

The Adventures Of a Bus Truster

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IT IS BETTER, the Chinese say, to travel hopefully than to arrive, and that is what I like about busses. There are no inevitabilities about bus travel in Europe and the Middle East. It is not merely unpredictable but, on the whole, enchantingly so.

On the rare occasions aircraft do anything so interesting as fly off course, one is all too likely to be landed on a glacier clad in beachwear, which is not really very funny. The one-hour bus ride from Le Havre to Deauville, on the other hand, involved me recently in crossing the Seine by raft—which is.

ONE DAY in the summer of 1951, following the disappearance of Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, an important western diplomat who was touring Greece spent a couple of days in the remote coastal town where I was on holiday. He arrived in a diplomatic car but, eager to lap up local color, decided to return by bus. Accordingly, on what might well have become a historic dawn, he was wedged aboard the town's throbbing Olympian Flyer beside an Orthodox priest whose presence was already causing the other passengers dismay. As every Near Easterner knows, to see a priest at the outset of a journey is a grim omen, and to travel in the company of one is to court disaster.

It was a very nice bus, too—a magnificent old monster of heroic if slightly rakish aspect. Its windows were still almost all intact and it had not yet had its rear seats removed to make room for building materials and crates of vegetables. It still, for

all its age, had the unweathered, newish smell of a bus that has never yet transported goats, a rare thing in rural Greece.

I learned of our visitor's disappearance the following morning. It was clear from the agitation of the man who rang me up about it that this was another Maclean case: M.I.5 operatives would soon be descending on the town in shoals.

Twelve hours later, however, I was informed that the hunt was off. The diplomat was found performing folk dances in a village tavern up in the hills. The bus had developed gearbox trouble while battling through a storm, and not wishing his passengers to be stranded on an exposed mountainside, the driver had coasted it down a side road to his village in hope of fixing the fault there. In the village, however, the gearbox had proved unco-operative and since there was no telephone on hand, it had taken some twenty hours to get outside aid.

Pan and Bacchus

Busses reveal quite a lot about national character. Greek busses are more often than not dusty and down at heel but at the same time, like their human compatriots, magnificently resilient and resourceful. They too, when reality becomes a bore, fly headlong into fantasy and invoke ancient gods.

You will generally be drinking beneath a vine in front of a village café when this happens. A bus draws up in a cloud of dust. The passengers peer out at you and nod pleasantly. You nod back; and it is really

only as the bus is pulling away that you notice the prevalence of beards and horns and bright mad eyes, and sense the nearness of Pan—or even the men of Odysseus after Circe had worked on them.

Italian busses are sophisticated, superbly articulate creatures, booming and trumpeting operatically and even contriving to gesticulate. Spanish busses have an appropriately oppressed, overburdened air. French busses gravitate with deterministic inevitability from one café to the next, and the men who have the incredible good fortune to drive them on country routes are forever clamping on the brakes, dashing off into some idyllic *auberge*, and reappearing after a good interval hastily wiping their lips. Cafés and *auberges* are, of course, bus stops in France. It is there that you buy your ticket and fortify yourself for the journey. What could be more natural than that the conscientious driver should wish to check on the smooth working of the system?

Parliamentary Procedure

British busses have curious canine instincts: They stop not at pubs but at lampposts—lampposts chosen, in accordance with the approved Spartan precedents, for the icy isolation of their position. Here, the regulations insist, the intending travelers must form a queue on the side of the lamppost indicated in the relevant local bylaws and adopt fencing stances, holding out their umbrellas at an angle of thirty degrees to the ground and of eighty degrees to the approaching vehicle. Visiting Americans may hire dummy umbrellas for this purpose from the English-Speaking Union.

The proceedings aboard the bus are as formal as the opening of Parliament. There is an endless ringing of bells as the gadgets that issue and punch tickets tinkle and jangle, and the conductor—who sells the tickets—tells the driver to stop (one





ring), go (two rings), or slow down because he has attracted the attention of a police car by exceeding the speed limit (three rings).

The conductor is the British public employee in comic epitome—polite and deferential, pleasing and thanking you eight to the bar. If he wrote you a letter he would sign it, like the Home Secretary informing a condemned murderer that his appeal has been rejected, “Your obedient servant.” The newer Paris busses, not to be outdone, are equipped with a *fonctionnaire* in caricature. He sits in the center of his world at an imposing desk, *se foutant du monde* and letting it be understood that it is the traveler’s duty to seek *him* out, not the other way round.

