

Chapter 1 : “The Idea” and Circumstances

I can't remember when exactly the idea of travelling came about, but the inspiration probably started with a game of “globe spinning”, and perhaps the name my parents gave me.

I still remember the early 1990s, when I was just seven years old. One of the games I played with my friends was “globe spinning”. We would spin a globe, stop it with our fingers and make up stories of the places where our fingers had landed on. Of course, the proudest moments were when we managed to land on the U.S.S.R. or U.S. They were both big, powerful nations which young boys liked to associate with. We would comment that the Japanese geisha's white makeup was utterly ugly (we generally *hated* girls). Of course, we did not know that the Soviet Union was falling apart, and that Japan was at the peak before its lost decade.

We eventually grew up from our comical nonsense.

After completing a physics degree in 2006, I started working as a trader with Citigroup in London. It was a fantastic opportunity to learn about the global financial markets and the different economies of the world. I was also paid handsomely in the process. However, come 2008, the financial crisis made me reflect upon the history of mankind and geography. There was too little I knew about the world and I wanted to understand the very fundamentals, the building blocks so to speak, of our society and economy.

By January 2009, I figured that if the crisis continued, bank bonuses would be curtailed and I would perhaps be better off travelling and exploring the world. After all, I had enough savings to sustain a three-year sabbatical (the amount of time I thought I would need to travel the world), and still have enough for a deposit for an apartment in central London, which I thought was pretty good for a twenty-four year old. The mood during that winter was doom and gloom, but yet I was smiling to myself every time as I pictured myself seeing, smelling, tasting ... and learning about the cultures and wonders of the world.

And so, I handed in my resignation, and said that I would leave in May 2009, just in time for the warmer months of the Northern hemisphere. My initial plan would be to travel to Japan via the Trans-Siberian railway, continue south-eastward to South America by the end of 2009, be in Europe again during summer 2010, then through Africa, back to Asia via the Silk Road, and perhaps finishing in Malaysia by mid-2012. It would be an ambitious solo trip, and hopefully a life-changing one.

Things didn't happen as planned. I was asked to stay in the company, or at least delay my trip until January 2010, in exchange for a guaranteed bonus. The bonus was substantial, especially given where everything was headed. The S&P500 index was below 700 (it reached a devilish low of 666 on March 9th, 2009). When they gave me the guarantee in writing, I agreed, given that it was decent money and I reckoned that I could wait until I was thirty years old before embarking on my trip. At the same time, they were signing on senior bankers for millions of dollars. From their end, I was just a small fry that they could easily afford to keep.

With that in mind, I knew also that it was not good to be sucked into the job just for the money, and it would be a bad thing if I continued working and eventually grow up old, rich, but with an unfulfilled childhood dream. Thus, logically, I gave myself three conditions: If any one of them were to occur, I told myself I would “quit and travel”.

- Economic weakness persisting: the very reason which prompted me to seriously consider travelling the world. If the economy was bad, there would be salary adjustments and limited employment opportunities. The opportunity cost of not working during these times would be the lowest.
- Hitting the big three-O: I would travel the world before I turn thirty years old. Youth is a finite resource. I was 24 years old then.
- Falling in love: It was a long shot, but it is entirely possible that I would fall in love with somebody who would want to travel around the world with me. I thought, "Hey, you have to give love a chance!"

Things were going well, nonetheless, and I was offered a position in Hong Kong in 2010. My team expanded the business quickly, but come 2011, the Asian equity derivatives business suffered an impairment at the onset of the

Japan Sendai earthquake and the Euro-Greece crisis. In addition, my colleague whom I shared the trading book with was pregnant, which probably made her fire-proof as it was very costly to lay off expectant employees. Inevitably, Citigroup laid me off on 29 November, 2011. I happily accepted my fate given that the financial industry as a whole was undergoing a painful restructuring, and I could finally travel as I had planned nearly three years ago.

