

DRIVING LIKE I DON'T LIVE THERE

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I share one experience with every single one of you, no matter where you reside. You know that moment when the driver in the other vehicle leaves you baffled and breathless but then you pull alongside or get a little closer (or they ask you for directions in a foreign language) and you realize, oh, this person is a tourist driving in my city. This is when your inner voice screams “thank you for your much appreciated and plentiful tourist dollars, feel free to leave every one of them with my fair city, but please, for the love of Pete, DON’T DRIVE!!”

Yes, that experience. Picture that experience. That’s me.

No, no, not *that* person. Not the frustrated local yeller. I’m talking about the yellee / the yelled at / the subject of the yelling. *That’s* me. In Prague, in Stirling, in St Petersburg, in Breda, in Vienna. Sure, I’ve been the yeller at home. Many times. But the topic of these remembrances is of me the hapless tourist driver.

Let it be said that I have done many a drive on foreign soil without so much as a raised eyebrow from the locals. I’ve driven white-knuckled but safely over the bridge above the abyss in Ronda, or on roads clinging to the sides of cliffs outside of Phoenix and Cinque Terre. And lots and lots of open, flat roads. All successful. Funny how those non-descript moments get over-shadowed by the few screw-ups.

Some just can’t be helped. How is one truly expected to get around the busy streets of the city of Prague when all of the signs are in Czech orthography? Western European countries are a breeze when it comes to reading signs, generally close enough that you can guess what it might mean and be right enough of the time to stay out of trouble. But the Czech language? It’s very different. I should have known. I should have realized. But crossing the border from Austria was a startling revelation. I couldn’t read anything! So in those pre-GPS days we just followed anything that said Praha for as long as it took (pretty sure those tiny villages were not on the ideal route).

In Prague itself there was so much more traffic, more pedestrians, more signs. More everything! We thought it best to park the car for a couple of days but when we took it out to do a jaunt to a countryside castle, we found exiting the city a bigger hurdle than we anticipated. The particular moment that remains with me was when I turned down a side street that looked like it could take us in

the desired direction. Heads of passing locals turned. That's not good. Nor was the fact I was now driving on tram tracks. You mean that sign there means "trams only"? And that other one means "one way"? After a half block of glances from puzzled pedestrians, I did a 3-point turn and returned the way I came, confident that I was now breaking 50% fewer traffic regulations.

Some of the memorable driving incidents have been during home exchanges. Not only have we exchanged the house keys but the car keys too. This has led to blunders on the johnny canuck side of the deal. That would be me. The first exchange was in Breda of the Netherlands, and the first damaged car too. We took James and baby Jackson to Galderse Meren, a little lake with a beach. The parking lot had short logs placed on end to designate how far you should pull in. I pulled into a spot and up to the logs, initially stopping but then decided that just a little further would be okay. Slecht idee! I went right over the log, slipping the bumper over it like a snug glove. If I backed up, I would rip the bumper off. We panicked for a few minutes as I tried to absorb the extent of my stupidity when the solution strolled by in the form of 4 young men on their way to the beach. They were shirtless and I could see that they could lift more than me, so I asked them if they wouldn't mind demonstrating their ability. They gave that look, you know, the one we give to those silly tourists driving on our streets, then they lifted the car and it was free in all of 5 seconds. A part of the bumper dragged all the way back to the house, but really, it could have been torn off completely so the sound of it rubbing on the highway wasn't as awful as you might think. This required more than some duct tape from Canadian Tire so we took it to the shop the next day. They quickly fixed it up and we paid a bill equivalent to less than 100, so we felt pretty lucky. Never again will I be so stupid, I promised myself, and I believed me too for some reason.

