

GRAND TRAVERSE

The story of how we came to do the Grand Traverse started during our last summer at Marwood Hill. Margie's brother, Michael, came to stay with us for a weekend and announced that he was off to live on a Greek island for a month or two! Michael is a couple of years older than Margie, an inveterate traveller and was then a confirmed bachelor, who at that time made his living by selling Aborigine bark paintings in the USA. He was happiest when travelling fourth class on a ferry, village hopping up the Amazon!

At the time there was a very popular book about an Australian couple who had opted out of the rat race and gone to live on an Aegean island. We all read the book and found it incredibly romantic. Unfortunately the story ended in tragedy when the freezing winter set in and one of them became ill so they had to return to the rat race for medical attention. However, reading about the halcyon summer period had really set all our hearts aflutter.

Michael had some American friends in Melbourne, who also wanted to take an extended holiday on a Greek island with their three young children so planned to all meet in Samos and rent two cottages for June.

Michael came to see us at Marwood on the way and about a month later we had a call from Margie's father to tell us that he had persuaded his girlfriend Judy to join him and they had decided to get married. The problem was that this was to happen in Athens so would we please all go to the wedding and represent the family at his expense, and at the same time take out some money to pay for the Wedding Breakfast!



Our house in Kokari

We arrived in Samos and after spending a night in an awful hotel I decided that we would also look for a little house in the village. I found a fisherman's cottage, owned by a widow, who was happy to move in with her daughter for two weeks and let us rent her home. The front of the house

opened directly onto the pebbled beach and azure sea so we were able to swim across the bay to the two-room cottage Michael had rented.

The boys loved the sea, the village and the sun. Michael and Judy were obviously very happy and their friends could not have been nicer. Their three children were delightful and I was thrilled when their parents asked me to sculpt them. The eldest was a girl of seven, the youngest a boy of four, and between the two another girl. When I got home to England I sculpted the two girls watching their brother building with blocks. The sculpture was very popular and Crowther sold the entire edition of nine, twenty-seven children in all, so it turned out to be a working holiday, which are always the best!



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Michael and Judy's house

Every morning we would go to the village bakery and buy delicious loaves. More organised families would bring a leg of lamb or a chicken and pay to have the baker put them in his bread oven. While standing in the queue one day waiting to buy bread, I heard an American voice behind me, and on turning, found another family of four seeking the romance of the Greek islands. We got talking and they invited us to their cottage at Little Lemon Tree bay for a swim and a meal. Harvey Edwards turned out to be a documentary film producer. Suzy, the mother of the two small boys, was French and they all lived in Chamonix in the French Alps.

I had hired an old bright-blue army jeep to enable us to explore the island so drove the short distance to their secluded cove. We found their cottage was even more primitive than our humble abode being a one-storey building that was really just a garden shed surrounded by grape vines and fig trees. The drinking water was at the bottom of a well in the middle of a vineyard. Van Gogh would have loved the place and could have done some beautiful painting of the cove! Harvey told us all about his life as a filmmaker and how fantastic it was to work in Chamonix, walking in the mountains in the summer and skiing in the winter. It sounded like a very good life.

One evening Harvey suggested that we all drive along the coast to the next village for dinner at the Swallows. We arrived to find the taverna was a circular concrete dance floor about the size of two tennis courts set amongst plane trees full of fireflies. Some lights were strung amongst the trees, a band sat on one side and tables were set up around the floor. Waiters brought wine and bread, the band played and people danced. Balalaika music filled the air, turning the night into one of sheer magic.



Swallows Taverna

A young girl in her early teens was dancing with a man who was obviously an expert and we watched entranced. The floor cleared and they gave a wonderful exhibition of sublime joy. We could have watched them all night. When they were exhausted and sat down a middle-aged man took to the floor on his own and did a Zorba dance with a handkerchief. The young couple had been magnificent to watch but seeing the Zorba dance was to experience pure Greek emotion being enacted to passionate music. It was a night to remember.

