



THIS PAGE Segovia, Castilla, in Spain. OPPOSITE Sienna, Italy.

story + paintings by David A. Haughton



a convenient rationalization

A doctor bikes and paints his way through the European countryside and finds that the landscape and his perspective has changed with each decade...



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1 Watercolour of a monastery in the French countryside. 2 – 5 Different stages of Dr. Haughton's European tours: in 1975 on the Greek island Velos, carrying pen and ink (2); wielding a paintbrush (3); with loaded bike in Greece (4); and most recently on the French roadside painting (5). 6 An acrylic painting of the French landscape as seen by Haughton upon cycling up a hill near Revest des Brousses.

At the top of the hill, winded and dripping in sweat, I prop my bicycle against the signpost. The attached heavily-loaded cart, still on the slope, tugs insistently at the frame, like an old field horse nudging me under the arm to return to stable.

My vision gradually returning, I look about me: a small village in the Luberon with a single street leading up to a 13th-century church, pine trees, a few ploughed fields, the landscape echoing itself visually in the distance. The sun has fallen to the west in golden tones, backlighting the church except for a corner that just catches the light obliquely. (Image 6 below.) What an instant of exhilaration! Survival against all odds (or so it seemed half-way up the hill), inspiration of beauty, and adequate cerebral oxygenation.

But beneath my happiness, I feel uneasiness.

The world is changing. Whether as a result of global warming, ozone holes, overpopulation or the sudden disappearance of sharks in the oceans, the world is no longer the same as the one I set out to explore and paint 30 years ago. I have survived as an artist-traveller by making abrupt, essential changes in my travel style. Using the tool-recognition centres of my brain, I have overcome new obstacles with adaptive ingenuity.

Thirty years before I cycled alone from Switzerland to Provence. Fifteen years ago I toured this entire area for a month with the same bicycle and equipment. This morning I set off from a fully stocked camper van, my wife still sleeping as I quietly removed my touring bike from its rack on the back.

Art and independent travel have always, for me, been entwined. In 1975, I studied for a year in Athens and, in the summer, began doing pen-and-ink drawings of the Greek landscape. I used technical pens by Rotring, drawing directly on fine paper without pencil pre-sketch or notation. Over the next 12 years I developed these works and exhibited successfully.

The first three summers I walked everywhere, drawing pads fitting in my backpack, with assistance by ferry and by public bus (this was still the time when goats and chickens were permitted in the aisle). I carried a sheet sleeping bag and slept out under the scrub pine trees. In those days it was warm; it rarely rained. I slept soundly. I bathed in the sea.



Scenes out of *A Year in Provence*. ABOVE Ménerbes in the Luberon. BELOW Apple orchard near Bonnieux.



BELOW Old Barn & Fields, Alpes de Haute-Provence.



If you seek the experience of a travelling artist

BICYCLES >

A touring bike is better for most of Western Europe's country roads. A touring bike has a longer frame, and provides easier positioning for long-distance daily cycles and allows you to carry more weight with more stability. Should you rent or ship your own? Your own bike is a known variable; will you be able to rent a bicycle to fit your size and preferences? On the other hand, taking your own requires packing it in a box for protection, and where will you store the box while you are cycling?

CAMPER VANS >

In Switzerland, I rent from Moby campers outside of Zurich; very clean and reliable vans, replaced new each year. Not cheap, but I offset by staying with friends around Switzerland. Similar rental companies exist in most European countries.

ART MATERIALS

> watercolor

The traditional medium of travelling artists; portable, washable, non toxic; finished work is easily transported. I travelled through Nepal and India with 100 lbs of watercolour and other equipment.

