

TRAVEL – LEISURE – ADVENTURE

OR

**„AMERICA SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF
HERMAN(N) THE GERMAN“**

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The symbols of Vanderbilt University, Nashville/TN, USA

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INTRODUCTION

„Travel – Leisure – Adventure“, these are the key words when being reminded of my year as an exchange student in the USA in the late 80's.

The following series of stories is meant to serve as a refresher of those precious and very best moments which I was lucky to enjoy during that time. There is no doubt that this unique opportunity is still firmly anchored in my memory and is now lively recaptured by giving you a glimpse of several outstanding impressions.

I am going to start off with my first footprints in the U.S., i.e. portraying the way from 'good old Germany' to the 'land of the free' including my first days at Vanderbilt University, where I spent an academic year and which is located in Nashville/TN, the country music capital of the world. Then I will continue with the celebration of Thanksgiving in New York; afterwards I focus upon the importance of Parents weekend at American universities. Staying with a host family is another great experience worthwhile to be mentioned, in particular concentrating on an excursion to the Amish people whom I gladly got to see with them. Last but not least I put some emphasis on the fabulous bus ride with an organization called 'Green Tortoise' offering extraordinary trips to off-beaten pathways.

To be honest this synopsis may be considered as a 'vade me cum' for every traveler, who is inclined to take a trip over to the United States. These reports will provide him/her with much information and lots of imaginations from a personal point of view making his/her mouth watery for an unforgettable journey to the new world and let him/her contrast the perceptions with 'old Europe'.

„If you can't do great things, you can do small things in a great way.,

My first footprints in the USA

The sky's the limit – time had come for me and another 5 companions to take off and head to the new world longing to indulge in the unlimited possibilities supposed to arise sooner or later. We happily and curiously departed from Munich on August 22nd of 1987 and flew via TWA to our first stopover, New York, the city which – according to popular belief – never sleeps. This was absolutely true for me, too, since I was able to stare – for the first time in my life – at the gigantic skyline of Manhattan that night from our hotel in Brooklyn. At this stage I finally realized that I'd won the first prize in a lottery, having been selected for this spectacular adventure by the DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst) of the university of Regensburg. I have to add, that there has already been a more than 33 years lasting relationship between the University of Regensburg and Vanderbilt University in terms of implementing regular exchange programs: by the way, in the year 2001 the 30th anniversary had been celebrated.

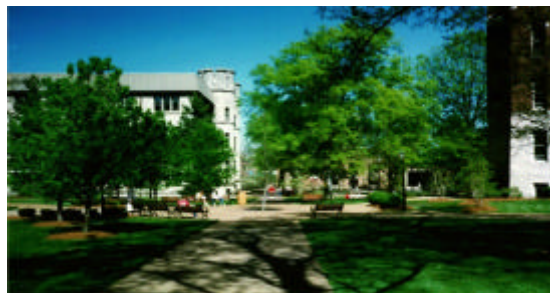
From now on I was sure that I was not 'just another face in the crowd', which made me fairly proud indeed. After taking an Early Bird's breakfast our connecting flight to Nashville was ready to go and the location of truth ought to be reached pretty soon. Taking a cab from the local airport to downtown Nashville, however, turned out to be rather peculiar. This was my first encounter with the southern accent which sounded rather strange to me, at least at the beginning of this trip. Listening to the driver carefully I could lively imagine how a stranger might feel when making holiday in Bavaria. Nevertheless I could detect a few linguistic similarities between this southern style and my Bavarian origin.

Eventually the campus area was just a skip, hop and a jump ahead of us, making my heart feel a bit nervous and bewildered now, because I did not know what was to be expected from me in terms of fulfilling university requirements. Never mind, this trembling feeling was just overwhelmed when we approached the lush greenery, the picturesque brick-wall buildings and the countless squirrels, diversifying amongst the numerous trees – resembling a national park, just the perfect setting for inhaling the inspiring atmosphere of the American spirit.

The majority of those really beautifully looking old buildings was strategically scattered around Kirkland Hall, which was the administrative heart on campus, due to the fact that the Dean resided there. Furman Hall, another impressive piece of architecture with its well-known arts & science department was constructed 1907, thus representing the architectural style of the Victorian age. The famous Own School of Management shouldn't be neglected as well, when talking about some essential sites on campus.

