

Video Odyssey of an advanced beginner (what could possibly go wrog?)

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It has been said: "If something can go wrong it has already gone wrong", this is known as the Ranharter extension to Murphy's Law (after all, infinity extends in both directions; past and future.)

The project in brief: To take full length shots of an illustrated light rail train in the city of Vienna, Austria, on behalf of the illustrating artist Jolanda Richter (see: <http://www.Jolanda.at>) so as to see the entire length of the train in one photograph and to produce a video interview given in the artist's studio and to take live footage featuring the train for eventual posting on the web. The allocated time: four days, plus two days of travel to and from California, to Vienna, Austria.

Day one: Travel limitations demand compromises. Needless to say as a sole proprietor I need to be frugal. I pack all critical equipment into a trusted old hard-cover carry-on with rollers. This saves on insurance cost and allows control over the handling of the equipment. I aim to take the red eye flight from SFO to VIE; ca. 16 hrs all told. Forced by the new weight and size restrictions, I only bring a tablet computer for communications and I intend to save all serious computing and editing for a post production workstation in California. In spite of my best intentions the carry-on got too heavy, but some creative shuffling among bags at the check-in counter got me past the scales in service of the "Luftwaffe" (er'..... Lufthansa,.... of course; my mistake). I am thereby accepting the risk of losing a few items during transit. Of course I choose items that might be reasonably easy to replace, even when in another country.

My packing list: A Kindle Fire tablet computer, two Nikon 5100's, a Zoom H4n audio recorder, an auxiliary video recorder, spare rechargeable batteries, shotgun XLR microphones, all the different chargers, transfer cables and assorted steady cam gear. Yes, and 220V connectors, EU telephone, contact lists and access codes for all relevant computer services.

Security control is surprisingly reasonable and only wants to inspect the steady cam hardware. As I wait to board the aircraft the first email-failure message issued by the airport WiFi authority arrives: "Unable to deliver your eMail"- cursing Drecknology I shut the tablet down and proceed to board the airplane. Once in my seat with my equipment "safely" tucked away in the overhead compartment, I tap into the monitor in front of my seat. The movie menu (which is surely intended to serve as a drug free sleeping remedy) comes up in Arabic and refuses steadfastly to be reset to English. This narrows the already dubious selection of B-movies on the English channels to a yet narrower choice of an all action C-movie menu. The hostesses serve dinner shortly after takeoff, but by the time the dinner cart gets to my seat they are out of chicken; pasta it is. The Spanish lady next to me appears to suffer quite a stomach condition that well, the effects are too fierce to detail. I did ultimately get one hour of sleep on the way to Munich. Of course I lose a day on the way over (though I will say Schwarzenegger in Arabic isn't half as bad at whiling away the hours as he might have been in English; no accent, "mumtaz"- that's Arabic for "mazletov".)

I am now, Technically on Day two: I arrive at the Munich Airport because there are no direct flights from SFO directly to Vienna. Now, the Munich Airport is big, very big; big enough to wear out one wheel on my hardcover carry-on, making it difficult to get to the connecting flight without some backache from hauling over long distances (the technical term is, I believe, "Schlepping".)

Passport and duty controls are pleasantly relaxed, an inquiry by the customs agent of, "business or pleasure?" is met with my prompt and apparently convincing response: "yes". He quickly waves me through the gates, while clearly still chewing on my reply, so to speak. The connecting flight is, I am certain, for security reasons misdirected by way of the electronic bulletin board calling for what turns out to be the wrong gate on the upper level. There, a very nice, but not entirely knowledgeable Lufthansa clerk redirects me to the correct gate on the lower level. Unfortunately the gate marquee of the proper gate is hidden entirely from view by an escalator that was no doubt an architectural afterthought. A double "Schlepp" back to the information desk (now without both rollers on the carry-on) clears this problem as well, with elegant ease. My second attempt to send an eMail to announce my being on schedule again results in the, by now familiar, error message of "not able to deliver your email". After that a seemingly endless bus ride to the far reaches of the Munich airfield which is topped off by a relatively brief air ride to Vienna, where I am picked up by a friend who has received my eMails anyway and knew I am on schedule. After a very long wait for the remainder of my luggage I am on my way with unharmed luggage and thus delivered of my airway adventures and dropped off at my final destination. There I succumb to a very good tasting but entirely unhealthy meal of "greasy beast fried in grease" and to a subsequent deep sleep.

