

One Leave, Live It

By : Lee Bryan

Summer 2009, we were soon to deploy to Afghanistan and time wasn't on our side as we decided how to spend our leave. A bucket list, a coffee and a broken arm later we were in Europe breaking our travelling cherries. After all the European traffic, missed flights and abnormal food, we reflect now on a starting moment in our travelling lives.



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It was early August of 2009 in the North East of England. In typical English summer style it wasn't hot or cold. Regardless, young lads strutted around topless and town was noisy with the busy mid day shoppers, parents dragging their shouting kids about and groups of people pushing to get through each other. Pre-Deployment Leave was upon us, it would be just over a month until we deployed to Afghanistan on a six month tour of its hot and harsh Helmand Province. Being Infantry, we were under no illusion that our tour was to be a naughty one, the news was filled with British lads who were being killed daily on the frontline by improvised explosive devices and gunfire. We were fully aware of what was to come but we were on leave and we were determined to make it count.

Starbucks, Middlesbrough Town Centre, the place that would eventually become our haven for thinking up our travels. Me and Dom were sat over a double barrelled caffeine drink each and we discussed how to make our leave unforgettable. The quote "One Leave, Live It" became the mantra for our pre-Tour leave, if things had turned out differently in Helmand, it would've been horribly ironic. We got a scrap of paper and began writing what you could call a bucket list as it was things we wanted to do before we die. We planned to tick off everything from the list before we went back to camp. I don't remember exactly what we wrote that day but it involved things like 'Get on TV', 'Eat this..' 'Drink that'..â . After throwing ideas out between ourselves and laughing over some of the horrendous ones, an idea came out that got us thinking, 'Get pissed somewhere random'. At first, in our heads, this meant a random town in England. It would just involve picking a town or city off the map, getting to it on the train, get pissed and come home. We were happy with that idea, but then we started discussing how good it would be to go to some random town abroad and get smashed. We would get on a plane to our chosen destination, get a hotel for the weekend and end up horrible and drunk. Perfect. Again the idea developed. What if we were to get a train and make our way across Europe to somewhere well-known like Prague and get on it, maybe a few stops along the way. For a couple of days, this remained the plan and we started conjuring up routes and plans on our tourist maps. After a few more Caffeine fuelled planning sessions and a booze run in Redcar one afternoon, the word 'backpacking' was used. Why didn't we just go backpacking? Literally pack a bag each and go anywhere we wanted. We fast got excited at this idea and all previous plans, including our bucket list, went out the window.

There is a something that happened between our planning of the trip and our departure that should be explained. The reason I should explain this is to make telling later stories easier as it affected some of our time on the road. It happened a few days before we set off, drunk and full of angst in Stockton. We were in a taxi full of randomers going from town to my sister's house to carry on the party, I was in the front passenger seat and sitting still until we got there just seemed out of the question. Less than three hundred metres from our destination, I unclipped my seat belt and started my ascent to the taxi roof. With the vehicle moving at about forty mph I climbed out of the window and onto the roof, belly down using the two front windows as grips. The driver was shouting and flapping, who wouldn't be? A steaming fool clinging to the roof of your moving vehicle, your livelihood, gripping for life with no plans to let go. I've got no idea what was going through my pickled brain at this point except the need to impress and shock, I definitely achieved the later. Anyway, instead of stopping the taxi and demanding I pay him for turning his roof into a shell scrape, he decided to start turning the wheel frantically left to right in an attempt to shake me off. This worked. I lost my grip, landed on my right leg, did a roll and broke some bones in my hand. I was lying on the curb in complete agony, like a true down and out, regretting my choices and cursing my life. I tried to shake off the pain and stood up, limping towards my sister's house, twenty metres away. I could hear my sister shouting at the driver but I wasn't interested I was totally finished for the night. My angst cost me a hospital visit the next morning, I woke to my wrist looking like a half deflated football and my knee looking no better. During the fall I had landed badly on my knee, it wasn't broke but the joint had filled with blood. In a&e they had to take three needles worth of blood from it, I'm not talking shot needles I mean big horrible toilet roll tube sized needles that made me sick on sight. I ended up passing out by the third needle and woke up trying to attack the doctor,

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completely lost and confused. My right arm had to have a caste put on it. I was told if I was going travelling, I'd have to have it cut down the middle and strapped up, this was to relieve any pressure that would be caused by flying, something that was not yet ruled out of our return plan from Europe. Initially this was a spanner in the works as I could barely walk without pain killers, but as a few days passed, even though still in some pain, I could walk a lot better. As for my hand, what could I do? It was broken and in a caste, this wasn't going to change so a decision was made to crack on, the Euro trip was to go ahead. One leave, Live it.