One would expect that a person who was laid off would leave the office in a contemplative mood, perhaps with a “where-to-go-next-and-apply-to” mindset in place. But I was the complete opposite. The very moment I left the office building, I knew I was going to enjoy a wholesome day. I had a late breakfast with friends and played five hours of sports: badminton, running and table tennis. During the next two weeks, besides doing six hours of exercise every day, I was busy going out on dates with my would-be fiancée Wei Wen, making sure we could juggle a new relationship with a fairly ambitious travel plan. At that time, my good friend Norman was unemployed and staying with me in Hong Kong, looking for a job. He said that he had never seen somebody so busy being unemployed.

My relationship progressed to a more solid footing and I finally asked Wei Wen about her travelling aspirations.

“Where do you want to go?”

“Everywhere!”



Everywhere meant “anywhere”.

Of course, there were some reality checks. I explained that this was not going to be a normal holiday trip, but a rugged backpacking trip, where as much as possible, I wanted to cross borders by land, through public transport or any other local means. There would be hard and tough times. She understood and was just as excited. I thought, “Wow. Perfect!”

Maybe we were in our dream world. It was much later that I found out that when she said “everywhere”, she did not have Africa or the Middle East in mind. Well to me, everywhere meant the 206 sovereign states around the world, including those which were disputed or not recognised by the United Nations. Oh well, not so perfect after all.

In addition, we knew that our future would be a tough one. I would be travelling for the first year on my own, and she would be working and studying in Hong Kong. We knew that we would not see each other much, except for my occasional detours to Hong Kong, and the Europe trip that we planned together for the summer of 2012. Even after all the travelling, we would still need to figure out where we would want to settle down—if we would even settle down at all. On the positive side, I was optimistic that it would be an exciting two years of adventure, and that Wei Wen would turn out to be the partner that I could look forward to growing old with. The future was rosy and bright, albeit a bit uncertain.

In some ways, the three conditions that I had set for myself three years ago: the economy, my youth and love life, all occurred together. So I was really confident things would be alright.

There was this sense of fate that I realised which goes back much earlier. One might wonder if I would suffer a barrage of disapproving opinions from my parents, family and friends, on travelling post being laid-off. Actually, that was the easy part.

“Why do you want to do this?”

“Don’t ask me, ask my mom! She named me Jia Hong. Although that is the Mandarin pronunciation, my being Hokkien would mean that the Chinese characters of my name is pronounced “*jiak hong*”. So I was born to go *jiak hong* lor!”

Jiak Hong literally means “eat air”. In the Malaysian Hokkien community, *jiak hong* means travelling and is a direct translation of the Malay term “*makan angin*” which carries the same meaning. Eventually, my mother used

the same story whenever her friends asked the very same question about her son's career plans. It was punchy, straightforward, and somehow, made her look cool.

Compared to almost three years ago, the many places on my initial itinerary of 2009 remained unchanged but my circumstances were now different. First, I was committed to a stable relationship, and three years of travelling was probably too much. Secondly, there were plenty of wedding ceremonies of a few close friends around Asia that I had promised to attend. Thirdly, I was in a much better financial position after two rounds of decent bonuses, thus affording more freedom to adjust the travel budget as necessary. As a result of these three factors, my round-the-world trip would be split into a few discrete legs over two years.

At least, that was the plan.

The Packing List

The three-year delay also allowed me to experiment, and crucially think about the things that I would really need during my travels. The end result, was packing light.

Often, I was asked: "That's all?"

"Yes, five kilograms of luggage."

In summary, I travelled with limited clothing, washed them often, and kept technology related items high tech but simple. But let me elaborate further.

Bag: I travelled with a 25 litre Karrimor Airspace 25, a running backpack, which I had used when running back from work. The main features were a breathable framed support, and an extendable rain cover. The framed support was crucial for long hikes and the breathable mesh allowed for ventilation and comfort of carry, especially when sweating in hot weather. The rain cover also served another practical purpose—as the bottom of a cushioned stool on dirty ground (e.g. on the overnight train from Guiyang to Kunming, China). Even better, the accumulated dirt and grime became a theft deterrent because it made the bag appear plain and ugly.

