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# Around the World in 80 Days

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# Around the World in 80 Days

MICHAEL PALIN



PHOENIX

# Preface to the new edition

Little did I imagine, as I was turned away from the doors of the Reform Club in London after completing my circumnavigation of the globe back in December 1988, that far from being an end to my travelling career, this was just the beginning. *Around The World In Eighty Days* was to become around the world in twenty years.

I had intended to stop once we reached the unyielding doors of the Reform Club and return to a normal life – slapping people with fish, running over Kevin Kline in a steamroller and singing the Lumberjack Song in German to selected audiences. The attempt to circle the world in less than three months without ever leaving its surface had, I felt, offered me enough adventure to last a lifetime.

But something had happened on all those long sea trips, on battered cargo boats and creaking container ships, on heaving Indian trains and racing dog sleds in the Rockies. Though I had travelled with a course of painful injections and bag full of pills and potions, nothing had protected me against the overpowering, aching desire to do the whole thing again. It was as if a door had been opened through which I could see a big beckoning world. I could see North Poles and South Poles and Equators and Tropics and rapids and volcanoes and it was all much more exciting than slapping people with fish. The success of *Around The World In Eighty Days*, and a very tolerant wife and family, made it possible for me to walk through this door and discover new people, new places, and experience sights and sounds beyond my wildest expectations.

Twenty years on, I and my crew, many of whom had accompanied me on that first journey, have been to every continent in the world, travelled hundreds and thousands of miles across every terrain from ice and snow to burning desert, and regurgitated it all in seven books and television series.

So I must thank my lucky stars, and Clem Vallance and the BBC in particular, for creating for me a role I never expected, that of a sort of tour guide to the world. I also have to thank those who so selflessly agreed to let our camera peer into their lives, for, as I've learnt in all my series, it's the people you meet who make the programmes work.

Bearing that in mind we decided that the best way to celebrate twenty years of travelling would be some sort of a reunion. The choice was easier than I'd expected. Looking back over the years no single experience has remained more powerfully in my memory than our dhow journey from Dubai to Bombay. It was the first time I realised quite how much the success or failure of our series depended on those with whom we were travelling, in this case a crew of eighteen Indian fishermen from a small village north of Bombay. Despite their assurances of getting us to Bombay in six days, we shared the boat with them for a week. We slept on deck, sacks of pistachio nuts beneath us, we learnt to use a toilet which was nothing more than a box suspended over the stern of the ship, we gratefully ate the curries they produced from nowhere and we tried not to think about the lack of life-jackets, or the fate of the captain's brother whose dhow and entire crew had perished in a storm the year before.

It was only when the time came to say goodbye in Bombay that I sensed just how close we'd all become. The combination of my gratitude and their affection made leave-taking difficult and surprisingly emotional. As I said in my commentary, 'It's almost impossible to accept that I shall never see them again.'

So, after twenty years, I took myself at my word and we went in search of the crew of the *Al Shama*. The result of this extraordinary trip is contained in a new chapter at the end of this book.

The way we made *Around The World in Eighty Days* can never be repeated. Now we have mobile phones and global positioning satellites and digital tapes instead of cans of celluloid. But how much the people and their lives have changed is less easy to tell.

There was only one way to find out, and the reissue of the book and our return to India and the Gulf is more than just a celebration of all twenty years on the road, it's an affirmation that, for this traveller at least, there is still no end in sight.

MICHAEL PALIN *London, September 2008*

## Note on names

As this is a 20-year-old text, names are sometimes out of date. Bombay has become Mumbai and Madras, Chennai since then. To keep the flavour of the time, we've kept the old names.

# Introduction

The compulsive urge to travel is a recognised physical condition. It has its own word, dromomania, and I'm glad to say I suffer from it. The ambition of every dromomaniac is a circumnavigation of the planet, but it's a less fashionable journey now than in Jules Verne's day. Part of the reason is that you can do it by air in 36 hours (a technological feat that Verne would have greatly appreciated). But air travel shrink-wraps the world leaving it small, odourless, tidy and usually out of sight.

There are container vessels which will take you round in 63 days, but you will see only water on 58 of those. The reason why Phileas Fogg's 80-day journey retains its appeal is that it is still the minimum time needed to go round the world and notice it. To see it, smell it and touch it at the same time.