Samos is within sight of the Turkish coast and a ferry took tourists from the island across to Ephesus on day excursions, so I decided that we should definitely see this famous place. I bought large straw hats for us all as the ferry was open to the sun. We had a smooth crossing to Ephesus and walked up to the temple, had a good look around the ruins and then returned to the harbour to wait for the ferry to depart while eating our picnic. We bought a beautiful alabaster vase from the tourist stall, which Margie fills with flowers bringing back many happy memories of an incredible day.

The ferry left on time and although the day was still beautifully sunny, the wind had changed and was now blowing against the current. By the time we were halfway back to the island the waves had become frighteningly large. The small ferry was plunging straight into them as the wind was head on causing the boys to hang on to the wooden seats to stop sliding overboard! The new hats were soon in use and then thrown over the side. I have never been gladder to reach port.

Our island holiday was over and the wedding was on. Michael, Judy, the Melbourne friends and children, and all the Robinsons, climbed into a plane and set off for Athens. We set up camp in the hotel Margie and I had used on our train trip to Greece and to show the boys some of the wonders of ancient Greece hired a van for a day's excursion to Mycenae and Epidaurus.

The wedding day arrived and the service was held in a little Presbyterian church. It was a moving ceremony and Judy looked angelic. Afterwards we walked up to the Acropolis to take some photographs of the newly weds. Being summer the tourists were in their thousands, so getting a shot without people in the background was a problem.



Judy and Michael

Michael wanted a photograph taken in the Temple of Athena in front of the altar. In those days we were allowed inside the temple although the altar was roped off and an armed guard made sure you didn't step over it. The couple stood by the rope and I tried to get back far enough to take a photograph without including a host of tourists. It was impossible. The guard saw my predicament, lifted the rope and took Judy by the hand and led her over to the altar. I got my photograph and so did hundreds of other people. There must be photographs of Michael and Judy in albums all over the world! That evening we joined the Bride and Groom for their Wedding Breakfast on the roof terrace of a hotel. The wedding cake was the restaurant dessert trolley. It was the best reception we have ever been to!

That winter Margie and I took the boys skiing in Chamonix, staying in a little house that Harvey, the film producer, had rented for us. We went by train so were able to stop in Paris and show the boys some of the wonders of that city on the way. We had a superb holiday and were taught to ski by André, the Chamonix postmaster. Harvey and Suzy often asked us to eat with them so we got to know each other very well.

What, you are asking, has this to do with the Grand Traverse? Well, one evening a couple of months later, Harvey rang me and asked if the Robinson family would be interested in walking from Geneva to Nice? He went on to explain that he had been commissioned to make a film for the French Tourist Bureau about an English family walking in the Alps on one of the official trails. The film script told how we would meet up with two American girls during the walk, and that the seven of us would finish the journey on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice. He would be the producer and an American friend would be the cameraman. The journey would take four weeks, but a truck would carry us between panoramic locations, so we would actually not be walking the whole 500 miles! I said I was certainly interested but would have to talk it over with Margie and call him back.

That evening Margie and I decided that it was just too good an offer to pass up, especially as we had no other plans for the summer holidays. Harvey had promised us that he would provide all the equipment; tents, backpacks, sleeping bags, boots, all from a firm called 'North Face'. He would also pay for our trip out to Chamonix and back and our food for the whole month, but he would not be able to pay us wages!

Having decided we would do it I rang him and then worried for months if we had made the right decision. The day arrived for our departure and we set off again by train for Chamonix. Harvey met us and introduced us to the American girls, one of whom, Martha, was his niece, and the other, Janet, was the girlfriend of the cameraman named Duke. Harvey had sent our boots to England so we could break them in. We had done a couple of walks but nothing serious, so we were definitely not prepared for what lay ahead.

The first night under canvas was spent in the Geneva municipal campsite! It was not a grand start as we were surrounded by happy campers who had no intention of going to bed. Next morning we followed Harvey onto the Geneva-Lausanne paddle steamer and we set sail feeling a bit like David Niven in *Around the World in Eighty Days*.