In fact just before I entered the final gate I could admire a superb eye-catcher, the Parthenon located in midst the Centennial Park, that was built for the Tennessee Centennial Exposition of 1897 and this full-size replica of the Parthenon in Athens was the exposition's centerpiece.

Oh boy, all this was dream but in fact part of first glance. Therefore, gone immediately and I music. Next topic on the the arrangement of my which was located a bit was Lewis House. My



turned out to be a real melting pot, consisting of all kinds of international students squeezed together in fairly small rooms; this scarce space was basically inhabited by 2 people, who

unbelievable like a reality; it was love at nervousness was ready to face the 1st day's agenda was first accommodation, off-campus; its name local residency

were forced to share one bathroom, one kitchenette and ponder about the perfect way of managing one's life within one sleeping room and one living room.

I must admit that I was not – yet – used to this situation of being a roommate, but it definitely happened to become the genuine spice of life from now on. Unfortunately I lost the rally obviously throwing the wrong dice, i.e. I had to cope with the living room which was my little empire for the next 3 months. Being fully aware of this matchbox-situation I tried to deal with it in terms of motivational composure. In the long run, however, I was lucky to move into the Intl. House of McTyeire on campus.

The concept of this dormitory was characterized by 4 halls, i.e. you could have applied for the German section, which was kind of logical because of my origin, or you might have chosen the French or Spanish hall or you have gone for the Russian floor. This distinction proved to be a perfect way for studying a foreign language and ideally dive into its cultural roots. Thus this kind of 'dormitorian' life-style meant to be rather different compared to my first choice.

This decision was, due to many vital reasons, very wise; primarily I was involved in a wide variety of social events, let alone to mention the famous in-house coffee hour that gathered lots of interesting international students who really symbolized the food for thought during this occasion. Besides, I was grateful for participating in several seminars and workshops held by international professors, scientists and/or famous writers.

Moreover I was part of the organization of an international week at McTyeire, displaying many colorful booths of all nationalities registered at Vanderbilt; it turned out to be an event, which successfully managed to bridge the gaps between the cultures. It goes without saying that enjoying the incredible variety of delightful food was one of the topical highlights.



This picture displays the booth of the Pakistani community living and studying at Vanderbilt university and revealing the multicultural character of this event



This photograph shows one of the highlights of this international week performed by international students: Here the ‘Dragon Fight’ comes to its end whilst lively accompanied by highly motivated Asian students.

Furthermore it shouldn't be neglected that making good and long lasting friendships was made very easy as a full-time member of this dormitory. This impression of feeling like in a huge family was already enhanced during my first days at Vanderbilt, because then an orientation program was organized by the university administration, where all foreign students got to know their companions and colleagues, already forging basic contacts for further hilarious events taking place apart from university, too. In this way I felt very content and happy, since nearly every effort was made to make life as bearable as possible. The fact that Vanderbilt University also provided a special walking and vehicular escort service was the dot on the i concerning a convenient, safe and unconcerned life there.

Looking forward to taking and passing the mandatory TOEFL exam on the second day, I was finally game for entering this new horizon of mental and physical distraction, personal development and invaluable experiences to come.

Beforehand, I would like to give you a brief summary about Vanderbilt University: this wonderful place was founded 1873 by Cornelius Vanderbilt (1794-1877) as a response to the cultural decay of the Southern states after the civil war. It aimed to maintain the spiritual heritage of the South. Vanderbilt University is (still) often titled as a ‘Harvard or Yale of the South’, which perfectly fits in terms of raising the incredible fees (1987: 20,000 \$; 1996: 27,000 \$) to obtain entry for registration.

Besides, the very high standards of education and its excellent ranking amongst all private American universities cannot be denied either. What a coincidence that I was glad to take part in the celebration of the Founder's day – March, 17 1988 – the 115th anniversary of Cornelius Vanderbilt's founding gift. By the way, Mr. Vanderbilt – entrepreneur, treasurer and king of trains – got also involved in the ‘creation’ of the Grand Central Station (N.Y.) in the year 1873. Moreover it is absolutely worthwhile to stop by one of his colossal mansions, the Biltmore Estate near Asheville, North Carolina.

