

Maryland on Wheels

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Even before I could walk, I loved the freedom of being on my own wheels in control of my destiny. Father's house bore the marks of my "driving" as I did not steer well and scraped the walls near every door. Eight years later there was a bicycle under the Christmas tree for me. To get started on my first ride, Dad gave the bicycle a good push once I was seated. Fifty feet away I plugged the bike into a big tough shrub. Later that day I learned how to steer and stop. I was on my way on two wheels.



I like travel, it has been my best entertainment. To make it meaningful I paid close attention to maps, geography and geology. It was only natural to be traveling and teaching, so I fitted well into Maryland's overseas program. Some instructors like friend Spiros moved Heaven and Earth to homestead in one place. He is a teacher as I am. It is what we do. Caring enough to teach well is of critical importance. The Arden years were good years for teaching as quality was of prime importance. We had the freedom to teach well. That has radically changed, Frank said "Dennis, you would not like Maryland as it is now.

The adventure is all in traveling. I rarely used the Autobahns and never used the Autostradas because in the words of Charles Kuralt "You can drive across the entire USA on the interstates and see absolutely nothing at all". Adventure according to Paul Theroux "is when things do not go as planned". Commuting is not travel, it is boring, dangerous and time consuming. Deaths in Korean traffic became too common in the early 90's. Returning home after class on Korean roads was dangerous because of drunk Korean drivers, dense fog and incompetent placement of hazard warnings.

By design, teaching was not adventure. Only once was there a minor problem. Our classroom door was locked so I got out a screwdriver, removed the lock, taught class and then locked the door by screwing the hasp and lock back in place. That is too insignificant to be an adventure.

Instead of using the Autobahns, I drove my Fiat on the delightful woodsy back roads in Germany and the side roads in Korea. I even drove to Fez in Africa one Christmas vacation when I had nothing better to do. I was on the way to Timbuktu but by Fez I wanted no more Africa. I saw a Moroccan and his three wives walking to the market to sell sticks. There were three big stick bundles moving down the road with only feet under them to show that they were not self-propelled. The man, doing his share, carried a small twig in one hand. It was a different culture.

At times we are privileged to experience other cultures intimately. Sometimes it was too intimate for our well-being. No one with a strong sense of self-preservation would seek such situations, but the adventure is undeniable, and they make the best stories.

You must be aware of your surroundings at all times. This is illustrated by a friend's story of buying strawberries. He reached his home with only two strawberries in a bag. He claimed that the vendor was so pretty that he didn't pay attention and the woman put two berries in a bag, blew it up and sold it to him priced as a full bag.

There was more unsaid as by itself that seems impossible. I remember that he usually "grazed" in grocery stores. I can easily imagine him sampling enough strawberries to irritate the woman. He may have been focused on the calculator that he usually carried as it was his habit to always recalculate prices.

There are two antipodal approaches: A fatalist would say it is fated to happen anyway, so he ignores reality. The other is to stay alert, to react quickly and have some say in your destiny. My approach, being alert, is at least somewhat better than doing nothing. That I survived 15 years of teaching in Asia is not proof that plain old dumb luck is a major factor. Most of the risks in Korea involve the Korean approach to driving. They will try anything at all, improvising as they go. It is the exact opposite of the predictable, inflexible German driving. Other cultures do much better. When I saw an accident in Spain or Italy, a German was often involved.

Descending a long two lane grade a few miles inside Italy I chose to pass a car. Suddenly an oncoming car appeared, and I readied myself for death as my Fiat's brakes were not capable of doing much at that speed down a mountain. Fortunately the two other drivers were Italian, so the oncoming car pulled to his right and the car I was passing pulled to his right and in the Italian way, I sailed right down the center. It was a brilliant solution to passing on a two-lane road because it saved my life.

Driving home from class on a Korean road at night, a blinding white light was approaching in my lane. At the last moment, I dodged the end of a heavy steel truss being carried flat to a construction site. The light blinded me so I could only see the truss two seconds before it would have decapitated me. It seemed that it was an illegal load being trucked at night to avoid the police. Properly loaded, trusses are carried upright, never flat. It was the worst possible time to carry such an ignorantly loaded lethal object.

We had losses in Korea. The man who replaced me did not last a year before he died driving into part of a bridge. David Arnold died in a more complex situation. He caused a young woman to lose her job in the Osan main exchange. A few weeks later he died in a head-on collision with a dump truck while commuting to class. I cannot exclude the possibility that it was a revenge assassination because it fits with the directness of Korean dispute settlements.

