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Diplomats & Doormats

An Hotelier's Odyssey

PETER ALATSAS



Diplomats & Doormats

ISBN: 978-960-9490-14-6

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1st edition, January 2012

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Production: KERKYRA Publications - Economia PUBLISHING

Publication Coordinator: Fani Karafylli

Editing: Mike Hatzidakis

Layout: Atelier KERKYRA

Cover: Eleni Tsakmaki

Author's photograph: Penelope Masouri

Distribution



KERKYRA Publications S.A.

6-8 Vlahava street, 105 51 Athens-Greece

Tel.: 0030-210-3314.714, Fax: 0030-210-3252.283

www.economia.gr, bookstore@economia.gr

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An Hotelier's Odyssey

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For Arya & Jahan

*“Nurture your mind with great thoughts,
for you will never go any higher than you think”*

Isaiah 40.8

*“Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave,
for knowledge is what draws us closer to God”*

The Prophet Muhammad

CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i>	13
<i>Introduction</i>	15
Rounder Moon	35
A Good Seat	39
Security in Insecurity	43
Like Ducks to Water	47
Testosterone on Wheels	51
Accentuating the Positive	55
Perspectives on Luxury	59
Five Star Semantics	67
Modern Oases	71
Fortress Manila	75
Perception is Illusion	79
Lessons on Beauty	81
Teachings of Budapest Architecture	85
Sailing the Avant-garde	87
In-SPA-ration	93
Going Solo	97
Leadership and Management and the Tip of the Iceberg	101
Notions of Assertiveness	109

Thoughts and Actions	113
Universal Truths	115
Today's Stupidity	119
Mystical Bali	123
Fusion and Preservation in Kyoto	127
Poetry of Vino	131
Meet me in Cyberspace	135
Rosemary's Sphinx	139
Escape from Milan	141
Lost in Politics	143
Whirling in Istanbul	147
Browsing in Brugge	149
Wanting and Waiting	151
Short Breaks and Takes	155
Greatness Stilled in Infamy	159
Going Back	163
Finding Mystras	165
Sleepless in Santorini	169
Jaded Traveler	171
Mockba Then and Now	175
Walking Kiev	185
The Elixir of Life	189
Everything Comes to Pass	193
Tid-bits of Wisdom or Folly?	199

Order and Disorder in the Town Square	201
The People you Know	203
Parts Unknown	205
Journey Within	209
Trust	213
Home and Sacrifice	215
Encounter with Nostalgia	219
Nothing and Everything	225
My Garden	227
Linked in Humanity	231
Odyssey	237

Postscript	245
-------------------------	------------

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Life's wisdom	251
Quotable Quotes and Ideas of Note	255

Index	311
--------------------	------------

FOREWORD

“Words create worlds.” How true. This particular quotation leapt off the page as I read *Diplomats and Doormats*. For I too was on the move, seeking inspiration in a new place. Nanjing is not a city mentioned in the book, but it was during my train journeys to and from China’s former capital that I was glad to have such a perceptive and curious traveling companion.

Peter is a traveler who pays the greatest courtesy to every country, region, city and site of interest that he visits; he thinks relentlessly about its past, present and future, its cultures, architectures and cuisines. He searches for meanings in a place’s existence, its peoples’ lives and their work, and he questions the purposes of his own thoughts and impressions. The result is a collection of taut essays that are never simply of a place in time

nor framed in a casual snapshot. Each is carefully crafted and inspired by the swarm of thoughts that fill the mind on each arrival, stay and departure from an unfamiliar destination.

“Everything has its beauty, but not everyone sees it,” wrote Confucius. We all miss elements of beauty during our travels, or long for the embrace of beauties yet to be encountered. For this reason we are always glad when others capture and illuminate an undiscovered beauty for us. En route to Nanjing, as I passed landscapes of mud-choked canals and fields of lemon-yellow rapeseed, I found myself simultaneously traveling through Tehran, Kyoto and Brussels. On the way home, I stopped briefly to admire Lake Maggiore, Sanya Bay and Mount Athos before returning to Shanghai and falling sleepless in Santorini.