With regard to the university system I would like to stress the outstanding ratio of 1:6 between professors and students, which simply seems unbelievable in the eyes of European standards. The philosophy of competition and a high degree of presence and pressure mainly predominated the student's life; however this momentum kept the students busy in finally achieving their goals and milestones according to a very tough syllabus with its precise information of requirements, basic procedures and even lists of necessary literature. From my point of view I tried to do my best in order to cope with these circumstances, willing to master this challenge by all means.

The following pictures are meant to be some real eye-catchers for the reader:



This is a photograph of my Spanish class showing me with my sister on the very left side and her friend on the very right side including my lovely teacher, Ms Francis Johnson, who originally came from Lima, Peru. This class happened to be a real challenge for me, since I had to think in English while simultaneously applying the Spanish language. In the long run I guess I did a great job almost being the best student at Vanderbilt amongst all participants on campus.



Here that's me (at the right) with a bunch of nice buddies of the international group of students: the guy with the yellow shirt is Serdar, who was my roommate at Lewis House; the picture was taken upon an excursion to the outskirts of Nashville during the first days after my arrival in the U.S.

Thanksgiving in New York

Glad, that finally my first break [11/1987] came up, I decided to head primarily to New York City, where I already spent one night on the way to Nashville. So this place was kind of familiar to me and I was extremely curious about having a good time there. Additionally, my friend Mathew, whom I got to know at Vanderbilt University and who turned out to become one of best “buddies” nicely convinced me to join him and his family in the traditional “Thanksgiving Dinner” at their house in Long Island. I was really pleased to find a ‘refuge’ to go, since University life during any break happened to be fairly boring and a bit unattractive especially for a foreign student. Anyway I made up my mind to be the host of Mathew for a couple of days clearly anticipating the fun activities to be experienced around the breakfast, lunch and dinner table. By the way I have to point out, that both of us are well known for intensive, long lasting, delicious and exquisite meals wherever we emerge as visitors. This was definitely proved again for several times back in Germany.

There ain’t no free lunch – that’s why I had to ‘deserve’ this unique encounter for Thanksgiving, i.e. I planned to stop by a friend of mine, who participated in the summer courses at the university of Regensburg a year ago. Her name’s Lisa and she lived north of N.Y. in Albany. Since I arrived earlier than the official date of Thanksgiving I had plenty of time for diversification. Getting to her I had to take the L.I.R.R.T (= Long Island Railroad Train) from Northport to Penn Station downtown New York. It goes without saying that I did not want to miss a glimpse of MACY, the world-famous shopping center without being subject to prevailing tastes. Nevertheless I was fairly puzzled about the wealth and riches spread all over this glamorous alley along 5th avenue. After spending a few hours in Albany, where Mario Como preferred to work in the local State Capitol at that time, I was forced to take the 4 o’clock train back to N.Y.

Enjoying a very peaceful train ride so far, something occurred which could have happened in an action thriller as well: our train all of a sudden stopped the engines and was not able to inch any more. We were just crossing a bridge somewhere in the Bronx, but the overall environment didn’t seem to be quite inviting; in fact I felt a bit frightened, too, because nobody exactly knew what was going on for the first half an hour. What a nice evening surprise! At any rate the temporary location was not the best one, as somebody whispered to me. Looking outside – it was already dark – I got this mysterious feeling, since I spotted some people scattered beneath this endless bridge quite close to our wagon, who were either involved in a gun fight, a drug deal or anything else which you could have easily imagined at that moment. Without any doubt the passengers did not feel comfortable at all, not knowing how long to bear this thrilling situation, shut out from the external world and literally sentenced to the interior; this gave me the impression of being in a tiny tin box having gotten no chance to act but only to react. In the meantime the passengers bridged the tedious waiting with small talk, playing cards, reading and getting to know each other, which perfectly worked as an effective means of distraction. Eventually, after 3 hours of uncertainty we started to move again and happily reached the Grand Central Station. Upon our arrival we were told that there had been a fire at Penn Station, causing us to take this detour non voluntarily.

After recovering from this shocking experience Mathew and me grasped the chance of cruising around Long Island next morning, showing me some admirable places, such as for instance the private homes of Billy Joel or Barbara Streisand.

