

PRAISE FOR *THE BUDDHA AND THE BEE*

“Life is an adventure. Cory Mortensen has captured the fun, wisdom, and sense of accomplishment gained from keeping your heart and mind open to life’s gifts.”

—Rob Angel, Creator of *Pictionary*
WSJ Bestselling Author of *Game Changer*

“This book gave me the refreshment I needed; to put it more precisely, it was a short vacation from everything that I was reading and living. While reading this memoir, I went through the myriads of experiences with the author and lived the lives and places I have no connections with. It triggered some suppressed desires that I’d buried deep down in my mind and compelled those emotions that were just too surreal.”

—The Lectorem & Books

“At times, *The Buddha and the Bee* feels like what would happen if Jeff Spicoli, Sean Penn’s iconic anti-hero from *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* had taken up biking and set his sights on San Francisco. Dude.

“*The Buddha and the Bee* sort of turns the idea of the inspirational memoir upside down, a few obscenities here and there joined at the hip by an occasional joint and near daily rural roadside Chinese dinners and overnight stays in forgotten America’s roadside motels.”

—Devon Street Review

“The only thing I didn’t like about this book was that it ended. It’s not just for bikers. It speaks to the heart of anyone who’s ever wondered if their life is going in the right direction. Every page is a reminder that life is meant to be lived, not spent wishing for something to change. At best, this book will change your life. At worst, you’ll be left hoping Saturn returns for you.”

—Lisa T.

“Humorously written book that proves life isn’t about the destination, but about the journey and all the beauty that unfolds if you simply allow life to come to you... with some effort of course.

“This book is a page turner. I found myself lying in bed at night laughing aloud at the situations the author experienced, while biking across the country. And at the same time, distilling life lessons that we all encounter into compassionate and simple statements that reminds us that we’re all human, living life and wanting to be happy and smile... even when hardships come our way.”

—F. Schilling

“Cory takes the reader on a journey into the vast landscapes of the American West and into his deepest thoughts. Told from an honest, emotional, funny, self-deprecating perspective, it gives the reader pause to reflect on their own life and perhaps light a fire or at least stir some dormant embers of a quest for adventure. If you are a fan of *Blue Highways*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, *On the Road*, *Into the Wild*, *A Walk In the Woods* or other similar tome, then you should put *The Buddha and the Bee* on your reading list.”

—John H.

“This guy is crazy, someone who you don’t want planning a trip for you, but who you’d probably love to have beers with or read a book by. A great storyteller with tons of asides and background info. If you have any interest in biking cross country, reading this will either convince yourself to do it or never try such a thing. Hopefully if you decide to, you’ll plan it out better than he did.”

—E.W. Bertram

“I was in just the right mood to read a book like this. Different from my usual fiction, mysteries, etc, *The Buddha and the Bee*

is the story of Cory Mortensen, who decides to make his way by bicycle from Minnesota to California with almost no supplies, no helmet, and practically no plan. Along the way, he meets his share of characters, eats a ton of Subway Italian sandwiches and Chinese food, stays in some of the country's sleaziest motels and takes in the sights in every town he visits—like the giant stuffed polar bear—The White King in Elko, Nevada. His bike breaks down multiple times, but he finally makes it to California.

“Cory Mortensen is a true free spirit. I have never done anything like he's done and I am envious. I hope he continues to have adventures and write about them! This book was a great change of pace for me from my normal reads and I enjoyed it immensely.”

—Eileen

“This book is engaging, humorous, and a great escape during a pandemic. Interesting facts and trivia about the landscape and cities Mortensen travels through are an added bonus. This book is a gift to the reader to examine our own lives and reveal our adventurous spirit!”

—Joyce E.

“Cory Mortensen writes about his journey biking from Minnesota to California. I 'oh, no'ed' every time a car pulled up. And, I had a mini-anxiety response every time he blew out a tyre! What really caught my attention were the historical aspects of the towns he went through. Interesting, engaging, entertaining! Well written and witty.”