To reference Peter’s travels as purely physical would be wrong. A profession that has enabled him to travel the world, also gave geographic freedom to a restive mind, and enabled him to craft his own philosophical approach to life and work. Drifting through the continents, he sought out some of history’s most challenging thinkers, and this book serves as a treasury of choice quotations, ranging from Aristotle, Confucius and Camus to Einstein, Picasso and Darwin.

My favorite quote in the book is “Home is not where you live but where they understand you.” As a thinking traveler’s traveler, Peter chose to leave behind that comfort zone, to escape from where he is understood and where he understands. As he says, “Much of life is what we make it.” Reading this book it is clear that Peter’s journey of discovery has many more rivers to cross, valleys to walk and cities to explore. As life continues there will definitely be more chapters for Peter to write. For now, we can be grateful that this book offers new perspectives and creates new questions for us to take on our own journey through words and worlds.

Gary Bowerman

A ROUNDER MOON

*“Never tie a ship to a single anchor
or life to a single hope”*

Epictetus

Living and studying the classics in Greece as a teenager was indeed a happy time. Yet I had to leave beloved places and friends to realize my dream, which at the time was to become a world-class architect. I left Greece, in search of my “rounder moon” as the Chinese proverb goes, only to find that my destiny was not to be a world-class architect, but a world-class (traveling) hotelier.

The moon as we know is the same everywhere. What might make it different are our notions, perceptions, ambitions and dreams. **There are, I would suppose, as many moons as there are people with dreams.** Traveling in its simplest manifestation is an opportunity for discovery but it can also be a test of one’s powers of imagination and inspiration. I will always continue testing myself, my imagination and my abilities; my search for a rounder moon is ongoing.

While visiting Melbourne recently, I was told the true story of a 16-year old Greek girl who came to Australia unescorted in the early 1950s. She was a 'mail-order bride' in search of a new life; mail-order bride being a label that was applied to women who published their intent to marry someone from another – usually more financially developed – country. Mail-order marriages were a common practice in the Americas and Australia after the end of both world wars.

My heroine was one of the many mail-order brides coming from various parts of war and poverty ravaged Europe to find their rounder moon. Finally, after many months at sea in less than 5 star conditions the ship approached Victoria's Port Melbourne. Her first task was to locate her new husband of whom she had only a fading photograph with which to identify him.

As the huge ship sails closer to the shore she clutches the picture in one hand and her meager belongings in the other, waiting anxiously to dock. Disembarking, she finds herself just one amongst hundreds of expectant men and women, all with photographs in hand, all searching desperately to find their dream. The young girl wanders through the crowd in vain. The crowd begins to thin and after closer inspection of her photograph she realizes that a well-dressed, middle-aged and mustached man (who she has already passed several times) is the aging reality of the youthful man in her photograph. Her romantic dreams are dashed. Though penniless and demoralized she is unwilling to accept this older version of the younger man in her photograph. She decides to return home on the same ship. She pleads with the Captain, convincing him to take her back from whence she came.

Dreams and new husbands aside, a voyage is a complicated experience. At the micro level, it is a journey of discovery with two main dimensions: discovering a new place, and in the process, discovering oneself.

You cannot be taught everything in life. Some things you have to go through.

As Paul B. Pedersen says, “There is no substitute for experience.” Professor Emeritus at Syracuse University, Pedersen is an expert on American and corporate culture, the author of 45 books, and boasts a wealth of experience himself – he has spent over 40 years in his field. Pedersen tells a fascinating story of shipboard learning.

In 1877 an eccentric visionary, James O. Woodruff had the notion of creating a University on a ship. What an idea! But it was not until 1926 that shipboard education became a reality, thanks to James E. Lough, Dean of New York University. Students earned full degrees on the ship, while traveling the world. As with most who are ahead of their time, Lough had his share of detractors, and he was eventually fired after 27 years of service as Dean of New York University. The precedent had been set however, and adventurous education was now on the drawing board.

