

Starbucking

Chapter One I Get My Thang in Action

“Show a little inspiration, show a little spark”

The sky had already started to lighten on the morning of June 18th, 1998, and after a long night of driving, I finally pulled off I-20 in Odessa, TX, and stumbled into the Royal Inn for roughly four hours of sleep.

The room cost just under \$34, not that much money for a computer programmer, but that small travel expense foreshadowed the poor financial planning and decision-making that had already--only a few years out of college--begun to bury me in credit card debt and would lead to bankruptcy half a decade later. While I will never know if my fiscal health would still have hit rock bottom if I had never begun Starbucking, there is no question that the nonstop traveling that began that summer was the primary reason that I never pulled myself out of debt.

At this point, those already familiar with my Starbucking adventures might be asking—well, Winter, why didn't you plan your departure better, or why didn't you just nap in your car, or did you stick around for a Permian Panthers game?

Well, one truth about the quarter decade that I have spent chasing the world's preeminent coffee behemoth is that Starbucking has been tracking my own personal growth and development as a person almost as much as the expansion of the company across the globe. For all practical purposes, the Winter who embarked on that first road trip, barely a year after conceiving of

the idea of Starbucking, was a babe in the woods when it came to global travel, and it never occurred to me during that first trip that I could save money by dropping the back seats of my Integra and nap quite comfortably.

Nor did it occur to me that I should have planned my schedule much less aggressively for my first go-round, and that is why, without having any idea of just how much driving I could handle, I had booked a PHX-PDX flight with the expectation that I could make the drive from Plano in a little over a day. So confident was I in my driving stamina that I had also purchased a pass to the Warner Bros. 75th Anniversary Festival of Film Classics, with plans to see a few films during the afternoon and begin my trip in the early evening.

Running behind schedule and racing against the clock would become a staple of my Starbucking adventures, and that first trip set the template for the future. Just as I was about to leave my apartment, a neighbour whom I had been chatting up for a few weeks dropped by, and let's just say that back then, Starbucking was not a priority, certainly not so much that I would have passed up a willing partner. Afterwards she suggested going across the street to our usual Starbucks, and by the time we finished chatting with other friends, I realised that I might as well head back down to Dallas to catch another classic film, Hitchcock's *Dial M for Murder*. I did not leave D/FW until well after midnight, and that is why I came find myself spending a few hours at a cheap motel in Odessa, TX.

I woke up between 10 AM and 11 AM, looked at my atlas, did some quick mental calculations, and quickly realised that my odds of making my Friday morning flight were growing slimmer with every delay. Pushing the flight back was not an option, because, surprisingly given how obsessive I would soon become, the primary purpose of my trip to Portland was not Starbucks, but rather a music festival, the Sarah McLachlan-fronted Lilith Fair.

That's the thing about my first year of Starbucking—even though I had conceived of the goal in the summer of 1997 and decided that it was a project that I wanted to pursue, I was not yet all in, not at the onset. I know this because, about a month or two after my original brainstorm (the exact date of

which is lost to history), I flew to Minneapolis to both attend Lilith Fair (yes, I really loved the concept and lineups and would go on to attend nine different festivals between 1997 and 1999) and visit an old high school friend. Because Starbucks was not yet in the forefront of my mind, I did not think to obtain a list of Starbucks ahead of time, nor did I think to rent a car and plan my return around seeing all of the stores in the city. Instead, I visited only a handful in between my other activities--Starbucking was almost an afterthought that first year.

Similarly, in early 1998, when I was overcome with a random travel bug, I chose Italy, even though Starbucks had already opened international locations in Japan, Singapore, and the Philippines. As far as I can remember, the thought of looking up which countries had Starbucks never even occurred to me. Of course, today, after two decades of building my travels around Starbucks, even I am stunned that I chose Italy instead of Asia, but my best guess is that the idea was still percolating, yet to cement itself into my psyche.

For that same reason, when I planned out my first Starbucking road trip, many of my activities were unrelated to Starbucks—concerts, exploring new cities, gambling in Las Vegas, and flying to Alaska, for example. The reason I flew to Portland was the music festival, and even though the city had nearly three dozen Starbucks by then, I only visited a few because, again, I did not think to rent a car, nor to give myself enough time to see them all. Instead, I took a bus downtown from PDX walked to a few Starbucks, then to my hostel and finally to the concert itself. The next morning I saw another handful of stores before returning to the airport, and it would be over a year before I returned to Portland to see more stores.

Of course, the fact that I even made it to Portland at all still amazes me, because my last-minute plans back in D/FW had really crunched my schedule. In the late 90s, the speed limits in the southwestern states were not the 75-80 MPH that they are today, but I certainly tried to push past 90 MPH whenever I thought I could get away with it. I distinctly remember that as I sped towards the NM/AZ border, I started counting down the miles, thinking that if a trooper busted me, all I had to do was make it to the state line, and I'd be

free.

