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Here's your annual description of people you don't know, places you don't want to visit, and situations you hope you won't ever experience. Read on to find out why to hope never to be allowed inside an Ethiopian Orthodox church, how to find your way in the desert, and why not to name ceramic figurines after your loved ones.

January

TANJAVUR, TAMIL NADU, INDIA – So many ingredients, so little time – no wonder the traditional healer was nervous: the conference moderator was pushing him to go faster. Evelyn was called onto the stage. “Hold out your hand”, she was told, and the healer put the mixture into it – and set light to it. Flame and smoke, but no heat. The healer extinguished the flame, then wiped Evelyn's hand with a cloth before turning to prepare the next remedy. What was the medicine for? No idea, but it worked: no burn marks, though I swear her hand is still glowing.

February

ADDIS ABABA AIRPORT, ETHIOPIA – The red carpet was rolled out on the tarmac, ready for the next president's plane to land for a meeting of African heads of government. The brass band was on standby to play the arriving dignitary's national anthem. Better call that “layby”: drums and tubas were lined up in neat rows on the tarmac; a ragged line of uniformed band members lay asleep on the red carpet.

BAHIR DAR, ETHIOPIA – My Swedish colleague Anna and I went out for an evening walk along the shore of Lake Tana. A guard carrying an AK-47 gesticulated as we passed. “Sorry, we don't speak Amharic”, we shrugged, and continued along the path. Five minutes later, three men came in the opposite direction. “That way is not fair”, said one. “Not fair?” we were puzzled. “That way is not fair”, he repeated, pointing the way we were going. “Not safe?” we ventured. “Yes, not safe. There is honey”, he said. “Hyenas?” we suggested. “Yes, hyenas.” Now we at least knew what the guard was trying to tell us, and why he was carrying an AK-47.

Sunday afternoon at about 15:00, the hooting begins. First comes a pickup, with a young man perched on the back, facing backwards and shooting video of the following vehicles. Then comes a saloon car decorated with ribbons and carrying the bride and groom, followed by a cavalcade of minivans, buses, cars, land cruisers, motorbikes and tuktuks, all honking, flashing their lights and weaving from side to side in an attempt to run down pedestrians. One of the minibuses has a ceremonial basket on the roof, laden with the Ethiopian equivalent of wedding cake. One procession follows another at brief intervals throughout the afternoon.

The rest of the time, the road is empty: either all the vehicles have been chartered for wedding duty, or perhaps all the drivers are getting married.

A steady stream of worshippers went in and out of the Orthodox church across the road from the office. But a small group of young men stood praying outside the gate, facing the wall of the compound. Why don't they go inside? I wanted to know. “Because they are unclean. They have had sex in the previous 24 hours, and they are not allowed inside the compound”, explained one of my Ethiopian colleagues.

I'm still trying to work out whether they were praying for forgiveness, or praising the Lord and asking for further blessings.

The girl – she can't have been more than 15 – accosted me during my lunchtime stroll. “Come to my house to drink coffee” she said, grab-



Doesn't seem like 25 years

bing my shirt and flashing her eyelashes. A lad Anna and I had met the day before said something to her in Amharic, and she disappeared. “I told her that you were married and your wife would be angry”, he said. Back at the office, Anna was understanding: “At least you don't have to stand outside the church wall”, she said.

March

MÜLLENBERG – In an attempt to stimulate the local tourist industry, Germany has introduced lower value-added tax rates for hotels. “When you reclaim your expenses for job-related travel,” says a circular, “report the costs of the breakfast (charged at the old VAT rate) separately from the room (new, lower rate). You must also justify the breakfast as a legitimate expense.” I wonder what a breakfast has to be like to be an illegitimate expense.

AESCHI, SWITZERLAND – I'm glad I don't live in Switzerland – especially not in Aeschi. If I did, I would never get any work done: I would spend my time gazing at the mountains and the lake below. Just as well the training course I taught here was in a room overlooking a car park. That didn't prevent me from going out for walks whenever I could. Hmm... I wonder if they'll invite me back next year?

April

TALL ZIRA'A, JORDAN – Get up at 4:15 every morning, a hurried breakfast, then a bus ride to the site. Hack at the ground with pickaxes and spades all day in the sun and dust, then back to the hotel for a shower before collapsing in exhaustion.

