

The Life of a Backpacker in Asia in the 1970s

Story and photos by Kevin Kelly

In an adapted excerpt from an interview on the [Deviate podcast](#) with Rolf Potts, a writer and speaker best known as a futurist talks about his early travel years in Asia, when backpacking meant cutting yourself off almost completely from the home you left.



Growing up in the 1960s in New Jersey was very parochial. Before I went traveling later, I had never eaten Chinese food in my life, I had never held chopsticks. But a friend of my father's was living in Japan and I would listen to his exotic stories when he visited and his life there seemed so interesting. But I never really dreamed of going. The only other window I really had into the world beyond was National Geographic magazine.

I became interested in photography in high school because I was kind of a science nerd. It seemed like a beautiful convergence of art and technology. At that time in the sixties the only way to do photography was to develop and print photos yourself, to go into the darkroom and mess with the chemicals. Photography was esoteric in the sense that there was a lot of information you had to master. Cameras were not automatic so you had to learn the system. I really got into photography in 1970 and spent a lot time in the darkroom then.

My first impetus to want to travel was reading Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*—an ode to the diversity of geography. After that I suddenly got this urge to travel, something I had never really had before. Then a friend of mine told me he was moving to Taiwan for a while and

invited me to come visit him there. So then I concocted a plan to take photographs in Taiwan and Japan because my father's friend had a contact for me in Japan also.

I knew nothing about Asia, or even travelling; I had never even been out of New England. I knew nothing about what to expect. I went to the bookstores and it was really hard to find any information. There were these Fodor's guidebooks for people who had a lot of money. I didn't have any money. They barely covered places like Taiwan, so these books weren't of any use to me. There was no internet, of course, and the libraries didn't have much. I travelled kind of blindly because I had to.

I started getting this idea that maybe I should be a National Geographic photographer so I actually called up the National Geographic office and asked for the photo editor. I was about 18 years old. I had looked at the masthead and got a name, so I called up and asked to speak to him. The guy took my call, I told him about my going to Taiwan and Japan, and asked him if he needed any photos from there. He patiently said, "Well, that's not really how it works. But show me what you've got when you get back and we'll see if any of it's worthwhile." (True to his word, he did take a look later, but I never got published there.)



Thinking back it's sort of remarkable. When I was in Taiwan I came across very few other travelers. Taiwan at that time had almost no English translation anywhere. This was in the early seventies and it was similar to China in that respect. It was like I had discovered a secret world.

It was very frustrating for me as someone who didn't speak Chinese or read Chinese just finding hotels because to start with there just weren't many apart from business hotels. There were no signs I could read and so I was trying to learn this character for hotel, but sometimes it was more than one character. Often they didn't look like hotels, there was just something like a garage door on the street, and then often they often didn't take foreigners. So just finding a place to sleep was actually a big deal for me as I was trying traveling around.

Eventually while I was still in Taiwan, my first foreign country, I encountered these two Swiss guys who were traveling and they were describing their recent adventures going through Indonesia and India and I asked, "Wait, you mean you can just go there? You just buy a ticket and go?"

And they said, "Yeah you just you just go there." Then of course I asked, "Well...how do you get around? How do you know where to go?"

They said, "You just go and ask around." Then they were raving about the Philippines, where they had just come from, because you could get by with English. "It's just a couple hours away by flight and the fare is really cheap. You should go!"



And I thought yes, I should go. I wanted to take a break from this struggle of trying to get around in Taiwan with the language barrier so I actually bought a ticket to the Philippines a week later. It was very cheap. When I got on the plane. I had nothing. I mean I had zero information. I had no guidebook, no contacts, no addresses. I didn't know anything about the country. I remember sitting there on the plane and there was a little map in the back of the seat and I thought to myself, "Wow, there are a lot of islands down here."

I arrived in Manila at the airport and I didn't even know where to go. There were families meeting other people at the airport and one of them threw a little garland of flowers around me. I was asking them, "Are there hotels here in Manila? Where should I go?" I didn't have a single scrap of advance guidance.

They told me to get a jeepney into the city and showed me how, so I took a jeepney from the airport and then I was walking around, seeing if I could find a hotel. I just would get a map and try to figure everything out. Well, there's a ferry here, let's see what time the ferries go.

The absence of information sounds almost unbelievable to us now but that really was the state of affairs at that time and the solution was just to ask. That's easier in a place where they speak English. Asking in places like Taiwan was frustrating, it was work. There was a little bit of anxiety every day. Will I be able to find a place? I was writing down characters, trying to translate signs. In India, Burma, places like that it was a lot easier, but in Japan it was a constant struggle to communicate and find things. Very little was in English.



