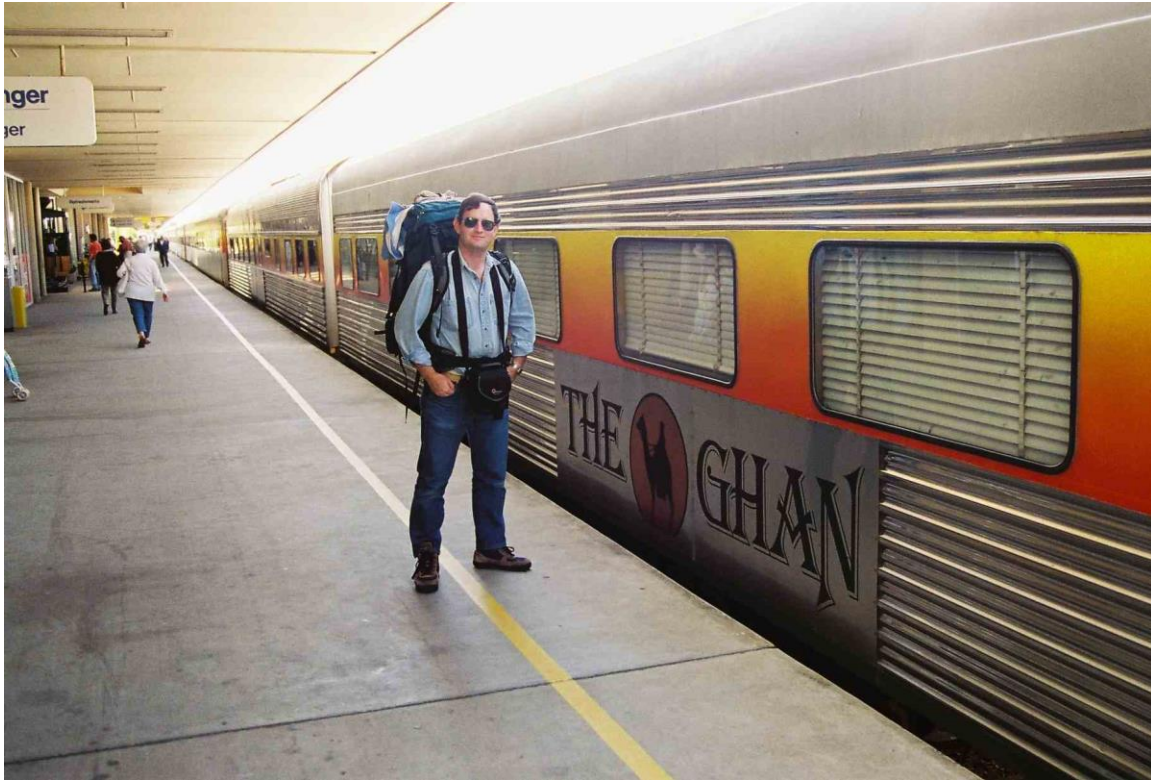


A long journey to Arizona

by Steen Hviid



A Danish engineer travels the world, immigrates to the United States, and eventually gets sick with multiple chemical sensitivities and electrical hypersensitivity.

I wanted to see the world. When I was fifteen I did my first solo trip driving around my native country of Denmark on a little one-horsepower moped with a top speed of 20 miles (30 km) per hour. This was 1976. The following year was my first solo foreign trip on a package tour to London. As I grew older and more experienced, I grew bolder. Each summer I bought a ticket that allowed me to roam around Western Europe on trains for a month.

I soon found out that after seeing the famous buildings, like the Eiffel Tower and the Acropolis, I enjoyed walking into neighborhoods away from the tourists. Soon I thirsted to go where there were no tourists at all, just a few other adventurous backpackers like myself. That turned into treks across North Africa, central Turkey and behind the Iron Curtain. Later on I went to Asia and Australia. All together, I've been to 36 countries and 2 territories on 5 continents.

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I have crossed well over a hundred borders – most of them friendly, a few not. Only one, Burma, refused to let me in. A Danish passport is welcome in many places. It even gave me preferential treatment crossing into East Germany and avoiding a thorough search of the other passengers entering Greece from Turkey.

Backpackers often carried their national flag on their packs. My Danish flag got me waved through some border crossings and was helpful a few other times. American backpackers did not carry their flag – a few even carried the Canadian flag. This was to avoid harassment. The Vietnam war was still freshly remembered.

