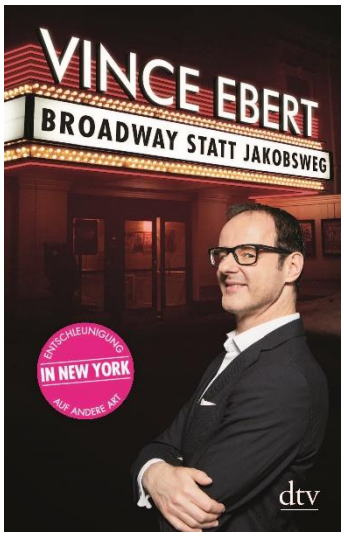

Vince Ebert

Broadway instead of Camino de Santiago

Anti-Deceleration in a Different Way

Original title: *Broadway statt Jakobsweg. Entschleunigung auf andere Art*
September 2020
368 pages

Outline

Adventure instead of midlife crisis!

“I didn’t need a sabbatical; I needed a new challenge.” - the cabaret performer and bestselling author Vince Ebert about his time in the edgiest and fastest-paced metropolis in the world: New York City!

What do you do when you find yourself on the verge of a midlife crisis? Retreat into monastic silence? Adopt a strict regimen of fasting and long hikes? Early retirement? Boooooring! The cabaret performer and bestselling author Vince Ebert went in the opposite direction, choosing to spend a year in the edgiest and fastest-paced city in the world: New York City! Ramping up instead of slowing down. In a shoebox-sized apartment on the Lower East Side. And thus he took a deep dive into the American Way of Life, where he relentlessly pursued the most basic of questions. How is it possible that a nation that sent astronauts to the moon is incapable of producing functional shower faucets? And can you really go from dish washer to millionaire? Or just to dishwasher operator? Broadway, not Jakobsweg: Vince Ebert discovers that life after 50 has new meaning in the Big Apple.

- Personal, smart and very funny: Vince Ebert recounts his hiatus in the Big Apple

Vince Ebert, born in Miltenberg in 1968, studied Physics in Würzburg. Before starting a career as a cabaret artist in 1998, he worked in a consulting company as well as in market research. His goal is to present complex scientific ideas in a generally comprehensible way in accordance with the laws of humour! He made a name for himself with his successful solo program *Big Bang – Physics is Sexy*.

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Sample Translation

by Jamie Lee Searle

No rush…

If you ask a German for a positive cliché about the Americans, the usual answer is that they’re so incredibly friendly – but you know they don’t really mean it. A good example is the standard American greeting of “How are you?”. They’re not actually interested in how you are, of course, but they ask regardless. And the only acceptable answer is: “I’m fine, thank you. How are you?”

It took me quite a while to get used to this simple ritual. Because to us Germans, “How are you?” is not an empty greeting but a very specific medicinal enquiry. Our usual response being: “Good God, don’t ask! My fourth lumbar vertebra is shot, my lymph nodes are swollen, and for the past three days my bowel movements have been slightly green. Maybe it’s cancer…”

As a German, when you ask a question you automatically assume that the other person really wants to know the answer. That’s why we give a detailed response when someone asks us how we are. It’s like a reflex. In my opinion we Germans have many positive skills, but small talk is definitely not one of them. In casual conversation, we have a tendency to go straight into high gear. Say we meet a businessman from Boston at a dinner party – after just three minutes we’ll be asking him how on earth the genocide of the native Indians happened. That’s what we Germans consider a relaxed chinwag.

My wife has always found small talk a little easier. As an Austrian, she learnt from a young age how to handle superficial pleasantries. For example, many Austrians know and use the phrase “I liked it, it was very pleasing!” This empty phrase was a favourite of Emperor Franz Josef, the husband of Empress Sisi. But very few know why the Emperor used it. When the architect Eduard van der Nüll proudly showed his Emperor the newly-constructed Vienna State Opera, Franz Josef uttered the rather offhand verdict: “Well, it looks like a train station concourse…”. The mortified architect promptly went home and killed himself. Crazy, right? If architects took their own lives when projects turned out unsatisfactorily, clearly things weren’t all bad back then. In any case, news of the architect’s tragic end reached the Emperor, and he was greatly embarrassed. He decided that, in future, every time he was presented with such half-assed nonsense, he would always respond with the words: “I liked it, it was very pleasing!”