The standard way to deal with money then was travelers checks. To cash them you had to go to a bank. Not just any bank, but a special bank, and those were usually in the biggest cities. It was always a big ritual, a lot of bureaucracy, standing in different lines. That worked pretty well at the time. I would carry a few hundred dollars of cash at any given time and that continued through the 80s. You had to pace yourself with what you had and make sure you didn't run out.

This was way before the internet, of course, and you couldn't make phone calls that weren't prohibitively expensive. So the way you stayed in touch was you sent aerograms. These were single thin sheets of paper that you folded up a certain way after you wrote on one side and you could send a letter to someone fairly cheaply. You would then collect mail by telling people ahead of time that you were going to Burma and they should send a letter to you post restante in Rangoon. Then in the main post office in Rangoon there would just be trays and trays of mail, these long trays, full of letters from abroad addressed to different people. There were hundreds, sometimes thousands of envelopes. Often they weren't in any order, so you just had to flip through them all to see if there was anything addressed to you. You could write a letter to anyone, anywhere in the world, and send it to post restante in that city.

Japan was very expensive, even then, so I hitchhiked through Japan and stayed in youth hostels. They offered an all-you-can-eat breakfast and dinner. Granted, hostel meals were

white rice, miso soup, some pickles and maybe an egg, but that was enough to keep me going most of the time. Then I'd try to find a noodle shop I could afford now and then. I was living on three or four dollars a day in Japan. In India and Burma back then you could get by on a couple dollars a day. You could really go very, very far for a few thousand dollars if you were willing to live at a level where where you stayed was in a dorm with a shared bath and no shower.

I wound up going to these communal places not because I wanted to hang out with other travelers necessarily, but because that dorm became the guidebook! Every place would have these guestbooks that guests would write in. People would post key information there. There was this very thin, rarified network of people who just came from an area. Now traveling the circuit is like a rite of passage in Southeast Asia especially, but then it was like this secret network of people who would leave breadcrumbs: which hotels would accept travelers, where you could find yogurt, where to find a bus in the northern Philippines. Because this was before Lonely Planet and Moon Handbooks, this is where you would get all your information, where you picked up all your tips.



I didn't identify quite with that crowd though. They were really there to have a good time, cheaply, but I had given myself an assignment. I saw myself as a working photographer. I was documenting the rare stuff. I was out all day taking photos and exploring, traveling hard, always moving. I went to those traveler guesthouses because they were the sources of information.

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Back then you could take a bus from London all the way to India for very little money and people were realizing you could get to places that previously took expedition level funds to reach. I remember taking an overnight bus from India to Kathmandu. That bus was probably not more than \$5. I remember that morning, after traveling all night, rolling down the Kathmandu Valley and seeing the Himalayas, and a whole city with zero cars. It was like taking a spaceship to another planet for five dollars.

The way things would often happen is you would meet another traveler in, say, Japan and they would say, "You can take an overnight ferry to Korea, and you know, Korea is kind of cool."

So I would think, Hmmm, my visa is running out and I need to go somewhere else, and then I could come back. And it's only a few hundred dollars. I've got that much... Then when you're in Thailand, you find out it's easy to get to Burma. It's almost like you're walking out to the end of the plank and the platform keeps extending below you. You keep meeting people who have come from somewhere else and their tales would convince you that you have to go there-and you can.

There were a few jobs you could do along the way, mostly teaching English. But I calculated that I could make more money working for a few months in the USA and saving money, then taking off again. I did that twice, coming home for about six months or so. So that was my solution, except when I got to Iran and I got a "real job" with a driver and everything. But then that kind of blew up in my face when the revolution in 1979 came...

Most of the time I was traveling alone, though you really couldn't avoid traveling along with other people because the routes were so parallel. One of my brothers came with me twice for a while. While on one of those trips across Afghanistan, there was a coup by the Soviets. We actually got arrested and exported out of the country.



I was photographing with 35mm film. I left home with 500 rolls of film in my backpack. I had 500 rolls of cellophane-wrapped boxes of film, worth a lot of money in those parts back then, and yet over 10 years, no one ever looked inside my backpack, including coming back to the US.

I would send home maybe 20 or 30 rolls of film at a time in a box. I asked my mom to put them in a freezer when she got them. The first thing I would do when I was back home and earning money was to start getting my rolls of film developed. It was close to \$5 a photo in today's money just to develop and print the photos. So I had to really think about it each time I pressed that shutter. It was almost too expensive to experiment. It sounds crazy now, but I often didn't see my pictures until years after taking them! So as you could imagine, there was this really long feedback loop between when I took the picture and when I got to actually see what it looked like. That's a horrible way to do photography where you never see your images. To make it worse, I only had a manual camera, not automatic, so my exposure and focusing could be off and I wouldn't know it. Every few months I would buy a roll of black and white film and get it developed locally just to make sure my cameras were working.



