

SAMPLE  
TRANSLATION

ALEŠ ŠTEGER  
TEN ESSENTIALS FOR  
THE ROAD

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## Aleš Šteger: Ten Essentials For The Road

We could delve into history books, look into the vacation habits of the English or French courts, or go further back to various Caliphs, Roman emperors, Pharaohs or Emperors of China, but there's no need. "History nourishes repetitiveness" is what any faithful reader of Borges might think every August when the newspapers are full of articles like the following:

"Saudi King makes huge spending cuts in these times of crisis. When on holiday in Marbella his spending is cut by up to two million euros – a day. Does this mean that the most expensive tourist destination on the Spanish Riviera is about to go through a crisis? The truth is that King Fahd's caution in spending his petrodollars is worrying shopkeepers stiff in Marbella. During last year's visit to his snow-white holiday palace, the Saudi regent with his three hundred-strong escort still spent around three million euros a day. The year before he spent five. Well, a light relief to the locals was that he did stay for nearly two months this time. He arrived with over a hundred tons of luggage ..."

The three hundred-strong holiday entourage was undoubtedly the king's way of demonstrating his inability to escape the shadow of his own home. The more of what surrounds us in our every day existence we drag along to our holiday destination, the less of our habits and rituals will we have to adapt to our new surroundings. On a symbolical level, going on a holiday is yet another way of displaying the untouchability and unchangeability of the sovereign status. Dragging one's entire environment along means we do not wish to rest from this intimate environment, nor do we really wish to have a break from what we would normally be seeking a break from. Despite all his petrol millions, Fahd cannot afford any serious changes in the nucleus of his empire. When he can afford to implement them, these changes are only cosmetic, climatic and conditionally gastronomic, since on an ordinary day of his holiday, despite all the spending cuts, King Fahd still orders around 100 kilos of chocolates and 20 cakes for himself and his court. Any change allowed to invade this home he drags along with him is strictly controlled, comes in minute doses, well checked over and under video surveillance. When the sovereign is on holiday, this is at its best a slight change in the backstage arrangements, rather than in the set or, god forbid, the scenario of the King's play. Fahd looks at the same courtiers, the same furniture, the same carpets, the same servants. All he can now have a rest from is this need he has for displaying a restful existence to the entire world.

We ourselves are minor caliphs, emperors, princesses and dictators. Maybe some of us do not have as large an entourage available, but the pattern remains the same. Our belongings are our

court. They are the nucleus of our transitional kingdom. By surrounding ourselves with them, we can quickly weave an illusion of home wherever we are, be this in an airport waiting room, a hotel or in some berth of an ocean liner. When we travel we become more and more our own belongings. When at home it is the other way round, things adapt to us, but that's another story. From this viewpoint the strategy of food and hotel chains, of putting great efforts into looking the same the world over, is quite understandable. Abu Dhabi or Johannesburg, Monaco or Shanghai. Having a fishmac at an Ibis hotel is the safest imaginable form of exoticism for any traveller through this tourist century we live in.

So let us ourselves follow the disgusting habit of the ever-yellowing media of prying into privacy, the need for de-intimization, for regardless rummaging into what might be sensitive areas for the pursued. Let's get an insight into the deepest of our migrant intimacies, open our satchel, remove our swagman hat, throw the nomad out of the saddle and see what lies beneath his spurs, stick the dagger right into the soul of the suitcase, allowing it to gasp, to break the locks of our secrets and spread out on the evidence table the ten essentials we should always pack before setting off on the road. Ten things that are far more of the travelling "me", than any mix of neuron signals, a slightly excited nervous system, sweat glands, seventy-seven kilos of water and bones dressed up in clothes, the contraction of a muscle known as the heart and our flat footprint could ever be. Let's uncover the psychopathology of the traveller through an analysis of his weapons, his fetish or surgical equipment, or whatever else you might prefer to call them.