The Americans have perfected the art of superficial chitchat even further. As soon as you sit down in an American restaurant, one of the wait staff will immediately appear, put on their broadest smile, and greet you like an old school friend who has returned to their hometown after years away: “Hi, I’m Matthew! I’ll be your waiter this evening, and I hope you have a fantastic time in our restaurant. If you have any questions, if you need anything – regardless of what it is – don’t hesitate to ask. Because I’m Matthew, your personal waiter for this evening…”

At this point, a German would intuitively think: Hey, Matthew! I don’t want to date you; I just came in for a cheeseburger.

You could say that the service mentality that fuels the hospitality industry is installed in Americans at birth, something which isn’t the case with us Germans. There are historical roots to this. In German culture, the term “serve” has always had rather negative connotations. Until 1918, Germany was a typical feudal society. A person who served, from a hierarchical point of view, was ranked below someone who was served. The service provider, therefore, was of lesser value. America, on the other hand, was founded as a hierarchy-free immigration state, and consequently had a more relaxed relationship with the service industry from the very beginning.

The impact of this can be felt even today. In America, menial workers are put in service uniforms and stationed in front of restaurants and hotels to park your car for you, and Americans love that. In Germany, menial workers in uniforms are called traffic wardens. And yes, you guessed it, the Germans hate that. The Americans make parking easier; the Germans make it harder. That’s the difference between a service society and an authoritarian state.

Don’t get me wrong. If I had to choose between free iced water and sensible healthcare provision, I would definitely choose the latter. Nonetheless, America is far more competent when it comes to service mentality.

We Germans are always a little suspicious of too much friendliness. “Sure, so this Matthew guy might act really friendly, but he’s only doing it to get tips…” If we had a choice between fake friendliness and genuine unfriendliness, we would choose the latter. Because when grumpiness comes from the heart, we can deal with it.

I’ll admit that, after a year in the U.S.A., I was really homesick for typical German comments like: “No, we don’t have that size …”, “I’m sorry, this table isn’t in my zone…”, or, not to forget the classic: “Look, pal, don’t rush me…”

That’s probably why we love the Austrians so much. Because it feels very authentic to sit in a Viennese coffeehouse and be served by the staff with pure contempt. “Isn’t this Viennese sarcasm delightful!” When a maggot in your goulash is charmingly recast as: “Oh, that’s just a piece of ham”, you truly know you’re in Vienna.

The Austrian waiter, after all, regards the customer with silent contempt, making it clear that with every order you are massively infringing upon his quality of life. Small requests for adjustments to a dish are answered with an abrupt “Can’t be done”. If you ask for a side dish that isn’t on the menu, you’ll meet with a scornful “We don’t have any”. And if you have the audacity to ask whether it’s possible to get spinach with the Viennese schnitzel, it’s entirely possible that the waiter will take your arm and, with the words “It’s time to go”, escort you to the door.

It’s different in American gastronomy. There, as a customer, you really are king. Okay, okay… as long as you obey the unspoken rules. For example, in American restaurants you should always wait to be seated. That’s the cast iron rule. And it even applies when the place is completely empty. If you sit down of your own accord, the waitress will come to your table, raise her eyebrows and comment snarkily: “Aha. I see you’ve already found yourself a seat.” “Well yes! And just imagine, I got myself dressed this morning too…” The proverbial American service mentality, by the way, will also disappear if you’ve booked a table for four people but foolishly don’t all arrive at the same time. Until your “party is complete”, you will not be shown to your reserved table under any circumstances, but instead be parked at the bar or – if things are really bad – left standing in the draughty entrance area. Because the risk that the rest of your party won’t arrive, thereby potentially leaving valuable seats unoccupied, is far too much for American restaurant owners. The table bookings are as efficiently jampacked as the take-off and landing slots at JFK airport. As a rule, one and a half hours are allowed for dinner. After that, the table is reassigned. As soon as you’ve swallowed the last bite of your meal, your friendly waiter will reappear, slap the bill down on your table and, with a sugary sweet smile, utter the magic words: “No rush, sir!” Which, in American, translates as: “If you don’t immediately put your credit card on the table then clear out of here at once, Ramone will come out of the kitchen and break your little finger.”

To linger in a restaurant after dinner and drink another glass or two of wine with friends is, to the Americans, as absurd as putting on a children’s birthday party with a marshmallow eating competition in Death Valley. If you do want to have another drink after dinner, you have to change

locations. Usually to the nearest sports bar, a romantic setting in which you can order a Bud Light in a plastic cup and stare at a 72-inch monitor showing some mind-numbingly boring baseball game.

