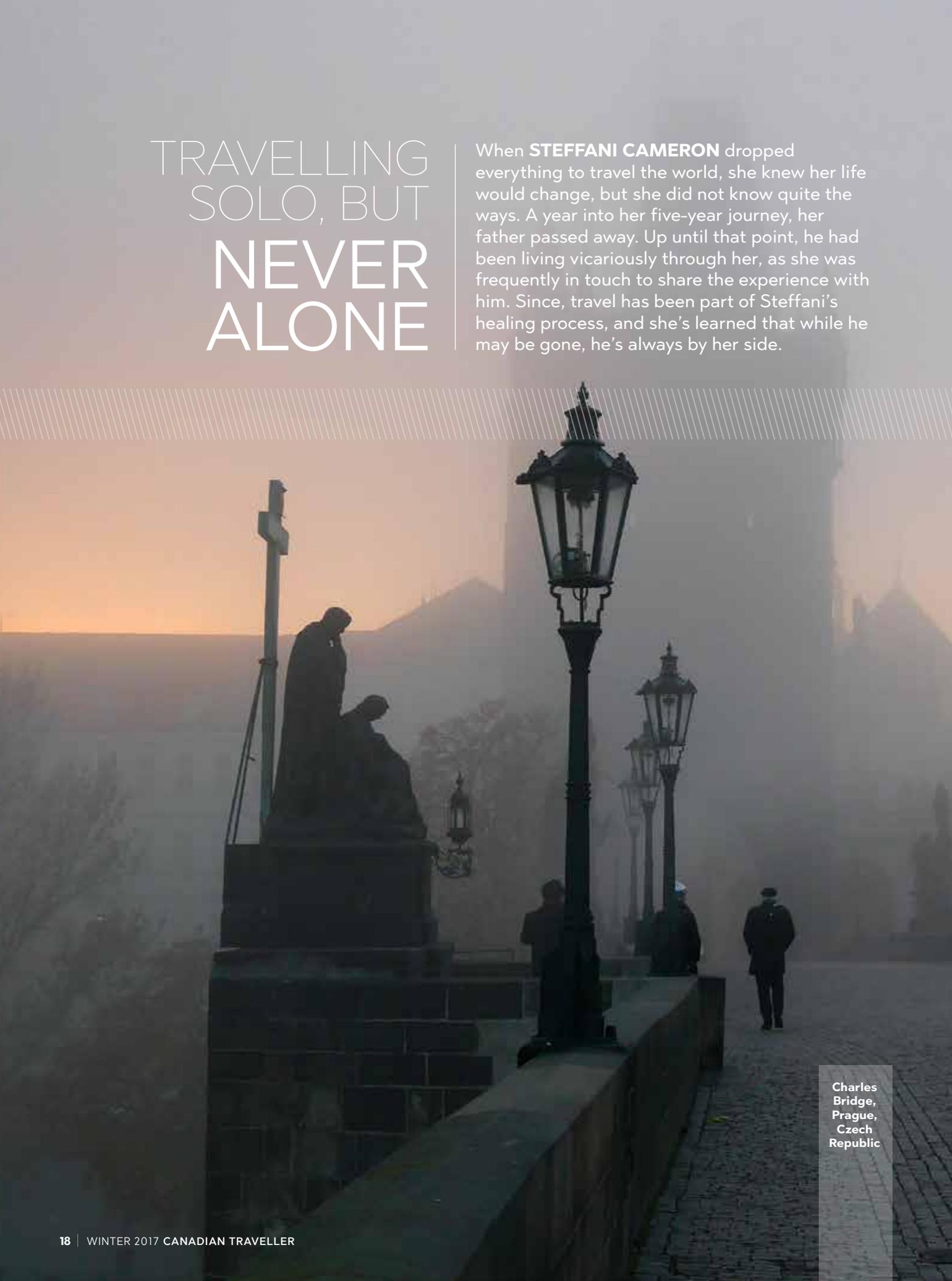


TRAVELLING SOLO, BUT NEVER ALONE

When **STEFFANI CAMERON** dropped everything to travel the world, she knew her life would change, but she did not know quite the ways. A year into her five-year journey, her father passed away. Up until that point, he had been living vicariously through her, as she was frequently in touch to share the experience with him. Since, travel has been part of Steffani's healing process, and she's learned that while he may be gone, he's always by her side.



