



# Overlanding from Brussels to Kuala Lumpur: A few comments on interactions along the way

Guest post by Johanna Maccioni



As a family with four children, we decided to travel for a year and a half from Brussels to Sydney with our own truck. Our first itinerary planned to cross Luxembourg, Germany, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, part of Russia, Mongolia, China, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and finally Australia. However, we never managed to obtain Chinese visas, so we had to build a new itinerary. From Mongolia, we exited through Siberia again to reach Vladivostok where we took a ferry to South Korea and then to Japan. We then shipped our truck to Borneo planning to cross from Malaysia to Indonesia by land on that island, and then take ferries up to Dili in Timor for a last leg to Darwin. During the time our truck was being shipped from Japan to Borneo, we stopped in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao. But plans changed again as we were running out of time and money. So, we finally decided to travel to peninsular Malaysia from Borneo, made a loop in Thailand and Laos and sent our truck back home from Kuala Lumpur to sell it. The trip continues for us as we have now settled for a projected two years in New Caledonia, a French island in the Pacific, giving us time to visit part of Oceania.

This road trip was a very exciting adventure and experience to learn from. While there are many possible subjects to describe, I would like to report here a few comments related to interactions during our trip, placing them into a personal perspective.

During this trip, there have been three main type of interactions with others: interactions with local inhabitants in each country, interactions with the expatriate community living abroad, and interactions with members of the overlanding community.

### 1. Interactions with Local Inhabitants

As western travelers, one of our aims was obviously to meet people of many different cultural and social backgrounds. A few catalysts and obstacles to this encounter were experienced on this trip and are presented here. The willingness of others to meet and interact with us is discussed further on.

#### 1.1. Our Will to Meet and Dialogue

Part of preparing this trip turned on how best to present ourselves. Travelling in a big truck, our vehicle was the first visible sign of our family, and so we were concerned about its presentation. We decorated it to send friendly messages, especially knowing the front part was an ancient khaki colored military truck, which actually scared a child in Serbia. We planned to change the color in Turkey to something more colorful, so that we would be identified as safe strangers. We took time to order stickers for the outside of the truck made from a friend's drawings, including a picture of all our family members. We thought especially hard about the depiction of the mother, knowing there would be differences in norms of women's clothing in Turkey and Iran. We especially were concerned about the two lines indicating breasts, and so took them out. In addition, we widened the dress and put a scarf on the hair. This was almost the same color as the hair and did not really stand out much, but it was there. Even with this caution, the drawing remained far from local norms in eastern Turkey and Iran as the neck and ankles were still showing, for women always wore pants under their dresses in these countries. Very few Iranian people we met were Muslims

(most of the Iranians we talked to thought only 10% to 15% of the population in that country believes in Allah... and we would agree to a similar proportion, considering we met far more atheists than people believing in God), so nobody seemed too shocked about the picture, although many were surprised, and they often brought it up as a topic of discussion. But at least we didn't have problems with the special government militia over the image.

We also included images on the truck of a few of the major tourist attractions in countries we planned to visit, so that we could be identified as a travelling and moving family. We put two clear messages: the URL of our personal family blog ([www.sixglobetruckers.com](http://www.sixglobetruckers.com)) and a message on the back "Slow travel: keep your distance. Thank you." That was especially intended for truckers and fast drivers who were tailgating on the highway as we typically drove at 50km/h. The goal to be identified as a travelling family was achieved and many curious people were at first attracted by the colorful truck, thus helping to create contacts. Painting the monuments also worked out well as a visual aid, providing an easy way to explain the itinerary for our trip. But as for the lettering, we realized that the Roman alphabet is learned as the second alphabet for people living from Bulgaria to Thailand (everywhere except in Malaysia, where English is a national language). People couldn't even enter the URL for our blog into their phones because most of them did not have the appropriate keyboard available for the Roman alphabet. The same issue arose for English and the message on the back of our truck, which turned out to be even less relevant considering the low proficiency in English we witnessed throughout the trip. On the other hand, we realized that as many countries were formerly governed by Russia, Russian was spoken and understood, at least as a second language in most of the countries (including Bulgaria, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan), as well as in Mongolia and South Korea, being close neighbors of Russia. The Turkish language was the second most understood language on this itinerary, being spoken in Turkey, Iran (at least the Kurdistan part), Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In all of these countries English is learned as a third or even fourth language, or not learned at all. Thus most people who crossed our path barely had three words of vocabulary in English (they were "hello," "goodbye," and "thank you"). In Iran most people think the image of their country abroad is very bad, so they also always ask the question "What about Iran?" meaning "What do you think about Iran?" At the same time, they couldn't understand much more of a response than "good." In Korea and Japan we hoped to engage in more substantive communication but that was not the case. Except for young students, in big cities, or people working in tourism sector, most people we met still had only the same three words of English. It appears very clearly that to be able to better communicate in this Eurasian route, Russian would be the best language to know.