When Germans living America are asked what they miss most about their homeland, they often say: German bread. For me, it was the ability to take my time in restaurants, because this supposed no rush mentality always clouded my mood after every enjoyable meal. “I hope everything was okay for you?”, I was asked as I left, time and time again, by countless Matthews. “It was great! Thank you!” I would always answer, like a real American. But as I walked out, I often mumbled to myself: “I liked it, it was very pleasing”

German Thoroughness

At this point, I have to stand up for us Germans. We may not be as daring as the Americans, but the way in which we try to avoid mistakes by thinking through all potential problems in advance has its positive side. There’s a reason why German thoroughness has made us world market leaders in kitchen appliances, shower systems and cylinder head gaskets. The wet blanket, by the way, was also developed by German engineers. And it still works perfectly.

In the U.S., these German qualities are highly regarded. Every child in America has heard of Dirk Nowitzki, the basketball player from Würzburg who, in 1998, joined the Dallas Mavericks as a complete nobody and played there until the end of his career in 2019. And that’s despite receiving significantly more lucrative offers from other clubs over the years. Together with his youth trainer Holger Geschwindner, who used mathematic formulas to calculate the ideal throw, Nowitzki has spent the last 20 years trying to perfect his game with typically German meticulousness. Initially, the Americans made fun of his unorthodox methods. But his successes speak for themselves. In 2007, Nowitzki was the first European to be named the most valuable player (MVP) of the season, and in 2011 he won the cup with the Mavericks. With over 31,000 points scored, he is one of the seven best basketball players in NBA history.

It’s this mix of humility, hard work and loyalty which the Americans admire so much in “Dirkules”, as he’s affectionately known. I’m convinced that by now the NBA star could shoot some little old lady on Fifth Avenue and people would say: “Well, maybe he overreacted a bit. But hey, the man is over 40 and he can still hit the mark. From 15 metres! You can really depend upon the Germans…”

There’s another German superstar in the U.S.A. who’s relatively unknown back home: Eckhart Tolle. Tolle was born in Lünen, but in America he became a spiritual superstar. His first book “The Power of Now” topped the New York Times bestseller list for what seemed like an eternity. Since then, he has packed out huge conference centres all over America. To put it concisely, his message is this: Live in the moment. But he says it in such a strong German accent that the Americans love him all the more, because they think: That’s Buddhism and German technical mastery combined!

We Germans are fascinated by getting to the core of the subject, and this has also taken us far in academia. A hundred years ago, the physicists who discovered that light is both a wave and a particle were German. “So what?” says the American, “the most important thing is that the light comes on when I flip the switch.” That kind of approach is much too banal for us. Because we want to know

precisely what light is. That’s why Max Planck developed quantum physics, and Edison, by contrast, merely the lightbulb. On the other hand, without the lightbulb we would all be watching Netflix by candlelight.

The German mentality is deeply influenced by Goethe’s Faust. We want to understand what it is that holds the world together at its core.

A technical invention which clearly illustrates this kind of approach is the so-called Flachspüler, or “shallow flusher”: a toilet bowl design which is colloquially referred to as the “poo shelf”.

As you may know, toilet bowls have differing architectures in different countries. In France, for example, the bowl’s wastepipe is usually located right at the back. This means that everything one produces in terms of solid matter immediately disappears into the depth of the bowl. In Anglo-American territories, the hole is usually in the middle, and filled with water. This means that for every sizeable delivery you make, you receive wet feedback. In technical jargon, this kind of toilet bowl translates as a “deep flusher”.

In Germany, the art of toilet design has led to another, notable development: the shallow flusher. In this, the hole is positioned at the front, meaning that your business doesn’t immediately fall into the water. No! Instead it glides elegantly onto the specially constructed poo shelf and comes to rest there in its full splendour.

Every time I’ve explained the functioning of the shallow flusher to an American, the response was a disbelieving, disgusted headshake. With two New York acquaintances, we were never invited back.

These intense reactions also led to my giving this controversial topic a great deal of thought during my stay in America. I’m now convinced that the real reason for the differences in toilet design lies in our historical and cultural roots.

Consider our French neighbours, for example. The French are strongly influenced by the French Revolution, during which the general rule was: Off with their heads and away with them. Classic problem suppression, if you will. We don’t give a shit.

The Anglo-American mentality, on the other hand, is much more pragmatic and rational. “Let the thought sink in first…” Hence: Hole in the middle, brief feedback – then a quick press of the button, and the problem is removed.

