



SIGN OUTSIDE INDIAN HAIRDRESSER; YOU CAN'T GO PAST A BARBER SHOP THAT LOOKS THIS CUTE. GREYMOUTH, NZ.

# travel with the trimmings

With millions of Australians denied their regular visit to the hairdresser, HUW KINGSTON reflects on some hair-raising moments in the barber's chair – but not in Australia. While most of us have a haircut before a trip, he saves his for overseas adventures.

**V**ieni signor Huw. È il momento del tuo taglio di capelli.” (Come Senor Huw. It is time for your haircut). Lucio rose from the restaurant table and picked up a chair. He placed it between the table and the bar and, flourishing a satin cape in the manner of bullfighter not barber, motioned me towards it.

We were in the tiny Italian hilltop village of Monte Santa Maria Tiberina as part of a mountain bike ride, but I was aware that Lucio also owned a string of salons. “We try to give you style,” he smiled. Tucking into their tiramisù, the rest of our companions offered advice as this trimmer of Tuscany set to work with his scissors.

Millions of Australians right now would love a surprise haircut, a trim of locks in lockdown. Sales of home clippers have apparently reached record levels.

For decades I've saved my time in the barber's chair for when overseas, seeking out local street barbers and salons wherever I go. With a head of hair that grows out, not down, there's little that can go wrong. Soon though, it will be two years since my last international travel trim.

On New Zealand's South Island, Greymouth in Grey District on the banks of the Grey River is a gritty west coast town with few pretensions. Off the mountains, a bitterly cold and misty wind reputedly rolls into town. Locals call it The Barber, although it never showed up when I was visiting.

When I, too, rolled out of the mountains, in need of a shave and shower, I spied the cutest barber shop frontage I'd seen in years. Yvonne, the shop's third owner in 70 years, did a grand job of tidying me up. On the drive back east, over Arthur's Pass, a handwritten sign advertised Psychic Reading and Hot Shower. It was tempting, although I was unsure if one went with the other.

My love for street barbers started in India back in the 1980s. Having a haircut provided a box seat amidst the street theatre. Performances could be viewed not only in front, but back and sides too, courtesy of the mirror propped on an old crate or hung perhaps from an old door. A holy cow munching on discarded naan breads, an ashen faced sadhu meditating in a doorway opposite, schoolgirls giggling and pointing as they passed the makeshift salon.

In 2019 I was in Kashmir for the first time in nearly 30 years,



“And so it was that Bashir, then 18 now 46, gave me a shave and head massage in the same place as the sun went down across the lake.”

**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT**

BASHIR THE BARBER GIVES HUW A TRIM IN 2019 ON A HOUSEBOAT IN SRINAGAR, KASHMIR; BASHIR AND HUW IN THE SAME SPOT IN 1991; STELIOS THE BARBER OF MONEMVASIA, GETS TO WORK, PELOPONNESE, GREECE; SUSANNA AND MIGUEL, BARBERS AND BIKERS IN ANNA, SPAIN, AND THEIR TOOLS OF THE TRADE; LUCIO IN ACTION OVER DINNER IN MONTE SANTA MARIA TIBERINA IN TUSCANY; IN THE FANN MOUNTAINS, TAJIKISTAN, WITH A 10 MONTH MOP, SHORTLY BEFORE IT WAS SHORN IN DUSHANBE.





FROM TOP SETTLING INTO A FINE SESSION IN CANAKKALE, TURKEY; THEO AND HIS HILLS HOIST ON THE SHORES OF THE MEDITERRANEAN, NEA MOUDANIA, GREECE.

back onboard the Badyari family's Srinagar houseboat. In 1991 I'd stayed on the same boat just before setting off on a long Himalayan expedition.

Bilal Badyari and I were reminiscing over some old images when one popped up of me being shorn on the gangway between two neighbouring houseboats. "Bashir the barber man is still here," exclaimed Bilal. "Let me go get him."