Each time I look at the map and retrace my progress I become painfully aware of the countries I didn't visit, and I'm sure there would be a case for a zig-zag circumnavigation which would take in Australia and Thailand and Russia and Africa and South America and Canada. Nevertheless my route, following Fogg's as closely as possible, still took me through an extraordinary sequence of countries: from the European empires of Britain and Venice and Greece, to Egypt, one of the oldest civilisations on earth, through the heart of the Muslim world, across India into China and the awesomely energetic economies of the Pacific Rim countries – Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan – and finally to America, still the most influential nation in the world.

The pace of this kind of travel has not much changed since Fogg set out in 1872. Trains may be a little faster, but there are certainly no high-speed rail links yet across India, China or the USA. Passenger services have practically disappeared from the world's shipping lanes, whilst at the same time the armoury of bureaucratic obstacles – visas, permits, passports and carnets –

has proliferated. Recourse to air travel, even as a convenient means of escape, was not allowed.

But these were challenges and challenges help to make an adventure, and an adventure was what I was after when I signed up. This diary is a record of success and failure, of euphoria and deep gloom, of friends made and advice and help generously given on what must still be the ultimate terrestrial journey.

There was never time to dig very deep and those expecting profound international insights will be disappointed. I'm particularly aware of how traumatically China suffered only a few months after my visit. But my journey around the world gave me a sense of global scale, of the size and variety of this extraordinary planet, of the relation of one country and one culture to another which few people experience and many ought to.

For this I am eternally grateful to a lot of people. Not least to Clem Vallance of the BBC who dreamt up the whole crazy idea, and thought of me; to Will Wyatt who first asked me and made sure I didn't say no; to my wife Helen and the family who let me go; to my attentive, patient, incredibly hard-working, almost uncomplaining Passepartout* – Nigel Meakin, Ron Brown, Julian Charrington, Nigel Walters, Dave Jewitt and Simon Maggs, who between them shot and recorded film on 77 out of 80 days; to Angela Elbourne and Ann Holland without whose level-headed, panic-free presence I would probably still be at Cairo station; to Basil Pao, without whom none of us might have survived Hong Kong and China, and to Roger Mills who, along with Clem Vallance, directed, guided, encouraged, cajoled and tolerated me for many months.

MICHAEL PALIN *London, 1989*

## *Note about my Passepartout

Clem Vallance and Roger Mills (with production assistants Angela Elbourne and Ann Holland) travelled all the way with me. Nigel Meakin, Ron Brown and Julian Charrington filmed me to Hong Kong, then Nigel Walters, Dave Jewitt and Simon Maggs brought me home.

## Day 1 25 September

I LEAVE THE REFORM CLUB, Pall Mall, London one hundred and fifteen years, three hundred and fifty-six days, ten and three-quarter hours after Phileas Fogg. It's a wet, stuffy morning, I've had three and a half hours sleep and the only thing I envy Phileas is that he's fictional.

Few buildings could be more fitted to a Great Departure. With its 60-foot-high main hall, marble columns, galleried arcades and the grand scale of a Renaissance palace the Reform Club is a place of consequence, grand and grave enough to add weight to any venture.

This morning it smells of old fish, and glasses and bottles from the night before stand around. I can see no one sampling the sort of breakfast Fogg had taken the day he left: '… a side dish, a boiled fish with Reading sauce of first quality, a scarlet slice of roast beef garnished with mushrooms, a rhubarb and gooseberry tart, and a bit of Chester cheese, the whole washed down with a few cups of that excellent tea, specially gathered for the stores of the Reform Club.'

I have tried to follow Fogg's example and travel light. 'Only a carpetbag,' he had instructed his servant Passepartout, 'in it two woollen shirts and three pairs of stockings … my mackintosh and travelling cloak, also stout shoes, although we shall walk but little or not at all.' I've managed to find a passable equivalent of a carpet bag and in it packed six shirts, six pairs

of socks, six pairs of underpants, three T-shirts, a towel, a pair of swimming trunks, a short-sleeved sweater, three pairs of light trousers (long), two pairs ex-R.A.F. trousers (short), a pair of sports shorts, a sponge bag, various pharmaceuticals, a change of shoes, a jacket and tie, a Sony Walkman, six cassettes, a small short-wave radio, a Panama hat and one or two heavy and serious books with which to improve my mind on long sea journeys. In a shoulder bag I carry my diary, a small Dictaphone recorder for on-the-spot notes, a camera, the BBC's *Get By In Arabic*, a Kingsley Amis novel, some extra-strong mints, a packet of 'Family Wipes', an address book and an inflatable globe to enable me to check on our progress. Phileas Fogg would doubtless have regarded all this as clutter, but it's still less than I would take on a two-week holiday.