The German way of thinking is strongly influenced by metaphysics. The land of poets and thinkers: “Let’s take a very close look at things. From every possible angle. Using all of our senses. Forget the solution, it’s the problem that counts!” The shallow flusher is the porcelain-sculpted manifestation of the German soul.

Before we Germans design any device or machine, we first want to understand the theoretical concept behind it. Only then do we begin with the work. The American approach is different. The Americans try something out first, and if it doesn’t work, that’s when they question it and make improvements. Admittedly this means that American companies introduce their apps, devices and machines to the market very quickly, but they generally function less efficiently than German products. During a road trip, we once spent three weeks in a house in Florida where we had to turn on the microwave in order to open the garage door.

Any German who has ever spent time living in America doesn’t necessarily miss German rye bread – no, they miss German engineering.

It’s almost incomprehensible. This is a nation that has travelled to the moon. Americans invented the hydrogen bomb, the pacemaker and the lightbulb – but the mixer tap is an invention which has completely passed them by. If you want to wash your hands in an American bathroom, you get to choose between being scalded or cryogenically frozen.

Heating thermostats are called “windows” in the U.S., by the way. And in order to flush a toilet over there, you need the kind of special touch required for starting a classic car.

Don’t even get me started on the showers. Because “water pressure” is a term that doesn’t seem to exist in American-English. The water pipe systems in New York are so badly maintained that the showers act like they have prostate problems.

The Americans are also clueless when it comes to electric energy. For example, wiring is generally installed over plaster, and to be honest “installed” is saying too much. They simply staple or tape the cable haphazardly to the wall and don’t even secure the end of the wire with a terminal strip. This results in the electricity cables protruding unceremoniously -- and completely unisolated -- from the walls in many houses. That’s why the bathroom in our New York apartment was laid with thick carpet, so that the frequent electric shocks we got while shaving or using the hairdryer at least weren’t fatal.

We Germans have a great love for precision, exact measurements and meticulous calculations. If you invite a German to a party “at around eight”, then you can be sure they’ll be ringing your doorbell between 19:59 and 20:01. That’s why many Americans suspect that each German has an atomic clock in their cellar.

My friend Jeff once said to me with a smirk: “You Germans are correct in such a sweet way.” He’s probably right. When Christian Wulff was the German president, he was charged with accepting a fraudulent payment to the scandalous amount of exactly 753.90 Euros. Somehow, even when it comes to corruption, we Germans are decorous and precise.

American politicians would only have to stand down if they had cheated someone out of billions, committed murder or, even worse, betrayed their wives. In Germany, the latter wouldn’t be a reason to stand down. In fact, a Bundestag official wouldn’t even lose his mandate if he kills his wife. If he had a shred of decency, of course, he would surrender his mandate of his own accord. But then again, how much decency does the average wife killer possess?

Richard Nixon secretly commanded bombings in Cambodia, spied illegally on his political opponents, and lied to Congress about it before stepping down. Over here, 753.90 Euros are enough to finish someone’s political career. If the bookkeeping doesn’t add up, it’s no joke to us Germans.

It’s no coincidence, therefore, that the Gaussian distribution – an equation that aims to bring order to random variables – used to be printed on the ten Deutschmark note. We’re fascinated by it. That’s why it horrifies us that America has always refused to introduce the metric system. What on earth is so appealing about feet, inches and miles? There are ounces and pounds and they make everything messy, lopsided and imprecise. An ounce is £0.0625 and a Hundred inches are 8.333333… feet. None of that makes any sense!

Nothing is standardised either. Every plug, every screw, every nut has some arbitrary length, width or diameter. If you want to buy a simple strip of wood measuring 13.74892 centimetre in length in an American DIY store, you’ll end up tearing your hair out. Because an American DIY shop assistant doesn’t have the slightest clue about nanometres.

The most disturbing thing, admittedly, are the imprecise American measurements. How much is “a bunch” for example? Or even worse: “A bunch of stuff”. “I’ve got 2.63 kilograms of stuff” would at least be a step in the right direction.

The Americans are slapdash and imprecise even when it comes to curse words. The typical curse in the USA is: Fuck you! In Germany, the most common one translates as: “Fuck yourself in the knee!” A clear, precise instruction if ever there was one. Now that’s German thoroughness.