Disputes in Korea are often handled on the spot so Korean drivers commonly carry several hundred thousand won for emergencies like paying off a traffic cop or paying for damages in a

traffic accident. A century ago community disputes were often settled by a big community rock fight.

There were entertaining moments involving Korean police. In evening I was driving too fast and a cop motioned for me to stop. He demanded money but I feigned complete ignorance of the Korean language, so he gave up and told me to go away as I was a worthless source of cash.

One afternoon I saw a woman directing traffic in Songtan and she was doing a better job than the Army boys did when they directed traffic.

To survive, you have to adapt to the culture you are in and to adapt, you must understand the situation you are in. In asking directions of Korean men, you must understand that he will lose face in your eyes if he cannot answer your questions. In saving face, any answer will do whether it is correct or not and his honor is safe when you are out of sight.

You can get really lost in a city. Cab drivers should know directions but following their directions in Seoul I crossed the same small bridge five times enroute to class one afternoon. I bought a compass the next day and never asked directions in Korea again. Road signs to the city hall are equally useless in Korea as a huge city like Seoul will have many community halls. Each is labeled "City Hall". Following that sign is a sure way to get lost.

It is easy to get to your destination by train (except in Seoul as the North-South tracks did not connect to the East-West tracks when I was there). If when you find yourself in a place that does not look right, simply get off at the next stop, cross the platform and take a train going back the way you came until you are in familiar territory.

A bus can be a problem in getting lost as unlike the trains they can go anywhere. We rented a MWR bus in Korea for a biology field trip in the Seoul area. The driver decided on his own in spite of instructions where we were to go, and I had to come up with an impromptu excursion on the spot. The military bus was different from the Korean buses, so the driver boasted about his bus to the other bus drivers. Korea has a unique bus rented out to funerals. The dead person rides in a bottom compartment while the funeral celebrants have their party above dancing and drinking.

Taxis have another peril, if the driver senses that you do not know the way, they will add miles by taking a roundabout route. In Kunsan Korea, I rode a taxi home, but the driver hit a pothole at his destination. He demanded money for what he imagined was damage to his cab. I refused and he drove off in his undamaged cab with only the correct fare as we were already at our destination.

In the Philippines, taxis are usually complete used taxis from Japan with the meter reading in yen, but you must pay in pesos which are about three times more valuable than yen. I got out of nine taxis lined up at the Manila airport as they would be cheating their passengers. The tenth one was honest. At that airport is a USAF firetruck stolen from Clark Air Base. Filipinos got into it on Clark, turned on the lights and siren and drove away. The Manila airport refused to return it. Our Air Force has the policy of not disputing claims. I discovered that when on a Geology field trip in Okinawa our base bus was hit by a drunk Japanese driver. He staggered to the bus and made slurred demands. The Air Force paid; they don't want trouble of any kind.

More on the Manila airport. We landed at Clark Airbase early Friday evening and went through as much processing as could be made but as Philippine customs at Clark would not be open there until Monday, I had to improvise. We went to the Manila Airport, went through customs

backwards, claiming a bag left behind and came out through immigration in the right direction stamping in late Friday evening saving a two day wait.

Walking is not so good. I returned to Korea to see friends in 2014 after being away ten years. Yongsan Army Garrison, a short easy walk from the train station was closing down so I decided to walk around the garrison perimeter to Itaewon to meet Frank. I'm glad I had two hours as it was a very long walk, but seeing Frank again was well worth it.

In 1983 my gall bladder was removed at the Navy hospital. My dedicated 4-foot-9-inch wife Connie walked there to see me from Kadena AFB where we lived. As she was afraid to use the Marine Corps bus from the hospital at Camp Lester she also walked back to our quarters at Kadena. It was a 6-mile, walk, significant for even a dedicated woman but it would have been a lot easier on the bus.

Paul Theroux has observed that, "most travel involves no adventure at all."

It sounds exotic to travel to Nepal, but the adventure in traveling there is very much like visiting a crowded second floor cafeteria at a Macy's department store. In both cases you ride an escalator up to the second floor into a place packed with people as efficiently as possible. You endure their intrusions into your personal space longer than conceivable and then descend the escalator to your destination. You have experienced nothing, everything went as planned, there was no adventure whatsoever.

He advised that, "for travel to have any real value you must go alone."

