

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering and Wondering in 2012

by Christopher Damitio

Contents

Introduction.....	2
An Inevitable Vagabond	3
Aging Itinerant Writer	6
Travel Blog Fairy Tales.....	9
Those Lovable Turks.....	10
Important Life Decisions.....	12
Win \$1 Million Dollars.....	14
Egotourism.....	16
Having Fun in Morocco and Living My Dreams.....	18
Dragging My Family Around.....	20
Learning Travel Lessons All Over Again.....	22
Fulfilling Prophecy.....	25
Blogging Bologna.....	27
Weighing Istanbul.....	29
Heading Toward Fairy Chimney's and Cappadocia Wonders.....	31
Avoiding Syria Troubles by Heading to the Trees.....	32
Soaked in a Sunshine Destination and Happy About It.....	34
Blogville in Bologna, Italy.....	35
Drawing Distinctions About Extinctions.....	36
Moroccan Complaining.....	38
What happened to Sefrou?.....	40
Dreaming of Hawaii and Making Plans to Get Away.....	43

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Flights of Fancy.....	44
Refocusing, Reflecting, Rejoicing.....	46
Telling People Not to Travel.....	49
Looking for the Maltese Falcon.....	50
Exploring Italy's Essence – Food, Wine, Art, Architecture, and Religion.....	52
Celebrating International Independence.....	53
Exploring the Sultanate of Baboob.....	55
Confessing and Getting Ready to Fast.....	57
Ramadan in Morocco: Participating and Observing.....	60
Celebrating a Year of Fatherhood.....	61
Sailing and Sweating in Greece.....	64
Wondering How to Get Home.....	65
Smooth Living in the Aegean.....	66
Istanbul, Cairo, Greece, and Going Home.....	68
Building the Future of Travel – I Hope.....	70
Remembering 911 and Seeing the Effects on Travel 11 Years Later.....	72
Ranting About the Mohammad Movie.....	74
Stacycation in Morocco.....	77
The Moroccan Atlantic.....	79
Morocco in Black and White.....	81
Considering Egyptian Souvenirs.....	83
A Sahara Desert Artistic Retreat.....	84
Halloween in Marseille.....	86
Rediscovering England.....	88
Flying the Hajji Skies – From Cairo to Morocco	90
Revisiting the World Travel Market in London.....	93
The Egyptian Pyramids on Horseback.....	95
The Egyptian Hustle.....	98
Christmas in Sefrou.....	99
Sledding with Moroccan Snow Bunnies.....	101
Looking at my travels in 2012.....	102

Introduction

Sefrou, Morocco
12 January 2013

As the new year unfolds, I find myself still living in small town Morocco and I'm not terribly happy

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

about it. My plan for the past couple of years has been to get my wife and daughter out of Morocco, but so far, it hasn't happened. The problem is that my wife is a Moroccan Arab and the paperwork involved to get her to the USA is monstrous on both sides.

Our first hurdle was getting the paperwork in Morocco and waiting until we'd been married for two years to file for her immigrant visa to the USA. After that, it's been a matter of fulfilling the requirements on the US side. I think we've finally got it licked. I sent the last batch of paperwork off on my birthday, December 27, 2012. Coincidentally, that was also the date I wrote the last column in this collection. I've got my fingers crossed.

In terms of this collection, I want to explain what this is. I've been writing and traveling for most of my life. I haven't always been the most orderly person about the way I do either. From 2008-2011, I was all over the globe but I wasn't necessarily writing about where I was or in an orderly way. Despite the fact that I was running my own website(s), I wasn't managing them like a magazine or newspaper, which, given my background in managing newspapers and writing columns for magazines – was rather odd.

At the end of 2011, I realized the truth of that situation and decided to turn Vagobond.com from just another travel blog into a travel and lifestyle magazine. There was a lot to that, but one factor I added in was weekly columns. The first one, was my own. I decided to call it “What am I doing here?” - Each week in 2012 (and to this day), I publish “What am I doing here?” on Vagobond.com. It's been a joy for me and as I look at this collection, I'm amazed by how far and wide my experiences and travels took me in this past year.

I hope you enjoy my life! I've enjoyed it, but I'll be happy to finally escape Sefrou when that day finally comes.

My Best to You!

An Inevitable Vagabond

04 January 2012
Sefrou, Morocco

Here I am again and while this week has been a bit Vago heavy, rest assured that from now on I will be confining my editorials to Wednesdays.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

I've decided to call my weekly column "What am I doing here?", the inspiration for this simple title comes from the French poet Jean Nicholas Arthur Rimbaud who famously wrote home from Ethiopia "What am I doing here?"

Even if the words had never been said or written famously by Rimbaud or others, they are still perfectly apt for an editorial travel column and specifically for one written by me since, in truth, not a week goes by that I don't ask myself "What am I doing here?" whether I am in Morocco, Turkey, Hawaii, Paris or anywhere else on this planet.

Rimbaud himself was a libertine who traveled extensively and lived only 37 years before being taken by cancer. In that time, he had a profound impact on literature and while he isn't specifically known as a traveler, certainly travel had an impact on his work that cannot be measured.

I like to think that Rimbaud was like me in many ways. He was a vehement anti-authoritarian – so much so that he probably did the very things that killed him and harmed him simply because they were forbidden. Absinthe binges, hashish bouts, fights, running away from home, crime, and even joining the Army to get free travel benefits. Yes, Arthur, me too.

Like Rimbaud, I feel that it was inevitable that I become a vagabond. My childhood traumas, teenage rebellions, and natural proclivities for that which is forbidden led me to eventually flush my future down the crapper whenever it began to look like it would be settled. And, like Rimbaud – my wandering eventually led me to Africa where both of us have spent more than a bit of time asking "What am I doing here?"

If all of that sounds ridiculous, consider that I left the dot com world of stock options and new millionaires every day in the Seattle of 1999 to move into a \$100 Volkswagen van and learn how to enjoy being homeless. That life changing experiment yielded *Rough Living: Tips and Tales of a Vagabond*.

As for Rimbaud, at 17 he wrote the following in a letter..."I'm now making myself as scummy as I can. Why? I want to be a poet, and I'm working at turning myself into a seer. You won't understand any of this, and I'm almost incapable of explaining it to you. The idea is to reach the unknown by the derangement of all the senses. It involves enormous suffering, but one must be strong and be a born poet. It's really not my fault."

By the way, I didn't encounter Rimbaud until 2007, oddly enough. If I had, I might have avoided a lot of suffering since it seems he answered many of the questions I was seeking answers to. Of course, the answer that never comes is that eternal question "What am I doing here?"

Whether a question of practicality, being lost, sudden realization, purpose, or philosophical

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

exploration, I've found that it's a question that needs to be asked. I've asked it as a way to evaluate my careers, a way to evaluate my relationships, a way to evaluate my geographic location and a way to check up on my work.

Most recently, I find myself asking "What am I doing here?" in regards to Morocco. Morocco. A culturally rich country filled with wonders, kind people, fresh delicious foods and more. What am I doing here?

The truth is, I can't stand living here. Morocco drives me insane. From the fact that in order to get a dental appointment you have to wake up very early, go to the dentist, take a number and then come back later when your number 'should' be up (and that's the modern version) to living in a cinder block concrete house with no insulation that is sweltering in summer and freezing in winter. More specifically, what am I doing here in a medium sized town in the Middle Atlas mountains where there are no restaurants, no movie theater, no cultural attractions, no outdoor attractions, no writing groups, no university, no this, that or the other? What am I doing here?

Well, the answer, isn't too difficult to suss out. Rimbaud died at 37 and instead of that, I fell in love and got married to a shepherd's daughter in this medium sized Moroccan town. At 38, I got her to escape to Turkey with me but at 39 when she became pregnant, she (quite reasonably) wanted to be surrounded by family – and so at 40, I'm trying to convince my wife that we should take our daughter somewhere else. That's what I'm doing here, geographically speaking.

The truth is that there are only three places that I've ever felt like I could call home. The Pacific Northwest of the USA, the Hawaiian Islands and Turkey. And that brings me to economically what I'm doing here. Trying to get together enough money to drag my wife and child to one of those places or possibly to someplace else – you know, because Sri Lanka, Japan and Peru all sound like they could be pretty good too.

I'm an inevitable vagabond and when I met my wife, I explained all of that to her, but I think she thought maybe it was just because I wasn't married yet and didn't have children yet. Nope, I was telling the truth. My dream is (and always has been) to drag my family around like that guy from Paul Theroux's Mosquito Coast. I love that guy's answer to the question of what is he doing there? "I'm in the hot, sweaty Amazon – I'm making ice! That's what I'm doing here."

So, I'm writing, building a travel company, furnishing an apartment I can't wait to leave, looking for a piece of property, dreaming about a garden space and becoming impatient at the inability of Moroccan's to use telephones to make appointments or stand in ques when they are waiting for taxis. I'm dreaming about buying a gallon of organic maple syrup so I can do a ten day master cleanse fast and dreading the overcooked cauliflower that my mother-in-law (and all Moroccan women from what I can tell) loves to cook.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

I'm escaping from the garbage filled streets of our little Moroccan town to other towns that are slightly different but pretty much the same and avoiding my wife's suggestions that I get a residence permit so that I have a completely valid excuse for leaving Morocco at least every three months so that I can drink whiskey, talk about books, look at scantily clad women (you know, not in djellabas or burkas) and pretend that I know how to solve the major problems of the world with the other bar stool philosophers (by the way, this is an impossibility in Morocco because one, there aren't many bar stools and two, the guys on them are Muslims even if they are drunk and so when you talk about problems they just say 'inshallah' meaning, it's the way God meant it to be).

What am I doing here? Obviously, I'm going crazy. I'll look forward to telling you more about it next week.

Aging Itinerant Writer

11 Jan 2012
Sefrou, Morocco

What am I doing here? This week? This year? Right now?

I'm thinking a lot about time and age this week. Thinking about where travel is headed and in a big way about where the world is headed. It all ties in, but it might just take me a second to get around to it. You see, the world is changing and as a result of that (as would logically follow) – world travel is changing and the reason all of that is changing is because all of us are getting older.

I know, it's an obvious truth – but here's the thing, it goes deeper than that. The average age of the population is climbing. Life expectancy is climbing. Birth rates are going down and immigration is going up. At no time in the history of the world have we ever faced anything like this.

And that's not all- at no time in history has it been so easy to travel, so easy to create, so easy to share with the entire world. But, wait, I'm diverging a little bit.

So, look at the world through your own lens as I'm about to look at the world through mine. I'm 40 years old. Two hundred years ago, my life would be pretty much over and I'd most likely be dead. A hundred years ago, I could expect that 4/5ths of my life was complete. It was all downhill from here. Fifty years ago, I could have expected that 2/3rds of my life was complete.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Twenty years ago I might have expected to live to 70 years and today my life expectancy (on average) is 80 years. So essentially – today, I'm the equivalent of a 20 year old from 200 years ago.

But I'm not done yet – In the next twenty years- my life expectancy will go up to approximately 100 years. By the time my current 80 years come up, some futurists and scientists expect that humans will be living to 200 years! So, when I look at it like this, my life is really just beginning... in fact, I'm the equivalent of a 20 year old today in terms of how much living I have ahead of me!

Okay, so consider this...the age of retirement is 65 years in most developed nations. Now, if those people live to be 100, that means they have 35 years ahead of them with no work and their income coming from pensions being fed by current workers. Now imagine me (long life scenario) – I retire at 65 and have 135 years ahead of me – What??? Seriously – WTF? Even if I have just 35 years ahead of me, that is most of my current 40 years...what am I going to do with all that time? And how am I going to support myself? Because we all know that the social security and pension system is failing. It has to, there are fewer young workers and more retired and about to retire pensioners...

Uh-oh.

We're already seeing several effects of all of this in the travel world of today. Retirees are traveling the globe in never before seen (and always increasing) numbers. Go anywhere and you are bound to see at least one person traveling in their 60's. And most likely, you will see more than one – herds of them moving along. These aren't like the decrepit senior groups you used to see in Vegas either (well some of them are)- these are intrepid travelers – hiking, kayaking, scuba diving, volunteering, teaching – you see, they've retired and now, they aren't real sure what to do with their time, so they are traveling.

These are the lucky ones though. Already many nations are pushing to raise the age of retirement to 70 or higher. They have to. The smaller, younger work force isn't producing enough engineers, doctors or other highly skilled workers. And even if they were, they wouldn't be able to support the huge numbers of pensioners we will see in the next ten years – so the only solution is to raise the age of retirement and keep older workers in the workforce for longer – but, it's a stopgap measure. The disparity between birthrates and death rates means that at some point the pension and social security systems are going to fail. It will probably be about the time that I'm reaching my retirement age (I thought) about 25 years from now – if it lasts that long.

Whoa. Add to that the resources are definitely reaching peak volumes, the cost of travel and living is going to skyrocket (because not only are more people not dying but the birth rate continues to bring new people into the world so we can expect almost a billion more people in

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

the next ten years) – I don't mean to scare you, but this is the reality unless something far worse were to happen which we can all hope and pray it doesn't.

So, what am I doing here? Here in Morocco in 2012? Well, I'm preparing for that future. Don't misunderstand me – I'm not buying guns and hoarding canned goods, gasoline and water – I'm preparing for a world where I can't expect to get a pension or social security. I'm preparing for a world where I have 4/5ths of my life ahead of me. I'm preparing for a world where I can expect to need to provide for myself and my family for at least the next 65 years and possibly the next 135 years!

How am I doing that? Personally, I think the travel industry is going to explode in the next decade. It's going to explode with more and more senior travellers looking for something to do and a nice way to spend their pensions. It's going to explode with more and more young people putting off their careers while they travel since they (like me) will have 40 years of working life ahead of them even when they reach 40! And it's going to explode with more and more people who are in between (like me) trying to find authentic, valuable experiences.

So, in preparation for my next 135 years – I'm building Vagobond Travel Media. And, since I have a lot of time on my hands here in Morocco, I'm also following my chosen vocation and writing, editing, and publishing my work. At the moment, I'm publishing everything in the Kindle format. I think the Kindle is going to outlast all of its reader competitors- I'm betting on it. In the next three years, I suspect there will be mass adoption – something like smartphones in 2007-2010.

In November, I wrote a new novel *Douchebags, Fags and Hags* which I'm still editing and revising for publication – but since then, I've been on fire re-editing and publishing my existing work. Most recently, I finally published *Not My Morocco* which is the story of how and why I'm here in the first place.

I've been on fire. In late December, I also finally published my *Expat Guide to Morocco* which had been on the burner for a while. While I want to eventually add more information to it, I figured it was better to publish it with what I have now and update it later in case someone needed the information. Plus, that frees me to get other things going.

I've created my first collection of short stories – *Meliptimous Taggle and Other Stories* and published them for Kindle in addition to publishing a short photo and verse memoir of my time working on a Gillnet Salmon Boat in the Pacific Northwest, *Gillnetting in the Puget Sound*.

And, I've finally fixed the formatting errors in *Rough Living: Tips and Tales of a Vagabond*, *Liminal Travel* and my novels *Slackville Road* and *The Hu Factor*.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

All of this is in preparation for a world that will be totally connected, filled with e-Reading devices, and where I can't expect a safety net for me or my family for the next 160 years...so think about it. If I make \$1.00 per book sale and I manage to sell twenty books per month then that's \$240 per year (I certainly hope I can sell more than 20 per month though!!!) Now, multiply that by 135 and it means that I've earned \$38,400 for my 200th birthday party. And that's without any interest being paid. I'm guessing that even with inflation, that will take me and Hanane to someplace comfortable for a couple of super old farts and maybe our 160 year old daughter will join us.

So- that's what I'm doing here – at least for now. For those who are interested, you can find all my books at my [Amazon Author Page](#)

Travel Blog Fairy Tales

18 Jan 2012

Istanbul, Turkey

Oh man, the only problem with Istanbul is that I never want to leave. I just love this place. The smells, the sounds, the music, the noise, the food, the people, everything. Well, it's easy to answer my perpetual question this week.... I'm trying to find a way to justify staying in Istanbul, bringing my wife and child here, and making our life in Turkey really work.

I'm also living in a hotel for a month. Not some fleabag hotel either, a nice hotel. I remember reading about Henry Miller, George Orwell, Hemingway, Kerouac, Burroughs and all those other deadbeat writers I love and wondering how the hell they managed to live in hotels. I'm still not sure how they did it – but I guess I've figured out my own way.

Tourism and travel consulting. That combined with web development and social media skills mean that I'm living in a pretty nice hotel and enjoying most of my meals being paid for, earning some money and didn't even have to pay for my flight. How's that for the writer life? The key is to diversify – nobody pays for a writer to live in a hotel for a month just so he can write (at least nobody I know) but I suppose Orwell was doing the dishes, Burroughs was shooting smack, and Miller was borrowing money...so we all have our means towards an end.

So, here I am, just kind of amazed at everything Istanbul offers up to me. In Morocco, I tend to be pretty solitary – I don't have a lot of friends there. Some, but I don't see them all the time and I'm not particularly enthusiastic to wonder around Morocco these days. It's beautiful and exotic,

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

etc etc etc – but it all starts to look, taste, smell, sound and feel the same to me – especially around Sefrou and Fes. Morocco holds two things for me really, my wife and daughter.

But Turkey – Istanbul? I never get tired of it. All I have to do is walk around a corner and there is something extraordinary and completely different...any corner. So, I'm dreaming and scheming and working and plotting and figuring out six different plans to figure out a way to stay here, to bring my wife and daughter here.

Here in Istanbul – I have friends. Turkish friends, American friends who used to live down the street from me, classmates from the University of Hawaii, writer friends, old neighbors, friends who used to be my students, friends I've worked with, and more. And we don't have to sit in just one cafe – we can go for lunch, dinner, beers, drinks, go to the cinema and watch movies in English, take boat rides on the Bosphorus, take the overnight train to Bulgaria, take a bus to Antalya, go to Thessaloniki, go to the Black Sea, cruise the Aegean, visit any of about 300 museums, take a ferry to Bursa and go skiing, or just sit around and drink tea or raki.

Yes, I tend to rhapsodize about Istanbul. The call to Prayer is beautiful instead of grim, the Istanbulis are dressed to the nines, the fruit is cheaper, the clothes are cheaper, the rent is more, but hey- it is Istanbul and so it's worth it, actually.

So, what am I doing besides rhapsodizing? I'm working on websites, writing, walking, connecting with friends, comparing technical notes with other guys that work on websites and are much better at it than I am (I can't do that in Sefrou) and scouring the online postings for the perfect little apartment to move my family into since I can't stay in the hotel for ever. But hey, how cool is it that I am living in a hotel in Istanbul for a month? Did I ever think this would happen? No way, my 40 year old self is way cooler and doing way cooler things than my 20 year old self or 30 year old self ever imagined. And yes, it does all seem like a fairy tale. And yet, this fairy tale really is my life.

Which reminds me – I finally published another fairy tale from what seems like long long ago.

The Princess and the Vagabond

It's not exactly a story for children since it contains some very adult situations, some extremely violent monkeys, and more. The story begins "Once upon a time..." though and it does contain a Princess, a Vagabond, Evil Monkeys, black magic, and more. It's well worth the read. Hard to believe my life has come so far and changed so much since I wrote that, but I suppose that is what life does. Especially when you live this kind of traveling life that opens up doors most people never even get to see. So, that's What I am doing here...at least this week.

Next week...well, who really knows? Not me.

Those Lovable Turks

25 Jan 2012
Istanbul, Turkey

This week as I ask myself "What am I doing here?" the answer is in the smiling and helpful faces of all these Turks around me. Yes, the stereotype I held before coming here certainly never included anything like the word lovable when I thought of Turks. Instead I thought of Midnight Express, big Turkish mustaches, sodomy, the movie airplane and the mention of Turkish prisons, Turkish bath houses, more sodomy, drugs, Midnight Express again, Turkish delight, Narnia (since that was the only thing I knew about Turkish delight), Turkish coffee, hookahs, and some vague ideas of the bad guys in World War I or the sort of duncy bad guys in World War II – oh yeah, and sodomy and Midnight Express.

Most of these associations came from films and TV shows like Indiana Jones, The Mummy, Lawrence of Arabia, Midnight Express and the extreme exotic oriental-ism of the west combined with some of the worst racial stereotyping in history. Seriously, I'm ashamed of the ideas I had about Turks before I came here because the fact of the matter is that Turks are among the most lovable people I've ever come across. Don't get me wrong, they will certainly cheat you if you give them a chance when you are doing business with them, they will lie to you and break your heart if you let them (just ask any of the many foreign women who come here, get charmed, and then learn that they are dating a married man who has no intention of leaving his family) and if it comes down to a fight, you can probably expect a knife or a gun to come into play at some point. The average Turk is just as dangerous as any biker gang member. And, there probably is some sodomy and a bit of the Midnight Express going on beneath the surface....

But, walk down a busy street and look lost and someone is sure to ask you if they can help. If you let them help, they will go to no small ends to assist you – down to paying for the taxi they finally put you in or walking you for two miles to ensure you find your destination. If you offer them payment for this help or try to pay for your own cab, they will most certainly refuse. Invite a Turk out to lunch and unless you make it clear from the beginning that you intend to pay and manage to argue about it and win – the Turk will pay. Ask a favor of a Turk, even a mere acquaintance and they will go to great lengths to fulfill it. Need I mention that you will be brought tea when you go to the bank and have to wait? Or the idea that the same cab driver or carpet merchant that will happily overcharge you for your fare or rug will also invite you to a dinner that will exceed the overcharge by 2 or 300%?

Why do they do this? Because when it comes down to it, there is something that is very good and decent going on inside of Turkish people. That same man who has a girlfriend, a wife, and

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

three prospects actually loves each one and might spoil them all – and as to the right and wrong of what he is doing? If it was wrong, he wouldn't be doing it. For him (or her) is simply is right. And I suppose this brings me to the physical characteristics of the Turks – I'm not sure there are a better looking people on the planet. Walk through the streets of Izmir or Istanbul and you will see men and women seemingly everywhere who look like Hollywood actresses and actors. Better looking actually. Obviously not all of them – there are plenty of older baba women and old Turkish farmer types with round bellies and full mustaches....along with the dark Kurdish and Arab types – which I suppose is something I should clear up right away – Turks are not Arabs. Turks are not Kurds. Kurds are not Arabs. They are all different. Turks are light skinned, Mediterranean looking people. Often they look less dark than Greeks. And, here is something else, Turks are descended from Asians so they sometimes look like they are Korean or Chinese more than Arab or Indians. So, what am I doing here among these beautiful Turks? For the past week, I've been web-slaving away, building websites, doing SEO, and writing copy. All of this while drinking apple tea and trying not to eat the rich and delicious baklava or borek which always seems to be at hand. I'm searching for a reasonably priced house to move my family into and taking photos as I cross the Bosphorus, wander around the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, stroll through the oldest, largest covered shopping center in the world and idly wander through some of the most impressive architecture in the world.

By the way, did I mention that I managed to implement the coolest hotel booking engine in the world onto this very site? Give it a try Hotels.Vagobond.Com and while you're at it...check out the incredible flight booking engine we now run Flights.Vagobond.Com - so, that's what I'm doing here too. Turning Vagobond.com into the place where you can find the best prices on hotels or flights for your adventures, business, or relaxing holidays.

And, in the meantime, I 'm surrounded by all these lovable Turks. Life really is pretty fantastic.

Important Life Decisions

01 Feb 2012
Istanbul, Turkey

Now more than ever, the simple question “What am I doing here?” holds importance not just in my life but in the lives of my wife and daughter as well. When my wife and I began ‘courting’, I certainly knew that our relationship would change my life and my ability to make decisions, what I didn't know was how much.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

For some reason, I was so focused on getting the proper paperwork in place and convincing everyone that I wasn't making the biggest mistake of my life by getting married to a small town girl from Morocco who had never had the chance to see much more of the world than seeing me – that it never occurred to me that once we managed to tie the knot, we would have other things to think about, other paperwork to consider, and that since I am the older, more experienced, better educated, more world-wise, and male (it matters in Morocco) half of our partnership – that making these decisions would pretty much fall on my shoulders. My wife seems surprised when I try to include her in making plans for our lives and tends to just tell me to make the decision and she will support it. Perhaps that sounds ideal to some, but what it means is that if things don't work – total responsibility for any failure falls on my shoulders. Yikes!

So, what am I doing here – in Istanbul, in Turkey, in Europe or Asia or Africa where my wife and daughter wait for me to come and tell them what we are doing? I'm trying to figure out the best decision for all of us. It's not easy.

I'm American, I know what the world has to offer and while Morocco is certainly pretty and offers a lot for tourists on a 2 week visit or rich expats who can afford to buy luxury guest houses – it doesn't offer much in the way of employment, opportunities for education or creating a business without huge reserves of cash, and it doesn't offer much in terms of an education or future for my daughter unless we want her to get an inferior education and some surprisingly backwards ideas about life, relationships, and the way the world works. My wife, however, is Moroccan and so what Morocco does offer is the support of her family and friends (personal not financial), the comfort of the culture she grew up in, and a culture that she knows how to navigate (even if I often pull out my hair in frustration over how it has to be navigated).

Hard, important life decision #1: We can't stay in Morocco. It's not a great place for me to improve our financial situation, it's not a great place for our daughter to grow up, and despite the helpfulness of my in-laws – we simply can't stay there.

So, what do we do? Easy, right? Go to my country, the good old USA. Go back to Hawaii and live the good life. – Oh, wait. Not so fast. My wife is Moroccan. It's not so easy. I have to prove that I earn 300% of the minimum income and since I'm a self employed freelancer – I can't really do that yet. Plus, the visa is a long complex process, plus getting the airfare, renting a house and finding a job in the current economy aren't exactly easy. My wife says "Yes, take me to America." But the truth is, the timing isn't right and I'm not even sure that I can. Hard decision #2 – We ain't going to the USA – yet.

So, where do we go? Well. We came to Turkey in 2010 and despite some culture shock and a bad experience working for a Turkish school (where they used my wife as leverage against me – long story) we like Turkey a lot. Turkey is prosperous. It's modern. It's got huge opportunities. It's close enough and cheap enough that we can get between Morocco and Turkey without too

much problem.

Great. Decision made, tickets purchased – I'm bringing my wife and daughter to Turkey. Now, I need to find us a place to live.

Crap. Istanbul is about the same cost as major US and European cities for rent. A small studio apartment costs a minimum of \$600 a month plus the utilities. I like Istanbul, but I'm not sure it's where we should live. But I have friends here, I have a bit of freelance work here, it offers all the modernity we (I) need and our friend has offered her apartment to us for a month when we land here in March while we find a place to live – still, I should look for a place for us- but it makes no sense to rent it for a month while we aren't here – unless it's some sort of a killer deal. Okay, I won't rent a place unless it's the right place until we all get here.

Crap. We have an apartment filled with things in Morocco. Oh well, that's easy. My wife says to move everything into her mom's house, but since the rent is only about \$150 a month, I prefer to just keep it for 3 months as a backup plan in case things go wrong in Turkey (again) – but I'm crossing my fingers they won't. One thing for sure, I won't ever work in the same school or company as my wife again. Anyway, Turkey seems to fit the bill for now – I hope...okay, it has to. The tickets are bought. At least there is no visa problem for my wife like there was when we tried to go to France last fall...no visa problem like the USA. My daughter has a nice American passport so she gets a \$20 visa on arrival like me and we should be able to get a residence permit.

Work. This is a huge one. A hard one. I earn enough to support us with my own business ventures – but the problem with being self supporting is that there is no social safety net, no fringe benefits, no health care, no guarantee of future paychecks. This week, I'm freaking out about \$1500 that is past due from a client and wondering if I did all that work for nothing. I hate that insecurity and sometimes I think I should take a job – but the truth is, I probably earn more on my own than anyone will pay me. And when I have a job, I can't do my own work...

As a writer, I keep getting rejected. I hate it. I guess all writers do. Those walls of shame of rejection letters only start to feel good after you get accepted. Despite my books selling well on their own – I sure would like to have the validation of some agent or publisher saying "We love the way you write and want to represent you" but so far they all say nice things followed by "... we'll have to pass for now." Reminds me of when I used to get up the nerve to ask some cheerleader out in college...yeah, it hurts. At the moment, I just can't ask anymore because it makes me angry and hateful towards everything and everyone.

