

Three summers of European travel have turned a lifelong enemy of mine into a valued friend. The enemy is the Automobile: nemesis of my Manhattan-based existence, malevolent demon of clogged streets, blaring horns, poisonous air, and persistent interruptor of the street games that are the lifeblood of a city boy's childhood.

Until I began traveling abroad, my autophobia knew no exceptions. I refuse to own a car; my driving license, reluctantly acquired at the venerable age of 24, lies expired and virtually unused; I support the movement to ban private cars from the central city. My fondest New York fantasy is to tear down the East and West Side Highways, thus reuniting New Yorkers with our hidden waterfront. I am repelled by atomized Los Angeles: a non-city of non-neighborhoods, a 1984 on wheels, where walking after dark is an indictable offense.

Yet, thanks to this lifelong enemy, my wife and I have enjoyed the serenity of the English countryside, the spectacle of Norwegian fjords and mountains, Italy's Tuscan hills, and the rustic calm of Denmark's coastal dunes. We have managed to enjoy Europe at our pace, on our terms, freed from the pressure of timetables, schedules and frenetic tour guides shepherding their flocks like teachers pushing a third-grade class through a museum. Thus, while I still regard the automobile as my sworn enemy in urban America, I readily concede that it has become an indispensable ally in the European countryside.

There is a reason for this schizophrenia. A half-century of American motor madness has destroyed much of the pleasure of motoring. A generation ago, a family could pile into the DeSoto and enjoy a day in the countryside; now a family traveling by car encounters bottlenecks on an eight-lane highway, homogenized, government-approved scenery, and the decomposing urban sprawl—Speedo-Burgers, Wash-O-Rama, Macadam Drive-Inns, and plastic garden apartments.

The European countryside, in contrast, is still that: a *countryside*. Twenty minutes from Bergen, Norway, brings you to fjord country; an hour outside of London stand thatch-roofed cottages and quiet streams. Precisely because the automobile is *not* king in Europe, motoring is a pleasure. It can bring a visitor into diverse, refreshing environments. In much of America, the automobile *is* the environment.

Our first motoring experience in Europe was almost our last. Both Harriet—my wife, and the sole driver in our family—and I had been hypnotized by British novels celebrating the countryside, and the serenity of small towns and villages. Our thirst for rusticity was almost overcome by apprehension as we set out from London's Heathrow Airport, with Harriet peering at the *left*-hand side of the road from the *right*-hand side of the car.

Within an hour, we had managed to avoid three wrong-way turns around traffic circles by slim margins; driving out of Oxford, a traffic policeman watched our uncertain path and snapped, "One more turn like that and I'll run you in for reckless driving."

ODE TO EUROPE'S EMPTY ROADS

LIFESTYLES/Jeff Greenfield

Dropping my navigational duties, I began chanting, "*Left*-hand side of the road, *left*-hand side of the road..." With this incantation warding off danger, we reached the Cotswold Valley, where the green hills and valleys dispelled our earlier anxiety. We drove leisurely, on a two-lane road, taking in the farms and streams. By early evening, after following a dirt road two miles, we stopped in Minster Lovell, a

town of small thatched cottages, where stand the ruins of one of the oldest Christian churches in Europe. We were less interested in the spiritual attractions of Minster Lovell than in a distinctly materialistic lure. Minster Lovell is the home of the Old Swan Inn, a food-and-lodging establishment with a deceptively countrified exterior. Inside, we found paneled walls, brass and silver utensils, and black-tie waiters. The food was elaborate, delicious, and served with grace and confidence—fresh-caught trout, *tournedos*, an enormous cheese tray, and a huge selection of wines.

Minster Lovell set the tone for our motoring in Britain. Using a road map and the Egon Ronay guide—which lists and rates every hotel, restaurant, inn and pub in the British Isles—our week on the road was a joy. We had never heard of the town of Ludlow; it turned out to be a city with the air of the 14th century. A single bridge leads in and out of the city, with a walled fortress spanning the bridge. The streets are crooked, meandering, and laid out around a venerable town hall. Our hotel—the Angel Inn—was one of three 15th-century hostelries refurbished and modernized. Its dining room was presided over by a stern-faced, good-natured captain who wore a tail coat even at breakfast.

