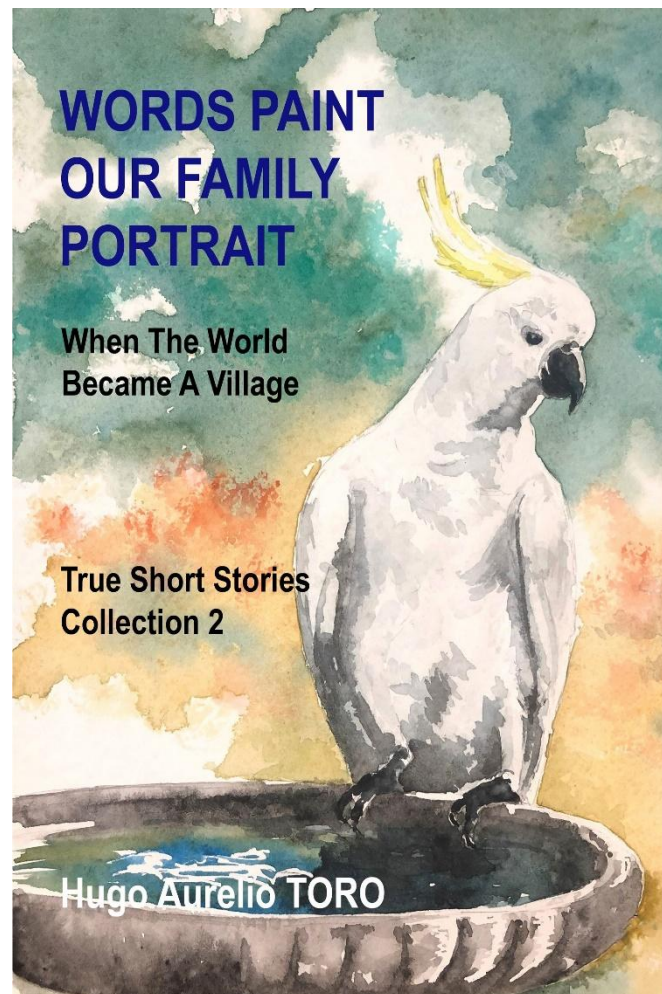


A short story from this collection.



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2.4) Friends On An Overseas Trip

A short story by Hugo Aurelio Toro



Friends Simon and Hugo travelling overseas - Iguazu Falls 1991.

Simon from college days, shares the idea for an overseas trip. We are thirty years old and free to travel when others in our group had married and were changing nappies. There is a window of opportunity for two good friends to see the world.

Eagerly we plan an epic cultural exchange trip. I will show him Chile and South America, and he will show me around England and Europe. With our diverse cultural backgrounds, it is to be an enriching travel experience, plus it is time to visit our overseas relatives.

We purchase round the world flight tickets. These are more cost effective and provide a choice of stops along the way.

We renew our passports, have all our visa applications approved, and update our vaccinations. Mosquito borne diseases is one of the things that we are advised to protect ourselves against.

For me, things become a bit odd at the travel doctor's practice.

'Are you going to enjoy yourself overseas?' asked my travel doctor. I think to myself, *what a strange question, why would I go overseas and do anything but enjoy it.*

'Yes, of course I will enjoy myself overseas,' I replied with assurance.

'Ok, then you will need all these extra vaccinations,' she said. I was jabbed with hepatitis A to Z and any other vaccinations she could find in the medicine cupboard.

In January 1991, we depart from Sydney, destination South America.

Santiago - Chile

We are barely a day in Chile, and we pick up a stomach bug. Simon is unwell and is staying close to a loo. I spent three days at my aunt's place with a fever. I can't be woken up, and I drift in and out of consciousness. I recall her soothing hands placing a damp cloth on my forehead. If it is possible to fall in love with your aunt's hands, then guilty I did just that. Simon admits to having visions of taking me back to Australia in a box.

We eventually recover and we had a good time exploring Santiago with my cousins. There are extremes in this city. The metro is government owned and spotless. No one dares put a mark on the walls. The military has only just handed power back to the citizens a year earlier, so the graffiti artists are too scared to come out. I think to myself, *what chickens!* The buses are privately owned and held together with gaffer tape and electrical wire. We hold the grip bars tight as the buses race each other, three side by side on a two-lane road, to get to the next fare.

On our city centre walks, I notice that Simon is immensely popular with the children. They follow him everywhere. Picture this: he is six feet tall; keeps his light brown hair long; grows a beard; and he wears shorts and sandals.

'Es Jesus, es Jesus!' the children whisper to each other, in Spanish. I didn't tell them otherwise, just smile at their confusion. Simon remains unaware of what the fuss is about.