Once having already sighted the materialized wealth downtown N.Y., I got a brief peep of another Vanderbilt mansion, which included a museum, a planetarium and as the cross on the t a golf-court starting off on top of the roof. This was just too much for me, although I was very proud indeed having been able to get to my 'donator's property'.

Eventually time is flying when you are having fun and therefore we had to scoot back in order to take our seats for the start of Thanksgiving Dinner. Oh gosh, the upcoming hours would end up in paradise. It was simply terrific – Mathew's mother prepared almost everything which you would never have imagined in your least dreams. I have not seen such an outstanding rich meal before, nicely decorated and spread out all over the big table. I believe, on Thanksgiving day there is always an exactly measured table available which can handle the incredible amount of nutritional treasures, let alone to mention the additional ingredients. The eating procedure is the most important feature of this day, followed by a short period of relaxation and rejuvenation such as a nap. Then everybody automatically moves over to the living room where the TV is already set to watch the traditional Macy's Parade, the biggest parade in the U.S., which takes place near 5th avenue and snuggles around the downtown area. Finally the beginning of the football game beat everything I told before: at this stage all family members more or less are to be found on the floor unable to move anywhere. They basically idolize these games quite a lot, which I could not yet comprehend at this time of my stay. Sooner or later my understanding of the philosophy of football had extremely changed, particularly since I had been accompanied by some colleagues, who made all kinds of efforts to explain it to me.

Of course I needed half a day of recovery, but then I intended to use my remaining time efficiently via strolling around downtown N.Y.C. Due to obvious time constraints I focussed upon some major sites like the Empire State Building, the Rockefeller Plaza, the Public Library of N.Y., the St. Patrick's Church, the Soho area including Canal Street and the avenue of the America's that connects the upper and lower part of Manhattan. I also favored the Brighton Beach area in Brooklyn, where the majority of Russian immigrants has settled down.

However, the most impressive place, where I was happy to go, was the WTC, which according to the latest history does not exist any more. Therefore, thanks to God, that I could make it and adore the top of the skyscraper and experience more than 30 miles of visibility at that gorgeous day. Looking back from now I still have a strange feeling when being reminded of this once architectural piece of art and the sad outcome of 9/11 not neglecting its impact on global politics either.



This is part of the Vanderbilt Mansion which I could spot on my tour through Long Island

„There ain't no free lunch,,

Parents weekend

With bells on I couldn't help waiting for the spring season, which - amongst lots of other joyful occurrences that happened to me - was supposed to be an extraordinary period of time: the arrival of my sister, Gaby, was a major part of the agenda, which turned out to be an interesting episode anyhow. On March 20, 1988 she showed up just in time for celebrating another highlight on campus. Each year around the end of March (Mar 25-27, 1988) it's time for the famous Parents weekend, that is considered a traditional occasion at American universities and which was then arranged by the "Office of Student Organizations and Events" (OSOE). Of course, I was looking forward to participating in this special event, in particular offering a hands-on insight into American customs to my sister. Basically, the overall understanding of Parents weekend can be described as follows: during these 3 days the university offers the parents the opportunity to see, where they are tossing their well earned money for their kids education; nevertheless any additional financial donation is always welcome. It is also a time of open doors, where the parents can admire the facilities or utter complaints whatsoever. Moreover, it's a time for parents, who once attended the same university as their children; in this way it's a kind of 'homecoming' and the right place to share old memories with former buddies.



In this picture you can see me and my sister Gaby shortly after her arrival at Vanderbilt; the building in the back gives you a glimpse of my second dormitory, the International House of McTyeire on campus

The main issue my sister was already worried about back in Germany was the proper selection of adequate clothes that ought to be worn at such an evening. To me, the tuxedo was not the first choice but I managed o.k., emphasizing the principle of improvisation. Anyway my sister's intention of appearing appropriately played an important role, since she somehow wanted to enjoy being in the limelight for this unique opportunity, in particular because she proudly represented our parents, who couldn't make it due to their age. I must admit that the basic expectations were quite high - now it had to be proved if we simply exaggerated in preparing for this happening.

