

LETTERS FROM A GRANDFATHER

This is my passion project. I spent afternoons with my grandfather, recording stories from his six-month hitchhiking trip across Europe in 1968, capturing the excitement and curiosity that fueled his journey. I documented his tales in a series of six letters, written in his voice to reflect his unique perspective and adventurous spirit. Through this process, I created a lasting family legacy, ensuring that his inspiring experiences will be remembered and cherished by future generations. Read through these letters and immerse yourself in 1968 Europe, as if you're alongside him on his incredible adventure

FIRST LETTER IS IN THE NEXT PAGE

Letter 1

Dear Grandchildren,

For years, I have told you all bits about my adventures as a hitchhiker in the summer of 1968. This time I thought of pinning them down for you.

Not only were those different times with the hippie movement with its talk of peace and individualism but I know that for most of you it sounds like a fantasy- the flowers in the hair of the hippies, the dances and songs of that time seem to belong to a different world.

As I watched the hippies in Calcutta and even spoke with some of them, what really excited me was the idea of hitchhiking across Europe with a rucksack on my back. That was the ultimate dream for me and one day I decided to jump in and live it!

I had found out that you had to show that you had \$5,000 to travel abroad, but if you had a P form (pilgrimage form) you didn't need all that money. You could easily go on a pilgrimage mode as a deck passenger. That's how I decided on the British India Lines. They had a service where people going for Hajj or other pilgrimages could go as deck passengers without carrying that load of cash.

So that beautiful summer, some friends and I set out for Bombay to board a ship on the British India Lines.

My first time on the sea was not easy, my stomach was churning, and my hands were grabbing the railings cold and clammy, but I was amazed by the power of water. Being on the sea was so different, the world suddenly seemed so much bigger. I spent many hours on deck, dreaming of the places I would see.

There were many people my age who were on that ship. We all travelled with the same dream of travelling and seeing the world so even the stay as a deck passenger seemed like a joy.

I easily made friends and we spent our time playing card games or chatting. In such joyful company, time passed quickly.

One day I was chatting with a friend called Marion De, who had accompanied me from Calcutta. I took out a picture of your grandmother who was my girlfriend at that time and showed it to him. He quickly sketched a very fine likeness with pencil. It was beautiful.

The news of his skill soon spread, and he was asked to draw sketches of girlfriends, wives and loved ones left on shore for everyone from the passengers to the officers. Marion did not lose the opportunity and charged everyone a princely sum of \$1. By the time we reached Basrah, he had collected a fortune of \$200!

I think Basra was my first port of call. It was known as a melting pot of cultures and histories and called the Venice of the East because it had canals like Venice.

Walking down the canals, the women and the men looked as modern as their western counterparts, with women in miniskirts and coiffed hairstyles. I know it seems hard to believe now but that Iraqi city felt like a cosmopolitan city of the west. No longer so, I have been told that the canals are no longer the pristine blue and are often lined with garbage dumps.

We had earlier informed the embassy of our arrival, so my friends and I were invited to the Indian consulate for a party. As I only carried Indian rupees, someone from the consulate arranged for me to get some dollars from a shop called Iraqi Sports. I went there and found it was run by a guy called Rajinder Singh.

Throughout my travels I met with a lot of kindness and generosity. There must be just a few incidents which were bad or dangerous, but the first time I was ever scammed was by Rajinder Singh, a fellow Sikh! He passed on a counterfeit note in the bundle of notes. As soon as I held it, I knew there was something wrong with it because it felt different, but I was too polite or maybe too young to say anything and quietly pocketed the dud note.

Would I have been that polite and reticent if I had more experience or was older?

I don't know... but at that time I did what I thought was right.

I hope you too find reading these stories as interesting as I find writing them.

Your loving grandfather,

Daljit

Letter 2

Dear Grandchildren,

Writing about my trip is like a dose of a good medicine. Whenever I sit down to write I am 20 again, walking and hitchhiking through the towns and villages of Europe.

In my last letter, I spoke about landing in Basra. I was keen to leave Basrah because I could finally start hitchhiking, I had just been on the ship till then.

From Basrah, my friends and I took a bus to Baghdad. Which song was playing on the bus?

It was 'San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Some Flowers in Your Hair)!' This song was the anthem of our time with lines like

*"There's a whole generation with a new explanation
People in motion, people in motion"*

People of my generation everywhere were humming it, and in the summer of 1968, Iraqis were no different...they too happily throbbed with the sound of that time.