Lo, not 2 years and a bit later did we find ourselves in Scotland where they expect me to drive from the opposite side of the car and on the opposite side of the road just to keep it all balanced. My balance may have been off a wee bit. We were driving some small roads within sight of Stirling castle and found ourselves trying to exit a one-lane residential road with a car attempting to enter. He had the right of way so all I had to do was back up, back into a laneway behind me to my right, and let him pass. Oh, it sounds so easy when I tell it now. Arran was kind enough to warn me of the stone wall back there, and I could see said stone wall in the rear mirror and the one side mirror that I had checked. But there is a second side mirror for a reason and I decided I didn't need it, or I forgot it was there in my disoriented state with the other driver impatiently wondering why this bloke couldn't maneuver any faster (probably *a tourist* he thought), so I backed up anyway beside where the stone fence appeared to come to an end. Seems the fence didn't end, it just got a little shorter, going from 5 foot high to about 3, just out of sight of the mirrors that I was depending on so mightily. I only touched it, really, if it had been my shoulder I don't know that I would have even bruised. But the light lens broke and the bumper pushed in. Could we still drive it? Absolutely, I don't know if anything but a trained eye would have seen anything amiss. But the garage where we took it before calling our exchange partners in Canada with the delightful news explained that despite the minimal damage both would have to be replaced and we were looking at 1000 pounds. That would be roughly 2000 dollars. That made the call to Brian and Margaret at our house in Kanata so much more interesting. But as luck would have it, they had just had a near miss that day with our van that could have banged them up as badly as the van, so they were sympathetic to me hitting the sneaky stone fence. Thank goodness you didn't have an accident I said to them, very sincerely, though inside I was high-fiving myself for some reason. The fender bender did nothing to their insurance rate and there was no deductible so in the end it cost nothing but another body-blow to my pride.

Home exchange 3 kept us in Canada, but it was in Sechelt BC and we stopped in Calgary on the way. As we approached the Ottawa airport for the flight out it dawned on me that my drivers license was sitting

on the photocopier at home, where it had been scanned to prove that we lived where we said we did. That was necessary for minor hockey registration so that Jackson could begin his career in 2008. As a result, I was not permitted to drive the rental car in Calgary. I did drive the exchange car in BC however, but I was in perfect working condition and didn't so much as bang a door on the tight parking on the many BC ferries we were obliged to take.

Two years hence we were in Foix France and our good exchange family said they not only had a car for us to use, but a camper van as well. The husband Laurent left many instructions and encouraged us to take it to the open road and enjoy. Except that when we arrived, we saw that to get to the open road on the other side of Foix, we had to drive 15 minutes of the snuggest little country lanes and village avenues that you can imagine. Exiting the exchange home driveway and swinging through the 4 or 5 buildings that comprised the hamlet of Balmajou required more twists of the wheel than I would normally use on a bumper cars ride. There was also the odd angry dog and three-legged cat to avoid. It was a challenge even in a relatively small car. Next came a few kilometers on an intimate rural lane. Meeting oncoming cars here I was expecting that we would both slow down and gauge the distance as we carefully squeaked by, but the locals preferred speeding up and swerving slightly at the last second, maybe so that if you clipped side mirrors they would sever more cleanly, I'm not sure. So I did as the locals did, plus I closed my eyes and held my breath, a little touch of Canadian flair I like to think. Once off the winding little road down from Balmajou we take a more normal two lane road into Foix, except that as we pass through a small town the buildings encroached on the road so much that you really did have to stop if someone was coming the other way to let just one car pass at a time. Grannies walking home with the morning crusty bread had to mind the space as even they took too much space to share it with a vehicle. It was with these narrow streets in mind, and my bad fortune on two previous trips, that we wisely decided the motor home would stay put. I would have loved to have seen how Laurent maneuvered that thing without clipping buildings, cars and grannies, and I'm sure he managed to quite nicely, but it was outside my zone of comfort and it stayed parked the full 23 days we were there.

Local law enforcement have the authority to do more than merely roll their eyes at the bumbling tourist driver, as I discovered in Vienna. We were approaching the city for the first time in a rental and were tracking our hotel on the map and the theoretical place where we should get off the ring road and snake our way to our place of rest. Except that we missed the turn. It's a big ring road and many more minutes and gallons of gas would be consumed going around the ring road once more. We took the next stop to see if there wasn't another option. There was one place where it appeared that we could back-track and we quickly found that street and I drove down the rather narrow passage. We quickly realized that at the end of the first short block the lane turned into a pedestrian-only street. After a 7 or 9 or so-point turn we went to exit the narrow street and look for another option but our way was blocked by car with the words POLIZEI on the side, front and back and a grumpy looking fellow in uniform. Arran was panicking. Outwardly I wasn't, I said it would be fine, but inside I knew it was me and not her that could be subjected to some forms of old European torture for unwittingly breaking traffic laws.

He approached my window. I rolled it down. He said something brusquely in German.

