

Sardinia, I'm sitting on a rock. The sea sparkles in a thousand shards, the sand is still warm, the sun is setting, and finally, I'm here, witnessing this long-awaited natural spectacle - and I'm utterly disappointed.

I've just emptied twenty liters of family feces from the emergency canister of our motorhome into the toilet at the campsite. Splash, splatter, gurgle, hiss, it all shot noisily down the drain.

What the hell am I doing here?

I felt some splashes from the canister land on my feet and legs as I emptied it. I was wearing only flip-flops and shorts. Suddenly, something got clogged somewhere. I didn't want to know the details; a surge of anger began to churn in my gut. In an instant, I not only realized the absurdity of what I was doing, but I also suddenly found the entire camping culture to be sheer madness. An imaginary figure from the Middle Ages approached me, shaking their head in disbelief: "The 21st century - running water, electricity, mattresses instead of straw, sewage systems! - and yet you're voluntarily foregoing the latter?!" In a novel by Don Winslow, there's a great anecdote that basically all of human civilization owes itself to the invention of the sewage system. That it was only through this technology that people could live together in large numbers in one place. That without this invention, people would still be nomads "constantly running away from their own shit." Oh, how I laughed heartily at that back then, and how unbelievably dumb I felt in my current situation.

All that work, all those sacrifices - for this?!

Nothing comes from nothing.

One year earlier. 5:30 a.m., I hop on my bike and pedal fifteen kilometers to work.

6:10 a.m., I arrive at the university hospital, long hallways, cold shower, change of clothes, start work at 6:45 a.m.

A sweet old lady with a hip fracture wants to be transferred from her hospital bed to the operating table as painlessly as possible. With the help of the anesthesia nurses and two colleagues, we try it without painkillers—no chance, the old lady screams out in pain. I'm just an orderly, so I ask the anesthesia nurse about the possibility of giving the lady something for the pain. I wouldn't want to move or be moved with broken bones myself. After much patience and a shot of pain relief, I push the old lady into the pre-op room for surgery prep.

Two hours later, I slowly and carefully crawl under a sterile operating table. During the surgery, the surgeon decided to reposition the operating table's column. The remote control wasn't working, so someone had to go under the sterile, blood-and-fluid-soaked drapes to fix it. While the surgeon is handling sharp instruments inside the patient's abdomen above me, I'm pressing buttons just forty centimeters below. "Careful, the table is moving!" Sweaty and dirty, I take a quick shower, but my colleagues protest—it's a madhouse today.

3:00 p.m., end of the shift. I bike fifteen kilometers home, kiss my girlfriend, kiss my son, take a cold shower, grab fresh clothes, snatch up my camera, and head to the fancy restaurant.

A small, darkened room, a lighting setup, a white cyclorama backdrop, tripods, styrofoam boards, black cloths, cables tangled across the floor. As a part-time photographer, I shoot products: wine, champagne, packages of pasta, and "for the photographer" prettied-up food platters. Expensive steaks that barely withstand the summer heat of 96°F, let alone the room temperature that feels like 113°F. So everything needs to go quickly, but for God's sake, be careful—it's insanely pricey stuff. One of the flashbulbs burns out and needs to be replaced. I rearrange half the room several times to make space for bigger products. I climb onto wobbly chairs, shoot from above, crouch low, twist sideways, and crawl on my knees. Sweat drips, and I just hope it doesn't fall onto the camera lens.

5:30 p.m., end of shift. As a photographer. Off to another fancy restaurant. A towel substitutes for a shower, I change into my chef's whites and dive into the action. A medium-sized event with 700 people in the city center. Setting up buffets, chopping vegetables, searing meat, filling salad bowls, remembering to drink plenty—the day's heat barely subsides. As a trained chef, I sprint through the kitchen in my side gig, helping out, standing at the buffet for three hours, my legs aching.

11:40 p.m., end of shift. Tomorrow, Saturday, my day off - though six to eight hours of photo editing await. No matter, I know why I'm doing it. - Or so I thought!

France, somewhere around kilometer 1324 of our journey. We realized we were missing too much of the country, so we decided to stick more to the backroads. Google Maps and various camper apps for finding scenic spots helped with that. But we weren't enjoying the lakes and mountains, the valleys, the landscape—because thanks to unimaginable craters in the road, half of our household was slowly but surely spreading all over the motorhome. Meanwhile, in the hidden darkness of the cupboard, one item was rubbing another raw until the latter spilled its liquid contents into every nearby (and far-off) crevice. We only discovered this four weeks later during the next heatwave, when we were looking for the second fitted sheet because our son had peed a lake on the first one. On top of that, I was sweating bullets, worrying about the remaining resilience of our twenty-year-old suspension.

To play it safe, we decided to get back on the highway. Mountains could be vaguely seen on the horizon. After a while, we even managed to convince ourselves the toll fees were worth it.

What the hell is going on here? This isn't how I pictured it... Oh, just shut up!

Later, we spent ages looking for an especially nice spot to park. The painstakingly Googled paradise turned out to be in the middle of nowhere: a mud lake from the last rainstorm, no trees for the hammock, and the field was a moonscape where it was impossible to park evenly for a restful night's sleep. My girlfriend was disappointed, I was furious. Meanwhile, our son—blissfully free of expectations—laughed while smacking a tree with a stick.

Long story short: we went looking for another spot. I was back behind the wheel when we should've been enjoying dinner together, basking in family bliss. The search for another, better place turned out to be a precursor to hell, as our kid had forgotten his stick and was now wailing in sorrow. My girlfriend was struggling with the lockable dining table, which had shot un-locked into my elbow during the last hard braking.