These bags I heave up onto my shoulders as the clock shows ten o'clock. I carry them down the stairs, out of the tall doorway and into Pall Mall. I've eighty days left to get back in again.

Fogg went from the Reform Club to Charing Cross station, I leave from Victoria.

Here I find Passepartout, who will travel everywhere with me. Unlike Fogg's Passepartout, mine is five people, has fifty pieces of baggage and works for the BBC. Roger Mills is the director of this first leg of the journey and is already bemoaning the fact that we've just missed some foul weather in the English Channel. 'If only this had been yesterday.' He draws on his pipe despondently. Ann Holland is his Production Assistant. She will keep full details of all the shots we take, and keep in touch with our base camp in London. Nigel Meakin and Julian Charrington are the camera team and Ron Brown is recording sound. The film equipment is in containers of many shapes and sizes and mostly very heavy. As I help them down the platform with a muscle-tearing case of film stock I think of Phileas – 'one of those mathematically exact people … never hurried … calm, phlegmatic, with a clear eye' – and how desperately unlike him I am.

However, I am leaving London in a manner of which he would doubtless have approved had it been available in 1872, aboard the Venice–Simplon Orient Express. Last farewells and a check on the exact time of departure by two friends acting as judges. Fogg's friends were bankers. Mine, Messrs Jones and Gilliam, are Pythons. Terry Jones eyes Passepartout, already about his business with the camera. 'You're going to have to look happy for eighty days.' 'No,' I reassure him. 'There'll be no cheating.' Then the whistle sounds, the last door slams and we're off.

I am installed in a sumptuous refurbished Pullman coach called 'Zena'. Behind me are 'Ibis', 'Lucille', 'Cygnus' and 'Ione'. Antimacassars, marble washbasins, upholstered armchairs and inlaid walnut panelling come as a bit of a shock to one used to the Gatwick Express, but I try hard to forget about guilt and silly things like that and sit back and sniff the fresh orchids and sip a little champagne. The leader of a crack force of waiters approaches, issuing brisk directives.

'We *do* advise you to be seated. We're coming through the train with hot soup.'

We are dealt a three-course meal and coffee in 55 minutes flat. It's delicious, but such is the precision with which it has to be served that you feel that any lingering over the menu might result in the aforementioned hot soup being lightly but firmly applied upon some tender area.

A huge scar slices into the landscape on the eastern side of the train. It's the site for the Channel Tunnel terminal, 16 acres of devastation. Jules Verne would surely have approved, being a man fascinated by transport technology. He'd probably have sent his hero to have a look at it. Or rather, he'd have sent Passepartout to do it for him, as Fogg hated sightseeing.

We're in Folkestone now, the last few hundred yards of England, and rumbling down a steep gradient past back gardens close up to the railway line; a world of sheds and extensions, corrugated iron and chicken wire, unself-conscious,

domestic and reassuring. The sun breaks momentarily through the leaden cloud causing the mountain of cut-glass on my table to sparkle, but the word is that the Channel is 'rough' to 'very rough', and I'm glad I passed on the ginger profiteroles.

No longer do the ferries carry trains and at Folkestone Harbour I part company with 'Zena' and take up with the *Horsa*, a 6,000-tonne vessel which has been plying the 22-mile crossing to France for 16 years.

'It's that Monty Python bloke!' shouts one of the crew as I mount the first of many gangplanks of the world. He turns confidingly to me: 'If you want a farce, you've got one here.' The passageways of the *Horsa* smell of day-old school food, but we Oriental Expressers are ushered to our own private lounge.

It's a dispiriting place, decorated in International Cowboy Saloon Style. The walls are ringed with reverentially lit alcoves which look as if they might contain international art treasures or religious icons, but which, on closer inspection, are found to be full of duty-free goods.