Within the bag, I had three separate laundry bags. One was for slippers and dirty clothes, the second for clean clothes, and the third for tech-related items, medicine, and sometimes, slightly dirty clothes. For the third bag, I usually packed them in small Ziploc bags, which ensured things remained

dry and organised. The front pocket was for things that needed to be conveniently accessed—toiletries and a headlamp. The outside pockets were only for water and food. The laundry bags doubled as extendable second bags, if I happened to require more space. Plastic bags would replace them temporarily.

Clothing: This depended on the climate of the places I went to. As a rule of the thumb, I packed for up to minus five degrees Celsius of cold weather, as well as the humid, hot weather like Malaysia. This assumption was good enough for most of the journey. Also, if required, I could buy clothes along the way.

Clothes packed were:

- 1 beanie
- 1 thermal top, 2 Nike Dri-fit long sleeve shirt, 1 fleece, 1 all-weather jacket
- 1 pair of thinsulate gloves
- 1 thermal bottom, 1 thermal pants
- 1 extendable quick dry pants (the only pants that I had)
- 1 pair of briefs, 2 speedos swimming pants
- 3 socks (2 thin, 1 thick)
- 1 pair of walking shoes, 1 pair of sandals

Except for the shoes, gloves and winter socks, all my clothes could dry overnight after a hand wash. In particular the swimming pants, which I normally used as underwear, could dry within three hours. For sub-zero weather, I wore all my clothes, five layers on the upper body and three layers on the lower body. Whenever I had a decently warm bed, I would dress down and wash the base layers and have some fresh clothing the next day. During warmer days, the combination of Dri-fit shirt and short pants (by reducing the extension) and sandals sufficed. However, that would mean using the laundry bags, due to the additional luggage.

Technology: I bought a Canon S100 and a Samsung Galaxy Note, both powerful devices in January 2012. This was my initial list of items:

- Camera: Canon S100, 2 extra batteries, gorilla flexible tripod, charger
- Phone / Computer: Samsung Galaxy Note, three extra batteries,

charger, memory card reader, micro USB to USB connector; Nokia 101, extra battery

- Backup: USB drive, extra SD card, external hard disks (on extended trips)
- Other: headlamp, Casio Protrek 1500T watch

For communication devices, I considered smartphones, laptops, tablets or a combination of those. I had been using Apple's iPad and iPhone prior to my travels, but there were some major drawbacks: a non-changeable battery, limited Google Apps support, and a fair amount of weight—a combined 800 grams. My aim was to find a powerful device that was light. The Samsung Galaxy Note, with a 5.3 inch 1200 x 800 screen, was a compromise to the iPad's comfortable screen size, but at only 178g, was far lighter and more suitable for my travel purposes.

In addition, I travelled with plenty of batteries and external chargers, which allowed me to stay functional for a week without access to electrical power. My primary phone was a Nokia 101, which was a very cheap and simple dual SIM card phone. It made me look more natural in the less developed parts of the world. I figured it would be safer if I appeared like a poor student, with an old rugged bag, and a lousy candybar phone.

For the camera, I considered DSLRs, compacts, and a mirrorless interchangeable-lens cameras (MILC), such as the Sony NEX series or Olympus PEN series. I wanted a camera that could take high quality photos, but not of SLR weight. MILC, though light, were still twice as heavy as compacts. My travel aims were to experience and learn—taking nice, beautiful photographs was really a secondary bonus. Moreover, I was not a professional photographer, and neither did I aim to be one.

The Canon S100 fitted those needs; it took good pictures, especially in low-light conditions, with a F2.0 aperture size. The GPS was an important feature too, for geo-tagging and managing the eventually large amount of photos. I survived mostly on auto mode, but sometimes, switched to manual or used the high dynamic range (HDR) function to achieve more depth (see the colour pullouts for the results).

Subsequently, I did modify my packing list, with a laptop, and an Amazon Kindle. Also, I “downgraded” to a 40 litre backpack, as the Karrimor 25 litre backpack wore out in one year.

It was a significant downgrade from my working days, but being minimalist had its pleasures, and I looked forward to *jiak hong* with my light backpack.



Minimalist living, organised in three sections of personal items, electronics and clothing.