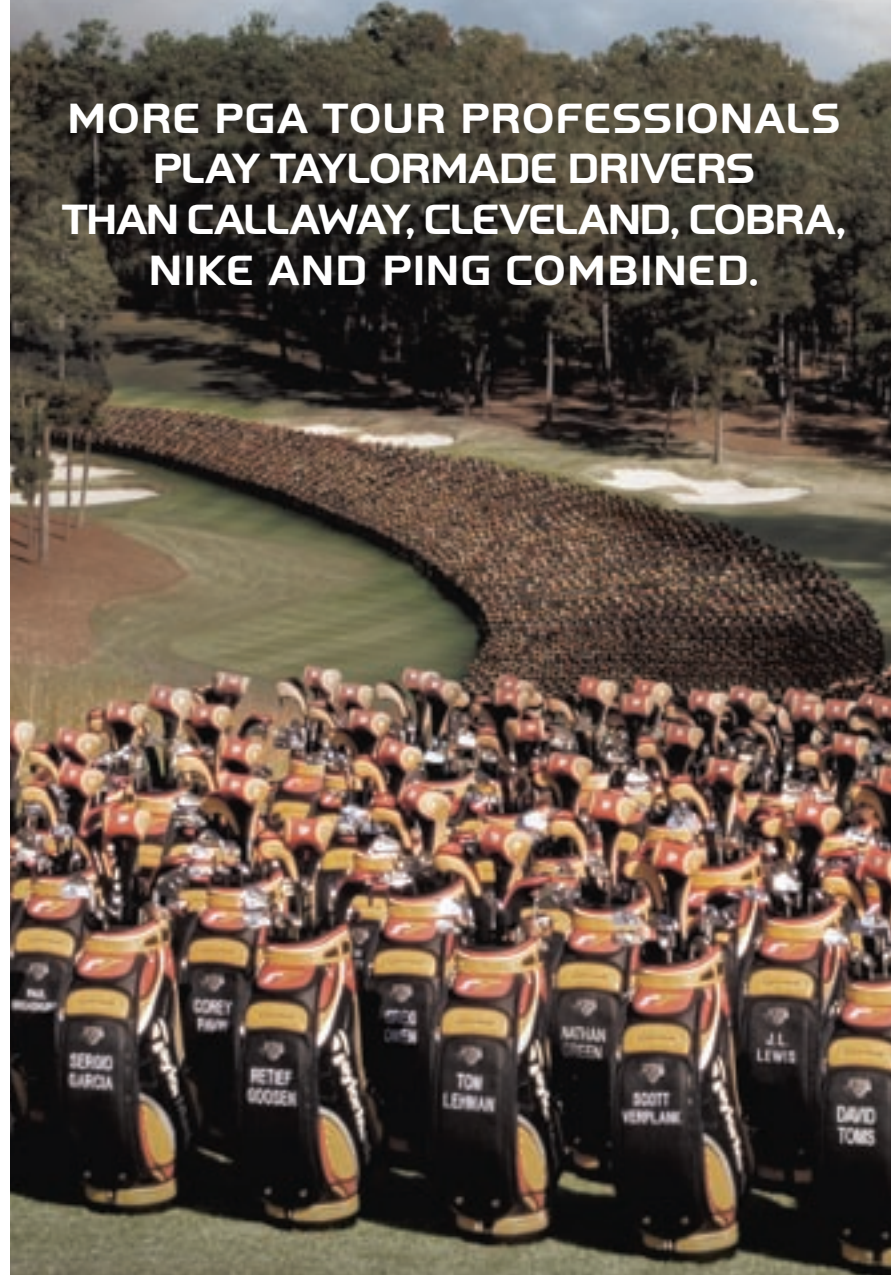
> pen & ink

The most compact medium. High quality, very smooth (Bristol) rag paper is best, archival and elegant. Rotring, Rapidograph or Staedler technical drawing pens come in various nib sizes, carry ink neatly, and deliver smooth, continuously flowing lines from 0.1 to 0.8 mm width. > acrylic More complex to do on the road than either of the above, but infinitely easier than oils. Same pigments as oils, just in a very rapidly drying polyester resin. In windy, dry areas it dries too quickly for manipulation of pigment. A good support is Multimedia Art board as it is very thin and tough, if brittle.

> oils I don't recommend these as a travelling artist unless you are renting a villa and staying in one place for a fortnight or so. Oils take a long time to cure, and although the effect is luscious, the transport is problematic.