So, those are the big life decisions, right? Where do we live? How do I support us? What do I do for a living? I'm sure there are more important decisions I'm making – but man – no wonder travel has become something I no longer enjoy – the days of irresponsibility are long gone for

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

me. Everything now has to be considered not for me but for my wife and my daughter. I certainly miss being able to not care what happened to me, but these days, what happens to me affects them and so even though I'm in Istanbul, one of the most cigarette filled cities in the world and I always enjoyed smoking – I'm a non-smoker and won't be starting any time. Damn responsibility!

Win \$1 Million Dollars

08 Feb 2012

Istanbul, Turkey

I am very pleased to announce the biggest contest in the history of travel this week on “What am I doing here?” Through the generous philanthropy of an unnamed very rich person (we are talking very very very rich) – Vagobond is going to be giving one lucky traveler \$1 million dollars to fund their travels, adventures, or power lunches for as long as the money lasts with no strings attached. You can even use it to go to space with Virgin Galactic if you like!!!

You read that right – NO STRINGS ATTACHED! In fact, this contest is one of the most obsequious and clairvoyant contests to rise from the 3-D swamp of the internets. First, here is how the contest works – the following are things that you don't have to do to be eligible to win the \$1 million dollar prize.

- LIKE or RECOMMEND this post on Facebook and follow Vagobond
- TWEET this post on Twitter and follow @Vagobond
- SHARE this post on Google+ and CIRCLE +vagobondtravelmedia
- RECOMMEND, TWEET, or LIKE the Vagobond Hotel Search or Vagobond Flight Tool
- SUBMIT a video explicitly mentioning Vagobond.com to Youtube about what you will do if you win the \$1 million dollars from Vagobond and let us know the URL through one of the social media outlets above.

That's it. It's that easy. You read that right, \$1 million dollars really is that easy – if you win.

Now, let's look at the eligibility requirements:

- Everyone living at the time of the award is eligible to be given the \$1 million dollar prize with no strings attached.
- Those who have died at the time of the award are no longer eligible
- Those raised from the dead but not among the un-dead (sorry zombies and vampires) are eligible (Yes, Jesus, that means you!)

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

- Winners must be current residents of one of the 237 eligible nations or have been born in one of the nations that no longer grace the maps
- Employees of Vagobond.com, Vagobond Travel Media, and every other company legally registered or not ARE eligible so long as they meet the above requirements

The winner will not be announced on JULY 31, 2012 but will be contacted privately and awarded the money with a strict non-disclosure agreement which will detail the terms and conditions of the NO STRINGS ATTACHED \$1 Million Dollars. Only the winner will be notified and so if you are not notified on July 31, 2012 – you are not the winner. The winner will not appear in any PROMOTIONAL VIDEOS for Vagobond and will not be required to act as a TRAVEL SPOKESPERSON for Vagobond. The winner will not be constrained, restrained, held captive or have the fact that they have won \$1 MILLION DOLLARS revealed to the world, their family, or anyone else so that they can move freely, avoid paying taxes, and not have a bunch of freeloaders hit them up for loose change or investment. So, that should be enough for anyone.

Good luck. I hope you win \$1 Million Dollars.

Egotourism

15 Feb 2012

Casablanca, Morocco

When I was a kid, I used to sit on the floor of my grandmother's single wide trailer and look at her collection of National Geographic. My grandfather was usually away in Sumatra, Iraq, Hong Kong, Norway or somewhere else – and I would look through the magazines trying to find stories about the places he was visiting.

I suppose, like many kids, National Geographic was my introduction to world travel and the fact that there was more to the world than just the little mountain town we lived in. That yellow border and all those huge fold out maps, not to mention the full color pictures in the magazines laid my path out ahead of me, though I didn't know it until much later. The funny thing is, I can remember tons of those stories but I can't tell you who wrote them. Not a single one of them – they may have been the stories of great expeditions, new discoveries, or something else – but they weren't egotourism.

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should define that term – maybe the best example would be the now very famous viral video by

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Matt Harding "Where the hell is Matt?"

Egotourism is the kind of writing, film, travel, or blogging that puts the person doing the reporting first. In the video above, the focus really isn't on the places so much as on the fact that Matt is in all of them. There's a huge difference between this kind of thing and the National Geographic I used to look at. Those were about the people, the places, the history, the culture – today, when I look at a lot of travel blogs – what I really see is the ego ahead of all the rest of it. Let's get it clear – I'm guilty of it – this site started out as my personal adventures – My name is Vago and this site is called Vagobond, maybe it's not as direct as 'Nomadic Matt' or 'Adventurous Kate' or "Johnny Vagabond" but the intent was certainly the same – as time has gone on, I've tried to put much less focus on me and more on the travel – some of those others have too, but there is plenty of Ego-Tourism out there still.

I remember that when I walked around the Island of Oahu, I thought it would be newsworthy and was surprised when no one really cared – it was only 130 miles, after all. Same with hitching across Canada with only \$2 – it was a stunt – or rather- it was something I was doing that I tried to make into a stunt but without much success. Since that time, I've seen people doing far more adventurous, dangerous, silly, or just plain insane things.

Rolf Potts went around the world with no baggage (and did it the smart way with sponsorship first), I met two guys who walked across America dressed as Spanish monks (I have no idea why – they weren't monks, they were using twitter to pick up girls and getting hammered every step of the way – maybe they were monks), I met a guy riding a unicycle from Egypt to South Africa (no idea if he made it or not), I've met plenty of hikers, cyclists, walkers, runners, buskers, and solo sailors and while I love the circus aspect of ego-tourism and the spectacle of the "Hey, look at me in this crazy spot doing this crazy thing!" – I'm also a little bothered by it. It can get ugly very fast – someone pointed me to a website of a guy who is 'fucking his way across every country in Africa' which is nothing short of sexploitation at it's very worst and degradation on top of it.

I don't really know what I'm trying to say here except, I have become a bit weary of the egos in travel. I've become a bit jaded about the reasons people are traveling and in some cases, I've decided that travel just isn't worth it because you have to deal with the travelers. The tourists are fine, but the travelers tend to be so focused on themselves and how much better they are than everyone else that it is just unpleasant to be around them.

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he old Turk is far more interesting than this backpacker.... I have a friend that went to Petra recently and she told me that she met no less than fifteen people who described their profession as travel bloggers, five travel writers, and a few travel photographers. She was only there for a week! One thing for sure, it made me scratch Petra off the list of places I want to go right away. Those might be the coolest, nicest people in the world, but more likely they would be like the

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

couple I sat near on the public ferry yesterday going up the Golden Horn – on his backpack was a 5 inch square that said ‘Don’t touch me Bitch’ – both of them had thousand dollar cameras and took pictures each step of the way and as they spoke loudly, I got to overhear their conversation – it was so incredibly petty and I just wanted to shake them and say “Stop talking for a second and look at those six schoolkids throwing stones from that rusty bridge!” or “Hey, look at that old Turkish man over there cleaning out his boat. How long do you think he’s owned it? Wow – wouldn’t he make a better picture than the Galata Tower?” – but I didn’t. They wouldn’t have liked it and frankly, it’s none of my business. As I said, I’m guilty too – but perhaps not that guilty. At least I hope not.

It’s just a bit sad. One of the reasons I love the Sahara is because I remember sitting at Moha’s mom’s house eating her homemade date syrup and a huge loaf of desert khobz. Turkey is special for those hikes in Manisa with everyday Turks who told me “If you see food, help yourself, just be ready to run!” I was in those places, doing those things, but what made them special were the people, the land, the texture. Perhaps, I’m simply becoming disillusioned as the texture of travel starts to feel like people are laying their texture over the top of the local texture, the big travel egos end up blotting out the texture of the local ways, and the spectacle eats up the experiential.

Anyway, that’s what I’m doing here this week – in my mind. In terms of my body, I am back in Morocco playing with my infant daughter, hugging my beautiful wife, and enjoying the tastes and smells of this place that I sometimes wish my own big travel ego didn’t forget to notice is really quite nice.

Having Fun in Morocco and Living My Dreams

22 Feb 2012
Sefrou, Morocco

I’m not always the most upbeat person when it comes to Morocco or Moroccans despite the fact that my wife is Moroccan, my daughter is half Moroccan and we live in Morocco. Actually, all of that might actually be the problem. The huge amounts of paperwork we had to go through to get our marriage completed (almost two years ago now...wow!), the bureaucracy and red tape that went along with that, the trials of working and living in Morocco – not to mention, the hellish period of our engagement when it felt like every Moroccan man wanted to molest my wife and kill me for us being a mixed couple – all of that kind of built up some serious negativity about what is really an incredibly beautiful country filled with kind, friendly people (for the most part).

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Maybe a part of it is having been away from Morocco for a month and now being back for just a few weeks before returning to Istanbul with my family – but to tell the truth – I’m having a lot of fun in Morocco and enjoying my time with Moroccans too. Actually, the leaving factor is probably a part (though we are keeping our apartment and just going away for 3 months) but another factor is that I’m going through some serious changes that just need to be made since I want to thrive and survive in this life. The changes are mental, physical, and to a certain extent emotional too.

Being a father certainly has something to do with it. Suddenly, my selfish perspective on life needs to go away – my daughter and my wife need to come first. Ego – be tamed! That realization has led me to some big changes – I gave up smoking without a problem after twenty-five years of enjoying my habit. It was simply a matter of not wanting my daughter to see me smoking, not wanting to give her that visual approval of what is, after all, a stinky bad habit. Of course, giving it up was also a matter of realizing, I don’t want to be sick or dead as she grows up because I want to be able to be there for her and to help her become everything she is capable of and wants to become (whatever that may be.) I had thought going to Turkey, the land where everyone smokes everywhere would make that decision difficult, but in fact – it was no problem. Not even a temptation.

While in Turkey, since my family was here in Morocco, I had some time to really look at my life. I’ve been bringing my daily exercise routine back from the days before I was married. Man, it feels good to use my body and do yoga, stretches and resistance training first thing in the morning. Finding opportunities to walk instead of take a car, bike instead of taxi, or just do something physical in the course of my day makes me feel wonderful.

The mental changes are important as well. I’ve realized that there really are two kinds of people in the world. Those who ‘do’ and those who ‘feel’. The doers do and the feelers do if they feel like it. I’ve spent far too much time in my life being a feeler and letting things slide past. It’s been fun for what it is worth, but there is a reason I’m a 40 year old man without a plan for retirement, an owned home, or any of the many other things I would like to have but don’t. I’ve been living like a spoiled kid. I’ve been doing whatever I want whenever I want without looking at what I want and how to get there! It’s like I’ve been cooking without a recipe or an ingredient list (which by the way, I do enjoy doing – but this is my life I’m messing with) – so, I’ve started making some concrete goals, figuring out some solid principles to live by, and working towards the future I want for myself and my family. And that’s when I made what may be the biggest discovery of my life...

I was working with an office full of people in Istanbul. Friends – and yet, one day, I bought a bag of gummy candy and had a serious craving I couldn’t deny – like a drug craving (for the candy) – I bought the candy, went back to the office and kept the candy in my pocket – not because I was denying my craving but because I didn’t want to have to share my stash! I was acting like a

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

freaking junkie over a bag of gummy worms!

I noticed the behavior and started thinking about it – it seriously disturbed me. What the hell was going on? With some serious research on the web, a lot of self analytic behavior, and some logical thought. I realized that it was the sugar I was a junkie for – not the gummy worms. I bought the excellent book *Sugar Shock!* and much to my surprise found that not only was the addiction to sugar causing me to act like a gummy worm junkie, but it was also causing me to freak out, get sick and get fat. Our bodies aren't designed to process refined sugar, it literally puts our bodies into a state of shock and causes us to release adrenaline, testosterone, insulin and a gamut of other things that aren't meant to be flooded into our blood stream and brains on a massive scale. Sugar is everywhere (in your latte, in your ketchup, in your bread, in your desserts, in alcohol, in soda, in tonic water, in crackers, in mayonaise – everywhere!) and the fact of the matter is, for people like me – it's a poison. Eating sugar actually causes blood sugar to decrease creating the urge to eat more sugar (gummy worm hoarder) causing tiredness, moods and even intermittant explosive disorder – hello road rage, school shootings, spousal abuse – and guess what – because alcohol is an easy source of sugar – hello symptoms that look remarkably like alcoholism but are really sugar induced! No wonder AA meetings are all about the desserts and sugary coffee! Those people are setting themselves on a path for destruction when there is no cake handy! Anyway, I'll write more about this another time, but I've been paying attention and cutting the sugars and easy carbs from my diet and the results are nothing short of miraculous. I feel like now, I'm on the road to becoming the man I was meant to be – all this time something felt wrong and the answer was everywhere I looked – sugar.

As a result of all of this – health, goal setting, fatherhood, releasing myself from sugar addiction – it's no surprise that I'm having fun in Morocco with Moroccans. Today was a great example – I woke up early, got my writing work complete, went to Fes to meet with a client, got in a fist fight at the taxi stand, did the work with a client, joked around with all the guys in the medina as they tried to sell me things I don't want, visited friends, came home, played with the baby, kissed my wife and now am writing this. It was a perfect day.

Yeah, you read it right – a fist fight, okay, just some shoving really – but in fact, that was part of my day and when it comes to it, I enjoyed it. I got out of the taxi and a guy reeking of beer stepped in my way and tried to stop me for some reason – he was one of those Moroccans that give all Moroccans a bad name – I tried to step around him and he stepped in front of me again – so I shoved him pretty hard. He began yelling, I grabbed him and I began yelling, then I decided that was enough and stepped away – three steps later he said “I'm going to shoot you!” and (maybe there's still some sugar in my diet somewhere) I lost it and ran back and grabbed him but before I hit him (I really wanted to) some logical part of my mind that I swear has been missing all these years – stopped me and instead I grabbed his arm like he'd just won a boxing match and raised his hand in the air and started shouting “Police, police – he said he's going to

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

shoot me. Police, someone call the police, this guy said he wants to shoot me because I'm American." The guy had no idea what was happening – but five very big guys got up from the cafe next to us and walked over – I thought – "Oh shit, I'm going to get my ass handed to me now" – one guy pulled his hand back and slapped the guy whose hand I was holding in the air while the other four all started apologizing to me for his behavior, asking me where I lived, why I spoke Arabic and how I like Morocco. Nice guys. Good guys. Good Moroccans – and that moment of not hitting him, of having the clarity of thought to restrain myself – it's something I wouldn't have had a few months ago. So yes, that fist fight (you can't really say shove fight and have it sound good) was a part of my great day and actually those five guys set the tone for my day and helped me to have fun with everyone else who approached me, tried to sell me something, or bonjour monsieur me in the Fez Medina.

What am I doing here? Loving life and finding out that the path of my success was never far away from me – in fact, I've been on it all along but now, I can see the road since the sun has finally risen.

Dragging My Family Around

29 Feb 2012

Somewhere between Sefrou, Morocco and Istanbul Turkey

As you read this, my wife, my seven month daughter and I are somewhere between Sefrou, Morocco and Istanbul, Turkey. We're not moving from one place to another – well, literally we are, but I mean in terms of moving house- but at the same time, we aren't exactly staying either. In 2010, I tried to move my wife to Turkey, but learned that you can take the girl out of Morocco but you can't take Morocco out of the girl. She was excited to travel and I made it when we first started that odd thing that you can only call courtship in a relationship with a Muslim woman, that I wasn't a first class traveler, I liked to travel rough, and that we wouldn't be living high on the hog like some Bahrain or Lebanon dream travel show. One thing I've learned about my wife though, I can talk for hours and say the same thing five thousand times, but she only hears what she wants – it's not a language or a cultural issue, I think it's a male-female issue. In any event, Turkey wasn't what she'd expected or wanted and she couldn't wait to get back to Morocco.

When we learned she was pregnant with our daughter, she jumped at the chance to leave and frankly, I didn't stop her even though I wasn't too enthusiastic about coming back to medium sized Moroccan town life. To be fair, it was her first time living abroad though, so the culture shock was at a pretty high level.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Once back in Morocco, she began to see just how good things had actually been in Turkey and to my surprise to miss it – pine for it even. And as for me- living in a small Moroccan town is a fate slightly above hell for me. Just slightly, but it is nice for my wife to be near her family and they do often help with taking care of the baby or other things – but to be completely honest – if it weren't for my wife, this is just about the last place I would choose to live. There are an infinite number of possibilities that would suit me better.

Like pretty much anywhere in Turkey or even anywhere else in Morocco. Don't misunderstand me – Sefrou has it's charms. The medina is small but interesting, the cascade nearby is very nice, there are many small trips you can take to nice places, and you can take walks in the hills and observe Berber shepherd life in action – in fact, if I owned a piece of land and a high walled villa, I might even be happy here – but I don't. Not yet anyway.

So, here we go again – only this time there are a few differences. First of all, we're bringing our infant daughter with us. We've taken her to Fez and Casablanca by train and by car, but this will be our first trip out of Morocco as a family and our first time flying with an infant. it should be interesting. Also, I've decided that I don't want to go through the mayhem of finding a new place to live if (actually, I should say when) we return to Morocco – because I've learned enough to know that you can't take a Moroccan girl from her family unless you take her so far away she can't get back and then ignore her crying. So, this time, I'm paying the rent for the first three months, bought the return tickets for three months, and have paid the utilities for three months. Whether we find a house in Turkey or not, we have one in Morocco.

Since we have the house in Morocco, I decided to use AirBnB and Roomorama to rent the house out as a vacation rental. It's not like there are a lot of people who come to Sefrou, but if they do, there aren't really any places to stay – so maybe I can recomp the rent and utilities by doing this. This of course led to another issue – someone needs to be there to hand the guests the keys, look after the house, clean it after guests go, etc. - Well, no problem, because my wife's family is here – (although I have to say that I am not 100% confident they will do it the way I've asked – and worst case scenario, it will become the vacation rental for her father, mother, brothers, their wives, cousins, the sheep, and the neighbors – after all, our apartment is nice, clean and modern and Moroccans love inviting their relatives...so, when I hand over the keys and a payment for potentially taking care of things, there is no certainty how things will go.)

Which leads to another point – I nearly had to murder my wife to get her to understand that she needed to put away things she didn't want strangers to potentially break or even take. She said “But no one wants my wedding dress or all of my clothes,” and “No one would take my jewelry” and while I appreciate her optimism – I think it is far better to be safe than sorry and so finally convinced her to put her non-valuables in the locking cupboard and store her valuables at her mom's house. The other hard part was communicating to her and (harder) to her sister since

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

they don't necessarily understand what people from Western countries expect and need in a vacation rental. In any event, if you are coming to Morocco and want to stay in our little place (or are just curious to see it) here are the links.

I'm crossing my fingers on that one.

Another small matter of stress is packing. We aren't moving so we have a 20 kg baggage allowance and the baby doesn't get a baggage allowance so we can't take everything and the kitchen sink, but my wife has already bought Moroccan supplies to tide her over while we are away – couscous (which I've assured her is available in Turkey), green tea (which is also available), a couscous pot, olive oil, olives (both of which are not only available but cheap and delicious in Turkey) and henna (also available in Turkey). I vetoed the tajine outright and am going to veto a few other things because otherwise the baby doesn't get any clothes. Fortunately, I had a trip to Turkey last month and left my clothes there when I returned because I knew this would happen – still there is packing drama coming for certain (as I write this anyway – as you read it, the storm has already passed).

It's no easy thing traveling with a family – imagine how hard it would be if I told her that I only have housing arranged for the first month? After that we are on our own as we become a vagabond family and I don't have any idea where we will be going or what we will be doing...lucky for me, she doesn't read my books or my blog.....

Learning Travel Lessons All Over Again

07 Mar 2012
Essouaria, Morocco

I feel thankful that this year I have been deconstructing my attitudes and ideas and carefully replacing them with attitudes and ideas that I agree with spiritually and mentally. It's funny how we allow life to program us into thinking, reacting or behaving a certain way and then we just run on auto-pilot without bothering to consult our actual selves about whether the course we are on is positive for us or a complete disaster. I've been on an auto-pilot disaster course for so long that sometimes it feels completely natural and yet, when I take the time to actually be conscious about my reactions, decisions, and actions – my 'natural' reactions are anything but natural – instead they are programmed into me over 40 years of watching, listening and learning and sometimes I've taken the complete wrong headed notion of something and made it my truth.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Here's what got me to thinking of all of this. Last week, I wrote about our forthcoming trip to Turkey and the struggles I had with my wife to get ourselves and our house ready for us to go. Well, some part of her apparently was pretty dead set on revenging against me and the morning we left, she dragged her feet, took a long shower, took her time putting on her makeup, needed to say her prayers and all of that led to us missing the train I'd intended us to catch from Fez to Casablanca by ten minutes. We had to wait an hour at the station for the next one. Last year, I might have fumed and blustered – I was a bit miffed to be sure, but instead of yelling or being a jerk – I bought her ice cream.

Because we missed that train, we also missed the train from Casablanca to the Airport which meant waiting another hour for the train to the airport. I felt myself tensing up and beginning to freak out since our tickets were non-refundable and non-changable and I had work waiting for me in Turkey – not to mention an apartment, a car and driver etc etc. But, rather than freaking out (which I would have done a year ago for certain), I ate a handful of nuts to balance my blood sugar and sat calmly looking at our daughter and reassuring my wife that things were fine as she looked at me like I was insane since she knew my usual reaction would be to become incredibly stressed out in a situation like this and was waiting for the explosion.

On the train, I found her unusually compliant to my instructions that when the train arrived she take the baby and the baby bag and go directly up the stairs and wait for me near the check in counter – usually she argues and demands to know why I want her to do anything until I have to shout to get her to do things – but I think my calm actually unhinged her. She did as I said and we got to the check in counter in record time and found that we had missed the check-in by 20 minutes. Too late.

I put the bags next to her and sprinted to the airline ticket office where I did my best to explain in a melange of Arabic, French and English that we had come a long way, we got delayed, my wife and baby were waiting upstairs with the bags and could they please just let us board (since the flight was still 40 minutes from takeoff) – the man at the counter was hardfaced. My 'normal' reaction would have been (much to my shame) to begin throwing f bombs, cussing, blustering and in some cases to have caused so much of an incident that security would have to be called if I didn't get what I wanted(yes, it's happened.). Instead, when he told me with his set features - "It is impossible, Monsieur." I calmly replied (to even my surprise) "Impossible is a dream" which I didn't quite understand or know where it had come from but which miraculously melted his features. He picked up the phone and made the call to the gate – and was told that it was too late.

So, we missed our flight – but much to my surprise, at this point he offered to change our flights to the next week for no charge which I accepted with thanks.

Back up to the counter where my family was waiting and I could see that my wife was waiting for

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

'the incident' or 'the explosion' – I felt the urge but resisted it since it wouldn't accomplish a thing. "We missed it" I told her. "Come on." I didn't know where we were going but I needed to sit and think. We were packed, our house was ready, we'd said our goodbyes and we had four days until our flight and a days journey between the airport and home.

I called my friends in Istanbul and told them what happened so they could cancel the car etc etc and they assured me it was no problem. I thought of going home and realized it was a mistake (and keep in mind if I had exploded we probably would have gone home because she would be crying and I wouldn't be thinking).

So what did we do? Well – the perfect opportunity for a nice Moroccan holiday lay before us and so we grabbed it. I bought us first class train tickets to Marrakech. On the train we made friends with some very nice people. In Marrakech, we checked into the Ibis Hotel (which are always conveniently located next to the stations). It was late. My wife settled into the room with the baby while I went to the bar and drank a very much deserved glass of whiskey.

I'd always wanted to see Essouaria on the Atlantic Coast, so in the morning we ate the very nice breakfast at the Ibis, bought bus tickets to Essouaria and then spent the next couple of days enjoying one of the most enjoyable towns in Morocco. Our baby got to play in the sand and see the sea for the first time, the weather was balmy and perfect, and my wife even confessed (this almost never happens) that she had prayed for us to miss our flight because she wasn't ready to go yet. To be honest, this would have made me angry except for the fact that I had an admission of my own to make – I was glad we missed it!

It was the first time I'd ever missed a flight and it led to writing this as I sit on a rooftop watching the waves roll into the shore but that's not the most important reason I was glad. Mostly, I was glad to be confirmed that my changes in attitude are leading us in a positive direction and to be reminded that the best part of travel is often the result of things that at first seem to be terrible.

I've always liked the phrase "When life hands you lemons, make lemonade" and I have to tell you, from where I'm sitting, the lemonade is incredibly sweet and delicious.

Fulfilling Prophecy

March 14, 2012
Istanbul, Turkey

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Did you ever have someone tell you something and then later you look back and realize they saw the truth much clearer than you yourself did? At those times, you might think one of two things if you think at all 1) it's a self fulfilling prophecy or 2) the person saw more than you did. Either way, when you take part in the action that was foretold, you are fulfilling prophecy. It's what I'm doing now.

Flashback to 2003 on the eve of the 2nd US war in Iraq. After September 11th, I'd abandoned the mainland and bailed to Hawaii where I started managing hostels and running kayak tours. I was the happiest I'd been in years and life felt really good. It must have reflected in my character because before I knew it, I had hooked up with this incredibly hot flight attendant who fed every bit of my ego with her soft body and admiring words. I had to have her.

So, when she left Hawaii, instead of just waiting for her next fling like I should have done, I followed her back to Portland, Oregon and set about trying to prove that I was good enough for her. The funny thing is that I didn't have anything to prove, her hard body and soft words were all the proof necessary. But let's face it, I was stupid.

I left Hawaii, went back to Portland, got a job as a stockbroker, passed my Series 7 and Series 63 exams and began wearing a suit to work everyday. Let's face something else – flight attendants like island flings with kayak guides, layover lays with pilots, and then later a settled relationship and mine already had her settled relationship – I was just a fling. So there I was, wearing a suit, hustling people to buy J.P. Morgan and Krispy Kreme Donuts and falling into a deep depression as I worked on the finishing touches of *Rough Living: Tips and Tales of a Vagabond* and dreamed about sleeping in a hammock back in the Kalalau Valley surrounded by six naked women of multi ethnic backgrounds (true story by the way...).

The flight attendant didn't want me, I felt like I was selling my soul as I told people that war would make the market drive to new heights (which, by the way, it did), and I didn't have much in common with my colleagues in the brokerage despite the fact that I was damn good at what I was doing. I probably would have stayed with it and made lots of money, bought too many houses and then lost it all except for one day, I was trying to close a prospect and suddenly he started spouting things like no other prospect before him had...

This guy had assets of \$31 million and I was trying to get him to move \$30k into my hands so I could prove I was better than his other brokers. On the verge of closing the deal – I could feel it. We were there. And suddenly, this multi-millionaire blurts out “Man, you shouldn't be doing this work.”

Now, I hadn't told him much about me aside from I was a shit hot broker but this guy spits this out at me. “This is what I'm good at,” I told him, “Let's make this transfer and I'll prove it to you.”

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

“Have you ever been to Istanbul?” he asked me. I told him I hadn’t. At this point, this hard businessman starts waxing poetic about the amazing blues you can see when you gaze into the wakes of the Istanbul ferries as they cross the Bosphorus. He starts rhapsodizing about the konaks along the shore. He starts talking about the exotic smells in the Egyptian spice bazaar and the way suitcases rumble as the wheelie bags are dragged over cobblestone streets.

I made a couple of attempts to get him back on track, but he kept going and let’s be honest – he had my attention and I wanted to hear more. Finally, it was me listening as he described what seemed like a dream to me back then. Finally, he said “I’m not going to buy any stock from you. It wouldn’t be right. You might stay in this life if you did.”

I tried to laugh and urge him back to business, but I knew he was right. My heart wasn’t in it. My heart was transported to where he had taken me with his words. Istanbul.

“You need to quit this job and go manage some hotel looking out on the Marmara Sea,” he told me. “You need to walk away while you still have your soul and go restore one of those konaks along the Bosphorus. Run a guesthouse for savvy travelers. Get out, man. Just do it. Go.”

I tried to bring him around but he wouldn’t listen. Maybe he felt the same way.

I don’t remember his name. I don’t remember where he lived. I wonder if he remembers me – because three weeks later, I walked out of the brokerage never to return. I gave up my dreams of the flight attendant, went back to Hawaii, and eventually now, nine years later (because 9 is the magic number), I sit here staring out at the Marmara Sea from the hotel I’m managing in Istanbul, I remember his words. I’ve just looked at my journal from back then to make sure I was remembering things the right way and yes, the multi-millionaire was somehow prophetic about my fate, about my future.