More recently, the late shipping magnate Chao-Yung Tung again embraced the idea of shipboard education with vision and vigor. Tung, who started out as a shipping clerk in Shanghai, established a floating university on the RMS *Queen Elizabeth I* in collaboration with the Seawise Foundation. His motto was “the greatest ship is friendship.” Fate intervened. After several million dollars had been invested in the project, the ship caught fire and sank in Hong Kong but this catastrophe did not deter Tung. He purchased the SS *Universe* which, in time, became the world’s prime university ship. Tung passed away in 1982, but his eldest son has taken the helm to ensure that the SS *Universe* sails on.

“Each spring and fall semester since 1981, approximately 400 University of Pittsburgh college students have the rare opportunity to learn about their world directly from the people of the world,” Professor Pedersen further enlightens me. Apparently the students appreciate the experience as much as their adventurous professors, one student observing, “the decks are

a backdrop for a personal voyage of self- discovery and for bringing the peoples of the world closer.”

As for our would-be bride’s adventure of discovery... months later she returns on the same ship to Australia, presumably a less trustful, but just as hopeful young woman. This time she finds her rounder moon and discovers the man of her dreams. He matches the image of the young man that is on her new photograph and is the appropriate partner to the woman she has become.

John Amatt the organizer of the first successful Canadian expedition to the summit of Mount Everest said; “It isn’t hanging on a rope off the side of a mountain. Adventure is an attitude that we must apply to the day to day obstacles of life – facing new challenges, seizing new opportunities, testing our resources against the unknown and in the process discovering our own unique potential.”

Discovery is not the sole domain of scientists and explorers. It is also the reward of the brave and the creative. **Inner strength comes from hardships, struggle and endurance, not when we are free of problems.** According to Nobel Prize-winner Albert Szent Gyorgi, discovery is “seeing what everyone else has seen and thinking what no one else has thought,” whether it be a new husband, a new world or a new opportunity in life. It is enlightenment for travelers and moon-gazers alike.

INDEX

A

Abrahamson, Eric	103
Adams, John	284
Aesop	307
Agathon	163, 297
Agra	151
Alborn, Mitch	204
Alcott, A.B.	287
Ali, Muhammad	294
Allen, James L.	135, 188, 301
Allenbaugh, Eric	260
Amatt, John	38
Amiel, Henri-Frederic	287
Angelou, Maya	242, 278
Aristotle	113, 201, 209, 255, 259, 260, 262, 270, 274, 275, 283, 286, 289, 293, 306
<i>Art of Travel</i>	80
<i>Art of War</i>	105
Athens	201, 202
Attitude	20
Aurelius, Marcus	195, 261, 297
Axial period	26-27

B

Bagehot, Walter	257, 279
Bali	123-125
Bangkok	39-40
Barday, William	288
Baruch, Bernard	270
Barychnikov, Mikhail	258
Bates, Norman	265
Beauvoir, Simone de	303
Beckett, Samuel	298
Behavior	21, 24-25
Beijing	144
Bell, Alexander	270
Bell, Graham	278
Benarente, Jacinto	293
Benn, Ernest	304
Berkeley,	
Bishop George	297
Berle, Milton	304
Berra, Yogi	274
Billings, Josh	258
Bittsu, Ni	120, 259
Blake, William	131, 297
Boffon, Georges De	274
Bolshoi Theatre	176, 179