Charles
Bridge,
Prague,
Czech
Republic



DEATH FAVOURS THE WEE hours. Nothing good comes of five a.m. calls.

The news: Dad was dead. The motel bed stopped my fall as I collapsed. After a year of playing nomad in Mexico and Europe, I was on Vancouver Island briefly, and days from home. Dead?

I was supposed to be with him five days later. He was supposed to point at me while at his bedside and harangue his nurses. “My daughter travels the world! She’s a nomad! Do you know what a nomad is?” He would have explained either way, his forgivable habit leftover from 35 years of teaching. (*Nomad*: noun, to have no abode.)

I only realized that “always a teacher” bit in his final year, as he lectured me from his recliner on how to put dishes in a dishwasher. While I protested that I’d done it before, my stepmom chuckled. She said, “He taught for 35 years. He can’t stop explaining any more than he can stop breathing.”

At least I’d finally begun learning these things about him. We’d had a decade-plus of sketchy relations after the death of my mother in 1999 – she was the glue that held our family together – but my becoming a nomad brought us closer than ever. The travel excited him, and not just when we chatted on the phone.

I later heard from his cribbage friends that he constantly bragged about my adventures, educating them with comments like, “She’s in Croatia now. Zagreb is the capital.”

His enthusiasm was a slow build. For the first while, my plan to sell everything and travel for five years left Dad dubious. But, in late 2014, a year before my nomad life was to begin, my travel bug bit him too. He’d ask about my preparations, cultural differences I expected, cost of living, place histories, and what side of the road they drive on.

Travel connected us. His dream to jetset went long ago, like the cartilage in his bum knees. A decade into retirement, he was largely shut-in when I left Canada in fall 2015. Those knees, burdened by obesity, diabetes, and chronic pain, meant yeah, he’d never see the world, but he lived to see his daughter do it.

Then, three weeks before his death, I got an update. Dad’s broken foot that hospitalized him two months previous had required so much physio in his prolonged rehab stay that he’d lost 23 kilograms. I wondered if maybe he’d live to see my whole five years as a nomad.

Then, less than a month later, he died.

So, I collapsed on the motel bed. Who checks into a hospital for a broken foot, loses weight in rehab, then dies? ▶



Top row:
Cesky
Krumlov
and graffiti
facades,
Cesky
Krumlov at
sunset



Bottom row:
Watches in
old town
Sarajevo,
Bosnia,
Local in
a Naxos,
Greece



I rushed back to Vancouver from Victoria. A week later, I zombied my way through his services with a respectable eulogy and the requisite meaningful conversations. But grief and rage simmered in me.

Before long, Europe loomed with the next chapter of nomad life, year two.

Travel conflicted me. How would I shut down that sadness and loss when alone and so far from home? Cancelling wasn't an option because I felt that I no longer *had* a home.

It wasn't travel that so unnerved me, but rather the arriving. Dad had become part of my adapting to new places. My routine included calling him from new towns after I'd experienced a few days. It was fun fodder to chat about. One of our last talks was over Oaxaca, Mexico's garbage chaos, and how sidewalks often smelled like baked trash juice on hot days, sweet and sickening in the sun. That same call, I held the phone up for a minute, so he could hear the summer song of Mexico, as I called

it – neighbourhood dogs barking, firecrackers popping, and a graduation brass band blasting in the distance, accompanied by the occasional thunder rolling.

Sadness may have lingered as my travels began, but that thrill of arriving somewhere returned too. Soon, I learned that travelling with grief would allow me to experience countries in a unique way. These cultures somehow influenced my mourning, and I'm a better person for it.

MY EUROPEAN ADVENTURE began with Prague for one hectic grief-free weekend. I ate, drank, and photographed all the things. Finally, afterwards, while riding a south-board train for three hours, rolling past homestead shacks cobbled together near the tracks, my thoughts returned to Dad. Was that how poor he was as a kid? I wished I could ask.

My train clacked through Czech countryside to the

river valley hamlet of Cesky Krumlov. Population 14,000, it largely remained the same since the 1500s. Building facades with Renaissance “graffito” paintwork earn it frequent praise as one of Europe’s prettiest towns.