After a short stop in Baghdad, I decided to board the Orient Express. I know the movies about the Orient Express all show it as a luxurious ride, but it had a section for us common people too and that's how I travelled on my way to Ankara.

As I disembarked at Ankara, life's interesting coincidences happened. I saw a young lady looking a little hassled. Her rucksack was lying on the floor and she was just looking around for someone to help her. I went up to her and asked if I could help. "I have hurt my leg and I can't carry my rucksack," she answered. She was pretty and blonde and needed help so of course I carried her rucksack out of the station and we had a cup of chai. That was my first meeting with Heidi Kaltennger.

Heidi would soon become a dear friend and. We usually exchange Christmas cards and she also visited us in India a few times. In fact, she helped locate my brother in Nepal when he had gone there during his hippie years.

From Ankara I went to Istanbul. I was excited about Istanbul because with its unique geographical location linking it to the East and West, it was a must-visit on the hippie-hitchhiker map. I had heard so much about it from other hitchhikers and Istanbul did not disappoint at all...

It seemed like a paradise with the maze of the Grand Bazaar, Istiklal Street with pubs on either side of the road, and so many gathering places for hitchhikers and hippies. I spent hours walking through the streets talking to smiling moustachioed shopkeepers who did their best to try to sell me things from rings to bags, carpets, and embroidered jackets. It was a place that attracted everyone.

I remember meeting a girl there. She took me to her home, and we'd hardly been there for half an hour when her landlord came in and threw us out. I could not make out the reason because he was shouting in Turkish. She later told me that the last guy she had got home had stolen his refrigerator. I tried to imagine a thief walking away with a refrigerator and doubled up with laughter. Those were crazy and wild times!

From Istanbul I went down the east coast of Greece. I crossed places like Alexandroupoli, Kavala, and then reached Olympus. For a short time, I was stuck in Olympus because I could find no rides. That's one of the shortcomings of hitchhiking. You just can't get up and go whenever you want to. Usually, you don't have a lot of money when you travel like this, and rides cost money, so you have to wait till you find one willing to take you for free.

One tip: Brush up on your singing skills. In Turkey, truck drivers often asked us to sing and dance for a ride. They loved, "Awara hoon." One of us had a tambourine and he would play it while we sang. Songs got us many rides...

At Olympus my friends and I were actually stuck. We were short on cash because some had to be kept aside for stay and travel, so we were trying to spend less on food.

One day, hungry and tired, after spending hours asking around for a ride, I spied an apple tree laden with apples. They looked delicious and most importantly could be a free meal, if we were careful.

The tree lay in somebody's courtyard, so taking great care to not be seen, my friend and I slowly climbed up to pluck some apples. As we were walking away with our princely loot, I heard someone shout. Thinking that now we will be caught and beaten up, we started running. I looked back as we scooted and realised that a lady was running towards us with her apron full of apples. She was not angry...quite the opposite. She wanted us to take some more!

She was so generous that she asked us to stay at her house. People really amaze you! We spent one night there and the next morning we finally found a ride to Athens.

Meeting such kindness on the road is so wonderful. It just makes you believe so much in people. I remember her daughter was called Xaido. I took a photo of her. I think I will look for it.

Your loving grandfather,

Daljit

Letter 3

Dear Grandchildren,

Writing these letters made me relive those beautiful memories that I could not stop myself and went searching. I got after your grandmother to help me look for some photos of that trip and after some effort we have found some. I am sure there will be more too. Will share them soon!

In my last letter I was on the way to Athens. In Athens, I remember going to the famous Syntagma Square... It was a very hot summer, yet the Square was filled with American hitchhikers and hippies with flowers in their hair wearing bell bottoms and colourful dresses. It was like the whole world had gathered in that Greek town! Most of the conversations were in English rather than Greek, so my friends and I easily joined in.

Athens was also the place I got arrested.

Remember that bum note?

I knew that there was something wrong with that note, so I never used it at any shop. In Athens, I was down to the last dollar but instead of going to a shop with it, I took it to the bank. The teller whistled as soon as he saw it, which confirmed my doubt. I was worried but could do nothing other than wait for things to unfold. The cashier called the police. Thankfully when the policemen took me, the magistrate was already at the station. After hearing my story, he passed a good judgement- he took the dud note, and all my money and then made out a cheque of the whole amount. He gave me that check and let me go!

I learned to trust my gut that day.

From Athens we went to Igoumenitsa and there my friend decided to stay back and relax. So, we parted ways.

