

carpe diem education



Thoughts and Ramblings of a Serial Group Leader

Or

A Carpe Diem Survival Manual

Introduction

I've returned to be a group leader again and again. It's not much of a career choice, I grant you, but those of us drawn to this type of work tend to be less concerned than most about traditional career paths anyway. What is it then, other than adventure and wanderlust that attracts me to this position? Why would I possibly want to take 24-hour responsibility for the emotional and physical wellbeing of young people while in developing countries? These are hard questions.... that I refuse to answer. But I will share with you some of my thoughts on what it takes to successfully lead a trip, and how you might go about maintaining your sanity, before, during and afterwards.

For the sake of semantics, I will henceforth refer to the Carpe Diem team leaders as rogues. If you're reading this, I'm assuming that you are, or will soon be a rogue yourself. We rogues are queer breeds of fish. We leave our comfortable homes (if we have them) and swim upstream, with a youthful school of salmonids in tow. Maybe I should refer to us as "queer fish". But so much for analogy.

I consider you fellow rogues my kindred spirits. We shun the military-industrial complex. We take to the outdoors. We work seasonal jobs. We get extra pages sewn into our passports. We couch-surf with friends and family, more often than we'd like to admit. You get the idea. You know who you are.

There are a number of admirable qualities that I have repeatedly noted in my fellow rogues. Rogues tend to be resourceful and energetic. They have the curiosity and boldness to go out of their comfort zones. Rogues are seekers. They tend to have a humanitarian focus. In addition to this, I strongly feel that two indispensable qualities of the rogue are flexibility and humor. Which brings me to the preliminary section of "maintaining your sanity before your trip".

Maintaining your sanity before your trip

It's not uncommon for the rogue to experience periods of limbo, in which you're in between jobs, you're waiting for confirmation, or you're preparing to go. Mentally and emotionally, limbo can take its toll (when you're out of work, limbo can take its toll financially as well). Sometimes it's unclear when or where you have a job. Sometimes it's unclear whether or not a trip is going. This is where flexibility is key.

My perhaps hackneyed advice for periods of limbo is to make the best of the situation. Love some loved ones. Climb a mountain. Learn some Spanish. Do something you've been wanting to do "if I had the time". Otherwise the limbo can turn into a bit of a doldrums, which is what you want to avoid. As a rogue you'll spend a lot of time taking care of other people's needs. **It's extremely important to take care of your own needs too.** I don't think this can be overstated.

So part of maintaining sanity prior to the trip lies in being comfortable with uncertainty. Other issues that can arise before leaving are feelings of anxiety or worry, particularly if this is your first time leading a Carpe Diem trip. How do you prepare for the unpredictable? What can you do prior to travel to help you feel ready?

Most likely you'll already have some degree of familiarity with the country or countries you'll be leading in. Even so, a bit of research can help to keep you enthused about the trip, as well as making you a better resource for your group. Read some books. If you're unemployed there's no better place than the library. Check out some language tapes. I find that the Pimsleur series of language tapes are good, and if you want to work on reading (in Hindi, for example) the Teach Yourself series is quite good. If you're bringing an mp3 player or iPod, put a few on there. Part of being a good rogue is continuing to learn yourself, and emanating that kind of enthusiasm, which sets a positive example for the students. There's always more to learn, no matter how much you already know, how many trips you've already led, etc. and etc.

Another thing you can do in preparation for your trip is to call, write, e-mail, visit, send greetings/flowers/chocolate to your co-rogue. A successful trip depends on the two of you developing a mutually trusting and respecting relationship. Which brings us to the next section: "Maintaining your sanity during your trip".

Maintaining your sanity during your trip

During your trip you're in a high profile position vis-à-vis your students, contacts, and host communities. You have a great deal of responsibility. It's a really bad time to lose your sanity.

This is the part where I humbly offer some insight and advice as to what goes into a "successful" trip. Successful is in quotations because I don't like that word. It's loaded with materialist overtones. With the right mindset, every trip is successful. And no matter what happens, no matter how insane the situation, everything is workable.

Practically speaking, the primary concern is the safety and wellbeing of yourself and your students. At this level, bringing everyone back in one piece is grounds for considering the trip successful. Here the rogue may be walking the razor's edge between caution and adventure. How to keep everyone safe and healthy when they're in a foreign environment, eating strange things with their hands, rafting, trekking, scuba diving? ...You're liable to feel like a mother hen.

With the adventure and exoticism of travel, your students may want to do adventurous, and not entirely intelligent things. "Can we go bungee jumping?" you may hear. "Can we go skydiving? Can we pet that friendly-looking hippopotamus?" Shocking, perhaps, but you may be fielding such questions on a regular basis. Stand your ground. Don't cave in to the ridiculous demands. Regardless of whether you'd like to do such things yourself, during the trip is no time to throw caution to the wind.