I was shooting two rolls of film a day while traveling, about 70 photos. When I was growing up, my family would shoot a roll of 24 photos in a year, which was pretty typical. You'd have three holidays on one roll. It was considered radical, extreme to be shooting as many photos as I was. When I would tell people I shot 70 per day their jaws would drop. They couldn't imagine how you could find 70 things to take a photo of in one day! That many pictures in a day was considered insane.

There were great shots I missed because the settings weren't automatic. There are great shots that are gone forever. But the interesting thing is, I never lost a roll of film. Some rolls of Kodachrome got heat stroke when I stored them in Delhi, which affected the color, but I never lost anything. Now I back up digital photos three times, so I still haven't lost any over 40 years.



Apart from my camera gear (two camera bodies, 4 lenses) and film, I only had one change of clothes. One pair of pants, a down jacket, a sleeping bag, maybe a sweater. When I went to Sri Lanka with my brother, we left our backpacks somewhere and just brought daypacks. That was fun because we could jump off buses anywhere and stop quickly. My pants were in shreds by the end. I was a total disgrace to hosts. We were obviously not poor, but we looked poor, which was very perplexing to the locals. I was patching my own jeans, not to be cool, but because I was short on money.

Sickness was a real risk in Asia. You didn't need a prescription to get any medicine at all though. I went to the library to do research on what I was experiencing in India and I figured out I had giardia. I went and got the right medicine and treated it. Another time I got hepatitis in Nepal. The remedy for that is rest and I ended up spending a whole month in a hostel in Calcutta recovering. Wherever locals drank the water, I drank the water. I think that keeps my microbiology robust. Outside of those two cases I stayed pretty healthy. I still drink local water if the locals do.



There were certainly the encroachments of modern life happening, even at that time. But there were places like northern Afghanistan or Kathmandu that hadn't changed in centuries. Now those "unchanged" areas have become much smaller, like tiny corners. In places like China, they have almost disappeared entirely. Other countries like Myanmar still hold the old. Most of the world doesn't look much like the images I captured then at all. My recorded views are increasingly rare views. My first book of pictures from that time—*Asia Grace*—was published by the German art book publisher Taschen. I'm working on photos now for a second photo book called *Vanishing Asia* that I hope Taschen will also publish. There will be lots more images of the culture that is rapidly disappearing from Asia.

In every culture the native costume is the first thing to go, native architecture is next. Food is one of the last to go, even in modern places where people are wearing blue jeans. So these days I like to go to places where there is still native costume and native architecture. Unfortunately these areas are shrinking. I'm not nostalgic about it; I understand the reasons behind the changes, and it's a net improvement, but someday they will be gone and I want to capture them.



After 10 years, when I was hitting 30, I made a switch from being a poor nomad and I started a business. I started to write about travel and was importing and selling travel books by mail order that were hard to find, you know, guidebooks from unknown-at-that-time writers like Maureen and Tony Wheeler (Lonely Planet), Bill Dalton (Moon), and Rick Steves. I started a mail order catalog in 1981 called Nomadic Books selling their self-published guides. That led to other things, like computers, and I quickly graduated to a new class. I stopped traveling so much, had a family, and for a decade and a half in the 1980s and early 1990s I was able to resist that desire to document those disappearing wonders. Now, once my kids left home, I'm covering almost as much territory photographing as I was back then. Again, I am mostly in Asia, returning to the same original assignment, but with more money than time, rather than more time than money. I'm still trying to document these disappearing pockets of timeless places.

There was definitely an isolationist aspect of Asia then that is no longer around. These were often societies that were willingly closing themselves off from the rest of the world, economically and culturally. Clearly that is no longer the case. Almost two thirds of the people on the planet live in Asia, so Asia is going to become the cultural and economic leader of the world, which is going to be a big blow to the West. That will be a huge adjustment to make. I keep returning to Asia to both record what is vanishing and to see the future that they have in store for us.

Hear the full interview between Rolf Potts and Kevin Kelly on the [Deviate podcast](#).

Kevin Kelly is the co-founder of Wired magazine and one of the world's best-known authorities on where technology is headed. He is the author of several popular books including *The Inevitable* and the Taschen coffee table book *Asia Grace*. See more at [KK.org](#).

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