

*This is an excerpt from the book Letmestayforaday by Ramon Stoppelenburg.*

## VIENNA FOR ONE DAY

On June 5<sup>th</sup> 2001 I hitchhiked from Exeter to the picturesque coastal town of Paignton, on the south coast of England. In Exeter carpenter Robert and his family had hosted me. Before he went to work in the morning he dropped me off at the two-lane road to Paignton. Within an hour I was offered a ride to my destination.

Together with Torquay and Brixham, Paignton is known as the English *Riviera*. The long sandy beaches and cozy promenades attract many tourists in the summer season. It is said that every Englishman goes on holiday there at least once in his life. It's probably true: there are more hotels there than residents.

I had been invited by James and Pauline. After a short stroll through the town I was not surprised to learn that they too ran a small hotel: the Cherwood Hotel. It was a small but comfortable Bed & Breakfast with nine rooms in a street with nothing but small and comfortable Bed & Breakfasts. Basically, if you live in Paignton, you run a B&B.

I arrived early. Pauline was preparing an English lunch with toast, eggs, sausages and bacon for me. It was delicious and could not have been more British. James welcomed me as a guest in their hotel. A few months before he had invited me through my website. Because they ran a hotel I was more than welcome; they always had enough room to spare. But when I arrived it was actually a busy period and they were fully booked. 'I have arranged with my neighbor that

you can stay in his hotel tonight. I'll pay for it,' he said and smiled. 'It is quite amazing what you do!'

James had been following my trips on the internet. 'Travelling every day and meeting new people all the time, it must be tiresome, isn't it?' he asked. Before I could answer he continued: 'Feel free to stay here for a few days. Tomorrow we'll have the honeymoon suite available for you so that you can rest a while in Paignton. If necessary you won't travel any further until next weekend!'

I was amazed. I had been meaning to ask him if I could stay a day longer. But that was not because I was tired.

The reason was Cathi, the assistant-producer of *Vera* – a very popular talk show in Austria, who had e-mailed me a few days before. She asked me if I could appear on the show on Wednesday, June 6<sup>th</sup>. It sounded like fun but I told her I was in England at that moment. She replied that she would set up everything for me to appear on that show in Vienna.

'Everything?'

'Everything.'

I explained to James and Pauline that I would be flying to Vienna the next day, all expenses paid by Austrian television, and would be back the day after.

James looked at me and was quiet for a moment.

'Vienna? As in... Austria?' Pauline asked.

'Yes, in Austria.'

'For one day?'

'Yes.'

'Well, I think that's wonderful!' said James, quite astonished, and continued: 'But I hope you won't mind if I call the papers now to tell them that I've got a celebrity in my house.'

James and Pauline had been married a few years. They had owned the Cherwood Hotel for two years now. Growing up James never knew what he wanted to become when he was older.

'I've sailed all the seas as a deep-sea fisherman,' he said. 'And one day I just didn't feel like it no more. I got a job on land as a representative. Well, at least I didn't smell like fish every day! When I was twenty-one I founded my own company and had twenty people serving under me.'

During dinner in a restaurant at Paignton's boulevard, James told me about his forty-nine years of experience. He gave me advice on how to make this internet project more successful. We ended up in The Spinning Wheel Inn, a small pub with a nice open fireplace. Drinking local brewed ales and listening to a band playing modern rock music, we discussed life in the broadest sense of the word. And we talked about happiness. James told me he was very happy.

'I adore my wife, we run a small hotel and we both enjoy life to the fullest.'

'If ever you should give up travelling,' James said, 'you should write a book. I would want to read that book, just from having met you here and knowing you'll be doing a lot more travelling. You really should write that book.' I laughed and ordered two more pints on his tab.

The next morning my alarm went off at six o'clock. Ouch. My head was pounding. All I remembered of the night before that it had been fun.

I packed a small rucksack with clothes for the next day and left my backpack behind. At Paignton's train station I got on the train to Bristol, 160 km north; it was the nearest town with an international airport. In Bristol I took the shuttle bus and an hour and a half later was on my way to Vienna with British Airways.

The assistant producer in Austria had arranged everything. James and Pauline had advanced me money for the train ticket to Bristol, but I was to get that back once I had arrived in Austria. All flights had been booked and I just had to wave my passport to get my boarding pass.

