

A birthday is a day off

By Constance Scrafield

It's my birthday this week ? let's have some fun...

Lots of years ago, my then husband, Ernest, and I were travelling in an old Volkswagen van across Eastern Europe, headed for Greece, with no schedule. The van was pretty basic but we lived in it for months so it was comfortable enough. The adventure was all.

As navigator, I noted that Istanbul was only a thousand kilometres east of the very spot where we were camped for the night. ?Well,? says I, a finger on map ? ?just look at that. Who knows if we'll be back this way any time soon. We should go and see it, don't you think?? And the answer was, yes, he did think.

Driving into Istanbul from the road west of it is to see one of the most stunning sky lines imaginable. It is the minarets rising above everything, so elegant, with only the domes visible of the world-famous mosques by which they stand, the sun shining on it all, the eastern music in the air, even at a distance, declares a place that is exotic and fascinating.

A large campground was just outside the city and, booking a place there, we hurried to join Istanbul. It was so different from Europe, from Canada; most people were dressed in djellabas and loose trousers and shirts. The women wore robes; some but not all covered their heads. The architecture and decoration of the intricately woven patterns on the buildings, complicated and beautiful, were wonderful to see.

?Funny to think of it,? Ernest commented. ?One part of this city is in Europe but the other part, take the ferry across the Bosphorus, you're in Asia. It's the only city that spans two continents.?

We wandered through it, visiting the famous and huge Hagia Sofia, the labyrinth of the souk, the port where fish, freshly caught and cooked on the decks, accounted for lunch.

We decided to drive south, crossing the Bosphorus, indeed, into Asia. We travelled the coast along the Aegean Sea. The city Ismir was hosting a festival, but we carried on without dallying there until we came to the village of Soke, where our van broke down. Beside a cafe. As luck would have it, the village mechanic, a broad man, with broad gestures and a wholly generous attitude toward strangers, was taking his coffee there and he came to our rescue immediately. He cast an expert's eye over the engine, saw the problem; knew how to fix it.

Between us, for a common language, there was some English on his part, enough to bridge the gap.

?No problem,? he pronounced, ?my boys will fix it. Meanwhile, be my guest here at the cafe,? ushering us on to the patio.

We drank the intense, delicious Turkish coffee, with honeyed pastries; he pulled out a hookah for himself and Ernest to enjoy (not so sure). We laughed and told stories until, like magic, our van was back with us, ready to go.

The previous Christmas, my grandmother had given Ernest a silver key chain, to which he attached the van's keys. The motor was running when we got into the van and we continued south, happy and relieved that the repair had not been expensive. When we found a perfect place to camp, we stopped and it was then Ernest noted his key chain was missing.

Searching the van produced no results: the mechanic's ?boys? had stolen it.

?Soke's on the way back,? Ernest said. ?We'll tell him ? he won't be happy about it ? we were his guests.?

We took our time on this idyllic spot on the coast, before heading back to Soke.

The mechanic was easy again to spot. As Ernest had predicted, he was furious that his hospitality had been violated by the theft.

?The boys are at the festival,? he told us. ?When they get back, I will tear their rooms apart to find your keychain.?

So, after coffee to seal our friendship, we left him with the address of the Canadian embassy in Athens and went on with our journey.

Into Greece we travelled, taking several days, down into the mighty city of Athens, the Parthenon overshadowing the whole. The city was busy, many of the buildings were raised on stilts, the streets were lined with eateries.

Finding our way to the embassy, we went in looking for money from Canada as we were all but out and to see if there was a parcel from Turkey. There was no money but there was a parcel.

Opening it, we discovered, not really to our surprise but happy to see it: Ernest's silver key chain, with a note apologizing and promising life-long friendship.

As to the money, it was on its way and how we managed for the two weeks it took to arrive is a story for another time.