, the more I wondered why I had done so, because unhappiness always followed.

Calling her my girlfriend may be misleading.

We didn't exactly break up when I left, but didn't swear undying love, either. As a compromise, we left each other with the freedom to date should we want, and agreed not to tell the other about romantic entanglements until sex entered the picture. At that point, we agreed we would have to call the whole thing off. I never planned to date anyone, it would have been too difficult on the road. It was just my way of protecting myself after a story my accountant told me.

In the summer between his final year of college and his first job he left his girlfriend behind and took a three-month trip to Europe with a friend. Before he left, they talked about moving in together once he returned. While he was on a train that had broken down just hours outside of Vienna he and his friend saw an American woman sitting by herself, crying, because she was afraid the friends who were supposed to meet her at the station wouldn't know about the delay and would leave her behind. Ever the nice guy, my once-and-future tax preparer and his friend asked if she wanted to join them in a card

game. The next thing he knew, the three of them had been traveling together two weeks and she wanted to sleep with him. She wasn't put off when he told her he was seeing someone.

"Come on, your girlfriend will never know," she said.

"Yes, but I'll know," he replied.

And that was that until he returned home and his parents met him at the airport. They dropped the bomb on the way home, saying, "Your girlfriend dropped off her key to your apartment two weeks ago," leaving him with memories of the one that got away.

Although my girlfriend and I had talked about her meeting me at my sister's wedding, and my visiting her family the following week -- during Thanksgiving, I wasn't taking chances. I mentioned the story and told her not to wait until I got back to tell me she met someone while I was gone. I also made the same promise. As a result, neither of us would miss the chance at a life-changing relationship on the mistaken belief that we still had a relationship with another person.

I suppose I could have waited until she graduated so she could go with me, but that wasn't the point of the trip. I had to do it on my own because I needed to know if I could survive by myself. I didn't want to be one of those people who always talks about going on a trip abroad and who never does it, a person who looks back and wonders what it would have been like. I also viewed this as my last blast of freedom before getting married -- even if I didn't get married to her. After all, I was 31 and it was getting to be time to settle down. I knew the relationship might not survive, but I was willing to take that risk.

There was another reason behind my going it alone. The trip was so important to me that I wanted to do everything I could to make sure it was a good one, or at least ensure that I could only blame myself if it went bad, and the only way to do that was to go solo. It was a question of self-preservation. I had not only heard stories about good relationships going bad on the road and ruining great trips, I had also been down this road several times before. The most notable example was when I traveled cross-country in a car with a girlfriend to attend a wedding in St. Louis, only to have her make my life a living hell the majority of the trip. She even left my suitcase on top of the car as we started the trip back to Seattle, strewing my clothes all across four lanes of traffic on Interstate 70 -- less than a mile outside of downtown St. Louis -- just moments before the start of rush hour. The carnage was unbelievable: underwear everywhere, shirts with tire tracks up their backs, and socks stuck in radiator grills. That wasn't even the worst part. No, what made it even more terrible was knowing that I would have to spend the rest of what turned out to be a two week return trip sharing the car with her. If I had been smart I would have left her and my luggage by the side of the road and driven home naked. Still, I made it clear to my girlfriend that I wouldn't have minded if she joined me on the road for a short period after graduation. I reasoned that, by then, we really would miss each other and it would have been a nice change of pace. A two-week visit seemed ideal. Anything more would be pushing it.

It already appeared to be a wise decision. I had already seen enough young couples in the throes of memorably ugly vacations that I was shocked when I ran into dating couples still getting along after weeks on the road.

There were fleeting moments when I wondered if my girlfriend at the time was the MISS RIGHT, however, but mostly, I tried not to think about it.

It was around this time that I ran into someone who had obviously spent way too much time thinking about love. It was a Friday night and I had decided to go to synagogue, but arrived late because I missed my bus. As I walked into the temple, however, I saw a woman who was just opening the door, and I asked her to wait so we wouldn't both interrupt the proceedings by opening the door twice. Once we

walked into the sanctuary we went our separate ways and didn't have a chance to talk until after the service was over.

"Where are you from?" she asked.

"The States," I said.

"I could tell that from your accent. Where in the states?"

"Seattle," I said. Fool that I am, I couldn't leave it at that. No, I had to say, "It's just a hell of a town." Even that would have been enough if I hadn't remembered the song lyric about Chicago and added, "Not to be confused with Chicago, which is also a hell of a town."

"Oh, my beloved is from Chicago," she responded.

Before I had a chance to say "that's nice," she reached into her purse and whipped out her handy, dandy purse photo album, flipped it open to a black-and-white picture of a ruggedly handsome man, then asked if I recognized him.

Considering how large Australia is, the question caught me by surprise. Coming from a country where the cities are so far apart, I figured this woman would have had a feel for the distance between the two cities. I was getting ready to use my hands to draw an air map of the states to show the distance between the cities when she flipped to a picture of a TV set with an image on it.

Suddenly, it all became very clear.

She was in love with Mandy Patinkin, the actor who played an arrogant cardiologist on the television show "Chicago Hope." I didn't have the heart to tell her he didn't live in Chicago, he was married, had children, and had probably never heard of her: but I knew that if I didn't do something soon I would be stuck there all night listening to her expound up on her torrid, imaginary love affair. Fortunately, just as she was starting to gather steam for a long singing of his praises, she spilled pineapple soda on the rabbi's prayer shawl. And I saw my opportunity and ran out into the streets laughing hysterically at my sudden, unexpected freedom.



**Mandy Patinkin,
Somebody in Australia loves you**

I don't know how I attract these people, but I seem to do so wherever I go. There are times I would almost swear I had a large, flashing neon sign on my chest saying, "ABUSE ME, GIVE ME GRIEF" because so many people love to come up to me and do so, especially people who don't know me.

Although I've looked in numerous mirrors, I still don't see it, but apparently everyone else on the planet can. Still, it's not a bad thing to have if you're an open backpacker with a good sense of humor. Sure, I meet a few wackos, but at least they haven't been dangerous -- yet.



David Volk
Project Runway Winner