Day three: When you fancy a spot of telecommunications in the EU, eMailing is not the way to go. Texting on your telephone is the preferred vehicle of parley. A new difficulty arose from having lent my EU phone to friends to aid their telephoning needs in the EU; bad move. On return of the phone they didn't tell me of their having soaked my beloved "pickle" in a beer mug. Well, that was the story the very accommodating and knowledgeable tech told me while he happily, no doubt anticipating a sale, dissected my phone with considerable authority while pointing out that the little flags inside, on the motherboard, had turned red and smelled of beer. Bottom line diagnosis: Irreparably demised, likely drowned. A reasonably priced "pay as you go phone" was procured at an electronic superstore and paired with a great introductory deal of 200 free hours by way of a coupon serving as thanks for switching to my new provider (?), the required SIMM card was attained at a dubious low-end grocery store of all places. Minor difficulties with the new SIMM card refusing to break properly out of its casing and thus to fit into its receptacle in the phone was overcome with the help of a plastic band aid and extensive filing with my nail file. Now, off to find a working WIFI downtown, in the first district, so that I may spread my new phone number by eMail. This was not as easy. Firstly, for some inexplicable reason they call WIFI: WLAN (pronounced "weelan") leading to some communications confusion. Secondly: most places require signing up via eMail to be able to get an access code by eMail, great when you are a student at the technische Universitaet, not much use when you are on the go and in a bit of a hurry. Same story at several other of the more modern coffee shops. Oddly enough, the older, more conservative places have flawless WIFI service; well, once you figure out which table to sit at for the

benefit of actual reception. Great, by the time I might have written on line my hands were too jittery from all the Mochas I had consumed while testing for good reception, so I simply couldn't type for a while. Sunlight waning found me disseminating my new phone number by eMail and subsequently meeting up with old and new friends during Happy Hour at the Salmbräu near the Belvedere Museum.

Day four: (One half day behind schedule) extensive to and fro telephone communication reveals that the train runs on a different line every day, to "maximize exposure to the citizenry and the tourists of the city" is given as rational. Other details include that the light rail train runs by any one spot on the route in intervals of 55 minutes. This reduces the opportunities to actually record the train to a cumulative few minutes a day stretched over the entire day. As each attempt at a clear shot is highly susceptible to incidental interfering traffic, on-looking gawkers and the like, the assignment becomes successively more difficult. Add to this very temperamental weather, rain and varying cloud cover and high wind that changes its direction every few minutes. At one time the wind actually blew over the entire camera with tripod; the folded out monitor had acted like a sail or a blade on a wind mill. My camera bag, sitting near the tripod fortunately softened the blow and prevented damage. Bonus: When the sun comes out the monitor is impossible to see, of course the camera records video only when the monitor is folded out. It should also be said that the train, where it actually could be seen in its entirety with minimal obstruction, was at these points on long stretches of track that allowed the driver of the train to make up for time lost in traffic. So, the driver would substantially accelerate through the open areas to keep on what little schedule there actually was. A long shot was necessary to minimize perspective distortion and to get the entire train sharply into one still frame even though it moved rapidly. Such a picture is a rare prize, attained after six hours of high wind, dark clouds and occasional rain; not to forget interfering traffic. When the rain didn't bring water down from the skies, the wind brought it along from a nearby fountain on the plaza, but this at least kept the gawking, inquisitive public from walking into the field of view as they are so happily given to. I finally got my shot with minimal interference and reasonable sharpness during the last rays of acceptable sunlight in the late afternoon. I also managed to get some acceptable hand-held video with the other camera, by taking advantage of a nearby curve in the tracks where the train had to slow down. These sequences were much easier to get because the angle of the shots didn't so much matter. After about seven (trying) hours in the same spot I headed for a place to sit and unthaw. Fortunately such places can be found in abundance. My clients joined up with me and there was much rejoicing.

Day five: The train takes another route today consistent with its mandate to promote maximum exposure to all the citizens and visitors of the town. I find out about this while underway to the established and tested route. Ok, I am flexible; perchance there might be a better vantage point along this, hence to not fathomed, route. First move is to find the active route, this entails a change in direction on the subway and to take yet another line that intersects with the new route. An hour later I begin to evaluate this new route. A full scan confirms what intuition had told me to begin with: The end nearer to the town center yields a better vantage point. There is no clear shot of the train anywhere along this route at all; except at the end station where the trains curls 'round under a new library building and reemerges about 30 yards over, on the other side of a grand staircase. Now that is a useable spot and I actually like this location. Great, this has at least potential for "filler-material" and

some detail footage which will surely come in handy. "Great minds think alike"; I notice that there is another film crew already at work limiting my angles of approach somewhat, as I find out as I set up. Oh well, a minor distraction as they gawk and wonder what I am up to. Hours pass without the painted train. I while away the hours with test shots so as to be ready when the real thing arrives. What keeps me occupied and on my toes among other things is that there is a double track in the loop. Initially, the other track seems unused and thus largely escapes my attention. Then one of the conductors actuates its switch manually thereby changing the route radius substantially. I have to alter my setup. I now have to be ready for either track and for the possibility of additional interference. I do and continue to wait. Waiting, waiting, waiting..... While I wait one of the local breweries sets up a stand not 20 feet from me and begins to hand out beer samples and coupons. Rapidly crowds of people move in on my setup, like thunder clouds. They gather momentum with noise and eventually become unstable and increasingly unruly. Fortuitously I am rescued, equipment and all, by a phone call informing me that the train will not run today at all. "Has it developed a flat?" I quipped on hearing this message; my humor falls on deaf ears. Since I like the current setup I ask for perhaps running the train on the same route the next day. Alas I am ignored and informed it has to be back to the previous day's route on the subsequent day. This goes counter to the rationale I had received to justify the previous change of route; but I must settle for "rational du jour"; after all: "it's their nickel." By that time I suffer from sunburn and a beer buzz anyway and care no longer. I pack my bags and stagger onto an unpainted train to head all together unhappy for another bout of "happy hour ". Friends and two South African stewardesses with a keen interest in being on TV, console me over dinner and drinks. "Surely tomorrow will be more productive" I drink to ameliorate my worries about the next day.