So we had, what we thought was, our route and with no more time to waste, plans needed to start becoming actions. We conjured up a bit of a packing list between us, being soldiers we couldn't be blamed as we started everything with a packing list. The list involved (what we now know to be way too much) items such as tinned food, CD players and a tent. None of which we ended up using. The only thing we were missing were actual backpacks, we had our army issue daysacks but we were hesitant about taking them as we didn't know how people would react if they knew we were soldiers. We agreed to meet in an Argos shop on Stockton High Street on the morning of our trip, we would buy a 60 litre travellers backpack each, long back ones covered in pouches and compartments. They were exactly what you'd imagine when you thought of backpackers. We met up, each carrying a black bag with all our "essentials" in, ready to make the purchase. The till ladies must have thought we were mad, it was first thing in the morning and we looked like a couple of casually dressed hobo's, although we were probably too perky and excitable to be street bums. We re-packed the contents of our packing list into our new shiny backpacks, they were brand spankers and any hardened travellers who seen us on that trip would have knew straight away that we were newbies. Mine was Red and Black and Dom's was Grey and Black, both equally packed to the brim, mostly with unnecessary kit. We didn't have pans or anything else tied to the outside of our backpacks like what you see hanging off the kit of some travellers, we would never allow ourselves to live it down. Although we looked the business, we were complete virgin's to the backpacking world, eager and ready to bust our cherries.

We made our way through Stockton High Street in all its glory and hopelessness, each carrying our long back backpacks looking like a pair of seriously lost hitch hikers. Regardless we were happy with our situation, neither of us knew what we were doing, just that we were getting a train to London St. Pancras, then onto Europe. We hesitantly bent over and took the beasting that was the extortionate train fare from The North East to our Capital. In the euphoria of a good idea there's always the unexpected to bring a touch of reality back to a situation. The mood kill was short lived as we bared on south-ward in our bliss of adventure. A change over in Darlington brought about the end of our first leg and our departure from the North East. We chose to sit on our kit in the centre carriage, the section where two carts join together and there is no seats, maybe push bikes, prams and usually a toilet. We didn't care, we were backpackers and had worldly business to discuss. We both perched over our Tourist Centre acquired maps of Europe and thought aloud about which countries we should see. I remember our original plan involved most of Western Europe, France, Spain, Switzerland, Italy, Austria, Germany, Poland and Czech Republic roughly in that order, Prague still being in our heads as the final leg. We didn't know in our in-experienced travelling minds that a route like that could take months, or at least a few weeks if we moved quickly through each country. We only had three weeks left until our presently forgot about return to camp. We obviously weren't thinking we would be stopping too much in each country, if we even thought about that at all. We just wanted to rack up the miles and tick off the countries, which is hard work. This became an on going learning curb, one that was still not given much thought when we hit Europe again a year later. So far all we knew is that we had to get on the Euro Star train from St. Pancras, from there Europe was ours. The Euro Star has three main stops in Europe, Paris, Brussels and Antwerp, we were headed for Paris.

The rolling green Moorland and industrial history spots of Yorkshire slowly turned into busy city centre stops and diverse multi coloured train passengers and we knew The Capital was close.