I have slept in many unusual places, such as a castle in Germany, a bamboo hut on stilts in Thailand, a cave in Tunisia, the porch of a mud-house in Morocco, a family compound on Bali, several beaches in Greece, and the luggage racks on trains in Yugoslavia and Portugal.

There have been many adventures. In Morocco the police stopped the bus and demanded bribes. In Thailand I visited a refugee camp for people who had fled Burma (now Myanmar). In Australia I climbed the Uluru rock and snorkeled the Great Barrier Reef. In Indonesia I saw people walk on glowing coals with their bare feet. They were so close I could feel the heat myself; it was not faked.

Riding the rush hour commuter train in Singapore I was a full head taller than the throng of Chinese people, despite I am just average height in America. A few other westerners also stuck out in the crowd.

In Italy I quickly learned that traffic lights were only for decoration. To walk across a street in Naples it was best to walk with some Italians, so the cars would hit them first (miraculously, they never did).

I walked into all sorts of churches, temples, and mosques, and got thrown out from some for being an infidel.

The dumbest thing I ever did was to run with the bulls in Pamplona, Spain. Truly insane, but what a trip! I nearly broke my nose jumping a fence when a bull charged me.

It was a chilling experience to ride the train into West Berlin from communist East Germany. While they searched the train for escapees, a long row of guards stood with their machine guns ready.

In Algeria I stayed in a hotel that was filled with the biggest roaches I have ever seen.

In Turkey many cheap hotels had no showers at all. Instead, I used public baths, which were all in beautiful ancient buildings. In one of these Turkish baths I got a Turkish massage from a very muscular man. I was barely able to walk afterwards.

I was invited to lunch in a Tunisian home. The women were not served, though my host's mother sat with us and occasionally stole food off his plate. She spoke only the local language, her face was covered with tattoos, and she looked with great amusement at this strange alien her grown son had invited home.



Backpacking in Sahara, 1984.

Sanitary practices vary. If not pre-warned, the first encounter with an Arabic toilet can be rather shocking. Then there was that memorable long train ride in the Balkans where the toilets were piled very high, if you get my drift. In one Thai village, I saw children defecate into the same lake the adults gathered water from.

My health was nearly bulletproof. I was careful with what I ate and drank, and suffered just a couple case of upset bowels. I only got really sick one time, where friendly villagers put me in their only car and drove me to a tiny clinic. The doctor spoke only Turkish, the nurse a little German. They gave me some pills in a

package that was only in Turkish. I never got a diagnosis, but now I think it was dehydration and heat exhaustion.

I broke a tooth in Australia, which was patched up by a dentist in Alice Springs. I'm glad it didn't happen elsewhere. I once saw a Moroccan dentist in his outdoor shop; all he did was extractions. He proudly showed me his collection of extracted teeth and gruesome tongs.

In the third world I used the transportation the locals used. Some had names like "bemo," "dolmush," "tuk-tuk" and "grand taxi." In Malaysia I once traveled in a bicycle-powered rickshaw.

I loved traveling on trains. From the to-the-minute German trains, to the "whenever it arrives" trains in Asia and southern Europe. I tried to ride the French TGV highspeed trains, cogwheel railroads in the Alps, the Australian Ghan, and local rural trains in Greece and Thailand, where people carried chickens and water melons for market day. In Norway I rode a train down the steep sides of a fjord. The train driver assured the tourists there were three fully independent braking systems, each able to stop the train by itself. Some trains went very fast, some so slow we passengers stretched our legs walking beside it.

Trains are a great way to see landscapes and areas where no tourists go. And to observe the local people and talk to them. I met a lot of people from many countries. I spoke five languages, but that was sometimes not enough. Hand gestures were often needed.

The first time I rode a French TGV highspeed train, I sat next to a French engineer who worked on them. He spoke nothing but French and my French was not good enough for a discussion of how they designed trains that could work at such speeds. But engineering symbols was our common language and worked very well.

When I hiked around Turkey people would come out and invite me to share a cup of tea on their shady porch. We had no language in common, so we could just nod and smile at each other.

Learning a handful of words in each language helped tremendously, such as "yes," "no," "thank you," "water," "bathroom," and "train station."

Navigating was more difficult in some countries. I could interpret street names in Greek letters, but not in Arabic or Thai script. It helped the numerals were the same everywhere; they were invented by the Arabs.