You may encounter uncaring, abrasive functionaries who will frustrate you, you will be tired, wet and uncomfortable and you will be lonely and wish that you were safe at home. That is when adventure takes place. You will survive by your wits improvising and making do or good people will rescue you.

A farm family in Spain rescued me from my plight. I had stupidly ignored local advice 30 miles back that the road was impassible. My trusty Fiat took me within 100 feet of my destination, but it was a vertical 100 feet best negotiated with a ladder. I was invited into their home to eat and at 11PM we drove bumper cars at the town fiesta and were able to sleep at 2 AM. I was up at 6 AM and would drive their son to his military assignment 100 miles north. As I had come a half mile down a gravel road too steep for my poor Fiat to climb. The young Spaniard explained that I would have to zig-zag the front wheel drive car up the road, so it was not so steep. The car still did not have enough power so I would race the engine and pop the clutch in first gear and lurch up the incline a few feet. I repeated this every 6 feet for half of a mile. The poor Fiat survived that abuse for half an hour. We arrived at his base 2 hours later where he made a magnificent speech of thanks to me, it was heartfelt and wonderful and I understood not one word as neither of us spoke the other's language. I understood his appreciation and grace. That was enough. I will never forget this fine young man who physically pushed my Fiat until the car could go on its own.

In the same area going south 3 weeks earlier on the same trip I watched as my Fiat rolled over a cliff. Imagining my hand trapped by the rear bumper, I was not about to go over a cliff attached to a \$200 car, so I shouted "Fred if you go over I'm not coming down to get you."

The Fiat carried me to an aircraft factory in Northern Germany. The factory owner asked me "if the police frowned at my illuminated frog hood ornament." I had made it from a soap bottle. "They want me to promise to remove it, so I promised." "Leave it on" he said "I always do" I

replied. Then he asked how much it cost “\$200 I replied, to which he said ”My BMW cost 200 times more than your Fiat and they both do exactly the same thing.” The \$200 Fiat carried me 65,000 miles in the year and a half that I was in Europe. The engine was well worn so I would just stop promptly and add 2 quarts of oil whenever the oil light came on. Oil was cheap and a proper repair was expensive.

Late one evening I entered a small army post and the American guard demanded ‘What’s that green light on your hood?’ “A frog light” I replied, innovating on the spot and drove in past the sentry with his mouth open still contemplating my answer. I liked the frog and brought it home to Oregon.

The German sentry at Kaiserslautern said my lights were wrong and had to be changed because some were square, and others were round. Knowing not to argue, I said “Ok” and ignored his advice. My Fiat was supported with dirt cheap parts salvaged from the Morale Welfare and Recreation junk yards. Some parts were expensive (powerful \$700 rally competition lights that I bought for \$3 each). They drew so much electricity that solder holding the wires melted.

“What’s that German doing in our junkyard?” asked one private looking at me. “Did you ever hear a German talk like he does, he’s one of us.” Replied the man in charge.

I fitted in enough that in the Subic Bay base one man barbershop, the barber left for a few minutes and I cut my own hair as I wanted with his tools. He seemed not to notice but Darrel Paul did when he saw it: “Dennis you look just like the Navy guys with that haircut”.

Blending in had its advantages: In China I wore a blue cap with a red star pinned to its front. Our minder liked that and gave me a short speech of appreciation (in Cantonese) when our tour concluded, I was the only one he talked to. That we spoke different languages did not matter, we still communicated. Two young soldiers wanted me to take their photo in a famed Shanghai Garden, so I did: I had them move left, then right, then forward, then back and finally to squat down. If I could have had them hop up and down while spinning in a circle, flapping their arms like wings, I’d have had them do that also. By then they understood what I was doing to them, and we all had a laugh.

Humor is always possible, the Osan Airbase ed center had a fine canary cage. When the office was empty I added a tiny egg. Ed Romery (Osan) and Bill Berlin (Misawa) stood out as ESO’s for going out of their way to help us so we would not flounder around. They cared, so did Don Weitz (Taegu and Kadena) who said “Dennis, you can laugh at adversity. I can’t”.

Bill took me to my assigned room. Its window showed the gloomy inside view of pine tree limbs. He said “we have better rooms than this.” I changed to the cheery adjacent room at first chance.

One day I entered my room and found a young woman sound asleep on my bed. She must have known about another lecture’s amorous adventures with his student, a navy dependent wife and perhaps she wanted some action also.