—Angie

BOOKS BY CORY MORTENSEN

*The Buddha And The Bee:
Biking Through America's Forgotten Roadways
On An Accidental Journey Of Discovery*

*Unlost:
Roaming Through South America On A Spontaneous Journey*

*Embracing Bewilderment:
A Reluctant Entrepreneur's Journey—
An Unconventional European Summer Twisting Into a
Mind-Bending Excursion Through Southeast Asia*

EMBRACING BEWILDERMENT

A RELUCTANT ENTREPRENEUR'S JOURNEY—
AN UNCONVENTIONAL EUROPEAN SUMMER TWISTING INTO
A MIND-BENDING EXCURSION THROUGH SOUTHEAST ASIA

CORY MORTENSEN



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Disclaimer: This is the author's story. It is not intended to be a guide or how-to manual for a similar trip. No claims are made as to legality, suitability, safety, or efficiency of any route, road, service, establishment, or method of travel. State laws may have changed since this trip was taken, and the author recommends you familiarize yourself with state and local laws where you plan to travel.

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This book is dedicated to my niece Isabella.

You still don't get any royalties.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This story is a continuation of *The Buddha and the Bee* and *Unlost*.

While it is not necessary to read *The Buddha and the Bee* or *Unlost* to enjoy this journey, there will be references to both books throughout, footnoted as TBATB or Unlost, respectively.

If you have not already, I might suggest you put the brakes on this book, log on to your Amazon account, and start there. You can also go to www.thebuddhaandthebee.com

What you are about to read is based on actual occurrences. The dates, route, meals, and consumption are all true.

I have changed the names of those I know to avoid having to share any of the profits I make from this book with them. I have made up names for those I don't know or whose names I don't remember.

While I make an effort and prefer to respect the actual spelling and pronunciation of names to make the book a bit easier and more enjoyable for the reader as we travel through Europe, China, and Southeast Asia, I will be using Westernized versions. For example:

Praha will be replaced with Prague.

Macao will be replaced with Macau.

I HOPE THIS BOOK GUIDES IN SOME WAY
BUT THIS IS NOT A GUIDEBOOK

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“Sell your cleverness and buy bewilderment. Cleverness is mere opinion. Bewilderment is intuitive knowledge.”

— Rumi



I JUMPED ON A FLIGHT TO ICELAND



ICELAND

Rain scurried across the window as the plane passed through the clouds. Behind the wing in seat 45D, I looked out at Iceland's landscape. It was lush, green, cold, remote.

I always liked the perspective of the world upon landing. At thirty thousand feet, the world is cut up in large, segmented swaths of land passing under us at a snail's pace. At some point, the pilot pulls back on the thrust, a bell rings, and an announcement is made as the plane descends. The city blocks form, and soon skyscrapers and commercial buildings expose their hidden mechanics. Houses come closer. Cars, just slow-moving dots, grow in size, and the world starts to speed faster and faster. Trees soon seem to be within reach as the runway emerges out of nowhere, and suddenly, the jolt of touchdown.

“Welcome to Iceland, where the time is 6:35 a.m.”

Isolation was the first feeling that came over me as we landed on the tiny archipelago positioned between the Arctic and North Atlantic Ocean. It was summer in Iceland. The temperature would reach fifty degrees today, and not having a clue as to what to expect, I was ready. I watched my backpack travel down the conveyor belt, rain pelting it as the rampies¹ threw the bags one by one onto the tug cart.

1 An airline employee who loads and unloads airplanes which are parked on the ramp or tarmac.



Ten months ago, I took a leave of absence and left Minnesota for a two-month bicycle ride to California. After arriving in California², I decided not to return to ordinary life and headed south. For seven months, I ventured through Mexico, Central America, South America, and finally Antarctica³.

My months of adventure in South America planted so many seeds. Places I wanted to go, activities and food to experience, people to reconnect with. One person in particular was Cindy. An Australian lass I met in Chile and became very fond of.

I met Cindy on a multi-day ferry ride through the Chilean fjords. We then trekked Torres del Paine and went our own ways. She went to Carnival in Brazil; I went to Antarctica to run a marathon. We agreed to meet later in London, where she planned to work for two years.

