

CHAPTER FOUR

Adventures in Hosteling

Wellington, the country's capital, is one of the many places worth a day stop. Unfortunately, I stayed three.

To hear the locals tell it, the city is known for its theatres. Since I love a good play or two, I stepped off the bus on Wednesday and made a reservation for a ferry to the South Island on Saturday. No one bothered to mention that the actors leave for a several-week holiday at the beginning of the year and that was the week I hit town. One play, a campy parody of "A Streetcar Named Desire" sounded interesting, but it didn't start until the day I left and closed the day before I returned to town on my way back to Auckland.

This run of unfortunate timing extended to every part of my visit in Wellington. When I went to see the capital it was being refurbished and I wasn't allowed in. The security guards did, however, let me watch a nifty video explaining New Zealand's form of government. (As I recall, it had something to do with the island nation being populated by five million sheep with one million under the impression they are human.) Oh boy.

There were pubs, of course, but bad things happen to me when I go into bars and pubs. One of the last times I was in one, for example, I had to get twelve stitches in my scalp when I hit my head on a low-hanging ceiling beam. Another time I ended up having to walk home a friend who was so drunk he proudly exclaimed, "I always point north! I've got a metallic thing in my head."

The only other form of entertainment left was shopping. The extremely high price of meat left me aghast until I realized a kilo is the equivalent of more than two lbs. Then, \$8 for fish didn't seem so bad. So I purchased about a quarter pound of fish and some vegetables and cooked them in the hostel where I was staying.

Like most of hostels, this one wasn't fancy, but it was cheap and friendly. While a decent hotel in Wellington cost around \$40 to \$50 US a night, a dorm room in a backpacker hotel/hostel was \$13 US. It meant sharing sleeping quarters with anywhere from two to 20 other backpackers and waiting in line for the bathroom in the morning, but it was worth the price. I could have spent a little more for a single room, but that seemed to defeat the purpose of staying in a hostel. As I see it, the whole point is to meet strange and unusual people from foreign and exotic lands... and kill them.

No, wait, I'm sorry, that's the Marines...

Most hostellers are nice, considerate people who would rather spend money seeing a place at ground level than fork out big bucks for a room they'll only be sleeping in anyway. So, they're willing to share rooms and occasionally stand in line for the shower. In most cases, it wasn't really a big trade-off because I met interesting people from all over the world. In Taupo, a Singaporean couple living in Sydney shared freshly cooked mussels with me, and in Waitomo I shared half a grapefruit with a Brazilian travel agent who had never tasted one before.

Hostels aren't risk-free, though. There have been thefts at even the best ones and loud parties and snoring roommates kept me awake at more than a few places along the road. I also had occasional run-ins with people like the young Korean man who asked me to marry him.

I think it was just a miscommunication.

He was from South Korea and he was going to start work the following day as an au pair on a nearby farm. Once I heard where he was from I told him I was thinking about visiting his country but was worried about the reports I had heard of famine. When I asked if it was a good idea to travel there, he didn't answer the question. Instead, he told me what a wonderful country his homeland was and how much most people enjoyed it.

Then he changed the subject rather abruptly.

"Are you married?" he asked me.

"No, I'm not. I delayed getting married so I could go on this trip," I told him.

Then, he leaned forward, looked at me earnestly and said, "Well, I want to get married."

It sounded like a proposal to me.

"You can't have me, I'm taken," I shot back.

While the story may be amusing, what happened later the same evening wasn't.

He not only snored but also had a bad cold. The combination of his loud snoring when he exhaled and his sniffles when he inhaled kept me awake all night, and made me as prickly as a pin-cushion in the morning. When I left to go sightseeing, I took solace knowing I wouldn't see him again because he was starting his job. My daydreams of a good night's sleep were crushed when I returned to the hostel and saw he was still there. Apparently, the job had been delayed a day. Out of frustration I went up to the dorm room to take an afternoon nap to catch up on the sleep I had missed and make up for the rest I wouldn't get later when the snore-fest began again. Unfortunately, he, too, wanted a nap and his snoring and sniffing kept me up again until I stormed out of the room and slammed the door.

Consequently, I was in a foul mood that evening when he asked me another strange question.

"Do I look like Double-0-7 to you?" he asked, referring to fictional British secret agent James Bond's infamous license to kill.

"NO," I said, as tersely as I could.

"Good, because I'm double 0-8," he shot back.

I can't say I was sorry to see him go.

Sleep deprivation gave way to homesickness and depression followed. Many fellow travelers warned me it would happen. As long as I made it past the initial loneliness, they said I would be able to go six months without feeling homesick. I missed Seattle, my friends, my girlfriend, my car, and people who spoke normal English. The mood lifted slightly when I saw someone I met on the Magic Bus, but my spirits plummeted later when I visited the capitol building and ended up watching the aforementioned film about the New Zealand government instead. The last time I saw a film so dull was my first day of work at a Baskin-Robbins in Columbia, Missouri where I had to watch a film that trained employees on proper scooping methods.

"Remember, round and regular, two-and-a-half ounces," the announcer on the ice cream film said.

For some reason, stopping at a grocery store, buying food and cooking it helped end my funk even though I accidentally incinerated the rice for my stir-fry dish. Just knowing the Korean James Bond-wannabe was gone was enough to send me to bed early to catch up on two night's worth of lost sleep. A scheduled early morning ferry departure also gave me added incentive to call it a night.