Why pay to get up before the muezzin and spend all day doing what we can do in our own garden? It's all in the cause of science: we had enrolled as volunteers on an archaeological dig on this “tall” – a hill built up of layer upon layer of ruins, going all the way down from the Islamic period, through Byzantine, Roman, Hellenistic, Iron, Bronze and Stone Ages. The tall perches alongside one of the chief routes from the Nile Valley to Damascus and has water year-round, so has been settled for over 5,000 years.

Digging with a trowel rather than a pickaxe, I found a graceful little pottery figurine, minus legs, but still with one ear and two holes for eyes. Thinking it was a gazelle, I named it “Evelyn”. Word quickly spread around the dig that I had found a donkey and named it after my wife. Turns out it was most probably a dog.



Looks like a gazelle to me



If only we worked this hard in our own garden

JERASH, JORDAN – The column-ringed oval piazza in this ruined Roman city is one of Jordan’s main attractions. Just the place for the start of a motor race: the cobbled piazza was filled with rally cars revving their engines, while crowds lined the colonnades to cheer on the drivers. Mentally replace the cars with a caravan of camels laden with incense from distant Yemen, and the function of the piazza has not changed much over the last 2000 years.

WADI MUSA, JORDAN – “You feel reborn after a Turkish bath”, our tour leader promised. So we swapped our street clothes for sarongs and trooped into the sweltering fog. One hot, steamy room was followed by another, even hotter and steamier. Every now and then someone came in

to douse us with cold water. After the sweatrooms came a massage, but progress was slow, and I had been braised for 2½ hours before it was finally my turn to be kneaded. If one wants to be reborn, is it necessary to die such a prolonged death first?

May

MÜLLENBERG – Our next-door neighbour couldn’t hide his disappointment. “You haven’t noticed anything?” he asked, pointing at Oliver’s car, parked in front of our garage. Evelyn studied the vehicle. “There’s a dent in the roof”, she said. The neighbour was crestfallen. “I polished the car while you were away”, he said. “The red was so faded, and I had some polish left over after doing my car.” Evelyn and I treat vehicles merely as a means to get from A to B, pay so little attention to such niceties: he could have painted it green and we still wouldn’t have noticed. But we have begun leaving our own car outside the garage. Maybe it will get a free wash and polish too?

EDEN PROJECT, CORNWALL, UK – It was steamy inside the world’s biggest greenhouse. Evelyn shed several layers of clothing as we wandered through a banana plantation and a bamboo forest. The jackets back on as we emerged into the chilly wind outside.

The weather was no better the next day, when we visited a retirement home for old donkeys. Evelyn was still cold: she took refuge under the heat lamps in the donkey shed. If she is ever reborn, she wants to come back either as a donkey or as a banana plant. Or failing that, get a subscription to a Turkish bath.

June

MÜLLENBERG – That nice Angela Merkel has promised that the whole of Germany will be served by broadband internet. But she seems to have forgotten Müllenberg. We used to use a mobile phone connection to keep in touch with the rest of the world. But that died back in April. I clambered on the roof to reorient the antenna, but to no avail. So we’ve installed a satellite receiver on the roof at great expense. Now we’re OK until it snows.



What happens in Müllenberg if the internet goes down

July

AMSTERDAM, NETHERLANDS – Flocks of bright green parakeets squawk their way across the Oosterpark. The escaped pets have established a colony in the city. Wikipedia says they have successfully adapted to living in “disturbed habitats”. Amsterdam seems to qualify.

SILANG, PHILIPPINES – Two of the buildings were closed, and the roof of a shelter where we used to hold meetings had collapsed. Yes, the campus of the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction, where we lived and worked in 1993–96, had gone downhill. The institute had faced a series of crises and was forced to downsize radically. It now has just 15 staff, compared to more than 100 when we were there.

Angie, Mamet and Joy, my former colleagues at IIRR, hadn’t changed much, though. A bit wiser maybe: Mamet told stories about shopping in Kabul (get out the car, go into a shop to buy something, get back into car, drive 50 m, get out of car again outside the next shop). Angie talked about her new job as a village secretary. And Joy was late as usual – 29 hours late. “Pressure of work”, she said, “a meeting with a client”. Must remember that next time I arrange to meet my ex-boss.

MÜLLENBERG – “I’m not going to visit you”, said our friend Rose on the phone. “You have snakes in your garden.” True, but the snakes are harmless. Anyway, how did she know? “It’s in the paper”, she said.