Clueless as a cigar store wooden Indian, I sat down quietly to see what would happen as I did not want to frighten her away. If she was naked, or even a card on my door saying “Enjoy!” and even I would have known what was expected. She awoke and explained that Lucy had arranged to let her in and that BOQ she was a student of Lucy’s and she had asked Lucy if there were any nice men that Lucy knew. She was in the Navy, worked their difficult schedule and was simply too tired to stay awake.

Forty years later the parts of this “puzzle” came together:

1. Two Maryland students at Misawa with a Navy connection knew each-other.
2. One of the two had an affair with her Economics instructor.
3. Jim bragged about it to me 30 years later saying he used the wife and her husband’s car. Nine months later seeking a reunion he called her and she told Jim she was pregnant.
4. The second woman was bored and asked her instructor, Lucy, for a suggestion.
5. I lived a lonely, monastic life in the BOQ.
6. Kind Lucy lived down the hall in the BOQ and decided to help out.

Saying that I am slow in such matters is a massive understatement, I was a proper dolt and missed having that adventure. Men will go to great lengths to put a woman in bed. What they don’t know is that if she is going to “get friendly” she decided that well in advance. My situation was the reverse: A fully clothed woman was sound asleep on my bed. Although she was not my student, she was a Maryland student, so this was a gray area. Careful consideration was needed. As an iron clad rule, I never became involved with any students.

Misawa had its compensations. For transportation I found a 50cc Yamaha. The bicycle shop offered it for the equivalent of \$15 as it had no key. I went to where it was stored and knowing the key worked by grounding the ignition system I removed the switch and it started immediately. I returned to the shop and paid the asking price. “Too much cheap” the owner plaintively said. “Too Much Cheap” became its name. “Too Much Slow” would also have been as appropriate. Its top speed was a pathetic 30 mph. It was designed for old men to putter about in town, but it gave me cheap mobility.

Even an experienced motorcyclist has things to learn in a new culture. In Japan, traffic proceeded English style on the opposite sides of the road from my experience in America. It was no problem in traffic as you just followed along behind the car ahead. When the only car in sight approached on the left side of the road powerful reflexes kicked in steering me to a potential head on collision. I solved that problem with a compromise, riding the motorcycle down the exact center of the road. Actually, I liked driving a left side driver car in Japan because if you steered from the opposite side of the car, you were safer in a head on collision and you safely exited the vehicle stepping directly onto the curb. In exchange for increased safety, the price was that passing was something you could not do. As I’m never in a hurry, it fitted me well.

As motorcycles are not subject to the physical limitations of cars, I ride them by preference. I had motorcycles waiting for me in Korea, Honshu and Okinawa.

Buying a motorcycle in Korea was a problem as to protect local industry, Korea imposed an import tax equaling the motorcycle’s new price. I solved that by buying a delivery motorcycle outside of Yokota air base and shipping it in parts to myself in Korea where I reassembled it. What I did not know was that a man in the Osan hobby Center was under investigation for black marketing motorcycle parts.



When I picked up my parts at the mail room the box containing the frame was ominously stamped “this package has been inspected by x ray”. Two hours later my used motorcycle parts became a tax free, Yamaha motorcycle. That year no plates were on motorcycles in Korea, so I rode freely but the next year, number plates were in use. I could not get a regular plate by normal channels without paying a \$1000 tax on a \$50 motorcycle, so I made a copy of a plate on a

motorcycle parked next to a friend’s apartment. It didn’t work as when I entered the base I was told that it was a plate valid for motorcycles restricted to being on base. I had copied a plate of what may have been a stolen bike. I also taught at Kunsan that term where a motorcycle was parked at the VOQ where I stayed. A week later I arrived with plaster and made a mold from the Kunsan bike plate. Back at Osan, I melted car battery lead into the mold. With green and white paint I had a 5-lb. lead license plate. I used it for a term and mailed the bike and the plate back to Oregon as used motorcycle parts.

Reassembled, repainted, legally imported, registered and plated, the little 57-year-old red 90cc Yamaha with its checkered past still runs nicely to 60 mph.

It was the best of 5 small motorcycles that I bought in Japan.