A story here, if I may,...

In a remote corner of the Indian state of Rajasthan, a rogue and his charges had embarked upon a camel safari into the great Thar desert. The good rogue had done everything in his power to wisely prepare for the adventure. He'd met with the Indian camel guides to assure that appropriate rations would be carried. In the searing desert heat, they'd need plenty of water to avoid dehydration, the rogue reasoned, and he convinced the Indian guides to bring even more than they'd planned. The rogue himself had packed sensibly; his well-stocked first-aid kit was nearly bursting at the seams. He'd led a preparatory safety meeting with the students to ensure that they too had packed sensibly. The bases were covered, the rogue had thought, and there was nothing left to do. Little did he know what lay ahead.

These days, we have labels for any number of disorders and syndromes, such as chronic fatigue syndrome for example, or attention deficit disorder (ADD). Many a rogue has come across an as-yet undiagnosed syndrome common to American adolescent males, that I call “cool-guy syndrome” or CGS. It so happened that on this camel excursion into the Thar desert, one of the students, let us call him Jed, was woefully afflicted with CGS. Though likeable in most respects, Jed was prone to act out in order to command attention, particularly from anyone of the feminine persuasion.

It was well into the camel safari, when Jed took it upon himself to teach his less than amused camel how to do “camel tricks”. The camel tricks were even good for a couple of laughs until the camel finally had enough and gave Jed a punishing, skin-breaking camel bite right on his ass. It’s all fun and games, as the saying goes, until the camel bites somebody on the ass.

Though Jed more than likely deserved the camel’s retribution, the rogue was left with a disconcerting state of affairs. Jed’s ass was bleeding, and there are no hospitals in the Thar desert. Moreover, the camel’s bite brought about speculations of rabies. How in the world to procure refrigerated rabies prophylaxis with camels for transport and no refrigerators for miles? Draw your own conclusions.

This brings us to the role of the rogue and the relationship between the rogue and the students.

From the moment of first impressions, you’ll be under a kind of scrutiny from the members of your group. They may be trying to gauge how fully they can trust you, how safe they feel with you. They may be trying to gauge how strict you’ll be, to see what they’ll be able to get away with. Of course, they’ll all be checking each other out too, but they’ll be checking you out in a different way.

I believe that the art of being a rogue closely parallels the art of being a person, which closely parallels the art of being oneself. In other words, the best advice I can give about being a rogue is to bring your whole self into the role, in a genuine way. Every rogue brings his or her past experiences, personality, insight, humor, etc and etc. to this new experience. Do this fully and openly. Any other advice that I have is secondary.

This is easy enough to say, but in practice, you may find it’s a subtle and challenging dance. It’s all well and good to be yourself, but you may not want to be a strict disciplinarian. You may not want to call a student out on their behavior. You may find yourself uncomfortably caught in between a dispute between

students, or between host families. The trick is to stay comfortable with ourselves even while we're in situations that make us uncomfortable.

But back to first impressions, and getting to know the students....While first impressions may not be accurate, they are likely to be remembered. If you give a first impression that's nervous and unconfident, it may take you awhile to undo it. During the course of the trip, everyone is likely to see everyone's dirty laundry, so to speak. You may be nervous about meeting the students and getting started, but try to keep the attitude positive. Some nervous excitement is fine, as long as it doesn't transform into the dastardly enemy of self-doubt.

A common pitfall for the rogue in dealing with his students is wanting to be liked, and trying to get too friendly, too quickly. As with teachers in a classroom, it is useful, especially in the beginning, to keep a respectful distance in this regard. This also is a challenge. The students may have a great deal of practice at sabotaging or undermining authority figures. Generally it will take some time to really earn their trust and respect. It's possible to grow friendlier with the students during the course of the trip, but it's very difficult to become stricter. Few of us rogues want to spend our time angrily shaking our fists, acting like the authority figures we never wanted to become. When disciplinary issues do arise (broken rules, for example) it's easy for the rogue to take it as a personal affront, an act of defiance and a lack of respect. This can really mess with your emotions and test your sense of cool.

Of course, it is also possible to be too strict, and the trick is to find the middle ground. Again, it's finding the place where you're comfortable, to be something of an authority figure without feeling that it's cramped your style.

Another pitfall the rogue may fall into is playing favorites. More than likely, you will have at least a couple of absolute rock stars in your group. More than likely you will also have at least one student who will really push your buttons. Just as the students will gravitate toward each other and form cliques, so will you be drawn to certain individuals. Some students are much easier to connect with. However, it may be that the more introspective, harder to reach students, are the ones who really need the connection most. Yet another of your challenges is to connect with them all. A common rogue's reflection once a trip has ended is the wish he/she'd further connected with a particular student, while he/she had the time. With this in mind, all of your time is precious.

