



PLAN SOUTH AMERICA

ANGIE COSEY

MY EXPERIENCE CHAMPING, or, THE TIME I FLED A MEDIEVAL ENGLISH CHURCH AT MIDNIGHT IN MY PAJAMAS

I guided my little Fiat down a mile-long dirt lane under a leaden sky. It was 6pm on a Friday and I was just arriving to St. Cuthbert's Church on the outskirts of Holme Lacy, a sleepy hamlet on the English- Welsh border where I would be spending the next two nights champing. When I parked my rental car and pulled my suitcase through the massive studded wooden doors, the grounds were as quiet as . . . well, a churchyard.

There are over 16,000 churches in England, the oldest extant one dating from the late seventh century. In a country whose population is increasingly secular, more than 25% of the churches have fewer than 20 attendants on any given Sunday. Faced with an overabundance of historic buildings that needed care, and an underfunded bankroll for preservation, the Churches Conservation Trust has turned to other enterprising ideas: among them, the idea of renting out unused churches to people looking for unique accommodations. Thus the notion of Champing (church camping) was born.

It felt a little daunting to be there alone -- so remote, so quiet, so huge. I oriented myself inside the vaulted stone cathedral and set about making up my bed for the night with the cot and sleeping bag provided by the CCT. I made a small picnic from some supplies I'd brought: bread and wine, which seemed fitting, and slightly less orthodox cheese and chocolate. Marble skulls leered at me from the walls and epitaphs bemoaning ancient deaths inscribed the slabs of stone under my feet. I admit I found it a bit creepy at first but after I familiarized myself with the church by exploring and taking photos, it didn't seem so sinister.

St. Cuthbert's has a story, like many things in England, that is entangled with history and literature and a healthy dose of myth and legend. Built primarily in the 13th and 14th century, no one is sure exactly why it was situated over a mile from the village it served, and laid out on a floodplain of the River Wye. Its evolution includes a 16th century transept and early 20th century stained windows; tales of heroic patrons and thieving wardens cling to the church like bits of dead ivy. The land and village passed from the de Lacy family, who acquired it after the Norman conquest, to the Scudamores in the 15th century -- Sir James Scudamore was idealized in Spenser's Faerie Queene as the archetype of chivalry -- to an Australian beer baron in the early 20th century before eventually falling into disuse.

I slept fine that first night. The sound of birds singing in the churchyard roused me the next morning, and gentle dawn light streaming through the stained glass coaxed me from my slumber. I enjoyed a cup of breakfast tea in the transept. I put away my backpack and made the chapel presentable before unlocking the massive oak doors to the public and heading out to the nearby Hay Literary Festival for the day. Though I had full custody of it overnight, the church is a historic landmark and as such it stays open during the day for visitors.

I stayed at the Hay Festival through the last lectures, not returning to St. Cuthbert's until around 11pm that night. In the pitch black of the countryside, the church lurked out of the gloom somewhat more ominously than



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it had in the daytime. I locked myself inside with a skeleton key as big as my hand and tried to quell my misgivings as I fortified my courage with another glass of wine that the Lord had provided to me from the bottom shelf of a Tesco's. The earlier cheerful sounds of birds had been swallowed by the night and the deathly quiet was unnerving. I sat in the circle of a battery-operated glow of fake candlelight and tried not to wonder what horrors the inky blackness of the nave might be hiding.

I was wrestling with my own inner demons: namely an imagination that was running away with itself and forcing me to consider all the dreadful things that could happen in an empty church at night. I don't believe in ghosts, or spirits, or demons, or any of that supernatural jazz. But I believe in the Evil of Man. And all I could think was, What if a serial killer snuck in here during the day and I've locked myself inside with him? The corners of the church were black as sackcloth; they could be hiding anything. Anyone. I crawled into my sleeping bag and compelled my brain to cling to reason, promising myself that if I could just fall asleep, everything would be fine in the morning.

And then I heard a noise.

It was not the tweet of a bird, or the call of a gentle woodland creature. Not a noise that I could ascribe to an animal at all. It was the kind of noise that you might attribute to a family member shifting positions in another room, or maybe to a creaky house settling. But this was an 800-year-old church built of stone, and I was alone.

I pulled out my torch and shone the light into the darkness, willing my heart to stay inside my chest. After a tense moment I texted a friend back in America, hoping that the distraction of conversation would ease my fears. After about ten minutes, I slid back down into my sleeping bag, forcing myself to stop freaking out and go to sleep.

And then I heard another noise.