Day six: I attempt to explore yet another possibility for a full-length train shot. This vantage point would allow me to make a broadside long shot from the steps of the houses of parliament. Many tourists are deliberately trampling in front of the camera, this may become a problem. Little did I know that these are not tourists but rather constituents of an action group to save the Austrian bees from certain death under the all too permissive chemical arm of the government's pest eradication program. As banners and voices rise aided by megaphones organized chanting ensues, a small contingent of what might have been secret police, (judging from the curly wires emanating from pods in their ears and altogether too deliberately inconspicuous suits), start to query me about my recording efforts in front of parliament and in front of the ever growing mass of demonstrators. I assert my rights a free citizen with every right to film wherever I want to. This is met with uncontrollable laughter on part of the agents. Fortunately, before the situation can get out of hand (as it may well have) I am whisked away by my clients to head to a yet different location at the train's end station where it may be possible to at least conduct an interview at the train without much disturbance. So be it. We get there in time to set up and rehearse. A group of noisy roofing workers finish their ear-wrenching unloading of sheet metal (the kind used for thunder sound effects in horror movies). Thankfully they disappear before the train finally arrives. Finally, I get some useful footage into the can. The only damper is that the wine cellar we want to use for our closure celebration doesn't open until six pm, this is deemed too long to wait for. My clients drive me back to my lodgings by way of a lovely detour through the Vienna Woods and through the light of the evening sun.

Day seven: A fortunate coincidence provides me with ride to Jolanda's studio and a ride back after recording. Great, this cuts hours of time that would have been otherwise spent in transit! Both cameras and an audio recorder are used; one camera is stationary, audio recorder is also stationary, the only mishap in all these activities is my dancing with the mobile camera into the field of view of the stationary camera during one of the dual camera sequences. In retrospect I must admit it loosens the shot up and I may well keep myself in there; it's tempting. This leaves some casual interviewing to be done at a café in the city in the evening, easy pickings one would think. Nothing is ever simple! The partying and drinking noises are overwhelming the audio recording systems and will require lots of post-production editing, a most unpleasant thought. On the way back to my lodgings we get stuck in traffic – what should pull up right next to the car? The painted train, what luck; camera at hand, as always, I start to “vidi”. Unfortunately the camera refuses to focus on what it is pointed at and only takes the gps system of the car in focus possibly because the screen emits the most light - grunt. At the same time the spontaneous audio disintegrates into aimless babble. I suppose just after a long interview it is difficult to be spontaneous, especially without rehearsing; nobody knows what to say just then and a great opportunity is all together wasted. “Ach! Cest la guerre.”

In retrospect: Some footage got trashed because the cameras are temperamentally sluggish when it comes to staying on focus and rather demanding when a change in setup is required. This equipment is Ok for tourist photos, even for close-up interviews in a controlled setting, but much too touchy and sluggish for other purposes. Where are the days of my old and trusted Sony PD170? Good thing 64 bits are already obsolete as the industry starts flirting with 4k and even 8k, prepare for more tears.

After that I thought I was done and could devote some time to more casual tourist activities such as archival recording and shooting for my own productions. I should have gone over all the recordings in great detail and considered reshooting some of it.

Back at the editing station I find out that the work coat worn by the interviewee creates Moiré patterns in compression, so do European traffic lights Much of what happened was my own fault, I hadn't prepared sufficiently. I should have rehearsed and scripted more. Above all a capable assistant would have been most efficacious. On the editing side of all that had occurred lay more grief yet. The inferior sound and some of the troubled video put me into the most peculiar bind about what the final product might look like now that continuity was no longer at hand. Much time thus went into rethinking a contiguous vignette of a story that could be compacted into 3 + minutes for web delivery and still convey a sense of motion and a sense of the artist. I think Charlie Chaplin found himself frequently in the similar position of not knowing how to tie all his sequences together into a cohesive story. The last hurdle was getting 3.5 minutes of a high resolution assembly that occupies 20GB onto a flash drive that is inherently limited to accept a maximum 4G; a file limitation brought to you compliments of Microsoft on behalf of the entertainment industry; better find out for your next project.