The one-on-one meetings are a very good opportunity to connect with each of your students in turn, to get to know them on a deeper level. You can strategically use these meetings to open things up a bit, to get

into some really meaty discussions. I personally think that this is one of the coolest parts of the job. Where else are you given a forum to sit and talk to someone about his or her personal journey? What are they really about? What are their struggles? How is the trip fitting into all of this? And best yet you can sit together over a quiet cup of mate or chai, far away from the impersonal world of computer chatrooms and cell phones, to which we're all too accustomed. Would that we could do this all the more often.

Any number of delicate issues may come up in conversation with your students. More than likely you'll have students who are taking anti-depressants or anti-anxiety medication. You may have students with eating disorders. You may have students who have attempted suicide. They may look to you for guidance on issues of mental and physical health. Clearly, we're not trained as doctors, nor as therapists. But we're human beings, and we're working and living with these issues on a daily basis.

The countries in which we're traveling are not as litigious as the United States (are any countries?) but we are nonetheless working under an American system. So we have to tread lightly in these matters. When medical advice is needed, we have to defer to the doctors. When professional therapy is needed, we have to defer to this too. Opening the floor for honest and meaningful discussions, however, is by no means out of place. On the contrary, these discussions hold incredible potential for the opening of minds and hearts. And this, I believe, is what it's all about.

Ideally, you want the group to become a community in which all of the members help to support one another. The more you succeed in promoting this, by subtle or obvious means, the more support you have for yourself. Support (trust me on this) is good.

Which brings us to maintaining your sanity with your co-rogue.

The relationship between co-rogues is a unique one. Your co-rogue may be a stranger at the beginning of the trip, but by the end you'll likely feel as though you've gone through the trenches together. This also, is a relationship that will develop with time, but circumstances will require that you get to know each other pretty damn quickly. From the start, the more openly and honestly you approach this relationship, the better.

The way in which you and your co-rogue interact sets a crucial example for the rest of the group. If co-rogues belittle or disrespect each other, even in small ways, they sabotage themselves as well as the entire group. If the co-rogues work with cooperation and humor however, developing mutual trust and respect, this will infectiously set the example for the entire group to develop a supportive community.

A pitfall to beware of in working with your co-rogue is the power struggle. This pitfall can show up in a number of devious ways. Sometimes students may gravitate more toward one of the rogues, leaving the other rogue feeling unappreciated. Sometimes contacts or host communities may approach one rogue much more than the other (perhaps because of gender or language skills). Popularity contests between rogues can be devastating. The rogue has to be prepared not only to deal with any situation that arises, but to do so in cooperation with one's co-rogue.

Another pitfall to avoid is holding grudges due to lack of communication. I can't think of a better opportunity for practicing interpersonal skills than in the inter-rogue relationship. Perhaps marriage, but even that's a close one. If something's bothering either one of you, you really have to talk about it. Some of us are better at this than others (speaking from the XY chromosome set, many of us lag behind in the oral communication skills). We have to work with each other and help each other. There's no way around it. Take time specifically to meet and talk together. Make a conscious point of being compassionate and kind to your co-rogue. You both really need it. We all do.

Maintaining your sanity during your trip is thus a joint venture between you and your co-rogue. The two of you can keep each other afloat in a sea of madness. No matter how well you relate to anyone else on the trip, your co-rogue is the only one who is really going to understand your position, in all of the crazy situations you'll find yourself in.

As you learn to work with your co-rogue you'll develop skillful means to give each other time and space. During group meetings, for example, you'll leave space for your co-rogue to speak rather than egotistically commandeering the discussion. You'll ask for your co-rogue's opinions, showing respect for each other in front of the students. And importantly, you'll cover for each other, allowing for the sorely needed time each of you will need in order to recharge.

Indulge me, if you will, in another story.

We were in the Philippines when my trusted co-rogue went down with a ghastly injury. He was performing a traditional Filipino dance, stepping nimbly between two long bamboo poles, clacking together in time to accelerating music played by local musicians. The music and dancing had reached a dizzying height. A crowd of people was jubilantly cheering. Then suddenly, something was horribly wrong.

My co-rogue hobbled away from scene of the dance, in visible pain. His big toe had been caught between the bamboo poles, nearly tearing it off. Flesh had torn from bone. Skin had torn from the flesh. It was an unsightly mess. Those who looked, winced.

The wound would require multiple surgeries. Immediately, my mind began racing. I started thinking of the logistics involved. My co-rogue would need to be hospitalized. For some time he'd be unable to walk. Following that time, he'd be on crutches. And for practical purposes, I'd be on my own.