After Antarctica, I returned to the United States for the sole purpose of selling my house. Once sold, I would be off to London.

With no official date set to arrive in London and after selling my house in record time, I decided not to pass up the opportunity to visit Iceland before getting settled before my rendezvous with Cindy, who was no doubt waiting patiently for my arrival. Although we had been in limited contact with each other, assumptions were made. I had decided that if reconnecting with her went well, I would

² TBATB

³ UNLOST

stay in London, find some work, and then move to Perth after her work visa expired.

I was in Iceland now, and having not established any solid day for Cindy and I to reconnect, it would be a huge mistake to pass up the opportunity to see what this little country had to offer, to walk in the footsteps of Leif Ericson, Eric the Red, Egill Skallagrimsson, and the great female Norse explorer Gudrid Thorbjarnardóttir, whose son, Snorri Thorfinnsson, is said to be the first white person born in the Americas.

KEFLAVÍK – Driftwood Bay

Immigration was organized. Most people, if not all, had taken advantage of the deal Icelandair offered: \$250, one way, from New York to the UK by way of Iceland.

The government put together the Icelandair deal in hopes of generating tourism, something that Iceland lacked in 2002. The flaw in the plan, in my opinion, was that there was no required multi-day stay in Iceland. All one had to do was simply deboard the plane, process through immigration, and board the plane heading to the UK. Final destinations of choice were Glasgow, Edinburgh, or London. I had opted for Glasgow.

“Where will you be visiting in Iceland?” the immigration officer asked each passenger.

The responses from everyone in line were consistent. “Not

staying, just a quick layover on the way to London.” Or “Just taking advantage of Icelandair’s amazing deal to Edinburgh.”

Each response seemed to remove a sliver of joy from the immigration officer’s face as she stamped each passport with an entry. It seemed that no one wanted to visit her small but impressive country.

“Where will you be visiting in Iceland?” she asked me, cheerlessly reaching for my passport with one hand, stamp in the other.

“Oh, I’m thinking about seeing as much as I can,” I responded.

It was like watching a flower bloom. “Really?! You are going to stay and visit? How very exciting!”

“Yes, of course. It’s Iceland?!”

She stamped my passport with great enthusiasm. “Have a great stay!”



I was considerably more prepared than I was in South America⁴ or during my bike trip⁵, for that matter. First and most importantly, I had my new debit card. While in South America, my credit union had a security breach, shut off everyone’s debit cards, and reissued new ones. I had no way of getting my new card in South America, so upon returning to the States, I finally acquired the new one.

Additionally, my small yet diverse wardrobe had enough variety

4 UNLOST

5 TBATB

to get me through the cold Icelandic summer as well as a weekend on Ibiza.

As for trekking and camping, I acquired a new MSR Fusion 2 tent, an Optimus Polaris stove with two 20 oz. fuel bottles, and a MSR Alpine mess kit for cooking. The rest were incidental items like a compass, Swiss Army Knife, two Nalgene bottles, hat, gloves, socks, and so forth. All of it crammed tightly into my 90-liter Lowe Alpine Counter IV backpack, weighing in around seventy pounds. This was everything, everything I owned aside for some photo albums and family heirlooms I had stored away back in the States. With the selling of my house, I was officially homeless.

My book of choice for Iceland was *The Vinland Sagas: The Norse Discovery of America* by Magnus Magnusson.

I could have taken a bus to Reykjavík, but I was not quite ready to immerse myself into the backpacker hostel culture. Listen to all the stories being told. Respond to all the questions being asked. No, I needed a night to decompress from the flight and get myself dialed in time zone wise—I was five hours off. So, I found a hostel—more of a bed and breakfast—in Keflavík for my first night. Its Scandinavian design was clean, purposeful, and empty.

In the living room of the bed and breakfast, reading my book, my quite time was interrupted by two women from Lithuania. They were wrapping up a year of working at a fish processing facility just outside of Reykjavík. The average annual salary in Lithuania (2002) was \$3400 USD. They didn't complain about how shitty the job was, but rather, they were upset that their visas were expiring. They were

sad to be leaving as they were so happy for the money they were able to make and save. It would take them about five years to make the same kind of money back home.