Bonaparte, Napoleon	284, 285, 286	Coleridge, Samuel	285
Bono, Edward de	91, 261, 278	Colonel Sanders	306
Botton, Alain de	80, 94, 164	Colton, Charles	265
Brown, H. Jackson	268, 277	Communication	21, 22-23
Brown, Les	301	Confucius	28, 55, 143, 169, 185, 255, 256, 259, 262, 266, 267, 270, 271, 277, 278, 281, 292, 297, 299, 303, 305, 307
Browning, Robert	271, 293	Crosby, Bill	266
Brugge	149	Cousins, Norman	307
Brunei	40	Crawford, Joan	292
Buck, Pearl S.	276	Csikszentmihaly, Mihaly	53
Budapest	85	Curie, Marie	289
Buddha	189, 275, 286		
Buddhism	39, 65, 120, 128, 148	D	
Burke, Edmond	270	Da Vinci, Leonardo	123, 306, 308
Byzantine	166	Dalai Lama	282
		Darwin, Charles	261
C		Dean, Jimmy	262
Cameron, Hugh	203, 263	Delis, Dimitri	303
Camus, Albert	288	Democritus	263, 267, 274
Carlyle, Thomas	300	Desire	21, 22
Carman's Club	219-223	Destiny	17
Carnegie, Dale	277	Deval, Jacques	294
Cavafy, Constantine	211, 212, 240, 241	Dewar, Sir James	279
Cervantes, Miguel	272, 274	Dickinson, Emily	286
Chang, Richard	293	Diogenes	133, 262
China	29	Diplomat	30
Choices	17	Discipline	21, 25-26
Chuang-Tzu	274, 275		
Churchill, Winston	225, 262, 267, 269, 288		
Cicero	281, 305		
CNN	196		
Cocteau, Jean	293		

INDEX

- | | | | |
|-----------------------|--|-----------------------|---|
| Disney, Walt | 279 | Five-fold path | 20-26 |
| Disraeli, Benjamin | 26, 263, 295, 300 | <i>Fodor's Travel</i> | 95 |
| Dnieper | 188 | Fontain, Margot | 271 |
| Drucker, Peter | 103, 268, 270 | Forbes, Malcolm | 279 |
| Dubai | 73, 171, 193,
194 | Ford, Henry | 258, 269, 272,
295, 302 |
| E | | Formula One | 51-53 |
| Edison, Thomas | 278 | Four Season Hotel | 86 |
| Ego Check | 44 | Franklin, Benjamin | 301 |
| Einstein, Albert | 89, 165, 261,
269, 273, 278,
279, 280, 297,
302, 308, 309 | Freedman, David | 103 |
| Eisenhower, Dwight | 267 | Freyman, Richard | 141 |
| Elgin Marbles | 159 | Friedman, Milton | 266 |
| Eliot, T.S. | 279, 299 | Frost, Robert | 262, 268, 299 |
| Elizabeth II, Queen | 115, 260 | Fudan University | 63 |
| Emerson, | | Fuller, | |
| Ralph Waldo | 139, 264, 269,
277, 293, 295 | Buckminster | 87, 280 |
| Epictetus | 35, 79, 193, 255,
256, 267, 277 | Fuller, Thomas | 304 |
| Epicurus | 98 | G | |
| Erasmus, Desiderius | 276 | Gagarin, Yuri | 178 |
| Esslin, Martin | 309 | Galileo | 227, 271, 308 |
| Euripides | 265, 267, 309 | Gandhi, Mahatma | 204, 276, 290 |
| F | | Garoufalis | 17 |
| Fan Ye | 291 | Gibran, Kahlil | 257, 264, 269,
273, 280, 287,
290, 298, 308 |
| Feather, William | 288 | Goethe, Johann | 51, 257, 258,
271, 272, 273,
284, 287, 309 |
| Fermor, Patrick Leigh | 205 | Goldsmith, Oliver | 285 |
| Feynman, Richard | 298 | Graham, Martha | 273 |
| Fitzwater, P.B | 264 | Grande Bretagne | 180 |
| | | Gretsky, Wayne | 270 |
| | | Gritti, Sacha | 294 |