How not to get to Omaha

It’s very difficult to understand the customs of a foreign culture. The deeply American idea of owning a weapon seems grotesque to us, as does the deeply American fear of unpasteurised milk. You would have no issue running around Alaska brandishing an AK-57, but heaven forbid you try to smuggle a piece of French Brie over the U.S.-Canadian border. “Sir! This piece of cheese is very dangerous!”. And it won’t help in the slightest if you tell the border guard: “Sir! Cheese doesn’t kill people. People kill people…”

The American authorities really do make it extremely difficult for people to enter the country. On an earlier holiday, I was once asked at the border: “What’s your profession?”, to which I stupidly replied: “I’m a comedian”. The border guard’s response, without a touch of humour, was: “Tell a joke! Otherwise I can’t let you in.” And I was so nervous that I couldn’t think of anything in the slightest bit funny. Since then, I always say: “I’m a proctologist. Do you want me to prove it?”

It’s ridiculous to exhaust people as soon as they reach the border. How is a person supposed to go from plate washer to millionaire if the entry procedure alone makes their hands shake with fear? That in itself, by the way, should have made it clear to them that I couldn’t possibly be a proctologist.

As EU citizens, we like to think we’re the uncrowned kings of bizarre rules and pointless regulations. For example, according to the EU, wild honey must contain an electrical conductivity of 0.8 Microsiemens per centimetre. There are EU regulations for the clips which attach to babies’ dummies: all the essentials are set out over 52 pages in 8 chapters with 40 sub-items. Brussels defines how much water is allowed to flow through a showerhead and how large the distance between two barbecue grills must be. There are roughly 21,000 guidelines to tell us exactly how to put up a ladder, whether it’s permissible to drive an automatic car in a leap year, or that the “faecal matter of a dog is an independently movable object which, when brought into contact with a plot of land, doesn’t automatically become the property of the land owner in question.” Just in case that wasn’t obvious.

An apparatus with 25,000 workers can quite clearly generate considerable momentum. This was already established back in 1955 by the British sociologist Cyril Northcote Parkinson, when he formulated the law which would become known as Parkinson’s Law: “In every public administrative organisation operating in peacetime, the number of staff increases by between five and six percent each year, completely independent of the workload and problems to be resolved.”

We also know that the size of a team has a decisive influence on its output. Some years ago, a work group at the University of Vienna studied the sizes of the government cabinets in almost 200 countries and came to a predictable conclusion: Growing cabinet sizes correlate strongly with a reduction in prosperity and education in the respective country. In other words, the more politicians there are to stick their oars in, the more the system is incapacitated.

The anthropologist Robin Dunbar discovered that willingness for productive cooperation amongst groups of up to 150 individuals functions relatively well. But as soon this magic “Dunbar number” is crossed, it becomes increasingly difficult for people to work together constructively. Quite simply, attending to all the different relationships expends too much energy.

The biggest dilemma about bureaucracies is their inefficiency. In Egypt, for example, it takes several hundred working days and dozens of authorities in order to register a small company. And can someone explain to me why every German receives an eleven digit tax number? With 82 million Germans, an eight digit one would surely do. But who knows, perhaps the population will swell to 100 billion, and then the tax office would be a laughing stock with their eight digit numbers.

Of course, bureaucrats don’t bombard people with pointless, time-consuming regulations and guidelines because they’re unintelligent, or even malicious, but because they themselves don’t feel the consequences of their decisions.

That, of course, is no different in America. There the nonsense even differs from state to state. In Illinois, for example, it’s forbidden to eat dinner in a burning restaurant. You should keep that in mind if you’re ever in Chicago: Don’t book a table that’s on fire. It’s against the law.

In South Carolina, no one is allowed to swim in sewage canals without an official permit. I was there once and really fancied doing just that, but unluckily for me the town hall was shut.

In Connorsville, Wisconsin, men aren’t allowed to fire their weapons while their partners are having an orgasm. And no, “firing their weapons” is not a metaphor.

My favourite state for bureaucracy is, however, Nebraska. Hairdressers there are not allowed to consume onions between 7 AM and 7 PM. Whale hunting is also strictly forbidden there. Which makes total sense, because Nebraska is landlocked -- they don’t even have access to the sea. But just in case anyone should ever open a SeaWorld there, at least the tourists are already forbidden from picking off the Orcas from the stands.

To be fair, I should mention that Nebraska was originally colonised by German immigrants. Which means it was our forefathers who introduced these pointless laws. And so it comes full circle...

People always say that home is where you get annoyed at the bureaucrats. I can only partly agree with this. The USA isn’t my home, but this doesn’t stop me from getting worked up about American bureaucracy.

As a foreigner, getting a restricted work visa for the USA is harder than convincing a Mormon about the theory of evolution. First of all, you have to consult a lawyer – because you can only get a visa via an official immigration lawyer, who takes care of everything for you whilst charging a daily rate that equates to the GDP of Burundi.