Thankfully we were not quite amateurs at the art of camping. The tents that I had bought and first tried out in the Agecroft orchard had been used once in Wales and again in Scotland when we had taken a tour right up to the

top and experienced millions of midges, or as the Scots call them, *wee beasties*. Only once, when it had poured, were we forced to retire to a motel!



Camping beside Loch Hourn

Harvey had provided us with knee-length walking breeches and bright red socks, so we looked the part when we landed at St Gingolph on the south side of Lac Léman and started off up the mountain. We were soon wondering what we had let ourselves in for, the main problem being the weight of our packs. Mine was 60 pounds, Margie's 40 and the boys were carrying 30 each!



The view from 'Col de Bise' of Lac Léman and Lausanne

The climb to the top of Col de Bise was murder. Thank goodness on the first night we camped halfway up so we could put our packs down. The

Robinson team were obviously not in good shape! We all slept like logs and could have stayed asleep all day but for Harvey getting us up at the crack of dawn to reach the top in time for good filming light!



The view was magnificent from 6,000 feet!

From this point on, the path got steadily rougher and the packs seemed to get increasingly heavier. Obviously something had to be done about it before we all died of exhaustion! The solution came to me during the night when luckily we met up with Suzy and our back-up truck. I emptied most of our gear into boxes, keeping only bare essentials, and filled the space with scrunched up newspaper. I saw no point in our carrying two sets of spare clothes and all those other last-minute things one tends to pack, just in case. The packs became manageable and our trip became enjoyable.

With a new spring in our step we were now prepared to follow Harvey anywhere he wished to go, and go he did, even over places that goats would avoid. We happily followed our leader, usually repeatedly, so Duke could film us from every conceivable angle.

The night at *Le Lac des Neuf Couleurs* was the highlight of our misery. None of us has ever been colder and the wind was blowing a gale and rain was pelting down in stair rods. Going outside for a pee reminded us of poor Captain Oates on the way back from the South Pole with Scott.

But all things come to an end and as each day was ticked off and we got nearer and nearer to the Mediterranean, we all got into the rhythm of the march and really started to enjoy the beauty of the Alps. We would stride down

the track greeting those coming up with a smile and, “Courage, mon ami.” On the way up, they would do the same to us. We were told that a million people are marching around the Alps every day throughout the summer as it is one of France’s national sports.



Tim, Peter , performing for Duke



Mark studying the terrain ahead



Peter and Tim asking Harvey if he really wants them to wade through the torrent



The girls had difficulty in finding privacy



*Demonstrating the new super lightweight pack
stuffed with 'Le Monde' newspaper*

At last we reached the outskirts of Nice and climbed into our bus and headed for the 'Promenade des Anglais'. Harvey had worked out a final scene for us when we hit the beach. Martha and Peter were to hang back as the rest of us walked down onto the pebbles, and then they would rush past us straight into the sea, fully clothed! We would then let out a yell and follow them in still booted, take them off in the sea and throw them back onto the beach!

We over-acted our parts with gusto. As I raced for the waves I heard a bikini clad beauty say, "From their clothes I think they must be Austrian." We were filmed from behind running into the Mediterranean, then Harvey wanted Duke in the water with us running towards him! This of course meant getting our boots on again and doing the whole thing over again in wet clothes! As it was to be the *Final Wrap*, as we film people say, we didn't mind as it was a gloriously hot day. The beach audience enjoyed the performance, but I think we enjoyed showing off more!

We retired to the hotel Harvey had booked us into and had one of the best baths we have ever had in our lives. Putting on clean clothes was a joy and after meeting in the lobby, Margie and I took everyone out to dinner. It turned into quite a celebration as halfway through the meal Duke and Janet announced that they had decided to get married! We ordered a bottle of champagne and a large bowl of rainbow ice cream to act as an engagement cake. The French Tourist Bureau was very happy with Harvey's epic and when he showed it at the New York Documentary Film Festival he won a medal. No Oscars came our way; our reward was a unique journey. Thank you Harvey!