LONDON, ENGLAND

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Getting off that platform in London feels like you've already entered a foreign land. Unfamiliar smells, sounds and people with strange appearances that unsettle you. The diversity is actually unbelievable, until you walk the streets yourself and witness it, the rushed buzz in the air, everyone moving around in mass colourful crowds, each moving at the pace that their chosen life bubble will allow them to. A city where your almost constantly shoulder to shoulder with people yet probably a very easy place to become lonely. We pushed through the crowds of Kings Cross with our morale still on the roof, making our way to St. Pancras. When you get there it becomes apparent that this station isn't like any other in England, it's brimming, not only with other travellers using the gateway to Europe to begin or continue their travels, but with people who commute under the channel to work. People armed with nothing more than a briefcase and a take out coffee waiting for the train to Paris. People and families on day trips to and from The Continent sporting 'I LOVE PARIS' t-shirts and other tourist tat. We now no longer looked like a couple of lost boys, instead we were on home ground. At this point our brand new backpacks didn't make us stand out like sore thumbs. This was the start point for any budding backpackers starting their trip to Europe and the abundance of eager, fresh faces ready to discover the lands of our European neighbours made us feel better about our inexperience. We walked up and down St. Pancras looking for the ticket desk, soaking up the unfamiliar accents and languages getting thrown around, a sample taste of the continent. We found where we needed to be and after a hefty stint in a line of weird individuals, we managed to bag a decent deal on our tickets. We knew roughly what we were going to be paying anyway. The ticket was for a set price and it allowed you travel to any train station in Europe, with that set price came a set amount of travel days you were entitled to use it for. Obviously the more expensive your ticket, the longer your trip could go on. The only 'catch' being that you might have to book a seat on busy train in advance to avoid disappointment, this was usually no more than ten to twenty Euros. We bought the necessary ticket we needed and moved off towards our platform. Boarding the Euro Star train was like boarding an international flight only a little easier, not to say the security wasn't there, it just seemed a little more relaxed. The line waiting to go through check-in was, safe to say, horrendous. I managed to get my passport stamped, the first of many, only for it to say Londres, French for London, I'd hoped to get a Parisian one to be honest but a stamp was a stamp and it still had a story behind it. We boarded the train and found our allocated seats. The pre allocated seats were a gift as there was mass confusion and fussing on with tortured parents trying to find a seat for their kids as well as all their luggage, French words were getting thrown about all over the carriage. It took long enough but eventually everyone was settling into their seats. We were told the trip would take no more than three hours. It had taken us most of the day to get to London from the North East so we figured that we'd be in Paris quite late, plus the extra hour time difference would make for an interesting time finding somewhere to get our heads down. Although I'd been abroad quite a bit before, I'd never actually 'travelled' so much we weren't quite sure what the situation would be with accommodation, we hadn't booked anything and we didn't know what Paris was like. Having had to kip in a bus stop in Brighton before and in the train station at Sheffield for whatever reasons we weren't worried about it, but finding somewhere to put our bags and eventually sleep in after we'd inevitably got drunk was something we agreed to do as soon as we could. Though we weren't yet in Europe, there was still a lot of things to be noticed on board the Euro Star. Things like hair cuts that you would never see in England, like perms and bobs that have been extinct since the Eighties. Clothes as well, the people of Europe seem less bothered about how you dress. This isn't saying that people in Europe dress bad, far from it, just that it seems people aren't as bothered about keeping up with trends and fashions, like there's less pressure. Whereas in England you can be judged instantly at a glance, solely on your clothes and how you look, making fashion quite rigid.

ENGLAND TO FRANCE

Eventually the rumbling of the engine began and whistles were getting blown by the staff as a signal to each other. Departure had finally come. We treat an ear each to some chosen music and left the other one free to talk shop, the Euro Star coughed into movement, slowly gathering speed, leaving the City of London behind us. The journey on the home side of The Channel went on for some time, teasing and making us eager to leave it behind. Watching passing buildings and fields in England is nothing spectacular when you've seen them a

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hundred times over. As we entered the tunnel that would take us under the sea and into France our ears began to pop, feeling the pressure of all those tonnes of weight above us. There was nothing to see here and we passed the next hour or so listening to tunes that made us feel cultured and chatting like we were embarking on the adventure of a lifetime, although in our heads at the time, we were. Coming out the other end of the tunnel was an anti-climax from what we'd expected in the last hours spent speeding through darkness. As the outside light approached, our eyes became fixed on the windows in order to get our eyes on the land of France. It was nearing dusk and the daylight was on its way out failing to halt our curiosity. What we saw when that train left the tunnel and emerged in the diminishing daylight of France was a far cry from what our minds had already thought they would see. There was no fields of yellow pansies, no wooden windmills or beautiful women being wooed by handsome men with moustaches and there was certainly no accordions. Instead we saw fields. Green fields. And cows. Now and then was the odd sign written in French and in the distance we could see cars driving on the wrong side of the road. Madness. We slumped back into our chairs and waited for our arrival in Paris. Curiosity hadn't killed this cat, it had just let him down. Judging a place by the first thing you see is something that we would do a lot of in our first years.