Seeking refuge from the world of 'Antaeus, Pour Homme' and 'Superkings', I walk out on deck. It's mid-afternoon and the white cliffs of home are now little more than a blur. A huge black cloud seems to be sealing England off behind us. A sharp, squally wind that would test the stoutest toupee rips across from the West. With friends and familiar surroundings disappearing over the horizon, I catch my breath for a moment at the scale of what is just beginning.

The Channel crossing is bumpy, but to the director's chagrin nothing more. A Force 5. 'I've had her out in a Force 12,' says the captain, eyes skinned for stray fishing boats, tankers, ferries, yachts, channel-swimmer's support vessels and every floating thing that makes this one of the busiest waterways in the world.

4.30: On the bridge. From a mile out at sea Boulogne, France, looks to consist of one huge steelworks, but as we get nearer a hard skyline of soot-flecked concrete apartment blocks looms.

Down below, the Orient Express passengers are impatient to party. They so want to have a good time, and the expensive hours are ticking away and the luxury they were promised is not to be found on the *Horsa* or in the passageways of Boulogne's dockside. But spirits rise once they reach the platform of Boulogne station at which stand a dozen coaches sporting the navy-blue livery and solid brass letters of the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits et des Grands Express Européens. I am billeted in sleeping car 3544, built in 1929, decorated in 'Sapelli Pearl' inlay by René Prou and having been, in the course of a long and distinguished career, a brothel for German officers and part of the Dutch royal train. My cabin is small but perfectly formed, sheathed in veneered mahogany inlaid with Art-Deco panels. From this luxury cocoon I watch grey, seagull-ridden Boulogne slipping away and when its drab suburbs have gone, I turn once more to make-believe, and begin unpacking my dinner jacket.

I dine next to a couple from Southend who are celebrating their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary with an Orient Express trip to Paris. Nice people but, looking round, I'm rather disappointed at the lack of princesses, murderers and deposed heads of Europe. Most of the 188 passengers are either going to a pipeline conference in Venice or are Mid-Westerners on a tour. Instead of falling into risqué conversation with a Mata Hari of the 1980s, I end up in the piano bar with the pipeliners. They seem very interested to hear that, in 70 days from now, I hope to cross the Atlantic from Halifax, Nova Scotia. 'We've got a big pipe there, we could flush you through.'

My cabin has been prepared for the night by Jeff, a down-to-earth, well-informed Englishman who has responsibility for Coach 3544. The bed is soft but short. 'Yes, we do have a bit of trouble with our Americans,' he concedes. 'There's one tonight who's 6 foot 8.' He looks apprehensively down the corridor, listening no doubt for the giant's tread. Feeling for the first time in my life rather smug about being 5 foot 10 and a half, I turn in.

The train is heading for the Belfort Gap, my head is buzzing with an evening's champagne, and so far circumnavigation is a doddle.

## Day 2 26 September

Slept as badly as I ever have in a really comfortable bed. Passepartout complains as well so it can't just be me. The ride of these old coaches is not as smooth as their interior design.

8.30: Jeff arrives carrying a tray of croissants, brioches, jams, hot, dark, intensely tasty coffee and the *International Herald Tribune*. More record-breaking from Ben Johnson in the Olympics. Pull back the curtain and there is Switzerland. The murky gloom of Northern Europe has been replaced by clear and cloudless skies, and the *banlieues* of Boulogne by neat meadows grazed by neat cows interspersed with neat factories. All this orderliness is contained within violently twisted cliffs of rock rising thousands of feet to left and right. As we slow through a small town people gaze at us, curiously but not censoriously. The conspicuous luxury of the Orient Express seems not so remarkable here in Switzerland. Perhaps it goes with numbered bank accounts and private nuclear shelters.

A little trouble shaving. There seems to be no hot water to fill my exquisite marble wash basin. Jeff is philosophical.

'Try the cold tap, sir.' Sure enough a steamy, near-boiling torrent pours out.

There's never a dull moment on the Orient Express and flakes of brioche are still fresh on my fingers when the first call comes for brunch. Before I embarked on this journey I sought advice from many experienced travellers, and it was John Hemming, the Director of the Royal Geographical Society, who advised me that a true explorer never turns down a meal. It might be the last he'll be offered for days. I decide to approach brunch in this spirit, tucking into Eggs Benedict but avoiding a 'light breakfast wine' at £24 a bottle.