Krumlov became a great place to grieve in. Death and afterlife seemed omnipresent in the village.

On day one, my walking guide shuddered when I asked about ghosts. He indicated a large, white, neo-Renaissance building that housed the music school, said to be the most haunted. Once a chapel and ossuary, it was home to the town’s unclaimed skeletons before the 1800s. Whether due to the unclaimed bones or other dark legends, my guide never stayed after dark as a student.

The ossuary basement had been packed with Plague bones eventually buried nearby in a mass grave. The Black Plague hit Cesky Krumlov hard, killing 75 per cent of townsfolk in two periods, 1680 to 1681 and 1711 to 1715. When Plague killed whole families, bones went unclaimed, keeping the ossuary full.

On a foggy, misty November evening, after a night in the tavern, I came upon three women in the cobbled town square. They placed flowers atop a pile of bouquets around the Marian column. They said it commemorates those who died of Plague, who they pay tribute to yearly.

Flowers for those who died 10 generations ago? What better proof that grieving isn’t weak? It’s raw, real, and maybe never truly leaves us. This gave me hope that my

grief could be a tangible part of my life forever, where it was part of me, but not a burden to me.

A FEW WEEKS LATER and I was off to Greece for the holidays. A month on an off-season island might be just what I needed, I thought. It’d been three months since his death, and my first Christmas without him worried me.

I ferried out of Athens, where I’d flown in only the night before, to the Cyclades Islands. Naxos, one of Greece’s most agriculturally-rich islands, would be home for four weeks over Christmas and the New Year.

The birthplace of the Pantheon of Gods, home to Zeus, and the stomping grounds of Dionysus (the god of wine) all combine to make Naxos sacred to Greek mythology. Even in wind-swept winter months, its 7,000-plus years of history resonate.

Off-season Greek Islands prove a hard vacation to arrange. Most lodgings and restaurants close. Freezing nights with winds whipping the islands at 80 kilometres an hour or more are hardly the toasty image one has of Greece, but I’d been warned.

The island might have been largely closed to tourists, but the locals embraced me. In my first 36 hours in Naxos, four different strangers gave me nutty-honey Christmas cookies. It made me more optimistic ▶



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by the hour about spending Christmas on that wee island. For a month, my “Canada” toque and I became a regular sight on the streets of the tiny town. Everyone likes Canadians. There, the toque was not a “rob this tourist” beacon but, instead, a conversation-starter. We talked weather, local food, and always some distant cousin who long ago moved to Canada.

PEOPLE WERE KIND to me. They shared wine, food, raki, retsina with gusto. They tried to teach me the language and about the land.

On Christmas Day, my hosts gave me a three-hour tour around the island. Midway, we reached Mount Zas, Zeus’ birthplace. They pointed high on the rockface and said they’d celebrate their holy mass there the next day. Despite a 45-minute hike up the cliff, mass had been said there for more than 5,000 years. More than 160 generations of locals celebrated holy days, births, deaths, and marriages in that cave.

Such ancient places put grief in perspective; humans have lived and lost loved ones since history began. Nowhere do legends of life and loss scream louder than in Greece, especially in Naxos, where gods were born and a civilization birthed.

Greece is a living classroom, its cultures and beliefs and stories spanning millennia past resonate amongst its citizens and visitors, even now.

My empty Greek island gave me peace and comfort – not loneliness. There, it didn’t feel like Dad was gone, and leaving affected me deeply. The kindness of the people and their firm insistence that anything could be cured through the joy of good food and wine had proven exactly the holiday doting I needed.

In Greece, Dad became another lost, great hero, who lived and died and was mourned. Greek reverence for history taught me I never needed to stop celebrating him.

LATER, IN SPRING, Sarajevo, Bosnia became home for two months, and I found a nice mountainside apartment with a view of the city below – perfect for afternoons spent writing as spring storms rolled past. My arrival coincided with the 25th anniversary of the start of the bloody Siege of Sarajevo. It lasted nearly four years, as Serbia and Croatia launched a bi-frontal assault on Bosnia.

