

Two Years on the Road – May 28, 2018 – from Zadar, Croatia

By Tom Allin

Two years ago today we left the U.S. for Tokyo, Japan. One year ago today we were driving and birding in Nepal with Audette Foyt. Today we drove from Grabovac, Croatia --where yesterday we hiked over seven miles at Plitvice Lakes National Park -- to Zadar, Croatia.

A photograph of a religious site in Nepal.



A quick recap of the last two years:

Japan/4 weeks

Australia/5.5 months

Indonesia/3 weeks (Tom; Nancy visited home)

Singapore/4 weeks

Malaysia/twice and a total of a month plus

Cambodia/12 days

back to Malaysia

India/Nepal/India for almost 6 months

Italy/2 months

USA/almost 3 months including Marshall, Austin, Dallas and Tucson

London/2.5 weeks

Italy/7 weeks
Tunisia/16 days
Italy/a month
Ljubljana, Solvenia/3 days
Croatia/so far 9 days.

A total of 13 countries not including the United States. I think it is safe to state when we travel in a country we see more than just the highlights. And being able to see the secondary sites, the back roads, spend as little or much time in various places, finding the local market or grocery store, and more is what our driving the world is all about.

Yet, with all the time we have taken we still feel rushed and have missed a site or city or park. Think about it: we have spent roughly five months in Italy and have yet to see Venice, Padua, Ravenna, Milan or hike in the Dolomite mountains or drink a bottle of wine in the Tuscany countryside! Yes, a return trip to at least the northern part of Italy is in our future plans.

Monks praying in their monastery in Nepal.



For those wondering how our trip has matched up with my original 56-page itinerary – lets just say after Australia it hasn't even been close. The two major issues which caused us to change our route: (1) Thailand changed its law while we were in Australia so that there is a 20 day wait to get a temporary car import

permit; then you must hire a driver from a *licensed, Thailand-based tourist company* to escort you through the country.

(2) China has refused to re-open the border between Nepal and China.

I also was unaware that Americans may only stay in the European Union for 90 days out of 180 days. This is the same rule the United States imposes on Europeans.

Another change to our travels instituted by us and not by some government is we have decided to travel slower – more rest days and fewer all day exploring. Maybe - - and this isn't for sure – we are approaching a later stage of life that requires a little more rest than in the past. This slower travel has some advantages of which I believe the biggest is we get to know the day-to-day living in our various stops because we aren't just touring (yes, this is a new word in the English language invented by me).

Tom's dream comes true in Tunisia – alone in a room full of women. Then again, maybe not.



We call our trip a driving trip and so far we have put 35,000+ miles on our Toyota 4Runner. Our 4Runner is dinged up – mostly from our drive through India – and currently we have an electrical problem with the auxiliary battery. All in all the 4Runner has responded to our trip just as it was advertised to hold up.

Should you decide to drive the world I have one recommendation: don't drive India's hill station towns! Driving these streets goes beyond bravery, stupidity, and any driving skill you may think you possess.

Easy countries to drive in: Australia and Malaysia (even though they drive on the wrong side of the road), Tunisia, Slovenia and Croatia. Countries that are a little more difficult than the aforementioned countries are Japan and Italy. Difficult country to drive: Nepal, mostly due to road construction. Impossible to drive and in a class of its own: India.

We began two years ago with a Garmin GPS and Google maps on our phones. Both have their quirks and neither works in the mountains of India and Nepal. I left our Garmin somewhere in India so for much of the last year all our navigation has been by Google maps. I don't know how we could make this trip without Google maps but believe about every two or three days I am thinking we should give it a try. Google maps will take you through the narrowest of roads and the occasional crowded market to save a kilometer in travel and don't get me started on how far it will take you out of your way just to make a U-turn.

As I noted on our one-year anniversary, we only get lost when we step out our door.