This form of travel gave me a much deeper experience than if I had gone by private car or bus, or in a group. I usually traveled alone, but in more dicey places I often teamed up with another lone and experienced backpacker. I especially liked the unflappable Australians.

The only harassment I encountered was from idle Moroccan teenagers who wanted money. In one remote village that I hiked through with an Australian, we were chased out by rock-throwing teenagers when we refused to give them money.

In the Arab countries men frequently asked the same three questions: what was my religion, how many wives and sons did I have? When I replied “none” to all, they felt genuinely sorry.

In Austria I crossed the Alps on the famous Grossglockner Hochalpenstrasse (Great Glockner high Alpine road) by hitching rides with local people. I didn’t even have to ask, they offered freely.

In Czechoslovakia two students bailed me out when the train conductor demanded extra money and I had none of the local currency left – I was leaving the country and it was illegal to take any of their money out.

A woman in Bulgaria asked me to marry her so she could get away from the oppressive communist dictatorship there. A Moroccan butcher begged me to help his son leave “this prison” of poverty and get a job in Europe.

Turkey was a military dictatorship in those days, with soldiers patrolling the streets carrying machine guns. But those same soldiers were the friendliest people and didn’t mind me taking their photo.

Despite cultural differences, people are really people wherever you go.

Coming to America

I graduated with a Bachelor’s in Engineering in 1984 and started working for a large engineering firm in Denmark. I decided to go back to school and got my Masters in 1987. Two weeks after I graduated, I flew across the Atlantic and

started my new job at the Ohio State University. It was a one-year job-exchange, where an American spent the year with my old engineering firm in Denmark. When the year was over I was offered a permanent job, so I stayed.

To really experience a country, you have to live in it. And it takes much more than a year to “know” it. I had never been to America before, now I got to experience its many sides. I had expected to commute to work by bike, as people did in Denmark, but that was far too dangerous. Instead I marveled at how cheap cars and gasoline were. Americans like choices, in Europe an ice cream vendor usually offers one or two flavors, here two dozen were common.

The local grocery store was bigger than any in Denmark, and none of their brands were familiar to me. I spent hours exploring, but couldn't find anything like the muesli I was used to eating for breakfast, or the hardy rye bread all Danes eat for lunch.

I loved the Americans' embrace of new technologies. At work I had three computer screens on my desk, at my old job nobody had more than one. All grocery stores had scanners at checkout; I had never seen any in Europe (they got them a few years later). The dynamic American “can do” spirit also appealed to me. It fit me better than the Danish way of doing things, even though this also meant there were a lot more charlatans and hucksters than I was used to.

I loved my job. There was always something interesting to work on, and it was never boring. I was given much more responsibility than I would have had so early in my career if I had continued working in Denmark.

Then there were all the absurdities. My department had a small ladder with a sign sternly telling me NOT to place the ladder on an icy surface. Pumping deceased people full of formaldehyde and then putting them on display was another odd custom. So was adding toxic fluoride to the drinking water, instead of occasionally rinsing the mouth with it. And America is the last country to not use the Metric system.

I briefly had a boss who told me the female staff didn't need the salary of men. “Just enough for clothes and makeup so they can get married,” he said. I was speechless.

In Europe and Asia there were far fewer pharmacies than in America. American doctors prescribe far too many unnecessary pills.

American homes are bigger and have a lot of stuff in them. Danes prefer fewer things, but of good quality. Danish homes do not even have walk-in closets.

The first winter I watched a lot of television. In Denmark we had two channels, here I had 32. In Denmark the people reading the news looked like everybody else. Here they were all young women or mature men, and all very good looking. The Danish news had more positive stories and was less focused on conflicts, crime, and mayhem. I explored TV Land and saw game shows, tabloid shows, cop shows, pro wrestling, home shopping etc. My co-workers were amused by my questions about what I saw and a bit horrified what impression it might give me of this country.

The worst was a highly advertised show about opening the gangster Al Capone's safe. They strung the viewers out for an hour and then the safe was empty, which they obviously knew in advance. TV commercials were illegal in Denmark, so they were a novelty. But I quickly got fed up with them, especially the obnoxious car commercials.

When spring came, I returned the cable TV box. The staff asked where I was moving to. When it was clear I just had no use for TV, that was totally incomprehensible to them. They later sent a technician to my door offering to reinstall the box! I have not really watched TV since, except during the 1990-91 Gulf War.