If it’s in the newspaper, it must be true. Sure enough, there was a photo – my photo – of grass snakes sunning themselves on top of our neighbour’s composter. We had been eating breakfast in the garden, and watched as one snake after another emerged through a hole in the lid of the composter. We counted 18 in all. I had given the photo to our neighbours (well, it was their composter), and they had shown it to someone else, who had passed it on to the local reporter. Who says that nothing ever happens in Müllenberg?

MÜLLENBERG – “My husband gave me a beautiful diamond for our silver wedding!” said a friend. Evelyn got nothing of the sort from me: I bought her a composter instead. She likes the snakes so much that she wants to attract them into our garden too. And trips to the garden store tend to work out cheaper than a visit to the jeweller’s.

Most of Müllenberg turned up in our driveway, bearing wood, greenery, rope, stacks of paper flowers, and an illuminated sign saying “25”. An hour and several beers later, a floral archway stood outside our door. Yes, it’s been a quarter of a century, and I’m amazed that Evelyn has managed to put up with me for so long. She probably is too.

Oliver and Julia were entrusted with managing the entertainment for our silver wedding party. We were treated to ballet (Daisy magical in a jet-black tutu), a Swedish song (I won’t say what your son told me, Hasse), slide shows of embarrassing photos, and a quiz packed with even more embarrassing questions. Evelyn dug out a letter she wrote to her parents after we got engaged: I am mentioned on page 3, after the news that her dog had ticks. We no longer have a dog, but in other respects things haven’t changed much.



18 more reasons not to visit us



I can recommend Julia and Oliver as moderators. Just let me know if you need any embarrassing questions for a quiz



At least I no longer have to compete with a dog for attention

August

SIEBEN-TÄLER CAVE, ROTTENBURG, GERMANY – A great place to get dirty, wet and claustrophobic. You have to crawl to get through the entrance; once inside, you can stand up, but for much of its length you have to slither through muddy pools and walk sideways to squeeze through narrow gaps. Understandably, the cave is now a major tourist attraction: Oliver brought a stream of visitors here every weekend during his internship at a local firm. Bring your own wellies, helmet and lamp.



Now turn around and smile at the camera

September

MASSAI LODGE, NAIROBI, KENYA – “Only two people at a time”, said the guide. The drop was sheer, and crocodiles waited in the river below. The suspension bridge across the gorge was made of the sort of wire you can pick up in a hardware store. It swayed alarmingly as the others in the group shuffled along behind me.

On the far side I considered the options: a 14 km walk in the dark through hyena-infested bush to the next bridge, or climb down into the gorge, swim the river, dodge the crocs, then climb up the other side.

So back across the bridge it was. This time I waited until everyone else had reached the other side before venturing onto the deck.

FEUCHTWANGEN, GERMANY – An opportunity too good to miss: Günther and Ingrid, Julia’s parents, invited us to take part in the annual “Mooswiese” – a centuries-old festival in this picturesque Bavarian town. To mark its 60th anniversary, the Feuchtwangen forestry association planned a large contingent to take part in the parade through town.

We dressed in the appropriate gear: Oliver took a two-man crosscut saw and donned a straw hat to become a mediaeval lumberjack. Evelyn and Julia donned aprons and headscarves and were instantly transformed into 19th-century wood choppers. They rode on a horse-drawn cart, hacking fir branches into kindling and strewing it into the crowd that lined the parade route.

I represented the 21st century: I walked behind their cart, lugging a chainsaw. Günther obviously did not trust me with such a dangerous piece of equipment: the fuel tank was empty. So I was reduced to roaring chainsaw noises as we paraded through the town: brrrrm brrrrrm BRRRMM!

Small children burst into tears as Evelyn and Julia rode past: expecting a hail of goodies, the children were pelted with finely chopped tree. I had to stop pretending to be a chainsaw to distribute sweets to the howling youngsters.

October

GODAVARI, NEPAL – You have escaped from your kidnappers but are lost in the desert. You need to find which direction is north. What do you do?

To get the contract for some work here, I had to get a “security clearance” from my employer – a United Nations agency. That meant taking two online courses so I could earn the requisite certificates. I learned that I should not stay on the ground floor of a hotel (too easy to attack) or above the seventh floor (too high to be rescued in case of fire). I know how to recognize a minefield and what not to do if I stray into one. I know how to plan a convoy through rebel-infested territory, and how to negotiate with the terrorists who have taken me captive.