Grove, Andy	44	Irwin, Bill	260
Growing up	18-20	Ithaca	17
Gyorgi, Albert Szent	38		
Gytheon	237	J	
H		James, William	256, 273
Hannibal	282	Jeans, Sir James	304
Happiness	53	Jeddah	205
Hayward, Mathew	44	Jefferson, Thomas	272, 273, 285
Hemingway, Ernest	260	Johnson, Samuel	273, 299
Heraclitus	149, 260, 262, 275, 292	Jonathan Swift	30
Herbert, George	284	Julius Caesar	283
Herodotus	286	K	
Heyerdahl, Thor	302	Kalifatidis,	
Holiday Inn	47-49	Theodoros	277
Holmes,		Kanfer, Stefan	298
Oliver Wendell	280, 299, 308	Kant, Emmanuel	308
Homer	16, 17, 268	Karrass, Chester	284
Hong Kong	37	Kazantzakis, Nikos	175, 237, 258, 268, 294, 303
Horace	131, 255, 258, 298,	Kellaway, Lucy	196
Hubbard, Elbert	301	Keller, Helen	301
Hughes, Howard	300	Kennedy, J.F.	271
Hugo, Victor	288	Keynes, J.M	269
Huxley, Aldus	272	Khayyam, Omar	129, 274
I		Khrushchev, Nikita	178
Ibrahim, Anwar	272	Kiev	185
Ikebana	135	Kipling, Rudyard	268
Ikkyu	271	Kirkegaard, Soren	16, 285, 287
Inamori, Kazuo	128	Korbman, Jeff	284
Indonesia	123	Kundera, Milan	307
Inspiration	39	Kyocera,	128
		Kyoto	41, 127-129, 152

INDEX

L

Lao Tzu	27, 278, 281, 282
Lee, Bruce	257
Lee, Robert E.	268
Lemon, Jack	302
Leningrad	176
Lewis, Richard	111
Lincoln, Abraham	264, 265, 273, 309
Longfellow, Henry	284
Lough, James E	37
Lowell, James Russell	171, 306
Luxury	59-65

M

Macao	163
Machiavelli	285
MacInnes, Helen	256
Mackay, Harry	269
Mahfouz, Naguib	308
Mailer, Norman	294
Management	55
Manolikakis, Andreas	304
Marchant	301
Marquez, Gabriel Garcia	264, 291, 296
Marriot, Bill	90
Martin, Abe	276
Marx, Groucho	264
Marx, Karl	279, 281
Maslow, Abraham	64-65, 196
Maugham, Somerset	291
Maxwell, John	283

McGannon, Donald	285
McKinsey	57
Melbourne	36, 136-137
Menandros	302
Mencius	265
Mencken, H.L.	291
Merleau-Ponty, Maurice	298
Metropole	179
Michaelangelo	30, 280
Miss World	81-82
Moliere	257
Montagne, Michel de	281, 308
Montreal	132, 175
Morgenstern, Christian	215, 266
Moscow	175, 177
Mostar, Bridge of	85
Mount Athos	185, 213, 231-235
Musial, Stan	284
Mystras	165-168

N

Neruda, Pablo	291
New Delhi	151
New York University	37
Newton, Isaac	40, 257
Nidetch, Jean	39, 267
Nietzsche, Friedrich	120, 279, 290, 291, 309
Nihon Keizai Shimbun	127
Nin, Anais	289
Nisargadatta	307

Nobel Prize	31, 38	Renard, Jules	151, 287
Nusa Dua	123	Richter, Jean Paul	119, 263, 295
O		Ritsos, Giannis	238
Obama	31, 228	Robbins, Anthony	300
<i>Odyssey</i>	16, 239, 240	Rocco, Mario	295
Onassis, Aristotle	294, 305	Rochefoucauld,	
Oster, Sir William	278	Francois	299
		Roethke, Theodore	258
P		Rooney, Andy	292
Pasternak, Boris	97, 276	Rooney, Mickey	294
Pasteur, Louis	261, 263, 293	Roosevelt, Eleanor	260
Patton, George	268	Roosevelt,	
Paz, Octavio	205, 264	Theodore	257
Pederson, Paul B.	37-38	Roppongi Hills	71
Persepolis	144	Rose, Aaron	258
Peter, Laurence	271, 296	Rosten, Leo	305
Picasso, Pablo	59, 64, 273, 295	Rowland, Helen	81, 296
Pitakos	282	Royal York Hotel	43
Plato	55, 160, 226, 234, 258, 259, 263, 275, 277, 282, 298	Rumi	148, 303
Plutarch	59, 275, 306	Russell, Bertrand	272, 279, 287, 295, 298, 303
Poe, Edgar Allan	299	S	
Powell, Colin	300	Saint Augustine	303
Publilius Syrus	283	Santorini	169-170
Pushkin	181, 187	Sanya	153
Puzo, Mario	280	Sartre, Jean Paul	292
Pythagoras	256, 275	Savarin, Anthelme	276
		Savarin, Jean	304
R		Schwab, Charles	300
Raffles	32	Schwartz, John	80
Relationships	40	Schwarzkopf,	
		Norman	285
		Schweitzer, Albert	219, 288