And that was it. I managed to throw my belongings haphazardly into my backpack and replace the key in its lockbox before I escaped. And then I fled a medieval English church at midnight in my pajamas.

The End.



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Rossella E. Frigerio

Travel is a series of synchronicities compounded. Perfectly timed, as on that parched-hot morning in Tripoli. One moment, I was exploring my mother's laid-back childhood neighbourhood. The next, with the opening of a taxi door, I was on a deserted road leading towards expanses of Roman remains.

I have set foot in Libya only once, yet it pulses within my blood. An invisible thread connects my maternal ancestors to my life spent on continents far removed from the country's shores. Great-grandparents that emigrated from Italy at the turn of the century to embrace Libya's new colonial passage, setting on a journey that decades down the line would bring countless of threads together in full circle.

I grew up listening to warm stories recounted by my grandparents, who spoke of friendships between ethnicities and religions living peacefully in a glittering, expansive city by the sea. None of these stories would square up with the international headlines that screamed horrors of Libya to the world. I would read of hijacked planes, foiled terrorist attacks, a mercurial dictator and his complete disregard for human rights, and puzzle at how such opposing voices could emerge from the same one country. It was a contrast that fascinated me for years.

One summer, as my mother and I were sharing a lazy Sunday afternoon conversation splayed across the armchairs of my parents' living room, retreating from the blazing Maltese heat outside, Tripoli surfaced - as it usually did when she would reminisce about her childhood. At the time, flights to Libya were running daily, and the headlines emerging from the country were of peace and reconciliation. It was a rare moment of calm - looking back, possibly the last before the country was thrown into a continuing destructive turmoil. What if we were to visit? On a whim, I looked up flights online. In a handful of minutes, we were both booked onto a flight to Tripoli that was to leave in three weeks. For years I had imagined what exploring this city - the place where my grandparents met; where my mother was born, where they were abruptly uprooted out of in 1969 - would look like, and whether it was all the media played it out to be. At last I was going to find out.

That first morning in the capital, we discussed over breakfast where to begin our explorations, and my mother's childhood home seemed the obvious first choice. From her recollections, we were just a short stroll away from our hotel, the Al Waddan - a glorious, historic building that was once known as the Waldorf Astoria of Tripoli, a 'jewel of modern African architecture'.

We set out on foot, conscious that we were the only two women out strolling unaccompanied on the seafront's promenade. As unreasonable as our venturing out by ourselves may have seemed, from the moment we had landed here, we had been welcomed with gentle respect. Instinctively, we were in trust, and the rare graciousness and hospitality of the Libyans we encountered is an energy that I still hold close to my heart.

As we walked into a residential quarter not far from the city center, my mother remarked how the seafront walk was entirely different to her days growing up there. We were in fact standing on a brand new sidewalk that had been constructed under Gaddafi's reign, wholly upon reclaimed land, where an efficient new coastal



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highway had been built that ran the entire length of the old road. The scale of the project was remarkable, and from where we were standing, I could just about catch a glimpse of the old art deco streetlights several meters inland, punctuating the streetscape as reminders of what once was.

We stopped in front of a non-descript apartment block, just a few stories high. The façade had turned from white to a light grey, marking the passing of the countless turbulent years that it had stood there. In some corners, the paint had begun to peel, exposing bare slabs of cement. The large square balconies overlooked expanses of the Mediterranean, which now lay further out, contouring the new road. A stillness hung in the air. The windows and balconies stood empty, and not a voice could be heard. As I watched my mother stare at these tired four walls that she once called home, I could see moments from her past being played out before her, as if an old black-and-white film had been pulled up from a dusty box and was being projected onto those cracked grey walls.

I snapped a photograph and tried to imagine what it must have felt to be expelled and ordered to leave the country you had lived in for all of your life, rushing to fly out with a handful of belongings on a military plane. That was my mother's story, and this building seemed too quiet to hold all of the angst and fear they would have felt as they were packing to leave almost fifty years ago.

As if wanting to stop remembering, my mother drew her gaze away and blinked quickly a few times, walking off the unpaved footpath and back onto the main road. She hadn't said a word as we had stood there, and I trailed behind her as she walked hurriedly ahead of me, pushed by an invisible hand. The traffic on the road was light, and beneath one of the few trees that lined the street was a taxi with its driver napping from the morning heat. Before I had time to ask where we were heading, she had walked up and gently tapped onto the driver's half rolled-down window. I frowned slightly. I could only imagine what he was thinking at the sight of two foreign women approaching him out from off the sidewalk.