There are more than a few lawyers who even go so far as to include the time for “invoicing” in the invoice itself, and with that sum alone you could live in New York comfortably for a few weeks.

My immigration lawyer was a woman named Tess. Tess ran a small legal practice in Brooklyn and was recommended to me by a good friend. Our first telephone conversation was very promising. I told her of my intention to spend a year in her wonderful country and try my luck there as a stand-up comedian. After just a few sentences, she interrupted: “To get a visa, first you’ll need a comprehensive tour plan for the duration of your stay.” I was stunned, and tried to explain to her that, as a rule, shows only come up once one is in the country in question. “No stage appearances, no visa,” she said with light regret. “But that’s the American dream!” I replied. Then she laughed and said: “Exactly. But we don’t do it any more…”

That was a shock. In that moment, I briefly thought through my alternatives. As long as there wasn’t yet a wall, could I perhaps make it over the border at El Paso dressed as a Mexican, in the protection of Mariachi band? Then at least an illegal job as a pool boy or gardener would be in the bag. And Valerie could earn a few untaxed dollars as a nanny or a maid.

But Tess bolstered me. Generally speaking, she said, it would satisfy the authorities if I could submit enough emails from organisers who were simply announcing their interest in letting me perform in their club. “And if these appearances don’t actually come to fruition?” I asked sceptically. “Well, by then no one will care”, she said.

I spent the next few months writing to countless clubs, pleading that they write an ambitious German science comedian a so-called “letter of interest”. To my astonishment, my efforts paid off. Three

months before the planned trip, I had enough letters together. My “tour plan” had come into being. I happily called Tess once more.

“You did a great job!” she said, in a very American fashion, only to then reveal to me that I of course also needed an endless litany of certificates, official documentation, forms, applications, bank statements, résumés and letters of recommendation from guarantors. “Get hold of everything and prepare yourself for the American authorities to go through your life with a fine-tooth comb…”. “What could go wrong?” I answered in a relaxed tone. “I mean, I don’t have anything to hide.” “Don’t be so sure. One of my previous clients had all their papers together. And then the NSA found out that, back in 2009, in a Starbucks in Minneapolis, he had once written the wrong name on the cup as a joke. Things got pretty dicey after that!”

But thanks to Tess, everything went smoothly for me. One month before our adventure, I received a O1 Artist Visa, which entitled me to perform in the USA for a year. Valerie, by the way, didn’t have to be smuggled across at El Paso, but was generously given a partner visa. Admittedly all it entitled her to do in America was sit around and breathe for a year. But nonetheless.

There were limitations in my case too. With a O1 Stand-up Artist Visa, you can only do stand-up. If you sit down or dance on the stage and someone gets wind of it, you’ll be immediately deported. Because for that you’d need a D2 Sit and Dance visa.

Considering the difficulty of legally entering the U.S. as a foreigner, the Americans are surprisingly laid-back once you’re there. As soon as you’re on American soil, the official authorities no longer seem to care about the formalities. At home in Germany, every time we move house we have to register our new address. The very fact that such a registration authority even exists is bizarre to the Americans. Nor are there personal identification papers in the U.S. There are numerous occasions when you need to show photo ID, but it can be something as ridiculous as your library card. I once tried to fly from New York to Omaha, Nebraska. Stupidly, I didn’t have a document with photo ID on me that day. “I’m sorry, but I have to see some identification with a picture,” said the woman at check-in. I rummaged around frantically, and in the depths of my travel bag found an ancient international driving licence which I had held in 1990 as a student. “Sorry, this is expired,” she said with a shrug. I couldn’t hold back the retort: “Well, I guess I can’t fly the plane then, can I?” “No, we need a current photo ID,” was her toneless response.

As I nervously searched on, it suddenly occurred to me that I had one of my own books in my luggage, the cover of which was emblazoned with a large, clear image of my face. I proudly presented my work to her. Clearly unimpressed, she looked in her files and eventually replied: “No, that’s not on the list of permitted visual documents. Do you perhaps have a library card on you?”

That was the final straw. “Madam,” I hissed, almost foaming at the mouth. “Do you really think I had this book printed especially so I could smuggle myself onto a plane to Omaha? And do you seriously think a terrorist who is planning some ingenious plane hijack wouldn’t be capable of getting themselves a library card with photo ID???”

