

Karl Peter Schilling

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Introduction

In 1996, a 28-year-old Englishman, by the name of Karl Peter Schilling, embarked on a Winter sun holiday with friends, to Gran Canaria. Despite a lifelong dream of living in New York City, he had never before left the UK. A week later, the return flight would depart without him.

While many of us may have experienced a longing to remain in some exotic destination, and some may work a summer in a beach bar, or even save and plan a retirement scheme overseas, few would simply stay, unable to speak the local language, with little money and no plan or contacts.

Even such adventurous souls as might take such a risk, could be expected to settle in their new surroundings, or return to their homeland after an impressive Odyssey, armed with a lifetime supply of suburban dinner-party anecdotes, about the time they backpacked all the way to Goa, and didn't need daddy to bail them out once.

That a diminutive man, armed only with an acoustic guitar would, or even could, simply keep travelling, with no plan, no income, no safety net, no insurance, and no possessions beyond what he was gifted along the way, is unthinkable. The idea that some twenty-five years later he would still be travelling without aim, relying on his ability to reach out to his fellow humans, despite language barriers, in a daily existential leap of faith that 'something will work out', is truly absurd.

Is this the tale of a monk? Some enlightened holy man, who's pure shining divinity moves strangers to bow down before him and lay delicacies at his feet? Or perhaps a villain, utilising elaborate cons to swindle the gullible, before fleeing to new territories? Is he, perhaps, an intrepid explorer, paying his way in ancient treasures, smuggled from lost cities?

No. This is something far more remarkable. This is the story of a man who has refused to compromise his dreams. A travelling minstrel, in the purest form, taking his music direct to the people, as an improvised reflection of the world he sees, and reliant on his ability to connect across cultural barriers for every next meal. This is the story of a busker, in the purest sense, from the Spanish 'buscar' (to seek), in turn derived from the Indo-European *bhūdh-skō* (to win).¹

In our modern world, where success is measured in material or egotistical terms, and goals are assumed to have an end point, this existence seems barely possible. An ambition to be the living proof that there is another way, or indeed just to find somewhere to sleep the following night, is alien enough, but the idea that an individual could successfully survive this way for decades, while travelling the entire world, is almost inconceivable.

This is, at once, a biography of a remarkable individual, a street level 21st century travelogue, a philosophical challenge to our ideas of social normalcy, a distorting carnival mirror reflecting the domesticity of modern life in all its absurdity, and a comic-book 'Boy's Own' adventure, encompassing tragic romance, desperate scrapes and escapes, madness, and the final triumph of the soul. A life inspired by the image of David Banner, in the Incredible Hulk TV show of the 1970s, hitching a lift at the end of each episode, bag over his shoulder, carried by the whims of the road to his next adventure.

¹ Real Academia Española y la Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española, 'buscar', in *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*, 23.4 edn., 2020. <https://dle.rae.es/buscar> [accessed 11th September 2021].

But in the end, this is something far more beautiful. At its heart, this stands as testament to the kindness, generosity, and sheer decency of people, regardless of culture, creed, colour, or class. Wherever we might travel in this world, that is precisely where we can find the best of humanity. Mr. Schilling relies on this truth daily for his very survival, and at the time of writing, he still survives.