## The first essential: FOOTWEAR

Let's start at ground level. At the one thing that differentiates us from reptiles: footwear. Before you set off, a fair part of the well meant but dumb advice on the subject is unavoidable. Friends, parents, your partner, sales people will all bombard you with advice on what kind of footwear, essential or spare, for any imaginable and unimaginable situation, will come in at least useful though may even be absolutely essential on your trip. And when you see Peruvian sherpas with fifty kilos of luggage running along rocky precipices like llamas in plastic flip flops, Indian porters carrying ten suitcases along dirt track roads wearing slippers made out of car tires and barefoot Chinese farmers sinking into muddy rice fields, you will necessarily begin to have doubts about your own concept of necessity. Ever since it became common for city ladies to appear at underground stations or top class restaurants wearing wellies more or less identical to those that farmers at home use to muck out the stables, my idea of appropriate footwear has slipped into a radical crisis. Though modern orthopaedics might not quite agree, it is still possible all over the world to get through life in not absolutely ideal footwear. If nothing else, in most cases one is able to obtain at least the basic footwear needed on site. Our problem isn't the obvious question about what footwear we might need to run up and down the pyramids, to conquer the highest mountains or to cover kilometre after kilometre of city

asphalt. The question that poses itself is much sneakier and catches many of us unprepared and without warning. It is the following: What are you going to do, tired and exhausted in the middle of the night in some back of beyond village once you have barely managed to get the last available room in the only guesthouse in the place – all you wish for after the endless march or ride on the back of a lorry full of sheep or by bus penultima clase, is a short rest and before that a long shower – you go to the bathroom, pull back the shower curtain and –? Even for the most strong willed, what you have in front of you is absolutely unacceptable. The basin is full of evidence of your predecessors. At that moment you know there isn't a single sole that dares step into this situation and hope that it might miraculously survive the fungal raid without serious consequences. In such situations what you have or should have included in your ten essentials for the road is decisive. The miraculous footwear of the Roman god Mercury or the more contemporary cartoon demi-god Sport Billy, which you can wear with your hair still wet with drops sliding down your refreshed neck, sitting on the rickety chair on the balcony, staring into the night or at the animals mooing under your balcony, or at Orion looking back at you; this, after a long tiring journey, strangely clean and satisfied creature amongst creatures. He would tickle the soles of your feet with a star beam were they not protected by miraculous footwear, the first of the essentials for the road.

## The second essential: A BOOK

This is a matter where the social inequalities between the majority of us and the rare minority that can afford a butler, a porter, a slave or a sherpa, a servant or a private tourist companion, a being which they can, in good old colonial manner, weigh down with the unbearable weight of our daydreams, our bad habits and arrogance, are most obvious. But what if we are against such a concept, what if we wish to be true travellers? By true traveller we mean a person who, for most of the time at least, independently tends to all their travel needs and one who, when they are not too confused, intoxicated or depressive, also looks after themselves. This means: you look after your own bag, suitcase, rucksack or sailor's kitbag. Obviously this also means you will personally pack it up every morning and unpack it in foreign hotel rooms every evening. Most importantly of all, you will also personally carry it with you from place to place, will watch over it in fear, because in the event of it being stolen, it would be like someone had stolen your mobile home, your sanctuary of well being, your personal shelter or your den in your hour of need. This suddenly makes you a powerless dictator, a maharaja without a court, a nameless king and president of merely your own thoughts. You become a redundant lonely entity exposed to the elements, a traveller with the thinnest of skins, barely able to differentiate between their own curiosity, fears and expectations on the one side and the merry-go-round of worlds flying by on the other. In other words: the desire for mobility as well as, to the greatest possible extent, the need for so called "connecting" with your environment, forces you to travel with the least possible luggage. In the best of cases there is space in your suitcase for only one single item that weighs far too much to start with anyway. Think about the millions of letters and punctuation marks in chapters more numerous than the countries of the world. Think about the number of spaces between words which is at least as many as the

number of times you will blink on the entire trip (unless you have a blinking twitch or the maximum length of your trip is from your living room to the bathroom and back). It's up to you to choose between the following categories:

Firstly, books that initially come to mind when travelling. By this I mean all those books that narrow your perspectives, that direct your gaze, tell you where you have to go and what you have to do for the sake of going to all the places and doing all the things that so many like you have done before; basically what to see and thus fulfil the silent imperative of the tourist industry. Charles Bridge, the Eiffel Tower, the Statue of Liberty and Red Square, all among the hundreds of mostly self-declared wonders of the world, as well as all the rest, UNESCO-declared lost territory for all those to whom travel does not mean pushing through camera clicking groups, fighting with tourist guides and paying entrance fees for hysterics, sweat and stress. It's not that I am claiming that there aren't cases when even such books have a certain role to play, especially in countries that haven't got a clue how to differentiate between the signs on the men's and ladies' loos or worse, where we don't even know what a loo looks like. I remember an extraordinary footnote in some lonely planet guide that got the traveller from A to B with two bus changes and long walks through a labyrinth of narrow streets in the suburbs of some southern Indian town with unbelievable reliability (despite the fact that five locals with whom I checked the correctness of the information all swore on the five heads of some local Hindu deity that the given directions cannot possibly be right). On the other hand you can find guide books that declare on their cover that they are NOT FOR TOURISTS, attempting with this manoeuvre of false declaration to attract the attention of those who are ashamed of succumbing to their desires (those who want to be sort of tourist-nudists on deserted beaches). One acceptable solution in such a dubious situation (i.e. I want to travel, but don't want to be a traveller; I want information about the places I travel to, but not the same information everyone else has; I want to be a sheep, keeping a safe distance in the flock both from the wolf and the remainder of the flock, howling instead of baaing), is a friend's decision to travel exclusively by old Baedeker guides, guide books that set the European standard for such literature before the First World War. In doing so this friend travels according to town plans which in most cases no longer exist or are barely traceable, stands next to built over alleys, looks for fountains that have been moved, pointlessly studies train timetables for links that haven't run for the last sixty or maybe even eighty years. Here and there he does come across a hotel that still stands, a coffee shop that has changed its interior and five generations of waiters, but kept their rudeness and the names of all the cakes on offer. He traces in his travels barely visible layouts based on maps of places that no longer exist or at most exist as a topographic palimpsest. He travels along the difference between the imaginary and the existing along a pathway determined by his own fantasy. Thus it might perhaps be more appropriate to count guide books older than, let us say, sixty years, among the books in our second category:

Secondly: books that pretend to talk about places, but whose true aim is to talk about us. With this we suddenly open up an incredible range of possibilities. From novels taking place in

places you are travelling to (such books are especially recommended when their authors have never actually been in the places they are describing, such as Kafka in New York or Karl May in the Wild West), memoirs about people so obscure that you're never likely to meet anyone who has ever heard of them, or notes on trips that happened so long ago that their only connection to the present is the rustling of the leaves in the jasmine bushes, the sound of dirty water running through drainage canals, the yellowing newspapers stuck on the asphalt roads (Paolo Santonino and Marco Polo, Sigismund von Herberstein and Alexander von Humboldt). Included in this category may also be old newspapers and magazines that have long stopped being issued, yellowing postcards and old ads, menus from restaurants that closed long ago, the programmes of burnt-down theatres, declarations of nonexistent republics, invitations from eclipsed societies, road signs with changed names, products by firms that have gone bust, documents belonging to persons long dead, plans of demolished houses, photographs of nameless people, basically everything that manages to weave an Ariadne's thread through our attention and drags us into a labyrinth of dreams and discovery. This is the landscape of our imagination, our passion and curiosity, our signature on the surface of the water, our nonexistent footprint on the soulless metal surface of escalators, the moment before the distorted reflection of someone we think we recognise in the windows on the underground disappears, though that might just have been a reflection of our own self.

Thirdly: books that make long distances clearer and more bearable. This last category includes books which have no obvious connection with the places we are travelling to. Books that are a negative, a movement away from, an estrangement, an escape, a surveyor, the flight of migratory birds, a satellite connection and a bitter medication for our ruinous relationship with a certain place. We drag these along for the sake of remembering the relativity and the arbitrariness of the constellations we are part of. Mallarmé on Mont Blanc, Walter Benjamin on a beach in Turkey – an all inclusive variation, sister Wendelina on safari in Tanzania, Niels Bohr in Transnistria and a nanotechnology manual on the local train from Šalovci to Hudajužna (providing it is not linked in any way to what you do professionally; any reading material related to studies or work that some are keen to drag along with them is absolutely excluded from this trail of thought).