Perhaps useful skills for shopping in Kabul, but less vital for a stay in a luxury resort outside Kathmandu. Not a minefield or terrorist in sight. The most dangerous thing was probably the drive here: Kathmandu drivers tend to regard pedestrians as entertaining targets and roundabouts as “pass either side” traffic islands.



I thought he said two at a time?



Lucky the fuel tank was empty



That’s beer number three... Two-thirds empty, or one-third full?

Nevertheless, I'm amazed that my other employers do not demand that I have such skills. Though one Catholic organization did insist that I sign a piece of paper pledging not to molest small children while in their employ. They called this the "Gary Glitter clause" after the aged British rocker who committed a series of such crimes in Vietnam.

Oh, the answer to the question: take a sewing needle that you have managed to conceal from your kidnapers, rub it against some silk (ditto) to magnetize it, then put it in a blade of grass and float it in some water. The needle will point north. Let me know if it works.

BRUSSELS, BELGIUM – That grubby-white piece of fluff on legs is not a sheep: it's a "seed taxi". As they graze, sheep pick up all kinds of seeds from the grass and hedgerows. They carry them from one field to another, and every now and then a seed falls onto the ground and germinates.

One person's weeds are another's biodiversity. So Evelyn has been following a flock of sheep around Europe for the last few months. As part of an awareness campaign, an association of shepherds herded their animals from Berlin to Brussels. No, the individual sheep didn't have to walk all that way: one flock took over from another in a kind of bleating relay race. Evelyn didn't either: she visited the flock several times – in Paderborn, Brussels, Bitburg and Trier. At each stop, the sheep were escorted into town by the police, to be greeted by a bagpiper, politicians in suits and high heels, anorak-clad activists and bemused shoppers, before being ushered out to the suburbs to spend the night mowing some public park.

One animal in the flock had a grid spray-painted in blue on its back and sides, and every evening a researcher picked off the seeds to count them. So if you happen to see a sheep with what looks like a noughts-and-crosses board on it, don't mess with it. It's a quadruple-function ovine: it's gathering data for some scientific research, it's a seed taxi, it's a lawn mower – and it's a sheep. Baaa!

VARIGNANA, ITALY – The streets were deserted, the windows shuttered, the houses run down. A couple of elderly people watched as Evelyn rang the door of the guesthouse. No answer. She needed to call on her mobile to get someone to open the door. A dead village: a quiet hilltop backwater, somewhere cheap and warm to spend our retirement?

No: in the evenings, the glitterati of Bologna throng home to Varignana. Behind the dingy facades, the houses have been converted into high-priced condominiums. The narrow streets are full of Maseratis, and the guesthouse hosts one of the best restaurants in the area. Looks like we'll be staying in chilly, Maserati-free Müllenberg after all.

November

MÜLLENBERG – We've found a way to get other people to do our gardening for us – and to pay for the privilege. We invite them to stay with us for several days to do writing and editing work. During the



Yes, I do fashion consulting too

breaks, we take them for walks. When we have softened them up, we put an axe or rake in their hands and set them to work. So far, we've had a tree chopped down and split into firewood, and the leaves raked from the lawn. Digging the potato bed is next. It's amazing what people will do to avoid sitting at a computer trying to write.

KAREN, KENYA – There is such a thing as losing face. That is the only reason I can think of for turning up to a yoga class at 6:40 in the morning. The teacher got a small group of insomniacs into positions that we had not realized were possible given our calcified joints, then told us to relax. Ommmmmm!

Relax? Tricky while balancing on one hand and one foot, with the other arm outstretched and the other foot horizontal against the wall. (Try it and you'll understand why.)

The following morning, fear of losing face drove me to turn up again. And the next morning. But by then I was beginning to get a most un-yoga-like feeling of superiority over those poor souls who preferred their beds to a healthy workout for body and soul.

December

MÜLLENBERG – The satellite dish is covered with a blanket of snow. I've tried hosing it off, but the dish faces the wrong direction. So we are cut off. I would complain to Frau Merkel, but I can't send her an email until it thaws. At least I have a plausible excuse for sending you this letter late.

A very happy Diwali, Christmas, Hanukkah, New Year, Tabaski, Eid Ghorban, Idul Adha, Têt and Norooz. Remember to keep a sewing needle and piece of silk handy, and good luck finding grass and water in the desert. Baaa! Ommmmmm! BRRRRMM!

Paul, Evelyn and Oliver



Are we in Baaa...Baaa...Brussels yet?