We had never heard of Crainlarich. It is a small village at the top of Scotland's Loch Lomond, with a small inn run by two gracious women who looked shocked at the notion that a guest would want a key. A short walk at teatime and we gorged ourselves on sandwiches, scones and "fancy cakes" for about 75 cents each. After dinner, we sat in the smoking room and chatted with a retired colonel whose life had been spent east of Suez.

There were towns and villages where, each morning, we bought fresh-baked bread and good cheese; lunches at pubs, where we washed it down with brown ale; nights at inns along country roads. It might have been possible to take such a vacation using buses and trains, but what gave the week its spice was the serendipitous quality—the knowledge that we could go where we wanted to, when we wanted to. If a detour caught our eye, we took it. If we wanted to

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change our minds at midday, we did it. The automobile had freed us from relying on anyone else's sense of convenience.

The liberating quality of an auto in Europe was brought home to us two summers ago in Scandinavia. We had planned to travel through the fjord and mountain country of Norway, from Bergen on the West Coast to Oslo. On the flight over, a steward offered us words of warning:

"Don't do it...the roads are treacherous...it's still snow-ridden (this was June)...take a tour."

Naturally, we rented a car. My courage knows no bounds—especially when Harriet is driving, which is always.

Within an hour of leaving Bergen, we were in fjord country: fingers of the sea stretching inland, bordered by imposing mountains. By early evening, we stopped for the night in Stalheim, whose inn has been an attraction for more than a hundred years. It sits at the top of a mountain, overlooking a lush valley, meandering streams and waterfalls.

After an enormous meal and a night during which the light lasted until 2 a.m., we decided to spend the morning at Stalheim, just sitting on the terrace and looking. Almost every other guest was part of a tour; they looked harassed and confused. Schedules were posted all over the hotel:

"Breakfast—7:45 a.m...All bags outside door—8:05 a.m...Departure—8:30 a.m."

All that morning, buses pulled in and out; other tours, staying elsewhere, disgorged their charges for 15 minutes of frantic "sightseeing" and camera-clicking. As we sat on the terrace, taking in the view, we felt as if we were living in slow-motion while all around us people were operating on a fast-forward time.

The five days in the Norwegian countryside made the automobile a permanent friend abroad. Because it was early June, and because the main roads had just been cleared, we were virtually alone in our wanderings. Hotels had just opened, but few guests were willing to travel on roads that were still officially closed. So one evening we found ourselves in an enor-



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mous ski-and-summer resort called the Fefor, with hundreds of tables in the dining room—and a total of eight guests! The lake and the woods were divided between us and a flock of sheep. Sitting down to dinner with a covey of waiters, waitresses and captains, we felt like something out of *Citizen Kane* indulging a billionaire's whim in a mansion where only we were allowed to eat and sleep.

The same kind of emotion followed us through Denmark's countryside, through the middle island of Funen and the western island of Jutland. We meandered up the West Coast of Jutland, stopping the car when we felt like it for a walk through sand dunes and along a gray coast. In one coastal village, our enormous resort hotel, the Christianminde, was so deserted that the formal gardens, the terraces, and the dining room orchestra all belonged to Harriet, myself, and two other couples. And the room they put us in was about the size of a football field.