"I'm sorry," I apologized, tipping my hand as to my nationality. "I only speak English."

He looked at me as though I had insulted his mother *and* his grandmother in the same breath.

"Show me your drivers license," he said as he glared at me.

"I will have to get it from the trunk," I announced as I had left it in my international driver's license, which was needed at the time (2001), in my suitcase.

He grudgingly backed up from my door, though I'm sure he preferred to just beat me first and see the license later. I walked as calmly as I could to the back of the car, popped the trunk, pressed aside dirty shorts and socks and found the document that I didn't think I would ever need to show on this vacation. He looked at it. He turned it over. He seemed unimpressed.

Then he said with a tinge of anger in his voice, that tone which we all reserve for those inept out-of-towners, "You have driven where the people walk."

I looked back, a stupid grin of not understanding on my face. Arran looked back through the back window but really couldn't see or hear what was happening.

"You have driven where there is only foot walking," he tried again.

"Oh." I said, then getting his drift, "Oh! No, no. I drive down and when I see the only foot walking place, I turned the car to make my exit." Or some such poorly worded simplified English which I hoped he could follow.

But he understood it. "Ah!" he beamed. "You turned the car!"

"Yes, yes! I turned the car," I agreed, now laughing with him.

"You did not drive where there is foot walking!" he exclaimed, and I believe he actually slapped me on my shoulder.

"No, I turned around!" though I didn't admit that it took a lot of forwarding and reversing in the tiny area, which is probably why he thought I must have driven out from the pedestrian only area.

"Where are you trying to find?"

I mentioned the hotel name.

"I know it!" he shouted. "I will show you how to get there! You must follow me!" This was better than help on a scavenger hunt!

He rushed to his car and I got back into ours. Arran looked at me to find out how many years I was likely to be sentenced to. "We're friends," I let her know. "He's going to show us the way to the hotel."

I'm pretty sure that she didn't believe me, but he was true to his word and showed us another shortcut to avoid going around the ring road again. We waved thank you. Back at the station at the end of his shift I'm sure the story he told the guys over a cold Stiegl must have included something like this: "I was sure he had run down some pedestrians. It was such-and-such Straße, you know, the one that's about four feet wide!! This silly Canadian must have been going back and forth all bleeping afternoon trying to get out of there!!! Dummkopf!!! Ha-ha-ha-ha!!!"

Then there was the cop in upstate New Hampshire somewhere near the Dixville Notch. We were returning from PEI by way of the American route. Being a non-local meant that I had no way of knowing that there was a radar trap in the proverbial middle of nowhere. But there was. I was trying to make good time by doing up to 65 on the 55mph limit highway 26 through Maine and New Hampshire. Just after cresting a hill and picking up a bit of speed down the other side the speed limit dropped from 55 to

40. Dropped without warning. No sign that said “40 up ahead” or such. I hit the brakes to conform at least a little as I looked at the “40 mph” sign on one side of the road and a state trooper on the other. His lights came on, he pulled after us and I knew I was screwed. I bet he was delighted to see Ontario plates.

Now before I recount our exchange, one fact must be disclosed. It may seem irrelevant, and if told of it before we set out on our long drive I would have said, thanks for that but honestly, I don’t see what that has to do with anything. But honestly, it did. You see it was the summer of 2014 and Martin Brodeur had played his final game for the New Jersey Devils. At this point of summer Brodeur was still an unsigned free agent. Keep that fact in mind. See, I told you that it would seem irrelevant.

He walked up to the car and I put the window down. “License and registration,” he said in a deep serious tone. He’d been to the same school of charm as the policeman in Vienna.

I was trying to dig my wallet out of my back pocket, and seeing he had a chance to scold me and let me know how bad it was looking for me, he spoke again. “Do you know I clocked you doing almost 60?”

My answer was pure honesty, I don’t know if it bought me anything later, but it was what came out first. “I was doing more than that until that sign came out of nowhere and I hit the brakes,” I said as I handed over my documents.

He scanned them over. I couldn’t see much of his face, he was keeping his head low and obscured by the brim of his trooper hat. “On a long drive?” he asked.

“Ya, heading home from PEI. We’ve been driving all day.”

He raised his head slightly while still reading my license. “Kanata. Isn’t that where the Senators play?”

“Yes,” I said, hoping that was the answer he wanted.

“Are you a fan?”

“Yes,” I said again, still hoping.