Travelling like a hitchhiker is a different feeling from travelling in a planned way, that doesn't mean that there is no plan in hitchhiking, you definitely need a broad plan, but you can choose your own road and the people you travel with might

change along the way. Meeting and leaving people is not wonderful or sad, that's just the way it is.

I took a ferry to Italy. I think the whole trip across Europe was full of such spectacular landscapes that when I play their reel in my mind sometimes it's hard to remember which is which after all these years, but I still remember that ferry ride vividly. The sea was calm and blue and the coastline with rolling hills topped by fluffy clouds was unforgettable.

After landing in Italy, many wonderful things started happening. First I bagged a ride with an American couple to Rome and then in Rome I met Beverly Yamaguchi. Beverly was a Hawain American hitchhiker and she agreed to become my partner in hitchhiking.

The lucky thing about travelling with Beverly, was that unlike my travels with a group of boys, where we had to beg for rides or dance and sing for a ride, now everyone wanted to give us a ride!

Beverly with her small petite frame, mini-skirts and her long black flowing hair made a very pretty picture. All the Italians loved her hair. They wanted to touch it. The Italian truck driver would stop their trucks and touch her hair all the while exclaiming, "que belle," "bello bello!" They would give us fruits and never say no for a ride!

With Beverly's charm, we easily travelled onwards to Florence and there another miracle awaited us—an empty flat.

Actually, we were going to stay at the youth hostel, as usual. They were a cheap and good option with dorms and communal bathrooms, but as soon as we walked in we heard that there was an empty flat one-room flat with an attached bathroom across the road. A free luxury! Of course, we ran to claim it. Finally, we shared it with two German couples. That was a good time and plus I could easily clean my turban. I had carried only one turban for the trip, so I was always on the lookout for a place to wash and dry it. Our freeloading days were never supposed to last long, so after two or three days the landlord barged in one night and threw us out.

Then we all went back to the youth hostel, but it was closed for the night and this led to the inauguration of my sleeping bag which till then had not been used on the trip.

Small memories like this are such a happy way to relive the past...

Beverly and I decided to cross into Switzerland by walking through the Alps. It was a wonderful slow-paced journey, and we took a ride wherever we could, but there were not many people on the road and one night on a high mountain pass, we found there was no accommodation, nor had we met anyone the entire day. Thankfully we found an abandoned petrol pump. Since that was the only option, we decided to spend the night there to shelter from the cold and wind because the temperatures even in high summer went down to 2 degrees.

In the morning, as I struggled to wake up, silvery marks across the floor caught my eye. I looked closer and realised they were snail tracks. Then I had the surprise of my life when I noticed that the silvery tracks had reached the black mass that was Beverly's hair. There were a whole bunch of snails snuggling in her hair.

My hoot of surprised laughter woke her up. Horrified at the sight of snails in her long, dark hair she started pulling them out. I also pitched in and soon we got them out. But Beverly was so upset that despite the cold she went to wash her hair in the freezing water of the petrol pump's bathroom.

The amazing things I am remembering as I write to you!

Sometimes I wish there was a phone at that time to record these memories.

Hope you too create some travelling memories.

Your loving grandfather

Daljit

Letter 4

Dear Grandchildren,

There is nothing quite as delightful as journeying on your own. You don't only meet new people and test your survival skills but also create memories that last a lifetime. I can't believe that I travelled like this almost 60 years ago. I remember so much of that time...

When Beverly and I came down the Alps, I planned that we would stay in Zurich with one of my friend's sisters, but her husband would not hear of Beverly coming to his house, so Beverley and I parted ways.

During my travels, the one thing I missed was a good rucksack. I used to see Americans with their sturdy rucksacks which had a frame. I, on the other hand, was using a bulky army surplus rucksack. It played havoc with my back. But I was young and a few days' rest would see me straighten up again.

After a few days of rest in Zurich, I again started my journey. I crossed Lake Constance and went to Germany. At the border a very interesting thing happened, which I think will not happen now...

At the German border, out of habit, I started taking out my passport for the routine check, the guard at the border looked me once over and asked "Indisch?"

"Yes," I answered.

He raised his hand and waved me through without stamping my passport! That moment I was really proud to be Indian and the guard's reaction showed the amazing reputation India and its citizens enjoyed at that time.

At the border I was again lucky enough to be picked up by a priest. He took me home and gave me some medicines for I had caught a nasty cold in the Alps. From there I proceeded to Munich. I was excited about Munich because I had heard so much about it...

