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THE JOURNEY

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

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'It will be the end of your legal practice', warned a barrister friend. 'If not the end of civilisation as we know it!', I suggested in response.

I had just announced my intention to take a year off to travel 'overland'. My desk groaned with briefs awaiting my attention. They were all politely returned. With my partner, Johan van Vloten, I set out to undertake the long road trek from Singapore to London.

Johan got the idea in 1969 from the big race that had just been reported, in the opposite direction. We purchased a VW kombi van in Sydney and shipped it to await our flight to Singapore, Qantas of course. And so the adventure began that would take us through India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, eventually to the Netherlands and England.

From Madras we drove down to the tip of India, up to Simla in the Himalayas and then through the Khyber Pass, with its ghostly memorials to the British regiments that had guarded the porous borders of the North West.

In Peshawar, a charming man asked us to hide a little packet in our tape recorder and deliver it to London. The offered reward would cover the costs of the trip. We declined. As we reached the border of Iran the Shah's police went straight to the recorder. The packet of drugs could have left us marooned in the prison in Mashed, as several young Australian travellers were said to be.

Every night, a large group of locals would gather round our kombi to look at our luxuries (such as they were). Speaking with the locals, and reading about their history and their challenges we drank deep at the well of civilisation. Only in Afghanistan, where guns were everywhere, did we feel unsafe. This was before the Russian and later American incursions. A brief window of opportunity. We stood at Cape Helles. We saw where Xerxes crossed the Hellespont and where the ANZACs landed at Gallipoli. We crossed the Communist states of Eastern Europe. A biography of *Stalin* was confiscated in Ceausescu's Romania. Then all too soon the bright lights of Austria were welcoming us.

In busy lives, routine prevails. However, every day on the overland journey presented fresh experiences. We learnt the essential unity of human beings. We could never look at our planet again, in the quite the same way. Along the route a steady stream of Australian and other voyagers greeted us. And in the distance, the caravans of camels moved at a stately pace, as they had done for millennia.

When eventually we took the Qantas flight home and pensioned off our kombi we knew we had shared a great privilege. Our most enduring dividend, however, was personal. If you can live with another human

being in a confined space for a year, the likelihood is that you will stick together for life. Relationships are like an overland journey. Ups and downs. Dangers and joys. Taking time out to think about life and the gift of consciousness fills the soul. The music and poetry of the world remain with us decades later as a lasting treasure.

The briefs returned. Life resumed its hectic pace. Civilisation survived. Often a memory flashes back. And after the memory comes a smile.

Michael Kirby was a Justice of the High Court of Australia until 2009 and recently chaired a UN Inquiry on North Korea.