Yes, I was quite naive back then.

Unsurprisingly, I barely made it to Phoenix that night. In fact, it was well past midnight, around 2 AM, when I arrived at the hostel, well past check-in time (yet another example of poor planning). Fortunately, I had called ahead, and the attendant was kind enough to leave the door open for me and let me pay in the morning.

As soon as I woke, I dropped some cash at the desk and I rushed to the airport, only to arrive at the gate to find it closed. This was before the September 11th attacks, and the air travel landscape was different, friendlier, and I was used to cutting my flights quite close. Sooner or later I was bound to cut it too close, but, amazingly, I caught a lucky break that I do not understand to this day--for some reason, the gate was opened, and I was able to board.

Barely twenty-four hours later, I was back in Phoenix and relieved that I could finally slow down for a spell. I saw the just-released *X-Files* film, and then I returned to the hostel and hung out with other guests. I had discovered hosteling during my trip to Italy, and, for a person like me, who enjoys being around people but does not make friends easily, hostels offered the right balance. In a hostel, the atmosphere is such that it is quiet easy, when sitting at a communal table, to strike up a conversation with another guest and make plans to go eat or see the sights. To this day, I am still connected to a handful of travelers whom I met at this or that hostel around the world, and that experience of meeting people has been a significant factor in why I continue to pursue Starbucking, even when that pursuit proves tedious.

I remember meeting a young German or Austrian woman, striking up a conversation about dinner, and joined her across the street at Hooters (my first and possibly only time at that iconic American establishment). The next morning I was out early to visit a nearby Starbucks, but rather than grabbing a quick breakfast so that I could rush to other cafes, I instead returned to the hostel to make pancakes. One of the other guests wanted to see the famous

Frank Lloyd Wright home, Taliesin West, so I drove us out there, and later that evening I decided to see *The X-Files* again. I was clearly in no hurry to finish seeing all of the Starbucks in Phoenix, *but* I think that the process of Starbucksing across the city was already proving addictive, and unlike Portland, I made sure to see visit all of the stores before I moved on.

To be clear, drinking a coffee from every store was the goal from the beginning. Even at that early stage, one of the factors driving my Starbucksing was the collector's instinct that I had possessed my entire life, and which manifested itself most clearly in my decades of serious comic book collecting (amassing nearly 20,000 books at my peak). In my mind, I was collecting Starbucks from day one, but it took a full year for this new collecting project to become a priority.

I drove northwest on US-93 to Las Vegas, but my travel inexperience bit me again, and I ran right smack dab into a multi-hour delay crossing Hoover Dam. It had not occurred to me that I needed to time my departure to leave early in the morning, especially during the summer season. Similarly, I knew nothing about Vegas or gambling (only friendly poker games in college), but I nonetheless headed straight to a casino, the Mirage, to find out more so that I could return an play poker later. Another area of inexperience, likely shared by many, is that I assumed that prostitution, in the form of legalised brothels, were legal in Las Vegas, and I was quite surprised to learn that one had to travel outside of Clark County, to a town called Pahrump, in order to partake.

Always up for new adventures, I am pretty sure that I drove out there during one of my three days in Vegas, but I distinctly remember being shocked by the pricing. Something like \$200 for 15 minutes of time—too rich for my blood. I wish that that I had thought the same when I returned to the Mirage for seven-card stud, because one of my more painful memories of that trip is that I made multiple trips to the casino ATM for a *credit card cash advance*. These types of transactions are particularly expensive and subject to a much-higher interest rate, and I ended up blowing all \$1000, plus fees, plus interest, on just a few hours at the poker table. That was the type of reckless spending that would set me on the path to insolvency, and it was not be long before the combination of Starbucksing and profligacy put me in a hole that I could not

get out of.

After a few days, I cleared out all of the Starbucks and then sped down I-15 to the Southland, a region of California that, in just seven years since Starbucks entered the state, already boasted an impressive number of stores and would soon grow to include more Starbucks than any other part of the country. With no photographs from that period, my memories of those few days in Southern California are scarce. If I had a list of the opening dates of all the Starbucks in the area, I could probably reconstruct my route, but my memory only contains a few locations, like Ontario, San Dimas, Pasadena, Burbank, and of course Los Angeles. Just as in the Portland, Phoenix, and Las Vegas portions of that trip, I barely remember the Starbucks themselves—it is the other memories that stand out.

One of my fondest memories has to do with Lilith Fair, which had worked its way down from Portland. It might surprise many to learn that back in the late 90s and early aughts, Starbucks had made CD sales an increasingly significant portion of its business, eventually reaching the point of outselling many other retailers. In fact, being selected for display at Starbucks could create significant name recognition for artists or boost sales of their records to the top of the charts, and Starbucks even created a music curation company called Hear Music, with several stores (also serving coffee) around the country.