PARIS, FRANCE

First thing you notice when you get to Paris is the tramps. Groups of them, everywhere, like a social club or something. Not ordinary tramps, they didn't look miserable, and they weren't sat in shop doorways with a cup of change and a dog hoping for the generosity of strangers. These were like tramps I'd never witnessed before, they looked comfortable in themselves, sitting in groups laughing with bottles of wine and playing checkers. They still looked unclean and undesirable but in no way out of place. In England, a person would cross the road to avoid a tramp, either to avoid contact with them or just to avoid the guilt of ignoring their plea for change, but in Paris, passer bys didn't seem at all bothered by them and vice versa. The Parisian tramp had a class of his own and there was something strangely refreshing about it. This was the start of our 'Euro Bum' hunts. Europe, not just Paris, has a large bum population and we would see one, or a group of them and shout "Euro Bum" while trying to sneak a photograph. The plan was to take as many as we could and make a European hobo album. Although the 'Euro Bum' chant remained strong, the photographic evidence dwindled eventually due to the overwhelming bum population we were up against. As juvenile as it was, it kept our simple minds amused for a while.

We got off the train at Gare 'du Nord, a large station that is a Metro station and a bus station also. The Paris Metro is like the London Underground, confusing as hell when you've never used it before but practise makes perfect. The whole main entrance of the station was made of glass and the rest of the building was made of red/brown stone. The name, in big letters hung way above the main entrance. It had more levels than I remember and was still seriously busy even though it was way past dark. Gare 'du Nord is one of the busiest train stations in Europe and is perched right in the middle of what I can only describe as a tourist trap. The streets are lined with open front restaurants, fast food takeaways, hotels and b&bs, internet cafe's, burea de change places, tourist tat shops, and any number of conveniently placed shops and establishments. I say its a tourist trap, not because its not genuine in its Parisian(ness), but because an unseasoned traveller will get off the train, tired and hungry, go to the first hotel that pleases his eye, drop his bags off and go straight to the nearest restaurant that offers 'genuine French cuisine' and spend his money without actually seeing Paris, then once he'd left he would tell his romantic stories of his time in the City of Love. Ironic, because as I sit here and type these things a number of years later, unseasoned in the travelling world as we were back then, that's exactly what me and Dom done.

We found ourselves a second floor room to call home for the night, no more than three hundred metres from the station, bartered to us by an arab man in the street for seventy Euros. Between us the price was fine and being late, nearing ten pm, it would do us until we found our feet. We were staying in Paris for an unspecified amount of time, the whole trip was done like this, by chance and random decisions. We took it in turns between the shower and looking out the hotel window at the busy streets below us, cars speeding up and down

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the road, beeping at each other for domination of a junction. Rules of the road seem a little more laid back in Europe and crossing the road is risky business, we came to the conclusion that the little green man that wills you to cross is not to be trusted, only your own eyes can be relied on. In places like this the tourists stand at a safe distance from restaurants, trying to make their mind up where to eat without being hassled and guilted. Standing in obvious groups, cameras slung around necks, bum bags tightly strapped round the waist carrying probably most of their money, a five Euro map badly folded up in their hand.