The Middle East

The unhappiest bus I ever saw was a British double-decker in Tel Aviv. How it got there—whether it was a gift of the London County Council or was driven across Europe by a party of British Zionist immigrants—I never discovered; but one could sense its bewilderment at the Hebrew shop signs and multilingual animation, its nostalgia for smog and the smell of boiled cabbage.

Throughout the Near East British-made busses suffer the grievous disadvantage of needing two men to operate them. All really self-respecting Near Eastern busses drive themselves, leaving their nominal driver free to issue tickets and entertain passengers. I discovered this aboard a bus that was hurtling down the chain of hairpin bends that links the villages on the upper slopes of the Lebanon range with the coastal plain five thousand feet below. The driver was engaged most of the way in an energetic political discussion, gesticulating eloquently with both hands. From time to time, when something in the argument annoyed him, he would turn away from us, stare moodily at the road, and toot

at a passing donkey, but he would soon be back with a triumphant rejoinder and the altercation would flash anew.

In Cyprus, the monastery of Stavrovouni on an isolated peak two thousand feet high can be visited by car by anyone with a taste for unsurfaced mountain tracks edged with crumbling precipices. The safest and fastest way of doing the trip is by bus with one of the parties of Greek Orthodox pilgrims who go there to see the piece of the True Cross which the monastery possesses and to taste the monks’ honey. The driver will usually have a couple of children on his knees, a travel-sick female relative hanging around his neck, and a group of friends and admirers crowding in on him with bundles and offering him slices of watermelon and goat’s-milk cheese. Invariably, halfway around the first hairpin, he will discover an old acquaintance at the back of the bus and from then on be embraced and interrogated at length by not only the acquaintance but all the acquaintance’s acquaintances. But there is no danger. The bus will get you safely there even if the driver stands on his head. He and the local passengers know this.

IN LIBYA, on the other hand, possibly because it is so far west, there is a disturbing lack of faith in such fundamentals. The country’s main bus route, the six-hundred-mile Tripoli-Benghazi road, can only boast about three minor kinks, but travelers insist quite fanatically that their driver keep his eyes on every inch of the way. As the bus moves off, the passengers set about singing and shouting to keep him awake. Some of them feed him at frequent intervals lest he should faint at the wheel. This effort is sustained for about the first eighty miles. Then, exhausted by the din, passengers and driver alike doze off one by one, and the bus is left to manage its affairs in peace.

THE ONLY all-American bus I have ever traveled on—a bus driven by an American driver and populated by American passengers—I boarded on the fringes of the Egyptian desert not far from the pyramid at Saqqara. I was staying with friends on the east bank of the Nile almost opposite Saqqara and had got myself ferried across the river, aboard a felucca laden mainly with water buffaloes, with the aim of exploring the site of Memphis and the ruins of some of the earliest pyramids. I hired a donkey—the only form of transport—in a village near Memphis, and its owner came along astride another animal.

Halfway through the afternoon the donkey owner went into conference with a small party of Bedouins that had suddenly appeared and asked me rather pointedly for a sum approximately four times that agreed upon for the hire of my steed. The five or six Bedouins, no doubt eager for their cut, grinned and nodded encouragingly. It looked as if only a miracle could rescue me from what promised to be an undignified argument—and the miracle happened.

A beautiful little bus, like something out of a toy-shop window, came gliding over the top of a rise about twenty yards away and down a track a few feet of where we stood. I put out an arm and the driver stopped.

“Are you going to Cairo?” I asked.

“Sure,” said an American voice.

“Hop in.” So I hopped in and left the dumfounded donkey owner and Bedouins pondering (I suspect) on the iniquities of western imperialism. There were about twelve people aboard the bus, mostly youngish couples, all Americans—aglit with sunglasses, cameras, and photometers. I sat next to the driver.

“You’re English, aren’t you?” he asked. I admitted the charge and he shook his head in mock mystification. “Jeeze,” he said. “You guys sure pop up in the most unexpected places.”