Much to my surprise I was flying business class. This meant I was in the front of the plane in a soft chair drinking champagne, offered to me by a friendly stewardess. 'Champagne?' 'Of course!'

After three hours of flying over England, the Channel, and Belgium I landed in Munich, Germany. Then something happened which the assistant producer could not have anticipated: in the jungle of platforms, gates and flight numbers I got lost. When I finally found the right place of my transfer flight to Vienna, the gate had already been closed. I called Cathi to let her know I would arrive on the next plane, three hours later.

During the next flight I kindly declined the champagne and after I had finished some salmon on toast, the plane landed in Vienna. I was in Austria!

With my small bag I walked through customs straight into Cathi. Via a labyrinth of roads around and through Vienna, we ended up driving through the narrow streets of this city in a way I had only seen James Bond do before.

The building of the Austrian Public Service Broadcasting, the ORF, looked like a concrete building block from the communist era. Inside we walked countless stairs and halls before arriving at the right studio. Cathi introduced me to the show's director. 'Right on time,' he said after a few welcoming words. 'Now hurry, to the powder room. You're on in ten minutes!' They quickly put a layer of make-up on my face and wired me up with a microphone and earplug.

Before I knew it I was waiting on top of a high staircase behind the studio's decor. The moment they would call out my name the door would slide open and I would have to walk down these long stairs. At the same door some musicians were waiting with me; they were on right after my interview. A black man with big afro hair walked up to me.

'Congratulations!' he said with an American accent. 'You're really very famous! Good on you!'

Suddenly I heard my name. The door opened and I was greeted by lights in my face, the steep stairs, and a thunderous applause. I walked towards the woman on stage and shook her hand. She greeted me in German. Meanwhile an interpreter was translating her words into English for me. They had told me to answer her in English but it was not easy. I listened to Vera while simultaneously hearing the English version of the question in my left ear. Then my answer would be translated to German, while I was talking, for the benefit of Vera, the audience and the many viewers of the show. I started to sweat and hoped I was making any sense.

After five minutes Vera thanked me for coming on the show and wished me luck. I received another thunderous applause from the audience. An assistant then pulled me off the floor while Vera introduced the band. It was Eddy Grant and his band playing a modern version of his hit from the 80's, *Electric Avenue*. It was the same man who had just congratulated me on my success. The director tapped me on my shoulder. 'You did great,' he said in German. 'You did great,' a voice said in my ear in English. Quickly I removed the earplug.

Someone started taking off the make-up from my face with a wet tissue and a technician removed the microphone. Then I realized I was actually shaking on my feet.

'Do you happen to have a glass of water please?' I asked Cathi.

‘There is a refrigerator in the dressing room filled with drinks. Come along, I’ll show you.’

She took me to a small room. On the door was a sign with my name under it. Underneath it said in German: ‘King of the internet’. Suddenly I wondered what on earth Vera and I had been talking about during the show.

Around 10 PM the studio was deserted, camera’s had been safely stored away and all the wires had been rolled up. I was sitting in a small smoky room together with some of the editors. Clearly I was amidst journalists. Cathi refunded my train ticket from Paignton to Bristol and gave me enough money for the trip back.

In Vienna I stayed at the luxurious Wimberger Hotel right next to the center of the old town. My suite consisted of three rooms, two fully filled minibars, two television sets, a grand desk, three couches, a kingsize bed and an enormous bathroom. I almost felt bad that a driver came by the hotel to pick me up in a limousine the next morning at 5 o’clock to take me to the airport.

The next day I arrived back at the Cherwood Hotel in Paignton at 6 PM. James put down a cup of coffee in front of me. Next to him was a reporter of the *Herald Express* ready for an interview. James had not told him yet where I had been the night before.

‘I understand you use a website to gather invitations to stay at people’s houses and this way you travel around for free?’

‘Correct,’ I answered.

‘Great. So you sleep in a different place every night then?’ he asked while writing in his notebook.

‘That is also correct,’

‘Fabulous. May I ask where you were before you came to Paignton?’

There were two ways of answering this question and I thought about which answer I would give him.

‘Vienna,’ I replied truthfully.

‘Vienna? In Austria?’ The poor man clearly did not follow. From the kitchen James and Pauline were laughing out loud.