All this time, I wondered where I was going, but apparently I was just heading towards fulfillment of this prophecy. Now, I just hope the psychic who told me I would be very rich and the other psychic who told me I would win an Emmy or Oscar (how the hell is that supposed to happen?) were right too. As for the gypsy in North Carolina who told me I would have a wife in the East and a wife in the West (one light and one dark, she told me) – I’m thinking one wife is plenty. But, like me sitting in this old Ottoman Hotel – perhaps I’m already headed there and just don’t know it yet.

Look out Oscars, here I come. Fulfilling prophecy like an inevitable train chugging to the station.

Blogging Bologna

21 March 2012
Istanbul, Turkey

I like to think I'm pretty good at this travel stuff. I mean, I've traveled the world on my own without a job, figured out how to pay for it - without having to work for other people, picked up a wife along the way, managing to pay for her with what I do - oh, and bringing our baby along. And all of it is paid for by what I do - travel and writing, working on the web, and finding opportunities along the way that hopefully open up more opportunities. Life is pretty good.

So, what am I doing here? Well, I'm building a business and trying to take care of my family, see the world and get better at what I do on a daily basis. The fact is though, I sometimes make mistakes. Take this for example, when Google+ came around, I pretty much abandoned Twitter and my Facebook page for what I considered to be a better platform. I still think G+ will end up winning the battle of social media - but here is what I didn't consider - advertisers and sponsors aren't necessarily as excited about G+ as I am - so when they look at my social media - they look at Facebook and Twitter first - oops! That cost my family a press trip we were really excited about last week and since then, I've been putting more effort into both Facebook and Twitter. If you haven't visited either lately - please do, I'm there and active!

Luckily, there are other opportunities and just as one door closed, another one opened. The Blogville Emilia Romagna project. I'll be going to Italy in April and then in June for an awesome travel blogger experience - check this out from the site:

"From the 23rd of April to the 31st of May in Bologna and from the 2nd of June to the 14th of July in Rimini, BlogVille Emilia Romagna, thanks to two apartments, will be the perfect place from where you can start to discover Italy and the Emilia Romagna region. We will give you access of the local life and immerse yourself in the "Italian way". We will also help you to create an interesting itinerary for you and your readership throughout the Emilia Romagna, and of course BlogVille will be the perfect place to experience and share things with other bloggers.

The first apartment of the BlogVille project is located in Bologna, aka "La Grassa" (the fat one) in the heart of the Emilia Romagna region and a perfect departure point for discovering the region's treasures like Modena, Reggio-Emilia, Parma, Piacenza, Ferrara and the Motorvalley, and the top and world famous food producers of the Prosciutto di Parma, the Parmigiano-Reggiano Cheese and the Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Modena.

The second apartment of the BlogVille project is located in Rimini, Emilia Romagna's top holiday destination, famous for its wide sandy beaches, bathing establishments and nightlife.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Yet Rimini is a city of notable historical interest. Starting from Rimini you will have the chance to reach some of the most important cities of the region like Ravenna, Ferrara, Bologna, Faenza, Forlì and Cesena, the top trendy beaches like Marina di Ravenna, Cervia, Milano-Marittima, Cesenatico, Riccione, Misano Adriatico and Cattolica and the family beach destinations like the Lidos of Ferrara, the Lidos of Ravenna, Gatteo a Mare, San Mauro Mare and Bellaria-Igea Marina, plus the hidden jewels of the countryside, plenty of ancient castles, Roman rests, vineyards and excellent food producers."

This won't be a family holiday but while I'm gone the first time, my wife will be catching up with old friends here in Turkey and for the second trip she'll be visiting her family in Morocco. To be honest, this trip we're on now is about three months of family travel in Turkey - so the break is something I look forward to.

It's funny, I've been so focused these past few years on building Vagobond as a reputable online travel magazine that I haven't taken the time to really connect with bloggers, to learn the ins and outs of press trips, or even how to maximize my readership through networking. All of that is changing now.

Last week, I had to file my taxes. My 2011 income was high enough that I got an unpleasant surprise when I filled out my self employment forms. Yikes! My projected earnings for 2012 are approximately three times what I made in 2011 and if all goes well, they will be more than that. Much to my surprise, Vagobond Travel Media has become the best paying job I've ever had! So, I had to take some action to make things legitimate. Last week, I formed Vagobond Travel Media, LLC and appointed myself CEO. With great titles come great responsibility - as CEO of Vagobond Travel Media and Editor in Chief for Vagobond.com - my hands are pretty full. Add to that a new baby and making all of our perpetual travel arrangements and you might start to get the picture. I love it. When I was an Air Traffic Controller in the US Marines, the stress was the best part of the job.

Anyway, I'm juggling. Trying to find and hire the right writers, hiring virtual assistants, editing guest posts, writing, putting together business plans, working through a massive To-Do list, networking, trying to relearn how to use social media, connecting with old and new friends - and oh yeah, running an Istanbul Hotel, planning some incredible travel adventures in Eastern Turkey with an infant and wife, and sometimes cooking dinner. I'm having the time of my life.

Still, I'm looking forward to the time at Blogville - already I can see it as a time to take some breaths, connect with other travel writers and travel bloggers and most importantly experience as much as I can about the Emilia Romagna region of Italy.

By the way, the trip there should be pretty good too, heading first to Bodrum then taking the ferry to the Greek Island of Kos, from there a flight to Bologna and then the opening of the

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

house party! I am already enjoying it. There might even still be space - contact Nicholas to find out.

Weighing Istanbul

28 March 2012
Istanbul, Turkey

What am I doing here? Loving Istanbul. This week has been a lot of work and a lot of fun. On the fun end, my wife and I took a Bosphorus cruise, ate Turkish food out several times, had great walks in Kumkapi and Sultanahmet, and visited the Istanbul Aquarium. In addition, we were able to reconnect with friends here in Istanbul and last Saturday, I had the chance to meet up with fellow travel bloggers Anil Polat (Fox Nomad) and Earl Baron (Wandering Earl) for beers and story telling. So, what I am doing on a broad scale is enjoying Istanbul, spending time with family and old friends, and making new friends along the way. Life is very good.

It's no secret that I love Istanbul. This city offers so much for visitors and residents that it's incredibly hard to resist...the problem though, is deciding whether or not it will work for my family as a place to live.

Istanbul is nearly as expensive as Paris, New York and Honolulu and when you look at it that way - there are plenty of other options in the world. At the moment, what I am doing here in Istanbul is weighing the options.

On the positive side:

Istanbul is the center of the world. It's easy and cheap to get to Europe, Asia and Africa from here. It's relatively cheap to get to the USA from here too...consider this - to fly from Morocco to the US, costs more than double what it costs to fly from Turkey. Since my wife is close with her family, access to Morocco is a key thing for us...using Air Arabia, we can fly to Morocco for a couple hundred dollars each. That's worth something. In addition, the central location of Istanbul and major airport make it a very convenient location for me to be based out of.

Istanbul offers wonderful parks, thousands of restaurants, movie theatres, any type of shopping you could desire, cultural events, museums, history and ready access to tourism resources -

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

which, in my line of work, is pretty important. Istanbul is a safe and progressive city - sure, there are occasional bombs, but generally not in the areas where we go. Most of the violent problems in Turkey are far to the East, closer to Iran, Syria, Iraq and the volatile Middle East.

There are certainly opportunities here in journalism, technology, travel, tourism and if necessary in teaching English.

BUT....on the negative side,

Istanbul is expensive. For the same rent we would get a crappy apartment here, we could get a very nice apartment in Izmir, Fetiye or elsewhere. While Istanbul is close to the water and by definition is a water city, it's not a beach city and frankly, I want to be able to jump in the water without getting drowned by the currents of the Bosphorus or run over by a ferry or cargo ship. Food is roughly double the price in the rest of Turkey and transportation is a mess.

The transportation system here is good but with an estimated 17 million people - traffic is a nightmare and crowds can be daunting on the metro and buses. While I love big cities - I sometimes need to be able to find that solitude of sitting on a surfboard outside the lineup or hiking through a jungle or forest without encountering anything but a bear or a wild pig. Honestly, I go a little stir crazy when I'm always surrounded by people...

So, figuring out whether or not to stay in Istanbul is a tough one. I've weighed it again and again and each time I come up with a middle ground. But, I need to make a decision soon. The key is money, if I had enough to provide for an upper middle class lifestyle - Istanbul would be a no brainer. On my own, I don't have that yet. So, I've applied for a job and given the magic number I need to make things work here.

And with that - the decision is out of my hands. If the company comes back and says - "Evet! (Yes in Turkish)" then I will find us an apartment, get my wife and baby residence permits (I already have one) and continue living in Istanbul. If they come back and say "Hyey (No in Turkish)" or "We can't pay that much" then I will be dragging my family around Turkey for the next few months and then in June we will be returning to our apartment in Morocco for a while.

Another factor, is that we've begun the process of applying for my wife's permanent residence permit for the USA. This could well take a year or more, but if it should happen sooner than that - we will be going to Portland, Oregon and my Moroccan bride will get to learn about life in the Pacific Northwest - funny to think about, but we can live in Portland for about half what we can live in Istanbul for...of course, we can live in Morocco for about half what it will cost to live in Portland, and I suppose if we went to Indonesia we could live for about half of that...

So - that is what I'm doing here. For now anyway....

Heading Toward Fairy Chimney's and Cappadocia Wonders

04 April 2012

Between Istanbul and Uchisar, Turkey

I'm not sure why I always seem to end up traveling on Wednesdays. It's just one of those strange coincidences that seems to happen in life, but then, maybe I'm traveling on most of the other days too. I do tend to travel a lot, but since I write these columns on Wednesday's - I always tend to notice that yes, I'm on the road again.

As you read this, I am no doubt in transit with my wife and daughter on the way to the land of fairy chimneys and hot air balloons - Cappadocia. A wonderland of rock cut churches, surreal landscapes, and more than a little Turkish hospitality and charm.

The last time we were here was in 2010 for our honeymoon and now, in just a few days, we will be celebrating our two year wedding anniversary. We couldn't think of a more magical way to celebrate than to come back to one of Turkey's most captivating landscapes. When we were here last, we stayed in Goreme at a wonderful cave hotel, but this time, we decided to take things to the next level by heading to Taskonaklar in Uchisar, high above everything else. We were invited by one of the managing partners, Mr. Tolga Akarcali.

For the next several days we will be celebrating our two years of marriage with the best that Cappadocia has to offer - from breakfast terraces that overlook the plains of Cappadocia so that we are literally on a level with the balloons (at least for a while) to the finest dining in the area to actually waking up on our anniversary and heading up, up and away - we will also be bringing our 8 month old daughter and while she is still a little young to be getting high - we figure as long as we have her strapped in the backpack, she should be able to enjoy the ride too.

To say we are excited would be an understatement. Of course, the last week has been pretty fantastic too. My work at the hotel finished up and while my salary requirements seem to have been higher than the hotel was willing to pay, this actually came as a bit of a relief after a month of running things - my number was probably too low to begin with. And so, we head off to

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

adventures for April and May before heading back to Morocco in June.

I've been invited to attend the Arabian Travel Market in Dubai at the end of the month which certainly seems like a good idea, but there is no time to get Hanane a visa so we need to figure out if she and Sophia will be alright on their own for a few extra days (since I'm heading to Blogville in Bologna, Italy from the 22 to the 29th of April.) Of course, expense is another concern because that means two separate vacations running concurrently - so we have to figure out how best to do that.

In the meantime, since we had a few days at the beginning of April, we decided to head to Bursa, on the other side of the Marmara Sea from Istanbul. The ferry ride to Yalova was rough, the bus from Yalova to Bursa was sort of hot and stinky - and unfortunately, the cable car to the top of Uludag and the Green Mosque (Yesil Camii) were closed for maintenance and we came on a Monday so all the museums were closed - but you know what? We had an incredible time anyway. We used the opportunity to scout out some hotels, visit the beautiful Ulu Camii (one of the five most important mosques in Islam) and of course eat some of the delicious Bursa food, do some shopping, and trek through the winding streets of 'Green' Bursa, the first capital of the Ottoman Empire.

It's during these days that Sophia has learned to crawl and so between having parent time and enjoying our travel time - there is never a dull moment. Life is good and while we don't have a plan for May worked out yet - April looks like it is fully booked with travel, adventures and fun - of course, the hard part for me is to still find the time to work a minimum of a couple hours a day - which actually is much easier without having a hotel to run!

As you read this, we are probably already checking in at Taskonaklar! I'll tell you more about it tomorrow!

Avoiding Syria Troubles by Heading to the Trees

11 April 2012
Konya, Turkey

Leaving Cappadocia felt a bit like abandoning a true love. I felt like I could stay there forever. I've always been a beach and water guy, but the dry landscape and amazing canyons and

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

history of Cappadocia captured me this time - I think I may be hooked.

In fact though, it wasn't just the landscape. Our stay at Taskonaklar was beyond pleasant. Unlike many hotels, when you stay in a stone palace, you don't hear the sounds of other people, in fact, sipping wine as I watched the shadows lengthen in the Pigeon Valley from our terrace was as close to feeling in heaven as I've been for a long while.

There is something in Cappadocia that I carry away with me and feel a longing for at the same time. More than the place, more than the landscape, also the people. To be around Japanese people in such numbers hasn't happened since I moved from Hawaii four years ago - maybe it sounds funny, but I miss Japanese people. In fact, did you know there are strong ties between the Turkish and Japanese languages? Perhaps that is why you find so many Japanese/Turkish marriages and partnerships in Goreme.

And then there is Uchisar which was the home of Club Med until they left Cappadocia - but they didn't take the French with them. In Uchisar, I found myself having dinner with a diplomat and speaking of economics, politics and even the way that 100,000 baby bats can be found by 100,000 baby bat moms using sub microscopic smell....

This trip to Cappadocia also introduced me to new friends and united me with old ones. My friend Halis has recently opened a Travel Agency - Trace Cappadocia Tourism and Travel - Halis arranged the South Cappadocia Tour for us which took us to amazing underground cities, a gorgeous river cut valley, stone cut monasteries and churches and some delicious chocolate covered apricots.

Our intention had been to head East from Cappadocia - visit the giant stone heads on Nemrut Dag and then head south to Sanliurfa, Gaziantep, and Hatay (Antakaya) on the Syrian border. We were forced to cancel, not because of the unrest on the Turkish/Syrian border but because there is still 3 meters of snow covering the heads on Numrut Dag!

So, we headed to Konya - the home of Mevlana Jeladdin Rumi and the most spiritually conservative city in Turkey. It is only here, as I write this that I have seen reports of gunfire in the refugee camps near Hatay and serious problems in and near Syria. I am thankful we were turned this direction.

From Konya, we will be heading to Antalya on the Turkish Riviera for a couple of days and then onward to the new hippie trail in Olimpos (Olympos) where we will be staying in tree houses and exploring the wild coast. We will be staying four nights in Olympos - two nights with Bayram's Tree Houses and then two nights with Kadir's Tree Houses - I'm not sure how Hanane will deal with 'roughing it' but I'm sure the baby will love it - and of course, I will .

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Here in Konya, we decided to go Mevlana all the way which (unfortunately) led us to Mevlana Otel which, while close to the Mevlana Museum and the Tomb of Rumi - is a very 'Turkish' hotel with lots of cigarette smoking men (outside to smoke) in the lobby watching television and loud tea drinking at all hours of the day and night. Hanane occasionally moans "Oh, Taskonaklar...." in a mournful way.

And of course, the hardest thing is to continue running Vagobond Travel Media, editing Vagobond.com, taking care of the baby, enjoying the sites and foods and adventures and finding the time to write about it all. I'm afraid I've been monopolizing Vagobond during this time but our contributors are providing a great backlog of wonderful travel adventures which I will edit and post as soon as I have the chance...

This life is beautiful - but if you think it is easy, you should try living it!

Soaked in a Sunshine Destination and Happy About It

18 April 2012
Bodrum, Turkey

They say that April showers bring may Flowers, but one never really expects to find the rain quite so heavy as we found it today - especially when visiting a place known for it's sunshine and mild weather. While I've explored a great deal of Western and Mediterranean Turkey, yesterday was my first time arriving in the city of Bodrum. We'd spent the previous four days basking in the treehouse paradise of Olympos but since Hanane is meeting a friend on the 21st in Izmir and I'm leaving from Bodrum for Greece and then Italy on the 22nd - we decided to come direct and skip our planned stop at Pammukkale. We had an invitation from what has been described as one of the nicest hotels in Turkey - Antique Theatre Hotel and so we hopped on a Kamil Koch bus - which I'd always thought looked like the nicest buses in Turkey but which turned out to be just okay - mainly because there was no air vent and the seats felt crowded. Now I know.

So, we set off for Bodrum thinking of sunny weather, poolside dinners and maybe even a gulet cruise - after a long bus ride (8 hours) - we arrived at the Antique Theatre Hotel and found it just as beautiful as described with views of the Bodrum Castle and harbor and a pool that made me want to dive in - except that the owner called to welcome us and told me that we had arrived with thunderstorms. We took a short walk but got gusted and blown all over the harbor walk before retreating to our hotel. Today we braved the rain when it looked like sun had come but

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

what we found was a good soaking as we explored Bodrum Castle and the Underwater Archaeology Museum

To be honest, I can't say I'm disappointed. The room is nice, I'm way behind on pretty much every aspect of my business (except the traveling) since travelling with my wife and infant daughter is sometimes like traveling with two fussy children who constantly have to be taken care of and as a consequence I've dropped my exercise plan, lost control of my eating habits, forgotten all my goals, allowed my editorial calendar to lapse, and even for the first time - forgot to write this weekly editorial and missed my morning deadline. Luckily, I am the Editor so I allowed myself a late edition - just this once - next time I'm going to fire me.

So, in fact - I'm pretty happy that the rain has us trapped in our hotel room and I've suddenly found a few unexpected hours to catch up on things -

Blogville in Bologna, Italy

25 April 2012
Bologna, Italy

What am I doing here? Feeling like a very lucky guy - that's what. While traveling in Turkey the past few months has been wonderful, anyone who has traveled with their wife and an infant can tell you that it can be exhausting -

When the chance came up to come to Bologna and share a house with a number of other travel writers- I knew that I would need a break and as luck would have it, Hanane had a British girlfriend flying in from Morocco at the same time and an offer to stay with a good friend in Manisa where we used to live - so, I picked up Hanane's buddy from the airport in Izmir, dropped all three of them off with our friend Seval in Manisa and then took the aforementioned drive, ferry, flight, bus trip to Bologna, Italy for a week of communal travel writer living sponsored by Emilia Romagna Tourism .

My housemates are a group of people that so far (as I write this) I've only met through Twitter - they are @runawayjane, @Changes_Long, @BudgetTraveller and @twooregonians - all of whom seem fun and interesting and luckily we don't have to kick anyone from the house since this isn't a reality show and everyone seems like someone I want to spend time with.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Here is a bit about the project:

From the 23rd of April to the 31st of May in Bologna and from the 2nd of June to the 14th of July in Rimini, BlogVille Emilia Romagna, thanks to two apartments, will be the perfect place from where you can start to discover Italy and the Emilia Romagna region. We will give you access of the local life and immerse yourself in the “Italian way”. We will also help you to create an interesting itinerary for you and your readership throughout the Emilia Romagna, and of course BlogVille will be the perfect place to experience and share things with other bloggers.

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The second apartment of the BlogVille project is located in Rimini, Emilia Romagna’s top holiday destination, famous for its wide sandy beaches, bathing establishments and nightlife. Yet Rimini is a city of notable historical interest. Starting from Rimini you will have the chance to reach some of the most important cities of the region like Ravenna, Ferrara, Bologna, Faenza, Forlì and Cesena, the top trendy beaches like Marina di Ravenna, Cervia, Milano-Marittima, Cesenatico, Riccione, Misano Adriatico and Cattolica and the family beach destinations like the Lidos of Ferrara, the Lidos of Ravenna, Gatteo a Mare, San Mauro Mare and Bellaria-Igea Marina, plus the hidden jewels of the countryside, plenty of ancient castles, Roman rests, vineyards and excellent food producers.

As you can see, I am among the first of the travel writers and yes, I will be coming back in June for the Rimini Blogville as well - which should be just as awesome as this one.

Tomorrow, I will be writing about some of what we've seen and done here and on Friday, I will introduce you to my housemates in a very special Vagobond Travel Museum - Bologna Blogville Edition.

At the moment, I'm about to head out to meet Nicholas and move into the Blogville house - yes, I'm very excited. Life is beautiful.

Drawing Distinctions About Extinctions

02 May 2012

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Kos, Greece

It's been an interesting few weeks. Not only have I been able to enjoy some incredible destinations and activities, but I've also been fortunate in that I've been able to discover some philosophical and personal truths along the way. Not only have I been enjoying the fine cultural distinctions between countries, regions, cuisines and cultures, but I've also been able to draw some distinctions between people, demographic segments and stages in life.

Like most pleasant surprises, these came unexpectedly but with hindsight, I could easily claim that I saw them coming- but in fact, I didn't. So, what the hell am I talking about?

First of all, let's get this out of the way. I'm not a 'Travel Blogger' and Vagobond isn't a 'Travel Blog.' It used to be (and I used to be) but in fact, all things change and if they don't change, they tend to break or die which are changes of the more difficult variety. The moment that I disabled the comments and began to welcome other voices, the words blog and blogger were no longer a part of Vagobond's reality.

There was a part of me that wanted to hang on. I remembered the fun and excitement of the original Blogsherpa community on Lonely Planet. I remembered the feeling of community and the humility that came with being the pioneers in a new industry. It's funny, but when you look at those original Blogsherpa blogs, you find that most of them have become something else, been abandoned, or are still struggling to find an identity in a world that changes as quickly as a runway model.

The truth is that I can't see much of a future for 'Travel Bloggers.' Recently, I've had the opportunity to meet a number of people who write about travel, many of them on blogs. For the most part, they are nice people who simply want to see some of the world and share it with their family and friends. Sometimes, they are people who have been caught up in the hype of a new industry and they have abandoned their lives in pursuit of a dream of becoming a professional traveler. Then there are the 'Travel Bloggers' - these tend to be a group of self-important, narcissistic people who are more likely to self-destruct or backstab than collaborate or work together to create a new industry.

It's interesting, because just as in the old game of Italian politics, each of them tries very hard to look like a collaborator but when you go just a tiny bit beneath the surface you find nothing but resentment, back-biting and in-fighting. There seems to be a tiny core of people who must be praised and the rest are all laughed at snidely behind the hand. In fact, they should read Machiavelli because what they are doing is simpering for favor from those they see as successful and trying to put themselves above everyone else at the same time. Ultimately, this can only lead to a massacre. The masses aren't stupid all the time.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Like self-made reality stars, these people pose for photo ops and tell their story as PR professionals but they seem to have forgotten something. The money they say they deserve has to come from somewhere. Generally, it comes from normal, everyday people who want to have a relaxing holiday. Those people pay the hotels, airlines and tour companies. Those people pay the PR firms. Those people pay for promotion. But it has to come back to normal people or else it just won't work.

So, who are those normal people? Well, they certainly aren't all 25-35 year old social media addicts who harbor a deep sense of entitlement. Certainly that group is there - as an amateur anthropologist, I would call them homo sapiens connecticus. They are the children of homo sapiens technicus. The problem is that they don't seem to think they need to offer more than their sparkling personalities and that somehow that entitles them to being paid. They do have an evolutionary advantage in that they are the first generation of smart phone social media users, however, like homo erectus, one evolutionary advantage does not a winning species make.

Maybe I should call them homo sapiens connecticus primus because the generation following on their heels homo sapiens connecticus secundus might have a few surprises for them. And one should not forget that homo sapiens technicus is going to be on the scene for a long while to come. Technicus is watching and learning from this upstart new species from the still dominant position in the information jungle hierarchy. My impression is that the Boomer/GenX alliance is not at all pleased with connecticus primus and it seems that there may well be a technicus/secondus revolution in the works that will leave connecticus primus bemoaning their fate.

So, what does this have to do with Travel Blogs and Travel Bloggers? I would suggest that connecticus primus has co-opted the terms - along with everything else blog. I feel that it's important that serious travel journalists and travel professionals begin to distance themselves from this term. It's time for online travel professionals to join into the community of respected travel journalism. The path to do that demands that the terms blog and blogger be left behind.

There will be (and already is) a lot of moaning about this among connecticus primus. Sadly, because they have already proven that they are incapable of seriously collaborating, nothing more will come of it. Already, I've been told not to disparage or disrespect the term blogger, travel blogger, etc. I've been told that I'm making the future of the community harder. I can only smile. That work has already been done by the 'Travel Bloggers' themselves and besides...I'm not a blogger and I don't run a blog. I'm an editor, a writer, a traveler and a journalist.

Moroccan Complaining

09 May 2012
Sefrou, Morocco

Well, here we are, back home in Morocco. It was an interesting couple of months as my wife, our infant daughter and I explored Turkey. We got to see a lot of places we'd missed on previous trips, got to take part in some amazing activities and we even learned something about limits. One example of that is that we learned that two months is far longer than my wife likes to be on the road. When it comes down to it, she is a home body and needs to have her kitchen, the comforts of our house and family and friends nearby. For her, a two week trip is more than enough, but since she married a born rover - that means that I need to sometimes head out by myself. One of the great benefits of this trip is that all of this is now clear to us both.

I had intended that we would travel for a total of three months this time, but since it was making her miserable - we came back home to our apartment in Morocco. I have to admit, it's nice to come back and have the bills all paid for another month, find the weather perfect and of course to enjoy reuniting with family and friends. And yet, as those of you who know me have heard, I'm not entirely happy living in Morocco.

I often meet people who tell me that Morocco is on their short list of places they want to travel to. When they find out that I live here, they say things like "It must be wonderful." I tell them that Morocco is a beautiful country filled with wonderful people and beautiful landscapes but it's better to visit than live in.

Then, they seem surprised when I tell them that, in fact, I'm not very keen on it. |In fact, if my wife weren't from here, I probably wouldn't live here at all. Here are a couple of examples taken from a single day when we arrived back in Morocco after several months in Turkey.

We arrived at the airport and headed towards customs and security. Moroccans don't understand the concept of a queue. It's a funnel and you have to fight to maintain your place in the line. Even then, people will simply come and step in front of you. One woman came and shouldered by me saying "I need to go past." I let her, but her need was only to move to the front of the line. I like orderly lines. I like not having to fight for my turn. In Morocco, that never happens.

Next we gathered our bags, left the arrival area and went to the train. As we walked toward the train, a corpulent security officer called my wife over. "Where is your husband from?" he asked her in Arabic. "Where have you been?"

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

She told him I was American and we'd been in Turkey at which point he rubbed his fingers together in the universal sign of money and said to her "You should tell him to give me something." I understood all of this, but simply was looking at him. She said to me "He says you should give him some money."

"Why would I want to do that?" I said and motioned for her to walk past him and leave him behind. We watched and he pulled the same routine with every Moroccan, some gave him money and some didn't.

On the train, I became aware of something that somehow had escaped my notice before. Moroccan's love to complain. They love to complain to each other about everything. I don't know how I missed this before. This is what conversations are about. They complain about the prices, the weather, people they know, people they don't know and anything else. It's a part of the national mentality.

At the Casablanca train station where we had to change trains, we filled our baby's bottle halfway with cool water, added the formula, and then I went to ask the man in the cafe if I could have some hot water. During all of our time in Turkey, this was our normal practice and we were never refused, never scolded, never asked for money - for hot water for our baby's milk. First, the Moroccan told me to pay for a cup of coffee, then he refused, then he dumped out the formula, then when I began to harangue him in Arabic, he filled it with milk and steamed it.

Arriving in Fes, we were approached by the usual touts. Since my wife's suitcase had just broken, we were tired, and the baby needed to get home (and have some formula), I decided to negotiate for a taxi directly to our house rather than a small taxi followed by large taxi followed by another small taxi. Our usual 3 taxi route costs us about 80 Moroccan dirham. For a single taxi, the first price was 400! Then it dropped to 200, finally, I offered to pay 150 if they drove us to our door. They accepted.

When we arrived in our town, the driver told my wife that we had to pay an extra 20 dirham. I told him to stop talking to her and that he could either drive us to our house or he could drop us off and get paid nothing. I told him if he didn't like those options, we could go talk with the police. He dropped us off - at our house and grumbled when I gave him the agreed upon 150 dirham.