My family takes us to the coastal town of El Quisco for the weekend. My uncle Sergio owns a seaside cottage there and a group of us cram into the cottage, late in the evening. Since the time that my grandfather owned a cottage there in the 1960s, the beachside towns hold a significant attraction to the family. The atmosphere is one of total holiday relaxation.

The next morning, our first task is to each get a bucket of water from the well. This is to wash ourselves and flush the loo. Then we gather at the table for breakfast consisting of freshly baked bread rolls and tasty fillings. The second task is to get ready for a gentle walk to the village.

In the afternoon, with my cousins, we cross the nature reserve shaded by large pine trees to the beach, and we watch the waves roll in, till late afternoon.

For the last week of our stay, another aunt recommends that Simon and I see the south of Chile. The natural beauty of this area is stunning, and it is rich in Spanish, German, and Indigenous culture. We take a train trip, long and slow, from Santiago to Puerto Montt. On the way, we stop in a town called Frutillar on Lake Llanquihue. The town has a strong German cultural background and is postcard charming. The lake's water glows emerald in the midday sun.

At Puerto Montt we wait to check into The Grand Hotel. In the hotel foyer is a large television playing out the events of the Gulf War and Operation Desert Storm. On 17 January 1991, the aerial bombing of Iraq commences, and we watch knowing that this is a significant point in history.

In our room, we comment on a past era décor, and how sparingly the word 'grand' is used. In the hotel foyer, we join a tour group consisting of travellers from Mexico, America, Sweden, and other countries. There is an instant spark between me and one charming young lady on the tour.

The two of us have our Chilean heritage in common, but both reside overseas and will travel back home to different continents.

Buenos Aires - Argentina

While waiting for our flight to Buenos Aires, and having already checked our luggage in, an attendant with urgency comes calling for 'MR SIMON.' There are three luggage tags, but only two bags under his name. The flight is held up while Simon goes into the aeroplane's luggage compartment to identify his bags, one of which has two tags stuck together. There is the problem.

In Buenos Aires, we stay in a hotel in the city centre. All is going well until we naively go into a bar for a beer, that also happens to offer female companions. We ignore the flirtatious proposals from the barmaids since it is only a beer that we want after a long flight.

When finishing our one beer, we go to leave. The barman informs me that the bill is fifty dollars US cash. I object since eight dollars is enough. At that moment, I sense threatening thugs surrounding me. I know what this means – potential harm. I agree to the excessive charge but tell the barman that I must go to the hotel to get cash. The manager becomes involved, and he agrees to let me go but insists that my friend stay behind. Simon doesn't speak Spanish, so he looks a bit confused, and I had no time to explain. I reluctantly left him there.

I return quickly to the bar with fifty dollars cash. In that short time, the bill went up; it is now two hundred dollars cash. My face is turning red since outrage and anger are coursing through my body. Yet, faced with a potential ugly assault, it is a small price to pay. I had heard about tourists having arms broken over such disputes.

Again, at the hotel, I exchanged more money at the front desk. The exchange rate is outrageous but of no consequence at this moment.

'What is going on?' the curious hotel attendant asks. I explained our hostage situation.

He is equally outraged and gathers three other hotel attendants for support. Together we march back to the bar, to collect Simon. On the way they inform me that in Argentina, the tourism industry and the police are pushing back on cowboys trying to rip off tourists. I'm relieved and thankful for their help.

At the bar, without a word, the fellows drop my original fifty US dollars on the bar, and I gather Simon on the way out. We walk out glancing over our shoulders, expecting retaliation. Once safe, I let Simon know what had just occurred. He gathered that something was wrong and

wondered why I had left him there and naturally, he is unimpressed. Fortunately, he kept his cool at the bar. All ends well that evening.

The following day, we explore Buenos Aires enjoying the city centre and Latin culture. Buskers in the streets play amazing tango tunes on their accordions.

The Argentinians are famous for their leather clothes, and Simon is shopping for a leather jacket. In one store, there are racks of quality leather jackets of all sizes, from front to back of shop. The shop owner approaches me with an odd request.

‘El es Ingles? Take all his money,’ she requests glancing over at Simon. Argentinians are still bitter from the thrashing by the British during the Falkland War eleven years earlier.

On a mild evening, and hungry from walking all day, we stop in front of a restaurant specialising in Argentine barbecues. The aroma from the sizzling meat is inviting and mouthwatering. Just then, the doors swing open, and a boy runs out of the restaurant chasing and kicking a large rat.