In addition to driving we have used various other means of transportation. Each of our two feet, knees, thighs and hips will vouch that we have climbed more steps than we ever imagined possible and walked more than any reasonable American is expected to walk.

Then in the last two years there have been 15 airline flights, one helicopter flight, seven train rides + the toy train in India + two historical train rides in Australia – the Japanese trains make airplanes seem so time consuming and uncomfortable -- ten car ferry trips including four overnight trips from Palermo, Sicily to Tunis, Tunisia and then back and mainland Australia to Tasmania and back, plus buses, the London underground, several river boat trips, taxis, tut tuts, and camels.

Steps, what steps? There aren't enough here to even qualify as a set of steps. Hell, more than one of our lodging stays required us to walk up more steps than these.



In the last year we saw art that I wish everyone could view and experience:



And the art we have seen has been simply beyond my words in its beauty, perfection, and execution. We have seen paintings from 1200 to 2016 and probably newer and older. We have seen frescos that are older than 900 years.

Statues of papier-mâché, wood, bronze, marble and more.

Books that are works of art in their script and illustrations.

Architectural buildings from the overall layout and planning of Chandigarh, India's new city, to churches, cathedrals, monasteries, castles, villas, governmental buildings and ruins going back 2,500 years or more.

Fountains with their fantasy animals and gods.

Floors that stun me with their designs in marble, tile and mosaic, creating the *tree of life* to outstanding geometric designs.

Pottery, helmets, toys, plates, a crown, and jewelry from 2,000 to 8,000 years ago that is beautiful even by today's concept of beauty.

There are the Catholic churches' candlesticks, altars, crosses, chandeliers, stained glass windows, wood ceilings, station-of-the-cross representations, entrance doors and more.

And we saw tourists with angels looking over their shoulders.



For the most part I believe we haven't had to contend with other tourists all that much. A lot of our travel ends up being in a country or location's shoulder season, a little bit in off-season and what is left has been in high season. We have another two plus weeks in Croatia, Bosnia and Hungary before flying home. Being home will allow us to miss a majority of high season and the associated crowds and higher prices.

Some of the places we have visited such as Florence, Plitvice Lakes National Park in Croatia, and the Amalfi Coast in Italy have had more people than we like to share with and I can't imagine what it must be like during high season. The down side to traveling in non-high season can be reduced by bringing a coat and umbrella.

I have no idea how many Italian Catholic churches we have visited. I do know that each is unique, beautiful and provides a sense of serenity. Each is also a work of art and many have art that the world's greatest museums would be grateful to own.

Caravaggio's *The Inspiration of St. Mathew* is hung in Contarelli Chapel within the church of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome.



Highlights of the last year:

The best road trip we have ever driven is the Kinnaur-Spiti Loop Road – not just in the last year but ever! Nancy says, “This is the best thing we have done or seen in the last two years and maybe in all of our travels”. I agree with her 100%.

We took 12 days to complete this drive and a large majority of the time we were above 12,000 feet and also spent time birding or just enjoying the scenery at over 15,000 feet above sea level. We both wish we had driven slower and explored more of the dirt tracks going to who knows where.

I still state until someone can prove differently that our Toyota 4Runner was the first American licensed vehicle to ever drive this route.

There are monasteries and small towns to explore, the roads when they exist are usually at the very best only one and a half lanes wide with little to no pavement and a 45 degree sloped mountainside on the high side of the road if not a vertical rock face or overhang rock above our 4Runner and a 45 degree sloping mountainside fall of over a 1000' without a single ledge or weed to stop your fall into a rushing freezing rock-strewn river – and then there is some of the most beautiful and simply incredible scenery to see!

A photograph from the Kinnaur-Spiti Loop road:



For chanting there is nothing like a Nepalese Tibetan Buddhist monastery full of monks. And if the monks are accompanied by horns, shells and drums so much the better.