I bought a little Kawasaki in Okinawa and used it there. I needed a place to park it off-base near Camp Hansen and seeing a nice steel pole, I chained it to the pole. Unfortunately the police noticed something that I overlooked; it was chained to a No Parking sign. They could not trace it as they assumed it was an on base bike which it was not, although it was legally registered and plated and insured. So when leaving Okinawa to go to my next assignment I put it on the ferry to Kyushu and rode it to Iwakuni on roads so little traveled that the road signs remained from occupation days and were readable in English. The population there is as low as anywhere in British Columbia.

As I did not really like the noisy Kawasaki, I sold it in Iwakuni before leaving for Korea. Then I took the Kampu ferry to Korea for my next assignment and met good friend Doyle Wyatt who said “Dennis, you need a car and I’m selling one for a Maryland lecturer who drove it into a ditch and left it there. So I bought the \$200 Saehan Rekord Royal a mid-sized Opel figuring I could make a friend in the Ed Center and at least paint flames on it. The problem was that it ran.

Koreans had bought an entire Opel factory and shipped it to Korea including the completed car engines. It, a miserable car, was a shock coming after my much-liked Fiat. I painted flames on it and they came out well but everything in the car was junk and it was only five years old.

The driver's door shook open every 20 seconds on gravel roads. Its muffler lasted about 6 months. Glass in the front window had a ripple in it as did the headlights. The high beam headlight wiring failed one evening and I replaced it, a few days later low beam wiring failed. The voltage regulator caused the battery to boil and eat up the corner of the car near the battery, the seat back was twisted and the taillights had faded to pink. Its radiator leaked, so I carried a spare radiator. It was the least competent car imaginable.

Its lights were dim so one rainy night I hit a small concrete mesa that suicidal traffic cops stand on in the middle of streets. The concrete bent the car's tie-rod so that its front wheels pointed in wildly different directions. The next morning I drove it to a shop by keeping one front wheel sliding on sand near the curb while the other wheel directed the car down the road. The mechanic busied himself straightening minor dings in the frame while I straightened the tie-rod. The Opel lived to zombie on.

It was a true zombie but a strong zombie due to its German engine. One dark evening it rammed a manhole and destroyed the cement manhole that stuck out of the road before paving. I had caused irreparable damage, so the Koreans expediently covered the manhole and paved over it.

The "Zombie Manhole Killer" now had a pronounced list at its front that more or less matched the shortened rear fender on its right side the result of backing into the base commander's flagpole. The flagpole suffered not at all, and the car was somewhat better after I tied it to a shed and drove away stretching the car back into an approximation of its old self.

Meanwhile I bought a Datsun B210 for \$35, it was infinitely better and even towed the Opel to a junk yard. The Datsun served me well a few years in difficult driving conditions. Imagine driving in thick ground fog, then a Korean decided to follow me with his lights on high making it impossible for me to see anything, so I turned off my lights and sped up leaving the Korean stumbling along far behind. The fog was so bad that I had to drive following the center stripe on the road. Then I came to a large "Y" intersection with no center stripe and got lost in the intersection. A few minutes later I found the other side stripe and proceeded onto my room at Suwon AB. Korean drivers are (were?) a good match for that Opel. We lost a few lecturers to them in the early 90's. Korean driver competency was good for an ox cart. If the driver was drunk the ox would proceed on his own but Koreans seemed not to differentiate between ox carts and cars, so they drank and drove both. My Datsun was in a head-on collision with a truck driven by a drunk. He passed a bus on a blind corner and hit my car and the car behind me. It was impossible to pull off the road as the police had a pile of road barricades piled there so I cut it fine and ended up with my left front wheel between my legs as the truck exited my Datsun in the middle of my door. My car was pulled 50 feet to a junkyard. I, untouched, went home on the next local bus.

Then I used a war surplus Chevrolet van for a year before I decided that Korea driving was unsuited for any vehicle lighter than a 19-ton Chafee light tank. Seeing a M119 Armored Personnel Carrier driving along, I offered to trade Brian's Station wagon for the APC. Brian wanted me to sell his car, the man smiled but could not trade and there were no buyers for Brian's car.

I was asked how it was that I had adventures. It all depends on the situation that one is in. There are more unplanned things in Asia than in Europe and our work can involve driving risk because we return home at night. Your survival is all that matters. The critical part of survival is to be alert to impending disaster and you must be capable of quick action to avoid your death. If you

cannot take quick action, consider the risk much more carefully. I left Korea in 1993 as the risk of invasion was much more than I felt at ease with. It was the only way I could negate the risk. William Least Heat Mood aptly advises: "Be careful going in search of adventure--It's ridiculously easy to find."

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