Of course, it's not all bad. Arriving at our house we found my wife's sister there, cleaning it so it would be comfortable for us. She had brought groceries, made us a welcome home meal and welcomed us with the warmth and smiles that make being part of a Moroccan family worth having to live in Morocco.

Still, I stand by the fact that Morocco is a nice place to visit, but a lousy one to live. That's why I tend to leave every three months instead of getting a resident permit. That way, I remain a

visitor.

What happened to Sefrou?

16 May 2012
Sefrou, Morocco

For those who don't know, Wednesday is the day when I give myself license to editorialize. The title of this weekly editorial is "What am I doing here?" and this week – I have to confess that I'm not at all certain. I should point out that the information in this article is based on oral histories and folk knowledge, not historical research or records. Any errors in accuracy are errors of 'common knowledge' in Sefrou itself.

Sefrou used to be called the 'Garden of Morocco' – it was the city with the highest concentration of Jews in North Africa. The city was renowned for its gardens, cherry orchards, artisans, earthenware, and metalwork. The architecture in the Sefrou medina is unique in Morocco as the narrow streets of the Mellah were intentionally made narrow so that the medina could easily be barricaded and defended. The wooden balconies of the Mellah are also distinctive as Arabs and Berbers had no desire to chat with neighbors across the alleyway the way the Jews did. Mellah, by the way is what Sefrouis and Fezzies call the Jewish Quarter - 'mihl' is Darrija for salt and it was the Jews who sold salt thus their neighborhood was called the Mellah – this is true in both Fez and Sefrou. I should point out that the architecture in the Fez Mellah is similar but the streets and derbs (alleys) are not so narrow as in Sefrou.

Sefrou has a fascinating history. It was where Moulay Idris lived while he had the city of Fez built to be his capital. Jewish people were in this area for as long as history records anyone being here. The biblical prophet Daniel was almost certainly a Berber and definitely a Jew. There is evidence to show that he came from this region. There is also a whitewashed cave filled with shepherd crap and broken wine bottles which is where legend has it that he had his visions of the apocalypse. (666 the number of the beast apparently comes from Sefrou, though I am sure that Iron Maiden has never performed here.)

Sefrou has an older medina than the more famous medina of Fez. The limestone hills around Sefrou were once filled with troglodyte families who lived in sprawling cave complexes which some say were nearly as extensive as those of Cappadocia. I find that hard to believe, but certainly it is a possibility. One can't walk through the hills here for any distance without seeing blocked in cave houses, bulldozed caves or every now and then one that is still occupied by people or goats.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Many of the founding fathers of the first Christian church were Berbers and while there is no evidence that they came from Sefrou, certainly there was a blossoming of Christianity among the Berbers and the Jews of the region. The Romans were here as well. The once great city of Volubulis is not far away and it is certain that the Romans traded and perhaps even had countryside villas in the vast gardens and vineyards of Sefrou. I've hiked to remote hilltop ruins nearby which certainly could have been Roman ruins.

Sefrou was famous for its many rivers and streams which watered the fields and orchards as well as the bountiful cherry harvest that came each year. A stream which runs above the city near the marabout tomb of a sufi saint is said to cure mental illness. The saint himself is lost in history though his tomb is a much visited monument. Some people say that the tomb contains the bones of an ass. Others that the saint was actually a Jew. Either way, the tomb is a holy Muslim-Sufi spot now, regardless of who is (or isn't) buried there.

The cascade of Sefrou's Aggai River was once famous throughout North Africa. When the French came and made Morocco a protectorate, they came to Sefrou in droves. Bountiful olive and cherry orchards, a cooler climate than Fez, and a cultured and happy people lived and loved here. During evening walks along the River Aggai, it was hard to tell the Muslims from the Jews from the Christians because everyone dressed the same in djellabas and bright yellow slippers. During those years, Sefrou was known as the city of wonderful food. An aged Sefroui friend told me that when he was a boy, Sefrou had more restaurants than Fez. Chinese, Indian, French, Italian and more. Mountainsides were planted with orchards of pinion pine for making wonderful pesto and harvesting pine nuts. Sefrou had become more paradise than it already had been. And yet -

Today, Sefrou pretty much sucks. There are typical sandwich and snack places and one or two places that serve bad pizza, but that's it for restaurants. The gardens are gone, the cherries are gone, the streams are filled with garbage and the people are no longer prosperous. What happened?

The French mostly left Sefrou (and the rest of Morocco) after Moroccan Independence. In some cases they kept their land and their homes but they became absentee landlords. Some of them remained for a while, but then came the troubles surrounding Israeli independence. I've heard several stories about this and any of them could be true. One is that after Moroccan independence, the Muslims began to persecute Jews for having collaborated with the French. Sounds possible – there was a reason the Mellah was built for defense. Another theory states that the new Israeli state offered to take all the Jews from North Africa but they didn't want to go since they had a good life here (Morocco, by the way, harbored Jews when they were persecuted in Spain, in Italy, in the Middle East and even offered safe haven during Hitler's genocide during World War II) – and since they didn't want to go, the Israeli government (which

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

needed them) started a campaign to drive them out of North Africa by inciting Muslims against them. This also sounds possible. Another is that they all just went and said "Hooray for Israel!" and abandoned their homes, their shops, their land, and their culture. There are others, but the bottom line is that Sefrou was pretty much evacuated as the entire Jewish population (2/3s of the people) emigrated to Israel.

This, left those French who had remained in an uncomfortable minority position and so the rest of them left soon after. The Berber people had been a fairly constant thorn in the side of the Arab/Muslim dynasties in Morocco and it was at this point that they began a process of Arabization of the Berber nomadic tribes. Berbers were forced to leave their camps and become sedentary Muslims. The Berber language was outlawed, Berber names were made illegal for newborns, and the Berber people were forced to move out of caves and camps and into cities. Newly abandoned cities like Sefrou were ideal candidates.

The Moroccan Army had maintained a beautiful base in Sefrou and they used the armed forces to round up the people from the countryside and make them into city people. Bulldozers filled in caves and destroyed villages. Guess what happens when you take people who have no idea about sedentary life and try to turn them into farmers? Guess what happens when 2/3 of the population of a city (most likely the most successful artisans, merchants, and farmers – not to mention the most educated) abandon it? Guess what happens when people who don't want to be there in the first place and who don't own the land are forced to occupy it? Guess what happens?

Sefrou happens. The cherry orchards have almost all been cut down. Cheap concrete buildings sprawl over what were once bountiful gardens. The rivers and streams became polluted because of the increased population density and so were either filled in or cemented over. The many restaurants closed and left. The army base became the number one industry and then when the King came to visit what he had remembered being a wonderful garden – he found a fetid slum. He condemned it and closed the army base and the people here say he put a curse on Sefrou for turning the most beautiful city into the ugliest.

Welcome to Sefrou. The 'Jewish Pool' closed last year because no one had repaired it. The camp ground has been turned into yet another cinder block development. The pine orchards are being cut and harvested for hammam wood. The hotel at the cascade turned into a place for drunken Muslims and was subsequently closed when someone was killed in a knife fight. The other hotel at the 'monument' on the hillside near the former army base was abandoned halfway through building. Every year for the annual Sefrou Cherry Festival – truckload after truckload of cherries have to be imported from places that still grow them. Most recently, the River Aggai was diverted and then concreted under before the water was restored. Medina residents still chuck their garbage into the stream. Wild dogs run around at night and after they attacked some people, the city officials went out during the day and shot all the dogs they could find. Including

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

my father-in-laws two shepherd dogs. He, his wife and his daughters ran out to tell the shooters, but in a blood lust they killed every dog they could see. The wild dogs, by the way are still out there. I got attacked by five of them four nights ago– luckily dogs in North Africa think a man with a rock can kill them all so once I picked up a rock they were all off like wildfire.

Ah yes, Sefrou. What am I doing here?

Dreaming of Hawaii and Making Plans to Get Away

23 May 2012
Sefrou Morocco

Still here in Sefrou, it is home after all, although I can think of no less than a hundred places I would prefer to call home. That's the way life works though when you take on the responsibility for other people. No word yet on my wife's visa forms – we sent the I-130 and a bunch of other forms in nearly two months ago but so far, no word. Once we get the approval, I'll be taking my family back to the USA.

I'm dreaming of being in Hawaii again. I want my daughter to grow up next to the water, learn how to surf, feel comfortable at the beach and be surrounded by the sense of aloha that I miss so much from Hawaii. It's a funny thing, other people miss their parents, their friends, their family or other people – but I find myself feeling that same sense of longing for the island of Oahu. I miss walking her hidden trails and discovering her secrets.

I've always thought of Oahu as a living, breathing entity. The other islands too, but with Oahu I've always had a special connection. Both she and Kauai took me in, embraced me and provided everything for me when I had nothing. I can remember several times not having any money on Oahu and taking long walks. I've had money just appear on the side of the road or the sidewalk where anyone else could have picked it up, but it was waiting for me. Oahu is like a mother, a wife and a friend that I love and miss.

All the islands are special, but she is like my mother. The rain in Kahalu'u, the beautiful rocks at Malekahana, the shrimp ponds and papayas at Laie, huge swells at Sunset and Pipeline plus the magic of Makaha and Yokohama Bay at sunset or under the water. The warm currents and colorful schools at Electric Beach and walking the tracks across the Ewa plains. The sense of solemn pride at Pearl Harbor and the feeling of international excitement that stretches from Ala

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Moana into Waikiki and Manoa while still coloring everything with a local flavor that can only be called Hawaiian. I miss climbing through the Pali range's ferns and scrub lehua, looking for the telltale signs of honeycreepers and feeling far too happy every time I saw a mongoose or a chicken. Crossing via the Pali and back across the H3, which is certainly the most beautiful highway anywhere in the world but calling it an interstate was sure a funny idea.

I miss cruising Kahala Avenue on Sunday mornings to see what the ultra rich were leaving out for the garbage trucks and checking out the G-sales in Kailua on Saturdays for dive gear, vintage boards and all da kine. Yeah, that's right, I'm homesick but I'm not allowed to go back yet...so will have to wait.

In the meantime, I'm making small plans to get away. Italy in June with a trip to Malta possibly in the works, Spain in July and who knows maybe I can squeeze in a bit of the French Riviera before going to Greece for more sailing in August – even if she could, my wife wouldn't want to miss the Ramadan fast in July and August but I've done that gig enough.

I'd give it all up for Hawaii though, but for that, we have to wait and wait and wait and it's always possible that we'll never get the answer we want to hear.

Flights of Fancy

30 May 2012

Sefrou, Morocco

Did you ever see Fiddler on the Roof? I love that song, "If I were a rich man..." and like Faisel, I sometimes engage in flights of fancy which may not be "...all night long I'd biddy biddy bum, if I were a wealthy man!" but which, none the less are flights of fancy.

After all, for the moment, I live in the town of Sefrou and even if I could open up a breakfast diner called 'Toast' where vintage toasters sat on every table and patrons were free to buy twenty types of fresh baked bread and then toast it at their own tables – plus have coffee and order a variety of cheeses, vegetables, spreads and meats to go with their toast – no one would come.

Sure, I know the idea sounds cool to you and you would come, but let's be honest – you probably won't come to Sefrou. Not many people do. Still, 'Toast' has been a small fantasy of mine for years. The problem is that Moroccans wouldn't come because they don't really go to restaurants and even if they did come, Moroccans in Sefrou wouldn't pay more than a quarter

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

dollar for toasting their own bread. They don't really care about concepts like hip, fun, or different. People in Sefrou are practical.

That's why my other flight of fancy would never work here either. A tea shop called 'Paradigm Sans' where cultural speakers and puppet shows happen daily and patrons gather in tight salon circles to discuss idea of the metaphysical, spiritual and revolutionary would never work here either. Still, imagine it – calligraphy courses, invited intellectuals, sufis, great thinkers, puppet shows, kabuki theatre – all taking place on a central stage while patrons drank tea from all over the world until 9 pm when a very limited wine list became available. No coffee and no beer – tea and wine only – along with ideas served up as the main course. Of course, a wine bar in conservative little Muslim Sefrou would never do and no one here would order anything but Moroccan tea and they wouldn't order it from a foreigner...

And then there is the writer's retreat – a place where writers could come and take up residence while they worked on their masterpiece for a month at a time. A four bedroom house with four writers in residence at any given time. The cost? Only productivity- while there, they would need to contribute to an annual literary collection about the place. 48 Stories in a year by 48 writers working on 48 different projects but all about just one place. That one might work – but the problem is funding it and finding 48 writers who are willing to come to Sefrou for a month at a time. Let alone writing about Sefrou...there are stories here, but they are beneath the surface and most take more than a month to reach.

I used to dream of owning a used book store but that dream has gone along with my dream of owning a hostel or guesthouse – I've managed both hostel and hotel and found that unfortunately, mostly I just want the people who come there to leave. For every wonderful guest that you wish would stay on and on – there are five that you only want to leave as soon as possible. Then there are the twenty guests that you don't care about one way or the other. They are who the business is built around – the people you are indifferent about. Still, those five guests that are a pain in the ass are so exhausting and suck so much energy out of you that you more than likely miss out on enjoying time with that one extraordinary guest or couple – the 1 in 26 and when it comes time to say goodbye, you have to wonder – Did that extraordinary person enjoy themselves here? They probably did – because that is what extraordinary people do, but they may not come back to your place again.

Morocco is a funny place for me to live. Sefrou is a funny place for me to live. The bookshops are filled with the same religious book and commentaries on that same religious book. The cafes are places where conversations don't happen and if there is entertainment, it is a football match on the television. In terms of cuisine you have a choice of sandwich with egg and meat or sandwich with meat and egg – you can drink coffee or Moroccan tea or soda. If you are looking for something to do, the people here probably wonder why you have enough free time to look for something to do – and anyway, why don't you go to the cafe and stare at the football match

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

with the other men while drinking a coffee?

Actually, if I could build something in Sefrou, I would want to build something that would change the mentality- but my imagination reaches the brick wall when I try to imagine what that would be.

Refocusing, Reflecting, Rejoicing

06 June 2012
Sefrou, Morocco

The past few weeks have been very good for me. While I haven't been doing much in terms of travel or exploration, it has been nice to focus on the things that are most important to me. My family and my writing.

Having the time to play with my daughter, to watch her become a person and to enjoy watching her explore and learn is perhaps the greatest thing of my life. I am proud of the fact that thus far, her life has been good and I will do everything I can to keep that so, for as long as I can. That's my responsibility.

As she grows, I will encourage her, challenge her, support her, and eventually, I hope I can give her financial backing to achieve whatever it is that she will dream of doing or becoming. I'm not working for me, I'm working for her.

Strange how many parents seem to forget that and focus only on themselves – they focus on making themselves happy at the cost of their children and often – they lose them. Incredibly sad, but I can only continue to do my best. My philosophy on raising a child is simple – love her and then love her some more. I hope it works.

In terms of love, I've been focusing on my love of writing too. Funny how I got a bit lost for a while. Don't get me wrong, I love travel, but the fact is, I love writing more. Travel for me is just a way to collect ideas, experiences, material, personalities and perspectives so that I can write. My great love is fiction, though I also enjoy recounting tales of my adventures and offering what small advice I might be able to serve up for those willing to read it.

It's a question every writer asks themselves...'Is anyone willing to read my work?' and I am very thankful that over the past few weeks the answer has been a resounding 'YES!'

Through Google Plus, I've connected with editors and readers who have volunteered to edit, critique, read, and talk about my writing with me. The interaction with these wonderful people (in

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

particular +Grace O'Malley and+Élan Karpinski) Grace went through and did an astounding cleanup on my forthcoming novel *Douchebags, Fags, and Hags* and then went on to suggest some awesome cover elements and a nice blurb. I am deeply in her debt.

Élan is doing the same with *Smooth Living: More Tips and Tales of a Vagabond* which is my decade later follow up to *Rough Living: Tips and Tales of a Vagabond*.

During the past few weeks, I went through *Rough Living* and gave it some much needed attention. Frankly, I can't believe that I've allowed it to sit with misspellings, typos, and some really really bad grammar for almost ten years! I considered changing some of the text but upon consideration and deliberation, decided to leave it mostly unchanged (except for that misspellings, bad grammar, and typos.). Since I'm publishing on kindle, there are no 'first editions' left behind once I update the text, so, while there are a thousand or so print copies knocking around the world (if they haven't all been burned yet) – I'll leave this version with my 2012 author intro as is.

In 2013, I plan to release an updated and expanded version including photos and a lot more information. We'll see how that goes. In any event, people have asked me for years, just how many copies of *Rough Living* have been sold. The honest to goodness answer is, I don't know. I know that between Booklocker and Lulu (the first two publishers) there were about 1000 print copies sold. At the same time there were about 10000 eBook copies sold which unfortunately were quickly uploaded to minimalist websites and shared all over the web. I estimate that around 15,000 copies were downloaded, though that number may be very low as you shall see below.

When I saw that my sales had all but disappeared and people were giving away my book, I tried to ask them to stop but most of them ignored me. So, I resigned myself to it. I was a guy who had written a book about how to live life to the fullest without a job or much money, go figure I didn't have the money or resources to hire a lawyer. So, I decided if I couldn't beat them, I would join them. So, I pulled my book from Lulu and began giving it away on my own site. In a year, I gave away around 4000 downloads of it. That was just from my site – I figured it was safe to estimate that 10,000 copies got downloaded from the hundreds of other sites – some of which were quite large (hello Scribd). In fact, over the past nine years, it has probably been at least five times that many. At least.

This week, after uploading the freshly edited and author intro'd *Rough Living: Tips and Tales of a Vagabond*, I decided to run a two day promo for Amazon Kindle where I would give away *Rough Living* for free. The results tell me that my estimates were almost certainly too low.

Here's the stats breakdown for the two day giveaway of *Rough Living: Tips and Tales of a Vagabond*

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Regular Price \$5.99 Promotion: Free for 48 hours # of free downloads: 4327 best rank on Amazon: #1 in travel (free) #8 in Nonfiction (free) #82 in all books (free)

I didn't beat the Holy Bible, which sat at #4 in non-fiction, but I got close enough to feel very good. The fact that I had the top rated free travel book on Amazon.com (for kindle) is something I'm very proud of. And hey, look at those numbers. In 48 hours, Rough Living was downloaded by 4327 people from all over the planet. That is AWESOME!

It also means that I can comfortably say that my book has been downloaded at least 10,000 times and probably closer to 35 or 40k, but I'll never know the stats for those other sites. Some of them are gone, some are still there but hey, like I said in the intro, that's like me paying back karma for all the free TV shows and music I've enjoyed through the years.

Overall, I'm stoked at this promo. I hope that those who downloaded it, truly enjoy it and find some useful advice or interesting stories in it. I also hope that later this year when I release Smooth Living: More Tips and Tales of a Vagabond, people are ready for a book that goes beyond just surviving without a job and enjoying life, but also delves into world travel, overcoming obstacles, and still is focused on enjoying life.

Your reviews and 'likes' on the Amazon page are greatly appreciated and every little bit helps to push Rough Living up the rankings in the paid listings – which is also very much appreciated!

(As I write it's #5 in Specialty Travel Tips and #14 in Budget Travel – which is better than being buried everywhere)

Now, if I can just sell that many copies at the retail price of \$5.99 then I'll be able to pay back my student loans, pay for Sophia's college, buy a house in Morocco, and maybe finally pull my old VW bus out of impound in San Francisco (which was the last place I heard it was back in 2003). Ah, hell, if I sell that many, I'll just buy a new one! :)

Telling People Not to Travel

13 June 2012
Sefrou, Morocco

This is one of those situations where I'm finding that people don't actually believe me. This isn't a joke, it's not a trick – in fact, I think that most people will be happier if they don't travel. I don't recommend that most people travel.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Does that mean that I'm not going to travel any more? No, of course not. In the immortal words of J.R. Bob Dobbs "Of course I don't practice what I preach, I'm not the kind of person I'm preaching to."

Does it mean that I am retracting all my travel advice or unpublishing my books about travel? Of course not, don't be silly. If you are going to travel, I suggest that you travel in the ways I've suggested in *Liminal Travel* or in my forthcoming book *Smooth Living: More Tips and Tales of a Vagabond*. If you are going to travel, this is how you should do it. The fact is though, for most of you, the best advice I could give you is to not travel. Your time is far better spent taking a walk through your neighborhood, playing with your kids or the kids of your friends, sitting down and writing that story you've been thinking about, taking a class on life-drawing, or just sitting in a coffee shop with a good book.

The reason I'm saying that, is simple. As I travel, I see a lot of people who are disappointed and frankly, just not having a good time. The reasons they are traveling are all wrong. They are traveling to check things off on a list, they are traveling to impress people, they are traveling to escape from a life they find dull and dreary. In fact, they are bringing that dull and dreary life with them and the things they are looking for – well, chances are they don't exist where they are heading.

Hey, if you are going to do some serious life changing travel, I support you in that. If you are going to go to Paris and see the great works of art in the Louvre because you love great art, that is cool. If you are going to India to spend time in an ashram, right on. If you are doing something to fuel your passions – that's great. I support you.

That's not the case with most of the people I see traveling though. They are traveling because they are bored. They are traveling because their lives are meaningless. They are traveling because they can't think of anything better to do. And you know what? They are making travel boring and meaningless.

Do you read travel blogs? (This, by the way, is not a travel blog – it's not even a blog) I'm guessing that you don't. You know why? Because they are fucking boring and written by boring people who are doing everything they can to not seem like they are boring. Travel bloggers are some of the most boring people I've ever met. Ask them what they are passionate about and the answer is usually something like "Oh, what? Yeah, I love to travel." Yeah, how fucking boring.

You want to know why I travel? I travel because I'm hoping to find a people or a culture that hasn't been destroyed by American culture. I hope to find people that enjoy singing more than they enjoy listening to songs. I want to find people who value making art above collecting art. I want to meet the people who grow the foods, make the artisanal products. I travel in the hopes

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

of finding a place where people are doing things because they love them, not because they have to make a living.

In fact, I travel because back in 2000, the disgusting civilization we live in didn't collapse like I'd been hoping it would. At that point, I found myself to be in the same position as most Americans. I was terrified that I was going to lose my job and didn't know if I would be able to survive without any money. When I recognized that, I left my job and set about living for a year without a job or a means of income, without a house, without the things people think they need to survive. That experiment yielded *Rough Living: Tips and Tales of a Vagabond* which you should buy and read right now.

I'm not saying you should buy it so you can be homeless like I was, you should buy it so you can stop being afraid. You should read it and think about what it is that makes you happy, makes you passionate.

Travel doesn't make you happy. It's not a solution to your problems. It won't even relieve your boredom. Trust me, sitting on a plane, sitting in an airport, sitting on a bus, sitting in a hotel room – these are boring things. This is most of what travel provides. Personally, I like that time. Most people don't. I use that time to read, think, meditate, write, and ruminate.

I dream of a time when I can stop traveling. I dream of a time when I can work in my garden, take a walk, read a book, and enjoy where I am. Oh yeah, that time is now! Man am I glad that I'm not traveling!

Looking for the Maltese Falcon

20 June 2012
St Paul's Bay, Malta

Malta is not at all what I expected it to be. As with much of my travels, I came here without knowing much about the place. Here is what I knew – Malta is a Christian country on a small island in the Mediterranean Sea which has a culture that combines aspects of Arab and Italian cultures. I knew there was a film called *The Maltese Falcon* starring Humphrey Bogart (I actually ate a steak at John's Grill in San Francisco where much of the film was made) and that's actually it. I didn't know any city names, the language, the history, or anything else although I had some idea of the Knights Templar having something to do with the place.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

I'm here to write some articles and also because every few months, I need to clear my head to continue functioning in Morocco while we wait for my wife's visa to the USA to hopefully come through – the cheapest flight from Fez was to Pisa – a Ryanair flight for \$20. I grabbed that. In Pisa, I was picked up at the airport by my AirBnB host and taken to his cool little house along the banks of the Arno River – he and his girlfriend sing in Italian choirs and we had a lovely dinner of fresh pesto and pasta. In the morning, they drove me into Pisa for a little bit of sight seeing before catching my flight to Malta.

This is a short break in Malta, just two days and while my main assignment is in Italy, writing about food tours in Umbria, Emilia-Romagna, and Tuscany – the editors of a couple of magazines have agreed to a piece about short breaks to Malta including the nicest places to stay, top highlights and more. In addition, I will be writing yet another guide about short breaks in Malta. So, sometimes a short break can pay. You'll forgive me if I don't tell you everything I've learned so far here...but back to Malta.

Maltese is a funny language with lots of words from North African Arabic (Darija!) in the daily language. Words like triq (road) kbira (big) suq (market) and medina (city) are common words here. Many of the people look vaguely Arabic, but make no mistake – this is a very Catholic country. Settled by waves of immigrants from the Phoenicians to the Romans to the Ottomans to the English, this is a beautiful mish-mash culture on a beautiful island that has no rivers or lakes and relies on desalination for most of its water.

This morning I plunged into the sea before doing anything and the dust of the past several months was washed from my soul. Malta was occupied by Napoleon and liberated by Admiral Nelson of the UK and then sat under an English protectorate for nearly a century – during which time it was mercilessly bombed by fascists and Nazis before gaining independence and then becoming a member of the EU. The history of this island is fascinating. And, everyone speaks English, the beers are cheap and last night for the Euro 2012 football cup, there were massive crowds gathering everywhere there was beer and a TV screen to cheer for England. Yes, my friends, Malta really is a paradise island.

As to the Maltese Falcon? Here's the story...the Knights of St. John were an order founded to take care of the sick when they pilgrimaged to the Holy Lands in the Middle Ages – through the crusades they became a much more militaristic force. They were the main barrier between the expansion of the Ottoman Empire and Europe and as a reward for that, they were awarded Malta by the Holy Roman Emperor for the nominal rent of a falcon each year being presented to the Emperor – yes, the Maltese Falcon. As to the gold falcon and Bogey, I'm not real sure...but I'll keep digging.

It's a shame I don't have more time here as I could quite easily spend a lot of time here with very little effort...

Exploring Italy's Essence – Food, Wine, Art, Architecture, and Religion

27 Jun 2012
Modena, Italy

Ask anyone in the world what they think of when they think about Italy and they are going to tell you a few things right off the bat. Most likely you are going to hear about pizza, pasta, the Roman Empire, wine, Venice, and love. You might also get mafia, Leonardo Da Vinci, red sauce (or Marinara), coffee, Catholics, the Pope and the Vatican.

Let's distill those words down to the heart – food, religion, architecture, and art. These are perhaps the quintessential essence of Italy and over the past weeks, I've found myself exploring them all in ways that I might never have expected before I came here. Arriving in Pisa, I was knocked over by the leaning tower of Pisa before heading to Florence where I was fortunate to stay in the same hotel as a class of university students who had come specifically to study the architecture of Firenze (that's Florence to Italians) and then the next day, I found myself on a historic walking tour of the center of the birth of the Renaissance. This after having stared face to face with the face of John the Baptist's severed head while in Malta. This, my friends, is the convergence of religion and art – I might add that architecture was along for the ride too.

During my time here, I have stared in wonder at famous paintings, stood beneath astounding frescoes – while skirting the edges of ancient Christian churches sparsely populated by aging pensioners.

From Florence to the beach holiday city of Rimini, where Federico Fellini took Italian film to new heights while exploring the odd backroads and active Adriatic beachfront filled with even odder characters than those he brought to life with his imagination. For in fact, we can't discuss Italian art without including Italian Cinema whether it be Sophia Loren as the Lady of the Eels or the exciting but somehow dreadful ambiance of *Amarcord* and the Grand Rimini Hotel.

And yet, with all of these, the thing that is present is not just the architecture and the holiness of sacred places but also one sees, tastes, smells, and enjoys the wide array of foods and products that bring Italian food to life (or should I say Italian life to food.) While each region of Italy has its claim to fame, there is nowhere more renowned or filled with the wonders of Italian gastronomy than the region of Emilia Romagna and within that region, it has to be the ancient city of Modena that wins the prize for production of some of the most important components of the specialized Italian menu.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

And yet, there is more, the final and most important ingredient of Italy and the one that without, there would be no Italy at all. Can you guess it? Ah, yes, perhaps you can. It is the Italians that make Italy the place that it is and that have always done so – from the old men sitting in front of the cafes to the old women soaking up the sun on Sunday afternoons to the beautiful women riding bicycles to the cool guys that work in the shops, build and drive the incredible Italian sports cars, or the men and women who produce all of the products, art, culture, or cuisine that this country is so filled with. And yes, there are many other things and people who I might mention in this realm. Pavarati, Michelangelo, Monica Belucci, Machiaveli, Caruso, Columbus, Enzo Ferrari, Marco Polo, Marconi – the list goes on and on. Italians have not only made Italy the place that it is – they have also greatly contributed to making the world what it is. And, to answer – What am I doing here? In fact, I am getting to know Italians, getting to know their country, getting to know their cuisine, their art, their architecture, their sports cars, their lifestyle....and really, in the process, getting to know myself better too. For after all, the heritage of Italy, is truly the heritage of mankind.