I think the best music we heard were the bands marching behind each of the approximately 25 religious floats on Good Friday in Trapani, Sicily. Each float is carried from the cathedral on the shoulders of 24 to 30 men for about an 18 hour round trip – the floats never hit the ground during this march.

Best religious ceremony or at least the most interesting to us was the Easter Sunday Dance of the Devils ceremony where Death and several Devils confront Good in the form of the Virgin Mary and Jesus – it was crazy. Death and the Devils begin their dance at the high end of the street.

Everyone is jammed together on the narrow street as Death and the Devils dance through the crowd. The music is loud – various horn instruments and drums. We watched and wiggled our way between people to get close just as everyone else was attempting to do the same.

We left several hours before the actual confrontation took place (didn't want to make the drive back to Palermo in the night's darkness). Although I can't imagine how the Evil vs. Good confrontation could be any more fun, interesting and just plain crazy as the initial Dance of the Devils was, my guess is it does.

Best show music has to be the musical *Hamilton*. But *The Book of Mormon* is a very close second. We saw these while we were in London.

Most surprising music was when I walked into a church in Naples where about 40 band members in ages ranging from about 10 to 60 were sitting in the pews and practicing. Listening to their practice while viewing the church made for a very different experience than all the other churches we visited.

Best ruins for me are Paestum. I remember my high school history books had photographs of Greek and Roman ruins. But until you see a temple up close I don't believe you really understand just how massive these temples are and the engineering and construction expertise it took to build them.

At Paestum I saw my first and in my mind still the most outstanding temples we have come across. The Temple of Neptune is in my photograph below. This temple dates back to 450 BC. The temple is roughly 25 yards across, 60 yards in length and the exterior columns are 10 yards/30 feet in height (think and compare these dimensions to an American football field).



We spent several hours walking the temples and the city ruins. And then we spent another three hours in the museum. This was one of my favorite days: it was cool, we almost had the entire site to ourselves, my first Greek temples, the signs were in English, the museum was a history and cultural lesson, and I believe the museum's mosaics were the first to captivate my imagination and admiration for this art form.

Nancy's favorite was the next day when we spent almost seven hours walking and exploring Pompeii. We walked almost all of the ruins, viewing the structures, the frescos, the mosaics and the streets with their chariot barriers: no racing in the streets of Pompeii! Nancy was fascinated by a structure in all the houses called an impluvium – the sunken part of the interior atrium of a house designed to collect rainwater and carry it to the exterior.

Our best stay in the last year and the trip as a whole has to be Rick and Lee's home outside London. They provided lodging, tickets to museums, guide service, beer, and when they turned their house over to us it included Oslo the ghost cat who only came out to eat.

Westminster Abbey where we sat for the Sunday afternoon choir service.



We are Airbnb fans. So far we have stayed at 34 Airbnbs in Japan, Australia, Malaysia, Cambodia, Italy, Slovenia, and Croatia. I am guessing about half this total has been in Italy. We have stayed as short as two nights and our longest stay was 12 nights in Rome.

We have stayed in several places that were so nice it was difficult to leave them to go exploring the local area – we just wanted to relax in our new home. Each apartment provided more space and cooking facilities than a hotel and at a lesser cost. I can only think of one stay – my fault for not reading the description better – that we didn't like. We left the following day and the owner refunded our money for the days we didn't stay.

When we aren't staying in an Airbnb we rely on Booking.com to find a night's lodging. We qualify as genius members and take advantage of the additional discount when we can.

Our cheapest sleeps were the Trekker's Inn in Nepal and Hotel Samsong on the Kinnaur-Spiti road. Each cost less than \$10 and included a very good breakfast for two.



I haven't kept an exact accounting of lodging expense but feel safe in stating we have averaged less than \$100/night not only for the entire trip but also the European portion of our travels.

I believe in the last year our most expensive room was a single night charge in Calcutta at \$179. We had another approximately 25 nights costing somewhere

between \$120 and \$140/night. But we also have had our \$8/night and many more in the less than \$80/night range. (Tonight's hotel room in Mostar is \$70 and much better than a Hampton Inn, etc.)