Thinking we were complete geniuses, we stashed our passports and spare money under our beds, finished getting ready and went to find out what Paris was about. We found ourselves sat streetside under the viranda of an open front restaurant no more than twenty metres from our abode. We ordered a Stein of beer, a batch of snails and the most continental sounding meals on the menu, we were in Europe now and planned on doing everything continental. Operating in this way was always a trial and error situation but as everything else in the travellers world, you lived and learned. The snails were small, chewy and soaked in garlic, nothing worth getting excited about but a Parisien experience nonetheless and the steins were basically a litre of beer in a large glass mug that took a two hand grasp. Our meals arrived at the hand of a happy, prancy French waiter who floated to our table and was happy to take a picture of us proudly giving thumbs up while lurched over our first European plates of food. I couldn't tell you what it was I ate that night as it was insignificant and I don't remember, I also couldn't tell you what Dom ate, simply for the reason that we had no idea what it was. The waiter had brought him what looked like a large block of bright pink meat, rather like raw chicken except it had thick round bones and dimpled skin that over lapped itself and hung off its sides making it look un tidy as well as un desirable. A few boiled potatoes were the dishes only saving grace although not nearly enough to redeem it. We shared what we could, finished our steins and made tracks to explore the nightlife of Gare Du Nord. We made our way up and down streets we were completely unfamiliar with, hopping and skipping across roads with my recovering knee and trying to second guess the little green man at every turn was dangerous work. The traffic slowed for no one and a near miss with a bus made me momentarily forget that I couldn't walk properly as it neared take off speed no more than five metres behind me, the driver beeped and shouted manically, and the wind it kicked up after passing nearly took me out as a sort of runners up prize for not being killed by the bus itself.

We ventured around for the best part of an hour, wandering through areas that we hurriedly left as quick as we'd came. Bridges crossed above the dark streets that were part of The Metro rail system and played host to hordes of people underneath, the type of people you avoided at first glance when in a new place, boulish drunk people that were watching us pass through, unlike their daytime bum counterparts, their presence was an uneasy one and our body language clearly gave us away as outsiders. We decided that we'd left the tourist friendly area that we'd started in and made tracks back to the familiarity and false feeling of safety that was the tourist trap. Fear is another way tourists become trapped in their safety bubbles when travelling. We were no different. Eventually we found a series of streets, more like large alley ways that had no road, just cobbled footpath with bars lined on either side, each street lead round a corner to another identical street lined with bars then that would break off into two seperate streets that were the same and so on. The streets were busy with a mix of tourists and locals each at their own level of intoxication, some feeling the need to shout to be heard by someone two metres away while others casually scouted out their preferred drink hole for the night. Couples clung to each other, drunks greedily putting their midnight takeaways to rights and groups of what could easily be strangers or friends, standing at entrances smoking and chatting loudly together. Most of the bars employed door men, the types you'd expect, gorilla like men dressed in black and showing no sign of emotion unless it being an angry one. We had found what we were looking for and wasted no time in hopping between the bars. There was nothing outrageous about the bars and there was nothing we hadn't seen before, the usual themed bars, jazz bars, dance bars and the odd basement bar that sported a large dance floor and would easily be the popular attraction at the end of the night. In our usual manner, we ruined ourselves on endless Tequilas and drinks that sounded exotic or unfamiliar and our physical states slowly worsened while our senses give us the misinterpretation that we were on top of the world and that we were the life and soul of the party wherever we happened to be.

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The early hours of the following morning, as they always do on these nights, came around fast and unexpected. Our thirst for the poison stuff was as unquenched as ever but our curiosity for the bars of Gare Du Nord was satisfied. We sniffed out a taxi rank and started quizzing the drivers in loud, broken English, one by one we patronised them in an attempt to take us somewhere bigger and better. We were unsuccessful due to our ignorant, drunk and foreign mannerisms until one driver blurted out "Moulin Rouge?"

We barely even sent him a reply as we wrestled into the back of the cab as if the first one aboard would arrive there quicker. We arrived in the area of Pigalle, a district of Paris well known for its nightlife and cabarets, the most famous of which being The Moulin Rouge. A lot of the cabarets and big clubs were shut due to us travelling to Paris on a quiet night of the week, so once again we bar hopped. There's only two events within memories grasp I can write about. Firstly, as we urinated up a wall in what we thought was a discreet alleyway, a French man kindly offered us some of his spliff, when we declined his offer he burst into a vicious rant about English men coming to his city and him being the one having to speak a foreign language. He was still speeching away as we zipped up and stumbled off. After leaving the alleyway we found our way into a packed wall to wall bar where we happily ordered our twenty Euro drinks as to not bring an end to our night. The situation then became awkward and uncomfortable when everyone in the bar sang along to Edith Piaf - Non, Je ne regrette rien and we realised it was a local bar for local people. It was probably drink induced paranoia that made us want to leave but the drinks went down like water and we made our tracks.