Munich, at that time, was a lively place with many live clubs. Hitchhikers would congregate in bars and pubs to exchange travel plans and meet other travellers. That's where I met my friend Gertz Westemeyer and also crossed paths with Beverly.

When I left Munich, I got the ride of my life to Vienna.

As he let me in, the driver of the Mercedes, gave just one instruction, "you sit down here, and don't say a word." The entire trip was spent in silence as he zipped down the motorways at breakneck speed. We must have touched 200!

In Vienna I bought a click camera and that allowed me to take coloured photographs. I still have it somewhere. I clicked a lot of pictures with it.

In Vienna, I again met Heidi and she invited me to her home. She was living with her parents and they very kindly put me up for a few days. But I was now not ready to stay for long in one place because I wanted to reach London and then go back to India before winter started.

From Vienna I went to Berlin and then onto Copenhagen. It was a beautiful town with canals, dance joints and happy smiling people. A very relaxed place. Here too I was stuck for a few days as I couldn't find a ride to take me to Bremen.

Travel teaches you that most people are good and kind. I had my fair share of cheats but met so many generous people too, like a student in Copenhagen. I don't remember his name, but he took me home.

I still had that bad cold that I caught in the Alps. He and his mother were very kind. They fed me and let me stay at their home. When I wanted to leave, his mother even drove me to the highway and while dropping me off she gave me a jacket. I tried saying no, but she stopped me by saying, "I am your German mama. You take this jacket." Later, when I put my hand in the pocket, I found a bundle of deutschmarks.

She was so kind and generous.

After my German mama dropped me at the end of the road, the first car that came, picked me up rather than the others who were also waiting for a ride. I asked her why she picked me up and she said, "you look clean. Other hitchhikers are not clean."

The kindness of strangers on that trip was so beautiful. I still smile thinking about it.

Your loving grandfather,

Daljit

Letter 5

Dear Grandchildren,

Travel teaches so many things. It not only shows you how people truly are but you also learn about your own strengths. By the time I reached Bremen, I was almost penniless. There I heard of a job in Hillegom, so I crossed over to the Netherlands.

At Hillegom I got the job. Nothing fancy– I was filling and carrying sacks of tulips from the farm to the waiting trucks. It earned me 20 guilders a day and was a good, honest job. I was quite happy working there.

But my family grapevine was working and soon my sister's friend, Ninky Oyevar, heard that I was in Hillegom. She drove down from The Haag which must be around 45 km away, to pick me up. At her place I finally got a chance to wash my hair after a long time.

After a brief stop at Ninky's place I made my way to Paris.

In Paris I went to a friend, Pier Armando's. The funny way the world operated then...Pier was not at home, but his door was open, so I walked in. He had a landline and I had my telephone diary. I used that opportunity to call Lydia Tabari. Lydia was a fellow hitchhiker I had met in Florence and she told me she would be in Paris around that time. That's why I rang her up. She picked up the call and we decided to meet at the Eiffel Tower.

It was a beautiful day and on seeing her, I ran up to meet her. We met like the French, with hugs and kisses. There was a sardar sitting nearby and seeing our enthusiastic French greeting he could not stop himself from loudly exclaiming in Punjabi, "sardarji aithe bhi dhava bol da!"

After a week or so in Paris I was again ready to be on the move. I took a ferry and crossed over to Britain from Calais.

In Dover, the immigration officer asked me if I had any money. I decided the best policy here would be to declare everything, so I said, "yes, it's all stitched onto my clothes."

"Take it out," he ordered.

I thought the best way to deal with this situation would be totally honest. I took out all the money I had and carefully stacked the deutschmarks, franks and other currency on the table. He counted the money and then asked, "how long do you plan to stay?"

I again truthfully answered that I don't plan to stay beyond a month and a half since I didn't want to get stuck in the winter.

Saying the truth paid because out of the 32 Indians on that boat that day only your grandfather got the visa!

Different places have different rules, but travel has taught me to trust my gut, and I did that. At another time and place I would have acted differently.

Your loving grandfather,

Daljit

Letter 6

Dear Grandchildren,

I have now reached the last part of my journey. I was staying in London which was the last destination in my plan to go hitchhiking across Europe. I planned to stay there for 4-5 weeks but London was expensive, so I had to find a job.

I found some secretarial work, writing letters for a Bangladeshi. He, of course, paid me peanuts at ten pounds a week but it kept me going.