I certainly don’t want to meddle in a foreign country’s security policy, but in my opinion the fight against terrorism would be much more efficient if they employed people in American regional airports who have an IQ slightly higher than a jellyfish. I didn’t say that to her, of course. But only because, off the top of my head, I couldn’t remember how to say jellyfish in English.

Long story short: I didn’t make it to Omaha. Not on that day, nor any other. But the very next day, I got myself a library card. After all, you never know…

Culinary Matters

Many people claim that a nation’s culture is most evident in its food and drink. Many countries, for example, have a drink that tastes amazing when you’re there, but completely awful if you imbibe it anywhere else. In France, it’s Pernod. In Japan, tepid saké. In England, ale. Only the Greeks have succeeded in creating something that tastes awful even when you drink it in Greece: Retsina. A disgustingly sweet, resinated wine which tastes a lot like the contrast agent administered before a thyroid test. The Greeks also have the only national dish that looks much like the bloodbath implied by its name: Moussaka.

The French, too, are extreme where food is concerned. There are frogs’ legs, foie gras and entrail soups. The French’s disdain for fast food is so great that they eat snails out of spite, simply because they’re so slow. But the worst thing I have ever tasted from my beloved neighbouring country was Andouillette: a sickly-looking sausage made from offal, which reeks so strongly of excretions that the French also use it to fertilize their lavender fields.

The thing is, tastes are very different. In China, people eat dog. There it’s known as “aroma meat”, and allegedly it tastes like chicken. As do, apparently, crocodile and snake. Chicken is probably the only meat in China that doesn’t taste like chicken. Traditional Chinese “street food” is made from animals which crawl around on the street. They’re dunked in oil, so that they at least look a little more appetising. People say that the Chinese will eat everything that moves, but that’s not actually true. Because they also eat things that aren’t given the slightest chance of ever being able to move.

The only people who can top this are the Scots. In Scotland, the traditional dish is a deep-fried Mars bar. It actually doesn’t taste all that bad, and only costs you two pounds. And gives you three weeks to live. I’m pretty sure the Scots would even eat a washing-up sponge if it was nicely fried in oil.

I sampled every one of these culinary oddities in New York, where, believe it or not, there are over 23,000 restaurants. From all over the world. If you wanted to, you could eat in a different restaurant every day for 63 years in this city without ever frequenting the same place twice. It’s impossible to determine how many different restaurant nationalities there are in New York, presumably because literally every national dish can be found there. Would you perhaps like to try rice cakes steamed over pine needles from the gourmet paradise of North Korea? Or spicy millet pastries from Burkina Faso? How about a well-seasoned bat soup from the Fiji Islands? A deep-fried cockroach from Thailand? Consecrated wafers from the Vatican? A quick look at Zagat – the city’s best-loved

restaurant guide – and you’ll find everything a robust stomach can handle. I know what I’m talking about, because in my childhood home the cooking was also very creative and unorthodox. I was almost an adult by the time I discovered that icing isn’t normally made from clingfilm. My mother even flambéed the salad from time to time, although technically more by accident. Dinner time was usually after the voluntary fire service had retreated. And of course, nothing was ever thrown away either. The general rule of thumb was: anything that didn’t make you recoil in horror when you took the lid of the Tupperware was still edible. No kidding, I recently found a tin of pineapple in my parents’ larder which still had a four-digit area code. America may have Hawaii, but we invented Hawaiian toast.

Of course, for all its culinary exoticism, New York is also a junk food paradise. After all, it’s located in the country that gave the world canned cheese and invented Fluffernutter Sandwiches (comprising of peanut butter and marshmallow cream) and the Double Chocolate Butter Frosting Super Glaze Mega Muffin. In the 1960s, one had to be sure of satiating many hungry people. Today, we have to be sure of making many satiated people hungry.

Even the smallest of supermarkets has countless varieties of breakfast cereals. Literally every substance that can be dried, puffed and drenched in sugar is on offer. There’s even breakfast pizza, and pancakes which can be made in the microwave. For Thanksgiving, there are turkeys the size of small cars, slathered in a layer of mayonnaise several centimetres thick before roasting so they get nice and crispy. This is accompanied by bath tubs full of mashed potatoes and gravy. Anyone who hasn’t died of heart failure by the end of the meal is forced to drink eggnog by the litre: an egg-based punch made from spices, cream, sugar and eggs, which contains 327 calories. Per sip. Eggnog must be the only drink on Earth which becomes healthier the more alcohol you add to it.