The next morning we woke to the noises of the busy street below, the window was wide open and the morning sun relentlessly beamed down on us, drying out any moisture the alcohol had left behind. It was one of those moments when you and your friend wake at the same time, each greeted by a creased, confused face, we had twin beds no more than five meters from each other and our expressions both personified how horrible we felt. I didn't remember getting back to the hotel but I knew it wasn't long after we'd seen The Moulin Rouge. I checked my pockets and realised, in all too familiar shame, that I'd spent every penny I took out. We didn't have a plan, as usual, so it was decided we'd go out and explore the city, the obvious places like The Eiffel Tower and The Louvre came to mind but the good things you find are the ones your not looking for.

We followed the main streets, the safe tourist option, passing Champs Elysees and the Arc De Triomphe and eventually getting to The Seine, the river running through Paris. Tree lined roads, elegant old buildings and grand bridges topped off with the Eiffel Tower, this beautiful backdrop is the scenery you'd expect when thinking of France and Paris, but also street cafe's full of trendy folk smoking cigarettes and sipping Espresso shots, accordionists playing Bal Musette on the corners and couples in love. You do get some of this, except it's diluted by the tourism and the inevitable tat that tourism brings with it. The streets around the Eiffel Tower are filled with lucky lucky men trying to sell you anything, from snow globes to key rings, and various sized mini model towers, its an unfortunate fantasy killer and its a pain in the arse, when you go travelling, it's something you have to deal with. We didn't bother going up the tower, paying to stand in a line and wait for hours. We moseyed around for a few hours, seen the Notre Dame, took a boat trip, took pictures and bought memorabilia, like the tourists we were and decided on our plans for the night. We couldn't repeat the last night. It became obvious to us that the people here didn't need to be anywhere special to socialise, the streets were sufficient to hold any kind of event, a picnic, a board game competition or a drink. This isn't seen as anti-social like in England. We thought we'd oblige, no better way to experience Paris than by doing what the Parisians did. We each purchased a bottle of French red wine and a baguette. We took the stairs down from street level, onto one of the many walkways that ran alongside the river and under the bridges, known as the Port du Louvre. We found a bench beside a bridge where a small gathering of locals had already massed on a mosaic of picnic cloths, they were eating things I couldn't recognise and drinking wine, laughing and socialising. This was completely normal here and as the warm daylight softly faded, the lights from the buildings above, the boats and bridges all came on making for a nice atmosphere. We felt part of Paris. The boats slowly trundled past at regular intervals, people ate meals on the decks, being served by upright waiters, floating around with their noses in the air. We drank our wine from the bottles and ripped off chunks of crusty baguette to soak it up. Our conversation took us to each corner of the globe, no metropolis was out of the

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question, neither was any desert too desolate for our wanderers appetite. The exotic, the undesirable, the unorthodox and the unsafe, it was all up for grabs and our new to the game, naive, attitudes were unshakeable. We came to the conclusion that Swizerland would be our next destination, in the morning we would pack our bags and get on the first train south. We stayed by the river for a few hours, basking in the pleasant air and letting the red take its effect. The night started to settle right in, bringing with it the insatiable thirst for more booze and the inevitable craving for a bouncier atmosphere and loud music. We knew this feeling well and somehow our common sense prevailed. We made our way to the Metro, nurturing our culture buzz from our night by the river. we weren't walking back to the hotel.

PARIS, FRANCE TO SWITZERLAND

We woke, not to each others distraught heads this time but to a wisely set alarm. Our laundry had been laid over the bannister outside our window, due to it been the dead of summer we had sweated a lot, but this also aided in a quick turnover from washing it the previous night. The mid morning sun had baked them hard dry but it wasn't a concern to us, Switzerland lay before us. As standard, we hadn't prepared, we had no seats booked on the train, or a timing to go by. We entered Gare du Nord through the front, passed the tramp social club and joined a line of other travellers and commuters at the ticket desk.

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