Ignoring that scene, we sit down in the country style rustic restaurant and order a mixed grill. We wait with anticipation. Soon, a small coal barbecue is placed on our table with meats sizzling on the tray. On close observation, it is truly a mixed grill: rump, ribs, tongue, and gut. This is good use of a food source, but we order the steak and chips on our next restaurant visit.

Iguazu Falls – Border of Argentina and Brazil

From Buenos Aires we board a domestic flight to Iguazu Falls. It bounces over clouds at low altitude like a child skipping home. At our hotel, we rest and wait for a small tour bus to take us to the waterfalls.

The rainforest walk through the Iguazu National Park is mesmerising, and once at the top, the view suddenly reveals a broad chain of waterfalls with the river and forest below. Tons of water per second tumble over the edge in a massive horseshoe shape crater, spreading far to either side of us. The waterfalls generate a continuous thundering roar that is deafening. At the base of the waterfalls, the water disperses in the updraft forming low clouds. We spend the day exploring the falls and walking close to the edge.

It is visually a beautiful tropical experience. All senses are engaged. Thirsty, I crack open my soft drink can and before I can take my first sip, large bees appeared from nowhere and they shot into the can. It is not wise to take a drink so I abandoned the can. In seconds they are covering the can in a frantic sweet party.

Rio de Janeiro - Brazil

Next destination is Rio de Janeiro. We had heard much about this beautiful, and sundrenched city.

Upon arriving in Rio, we follow the crowd off the plane and towards customs. The passengers continue down corridors and through exit doors. We all walk out into the street. Somehow, we bypassed customs.

We re-enter the airport via the front entry and explain our situation to the guard. He is unconcerned by this security breach and allows us back into the airport to get our passport stamped and then collect our luggage.

This was an inconvenience to us, but I wondered if perhaps it was of benefit to others who were keen to bypass customs.

Rio is a spectacular city, and the beach even more so. Tanned and super fit ladies play volleyball on the sand. Pulling ourselves away from the beach, we visit the steeply rising streets, as well as Sugarloaf Mountain, and Christ the Redeemer.

Rio is curiously smelly. We breathe through our mouths while our noses adjust to the added stimulus. That is what happens when you locate thirteen million residents in a small, tropical space.

Copenhagen - Denmark

Our next stop is Copenhagen. When we arrive at the airport, we do so without a hotel booking. Being carefree, hotel bookings are just an inconvenience to us.

Unfortunately, this set off the 'loser' red flags with the airport police. Admittedly we are dressed a bit casual and unshaven. I look like someone who may have more than just clothing in his bag. Which I don't of course since I'm reluctant to even take headache tablets overseas.

They hold me at customs and order me to empty my luggage and repack three times. Two tall policemen stand centimetres from my face. They watch for any signs of discomfort. Occasionally, I would peer up their noses and smile at them. I think to myself, *funny how my English travel friend wasn't stopped*. I'm not bitter - just pointing out a fact.

That first evening in Copenhagen, I'm too tired to explore. There had been too much packing and unpacking at the airport. Simon is feeling refreshed, so he goes for an evening walk. He returns to the hotel a bit shaken, and pale faced. He was robbed at knifepoint in a dark street. He isn't hurt; he just lost a bit of cash.

Sightseeing the next day takes us to the Langelinie harbour and The Little Mermaid, sculptured by Edward Eriksen, a Danish sculptor. It is a small but impressive statue sitting on a rock with the blue and icy ocean as a backdrop.

The next stop is London, where Simon's family are charming and welcoming.

London And Surrounds - England

London is cold and icy in the winter. Parked cars wear six inches of snow on top like thick icing on a cake.

We stay with Simon's family in East Ham, London. They are a family of four who own a two-story terrace house. It is kept warm with radiant heating and cups of tea flow from morning until evening. His uncle is a tall and fit walking postman, and we stride out with him on the narrow suburban footpaths. We also visit another one of Simon's uncles, where we sample sauerkraut served with the evening meal. This uncle is English married to a lady with German heritage.

We use the London Underground to get about, since it is a reliable system covering 270 stations. On a trip to the city centre, our train is halted as we approach Liverpool station. A bomb is discovered in a garbage bin that morning. On another day, when walking near the city centre, a sinister utility parks a street away from Number 10 and fires a missile at it over the houses. Exposure to terrorist violence is common in the 1990s, and it heightens our sense of awareness.

With a keen interest in history, we enjoy meeting Simon's godfather, who is a historian. He monitors building excavations in London. He explains that artefacts from Roman and early English cultures are often dug up when foundations are cleared for new buildings.

Our daily schedule is busy with walks, including a visit to The National Gallery at Trafalgar Square, The British Museum and St Paul's Cathedral. We marvel at the amazing art and history that is all around us. Turning into an alley way and discovering an 1100-year-old church hidden amongst new buildings, boggles the mind.