Over the years I traveled around forty-five of the American States and saw many of the iconic bridges, skyscrapers, and national parks. I also experienced lots of Americana, such as football games, Medieval festivals, Fourth of July parades, a tractor pull, a rodeo, and an Apache pow-wow.

In New Mexico I wanted to visit a solar research center, which was located on a military base. I got a pass-note at the gate, but it was not valid on Sundays, which I didn't notice. A military police officer got very upset that a foreign national was driving around his base. A complete farce. Fortunately, another MP arrived to calm him down. I was then escorted off the base by two patrol cars.

The social conventions were a bit different in America. In Denmark nobody talks to strangers, even people you see every day on the commuter train. Over here it took some getting used to clerks in the grocery store asking how I am doing today – and realizing they don't actually want a true answer.

The dating scene was also different. In Denmark it was: engineer? nerd! boring! go away! I never got that reaction from American women. This may be because Danish women are more equal and don't need a well-paid spouse if they want to have children. In Denmark there are many blond men and women, in America the blondes are all women. Puzzling, until I was told about hair dyes. Hairspray was also unfamiliar to me.

One of the first dates was with a woman who clearly struggled walking in her ridiculous high-heeled boots. I hadn't seen such things before and didn't realize she wore them to impress me! All future dates were with women wearing sensible shoes.

Environmental illness

When I moved to America in 1987, I arrived in September wearing my winter coat as it was fall in Denmark. The guy who picked me up at the airport wore a T-shirt and shorts. I never wore shorts in the cool Danish summers. That really impressed me.

It also impressed me that few people at the university I worked for smoked, and most did it outdoors. They were gradually banning indoor smoking already then. Despite its "green" image, Denmark was much slower to restrict tobacco. A comprehensive tobacco ban was finally enacted in 2007.

In my many travels I noticed I felt a little "better" when I went to a desert, whether it was in Africa, Turkey, Australia, or America. My nose was not stuffed up in these places.

I was extremely healthy and didn't miss a single day of classes the last ten years I was in Denmark. My last year there I had severe stomach troubles. The doctor stuck a scope down my throat and declared all looked fine. But he also said he was sorry he had no idea what it was. His wife had the very same problem and he couldn't help her either. I miss such frankness from American doctors.

The problem went away a month later, I just had to take an antacid now and then. In retrospect, I think it was the start of my later food allergies. It took another decade before Danish doctors became really aware of allergies in general.

Moving to America cleared my nose, but it took just three years before I became allergic to the local pollen. A friend suggested I see an allergist. Until then I had never even heard the term “allergy.”

Through the 1990s I gradually became more reactive to things. First, I just had episodes of “the flu” each winter, as I didn’t get so much fresh air. Then there was a particular meeting room that was not ventilated that gave me headaches. Then there was a colleague who used too much fragrance. A certain “sick” building on campus made me dizzy. Gradually more and more places and situations became a problem.

There was one building I needed to visit about once a month. If I went there in the daytime, I always got a major headache. A few times I even got tunnel vision. If I stayed in a part with few people and a separate ventilation system, I was fine. If I went there at night or on the weekend, the whole building was fine for me.

My boss worked in this building and was concerned. She asked about the ventilation system and was told it provided fresh air according to standards – standards that were designed so at least 80 percent of workers were comfortable (the 20 percent were out of luck).

My allergist installed a new carpet in his waiting room. It made my sinuses burn, so I had to wait out in the hallway. Luckily the carpet offgassed enough in a couple of months to be okay. The allergist gave evasive answers to why the carpet was such a problem. He also had little to say about my other puzzling observations. When I really pressed for answers, he told me that “my college does not accept this,” so he clearly knew about MCS, but didn’t tell me. I wish the allergist had leveled with me and just explained there was something called MCS; that it was controversial within the medical profession; and whatever he himself thought about it. If he had done that, perhaps I would have found the right doctor early enough to stop the progression of the illness. Instead, this paternalistic American doctor didn’t tell me anything, so it took years before I even heard there was a name for it and that I was not the only one with these problems.

One time I had to attend a seminar in a building that had a gas leak. Attendance was required as it was part of a new management fad. The presenter was one of the university architects and she told me with strong conviction that buildings could not make people sick. I got through the day standing by the open window.

The university was good at accommodating people with disabilities. I knew of a handful of cases, and was once involved in modifying a workstation so someone with poor eyesight could use it. Now I needed help myself.

