

Praise for *The Silk Road Odyssey*

“An inspiring, lyrical memoir of youthful wanderlust and discovery. Vance provides a masterclass in seeing the world through open eyes.”

—THE NEW YORK TIMES

“The dreamy travel descriptions are pure joy, but what’s loveliest is watching a young writer’s mind slowly open to a world far bigger and more complicated than he ever imagined.”

—THE
WASHINGTON POST

“A gorgeous chronicle of freedom on the open road. Essential reading for anyone who has ever dreamed of packing a single bag and heading East.”

—NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

OLIVER VANCE

on

the

SILK ROAD

ODYSSEY

*From the Bosphorus to Kathmandu and the
Making of an Expedition Writer*

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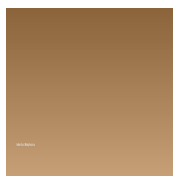
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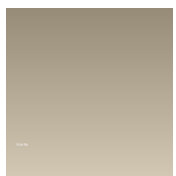
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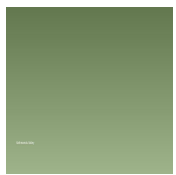
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Leaving Europe 1978

Preface

In the spring of 1978, I was a 23-year-old piano teacher, newly graduated from the University of Washington with a history degree, and traveling whenever I could. With 50 wonderful students, I made enough money to spend my summers in Europe, and I fully expected to be a piano teacher for the rest of my life.

But Europe is the wading pool for world exploration, and I was aching to dive into the deep end. My travel dreams were taking me cast...to a tantalizing adventure called the “Hippie Trail.”

This overland trek—3,000 miles from Istanbul to Kathmandu—promised a once-in-a-lifetime journey through mysterious lands. The route echoed the fabled Silk Road of medieval Marco Polos, adventurers who set off for the “exotic East” and returned with fabulous wealth and fantastic tales.

By the 1960s, this route was attracting a new breed of traveler: young backpackers...hippies. And when The Beatles famously visited the yogi Maharishi, India became the next frontier, a place where young Westerners could find themselves and their purpose in life.



Istanbul Bosphorus

Turkey

July 19--23

The Bosphorus shimmered under the golden Turkish afternoon. Ferries cut white wakes across the strait separating Europe from Asia, their horns echoing against the minarets of the Blue Mosque.

Standing on the Galata Bridge, eating grilled mackerel wrapped in fresh bread, I felt the threshold between worlds. Everything to the west was familiar: cathedral squares, train timetables in Roman script, hostels with hot water. Everything to the east was an open question mark.

Gene and I found the Pudding Shop in Sultanahmet Square. For twenty years, this modest cafeteria had served as the central bulletin board for overland travelers. Index cards pinned

to the cork wall offered rides in Volkswagen vans to Tehran, warnings about fuel shortages in Anatolia, and advice on converting traveler's checks in bazaars.

We secured two seats in a battered Mercedes bus bound for Ankara and eastern Anatolia. Our overland voyage had officially begun.



Kathmandu Valley

Nepal

August 28--September 4

Throughout Nepal, even the smallest kids greeted travelers on the Hippie Trail with folded hands saying “namaste” (*The peace within my soul recognizes the peace within yours*).

It was pitch black by the time I entered my hotel. The candle-made Buddha glimmer and shine on the lobby floor. The desk clerk was sleeping when I passed. And I went to bed thinking about tomorrow...and home.

I concentrated on my pie and the music—and the impossibility of sustaining this wonder after stepping onto that plane tomorrow—while half-heartedly playing a game of chess across from a German girl. I traded queens, paid my 3 rupees, and stepped back into the streets.

I treated myself to one last jumbo slice of apple pie and tea with lovely Rolling Stones serenade. For me, being on the road usually means being away from my favorite music. Pie & Chai brings the road and my music together.



Leaving Europe 1978

Postscript

Decades later, travelers often ask me if the Silk Road route still exists. The borders have shifted, highways have replaced dirt tracks, and travelers now carry smartphones instead of letters of credit.

Yet the impulse remains unchanged: the desire to step beyond the familiar, to break bread with strangers across mountain passes, and to return home transformed.