On our side, we all managed to learn ten to twenty basic words in each country (beautiful, good, doctor, psychologist, child, boy, girl, one year, travel, etc.) except in Mongolia, Korea, Thailand, and Laos, where the alphabets were different and sounds more distant from what we know, but where we could learn at least some of the local language. It did, of course, help a lot to create connections and meet locals.

When English is not the main choice for communicating and you know very little Russian, the only other alternative is to use nonverbal channels, including gestures, pictures (we had a world map to show our itinerary, and pictures of our house, things we saw, etc.), drawings and Google Translate. It is possible to manage for an entire evening using this combination, and we had

opportunities to discuss politics and social matters as a result. But we have to admit it was exhausting.

Apart from language, learning small obvious politeness rules in each country also helped out. Tour books we read usually provided the main lines of “do's and don'ts.” We mainly took off our shoes from Turkey to Japan and now know how to call a taxi at least in ten different ways. A funny matter around this issue is that in Iran the “Taarof” rule teaches you to refuse three times a present or invitation before you can accept it. What underlies this rule is to permit anybody to make the honor of an invitation/present. . .even if they don't have the material possibility to actually fulfil the offer. So concretely, somebody will invite, we say no, they insist, we say no again, they insist again. . . that makes three. . .and we can then accept. The funny part comes when we compare this to politeness rules in Japan, where insisting is interpreted as rude.

As curious westerners, we planned on making this trip partly to meet people and finally “arranged” situations that eased encounters, especially because we had the time to do so and weren't held to a program, leaving us the possibility of staying somewhere a few days longer than scheduled. For example, putting up the front hood of our truck to access mechanical parts worked as a magnet. Parking at night near a yurt and asking if we could sleep there, as we often did in central Asia and Mongolia, was also a good way to initiate connection. Letting our children out of the truck to play in playgrounds would inevitably lead to making new friends. While settling in a park for a picnic in the evening, it never took more than ten minutes before someone came over and offered a dish in Iran. People were also attracted by the smell and fumes coming from the truck, as we could make a fire in a small stove we had inside. This led to a new friendship in a Siberian town where we eventually stayed a full week.

It turned out all the mechanical problems we had on the road finally also led to incredible assistance and bonds. In several garages (Turkey, Uzbekistan, Russia, Malaysia, etc.) typically the owner first invited us all to a restaurant before starting to work on our truck. In Turkey, as we stopped to paint our front cabin a different color, families and neighbors of the garage owner took turns to invite us all into their homes, and also took us for walks at the local markets to pass two days of needed repairs. In Russia we had at least five garages working together for us solving difficult mechanical problems before we entered Mongolia, managing their time so that we wouldn't be out of compliance with our visa schedule. In almost all countries, and even if we showed our embarrassment, most of the time we were not allowed to pay for either the food or most of the mechanical repairs.

Before we left Belgium, a number of our relatives were scared about us becoming ill (we never had to use any medicine during the entire trip, and none of the six of us were ever sick), and also about bad or dangerous encounters along our way. Having the same fears probably would have stopped us from making so many positive bonds. We, of course, obeyed obvious security rules (we never drove at night and didn't sleep anywhere without first presenting ourselves to our night neighbors or the owner's place to ask about security matters), but we left without being scared. The very rare moments we felt insecure were finally when we had to take local taxis, and it was about the driving, not the people. Concerns about honesty or money also could have been obstacles to authentic encounters, especially if mendacity or fraud were particularly turned on foreign travelers. But this

was absolutely not the case in most of the countries where we travelled, except maybe once in Uzbekistan and once in Kyrgyzstan, so those few occurrences therefore appear uncommon rather than typical.

## 1.2. Inhabitants' Willingness to Meet Strangers and Hold Dialogues

On the road, we met a lot of curiosity, sometimes regulated by social politeness, but still very present. To make it simple, we realized there were not so many ways to enter into contact with members of other cultures: some people mainly use internet and other media, some travel and meet others abroad, and some meet the foreigners that come to them in their home country.