My bosses and colleagues had known me for years and knew I didn't make things up, which probably helped too. They were great helping me out in several ways, such as changing the office I worked in and scheduling meetings in rooms that had good ventilation.

My job sometimes involved going to other buildings on campus to meet people. We eliminated much of that and talked to the rest about the problem. It worked well with everybody except one unpleasant dean who dismissively said "Can't you just take a pill?" I never met him again.

One day I went to a seminar. I was one of the presenters, which was no big deal as I had done that several times before and I was well prepared. But once I started on my 45-minute spiel, I realized I couldn't remember what to say. I had to muddle through using my slides as cues. That was not a good performance.



Backpacking in pristine air was wonderful. Here in the Appalachian Mountains.

I worked on a case that was so interesting I wrote up the whole story and sent it to a trade journal. A headhunter read the article and called me. She invited me to dinner to discuss jobs they were trying to fill, but I declined. I knew a new employer would not accommodate my MCS, and I liked where I was anyway. She might also have been too perfumey to share a table with. The headhunter kept calling, until I finally told her about my disability. Then no more calls.

I was struggling with daily episodes of dizziness, headaches, and brain fog, but with all the environmental controls I was still functioning enough to keep my job afloat. One of the worst episodes was on the flight back from visiting Denmark for Christmas. A highly fragranced woman sat right behind me. The plane was full, I could not get another seat. I tried to direct the air nozzle towards her to keep the fumes at bay, but her husband angrily moved it back. They spoke only a language I could not even guess what was. The flight attendant could not help. Six hours of hell that took two weeks to recover from.

Six months later I flew home on a plane from Denver. I was seated next to a very fragranced woman. When I asked for another seat, the flight attendant said none were available. Puzzled, the perfumey woman asked why I needed to move. When I briefly explained, she immediately went to the restroom and washed it off. I did not ask her to. Such kindness is exceedingly rare. Most people would be offended. My days of air travel were over.

I am so glad I traveled so much when I could. Today, much older, I am amazed at what I could do then, when I thought nothing of lugging a backpack all day.

Things kept getting worse and the doctors could not help. MCS was very controversial in the medical community, with the patients caught in the middle. How emotionally attached some were to their opinions was on full display once I visited a doctor who was a professor. He threw a fit. The two med students standing behind him exchanged interesting glances with each other.

I finally found a doctor who specialized in environmental medicine who could diagnose the problem. By then I strongly suspected I had MCS, but getting a proper diagnosis was a relief. Even though MCS is not a diagnosis anyone would want, getting it ended years of uncertainty. But it was too late, they could not restore my health.

I spent all day, every day, in front of a computer. It took me a long time to realize it caused the headaches and brain fog that kept getting worse and worse. They went away overnight, and started up again the next day – except if I went somewhere without computers. This time it was not the fumes, but the radiation. I couldn't reduce the radiation enough to keep working, so that became the last straw that finally ended my career.

That transformed me from someone who was impatient with how slow people and businesses were at adopting e-mail and other technologies, to one who had to do everything the old-fashioned ways. Now I have to hire people to buy things online with a computer, since many companies don't accept orders any other way. I even had to hire someone to type this story from my handwritten manuscript.

I needed to leave the polluted city. Since I felt better in the desert, I eventually moved to rural Arizona. Moving here was the right thing to do. It is not perfect, like all the Western states we sometimes get smoke from forest fires, and even here there is a pollen season. But this seems to be the best climate for me.

Many others have moved to Arizona for the same reasons I did. They came from all parts of the United States; nearly every state is represented. There are even other people from Ohio in my area, and we've had several other people who were born overseas. We're all migrants here.

Dealing with electrical hypersensitivity and multiple chemical sensitivities, along with the medical system, was a bigger change than moving to another country. Here too there were many new and sometimes strange customs, and unfamiliar places to live.

It was originally my plan to immigrate to Australia after my first year in America, but I liked it here and my employer offered me a permanent job. For the past ten years I've been pen pals with two Australians who serve on the Board of the Australian MCS organization. If I had moved to Australia and gotten sick there, I would probably still have known them. The world is indeed small.



Performing a skit at a Christmas party in 2017

Editor's note

A shorter version of this story was published in the winter and spring 2023 issues of *Ecologic News*, a publication of the MCS support group HEAL of Southern Arizona.

More stories

For more stories about people with MCS or EHS, go to www.eiwellspring.org/facesandstories.html