Then the curtain fell sharply and being fully awoken we smelt the coffee entering the ‘hall of fame’ without having a clue. Eventually it didn’t turn out to be the blast we thought it would be in terms of glamour and peculiarity. Without any doubt, the entire organization was professional: some officials made a speech, heartily welcomed the guests of overseas in particular and provided precious bits of background information regarding the university and the courses of study to be taken at Vanderbilt. Basically it was an unique gathering of many different, open-minded people being fond of devouring huge quantities of splendid comestibles, which were typical for the Southern (country) cooking style;

to mention only a few superior food samples here we go: meaty pork loin with apple chutney, garlic and juniper berries, country ham with red-eye gravy and homemade biscuits, hickory-smoked bucksnort trout, succulent fried catfish with crunchy hush puppies, pork barbecue sandwiches topped with a zesty dryish coleslaw, a wide selection of homemade pies and lots of vegetarian dishes. Knowing about this towering range of exquisite thingamajigs I simply had to take a wild guess in order to fully appreciate at least part of it. Last but not least we did a great job relishing the grand variety of food embedded in an elite society on campus.

However, we were not able to spot other foreign families striking our attention, that would surely have had contributed to an even more diversifying and beneficial evening. Moreover, there weren’t any heavyweight personalities either. Anyway, the funny thing was, that my sister felt like being completely overdressed – almost dressed to kill – that night, whereas most of the other guests preferred the more casual dresses. Recalling this picture I still consider this ‘Nashvillian’ encounter very amusing in terms of seriosity and its originally official character, as it had been announced.

In this way it makes perfectly sense to quote Tom Hanks in the movie ‘Forest Gump’: “You never know what you will expect, when you open up a chocolate box”. This was definitely true for both of us, when we look back now.

„You are sweet, kind, pure of mind and beautiful to see,,
[it goes without saying that this expression perfectly fits to my sister]

Life with a host family / An excursion to Amish country

After I had successfully got accustomed to the American way of life now, my friend Rose, who worked for international affairs at Vanderbilt suggested me, to think about the concept of a host family for the next half a year. She firmly believed that I was perfectly tailored for this new experience and chose a couple, that had already proved to be excellent for this purpose. His name was Norman, who was married to Mary White, who worked for the local church; they lived nearby campus in a cute little house surrounded by a decent neighborhood. I got to know them shortly after I returned from my Christmas break. First of all I met Norman in a Chinese restaurant just across of the Blair School of Music, which was part of the campus and distinguished itself by an excellent reputation. We had a very nice conversation and I liked him at first glance, discussing about a wide range of topics such as university, politics and economics. Norman was also very fond of sports, in particular he favored playing tennis, which we soon realized downtown Nashville at the main tennis-center, where usually the famous Virginia Slims Tournament are held once a year. I felt rather proud playing on the center-court and was highly surprised about Norman's excellent physical condition. He was in real good shape and I had lots of problems to compete appropriately. What I liked most was to be taken to several meetings of the United Nations – a lovely Greek/Roman building which is located close to Vanderbilt university. In fact Norman was an active member of its committee; therefore he invited me several times to some fairly interesting events, such as for example to a lecture of the ambassador of the UN who lively discussed the political situation in Iran and Iraq. Another topical highlight was a presentation of a Russian speaker who summarized the bad conditions in his country. Mostly I appreciated the fact, that the speakers didn't avoid to talk turkey when presenting their issues to the public.

Another field of subject he focussed upon was going on excursions to the outskirts of Nashville. However, the most exciting trip still had to come. When my sister and her friend Marianne arrived in Nashville, we briefly met at the international coffee hour in McTyeire and spontaneously made up our mind to head for Lawrenceburg, a place south of Nashville.



This picture shows my sister and me together with my host father, Norman on our way to Amish country

This journey ought to excel everything what I had experienced so far: we were ready to drive to Amish country, an unknown and rigid world. The area around Lawrenceburg – about 100 miles south of Nashville - was characterized by remote farms and small market towns. The Amish or also called Anabaptists completely cut themselves off from the “English” and live their plain life, moulded by carefully observed principles imposed upon them 300 years ago by the founder, Jakob Ammann.

