

Travels with my dad

Alice Elgie takes time out to create precious memories with her father and her daughter

I am standing in a bus station somewhere in the south of Spain with a collection of rucksacks scattered about my feet. Voices and action encircle me, yet seemingly oblivious to the riot of colour and noise surrounding us my 74-year-old dad and my 6-year-old daughter sit quietly playing cards together on a bench. For a moment all sound falls away as I stand, mesmerised, watching them make memories, for them, for me, and I feel an overwhelming gladness that I took this trip.

Age is a funny thing: it creeps up on us without warning. The strands of silver hair and fine lines seem to weave themselves seamlessly throughout our bodies before we have time to raise our hands and say: “Hey! I’m not ready for this!” It’s good, of course, because with age comes a deeper sense of self and a stronger me to share with loved ones, but it’s also sad because as we move forward other parts of life fall away. Once-tangible things become mere images hidden somewhere in our mind’s eye, and only we can keep them alive. It was a cold January day in 2013 when I decided I wanted to catch more of something before it fell away; that I wanted to make more memories.

The man I hold responsible for giving me the travelling bug – my dad – had been unwell and I thought he could do with something to give him a lift. I had a feeling that it was time to go on another adventure with my daughter, but my husband had work commitments. On a practical level it seemed like the perfect scenario for us all: my dad, my young daughter and me, and a month away from the old routine, bussing our way across Spain and Portugal. On an emotional level it would provide the opportunity to spend time with my dad: time in neutral space to connect in a way that everyday life does not always facilitate, time to write down the stories that he had told me a hundred times but that I always forget, and, of course, time for my daughter, Isabella, to get to know the man who had raised me.

And so our journey began when we landed in Málaga and stepped out of the airport straight into the early-April sunshine. Immediately my dad took his shoes and socks off and swapped them for sandals, Isabella unpacked her tiny toy collection and started playing on the path, and we all inhaled a deep breath and exhaled with a sense of ‘we need this’. Our first bus would take us to Marbella, where we had rented an apartment. Part of the understanding for this trip was that my dad wanted to be looked after. He was up for the adventure, but he didn’t want the stress of the nitty-gritty and neither did he want to backpack in the traditional sense: “I’m too old for all that,” he said almost immediately. Instead he requested the reassurance of a place to stay, so I dedicated two months to meticulously plotting our road trip from the south of Spain to central Portugal, taking in coastal towns, bustling cities, countryside retreats and peaceful mountains along the way, always with a thought for proximity to public transport and our small budget.

Marbella proved to be the perfect beginning to our trip because it constantly reminded us that we were somewhere different: somewhere warm and sunny, where oranges grow... and anything goes. Off season it’s relatively quiet on the Costa del Sol, so we enjoyed strolls along the promenade and mornings on the beach, where Isabella loved building sandcastles with Grandad and we all swam in the sea. We took a fantastic trip to Gibraltar, where my dad got to explore and share his RAF background, and in our apartment we played cards and talked and I found much-needed peace listening to the playful swallows outside the window making their way back from Africa.

From Marbella what followed was three weeks where we bussed along the south coast, through the built-up tourist traps, alongside the azure sea and on to the seaside town of Sanlúcar de Barrameda, where we stayed in a traditional townhouse and enjoyed endless sandy beaches littered with shells and graced with Andalucian horses. Then it was a brief submersion into the vibrancy of Seville before carrying on to a friend’s olive farm in Extremadura. Here we enjoyed birdwatching from the swing chair, laughs at the local bar, and freedom and space for Isabella. Dad got to spend many happy hours chopping olive branches with a chainsaw before we continued to Portugal. As our bus snaked its way through the stunning Alentejo region of cork oaks, low stone walls and simple whitewashed villages, I began to feel all restlessness fall away. Azóia, an unspoiled village nestled in the foothills of the Serra de Sintra and overlooking the sea, was the

perfect place to soak up this feeling. Here we enjoyed coffee and ice creams at the café where locals still wait for the daily bread van, walked up hills to enjoy spectacular views of wild flowers and cliffs, watched black kites soaring and of course strolled to Cabo da Roca, the most westerly point of continental Europe, to feel the wild Atlantic breeze.

Yet despite this tantalising itinerary and all the beauty it brought, the deepest memories of our trip are not in the places we went to, but in the time we shared. Hours were whiled away doing nothing in particular, and for that I am glad. The needs of a 74-year-old and a 6-year-old had to be listened to, and exhaustion from busy days or long bus journeys sometimes meant we abandoned big trips like visiting Cádiz by boat. Looking back I value more the deep and philosophical conversations we shared instead, or the memory of my daughter and my dad laughing together as they buried me in the sand. I appreciate the time my dad was able to give Isabella in answering her endless questions, and as always I was constantly astounded by (and grateful for, as we had no room for encyclopaedias and no internet) my dad’s infinite knowledge. We have a saying in our home: “We don’t need Google. We just need Grandad!” There were no rules to the holiday; it was simply an experience of being elsewhere, of switching off, and of hanging out.

Three weeks into our trip we arrived at Lisbon airport ready to collect my husband, and here we finally swapped buses for the ease of a hire car and a drive to the interior to stay in a tiny stone cottage in the forest amongst dark skies and stars. We watched the owner walk by each morning to milk his goats and we travelled into the beautiful countryside of the Serra de Estrela to enjoy coffee and quiet lunches in castle towns. Towards the end of this, our final week, my dad said that perhaps he was beginning to understand my quest for a simpler life centred more

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on time together. Raised conventionally to work 9–5, buy a house, attend school and so on, at times he feels uneasy, I know, about our unconventional approach of unschooling, wandering and entrepreneurial ways of supporting our dreams. Through this trip I think he gained a deeper understanding of my goals and – who knows? – perhaps he will feel less worry now when I phone to tell him of my latest escapade... Or maybe not.

Time is something we can never get back; we can’t buy it, freeze it or rewind it. It simply is, now, in this moment. Of course, travel is not an essential component for creating time with loved ones, but for me it provides the opportunity to make it more quality time. We unwind, we remove ourselves from everyday stresses, and thus we give more of ourselves, because we can. The trip I took with my dad and daughter can never be erased. I will always have a notebook filled with anecdotes and stories of my dad’s life that otherwise I would not have written down, my daughter will always laugh about the silly songs Grandad sang on our travels, or the time he snored and kept her awake when they had to share a room, and we will always have spent a whole month of uninterrupted time together; more time than I think we ever have, and perhaps ever will again.

As I watch my now 8-year-old daughter cycling off ahead of me, as I observe her growing independence, I realise time is always passing by; age still creeps up on us, but we will always have the memories we make. ●

Alice Elgie writes articles, books (for children and adults) and a blog, from her narrowboat in England and cottage in Portugal. She home educates her daughter and spends her life making and storing as many good memories as she can.