Over the next few weeks, I will be introducing you to much of Italy - and, because it seems that in addition to all of the above, there is also more than a little laughter in the Italian character – I now introduce you to someone one of my Italian friends introduced me to earlier today – The Italian Man who Went to Malta. Be prepared to laugh outloud – not safe for work as it has some particular sounds that are remarkably like cuss words – and don't spit your coffee all over your monitor as you watch this. (YouTube: The Italian Man Who Visited Malta)

Celebrating International Independence

04 July 2012
Sefrou, Morocco

It's funny, certain days will never lose their meaning. Christmas will always be an important day, no matter my religion. Ramadan (which is coming up) will always have significance for me whether I fast or not (by the way, it's coming up in a few weeks). And, being an American, July 4th will always be a day of celebrating independence, remembering the founding fathers of the USA, and thinking of barbecues, watermelon, and fireworks.

It's been years since I stepped foot in the USA, but it won't matter if I never go back – the 4th of July will always cause me to pause and reflect. When I was a kid, I used to get stacks of books from the public library – then I would sit in a treehouse and read them. I would go through series and collections and one of them was something like the 'Young Patriots' series – These were

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

childhood biographies of notables like Ben Franklin, George Washington, Patrick Henry, Daniel Boone, Davy Crocket, Thomas Jefferson, Frederick Douglas, John Adams, Samuel Adams and more...

These books led me to read the actual biographies of the men. And perhaps, it was reading those biographies that introduced me to the ideas and concepts of liberty, democracy, freedom, and independence. From my youngest days, these ideas became a fundamental part of my personality and ideals. In fact, it was probably as a result of all of that, that I eventually enlisted in the Marines, skipped going to college, and set myself on a path towards disappointment in my country and what it had come to stand for.

It was in the Marines, that I began to see that we had become corporate mercenaries working for the likes of Dick Cheney, Rumsfeld, Enron, and the entire military industrial complex. Those ideals of the founding fathers, they seemed to have been twisted and turned into something that was completely different from what the great men had fought for. Much like the teachings of Christ, Mohammad or any other religious founder had been twisted for selfish ends.

Benjamin Franklin based the new American passport, in those days just a single sheet of paper, on the French one.

So, in a sense, this holiday, this 4th of July, always makes me sad because it reminds me of what our country could have been versus what it had become. I finished my commitment in the Marines and wasn't able to reenlist in good conscious. From that time, I was working to try to escape – I wanted to look for someplace where those ideals still existed or to find a way to fight for those ideals. I had thoughts of becoming a revolutionary – but what I saw with research and time was that every cause becomes subverted and perverted by those who don't feel any moral compunction in exploiting others for their own benefit. This is the world, and this is how it works.

Pretty cynical – unfortunately, it is also pretty true. Eventually, I managed to escape from the USA and become an expat and traveler – but what I learned was that it doesn't particularly matter where you go, it's all the same.

So what is international independence? In fact, it's the passport.

God Bless America for giving me this beautiful blue passport that allows me to go just about anywhere in the world that I want. My wife, with a Moroccan passport, can't go to even 1/3 of the countries that I can go to without getting an expensive visa, filling out forms, and going through bureaucracy. Me, I just take my blue passport and get on the plane. I'm independent to go anywhere.

America's first passport cover, in 1918, was beige, going green three years later. It changed to various shades of red in 1926 and back to green in 1941. Only on the

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

bicentenary in 1976 did it turn blue, matching the shade in the American flag.

The list of countries that I can go to without a visa is vast. There are more countries I can just bop into without any planning than there are that I need to plan ahead about. The greatest freedom the USA has given me, is the freedom to live this kind of life I lead. Without my passport, my citizenship, my country – I wouldn't have been able to leave as easily as I did.

If the founding fathers failed in creating the perfect society they envisioned – it wasn't a complete wash. As Americans we can go all over the world and have international independence – and for that alone, I am going to go and get some hot dogs, light up the barbecue, and introduce my Moroccan family to this American tradition.

Exploring the Sultanate of Baboob

11 July 2012

Turban, Sultanate of Baboob

This week, I feel extremely fortunate to be one of very few travel writers ever allowed to enter and write about the Sultanate of Baboob. One of the most secretive and least documented monarchies in the world, the Sultanate of Baboob is among the least understood countries in the modern world. As a nation, they have managed to exist in complete diplomatic isolation from the entire world, while preserving the unique and vibrant culture of their country.

A few days ago, I was contacted by a member of their internal ministry of affairs who explained that this secretive North African nation is exploring the possibility of opening up to a limited number of tourists each year in an effort to dispel the myths which have grown around the nation and as well, to provide an alternative income for the growing population.

To say the least, I was very surprised to be provided with this opportunity. When I asked the minister, Mr. Mohammad al Mohammad why I had been selected, I was informed that there were three reasons. First of all, as the founder of the International Association of Professional Online Travel Journalists, Mr. Mohammad felt that I would be a perfect candidate to introduce Baboob to the world via electronic journalism. Secondly, I was recommended by a professor of Anthropology whom I had studied under while writing my thesis, as someone who was uniquely suited to explain not only the history, but also some aspects of the culture. My former professor and colleague, has asked not to be identified by name, but is, in fact, the first anthropologist to be allowed to document the culture of the nobles of Baboob. While Clifford Geertz and Margaret Meade both made brief studies of the common people of Baboob, Meade was actually involved in a considerable scandal and asked to leave the country. Her work on Baboob has never been

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

published. Finally, it turns out that I am one of only a few online sources to ever write about Baboob, though I hadn't yet been there.

In fact, remarkably little has made it into print about the Sultanate. Perhaps the most discursive text on Baboob, including notes on the culture, history, and people can be found in this novel.

Here is an excerpt, reprinted with the author's permission, on the caveat that I provide the following link so that those interested in learning more about the Sultanate of Baboob can learn more. While the novel itself takes place only marginally in the country, the Sultanate is a key character and can be said to be present and expounded upon during the entire narrative. As to whether the author has taken any license with the facts, the Ministry of the Interior has assured me that these are the facts:

Baboob occupies a mountainous region sitting between Libya and Tunisia. The country itself is one of the smallest in Africa and measures in at only 146 square miles. In terms of population, Baboob has only 150,000 residents of which nearly 130,000 live in the Capital city of Turban. Baboob is ruled by a hereditary sultanate with a line of succession designated by a combination of parentage and 'manna', a measure by the country's clergy which determines which heir is the closest to God, using a system which to this day has not been released. The current ruler is the direct descendent of the first Sultan and bears the name Sultan Mohammad bin Mohammad al Mohammad. Residents refer to the ruler as Sultan or M-Mucho pronounced /em-Moo-cho/.

Baboob is landlocked and consists mostly of mountains, though there is one sizeable river which begins in Tunisia, flows through Baboob and then continues into Libya. Baboob's official language is Arabic though most residents also speak either Italian or Catalan. There is a sizeable minority who also speak the native Boober tongue. The unit of currency is the Boobie Real which can be broken down into 100 centavos.

The population identifies as 100% Babooban though genetically it can be broken down into the following groups. 47% Arab-Andoran-Baboban 26 % Babooban-Andorran 13% Arab-Babooban 11% Andoran-Babooban and 2% Babooban and the last one percent made up of either 100% Arabs or 100% Andorrans. The reason for the low percentages of pure ethnicity are because of the Arab-Andorran wars of 1893-1897 in which those claiming pure blood were nearly wiped out by genocidal tribesmen as a result of a perceived skewing of metrics on the part of the hereditary succession.

The novel contains considerably more detail about the hereditary leaders, the settlement, and the culture of Baboob, but my purpose here is simply to whet the appetite of the reader and traveler. In the coming days, I shall endeavor to peer beneath the surface and uncover more about this incredibly unique place.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

For the moment, I am exhausted after the journey here. From Morocco, I had to be smuggled across the Algerian border by Berber Nomads (friends of the friends who helped to set up our Berber Nomad Wedding a few years ago). We first trekked by truck for nearly five hours through the heat of the Sahara before meeting up with a caravan of camels. The camel portion of the trip was nearly 48 hours, starting at night, resting during the day, and continuing again as the cool of night began.

I was picked up by what I can only describe as an Algerian Berber Party Bus, which traversed the entire width of the nation before illegally crossing into Libya where, thankfully, the population has been celebrating their very successful recent elections.

Once in Libya, it was relatively simple to make it to the mountains where I met with the emissaries of Baboob – from this point, it was a hair raising donkey ride into the mountains and finally, a rather exuberant welcome from my hosts. As you might imagine, I'm exhausted. I'll try to write more about the fabulous Sultanate of Baboob in coming days – but for now, I hope these few pictures from my journey will satisfy your curiosity. If not, you can get that novel, right here. (or here for Kindle)

Confessing and Getting Ready to Fast

18 July, 2012
Sefrou, Morocco

I know, the title of this week's column sounds like I'm Catholic, but I'm not. My confession is something else entirely. Last Thursday, after creating as much buzz as I could from a small farm town in the middle of a small North African country – I launched my most recent novel – *Douchebags, Fags, and Hags*.

This book launch carried a huge amount of disappointment. Back in May, I'd asked several notable friends if they would give the book a quick read and send me blurbs – two of them, well known travel writers who I'm friendly with, claimed that since they had told other writers they knew that they were busy, they needed to tell me the same thing. Understandable, but since both of them said it, I felt a bit like it was a writer blow off form letter.

Another six friends who work in various film and entertainment of various forms agreed to read it and at least get me blurbs for the cover in time for my launch. Despite their agreement, our

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

friendship, and sending them the book – I didn't hear back from any of them. If this was the end of our friendship because they feel guilty for not following through, I would have rather they just said no. Then there were ten or so people whose opinions I respect who agreed to read it and get back to me – but just didn't.

My initial reaction was that my book must suck – but then when I started digging deeper, I found that, in fact, none of them had even read it. They hadn't even picked it up. They were too busy and since I was far away, land locked in a North African kingdom in a different timezone and with a shitty internet connection – I wasn't a loud enough buzzing fly to impel anyone to follow through. This is the world we live in.

Being where I am, having a new daughter, and dealing with a rapidly changing online business environment – I didn't have the opportunity to hire a good PR agency just as I haven't been able to find an agent from here in Morocco – although I was fortunate to find the wonderful Grace O'Malley who edited my novel and provided awesome feedback. So, I did what I could with what I had – which wasn't much.

I hired a video guy to make a book trailer which I think turned out pretty awesome (you can see it in the sidebar). I got in contact with a few reviewers. I tried to build a little bit of buzz about the book. And here's the confession – and I thought it would be fun to write about traveling in the books fictitious Sultanate of Baboob here on Vagobond as if it were a real place. I did that last week, one day before the launch. My thought – and I think this is pretty reasonable – was that the name was funny and controversial enough to get some social media action and that bonifide travelers would see my bogus story about traveling in a fake country and call me out -

That just didn't happen. Instead, Lonely Planet actually syndicated my column about the Sultanate of Baboob, on social media I got plenty of reactions from readers – only instead of controversy I got “Sounds like an awesome adventure” and even “I've always wanted to go there” - thus far, 147, 105 impressions on Twitter alone and yet only Anil Polat and Rolf Potts actually called me out on it – and that's not even including the more than 5000 visits to the story, Facebook, Stumble Upon, Linked In or other social media.

I also decided to give away all of my other books for the launch day and the day following on Kindle. During the two day period there were more than 3000 of my books downloaded for free by Kindle Users, not including Douchebags, Fags, and Hags which was at regular price for the launch.

In addition, I did a launch Interview with Anthony Mathenia which I think framed the book in a way that was very positive.

The result of all of this? Not a single sale. One person besides me clicked the like button on the

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

books page. That's it. No reviews, no blurbs, no excitement, no controversy, no nothing.

And for the last few days, I've been nursing an intense disappointment. The book is good. It's funny, it's a travel adventure, it's memorable – there was a part of me that wanted to blame my friends for not following through on what they said they would do – but if I built a whole campaign based on the actions of other people (who I wasn't paying) – that's actually my fault for being stupid. People, not even friends, rarely do anything out of altruism and if you are landlocked thousands of miles away in a Muslim North African nation – chances are that you don't seem very important since no one can call you to help them move, cry on your shoulder, or benefit from your presence. If you aren't paying people – chances are, they aren't going to follow through, and (and this one hurts) – I suspect that people just don't take the time to read fiction anymore. Life is too busy, too hectic, and Netflix, TV shows, Youtube, and porn are only a click away.

I can see now, that my pricing was far too optimistic as well. While writers like Neil Stephenson and Stephen King may be able to charge normal prices for ebooks on kindle or nook – the general public isn't going to pay \$8.99 for a book from a relatively unknown author like me. My thinking was that I worked hard on the book, it's good, it's funny, it has some important lessons about travel and life in it, it makes people laugh out loud, and my friends are going to support me by telling the world this – but all of that was wrong.

Out of all of this, the only success is the nearly 1000 downloads of my only science fiction novel – *The Hu Factor*. That, for some reason and even though they were free downloads – has made me very happy.

Now, on to the fasting. Last year, after fasting with a newborn baby in the house and really not enjoying the way people in Morocco go about fasting in general – they suffer and become grumpy because they still have to work and then people begin to fight and life generally just becomes unpleasant all day while the sun is shining – I swore that it was my last year fasting in Morocco.

And yet, with the beginning of Ramadan just a few days away – I find myself looking forward to the fast. My daughter was born on the first day of the fast last year – so her Muslim birthday is always going to be the first day of Ramadan – which is pretty cool. I'm going to give the fast another go – my daughter's actual birthday is August 1. I'm going to stick around and see my little girl turn a year old – then, on August 2nd – I'm going to fly to Greece and go sailing and leave my wife and daughter to deal with the rest of the grumpy fasting while they are surrounded by family and friends who come to visit for the occasion. So there is my second confession – I'm going to fast for about ten days and then split to Greece – where I most certainly will not be fasting.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

If you would like to fast for Ramadan, I'm making my fasting book free (*Spiritual Fasting: Faith, Family, Love, and Jihad*) for the next couple of days – feel free to download it, read it, and please like it and leave a review. The book will be available for free until July 21 which is the day Ramadan is set to begin.

Ramadan Mubarak!

Ramadan in Morocco: Participating and Observing

25 July, 2012
Sefrou, Morocco

Just in time for Ramadan, the annual Muslim fast, the weather in Morocco got incredibly hot and dry. With winds blowing off the sahara and bringing dust and sand storms and the sun beating down on the believers as they go about their daily lives – albeit with a couple of major adjustments – no food or drink shall be consumed from dusk til dawn.

This is the hottest Ramadan in nearly 40 years and already you can see it having an effect on people even though it just began a few days ago. One might say, so it's Ramadan, take the days off – but that's not an option for most people. My friend owns a guest house in Fez and he was griping a bit about his staff during Ramadan. They insist on working, but of course, because it's hot and they are fasting – they are unpleasant to be around – grumpy. To hear him tell it was rather funny as he's very English and not a Muslim in any way, shape, or form.

Of course, he and most of the other expats in Fez have all flown the coop. The truth is, for expats, it's the most unpleasant time to be in Morocco because everything is closed during the day, you can't eat in public without making yourself a pariah, and people are generally slow at their jobs and more unpleasant than usual during the daylight hours. So, most of the expats leave. I don't blame them.

For me, it's a little different. I have a Moroccan wife and so I have a huge Moroccan extended family and I get to see the beauty and joy of Ramadan. Non-Muslims see what I describe above and think of Ramadan as an awful time, but for Muslims, it's a time of shared sacrifice, affirming identity, and, like Christmas for those in the West, a time for family to come together, share meals, laugh, and love one another.

I fast while I'm in Morocco and the truth is, there is a satisfaction to it that is hard to describe

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

unless you've fasted before – and even if you have, unless you've fasted with 1/5th of the human population of planet earth at the same time – it's a little hard to comprehend. Admittedly, I'm not saying prayers five times a day and my spirituality and beliefs are very different than those of the people who are fasting all around me – but as we fast together, we are family. All of us – all 1.5 billion of us who are fasting these days of Ramadan.

I go running with some friends and because you are supposed to continue your life as it is during the rest of the year, we run during Ramadan too. We meet at 6 pm and exercise together for an hour. It's still hot then and we've gone through the day with no food or drink, but as we run, there is a shared bond that goes beyond even just fasting. As one friend put it – we are exercising with God's extra approval. I hope so, because the hour following the run while I waited for the dusk is little short of excruciating.

The best part of Ramadan, though is the Iftar, breaking the fast at the end of the day with family and friends. Juice, dates, plenty of water, coffee and tea (coffee is perhaps the hardest for me to give up as it is an integral part of starting my day) – sweets that are special to this time of the year, cakes, tajines, Berber pizzas, and more. The night is a glorious time of celebration as everyone stays awake longer and enjoys the freedom to eat, drink, and be merry.

The worst part of Ramadan is if you have to get anything done during the day. Lucky for me, I don't. Right now, I don't have to go anywhere, do anything, get anything printed, certified, or stamped. Thank God for that.

And, thank God that this year, I'm leaving a bit early so that I can go sailing again in Greece. Ramadan is great and I'm happy to participate while I'm here – but, you know, like Vegas – what happens in Morocco, stays in Morocco and that's the way I feel about Ramadan this year.

The best part is – there's a pass for those who are traveling – so I don't even have to feel guilty about it. Not that I would...but this way my wife won't be mad at me.

Celebrating a Year of Fatherhood

Sefrou, Morocco
01 August 2012

Exactly one year ago today, I was celebrating a milestone in manhood. I was pacing back and forth after a sleepless night, waiting to hear from the doctor about the status of my wife and our daughter, whom she had just given birth to.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Because this is Morocco and things here don't happen quite the same way as they do back in the United States or other fully developed western countries, I found myself in the position of one of those sleepless dads from movies back in the 1940's and 1950's. I wasn't allowed in the delivery room, had no access to where my wife was, and because of the language barrier – wasn't able to even find out if she was okay. The birth had been difficult. Not just for me waiting, but more particularly for my wife who went into labor 24 hours earlier, was shifted into the maternity ward of our local hospital in Sefrou where she laboured through the day, into the night, and finally was transported to the bigger regional hospital in Fes at about midnight.

No one had bothered to tell me they moved her. She was simply loaded up into an ambulance with a soldier who was dying from a tsetse fly bite and driven to where she could get better medical attention. Her mom went with her and the rest of the family knew, but they didn't want to bother me with the information, so they told me to go home, get some sleep and they would tell me if anything changed.

I
t was only in the morning that they told me she had been moved. I never had the chance to be that expectant father to be from movies of the 1960's 1970's and 1980's who holds his wife's hand and says 'breathe, breathe, breathe' – they just don't do that here. So, one year ago this morning after a sleepless pacing night and about 4000 cigarettes, I showed up at the Morekab (Stadium) Hospital in Fez, asking if my wife and daughter were okay. In fact, I wasn't even positive I had a daughter since the doctor had told my wife she couldn't tell from the ultrasound since the baby had been covering herself.

So, I showed up and everyone told me everything was fine and I was a proud father of a healthy baby girl. No one bothered to tell me that there had been complications with the birth, that my wife had nearly died from blood loss, that the baby had been in danger, that on the way to the hospital my wife rode with a man who died halfway there. Finally, at around 8:30 in the morning – they released my wife and daughter. I was a proud papa!

I would have celebrated with cigars and whiskey at the bar across the street from the hospital like some character from a Frank Capra movie, but this is Morocco – no bar across the street and besides, Ramadan began with the arrival of my daughter – so no food or drink during daylight hours for my first month of being a dad. Along with no sleep – and of course, no smoking or drinking whiskey. Just like now, because it's Ramadan again. It's also my little girl's 1st Birthday today.

In Hawaii, the 1st birthday party is a big celebration because back in the late 1800's there was actually a year when infant mortality was 100%. The 1st birthday is a time of friends, family, beach barbecues, and lots of presents. Here in Morocco, they don't really celebrate birthdays. Lots of people don't even know when their birthday is. And, since it's Ramadan and we live in a landlocked mountain town – no chance for barbecue, beach, beers, or the kind of celebration

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

you get in Hawaii.

But, we aren't going to let it pass unmarked. We've arranged a party at my in-laws house. We're having a big Moroccan meal of chicken with prunes made, we've ordered a big fancy cake with 'Happy Birthday Sophia' written on it and we told everyone that we invited that they need to bring a present, even if just a small one of a couple of dirhams. My wife bought a big plush Teddy Bear for Sophia and since she loves my guitar so much, I bought her a tiny guitar. It's not a ukulele, it's an actual tiny six string guitar. I'm not sure if she'll get any other presents, but really that's okay – she's one year old.

They say that your first year has a huge impact on your life. We've given Sophia a pretty wonderful first year. Her toy basket is filled with toys from all over the world given to her by friends, family, or picked up by me on my various trips. Her wardrobe is also international – Moroccan, Belgian, French, Italian, Greek, Australian, British, Turkish and American. In fact, while she didn't get to use the ticket I bought for her to go to Paris (because we weren't able to get my wife's visa in time) – she did have a ticket to Paris when she was just a few months old.

She's actually a pretty well traveled baby. In addition to Fez and Sefrou, she has been to Casablanca and Rabat. She's ridden horses in Essaouira and wandered the medina in Marrakech. She's flown to Turkey, explored Istanbul, Izmir, Cappadocia, Antalya, Bodrum, Pamukkale, and Manisa. She's ridden horses, trains, plains, automobiles, and blue water gulleys in both Bodrum and Antalya's crystal waters. She's kayaked a stream through ancient Greek ruins in Olympos and cried when she was denied the chance to ride with us on a hot air balloon.

While she can't talk yet – her baby vocabulary is sprinkled with English, Arabic, French, and Turkish sounds – for some reason she insists on calling her mom Anne (pronounced ann-nay) – which is the Turkish word for mom. I think she thinks she's Turkish – after all, she was made in Turkey. What a mixture she is – Arab, Berber, Scottish, French, Italian, Irish, English, Cherokee – a true African-American but made in Turkey with the genes of Africa, Europe, and North America. Someday, perhaps she'll marry a South American – Asian – Aussie and they can have children of the world.

Being a dad has completely changed my life. Shortly after she arrived, I gave up smoking. I've had to learn to live with less sleep and of course, having a baby is expensive, so I've had to learn to live with less money. The freedom of mobility that I used to have became halved when I married (because my wife has a Moroccan passport and so can't go to a lot of places without extensive paperwork) and with fatherhood it was quartered. Our married life has changed significantly – lack of sleep, lack of private time together, and more.

And yet- when she look up at me with those two teeth and those smiling little eyes – when she

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

babbled those first sounds, ate her first solid food, hugs me, kisses me, yells Da-DEE from across the room, or when she began toddling around on her own two legs for the first time just a couple of days ago – there's no feeling in the world like it. There's no price that isn't worth paying for those moments.

We've given our daughter a pretty wonderful first year of life – I hope it forms the foundation of a long and happy life. She in turn has given us a wonderful first year of life which has added texture and joy to our lives in ways that we never expected. My travels with her are more fulfilling as I try to see the world from her eyes – my travels without her are more fulfilling because I find myself wanting to capture memories and things that might make her life better.

It's been said before, but I'm happy to say it again. Fatherhood is a trip. A wonderful trip.

Sailing and Sweating in Greece

08 August 2012

Skiathos Town, Greece

What am I doing here? How can I even begin to explain what I'm doing here. Thousands of miles from Ramadan and fasting and my family and my entire life. Sitting here, having a coffee on a Greek island as a dog owner (the kind I used to always see who buy treats for their dogs, allow the dogs in the house and think of the dog as a family member – even giving it a name – not like in Morocco where none of that happens) so the dog owner is saying "Sit, sit, sit. Good boy. Good dog." Amazing. What am I doing here?

Well, just about 30 minutes ago, I stepped off the sailboat I've been on for the past several days. It's been a beautiful couple of days – that's for sure. Green waters and great sunshine, plenty of beauty and more than a little bit of relaxation. Greece is beautiful, warm, with wonderful food, fantastic sailing, beautiful scenery – and What the hell am I doing here? Isn't it Ramadan? Aren't I supposed to be suffering and fasting through Moroccan days with my wife and breaking the fast with her family every day and cussing and sweating in Morocco – yeah, about that...

I've fasted and suffered enough in Morocco during Ramadan. Enough to last a lifetime. My friend Graham, an expat in Fez who owns a small guesthouse comes sailing every year and needs crew for his boat and every time he asks, I find myself saying - "Yes, sounds great." This year, since it's during Ramadan, it sounds even better. I waited in Morocco to see my little Sophia's first birthday and throw her her first party – and then – I caught a flight out of there. My

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

wife loves it, she loves Ramadan, it's her favorite part of the year – eating and fasting and suffering with family. Two weeks was enough for me though.

A flight from Fez to Milan, a slice of pizza in the airport, a flight from Milan to Thessaloniki – a night in a hotel before a bus to Volos and then – on the boat with three other expats from Fez, one of whom told me that he had just gotten word that one of his employees got sliced with a knife, because there is always a bit of Ramadan violence in Fez. And then sailing – Greek food, tavernas, a bit of beer, some gyros, and plenty of sun and water. No more fasting for me, but still sweating in the heat. Of course the sea spray makes it bearable and even if my cabin on the yacht gets a bit warm in the morning I can dive into the turquoise water and wash away the sweat – unlike back in Morocco where I just had to wait for the sun to go down.

So, that's what I'm doing here. Loving it.

Wondering How to Get Home

15 August 2012
Orei, Greece

One of the great things about living in Morocco is the proximity to Europe and as a result of that – the opportunities for travel. Low cost airlines like Ryan Air, Easy Jet, and Jet4You offer cheap getaways from Morocco to a bunch of fantastic destinations. Europe is at the doorstep and with AirArabia – so is Turkey.

That serves to partially answer what I'm doing here on Greece's largest island, Evia – in the little port town of Orei. As I mentioned in my last column, I caught a couple of 30 Euro Ryan Air flights to get to Greece – one to Milan and then another to Thessaloniki. The only problem was that I didn't like the cost of the return flights so I didn't book one. I'm spoiled – sometimes it works in my favor and sometimes it doesn't. In this case – the jury is still out.

I've been enjoying the hell out of floating around the Aegean on my friend Graham's sailboat. I do most of the cooking and figure that pays my fare for that portion. We eat a fair amount of spaghetti and canned meat sandwiches and the victuals tend to be long life since the boat's refrigerator is far from efficient. As we float around and visit these little Greek seaside towns, I am completely charmed by Greek village life. Each evening at around 9 pm, everyone tends to come out and head to the waterfront tavernas. All ages are represented from toddlers to geriatrics. People sit, have a coffee, drink a beer with friends, talk about the day to day events of life (I'm guessing because my Greek goes about as far as hello and thank you) – or maybe they

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

sit with friends around a big bottle of ouzo and eat mezes (Greek tapas) while laughing and joking. Sometimes they even break into song and dance.

Meanwhile, on the water, the fishermen get their boats ready and sit in them with their wives. The wives don't stay behind when the fishermen head out – instead it's husband and wife teams heading out to sea as the sun goes down. It makes me miss my wife – though through the power of Facebook, I know that she and our daughter are doing just fine. Greece is remarkably similar to the Atlas Mountain town we live in – it's just surrounded by water and the people have a bit more relaxed vibe about them. I've heard from a few expats here that doing business in Greece is about the same as doing business in Morocco – lots of paperwork and lots of corruption.

And while I can go on and on about this – I'm still not sure how the hell I'm going to get back to Morocco. Flights are expensive this time of the year. I've spoken with a few cruise ship companies but none of them go to Morocco – so a press trip seems to be out of the question. The most exciting and perhaps affordable option is to go the long way – take a train to Romania and Hungary and then fly to Spain to catch the ferry – or alternatively take the train all the way to Spain. I like the idea – but my wife is going to kill me if I take an additional three weeks to get home...still, it might be the best option – in the interest of saving money, of course.