Approaching the Amish was and still is a delicate matter; we shouldn't take pictures at all – according to the advice of Norman – in order not to deprive them of any of their culture, since they were used to live in their own world, being excluded from any modern influence as far as possible. The Amish reject the use of new technology, since it is not expressly mentioned in the Bible. In their houses you will search in vain for electrical appliances like washing machines and refrigerators, let alone radios, TV and phones. There's no electricity at all – water is going to be pumped into the house via pin wheels and then heated by gas. When we got even closer we could already detect horse drawn or mule drawn carts by which the fields are tilled; the use of power machinery is not allowed either; only for the purpose of transport the Amish may utilize a traction engine.

You are probably familiar with the picture of Amish people driving one horse buggies, which look like an old-fashioned vehicle at first glance; now it is dominated by the gloomy black of the plain carriage. The passengers obviously trying to hide from outside views are also dressed in black. Simple dark clothing is generally stipulated: that of the men may have buttons, that of the women only pleats. Orange and yellow colors are forbidden. Married men are wearing beards, which we have sighted a lot. When we finally entered one of the villages a few children and an old man came across us; they were just consumed with field work. Now the really funny thing happened. Marianne, who joined my sister, began to start chatting with them in her native dialect, which had its origin in Offenburg, a town close to Strasbourg, where she was born.

All of a sudden the fear of them was gone and they surrounded our VW-van indulging in a lively conversation. The Amish basically speak "Pennsylvania Dutch", a mixture of German dialects and sprinklings of English, which people from the Palatinate would probably best be able to understand. As a consequence, the ice was broken and we had even been invited to their home, where a woman – wearing small round glasses and a whitish head coverage to protect from the sun – friendly offered us self-made bread and cakes. Having been lucky to dive into this ancient world, we had been provided with invaluable facts, too: For example, the Amish have no houses of worship, i.e. they gather together in a farmhouse with men and women separated from each other; however, a hierarchical structure does not exist. Weddings are usually celebrated on a Tuesday or Thursday in November. Having lots of children is considered a blessing; the average amount of kids is about 8-10 per family. The Amish population has doubled within the last 20 years. Nowadays it is possible to encounter Amish groups in about 20 American states. Once you are born as Amish does not necessarily mean that you have to remain a member of the Amish. This is due to the fact that the children won't be baptized, i.e. they should decide on their own, if they like to maintain this way of life. However, once they have chosen to be Amish around the age of 18-20, they are automatically chained to the rules and regulations of the community, which is - besides the family and the farm –one of the substantial values, whereas career, power and money are looked upon as irrelevant aspects of life. In addition, the Amish practice non-aggression at all. They refuse to serve in the military and they reject to swear an oath.

Listening to the Amish we felt so happy and satisfied, also recalling the famous movie "The Only Witness", which was filmed in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. This movie depicts the clash of the Amish with the outside world. There is in fact not one Amish among the actors, of whom Harrison Ford is the best-known, and not among the extras either. Unfortunately, we had to call it a day late afternoon and leave this extraordinary site, being fully aware of the fact, that this visitation has been *the* event of the century. On our way back to Nashville Norman and us lively recaptured our time forging already plans how to spend the last day with Gaby and Marianne.

For this purpose Norman and Mary gratefully arranged an exquisite dinner at their house. Mary prepared an original southern dish and we had a great time together, pondering about American culture, politics, religion and my personal development so far. Gaby and Marianne were somehow surprised by the spiritual religious procedure before starting to eat; this was mostly due to Mary's profession. Norman, on the other hand, denies such kinds of rituals and does not seem to be a friend of the church; he simply prefers to question most of it and likes to be very critical. I shouldn't forget to mention his marked interest in German literature and poems, which he collected quite a bit up till now. That was rather impressive to us, since we were able to exchange many intercultural thoughts and ideas.

It is a real pity, that I could not get a hold of my host family, after I finished my studies at Vanderbilt, although I tried several times to touch base with them within the last 10 years.

Anyway the life with a host family belonged to the most exciting and valuable experiences!



This lovely house is the home of my host family, located in Nashville, TN nearby Belmont College, where another student is momentarily teaching German.