### 1.2.1. Use of Social Media

Even in places where computers were accessible (which was obviously not the case everywhere), internet connections could be very bad. On this point we were surprised. We bought 2Gb in Iran and were unable to use up that amount in two months. An internet connection was possible, but slow, and even that was available in major cities only. As an example, we were following Aras Valley in north Iran, and landed in a small town. Trying to show our blog to inhabitants, we were conducted to the only shop of this small town, which contained the only computer in the town. The owner tried to connect with the internet for at least 20 minutes, and when he finally managed to bring up a web page, all the electricity in his shop just shut down. From Iran to Kazakhstan, connections were terrible: during that entire period, we never managed to download a 10 Mb podcast and posting just one picture on our blog required 7 to 10 minutes.

Apart from these technical obstacles, we also have to add the problem of official censorship. In Iran and Turkmenistan most of the common websites (Google, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, for example) are censored. A government page appears when entering these addresses. Locals charge for special “antifilters” (few are free) to access them, and so most of young people manage to do most of what they want. But even with the help of a specialist in an internet shop, we never managed to access the appropriate website to update our personal blog in these countries.

Television programs were censored on the same scale. Being invited to a local resident's home, as television was turned on, we accidentally came upon a French documentary, “La Marche de l'Empereur,” which we had seen previously. It features Emperor penguins laying eggs and is accompanied by the beautiful music of Emilie Simon. . . but in Iran, we witnessed the same images with a boring spoken commentary for two hours, as music from the film was censored. Again, in Iran, public concerts are banned, leaving to people the right to listen to only music which has links to traditional instruments, poetry, or religion.

Anyway, when connections to the internet were possible, people were again limited in their access to world scale information because of the lack of knowledge and practice of English. On this subject, a small story that I can't resist relating. We met a retired English teacher in a big town of northern Iran who started crying as soon as he spoke with us. We asked why, and it turned out he had been an English teacher his entire life, yet this was the first time he was actually able to speak



English for real with actual English speakers rather than his own students. It was as if he had been teaching a dead language such as Latin and had run across a Latin speaker in the street.

As a result, in the same small village I mentioned previously, we made visits with our truck to locals showing *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, and *Frozen* themed decorations of our children beds, nobody, whether children or adults, had previously heard of any of these films.

In South Korea, on the contrary, we experienced the best internet connections of our trip, and it was free. In all of Southeast Asia, in fact, connections were good and inexpensive. The major problem with internet connections remained in Central Asia.

### 1.2.2. Visiting Abroad

Most of the countries we crossed had a weaker economy, and thus fewer luxuries, as compared to western Europe (excluding Korea and Japan; we crossed Siberia, so visited only the eastern part of Russia, where we witnessed rather poor communities). This financial matter is obviously the first obstacle holding back people from travel abroad.

In several countries, we also witnessed enormous difficulties obtaining visas, or even passports, for locals to travel out of their own country.

As a result, we met many people who never travelled, even close to their home country. For example, Reno, a woman who manages a very touristy yurt hotel north of Bokhara and speaks a quite competent English, has never even been to the world tourist attraction of Samarkand only a few kilometers away from her place. The same held for a family inviting us in Kazakhstan at 2km from the Russian border. . . but who themselves had never visited Russia. We were surprised during a conversation with Turkish people at the eastern boarder asking us why we were interested in visiting nearby Iran. Comments posted to the Amur journal which published a short article on our sleepover in Blagoveshchensk near the Chinese border in Siberia (<http://www.amur.info/news/2017/10/20/131103>) said things like “only foreigners have the money to travel.” In Iran there is a lot of local tourism since people have enough time and money, but then the possibility of obtaining visas (and passports) is the main obstacle.

### 1.2.3. Meeting Foreigners at Home

Considering the difficulties with the two prior ways to meet cultural others, the last, and almost only, way to meet foreigners would be to approach a tourist. . . and many people jumped on the occasion.

Especially in countries like Turkey and Iran where cultural traditions of hosting and welcoming travelers are still so vivid, the eagerness to meet foreigners is absolutely insane. It is nearly impossible to settle in a place without having curious locals arrive to ask questions. We often had queues forming of people lining up to get a chance to meet us. Taking selfies with us and approaching us with questions occurred every 10 minutes in most big cities. We were invited into private homes literally every day. In Brunei, we were told at the border that we were the first to

enter the country with a foreign truck camper. We'll never know if this is true, but as we passed through a village and stopped for coffee, the girl selling it looked very surprised and told us "I never saw something like this before, it's just as if Martians stepped into my town!" So it wasn't long before we started to wonder "who is the tourist here?"