INDEX

Scully, John	269	Tamils	27
Seawise Foundation	37	Tea Ceremony	128
Seneca	127, 282, 283, 289	Tehran	143, 145, 147
Shakespeare	246, 290	Thailand	39
Shanghai	51-52, 139, 153, 191, 197	Themistocles	307
Shaw,		Thoreau, Henry	292
George Bernard	257, 274, 291	Thoughts	21, 23-24,
Sinatra, Frank	289	Tokyo	72, 195, 248
Skinner, B.F.	309	Tolstoy, Leo	262
Socrates	147, 159, 160, 259, 286, 289, 290, 297, 305, 306	Toronto	43, 219
Sophocles	101, 160, 267, 282, 283, 286, 306	<i>Travel Plan</i>	
Spinoza	309	<i>Insights</i>	247
Stein, Gertrude	298	Truman, Harry S.	261, 273
Steve Renard		Trump, Donald	293
International	29	Tung, Chao-Yung	37
Stone, Clement	234	Turkey	79
Stresa	141-142	Twain, Mark	264, 266, 280, 292, 300
Sufism	148	Tzu, Sun	105
Sweetland, Ben	299	U	
Sydney		Ukraine	185-188
Opera House	87-89	Utzon, Jorn	88, 89
Synergy	114	V	
Syracuse University	37	Venizelos, Eleftherios	281
T		Voltaire	296
Tacitus	283	W	
Taj Mahal	152	Ward, William	266
		Warhol, Andy	292
		Washington, Booker	263
		Weng, Lu Xiong	63
		Whitehead, Alfred	289

Wilde, Oscar	85, 93, 155, 265, 272, 276, 279, 287, 292	Decisions	268
Wilson, Charles	47-49, 162, 261	Experience/Work	270
Wittgenstein, Ludwig	278	Happiness	274
Wooden, John	309	Ideas/Creativity	277
Woodruff, James O.	37	Integrity/Truth	280
Wordsworth, William	299	Kindness	281
Wriston, Walter	288	Leadership/ Management	282
X		Life/Death	286
Xi'an	189	Love	290
Z		Luck	292
Zakynthos	222	Marriage/Memory	293
Zerlanti, Paul	293	Money	295
Zint, Andre	281	Past/Present/Future	297
Zorba	155	Philosophy	297
		Poetry	298
		Success/Failure	299
		Time	302
		Travel/Leisure	303
		Wealth	305
		Wisdom/Knowledge	306
Food for Thought		Poems by the Author	
Living Life	251	Awaken to Dream	77
Working Life	252	One by One	83
Conventional Wisdom	254	Time	95
Quotable Quotes and Ideas of Note		Thinking @60	121
Attitude	255	Bend in the Wind	125
Behavior	258	At Times	130
Change	260	Forever	153
Character/Personality	262	Wanting and Waiting	157
Children	265	Mystras	168
Culture	266	Self	223
Destiny	267	To Love	235

**Praise for;
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An Hoteliers Odyssey**

...A memoir/biography of a globetrotting hotelier

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ISBN 978-960-9490-14-6



9 789609 490146