Let me make it quite clear: this second essential for the road should be one single book, hopefully one that is least useful to you, one that you would never pick up at home, a book about something that you are not interested in at all and about which you know hardly anything, a total unknown quantity, a packet of surprise, a cause of anger and mockery, something you will never forget and that will weigh down your rucksack and lighten your soul for an hour or two at a time.

## The third essential: A PLASTIC BAG

Yemen in the year 2000. The sight is frightening. Plastic arrived late and suddenly in this land. People used to using palm leaves to wrap almost anything began using plastic bags in exactly the same way as the material it replaced. Instead of rivers you got streams of plastics running through towns and villages, with minor and major tributaries joining them along the way. When the winds began to blow across the desert it was as if tonnes of white ghosts rose up and flew into all directions. It was the best lesson I could ever have had on the point of recycling the ghost I myself always carry carefully folded into four or eight in my backpack. Since Yemen I began using plastic bags over and over again and only once I started always having one with me (though at the same time this saved the souls of thousands upon thousands of bags I would have been given in shops around the world over the years), did I begin to find thousands upon thousands of reasons a traveller should always carry a plastic bag with him. When the rain drenches your rucksack you can hide your book in it. When it stops raining you can use it to put your wet umbrella in and thus prevent the book from getting wet. You can hide a wad of money in it, your passport or a love letter. You can stuff your dirty underwear in it in the evenings and then take it out again in the morning pretending that it is clean. Plastic is a brilliant insulation material on campsites or in beds of the most luxurious of hotels. You can stick it on your head when it rains if you don't have an umbrella with you. If your shoes are wet, you can wear it over your socks so your feet stay dry. If it's very cold you can wrap a plastic bag round your belly over your vest to keep the heat in (another good insulating material is newspaper, my eighty four year old grandmother swears on being padded out with newspapers and plastic bags in winter when she rides the 10 kilometres on a snowed over road from her village to the nearest town). You can use the bag if a Latin American poet gives you an excessive number of copies of his latest publication. You can use it if your rucksack gets ripped, or another plastic bag gets torn. You can use it if you want to steal a few ears of corn from the neighbour's field or pick a few bolls of cotton on some Turkish plantation. You can fold it and use it as a compression pad, as a bracelet or as a sun-shade when you try to get some sleep on a bus. You can use it to shake up the tickets at a raffle, as a trophy at monopoly or to keep your tarot cards in. You can use it to catch butterflies with or to store fish. You can keep all those objects in it that marked your trip, things that Cornell calls objets trouvés, things that others have discarded but you find meaningful. If you bury a treasure it is advisable to wrap any banknotes in plastic first, just so the worms don't get to them and they do not disintegrate in the soil. If you write a song, make sure it is as translucent as this piece of blown up nothing, that it can catch the air and hold water as well as love and hope, that can carry stuff or be worn. May it be weightless like all art, welcome and entertaining even for those who believe that they do not need any help or any friends and can carry the entire burden, themselves included.