The Eisenhower I'll Always Remember

BILL MAULDIN

WHEN I joined the staff of the *Mediterranean Stars and Stripes* in Naples in the autumn of 1943, I was delighted to find enlisted men on the paper living better than most staff officers in the rear areas and far better than any colonel of infantry. We journalist noncoms ate off china plates set on white tablecloths, slept in villas, and never had our dreams disturbed by raucous whistles at dawn.

All this luxury we enjoyed was under the indulgent eye of a rear-echelon major general whose job it was to police the city and supervise the unloading of supplies for the front forty miles north. The general's name appeared in *Stars and Stripes* with gratifying regularity, and his clerks held ping-pong tournaments which our reporters covered faithfully. His overzealous MPs arrested haggard infantrymen, back from the front for a rest, by the truckload and threw them in jail for wearing dirty uniforms before they even had time to change, but this the paper did not report.

Some of our reporters, along with several *Yank* magazine enlisted men, illegally sported civilian correspondents' badges, ate in officers' messes, analyzed the battle situation by press-camp handouts, and for laughs occasionally bawled out some hapless second lieutenant who would then respectfully call them Mister. At a time when the war in Italy was cold and bitter, when rifle companies were chewed down to platoon size, whole battalions suffered from trench foot, and many units had to stay in the line for months on end without relief, *Stars and Stripes* ran columns on tourist attractions in Naples, and occasionally gave voice to the lowly soldier by interview-

ing some convenient Quartermaster Corps dockhand.

The Rebels

I fell in with a bunch of belligerent characters on the staff—among them Jack Foisie, now of the San Francisco *Chronicle*, and Milton Lehman, a postwar free-lance magazine writer—who thought it was kind of silly that a soldier paper in a war zone should have to depend largely on columns by Ernie Pyle, a civilian, for firsthand news of the foxholes. Not that any of us radicals wanted to give up our comforts, mind you—we were the first to congratulate our energetic mess sergeant for scrounging a side of fresh beef or a bucket of ice cream from the Navy at the docks, and I remember I wasn't a bit ashamed of driving a jeep with foam-rubber seats and built-in food locker. We just felt it was a shame to waste so much space on ping-pong tournaments, which could not interest and might even conceivably infuriate some shivering dogface when all he had to brighten his dreary hours was the *Stars and Stripes*, while those in the rear areas had plenty of other things for amusement, including the Red Cross post exchanges and hours that enabled them to go to town at night.

"Hell, all you're gonna do is get that general down on us," said our colleagues of the status quo school, most of whom had themselves arrived on the paper with memories of a harsher life in regular units. "Besides," they pointed out, "the paper is supposed to be a morale factor for *all* the troops. Ping-pong is as big news to one man as a night patrol is to another."

Well, the radicals were stubborn and things slowly changed. Report-

ers began filing copy from the front; the letters-to-the-editor column occasionally blossomed out with comments about how the only way an infantryman could get a warm combat jacket was to buy one from a filing clerk in Naples; I sneaked in a subversive cartoon from time to time on this and kindred subjects. Pretty soon the roof fell in.

"Looka them M.P.s glarin' at us," a man in our circulation office complained. "They useta be our friends. Last night one of 'em wanted to look at my pass. Who ever heard of such a thing?"

Our officers and editors were summoned before the major general to get their heads bitten off. Our privileges were in such imminent danger that we thought of burying the table silver for the duration. Only the infantry were pleased with what we'd been doing.

And then a voice came down from Olympus, which happened to be located in Caserta at the time. General Dwight D. Eisenhower's headquarters announced to all subordinate commanders that the contents of *Stars and Stripes* were not to be tampered with, and that the editors of each edition (there were several) would henceforth be answerable only to the Supreme Commander himself.

This policy stayed in force throughout the rest of the war, and all Army editors knew that for the first time in military history they would enjoy real freedom of the press, short of downright sedition itself—and the word "sedition" was not open to interpretation by some local martinet. Unfortunately, some editions found it more convenient to play ball with their respective Pooh-Bahs and didn't take advantage of the edict. But we sure did. We put out a pretty sprightly soldier paper, and although we verged on impudence sometimes, we never once embarrassed our benefactor by inciting anybody to open mutiny.

THIS ACT of Eisenhower's endeared him to me so much that not even his recent venture into politics has lessened my regard for him, and sometimes when I feel outraged because he lets fools run wild, I take heart in his consistency, remembering that once long ago he let us fools run wild, too.