„There's no use crying over spilled milk,,

The Green Tortoise adventure

One day my friend Rosie Ashamalla, whom you already got to know from my story about my first footprints in America, recommended me to seriously ponder about an organization, called “Green Tortoise”, which is well-known for its amazing trips to outstanding places in the mid-West. I was nicely persuaded by this idea and decided upon taking the journey to the Grand Canyon. This was exactly what I was looking for, in particular as a student who is forced to prefer the shoe-string budget solution. Starting off in San Francisco, where I spent a lovely time with Duncan - another foreign student from GB -, I needed to head for the local station, in order to catch the bus in time. Reaching the site I encountered a bunch of people coming from all kinds of various states and countries. There was quite a mixture of young and old fellows, ranging from several Germans, a few French fellows, 2 Australians, one British guy, a Japanese student to an interesting old woman in the late 70’s.

After the mandatory administrative ‘bureaucrazy’ had been successfully mastered, we were ready to go. Being a fairly international group we were squeezed together in a somehow convertible bus, that was equipped with a portable kitchen which could be easily applied to different outdoor activities.

„The road to success is always under construction,,



This picture shows me as a proud man standing right beside this hilarious bus, called „Green Tortoise“

The interior of this bus turned out to be eye-opening, since there weren’t any regular seats but the passengers had to lie on the ground with mattresses whilst facing each other. Some people even dared to choose a tiny place right beneath the roof. The bags and other luggage was safely stored upon the bus. During the often long-lasting driving water was available in coolers and food was bought due to the necessity of a break. The first night we slept on the bus, while Wade, an open-minded American fellow got us to a spot in the desert of Utah, where we – for the first time – practiced the philosophy of outdoor cooking in midst a tidbit of shade donated by our vehicle. There, we prepared blueberry pancake, delicious fruits, coffee and tea to mention only few attractive comestibles. The basic principle was to assist in the cooking procedure as well as to clean up afterwards. This way of travelling was completely new to me; it didn’t ring a bell having ever experienced such a journey emphasizing the feeling of community so strongly.



This is just incredible: looking inside of this outstanding vehicle showing all of us being squeezed together like sardines but happily enjoying the ride, even applying countless instruments for playing music once in a while.

Then we continued to Needles, where we enjoyed a quick dip in the exceptionally blue Colorado River. It was superb to get a cost free watery refreshment strengthening our muscles for the upcoming activities. At this occasion I could already conclude, that nudeness would from now on naturally belong to the daily program of such stopovers. Our nightspot was to be found near the Colorado River, where we had been surrounded by mountains and a clean sandy beach. I definitely loved these precious hours by gazing at the fancy blinking stars, seemingly detecting far away galaxies and pondering about the miracles of astrology.

Eventually, we approached the South Rim of the Grand Canyon (elevation: 7,000 ft.) where we hit the hey on a legal campground facing another great event which was on its way shortly: descending the rim down to the very bottom of the marvelous Canyon – still an imagination that was too thrilling than being reality soon. Before we got our bearings together for hiking some essential aspects had to be clarified: first of all our group consisting of about 20 people was to be split into 3 teams with each of them choosing a different tour. Wade, our driver, suggested to participate in a lottery, which primarily registered me for the Bright Angel trail. However, I did not accept that choice and volunteered for the more off-beaten pathway, called Hermit's Rest. So I ended up belonging to the "Smiley Faces" with Nicoletta (I), Phillip (F), Heinz (D) and the Japanese guy. A third group had been formed to walk on the Indian Garden trail. Anyway I was extremely glad having selected Hermit's Rest, because this trail was described as traditional, rough and far away from tourists. Besides, enjoying the natural quietness and the extended wildlife scenery as well as countless spots for contemplation beat everything.

The most exciting thing was the historical date of realizing this unique adventure: **8/8/88** – another event of the century. Fulfilling the obligation to be equipped with sufficient water jugs when climbing down the rim was the last but vital prerequisite which we had to comply with. It took us approximately 7 hours of endless happiness to get down to heaven, i.e. the Colorado River with its torrential floods. Having made it so far, we satisfactorily sat down on almost untouched nature and absorbed this incredible feeling of beauty. Though our bones ached a lot we didn't want to spoil the moment and allowed ourselves a bath in a nearby water spot, ready for rejuvenation. Being already aware of spending the night down there beneath the marvelous sky in midst the sandy beach evoked a deep feeling of satisfaction and content. Of course, we would know for sure, that we had to get back to the top of the rim the next day, but we were not fully aware of the efforts to come; nevertheless we felt being on cloud nine and were highly motivated to even master this task. We were happily welcomed at our bus around noon and headed on to Desert View, where we stopped for dinner and a gorgeous sight across to the valley of the Gods and the Painted Desert.