## The fourth essential: A SECOND PEN

Obviously you always have some kind of a pen with you on your trip. But what about so called divine caution? All the stories never written down are the high calorie food of literature. Does this mean that we shouldn't join the battle against excessive obesity? Fuelling the phantom question in art per se – that damned what would be, if? There are at least as many stories about unwritten, unfinished or lost great masterpieces of world literature as there are available classics. From the second part of Aristotle's Poetics to the mystery of Walter Benjamin's lost black suitcase that he was supposed to have with him when he died in Portbou, to Coleridge's Kubla Khan, a work that according to its author came to him by divine inspiration (though it was far more likely opium-induced), up to the point when his writing was disturbed by a visit from a person from Porlock (after which Coleridge was never again in the right state to finish the poem), and to Borges' made up stories about made up texts that are supposedly lost or even supposedly found, all an (admittedly extraordinary) construction of fantasy, guesswork and mystification. Don't allow yourself to become included in this category of never read coffee shop tradition just because you ran out of ink. In such a situation you can't trust technology either. Computers and phones are prone to running out of batteries and are mostly too heavy and too sensitive for the muddy road. One can survive a shortage of paper. There's always the plastic bag. If that is not available you can use your clothes, (light cotton or linen shirts are especially suitable for the task). If you are naked, simply write stuff down on your skin, though be warned that you then cannot bathe or use sun cream and excessive sweating is also not recommended. If you are full of tattoos then you can always use the palms of your hands. If these too are tattooed all over, and there is absolutely nothing nearby which could serve as a guardian of your creativity, you will just have to make use of the ever less popular method of memorization. It's barely half a human life span since poems were smuggled out of the last gulags where it was most difficult to find them and where they were most radiant – by memory, and already the march of digitalization and (at least an iconic) accessibility to information has rendered learning things by heart a redundant thing of the past. How many phone numbers of your closest friends and relatives can you remember? And how many verses of poetry that you weren't terrorized into memorizing at school? So it is essential to take with you not one, but two pens, just in case the first one stops writing. What should they be like? It's a difficult choice. You definitely do not want to take anything valuable with you regardless of whether this value is measured in carats or emotions. You are sure to lose it, snap it in anger or, despite the beauty that surrounds you, chuck it overboard into the sea just because you can't find the right word to describe it. A rule: both pens should be cheap and easily replaceable. Then there is the second dilemma: pencil, pen, biro or anything else? A pencil easily fades and we frequently find ourselves in a quandary as to how to sharpen it. There is always something going wrong with fountain pens and most people nowadays don't even know how to use one. Even the better biros are not particularly good on aeroplanes and are likely to leak into pockets at the first change of cabin pressure. The list of clothes and handbags that have been assigned to the rubbish bin as a result of being marked with the sin of unstoppable leakage is rather long. So this is definitely one to avoid if we wish to appropriately serve literature with a faithful and uncompromising jotting down of our own verses, ideas, quirks, philosophical ponderings, dray dreams and experiences.



## The fifth essential: PAPER HANDKERCHIEFS

The argument is clear: not only can you use them in the front top part of your body, but you are sooner or later going to find yourself in a situation where they come in jolly useful in the rear lower part as well.

## The sixth essential: A PIECE OF STRING

Unless the trip is just an abracadabra of relaxation it is sure to contain areas where we are faced with a certain level of discomfort, however unprepared we are to accept it and however painfully forgotten it might be. The moment is bound to arrive when you have to tie up all the broken pieces, day and night, metamorphosis and confrontation, opposites and the uncomplimentary, basically the moment when one and one add up to three or more. Strings for tying up such pieces have not yet been invented. They are hidden in flashes of metaphors and thought that do not stop at a specific familiar territory, but are at the least – let's say – daring. If there is an exit from this labyrinth then it follows precisely such invisible, but nonetheless pliable, strings of realization. We cannot take a piece of such string with us on our trip, or buy it in a DIY shop or the local drugs store. Such strings appear without warning along the way, are themselves the pathway and it is up to us whether we run away from them (making the escape our new trip) or whether we grab hold of them despite how elusive and delicate they might be (they are no stronger than forgotten dreams or a spider's web early in the morning when dew falls in Babylon) and try to adapt your pace, your moves, your destinations, your thoughts and breathing to their capricious and unpredictable tangles. And it will come in handy if we take along with us a few yards of the other kind of string as well. How often have they been our saviour when washing dirty clothes in a hotel sink! Tied on the edge of a shaky bathroom mirror and the radiator in the next room, they can hold up all your clothes that need drying. It's like displaying all the memories of the past few days in a row through the T-shirts, sweaters, trousers and socks swaying gently on the line after being soaked in soap and water. I'm not sure whether they dripped with tears of joy or sadness. The mere thought seemed pathetic. The string itself agreed with my discovery. It was a fighter by nature. It never complained over the hundreds of kilometres it held together the snapped suitcase handle, the broken tripod or the radio charger that only worked at a specific angle because of a loose connection. It took its gradual shortening as a moral example of stoicism. Worn, dirty and cut into pieces it became absolutely redundant once it got back home. A useless pile, staring through the window at the various scenes from its life rolling past in front of its eyes. Will it ever be able to tie together all the pieces into a single story? Who knows?