I really hate flying. While the budget airlines are a great resource, I'd rather go by boat, by train, even by bus if I have the option since airline security, draconian baggage laws, uncomfortable seats – all of that sucks. I mean sure, as Lewis CK says "You're sitting in a seat flying through the air..." – that is amazing – especially for \$40 but I'd rather avoid it if possible.

From Greece, I'm going to head to Turkey – I'm still not totally sure how I'm getting there though it seems that a bus or ferry from Volos to Thessaloniki and then a ferry to Chios followed by a ferry to Cesme and a bus to Izmir. A few reasons to go to Turkey – one is that I love it, two is to activate the warranty on my wife's broken computer (which I've brought along to hopefully exchange) and three is to do some business that hopefully will yield fantastic results – along the way, I'm hoping to see a few friends.

Alright, you've caught me- I always drag my feet when it's time to get back home to Morocco. I miss my family but the truth is that when I'm out of Morocco, I almost never miss the country itself. That might be why I've set myself this very difficult task of figuring out how to get back home.

I'll let you know more next week....

Smooth Living in the Aegean

22 August 2012

Lemnos, Lesbos, and Chios Greece (as well as my stateroom on the ferry European Express as we power across the Aegean towards Turkey)

The only U.S. Presidential Candidate to ever have lived in his car is Dennis Kucinich. I always like Dennis. I use his name like we're buddies, but in fact we've never met – though I did meet one of his campaign aides in Turkey once – but that's a different story. The point is, I've never met him but I still feel familiar enough to call him Dennis. That's because, he and I share a common bond. No, I haven't run for President of the US ... yet, but I too once lived in my car.

That shared bit of history makes me feel a certain brotherhood with Dennis and I'm certain that he would agree. Those of us who are so dedicated to pursuing a dream or doing our work that we do so at the cost of house and home, are a certain breed. It's a point where a lot of people would give up on their dreams, take a soul sucking job doing manual labor, move into some kind of shitty housing, and lose the thread – and in the process, probably lose the dream.

Dennis had a dream of public service. To a certain extent, so did I. I wanted to write a book about how you can live a good life without having a soul sucking job. That book, *Rough Living: Tips and Tales of a Vagabond* – kept me moving forward when I was waking up with ice over the top of my sleeping bag inside my old VW van in Washington State. I absolutely knew that it could be done, I knew that somehow I could have a life of travel and luxury without having to sell my soul. I stuck with it, wrote the book, and with varying degrees of success – I walked the walk.

I admit it – sometimes I stumbled. I took jobs, I rented places to live, I had relationships, sometimes I cried and sometimes I laughed in surprise and joy. I remember holding that first ticket to China in my hand and wondering – “Is this real?” as I looked at the van I'd been living in for 40 weeks. Magical.

I remember sitting on the balcony of the most expensive hotel on Maui while wearing a fluffy white bathrobe and eating a room service breakfast a few years later and thinking – can this really be me? Can this last? Actually, it didn't...

But now, ten years after writing that book and shivering through those Northwest nights, I've just left the most luxurious hotel in Thessaloniki, Greece – The Excelsior. An incredible executive suite, the most impressive breakfast buffet I've yet encountered, and after a day of exploring this ancient city of Thrace – I boarded a ferry, looked around at all the passengers trying to sleep in lounge chairs and went ahead and booked a cabin where I slept soundly, had a shower, and enjoyed what would have been a miserable night of uncomfortable sleep. As I look around at all

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

the bleary eyed, uncomfortable passengers who did what I would have certainly done just a year ago – I feel great.

The ferry has just pulled into the ancient port of Lemnos (not to be confused with another ancient island Lesbos – home of the Lesbians) and the last two weeks were spent sailing on a yacht around the islands of the North Sporades – known as a playground for the rich and famous – and for the second time now – a place where friends and I could relax, escape from the world (a little bit, I mean except for email and writing and – hey wait, that is my work) but you get the point. Somehow, I'm able to come to the Aegean and not only work on my tan, build my sailing skills, eat in wonderful little Tavernas – but also able to get my work done. Every day. I work every day.

That last bit might surprise you. In the last ten years, there has rarely been a day when I didn't work. The difference between me and some slave is that the work I do is my own. I'm working on my life. I'm working on my future. I'm working on my business. I'm working on myself. Every day. While I've had jobs in the past ten years – I don't particularly count those as work – they were drudgery mostly. Work is important. Do the work.

As the ferry heads towards Chios, my destination, I am tempted to jump ship at Lesbos and wander through the ancient streets of Mytilene – one of the oldest cities in the world (inhabited since the 10th century B.C.) but settle for some seaside walks near the port while waiting to head off to Chios where I've learned that fires have forced the evacuation of ten villages and every hotel that was available is now full. I'm glad for that cabin on board now as it has given me the chance to sleep most of the day and come nighttime lit by Greek fires raging on Chios – there may just be no sleep to be had. But like a moth, drawn to the flame, I move onward. I only hope that somehow I can assist.

Istanbul, Cairo, Greece, and Going Home

29 August 2012

Cairo, Egypt

As I begin to write this I am still sitting in a beautiful little konak (wooden house) just a stone's throw from the Blue Mosque, Arasta Bazaar, and the Grand Palace Mosaic Museum in Istanbul. Erten Konak is a remarkable little guest house filled with unique oddities and treasures.

I'm still not certain about the ladies hats displayed like flowers, but the gorgeous mosaics in the courtyard and the glass covered basement access to a cistern that leads from the Basilica

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Cistern to the sea is something extraordinary.

In any event, I'm comfortable here and getting the work done which I came to Istanbul to do. I'll write a review of Erten Konak in a few days when I have a bit more time. As you read this, I am hopefully back at home with my beautiful wife and daughter in Morocco. (editors note – due to some booking issues with awful booking service Tripsta, I am delayed a few days in Cairo – not the worst place to be stranded, but I really wanted to see my girls :()

It's been a very nice and productive month in terms of getting business done, sailing, and enjoying the good life in Greece, Turkey, Italy, and Egypt – but the truth is, it's time to go home. This particular trip, I couldn't bring my family with me and I've missed them dearly while I've been away.

So, as I write I'm sitting in a cute little Istanbul konak, as you read, I'm hopefully back in Morocco with my family – but the in between is what I really want to write about. After all, I truly believe that it is the in between spaces of any journey which make it fulfilling and interesting. The things of the unknown.

Without at least a bit of uncertainty, I find that life and travel don't hold much interest.

For those of you who have been following, the uncertainty that has been hovering over my head during this trip was how to get home. For those who aren't familiar, let me catch you up. In August, I had the chance to go sailing on a friend's yacht in the Greek islands for a few weeks – since the best yacht is a friend's yacht – I jumped at the chance. Especially when I found a 30 Euro budget flight to Italy and then another 30 Euro flight to Greece. Part of the reason the trip worked was because I had some things to take care of in Turkey anyway.

After the sailing was done I stayed a few days in Thessaloniki, Greece as a guest at The Excelsior Hotel (which, by the way, was perhaps the nicest hotel I've had the pleasure of enjoying).

From Thessaloniki, I caught the ferry to Chios where even though fires were raging, I had a wonderful time exploring the island by motorbike before catching a ferry into Cesme, Turkey – renting a house in Alicate for the night and then heading to Izmir where I stayed (and never wanted to leave) at the Ege Palas in a 14th floor executive suite where my desk looked out over the Bay of Izmir.

There must be something to having an office with a view because I got more productive work done there than anywhere else in an amazingly short time – it might of been that I just didn't want to get up or move from the view.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

From Izmir a flight to Istanbul where I met with some colleagues about the nascent International Association of Professional Online Travel Journalists and also discussed the formation of a foundation based in Cappadocia which will focus on sustainable tourism and travel as well as create a permanent travel writers residency in Cappadocia. Very exciting projects!

While here, I've visited the Mosaic Museum, caught up with old friends, took a Turkish cooking class (don't worry, I'll tell you about it later) and have been enjoying this queen of all the cities once again. My home away from home.

But finally, I had to figure out how to get home. To be honest – I'm sick of budget airlines. Ryan Air is cheap generally but they don't fly to Turkey, the service is crap, and the baggage restrictions are draconian. I'm tired of counting my ounces and not being able to check a bag without paying a fee that equals more than the cost of a regular ticket. There are some cheap options from Turkey to Ryan Air hubs – but I scrapped that idea as soon as I thought of it.

As for Air Arabia, the worst airline in the world – at least flying to or from Morocco, they still have my credit card on a banned list (which, by the way was their mistake to begin with and that I've never been able to get them to fix) and when I went to check the prices – I found them to be about double what I would be willing to pay for a terrible flight at inconvenient times anyway.

I considered (seriously considered) doing a reverse Orient Express and taking the train from Sirkeci Station in Istanbul to Sofia, Bulgaria then to Romania, Hungary, Austria, Germany and then into Spain to once again take the ferry into Morocco – but the truth is, if I do a trip like that, I want to spend at least a few weeks on it and at the moment, I want to get back to my family so I wouldn't feel right doing that. Maybe another time.

I looked into jumping on a cruise ship – cabins are cheap these days and there is a twelve day cruise from Istanbul to Portugal which would give me the chance to jump ship in Spain and take the ferry – but again, twelve days is too long.

So, I looked at other airlines. Turkish Airlines, which by the way, is one of the world's great airlines – had flights to Morocco starting at about 900 Euro one way! That's more than a ticket to San Francisco and I just couldn't bring myself to do it. Royal Air Maroc had flights starting at around 700 Euro and they are a crappy airline, so I didn't want to do that either.

Finally, I turned to the Vagobond flight planning tool which is absolutely awesome and I (of all people) should have gone to first (and yet the company it directed me to, Tripsta, has the worst customer service on Earth – so the tool is good, but skip Tripsta and go to the airline directly for better service). I found a Turkish air flight for \$600, a Royal Air Maroc Flight for \$500 and flights that had layovers in Madrid, Tunis, or Jeddah for \$400.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Best of all, I found a flight that had a 21 hour layover in Cairo for \$350. I've never been to Egypt and on my list of things I wanted to do this year (which I generally make on New Years Eve of the proceeding year) go to Egypt was on the list. Ideally, I had hoped to go for longer than 21 hours, to have my wife and daughter with me, and to explore a bit – but that's what I get for not being more specific. So, I booked the flight. I leave for Cairo tomorrow.

I'm going to try to do a night tour before catching my flight to Casablanca the next morning. I have no idea what is actually possible on a 21 hour overnight layover in Cairo – but I'll be sure to let you know.

Building the Future of Travel – I Hope

05 September 2012

Sefrou, Morocco

While it's always wonderful to come back home and see my daughter, coming back to Sefrou is never really anything I want to do. But, it's my wife's hometown and it's where we live until we find out for certain whether she is approved to live in the United States or not. It's the house we have, the address we live at, and more importantly, the one listed on all the paperwork with the National Immigration Service and the Department of Homeland Security. Man, I hate paperwork and ever since I decided to fall in love with a foreign national in an African Arab country – I've been buried in it. Let's hope that changes sometime in the future along with my default location.

In the meantime, I've jumped headfirst into a number of other projects that will eventually require lots of paperwork if everything goes according to plan. In fact, if I can say something positive about Sefrou it's that I have plenty of time to work on this stuff when I'm here. First of all, I should point you to check out my latest online adventure – ThingstodoinIstanbul.org - this is a location based travel site which now includes 14 major cities around the world. The idea is to create an easy and complete list of things to do and places to see in some of the top cities in the world. This project is very much in the beginning stages of development, but I'm certainly hopeful that under the umbrella of Vagobond Travel Media, LLC it will thrive and grow into something wonderful.

I've been working with a huge number of independent travel reps, PR firms, and travel companies to bring the best content possible to Vagobond.com. This in addition to working with our regular staff writers and some incredible new additions (Sarah Spigelman writing about food in New York City and the East Coast and Anthony Mathenia writing about offbeat family travel in middle America among others...) Plus, we've been really lucky to have some incredible guest writers lately from all over the world sharing amazing adventures and insider secrets from the

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Paris Jazz scene to the top UK places to visit if you are a British music fan. All of this, has hopefully added up to a better experience for you, our readers.

Even though I've gone to some trouble to point out and distance Vagobond from being listed as a 'travel blog' – it still ranks high in all the major listings of the top travel blogs on the web, which is both gratifying and funny. As you know, I prefer to think of Vagobond as an online travel magazine and in the future, I hope to also make it a print travel magazine – though that is some time off. In the meantime, I've also gone to some trouble to distance myself and our writers from the label 'Travel Bloggers' – I have lots of friends who consider themselves travel bloggers, but to me, the term has always sounded cheap and unpleasant. Our writers are so much more than 'blah blah blahgers' – Dave Stamboulis is an award winning travel book author, Linda Kissam is a respected food and wine authority, Katherine Rodeghier is a recipient of the Lowell Thomas Award (possibly the highest honor a travel journalist can achieve), Susan McKee is a respected scholar and historian who has written guidebooks and for National Geographic. Brian Leibold is a – well – he's a yodeling vagabond. Calling these writers 'travel bloggers' is like calling Walter Kronkite a talking head – it's neither accurate nor respectful. These are travel journalists. They may work online, but they work. They are professionals. While there has been some movement to create a professional travel bloggers association and associations through organizations like Travel Bloggers Unite and TBEX – the problem is that these organizations are still using that term 'travel blogger'. Is Dave Stamboulis, a guy who has won awards for photography, book awards, and more and who doesn't blog – is he a travel blogger? Nope. He's a journalist that publishes online professionally. I support all the efforts to create a more professional class of travel blogger, but it's like calling it the amateur enthusiast travel writers club just by virtue of including the term travel blogger.

It may sound like splitting hairs about dotting i's but when I looked around, I saw that I wasn't the only one bothered by the term blogger. Just about everyone I know who is doing this kind of work professionally was not using the term travel blogger. They call themselves founder, travel writer, online travel editor, travel expert, all kinds of things to avoid that word that ultimately comes across as amateur – blogger. Tell someone you are a travel journalist and no one asks how you earn money. Tell them you are a travel blogger and they will ask – do you know why? Because bloggers are amateurs in most people's eyes.

I have friends that are earning six figures doing this work. Yes, six figures as in more than \$100,000 a year. Is that an amateur salary? Not in my thinking.

I looked around to see if there were any organizations that would fit the bill. As a food, wine, and travel writer and editor – I'm very happy to be a member of the International Food, Wine, and Travel Writers Association, but I felt like we needed something more focused on the online world with less focus on print. I didn't find it. So I created it.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

The IAPOTJ - International Association of Professional Online Travel Journalists. Obviously, an association needs more than one member so I asked around and soon found more than sixty professionals in this business that were interested in joining me to create this organization. At the moment, we are figuring out all the details through an online IAPOTJ group. It's a big process, but the industry is taking notice and already we've managed to secure prestigious mentions, discounts to incredible travel writer events, and even to set up our first Online Travel Writers Residencies in both Turkey and Morocco. We're in negotiations for residencies in Indonesia, Thailand, and Europe too.

And of course, time will tell. I think the future of online travel journalism is bright as the industry begins to notice that articles on the web never go away like print articles do and that online travel journalists have dedicated followings that pay attention and take action based on what they read.

As far as I can tell, this is the future of travel. With Google's recent purchase of Frommer's and Zagats – the travel industry is moving even more firmly online. You can expect Facebook, Microsoft, and Twitter to start doing more of the same. Frankly, with social media integration, I think blogs will soon be a thing of the past – but don't get me wrong, travel websites will never go away.

Remembering 911 and Seeing the Effects on Travel 11 Years Later

12 September 2012
Sefrou, Morocco

Sometimes, it's hard to even remember what the world was like before September 11th, 2001. For me, the door to the world of international travel had just opened up and then it was suddenly slammed shut.

In 2000, I'd left a dot.com job when I saw the impending bubble getting ready to blowup. I didn't get any stock options but neither did my co-workers who stayed until the bitter end. I spent the better part of the year living in a \$100 VW van in the Pacific Northwest and then after hitting a triple double-diamond jackpot – twice on the same slot machine – I decided to get out of the United States and see the world. Before that, I'd only seen England, Scotland, Canada, Mexico, the Bahamas and the USA. When I returned well into the second half of 2001 – I could count Myanmar, China, Laos, Thailand, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Indonesia on my travel map too. I'd

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

spent months sleeping in Southeast Asian guesthouses, eating banana pancakes, and meeting dashing and romantic international backpackers who were free and loose with friendship and love.

The only reason I left all of that was because I was out of money. Completely out. I had to borrow the \$10 to pay the airport tax in Bangkok and a silver smuggler I met in the smoking lounge in Taiwan offered to give me \$20 if I carried a bag of silver into Canada for her. That \$20 got me back to my VW van and there I was in Portland, Oregon on the morning of September 11th. I was house sitting for a poet friend and sat down to watch the Price is Right but when I turned on the TV there was only this damn police drama – that turned out to be the Al Queda attacks on the USA.

America went berserk instituting it's own form of the Taliban with radical Republicanism and the Patriot Act. I sold my van and had enough to get to Hawaii and I'll never forget the fully armored and heavily armed military security patrolling through San Francisco International Airport as I caught my one way flight to Hawaii with \$100 to my name. I'm thankful the military martial law went away, but so did the rights of travelers from all over the world. The TSA and airline security have never gone away. I still have to partially disrobe every time I travel by airplane.

That free and easy travel of 2001 went away too. From that point on, everyone had to think of terrorism and terrorists and the Nick Bergs of the world (decapitated on video for the world to see) and bombings in Casablanca, Madrid, London, and Mumbai. The media never let up, they've never let us relax and the governments have responded just the way the USA responded – with fear, xenophobia, overwhelming security, and in some cases – harder visa laws. Many of those little guesthouses I stayed at in the Muslim part of Thailand and Malaysia went out of business and the ideas I'd had of traveling to Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran have still not come back though when I see people like Dave Stamboulis do it in Pakistan - the desire returns a bit.

I wonder if I would have been so freaked out upon my rather traumatic arrival in Morocco in a pre-911 world? Honestly, I don't even remember what I thought of Muslim, Islam, Arabs or anything related to 911 before 911. I could lie and say I do, but the coloring of my mind has been so complete and total that it would be a lie. Sure, I'm now married to an Arab, I have a large Muslim extended family, I live in a Muslim country, I even had to officially convert to Islam to marry my wife – we have an daughter who is half Arab and will presumably be Muslim (though we will see what she chooses for herself someday). And I've been gone from the USA for almost four years – seven years in Hawaii before that can almost not be counted as being in America...

Almost 11 years since I left mainland America – it was October 1, 2001 when I went to Hawaii. I've spent brief periods on the mainland – but honestly – I feel like a complete stranger as we

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

still struggle to get the visa for my wife and head back to the USA to see what it is like. We're not going to Hawaii straight away – we're going to try living on the mainland and I am nervous as hell about it. I'm not sure that me and my Muslim Arab wife are going to be able to fit in... going back to America might be the scariest journey of all.

Ranting About the Mohammad Movie

19 September 2012

Sefrou, Morocco

The world is filled with idiots and evil people. That's the only conclusion I can come up with after watching the events of the past week unfold. As an American who lives in the Arab world and is constantly surrounded by Islam, I have to say that I'm shocked. I didn't see this one coming – but I should have. My big mistake is underestimating the stupidity and hate that oozes from the pores of society.

Congratulations to the extremist idiots of the Ibarhimic religions and the hate mongers of America, Israel, and the Arab world. You are the winners of this event. The rest of us lose and have to deal with the consequences of your actions. Some, like diplomat, Chris Stevens who was killed when the embassy in Libya was attacked, the nine foreign civilians blown up on a bus in Kabul, the dozen or so US Marines who have died so far as a result of this film, and the Arab civilians who have been beaten, killed, tortured, or bombed but had nothing to do with any of this – those have paid the high price with their lives, their health, or their liberty. And why?

The truth is, none of that is still very clear. Let me recap what the media has so far revealed. Nakoula Basilley Nakoula, a coptic Christian from Egypt living in California claimed to raise 5 million dollars from Jewish businessmen to make a film about early Egyptian desert life with a bunch of actors who didn't seem to find it odd that early Egyptians would be called Hillary, Condoleeza, and George (the names in the script) and apparently, they were all completely ignorant of Islam as well because they didn't recognize that they were perverting scenes from the life of the prophet Mohammad – or more likely, they didn't care or thought it was funny. In post production, the names of the characters were changed to Mohammad, Khadija, Abu Bakr and other beloved names in Islam and inflammatory statements that were 100% certain to drive the fundamentalist Islamic devout into a frenzy were added in a sloppy dubbing that doesn't show up as sloppy with the Arabic dubbing that were added for Arab viewers – which leads me to believe that Arabic speakers were the intended audience.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

The film, or at least the inflammatory scenes were then uploaded to youtube and promoted to Arab extremists and Christian hate groups by the hate monger Florida preacher who became famous for having a Quran burning party (I'm sure that Jesus was and is very proud of his followers being so filled with hate) – amazingly, the clips were marketed in just such a way that they were sure to reach those who would protest them violently (after all, a cartoon depiction of the Prophet led to the murder of the artist and this film clip showed the prophet engaged in cunnilingus with the first believer) – just in case, radical Muslim clerics were sent the files and of course Al Quaida, which more and more looks like the tool of the Western War Machine, used it's diminished capacity to send dangerous fanatics to the US embassies where they attacked people who had nothing to do with film making of any kind and killed Stevens (a former Peace Corps volunteer who spoke Arabic and French and was perhaps the best friend the Libyan people had in terms of building a prosperous and modern society). What a fucking nightmare.

For American civilians like me who live in Islamic countries – this adds a big headache and makes life dangerous for us and our families. It makes travel less likely and it makes development of the Arab world less likely because it has instantly burned the bridges of reconciliation – and why?

Because a shady individual made a film with questionable funds and marketed it virally online in exactly the way it needed to be marketed to make the biggest stink. A professional propaganda machine couldn't have done it any better and this guy is a check fraud scam artist? Are we supposed to believe that he just did it because he hates Islam? The mysterious backers – they gave up their money just so they could push the buttons of Islamic fundamentalists?

In situations like these – it's always best to look at who benefits the most. I'm not pointing fingers, I'm just looking at who benefits.

1) Fundamentalist groups – The zionists can show how terrible and unreasonable the Muslims are. The jihadists can show how disrespectful and hate filled the infidels are. The christian hate mongers can show how unreasonable the Jews and the Muslims are. It's a tri-fecta whammy – hate groups unite for hating!

2) The defense industry – Just in case anyone forgot about 911 or the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan don't kick up – we've got new martyrs and unreasonable foes. There's a whole new war to be fought. Every missile or bullet fired has to be replaced with tax payer dollars. Every death is a victory for the arms merchants no matter which side it is on.

3) Israel and Netenyahu. Obama has been ignoring Israel and it's demands that something be done about Iran. Perhaps the one success of his presidency was putting Israel down a notch in terms of the demands it can make on US policy, arms, and troops. With the Arab world going crazy over 'American free speech' – suddenly you can expect that Israel will be an easy sell to

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

American voters over the Arab world.

Follow the money and it leads to defense contractors in Israel and the US. The hate groups are their unpaid laborers.

And who loses?

I do. You do (unless you are a hate monger, a Zionist, or a defense contractor). Arabs do. Americans do. Libyans do. Egyptians do. Arabs do. Muslims do. Jews do. Christians do.

We all lose. Travel is harder, life is more dangerous, compassion is harder to come by, life is more difficult.

I just want to point out. I live in the Arab world. I live in the Muslim world. I'm American. I was recently in Egypt. 'These people' don't hate 'us' – by and large, every Egyptian I met was happy to meet me, spoke kind words about the USA, and behaved kindly towards me. The same can be said of just about every Arab or Muslim I've ever met. I'm in a position to know this. The extremists like to paint out that 'they' hate 'us'. The only way they can possibly be right is if we choose to throw out their definitions of them and us. Who are they? Not Arabs, not Muslims, not Christians, not Jews, not the group they are pointing to. Those groups don't hate 'us'. I would propose that the next time you hear 'they' substitute 'extremists' and when you hear 'us' substitute 'reasonable human beings'. That statement is true.

Extremists hate reasonable human beings.

Or if you want to get more radical substitute arms dealers and peace.

Arms dealers hate peace.

Staycation in Morocco

26 SEP 2012
Sefrou, Morocco

Well, here I still sit. In Morocco, in my apartment. Not really going anywhere anytime too soon. It's my own version of a staycation or a self imposed exile. I'm not sure which. The bottom line is that I've got work to do and the immediate environs of Sefrou just really don't interest me

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

much anymore. Not that it ever really has. But here I am.

Sometimes I think I never should have gotten married. Not because of my wife, she's nice and sweet and pretty much is the perfect Muslim girl next door. And certainly not because of my daughter, the apple of my eye. The two of them make everything worthwhile for me – but the reason I think that I probably shouldn't have gotten married is this damn wanderlust. I just can't sit still and unfortunately, part of being married is providing a home and a bit of stability. I get that, I appreciate it, but it doesn't do my head or soul any good.

Luckily, I married a woman who understands that and so she periodically sets me free so I can go out and find myself again. Oddly enough, I get more work done when I'm on a sail boat, sitting in the airport, walking around some strange city, or sitting in a hotel room than I do when I'm in my apartment or here in Sefrou. I blame it on constant interruptions and having to stop what I'm doing to say salaam a leycum whenever I see someone I am acquainted with. It's why I don't go out to work in coffee shops here – people just don't understand burying your head in something and not having the focus to look up and have a small chit-chat session with your wife's neighbor's brother's best friend who you met once at a after-wedding disco in one of the olive press warehouses. And the truth is, even a small interruption means a lost train of thought, a missing punctuation mark, or a bad turn of phrase left in place. Even if you want to just sit with a book in a Moroccan coffee shop, you can be sure that someone will interrupt your willing suspension of disbelief to ask you what country you are from. They mean well, but they aren't readers here. Not like that. They read Quran- or maybe just listen to sura chants. I like those, actually.

I like travel because people generally leave strangers in peace. Jesus, I've become such a curmudgeon. So, the title of this column is a blatant lie. This isn't a staycation – it's sitting in my apartment and working 16 hour days to get what needs to be done, done. What needs to be done?

I've got to plan out my trip to the World Travel Market in London in November and Marseille at the end of October. I'm looking for interesting travel experiences and trying to arrange the right accommodation and flights. The work of Vagobond is actually never ending – whether it is revamping the social media profiles (did you see our new Facebook page?), editing guest posts, tweaking the theme, working with our writers, plotting out our 2013 editorial calendar, doing PR and promotion, or (rarely these days) actually writing content, sorting photos, and publishing our articles. Then there's the whole range of working with advertisers, finding sponsors – but let's not get into that.

Part of the reason I'm going to Marseilles is because we are going to be publishing a Marseille guide – ThingstodoinMarseille.org along with a whole slew of other things to do sites like ThingstodoinVienna.org and ThingstodoinBeijing.org - there are a network of 20 more sites that I

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

am working to get ready. Obviously, it's more than I can do alone – so I've been looking for the right assistant to help with the project. These, and another 38 sites are the core of Vagobond Travel Media, LLC which I set up earlier this year. I'm still trying to figure out how to be a great CEO and how to manage a multi-pronged media company. All of which is pretty fun when I get around to it.

Right now though, the big news is the new Vagobond Facebook page and the revamping of our social media strategies. Our old Facebook page is still connected to the site with the social media icons above – this is to give the nearly 5000 fans the chance to find our new page and not surprise anyone. That page began life as my personal writer page and now it returns to that – though I haven't been doing very much writing lately. If you're interested in my curmudgeonly ways – you'll find that at <http://www.facebook.com/vagodamitio>.

What else am I doing here? Well – I'm signing up for airline miles programs. All of them. There are more than a hundred and it's a big process but I figure it's time I started learning a bit about this 'travel hacking' that I've read so much about in the past two years. Free flights? I'm there. The big impediment is that I don't have any credit and as a result, I don't have any credit cards. Back in 1994 when I got out of the US Marines at 22 years old, I had ten credit cards. I ran through them buying video games and comic books and then had no choice but to go bankrupt and the lesson I learned was that credit cards are bad. I haven't had one since – but I may have to change that policy. They seem pretty essential to travel hacking.