We hit it off, and I asked them if they wanted to have a beer someplace local. I offered to buy the first round. They took me to an Irish pub with live music.

During WWII, the US Military kept a base in Keflavík and built what is now the international airport. The G.I.'s brought rock and roll to Iceland, and soon after, Keflavík became Iceland's "Capital of Rock n' Roll" with the nickname of "the Liverpool of the North."

I was only familiar with one Icelandic band, the Sugercubes. Their song "Life's Too Good" was released in 1988, led by Björk.

The Gull beers I bought for the three of us came out to \$30 US dollars. It was actually 4100 krona, which made the tab look even steeper. Iceland, my friends, was expensive. I wasn't in South America anymore, haggling over \$1.75 rooms. I soon accepted I would be spending a lot of nights in my tent whilst here on the archipelago.

REYKJAVÍK – Bay of Smokes

The next day, I took a shuttle to Reykjavík. The Lithuanians told me about a hostel that had camping for five dollars a night. This included showers, toilets, and relatively inexpensive internet. This was 2002; we didn't wander around with laptops or smartphones. We had 35mm cameras, each picture carefully orchestrated, and

we sought out internet cafés, paying by the quarter hour for a very slow network. Browser of choice was AOL; free email doled out by Hotmail and Earthlink.

Dalur Hostel International was a bit away from the center of the city, but public transportation was easy, and the hostel was just a bus ride away from two places I had put on my list to see while in Reykjavík.

First Stop: Hallgrímskirkja, the largest church in Iceland, completed in 1986, stands 244' high. Its architecture is a representation of Iceland's unique and diverse landscape.

Out front of the church, a gift from the United States, a statue of Leif Eriksson stood facing north by northwest, keeping a close eye on the shoppers wandering down Reykjavík's first main street: Skólavörðustígur.

Here you could find souvenir shops, tattoo parlors, art galleries, jewelry stores, the Handknitting Association of Iceland, where all products are 100 percent Icelandic, and Iceland's oldest prison, built in 1872, anonymously located across the street from a clothing boutique. Sixteen prison cells and not one with a toilet or sink. The prison was shut down fourteen years after my visit.

The second place on my must-visit list whilst in Reykjavík was the Icelandic Phallogical Museum. Why would anyone pass up the opportunity to go to a museum with a collection of over two hundred penises? From the blue whale to the barn mouse, this museum was made for you and me. The owner claimed there were troll and

elf penises, but since neither troll nor elves could be seen, the same held true for their penises.

With a serious case of penis envy, I walked up toward Faxaflói Bay and hiked along the paved Sculpture & Shore Walk, passing by a few wonderful sculptures:

The Sun Voyager (Sólfar) by Jón Gunnar Árnason.

“A dreamboat, an ode to the sun. Symbolizing the promise of undiscovered territory, a dream of hope, progress, and freedom.”

Íslandsvarðan by Jóhann Eyfells. Known as “the Cairn of Iceland.”

The Partnership Sculpture by Pétur Bjarnason. A gift from the United States for fifty years of good diplomatic relationship.

Skolpa Sewage treatment plant. Just what its name suggests and where I decided to exit the path and head back to the hostel.

Ducking into a grocery store, I loaded up on food—a few tins of tuna and boxes of pasta. That was going to be dinner for the next few days. Easy to cook with my stove and just as easy to clean up. For breakfast, it would be porridge, and lunch would be hard cured meat, cheese, and rolls. Lastly, I grabbed a few packages of chocolate biscuits to snack on, but mostly to share with others. A rather easy way to speed up the friend-making process at hostels.

The grocery store was offering samples of hákarl in a small bowl. It was extremely fishy tasting, a bit chewy, and stunk of ammonia.

Hákarl is a fermented Greenland shark, a national staple of Iceland. Fermentation requires up to five months, if done traditionally. The process is required to remove the neurotoxins from the shark's flesh, which can either leave you feeling intoxicated or kill you.

Much like the piranha I had in Los Llanos, Venezuela, I'm happy to have tried it but wouldn't be up for seconds.