## The seventh essential: NAIL-CLIPPERS

The reason to take some along isn't just to cut your piece of string. There is nothing worse than when, at the sight of your long expected destination – be it some dried up waterfall, a pyramid

in a desert storm or a mist covered Macchu Picchu – some part of your own body bothers you. An ingrowing nail, a hangnail on your finger, hair growing out of your nostrils. It's as if that part of your body is trying to emancipate itself, to declare its independence, to split from the rest when you travel. You are willing to help it on its way, since deep down inside you know that travel is not about collecting things, but the reducing of thoughts and concepts, about clarification, calm seas, crystal mornings, rather than glut. The test of the true traveller's mood is like a thought loop. You must totally forget about it and then get caught in it to verify the strength of your departure from the norm. Verifications happen when we comprehend ourselves as beings within time. Most of the time our travels are outside time. True, we constantly bear in mind a departure time of a bus, the time we have between flights, how long a time the hotel room is paid for or how long the coupon for the balloon ride is valid. But in truth this is about shards of time that, at least if the trip with its own logic has managed to suck us right in, do not join up into a linear story line, but crumble like the stale bread children feed the birds with. There are moments when they suddenly attract an entire flock of feathered rabble back to the ground and they cram around us much like in Hitchcock's *Birds*. The lost fragments momentarily connect. We become aware of just how long we have been on the road for and how far from our familiar, everyday time we have stepped, without the possibility of this step ever being permanent and how there is always a revolving door somewhere that instantly swings us back to our clearly and firmly defined present. And when is this most likely to happen? The answer is clear: when you cut your nails. Nails, especially toenails (who knows why, but perhaps it has to do with the fact that when we are clipping our toenails we are bent over in a similar position to a foetus in the womb, meaning in the position of the absolute beginning of our trip), remind us how far out of our own time we have grown. Soon we will need to return. This feeling descends on us like a dark flock of birds. And if at this moment we inspect our nail-clippers closely, the gap between the blades reminds us of a mysterious mouth, slowly clipping away, sniggering at our absent-minded acceptance of constant reduction.

## The eighth essential: ASPIRIN

Most people I know drag more medication than common sense along on a trip. Illnesses we've never heard of and those with which no one has fallen ill in the last decades threaten them in every corner of their expectations, with every change in air, water and dreams. They make their destination far more barbaric, exotic and exciting than it really is. Considering that one mostly travels in the mind, the piles of pills form an entire trip of their own. You open up thirty or forty boxes of pills that you managed to get via friends and other contacts without a prescription, lie down on the living room floor reading their instructions, indications and contraindications. I can guarantee that your evening, even if you do not consume any of the stuff in front of you, will still give you an unforgettable trip through potential diseases straight to the imaginary and the results are very regenerating. What "real" trip can ever give you anything like it? If something does happen on the way, there's not much point in worrying about it. It's most likely that among the tons of medication you did bring along you have

forgotten the one that actually might be useful to you. And if by some divine providence or the systematic choice of boxes you did manage to accumulate you just happen to have the right drug with you, it is sure to have passed its use by date or is wet through and through or destroyed by heat, or the packaging is damaged. So there is little you can do but rely on local witchdoctors and wizards, shamans and sorcerers. On witches and wagateurs. In India you are likely to get the best advice on medication from a newspaper vendor, in China from local fishermen and in Mexico from some drunken mariachi. The only universal medication of course is not to fall ill in the first place. The rest are just tricks of relief like aspirin for example and all the other similar cranium pain removers and prevention remedies for felinological morning aches and pains. As we know, all the animals that lend their name to such symptoms belong to the category of beasts. And I cannot recommend sharing your coconut with such beasts, so prevention is imperative. When you return home after your spaeological research of Burgundian cellars, after your field work in Argentinean bars (a normal shot of whisky there can be anything between 5 and 10 ounces and this can cause even an experienced drinker to turn pale when the waiter puts a double down in front of him), after your comparative beerology expeditions to the heart of the dark homeland of King Leopold or after chasing away rabid dogs in the suburbs of Warsaw, it is also highly recommended to stay in control and consume at least one, if not more pills. Just to prevent finding yourself much further than the far end of your pillow.

