

**Excerpted from *Don't Worry, Be Happy* by Jim Ford. Copyright © 2006.
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I was setting off alone not entirely by choice. The truth of the matter was nobody wanted to come with me. Naturally, it would have been nice to depart in the company of a mate or a loved one to share all of those illuminating experiences en route but the opportunity simply hadn't presented itself and I could no longer let this stand in the way. I was, after all, reaching the ripe old age of twenty-five.

Unlike many others, I'd purposely decided *not* to embark on a full round-the-world trip as that would inevitably entail travelling back through the States and this was not something that enthused me in any way, shape or form. Not that I had anything against America in particular but when it came to places to visit, virtually every other country in the world seemed more interesting. I'd booked three flights in all, the first to Beijing, where I'd spend my first week visiting the city's sights – Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City, the Great Wall – slowly acclimatising and trying to adjust to the backpacking routine. Then, when I was confident I'd found my feet, I'd leave the capital to start the long six-week overland trek southwards to Hong Kong. After that, I'd make a brief stopover in Kuala Lumpur and then fly onto Sydney. I was setting off with around £4000 worth of savings although I'd taken the added precaution of obtaining a 12-month working visa for Australia just in case I needed to supplement these funds before travelling back through India. I was also curious to see if Australia was all it was cracked up to be. When I was three years old, my mother, leaving me in the capable hands of doting grandparents, had embarked on a twelve-month teaching exchange in New South Wales. She came back extolling the virtues of the country and for many months after, seriously contemplated moving back there for good. Not entirely sure I wanted to settle in the UK, I was thus keen to test the water myself.

But aside from this there was no apparent mission or quest. I wasn't following in anybody's footsteps, I wasn't travelling on a camel or with a fridge or television crew, I was just heading off into, what for me at least, was uncharted territory. Sure, travelling through China and India was never going to be easy, though this was just part of the challenge. More and more people were setting off on similar trips and travelling now at such an impressionable age seemed the obvious thing to do. Yet almost without exception all of these friends and relatives were going off in pairs or small groups whereas I was setting off alone. So the big question was how would I cope travelling by myself. I'd always thought myself strong-minded and independent but this would surely be the ultimate test and in truth, I couldn't wait for it to begin. That said, there was a certain point to prove and that was the small matter of silencing the critics.

'So let's get this right,' people would say before I left. 'You're travelling through China all by yourself? Surely you must be worried?'

'Oh, I'll be fine,' I'd glibly reply. 'You don't have to worry about me.'

But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried. Of course I was worried. In the months leading up to my departure I'd been worrying my little head to death. I was worried about meeting people, I was worried about not meeting people, I was worried about being ripped off, I was worried about getting lost, I was worried about losing my money, my passport, my rucksack, I was worried about falling ill, contracting diarrhoea, dysentery, malaria, hepatitis, or even worse, the dreaded Aids. I was worried about being hospitalised, I was worried about being drugged, being accosted, being kidnapped, I was worried about drowning, about being burnt alive, about falling

off a cliff. You name it I was worried about it: wars, military coups, revolutions, typhoons, earthquakes, volcanoes, cyclones, bus crashes, train crashes, plane crashes, the list went on and on. Quite simply, when it came to worries, I had more things to worry about than Mr Worry himself, though I was damned if I was gonna let anybody else know this.

And not only did I want to silence all the doubters, I wanted to confound them as well, by proving that the advantages of travelling alone – not having to continually rely on others all the time, not having to forever discuss which places to visit, which routes to take, which places to stay, which places to eat – actually outweighed those of travelling with friends or partners. I had no restrictions as such, there was nothing I needed to get back for: no children, no job and no girlfriend and herein lay the beauty and excitement of it all. I could feasibly go where I wanted, stay where I wanted and return when I wanted, money and health permitting. In my eyes, travelling solo effectively meant the world was my oyster and the fact I was ultimately responsible for my destiny counted for everything. As far as I was concerned, so long as this was the case, all the worries would duly take care of themselves. Right from the outset, all I'd wanted to do was to set off and just see what happened. Okay, I'm not saying I didn't have this rough itinerary mapped out in my mind, but I didn't necessarily have to follow it. I was at the helm, I was in command, I was behind the controls just as those two cheery middle-aged men in uniform were currently sitting behind that cabin door a mere fifteen feet ahead of me. Now at long last I was finally on my way. Now it was time to start looking ahead.

What, I wondered, could I expect of China, a country that had still only recently opened its doors to outsiders for the first time? Would the nation have recovered from the tragic events of Tiananmen Square? What, if any, were the chances of likely repercussions? Would I be prevented from travelling to certain places? Would it be safe? Would the locals be friendly or would they be hostile? How would I get by with no grasp of their language? Would it be an easy language to pick up? What kind of other travellers would I meet? Now there was a thought! What kind of other travellers *would* I meet? Here I was three hours into my Scandinavian Airlines flight to Beijing, idly staring down out of the window at the flickering Russian streetlamps below and my long awaited adventure had already begun. Leaping up in a flash of optimism, I lurched down the aisle towards the toilet carefully surveying all the other passengers in the hope I'd come across a gorgeous young nubile Swedish backpacker to befriend. Slipping inconspicuously back into my seat a few minutes later, I reached for the plastic ice filled beaker in front of me, knocked back the remaining contents, then switched off the overhead light. Moments later, I was out for the count.