The supply of food in the USA is so overwhelming that even the insects have got used to it. Researchers from North Carolina State University discovered that ants in Manhattan have adjusted their feeding habits to the typical menu of a major U.S. city: fast food. The most frequent cause of death amongst the little fellows is now no longer the pest controller, but high cholesterol.

In the 18th century, the French Empress Marie Antoinette is said to have advised the famished population that, if they didn’t have enough bread, they should eat cake. 250 years later, this is really happening. While the affluent upper classes meticulously count calories and philosophise about gluten sensitivity, fructose allergies and lactose intolerance over a small tofu salad with no dressing, the lower classes have a sugar problem. For the first time in the history of humanity, obesity poses a

greater health risk than malnourishment. And in the USA, the phenomenon is extreme: more than two thirds of Americans are considered to be overweight. According to a survey by the U.S. health authority CDC, an increasing number of US citizens are extremely obese. The American prisoner George Vera hid a pistol in his stomach fat for days on end: the 225 kilo man was searched upon arrival by the guards three times without the 9 mm pistol being found. The weapon was only discovered a week later, when he was showering.

In New York, this problem began to be tackled some years back, when in 2012 the city became the first in the U.S. to ban XXL cups for sweetened drinks. Since September 2019, there have been “Meatless Mondays” in New York schools. Many pupils think this is going too far. On the subway, I’ve noticed an increasing number of kids with a slice of bacon wrapped around their upper arms in order to cope with their withdrawal symptoms.

My wife and I became bona fide “foodies” In New York. A large part of our budget went on exotic dining experiences. In other words, we ate our way through the city, from super relaxed establishments to the super sophisticated. According to the Michelin Guide, there are five three-Michelin-star restaurants in New York, eleven two-star and 56 with one star. Almost always, the chefs in these restaurants are men. Which is astonishing, because since time immemorial it’s usually been the women who cooked. My theory is this: women find the culinary posing in the Michelin starred kitchen too ridiculous. For us men, on the other hand, the construction of a gherkin-tartar stuffed seabass anus on a vinaigrette of truffled crested lark eggs is simply another form of an ambitious DIY project. One of the craziest experiences we had during our stay was our visit to Chinese Tuxedo, a hip, posh Chinese restaurant in Doyle Street, in the midst of Chinatown. Even as we walked in it was like being transported to another time, a dimly lit mix of an opium den and a James Bond film set. No wonder, because Chinese Tuxedo was once an opera house where the legendary 1905 Chinese theatre massacre occurred: a bloodbath, unleashed by a Chinese professional killer, which was never completely solved.

It’s still appropriately mystical and secretive there to this day. Our waiter (a mixture of Johnny Depp and Conchita Wurst) led us to the table and pressed the menu conspiratorially into our hands. We ordered indiscriminately, without really knowing what awaited us. Johnny Wurst took our order, raising his eyebrows and whispering, with a look of genuine awe: “Adventurous”.

Only later did it become clear what he had meant by that. We scoffed down artfully-folded sweet and sour aubergine strips glazed with chocolate, steak tartare on rice cakes with plantain and

sautéed radish, and sweet and sour pigs’ cheeks in an orange-coloured vinaigrette which gleamed so brightly I genuinely thought it was kryptonite.

The first real confusion, however, was an entire, honey-glazed, deep-fried dove which was served in five pieces. Including the claws and head. I chewed around a little helplessly on the beak, then swallowed it down with a creamy hazelnut dumpling. Just as I was about to set to work on the claws, a commotion began around us. The chef approached and cheerfully presented us with the main course. A huge Dungeness crab, still ALIVE, which, clearly guessing its fate, was flailing its little legs helplessly and looking at us pleadingly with its button-like eyes. “Don’t you feel ashamed?”, a couple from the neighbouring table whispered to us, clearly repulsed. Overwhelmed, we nodded to the chef, who promptly disappeared off, giggling foolishly, in order to prepare the whopper. Twenty minutes later, the poor creature lay before us once more, dissected into its individual parts. We resolved to grin and bear it and got stuck into the poor creature, under the contemptuous looks of the other diners. Armed with the nutcracker supplied with the dish, we broke open the crab’s armoured legs to get to the meat. They cracked and squirted, and the sweat streamed down our faces. Even our waiter could no longer conceal his distaste. At the end of the undignified performance, our table really did look like the Chinese Theatre Massacre of 1905.

A few weeks later, by the way, we found out that the head chef of Chinese Tuxedo isn’t actually Chinese, but Scottish. We should have guessed from the deep-fried dove in the caramel glaze.