Lessons in Adversity

Apparent disasters often create rich layers of life experience that become treasured memories.

> By **Alisa Clickenger**

After a freakish, yet crippling mechanical issue, Ben Slavin, right, got a lift from the author, who also happened to be in El Salvador, and a friendship was born.

Employers in the European Union typically provide at least four work weeks of paid vacation. In the U.S., standard vacation times are strangely inverted, and most of us get about two weeks per year. That's a pretty small window for a real adventure.

Extensive planning to make sure everything runs smoothly on a motorcycle trip would be ideal, but sometimes things come up that derail even the best of plans. These snafus sometimes provide a rich dimension to your trip that would have otherwise never been experienced.

In 2010, I was riding by myself in Peru, ate something I should not have, and every day got a little sicker. My hotel room was above a row of shops, and each day I'd practice my Spanish and chat with one of the shopkeepers about mundane things with my limited vocabulary. Each day he'd ask, "Are you leaving today?"

I'd respond, "No, I've asked to stay another day because I don't feel good."

After five days of this routine, I was packing my bike and the shopkeeper said, "Where are you off to?"

"I'm not sure. I'm so sick I don't feel like leaving but they have a big group coming in tonight and they need my room," I replied. My new friend insisted that I put my things in his car. He closed his shop and brought me to a doctor. With the first dose of antibiotics in my stomach, he then brought me home to his wife, and took care of the arrangement for my bike. They set me up in a private room with bathroom, and insisted I stay with them until fully ready to continue traveling.

After three days of antibiotics and eating home-cooked "clean" food, as they called it, I felt better. They were an older couple, so I decided to stay a few extra days and be their "labor," helping with tasks around their compound. I mended mosquito nets, painted from ladders, carried stones and dug holes. It was a magical week for me, learning about this creative, artistic couple and their children, lives and loves.

Liz Jansen is a healer and writer. Jansen's grandparents were German Mennonite refugees, arriving in Canada from Russia in the 1920s. In their twenties, they'd survived the Bolshevik Revolution, followed by years of the atrocities of Civil War, anarchy, famine, and financial and personal loss. Jansen was born into that culture but had distanced herself from it in her teens.

In 2014 she embarked on a multicontinent motorcycle quest on her 1200cc Yamaha Tenere, to get to "know herself." At 60 years old, she'd divested her possessions, sold her car and given up her home. "Three weeks into that trip I crashed in rural Alberta. I demolished my bike and shattered my left shoulder," said Jansen. "I knew immediately that my plans had changed and this accident was part of my quest, although I didn't know how. I also knew with certainty I'd return to riding.

"My unplanned event was a life-changing experience. I needed to be off the motorcycle for a while for that internal journey. Ten months after the crash I bought my Triumph Tiger and returned to riding. In 2016, I took seven weeks to complete the quest, on a completely different route and from a new perspective. This time, I followed

A crash in Canada crushed Liz Jansen's left shoulder and her Yamaha Tenere. After rehab, she got back in the saddle and took a different route, straight to her roots.

where they'd landed in northern Saskatchewan and Alberta, throughout the West, to where they eventually settled in Ontario.

"I walked the land they'd lived on, visited descendants of people who had given them shelter, support and helped get them on their feet. The years since that experience have been the most enriching and joyful of my life so far," said Jansen.

For Jeff Underwood, a retired Wisconsin attorney and moto-traveler, his interpretation of things going wrong has shifted drastically with age and many adventures.

"I used to have so much ego involved in everything and I knew right off the bat whether some things were good or bad," said Underwood. "I'd make proclamations like 'this is the worst thing or the best thing that could ever have happened,' but I've since learned that time will tell me whether something is a good thing or a bad thing. I find that to be true with all the things that come along on the road and in life."

In 2010, an engineer riding a KLR 650 planned to spend a night in El Salvador and ended up staying a week. Ben Slavin had just exited Guatemala and was at the immigration station waiting to enter El Salvador when huge gust of wind blew his bike off its center stand. The kill switch button broke off and he was unable to start the bike. He took apart the switch and determined that if he touched two wires it would bypass the switch, allowing him to start the bike. Despite his engineering knowledge, he guessed wrong and ended up short circuiting the CDI, the bike's computer.

A friendly pickup truck driver agreed to take him into the next town, where he brought the bike to the Kawasaki dealership and checked into a hotel.

"After a day at the shop, we still didn't have a root cause or a fix," Slavin said. "I posted online, and you (Alisa) contacted me. You were also in the city and had met a local rider who offered to help and gave us the keys to his beach house. You kindly offered me a ride to the house.

"It was my first time on the back of a bike and I casually sat on the back as we left the city. It felt odd to not be in control of the bike. My casual demeanor quickly changed as we descended the twisty mountain roads on the way to the coast. You overtook an 18-wheeler, then another, then split lanes between two more. Whatever strange feelings I had from riding on the back of the bike quickly vanished and were replaced by fear! Leaning the bike over into the turns, further than I had ever done it myself, was pure terror, but we survived!

"After a short stay on the beach, we headed back into the city. I went to the mechanic and you headed off for more adventure. A short while later, the mechanic suspected that the CDI was busted. He called every dealership in Central America and Mexico, but no one had the part. I could have shipped one in from the States but that would have taken more than a month. The mechanic called up one of the two people he knew in El Salvador who owned a KLR 650 and told the story about this gringo who was traveling the length of the Americas and had broken his bike. Without hesitation, the local rider agreed to drop his bike off in the morning.

"The next day, we swapped his CDI over to my bike and it fired right up! I used my credit card to put in an order for a new CDI. It would arrive in about a month and the shop would install the new one back into the local rider's donor bike. The shop had spent many hours, over several days, to diagnose and fix my bike.

"When I asked to pay the bill, they told me, 'You already paid for the new CDI, there is no other fee.' I insisted that I pay for the copious amounts of time they spent on my bike, but they continuously refused. Eventually, I stopped pushing the payment, and instead walked down to the corner store. I picked up a 12 pack of beer and dropped it off with the mechanics. We all smiled.

"I spent about a week in El Salvador," he said. "Although my time wasn't spent as a typical tourist, I learned a lot about the people of El Salvador, their hospitality, their growing moto culture, and their deliciously famous papusas. I also made a new friend, a fellow rider traversing the Americas. We've bumped into each other over the years and we still keep in touch almost a decade later!

"Enjoy the challenges, because they are what you're going to remember 20 years from now. This is something we have to remember. No matter how bad things get and how poorly things go, it will probably be one of the highlights of our trip. We tend to forget it in the moment, but we shouldn't."

In the moment when trip snafus come up, I am sometimes rocked back on my heels. After a couple of decades on two wheels, I've learned to flow a bit easier with the snafus along the way. These challenges have often become the highlights of my trips and have provided some of the best stories to tell, as well as leading to many memorable encounters and friendships. MCN

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