I will note that for many years we only thought of a hotel room as a place to sleep. We spent our money on experiences not sleep. But in the last year we have found comfort, the ability to spread out like we do in our Marshall and Tucson houses is no longer a convenience but almost a necessity, and having a kitchen to make an American egg breakfast gets the day off on a satisfied stomach. So, we are more selective on where we stay and not upset when we have to spend more than we had previously budgeted.

Our best camel trip in the last 12 months has to be our overnight camping trip into the Sahara Desert (Tunisia). Yes, that is Nancy out in front.



Our time this year in London, Italy and Tunisia has opened up a whole portion of human history neither of us knew. I've always known there were the cavemen, then Egypt, then Greece and finally Rome.

Either my early schooling was really poor or the historians, etc. have discovered so much that is new information about how mankind started and progressed. The iron age, which got a late start in Europe vs. other parts of the world, is so very interesting. By the time the Greeks arrived on the scene in certain cities of Italy these cities had been around for hundreds if not a thousand years.

I definitely don't know the timeline history of mankind as well as I hope to know it one day but I am way ahead of where I was a year ago.

Intricately woven into our knowledge of mankind's history are various tools and weapons; burial rituals; no longer practiced religions and gods or today's Christianity, Jewish and Muslim religions and their single God; and the art of these very ancient civilizations.

I have especially become very interested in iron age relics and if you haven't already guessed Nancy and I are enthralled by the mosaics we have seen.

I have always enjoyed art even though I can't draw a stickman, I don't sing in the shower because it scares me, and only those with steel-toed boots should dance with me. My parents dragged my brothers and me to museums and were always telling us how great some guy who had died 300 or 400 years ago was and to enjoy what we were looking at. I think it was my rebellious streak that said to hell with these dead guys, look at the modern art in the next gallery over.

The last year of our travels has provided me with the opportunity to fall in love with the religious art of 1200 onwards and with what my parents' dead guys created.



Our trip hasn't been all art museums, churches, and ancient ruins. In the last year we have continued to look for and identify birds wherever we are, including our balcony in Zadar, Croatia.

So far:

New species in two years: 501

Birds in India in 2017/+previous trip: 153 new species/376 total species in two visits

United States in 2017/life time: 1 new species/350 total species

Australia: 291 species

Nepal: 133

Cambodia: 76

Malaysia: 69

Italy: 64

Indonesia: 54

Tunisia: 51

United Kingdom: 36

Japan: 23

Singapore: 21

Croatia: 20

In Nepal we saw wild and tame elephants, a mother rhinoceros and its baby, monkeys and crocodiles. In India we saw wild donkeys at the Wild Ass Nature Preserve and monkeys. In Tunisia we saw wild camels.

We have taken a number of hikes or at least trail walks. One of our favorites was the Path of the Gods along the Amalfi Coast.

Background is Mediterranean Sea and the trail and then there in the middle of the photograph is Nancy spotting another flower!



Other bests for this last travel year:

- A) My favorite city in the last year is Florence and Nancy's is Rome.
- B) Best farmer's market was in Turin
- C) Best car museum was also in Turin
- D) Best museum – British Museum (I don't think there is a better museum in the world but then again I haven't seen every museum in the world)
- E) Best art museum – there were so many but I am going to say, Uffizi in Florence
- F) Best modern art museum (OK, I am cheating a little my adding this sub-category) – an old favorite of mine and still contains absolutely great art, Tate Modern Gallery
- G) Best painted ceiling – of course, the Sistine Chapel
- H) Best mosaics – let me just name a few: Villa Romana del Casale in Sicily; Cappella Palatina in Palermo, Sicily; National Roman Museum; Vatican Museum and two

museums in Tunisia: the Bardo Museum (a not to be missed museum) in Tunis and the Archaeological Museum in Sousse.