So, I decided to repair my credit. I figured out a budget and began paying off my deferred student loans. And immediately was contacted by a collection agency for a student loan that hadn't apparently been deferred. \$3000 later, I've managed to pay off the fines and interest and consolidated all of the rest into one loan. I'm incredibly frightened that they will come back and tell me I have to pay a gazillion dollars a month when the paperwork all clears. It's funny how that guy swooped down on me like a hawk the minute I decided to do the right thing. Just goes to prove, no good deed goes unpunished.

And that reminds me of trolls – but that's another story. One you could probably ask my wife about after I've been home for several weeks without being a stranger in any strange lands for a while – I turn into Shrek on these staycations – but maybe I should call it a work-sentence instead.

The Moroccan Atlantic

03 October 2012

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Asilah, Morocco

Man, oh, man. We needed this. I don't know if it was reading about Anthony Mathenia's weekly column or reading my own imminent state of meltdown but last Thursday I got on AirBnB and rented a little seaside apartment here in Asilah, Morocco. Part of it was probably seeing that picture of myself from last week.

My wife hasn't been doing anything professionally since our daughter was born. Aside from visits to her friends or the doctor when she has a bout of mystery intestinal pain – she hasn't had any appointments, so imagine my surprise when I broke the good news to her that we were heading on vacation and her reaction was 'Oh, no.'

She'd put together a little English class she was going to start teaching in our apartment which began the day I'd rented a seaside vacation rental. After a bit of panic, she realized she could call the students and postpone until we returned. I gave her the option of staying while I went on vacation, but after two seconds thought she realized that she didn't want me to have all the fun. With all of that arranged, we got our bags ready for our departure the next day. In the morning, she came out of the bathroom with a grim expression "Guess what time of the month it is?" I didn't need to guess. Her menses seems to be uniquely timed for family travel.

Our daughter, on the other hand gooped and gawped and did a little dance. Not because she was excited but because that is what she does all the time. She's fourteen months old. We get excited when she points at something.

My wife got angry with me when I told her that she needed to pick up the pace a bit because the train wouldn't wait for us. Even though we've missed trains and planes in the past because she dawdles and won't tolerate my rushing her, she still feels that I don't have any right to say 'hurry up'. Despite dawdling, menses, and postponed English classes, we were excited to be heading to a family beach holiday and packed up some beach toys, bathing suits, and everything else we would need for a four day sun holiday. Then we stepped outside into the rain...

A big storm was covering all of North Africa and on the taxi ride to Fes it poured down on us. The grey skies mocked my swim trunks and all the baby's beach toys. As we pulled into the train station, I saw that a train was departing. "There goes our train.." I said.

"Stop teasing me," my wife said. "Look, we're right on time." Yeah, the train doesn't wait. Luckily the agent gave us tickets on the next train and we had a three hour wait in the train station restaurant which is actually a nice little place. I got to enjoy Eggs Benedict minus the hollandaise and we were dry and comfortable.

It rained all the way to Asilah. The little apartment was great and at \$60 a night, I found it to be a

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

great value but after talking with the neighbors, my wife let me know that I had paid far too much. Still, she was happy enough to stay inside watching TV the first 24 hours we were there while I was happy to be outside tromping around in the rain, smelling the sea air, and enjoying being at the coast. I'm from the Pacific Northwest and Hawaii, after all – so the combination of rain and ocean is familiar to me. I'm definitely not made of sugar so there isn't any worry of me melting.

I finally coaxed her out for a seafood dinner. "Hey, it's actually not that cold" she said. The dinner was great – a big mixed plate of shrimp, sole, and a bunch of other fish plus a salad and fresh orange juice. On the way home we wandered by a wedding and spent some time hanging out with the dope smelling Gnawa musicians before the bride was brought out loaded into a bier and then loaded on a horse and carried away to the groom's house.

The next day she was outside about half time and we managed to explore the old medina of Asilah a bit. Dinner was delicious hamburger and omelet sandwiches (kifta wa tortilla) and a nice wander around in the early evening. The rain was disappearing.

I should point out that during all this time, I was really enjoying myself. Just being away from Sefrou does wonders for me, plus, the rain meant that I could wander around to my heart's content and enjoy doing things on my own time without having to stop and look at scarves for a half hour.

Our next day was mostly sunny and we had a great lunch at Asilah's famous Spanish Restaurant where I bought a small painting from a street vendor. It's a watercolor on a couscous bag of musicians in Asilah. I don't always buy souvenirs, but sometimes it's nice to have a reminder of a trip. One, small, meaningful reminder. This was mine.

Hanane was starting to have fun and we played at the beach. I actually was able to do a little body surfing in the storm swell and the water wasn't as cold as I had thought it would be. The only downside was the creepy Moroccan dudes that lurked nearby. My impression was that they were either waiting for us to leave something valuable unattended or they were there to bikini watch. Either way, it's a big beach and there was no reason for them to be so near us aside from creepy ones. If all the creeps would just go away the world would be so nice.

Our last day was sunny and beautiful. I'd heard about a 'secret' beach that could only be reached with some real effort. My plan was to hire a horse and carriage and get them to take us the ten kilometers to it – I'm a western guy and to me, anything involving a horse is more romantic, memorable, and just cool. My wife though, she's Moroccan, horses are so old fashioned and bildy (country), plus the lady at the fruit stand told her that the horses would be more expensive and take longer and we could just hire a motorcycle truck instead...

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

One thing I've learned in Morocco, my opinion counts for nothing next to that of a neighbor, a fruit vendor, or strangers watching from the street – so we took a motorcycle truck and saved 30 dirham (\$3). We bounced and jiggled going out the sand country roads so much that I was afraid our daughters head was going to bounce off, but we arrived intact and the beach was magnificent. Our timing couldn't have been better in that all the Moroccan holiday makers are gone and there was just a lone cafe set up with some homemade beach chairs and umbrellas. 40 diram rented us a spot and there was no one on the beach but us and an English couple who had come out by horse drawn wagon plus their wagon driver and a sun bleached little blond Moroccan surf kid.

The day was beautiful, the water was perfect. The beach toys got played with. Me and the Moroccan surf rat body surfed and swam. The baby got to learn some of the joys of the beach. My wife got to tan, cavort in the water, and much to her joy found a big puddle of green mud which she rubbed all over her face and body. All the Moroccans we saw walking down the beach did the same. It's a mud that is good for the skin.

When I came from the water after my final surf, the baby had puked all over my sarong but she was smiling and enjoying the sand. The bumpy ride back to Asilah town followed by another platter of fish and more fresh orange juice and we all slept like we'd had a wonderful family day at the beach. Because we had.

Now though, it's time to pack up and head back to Sefrou, but hopefully that painting on the couscous bag will keep me in sunny spirits as I get back to work. But who knows? Maybe we'll miss the train...

Morocco in Black and White

10 October 2012

Sefrou, Morocco – Again

I never intended to live in a garbage strewn Moroccan town.

What the hell am I doing here?

In fact, I never intended to live anywhere that I couldn't jump into the water in the morning for a swim or lay down in the grass somewhere and read a book underneath a tree. And yet, every day I'm here, I ask myself what am I doing here?

The answer is right in front of me. It's my wife. This is her town. I'm here because her family is

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

here and because my country and the rest of the world make it so freaking difficult for her to go anywhere else. I don't want to be here. I don't want my daughter to be here. I don't want my daughter to grow up in a garbage strewn town with no grass fields and no clean rivers and no beach and where women are treated as second class citizens who are considered to be prostitutes if they are out alone after dark. Prostitutes or fair game.

I'm trying to orchestrate a visa so we can go somewhere we can swim and lay in the grass under trees, but I'm in a place with an unreliable post office and the bureaucracy here is baffling to my wife. The bureaucracy to get her a visa for my country is baffling me.

I find myself losing my shit here. As Moroccan towns go, it's okay. As a place for me to live, I'd prefer just about anywhere else.

Losing one's shit. It can be taken so many ways. I remember when I was a little hippie kid and for some reason my parents thought it was okay for me to watch Cheech and Chong's *Up in Smoke* - which, come to think of it, was one of their better parenting decisions. I'll never forget Tommy Chong telling Cheech that they were smoking some good shit – Doberman. But, I don't smoke dope any more and I don't have a dog so I've neither lost my weed nor my weed laced dog shit.

The shit I'm losing is mental. I'm trapped in a cage that I can't figure out a way to escape from. If I could chew off my arm I'd do it but I'm not willing to steal my daughter from her mother or to leave her behind where she can't become who she wants to be. I'm not willing to leave my wife behind either though I find myself blaming my wife for my being stuck here. I'm pretty sure that's not fair. And besides, I love my wife – I want her to have a better future too. It's not her fault that the world makes it hard for Moroccan's to emigrate or that Moroccans make it hard to get the papers she needs.

All this paperwork. I didn't go to college until I was in my mid-30's because I hated the idea of all the paperwork. Since I made the plan to marry a Moroccan, I've been buried in paperwork, stamps, and translations. Forms and duplicates. It's turned my brain to mush. Add to that setting up a business in the US while still in Morocco, running a business online, and then dealing with those student loans and the repayment of them. I'm buried in black and white paper and the streets outside are littered with colorful plastic wrappers and broken Chinese plastic junk.

If it weren't for those papers – life wouldn't be half bad. I think it might well have been paperwork that made me into an anarchist in the first place. Filling out forms, stamping papers, duplicate, triplicate. My desk is littered and the printer I bought here in Morocco sits idly in the corner because no one seems to sell the printer cartridges for it.

And yet, here it is. Paperwork and being trapped in a garbage dump is twisting me into

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

nightmares. But – it could be worse. I think. I have to tell myself that until later.

At least the people here are nice. I think. Whenever I go outside and see them, they seem to be. Man, I can't wait to leave again. I wish I could leave and never come back.

My advice to all those out there looking to find wonder. Find someone you don't have to marry to prove your love and who already lives where you both want to be. It makes things a hell of a lot easier.

Considering Egyptian Souvenirs

17 October 2012

Sefrou, Morocco – Again

Considering Souvenirs on My Recent Trip to Egypt

(I wrote a number of columns while I was in Egypt, since I'm incredibly tired of writing about Sefrou, I'm going to share them when I find myself stuck in Sefrou.)

I suppose my mistake was easy enough – with tourism down, the cost of hotels and tourist activities are lower than ever in Egypt. I made the assumption that this would also include tourist items and that the domestic economy would be such that buying some luxury items would also be cheaper. I think it was a fair assumption and it might even be true in some areas, but certainly it wasn't true anywhere I went in Cairo.

I quickly determined that buying any sort of souvenirs near the pyramids was a huge mistake as the prices began at around \$20 and I was pretty sure these were \$1 items. My next stop was a small mall near Tahirir Square where I found a gold merchant who told me that gold was at a premium in Egypt because no one was certain about the currency. There went that idea, but I figured I might try at the airport and maybe I could actually find something unique in the airport shops or the duty free.

Yeah, right – at the airport, a stuffed camel doll made in China was \$20 with no room for negotiation. That was my other quest – something special for my daughter – a baby. I couldn't bring myself to pay \$20 for a toy that would be \$3 in the USA, \$5 in Turkey, \$7 in Morocco, or less than \$1 in China. As to the gold in the airport – a small pair of scarab earrings that might have weighed just a gram each were \$276. With gold at \$50 a gram or thereabouts – I couldn't do it. Especially when he told me that they sold by the piece, offered no guarantee, and would not provide me with a weight or certification. I'd been to a few of the souvenir shops around

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Tahrir Square and found that the prices were approximately 300-1000% of the price they should be. In addition, the gift shops at the Egyptian Museum, gift shops at the Pyramids, and elsewhere were poorly stocked or still completely empty after having been looted during the Arab Spring. As my driver told me "It wasn't a revolution, it was a military coup."

Cheap 'papyrus' scrolls and Chinese made junk souvenirs with ancient Egyptian themes seemed to be the things that were in abundance. None of which I was looking for. I visited a hijab shop, thinking that perhaps I could get my wife a fancy Egyptian hijab, but fashion, especially Islamic is so foreign to me that I couldn't really find my way to purchase a hijab, besides which, I don't really want to encourage her to wear a hijab anyway.

Toy stores and kids stuff – I didn't find anything. I thought about getting them fancy Egyptian djellabas but the truth is, to me, they looked just like Moroccan Djellabas. My wife doesn't like perfumes – so that was out. Moroccans don't really seem to appreciate the decorative arts, so I skipped that. I thought I might buy a kilo of fancy Egyptian dates – but the dates were all fresh. I bought a bag and put them in my checked bag hoping customs wouldn't take them from me (and much to my surprise, they didn't.)

In Tahrir Square you can buy the flags of many countries, including the Confederate States of America. Still, I needed something besides that. Egyptian glass seems beautiful and delicate so I bought four delicate little glass bottles for my wife and a brass scarab for me. I actually would have loved to find a fancy reproduction of King Tut's tomb knife for me but never saw anything like that. For my wife, I was looking for a necklace my grandmother used to wear – a gold disk with a bust of Nefertitti on it on a delicate gold chain. No luck.

Finally, I arrived at the airport with just the glass and the scarab. I still needed something so I purchased some expensive food products at duty free. \$35 for some fancy dates, some sesame crackers, and some jasmine honey. More than I would pay for them in the USA, I'm fairly certain – but you can't go home without presents and souvenirs of some kind. I'm still hopeful they might sell something decent on the plane...

A Sahara Desert Artistic Retreat

25 October 2012

Moroccan Sahara nearabouts Rissani

Sometimes you just have to get away and sometimes it's the hardest thing to do in the world. As you may have noticed in my last few columns, I've been not so quietly losing my mind in Sefrou. The problem isn't so much Sefrou as me and what it takes for me to be happy. Solitude,

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

some artistic friends, and a bit of time to think – hard to find in a one restaurant town that doesn't even have an art gallery or museum. Hard to find when you're pounding the keyboards fifteen hours a day and taking care of a 15-month old baby, hard to find when you're packed like a sardine in a concrete block apartment can neighborhood....shit...

So, you can imagine how happy I was to receive an invitation from my friend Karen Hadfield to come join a group of writers, artists, and creative types at her beautiful artshouse retreat in the tiny Sahara Berber oasis-village of Tissardmine. Karen and her business partner Youssef have built a serene artists environment where I was able to join with friends both new and old for a weekend of creativity, thoughtful reflection, light adventures, and cultural immersion into the world of the Sahara.

A grand-taxi picked up myself and my fellow artistic Sefroui expat friend Jess Stevens for the long drive through the Atlas Mountains and into the isolated splendor of the Sahara desert near the Algerian border. The giant mass of Erg Chabbi in the near distance looming like a giant red wave of sand ready to swallow us and any cares we may have brought with us. The journey itself was worthy of far more description than I am providing here and as the landscape changed so did the clothing and people we passed on the road with the skin growing darker and the clothes growing brighter until finally in the town of al-Rissani, we were surrounded by brightly clad 'blue' men come fresh from the solitude of the desert and women fully covered in black challahs adorned with rainbows of iridescent thread embroidered in strategic patterns. Invisible, they were not and the allure and beauty of green eyes looking out from behind the veil must be felt to be known.

Through the desert with the mass of Erg Chabbi growing as we hurdled towards the vanishing point and finally at a seemingly random spot on the road the taxi pulled over to make a kidnap victims exchange and after hugs and hellos, we climbed into Karen's land rover and bounced and boggled across roads that only Youssef was able to recognize as such until finally we arrived at Cafe Tissardmine to meet with our friends and co-retreaters.

Our gathering took place initially in the warm comfort of Cafe Tissardmine's grand salon amidst a comfortable blend of nomad and Australian aboriginal artwork. The two cultures blend together seamlessly and one can intuitively understand why the partnership between Karen the Aussie and Youssef the Berber works so well. The cultures are coming from the same place. Karen told us that upon first seeing the aboriginal artwork, the Berbers in Tissardmine immediately understood the art and 'got it' with no explanation necessary.

Karen showed us to our Berber tents and much to my surprise and delight, I found them to be outfitted with modern comfort and luxury in mind. These tents have western toilets, clean sheets, and fluffy white towels while still having the feel and trappings of the Saharaoui tribes who made them. On the night of our arrival we were treated to thunder, bright flashes of

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

lightning, and a deluge of water to feed the desert's thirst. In the morning, a wide river had appeared next to Tissardmine and with the sun shining through scattered clouds – the day was perfect for an excursion to the top of the world.

Riding on top of the range rover through a lake and river studded sand land we were faced with Rorschach images of clouds and dunes – a meeting of sand and water that was unexpected and magnificent. We trudged upwards through the loose grains looking to a lone Berber on top who watched us struggle past camel bones and false ridges until finally we reached the tops and found the Berber's footsteps disappearing further into the desert with no sign of him beyond those and the memory of his having been there.

Days spent like this while we crafted mandalas, shared ideas, and slept in the afternoon heat in order to find the energy for evenings around the fire and communal dinners of Berber fare in various nooks and crannies of Cafe Tissardmine. Jess counted 17 shooting stars in an hour after the rest of us had gone to our tents and while I was there I found dozens of fossils lying on the sand where the wind had exposed them after millions of years. On the morning of our departure, the river had dried to a trickle. The donkeys in the night huffed their goodbyes and a final tearful session of dream writing before once again meeting the taxi-man Hassan at the hostage exchange point and hurtling from the desert back into the blank anonymity of the Middle Atlas Mountains.

To arrange a stay or find more information about the retreats at Cafe Tissardmine you can visit www.cafetissardmine.com or email Karen directly at karen@cafetissardmine

Halloween in Marseille

31 October 2012
Marseille, France

The locals here all laugh at me when I tell them that I love Marseille. They're rightfully dumbfounded since during almost the entire week I've been here, the weather has been terrible. The famous Mistral winds have been tearing things apart at 130 km per hour, a day of bucket dump rain soaked me on my second day here, and on top of that, I got a nasty case of food poisoning when I made the terrible decision to eat some fast Chinese food at a place populated almost exclusively by homeless people seeking shelter from the rain. And yet – I actually am loving Marseille. This wonderful South French city that gets 300 days of sunshine but has graced me with some awful weather.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Marseille has a terrible reputation as a city with nothing much to do, a huge reputation for a legacy of crime, and streets that are filled with dog-shit. It is one of the most ethnically diverse cities in France and also has some of the highest unemployment with rates reaching 30% in some neighborhoods. When I ask the locals I meet what I should do while I'm here, invariably they recommend that I take the little fake golf-cart tourist train. That, in fact, might be the worst thing about Marseille and even though I am most certainly a tourist – I just can't bring myself to get on one of those trains. At worst, I will sometimes ride a double decker City Tour bus if I am in a strange city for a very short amount of time...but a fake choo-choo...yeah, I just can't. I refuse.

So, what am I doing in Marseille? Walking. Eating. Riding the bus. Exploring back streets people tell me not to go down. Drinking the occasional glass of wine from a 2 Euro bottle of red. Marseille has its own 2 Buck Chuck, though I suppose it should be Deux Euro Charles. Of course, after living in the cultural wasteland of Sefrou for these several years – I'm made extremely happy by little things.

"Hey, it's a self service laudramat!" "Oh my God, look at that graffiti!" "Wow, a wine shop – right out in the open" "A Chinese restaurant with chinese looking people working in it – holy shit" "Wow, look at that – a walk in grocery store with wheeled carts!" "Huh, they actually sell Imodium in this pharmacy!" – So, I'm an easy customer to please.

Still, I do have a discerning palate and a taste for the delicious and Marseille has been fulfilling my needs on that front with no problems at all. My first couple of nights I stayed at the delightfully quirky Mama Shelter- Marseille and quickly made friends with the general manager Cyril and the head DJ – Bobzilla. My first Marseille meal was perhaps my favorite meal in 2013. I've always been a big red meat eater and I always have enjoyed sushi and sashimi but I've always been a little bit afraid of Steak Tartar which is really just beef sushi. Bobzilla convinced me to try the Steak Tartare at Mama Shelter and it rocked my world.

The next day Cyril recommended that I visit a delightful little Italian restaurant run by Denis, (Pierre- Antoine) a self trained Armenian immigrant who blew my mind with his homemade orange and lemon ravioli. Even at lunch, it was almost impossible to find a table and if you don't have a reservation for dinner – forget about it. La Contonetta is worth a visit to Marseille all by itself and if you can catch him in a spare moment Pierre-Antoine Denis will regale you with stories of how the neighborhood has changed since he and his wife opened the restaurant. (Located at 24 Cours de Julien tel. 04 91 48 10 48 for reservation.)

Part of the reason my stay has been so nice has been that after Mama Shelter, I moved into the very comfortable apartments of HiPark Marseille. With studios costing as little as 69 Euro per night, this is an ideal accommodation for families or for slightly ill writers with lots of work to do.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Four days of having a home in Marseille means that I have been able to cook, work, and sometimes step outside into poor weather and say “Ah, it’s too cold, maybe I should get some work done.” While I miss my wife and daughter who are back in Morocco, this time has been a godsend for me since I’ve been able to catch up on some projects, prepare for next week’s World Travel Market in London, and get ready to write my next novel for NanoWriMo 2012. The title is “The Keys to the Riad” – here is the short synopsis: The discovery of a ring of ancient keys leads a career focused woman on a journey through the exotic world of mystics and fortune tellers.

For those who don’t know - NaNoWriMo is National Novel Writing Month in November. You simply commit to writing a set number of words each day and at the end of the month...your novel is written. For me, it’s a great exercise and keeps me a writer when business threatens to make me into something else. This year will be challenging because November is shaping up to be a very busy month. Here are a few more pics and thoughts from my time in Marseille.

Happy Halloween! Now I’m going to head back to Mama Shelter and see what the Marseillese do for Halloween! Tomorrow I’m off to London.

Just for the record, I did accept discounted rates and free food at the hotels mentioned above but with no conditions about writing for them – I like to think I got the discounts just because I’m a nice guy. As always, I stand by my reviews and recommendations and will never recommend something unless it’s worth recommending.

Rediscovering England

07 November 2012
London, England

My last time in England was so different than this time, that it feels like I was another person in a different country. I can’t even understand how much everything has changed and the fact that I’ve pretty much been living in a small Moroccan town where donkey’s are considered effective transportation for farm goods and hot water is considered a luxury means that in the past five years, the modern world’s many changes have really slipped by me until now.

Don’t get me wrong – we have smart phones and DSL in Morocco and I’ve been traveling enough to see things are changing but this is the first time I’ve been in a major, English speaking city for nearly five years and let me tell you – I feel like Rip Van Winkle (who, by the way, was not one of the twins who tried to found Facebook).

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Suddenly, I've emerged into a world of electronic billboards and smart phone video editing where you can book a 'Megabus' ticket online using your cell and make your purchases using a chip in the same phone. Maybe I should tell you about the last time I was here. Just to give you an idea of how long ago – there were no cheap digital cameras and I had film. I could only afford three rolls while I was here and I have no idea what happened to the rest of my pics. Long gone in some used bookstore.

The year was 1998. Everyone was starting to talk about how the internet was going to change the world but as a morning radio show producer, the most I'd seen was that we could get the best jokes from across the country for our morning show before anyone else had heard them. The radio station sometimes let me use the station cell phones which were the size of my wife's shoes.

I'd taken a break from radio and gone to Alaska where I got a job working on a film by one of my favorite directors, John Sayles. It was a great opportunity but as the midnight sun shone down on the land of raging alcoholism, I made the mistake of telling everyone what I really thought of them. I finished up the film with a wad of cash in my pocket but no offer to be on the next one. I went back home to Bellingham, Washington and found that my Grandmother had died. She was Scottish and so I decided to take a trip to England and Scotland – even though it was October.

Arriving in England, I met up with my friend Danny from the film (okay, actually he was the guy who started screwing the girl I was into and yet somehow we became friends anyway when he started screwing a girl someone else was into). Danny was a raging alcoholic too but had the benefit of coming from money so could support his drinking. Me? I was broke after about four days of London binge drinking and so I hitched out of London.

Along the road, an Irish Gypsy picked me up and offered me 20 GBP a day for busting up pavement driveways that he and his crew would then offer to replace for the English Middle Class. After four days of living in the Caravan Gypsy Camp, I made my escape and jumped trains up into Scotland where I proceeded to tie my Grandmother's scarves around the necks of marble busts of famous Scots or the beautiful alabaster necks of Scottish lasses.

Back to London, drunk, nearly suicidal and completely broke and I called Danny whose mom happened to be a casting director and offered me a job as her assistant since I was an aspiring script writer and had worked with Dan in Alaska. This was where it got fun since at this point, Dan and I were running around doing what high rolling film people do in London – getting wasted on high powered stuff and having a blast with beautiful women and famous dudes.

So much of this is just a blur that it's not fair to tell any of the stories, but suffice to say, you've heard of these people and you know what they look like and I can tell you, they know how to

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

party. Unfortunately, I was always a bit of a terrible partier and the booze started to make me suicidal so between long walks around London, spending time in the museums, and doing my job – I began to get incredibly depressed. One morning I listened to two English guys who had just gotten wife-shoe size mobiles and were texting each other on a double-decker bus while comparing the sizes of their Thai bought gold chains (Yeah, if you've read Douchebags, Fags, and Hags – those guys were the genesis of Bob and Bing).

Eventually, and believe me, I've kicked myself for it again and again – I left what probably could have been a very nice career and instead went back to Washington where I founded a magazine that failed after a year and ended up working for a dot-com.

When I was here in London last – there were still the old double decker buses, the London Eye didn't exist, cell phones were just starting to become mainstream, the internet was pretty well misunderstood, there was no Facebook, no Google, no WordPress, no Twitter, and no bloggers. London was the first place I came outside of North America and it was exotic and wonderful.

Today, it is still exotic and wonderful but that may be because I live in a place where I never smell bacon and can't walk into a pub and drink a pint of beer without worrying what my breath will smell like later as I am jammed into a grand taxi with six other people.

My impressions of London, thus far are that it is the world's largest and most impressive amusement park. The London Eye, the boat tours, the free museums, the exhibitions, the food, the restaurants, the gift shops, the wax museums, the Queen, the other English characters – it's all really quite wonderful. It's also expensive, but I'm happy to report that I'm not checking payphones for spare change as I was the last time I was here – which is very good because there are far less payphones and probably much less spare change in them.

As to my friend Dan – well, I can't say I blame him for not getting back in touch with me. I dropped by his office and left one of my cards but he wasn't in. I can imagine his thought is something along the lines of "Oh, shit, not that guy! I don't want to be reminded of those days!" Although, I'm not sure he would have remembered me 15 days later, let alone 15 years.

Flying the Hajji Skies – From Cairo to Morocco

14 November 2012
Sefrou, Morocco

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

I'm just back home from the World Travel Market in London. The WTM itself was like taking a trip around the world and I'll be writing about it next week – but at the moment, I'm honestly still gathering my thoughts and materials. It's been a wild few weeks in Marseilles, France, London, England, Bristol, England, Aix-en-Provence, France and now back to Sefrou. Day before yesterday, as I flew on a RyanAir flight from Marseille to Fez, I was once again in a plane full of Moroccans coming from abroad.

For some reason there is almost nothing more stressful and there are always arguments with customs agents, some woman crying because she can't bring her purchases or her bag weighs too much, and the crush of Moroccans forced in a queue when the Moroccan mentality simply doesn't understand the nature of a queue and so it becomes a massive squeeze, usually with me in the middle. In any event, I'm home now and reminded of another recent flight on a plane filled with Moroccans...

Fly the Hajji Skies

As usually happens when I catch any flight to Morocco, and I can only assume as happens whenever you mix Moroccans and airplanes – chaos ensued. Add to that, the fact that most of the passengers were pilgrims returning from the Hajj (the sacred trip to Mecca that all Muslims are to conduct – if possible- at least one time in their lives) and hilarity quickly becomes a part of the equation.

The hilarity is a result of the fact that most of these pilgrims are old, taking the one trip of their lifetime, and all very proud and happy that they have fulfilled their life's mission. The waiting room at the airport rang with the calls of Ya Hajj and Ya Hajja (loosely translated as "Hey honored person who has completed your sacred duty (both male and female)). Once you have completed the Hajj, you are called Hajj or Hajja. It is a great honor and you can see it as these old Moroccans call each other Hajj, yell out the name to call their friends and loved ones, and every other oldster who is now a Hajj or Hajja turns to look.

Still, these are Moroccans and so regardless of respect, Hajj or not, when it comes time to form a queue and move forward, they press into a tight wedge shape and everyone begins shoving. I stood back out of respect for their age and their new status, but the other Moroccans I saw let the dynamic of the line push them forward.