Our next stop on the agenda was a holy and sacred place, called Canyon de Shelley, the remains of an ancient civilization. Here we trailed down to the architecturally beautiful and nicely detailed homes of former Indian tribes. Our nightspot ought to be an uncommon place this time: since it rained cats and dogs we necessarily stayed in a shed, relishing Taco salad and Tostados. We got the chance to chat with the local Indians, who seemed to be used having a harsh life, smoking marihuana once in a while and raising their kids in their own strict way.

One highlight still to come was obviously the Monument Valley, which I mostly recalled from famous Western movies starring John Wayne. Unfortunately, this day the whole scenery was temporarily packed with herds of tourists. Thus I was not able to enjoy the landscape to its full extent.



As you can see this bus was also embarked by an interesting old lady in the late 70's, who turned out to be a successful linking pin to the majority of young travellers

Zion National park was next on our list of distinctive sites, where we almost managed to go on a horseback riding, but curiously missed it by a few minutes. The unstoppable prediction of the end of our journey caused a melancholic feeling but was soon distracted by Wade's idea of tossing up the entire bus, in order to have everything sorted out properly.

Next morning our final destination was Las Vegas, where we briefly dived into the neon madness, attending several gambling halls, loosing/winning a few bucks and trying to classify this last stay with our perceptions so far.

When the time had finally come to say goodbye once we reached the Natoma area again I definitely realized that I'd been part of another overwhelming trip, which may be characterized as follows: "*Variety is the spice of life*".

**„That makes life bearable,,
laccording to a beloved student, called Lisa Perfettii**

Closing

Primarily, I would like to thank the reader for his/her endurance in keeping up with the sometimes apparently never-ending stories and events, which, in the eyes of the writer, however, had been carefully selected and diligently put together, in order to create an eternal piece of individual art. I admit, that this literal opus contains some parts, which would have deserved a bit more attention in focussing upon them, but sometimes I was not able to trace back all necessary details being noteworthy to be mentioned. I apologize for this and hope, that the reader had been provided with some tidbits of 'food for thought', despite the fact, that a few topics had only been scratched on the surface. Now I would like to make some last remarks about my return to Germany. After I spent my remaining weeks in Nashvegas, as I eventually called my second home city, meeting my beloved buddies, that I knew from Vanderbilt, I had to organize a farewell party; this was an excellent opportunity to express my overall appreciation not only with regard to those wonderful people but also to my hilarious stay in the U.S. I managed to invite a bunch of lovely fellows over to Rose's apartment, where we celebrated my finite day in Nashville. This was definitely the last chance for being the life and the soul of a party gladly being surrounded neither by couch nor by mouse potatoes. Fortunately, Norman my host father, came to see me as well and we exchanged two tiny pictures, one displaying him and Mary, his wife in former times and the other me, when I was up in Minnesota. Moreover, I had been accumulated with tons of presents such as for instance a book with the title "One day in the Life of America", including all the names of the guests that night, numerous jokes and prospective advice for the future, written on the first and the last page of it. Nearly not sleeping all night we, again, met for brunch at Shoney's before I had to be taken to the international airport. On the way there, I already was very sad about my leave, which was further enhanced by the marvelous presence of Norman, Rose, Zuhail, Rinko and a Colombian guy, whom I ran into some weeks ago. There we sat, at this moment not longing for a plane bringing me back to another world. When the time had come, we all got up and embraced each other like a conspirator circle swearing that it will be a time for a reunion sooner or later. Going down the gangway and almost entering the aircraft I internally began to cry and even lost some tears of joy and sadness. I could only bear the overseas flight, that seemingly wouldn't stop, by listening to a music tape of my favorite black singer at that time, Tracy Chapman, who stressed so much her line called 'be yourself'. Hearing this special song over and over again I safely arrived at the Munich airport, where my sister Gaby heartily picked me up and tried to cheer me up, in order to be able to cope with the circumstances of real life again and to stay grounded, too.

„To love something is to give it room to grow.,