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By 1978 I noticed the ground getting harder: my feet hurt on the long walks over stony ground, and I would awaken at night with my shoulder numb. I had taken a job in Switzerland, teaching high-school art and history. I had summers off. The changes in the world guided me to adopt a new travelling style. I bought a bicycle and, strapping my drawing pads to the back, set out to explore: Corsica, Provence, Norway, England, Normandy, Switzerland, Austria, Hungary, and the former Yugoslavia. I purchased a foam pad. My shoulder felt better in the mornings. The resultant drawings I exhibited in Zurich and New York City.

By the summer of my first year of medical school, the nights had gotten cooler: I strapped on a sleeping bag and tarp. One night on a hillside in Italy I realized that the mosquitoes had become more numerous and pestilent; I bought a small tent with netting and strapped that on. My drawings got bigger; I strapped on larger drawing pads. The ground hardened further and grew chilly at night; I added a Therm-a-Rest pad to the pile on the back of the bike.

The spokes of my rear wheel began to snap, perhaps due to a hardening of the earth's crust. Repairing a rear-wheel spoke is, at the best of times, a thankless task. Truing a wheel by sight and instinct on a shoulderless roadside in Yugoslavia is a terrifying experience. I purchased a new touring bicycle, with stronger spokes and more spokes per wheel.

After my residency I began work as a paediatric emergency physician. During months off, I began to experiment in watercolour. As I developed confidence in my personal style I required wider sheets of paper than could safely be carried directly on the bicycle. I purchased a kiddie-cart that I could pull behind my bicycle, stuffed with watercolour paper, drawing boards, water bottles, masking tape rolls, paper towels and camping gear. I painted larger paintings; a better cart was found. The resultant paintings I exhibited in Los Angeles, Athens and Vancouver.

By 1994, slopes that I could once cycle up without pain now ground at the back of my patella. My first adaptation to this global environmental change was to rent a small car to get me directly from the airport to the place where I wished to begin painting: no wrestling with trains, baggage, and border customs followed by two days of boring and dangerous cycling out from a city centre. Drive directly from Zurich to, say, Panzano in Chianti, park the car in the shade of some cypresses, reconstruct the bike, fill

the panniers and cart, and cycle off for two weeks.

In the last decade, hills have gotten even steeper; I have begun renting a VW camper-van. I now paint mostly acrylic landscapes, parking the van in a likely spot for a day or two, occasionally venturing forth on a day trip by bicycle with cart towed behind full of watercolour materials and sketch pads, but without tent, sleeping bag, tarps and other heavy camping equipment. Unlike some, I have not closed my eyes to the inconvenient truth that the world has changed dramatically. I have adapted, at least for now. ●

An exhibition of Haughton's British Columbia Landscapes: *Ships, Mountains, and the Sea IV* will run from May 3 – 24 at Gallery 0 – Contemporary at the Art Centre, 2060 Pine Street in Vancouver, BC. An exhibition of watercolour landscapes, *Fragments of the Sea* opens June 18 at the Skoufa Gallery in Athens, Greece. View Haughton's work at haughton-art.ca.

+ bike europe

GO GUIDED > The easiest way to bike Europe for first-timers or those who want a more leisurely excursion (food, accommodation, gear and repairs all taken care of, plus encouragement!) is a guided and organized trip with a tour company. There are many to choose from, the most famous and luxurious of which is Butterfield & Robinson. butterfield.com; 1-866-551-9090 **GO SOLO >** If you want to embark on your own, Haughton suggests getting a Michelin map (viamichelin.com); for a good bike route stay away from big red roads and stick to small white roads. Here are his recommended regions. > The Dordogne region in France is EASIER, and offers lots of castles and picturesque scenes. The French countryside in general is wonderful for cycling because of the network of smaller roads linking villages. > The Luberon in France is MODERATE. Wind your way in Aix-en-Provence countryside from Arles, where Van Gogh worked, to les Baux. > For a MODERATE to HARD route, take on the hillier Italian countryside of Tuscany. > HARDER still are the peaks and valleys of Switzerland. More planning and alternating of biking with trains and/or rental cars is necessary. Day routes are another option to test the legs and navigational skills. Switzerland Tourism provides a variety of national and regional bike routes on its website. myswitzerland.com

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