The heated music store near Trafalgar Square, draws us out of the cold and away from the icy footpath. The records are tightly packed in rows, up and down the store and in alphabetical order. A box of cassettes is on sale by the front door. I purchase a cassette by a new rock band called Faith No More. They are talented rockers, and I feel that they might do well.

A true highlight of our visit to London, is the Eric Clapton concert at the Royal Albert Hall. The blues guitar master is at the peak of his career and performing in a beautiful venue dating back to 1871. We look around, sitting among a sellout crowd in this luxurious hall, feeling lucky to be here. The crowd sit silently listening to every note and word from familiar tunes. This is something that we will remember for a long time.

To explore further afield, we rent a car. We visit Bath, Canterbury, and Oxford. Each of these historic places contributed to the development of modern society. Bath is multi layered with history dating back to pre-Roman times. Each time the archaeologists excavate deeper, they find more evidence of ancient occupants. Canterbury and Oxford reflect the cultural and intellectual explosion from the Middle Ages onward.

We are excited to stop at the prehistoric stone monument Stonehenge, located near the city of Salisbury. The day is clear, and few visitors are about. Walking around the site, we take in the scale of the monument and the massive rock structures. It would have impressed early farming communities from four-thousand years ago, just as a skyscraper may impress now.

Historians know that Stonehenge had a practical purpose for the farmers. The entry aligns with the summer solstice sunrise. The stones are in place in a circle to follow the sunrise and sunset. It was a seasonal calendar for the community. It may also have held other more mystical meanings in a superstitious age.

Amsterdam - Netherlands

Next on our agenda is Amsterdam. There, our terrace housing hotel is charming. It faces one of the canals and seems to lean to the left when you look at it from the front.

During the day we share the famous canals and the busy footpaths with cyclists. Cycling and canal boats seem to be the main form of transport. The terrace houses, cobblestone roads and canal bridges make for great photo opportunities.

Out of curiosity, we visit De Wallen red-light district in the evening. The policymakers in the 1990s tolerated so-called lascivious activities to minimise harm and protect women. It feels awkward walking the street and peering through windows at ladies in their revealing night wear. No shame here, just healthy transparency. The nightclub is equally challenging with its rampant, uncensored nudity. It is an odd tourist attraction, but one to be experienced.

By contrast, the following day produces a moving experience with a visit to the Anne Frank Museum. The notorious terrace house sits unassumingly by a canal near the city centre. In the house, we negotiate the narrow steps to the annex. The hidden shelter has been purposefully untouched to date. With a sense of deep contemplation at what occurred here, we scan the narrow spaces where eight people hid from the Nazis in 1942. Here Anne used her diaries to escape from her restricted freedom and danger.

Bangkok - Thailand

Our last stop greets us with a bang. Countless bangs that night, in fact.

Upon our arrival in Thailand on 23 February 1991, and after checking into our hotel in the heart of Bangkok, the army overthrows the government in a military coup and shuts down the airport. The Army Commander overthrew the government of Chatichai Choonhavan. Throughout the night, we hear gunfire in the streets below.

The next day, we have a tour booked of the Grand Palace in the heart of Bangkok. When our tour guide arrives, she looks nervous and hesitant, and she stresses that it is 'not safe.' As the eager and naïve tourists that we are, we insist on seeing the palace. She drops us off at the front and leaves us to explore on our own. I'm sure that we paid for a guided tour, but it wasn't to be.

We stroll about the palace grounds, taking photos while army personnel run down the hallways fully armed with military style weapons. Unfamiliar with the Thai language, we smile politely at everyone in the palace. The fact that there are no tourists about, strikes us but doesn't faze us. There are only workers restoring wall paintings, and of course, the soldiers rushing about. We stop and watch a young woman restoring large murals with a brush on one hand and a paint palette in the other. She expertly repairs traditional Thai palace wall paintings that were first painted in 1783. I think to myself, *that skill must be passed down through generations.*

The multi-story hotel that we are staying in is extremely comfortable, and staff provide an exceptional level of service. We are stuck in the country, and the hotel staff make it easy for us to extend our stay. Fortunately, the airport reopens two days later, and we continue our journey home.

Back Home

It was an eventful adventure, and we are glad to be home safe. We survived tummy bugs, a hostage situation, terrorists, a hold up, and a military coup. Emotionally, this travel experience challenged us and made us more worldly.

The next day I rush to the chemist. It isn't medicine I'm after, since I didn't 'enjoy' the trip in that way, but to have my rolls of film processed. Simon does the same with his film rolls. We get together to exchange photos and recall the highlights of the journey. The memories stay with us for a lifetime.