In the open frozen bins, mixed in with the bags of frozen vegetables and other frozen meats, were piles of sheep heads cut in half called Svið—a traditional Viking dish of Iceland. Waste not, want not, I suppose. I thought about trying it, but the head wouldn't fit in any of my cooking pots. I promised myself I'd try it along the way.



That night at the hostel, a campfire was blazing. The smell of hashish mingled with the smell of the campfire and smoke from hand-rolled cigarettes. Conversations between strangers in broken English circulated around the fire, as did the wine and exaggerated stories of adventures.

Inserting myself into one of the many conversations, I learned that I could buy a one-way bus ticket that would take me around the entire country along the Ring Road. The ticket allowed one to hop off and on anytime along the way if the direction was the same way.

The other thing I learned was one could dive in some of the clearest glacier water in the world at a place called the Silfra Fissure. The Silfra Fissure was also the only place in the world you could

dive between two tectonic plates, the North American plate and Eurasian plate.

A Kiwi⁶ gave me the name of a dive guide, and I immediately proceeded to the front desk of the hostel and requested the phone book in search of the dive guide's number.

If you are old enough to remember, we had the white page phone book for looking up people and yellow page phone book for looking up businesses. When you looked up a person, the names were listed last name first. Example: Mortensen, Cory.

Then you looked at their address to confirm that this was the droid you were looking for, and then there was the phone number. Stalking in the 1970s and '80s was easier than one might think.

Iceland doesn't work that way. Iceland lists all 288,000⁷ citizens by first name. In Iceland, last names are patronyms of the father's name and are not passed from one generation to the next. So, for example, Jón Einarsson's son's last name would be Jónsson and his daughter's last name would be Jónsdóttir.

Iceland is very traditional with its names. The law dictates that the names of children born in Iceland must—unless both parents are foreign—be submitted to the National Registry within six months of birth and be approved by the Icelandic Naming Committee.

I never was able to connect with the dive guide, so diving the Silfra Fissure would have to take place another time.

6 How many refer to people from New Zealand

7 2002 population of Iceland



Setting up my tent, a guy plopped his rucksack right next to me. It was Edward from Austria. Perhaps it was a subconscious urge, but suddenly, names felt like they needed to be shared in some sort of old-fashioned description.

“I am Stephan of Dresden, son of Gunther.”

Or...

“I am Loic, poet and lover of women.”

Edward had just arrived in Iceland, was traveling alone, and asked if I wanted to travel with him on the Ring Road. Over a beer, an alliance was formed, and after a second beer, Edward and I bought tickets for the Ring Road, sold at the front desk of the hostel. Like my recent journey where the Andes guided me south, the Ring Road would guide us around this volcanic rock sitting violently in the North Atlantic Ocean.

RING ROAD

The Ring Road, also known as Iceland Route 1, was 828 miles long and circumnavigated the entire country, passing through seven of the eight regions. If you were not interested in stopping to smell the roses—or, in the case of Iceland, mountain avens⁸—in twelve

8 Iceland's national flower

hours, driving at the legal speed limit, you could drive around the entire country sans the eighth region.

The eighth region—the West Region—was where one could find Eric the Red’s homestead, well a replica anyway. And according to Jules Verne’s *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, it was where Professor Otto Lidenbrock and his team descended into the planet. They soon found themselves pitted against prehistoric dinosaurs and were ultimately spit out of the inner world by way of a lava chimney on the volcanic island of Stromboli in the Tyrrhenian Sea. The eighth region is also home to trolls, elves, hidden people, and ykur, which roam the countryside. And let us not forget about the Lagarfljót Worm, Iceland’s very own Nessie.

Our first stop, Gullfoss Falls, is Iceland’s most photographed waterfall. Thirty-eight thousand gallons of water plunge seventy feet into a sixty-six-foot-wide crevice. Iceland is home to over ten thousand waterfalls; this would be my first of many.

Out along the hillside were a pack of horses, noticeably smaller than what I remember a horse’s height should be.

“I wonder what kind of horses those are?” I asked Eddie. I didn’t expect him to know; I was thinking out loud really.