We finally reached a barren parking lot and were just relieved to be done for the day. But relaxation was still out of reach, as we were parked right by a river, so we had to keep an eye on the little one every second. The usual daily questions loomed large: Who's cooking? Who's taking care of the kid? Who's putting all this crap back into the motorhome afterward?

What kind of crap is this?! Did I spend over a year planning for this...

The emergency canister was finally empty. I went back to the motorhome, stowed it, and washed myself off. My girlfriend looked at me and prescribed a round of beach time. So I went and sat on a rock.

After four months of traveling, I had to slowly but surely admit to myself that I'm definitely not cut out for this kind of traveling. At least not to the extent I thought I was. And that weighed heavily on me, since I had identified as a survival and

outdoor guy ever since I was a teenager and, to top it off, had been the initiator of this trip. I saw myself as the kind of man who takes things into his own hands, who knows how to pitch in and improvise. Raised on the books of Rüdiger Nehberg, the survivalist and human rights activist, I saw myself as resilient, capable of handling uncomfortable situations and mastering them. I was fascinated by the art of survival. Handy skills? Of course. Reality? Yeah, right.

It dawned on me that not everyone is cut out for every kind of challenge. I could handle dealing with a dead body in the OR much better than driving around for hours in 30°C (86°F) heat, looking for a supermarket, parking spot, campground, hardware store, cell phone shop, or gas station.

As a solution, I tried to follow my girlfriend's calm and patient example. She was definitely the balancing force. But was that why she was traveling across Europe with her family?

I used to throw the word "comfort zone" around a lot and emphasize the importance of regularly leaving it to gain new experiences. Sure, that sounds good and always gets nods of agreement. But on the road, I soon found myself screaming, cursing, and whining for the comfort zone I never even realized I had at home. Theoretical talk and direct experience collided. And it's hard to believe how long it took to grasp what was really going on at the core. Naturally, at first, it was the world conspiring against me. It's amazing how blind you can be to the mess in your own head.

During our travel preparations, we did thorough research on SIM cards for mobile routers to have internet access on the road. Nothing could be easier; there were plenty of online reports from people who had already done multiple times what we were planning. But buying a SIM card in the non-digital, real world almost drove me to despair. Since SIM cards aren't sold in rural villages, we had to go to the

nearest big town. The store that, according to Google Maps, sold SIM cards wasn't located on a bypass road but rather in a small, narrow side street, completely unsuitable for a motorhome. After my girlfriend shouted, "Back there! There it is!" and I drove past it three times - "Noooo!" - while looking directly into its window, because the entrance to the parking lot had a height restriction, I lost it. Keeping my composure over such unnecessary nonsense? That ability felt unreachable, like it belonged in another universe. When we finally parked a 25-minute walk away, I left the family safely in the air-conditioned motorhome and trudged through the 33°C (91°F) summer heat, sweat pouring off of me like a waterfall, and began wondering whether being at the lake back home wouldn't be just as nice. And of course, by the time I reached the store, it was closed. The lights were on in the salesroom, and it hadn't even crossed our minds to question whether the store might be open. Siesta! By that point, it was too late for anything. I cursed and screamed and damned everything and everyone, and I would've loved to tear the bars from the walls and smash the windows.

Today: how embarrassing! What had I expected? That a SIM card would just fall into my lap from the heavens at a foreign place? Challenges on the road? Sure, makes sense!

The second store in another small town was open but naturally didn't have any SIM cards. Survival expert? I could barely survive the luxuries of civilization and its problems - like an unreachable SIM card.

After enough of these situations, I could no longer ignore the doubts about my suitability for this kind of challenge. And since my tolerance for suffering wasn't increasing, the point had arrived when I had to face the uncomfortable truth: The survival expert in me had died.

“Who has ever dared to tell themselves the truth?” I once read from a philosopher. You really have to let that question sink in. Nothing seems more difficult today, even harder than it was in any other time. Am I not more broken the bigger the gap between my unvarnished self and the story I tell about myself?

Fifteen years ago, when I first read Patrick Süskind’s *Perfume*, I marveled and admired the part where the protagonist, Jean-Baptist Grenouille, retreats into the mountains: “...he sat for over twenty hours a day in complete darkness, complete silence, and complete stillness on his horse blanket at the end of the stone corridor, his back leaning against the rubble, his shoulders wedged between the rocks, AND WAS COMPLETELY CONTENT WITH HIMSELF.” Glorious!

Realizing you’re not the person you’ve believed yourself to be for years is unpleasant. And how easy it is today to distract yourself, to build a make-believe self-image on social media! But whether I play the hero in front of my colleagues, lose myself in earning and multiplying money, or pack up the family and travel through Europe - the demons come along. And they’ll stay until I recognize them for what they are, accept them, and only then will I develop the ability to let them go.

What an incredible gain in peace of mind and liberated energy! It sounds so worn out, dead, and dusty, but it needs to be repeated here: True freedom is felt only by those who have truly come home to themselves.

I got up and left my spot on the rock; the sun was already touching the horizon. I felt a little silly fulfilling this cliché: walking contemplatively along the beach. But then the irony of the situation dawned on me: Isn’t one of the main reasons to travel exactly this? To gather new experiences, to broaden the mental horizon? Or am I a relic from the Stone Age with this assumption? Given all the Instagram smiles from some of our fellow travelers, we often wondered if they would even be

traveling without Instagram. Because it seemed like taking photos and posting them was the absolute top priority. I had originally planned to post as well, but it soon became clear that managing a professional social media account—a future part of monetizing the trip—was ridiculously hard work. I got tired of it quickly. That wasn't why we were on the road. Our starting point was to grab life by the horns and collect new, unfamiliar, and of course, overwhelming experiences the old-fashioned way. How could I have known exactly how these new experiences would reveal themselves?

The sun had set, and I made my way back in the dark. Now I knew.