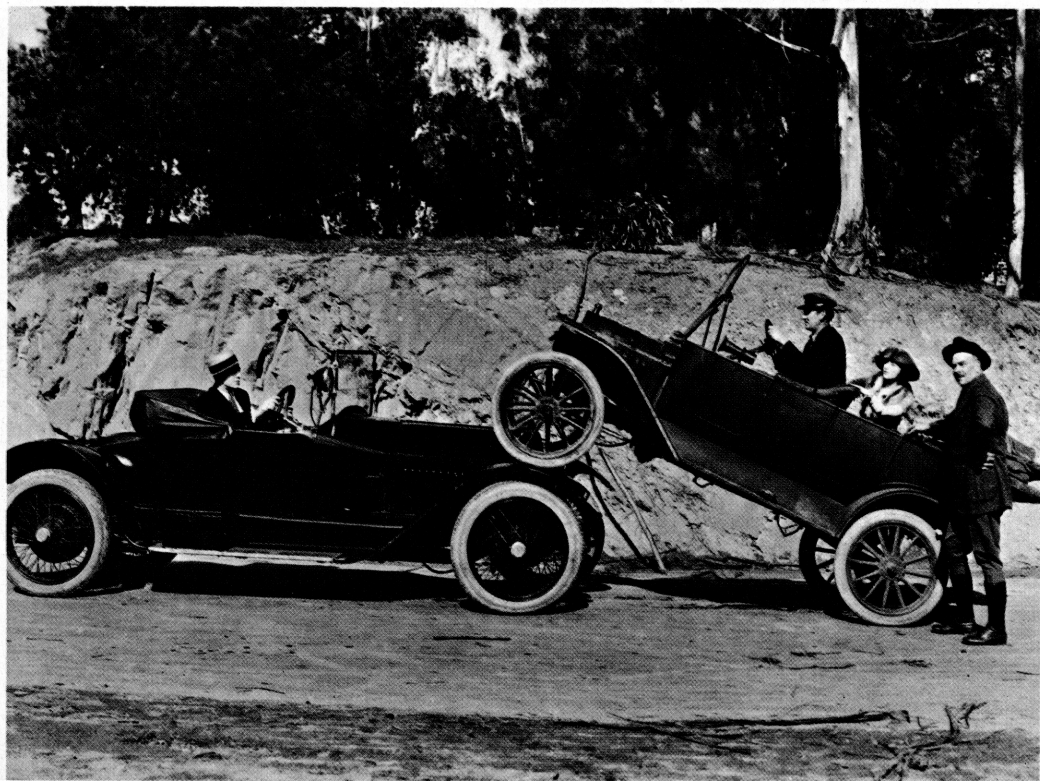
I don't mean to suggest that the auto is everyone's favorite way to see Europe. It's no \$5-a-day deal: most small cars rent for about \$5 a day plus 5 cents a kilometer, and gasoline winds up costing about 90 cents a gallon. This in competition with inexpensive train travel, and the trains in Europe tend to be much better than in America. Some of them, like the Trans-European Express we took from Paris to Milan one year, are so good that a typical Penn Central railroad rider simply wouldn't believe it: comfortable, clean coaches, on-the-dot punctuality, a route through beautiful countryside, and a four-course Italian dinner for about \$8. And Italy's "rapido" trains, with air-conditioning and all-reserved seats, put America's dying rail system to shame.

But there's one key drawback: railroads leave when *they* want to go. Also, logically enough, Italian railroads run in Italian. When we traveled through Italy recently by train, we found ourselves asking questions of porters, trainmen, and conductors, all of whom smiled and spoke to us in flawless Italian. We responded in flawless English. They answered in flawless...Well, you get the general idea. It wasn't too bad for us, because we'd re-



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lied on the hotel concierge to book our train passage. But we saw a lot of Americans running around train stations in Venice, Florence and Rome waving hundred lira notes and yelling “*prègo, prègo, dammit, prègo!*” at anyone in a uniform. And we had our own encounter with chaos in Naples, when we found ourselves in a crowd of 200 Neapolitans yelling at the baggage car crew to give us our suitcases. It was like waking up and finding yourself in a soccer game—with you as the ball.

Renting cars meant we could load and unload suitcases at the doors of our hotels, without wondering where cabs were and how much they cost. We could drop a car off in a big city, and get about town by means of the usually efficient and inexpensive mass transit of urban centers, but still retain the advantages of auto travel when we went through the countryside. It meant we could leave Brussels in the morning, spend a day at a luxury resort in the Smois Valley that evening, and be on our way without worrying about which bus or train was the right one.

I’m still determined never to own a car as long as I live in New York. I still think the auto is a danger to urban America. I still think we’ve got to rely more on railroads, subways, and new transportation systems in the United States before we choke ourselves to death. But I’ve also learned that, as long as the automobile is controlled, it can be a sheer delight to a vacationer—giving him the chance to see what he wants when he wants to see it.

There’s a danger, of course, that thoughtless and short-sighted highway development will destroy the European countryside—that the quiet roads through Denmark, for example, will turn into speedways with steel-and-glass fast-food stands taking the place of quiet country inns and leisurely restaurants. Norway is building a new highway through its mountains; it will be easier to drive than the twisting route we took, but I wonder if it will be as beautiful, or as much fun.

Until overdevelopment ruins the quiet places that we have discovered by car, we plan to stay on the road in Europe. The automobile has made our vacations something special. ©



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