I) Best traveling art exhibit – Modigliani exhibition at the Tate Modern Gallery (for years I had a Modigliani poster above my sofa in my Tucson townhouse.)

J) Best garden was at Villa Taranto and its Botanical Gardens in Italy.

K) Best National Park – we explored more than one but I will pick Naquane National Park in Italy. The rock carvings were fascinating and go back 10,000 years or about 8,000 BC.

L) Best animal and birding park – Chitwan National Park in Nepal and the elephant safari was great

M) Easiest birding trail & nature reserve – these two nearby reserves would be great walks even if you aren't a birder: Nature Reserve Valle Caranata and Nature Reserve Cona Island in northeastern Italy.

N) Best city wall to walk – Lucca, Italy's city wall

O) Best Stupa – we had lunch across from the Boudhanath Stupa as they splashed gold paint across the top of it in Kathmandu – one of the world's largest stupas and a UNESCO World Heritage site

P) Best leaning tower – I will let you guess, clue it's in Italy

Q) Best Cathedral – so many but because we took a tour to the top of and across the Cathedral I am going to say: Siena Cathedral in Italy

Q-1) Best library is the Siena Cathedral's Piccolomini Library

R) Best, for the most part unknown, Cathedral has to be Basilica di Santa Caterine d'Alessandria in Galatina, Italy – what a surprise when you walk in not expecting anything out of the ordinary

S) Largest Cathedral and possibly most overwhelming – St. Peter's Basilica in Rome

T) Best chapel: Cappella Palatine in Palermo, Sicily – we walked into this chapel and our jaws would have hit the floor but the floor along with the walls, ceilings and altar were too stunning to bleed or drool on. The chapel is a 360 degree mosaic and a one-of-a-kind masterpiece

U) Best Square: Patan, Nepal closely followed by Katmandu Dunbar Square

V) Largest kitchen – the Sikh’s Golden Temple in Amritsar, India is the world’s largest free kitchen; no one is turned away who requests a meal, it’s estimated they prepare 50,000 to 100,000 meals per day (mostly for the visiting pilgrims) and the Temple is a World Heritage site – our guide made sure we had lunch here

W) Best island in the last year – without a doubt it’s Sicily (and not because it was the only island we visited in the last year)

X) Best caves to explore – naming two and both are in India and are UNESCO World Heritage sites:

Anjata is a group of 29 caves that include some of the oldest paintings and rock sculptures in India dating as far back as second century BC and

Ellora Caves are a series of 34 caves carved out of a mountainside and the caves are Buddhist, Hindu and Jain temples -- carved as in “there is a mountain of rock, let’s chip away at this rock so as to leave the remaining rock forming a temple.”

We spent a full day at each and didn’t see everything there was to see.

Y) Most fun park to explore – Nek Chand Rock Garden in Chandigarh, India

Z) Best walks – Nancy downloaded Rick Steves’ walks in Rome and they were so interesting and fun

I can list more *bests* but I have run out of letters. I hope this post gives everyone an idea of where we have been, what we have seen and heard, and what we have learned in our second full year of *Driving the World*.

We have missed a few things. We stopped at the Museum of Frogs in Lokve, Croatia a couple of days ago. It was closed and won’t open till tourist season in another couple of weeks – true story.

A side note: We have traveled India twice for a total of about six and half months. And there is still more to see. We have seen 26 of the 36 UNESCO World Heritage sites leaving ten to see, haven’t visited the city Goa, still haven’t made the Great Snake Boat Race in Kerala or traveled to Kashmir and so on. And the same may be said for Japan, Australia, Cambodia, Nepal and Italy. So many places to see in the world and so little time.

During our travels I have to say the cathedrals and churches of Italy have just wowed me. So I will close this post with a photograph of Italy's Orvieto Cathedral:



More this time next year.

For more on our travels go to: www.Iwontgo55.com