Memories of the war were unavoidable in Sarajevo. From mountainside cemeteries surrounding the capital to monuments and museums, there was no escaping war. I’d never lived anywhere so tangibly and recently linked to war and senseless death.

Memorials served as frequent attitude adjustments. For instance, after one frustrating workday, I noticed a “Sarajevo Rose” in front of a café where I’d been spending a lot of my time. “Sarajevo Roses” were red, resin-filled mortar scars on sidewalks and roads, commemorating

blasts that killed innocents. Google told me this “rose” marked the deaths of 22 people waiting for bread one evening who were killed by mortar. The bombing was early in the war and among the first major casualties. A neighbourhood cellist was so bereft that he gave an impromptu performance there, at the blast site, for the next 22 nights – one performance for every death.

Each day, I routinely saw at least three Sarajevo Roses. And I woke by a window facing a household with more than 50 shrapnel scars and bullet-holes. Just down my street was the open-air market where dozens died while buying fresh produce, not once, but twice. There, I found it disconcerting to squeeze-test fruit ripeness while eyeballing a wall with 111 glass-etched names of those killed in two bombings of the same market.

One afternoon, strolling home, I noticed the War Child memorial. Heart-wrenching, its statues told a tragic story from the war. A father, Ramo, called to his son Nermin to leave the bushes he hid behind. Ramo said their captors were honourable; he assured Nemin they would be fine as prisoners. But their Serbian captors murdered 8,373 of them and dumped them into unmarked mass graves: the worst European genocide since the Holocaust, the Srebrenica Massacre.

Of course, fresh flowers surrounded the statues. From siblings? Elderly parents? Twenty-five years later. More proof that grief never leaves us. And perhaps it shouldn’t.

Omnipresent war reminders might seem bleak to outsiders, but they’re part of what it means to be Bosnian. Their war occurred as Yugoslavia crumbled. Neighbours Croatia and Serbia both attacking Bosnia would be like Canada dissolving, with Manitoba and Quebec both attacking Ontario in a war of attrition – snipers on every hill, minefields in every forest. They felt betrayed by compatriots.

But war reminders go further back in Sarajevo. A kilometre from my apartment, Archduke Ferdinand and his wife Sophie’s assassinations began World War One – an act that ultimately led to the deaths of more than 35 million people. A lovely, serene spot by the river, I closed my eyes and could hear my History 12 teacher, Mr. Acheson, reading letters from soldiers describing bloodshed on the Western Front.

Constant memorials and tributes mean Sarajevans live for the present like no one else. They understand that all we have is today; tomorrow holds no promises.

That Sarajevo “live today, tomorrow is tomorrow” lifestyle has changed me. No longer do I feel guilty if I stop to enjoy coffee at a sidewalk café; I have the rest of my life to endure sadness, but it’s a crime to waste a pleasant afternoon. I soon felt grief was a choice, in some ways. I could ignore it and sit on a park bench because a day was beautiful; I could enjoy my day simply because my lost loved ones could not.

Mourning while enjoying life is not a contradiction in Bosnia; it is a necessity.

A Sarajevo
Rose in
front of
Sacred
Heart
Cathedral



sunset seems, it's what we should strive for: time spent enjoying who and what humanity is. People-watching, appreciating architecture, art, music, bustle, and everything around us. That's life.

I spent the summer of 2017 connecting at my first-ever reunion for my Dad's family. I know him better now. Being "home" for the summer taught me that I truly am my father's daughter. He was the carrier of the travel bug. He infected me with my passion for culture, adventure, and meeting people.

TRAVEL TEACHES US that history is equal parts triumph and heartbreak. For every empire ascending to glory, one had to fall.

Still, we endure, we thrive. Art survives, food too, laughter prevails. We live, we lose, we carry on.

Humans have survived unthinkable horrors since the dawn of time – plague, war, tyrants, and so much more – yet here we are.

As trivial as stopping to have a coffee or take in a

As I type, I'm trying to get Dad's passport back so his can join mine and Mom's as I continue tackling the world. I feel I owe that to him.

Soon, the first anniversary of Dad's death looms along with the second anniversary of my nomad life. For all the sorrow and sadness, this journey is one of growth and maturity that no other lifestyle or school could provide. How fitting when mourning a life-long teacher. **CT**

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