We were impressed by and very grateful for the numerous presents received during the trip. When there is very little common language, the positive goodwill to communicate and interact needs to find a way, and giving gifts seems to be one of the best ways to create a bond. The first present we received was in Serbia: a few eggs and a sausage. In Turkey, every person we met seemed to have candies in their pockets for the children. It is absolutely impossible to count the number of presents we received daily in Iran (pastries, persimmons, a melon, drawings, books, ice cream, orange juice, even bandages). As we tried to help gather sheep to be sheared, we were invited to participate, and at the end received a sheepskin as a present in Turkmenistan. We received apricots in Uzbekistan, homemade cookies in Kyrgyzstan, the national costume in Kazakhstan, t-shirts in Russia, magnets in Mongolia, noodle cups in South Korea, coffee and chips in Japan, music in Taiwan, pepper in Borneo, a cocktail in a bar in Singapore, etc. Throughout the trip, we couldn't go through a week without people offering us something. This was equally true in developed as well as less developed countries. Only in Thailand, where tourism is most intense and the expatriate community enormous, did we not receive presents and not manage to build up contacts with locals, even in remote areas.

As different kinds of beliefs and superstitions are present everywhere, before and during the trip we also received numerous good luck charms: Saint Christopher, Fatimah's hands, the Greek eye, Chinese lucky cat (*maneki-neko*), stones, fabric pouches with magical things inside, benedictions, etc.

As a way to make clear our appreciation for all these positive considerations and warm welcomes, we also invited people for coffee or beer in our truck, giving them small presents in our turn: postcards, small keyrings with the Eiffel tower, chocolate, samples of cosmetics, etc.

We would like to make a special comment on people's interest in interacting with foreigners in countries ruled by obvious or hidden dictatorships:

- As foreigners in Iran, we witnessed a lot of openness from locals, who very often proposed to take off the veil in private, and who spoke openly when not followed by authorities. As we met an English teacher who was followed by authorities (we had also been followed in the market of Tabriz), he opened up quite easily, but made it clear that such frankness would not be possible with Iranians, even those counted as friends. But, as strangers, we provided a safe opportunity for him to have a conversation where he could speak his mind.
- In Turkmenistan we felt it was impossible to ask what people thought about their government, even though we were curious. A few small indicators dissuaded us from doing it. We met a French businessman who often entered the country for work, so we asked him if it would be appropriate to ask locals their opinions; he answered a quick and evasive "You never know who you're talking to." Or the need to hide the identity of author of the

Turkmenistan section in the Lonely Planet guide to Central Asia. Or the fact that people regularly needed to call their superiors to be able to answer small, practical, touristy questions (as “Is there any reduction for children?”, or “Can we buy your postcards?”, or “Do you have wifi?”, etc.). Above all, there were policemen everywhere. We were invited to visit by shepherds in Darvaza desert in the center of the country, but we couldn’t manage a real discussion as they had absolutely no proficiency in English, and there was no internet connection at all. In Turkmenistan, tourism is rare and well controlled, the tourist visa is expensive and requires travel at all times to be with a guide, so most foreigners pass through, like us, with a transit visa offering a maximum of five days in the country (without a guide but with a planned route). Apart from phones which seemed to be checked regularly (ours was looked at to see if we had taken pictures of the capital city - which is forbidden), communication within the country is stopped by very bad roads (only two major roads in this very small country and one is not even finished), and hectic post offices.

- In Kazakhstan, we also had an odd feeling visiting the “Peace and Reconciliation” pyramid (aka the Palace of Peace) which was so desired by the President. With guided tours only, the edifice was built for the glory of the President; we were shown the seat where the President sits at the theater, comments were only on national matters linked to the President, and it was specified that his favorite music was playing in the elevator. But, compared to Turkmenistan, we had much more time in the country and more opportunities to meet local people. We felt we could talk about politics, and people we met seemed finally happy about their leader, arguing “He does what he wants and corruption seems to exist, but at least he wants his country to be developed and does a lot of good things for it.”
- Unlike all these countries, in China, we didn’t even manage to enter (we had Turkish stamps in our passports which seemed to be the main reason for refusal, as a political gesture against the Uighur “minority” in China). Communication was impossible given that the consular section in Ulan Bator actually closed down and no longer let foreigners enter from one day to another without prior notice.

