

WEEKEND: TRAVEL



Seeing the world on an empty wallet

Man earns as he goes on multi-continent trip

By **BETH J. HARPAZ**
The Associated Press

Michael Wigge left his home in Berlin without a penny and traveled 25,000 miles to Antarctica, hitchhiking, bartering and working his way by ship, plane, car and foot, from Europe to Canada and the U.S. and then through Latin America. A series about his project, “How to Travel the World for Free,” is airing on some PBS channels in May and June, using video Wigge shot of his adventures. Here are some details on how he did the project and how it went.

THE TRIP Wigge, a German-born travel journalist and videographer who speaks German, English and Spanish, left Berlin in June 2010 and traveled for 150 days through 11 countries, arriving in Antarctica in November 2010. More than 100 people helped, providing transportation, food and places to sleep. He planned the journey for a year before starting out, collecting contacts for those who might provide accommodations or odd jobs, but he also relied on the kindness of strangers.

FOOD At first, Wigge scrounged for food from garbage bins behind supermarkets, but he soon realized that “Dumpster diving wasn’t necessary. I could walk in and do a barter. I offered to clean the floor or the shelf or wash the dishes in the restaurant in exchange for an old sandwich. And most of the people I approached in shops, supermarkets and restaurants gave me something.”

WORK He crossed the Atlantic working on a container ship from Belgium to Canada in exchange for his passage, doing everything from paint jobs to changing the oil in the engine room. In Las Vegas, he engaged in pillow fights for \$1 on the street and offered his back as a “human sofa” for tired visitors. In San Francisco, he collected tips for “pushing heavy tourists up the hills.” Eventually he had 300 \$1 bills, which he used to buy plane fare to Costa Rica. From there, he hitchhiked to Panama, where he worked as a butler for the German ambassador. To cross from Ushuaia, Argentina, to Antarctica, he worked on a luxury cruise ship as an assistant to the expedition leader. “You clean the boots of the tourists, you help them on the ice, you put red flags around the penguin field, you help refill the boats with gasoline,” he said.

ACCOMMODATIONS & ATTITUDES

In Latin America, he found that “people were very helpful if I went to their door and said, ‘I have no idea where I will sleep tonight, can I sleep here?’ There was this helpfulness, this hospitality, maybe because many people there are poor and they know how it feels. They didn’t care about my story. But in the U.S., it was more about the story. They would say, ‘This is cool, we want to help you reach your goal.’ Americans really go for this.”

WORST JOB Wigge’s stint as a porter carrying tourists’ luggage in exchange for a trip to Machu Picchu, the ancient Inca city in the Peruvian Andes, ended “in a bit of a mess. I was the worst porter the Andes had ever seen,” he said.

The other workers were accustomed to handling tents and meals for tourists along the 50-mile, five-day route, then running ahead carrying 60 pounds of luggage on their backs in time to set up the next campsite before the tourists arrived, all at 14,000-foot elevations. But Wigge did not have the stamina to keep up.

“They said, ‘This is not funny; you cannot do this; we do not want to lose our clients,’” he recalled. “I apologized.” After two days, they put his luggage on horses and allowed him to walk at a regular pace rather than staying behind and running ahead to help with campsites.



Courtesy Michael Wigge

Michael Wigge — at Machu Picchu in Peru — departed Berlin with Antarctica as his destination. But he decided to do it without spending a penny. He kept a video diary and some of the footage was used in a show about his trip, “How to Travel the World for Free.” “I would like to motivate people, inspire people,” he says. “If you’re not too vain to do something like pillow fighting or being a human sofa, you can barter your way from something very small to something very big. Why not travel and be a bit silly?”

TRACKING Wigge kept a “video diary” with the goal of eventually producing a TV series. To film himself and collect footage that was high-enough quality for TV, Wigge carried a Canon HDV 1080i camera with a good wide-angle lens and microphone. He ended up with dozens of tapes, which were edited down to five 30-minute segments.

He nearly lost the precious tapes while staying with a German expat in Cuzco, Peru. “The whole apartment burned down before we went to sleep,” Wigge said. But he was able to get his travel bag — including the videos and camera — out, and looks back on the incident philosophically: “We are still alive.”

HOME Once he’d achieved his goal of starting out with no money and completing a one-way trip to Antarctica, he had no qualms about accessing a bank account for return fare to Germany.

For more inspiration, check out Wigge’s website howtotraveltheworldforfree.com/