I hastened my pace and began asking her what on earth we were doing, but before I had the time to protest, I was told to get into the car. In moments, I found myself at the back of a worn-out white and yellow Peugeot. The driver turned back to look at us, and his eyes held a puzzled yet friendly gaze. My mother asked, "English? English?" He shook his head, and began speaking in Arabic. My mother paused, as if trying to open a drawer in a crevice of her memory that she had kept tightly shut for years, and uttered a broken line of syllables. The driver continued to look puzzled, but a slight smile edged his lips underneath his thick moustache as he acknowledged this stranger's attempt to connect with him. "Leptis Magna? Leptis Magna?" My mother was trying to get us to one of the oldest Roman archeological sites in the country, a veritable treasure-trove of history. After a brief pause, the driver's face suddenly lit up, as he exclaimed "Al-Khums!" while nodding his head excitedly and turning on the ignition. Al-Khums? I barely had a moment to turn towards my mother to ask if she had understood, but we had already swerved onto the main road and she had rolled down the window to bask in the heavy hot wind that was whooshing through. As we sped towards the unknown, she turned to the driver and asked "*Ma ismuka?*" He looked back at us through the rearview mirror and smiled. "Osama."

The End.



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Ruth Cox

'Just un toque de limón,' states Doña Carmela firmly, waving a lime under my nose. 'A little squeeze makes it special. You'll see.'

I defer instantly; Carmela is high priestess here. The whine of a blender swells over the busy market hum and seconds later she hands a tumbler over the counter with a flick of the wrist. Not a drop spilled.

A hazy perfume of citrus and dusky mango rises from my hands, the dewy glass cool and pleasant to the touch. But the colour – mustardy, electric, daffodil-centre orange – the colour is pure perfection.

Bolivia's rainbow spectrum is refracted on the white walls of Sucre. All day long, its arc is thrown into relief against a calm colonial background of pale stone.

A punch of flamingo bougainvillea on a sun-streaked iron gate. Threads of jade and crimson traced through the shawl on a woman's back, rose-cheeked baby tucked snugly inside. Sleek tan cowboy boots strutting down a cobbled street. At the day's end, a wondrous violet dusk caressing the crags of the Cordillera de los Frailes.

Sometimes this palette overwhelms, but it is addictive – the lure of Latin America at its most vibrant and sensual.

Sucre's central market is, naturally, a riot of hues, and there, a closeted concrete walk past deep vats of cornmeal and slippery river fish gasping their last breaths, are the cholitas de jugo; the juice sellers, and their fruity paint box is the best of all.

You may not spot the cholitas at first, obscured by mounds of misty grapes and Snow-White scarlet apples. But their siren song is hard to resist – you are sailing through perilous waters.

'Ven mami, ven!' 'Come here, honey ...'

'What'll you have, señora? I've got shakes, fresh cut salads ...'

'My oranges are just off the truck ... deliciosa, darling, the best!'

On my first foray, I succumb to the stall of Doña Carmela, who nods coolly rather than calling out when I pass by, eyes creasing into a smile above cut-copper cheekbones.

I visit Carmela often during my three-week stay and quickly learn it pays to heed a cholita's advice. These women are sages of fruit.

'You need to have the piña today, mami, it's fresh from the farm.'

'How about a shot of alfalfa to pep that drink up? Only three bolivianos more!'



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Carmela's nectars bewitch me. I try them all, from inky blackberry to milkshakes of the palest almond, a catalogue of contrasts in taste, texture, and tropical tone – every one lip-smackingly, belly-swellingly delicious.

Sucre is a city as sweet as its name. Time passes in a pleasant blur, punctuated by juice pilgrimages which offer more than a daily boost to the immune system. Like the wiphala flag of indigenous Bolivians, the fruit stands are an explosion of colour, but amongst the plurality of shades there is a gentle groove to life here.

The same scruffy cat dozing on a bed of hessian sacks next to now-familiar piles of reptile-skinned chirimoya that coyly hide their creamy centres from passers-by. Carmela's teenage son perched on a rickety stool, simultaneously scratching at homework and playing with his shiny phone.

And the cholitas, shuttling to and fro to borrow or lend an emergency guava, a wizened thumb of ginger. Competitors, perhaps; yet also sisters in arms in this corner of the market.

Above all, Carmela is constant. Proud of her produce and expertise, she tweaks requests, makes suggestions and rejects fanciful blends with the arch of an eyebrow and gentle shake of the head.

'Now, señora, that there is not a great combination. How about ...'

In the swirling kaleidoscope of urban Latin life, a vivid surprise around every corner, a reliable guide and a little routine turn out to be gifts in a glass.

The End.