It was natural, then, for Starbucks to sponsor and promote Lilith Fair, and in 1998 the company went further and scheduled performances by festival artists in some of the cafes themselves. I caught one of the performances at a Phoenix store, and another in Pasadena. At this patio performance, the organisers gave away tickets to festival, and the young woman sitting at my table won. I asked whom she would take, and when she said she would check with some friends, I offered her my number and indicated that I would be thrilled to go. She called me later that day, and I offered to pick her up and save her the hefty Rose Bowl parking, as well as picking up dinner at a local Salvadorean restaurant.

Besides Lilith Fair, I also attended a Mary Chapin Carpenter show at the

Greek Theatre, but the true highlight of that entire trip was my first trip to Alaska. Starbucks would not open in that state until 2004, and I could just as easily have flown up to Seattle to see dozens of stores, but, as much as I was enjoying the process of Starbucking during that first trip, when I made my travel plans a month earlier, seeing the Midnight Sun was at the priority, not Starbucks.

Decades later, I still have memories of arriving at ANC late at night and witnessing what I had only heard of—daylight, even though it was nighttime! The taxi driver was amused by my excitement, and as he drove me to the Anchorage Backpackers Inn, he explained that the sky never fully darkened at this time of year. At the hostel, the attendant showed me my dorm bed, and I was soon dead to the world. That Midnight Sun messed with my body something awful, though, and just a few hours later awoke and saw a bright sky outside, but when I checked my phone I was amazed to discover that it was only 4 AM!

With no Starbucks to see, and no car, I spent several aimless days walking/bussing around town, looking for coffee, and popping over to Barnes & Noble (which actually served Starbucks) or Surf City, a local internet cafe. The night before I was supposed to depart, I stumbled across Blues Central, a local bar and music venue, and there I had a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Noticing an attractive young woman studying at the other end of the bar, I called the bartender over, had him ask her what she was drinking, and then had him offer her another. I had seen that same scene replayed in movies all my life, and yet I was surprised when she actually accepted, then immediately confused when she brought her hand, palm open, to her chin, then moved it quickly towards me.

I shrugged the gesture off, returned to my drink, but later, after she finished studying, she came over to me and started chatting, in the process explaining that the motion she had made was the ASL sign for “thank you”. We immediately hit it off and went for a late breakfast at the Village Inn, and the next day, before I headed to the airport, I went over to the courthouse, where she was working as a judicial intern, and explained the situation to a desk

clerk, who immediately knew who it was and called her down.

As I recount the anecdote today, I can easily see how, given modern sensibilities, tracking down a woman to her place of work based on a small piece of information she gave you would be considered creepy, but times were different back then, and Vicki was quite happy to hang out for a while then drive me to the airport, where we made the last-minute decision that I would rebook my flight so that we could spend the next day together. Believe me, I wanted to stay longer, but my manager at the company where I was contracting had emailed, and I needed to return to resume the next phase of a project.

In all, I was on the road for just three weeks, but that was enough--I had fallen in love with Starbucking, and traveling, in a way that I could never have imagined. Believe it or not, when I was younger, I thought that I might want to stay in my Houston for the rest of my life. I began interning for Exxon while I was still in high school, maintained the internship throughout my college years, and as graduation neared, I fully expected to be hired by Exxon and remain in Houston indefinitely. Instead, I was hired by a small company in the Dallas suburbs, then later a startup in another suburb, and in all those years, the thought of getting out and seeing the nation never occurred to me.

My inspiration had come a year earlier, but it was unquestionably that first road trip that sparked something deep inside, and by the time I started the long drive back to Dallas, I was fully committed to Starbucking.

The question that I am most often asked about Starbucking is, of course, “why?”

In the context of a three-minute radio or TV interview, the most concise answer that I can give is “because I wanted to do something unique”, but that answer does not even come close to describing the full nature of what Starbucking means to me, why I began, and why I continue to pursue it.

Yes, when I originally conceived of the idea in summer of 1997, it was

framed as “would it be possible to visit all the Starbucks [and thus do something unique]”, but it was not until that first road trip that I committed to the idea, and the irony is that Starbucks itself was only one small factor of many that led me to commit.

Experiencing the Great American Road Trip for the first time, seeing new places, enjoying a greater range of concerts, meeting new people and connecting with some, the challenge of finding the Starbucks (it was very much like a scavenger hunt in those days, before Google Maps, before the company Store Locator), and my natural instinct to collect things—all of those things blended together that summer to firmly cement this truth into my mind.

From then on, Starbucking would become my cornerstone, the goal that formed the base on which I would build the rest of my life.