We cross Liechtenstein between the second and third courses, and are entering our fifth country in less than twenty-four hours, when things begin to go wrong. We are diverted through the town of Buchs because of derailment (which I just can't imagine happening on such an immaculately run system) and worse than this, we are to terminate at Innsbruck as there is a rail strike in Italy. So the Venice–Simplon Orient Express will not, today, visit either Venice or Simplon.

A bus is to be provided at Innsbruck but they are unable to guarantee the arrival time. Nervous now because of our tight ship connection onward from Venice, there's nothing I can do but sit back and enjoy the view. We're winding up to the Ahlberg Pass, through sweeping panoramas of lush green slopes and mountainsides of acid-rain-crippled trees. The villages with their onion-dome steeples lie calm and drowsy in the valleys. From each one there fans out a network of grey pylons carrying the cars, cables and chair-lifts on which their livelihood depends, and in the winter here you'll hardly be able to move.

Twenty-four hours after leaving Victoria the Orient Express pulls into Innsbruck, Austria and from its seventeen coaches in orderly confusion come the pipeliners and the Mid-Westerners and the porters and the apologetic couriers and even the chefs bearing food on silver plates, all of which is carried across the station car park to a fleet of anonymous modern coaches. Everyone tries desperately to pretend that they're still having just as good a time, but the magic's gone.

At the Brenner Pass we are delayed interminably while Austrian customs search for the correct stamp for our film equipment clearance. As the sun sinks behind the mountains I make a quick calculation based on the time it's taking to leave Austria. At a rough estimate I could be spending eight of the next eighty days waiting at customs. Not a problem Fogg had to deal with. Nor was he ever faced with what the Austrians call, rather dramatically, a *streik*. His train would be rattling through the Alps by now.

At the Italian border, a bottle of Orient Express champagne is passed over and this seems to speed up the customs process. Soon, amid smiles, shrugs and assorted gesticulations we are off and running into the land where a *streik* is only a *sciopero*.

Crossing the lagoon which divides Venice from the mainland a dreadful smell assails us. It's sulphur from the massive chemical works at Mestre, sending up a malodorous halo around the Serenissima, and firmly deflating romantic anticipations.

Twenty minutes later: On the canals. Stuck firmly under a bridge. We are in a fully laden 40-foot barge trying to negotiate a 90-degree corner. Sandro, our boatman, skips elegantly but ineffectually about the vessel and blames the tides. A small crowd of Japanese tourists has gathered on the bridge above us. They seem to have eight cameras each. It's all rather embarrassing. When Sandro eventually pushes us, and a fair-sized chunk of sixteenth-century stonework, away from the bridge, we find ourselves backing into a funeral procession. Somebody popular by the looks of things, as fresh gondolafuls of mourners keep appearing round the corner.

Much later: Hot, tired and missing the Orient Express and the antimacassars and the ever-solicitous Jeff to guide me through life, I find myself at the Hotel Atlantide with my bag weighing heavy.

The Italians take being on film very seriously, but not quite as seriously as what they're wearing when they're being filmed, and this costs André, one of the hotel receptionists, the part of Man Who Shows The Presenter To His Room. He goes off to do his hair and put on a suit, leaving the way clear for his colleague Massimo, who is not so worried about his personal appearance, to turn in a splendidly moody performance. There's no lift. My room is at rooftop level with a small balcony which does not enjoy any of the classic views of Venice. As I clean my teeth the

first cockroach of the trip scuttles across cracked bathroom tiles.

## Day 3 27 September

A few hours to kill in Venice before leaving by boat for Greece, Crete and Egypt. The director thinks it would be nice for me to see the city from the back of a rubbish barge, and very soon, perhaps a little too soon, after breakfast I find myself hosing down the Riva degli Schiavoni and tossing plastic bagfuls of Venetian unmentionables into the garbage barge. Mario, 48 years old, with a 13-year-old son and a daughter of 20, is in charge of our squad. 'Even the rubbish in Venice isn't cheap any more,' he replies to my routine suggestion that this must be one of the most beautiful cities to grow up in. 'The young can't afford to live here now.' The other two members of our crew are Fabbio, who turns out to have weightlifted for his country, and is profoundly embarrassed by the whole filming, and Sandro, curly-headed, beautiful, pre-Raphaelite, and unreachable on most levels.