Our group was on our way to do a trek through the great rice terraces of northern Luzon. My co-rogue would be rehabilitating, and I'd be alone with the group. Until this time, I don't think I'd fully realized how much I'd relied upon my co-rogue. We'd gone through the stages of getting to know each other. We'd learned how to work together, and how to complement each other. And now, with him on injured reserve, I suddenly recognized how much I'd taken him for granted.

Not only had I lost my sounding board for decision-making, but I'd also have to rework all of our well-laid plans. For trekking we had a tried-and-true system, one rogue in the very front, one in the very back, with nobody getting in front of the lead rogue or behind the lag rogue. It wasn't long into our rice-terrace trek until I was cursing the Filipino traditional bamboo dance that had rendered me co-rogueless.

Our trekking guide was a one-eyed Filipino cowboy of the Ifugao tribe, named Tony. He was a nice guy, Tony, and I liked him. He was familiar with the territory and he could speak to the villagers in their local dialect. But the prospects of a remote trek without the virtues of my co-rogue still left me uneasy.

As it happened, the entire trek was an unholy mess. Lagging behind with the slow hikers, I lost sight of where the others had gone. We spent hours lost in the rice terraces, hiking into the darkness, finally arriving at the remote village exhausted and stressed. During the night some of the villagers got drunk and belligerent. We'd split into two separate sleeping areas, and with my co-rogue gone, half of our students, without a leader, were scared by the drunken villagers. The following day, one of our students slipped on a precipitous rice terrace, being hauled to safety by our brave Filipino guide Tony, with a modest bit of assistance from my own good self. Shortly afterwards, we came across what was reportedly an impossibly poisonous bright green snake, that frightened even our cavalier, Filipino cowboy guide (the students thought it was "cute"). After a mere week without my co-rogue, I was exhausted.

Due to unforeseen circumstances, lost passports, sick students and etc, there's a good chance that you and your co-rogue will be separated for certain parts of the trip. Remember, whatever happens everything is workable. You may well find that after periods of separation, there's a sigh of relief once you find each other again. And the moral of the story is: love your co-rogue. Don't take each other for granted.

This brings me to the issue of time. A considerable challenge to your sanity during the trip involves finding time for yourself, or dare I call it "time off". Rogues don't have scheduled days off, and you'll probably find new crises coming up all the time. It's a hard pace to maintain, as not even the most dedicated of rogues can be on all the time. In addition to working with your co-rogue to make time for each other, I'd also recommend soliciting the help of the students wherever and whenever possible. Get those youngbloods to work for you. It's not sloughing work off, it's teaching them the ropes.

Another challenge I've found is keeping the group grounded in the present during the trip. You may grow very tired of hearing conversations surrounding American junk culture while your group is in a stunning area of the Indian Himalayas. There is a tendency, particularly when the going is tough, for regression into the comfortable and familiar. This seems to spread through the group like a virus. The antidote, I believe, lies in keeping them engaged and enthused as much as possible. By no means can you control all the conversations, but you can serve as a reminder that the time on trip is finite and precious, that it's better spent being mentally in India, or Guatemala, or Fiji, than mentally in an American television program.

The position of the rogue is an all-consuming one. During the trip, you probably won't have a great deal of time to apply for other jobs or to plan for the future. Your time and energy are monopolized until the trip is over. So the transition involved with the end of your trip can be fairly abrupt. This brings us to the final section of maintaining your sanity after the trip.

Maintaining your sanity after your trip

So your trip is over. You've lived to tell the tale. Your students are on their way back to the land of plenty and you're either going with them or waving them goodbye. A heavy load of responsibility is lifted from your shoulders. You give yourself a congratulatory pat on the back and exhale a tremendous breath of relief.

Initially there may be a blissful feeling of freedom. I have nobody to look after! There's nowhere I immediately need to be! I can do whatever I want! Somehow in the last weeks I seem to have forgotten, what was it that I want again?

I've found that the transition between having a great deal of responsibility to no responsibility is exhilarating at first, but a bit too drastic to gracefully manage. It's possible to fall into a kind of metaphorical post-partum depression. The community you've worked to build is suddenly gone, and you're on your own. If you come back to the states you're returning to a culture where your rogue lifestyle is unvalued and misunderstood. From the respected position of team leader you've been deregulated to the position of the wandering wayward friend sleeping in the basement.

Depending on your support network and your individual plans, you may or may not experience the reverse culture shock common to many rogues. But if you do, take heart. You've been involved in adventurous and worthy pursuits and there are those who truly do value your hard-earned contributions to the humanitarian whole. Returning to the consumerist, professional-worshipping culture of the United States, this can be all too easy to forget.

As you approach your next project, whether it's another Carpe Diem trip, a circumambulation of Mount Kailash, or the start of medical school, be kind to yourself, and give yourself space to adjust to the transition. Fellow rogues make a useful support group when you're looking for ground. Keep in touch with them. Call them and visit them. You're now entering a secret society of rogues. There's no need to go it alone.