## 2. Meet Expatriates

Aside from meeting locals, we also were eager to meet expatriates. Mainly our goal was to have a firsthand view from people staying in countries longer than we did, who could answer some of our remaining questions, for their good advice on tourist matters, and also for the “Feels like home” comfort level, given shared norms of interaction and the ability to talk fluently in French. We finally managed to meet some in Serbia, Mongolia, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and Laos. This was especially true in Mongolia, where the capital Ulan Bator is so small, the French and Belgian community put together are like a village, and impossible to miss.

These people and communities were also happy to meet us, as a lot of them had dreamed of having the opportunity to take a similar trip and were curious to hear about the main practical aspects.



These meetings were close to what we could have had at home, and discussion subjects often included countries visited during our trip, main tourist attractions to visit in each country, and obvious benefits or disadvantages to living in each.

### 3. Meet Overlanders

Being on the road, we had the impression lots of people were overlanding with their own vehicle for months to years. At some point we even had the impression it was normal... We met families, couples, individuals, travelling by truck, camper, van, motorcycle, or bike, and they had all kinds of different social backgrounds. The vast majority were Europeans (mainly German when without children - it seems impossible to homeschool in Germany - and French with children). We also met two Australians and two Koreans. In a year and a half, we haven't personally encountered an American (North or South) or African or Middle Eastern overlander.

While meeting other overlanders, conversations turned on common point of interest: mainly where to find potable water or gas, borders, visas, mechanics, parking in big cities, road quality, climate considerations, homeschooling, shipping companies, cheapest bank/insurance company, tourism, etc. We have in common that we all enter by borders and not by airports (capital cities always come after some countryside), we are frequently out of tourist paths and schedules, we have no watches or agendas, we have time and adaptable programs, and we all have with us a personal space, making us feel at home in our trucks, and therefore are able to invite people anywhere. Overlanders meet on specific web forums and can be defined as a very helpful community. All have personal blogs or Facebook pages with a travelling name and get identified by them.

Some meet from country to country and even share longer roads, if by chance itineraries are common at the same period of time. For example, we met a family in Kyrgyzstan that we met again in Mongolia, then halfway through Siberia, staying together until leaving Siberia, and we met for the last time in South Korea. This occurred a few times with different travelers. On the "Silk Road," all roads from the east or the west, at one point, end up crossing the desert in Uzbekistan by the same main road working as a bottleneck, which makes it difficult not to encounter the same overlanders in the main ancient cities of the country. Crossing China is also a big overlanding encounter as people group to share the fee of the mandatory guides the government requires for crossing the country in a private foreign vehicle. Preparing for this crossing at the end of summer in Mongolia makes Ulan Bator the hub for Eurasian overlanders on the last week of August.

One of the main interests in meeting other overlanders is that our children get to meet and interact. As none go to school, they have a common way of life and schedule during that time. As time passes traveling, all are eager to meet other children speaking their home language.

The overlanding community itself is probably rarely taken as a subject, though it seems appropriately described as a subculture, given that it has:

- a core vocabulary: "overlanding" is an example,
- shared values: not giving importance to controlling all situations, not being materialistic, keen to feel free, to take advantage of life, etc.,

- shared norms: use of blog names, specific applications, dealing of water/electricity, very helpful about sharing information,
- having places to meet virtually - forums, messenger, WhatsApp - and in person,
- and overall knowing “I’m part of it or not.”

## Conclusion

We feel very lucky being able to write about this overlanding travel. We know being a white European family with four blond children obviously had an impact on our experiences. As an individual or a couple without children, having black skin or being homosexual, would have probably made the travel much different in some of the countries we have toured.

Through these comments we have tried to show that we had numerous interactions along the way, not only with locals as expected but also with expatriates and with the overland community we discovered.

The main barriers to local encounters were the low proficiency in English we witnessed in almost all countries we crossed, and the poor internet connections we had, keeping locals from accessing worldwide information and partially shared culture. To overcome this lack of a common language, we used other media, such as presents, gestures, pictures, and translating applications to show our will to make contact. At the end, we still can't believe the number of positive contacts we made and the exceptional welcome we received everywhere from strangers.

*To cite this article, use this format:*

Maccioni, Johanna. (24 April 2019). Guest post: Overlanding from Brussels to Kuala Lumpur: A few comments on interactions along the way. Center for Intercultural Dialogue. Available from: <https://centerforinterculturaldialogue.org/2019/04/24/joanna-maccioni-overlanding-from-brussels-to-kuala-lumpur/>



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