“Icelandic horses,” an accented voice from behind answered. “I’m a tour guide, overheard your question.” She smiled while waiting as her group gathered around the falls, making pictures.

“They are small. Are they colts?” I asked.

“No, they are adults. One of the unique characteristics of the

Icelandic horse is they are only thirteen hands tall. Your ‘average’ horse is sixteen hands.”

“Interesting.”

“The other unique characteristic is they have five gaits. All horses can walk, trot, and canter, but Icelandic horses have a genetic mutation, which is responsible for synchronizing the left and right sides of the horse’s body. The Icelandic horse can also tölt and skeið. The mutated gene means their legs can move in new patterns and allows the horse to run faster without breaking into a gallop.”

I wasn’t all that knowledgeable about horses. Last time I rode one was months ago in Venezuela. I knew that they measured horses’ height by hands, a hand being 4”, from the ground to the shoulder. While I had ridden my fair share, I wasn’t knowledgeable about all the different makes and models that were out there or what sort of gaits they had.

From Gullfoss Falls, we passed through the town of Selfoss, home to eleven thousand Icelanders, former home to Björk, and the final resting place of Bobby Fischer, the famous American chess player.

Wanted by the United States government for playing in a chess match in Yugoslavia during the cold war, Bobby violated the sanctions placed on Yugoslavia and was a wanted man. Instead of returning to the United States, he denounced his citizenship, vowing to pay no income taxes on his \$3 million match winnings and found refuge in Iceland after Parliament voted to grant him citizenship and protected him from being extradited back to the United States.

He now sleeps eternally in a simple grave, next to a simple Lutheran Church, along an unmarked road.



We jumped off the bus at Hella, where ancient sandstone caves were said to have been built by Irish monks who took eremitic refuge on the island. Some say the Vikings arrived first, but the Icelandic sagas agree that the Irish monks arrived well before the Vikings. Born in 489 CE, St. Brendan, at the age of eighty, along with seventeen monks, sailed around the North Atlantic for seven years in a wood-framed boat covered in ox-hides in search of “The Land of Promise of the Saints,” all documented in the book *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*. Some believe he landed in North America during his journey, hundreds of years before the Vikings.

Next stop, Vík. On the bus was Edward, me, a French guy, and our driver. Edward and I both said “Hallo” to the French guy, but he didn’t respond. You might ask yourself, “How did we know this guy is French simply by looking at him?” Fair question. We didn’t, but we soon heard him speak in French...and since he has no name, for the sake of simple narration, he is the French guy. For now, anyway.

Everyone was quiet as we passed along Iceland’s coastal flatlands to the south and dramatic cliffs to the north. We passed several of Iceland’s ten thousand waterfalls. Though once amazed at their sight, they soon lost their charm. My cousin Amy once described a waterfall saying, “It’s just a bunch of water going over a rock.” And

soon, that was what they all became, a bunch of water going over a rock.

Suddenly, the bus driver shouted, “Drangurinn Rock! Look, you see it?”

A giant rock sat in an open field, with a few turf stables nestled tightly at its base.

“What is Drangurinn Rock?” I asked.

“Elves live under the rock.”

“They do, huh?” I smiled. “You believe in elves?”

“I’ve been driving around this country for decades. I have seen a lot of things I cannot explain. So perhaps there are elves and trolls and mysterious creatures that live in the rocks and under the waters. There are those who believe; there are those that do not. But I can tell you, there is no one who knows for sure. Most Icelanders doesn’t believe in elves. But also, most will not deny their existence. People respect the traditions and myths.”

Just down the road, he stopped at a dirt pullout.

“We are just twenty-four kilometers from Vík. I must keep going, but there is a plane crash three kilometers down this dirt road if you would like to see the wreckage. It’s old. Maybe twenty-five years ago, it crashed. Otherwise, we can all go to Vík together.”

I turned to Edward. “I’d like to see it. I’m sure we can hitch into Vík from here.” Edward agreed, and we grabbed our packs.

“Tread lightly, my friends! You are entering into known elf territory.” Our bus driver winked.