Through sheer coincidence, I met a Britisher who knew my sister and we went out to a few parties. London was famous for its party scene at that time. There were crazy parties and what happened in those parties remains in those parties. But yes those were the days!

One day I decided to try my luck at the Prix de l'arc de triomphe. I asked my new friend to take me there. What do you know? I won £ 450!

With that money I shifted to a better lodging in Euston road.

The good times became better... but I could feel the clock ticking, so within twenty days or so, I decided to head back home.

I don't think I told you about the Pudding shop in my earlier letters...

The Pudding Shop in Istanbul was the common watering hole for all the tourists and hippies travelling around the world. In the age of no internet, the Pudding Shop's message board was the mailbox of the world.

It was there that people pinned messages full of advice and shared numbers for friends and even strangers travelling east to the West and vice versa. "Contact me in Kabul or somewhere around May.' 'Contact so and so if you need lodgings in Dusseldorf.'

The Pudding Shop was the place to be and the place to meet in Istanbul, so that's where I went when I travelled to Istanbul on my way back home. They also had tasty rice pudding with the cinnamon on top, which was another reason to go there.

Destiny or fate sometimes works in a funny way... before Istanbul, I had gone to Furunlu island and was sitting at the beach when I thought I saw someone call out and wave to me, by the time I waved back, they were gone.

Later, I met Renate Foissner at the Pudding Shop and the first thing she asked me was, "were you in Furunlu islands before you came to Istanbul?"

It was she who had waved to me. It was not common to see sardars travelling those days and I stood out because of my turban!

Renate wanted to travel to India too and so we decided to go together. At that time, Istanbul had long travel buses with toilets. They were quite comfortable and economical too. We travelled in such a bus from Istanbul to Erzurum which lay at the other end of Turkey.

From Erzurum we got a ride to Iran.

At the Iranian border the guard said, "You are not Indian, you are Iranian," because I was born in Tehran.

You children might remember that your great-grandfather's family ran a business in Iran. We were quite wealthy but because my grandfather and father got involved in the Indian Independence movement, the Britishers, who were the invisible masters of Iran at that time, had them exiled. They had to leave all their riches in Tehran and carried only some Iranian carpets and some silver. My father was later imprisoned in the Red Fort in Delhi and my grandfather was sent to Lahore jail.

They were very strong-willed men who gave up everything for the cause they believed in.

I remember once I was travelling with my grandparents on a train and a thief tried to pick my grandfather's pocket. That thief got a good thrashing from my grandfather while my grandmother kept screaming at him, saying, "tujhe dekh ke pocket pe hath dalna chahiye tha na...kiske pocket pe haath daala?"

They were men who could take on the world without ever flinching. It's good to remember that we came from such strong people.

Anyways, I had promised my mother that I would get her turquoise from Tabriz, so I picked up a handful of turquoise for her in Tabriz. From there we went onto Tehran where Ajit Singh Sahney tolerated us for a few days. The plan was to go via Afghanistan, and luckily Renate and I got a ride to Afghanistan with a nice American couple.

It was a fabulous drive because the Russians had created a long highway across Afghanistan. All along the highway, there were many big hotels which were all empty as barely anyone was using the highway. So, we could stop at the hotels, have a bath, or maybe pay something to eat and then carry on. It would cost barely a dollar and was one of the smoothest travels during that time.

On the highway, I also saw many Afghani sardars sitting who were money exchangers. They would sit on the road with a mat and a box full of stacked coins and notes.

Afghanistan was so different at that time from what we see on TV now. You could drink beer on the terrace of the Grand Hotel in Kabul and see a man on a horseback with a rifle walking across the street. It was like two very different worlds were merged in one place.

Kabul was my last stop in my hitchhiking journey. From there I took a flight to Delhi while Renate decided to go by the more scenic road route.

Landing in Delhi I remembered the turquoise in my bag. Customs would definitely take it and I wanted to give all of the stones to my mother. So when I met the Customs officer, I used my surname and told him that I was related to Gurcharan Singh Sahney (the Director of Customs at that time). He let me go.

Different places, different rules...in the UK I had not hidden anything and that helped while in Delhi I had to make things up.

After my travels I was so used to taking care of myself that I was carrying my rucksack as we walked to the car. My father said, "you can let the driver carry your bag now, you don't need to!"

Yes, I didn't need to...but I had got used to carrying my own load and that was not a bad thing.

I am now at the end of my travels, but those memories are still vivid in my mind.

I hope you too create such memorable journeys for yourselves.

Your loving grandfather,

Daljit