“I’m a Devils fan,” he said, still not much in his voice except all-business.

I didn’t plan it. It just happened. Without hesitation I said with more inflection than either of us had used up to now. “What’s going on with Marty?”

He stepped back, lifted his head, threw his arms out a little, and his voice went up about three octaves. “I know! I don’t know if they’re going to sign him!” He looked me right in the eye and we both recognized the mutual passion that is hockey.

“After all those years!” I said.

“After all he’s done!” he said.

We quietened down. The moment was over. He motioned with my license and insurance still in his left hand. “I’ve gotta go back to my cruiser now.”

“Okay,” I said. I think we both were ready to talk more hockey but knew it was best to move on. He went back and climbed in his car and did some checking. I sat confidently, Arran wondering how much it was going to cost.

After several minutes he reappeared at my window.

"Here is your license. I won't ticket you today but slow down please."

"I will!"

"Good luck to the Senators."

"Thanks. And to the Devils too. I hope they sign Marty!"

For the record, Marty signed with the Blues, played one year then retired. That information may seem irrelevant to you now but keep it in mind, you never know when you might need it.

One other "driving" incident in the USA also had a hockey connection, though it didn't end as well.

One of the occasions that we spent Christmas at St Pete's Beach we decided to do a Segway tour. We called the number on the brochure from the hotel lobby and met the owner at Fort De Soto Park. His name was Ignas. He was waiting with a van full of Segways. We introduced ourselves and somewhere in the conversation playing hockey came up (as it should!) and it turned out that Ignas grew up and was still friends with Darius Kasparaitus who played more than 800 games in the NHL.

The Segways which Ignas brought were of varying ages and values. They were all in fine working order but he had a new one that was apparently fairly expensive and he hesitated to let me use that one until I had demonstrated my ability in the parking lot. He seemed impressed with my balance and control so after everyone had received the requisite practice and safety lecture, Ignas proceeded to lead us on a tour along bike paths, little used roadways, even the firm sand at the top of the beach.

It was terrific fun! We stopped from time to time to take photographs and have a snack. It was going so well that Ignas took us even further, away from the beach along a dirt path that followed the shoreline. Everyone did really well on the two-wheeled chariots, but I was a natural if I do brag so myself. I could speed up, slow down, stop, pivot, turn, whatever I wanted. And Ignas had so much confidence in me that as he led, I was at the back. As it turned out, I was too far back to hear his instructions which he made sure Arran and the boys could hear. Too far back as we came to a small three-foot rise and lip on the dirt path. Too far back to hear him say make sure you have enough speed to get up the rise and over the lip. My approach wasn't slow but neither did I speed up. As I went up the rise the Segway slowed quickly, too quickly for me to re-adjust my weight forward and keep the contraption going. As I hit the lip I hung there for a moment, that moment between the relief of forward and the alarm of backward. Backward won. I started rolling backward back down the rise with no control whatsoever. The Segway and I made an unintentional turn to the left toward bushes at the edge of the water. I let us hit the dirt so both man and machine didn't wind up wet. I'm sure it wasn't deep, but it also wasn't beach and I can't see that the water would have been good for either of us. We came to rest in the dirt, Segway upended and wheels spinning, Arran yelling to Ignas that he had a man down.

Ignas circled back to me in no time, speeding over as I tried to pick the Segway up and brush it off, hoping there were no scratches. Ignas checked me and asked if I was all right more than once but his eyes were on the new Segway the whole time. There was no doubt where his true concern lay. My concern was there too! My elbows had a scratch or two, but my pride had broken several bones and couldn't stand straight. I rode the rest of the tour as carefully as if I was trying to pass my driving test. Ignas shouldered the blame for not making sure I could hear the instructions but I'm sure the next time

he saw his buddy Darius he didn't have a kind word about the Canadian tourist taking a spill on his shiny new Segway.

Those that do not learn from their mistakes are doomed to repeat them, the same applies to being behind the wheel, and I confess that this is the path I am most likely to fumble along. Whatever confidence I may now have in my driving and cognitive abilities, they are unlikely to get any better. Unfamiliar roads will remain so, and unreadable signs won't translate themselves. And locals will continue to wag their heads, baffled at what the non-resident driver has done now. Which is only fair, that's exactly what I'll do myself when I get back home and they try their luck at navigating my streets.