We move at a stately pace up the canals, hurrying for nobody. Refuse collecting gives one a smug sense of superiority. The veneered-wood and polished brass launches may huff and puff as they try to get past us with their expensive cargoes, but we know they know how much they need us. We've seen what they like to keep out of sight.

I enjoy my refuse-eye view of Venice and suggest to Roger that we make it the first of a Great Dustmen Of The World series, to be followed, if successful, by Great Sewers Of The World.

Ron Passepartout baulks at this. 'I've just spent five weeks in the sewers, thank you!' He is referring not to conditions at TV Centre, but to a programme he's just made about a man who had taken refuge in the war in the sewers of Lvov. Ron has been

everywhere and met everyone. On the very first day of filming the phone rang on location and a P.A., covering the mouthpiece, shouted, 'Ron! Can you do the Pope, Friday?'

By boat to the Venice Post Office to send my dinner jacket back to London, the smartest part of the journey being already over. This is one of The Great Post Offices Of The World, located in the Fondaco dei Tedeschi, built between 1505 and 1508 as a base for German merchants in Venice. There's a wide brick-tiled courtyard with a stone fountain in the middle surrounded by three levels of pillared galleries. The walls were once decorated with the works of the great Venetians, like Titian – but of these only, as the guidebook has it, 'one much-impaired nude' by Giorgione remains. I notice a lot of young, beautiful women heaving mailbags out onto the quayside beneath the Rialto Bridge. They also work for the Post Office. The Grand Canal, at this point, is like Piccadilly Circus, and the driving is terrible, with motoscafi cutting up vaporettos and cement barges cutting up taxis and gondolas gliding serenely and suicidally between the lot of them.

I seek refuge at the Hostaria del Milion – good unpretentious food and wine in a tiny, intimate little courtyard. Two doors down there still stands the house where Marco Polo lived and from which he departed on his great journeys to the East. I stand and look up at the modest stone walls, as if there might be something I can learn from them. A photographer takes pictures of me doing this. He's an Italian. His real name's Renato but I've taken to calling him Posso which is the only word I've heard from him today.

'Posso?' Snap. I feel sorry for these still photographers. They're only doing their job, but they keep getting in the way of Passepartout and making him very cross.

Early evening: Our departure for the Levant is not, sadly, from some photogenic quayside flanked by the Lions of St Mark, but from the tourist-neglected backside of Venice, the docks of the

Stazione Marittima. The soft warmth of the day has given way to a chilly evening as our baggage barge chugs past the soaring hulls of a rough assortment of freighters – a Russian boat from Starnov, the *River Tyne* from Limassol (a poignant reminder of where the British shipping industry has gone) and finally the elegant wave-moulded bow and milk chocolate hull of my home for the next four days, the *Espresso Egitto, Venezia*. Maybe because we're all tired, or maybe because we can only count eleven portholes on her side, Passepartout and I are not as responsive as we might be to the promise of the *Egyptian Express*. A shout causes me to turn, lose my footing and almost disembowel myself on the camera tripod.

'Posso?' Snap.

Aboard ship after two hours in bureaucratic limbo on the quayside. 'People Who Need People' echoes from the PA system. 'People Who Need Portholes' would be more appropriate. Ron is in deep decline. His cabin not only lacks portholes but also lights. I keep trying to remember not to tell him what I can see out of my window.

What I *can* see is the delicate skyline of Venice at night, as we pass through the lagoon. A soft, almost insubstantial image, I feel that if I rub my eyes and look again it will be gone.

'The end of civilisation,' someone mutters darkly, as the stone quaysides and lamplit arcades recede into the distance. A bit of an exaggeration, especially if you're a Greek, but it is the end of temperate climates, seasons, and western ways for a month or two, and I allow myself a little homesickness.

## Day 4 28 September

The *Espresso Egitto* is a vessel of 4,686 tonnes, built in Livorno 14 years ago. She's owned by the nationalised Adriatic Navigation Company and provides the only regular passenger