## The ninth essential: A COUPLE OF PHOTOS

These can depict your favourite person or animal, your estate or some object from your shed or your psychoanalyst's shed. They can depict places frequented by the Tasmanian tiger on the verge of extinction, piles of sand left by Howard Carter, the faked image of Armstrong's footprint on the surface of the moon, a close up of the compound eye of a fly, the portrait of a boy who was given the name Hitler in his native Tanzania (thinking simply that this was some well known historical personality without going into the details), or simply a sunset over Portorož. Photography is a means of contagious magic, a niche in time, a screen and hope. When all seems awful and terrible, at the onset of a traveller's crisis and when even all the open windows on the penthouse suite of a luxury residence with all its magnificent views can no longer help, there's always this small paper window into your soul (however faded and worn). Since we travel (or mostly because we travel) to feed our own fantasies it is only right that our fetishes are not excluded from the menu. And since fetishes are normally difficult to transport (sports cars, high heels and tombstones are definitely out in our economy class vision of baggage), a good old-fashioned photograph printed out on plain photographic paper rather than some digital form is exactly the right weapon against melancholy, homesickness or boredom. Besides, this window of ours is also a window through which others can reach our muscle known as the heart. Far too often so many of those travelling in – the cardinal sin in travel – groups larger than one, shut themselves up in the isolation of their own travelling Alcatraz. Looking at photos in front of strangers is an extremely good mediator, a magic wand, a love potion or a pace-maker. New acquaintances are built via a medium that acts as an

intermediary, be it towards serious relationships or just for fun. What the eyes, despite all their alertness and eagerness for meeting new people, cannot accomplish, just might be achieved by a plain old faded photograph with all its stereotype and tediousness.

## The tenth essential: A HAT

Monsoon rains and ozone holes are not a reason for wearing a hat. Here we have a social moment that is in some places even political. Imagine elegant Buenos Aires where gentlemen wore elegant panama hats and the gauchos with their wide-brimmed hats made of rabbit hair. That's lost now since Peronists demonised headwear as a nest of bourgeois hypocrisy. Only the baseball hat remains in use to protect the environment from the aura of our heads, and that under pretence of being sporty. Long gone are the times when at least half the luggage of a rich traveller would comprise a dozen or so hat boxes for his, his wife's and his children's headwear! And long gone are the times when Panama straw hats were woven in caves so as to keep their flexibility and shape even when rolling about dusty roads all squashed and crumpled. In this category I also include the Arab keffiyeh scarf. They manage to wrap it round their heads and somehow tuck in the ends and shape it in wonderful ways that declare the region of origin of the wearer. Seeing a Sikh, be it a rickshaw driver in Mumbai or a bus driver in London, always made me happy. But maybe my story with hats started in Peru when I bought a llama skin hat that I wore non-stop until I forgot it on a bus. Its duplicate returned to me a few years later in the shape of an exceptional birthday present. By then I preferred wearing Maoist flat caps, later on replacing them with white summer gangster-style hats bought from a Russian seller in Manhattan or in winter a Chechen sheepskin hat purchased at a second-hand market in Saint Petersburg. As many hats as hidden thoughts. When we take them off to wipe our brow, we wipe away our dreams that gathered there whilst we were wearing it. At this moment we find ourselves on the verge. Of what? Where? What we should do in most cases at such a moment is hit our forehead with our open palm with all our strength, but usually, quickly placing the hat back on our stubborn head saves us from performing this ever so mediocre act.