The Moroccan line is a living and pulsing thing of awfulness and if I didn't need to sometimes get somewhere, I would refuse to take part. But, I need to get in the wedges to get a taxi, to buy food, to get government work done, and more. So, I am forced to be a wedgii as well. I managed to hold back until the second shuttle bus and then I was among the last to get on the plane, but this was a mistake because my seat was all the way in the rear.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Most Moroccans don't know much about assigned seating or the protocols that go with bag stowage, first class, economy class, or anything else that is fairly standard knowledge in the orderly western travel world. So, there was complete and total chaos as all the Hajj and Hajja tried to stow their pilgrim baggage anywhere they could, got told to go to their assigned seats, and made a muck of things.

The young Lebanese guy in the seat next to me laughed himself silly. So did I. The poor flight crew came out of the cockpit and tried to order things, but it was next to impossible until the Captain of the aircraft— came out and started yelling and screaming about things. I'm glad it's not just me that loses his patience with this stuff.

Finally they had all been seated and stowed their bags and then the constant trips to the bathroom began. The flight was, after all, delayed and these are old people with most likely weak bladders and swollen prostates. I decided to wait until the tide ebbed – but it was a near constant stream (haha).

Finally I took my turn and was very glad I didn't have to make #2 because I forgot that Moroccans, especially the old and the untraveled, don't do well with no bucket to wash with.

The western toilet is a strange phenomenon to these folks and they soon had the spotless EgyptAir toilet looking like a toilet on a Moroccan train. The sink was filled with water of almost certain washing the bum provenience, water was all over the floor, the seat, and everywhere. Later I began to see old folks trekking into the bathroom with empty water bottles to use to wash. This is life – and it's actually pretty funny from a outsider perspective – at least until you have to take a dump.

They were sweet, nice people. The girl next to me had sweet, dreamy eyes behind a flowered scarf that covered all but her eyes. She was traveling with her husband and the henna on her hands plus their youth made me think they were perhaps on their honeymoon. I'm fairly certain her husband was not Moroccan, but she was for sure. In any event, I tried not to look at her out of respect for her veil and her husband, but it was a bit hard because those eyes kept looking at me over the veil.

Elsewhere on the plane, the flight crew was struggling to deal with the demands of the Hajj and Hajja but failing pretty badly. There was one European woman who ended up carrying her and her husband's meal trays back for them. I can imagine that for anyone unfamiliar with the chaos of Moroccan travel, it must be completely insane and probably unbearable. Actually, even if you are familiar with it, it's insane and unbearable.

Many of the old people smelled like slightly stale pee. I suppose that's normal for just about any old people. Of course, there was more chaos to come when we arrived in Morocco but the

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Lebanese man next to me and I took desperate action. Upon the plane touching down, we both unbuckled our seat belts, grabbed our bags and rushed to the front of the plane. Our signal was when the first of the Hajjas began to do the same, even though the plane was still moving rapidly and had touched down just seconds before.

The flight attendants yelled at us but I swear their eyes were sympathetic and they smiled and wished us a pleasant journey as we got off the plane. We did manage to beat the hajjis to the customs and immigration but there was one last surprise as I got my bag. One of the customs of the Hajj is to bring back 5-gallon buckets of 'Zamzam' water which is the holy water from the well where God saved Hagar and Ishmael (the wife and son of the Prophet Ibrahim) in the desert.

One of the jugs had apparently leaked and so my bag was soaked with holy water. I felt like I'd been given a blessing. It was nice to be home. And so it is now.

Revisiting the World Travel Market in London

21 November 2012

Writing about London, from Sefrou

Hard to believe the world is going to end in just a month – or not. One thing for certain though, the world is a big, wide, wonderful place. If you don't believe me on that, all you have to do is take a visit to the World Travel Market in London or one of the other massive global travel shows that take place in various cities around the world.

My main purpose in visiting the WTM was to research new destinations to write about, find interesting destinations, and to connect with the businesses and tourist boards for those regions so that when we do have writers visit, we can get the best possible information and resources to share with you, our readers. My secondary purpose was to travel the entire world by going to one destination.

I'm happy to report that both goals were met. I was fortunate to visit Trinidad and Tobago – home of the lovely ladies you see here and a fascinating mix of Caribbean, Indian, British, and African cultures. I jumped to Bermuda, Guyana, Costa Rica, and Mexico before discovering the Maya and Inca trails of Guatemala, Honduras, and Central America. In Brazil I was able to drink great coffee and stiff rum and down the road in California, I indulged in some great wines before heading to Vegas to see show girls and Elvis and finally on to Florida for some Disney and Cuban culture.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Tripping around to Asia, I marveled in the beauty of Sri Lanka and felt the spiritual buzz of India's many regions. I stopped by Japan and then enjoyed some traditional treats in Taipei City before heading on over to the smiling bartender of the Philippines.

I trekked through Nepal, and of course, I had to visit the magnificent islands of the Maldives and the Seychelles before I wandered into the storybook land of the human happiness index – Bhutan.

In Africa I journeyed through the Serengeti witnessed the great migration in Kenya, Tanzania. The spices of Zanzibar, the mystique of Mozambique, and the party life and wild life of sensational South Africa. Old friends were there and I enjoyed visiting Egypt and Morocco with Henna and Pyramids before moving on to the exotic Middle East. Ultra modern Dubai, Iraq, making it's way back – after all, the cradle of the world. Jordan, Lebanon, Qatar, and the UAE – Syria...not there, but my old friend Turkey filling one of the biggest areas of the entire show. Turkey – so magnificent, so big. Everyone is going to go to Turkey.

Australia, New Zealand, and the sparse regions of the Pacific islands – not very settled. Not very present at the show...too far away I think, but the Aussies were serving plenty of cold beer and at times, the entire show felt like Burning Man. Different camps and different parties. Fantastic.

Don't think that I've forgotten about Europe. I spent time exploring the churches, wines, and culture of Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan before jumping into Siberian adventures and back into Russia where I was taught to weave and shown the wonders of a land that might be the most exotic of them all in my mind. Then it was onward, Westward...to Poland, Spain, France, Germany, the Czech Republic, and don't forget beautiful, quirky, lovely little Belgium.

From there, North, North to Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and the ice fields, volcanoes, and little people (elves) of Iceland. The cold Atlantic sister island to my beloved Hawaii. Yes, I must go to Iceland...I must feel this place. I must go.

And, the added benefit of leaving each day to be in magnificent London, the world's best theme park and to have each end of my trip buffered by visits to Marseille and Aix-en-Provence in France. My life really is magnificent. I admit it. I'll be telling you about some of the amazing places I stayed and saw soon.

There were fantastic talks, seminars, and booths and exhibitors who focused on the cutting edge of where travel is headed in the coming years. The Social Travel Market was gangbusters and told me one thing in particular – those that don't adapt, are certain to die in the age of mobile and social travel. Don't expect to see many travel blogs in the coming years – a few will

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

survive and most will become relics that die as the owners decide to skip paying the \$14 domain registration fees each year. If you want to see some of what I'm talking about, you can watch most of the sessions on the WTM YouTube channel. In a word, I just have to say, the WTM was magnificent. the chance to meet people from all over the world. The opportunity to meet friends and colleagues – new, old, and future. It was a wonderful opportunity. There were plenty of parties (like this one, photo and drinks courtesy of Hostel Bookers) where we all got to relax and enjoy life.

But all of this leads me to the inevitable conclusion. What did I learn at the World Travel Market in London? Is there a hot list for destinations for Vagobond or that we recommend to our readers in 2013. There is indeed. Here is what we want to see and do in 2013.

Here it is – our hot-list Top 10 for 2013!

- 1) Tanzania and Zambia Photo Safaris
- 2) Trinidad and Tobago Cultural Holidays
- 3) Iceland Walking Tours
- 4) Honduras Eco Tours
- 5) Sri Lanka for pretty much everything
- 6) Hyderabad and Anwar Pradesh in India
- 7) 7000 Islands of fun in the Philippines – all of them
- 8) Siberian Tribal Adventures
- 9) The Maldives – Luxury Travel
- 10) Armenia – exploring the food and culture of the first Christian land

There was so much more to share...but hopefully, I can share it all in person over time.

The Egyptian Pyramids on Horseback

28 November 2012

Sefrou, Morocco

The truth is, I'm currently back in Sefrou where I just finished writing the first draft of a novel called The Keys of the Riad. I've been writing, playing with my 15 month old daughter, editing, and putting together a newsletter where I share my writing (please sign up here – It's free). The truth is though, I've been wanting to share the details of my visit to the Pyramids a few months ago. Right now may not be the safest time to go, but you'll probably have the same kind of crowd free experience I had – and I can tell you – well, actually... read on...

The Pyramids

I don't know how mind blowing the pyramids must have been before there was tourist infrastructure and aggressive touts, but judging by how astounding they still are today they must have completely blown the fucking minds of every person who came upon them. I know they blew my mind.

My driver picked me up at 8 am and we drove out towards Giza but continued on to Saqqara, home of the oldest of all the pyramids, the famous step pyramid which the Egyptian government (or someone) seems to be in the act of rebuilding. This pyramid is considered to be the one that started the whole trend. Nearly 7000 years old, it was built for King Djoser by the great Egyptian architect Imhotep. Surrounding the pyramid are many complexes of buildings which it seems no Egyptologists have firmly labeled yet. In other words, nobody knows – except for perhaps the touts who will be more than likely to tell you the definitive answer. Whether what they say is true or not...well that brings me to the old joke...How do you know when a tour guide is lying? His lips are moving.

Despite my driver's warnings about the aggressive touts – I found them to be much less hassle than the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul or the medinas in Fez or Marrakech – of course, there were only about ten touts there and I was the only tourist that I saw – I was dressed in black like the foremen of the construction and I spoke enough Arabic I think they all thought I was an engineer working there. Which was cool because I just wandered wherever I wanted and told the guys who told me I couldn't go there that it was no problem.

Now is the time to come to Egypt if you want to experience the Pyramids, Luxor, or other amazing ancient places without crowds. The touts though, are tricky – several asked for my ticket and then said come with me – which sounded official but was actually just a way to give me a tour and grab a tip or fee – but I already know that trick and took my ticket back and walked away ignoring them.

In fact, I'm pretty sure that I ignored some real security as I walked past the construction fence and into the areas marked closed. It was just me on the ground and all the slaves, eh, workers doing whatever they were doing to the pyramids above. Just me and a 7000 year old pyramid – leather bags full of pot shards, an open door that led down into where-ever it led – the tomb? The burial chamber? I don't know. It was dark and I didn't have a light. I didn't really want to fall into a 500 foot shaft and have some future archaeologist find me and say "Hey, what's this guy doing here?" as he picks apart my bones and examines my Turkish shoes. But, I touched the pyramid. In fact, I pissed on it. I marked it as my territory. I had to go and there was no one there...

The step pyramid is only one part of a vast burial complex that served the city of Memphis (not

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Tennessee). There are several more pyramids in various states of disrepair in the area. Our next stop was a series of old kingdom tombs where the touts were slightly more aggressive and annoying. I attribute this to a busload of Mexican tourists who arrived at the same time as I did and that there was no construction going on to confuse things.

The touts began directing people where to go, closing doors to parts of the complex, and enforcing the no picture and no camera rules – until they would get a tourist alone and then they would say “You want me to take your picture in here? It’s okay. Just give me a dollar.” Frankly, this bothered me more than the touting – the rule is there to protect these treasures and preserve the feeling of specialness inside the monuments – I therefore declined, as did most of the Mexicans.

I saw one of the touts manage to get a couple of bucks from one old woman, but mostly, they were just annoying everyone. The police ignore it and I’ve heard, they sometimes even participate. In post Arab-Spring Egypt, tourism is way down and the economy isn’t doing so hot either. People have to make a buck and support their families, that’s not always so pleasant for those of us who are fortunate enough to be visiting.

In fact, though, it’s less pleasant for the Egyptians than for us...something to keep in mind if you visit. As we drove to Saqqara, we passed dozens of “Carpet Schools”. I asked my driver and he said that in this region, people are very poor and can’t afford to send their children to school. The children have to work at an early age. Families send them to ‘Carpet School’ where they work 9-12 hour days weaving rugs. As the driver explained “You and I can’t do that work for that long because it will destroy our eyesight and give us arthritis.” My heart broke as I realized what he was telling me – these ‘Carpet Schools’ are child sweat shops to make Egyptian rugs.

From Saqqara, we drove to Giza. My driver wanted to stop at a perfume factory but I told him I wasn’t interested. He wanted to go to the Papyrus Museum (another factory) but again I wasn’t interested. Suddenly, he was less interested in me. He told me the price to get in the pyramids, explained how big the complex was, told me about horse and camel rentals but wouldn’t tell me the total price.

He was a nice guy, my driver. An old guy with a funny habit of saying “Do you understand?” where most people say “You know?” I don’t know how much he makes for the tour without the commission, but it must be disappointing when a cheapskate like me comes along and doesn’t buy the expensive souvenirs like carpets, perfumes, and papyrus.

The horse renter gave me his spiel and offered me a special discounted price of 280 EGP for a 1-2 hour horse with a Beduin guide to make sure you return the horse and tell the touts to leave you alone. That’s about \$45 – the private day tour was \$30. My wife’s an Arab, she’s made me into an Arab in some ways. I haggle and I haggle hard. We ended up at 160 EGP which is

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

about \$25 US and included \$10 for the entry ticket.

My horseback guide, Alex, kept all the touts away from us as we took the long ride around the plateau so that I was able to truly experience the majesty of the pyramids at Giza and the feeling of what it is like to be alone in the desert with the Great Pyramids – on a horse. I've never specifically wondered what it would be like to ride an Arabian horse across the Giza Plateau and be alone with the Pyramids – but now I know.

As we rode up to the Sphinx, I saw the seats from the Sound and Light Show of the Pyramids – the seats don't appear to have changed since the movie Moonraker where James Bond fights with 'Jaws' at the pyramids. Inside the temple of the Sphinx, there were no more than ten people. Jaws wasn't there. The touts tried the ticket trick again, and failed again, and Alex waited outside with the horses. I asked the Sphinx a question and the answer was a riddle.

We rode back into Giza town like cowboy movie heroes on funny saddles with funny stirrups. My driver offered to take me to a few more locations to buy souvenirs, but I told him to just take me back to the hotel. We were supposed to see the famous Red Pyramid, but honestly, I'd already seen everything I needed to.

I'll go back to see the Red Pyramid another time. Inchallah.

The Egyptian Hustle

05 December 2012

Sefrou, Morocco – Writing About Cairo, Egypt

The recent changes I've made to Vagobond are awesome, but at times, I miss the challenge and regularity of writing about my own travels on a daily basis. (By the way, I recommend that you sign up for my free weekly reader here at my blog) At this point, I've had so many adventures and experiences that I can write about five years worth of weekly columns. Still, the changes are better – bringing more voices to Vagobond and abandoning the blogger format was one of the best decisions I've made.

Take for example, Monday's new feature column by award winning Travel Photographer Dave Stamboulis. His Myanmar photoessay this week did more to excite me about travel than a million "Ten reasons to..." blogs could ever do. Sarah Spigelman and James Isherwood sharing foodie insights in New York and London each Thursday makes me hungry and excited to visit both cities again. Then there is the hilarity of Anthony Mathenia's Syncopated Family Travel and the breezy vino adventures of Linda Kissam – not to mention all the incredible guest writers and

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

fun weekly features. In case you haven't noticed, we've moved to twice daily and it's got me hustling like nobody's business – which puts me in mind of The Egyptian Hustle...

The Egyptian Hustle

The hustle in Egypt is relentless and from my perspective anyway, downright shameful. Don't get me wrong, I call both Morocco and Turkey home, so I understand the hustle from the carpet vendors in the Grand Bazaar asking three times the price they want because the guidebooks say tourists should ask for half price to the Moroccan haggler that will overcharge you by 1000% just because he can. I don't dig that stuff, but they at least have something in common that I can respect. Once you agree on a price, that's the price. Not so in Egypt.

Granted, my experience is limited to street hustlers and taxi touts but within a short time, I noticed something that offended me far more deeply than being over charged. Egyptians continue to try to gouge you for higher prices even after you have agreed on a price. The price goes up when you pull out your wallet, if you pay in advance they then tack on extras like the 'airport ticket', and even if you shake on it – they will tell you a higher price immediately and try to wheedle it from you. That, to me is offensive. The violation of the handshake.

I can live with Egyptians (and Moroccans and Southern Italians, Greeks, and other North Africans) violating my ideas of what the queue (line) should be and why it should be respected. Frankly, I think it is a reason why their societies are less successful than say those of Turks, Northern Italians, Brits, Germans, or Americans. So, I hate my idea of the line being violated, but I loathe the idea of the handshake being nulled. The most classic example of a deal done. When an American shakes my hand, looks me in the eye and tells me something – and then it changes – I honestly feel a desire to maim and hurt them.

With the Egyptians, I just feel an intense sadness because the handshake isn't even worthy of a lie. The agreement of a price, isn't even an agreement. Certainly, a society where agreeing on a negotiated price holds no weight – isn't a society I want to be in for even a day more – no matter how cool the Pyramids might be.

Christmas in Sefrou

12 December 2012

Sefrou, Morocco

I was never a huge fan of Christmas, but I have to admit that I'm a bigger fan now than I have ever been. The reason, four years in Morocco during the season of good cheer. And what does

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

that mean – well it means four years in a small Moroccan town where nobody gives a shit about Christmas and the houses are all built of concrete with no insulation, no fireplaces, no chimneys, no roasted chestnuts, no Christmas at all.

That's not entirely true – at the k-mart like Marjane in Fes they have one little corner of an aisle with santa hats and Christmas decorations – it's tacked onto a huge aisle of kids toys and games set out just for the season. So, like everywhere, the commercial end of things is there – even if just a little bit. I saw a shop window in Fez yesterday that said Merry Christmas.

The thing that's missing is Christmas. If the visa gods ever approve my wife's immigrant visa to the USA or I get deported for some reason from Morocco – I'm sure I'll become jaded with Christmas again, but I have this memory of people smiling at each other and saying Merry Christmas and a sort of electric energy in the air from about this time until the actual day. I remember the lines at the post office, the awful times trying to park the car at the malls, and the annoying canned Christmas music everywhere. I remember how it all starts right around Halloween now and is a big slutty commercial fest and I remember how disappointing some presents are but I also remember the Christmas day phone calls with friends and loved ones, the surprise of a card from someone you haven't heard from in a while, and the joy of sending out a card or package and the hope that it will reach them in time.

Here, in Morocco. There's none of that. My wife says "Are you going to buy me presents?" and of course I am, but my answer is "You're a Muslim, you don't celebrate Christmas." Her answer, "Yes, but I like presents." Everyone likes presents and I suppose the ideal of them is a caring reminder that someone loves you but unfortunately what it comes down to is something for nothing.

I offered to take my wife and daughter to Belgium for Christmas this year – a chance to see a big, grand Christmas in a European style. My only condition was that my wife download and fill out the paperwork to get her visa (the baby and I don't need one because we are both American). Apparently, that was asking too much because she looked it up online and told me about it, but that was the end of it. She was waiting for me to download, fill out, submit, and send in the paperwork – but I'm tired of that process. I guess it wasn't enough of a present without me doing every bit of it. Too bad.

The immigration visa to the US has been a year long process of twisting her arm to get the necessary papers, translations, photos, and more. I've faithfully filled out the forms, submitted them, enlisted my mother in acting as a relay person on the ground in the States and my uncle as a co-sponsor for her. I've photocopied, filed, sent, and paid every fee – I wrote early last year and back in 2011 that I hoped to be celebrating Christmas back in the States this year – at this point, that obviously isn't going to happen. Maybe in 2013.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

I did finally get the last of the paperwork all gathered and sent off to the US Visa and Immigration Service though. About the same time I sent it (but before they could have gotten it) I got a notice that our address in Morocco had returned mail from them as undeliverable. The same address we get our utility bills, phone bills, etc on – but when something really important comes – leave it to Morocco to just return it to sender.

Still, the finish line is in sight. I hope. I'm looking at where we will go in the US and trying to figure out the best way forward – assuming that we don't get slapped with some crazy refusal because some bureaucratic is having a bad day in Rabat or D.C. Perish the thought.

Any way about it, this is the last Christmas I spend in Sefrou. Ever.

Still, being here isn't all bad – since there's nothing else here for me, I managed to write a new novel 'The Keys to the Riad' in November and this month, I've been on a marathon re-edit, rewrite of Slackville Road which has so far been cut from 120,000 words to 20,000. If brevity is the soul of wit, I was obviously witless when I first wrote it. I like where it is headed this time though – I may even have to change the title because the book is so incredibly different than it was.

If you'd like to join me for that, you can sign up for it at <http://eepurl.com/rMijn> - it's free and hopefully fun. A once a week email from me with (to start) a freshly rewritten chapter of Slackville Road (or whatever it is now) delivered to you each Sunday. It's my Christmas gift to you – all you have to do is sign up for it.

What am I doing here? Just waiting for permission to leave.

Sledding with Moroccan Snow Bunnies

19 December 2012

Ifrane, Morocco

I work too much. You wouldn't believe how much time I put into Vagobond with social media, site research, article writing, editing, finding and working with writers, handling guest posts, and searching for advertising revenue. I'm not looking for sympathy, I'm just saying I work too much. Add in writing, rewriting, editing, and formatting my books and - the answer is that I work too much.

So, this week, I decided to take a break. I hired a car and driver to take us on a Middle Atlas

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Wonderbreak - my wife, daughter, and sister in law piled in the back seat and I took the seat next to the driver. No grand-taxi crowding this time. Just the right number of people to fit comfortably in a nice car for a day up to the mountains.

We left Sefrou heading towards Midelt and Boulemaine but then turned west towards the alpine towns of Ifrane and Azrou. We passed through the famed Atlas cedar forests where the Barbary Apes reside and stopped to play alongside a lovely mountain lake.

The real purpose of the day though was some playing in the snow. Yes, there is snow in Morocco. We didn't go to the ski area but instead went to the big snow hill where we rented a homemade sled for 20 dirhams and began some serious downhill sledding action.

We had some great wipeouts that mostly consisted of me getting rolled in the snow, some fun snowball fights, and our little girl got to play in the snow for the first time. She loved it.

From there we went and had a nice tajine lunch in Azrou, walked around the markets, and enjoyed the laid back atmosphere in this incredible little mountain town.

From Azrou, we went to Ifrane town, where the King of Morocco has one of his many palaces. Ifrane looks more like somewhere in the Alps than a Moroccan town, but the cafes are still definitely Moroccan - no doubt about that.

It was an incredibly lovely winter day. I'm glad I don't work too much all the time because days like this make it all worthwhile.

If you want to ski in Morocco, there are two places Michliffen which is right about where we were. There are ski lifts there that sometimes work, but you can always hire a donkey to take you up and then rent some old skis.

There is also Jebel Toubkal and Oukaimeden near Marrakech. Oukaimeden has lifts which I hear are more reliable than at Michliffen and some say there is slightly better snow there. In addition there are some ski lodges there, but I can only imagine what a Moroccan Ski Lodge actually ends up being like. My recommendation is to go to Ifrane with low hopes and high spirits. You can't go wrong.

Looking at my travels in 2012

27 December 2012

Sefrou, Morocco

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Today is my 41st Birthday. I pushed this column to Thursday this week so it would coincide with my day of passing from 40 years old to 41 years. As you can see below - 40 was a great year. I have so much to be happy about in my life and I'm sure that my 41st year will be even better! Just 60 years to go by my reckoning....

It's been a hell of a year. Wow. When I say that, I mean it in a good way - mostly. As I look at the year 2012, I find that my site traffic increased 230%, the amount of money I earned went up a whopping 350% and I managed to travel to more than fifty cities in ten different countries in just 366 days while taking care of business, building relationships, and taking care of my wife and daughter. Add to that that I published a new novel, wrote another new novel, and published nearly 400 new stories here on Vagobond.com in addition to publishing on other sites, I incorporated Vagobond Travel Media, LLC, and continuously worked on getting my wife's visa to the USA and taking care of my student loans - and it adds up - but wait, there's more!

I improved my Turkish, French, and Arabic over 2012, though not to the fluent level I had hoped for, I bought more than 30 new websites, and I didn't get hugely fat from sitting in front of the computer. Wow.

There were some failures...I didn't end up buying a house in either Turkey or Morocco, my above mentioned fluency failed to materialize, and I didn't manage to kick sugar out of my diet or become incredibly physically fit. I also didn't manage to get my wife and my family to the USA during this year, which is disappointing, but we are getting closer all the time - I hope.

In terms of travel - it was far from my most adventurous year but it made up for it in terms of comfort and luxury. I only visited three new countries this year - Malta, San Marino, and Egypt. Most of my time was spent exploring and getting to know Mediterranean countries I've already visited - Morocco, Turkey, Greece, Italy, Spain, France, and (non-Mediterranean) England. In fact, it was a pleasure to get to know these countries even better and in every one of them I managed to stay in super high end hotels and eat meals prepared by world renowned chefs.

In fact, I even got to cook with a few of them with instruction in the art of national and regional cuisines. I got to ride around the pyramids on horseback when there were almost no other tourists there and to explore Florence on foot then get up close and personal with the famous foods of Modena and Bologna. I sailed around the Aegean, rode a motorcycle through massive fires on the island of Chios, and visited the world at the World Travel Market in London which was actually like going to a score of new countries.

For our second anniversary, my wife and I had a champagne hot air balloon ride followed by a

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

day exploring the largest underground city in the world and ending with a meal in a Michelin starred restaurant. I touched the leaning tower of Pisa, visited the tomb of Rumi, stayed in tree houses next to ancient Greek ruins, and crossed from Europe to Asia and Europe to Africa and Africa to Europe and Asia to Europe. I snow sledded in Africa, bought a deck of tarot in Marseilles (where they were re-invented), bird watched in Italy, and took long beer soaked walks in London. I sunned on African, Asian, and European beaches - and all in all - had a kick ass year.

Admittedly - it wasn't as far ranging as last year since I stayed in the Med region for the most part, but I feel like my travels in 2012 were more fulfilling in scope rather than geography. The truth is, this year, I didn't want to go so far from my little daughter - a couple of weeks felt like ages. I'm so thankful I didn't miss her first words, her first steps, her first crawl, her first laugh, or her first anything - as far as I can tell. I was there for it all and able to bring her back presents that most Moroccan kids don't seem to have which makes me feel a mixture of pride and shame at the world. Not her fault, not my fault, the world's fault. Still, I'm happy she gets to have nice things from all over the world and happier that I can provide them for her.

2012 was the continuation of another ongoing goal. Once again, I was not a smoker - quitting smoking was one of the best decisions I made in 2011 and I'm happy to have continued on the healthy path.

It's funny because there is a part of me that wishes that I could bring my wife and daughter with me on all of these trips but my wife's visa issues (her being Moroccan) makes every trip four times as complicated as it should be and for some reason, even though she is tiny - whenever I bring my wife, a trip costs 4x as much....besides, I like traveling alone and having time to think and dream and put things together. Although someday, I hope to bring Sophia on trips with me and of course, I want to bring Hanane (on some trips) too. So, there is a blessing in every hardship- that's for sure.

For 2013 - I have a funny message to give you. I love writing about my travel. I enjoy most of my travel, but the truth is, I have to tell you I think that travel is overrated. Mostly I think that is because people want to sell you trips, tours, flights, and hotels. The truth is - everything you get from travel, you can get from where you already are. I don't really want to travel very much in 2013. I want to take my family to the USA, dig in, and begin putting my energy fully into my passions - writing, food, art, gardening. I think that is where it is at for me and for you...I recommend you focus on the things that bring you joy at home and enhancing those...for example...I love gardening so taking part in a permaculture workshop in 2013 is one of my goals. I love art so doing some sort of artist retreat in 2013 is a goal. I love writing so doing a writing retreat in 2013 is a goal. And I love food so doing food retreats, foodie travel, learning about wild foods, or taking cooking classes is where it's at for me.

What Am I Doing Here? 52 Weeks of Wandering in 2012 by Christopher Damitio

Ah, this is also the conclusion of another goal. I made a resolution to write a new column every week during 2012 and this is the final one for the year. I did it! On that same note - there was at least one story published on Vagobond (and sometimes two or three) every day this year. Let's see if we can do even better on everything in 2013!

Happy New Year Everyone (because today is MY new year.)