And so it was that Bashir, then 18 now 46, gave me a shave and head massage in the same place as the sun went down across the lake, a shikara boat floating beneath the gangway and the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer.

My year-long circumnavigation of the Mediterranean in 2014-15 by sea kayak, foot, ocean rowboat and bike offered plenty of close shaves. Wanting a break from battling strong headwinds and needing my first haircut of the trip, I landed my kayak at Nea Moudania, a town in northern Greece. On learning of my fundraising for Save the Children, the young barber refused my payment and whipped around his friends for a donation.

Returning to my kayak, I met an old man whose house fronted the tiny harbour. Theo, 86, told me his story. Of his migration to Australia in 1950 and subsequent return to Greece 10 years later with his homesick wife. He shuffled into the house and returned with some photos of their wedding in 1956 in Hyde Park and honeymoon at the Melbourne Olympics. As he showed me, I glanced over his shoulder at the washing on his

line, taken aback to see it luffing in the breeze on an old Hills Hoist. Theo explained it had been the first thing his wife had wanted to bring back from their backyard in western Sydney. Purely by the chance of wanting a haircut, I'd landed bang in front of what I'm certain is the only Hills Hoist gracing the shores of the Mediterranean Sea.

As part of the same trip I crossed Algeria, Africa's largest country, by mountain bike. But I was not alone. For 1500 kilometres and two weeks I did it presidential style with a police escort front and rear and, at times, a couple of motorcycle outriders. This was totally unexpected and all rather bizarre. Just weeks before my arrival, a French trekker had been kidnapped and beheaded by an ISIS group. I think the Algerian Government decided it didn't want any more bad news stories.

When I rode into the towns and the cities, on would go the sirens and flashing lights. All the traffic was held back as we flew unimpeded through red lights and roundabouts, the numerous military roadblocks waving us through. When I mentioned the possibility of a haircut in the town of Oran, all was arranged and armed police stood, guns cocked, as Abdul attacked me with his scissors.

"...by the chance of wanting a haircut, I'd landed bang in front of what I'm certain is the only Hills Hoist gracing the shores of the Mediterranean Sea."

After riding through the rugged Cortes gorge country in Spain, I chanced upon the town of Anna. Having a granddaughter with the same name, I just had to stay. Local barber Miguel trimmed and shaved me whilst his wife delicately shampooed her mother-in-law's hair. It turned out Miguel was a keen mountain biker and, by the time he was done, he was insistent that I join the family for lunch. I stayed with them two days.

There have been disappointments too, of course. Who has not exited a hairdresser or barber uncertain or even in tears? A butchering by a barber in Barcelona and a slicing by a sheep shearer in Supetar, Croatia, left me in follicular despair and some pain.

A couple of years ago, after cultivating a fine mop for 10 months since the previous cut in Malta, I found myself, post ski expedition, in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan in central Asia. I had the quantity of hair and the desire for a detailed cut and shave; a slow, deft, relaxing removal with scissor and cut-throat. Alas, it was over in minutes courtesy of those bland electric clippers. Nearly a year's work cast unceremoniously to the cutting room floor. I did learn, however, that, by presidential edict, beards are banned in Tajikistan. Apparently to cut out any moves toward fundamentalism in this overwhelmingly Muslim nation. For the rest of the trip, I was on the lookout for police wielding trimmers not truncheons, accosting bearded young men in acts of barberism.

The barber standing head and shoulders above the rest? Opposite my hotel room on a narrow street in Canakkale near Gallipoli in 2014, a queue formed day and night at a small barber's shop. On the day before Anzac Day, a gap appeared. I took my chance. The Turkish barber was magnificent. Without asking, I had not only a cut and trim but ear candling, nose plucking and head massage. All for well over an hour, all for a princely sum equivalent to \$3.

With a head of hair most definitely in need of a trim, in Australia or elsewhere, let's hope it won't be too long until we can all experience such good hair days again. **HL**